

SEX RATING: STEAMY

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SIREN SEX Rating

SENSUAL: Sensual romance with love scenes comparative to most romance novels published today

STEAMY: Heavy sexual tension; graphic details; may contain coarse language

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SCORCHING: Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

SEXTREME: Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

Love's Redemption

When a fatal mistake ends Jake Ramsey's career as a big city cop, he travels the country struggling to come to terms with his past. Jake ends up in Mountaintop, Montana where, one day, while drowning his sorrows at the local bar, he discovers a young couple has gone missing but left their dog behind, so Jake adopts the stray.

When he meets Lily Baker, it's instant attraction for him. As he gets to know her, Jake realizes Lily could crack the brittle pieces inside his heart.

Lily, a widow, is just as attracted to Jake, but she's afraid he might not stick around long, and she doesn't want her heart broken again.

Jake gets snagged in the web of deceit surrounding the young couple's disappearance as his heart begins opening up to a woman who holds the power to free him from his past.

LOVE'S REDEMPTION

Sage Burnett



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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Love's Redemption

By Sage Burnett

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Chapter One

"Poor bastard." Jake Ramsey raised the stubby glass and knocked back the Jack Daniels and water.

Ice cubes clinked as he lowered the glass and studied the six-point whitetail buck's head mounted to the wall behind the bar. The deer had been shot down in his prime.

He nursed his drink, staring at the buck. In some twisted way, Jake identified with the animal. He was taken down in his prime, too. Guilt, knotted with bitterness, crawled up his throat. He swallowed more whiskey in a futile attempt to drown out the rancid taste.

When the door swung open, Jake hunched his shoulders against the assault of frigid air. A thin man, dressed for the below-freezing temperatures, sauntered inside, rubbing his hands together.

The new patron slid onto a bar stool. "How's it going, Ace?" he asked the bartender.

"No complaints, Harold."

Jake watched the bartender pour a healthy amount of Irish whiskey into a heavy mug before he added coffee from a glass carafe. He caught the bartender's eye and raised his empty glass.

"Coming right up." Ace slid the mug on the bar.

Harold dug a crumpled pack of Camel cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and

jammed the cigarette in his mouth, then lit up. Smoke drifted in Jake's direction.

A minute later, Ace plopped another whiskey and water in front of Jake. He picked up the empty glass and idled in Harold's direction.

Ace sensed when a man wanted to be left alone to wallow in his self-pity.

Jake landed in this small town two days ago. Mountaintop sat nestled under the shadow of the Rockies in northwestern Montana. Heavy snow blanketed the jagged line of majestic peaks. At least three feet of snow covered the ground in and around town. Snow drifted from the sky again today.

The town had the usual mix of stores, café, and another bar down the street. He had checked in at the only motel in town. A lumber mill, a few miles east of town, appeared to be the main industry.

"Goddamn mutt," Ace said.

Jake heard scratching and a dog whining at the door.

Ace scooped up a handful of salted peanuts from a plastic bowl on the bar, angled around it, and headed to the door. He swung the door open and tossed the peanuts down onto the packed snow. "This is the last handout you're getting." Ace slammed the door in the poor mutt's face.

Jack had gotten a quick glimpse of the mutt, a medium-sized, shaggy-haired black dog.

"That hippy couple just abandon him?" Harold asked.

Ace swung back behind the bar. "Yeah." He poured himself a cup of coffee. "They high-tailed it out of town about a week ago. Left the dog behind."

"I heard that fellow was peddling drugs at the mill." Harold held out his mug to Ace for a refill. "That's why Gordy Lewis fired him."

Ace poured another shot of whiskey into Harold's mug. "That's what I heard, too."

Harold blew out a smoke ring. "Somebody will end up shooting that worthless mutt."

Ace nodded. "More than likely will be me, since it hangs around here most of the time."

Jake glanced at the door again. The mutt had stopped whining. Maybe he wandered off in search of more food. He doubted that. The dog would sit there, hoping for another handout. He turned his bar stool in the direction of the two men. "You got a steak unthawed?"

"You want a steak sandwich?" Ace asked.

"Nope. I'll buy a steak for the dog."

Ace studied Jake. "Waste of money. The dog's gonna freeze. Get down to nothing. I'll end up putting a bullet between his eyes before the end of the month."

"I don't mind wasting my money."

Ace shrugged. "Suit yourself." He wheeled around and disappeared through an open door behind the bar.

Jake noticed Harold eyeing him. "Jake Ramsey." The skinny man had faded blue eyes and a ruddy complexion. Could be from too much booze, or the harsh elements of Montana.

"Harold." He sipped his whiskey and coffee. "Passing through?"

This time, Jake lifted one shoulder. "Haven't made up my mind yet."

"Where you from?"

"West coast."

There was a stinginess in each man's words. They only offered or asked what was necessary.

Ace lumbered back out, carrying a fat steak wrapped in clear plastic wrap. He paused on his way to the door. "Worth five bucks to you?"

The whole package of thick toast, char-broiled steak, and greasy fries probably cost five bucks. "Yeah." He reached around for his wallet, pulled out a five-dollar bill, and laid it on the counter. He watched Ace toss the raw steak to the mutt, then slam the door in his face again.

Jake felt slightly better for having done his good deed for the day.

* * * *

Snow still floated from the sky when Jake left the bar an hour later. The afternoon light had faded, turning the main street of town into a mixture of stark white and murky grey. He walked across the street toward his Ford four-wheel-drive truck when he sensed someone following him. Jake glanced over his shoulder and didn't see anyone, but noticed the black, shaggy mutt at his heels. The dog gazed up at him.

Without a real home himself, a touch of sympathy for the stray dog nudged his conscience. At least he wasn't going to freeze or go hungry. Jake heard the rattle of an old engine rumbling down the street in his direction. A circa nineteen seventies red Chevy truck belching smoke from its rear end grumbled past him. He gave the dog a look and strode toward his truck, the dog padding behind him.

He unlocked the driver's door and glanced down at the dog. "Ah, hell, get in."

The dog leaped into his truck and sat down on the passenger side of the bench seat. Jake climbed inside and started his truck. Before he pulled away from the curb, he glanced at the dog again. "Hell."

* * * *

Jake shifted the bag of groceries to his other arm so he could unlock the motel room door. He felt the dog following him like a stalker after midnight. He closed the door and watched the dog lie next to it, cursing himself for befriending the mutt in the first place. Why had he brought the dog with him?

Doubting his judgment on bringing the dog back to the motel with him, he shucked his jacket and tossed it on the bed. He opened the small bag of dry dog food and filled the plastic dish he'd bought at the supermarket. The dog stood up and wagged his tail. Jake set the dish down on the dingy brown carpet. Like a strike of lightning, the dog raced for the food and wolfed down his dinner. In the boxy little bathroom, Jake filled the motel ice bucket with water and carried it out to the dog. Once the dog had thoroughly licked the bowl clean, he lapped at the water.

Jake scratched the back of his neck, wondering what he had gotten himself into. The dog barked, followed by a knock on the door. Who the hell was out there? He didn't know a soul in town.

The people of Mountaintop weren't the friendliest bunch of people he'd met. He walked to the window first and pushed back the curtain enough to see outside. A boy, about twelve or so, shifted back and forth on the balls of his feet. Jake opened the door.

"Um...Mr. Ramsey."

Jake had seen the boy shoveling snow in front of the office yesterday afternoon. He wore a navy stocking hat pulled low over his head. Straight blond bangs peeked from under the edge of the hat. "Yeah."

"My mom says if you're gonna have a dog here, it's an extra five bucks a night."

So far, the mutt was putting a dent in his pocketbook. He dug his wallet out of his back pocket, found a five, and handed it to the boy.

The boy crumpled up the five in one hand before he knelt down and started scratching behind the dog's ear. "That hippie couple just left him."

Mountaintop seemed to be stuck in a time warp. Hippies went out in the sixties.

"I saw him wandering around Saturday, so I called him." The boy paused and looked up at Jake. "I gave him half of my candy bar. But don't tell my mom, 'cause she'll get mad at me."

"What's your name?" Jake asked.

"Brent. You're not gonna tell my mom, are you?"

"No, I won't tell her. Do you know the dog's name?"

Brent shook his head. "All I know is that hippie couple always had the dog with them. He rode in the back of their truck."

His instincts, honed by years of experience, prickled. "So they took good care of the dog?"

Brent kept scratching behind the dog's ear. Jake noticed how the animal closed his eyes and soaked up the attention.

"It always looked like he was fed good," Brent said. He stood up and turned to go, then wheeled back around. "I forgot. My mom said she don't want it peeing in here. That'll cost extra, too."

"I'll remember that."

The boy spun around and ran the length of the rooms back to the office. Jake closed the door. He hadn't petted the dog yet. No point in getting the mutt's hopes up. He watched the dog curl up in a ball next to the electric wall heater.

* * * *

The smell of bacon frying, the clank of dishes, and loud banter filled the local café as Jake ate his stack of pancakes the next morning. The waitress, an attractive woman in her mid-thirties with short brown hair, sashayed over to him. She carried a glass coffee pot in one hand and his bill in the other. She had waited on him the past two mornings. Jake had noticed the modest gold band on her ring finger the first morning she poured coffee for him.

"Thanks," he said when she refilled his mug.

"You're welcome." She slid the check on the table. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, thanks." He picked up the mug. "Would you happen to know of any places to rent around here?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Did you get hired at the mill?"

Jake shook his head.

"Because they fired a guy there last week. I thought maybe you were his replacement. He and his girlfriend were staying out at the Creek Cabins two miles south of town. Lily Baker does long-term rentals."

"Thanks," he said. "I appreciate it."

"Sure, no problem."

* * * *

An hour later, Jake turned right onto a freshly plowed road. Tall, lodgepole pine trees, their branches bowing under the heavy snow, flanked either side of the road. About a quarter of a mile down the road, he spotted a line of wood cabins with high-pitched metal roofs. The cabins sat a good fifty yards back from the lakeshore. The large lake, frozen with a thick layer of ice, spread out in the shape of a hard boiled egg, with a halfdozen ice shacks scattered across it. As he cruised into the wide parking lot, he noticed a boat launch and a small picnic area with the wooden tables tipped on their sides. Off to the right sat a one-story log house with an office sign attached to the left corner. Jake swung his truck in the direction of the combination office and living quarters.

The dog scrambled to follow him as he climbed out of his truck. He heard another dog barking. After Jake elbowed the door closed, he saw a yellow lab sprinting toward his truck. Before he could give the black mutt a command, the dog dashed off toward the lab.

As soon as the two dogs met up with each other, they started prancing around in a playful way. The dogs trotted off in the direction of the lake. The waitress at the café had mentioned that the young hippie couple rented a cabin here, which explained the dogs' behavior.

He turned and headed toward the office. At the door, he read the note taped to it. *Cleaning cabin number eight*.

Jake hiked across the parking lot and past the picnic area. A two-foot-wide path had been shoveled. He followed the path until he spotted a number eight painted in bright red letters on the door. He went up the walkway to the cabin and rapped his knuckles on the door.

Several seconds later, the door opened. A woman with straight, shoulder-length coffee-colored hair stared at him from under fringed bangs. She looked late thirties or so, with delicate laugh lines fanning out from her hazel eyes. She wore a men's large black-and-blue plaid flannel shirt with a sky blue turtleneck sweater underneath it. Her jeans were old and faded to the max. The blood pumped faster in his veins, knocking Jake off balance for a moment.

"Hello." The woman peeled off a pair of bright yellow cleaning gloves.

"Uh...hi." A feeling he hadn't experienced in a hell of a long time fired to life inside of him. "Are you Lily?"

"Yes, I am."

Good old sexual electricity shot through his body. "I understand you rent cabins out on a long-term basis."

"That's right. I do."

"I'm looking to rent one."

She studied him for a moment with her big hazel eyes. "If you're going to be here at least a month, I can give you a discounted rate."

He didn't have anywhere else to go. He could take up ice fishing. He needed something to fill his days. "That sounds good."

Lily glanced over her shoulder. "As soon as I'm done cleaning, this one is available. The other cabins are rented out on the weekends to ice fishermen."

Jake held her eye before he glanced past her.

"Come on in. I'll show you around." She turned and walked to an opened door.

Jake followed, appreciating her nice, long legs.

"This is the bathroom." She stepped inside.

He checked out the room. It was small but had all the necessities.

"Excuse me." Lily stared at his chest as she squeezed past him.

She smelled clean, like the pure mountain air. No heady perfume or chemicalsmelling hair spray. Jake watched her walk to a partitioned corner of the room. She was medium height and shapely. Definitely shapely.

"This is the sleeping area." She glanced over her shoulder at him and held his gaze for a few seconds before she looked away.

Jake stepped into the partially enclosed area. A queen-sized bed draped with a red

plaid comforter sat in the middle of the small room. Next to the bed was a night stand with a small reading lamp. A sturdy pinewood chest of drawers leaned against the wall.

Sensing her eyes on him, he turned and faced her. "This will work."

"It's nothing fancy, just the basics."

"That's all I need."

"Okay, then..." Her voice trailed off before she angled to the center of the cabin. With her left hand, she pointed. "Kitchen." She pointed in the opposite direction. "Living room."

The kitchen housed a small white range, white fridge, sink, cabinets, and a round wooden table with three chairs clustered around it. The living room had a red- and black-checked sofa with a small end table next to it. A cast iron wood stove sat on a rock pad in the corner of the room. A nineteen-inch TV perched on a stand near the window.

The cabin beat the hell out of the motel room. "I'll take it."

Her eyes widened. "You're sure?"

Jake wondered about her hesitation. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay then." Lily looked away from him again for a couple of seconds. "We can go back to the office and get the paperwork done."

He nodded. Was she feeling the same man-woman awareness he was? Or was she reserved, like the rest of the town?

"There are pots, pans and dishes in the kitchen." She walked toward the door.

Jake caught up with her and opened the door for her. He could have sworn he noticed a slight blush on her cheeks before she stepped outside. They were barely out of the cabin when the two dogs barreled towards them.

She stopped. "Hey. That's Steve and Diane's dog. Where did he come from?"

"He came with me."

Lily spun around, confusion written across her face. "With you?"

Both dogs squealed to a halt next to her. They wagged their tails begging for attention. "I don't understand. How did you get Stormy?"

"He was hungry and needed a warm place to sleep." The lab nuzzled Jake's hand.

"Sit, Rosey."-

The lab obeyed and focused her big brown eyes on him. Jake glanced at Lily. Her brows were knitted together. "The bartender at the Grizz Bar said some hippie couple abandoned him."

She snorted. "They were not a hippy couple. They were in their late twenties. Steve had long hair. Diane kind of wore her hair in a sixties style." She paused, bent down next to Stormy, and stroked his head. "And they were responsible pet owners. They adored Stormy." Jake's instincts prickled again.

"They wouldn't just abandon him." Lily stood up.

"So you knew them well?"

"Yeah. They rented cabin three for the past two months."

"Why did they leave?"

She tilted her head. "Why are you asking?"

"Because somehow, I ended up with their dog." Something just didn't feel right about that.

Lily seemed lost in thought for a moment. "Steve told me he had a family emergency back in Seattle. That's where he and Diane were from. Anyway, they loaded up and left a week ago Wednesday. Stormy was in the truck with them when they drove out of here."

The story of the young couple didn't add up for him. "He could have run off when they stopped somewhere."

Lily shook her head. "No. They wouldn't have let that happen."

"They might call you looking for him, and now, he's right here."

She looked doubtful. "I suppose." Lily crossed her arms over chest and stared down at Stormy. "It just doesn't make sense."

She obviously didn't know Steve had been fired for trying to sell drugs. It amounted to hearsay and speculation at this point. "Were they responsible people?"

Lily shot him a pointed look. "For your information, they were. Steve worked at the mill. Diane was hired to clean the offices and lunchroom at the mill a couple of nights a week. They paid their rent on time and kept their cabin clean." She paused and looked down at the couples' dog. "They took good care of Stormy."

His cop instincts kicked in, although he wasn't officially a cop any more. Jake wrestled aside the rush of bitterness that shot through him. He didn't know enough about the young couple or anything else in this small town to make a judgment.

"Did they leave a forwarding address where you can reach them?"

Concern glittered in her eyes. "No."

Jake reached behind him to scratch the back of his neck. He caught her watching him.

"What's your name?"

"Jake Ramsey."-

She dropped her arms. "I'm Lily Baker. We'd better get the paperwork done for you. When do you want to move in?"

"Today."

Lily's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Today?"

He wondered about her reaction. "Is that a problem?"

She chewed on her bottom lip and avoided his gaze. "Of course not." She barely glanced at him before heading off in the direction of the office.

Chapter 2

Lily stood by the large window of her office with her hands stuffed into the back pockets of her jeans. She watched Jake Ramsey turn his truck around and drive up the road. On the renter's form, he'd written Portland, Oregon as his previous address. Why in the blazes was he planning on staying in Mountaintop for a while?

He didn't strike her as a drifter, and he looked too young to be retired. She'd guess his age at early- to mid-forties. Something about Jake Ramsey's presence disturbed her. Disturbed her sense of order and routine. She'd settled into widowhood since her husband, John, had died three years ago. The first year, she floundered in a black hole, struggling to make sense of John's death and her life without him. Her son, Kyle, was a sophomore in college down in Missoula. He came to terms with his father's death and seemed content with college life.

No one needed to point out to her that she was stuck on hold, but she did feel content with running the business and living out at the lake. She didn't need her world churned up. Jake Ramsey didn't strike her as an average guy. Lily sensed those nutbrown colored eyes of his had seen too much. His tall, lean body and his jet black hair with slight graying at the temples made for an attractive package.

Just because he was an attractive man didn't mean she needed to be attracted to him.

She shook her head in an attempt to toss away images of Jake Ramsey from her mind. He turned up on her doorstep and stirred up emotions stashed deep inside of her. The fact that he had Stormy with him was almost as disturbing. Something didn't feel right about Stormy being abandoned. She hoped Steve or Diane would call and inquire about their dog.

Lily spun around. She had work to do. The cabins were booked for the night. The fish were biting like they hadn't eaten in a month. The word had gotten out. Hungry fish made for good business. Working took her mind off things. She hoped the day's work ahead of her would keep Jack Ramsey out of her thoughts.

* * * *

After Jake loaded his gear into his truck, he pulled in front of the motel office. Stormy sat on the seat next to him. The dog had joined himself to Jake's hip. He let his truck idle while he went inside.

The manager, bouncing a chubby baby on her hip, glanced around him. "I see you still got the dog."

Jake strode to the counter and dropped his room key on it. "I'm checking out."

"Hey, if it's about the extra five bucks for the dog, those are the rules." She shifted the blue-eyed baby to her other ample hip.

He shook his head. "That's not the problem. I found another place to stay."

She looked disappointed. He'd been the only customer for the past three nights.

"Could you give me directions to the mill?"

"Turn right two miles after The Gas and Go. It's back there another mile. You looking for work?"

"Maybe."

"My husband, Don, says there's an opening since they fired that Steve guy for trying to sell drugs."

Jake didn't answer. Lily believed the young couple had been responsible people. The rest of the town harbored a different opinion. "Thanks." He circled around and left the office.

It had started snowing while Jake was in the motel office. He flipped on the windshield wipers and turned onto the street. Ten minutes later, he found the road that led to the mill. He steered his truck as far to the right when he spotted an empty log truck hauling down the road. Farther down the road, he saw a large metal building. Hundreds of logs were piled to the right of the building, waiting to be processed. He parked in front of the office and went inside.

A young woman with long, blonde hair glanced up from her computer. "Can I help you?"

Jake couldn't help but notice her heavy eye makeup and shiny red lips. "Yeah, I'm hoping you can."

She leaned back in her chair. "Are you looking for work?"

"No, I'm looking for information." He must have thrown her off balance because her heavily made-up eyes widened.

"What kind of information?"

"About the black mutt in my truck."

She craned her neck to see around him. "That looks like Steve Watson's dog. Why are you asking me about it?" She leaned back in her chair again.

"To see if Mr. Watson left a forwarding address or phone number so I can get in

touch with him."

"I'm sure Watson doesn't want to be found." A man's voice spoke from behind him.

Jake wheeled around at the sound of the man's booming voice. The man looked about his age and same height. The man wore new black jeans, snakeskin cowboy boots, and an expensive-looking wool plaid shirt.

"I'd like to get his dog back to him."

The man casually leaned against the doorframe of his office. Jake wondered if this was Gordy Lewis, the guy who had fired Steve Watson for allegedly selling drugs.

"He's long gone." The man stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Guys like that can't hold a job. I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did."

The guy was trying too hard to be casual.

"You might be right about that. I just thought I might get an address so I could get in touch with him to return his dog."

"Lost cause, Mr...?"

"Ramsey. You never know."

The man looked over at his secretary. "Carrie, do you remember if Watson had a forwarding address in his file?"

"Um...Gordy, I mean Mr. Lewis."

Jake didn't look at Carrie. He kept his eyes focused on Lewis, noticing a slight change in his expression. Lewis's lips tightened while his gaze hardened.

"No, sir. There wasn't."

so.

Gordy Lewis glanced back at him and lifted one shoulder as if to say, I told you

Jake trusted his instincts. He knew when to back off. "Thanks, anyway." He headed toward the door.

"You looking for work, Ramsey?"

He turned to face Lewis. "Nope."

Gordy Lewis' eyes narrowed. "There's an opening if you're interested."

"Sorry. I'm not experienced in this line of work."

"Suit yourself." He skewered Jake with a look before he turned and strolled back into his office.

Jake glanced at Carrie, who avoided his gaze. Suspicion nagged him as he left the office.

* * * *

Jake returned to the Creek Cabins a couple of hours later. The parking area in

front of the cabins had been plowed, so he rolled his truck to a stop in front of his cabin. Stormy bounded out of the cab of his truck and trotted off toward the office, probably looking for Lily's dog, Rosey. Jake unloaded his tote bags full of clothes, a large plastic box stuffed with miscellaneous things, his laptop, and three bags of groceries.

After he put the groceries away, he set his laptop on the table in the kitchen and plugged it into the phone line. Lily had mentioned all the cabins had internet access. The world of high-tech had stretched its long fingers even to the edges of the wilderness.

After he booted up his computer, he went directly to the criminal database of Washington state. The passwords hadn't changed in years, so it was easy for him to access information on criminals. He took his time searching the files. Nothing turned up on Steve Watson. The guy had no priors.

Jake happened to glance out the window and caught sight of Lily chatting with older guy near the lakeshore. His awareness of her increased each time he saw her. Why had she snagged his attention over other women he'd met recently? He grabbed his jacket and left his cabin. Jake trudged through the deep snow, feeling his jeans soaking up the moisture.

The old timer headed in the direction of the parking area. He carried an ice auger, a fishing pole, and a metal tackle box.

"Lily."

When she circled around to face him, excitement rushed through his body. He had a definite reaction to this woman. Feeling the scrutiny of her gaze, he strode over to her. She wore a black fleece jacket and a blue knit hat perched on her head. By the expression on her face, Jake got the impression she wanted to bolt.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"Did Steve and Diane have Washington plates on their truck?"

Her brows puckered together. "Why?"

"I drove out to the mill to see if I could get an address for them."

"Did you get one?"

"No. Gordy Lewis and his secretary said Steve didn't leave a forwarding address."

Lily stuffed her hands covered with gloves into her jacket pockets. "I don't understand why Steve and Diane just packed up and left. If it was a family emergency, I would have held the cabin open for them. I can't believe Bob, the foreman at the mill, wouldn't have held his job for him. Steve told me he quit." She had a different slant on the story.

"And you believed him?"

Irritation flashed in her eyes. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Rumor has it Steve was fired for trying to sell drugs."

"Who told you that?"

"About everybody I talk to, including Gordy Lewis."

Lily frowned. "That doesn't surprise me. Gordy Lewis is full of himself. If he doesn't like someone, he usually gets rid of him. He owns the business. Bob is just the foreman."

Her assessment of Lewis was accurate as far as Jake was concerned. "Do you know if the two men had a beef with each other?"

She shook her head. "Steve was outgoing and friendly. It was hard not to like him."

She staunchly defended the young couple. The other people in town believed the drug story and didn't seem interested in questioning its validity.

Jake asked his original question again. "Did Steve and Diane have Washington plates?"

She nodded.

"Do you have the plate number in your records?"

Lily studied him for a few seconds. "Are you a private investigator or something?"

Or something. If he tried hard, he could find another home for the dog or take it to the animal shelter down in Kalispell. However, his poking around wasn't about the dog. As ex-cop, trying to solve a case was in his blood, whether or not he still wore the badge.

He cleared his throat. He should leave well enough alone, but things didn't seem to stack up right for the young couple. "I'm not a P.I."

Lily kicked one toe of her boot into the snow. "What do you do?"

Jake didn't talk about what he had done for over twenty years. For the last three months, he wandered the western half of the states like a gypsy. He carefully dodged all questions about his past life, but the way she watched him made him want to 'fess up. "I used to be in law enforcement." That was a broad term. He could have been a prison guard.

"Hmmm..." She poked her boot at the snow again.

Silence hung between them, thick as the ice crusted on the lake.

Lily chewed on her full bottom lip while she stared at him. After a few seconds, she blinked, and her gaze slid away from him toward the lake. Jake had seen the interest in her eyes, if only for a brief moment. His heart beat just a tad faster.

She glanced back at him. "I do have their license plate number in my files."

"You willing to share it with me?"

She regarded him again with another probing look. "Sure, why not?"

Lily trusted him. The burden on his shoulders lifted just a fraction.

* * * *

Lily scrolled through the files in her computer until she found Steve and Diane's license plate number. She jotted the number down, then handed the paper over the counter to Jake. His fingers accidentally brushed against hers and sent sparks sailing through her body.

"Thanks," he said.

She wondered what his smile would be like. Since she met him, she hadn't seen him smile. He had a lean face, strong cheekbones, and she assumed the lines etched from the corner of his eyes were laugh lines.

"What do you hope to find?" Lily asked.

"At least their previous address before they moved here."

"They might not have gone back to their previous address. I got the impression they rented back in Seattle."

Jake lifted a shoulder. "That may be true. I'll have to follow the trail to see where it leads me."

She unzipped her fleece jacket and plucked off her hat. "What exactly did you do in law enforcement?"

His expression turned shadowy and dark. His gaze shifted past her shoulder. She'd pushed too hard. Something or someone in his past haunted him. She sensed his feelings and now regretted her question. She dropped her jacket and hat on the chair behind the counter. "Please forget I asked. It's none of my business." For some unexplainable reason, she wanted to know Jake Ramsey unlike other men she'd met over the past three years.

He caught her eye. "I was a cop." He spoke in a hard, brittle tone.

Was. She sensed there was much more to the story, but she didn't pry. "I see."

"Why aren't you married, Lily?"

His brown eyes were so intense, she had to look away. Why did he ask her that? She combed a hand through her hair and fought back the urge to turn tail and run. Three years ago, she buried more than her husband and father of her son. She'd also buried her feelings, needs, and any desire for a man.

Why did Jake care if she was married or not? She wore her wedding ring for fifteen months after John died. Her ring hid in the top dresser drawer in her bedroom, tucked in a tiny box buried under her lingerie. "I was. My husband died three years ago in a car accident."

He nodded. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Lily shrugged. "Don't worry about it." She could talk about it now. For months, she hadn't been able to talk about John. "Life goes on."

"Yeah, it does." Jake's voice sounded flat and devoid of emotion.

They watched each other across the counter. The two of them had each shared

something about their lives. With reluctance, but they had shared. She considered asking him if he would like a cup of coffee. She frequently visited and served coffee and cookies to her guests. For some reason, she held back. Besides, a secret, shared sexual tension floated about them like morning fog over the lake.

He held up the sheet of paper. "I'd better check this out."

"Yeah."

"I'll see you later."

He held her gaze as he backed away from the counter. Heat pooled in all the right places of her body, reminding her she was still a woman with needs. Jake dredged up long forgotten feelings. He frowned when he bumped into the door and gave her a burning look before he disappeared outside.

Feeling a flush sweep through her body, Lily watched the dogs trot after him. She vowed she wouldn't ask Jake Ramsey another personal question. She'd sensed his attraction for her this morning when he had walked into cabin eight. She saw it in his eyes. Sexual chemistry between the two of them. Although she'd cut herself off from men, a few had attempted to spend time with her. She always discouraged their advances.

Lily didn't like admitting he stirred yearnings inside of her. For the past three years, all desires had been stashed under the rubble of her grief. She grabbed her jacket and hat off the chair and wandered through her house to the kitchen. Each and every time she encountered Jake, her emotions took a sharp swerve to the right.

She decided to have a solitary cup of coffee.

Chapter 3

Jake found Steve Watson's license plate number in the Washington Department of Vehicles base. He scribbled down Steve's previous address in Seattle, then brought up his driver's license. Steve's long, blonde hair fell to his shoulders, but the young guy looked neat and clean. He didn't look like a drug dealer or user from his picture. However, appearances could be deceiving, as Jake knew from experience. The same address showed on his driver's license as the plates. Jake jotted down the information. He picked up his cell phone and dialed information.

The number from Steve Watson's previous address had been disconnected.

Dead-end.

Jake called the office, wanting to hear Lily's voice. When she answered, the sound of her soft, feminine voice riled his senses. If she knew about his past, she'd probably boot his ass out. "Lily, it's Jake."

"Um...hi."

"Sorry to bother you, but I need Diane's last name?"

"Shepherd."

"Do you have any info on her?"

"Everything was in Steve's name."

Another dead end. "Okay. Well, thanks." Jake couldn't figure out how to prolong the conservation.

"You're welcome."

He held the phone to his ear for a second before he turned it off, wishing like hell he was still talking to her. Jake located Diane Shepherd's driver's license. He had a feeling the picture didn't do her justice. She had auburn hair, long and straight and parted in the middle. Her green eyes and flawless complexion added to her attractiveness. Her

address matched Steve's.

Scowling because he'd hit a brick wall, Jake got up, went to the counter, and made a pot of coffee.

Lily was a widow. Did she have another man in her life now? The green-eyed monster nipped at him. He'd just met her a few hours ago, and his emotions already raced down a fast track.

Jake found a mug in the cupboard and set it on the counter. He drummed his fingers on the counter and waited for the coffee to finish. She crowded his thoughts like shoppers in a busy mall.

He needed to concentrate on Steve Watson and Diane Shepherd. Instincts sharpened by over twenty years as a homicide detective, Jake had a gut feeling about the abrupt disappearance of the young couple, and it wasn't good. He reminded himself he was no longer a cop. He had turned in his badge and resigned after what had happened, but he was still a cop at heart. It was all he knew. All he ever wanted to know.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat back down at the table. Jake searched the program of the Washington criminal database again. He noted that Diane didn't that a record either, which didn't mean a damn thing. The couple could have been dealing drugs and never been caught. He sipped his coffee for a few minutes before he picked up his cell phone again.

Lily answered after the first ring. Her feminine voice floated to him like a song over the radio.

"Did you clean Steve and Diane's cabin for them?"

"No, I gave them a discount for doing their own cleaning. As a matter of fact, I forgot to mention that to you. You can have a discount if you clean your cabin."

Jake didn't need or want a discount. "Housework's not my thing." Besides, he wanted Lily to come into his cabin, however many times a week.

"Okay, then, I'll clean it."

"Did you find anything in their cabin after they left?"

"Like what?"

"Drugs. Evidence of drugs."

She hesitated. "I refuse to believe the rumor about Steve being fired for drugs."

Jake respected her loyalty to the young couple, but that didn't mean Steve wasn't guilty. "Have you rented it out since they left?"

"No, but starting tomorrow, it's reserved for three days."

"Can I take a look at it?"

"I've already cleaned it, and I didn't find anything. So what could you be looking for?"

"I won't know 'til I find it."

Five minutes later, Lily met him at cabin three with the key in her hand. As he followed her into the cabin, it struck him hard how much he liked being with her.

She shot him a doubtful look.

"I won't mess anything up." When she didn't answer, he said, "Promise."

That actually made her smile. "I'm going to hold you to that."

He grinned back at her. A feeling of surprise trickled through him that his face didn't crack like old, crusty plaster. His grin still worked.

Her smile disappeared, and wariness filled her eyes. Jake turned away, sensing Lily's vulnerability, and concentrated on the cabin.

The cabin was identical to his in structure but furnished with different colors. This cabin's primary color was navy blue. He walked to the bedroom first. He opened the dresser drawers before moving it away from the wall and pushed it back into place when he didn't find anything behind it. Jake lifted the mattress and peered under it.

"I know you're not going to find anything."

He was so involved in searching the place, he hadn't heard Lily come up behind him. He dropped the mattress back into place before he wheeled around to face her. "People aren't always what they appear to be."

She lifted her chin. "I know that."

"How well did you know them?"

"Well enough." Lily paused while she tugged off her gloves. "Diane and I hung out together. She was nice. We even went shopping down in Kalispell a couple of times. And she helped me a few weekends during hunting season cleaning the cabins."

"They must have left the same day he was fired." Jake scratched the back of his neck. "They gave you a different story than the rest of the town is telling. That's pretty damn fast if he was innocent."

"If he was fired," she reminded him. "Besides, there are no other jobs in town this time of year."

Jake hadn't considered that. "So Diane only worked part-time cleaning?"

"Two nights a week."

Jake gave the bedroom area another glance, but he had a feeling he wouldn't find anything. As he brushed past her, he caught her eye for a moment, feeling the sparks arcing between them. His jaw tightened as he headed for the bathroom. He lifted the lid off the toilet tank before he flushed it.

Lily followed him again. "I'm telling you, you're not going to find anything." Fire glinted in her hazel eyes.

"You're probably right, but it never hurts to check."

"Why don't you go interrogate Gordy Lewis if you think something suspicious is going on?"

"I tried. He's smooth."

"He probably didn't like Steve for some reason or another. That's his style."

Jake leaned one hip against the sink and crossed his arms over his chest. "Did he fire a lot of people?"

"Occasionally."

"Sometimes, when people get fired, they'll blame it on the boss and won't accept responsibility for their part in it."

"Steve was very responsible. He never missed a day of work. He always left in plenty of time to get to the mill."

Jake admired her for defending the young couple. "Did you talk to Diane before they packed up and left?"

Lily shook her head. Regret laced her voice. "I didn't have time. I had a dozen calls to make, and I kept getting incoming calls. I saw her in their truck as they drove out of here."

"Did she wave at you?"

She gave him a look of, Are you for real? "I saw them leave from my office."

"And Stormy?"

"You already asked me about Stormy."

He hated interrogating her, but details were important in an investigation.

"He was in the back of their truck."

Jake mulled these facts over in his mind. "They all left together, but Stormy shows up in town."

"I guess. I don't know when he was spotted in town."

The motel manager's son, Brent, had spotted him on Saturday, a week ago today. "They left last Wednesday?"

"Yeah."

Four days after the couple left, the dog showed up in town. Most everyone else took it for granted that Steve Watson had been selling drugs. Lily refused to believe the rumors circulating around town. "Did they make any friends here besides you?"

She shrugged. "Nobody they got close to, that I know of. The locals are slow to open up to strangers."

Jake wasn't how much he could do. His hands were tied. He had no authority to conduct an investigation. The best he could do was poke his nose around and see what he could dig up.

Lily trailed behind him into the kitchen, where he did a thorough search. He checked the couch last. He pulled off the cushions and put them back in place before he lifted one end of the couch.

"I think you're wasting your time." She stood at the opposite end of the couch, her hands on her hips.

Her annoyance at him for searching the cabin aroused him. He held her eye, feeling the heat swell inside of his body. She must have felt it, too, because she quickly looked away from him and fidgeted with the zipper of her jacket.

"You're probably right," Jake finally said.

* * * *

Jake laid the paperback novel down on his chest, yawned, and stretched his arms over his head. After he folded a corner on the page, he closed the book and dropped it on the night stand. Staring up at the ceiling, he worked the facts over in his mind about Steve Watson and Diane Shepherd. Stormy snored on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Images of Lily, her glossy brown hair and fringed bangs, kept distracting him. She had smiled at him, and he had grinned back at her. A simple gesture, but for him, a major hurdle. Plus, it rattled her.

His ex, Sandy, had thought he was scum. Probably lower than scum. He hung around long enough for the divorce to be final. He would just as soon have split Portland after he stripped himself of his badge and Sandy kicked him out of the house. Five months ago, he made a fatal mistake and deserved to be banished from the detective force.

Jake shut off the lamp on the night stand. He rolled to his side and punched the pillow three times, to soften it or release his hostilities. The last woman he shared a bed with was a cocktail waitress. Now, he wanted Lily. Tess, the waitress, had been good to him. She took him in for two days and nights.

The burden of guilt weighed heavily on his heart. He'd killed a man in the line of duty. The wrong man. An innocent man. He rolled onto his back again and gnashed his teeth together. His captain had suspended him, followed by an internal investigation that had found him innocent. Guilty of a bad judgment call, but still innocent. The brotherhood of cops.

Only because I was a cop. People didn't want to believe a cop could do wrong, could make a fatal mistake.

He could have gone back on duty, but he resigned. He stripped himself of his badge and job. Self-inflicted punishment. Since internal affairs hadn't seen fit to punish him, he had decided to punish himself.

Jake threw the blankets back and got out of bed. He wandered through the dark cabin to the kitchen. In the top cupboard of the tiny kitchen, he plucked the bottle of Jack Daniels off the shelf. He twisted off the cap and took a long, burning swallow. He leaned against the counter and took another swig. Stormy padded into the kitchen, sat down, and watched Jake.

He wondered how long he could have a dog and not touch it. Brown eyes gazed at him. The mutt hadn't complained about the lack of physical affection. Stormy seemed to sense and accept Jake's distance. Whiskey bottle in his hand, he squatted down to eye

level with the dog.

With his free hand, he motioned to the dog. Stormy hesitated, then slowly came over to Jake and sat down a foot from him. He reached out and patted his head. Stormy inched closer. He scratched behind the dog's scruffy ear. "This is temporary," he warned. "Just temporary."

Stormy thumped his tail.

Chapter 4

At nine o'clock Sunday evening, Lily raced out of the office. She scrambled into her jacket as she hurried across the parking area. Rosey trotted in front of her with her long tail swinging, happy to be out of the house and frolicking in the snow. Lily's heart pounded, and her palms turned clammy as she hustled to Jake's cabin.

She pounded her fist on the door. "Jake! Are you up? Jake?"

Several moments later, Jake opened the door. "What the hell is going on?"

She panted hard, out of breath.

He took her arm and pulled her inside. She heard the door bang behind her.

He laid his hands on her shoulders. "Talk to me."

Lily sucked in a deep breath. "They found Steve...and Diane." The horror of what had happened to her friends had nausea pooling in her stomach and her hands shaking.

"Where? When? Are they okay?" He fired questions at her like bullets from a gun.

She shook her head. "No." She gulped in another deep breath. "They're—they're dead."

"Shit," Jack mumbled.

She stared at the plain white tee shirt underneath his unbuttoned flannel shirt.

He tugged her closer. "Look at me. How did they die?"

Still struggling to come to terms with what had happened to her friends, she raised her eyes. "They think suicide."

"Suicide?" He frowned. "You mean, the cops?"

"The county sheriff's department."

Jake put his arm around her and held her close as he guided her toward the couch.

The feel of his solid, warm body holding her offered her comfort from the sadness clenching her heart. Shivering, she wanted to snuggle up close to him.

Jake sat her down and disappeared. Missing his touch already, she fought to ignore the chill invading her body. He returned with a blanket, which he wrapped around her before he sat down next to her. He swung his arm over her shoulders and gathered her close to him. Lily wanted to rest her head on his sturdy shoulder, but she didn't.

"Do you want some coffee? You're shaking pretty damn bad."

The frigid night temperature hadn't caused her to shake. She shook her head.

"Tell me what happened," Jake coaxed. "And how you found out."

She worked to separate her shocked and tangled thoughts. "Peggy Caldwell, a friend of mine, called me. Her brother-in-law, Mike, is a county deputy. A group of guys out riding their snowmobiles from Kalispell found Steve and Diane this afternoon."

Jake tightened his hold on her. "Where?"

"About six miles north of town off a logging road."

"Were they in their truck?"

Lily turned slightly to look at him. "They said it was carbon monoxide poisoning. There was a rag stuffed in the exhaust pipe." His dark eyes resembled a poker player's in a high stakes game in Vegas. He didn't say anything, just letting his gaze wander away from her. "Jake?"

He brought his eyes back at her. "Do you think they would do that?"

"No. I don't." She shook her head. "No. I can't believe it. Can you do something?"

Jake took her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "I don't know. I have no authority in Montana, or anywhere, for that matter."

"I know Steve and Diane didn't—didn't kill themselves."

He didn't answer her. His face hardened as the underside of his jaw tightened.

"Do you think they were murdered?" She nearly choked on the word murdered.

"I honestly don't know."

"Please tell me you can do something."

Jake's face softened a bit as his eyes met her gaze. After a time, he said, "I can't make any promises, but I'll try."

Oh, how she wanted to cuddle up against him, close her eyes, and try to forget what happened to Steve and Diane. There was no forgetting—she knew from experience. "I'd better go home."

"Are you going to be okay?"

Jake's concern cut a tiny wedge into her heart. "Yeah."

He stood, took her hand, and hoisted her to her feet. The blanket dropped to the

floor. He grabbed it and tossed it on the couch. "I'll walk you home."

On the way back to her house, he didn't touch her. Lily longed to take his hand and hold it. The dogs roughhoused in front of them and nipped at each other. At her house, Jake opened the door to the office and followed her inside. She spun around to face him. He rubbed the back of his neck. Lily recognized that gesture.

"I could sleep on your couch, if that would make it better."

You could sleep in my bed. For three years, she hadn't wanted another man. Since meeting Jake, her emotions had capsized. "I'm okay," she said with more conviction than she felt.

"I don't want to scare you." He paused. "Do you have a gun, by any chance?"

The image of murder clambered back into her thoughts. "Two. A shotgun and thirty-oh-six hunting rifle. My husband hunted."

"Do you know how to use them?"

When they had first married, John taught her to shoot. She never took up hunting, but she had practiced until she was good. "Yes." She kept the shotgun under her bed.

"I'll give you my cell number in case I'm not at my cabin." Jake angled to the counter and found a pad and pen. He jotted down his number, then walked back to her and wrapped her hand around the paper. "Memorize it."

His hand tightened around hers. "Lock all your doors."

Fear stung her senses. "You know it wasn't suicide."

"Not tonight, Lily. Just do what I say. And try to get some sleep. We'll talk again in the morning."

The words tumbled from her before she could stop them. "Come for breakfast."

Surprise and appreciation flickered in his eyes. "I'd like that."

* * * *

At seven-thirty the following morning, Jake strode into Lily's office. Rosey had greeted Stormy and him near the picnic area. The dogs were now trolling the lakeshore. He hesitated, not sure what to do. A small metal gold bell sat on the counter. He wondered if he should ring it or just barge into Lily's private domain. He sidled around the counter to the open door, then raised his hand and knocked on the doorframe.

"Is that you, Jake?"

"Yeah."

"I'm in the kitchen."

Jake stepped into her large living room. As he ambled toward the kitchen, he sensed the feel of the room. Warm and homey. A plump, dark brown couch was the focal point of the room, with wood tables and lamps on either end. Across the room sat a combination TV/DVD player on a stand. A cast-iron wood stove wedged into the corner pumped out its warmth. A half-dozen wildlife paintings of various big games animals

decorated the walls.

He rounded the corner and spotted Lily flipping pancakes on a griddle. The smell of fresh-brewed coffee filled the open, airy kitchen. Plates, mugs, and a bottle of maple syrup sat on the table. The large window next to the table showed off a spectacular view of the frozen lake and surrounding shore line.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Morning." She had on her faded blue jeans and an olive-green long-sleeved sweater.

"Morning." Jake walked over to her. "Smells good." He wasn't referring to the delicious smell of breakfast cooking. It was the clean, fresh womanly scent of Lily that intoxicated him.

"Pancakes are almost done." She stacked steamy, golden brown pancakes on a plate. "I hope you like wild huckleberry pancakes."

"I've never had them before."

She turned and handed him the plate. "Then you don't know what you're missing."

Lily appeared to be in a cheerful mood, but Jake immediately noticed the grey smudges under her eyes. She hadn't slept last night.

"Can I help?" He took the plate from her.

"Just put the plate on the table and get comfortable."

Jake did as he was told.

"How do you like your coffee?" She asked from behind him.

"Black." He set the plate in the center of the table, then pulled out a chair and sat down.

Lily came over to the table, holding another plate heaped with crisp bacon and a glass carafe of coffee.

He watched her fill their mugs. Her fingers were long and her nails bare of polish. She wore no hand jewelry. She left the table and returned with two small glasses of orange juice. He didn't remember the last time he had a home-cooked meal. What he did in the kitchen didn't classify as cooking.

She settled across from him and caught his eye for a moment before she glanced away. Jake had looked forward to sharing breakfast with her. He'd even whistled in the shower.

Lily cleared her throat. "Dig in before everything gets cold." She lifted the plate of pancakes and held it out to him.

Jake forked off four large pancakes and helped himself to four bacon strips. He downed his orange juice in one quick swallow. After he finished with his breakfast, he looked at her. "This is the best breakfast I've had in I don't know how long."

She smiled. "You eat out a lot."

Why did her smile do things to him? Jake picked up his mug. "Yeah." Even as a cop, he'd eaten out frequently. Lunches on the run, donuts and coffee for breakfast.

"If you're still hungry, I can whip up more pancake batter."

When she offered to fix him more of her delicious pancakes, his chest tightened unexpectedly for a moment. Even his ex-wife didn't do breakfast. Coffee and forty-five minutes in the bathroom every morning, doing her hair and makeup for her career.

Jake avoided her eyes. "No, thanks. This will do."

Lily didn't answer, just finished her breakfast. "Are you married?"

He wasn't proud of his failed marriage. "Divorced. No kids."

The discovery of Steve and Diane's bodies hung between them like dense fog over the ocean. He stood up and took his plate to the sink. He returned with the coffee pot. A look of surprise passed over her face when he filled up her mug.

"Thanks."

Jake realized after he refilled his mug that he had made himself at home in Lily's house. He walked back to the table and sat down again. "Thanks for breakfast."

She pushed her empty plate away. "You're welcome." Her eyes lingered on him for several moments.

He wondered if she ate breakfast alone every morning. "Do you have any kids?"

She cradled her mug in her hands and leaned her elbows on the table. "One son, Kyle. He's a sophomore in college in Missoula."

He envied Lily her child. Sandy and he had never gotten around to having children. "What's he studying?"

"Oh...general courses for now. He's not exactly sure what he wants to do. I'm just grateful he wanted to go to college. I didn't want him ending up at the mill."

Jake could understand that. The mill probably paid well, but there were opportunities outside of Mountaintop her son would discover.

After she took a sip, she set the mug down in front of her and looked him directly in the eye. "What about Steve and Diane?"

The discussion had been inevitable. He had savored the quiet, filling breakfast, sitting across from Lily. "Like I said last night, I'm not sure what I can do."

"What department were you in when you were a cop?"

Jake's fingers tightened around the handle of his mug. "I was a detective. Homicide. But like I said, I have no authority." He waited for her to ask more questions, but she didn't. Relief inched through him.

"But you know how to conduct an investigation."

He was an ace detective until he had screwed up royally. Jake scratched the back of his neck. "I don't know how well people are going to take to me nosing around asking questions. I get the feeling that Mountaintop is not the friendliest little town." Lily shrugged. "Like I said before, it takes the locals some time to warm up to a stranger."

She seemed to be warming up to him, which suited him just fine. "Do you know where their truck was found?"

Her eyes misted over. "Pretty much. Peggy told me where. I could find it."

"That would be a starting point."

Lily drank more coffee. "I'm having a hard time comprehending that Steve and Diane committed suicide. I'm also having an even harder time comprehending murder."

Jake reached across the table and took her hand. Her fingers tightened around his. He wrestled with the heat rocketing through him. "We don't know anything for sure at this point. Everything is speculation so far."

"We could go now. I can show you where they found their truck."

"Can you just leave?"

"Sure. I do it all the time. I lock up, tape a note to the office door, and take my cell phone with me."

Jake would rather she gave him directions. He wanted to shield her from the scene of the crime if it turned out be an actual crime scene. Unfortunately, he didn't know the area. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

"I don't know if I'm up to it or not, but it's something that needs to be done."

* * * *

The vivid blue morning sky mocked the temperature, which hovered in the midteens. Jake steered his truck down the logging road that wove back and forth like a snake in the grass. The tree branches, covered with thick snow, sagged under the weight. Lily remained silent. The dogs were in the back of the truck, barking frequently when they spotted a deer.

"I think we're almost there," she said.

Jake slowed. The road had recently been plowed, and snow berms lined each side.

"There's a secondary road off to the left."

As they rounded a corner, Jake spotted the road. The snow berm had been smashed down by other trucks. He stopped next to it and rolled down his window. It was obvious there had been quite a lot of traffic down the road. He eased his truck onto it and glanced over at Lily. "How far does it go back?"

"Maybe a quarter of a mile, if that."

"It's a dead end?"

"It's blocked off for grizzly bear recovery. Most of the secondary roads are around here."

"They were found at the end of the road, then?"

She stared straight ahead. "That's what Peggy said."

Jake wished like hell he hadn't brought her with him. There was no turning back now. He doubted they would find anything. A week and a half had passed since Steve and Diane had disappeared. Any potential evidence would be concealed under a foot of new snow.

The end of the road widened into a half circle. Past that, a large metal gate blocked any further access of the road. Dozens of tire tracks flattened down the snow. Jake stopped and let his truck idle. "Do you want to wait here while I look around?"

Lily unhooked her seat belt. "Two sets of eyes are better than one." She opened her door and climbed out.

He cursed under his breath and killed the ignition. He got out and headed to the back of his truck. She already had the canopy door open. Rosey leaped out and starting sniffing the ground.

"Come on, Stormy," Lily coaxed the dog.

Stormy sat on his haunches and stared at her.

"Come on, boy," she tried again. The dog refused to budge. "There's something wrong with him." She glanced at Jake, a worried look in her eyes.

He studied his adopted dog. He could have sworn Stormy's eyes were filled with fear. He reached around Lily and patted Stormy on his furry head. He still didn't move. "Let him be. We'll leave the door open. If he wants out, he'll get out."

He caught a glimpse of Lily's eyes before she circled around. He saw fear in her eyes, too. He wanted to gather her into his arms. Instead, he let his gaze roam the immediate area.

Carbon monoxide poisoning was clean. There would be no blood left behind. If there had been a struggle, the recent snowfall would have covered any signs of one. Lily wandered around the parking area—looking for what, he wasn't sure. Rosey trailed behind her. He glanced over his shoulder at Stormy, who lay down and dropped his head on his paws.

If there had been foul play, Steve and Diane had been subdued in some way to allow someone to turn their truck on and stuff a rag in the exhaust pipe. He started edging his way around the perimeter of the parking area and figured it was hopeless to even look. Jake trudged through the deep snow where tire tracks hadn't smashed it down. The bottom of the tree trunks didn't have much snow under them because of the thick sprawling branches.

He moved slowly and kept a sharp eye under the trees. When he drew close to the metal gate, he noticed it. About four feet from the end of the gate, under a giant fur tree, a prescription pill bottle stuck out of the snow. Jake squatted down and studied it. The brown plastic bottle still had the cap secured to the top of it. Its label had been peeled off. He unzipped his jacket pocket and dug out a plastic zippered sandwich bag. Since he had on gloves, he carefully picked the bottle up and dropped it into the bag.

"Jake!"

The alarm in Lily's voice had him scrambling to his feet. She waved at him from under a stand of trees across the parking area. Her red knit hat stuck out like a sore thumb. "What is it?"

"I...found something."

Jake stuffed the bag into jacket pocket as he made his way over to her. She hooked her finger around Rosey's collar to hold the dog in place. He looked down and saw a blue- and white-striped wool scarf partially buried under the snow.

He squeezed Lily's shoulder. "Do you recognize it?"

Her voice trembled. "Diane had one just like it."

Jake kicked at the snow to clear it away from the scarf. He wondered about the competency of the county sheriff's department. They had missed two critical pieces of evidence. He turned back to her. "Are you okay?"

Her face paled. "Yeah."

"Behind the seat of my truck is a roll of plastic garbage bags. Would you mind getting me one?"

She stared at him for a moment. He wanted to kick himself for bringing her out here in the first place. A good set of directions would have been sufficient for him to find his way out here. Lily spun around and hiked back toward his truck, Rosey at her side.

He considered leaving the scarf where they had found it, but he had already bagged the medication bottle. He searched under the trees until he found a twig sturdy enough to pluck the scarf out of the snow. She returned with a white plastic garbage bag and handed it to him.

"Jake."

"Why don't you go back and wait in the truck?"

Lily wrapped her arms around herself. "This isn't good. I mean, this is really bad, finding Diane's scarf."

Finding the scarf and pill bottle created a grim scenario. "I found an empty prescription bottle with the label torn off."

"Ohmigod ... "

"We don't know for certain this is Diane's scarf."

"I know it is." Lily dragged in a calming breath. "She wore it every single day. She told me her mother bought it for her before she and Steve moved here."

Jake's gut agreed with her.

"Maybe we should just leave it and call the sheriff," Lily said.

He fought back the urge to hug her close to him. "The sheriff and his deputies were already here, and they missed it."

"What are you going to do with it?"

A damned good question. "Take it with us."

Jake poked the stick at the scarf to lift it.

"The only murders committed around here are people who know each other. They get ticked off at each other, and one of them pulls a gun. They're usually drunk. The sheriff's department doesn't have a lot of experience dealing with murder."

Jake didn't answer her as he extracted the long scarf from the snow and started pushing it into the bag. He didn't have the authority to check out some deputy's butt for carelessness. In his book, there was no excuse for missing the pill bottle and Diane's scarf. The scarf and medication bottle weren't that far away from where the couple had been discovered. He stuffed the scarf into the bag and dropped the stick.

"This shouldn't have been missed." Jake tied a knot in the top of the bag. He decided to change the subject. "How's Stormy doing?"

Lily rubbed her hands together. "He's back there looking all pitiful." She held Jake's eye. "He knows. He knows what happened here."

Why leave the dog behind? Suicide or murder, Stormy was a loose end. "Unfortunately for us humans, dogs can't talk." He grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's go."

Silently, Lily walked beside him to his truck. He wanted to search more, but he would come back later. According to the recent weather report, the skies should stay clear for a few days. Now that he knew the location, he wouldn't need to subject her to any unnecessary crime scene investigating.

Chapter 5

Jake rested his shoulder against the window frame and stared out at the lake illuminated by the clear sky and quarter-sliced moon. He sipped brandy from a stubby glass. Closing in on midnight, and sleep eluded him. A feeling of helplessness hung over him like the sliver of moon high above the frozen lake.

Lily had pinned her hopes on him solving Steve and Diane's murders. There wasn't any conclusive evidence that the couple had been murdered, but his gut instincts warned him that had been the case. He'd been a cop for too many years to not listen to his gut.

The empty prescription bottle and Diane's scarf were critical evidence. He had no evidence tools to work with. Tomorrow, he would take the scarf and bottle to the county sheriff. It was all he could do. He drained the last of the brandy from the glass, then ambled into the kitchen and set the glass in the sink.

Jake shut the lights off in the cabin on his way to the bedroom. He wanted to help catch the bastard or bastards who had murdered her friends. He stripped off his jeans and flannel shirt, but left on his white tee shirt and long thermal underwear bottoms. The sense of impotence followed him to bed and weighed heavily on his shoulders. He killed the light on the night stand and forced himself to relax.

Images of Lily naked drifted through his head. He wanted her womanly curves wrapped around him. He longed to see her face flushed while making love to her. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up with an aching hard-on and would never get to sleep.

Jake cussed and pummeled the pillow with his fist. He dropped on his back and hoped like hell he would sleep.

The following morning, Jake stopped his truck in front of the county sheriff's office in Kalispell. A wealth of doubts plagued him. He would be asked a lot of questions about why he even had the scarf and pill bottle in his possession. He'd have to wing it.

* * * *

Inside the building, old memories washed through him. There was a particular atmosphere about a cop shop. Two uniformed officers, each holding a Styrofoam cup, were shooting the breeze in the far corner of the room. He noticed the receptionist's desk off to the right. A young woman with carrot-colored hair sat in front of her computer, her fingers flying over the keyboard.

Jake walked to her desk.

She glanced up at him, her green eyes only mildly curious. "Can I help you?"

His fingers tightened around the plastic bag he held in his left hand. "Yes. I need to talk to a deputy."

"And your reason would be?"

"I found a few items that might be of interest concerning the recent deaths of a young couple."

That tidbit of information got her attention. She sat up straighter in her chair. "You mean the couple found by the snow catters north of Mountaintop?"

Jake nodded.

The woman's brows knitted together. "That was a suicide."

He shrugged. "I still have some items a deputy might like to see." Jake could almost see the wheels churning inside her head.

She swiveled her desk chair around. "Roy. Can you come here for a sec?"

The leaner of the two deputies glanced over in Jake and the receptionist's direction. His gaze settled on Jake. The deputy pushed away from the wall and wove his way through the scattering of desks in the room.

"This gentleman says he found a couple of things pertaining to the double suicide up at Mountaintop."

The deputy regarded him. "Okay, come over to my desk and have a seat." He motioned Jake with the Styrofoam cup.

Jake followed him to a corner desk and lowered himself to the straight-backed, uncomfortable chair next to the deputy's desk. He opened the bag. Each item sat in a separate, clear plastic bag. He took the items out, then laid them on the desk. He read the name tag pinned to the deputy's dark brown shirt. Roy Hudson.

The deputy shot a suspicious glance in Jake's direction before he finally picked up the two bags. "Where did you get these?"

"Where Steve Watson and Diane Shepherd were found."

He leveled another suspicious look on Jake. "You a friend of theirs?"

"No. I'm staying at the Creek Cabins out of Mountaintop. Lily Baker, the owner, was friends with them. She was really upset when she heard about their deaths. She wanted to go out and see where it happened. We stumbled across the bottle and scarf. Lily's positive it was Diane's scarf."

The deputy leaned back in his chair. "How did you know to put them in bags? You watch a lot of cop TV?"

Jake lifted a shoulder.

"According to the deputies who responded to the scene, it was cut and dry."

Jake leaned back, too. "Lily doesn't think so. The couple rented a cabin from her for several months. She was good friends with Diane."

"People close to the victims always deny suicide."

"Maybe."

He studied Hudson, but the man's face gave nothing away. "Did you know Watson had been fired from the mill recently?"

The deputy leaned forward and dropped the bags on a pile of papers on his desk. "Yeah, for selling drugs."

"Lily doesn't believe that, either."

"I know who she is," Deputy Hudson said. "Her husband died in a car accident a few years back. Why didn't she come with you if she's so concerned?"

"She has a business to run."

Jake refrained from asking Deputy Hudson if he planned on doing anything about the medication bottle and scarf. He didn't want to push his luck.

The deputy stared at the bags on his desk, thoughtful for a while. He glanced up at Jake. "Thanks for bringing these in, Mr...?"

"Ramsey. Jake."

"We'll take them into consideration."

Jake knew when he was told to hit the road. He stood up and looked down at the man. "Are you going to have autopsies done?"

The deputy scrutinized him again. "Standard procedure."

Jake nodded before he turned to leave.

"Mr. Ramsey."

He tilted his head in the deputy's direction.

"Did you just move to Mountaintop?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What do you do for a living?"

Jake had expected this and more. "I'm on vacation, driving cross country. I'm stopping here and there and staying for a while if I like the place." He snaked his way around the desks, expecting to be stopped again. He didn't hear another word from the deputy as he left the sheriff's office.

* * * *

Two log trucks, their trailers empty, were just pulling out from behind the mill when Jake stopped in front of the office. The driver of the first truck, a young man in his late twenties, sneered at Jake as he steered the log truck past him.

He watched the truck roll out of the parking lot and disappear down the snowpacked road. Jake stood for a minute and watched the other truck pass by him, but that driver didn't even glance in his direction. An uneasy feeling needled him as he strode to the office door and opened it. He wanted to see if he could rattle Gordy Lewis' chain.

This time, Carrie stood at a metal file cabinet at the back of the room. She turned slightly and saw Jake. Then, she quickly turned back to the cabinet and pulled out a file. He noticed a brief flash of panic in her gaze.

She walked toward him, wearing tight black jeans and another snug sweater. "What can I do for you, Mr. Ramsey?" She didn't smile.

"I'd like to see Mr. Lewis."

"He's busy."

"I can wait." Jake glanced across the room. "I'll just have a seat over there."

"He's going to be busy for the rest of the morning." Carrie dropped the file folder on her desk, giving him an annoyed look.

"Maybe he'll need a break and can spare a few minutes."

"Look, Mr. Ramsey. I said Mr. Lewis is tied up for the rest of the morning."

Was Carrie trying to protect her boss? Loyalty, or something more intimate involving a man and a woman? "Did you hear about Steve and Diane?"

"Of course I heard," she snapped.

"A real tragedy."

Instead of looking compassionate about Steve and Diane's death, Carrie's eyes filled with anger. Why would their deaths make Gordy Lewis' secretary angry?

She glared at him. Jake remained nonchalant and casual. The oldest trick in the book. Every good cop knew it.

Carrie grabbed a pencil out of a small plastic holder on her desk. "I suppose you think it's Mr. Lewis' fault they committed suicide?"

Jake watched her knuckles turn white around the number two pencil. "Did I say that?"

"You didn't have to. You think because he fired Steve, they killed themselves."

"Is that what you think?"

Carrie started to say something, but stopped. Her painted red lips tightened into a thin line.

"Carrie, I need that file ... "

Jake glanced in the direction of Lewis's office. Gordy stood in the doorway, a

scowl on his face.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Lewis demanded.

Jake turned to face Lewis and kept his manner casual. "Carrie and I were just talking."

Lewis leveled his gaze first on Carrie, then on Jake. "What have you got to talk to my secretary about, Ramsey? If it's about that damn mutt, you can shoot it for all I care."

"I can see you're not an animal lover."

"What the hell?" Lewis strode over to him.

"Mr. Lewis," Carrie began.

He cut her off by raising his hand. "Unless you're here looking for a job, there's no reason for you to be at the mill, Ramsey."

Satisfaction inched through Jake, knowing he had rattled Lewis. "What if I were looking for a job?"

"There aren't any openings."

"What about Steve Watson's position? You asked me the other day if I was looking for work. You fill that already?"

"That's none of your business. If you don't get off my property, I'm calling the sheriff."

He believed that Gordy Lewis would do just that. "It's a shame about what happened to Steve and Diane."

Lewis glanced at Carrie briefly. "They were probably all drugged up. It happens all the time. Dopers OD."

Jake didn't argue with his theory. "Maybe."

Gordy Lewis's dark eyes glinted with steel. "Carrie, call the sheriff."

He stepped closer to Lewis. "That won't be necessary. I'm on my way." He wheeled around and headed for the door.

* * * *

Lily stood on the porch, dressed in her fleece jacket, knit hat, warm gloves, and her trademark faded jeans. She cradled a mug of hot, steamy green tea in her hands. Jake should be back by now. Normally, it took about an hour to drive to Kalispell. He'd been gone almost four hours now.

This is different, she told herself. John was her husband. She had waited that night and kept waiting until the sheriff had shown up. Jake wasn't her husband. He was...

When she spotted his truck coming down the road, her heart sped up just enough to annoy her. The dogs heard his truck, too, because they came trotting up from the lakeshore.

Lily waved when Jake glanced in her direction. He cruised over to the office. She

went down the steps while he shut off his truck and got out. She met him by the front fender. "You were gone a long time."

Jake leaned against his truck. "Were you worried?"

Why would he ask her that? Was she that obvious? "You're not used to driving on snowy roads."

"So far, I've been doing okay. I haven't landed in a ditch yet."

It was the first time she saw a twinkle of humor in his eyes and heard it in his voice. Lily jutted out her chin. "Doesn't mean it can't happen." John had been a safe, responsible driver, but that one snowy, January night, he lost control of his truck.

"Lily." He moved close to her, and cupped the back of her neck with his hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't make light of driving on winter roads."

The touch of his hand sent warm shivers through her body.

"The roads were bad, so I took my time. And I made an extra stop."

She forced herself to concentrate on the conversation. Jake, so close and touching her, distracted her. "Where?"

"At the mill."

Lily's brows puckered together. "Why? What happened when you took those things to the sheriff?"

"Nothing remarkable with the county sheriff. I talked to Deputy Hudson."

"I know who he is." Roy Hudson was the deputy who had knocked on her door late one January night.

Jake nodded. "I gave him the pill bottle and scarf." He lifted a shoulder. "He said he'd take them into consideration."

Deputy Hudson had gone out of his way that night to console her. She saw the sadness in his eyes when he gave her the news. "I think he's a decent man."

"He seemed competent. I stopped by the mill to talk to Gordy Lewis."

Lily scooted back from him. His hand fell to his side. "What happened?"

"He wasn't very cooperative. Is Carrie, his secretary, married?"

"No. Why?"

"You ever hear any rumors about the two of them?"

She shifted the mug to her other hand. "You mean, like, are they having an affair?"

"Yeah."

"Good God, he's way older than her."

"Come on. Things like that go on all the time."

"I suppose." She always made it point not to put too much stock in gossip, and

she hadn't heard anything about Gordy Lewis and Carrie. She did live in kind of an isolated world out here.

"Carrie seems damned protective of Lewis."

"He is her boss."

He'd been trained to be suspicious. Even if Lewis and Carrie shared a bed, that didn't mean Gordy shared his illegal secrets with her. If, in fact, Lewis was hiding something.

"Point taken." Jake pulled the mug from her hand and took a swallow. He frowned.

"Green tea. It's very good for you, full of antioxidants."

"I'll stick to coffee." He handed the mug back to her.

Lily's hand trembled slightly when she took the mug from him. She hoped Jake didn't notice. Husbands, wives, and lovers shared the same glass or mug.

"Number one," he said, "I don't want to raise any red flags, but I know I already have. And number two, Lewis threatened to call the sheriff on me for nosing around the mill."

"That doesn't surprise me. Gordy thinks the mill is his kingdom, and he's the king."

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Not particularly." He came onto her three months after John's death at the annual spring fireman's potluck and dance. Gordy's actions had sickened her. As far as she was concerned, he only cared about one thing—getting into her pants.

Jake didn't press the issue. "You got any coffee?"

She dragged her thoughts back to the present and his eyes on her. Her pulse fluttered, like a butterfly flapping its wing over a flower. "Sure. I can make you some."

* * * *

Fifteen minutes later, they sat across from each other at Lily's kitchen table. Jake drank coffee while she sipped more tea.

The warmth of her cozy kitchen stimulated his emotions. He figured he could sit here for hours with Lily across from him.

"What are you going to do next?" she asked.

Jake forced himself to focus on the case. Being with Lily caused his thoughts to wander in other directions. However, it wasn't a case. Not for him, anyway. He was most likely spinning his wheels. "I don't know how much I can do."

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "It's not right if Steve and Diane were really..." She hesitated. "Were really murdered, and the person who did it goes free."

He remembered the files of unsolved murders from when he was a cop. The sad truth was, a lot of killers slipped through the cracks. By the look in her eye, she trusted him to find out what happened to her friends.

He couldn't promise her the moon. Hell, he couldn't promise her he'd be around tomorrow. Jake leaned forward and pushed his empty mug out of the way. "Lily," he began. He never got a chance to finish, because the bell out in the office chimed.

She jumped up. "I'll be right back."

Jake got up, too. He went to the counter and refilled his mug, then wandered over to the window. As usual, there were ice houses scattered across the lake with fourwheelers parked next to them. A few hardy souls sat on short stools near holes in the ice.

When Jake heard a man's voice behind him, his gut tightened. He looked across the room and watched Lily walk into the kitchen, followed by Deputy Roy Hudson. His muscles rippled with tension.

Lily hurried to the counter and grabbed a mug off the cupboard shelf. After she poured coffee into the mug, she spun around and faced Hudson. "Cream or sugar?"

"Cream, thanks."

"Please sit down," she said.

Hudson ambled over to the table, his expression neutral. He nodded. "Mr. Ramsey."

"Deputy."

Lily brought the steaming mug over to Hudson and set it in front of him. "Jake, do you need more coffee?"

"No, thanks. I got my own."

Jake watched Deputy Hudson lower himself to a chair directly across from him. Jake stayed near the window. As Lily sat down, she glanced at him.

Hudson blew the billowing steam from his mug before he took a drink. "No point in beating around the bush."

Jake took a drink of coffee and felt the tension increase inside his body.

"I checked you out, Ramsey."

That didn't surprise Jake. He expected it from a responsible cop.

"Why would you do that, Deputy?" Confusion spread across Lily's face.

Hudson shrugged before he drank more coffee. "A stranger walked into the shop today with evidence pertaining to two deaths." He lifted his shoulder again. "That's what cops do."

Lily stared at Jake, but he avoided her eye. He shifted his gaze to Hudson.

"I figured you were a cop when you handed me plastic bags with potential evidence," Hudson said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Since I'm no longer a cop, I didn't think it was relevant."

Hudson chuckled. "Portland, Oregon. Wife and I drove through there once, about

ten years ago on our way to the coast."

Still suspicious of Hudson, Jake wondered how much the Montana deputy had dug up about his past. He felt her eyes still on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her.

"Anyway, I sent the bottle and scarf to the lab to see what they can turn up. If anything." Hudson sighed. "We finally located their families."

"How did they take it?" Lily asked.

"Diane's mother went ballistic. Diane's sister happened to be there, so she had to take the phone. Steve's dad kept it together."

She stared down at her mug for a moment. "Do they really believe it was suicide?"

"Diane's sister, Kim, got pretty steamed when I told her. She said no way. So did Steve's father."

"I know they didn't commit suicide, Deputy Hudson."

Hudson studied Lily for a moment. "Call me Roy. Now tell me why you don't believe they committed suicide."

She wrapped her hands around her mug. "I knew them. They rented a cabin from me for a couple of months. And Diane and I became fairly good friends. They were young, full of hopes and dreams. They loved it here."

Hudson rubbed his chin.

"There's an awful rumor going around." Lily paused. "That Steve sold drugs at the mill."

"You don't believe that?" Hudson asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"Looks like I'll have to pay Gordy Lewis a visit, then."

"I already paid him a couple of visits," Jake said.

"Do tell."

Since Hudson had made the effort to check him out, Jake decided to be open with him, too. He reported his two visits to the mill.

Hudson rubbed his chin again and looked thoughtful. "Gordy Lewis is a business man. A darned successful one, too, the way I understand it."

Jake shrugged.

"He's not always fair with his workers," Lily said.

Hudson glanced at her. "Is that right?"

"That's what I hear. Maybe it's only rumor and speculation, but if he doesn't like someone, he usually gets rid of that person." "I understand Diane worked there, too."

She nodded. "Yes, she cleaned the offices a couple of nights a week."

"Do you know if Steve and Gordy Lewis had a problem?"

"I don't think so. Steve seemed to like working there."

Hudson fell silent again, drinking his coffee. After he finished, he set the mug down and plowed his fingers through his light blonde hair, faded with grey. "Thanks for the coffee. I'd better be on my way." He stood, then pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, plucked out a business card, and laid it on the table. "If anything else comes up, give me a call."

Jake pushed away from the wall. "I have Steve and Diane's dog. You probably saw him. The black scruffy mutt outside."

Hudson regarded him, a dubious glint in his eye. "Would you care to tell how you ended up with their dog?"

"He was begging for a handout at the bar the other day. The bartender threatened to shoot him, so I took him with me. The motel owner's kid told me he'd seen the dog wandering around town a few days before that."

"Steve and Diane's families might want Stormy back," Lily said.

Hudson worked his jaw. "I'll get back to you on that."

Chapter 6

Later that evening, Jake paced around his cabin, restlessness driving him to keep moving. His mind crammed with theories of what happened to Steve and Diane. Plus, a strong yearning for Lily prevented him from any productive thinking.

Hudson hadn't gotten back to him, but Jake knew he wasn't obligated to. He would have killed to have been a fly on the wall when Hudson spoke to Lewis. He hated like hell not being part of the loop. His life had revolved around being in the loop, being a detective. A sense of helplessness kept him on edge. He strode to the kitchen, pulled a brandy bottle down off the shelf, and poured himself a shot. He carried the glass over to the couch and sank down on it.

Hudson came across as a laid-back good old boy. Jake didn't buy Hudson's act. He figured he would dig deeper into Steve and Diane's deaths now. Whether or not he could prove anything was another matter.

Lily...well, she'd basically hijacked his thoughts and dreams. They no longer belonged to him. Maybe it was because he'd been so long without a woman, but it was something more powerful than that. There was a possibility there with her. He wanted to take it to another level, but Lily wasn't ready. He sensed her wariness concerning him. She might still be grieving for her husband.

Jake drank his brandy and wrestled with his fantasies of Lily. He might not be here that long. Sooner or later, he would have to work again. His funds wouldn't last forever. On his journey east, he considered finding a place he liked well enough to stay and getting a P.I. license. What else could he do? He wasn't trained for any other career.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a soft knock on the door. Stormy growled and raced over to the door. Frowning, Jake stood. He went to the window first and saw Lily standing there, bundled up for the cold. She held a plate covered with tin foil in her hands, Rosey sitting next to her. He walked to the door and cursed his heart that soared like an eagle over a high mountain peak.

He opened the door. Stormy rushed out to greet them.

"Hi," she said. She reached down and patted Stormy on the head. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Just his jumbled-up feelings for her. "No, get in here. It's cold."

The dogs totted off toward the lake.

Lily stepped inside. "I baked some chocolate chip cookies. I thought you might like some." She held the plate out to him.

How long had it been since someone had given him fresh-baked cookies? Hell, he didn't know. Probably years. The gesture was so simple and wholesome. Then why did he want to take her in his arms and kiss her until she couldn't breathe, followed by stripping off her clothes?

Jake took the plate from her. "Thanks," he finally managed to say.

"Go back to what you were doing."

Lily started to turn around, but he caught her arm. "Thanks again. Stay."

Doubts flickered in her eyes.

"I always bake cookies when I'm restless," Lily said.

She suffered from restlessness, too. Jake wasn't sure why he liked that. "Why are you feeling restless?"

"I don't know. Maybe the visit from Deputy Hudson. I can't really get a handle on it. I'm packing the rest of the cookies up in the morning to send down to my son. They're his favorite."

He still held her arm, the need to touch her shocking him. Lily didn't back away from him.

"That will be a nice surprise for him."

She smiled. "Yeah, he loves it when I send him goodies."

"Would you like some brandy?"

Lily glanced a way for a moment. "Why not?"

Jake dropped his hand, carried the plate into the kitchen, and slid it on the counter. After he poured brandy into in a glass, he circled back around. Lily had her jacket and gloves off. She tugged off her hat. Her hair was mussed, but she didn't seem to care as she quickly combed her fingers through it. She dropped her hat on top of her jacket and gloves.

Jake carried both glasses over to the couch. He noticed how she hesitated again before she walked to the couch and sat down at one end. He handed her the glass and sat down a short distance from her. He didn't want to scare her off. Lily just being in his small cabin had instantly warmed it and brought life inside.

They sipped their brandy in silence for a time.

"Were you surprised that Deputy Hudson checked you out?"

Jake leaned back against the couch and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "Not really. He strikes me as a competent officer."

"He was the deputy who broke the news to me of John's accident."

"He mentioned that today at the station."

Lily took a small sip of the brandy. "He was very understanding, very sympathetic. I knew who he was because I'd seen him cruising through town or having lunch at the café. Ever since that night, when I run into him, he always talks to me and asks how I'm doing. His daughter is the same age as my son."

Jake nodded. His regard for Roy Hudson grew.

"That's one of the hardest things about being a cop." He paused. "Having to tell a loved one about the passing of one of their own."

"My world crumbled when John died, but I had to think of Kyle. I had to be strong for him."

Jake wondered if there had been a sympathetic shoulder for her to lean on during their tragedy. "What about family? Do you have family around?"

"Not close. My mom died when I was twenty-two. My father is retired and lives in Tucson, and my sister lives in Denver. They both came and stayed for a while. John's parents are in Boise. They came for a while, too. But people have to get back to their lives."

Which left Lily all alone to deal with her grief and her young teenage son.

"What about now?"

She turned to face him and pulled her legs up on the couch. "Now?"

"How are you doing now?"

She seemed lost in thought for a time. "Better. I've accepted it. I did that a long time ago. I had to. For Kyle, and for myself. Life does go on. It's different now—I've learned to be alone. It was hard all over again when Kyle went off to college, but I've adjusted."

Jake noticed how her cheeks were rosy, probably from the cold night and the brandy. He found that appealing. What didn't he find appealing about Lily?

She sipped more brandy. "What about you? Why are you playing gypsy when you used to be a cop? You're way too young for retirement." She watched him over the rim of her glass.

Jake glanced away and stared at the door, his jaw constricting.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's none of my business. I shouldn't have asked."

He brought his gaze back to her. "Don't apologize. It's only natural you'd wonder why I'm not a cop anymore."

"It's still none of my business."

Jake had buried that rainy, miserable night back in June. At least, he had fought to

bury the memory of those events. He slammed the remainder of his brandy down in one gulp, still clutching the glass in his hand. "I shot an innocent man."

Her eyes widened. "It was an accident. I know it was."

He had to look away from her. Her tone and expression were so damned sincere. "Yeah. An accident. A fatal accident."

"Tell me."

He needed to step into the confessional and absolve himself of his sins. What would Lily think of him if he told her his story? If she despised him, he could pack up and leave, but he didn't want to leave. Jake stared straight ahead. "The man I shot was a prime suspect in a murder investigation. Turned out, he was innocent."

"You must have felt threatened."

"Yeah, I felt threatened." He paused. "But if I hadn't had such a twitchy trigger finger, he'd still be alive."

Silence, thick and heavy, hung in the room.

Lily broke the silence first. "I think you need to talk about it. It's not good to keep things bottled up inside."

He forced himself to look at her. Sympathy and concern showed in her eyes. Jake reached behind him and scratched the back of his neck. "His name was Brad Lawson. His wife was found murdered and left in a dumpster for the garbage men to find." He paused. Since Internal Affairs had exonerated him, he kept the events of that fatal night locked tight inside. "The spouse of a murder victim is always the first suspect." Lily nodded, so he continued. "Lawson didn't have an alibi for the night she was murdered. He was a reasonable suspect. She was shot with his handgun, registered in his name. Lawson swore he didn't kill her and had no idea how somebody got a hold of his gun. Forensics didn't find a print on the gun. We figured he wiped it clean."

"That's a logical assumption," she said.

"Yeah, but you can't assume anything in a murder investigation. You have to dig out the facts and evidence."

"If he didn't kill his wife, who did?"

Jake smirked. "Her lover, Tom Wellington, a guy she worked with."

"Did you know about him?"

"Not right away. Lawson was paranoid to say anything about his wife, Debra, having an affair. He figured we would assume he automatically did it because of her cheating on him. After he confessed to that, we interviewed Wellington. He had an alibi. Supposedly, he was at home with his wife. Wellington's wife verified he was at home the night of the murder. Turned out, she'd do anything for him, even though he was cheating on her."

Jake needed more brandy to settle the churning inside his gut.

"I drove to Lawson's house one night to see if I could tighten the screws on him."

He glanced down at the glass in his hand, noticing his knuckles were white. "The rain poured down in sheets. I pulled up in front of his house and spotted Lawson jogging toward his car parked in the driveway. I thought maybe he planned to skip town. I yelled at him to stop. He turned." Jake swallowed back the dryness clawing at the back of his throat. "Then, he reached inside the pocket of his jacket. I figured he was going for a gun. I had mine out in a flash and yelled at him to get his hands up in the air. But he must not have heard me because it was raining so damned hard. The bullet lodged beneath his heart. He held on for three days." He paused again, every muscle in his body rigid with guilt and tension. "He was reaching for his car keys."

"Oh, Jake ... "

He dumped the glass on the small table next to the couch so he didn't crush it in his hands. "A few days after Lawson died, Wellington's wife, Lisa, came forward. Said she had lied about her husband being with her that night. She knew about the affair. He cheated on her half a dozen times in their marriage, but she always forgave him because she didn't want to lose him."

Jake dragged in a shallow breath. "You hear it on the news all the time. A cop thinks a suspect is reaching for a weapon, so he shoots."

Lily remained quiet for a time before she asked. "Were you fired?"

"No. After a thorough investigation, I was reinstated to the force."

"So you quit?"

He nodded.

"You've exiled yourself."

Jake stood and walked over to the window. He jammed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and stared outside at the black night, not seeing anything.

"You've also inflicted your very own punishment," she said behind him.

Jake didn't answer her. He expected her to leave. Why would she want anything to do with him now? He killed an innocent man, took his life away.

Suddenly, Lily stood next to him. She laid her hand on his arm. He forced himself to look at her. Her eyes were clear and unwavering.

"Hold me."

That was the last thing he had expected to hear from her. Was she asking for his embrace so she could comfort him? "I don't need your pity. I have no one to blame but myself."

Hurt shadowed her eyes. He cursed himself.

"You're wrong. It's not pity." Her voice trembled. "I think we both need comfort."

Jake didn't respond, his hands still stuffed in his pockets. He ached to hold her, but he held back. He'd wanted her since first meeting her.

"I haven't been held by a man since John died," she whispered. A moment later,

she dropped her hand and turned away from him.

He caught her before she got far. He wrapped his arms around her. When her arms twined around his back, something cracked loose inside his heart. He buried his head in her soft, sweet-smelling hair. Jake heard her sigh and gathered her closer.

"Lily..." He found her lips and kissed her. A slow, gentle, exploring kiss. The taste of her bewitched him. He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes.

She blinked, then whispered. "Kiss me again."

"Are you sure?"

Lily nodded.

The invitation in her eyes was unmistakable. Desire and need shimmered in her gaze. A carnal need swelled inside him as he smashed his lips against hers and parted her lips. His tongue pushed inside her, tasting her sultry flavor. Their tongues mated, danced, and seduced each other.

He broke the kiss abruptly. "Lily." His voice sounded rusty to his own ears. "Kiss me like that again, and I'll be carting you off to bed."

"I can walk." She untangled herself from him and grabbed his hand.

"You have to be sure."

She laid his hand on her cheek. "There are no guarantees. I'm as sure as I can be."

Lily's word struck a chord deep inside of him. There might not be a tomorrow.

Jake led her the short distance to the bedroom. His heart tightened, knowing he would be the first man for her since her husband died.

Standing beside the bed, he kissed her again with an even fiercer need. He felt her fingers fumbling with the buttons on his flannel shirt. She tore her lips from his and tugged her turtleneck over her head. Lily wore a black silk, long-sleeved underwear top. He'd never realized how seductive black silk underwear could be. He slid his hands under it, feeling skin as soft as the silk. Womanly skin that beckoned him. He peeled off the silk top to reveal a lacy black bra.

He cupped her soft, plump breasts, which fit his hands perfectly. As he kneaded her breasts, his cock grew rock-hard. Jake nipped at her neck. He felt her hands on the snap of his jeans, followed by the zipper gliding down. Lily's hand rubbed his throbbing erection through his briefs.

They stripped each other bare, then stood a foot apart and simply gazed into each other's eyes. His eyes roamed the length of her body. Her erect nipples were a dark, rosy color. Her hips were meant for having babies and cradling a man. Jake wrapped his arms around her and tumbled her to the bed. He settled himself between her legs and sucked on her nipple, inhaling the fresh, clean scent of her. Lily tasted sultry, erotic, and fresh.

He pushed his hand between her legs and fondled the curls on her mound. Lily's throaty moans fueled his desire for her. He raised his head and kissed her again, his tongue bullying inside of her mouth. Her moans and sighs of pleasure made his head reel. Her hot, soft body, flushed with heat, drove him crazy with lust and uncontrollable desire.

When he felt Lily's hand wrap around his cock, Jake gritted his teeth. His lust for her hovered near explosion mode. With a tight jaw and eyes clamped shut, he let Lily fondle and caress him. Her hand massaged him with the softest touch. He pushed his tongue inside her mouth again, swallowing both of their moans. His hand fondled her breast with a rough passion. He gently pinched her nipple, feeling her breast press harder against his hand.

He reached for her hand and removed it from his cock.

"Jake," she murmured.

"You're going to make me come." He looked at her and saw that her eyes were flooded with luscious heat. "I want to come inside of you."

He felt Lily spread her legs for him. He settled his body between the soft flesh of her thighs. First, he kissed with a demanding hunger and need. When he found her opening, he plunged inside her wet heat.

Her legs and arms twined around his sweat-slicked body, urging him to thrust deeper inside of her. Their bodies molded together, rocking with a hard, fast rhythm. Like two starving people, they found each others' lips again. Their tongues fed heavily off each other. A combination of raw passion and desperation threaded into their kisses as their bodies moved as one.

She came first, moaning and writhing beneath him.

"Lily...Lily...Lily." Her name tumbled from him as he emptied himself inside of her.

* * * *

Jake buried his face against her neck. She stared up at the ceiling, feeling full, satisfied, and complete. He had banished the emptiness that had been a part of her since John died. If guilt lurked somewhere inside of her heart, she didn't feel it. John would have wanted her to move on and to find love again. There was a possibility she could fall in love with Jake, but he was on the move like a gypsy, searching for answers to his fatal mistake.

He raised his head, looked at her, and brushed a soft kiss across her lips. "Are you okay with this?"

Her body felt satiated beyond belief. A strange, little ache in her heart she couldn't identify bothered her. "Yeah."

"You sure about that?"

Jake's sincere expression made it hard to lie or pretend. "No. I'm not sure. But I don't regret being with you."

He kissed her again. His lips lingered on hers. "Stay here with me tonight."

* * * *

Jake called Roy Hudson at nine-thirty the next morning. "How's it going?" the deputy asked.

"No complaints." He had no intention of telling Hudson about his love life. Lily had left at six-thirty. By the time he dragged himself from sleep, she was standing by his bed, dressed and ready to go. Disappointment loitered inside his body that he had missed out on making morning love to her.

Before Jake could state the reason for his call, Hudson said, "You were cleared of the charges. Why the hell did you quit?"

Caught off guard, he didn't answer for a few seconds. Hudson had done his homework in spades. "It seemed like the right thing to do."

"These things happen. It's a crying shame, but they still happen."

"Why do I get the feeling you know all about me?"

"It was a slow day yesterday. After I got back to the office, I needed something to fill up my time. Besides, I'm curious by nature, just like you are." Hudson paused. "You want to know what happened when I dropped by the mill?"

Relief inched through him when the spotlight moved past him. "You bet I do."

Hudson lowered his voice. "Gordy Lewis said he caught Steve in the men's can trying to sell cocaine to a couple of the guys at the mill. He fired him on the spot and told him to get the hell off his property."

"You believe him?"

"I have no reason not to."

"Did he keep the cocaine as evidence?"

"Nope. Lewis thought Steve might have a gun on him or something. He didn't want to push the issue."

Convenient explanation. "Who were the two guys?"

"Joe Brown and Keith Anderson. They're drivers."

The skin at the back of Jake's neck prickled. He wondered if one of them was the guy who shot him the evil glare yesterday. "Let me guess—they weren't around to be interviewed."

"Bingo."

Jake didn't ask Hudson if he planned on a return visit to the mill. He felt lucky the deputy had shared that much information with him.

"I figured I'd mosey back out there at lunch time today," Hudson said.

Hudson was his kind of cop.

"One more thing," Hudson said. "We got a hold of Steve and Diane's families. Both agreed it would be too painful for them to take the dog. They want him to go to a good home, though."

"Tell the families I'll find a damn good home for him. I won't take him to a shelter."

* * * *

Lily drove into town to do shopping and errands. Jake decided to head back out to the crime scene. She had taken both dogs with her, only because Stormy shot her a soulful look after Rosey leaped into the back of her truck. He didn't have the foggiest what to do about the dog. He'd keep him for now.

Twenty minutes later, Jake drove north on the main highway. Pregnant grey clouds crowded together in the sky. He figured it would snow before the day was over.

Lily had seeped into his senses, his mind, and his heart. He would rather have spent the day in bed with her, but she had business to do. Since being with her, his need escalated to find out what happened to her friends. The stakes had risen, now that Lily and he were lovers.

He'd eaten her cookies for breakfast with two strong cups of coffee.

Jake slowed and turned off the highway. He cruised down the narrow winding road. Deer crisscrossed the road like pedestrians hurrying across a busy city street. He found the side road, pulled onto it, and parked his truck. He let the engine idle while he studied the area. He didn't have high hopes that he would find anything, but it was worth another look, anyway. After he shut off his truck, he climbed out.

He spent nearly thirty minutes canvassing the area, but he came up empty-handed. Discouragement weighed him down as he tramped through the snow back to his truck.

The loud, earsplitting crack of a bullet whizzed over his head.

Chapter 7

"What the hell!" Jake ducked his head and sprinted to his truck. Two more rounds sailed past him before he got his truck door open and inside. He rummaged under the seat and pulled out his Smith and Wesson 9mm-semi-auto pistol.

Jake lowered his head as he turned on the ignition. Gripping his gun in his left hand, he backed up the truck. He punched the gas, spinning his wheels and spitting snow behind him. He finally got enough traction and peeled back onto the logging road. He didn't hear another shot.

Adrenaline pumping, Jake steered with one hand, still holding his gun in the other. His eyes darted back and forth between the road and the rear view mirror. The gunshots had scared off the deer, too. Not one animal crossed the road or stood beside it. A damn good thing. If he hit his brakes too hard, he would lock them up and go into a skid.

After he swung his truck onto the highway, he reached for his cell phone and dialed Roy Hudson's number. When the dispatcher answered at the sheriff's station, she told Jake he was up in Mountaintop. She would pass the message on to Deputy Hudson.

Who the hell knew he planned to be out at the crime scene? He hadn't even told Lily. Who had wanted to use him for target practice? He hoped like hell he'd find Hudson in town.

Ten minutes later, he saw the sheriff's truck parked in front of the café. Jake eased his truck in next to it.

Inside the café, Jake spotted Hudson sitting at a corner booth and taking a healthy bite out of a fat hamburger. He slid onto the seat across from the deputy. Hudson lifted a brow and kept eating.

Jake put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "Some S.O.B just took a couple of potshots at me."

Before Hudson could respond, a young waitress appeared at their table, a coffee

pot in one hand and a glass of water in the other. "Hi." She smiled at Jake.

He didn't recognize her from his other visits to the café. "Just coffee."

"Okay." She flipped over the mug on the table and filled it for Jake. "Cream?"

Jake glanced at her. "No, thanks. This will do."

The waitress refilled Hudson's mug before she spun around and left.

"Where?" Hudson picked up a thick French fry.

"Where Steve and Diane died."

"What in the hell were you doing up there again?"

Jake picked up his mug. "Thought I'd take another look around."

"You find anything?" Hudson stuffed the fry into his mouth.

"Not a damned thing. Is there any kind of hunting season going on now?"

Hudson shook his head. "Nothing. Lots of people go out in the woods and drink beer, then shoot at the empty beer cans."

"Do I look like an empty beer can?"

Hudson whistled. "That close?"

Jake nodded.

"How many shots?"

"Three."

"Could be somebody's not a very good shot." His eyes locked with Jake's.

Jake shook his head. "The shooter was gunning for me."

Hudson ate another fry and looked thoughtful. He pushed his empty plate away and grabbed his mug. "I stopped by the mill at lunch hour."

"Anything?"

"Joe Brown was hauling an extra load today, so I didn't see him." Hudson drank some coffee. "These guys get paid by the load. Keith was there. He verified Gordy's story."

"You believe him?"

Hudson took his time answering, eventually giving a shrug. Which meant to Jake he didn't buy Anderson's story.

"There's something to consider here," Hudson said.

"What's that?"

"These guys don't want to lose their jobs. The mill has the highest paying jobs around here. Most of them have families to support. Oh, the wives might get some summer work during tourist season. But their livelihoods depend on the mill. Hell, the entire town's livelihood depends on the mill." Jake lowered his mug. "Lewis has that much power?"

"I guess you could put it in those terms. The mill is in a damn good location, being so close to Canada. The way I understand it, Lewis buys a lot of logs from Alberta."

"Why would the mill import logs from Canada? There are enough trees in the area to build ten thousand houses."

Hudson held up his mug. The waitress hurried over and refilled both of their mugs.-Hudson thanked her as she picked up his empty plate and whisked it away. "Probably because it's cheaper. At least, it used to be when the Canadian dollar was so low, but now, it's catching up to ours. Not to mention a lot of the land around here is protected by the state and federal government. They only allow so much logging on those lands."

"Are his drivers going to Canada to pick up their loads?" Jake scratched the back of his neck. "What are we, thirty miles from the border?"

"About that. Those are Canadian drivers who bring in their loads." Hudson sipped his coffee. "The good ol' U.S.A. is growing by leaps and bounds. There's a big demand for building materials."

"What if something is coming in on those Canadian trucks?"

Hudson paused, ready to take a drink. "Like what?"

"Who knows?"

"Security has tightened up since September two thousand one."

"That's true," Jake admitted.

"They've increased the staff at all Montana border crossings."

"That doesn't mean something can't slip by."

Hudson drank more coffee. "It's definitely something to ponder. One more thing."

Jake didn't miss the warning tone in Hudson's voice. "What's that?"

"This is all on the Q.T. If my boss found out I was trying to solve a case with a civilian, he'd chew my butt up one side and down the other."

He knew exactly where Hudson was coming from. At least the deputy was willing to work with him.

* * * *

Lily handed the cabin key to the middle-aged man. "Thanks. I hope you catch tons of fish."

The man grinned at her. "No big deal if we don't." He glanced at his friend.

"Our wives needed a little vacation from us," the second man said.

Lily smiled. She knew the routine. "I hope you have as good a time as your wives, then."

The man pocketed the key. "We're not even worried about that. Do a little fishing, drink a few beers, and we're content."

She laughed and watched the two men stroll outside to the Chevy king-cab fourwheel-drive truck. Male bonding at its finest. She was happy to rent out a cabin for three days during the work week. She had one other cabin rented for the week, besides Jake's. During the winter months, the weekends were the busiest for her. She let the locals park there for the day to do their fishing.

She dropped the credit card receipt into the file box under the counter and scrolled the computer screen for reservations. All but two of the cabins were booked for the coming weekend. There were also two parties coming in with pickup campers who would park in the picnic area. She didn't make a lot of money off the weekend campers, but it was something.

Lily kept glancing out the window, keeping an eye out for Jake. When she got back from town an hour ago, disappointment trickled through her the moment she noticed his truck missing. Just because they had made love last night didn't mean he had to tell her what he was up to.

For too long, she had believed she would never be with another man. That strange little ache still lingered in her heart. Was it for John? Or was it for Jake? She opened herself up to him and made herself vulnerable. She believed her passion had been buried with her husband. Her growing feelings for Jake disturbed her safe, secure world.

She considered inviting him for dinner tonight. Lily straightened the pens in the plastic holder on the counter. Dinner might not be a good idea, after all—they would surely end up in bed again.

Would that be so terrible?

Shock rolled through her when she realized how much she wanted Jake again. A man in self-imposed exile, drifting across the country, didn't make for a steady bed partner.

The possibility remained that when he worked things out in his heart and head, he would return to Portland. Was she willing to open herself up to a man who might pack up and leave any day? Lily crossed her arms over chest and looked out at the lake. The two men in cabin three were dragging their ice house back to shore. They'd been out for the better part of the day.

It was too late now. She had already opened herself for him.

Several minutes later, she noticed Jake's truck coming down the road. Her tummy fluttered in anticipation. She tightened her arms across her chest. She considered going outside and waving at him to get his attention, but something held her back.

He pulled up in front of the office. Damming her heart, she went to meet him.

He came up the steps. "Hi."

She stared at him for several seconds, suddenly feeling tongue-tied.

Jake's brows puckered together. "Are you okay?"

She blinked, as if to bring herself out of a spell. "Yeah. Sure. I just have some things on my mind." She stepped back so he could come inside, but he didn't. Instead, he gathered her into his arms and kissed her, teasing her senses with his tongue.

She looped her arms around his neck, passion swelling inside of her.

When Lily was nearly out of air, they both leaned back and stared at each other.

"Can I help work out whatever is on your mind?" Jake asked.

You could help fill up the big, empty space in my heart. "Nothing that important."

Jake grabbed her hand and led her inside the office. He closed the door behind him. "What's up?"

She noticed disappointment filled his eyes. He couldn't have been disappointed with their kiss. She glanced around the office. "Oh, I was just tidying up the place."

Jake nodded. His eyes asked more questions, but he let the subject drop. "Your cookies were good. I ate them for breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Some unknown emotion tugged at her heart. He had eaten her chocolate chip cookies for breakfast. Lily scolded him. "That's not a very healthy breakfast."

"Doesn't matter. I enjoyed them with my coffee."

"Would you like to come for dinner?" The invitation was out before she could stop it.

"Yeah. I'd like that."

"Nothing fancy." *No candlelight and fine wine*. She stuffed her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Beef stew and biscuits."

His eyes held hers for a moment before he answered. "Sounds good to me."

"How about six?"

"I'll be here."

She regretted her invitation. Set herself up for a fall. The office seemed to buzz with electricity. Buds of panic sprouted to life inside of her. Jake must have sensed her mood because he laid his hands on her shoulders.

"It's only dinner. Remember, nothing fancy."

"I know." She paused. "It's just that I'm not used—"

Jake gently pressed his fingertips over her lips. "You don't have to explain anything to me."

His big, rough fingers on her lips brought back memories of his hands touching and exploring the secret parts of her body last night. She lowered her eyes.

Jake tilted her chin up with his fingers. "You can take back your invitation if you want."

"I feel so...I don't know. Mixed up."

"You can't be alone forever. You're too attractive, too vibrant."

His compliment pounded another dent into her heart. She stepped back. "Just come for dinner. I promise I'll have myself together by then."

"It doesn't matter to me. I like you either way."

* * * *

After Jake showered and shaved off his five o'clock shadow, he dressed in clean jeans and a black- and brown-plaid flannel shirt. He contemplated driving back into town and buying Lily a bouquet of flowers, but decided against it. If he came to dinner toting flowers, it would only make her more edgy around him. Stormy jumped up and wagged his tail when he saw Jake slipping on his jacket.

"We're stepping out tonight, boy."

Stormy gave him an expectant look.

"Nothing fancy. Just stew and biscuits. Maybe Lily will give you some leftovers."

Stormy raced to the door. Once they were outside, the dog scampered in front of him. Considering some lowlife had fired shots at him earlier today, he was in damn fine mood. All because of Lily.

He turned his jacket collar up against the brittle cold evening air. Jake had already decided he wasn't telling her about being shot at today. His protective instincts wanted to shield her from this entire mess. He'd tell her only enough to satisfy her curiosity.

Five minutes later, Jake leaned against the counter in her cozy kitchen, watching her put the finishing touches on dinner. A cold bottle of Miller's beer was secure in his hand. The dogs cuddled up together in the living room near the wood stove. She paused a moment and took a sip of beer from the bottle next to her on the counter.

He hoped she wasn't drinking to keep her nerves under control. "Are you sure I can't help?"

Lily dropped the last biscuit into a basket lined with a forest green napkin. She handed the basket to him. "You can put these on the table. "I'll dish up the stew."

Jake took the biscuits over to the table and sat down. She followed with two steaming bowls of stew, setting one in front of him and the other across the table.

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I think that's everything."

Jake noticed the uncertainty clouding her eyes. He picked up his spoon. "Smells great."

"I hope you like it."

Small talk to ease the tension, he knew. Lily held the basket of hot biscuits out to him. He took one and sliced it open with his knife. "You're a damned good cook."

"You haven't even tried anything yet."

"You made me breakfast and homemade cookies, so I've already made my judgment."

"I like to cook. I know it's probably not politically correct these days, but I like cooking and keeping up my house."

Jake found that concept both wholesome and provocative at the same time. His ex-wife had cottoned to neither. He took a bite of the warm biscuit, smothered with butter and honey. Nothing held a candle to good old-fashioned cooking. "Women shouldn't have to apologize for doing what they want to do. Men sure as hell don't."

Lily raised her water glass. "Touché."

After that, they ate the simple meal in silence. She spoke first. "At the risk of sounding like a politically incorrect, nagging wife, what did you do today?"

Jake leaned back in his chair with a full, satisfied belly. He figured this particular subject would eventually come up at dinner. "I had coffee with Deputy Hudson this afternoon at the café."

Lily lowered her spoon. "Did he find out anything more about Steve and Diane?"

"This is all confidential. I'm not sure why Hudson's decided he can trust me." He paused and scratched the back of his neck. "He talked to Lewis yesterday. Lewis said he caught Steve trying to sell cocaine to two of his drivers."

Lily shook her head. "I still don't believe it. Gordy must be mistaken."

"Hudson went back to the mill today and interviewed one of the drivers. He collaborated Lewis' story."

"Who was it?"

"Keith Anderson."

She got up, went to the counter and brought back the coffee pot. While she filled their mugs, she said. "I know who he is. He's only been in town about a year."

"Do you know if he's married, has kids?"

"I think he has a girlfriend. Live-in." Lily returned the pot to the counter, came back, and sat down.

"Do you know Joe Brown?"

She picked up her mug. "Yeah. He's from around here. About the same age as Keith. Late twenties."

"How well do you know him?"

"I know his mother, Mary, fairly well. She works at the post office. Keith was in a lot of trouble back in school."

His radar perked up. He reached for his mug. "What kind of trouble?"

"Underage drinking, drugs, vandalism."

"In other words, a real sweetheart of a kid."

Lily smiled. "Mary certainly had her hands full with him. Her husband ran off with another woman when Joe was really young."

He stared down at the steam rising from his mug. He decided to let it cool a bit. "Has he straightened out?"

"I don't know. He moved to Missoula right after he graduated. I heard rumors he was still doing drugs, but he moved back to Mountaintop about a year and half ago and got hired at the mill."

Jake wondered if Joe tried to sell drugs to Steve. If so, why would Lewis fire Steve and not Joe? He still wanted to know if Joe was the driver who had glared at him yesterday, and if he was, why?

"What does Deputy Hudson think about all this?" Lily asked.

"At this point, he has no reason to not believe Lewis."

"I suppose there's a possibility it was random. I mean, a stranger could have murdered Steve and Diane."

He didn't believe that. "I don't think so. They weren't robbed, and it wasn't a violent death. Somebody set it up to look like suicide. Which means that someone knew either one or the both of them. You don't need to worry about this. Deputy Hudson is competent. He'll figure things out."

Lily's hand trembled as she reached for her coffee. "But you're helping him."

He remembered the gunshots flying over his head earlier today. Had someone meant to kill him, or just scare him off? Either way, it had become personal. Someone in town considered him a threat. "A little input here and there."

She glanced out the window. "Things like this don't happen in Mountaintop." She looked back at him. "Like I said before, the people usually know each other, are drunk, get into a fight, and a gun goes off. It's still a tragedy. But this...this is sinister."

He had lived with murders and rape most of his adult life. He could understand how it would make Lily uneasy. "You don't need to worry about this. The county sheriff will handle it."

"It still doesn't change the fact that there's a murderer running around in Mountaintop."

Jake reached for her hand, loving the feel of her long, slender fingers and silky skin. "Everything will work out. This doesn't have anything to do with you."

"But I was friends with Steve and Diane," she protested. "And now I'm friends— I mean, involved with you. And I think you're more involved in this than you're admitting."

He rubbed the pad of his thumb across her knuckles. Instant heat radiated through him. "I just happened to take in their dog. By the way, Hudson got a hold of Steve and Diane's families. They want Stormy to go to a good home."

"He has a good home with you."

He kind of liked having the dog around, which surprised him. Stormy spent most of his time with Lily's dog. "I don't know about that. I promised Hudson if I don't keep him, I'll find him a good home." She nodded, lost in a thought for awhile as she studied their hands twined together. "That's good to know about Stormy. I was concerned about him. But I still want to know how deeply you're involved in all this?"

"Lily..."

"I might be a country girl, but I'm not stupid."

"If I come across something, I plan on passing it on to Hudson."

"I'm still not convinced."

Lily's persistence made him uncomfortable. He needed to change the subject. "I see you rented out another cabin."

Her eyes snapped with irritation. "Don't try to pacify me."

Jake couldn't think of any other way to shut her up. He stood, circled around the table, and hauled her to her feet.

"Jake," she whispered.

He ignored her pleas as he lowered his head and met her lips. His touch was gentle, but he increased the pressure, hoping she would relax into the kiss. He felt the tension coiled inside her body. Jake gathered her closer. Finally, a little sigh escaped her, making the blood pound inside his head.

Lily's arms looped around his neck. He lost himself in her womanly scent, her warm shapely body and the sweet taste of her tongue. Need, bordering on desperation, burned inside of him.

She suddenly tore her lips from his. Her breathing labored and her cheeks pink.

"Lily," he croaked out in a hoarse voice. He leaned his forehead against hers. "Tell me you're not sorry we made love."

An eternity passed for Jake before she answered. "No." She hesitated. "But last night, I jumped feet first. I feel off-balance."

Jake tamped down his disappointment. He knew what she meant. It meant he would be sleeping alone tonight.

Chapter 8

The more Jake tossed and turned, the more irritation churned inside his body. He walloped the pillow with his fist, hoping to ease the pent-up frustration in his muscles. Hours had passed since he had left Lily, but lust still burned inside of him. He wanted his cock inside her again. He flipped on his side and glanced at the digital clock on the night stand. Twenty after one in the morning.

"Damn." He'd steered clear of women the past few months. Lily would shave away the bitter edges. She could be a soothing balm for his guilt.

He closed his eyes in a useless attempt to relax. Despite his restlessness and hunger for Lily, his body begged for sleep. After a time, he drifted off and dreamed of her.

Jake woke with a start, sensing something was amiss. He opened his eyes and blinked several times, struggling to dislodge the sleep from his brain. He was positive he heard a noise outside the bedroom window. Stormy, off in doggie dream land, snored on the floor at the foot of the bed.

The dusky red curtains were drawn across the window. Slowly, he pushed the blankets off of him, and just as slowly pulled open the drawer of the night stand and took out his gun. This time, he heard the unmistakable sound of someone trying to jimmy the window open.

Jake stood and crept toward the window. Now fully awake and ready, he listened to the low clanking sound coming from outside. He pressed his body against the wall next to the window, his gun tightly clutched in his hands and pointed up at the ceiling. Jake tried to peek through the slit between the curtain and the frame. Darkness blocked any hope of seeing outside. The window crack open. The S.O.B. had succeeded. A quick blast of frigid air hit him as the window opened wider.

He nearly had a heart attack when Stormy's thunderous bark echoed in the small room. He watched the dog's silhouette race to the window. His loud barking lowered to a guttural snarl. Jake heard footsteps pounding outside in the snow. He came close to ripping the curtains off the rod in his struggle to get them out the way. The jerk had made a run for it. Jake jogged toward the door of the cabin, stumbling over Stormy in the process.

Muttering curses, he threw open the door. Stormy blew past him and stood on the porch. The dog snarled again. An owl hooted, perched on a high branch of a nearby pine tree. Jake stepped out onto the porch. "Dammit." His bare feet stung from the cold, hard porch boards. He hurried back inside and tugged on his boots, not bothering with his jeans. His long thermal underwear top and bottoms would have to do. On his way to the door, he grabbed his jacket and a flashlight. He made Stormy get back in the cabin, which the dog was none too happy about.

While he circled the cabin, he heard the dull roar of a snowmobile off in the distance. Jake found the footprints in the snow that led away from his bedroom window. He followed the trail a good quarter of a mile from his cabin, winding his way through the dense stand of trees. His bare hands burned from the biting cold. He should have grabbed a hat. The single-digit temperature proved to be too much for only his long johns. Cursing under his breath, he turned back. He made sure he didn't step in the tracks the bastard had left behind. He would call Hudson in the morning.

Jake hot-footed back to his cabin to escape the freezing temperature. He closed the bedroom window, careful not to smudge any possible fingerprints. The intruder had no doubt dressed for the winter weather with gloves and warm clothing, since he'd been sneaking around and driving a snowmobile.

Frustrated and cold, he stomped into the kitchen and passed by Stormy, lying by the couch. The dog leveled a hurt, brown-eyed look on him. Jake stopped. "Yeah. You're a good watch dog. You just have lousy timing." Stormy wagged his tail once. "Come on. I'll reward you with something." Stormy jumped up and followed him into the kitchen.

Jake started a pot of coffee. While he waited for the coffee to brew, he rubbed his hands up and down his arms to chase the chill out of his body. He noticed Stormy sitting next to the fridge watching him. "Sorry, I forgot," he mumbled. Jake plucked a slice of whole wheat bread out of the bag and broke it in half. He tossed the pieces over to the dog, which immediately wolfed the bread down in two big gulps. He snagged the brandy bottle from the cupboard and poured two shots into a mug.

He topped off the mug with coffee and parked his butt in a chair at the table. After sipping the heavily spiked coffee for a few minutes, he felt his body warming up.

It was official. Someone wanted him out of the picture.

Twice in less than twenty-four hours, someone had tried to get to him, and most likely kill him. Jake had no illusions what the guy's intentions were when he jimmied open the window. He doubted he would have gotten a verbal warning. Swallowing a curse word, he took another drink.

Lily.

He shook his head in a futile attempt to toss off doubts the thug might go after her, too. So far, they hadn't been seen together, with the exception of driving out to the crime scene that one time. He drained the mug and decided he needed to check on her for

his own peace of mind.

Five minutes later, the flashlight in one hand and his gun in the other, he hiked toward her house—this time, dressed properly for the frigid outdoor temperature. Stormy padded beside him. He kept commanding the dog to keep quiet and stay close.

He saw she kept a night light on in the office. Jake tramped around side of the house. He noticed another light glowing in one of the rooms. As he circled Lily's house, not noticing anything suspicious that would raise a red flag, he heard Rosey barking inside of the house.

Stormy started barking, too. "No. Stop that," Jake warned in a firm voice. The dog ignored his command and leaped up the steps to the office door. He considered disappearing into the shadows and letting Lily believe Stormy was the reason Rosey was carrying on. Jake knew she would wonder why Stormy was at her house in the middle of the night.

Shoving his gun under the waistband of his jeans, he went up the steps to the office door. He heard her inside, trying to quiet her dog.

"Lily! It's me, Jake."

Several seconds later, the door swung open. Lily stood there, a shotgun in her hands. Her dark hair tangled, just like last night in his bed. She wore an old, comfortablelooking flannel robe that exposed her body, covered only in silky black long underwear. He cleared his throat and focused instead on her fuzzy red socks, which under different circumstances would have made him smile.

"Jake." She frowned at him. "What's going on? I thought there might be a mountain lion prowling around."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." Stormy crowded past him into the office to be with Rosey. "Let me come in, and I'll explain." Not happy about getting busted, he cursed under his breath. He wanted to protect Lily from this whole damn mess.

She backed up a step. He walked inside and shut the door, blocking out the frigid night air. The fact that she gripped a pump shotgun in her hands impressed him.

"Damn you, you tell me what's going on this minute."

He took the gun out of her hands and leaned it against the wall. "Somebody tried to break into my cabin."

Lily's eyes widened with fear. "What?"

He sugar-coated the attempted break-in. "Probably kids. I heard a snowmobile off in the distance when I went outside to check."

She fired off questions. "Did they break the door down? What did they do? What about the other cabins?"

"No broken doors. He tried to get in the bedroom window. The other cabins looked fine. So does your place. I was checking around your house when Rosey heard us."

Lily spun around, her robe billowing behind her. "I'm calling the sheriff."

He caught up to her just as she reached for the phone on the counter. He wrapped his hand around hers. "No."

Her head snapped in his direction. "What do you mean, no?"

"I'll call Hudson in the morning."

"There are other deputies on duty. We don't have to call Deputy Hudson."

"Like I said, it was probably a kid trying to see what he could steal."

She turned to face him, sparks of suspicion shooting from her eyes. "Not good enough. Why don't you tell me what's really going on."

Jake shifted his glance away from her. He didn't see how he could worm his way out of telling her the truth. "Okay. I figure somebody is out to get me."

"Ohmigod." She chewed on her bottom lip. "This has to do with Steve and Diane, doesn't it?"

"More than likely."

Impatience glinted in her eyes. "You're not being straight with me."

Jake dropped his hand, while Lily kept hers on the phone. He blew out a frustrated breath. "If I tell you, will you promise not to call the cops?"

She stared at him hard for a moment before she removed her hand from the phone. "I want to hear what's going on first before I make any promises."

"I drove out to the crime scene today where Steve and Diane were found. I wanted to take a look around to see if I missed anything. Double checking."

Lily crossed her arms over chest. "Something happened out there today."

"Yeah. Something did happen. Somebody fired a couple of shots at me."

"Ohmigod." She clutched at his jacket. "Did you report it?"

"To Hudson. I saw his truck at the café."

"Why didn't you call the sheriff?"

"I'm trying to keep a low profile."

"I don't understand. If someone is trying to hurt you, why you don't want to report it?"

He saw she couldn't bring herself to say the word *murder*. "I reported it to Hudson. I plan on calling him first thing in the morning. I want him to come out here and see if he can lift any prints off the window, which I doubt he can, because the bastard probably had on gloves." Jake paused. "The two incidents might not even be related."

Lily shook her finger at him. "Don't you try to snow me. I caught you prowling around my house in the middle of the night because someone tried to break into your cabin. If you weren't concerned, you wouldn't be standing here."

He shrugged. "So maybe the two incidents are related."

Lily threw her hands up in the air. "How can you be so nonchalant about this?"

"I was a cop for over twenty years. It goes with the territory."

* * * *

The next morning, Jake and Deputy Hudson followed the footprints in the snow back to Jake's cabin.

"The problem is," Hudson said, "everybody and their mother have these snow boots. The only thing I figure is it was a man who tried to break into your cabin. But I've known a few women who had whoppers for feet."

Jake had to agree. The tread on his own winter boots were almost a match to the perpetrator's.

When they reached his cabin, they stopped at the bedroom window. Hudson had already dusted for prints, and he had been as doubtful as Jake about finding any fingerprints. Rosey bounded around the cabin, Lily trailing behind her.

"Morning, Deputy Hudson," she said.

"Hi, Lily. Sorry you have to go through this."

Lily glanced at Jake, then shrugged. "Did you find anything?"

Hudson shook his head. "Nothing substantial."

Large snowflakes floated from the sky. A couple of flakes stuck to her fringed bangs. Jake wanted to reach out and dust them off.

"You need to watch yourself," Hudson warned her. "Somebody is after our friend, Mr. Ramsey."

Jake wished Hudson wouldn't have said that. She didn't need more reasons to worry. He glanced at her, noticing she had paled. "It's me they're after. And only me."

She didn't answer, but set her lips in a straight line.

"I should know by tomorrow if we got any prints," Hudson said to Jake.

He nodded, still concerned about Lily.

"Would you two like some coffee?" she asked.

Hudson smiled. "No thanks, Lily, I've got business to take care of."

The three of them walked around Jake's cabin. When they reached Hudson's patrol truck, the man from cabin three strolled over to them.

"Morning, everyone." He frowned when he noticed the sheriff's truck and Deputy Hudson in full uniform. "Is there some kind of problem?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. Deputy Hudson just stopped by to say hi, like he frequently does when he's in the area."

"Just passing through on my rounds," Hudson agreed.

Jake figured if the few guests staying in the cabins believed they were in danger,

they would most likely pack up and leave, which would be bad for business.

The man turned to her. "I'm sorry to bother you, but could we could use some extra towels. We tracked in a lot of snow yesterday and used the towels to mop up the floor."

"No problem." Lily smiled. "Come with me, and I'll get some for you."

The man smiled back. "Thanks."

Lily, the man, and the two dogs took off toward the laundry cabin at the end of the row. Jake wondered if she ever bought new jeans. Her old, faded ones hugged her long legs and round bottom.

Hudson cleared his throat. Jake glanced at him.

"A woman like that shouldn't be alone. It's almost a sin." Hudson eyed Jake.

He lifted a brow and pretended a casualness he didn't feel. Hudson had caught him ogling her. He didn't bite the bait Hudson dangled in front of him. Instead, he said. "Did you know Joe Brown was in a lot of trouble when he was younger?"

Hudson didn't press the issue. "I remember he was one of those punk kids with mush for brains back in high school. It looks like he cleaned up his act as he got older."

"He still might be worth checking out."

Hudson reached for the door handle. "You got any evidence to back that up?"

Jake scratched the back of his neck. "Not really. But he was one of the guys Steve supposedly tried to sell drugs to. You never got a chance to talk to him."

Hudson pushed his jacket cuff back and checked his watch. "I'll run by the mill and see if I can catch him. I've got other stops today."

"Thanks." He watched Hudson climb into his truck and drive off.

He wondered if Lily expected him for coffee. He wanted to go back out to the crime scene to see if he could unearth any empty shell casings. Jake didn't remember being followed on the highway, but then, he hadn't been looking for a tail.

He needed an excuse to tell her why he'd gone for awhile. Jake went inside his cabin to collect his things. He hid his gun inside the waistband of his jeans and pocketed his keys. On the way to his truck, he spotted Lily walking toward him.

She stopped a foot from him and planted her hands on her hips. "You're going somewhere."

He got the distinct feeling she was ticked off at him. "Into town. I need to do a few errands."

"Why don't I believe you?"

Jake lifted his brows. "I don't know." He said in an innocent tone. "Why don't you?"

"I think you're going out investigating." She waved her hand in front of her. "Somewhere."

He wanted to kiss her. "I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

"Fine. Just go take care of yourself." She circled around and stomped away from him.

Jake hurried to catch up with her. When he did, he grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him. "Come on. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Her eyes shot off sparks of fire. "Go. Go do your thing."

"Ah...Lily. I like that you're worried about me, but I do know how to take care of myself. I've been trained for that. I've done it for years."

When she didn't answer, he said, "Trust me. I can take care of myself."

She blew out a frustrated breath. "Will you at least tell me where you're going?"

He hesitated. On the one hand, it might be a good idea if Lily knew his intended destination. On the other, it would probably upset her. "To see if I can find a couple of bullet casings."

She shook her head. "You're going back out there to where Steve and Diane died? What if someone shoots at you again?"

"I plan on being more careful this time. Yesterday, I was caught off guard."

"I'll go with you."

Jake's jaw tightened. "No, Lily. No way."

Their eyes locked. Her gaze said she wasn't going to give in that easily.

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "If I'm not back in a couple of hours, call Deputy Hudson. Her chin jutted out in a show of stubbornness. "If I'm not back, it will probably be because I got my truck stuck."

Lily leveled him with a look that said, *Don't try to fool me*.

"Promise me you'll stay put."

"I don't like this. I don't like this at all."

Jake bent his head and kissed her quick before he wheeled around and strode back to his truck. By the time he climbed inside his truck, she had disappeared.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, Jake neared the turn-off to the logging road. An older, brown Ford truck had pulled onto the highway two miles ago. Could be coincidence, but he didn't think so. He punched the gas. The brown truck followed suit.

Jake cruised past the turn-off to the logging road, the truck staying with him. He reached under the seat, fumbled for his gun, and laid it next to him. He spotted a driveway up ahead with a shiny red mailbox perched on a wooden post at the end of the driveway. He shifted through the gears and slowed down.

After he turned onto the driveway, he stopped. From the rearview, he watched the brown truck slow, but the truck continued on down the road. The driver was a man.

Damn, he couldn't get a good look at him from his rearview. He memorized the plate number, backed onto the highway, and drove in the direction he came from.

Several minutes passed before he spotted the brown truck a considerable distance behind him. Jake decided he'd visit the crime scene at night. Hopefully, his tail would be in bed where he belonged.

The Ford followed him to town. When Jake pulled into the café parking lot, the truck disappeared down the main street of Mountaintop. He went into the café and found an empty booth. He ordered coffee and a cinnamon roll when the waitress came to take his order.

Jake polished off the sweet roll and half of the coffee before he tugged his cell phone out of his jacket pocket and called Hudson. The dispatcher took a message. The phone rang as he drank his second cup of coffee.

"Ramsey here."

"What's up, Jake?" Hudson asked.

"Roy, can you run a plate for me?"

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

"I got a tail. I obviously had it yesterday, too, or else I wouldn't have been used for target practice."

"Give me a second to pull over so I can write it down."

Jake picked up his mug and drained it dry. "Any luck at the mill?"

"Our boy wasn't there." There was a long pause. "What's the number?"

He recited the license number to Hudson.

"It might take a while," Hudson said. "I gotta go smooth the waters of two neighbors brawling about snow plowing on their road."

Jake chuckled. Out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere crime. He sobered when he remembered Steve and Diane.

Chapter 9

Jake strode down the sidewalk. The main street of Mountaintop was quiet. A handful of cars and trucks rolled through town. He hoped to get a glimpse of the brown truck again. Plus, he wanted to get Lily a gift. He never was good at the romantic side of a relationship. Flowers were too ordinary. Besides, Mountaintop didn't have a florist shop.

He stopped in front of a small gift shop and glanced through the window. Two plump, middle-aged women browsed the shelves. Jake gritted his teeth and pushed open the door.

The two women gave him the once-over when he walked inside. The clerk, a petite young woman, greeted him from behind the high counter. "Hi. Can I help you find something?"

"Thanks, but no. I think I'll just look for awhile."

"Take your time, and if you need help, just let me know."

"Thanks." Jake meandered down an aisle far enough way from the curious eyes of the two women, but he still heard whispering coming from their direction. Scratching the back of his neck, he wandered through the shop. Most of the items stocked on the shelves were hand-made. There was a mishmash of items: candles, soaps, painted baskets, wooden figurines of wild animals. None of the items appealed to him.

In the next aisle, he came across a shelf crammed with books. The majority of the books were written about the state—history and present-day Montana. One particular book caught his eye. A book of cowboy poetry by a rancher from Billings. Jake wondered if Lily had ever read the book, or if she even liked poetry. He shuffled the pages until he found when it had been published and discovered it was only recently.

Jake carried the book up to the counter.

When he slid it on the counter, the young woman smiled. "Good choice. Is it a gift?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Would you like me to wrap it for you?"

"I'd appreciate that."

"Birthday or anniversary?" the young woman asked.

Jake shook his head. "Just something pretty. It's for a lady."

The woman's eyes twinkled as she turned to a table behind the counter.

He left the shop, the poetry book wrapped and tucked in a bag. His adrenaline revved up when he spotted the brown truck parked in front of the bar across the street. He jaywalked across the snow-packed street and just missed getting mowed over by an old timer in a rusted white Ford truck.

Jake shouldered open the door and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the bar. He strolled past three guys hunched over their drinks at the bar.

"How's it going?" He asked the bartender.

"No complaints. What's your poison today?"

Jake wasn't in the mood for liquor after two cups of coffee and a sweet cinnamon roll, but he needed to blend. "I'll have a bottle of Miller's."

The bartender nodded before went to the glass cooler and pulled out a longnecked bottle. He set the bottle in front of Jake. "Need a glass?"

"Nope." Jake pulled two one-dollar bills out of his front jeans pocket and handed the money to the bartender. "Thanks."

He circled around and walked toward a table in the far corner. There were a dozen patrons in the bar. Two women in their thirties sat at a table, talking and laughing. They smiled and batted their eyelashes at him as he passed their table. He nodded back out of politeness.

The rest of the patrons were men. Jake sat down facing the room, his back to the wall. None of the men looked familiar. The man driving the brown truck had been wearing a dark-colored stocking hat, probably navy or black. Two guys were shooting pool. Jake sipped his beer. He did noticed how the tall, skinny guy waiting his turn kept avoiding Jake's eyes.

The skinny guy bounced the bottom of the cue stick up and down on the floor. He looked about thirty and cursed with early baldness. His dull blonde hair was sparse on the top of his head.

Jake surveyed the room. Three middle-aged men sat clustered around a table, all dressed in flannel shirts and guzzling down beer.

Besides the two younger women, the rest of the crew didn't give Jake a passing glance, except for the skinny guy shooting pool. Jake caught the guy watching him when he pretended an interest in the game. The guy quickly looked away and reached for his beer bottle on a table behind him. Jake stood and dug in his pocket for a quarter.

He angled over to the pool table. "Mind if I throw my quarter in?"

Sage Burnett

The other guy, shorter and stockier but about the same age as the shifty-eyed guy, nodded. "Sure, put it down. I'm two shots from beating Joe here."

Jake's adrenaline sped up again when he heard the antsy guy's name. If it was the same Joe, why wasn't he driving logs to the mill? Jake went back to his table and picked up his beer. He sat down and waited for the game to end. The short, stocky guy had called the game right on the money. He ended the game in two easy shots.

Jake picked up his beer and walked back to the table. He stuffed his quarter into the slot and then racked the balls.

Joe hustled himself over to the bar, ordered another beer, and planted his skinny butt on a stool with his back to the pool table. Jake and the short, stocky guy played a close game. "Hey, you're pretty good." Jake threw the game on purpose.

"In the winter time, there's not much else to do but drink beer and shoot pool." He picked up his beer and took a swig. "I work for the Forest Service in the summer. The rest of the year, I collect unemployment and do odd jobs to keep busy."

Jake nodded. "Your friend in the same business?"

The stocky guy shook his head. "Joe? No. He drives truck at the mill, but he's taking a couple of days off."

Jake struggled to conjure up a mental picture of the guy who had scowled at him the other day when he cruised up to the mill office. It might be the same guy. Joe was a driver at the mill taking a couple of days off. So he could tail him? Whenever Hudson went to the mill, Joe Brown was always conveniently absent.

"How about another game?" The guy asked. "You're pretty good yourself."

"Sorry, I'll have to take a rain check. Maybe another time."

The guy nodded. "Sure. Hey, Joe. Get your skinny hide back over here for another game."

Jake headed toward the bar when Joe circled his stool around. Jake locked his eyes on him. The guy couldn't take the heat. He looked away, jumped off the stool, and brushed past Jake. He slid his empty beer bottle on the bar, walked back to his table, picked up his package, and left.

Jake hurried next door to the hardware store. He slipped inside without anyone noticing him, only because the store was fairly busy. He positioned himself near a window and pretended a great interest in rechargeable drills.

Five minutes later, Joe hot-footed it out of the bar and straight to the brown truck. He waited until Joe pulled away from the curb before he left the hardware store. Muttering curses, Jake broke into a jog to get back to his truck, still parked at the café.

By the time Jake reached his truck, Joe had disappeared. He maneuvered his truck onto the street and drove the same direction. After he left the city limits of Mountaintop he punched the gas, but the truck had disappeared. Jake headed in the direction of the mill. He didn't have a legitimate reason to drop by the mill. He was itching to know if that was where Joe had skedaddled off to. He slowed and did a quick u-turn across the road.

He glanced at his watch. He'd better get back to the cabins, or else, Lily would call Hudson.

* * * *

Lily sorted through her monthly receipts. She looked up and saw Jake stop his truck in front of the office. As usual, her pulse raced. She'd kept a sharp eye on the clock since he left two hours ago. Uneasiness had prevented her from getting any actual work done while he was gone.

Relief and excitement trickled through her. She didn't run to the door and throw it open like she wanted to do. Instead, she stood at the counter, pretending to concentrate on her paperwork when Jake strode inside and over to the counter.

He leaned against the counter. "Hi."

She noticed he held a bag from Wendy's Gift Shop in town. "Hi."

"I made it back, safe and sound."

Lily fought back the urge to throw her arms around his neck and drag his head down for a kiss. She wanted to chew him out for being so casual about putting himself in danger. In a businesslike manner, she arranged the receipts into a neat stack. "So I see." She glanced at him. "Did you find anything?"

She watched him scratch the back of his neck, a now-familiar gesture.

"I didn't find what I went to look for," he paused. "What does Joe Brown look like?"

Lily frowned. "You saw him?"

"I'm not sure, because I don't know what he looks like."

"Let's see...he's thin, with receding blonde hair." She didn't miss the glint of interest in his eyes. "You did see him. Where?"

"At the bar."

Why was he at the bar? "Are we going to play twenty questions, or are you going to tell me what's going on?"

Jake scratched the back of his neck again. "I wish you wouldn't ask me so many questions."

She drummed her fingers on the stack of receipts and didn't respond.

"I think the less you know, the better for you."

Lily's spine stiffened. "Why is it better for me to be left in the dark?"

He straightened away from the counter and locked his gaze on her. She realized he was weighing in his mind how much he would share with her. Perhaps he was only trying to protect her, which did lessen her irritation at him.

Jake set the bag on the counter. "I got you something." He pulled out a package

wrapped in white paper with yellow daisies scattered across it. The package was tied with a sunny yellow ribbon.

Surprise purled inside of her. He had bought her a gift. This was a first since John had died. A gift from a man. Her throat turned bone dry.

"Open it." Jake pushed the package closer to her. "I don't know if you'll like it or not."

She tore her eyes from the package to look at him. A trace of insecurity reflected in his brown eyes. He was such a big, strong, confident man. She'd never seen insecurity in him before. "Okay."

Lily picked up the package, slipped off the ribbon, and unwrapped it. It was a book titled *By The Campfire*.

Cowboy poetry. His gift had some how managed to wedge inside the secure, locked place of her heart. Unexpected tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

"Lily." Jake covered her hand with his. "Are you okay? The book wasn't supposed to upset you."

She shook her had. "I'm not upset. I'm...I'm touched." She stared down at the book. The picture on the front cover was two cowboys sitting around a glowing campfire, each holding a battered tin mug. "Thank you."

"Look at me."

She slowly raised her eyes.

"I wanted to get you something. I don't even know if you like poetry."

Insecurity still lingered in Jake's eyes, which touched her even more. "I love poetry. I've heard of this book, but I never read it." The insecurity vanished from his eyes. "Thank you."

"You already said thank you." He leaned across the counter and captured her lips with his. She was breathless by the time Jake ended their kiss.

* * * *

Later that night, at twelve-fifteen a.m., Jake idled his truck past Lily's house and office. Stormy rode shotgun on the seat next to him. He happened to glance in his rear view and saw the porch light come on at her place. "Dammit."

He shifted into reverse and backed up to the office. Lily came down the steps in a robe and snow boots. Jake shifted into neutral, climbed out, and met her in front of his truck.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Shit. He just couldn't lie to her. "I was going out to the old logging road."

"You said you went there earlier."

He had omitted telling her about being followed and skipping his destination. "Damn. You're making this hard." "No. You're making it hard."

He held up his hands. "Okay, okay. I didn't get out to the crime scene today because I was followed. I figure if I go now, no one will be the wiser."

"I'm coming with you."

"Come on, Lily. Go back inside. It's freezing out here."

"I'm going back inside to get dressed. If you're not here when I come back, I'll drive myself to the logging road."

Before he could answer, she wheeled around and hurried inside the office.

Frustrated, Jake kicked up a puff of snow with his boot. Then, he stomped to the office and into her house. After navigating around her house, he found Lily in her bedroom. She perched on the edge of the bed, lacing up her snow boots. Rosey sat at her feet, watching her. She glanced over at Jake.

It didn't matter that annoyance clawed at him—being in her bedroom gave him an instant hard-on. "I think I should go by myself."

"Do I have to keep reminding you that Steve and Diane were my friends?" Lily went to her closet, pulled out a bulky green down jacket, and shrugged into it.

He scowled at her.

"I think we should leave the dogs here. I don't want them getting lost. And it upsets Stormy to be there."

More annoyance scraped at him as he left the house to get Stormy. Lily was too stubborn for her own good. His protective instincts flew way over the top concerning her.

Five minutes later, they were on the road.

"Is this the reason you ignored me all evening? So you could sneak out?"

Jake blew out a frustrated breath. "I wasn't sneaking. And you made it clear yesterday you needed time."

"Hmm..."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"It's the only one I've got."

Snowflakes floated down and stuck to the windshield. He hit the wipers. There was a dusting of snow the past couple of days, but no significant amount of accumulation. Jake turned onto the highway, empty of traffic this time of night. He still hoped he might get lucky and find an empty shell casing.

The headlights kept picking up sets of eyes scattered near the shoulders of the road. He eased up on the gas.

"You're the first man I've been with since John died."

Jake already knew that. Lily had no idea what that meant to him. "Then I'm flattered."

"I don't want my heart broken again."

He didn't know how to answer that. He reached over, found her hand, and grasped it tightly. "I don't want to break your heart."

"Then just make sure you don't."

Jake looked over at her, but she stared straight ahead. He let go of her hand so he could keep both hands on the wheel. Every single time he touched her, emotions shifted inside of his heart.

They rode in silence the remainder of the way. After he parked his truck, Lily got out.

He turned the inside cab light on and gathered up his gear: a flashlight, his gun, and a three-inch heavy magnet. A metal detector would have been better, but the magnet was the only tool he had.

Lily held a flashlight, the beam pointed at the ground. It must have been in her pocket.

"Do you think you can handle staying behind me?" He wasn't sure why he was still irritated with her, but he sure as hell was.

"Lead the way."

Jake figured the shooter had been about a hundred and fifty yards away from him. He counted the distance. He beamed the flashlight in that direction and spotted the white plumed tail of a deer disappearing under the cover of trees.

Several minutes later, they reached a small, circular clear cut that had been logged recently. As they trudged through the clear cut, he realized the snow was a hell of a lot deeper out in the open. He could have used a pair of snowshoes. He stopped, turned, and watched Lily trek through the snow. She wore a pair of snow pants with boots that came almost up to her knees. She didn't seem to be having a problem, but this was her territory.

She caught up with him. "You're not dressed properly for deep snow."

"Don't remind me." The snow had slipped over his snow boots, dampening his jeans and wool socks.

Shortly after that, he found what he was looking for. The snow was packed down. Four-wheelers tracks led to that point. Boot tracks trailed off to the left. Jake followed the tracks as best as he could with Lily behind him.

He crouched down when the tracks stopped and circled the beam of the flashlight. The light didn't pick up anything. Daylight would have made his job easier. Jake didn't remember hearing the sound of an ATV engine that day. He did remember hearing the sound of trucks barreling down the highway. Engine noise carried a long way.

"This is about where the spent casings should be," he said. He noticed Lily shiver. She was definitely dressed warm enough. It was being in the spot where some thug had shot at him.

"How are you planning on finding them?" She knelt down next to him.

Jake pulled the magnet from his jacket pocket and held it up. "With this." Then, he leaned over and kissed her. Her lips were cold, just like his. She still tasted good, though. He figured Lily would always taste good.

She laid her hand on his chest. "We're not here for this."

"Yeah, I know."

He ran the magnet through the deep snow, which slipped over the edge of his gloves and melted down onto his hands. Jake ignored the icy cold. A few minutes later, his efforts paid off when he heard the unmistakable clink of metal to magnet.

He held the magnet up in front of his face while Lily shined her flashlight on the bullet casing. A thirty-thirty spent shell casing dangled from the end of the magnet. "Hot damn." He fished in his pocket for a plastic bag and dropped the casing into it. He went back to work searching for the other two.

When his knees and lower back started to ache, he stood up. Frustration gnawed at him. He knew the casings could have been thrown in any direction, or the shooter could have pocketed them. The bone chilling cold of the night started to catch up with him. "This is probably as good as it's going to get."

She nodded. "One is better than nothing."

"Come on, let's get out of here." He grabbed her hand. "I want to look around where the four-wheeler was parked."

Jake spent a considerable amount of time searching the area where the ATV had been parked. He didn't turn up anything, so they headed back to his truck.

He'd call Hudson in the morning to see if he could do anything with the empty shell casing.

* * * *

When Jake heard pounding on his cabin door, he dragged himself from deep sleep and a provocative dream of Lily. He patted the bed next to him, believing that maybe it hadn't been a dream, but real. He didn't feel her. "Goddammit."

Last night, Lily sent him home to his own cabin. He glanced at the clock next to his bed. Nine-twenty. He never slept this late. The pounding on the cabin door persisted.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and grabbed his jeans from the heap of clothes on the floor. "Shit." His pants were still damp from trudging through the deep snow last night. He raked his hands through his hair on his way to the door.

Roy Hudson stood on the small porch. "You don't strike me as the type to sleep late."

Jake scowled and moved back so Hudson could come inside. "I was going to call you this morning."

"First things first. You got any coffee?"

Jake wheeled around. "I'll make some." He heard Hudson padding behind him into the kitchen. While he filled the coffee maker on the counter, he said over his

shoulder, "I found an empty shell casing last night."

"Where in the blazes did you find a casing?"

"Where the S.O.B. tried to take me out the other day." Jake grabbed two mugs off the cupboard shelf.

Hudson parked himself on a chair. "You went out there last night?"

Jake circled around and tucked his long underwear top into his jeans. "I had to. Remember, I have a tail."

Hudson shook his head. "You know how to handle yourself in this kind of weather?"

"Obviously, I do." He didn't mention Lily had insisted on going with him. "I'm standing here, aren't I?"

"Where's the casing?"

Jake padded over to the hooks on the wall near the door and pulled the plastic bag from his jacket pocket. He carried it over to the table and handed it to Hudson.

Hudson held the bag up in front of him and eyed it for a few seconds. "A good old thirty-thirty. The best deer hunting rifle on God's green earth. I use one myself."

Jake filled the mugs and took them to the table. He sat down across from Hudson. "I suppose you're going to tell me everybody and their dog has one."

"That's about it." Hudson pocketed the bag. "You got any cream?"

"You'll have to settle for milk."

"That'll do."

Jake fetched the quart milk carton from the fridge and grabbed a spoon from a drawer.

After Hudson poured half of Jake's milk into his coffee, he stirred it. "I ran the plate number. He laid the spoon next to his mug. "The truck belongs to Joe Brown."

Jake covered his mouth to hide his yawn. "I already figured that out."

Hudson's bushy brows rose as he lifted the mug. "How did you pull that one off?"

Jake leaned back in his chair. "I ran into Brown at the local bar yesterday. He's taking a couple of days off from work."

Hudson drank some coffee. "That explains why he's never at the mill when I stop by. But Carrie or Lewis always gave me the impression he was too busy driving to be there."

Jake took a swallow of coffee. "Sounds like a cover-up to me."

Hudson nodded. "I still haven't the foggiest what they're trying to cover up, though."

Drugs were Jake's first bet. Since Lewis had came across as so anti-drug by firing Steve, it made him look like a fine, upstanding citizen.

"I can't get a warrant on what we have," Hudson said, "which is diddly. Suspicious behavior, and our instincts."

He knew Hudson was right. "So what are you going to do?"

"Looks like I have to go out there and stir the pot again. I have to serve some divorce papers up the road here first. Since I already had to come out this way, I thought I'd drop by and tell you about the plate."

"What about the casing?"

"I'll take it with me. Have it run through ballistics, but I doubt anything will turn up. No prints on the windowsill, either. Like I said, everybody around here has a thirtythirty. Probably ninety-nine percent of them aren't registered."

Chapter 10

Inside the bathroom, ready to strip down for his shower, Jake heard another knock on his door. He tucked his underwear top back into his jeans as he walked to the door and opened it. His hormones instantly shot into the red zone, seeing Lily on his porch, dressed in a fleece jacket and faded jeans. Why did casual clothes look so sexy on her?

Her brows were creased together, while her eyes sparked with impatience. "Why was Deputy Hudson here?"

"Good morning to you, too."

She brushed past him into his cabin.

Jake closed the door and turned to face her. She crossed her arms over her chest and eyed him with suspicion. "Want some coffee?"

"I've already had coffee. Quit trying to sidetrack me. I feel I have a right to know what's going on."

He plowed a hand through his hair. "Yeah, you do."

"Well?"

"Joe Brown has been following me. He's probably the one who took a couple of shots at me. Hudson confirmed the plate number."

"Then Deputy Hudson will arrest him."

Jake shook his head. "It's not that easy. Believe me, I wish it was. We don't have any concrete evidence right now. There were no witnesses the day he shot at me."

"Why did he do it in the first place? There has to be a reason."

"Roy and I think maybe they're hiding something at the mill. Something illegal."

Lily tugged her off her gloves. "Do you think Steve found out what it was?"

"Most likely."

"Then it has to be something major. Something really big to commit murder."

He knew people who had killed for less than twenty bucks in a wallet. He shrugged.

"What is Deputy Hudson going to do?"

"He's going out to the mill later to ask more questions."

"If they're hiding something out there, he's certainly not going to get any straight answers. Isn't there anything else he can do?"

"Unfortunately, no." Jake planned to do something, but it would be under the cover of darkness again, not to mention illegal.

"Jake, I hate this. Steve and Diane..." Her voice trailed off.

He reached for her and pulled her into his arms. "Everything's going to be fine."

Lily's eyes filled with fear. "You can't promise that."

"I can damn well try." He ran his fingers down her cheek. "I want you again. Make love with me."

He saw the doubt in her eyes, so she surprised him the hell out of him when she pressed herself against him and twined her arms around his neck. She coaxed his mouth open and slipped her tongue inside.

He ground his hips against hers so she could feel his hard cock. So she could know what she did to him. Jake backed her toward the couch. The bedroom was too damn far.

He laid her down on the couch and peeled off every inch of her clothing and boots. She gazed up at him with unabashed desire, her nipples hard and her legs slightly spread, showing her pussy to him. Jake kept his gaze locked on hers as he stripped. Her beautiful eyes flooded with desire.

He lowered himself on top of her. When his body wrapped around hers, need and passion burned in his veins. He kissed her long and thoroughly before his lips trailed down to her breasts, where he suckled each of her nipples. Then, he tugged on them gently with his teeth. He didn't stop until she moaned and gyrated beneath his body. Jake continued his descent down her flushed body until his lips closed around her clit. He moved off the couch and knelt in front of her. He shifted her hips to bring her closer to him.

"Jake," she moaned. Her hands tangled in his hair.

He licked her clit, slow and easy at first. As the fire built inside of him, he licked her harder and faster. The movement of Lily's shapely hips against his face and her wanton moans drove his desire for this woman to a new level. Her musky, womanly scent floated around him like a sultry cloud. When her body shuddered with her orgasm, he continued licking her until she stilled.

He scrambled up and climbed on top of her, then plunged his throbbing cock deep inside her dewy moistness.

Sage Burnett

Lily dragged his head down for a kiss. Now, he tasted all of her. Moans fell from her lips as her body thrashed against his. Her ragged breaths filled his ears.

Jake didn't know how much longer he could control himself. "Lily, come again for me. Please," he ground out through clenched teeth.

He felt her nearing her orgasm as her moans grew louder and her body bucked beneath him. His body absorbed her shuddering release as she came beneath him. A fierce growl rumbled from his lips, and his body convulsed with his own mind-numbing release.

* * * *

Jake unbuckled the snowshoe bindings. He leaned the brand-new snowshoes against the thick trunk of a pine tree and checked his gun holstered to his side. His cell phone was clipped to his belt, and a small flashlight was tucked in his jacket pocket. Lily undid her snowshoes, too,

Every fiber in his being had fought to keep her away from the mill. He had learned one thing about her. When she wanted something, she got it.

A solid blanket of clouds hid the stars and moon. There were three outdoor lights attached to tall poles placed around the main building of the mill. Several lights shone inside the building, too.

"This is as far as you go."

"Now, wait a minute," she said.

"We already discussed this," he reminded her. He dug his truck keys out of his jeans pocket and held them out to her. "If anything happens, you get back to my truck and get the hell away from here."

"No. I'm coming with you."

Jake grabbed her hand and dropped the keys into her palm. "Take the keys. I could get busted for trespassing. You don't need to be arrested."

As she wrapped her hand around the keys, he planted a quick kiss on her lips.

When he turned to walk away, Lily spoke from behind him. "I think I might be in love with you. And I'm scared something might happen to you."

Jake slowly turned back to face her. What a time for her to confess her feelings for him. He walked back to her. "Damn, Lily." He lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. "I'll be fine. I promise."

She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him until his brain turned fuzzy.

It was hard to concentrate after her passionate kiss. "Remember everything I said?"

She nodded.

He walked away again, Lily's words muddling his brain. He needed to focus and stay alert. A night security man had to be on duty, which was why he waited until midnight to start his surveillance. Jake set his jaw, then sprinted across the parking lot to the left side of the building. He pressed his back against the wall, near a window, and waited a minute before he peeked inside. One light glowed in the reception area, another in Gordy Lewis' office.

Jake snaked his way around the building to the rear. He stopped when he spotted three vehicles parked behind it. The truck nearest him looked to be Joe Brown's, the infamous brown truck. The second was a brand new white Dodge extended-cab fourwheel-drive truck. He figured the new truck belonged to Lewis. He didn't recognize the third vehicle, a vintage Ford Bronco.

He inched his way along the side of the building and stopped again when he heard men's voices near the back of the building.

"Did you get it unloaded?" That sounded like Lewis' voice.

"Yup," said another man.

Drugs? Weapons? Guns would be too bulky and cumbersome for a log truck. It had to be drugs. Packed in small containers, drugs could be easily concealed.

Jake's adrenaline kicked in. Tonight was for surveillance, for nosing around the mill to see what he could find. He had landed himself smack in the middle of some kind of illegal deal.

"Where the hell is Ray?" Lewis's tone threaded with impatience. "You damn well know I don't like having a hundred pounds of heroin at my mill."

"He'll be here, boss. He always runs a little late. That's just Ray."

Gordy Lewis was a drug dealer. The scum of the earth, as far as Jake was concerned. The street value of that much heroin boggled the mind.

The drugs had to be coming from Canada. A perfect set-up. That is, until Steve had stumbled across something suspicious.

As a trespasser, Jake's options were limited. If he could get a bead on this Ray character, most likely the pickup man, Hudson could have him stopped on a routine traffic check. That meant he'd have to hang around and get a look at the vehicle, which he didn't relish one damn bit. He hadn't bargained on ending up in the middle of a drug deal.

He stayed in the shadows next to the building and felt his hands sweating under his gloves. He sure as hell couldn't call for back up, since he was a civilian acting on a hunch.

"It's friggin' cold tonight," a third man groused. A cigarette lighter snapped to life.

Jake cursed under his breath when a set of headlights flashed in his direction. He realized too late he stood right in the path of the approaching headlights. He reached for his cell phone and hit speed dial. He had programmed Hudson's home number into his phone before he left for the mill.

He turned his back so the men wouldn't hear him. Hudson, dammit, pick up.

Sage Burnett

"Hudson here," the deputy snarled. He sounded mean when he woke up from a deep sleep.

"Roy, it's Jake. I'm at the mill. They're fronting heroin."

"What the hell is going on, Ramsey?"

Jake spotted an older white van cruising straight at him. "I don't have much time. I'm either gonna get shot or busted in about thirty seconds." He punched the *off* button.

The van, now parallel with him, stopped.

The guy inside rolled down the window. "Why are you hiding beside the building?"

Jake shrugged and put his hand on his gun, keeping his face in the shadows.

"Taking a leak, huh?"

He nodded.

"What's the problem, Ray?" Joe Brown stomped toward the van.

Jake faced a split-second decision. Make a run for it now and chance getting shot in the back, or stand his ground until Hudson or another deputy got here. There was Lily to consider, back under the cover of the trees.

"Huh?" the driver said. "I thought that was you over there."

Brown wheeled around to face Jake. "What the hell?" He took one step toward Jake and fumbled under his jacket.

Jake already had his gun out of the holster. He pointed it at Brown.

"Get away from the goddamn building now!" Brown hollered.

"What the hell is going on over there?" Lewis yelled.

Ray, the driver, climbed out of the van, a sawed-off shotgun in one hand. Lewis and the third guy jogged over to Joe.

"Who is that?"

"Don't know, boss." Joe pulled a pistol out from under his jacket. "Hey, buddy, why don't you show your face?"

Jake stepped out of the shadows, his gun aimed at Lewis. Maybe he could bluff these guys into dropping their weapons. The beam of a high-powered flashlight hit him smack in the face. Jake squinted against the assault of bright light.

"Well, look who we got here," Joe said. "Mr. Jake Ramsey."

"Drop the gun, Ramsey," Lewis ordered.

"Get the light out of my face, and I'll think about it."

"Who's this bozo?" Ray asked.

"Someone who's been sticking his nose where it doesn't belong," Lewis said.

The third guy, about the same age as Brown, lowered the flashlight.

"Drop it," Lewis said again.

Jake bent down and set his gun on the packed snow. He slowly straightened to his full height. "The game's over, Lewis. The sheriff is on his way. He'll be here soon."

Brown scowled at him. "Yeah, right."

"You're trespassing," Lewis said. "The average Montanan has a low tolerance for trespassers."

"You killed Steve and Diane because they discovered the little operation going on here." He needed to stall the men as long as he could. They could shoot him and say he was burglarizing the place. There hadn't been enough time to give Hudson a description of the van and driver.

"Steve did," Joe volunteered.

Lewis turned to Joe. "Shut up, you damn fool!"

"Why don't I just shoot him and get it over with?" Joe raised his pistol and aimed it at Jake's chest.

Adrenaline pumped inside his body. He hoped Joe didn't have a twitchy trigger finger. Raw emotion churned inside his gut. Maybe he deserved to be taken out by some lowlife after what he had done.

An image of Lily in her trademark faded jeans, her face flushed with passion, flashed though his head. Why hadn't he told her he was in love with her, too? There was a damn good possibility he might not ever get the chance.

Jake struggled to keep his tone even and hide the emotions erupting inside of him. "You're bringing heroin in on the log trucks from Canada," he said. "Steve must have stumbled across a shipment."

"You're full of shit, Ramsey," Lewis said.

"So you killed him and his girlfriend." Jake knew he could damn well be next.

"They committed suicide."

Jake leveled his eyes on Lewis. "The sheriff's department isn't buying that theory anymore. Like I said before, the game is over."

"The only game that's over is yours," Lewis replied. "Get some rope and tie him up."

"Then what?" Joe asked.

Jake wondered if the heavyset guy loping toward the building was Keith Anderson.

"Then, he's going to have an unfortunate accident," Lewis said.

Jake shook his head in an attempt to camouflage the fear rushing through his veins. He reminded himself he'd been in situations like this before. "Lewis, you're not using your head. The cops are on their way."

"You're trespassing. Why would they come to the aid of a trespasser, a thief?"

"Because I'm friends with one of the deputies. I know he won't let me down."

"Let me guess," Lewis said in a tone heavy with sarcasm. "Deputy Hudson."

"Maybe." Jake knew it could take a long time to get a deputy out here to this remote area. He trusted Roy had called it in as soon as Jake cut him off. He hoped a patrol car was near. "It doesn't really matter, does it? You're busted. What are you going to do with the hundred pounds of heroin you got sitting out here?"

"Get the stuff in the van now." Lewis ordered.

Joe swung around to do as he was told.

Jake saw the third guy return with a coil of rope. "How much is he paying you, Brown?" he asked. "Is it worth it? Did he pay you enough to kill two innocent people?" Jake noticed that got Joe's attention.

He stopped and wheeled back around. "How did you know I killed them?"

"Shut up!" Lewis hollered, his patience gone.

"Just a lucky shot in the dark," Jake said. Then, he heard the blessed sound of a siren, one he'd heard the last twenty years. "I told you, Lewis. You might as well throw in the towel. Game's over."

Lewis stared hard at him. "You filthy bastard."

Seconds later, a sheriff's sport utility sped into the lot, locked up the brakes, and almost rear-ended the white van. A uniformed deputy jumped out, a 9-mm hand gun secured in his hands. He stayed behind his open door.

"Drop your weapons," the deputy ordered. "Raise your hands above your heads."

Jake itched to reach for his gun. He didn't know if these idiots would try and make a run for it. Ray, the van driver, didn't hesitate. His sawed-off thumped to the ground, and he raised his hands above his head. A few seconds later, Joe Brown, cursing like the truck driver he was, let his pistol drop to the ground. He also raised his hands over his head. After Joe Brown crumbled, the third guy lifted his hands, still holding the rope in one hand.

Lewis stood there, glaring first at the deputy, then over at Jake.

"I'm Jake Ramsey, Deputy. I called Roy Hudson."

The deputy barely glanced at him. "So, you're Roy's mysterious friend."

Jake pointed toward Lewis. "That's Gordy Lewis, the owner of the mill."

"Roy is on his way," the deputy said. "Mr. Lewis, raise your hands above your head."

Jake wondered if Lewis had a gun under his jacket. If he did, would he try to take out the deputy and him?

When the wail of another siren could be heard in the distance, Lewis finally raised his hands over his head.

"I don't know if he has a gun," Jake told the deputy.

"Backup is here. We'll find out then." The deputy never took his eyes off the four men he held at gunpoint.

Jake recognized a good cop when he saw one. "There's a hundred pounds of heroin waiting to be loaded," he said.

"No shit," was the deputy's answer.

* * * *

Two hours later, Deputy Hudson eased his truck to a stop off the shoulder of the main highway. Jake parked under the cover of the trees, and he barely made it through the snow berm the county plow drivers made on the roadside. He had a bad feeling he was stuck. Lily gripped his hand hard, but he didn't care. He was alive, with her beside him.

Hudson voiced his sentiments. "I think you might be stuck."

"I probably am."

"Why don't I just drive you two home? You can call a tow truck in the morning. Send the bill to me."

Jake dropped his hand from the door handle. "That's my payment for busting Lewis and his partners in crime?"

Hudson maneuvered his truck back onto the road. He wore civilian clothes and drove his own Chevy four-wheel-drive. "What do you expect? You're not on the payroll."

Jake leaned back and chuckled.

Hudson cruised down the road. "It's a crying shame about those young couple. Steve sounded like a smart guy. He found those boxes of heroin in the storage room and reported it to Lewis like a responsible worker would, not realizing Lewis was the bad guy."

"I knew Steve and Diane were innocent." Regret laced Lily's voice.

"Joe Brown folded like a deck of cards when the pressure was put on him," Hudson said. "He arranged a meeting between Steve and Diane out on that old logging road. He told Steve he had a plan to get his job back. It was nothing but an ambush. Keith Anderson was hiding in the trees. Brown and Anderson subdued those poor kids and managed to get enough tranquilizers down them to make it look like suicide."

He tightened his hold on Lily's hand. "So Lewis managed to get his sidekicks to do his dirty work?"

"Yeah, that sums it up in a nutshell." Hudson slowed down for a deer wandering across the road. "Lewis kept whining for his lawyer. He didn't admit to anything. It's hard to say how many more are involved in the drug dealing."

Jake wondered about Carrie and hoped the young woman wasn't involved. "You're going to have a hell of a long day tomorrow."

"The next couple of weeks are going to be long. You going to stick around for a

while?" Hudson asked.

"Yeah, I think I might." That would all depend on Lily. "One other thing. I've decided to keep Steve and Diane's dog."

"Good. I'll get in touch with the families and let them know it has a good home."

Chapter 11

As soon as Deputy Hudson dropped them off in front of the office, Lily grabbed Jake's hand again and pulled him up the stairs. She'd waited in the shadows, not knowing the dangerous situation he had walked into. He could have died, just like John.

"Lily, what's the big hurry?"

She didn't answer as she tugged her keys out of her jacket pocket and unlocked the door.

"Are you okay?" He asked as he followed her inside.

She waited until he closed the door before she looped her arms around him. She kissed him with such feeling, tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

Jake framed her face with his hands. "Talk to me, honey."

She shook her head and kissed him again. He tugged her close and held her, tight as a vice. This time, his tongue assaulted her mouth, making her moan with an agonizing need. They ripped at each other's clothes.

"I was afraid you might die." Breathless, Lily tossed his tee shirt to the floor. She licked his nipples as a feverous yearning to mate with him nearly overpowered her. Jake's musky, male scent escalated her feverish state. She unzipped his jeans, pushed her hand inside his briefs, and felt the heat of his erection. She looked into his eyes and saw that a trace of fear still lingered. He had been so close to death tonight.

"Lily," he groaned as he lowered her to the carpet.

She didn't give him a chance to get his jeans completely off. She pushed him down on his back and straddled him. His penis shoved hard up into the core of her. "Jake..." She couldn't lose this man, too. She wouldn't let that happen.

He roughly caressed her breasts as she rode him.

"Come to me, Lily."

Sage Burnett

She lowered her head and slid her tongue inside his mouth. Jake's hands clutched her bottom, his fingers digging into her soft flesh. Lily rubbed her swollen nipples against his bare chest. The burning inside of her intensified with each movement of their hips pounding against each other's.

Jake nipped her neck and then her shoulder blade. He pressed his hand between their bodies. When his finger stroked her clit with an urgent rhythm, she came—swift, hard and completely. Boneless and mindless, she felt each and every stroke of Jake's orgasm.

* * * *

The next morning, Lily woke with her head on Jake's shoulder, naked as the day she was born. She snuggled closer to him, remembering last night's life-and-death situation.

Feeling him watching her, she raised her head and looked at him. His jaw sprouted a new day's worth of growth, and his eyes were sleepy and sexy. "Morning." She feathered soft kisses across his lips.

"Morning, yourself."

Jake rolled over, taking her with him. He lowered his head and proceeded to kiss her with such gentleness, a lump formed in her throat.

"I could get used to this." He kissed her cheek, eyebrows, and forehead. "Waking up next to you every morning."

Lily smiled as her heart swelled with emotion. "Does that mean you're planning on sticking around for a while?" She'd asked in a teasing tone, but her heart thudded hard inside her chest.

"I'm damn serious. You're the best thing that's happened to me in a hell of a long time. I want you, and I want us to be together. I'm crazy in love with you, too."

"I want something with you, too." She trailed her fingertips down his cheek as tears crowded the corners of her eyes. "Something lasting."

A lazy, morning grin spread across his face. "I can handle lasting with you."

"Then kiss me."

Jake did as he was told.

LOVE'S REDEMPTION

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIO

Sage Burnett has been composing stories since childhood. Short stories, school plays, and poetry. She now writes contemporary romance set in Montana. Romantic suspense and comedy. And she loves a happy ending.

Sage once had a face-to-face encounter with a grizzly sow and her two cubs. It's clear she lived to tell about it. She survived a one-hundred-year storm on the eastern side of the state, another nail-biting incident she lived to tell about. She loves hiking in the Montana wilderness, wondering what wild animal might be around the next bend.

Sage eats a bowl of Cream of Wheat every morning and is a chocolate addict. She also drinks tons of green tea.

Her roomies are a rowdy girl black lab, Madison, and two spoiled, lazy, temperamental girl kitties, Runt and Cody.

Some of her favorite authors are Dana Stabenow, John Sanford, Tami Hoag and Dr. Seuss.

Check out Sage's latest books at www.sirenpub.com/sageburnett

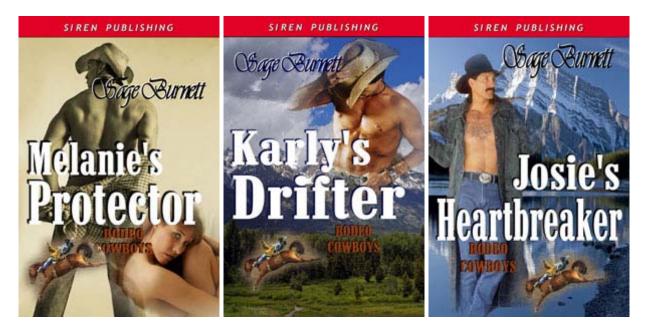
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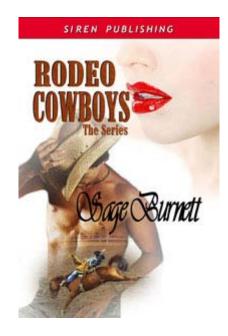
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