

# PORTRAIT OF DEATH

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## Prologue

There were too many people in the room, too many bodies bumping and pushing against each other. He moved through the crowd of people like a ship cutting through water. It was the way he walked, graceful, powerful or maybe it was the look on his face, the anger blazing out of his eyes.

Whatever it was, people unconsciously gave him space and moved away from him. He made his way from one side of the room to the other, not glancing at the paintings, not stopping to talk with anyone. He walked as if with purpose until he came to rest in front of number 407. *Woman Without Hope*. He stood, not staring at it in appreciation, but absorbing it with utter concentration. He was as still as a statue, silent, motionless as the minutes dragged on.

Suddenly, in an explosion of movement, he spun on his heels and stalked across the room.

A blonde woman stepped in his path. She tried to get out of his way, but she didn't move fast enough. He bumped into her, and she would have been sent sprawling to the ground if not for the powerful arms that caught her and pulled her upright.

His arms were on hers, his grip tight and possessive. "I'm very sorry. Are you all right?" he asked.

She couldn't find her voice as she stared into his face. He was drop-dead gorgeous. She smiled at him and he began to return the smile, but suddenly his face transformed. His brows furrowed, his mouth turned down and anger blazed from his eyes. And then, before she could react, he moved, pushed past her, and stormed off into a sea of bodies.

Unconsciously she took a step as if to follow. But she was restrained.

She looked down at the long pink fingernails grasping her arm, and then up at the face of the red-headed woman laughing and sipping champagne.

"Darling, I've been looking for you everywhere! The couple that bought painting number 429--I can't remember the name of it. You know the one, where the brunette woman is dead and lying across the ground with a rope around her neck? They want to talk to the artist about it. Have you seen Julia's agent? They think it's absolutely brilliant. And I have to agree it is. Julia is going to be famous one day."

As the man drifted through the crowd, the woman's words floated with him on the breeze of conversation. Oh yes, Julia Madson was definitely going to be famous, probably sooner than she expected.

## Chapter 1

"No, I can't. Look, I'm in the middle of a painting. You're interrupting my work. I have to go. Yeah, I am. Of course I'll be ready for the show. I promise, as soon as I'm done you'll be the first to know."

Julia slammed down the phone. It was the third lie she had told today. There was no painting. She hadn't done any work for days. She was blocked, unable to do anything but stare at a blank canvas. Inspiration, creativity, whatever it was called--it was gone. Her biggest fear, the one that sent her in search of alcohol, was wondering if what was left of her talent was dried up, this time for good.

She only needed two more paintings for her show. *Hershow*. The words were enough to send her into a panic. Julia took a deep breath and tried to calm herself, but fear poured through her body, numbing her

limbs and sending her heart racing. Taking another deep breath, she wiped her sweaty palms against her jeans and looked around the room for a means of escape.

Where had she put the scotch? Alcohol had become a dangerous sedative over the last year. One glass and then another. It usually took two for the harsh edges of life to begin to blur. That's all she needed, the edge taken off. She wasn't an alcoholic, she kept telling herself. But deep down she knew she would be if she kept drinking daily.

*No scotch tomorrow.* Each day she made the same resolution and then chastised herself as she broke it. But those few moments after the second glass, as her body and mind relaxed, she could forget who she was. Ignore her life, ignore her problems, and concentrate on her paintings. Painting was the only escape she had besides alcohol.

And now that escape had been taken away. She couldn't paint anymore.

She found the scotch and poured herself a glass. The amber liquid slid down her throat, burning as it went. Ever so slowly her stomach warmed and she began to relax. One glass and then another. How many drinks this time to quench the fear?

Tears of frustration poured down her face. She wiped them away and focused only on the bottle in front of her.

Time passed and she drank this time until she ran out of tears and scotch.

Her body slid back onto the couch and her mind gratefully floated off into oblivion. Oblivion-a place where the dreams waited, nightly images which always started out pleasant but gradually morphed themselves into nightmares. Colors began to roll across the back of her eyelids.

Blue sparkling water, mountains carpeted in pine trees. Julia sat in the canoe with her sister, Gretchen. The boat drifted slowly across the lake, as the girls occasionally splashed water into the boat and onto each other. Their screams of laughter filled the clean mountain air. It had been close to a perfect day. The pleasant images and sounds echoed in Julia's mind, but then, ever so slowly, darkness began to edge into the picture. The images narrowed until they disappeared and were replaced by the sound of rain.

Skip to raindrops streaming down the car windows as rock-and-roll music boomed over the stereo. Loud voices teasingly argued and laughter drifted over the music, entwining with the beat until the sounds became part of the song. The rain turned into ice, and the ice began forming small pools of slush.

Julia watched the wipers push the nasty mess up and down, left and right. She watched as her sister, Gretchen, blew on the side window, fogging it, so she could glide her finger across the cold surface and draw a smiley face. Julia turned back to the road and watched the bright lights rush past in the dark, one after another.

She heard Gretchen singing along with the music on the radio, as she continued driving carefully in the icy, slushy mess that now covered the road. They'd just finished arguing over who was better--REM or U2. U2, of course, came out the victor.

Suddenly a pair of lights changed direction. Julia saw Gretchen look away from her doodling as she slammed on the breaks, barely registering in the back of her mind that it might not be the best thing to do.

Metal twisted against metal and laughter turned into screams of terror. Julia's world became dark and

cold and full of pain. A pain so intense her mind rebelled against it and sought escape into darkness.

If there was more, beyond the fact that Gretchen was dead, she couldn't remember it.

\* \* \* \*

A loud crash of thunder startled Julia awake. She sat up and immediately regretted moving so fast. Her head throbbed and the screams still echoed through her mind.

Every night she relived the horror. She reminded herself it wasn't her fault. But it was little consolation. She pushed herself up off of the couch and moaned as blood rushed back into her left leg. It was completely asleep, tingling uncomfortably, forced for hours into an odd angle as she slept.

What time was it? How long had she been passed out? The thoughts drifted through her fogged brain as she shook her leg, trying to force the blood back into circulation.

She walked on unsteady legs to the kitchen. Turning on both faucets, she filled the basin with cold water. She counted to three, held her breath, and plunged her head into the icy water. Cold shot through her system, none too gently forcing away the alcoholic fog.

Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to stay under water, to never surface. Could you drown yourself in a sink? Her lungs began to burn from lack of oxygen.

It sounded preposterous but she had read somewhere that children could drown in only a few inches of water. Julia willed herself to open her mouth and drink in the cold liquid. This way there would be no more nightmares, no more heartache, and no more loneliness. It was a quick and painless solution to all of her problems.

But she couldn't do it. Something deep inside forced her head to rise, and she shouted out curses as she gulped mouthfuls of air.

"Too damn chicken to kill yourself," she angrily shouted to the empty room. Water streamed down her face and clothes. "Always the coward," she cried out as she fell down onto her knees. Her body shook and her breath came out in sobs. Since the accident, she had cut herself off from everyone she knew. She'd become a self-imposed hermit.

Another crack of thunder overhead. Julia stopped crying. She got up, wiped the tears off her face, and went to the window to watch the oncoming storm. A full moon was slowly covered by a blanket of dark clouds and rain began to pour from the skies.

Opening a window in the living room, she stood and listened to the sound of rain as it pitter-pattered against the tin roof. She wondered how on earth she could get her life back on track.

A bright streak of lightening lit the night, and another boom of thunder sounded over head. The thunder was closer this time. As it faded, the lights suddenly went out, throwing the room into darkness.

Julia made her way slowly into the kitchen, swearing out loud as she banged her toe on the coffee table.

Moving forward, slower this time in the dark, she stretched out her arms, trying to feel her way to the kitchen cabinet where she kept a supply of candles and matches. Her hip banged against the counter. Reaching up, Julia fumbled around for the handle. She opened the cabinet, grabbing a candle just as a

soft thud sounded behind her.

A quick flick of her wrist against the counter and a match burned bright then lit the candle wick. Illumination in hand, she turned around and came face to face with a stranger.

A blood-curdling scream tore from her lungs. Then she screamed again, dropping the candle onto the floor. The room was thrown back into complete darkness.

*Rapist? Burglar? Murderer?* She slowly backed up until she felt the counter against her spine. Her hand slid across the smooth top, desperately searching for a weapon.

The lights suddenly flickered back on. It was a distraction Julia tried to use to her advantage. She flew forward, running towards the front door. Julia tripped over something--probably her own two feet--and the next thing she knew she was falling hard into a tangle of long limbs.

Scrabbling quickly to her feet, Julia grabbed the only weapon in sight, a copper lamp from the small kitchen table. She turned, prepared to fight, adrenaline coursing through her body with each beat of her heart.

A man stood before her, his hands open as if in surrender. Julia was struck motionless by the sight of him. Typically tall, dark, and handsome, with a chiseled jaw and jade green eyes that somehow seemed familiar. She was about to be killed by a drop-dead gorgeous psychopath.

"Who are you?" she demanded, still holding onto the lamp.

Julia watched him take in her appearance. She watched his eyes as they moved from her long dark hair, a curly mass twisted into a loose bun held in place by two paintbrushes, then across her face and down the length of her.

Slowly taking in her once white cotton tank top, now spattered with paint, and jeans frayed at the ends with gaping holes at both knees, the man's gaze caressed her every curve with an appreciative gleam before coming slowly back to rest on her face.

She should have been terrified, but instead she was finding it hard to breathe.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," he said.

"What do you mean breaking in here and attacking me!" Julia yelled at him as she started towards the phone.

As if reading her thoughts the man moved quickly, putting himself between her and the 911 operator. "Before you call the cops you have to listen to me."

"Listen to you? Are you nuts? You broke into my home and tried to attack me!"

"I haven't laid a hand on you. The door was open and I called out but no one answered. I came in just as the lights went out."

"The door was locked," she said, holding the lamp high, prepared to swing it if he took a step in her direction. *But was it?*, that little voice asked. On more than one occasion she had forgotten to lock the door, and sometimes even when she slammed it shut it would swing slightly ajar. It was on the landlord's

long and never-ending list of things to fix.

“Look, I’ll just stand over here. I won’t get any closer. But please calm down and give me a chance to explain.” He pulled out his wallet and tossed it at her.

“My name is Logan Walker.”

The wallet fell at her feet and Julia leaned over, keeping her eyes on him as she picked it up. But she didn’t let go of the lamp. She opened the wallet with one hand and pulled his drivers license out of its plastic case with her teeth—still tracking him with watchful eyes.

“What does your license prove?” There was something buzzing at the back of her mind, something she couldn’t grasp with the haze of scotch still floating through her thoughts. Logan Walker looked familiar. His name sounded familiar. Why?

“If I was a burglar or a rapist would I give you my wallet? Your name is Julia Madson, you’re a painter,” the man answered.

“So you know my name. What does that prove? If you aren’t some wacko, what do you want?”

“I want to talk to you about your paintings. The same thing I wanted to discuss with you when we met at Alison Kates’ opening two months ago.”

Alison’s opening. There wasn’t much Julia remembered about that night, except drinking glass after glass of champagne.

“Right. You broke in here so you could see my work.” God, he looked familiar. Maybe she had met him at the opening, but so much of that night was a blur.

The man sighed. “I told you the door was open. I talked to your agent earlier and she set up an appointment for me to come and view you paintings.”

“What’s my agent’s name?” Julia had to figure out a way to make it past him and out the door.

He seemed to follow her thoughts again and moved to his left, directly in her path to safety. “Cindy Parker.”

“Describe her.” Maybe she could distract him by throwing the lamp in his direction.

“A petite woman with chin length red hair and long pink fingernails. Last time I saw her she was wearing a skirt that was too short and heels so high she could barely walk.”

Cindy wouldn’t appreciate such a description but he was dead on. Still, if he was some type of stalker or killer he could have seen her with Cindy.

“Cindy didn’t mention any appointment.” Julia tried edging towards the phone again.

This time he didn’t block her way. He began to smile, a smile that came into his eyes and then slowly started to stretch into a sexy grin across his lips. Julia’s eyes became riveted on his lips. Crazy man or not, he was hot.

But then it was as if this sexy stranger remembered something unpleasant. She saw it transform his face, saw the blast of anger. It came suddenly into his eyes and she unconsciously took a step back.

He walked to the opposite side of the room, across the threshold into her large open living room, leaving her a wide berth to the door.

“Leave, I’m not going to stop you.”

Julia started forward, but then something stopped her. If this man was intent on hurting her, why was he letting her go? She faced him again.

“Why should I believe your story?”

“Don’t. Leave, go bang on the neighbor’s door and call the police. They can straighten it all out when they come.”

Logan leaned his body against the wall and lowered himself to the floor to sit down on his haunches. Opening his jacket, he pulled out a cell phone and slid it across the hardwood floor.

“Or you can give me the benefit of the doubt, call your agent, and check out my story.”

Only a few steps and she could be out into the hallway. The phone stopped inches from her foot. Julia leaned over, picked it up and dialed Cindy’s number.

It rang seven times before Cindy’s voice mail picked up. Julia hung up and eyed the man, trying to decide whether or not to trust him. But he was familiar, in that *déjà vu* feeling that you got from time to time. The harder she tried to remember that opening from two months ago, though, the more fragile the threads became.

Standing there glaring at him, she began to feel foolish. Chances were that Cindy *had* told her about the appointment and Julia had forgotten. She didn’t want to admit it, even to herself, but lately she had been having memory lapses. Whole blocks of time lost—not just hours, but sometimes even days. It was getting so bad she’d taken to leaving herself notes. She wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol, but what else could it be? It probably was, since for months her drinking had been out of control. Now Julia silently vowed yet again to control herself tomorrow. Right at this moment, though, she could use a drink.

“Do you want a drink?” she asked, turning her back on him and heading farther into the kitchen. Julia chose to believe that he wasn’t going to harm her.

“Sure. Do you have any tequila?”

Julia searched through the cabinets. This was a very attractive man in her apartment, and it had been a very long time since she’d been with a man. Right now, any man would do. Maybe that was another side effect of the liquor.

She found a bottle of tequila, grabbed two shot glasses, and headed back across the room.

Logan hadn’t moved.

Julia was conscious of his eyes, the color of summer grass, as they followed her every step across the room towards him. She stopped in front of him and slowly lowered herself until she sat, legs crossed Indian-style, only a few inches from him.

She poured the golden liquid into a shot glass and handed it to him. His hand brushed against hers as his fingers closed around the glass. Little electric shocks traveled up her skin at the contact.

It was only when their hands made contact that the memories of Alison Kates' show came crashing to the forefront of her mind. She'd been drinking, well on her way to being drunk, when she'd caught the eye of the handsome man across a sea of people. The liquor had been playing tricks with her senses, making her think that the man staring at her so intently had something on his mind other than Alison's paintings.

Now Julia smiled at him as she raised her hand, licking a drop of tequila off the side of her finger. She had no doubt that this time, here in her apartment, Alison Kate and her pictures of lighthouses was the farthest thing from Logan's mind as he followed the direction of her tongue.

"Married?" she asked. She was happy to see that his eyes were riveted on her lips.

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"No."

She tipped back her glass and let the alcohol run down her throat.

"It looks like quite a storm outside. Not the kind of night you want to be driving around in."

Julia heard him sigh as he answered. "No, much better to stay somewhere warm."

*I'm warm*, Julia thought to herself, *and right now I'm also very, very willing*. She licked her lips once, and looked him straight in those drop-dead gorgeous green eyes.

"Any ideas on how best to stay warm?" she purred, shifting positions slightly to lean back against the couch. She reached for the tequila bottle and glanced at him.

And yet, something in his posture made her think he wasn't interested.

Logan's body had not moved, but his eyes were now following her finger as it traced the lip of the tequila bottle. God, this man was something else—broad shoulders, muscular forearms...and those hands. Not the hands of an office worker, but hands she could imagine running over her naked skin, rough yet gentle in their touch. A soft groan escaped through her slightly parted lips. It had been a long, long time since she'd been involved in some mind-blowing sex.

Okay, it had been a long time since she'd had any sex.

"I ... I should go," Logan stammered out.



## Chapter 2

It was the last thing she had expected him to say.

“Hmm ... stay,” Julia said, taking a long gulp of tequila straight from the bottle. As the amber liquid dripped, his eyes followed the path it took ... from her lips, to her chin, to the hollow right between her large, firm breasts straining against her v-neck shirt.

Julia watched Logan’s eyes and groaned again, this time loud enough for him to hear. The sound came out deep and guttural and she watched him smile in response.

Oh yes, a very long time since she’d been laid. But if she played her cards right, tonight could change all of that. Change it very, very nicely.

“I seem to have dripped,” she whispered, touching the wet spot on her chin with one trembling fingertip. “Now I’m all wet.”

Julia smiled at him, moving the fingertip to toy with the smooth patch of skin between breasts that were trembling beneath his gaze. A gaze that thrilled her, and made her wet in other places.

“Have you ever done body shots?” she asked him, scooting closer next to him. “I haven’t, but I’ve heard they’re quite delicious. Want to give it a try?” She set the bottle down between his spread legs.

“What if you don’t have any limes or salt?” he asked her, a smile touching the corners of his lips. His eyes burned her as they continued to stare, first at the bottle, then at her lips. Then lower, towards all those places that were tingling, hot, and wet.

She wanted him. *Now*.

Julia smiled, rising on her knees to join the bottle between his legs. She leaned close, close enough to smell the woody aroma of his aftershave mixed with the pungent aroma of tequila.

“We’ll just have to improvise,” she whispered in his ear. She licked the lobe, just once, lightly, to let him know she was well aware of this game that they were playing.

“Who should go first?” she asked, abruptly sitting back down. “I’ve got the bottle, so I think I should.” She grinned again and chose that moment to look up.

Logan sat motionless, eyes closed. His legs were spread, and the rigid line of his cock made a gorgeous sight to behold. His fists were clenched by his sides, and a muscle twitched in his cheek. That touch, that one very small light touch on his ear, had been enough to make him hard. The thought thrilled her, empowered her, made her feel strong.

Julia wondered if she had gone too far. Maybe she had read him wrong. Maybe he didn’t want her.

And then she watched Logan relax and give her a saucy grin.

“Forget it, lady. I’m the guest and I get to go first. So give me the bottle, and get your pretty little ass over here where I can see you.”

If he was hoping to shock her, it didn't work. Julia grinned back, and, tequila bottle held tightly, moved over and sat nose-to-nose with him. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and let loose a sigh when that throbbing, wet place between her legs came into contact with that hard bulge just under his belt buckle.

"Okay, big guy, you go first", she said, and surprised a gasp out of him when she poured some tequila right on that pale valley between heaving breasts.

"I'm wet again, Logan," she whispered, and pulled his head to her chest.

She'd died. She'd died and gone to heaven, and she wanted to stay there forever. Her fingers threaded through his full head of hair, and her entire body tightened and thrummed at the flick of his tongue upon the part of her breast spilling over the cup of her bra. His teeth bit her nipple, gently, then harder, right through her shirt, and she moaned deep in her throat.

The shirt had to go. Now.

"Take it off, Logan, take it all off. Touch my skin before I die," Julia said, straining to pull him closer, ever closer. She was on fire. Her pussy was wet, her nipples were hard, and she wanted nothing more than to feel that hard bulge of his dick inside of her.

Logan did as she asked, pulling shirt and bra over her head with one pull. And there she was, glowing in the night, brighter than the lightning that continued to strobe throughout the room.

Julia knew that he'd have her, come hell or high water, more than once before this night was over.

"Kiss me," she demanded, raising his head from her breast. Logan plundered, his tongue not stopping to ask permission before it raked the inside of her mouth. Julia's tongue tangled with his, thrusting, probing, trying to gain more access. His mouth was wet, so wet, and his tongue wrapping around her own felt so good. Better than anything she could remember.

Julia held on for dear life as his mouth feasted, and took, and took some more. She needed him closer, harder, faster...more. She needed him inside of her, now, yesterday, always.

"Now, Logan, now," she said, pulling his mouth away and back to her breast. "I want you now. Tequila be damned, I want your cock in me now. It's been too long," she moaned, twisting to get closer.

"Shhh, Julia," he whispered, licking her nipples. First one, then the other. Over and over again. It seemed as if he couldn't get enough. "We have all night, baby. And I, for one, want to taste that tequila on your skin."

He licked her throat, making her moan yet again. Her throat, to her breasts, and bending her back over his arm, lower.

Julia felt something warm pour over her skin and opened her eyes to see him staring at her, tequila bottle in hand, as he let a thin stream of warm liquor make a path across her belly.

Logan watched her eyes as he lowered her to the floor, naked from the waist up, a thin sheen of alcohol upon her skin. He watched her eyes widen, then go dark, as he removed his shirt, undid his belt, and took that off, too. He watched the moan gather force in her throat as he stood up and pulled his jeans down, down, down over a trim waist, lean thighs, and his straining cock.

He heard that same moan escape as he stepped out of his shoes, removed his socks, and threw the jeans into the corner.

This man, Logan, was perfect. And he was hard, and throbbing, and big. Julia's mouth watered, and not from the tequila.

"God. Oh, God," she moaned as he lowered himself back down between her legs. He held her still when she tried to rise.

"I need to be naked," she said, fighting his hands. "I want you inside of me." She gasped as his mouth went to the slight rise of her belly.

"Please," she begged, but all he did was shake his head and lay her back down.

"Patience, Julia, patience," he whispered, and his mouth took hers in a devastating kiss.

She knew she was quivering, every nerve in her body alive and screaming. She wanted him. Why didn't he take her? Oh God, she wanted him to take her *now*.

Logan's mouth trailed fire from her chin, down her neck, to first one breast then another. On to her belly, where he stopped to drink the liquid from her bellybutton.

"Body shots, eh?" he laughed, unsnapping her pants. And then finally, finally, her pants were off, and she lay before him, naked and shivering from the fire within her.

"You're gorgeous, Julia," he said, grabbing the tequila bottle once again. She gasped when the liquid dripped between her thighs, onto that place that was burning for his touch. She closed her eyes against the feeling, too overwhelmed to think.

She had been willing, and right now she was willing to do whatever he asked of her.

"Open your eyes, baby, and watch me," he demanded. He licked her belly, low, right above that spot that throbbed. He repeated it, just a little lower, but not low enough.

"Please," she begged, hating the whine in her voice.

"Please what?" he teased, his tongue streaking like a lightning bolt across her inner thigh. "Please go? Please stop? Or please fuck me? Tell me what you want, Julia." His voice was rough, from control or a lack of it she didn't know.

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her. Eyes gone dark with desire, cock pulsing between his legs, muscles straining from holding back. And she smiled, slowly, the smile of a woman who knows she holds the power.

"Fuck me, Logan, and fuck me hard. But first, touch me, before I die, where the fire is burning me alive." And she grabbed his hand and put it on her mound. She almost came then, with just that touch. But he wouldn't let her.

Logan teased the curls guarding that most secret place, the one that was dying for his touch. He stroked her where she was wet and they both moaned. One finger, lightly, just teasing the entrance. And then two

fingers, with her bucking hard against his hand.

She was going to beg again, dammit. This was nice, it felt so good, but it wasn't enough. She needed ... she needed ... oh, fuck.

Logan's mouth was on her, on her pussy, and yes, yes, this was what she needed.

Long, hard strokes had her gasping for air. His hands gripped her ass, lifting her off of the floor and closer to his mouth. Closer to that wicked tongue of his. Now soft, feather-light quick little jabs. She was going to come if he kept this up.

"Logan, Logan," she moaned, head twisting side to side. "I'm going to come, Logan," she gasped, as his teeth gently imprisoned her clit, and his tongue stroked it once, hard.

She came then, a gush of wetness that seemed to go on and on.

She shook and thrashed and bucked in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Logan was in heaven. No woman, ever, had responded to him this completely, had given herself to him this freely. And now it was his turn, to take in kind.

Julia was still moaning, breath hitching, when he turned her over with her torso resting on the couch. Her breasts were heaving, nipples hardened, when he grabbed them from behind. He flicked them, at the same time biting her neck, with his cock against her ass. She squirmed, trying to get closer. Ever closer.

"Now, Julia," he groaned, and lifted her ass up higher. With one thrust, he was inside of her to the hilt. *Hot silk*, was all he could think as she surrounded him, enveloped him in that tightness that he had needed for so long.

His thrusts were hard, strong, and sure. Julia met him, thrust for thrust, as her whole body geared up for another orgasm. She was holding on to the couch cushions for dear life, straining against him to be closer.

"Take me, Julia," he said in her ear, "take me now." Logan felt her push harder as his hands tweaked her nipples. Her gorgeous ass was in the air, straining to meet the pounding of his dick. And she did take him, squeezing the muscles of her pussy together to hold him in.

That squeeze, that tightness, was all it took. Logan came inside of her, hips thrashing and his dick on fire. He came with a groan of gratitude, her name on his lips. And he heard her scream, once, as she flew over the edge with him.

When it was done he couldn't speak, just gathered her to him and lifted both of them to the couch. Logan lay down next to her, his cock against her ass, his hand still upon her breast, and promptly fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Julia's tongue was covered in carpet. At least that's the way it felt. She sat up and immediately regretted the decision. Her head throbbed and there was something wrong with her eyes. They seemed to be glued shut. She pried the left one open with her fingers and immediately yelled out in pain as the light streaming

through the window blinded her. She dived back under the covers and into the sanctuary of darkness.

Under the quilt her brain cells started to slowly function again. It was morning and Logan was gone. Julia carefully lowered the covers, forcing her body into a sitting position. God, she felt like she was going to die. Too much tequila last night. She needed a pot of coffee and a bottle of aspirin.

Logan's body had left an impression in her bed. That's what she got for sleeping with a hunky stranger. A hangover and an empty bed in the morning.

*I am too old to do something this stupid.* One night stands--something you did once or twice in college--was not the action of a rational thirty-two year old woman. But she hadn't been rational last night. Logan had been too yummy to resist.

She hadn't had sex like that in years. Three orgasms. Complete sexual overload.

She stretched her arms and laughed as she realized she had been a very vocal partner last night, screaming out his name at least a dozen times. Thank God she didn't have any neighbors.

Julia was glad he had left before she'd woken up. It made things less complicated. Morning-afters were never comfortable. Trying to make small talk with a stranger, one whose tongue a few hours earlier had skimmed every inch of your naked body, led to more than a few uncomfortable pauses in conversation.

The last thing she needed in her life was more complications, but the sex had been incredible. Mind boggling sex with a stranger. Logan was a complete stranger and she had jumped his bones. Which made her a what, a hussy?

*No, a tramp,* a voice whispered in the corner of her mind, a voice which sounded suspiciously like her mother. Her mother, a woman who went to her death bed believing there were two kinds of women--the kind men used and the kind men married.

But Julia was not her mother and this was not the 1950's. Women now-a-days were free to explore their sexuality. Julia had always been a free spirit when it came to sex. At least she always thought she was, but now, even though she knew deep down she was being silly, she felt kind of slutty. Well, slutty was better than living a life of self-imposed isolation.

Over the last year she had been hiding away from people, from conversation. Solitude had become her daily companion. Hours, days and, on occasion, weeks filled with silence. She had never been much of a people person, but she suddenly realized she was slowly morphing herself into a hermit.

On one level it was a comforting thought; a hermit never felt the pain of losing someone. But Julia suddenly realized that she didn't want to hide herself away anymore. She was the one who had survived. She had to start living her life again. She had to force away the guilt she felt about surviving, while her sister had not.

This morning was the first time in a long time she truly felt alive. Her body still hummed with the aftermath of sex. Logan had ridden her until she had collapsed against him. The taste of his body mixed with tequila made her suddenly ache with wanting. Her fingers unconsciously ran over the impression his head had left in the pillow.

It was then that she noticed the green apple. It lay just below the pillow, and beneath the apple a note.

She picked up the apple and the note and carried them to the kitchen.

After three aspirins and two cups of coffee she started to feel almost human again. Taking a bite of the apple she tried to make her blurry eyes focus long enough to read the black scribble.

*Julia,*

*Sorry I couldn't stay for breakfast. I had an early meeting. I promise to make it up to you. How about dinner, tonight? I am smart enough not to wait for your answer. Expect me around 9:00. Hope you like sausage on your pizza.*

He was coming back. Tonight he would be back into her life. Julia wasn't sure how she felt about seeing him again.

\* \* \* \*

The doorbell rang at 9:20. She had almost convinced herself he wasn't coming. All day she had told herself he wouldn't show, but just in case she had gone to the store, filled her pantry, and picked up the apartment. She was also wearing a silk robe in a deep, dark purple, with nothing underneath.

She was nervous. Which was stupid, she chided herself as she brushed her hands through her hair. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

He stood in the hallway, pizza box in one hand, six pack of beer in the other. "You look good enough to eat. Hope you're hungry. I brought an extra-large."

He looked incredible.

The moment he stepped through the door, Julia's hands were on him. She didn't even think, just reached out and pulled him into the room. The door slammed at his back and she used the element of surprise to push him up against the door.

"You left. You left this morning and we weren't done yet. Not by a long shot."

"Julia, I ... what the hell are you doing?"

Julia watched as his eyes took in her naked body as she slipped out of her robe, as they widened in surprise as she moved closer and undid his own pants and pushed them down his thighs.

Logan didn't speak. She didn't either. When his shoes and pants were off and he was standing in only a polo shirt, Julia went to her knees in front of him. Using one long fingernail, she traced the length of his cock from the tip to the base. And smiled when he jerked and a low growl came from his throat.

"Julia, let's go to bed. Come on, baby."

Julia shook her head "No. This time is for you. Later, we'll go to bed. Right now, though, it's your turn."

Her lips were on his dick before he could protest. Damn, but he even tasted good. His scent was heady and the throbbing of his cock in her mouth had her pussy tightening in response. Julia used her tongue to

stroke him, then sucked him in until there was no more to take.

She pumped him, using her fist around the base to add friction. Logan's hands were fisted in her hair and the shallow breaths he forcibly exhaled riffled against the top of her head.

Julia felt him coming, felt the power building. She was delirious, crazy with lust and wanting, jubilant that her touch could make this man lose control. She sucked him harder and used her teeth to lightly tease the tip of his cock, where drops of pre-cum were already gathering.

"Julia, baby, yes. I'm going to come, baby, so unless you want me to do it in your mouth, you'd better stop now."

Logan's hands dug painfully into her scalp, but still she shook her head "No." One last suck, one last pull, and she felt his seed spilling into her mouth.

When it was over, she rose until they were once again eye-to-eye. She reached out for his hand and placed it upon her throbbing pussy, which was wet and dripping.

"Now we can go to bed."

### Chapter 3

Loud music hummed against her skin. Julia felt the beat vibrating through her body as she reached up and stroked the canvas with the brush. She liked to play the music loud when she painted. It took her focus from the outside world. She was transformed deep into her subconscious where all her creative magic lived, the place her dreams came from. A place lately she seemed to have little control over.

Dressed only in a white t-shirt and pink flowered panties, Julia squeezed paint from a tube onto a wooden palette. She was finally painting again. Joy raced through her body as she painted faster, her hand working across the canvas, her mind blank but for the music. She stopped only to reach for more colors, mixing them impatiently against the palette.

And then it started to happen. The painting full of bright colors began to change. Slowly it was transformed as the rage filled her mind and body. Black emotions filled her soul, forcing a stream of tears down her pale face and a moan of horror from her lips. But she didn't register these reactions. Julia was no longer aware of the world around her. She was lost in a world of mayhem and murder.

Suddenly she came to her senses. Like a diver breaking the waters surface, she gulped for air. Her body trembled with exhaustion as she stood in front of the large canvas, looking with bleary eyes for the first time at her creation--a woman with short blonde hair was hanging halfway off a bed, a piece of thin rope tied loosely around her neck.

No matter how hard Julia tried, all of her paintings for the last year were of murder. At first she had fought against the darkness, but finally, unable to control it, she had opened up to it. And to her horror, the dark canvases brought her success. She was selling more work than she ever had. Two shows in

three months, a dozen articles about her work, and a loud buzz in the art world. As much as she despised the themes of her paintings, hated the feeling of anger and hatred that pumped through her body as she painted, she had resigned herself to the fact that killing women on canvas was making her famous.

She wondered what Logan would think of this piece. She looked over towards the bed. Somehow even with the loud music, he lay sleeping. She watched him; took in his slender hips and narrow waist, his muscled thighs and toned calves.

The man was tanned all over. She'd have to ask him how he managed that. And he was so muscular that just looking at him had her breath hitching and her mouth watering.

This man was more than just a big dick. Logan's body was a work of art, a sculpture worth painting. Long, lean, smooth yet filled out in all of the right places. Julia had never seen such a perfect example of *male*.

She could slip back under the sheets next to him. Her eyes slowly trailed down his body. He had crumpled the blanket down around his waist while he slept. But the red sheets couldn't hide the huge bulge of his erection. She unconsciously licked her lips at the thought of taking him into her mouth. Feeling his warm, pulsating cock as her tongue slowly worked its way around the tip of him. Like licking a lollipop.

She grinned as she imaged his expression if he awoke and found her sucking his cock. She was tempted, too tempted, to join him in bed.

But suddenly she felt shy. What would she say to him when he finally woke up? Would he make another dash for the door?

Julia walked over and turned down the music. She wondered how he could sleep through the racket. It was a good thing she didn't have any neighbors to complain about the loud music or the noise they'd made again last night. This man took her to new sexual heights. She had never been this verbal in bed before--screaming out his name, screaming out God's name.

Well, any moment he would wake up and he would either make a beeline for the door, or stick around. Either way, she would find out what he thought of her and of their relationship. If you could call nothing but sex and ten minutes of conversation in a forty-eight hour period a relationship. The problem was she was kind of getting used to seeing him in her bed.

Walking back to the easel she hunched down in front of the painting. She studied it, not with admiration, but with critical eyes. Noting the places where she could improve, seeing all the imperfections. Maybe if she spent her whole life painting one day she would paint something that she couldn't find fault with. Until then she could only strive to get better. Thank God she had so much space to work in.

Her eyes took in the warehouse. She had moved in six months ago, and it had taken a lot of time and cash to convert the place into a living space and studio. During the day the commercial street bustled with people but at night it was like a ghost town. She should have been scared but she wasn't. She liked living alone. She loved feeling the emptiness surrounding her at night. Night time was her favorite time to work. It was the time when she could free her mind of all thoughts.

Julia stood up, took a dab of red paint on the tip of her brush and started on the canvas again, slowly making corrections.



“I’ve seen that woman before.” A male voice in her ear caused Julia to jump and drop her brush.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” She asked, suddenly shy and feeling uncomfortable being half dressed. She was sure he could see her nipples through the thin cloth of the t-shirt. *You’re being silly*, she scolded herself, *he saw all of that and more last night*.

“Sorry,” Logan chuckled, holding the sheet around his waist with one hand as he bent and picked up her brush. The sheet rode up and she glimpsed his strong thigh, his rounded ass. Christ, but the man had an incredible ass.

“Who have you seen before?” she asked, trying to tear her eyes away from his body.

Logan handed her the brush and motioned towards the painting. “That woman.”

“Impossible. I didn’t use a model. She came straight from my imagination.”

“Where have I seen her?” he asked himself aloud as he stalked back and forth in front of the painting.

The man was built like a tanned Greek Adonis.

“I’ve got it. The newspaper. She was in the newspaper.”

Julia shook her head and tried to concentrate on the conversation. “Newspaper?”

“Yeah, last week when I was in Denver, she was on the front page. 20 year-old college student missing.”

“The girl you saw looks similar to this girl...”

“No. She is the spitting image of the woman on your canvas.”

“That’s ridiculous. Impossible!”

“I’ll prove it to you. Do you have a computer?”

“Over in the corner.”

Logan stopped in front of her. Strong fingers reached up and caressed her chin. He took it in his hand and smiled. “You look tired.”

She couldn’t help herself and she grinned. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“What time is it?” he asked as he moved his body into hers. His lips caressed her neck and her earlobe.

Julia was having a hard time concentrating. “Two in the morning.”

“I’m ravished. Where’s the pizza?”

“In the corner. Want a beer?”

“Sounds great,” he said as he continued to nuzzle her neck. His fingers traced along her skin, sending

electrical bursts throughout her body. “What’s this scar?” he asked, his voice suddenly husky with more than sleep.

She moved away from him, instinctively covering the scar with her hair. “I was in an accident.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” He put both of his hands on her butt and gave her a gentle push forward. “You promised me beer.”

\* \* \* \*

“It looks just like her.” Julia handed him back the printout.

“I told you.” Logan took a sip of beer and studied the photo of the woman. There was no denying it; the woman in the newspaper photo was the same woman Julia had painted. “You’re sure you’ve never seen this woman before?” he asked.

“No. I’m positive. I’ve never seen her.”

“Well, how do you explain the likeness?”

Julia sighed. “You know I can’t explain it.”

“Have you always painted women being murdered?”

Julia heard the biting tone in his voice and winced. “No, only for the last year.”

“What made you take on such a grim subject matter?”

“I don’t know. It’s just something that started to pour out of me.”

Logan glanced at her. “What are you not telling me?”

Julia looked away, avoiding the questions in his eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I guess I don’t know you well enough to call you a liar outright. But I get the distinct impression that you’re hiding something.”

Damn him. “I don’t like to talk about it. I don’t *want* to talk about it.”

“Does it have to do with the accident?”

“Yes.” The man just wasn’t going to give up.

Logan’s sudden silence stretched on and she found herself talking again. “I was in a car wreck.”

“How long ago?” he asked.

“It’s been a year and six months.” She self-consciously began rubbing her scar. “A drunk driver hit the car. The accident was pretty bad. I was in the hospital for eight months.”

Now that she was talking about it she couldn’t stop. “My sister and a friend were killed. I was the only one who survived.”

Logan stood and started towards her, but Julia backed away. She didn’t want his sympathy, didn’t want him to pity her.

“I’m fine...really. I just haven’t been able to talk about it. I was in a coma for four months.”

“And that’s when you started painting these images?”

“Yes, when I came out of the hospital. My therapist says I’m working out the grief I feel for the loss of my sister.”

Logan’s attention was no longer solely on her. He stood up and walked across the room.

“What is it?” Julia asked him, rising to stand beside him at one of her other paintings.

“Another face that looks familiar.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“This one. I know I’ve seen her before.” He pointed at the woman slumped over a chair, a white rope twisted around her neck and body.

“That’s 452. *Woman in Despair*.”

He moved closer to the painting and stared at the woman. “I can’t remember where I’ve seen this face.”

“I think your imagination is starting to play tricks on you. Someone you know looking like one of my creations is just a coincidence.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. The student’s face was plastered all over the papers and news. Maybe you saw a story about it on TV.”

“I don’t own a TV.”

He grabbed her and pulled her towards him. “Woman how can you survive without television?”

She laughed and swatted at his groping hands. “I spend most of my spare time painting.”

“And what do you do for fun?” He asked nuzzling her neck.

“Fun?”

“Yeah fun, I’m sure you heard of it.”

“I paint.”

“That’s your livelihood. I mean what do you do for simple enjoyment and amusement?”

She looked at him blankly.

“Okay, maybe you haven’t heard of fun. That’s something we can rectify. Do you like boats?” He asked letting his fingers caress her neck and collar bone.

She tried to focus on what he was saying. “I’ve never been on one.”

“You don’t watch TV and you have never been on a boat. We really are going to have to do something about these lapses in your life.” He reached up and gently brushed the hair from her eyes. “Tomorrow is Monday. Do you have any plans?”

“No.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up at 10:00 and we’ll go boating.”

She laughed and pushed out of his arms. “Don’t you have to work?”

“No, I set my own schedule.”

“Does this job have a title?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to share the title with me?”

“Not yet. I want you to get to know me better before I try to sway you with my business suave.” He walked around the room gathering up his things.

“Are you going to try and sell me a vacuum cleaning or something?”

He chuckled, “No, I’m going to show you how we both can make a lot of money.” He pulled on his pants and reached for his shirt.

“Doing something illegal or legal?”

“Legal,” He laughed.

“Trying to be mysterious for any particular reason?”

“It’s a ploy to keep you guessing. I figure as long as you are intrigued you’ll keep agreeing to see me.”

“Does it work? This type of ploy. I mean has it worked on other women?” She asked as she wiped paint from her hands.

“Many times.”

“Never mind. I’d rather not know.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “Now be good until I get back.”

“And when will that be?”

“I’ll be back in...,” Logan looked at his watch, “Seven hours. Wear comfortable shoes and bring a hat.”

## Chapter 4

“I’ve never been to Canyon Lake.” Julie lathered suntan lotion across her legs.

“It doesn’t look like much, but wait.” Logan pointed across the lake towards the mountains. Dramatic, majestic, imposing. A gradual slope carpeted in desert foliage and stately cacti, morphed slowly into solid rock. Golden rock etched by weather and time forming rugged peaks that seem to cut into the clear blue sky.

“See that opening? That’s where we’re going. The waterway goes back about twelve miles.” Logan started the boat, slowly backed it out of the slip, and headed towards the middle of the lake.

It was a gorgeous day. October--the perfect month to be on the lake in Arizona. Today highs were in the eighties. Only the truly devoted would suffer through a hundred plus summer day in search of outdoor fun.

Julia sat back against the white leather seat and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of sun on her face. It had been a long time since she felt this relaxed.

Fingers gently stroked her cheek. “You’re as pale as a ghost; you’re going to fry.”

She opened her eyes and smiled. “You don’t find lobster-red attractive?”

“No, I don’t,” he laughed and tossed her a wide brimmed straw hat.

She put on the hat and leaned over the side of the boat, running her fingers through the water. “Ready to tell me what you do for a living?”

“I run a couple of galleries in L.A.”

“Only a couple?”

“I want you to come and do a show. But more than that I want to talk you into reprinting your work. I would like to see it in posters, print lithographs.”

She laughed. “How about calendars and greeting cards?”

“Why not?” Logan countered with a straight face.

“I don’t paint sunflowers and landscapes. My work is too dark for what you’re looking for.”

“Not for the right type of collector.”

“I think I’m scared to ask what type of collectors you’re talking about.”

Logan glanced at her with a small smile. “People with a more sophisticated taste.”

“The criminally insane, you mean?” she asked, laughing. He couldn’t really be serious, could he?

“No joke, your work strikes a cord with people. Look at the success you’ve had so far.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. It’s just, I don’t understand why people want to buy my paintings. I’m still struggling with why I feel compelled to paint women in such dark circumstances.”

“What did you paint before the accident?” he asked, his fingers trailing the back of her neck.

“Desert landscapes.”

“And you haven’t painted one since the accident?”

“No. I’ve only painted murder, death and mayhem.”

“And you aren’t happy with your work?”

“My work is dark and twisted. I can’t understand why anyone would want to paint nightmares. And that’s what I am painting.”

He planted a kiss on her forehead. “Your work is not twisted. It’s beautiful. You’re a truly talented woman.”

“More like a truly unbalanced woman.”

“Joke all you want, Julia, but people like your work. And I would like the opportunity to take you and your paintings into a whole new venue.”

“I think you’re nuts.”

“So that’s a yes.”

“You’re an idiot. Okay, yes. I will do a show at your gallery and you can try out this crazy idea about reproducing my work. But for the record, I still think you’re crazy.”

“Duly noted. Now, hold onto your hat with both hands. Let’s see what this boat can really do.”

\* \* \* \*

They spent the whole day on the lake. They didn’t pull back into the marina until the sun had slipped low in the sky. By the time they docked, gathered all their belongings, and secured the boat, the sun had long ago sunk below the horizon and it was dark.

Logan lowered the cooler and turned back towards the water. “Let’s go for a swim.”

“It’s dark.”

“I know. The water is warm, and it will feel good. Don’t you feel sticky?”

“Yeah.” She pulled her hair from the back of her neck. She did feel hot and sweaty.

Logan jumped in and Julia hesitated for only a moment before following him into the water.

A few lights sprinkled along the dock blinked on. The water was now ink black but warm against her skin.

“What if a boat comes by? Will we get run over?”

“Don’t worry. Most of the boats are all ready in. Come on, there’s a small cave created by the overhang against the mountain. It’s less than ten feet.”

They swam across to the rock face. Logan grabbed her hand and put it against the smooth edge of the rock. “See, there is a natural ledge here, just below the surface. We can sit and watch the stars.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“It’s my favorite place to vacation in the winter.”

She pulled herself onto the ledge. Her legs were still covered with water. She looked up at the rock ceiling six feet above her head. “This is cozy.”

He settled in next to her. “Yeah it is. Cozy and private.” He reached over and pulled down the strap of her bathing suit.

Julie swatted at his hands as she turned to look at him. “What are you doing?”

“Hmm, not much.” He lowered his lips onto her bare shoulder and swiped her warm skin with his tongue.

“You can’t do this here, Logan, someone will see us.”

His hand cupped her breast and a fingernail scraped across her nipple. “No one’s around here at night. The security guard stays up in his office by the restaurant. There’s no one to see, Julia.”

“But someone could come down to the dock,” she insisted, trying to ignore the sensation of his hand brushing against the wet material of her suit at her breasts, and the hair on his legs rubbing against the damp skin of her back.

She tried to think of something else, anything else but his fingers stroking her nipples into hard points of pleasure. A groan escaped her mouth as her nipple rose against his hand, searching, seeking. Her back arched against him as she lost control of her own body.

He slowly peeled down the other strap of her suit. “I suppose they could.”

Julia’s breath caught in her throat as he lowered his mouth to the newly exposed patch of skin. “Logan, please, stop it.”

His tongue glided across the skin of her shoulder blade. But he stopped and raised his head, looking into her eyes. "Do you really want me to?"

His other hand was caressing her leg, moving slowly up to rub against her where the material of her suit ended high up against her hip.

It was dark but the moon was full and bright. There were no clouds. Anyone standing on the dock looking in their direction could see them.

Julia stopped worrying about who might see them as Logan's fingers played a light tap-dance against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. Goosebumps rose on her flesh as she leaned her back against his chest. No one was around, and if they were, did she really even care?

She sighed as Logan used one finger to tease its way across her mound. The friction between her sensitive flesh and the wet material of her suit had her heart picking up a rapid beat. A groan slipped out through parted lips as he stroked her...once, twice, a third time.

Julia's body was on fire. Her back arched against Logan, and she could feel his erection pressing against her ass. She squirmed, trying to get closer, as his lips lowered once again to her shoulder.

"Shhh. Just relax, Julia, and let it happen."

She didn't know what he meant, didn't understand, until his finger slipped under the edge of her suit to slip inside of her. The contact of his wet, cold finger had her pussy tightening around him.

She gasped as he slipped his finger in and out, in and out, mimicking the strokes of his tongue against her bare shoulder. Julia's hips tilted as she strained toward him. Logan's mouth went to her ear, to the sensitive skin behind it. His thumb moved to caress her clit as his finger remained buried inside of her.

It was over almost before it began. Julia used her hands to clench Logan's thighs as she leaned her head back for his kiss. His fingers continued to work their magic as his tongue raked her palate, her teeth. Julia used her own tongue to duel with his as she felt him slip another finger inside of her.

She felt the orgasm coming and sucked his tongue harder into her mouth. Logan moved his free hand to her belly, pushing her back against him to rub his dick against her ass. She felt it sliding, slipping, probing, as his thumb expertly grabbed hold of her clit and flicked it once.

Julia came with a series of shudders and a half-scream that Logan swallowed into his own mouth. When it was done, and her shivers had subsided, Logan fixed her suit back into place and gently ran a hand across her long hair.

"That, Julia, is what we call having fun."

\* \* \* \*

Logan started peeling off his clothes the minute they made it through the door of her apartment. The phone rang and as she moved to answer it he sprinted past her, yelling over his shoulder. "Great, I get the shower first!"

"No fair! Don't use all the hot water." Julia yelled back and picked up the phone. "Hello."



Her agent Cindy's voice was on the other end. "Julia."

"Hey! How is the conference?"

"Great. It's beautiful here."

"Are you okay?" Julia asked.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"I don't know you sound funny."

Cindy coughed into the phone. "I think I'm coming down with a cold. Did you finish the paintings for the show?"

"Yes, they're all finished, and not a moment too soon."

"I'm dying to see them."

"When are you coming back?" Julia asked.

"Well, I'm going to be detained longer than I thought here. I have an idea, though. It's been a long time since you took a vacation."

Julia laughed. "Exactly what is a vacation again?"

"Come up here." Cindy begged.

"To Lake Tahoe?"

"Yes, why not? Take some snapshots of the paintings and bring them with you."

"I can email the photos to you."

"Christ, you know I'm technically challenged. Julia, it's just an hour flight. You can fly into Reno and then rent a car. I'm telling you, it's breathtaking up here."

"You know, you're right--why not. Okay, you convinced me."

"When can you come?" Cindy asked.

"I can't make it for a couple of days. How long are you staying?"

"Another week at least. Come up this weekend. I can't wait to see your new work."

"Cindy."

"Yeah?"

"I met someone."

“You met someone. Well it’s about time. Is he hunky?”

“Very.”

Cindy laughed and asked, “Employed?”

“Yes.”

“Does he have a criminal record?”

Julia laughed, “I’m not sure, but I’ll ask him when he gets out of the shower.”

“Is it serious?” Cindy asked.

“Seems to be.”

“Bring him with you.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Are you nuts? I can’t wait to see the guy that swept you off your feet. How did you meet him?”

“It’s Logan Walker.”

“Who?”

“Logan Walker. He made an appointment to see my work. He owns a couple of galleries in L.A.”

“Hmm, name doesn’t ring a bell,” Cindy said, sniffing into the phone.

“It doesn’t?”

“Are you kidding? In the last month I barely remember my own name. God, I need a vacation.”

“I thought you were on one.”

“Honey, this is a working vacation. Which means 90% work and 10% vacation. I have to go, but get yourself and your hunk up here.”

“Okay, I will.” Julie promised and hung up the phone just as Logan came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Who was it?” he asked, shaking his head in her direction and spraying her with water.

“Stop that!” She shrieked taking refuge behind the couch. “It was Cindy. Did you use all the hot water?” Julia demanded as she admired the half-naked man standing in front of her. “How would you like to get away for the weekend?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Cindy wants me to come up to Lake Tahoe. She wants to see my new paintings.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“I thought I’d spend a couple of days up there. Take a mini-vacation. Do you want to come?” Julia asked.

“I think I can clear my schedule. I’ve to go out of town tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But I’ll only be gone a few days.”

“When will you be back?” she asked, trying to keep from sounding like a pouting child.

“Friday. I’ll be back before you know it.”

\* \* \* \*

It had been only been twenty-four hours since Logan left. Julia poured herself another cup of coffee and stifled a yawn. It was eleven o’clock in the morning and she had just dragged herself out of bed. She had spent all of last night painting. The painting was just an excuse--the truth was that she was finding it hard to sleep without Logan in her bed. It was a disturbing thought. She had gotten use to him being around and, even worse, she was starting to depend on him being around. It was a dangerous thing loving people.

She stopped in shock as she realized she had just used the word love. Dear God, she had fallen in love with Logan. A man, she reminded herself, she barely knew. A man who probably thought of her as nothing more than a fun bedmate, a momentary distraction. How could this have happened? How had she let her guard down enough for this to have happened?

“Does it really matter?” she asked herself, slipping on a sundress and her sandals. For the first time in a very long time, she was enjoying herself. Having fun, Logan called it, and being around him, taking time for herself, flirting and joking with such a handsome man, *was* fun.

She grabbed her sunglasses from the table beside her door, along with the cloth bag she used when going to the market, and made sure to lock the door on her way out.

The phone rang and startled her. She picked it up as the door to the hallway stood open, her voice sounding rushed as she uttered a quick hello.

Silence. Breathing. Nothing else.

Julia’s brows furrowed as she said hello a few more times, but whoever was on the other end of the line wasn’t answering. Until a voice, so soft she barely heard it, whispered to her.

“You are the one that got away.”

The hair on the back of her neck stood up as the caller disconnected. Just an obscene phone call she told herself, replacing the handset into it’s cradle. Just someone out to rattle you. She refused to let it her bother her, and mentally gave herself a shake to remove the tingle of unease the caller’s words had

brought her.

Never mind. Move on. She left her apartment, locking the door behind her, and set off, the phone call already nothing more than a nuisance.

It had been too long since she'd been shopping. Her refrigerator was stocked with nothing but a few bottles of beer, some apples that weren't fit to eat, and a stick of butter.

It wasn't until she was halfway down the block that the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. A chill like ice spread from the base of her neck, along her spine, until it wrapped around and lodged in her throat.

Someone was following her.

Julia turned around quickly, glancing in all directions, but the few people that were out and about today weren't paying any attention to her.

"Nerves, that's all it is." But as she scanned the shadows one more time, she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was there, watching her.

Threatening her, without saying a word.

She kept walking, picking up her pace just a little, until she came to the small market that she'd been using since she moved to the neighborhood.

"Long time no see, Julia," Tom, the owner, hollered out to her as she entered. "Where've you been hiding?"

Julia laughed with the man, and the feeling of being followed was quickly pushed aside. But not forgotten.

\* \* \* \*

She spent the rest of the day and most of the night painting. It was close to midnight. She didn't know how much longer she could keep her eyes open.

The phone rang and she picked it up. "Hello?"

"Julia?"

"Yes, this is Julia," she answered, stifling a yawn.

The voice whispered across the line, "You are the one."

"Who is this?"

"The one that got away." The phone clicked dead.

The receiver was in her hand as her eyes searched the wall of windows. The crank call had freaked her out. Her nerves were raw. She needed to get drapes.

The dark had never bothered her before, but she kept imagining someone looking in and watching her movements. She got up and turned on all the lights. She felt like an idiot for being scared. What she needed was a weapon, anything to make her feel less vulnerable.

Julia rummaged through her closet, searching until she found an old baseball bat. Carrying the bat, she made her way to the kitchen. Maybe some warm milk would help her sleep.

Milk in one hand, bat in the other she started across the floor back to bed. Suddenly someone started pounding on the door. Startled, Julia's cup of milk spilled all over the floor.

"Hold you horses!" she yelled as she wiped milk from her fingers and made her way to the door. She put on the chain and slowly opened the door a crack. Half of Logan's face appeared. Julie threw off the chain and opened the door. "You're back!"

"I'm back."

She threw herself into his arms. "It's so good to see you."

"Did you miss me?"

"Yeah." And she did. Thinking of him made her feel good and happy for the first time in a long time.

"What have you been doing?" he asked brushing the hair from her eyes.

"Painting."

"I can see that," he said, his thumb wiping a streak of paint from her chin.

"I finished another painting."

"Let me see."

"Kiss me first," she demanded.

He kissed her and her body hummed with fire.

"Have you eaten?" She asked.

"No, I'm starved."

"I was going to have spaghetti."

"Sounds like heaven."

Julia went into the kitchen.

Logan voice called out from the living room, "It's Cindy."

"What?" she asked as she came out of the kitchen carrying a bottle of wine.

Logan pointed at a painting of a brown haired woman draped over a boulder, her neck decorated with a

thin rope. Behind her a circle of large pine trees and a small stream ran not far from her left arm.

“It’s Cindy. Your agent.”

She handed him the wine. “Cindy? You’re nuts. This doesn’t look anything like her.”

“It’s her, but with long brown hair instead of short red.”

Julie studied the painting. “Do you really think it looks like Cindy?”

Logan opened the bottle and poured out two glasses, handing her one. “You didn’t use her as a model?”

“No, I don’t use models at all.”

“It could be her twin. You really can’t see the resemblance?” Logan asked, his eyes studying the face.

“No, I really don’t.”

“Do you have her picture somewhere?”

“Sure. In the promotional stuff from my last show. I just have to find it.” She walked over and started rifling through a metal filing cabinet. “I know it’s in here somewhere.” She picked up a stack of laminated cards and started flipping through them. “Here it is.” She walked back to where Logan was still standing, holding up the card next to the painting. “Oh my God, it *is* Cindy.”

“You really didn’t know?”

“No, of course not! I wouldn’t purposely paint her without asking. I don’t think she’d mind modeling for me, but I’d still never paint her without permission.”

“That’s odd,” he said.

“What?”

“It’s just odd you didn’t recognize her.”

“Maybe I was unconsciously thinking of her.”

The phone started ringing. Julia jumped.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Logan asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been getting crank calls.”

“Since when?” He asked as he walked over to the phone. His hand reached for the receiver but it stopped ringing before he picked it up. “You should get caller ID. Hey, what is it. You look scared. What’s wrong?”

“I know this sounds nuts, but I think someone has been following me.”

“Following you?”

“Someone might be stalking me. Yeah, I know, maybe I’m just being paranoid, but for the last couple days I’ve had this feeling someone has been watching me. Yesterday I could have sworn someone was behind me all the way to the market. I’ve heard footsteps in the hallway late at night, but when I open the door no one is there. And then there are the phone calls.”

“What phone calls?”

She started to tell him and then felt foolish. But by the look on his face he wasn’t about to let her get by until she explained about the calls. “Crank phone calls started a few nights ago. I know it’s probably a bored teenager. But they have been unsettling.”

“In what way?”

She unconsciously twirled her hair between her fingers as she answered, “A strange voice on the other end, a male voice, which says ‘you are the one that got away.’”

He reached out and took her hand in his. “It’s kids. But tomorrow we’ll hook you up with caller ID, okay? And I’ll go out and buy a whistle, so the next time the bastard calls you can blow out his eardrum. Hey, you’re trembling.”

Logan gathered her into his arms. “I’m here now. You don’t have to worry, Julia, I’m here and I’ll protect you.”

\* \* \* \*

Rain poured down in sheets from the sky. They stood locked together staring out at the storm. His hand caressed her cheek and slowly slid down her body.

“Are you sleepy?” he asked as his hand slid inside her blouse.

His touch made her body hum. She leaned into him enjoying the feel of his fingers gliding across her skin.

He pulled the blouse off, dropping it to the floor and suddenly turned her around gently pushing her against the window. The cold surface of the glass against her nipples sent shivers of pleasure down her back.

His hand trailed down her back. A moan escaped her lips. A moan suddenly replaced with a shriek of horror.

“What’s wrong?” Logan demanded.

Julia scrambled behind him. “There’s someone out there.”

“Where?”

“On the fire escape looking in.”

Before she could react Logan opened the window and was gone into the night.

Julia stood uncertain what to do. She could call the police and tell them what? Any minute Logan would be down the fire escape and on the main street. And then who knows what direction he would be going.

She grabbed her blouse from the floor, quickly buttoning it as she stumbled around in the dark looking for her shoes.

She opened the window and was immediately pelted with raindrops. It was cold and the night air was chilly. She ignored the water dripping down her face and held on for dear life as she made her way down the fire escape to the street. What direction had he gone?

She saw a body heading around the corner. At this time of night, in this weather it had to be him. She ran down the wet pavement, her heart pounding. As she rounded one corner and then the next.

Logan was standing in the alley looking over a fence.

“He got away,” Logan said trying to catch his breath.

“Did you see who it was?”

“No. Christ, what the hell are we doing out here?” He started laughing. “Sorry I reacted before I thought. It was probably some teenager playing peeping tom.” He stopped laughing as his eyes went to her shirt. It was plastered against her chest, making her breast clearly visible through the soaked material.

“Logan, I’m cold.”

“You’re beautiful.” He reached out and touched her cheek, the warmth of his fingers burning her skin. She wanted to melt her body into his. His hand moved down and his fingers brushed against buttons. Fingers started working the buttons on her shirt.

“What are you doing?”

“Finishing what we started earlier.”

Julia’s breath hitched once more as she tried to meet his burning gaze. Logan’s eyes had gone dark with desire, just like that first night at her house

She heard the sound of material tear as impatient hands pulled her shirt apart.

“My blouse!”

“I’ll buy you another one.”

She was well aware of her torn t-shirt, her breasts spilling between the folds for anyone who happened to walk by to see. Her nipples were hard, but from the cold or the green fire of his eyes she wasn’t sure.

His lips lowered onto hers.

Her hand came up and touched his chest. One touch. Just that one simple touch upon skin, and Logan



was hit with a fist of lust. Pure and untainted, but surrounded by all of the doubts he had had for weeks, it hit him square in the groin. He grew hard, and throbbing, from that one light caress of her fingers upon his chest

“Logan,” she whispered, “we’re in the middle of an alley, in the middle of the night. *Inpublic*. And you’re looking at me like you want to fuck me right here.”

“Because I do, Julia, *I do* want to fuck you right here. Public or not, alley or not, to hell with it all. You can feel what you do to me,” he groaned, pushing himself harder against her palm. “You can feel it, and screw the rest of this damn city’s population, because I want to take you here. Now. Later, we can do it right, in a bed. But for the love of all that is holy, if you don’t kiss me right now, I’m going to go crazy,” he growled, and pulled her towards him.

Her lips met his, hot, hungry. Soft and pliant. And damn it all if he gave a flying fuck as to where they were at or who might possibly see. He wanted to possess this woman, and he was going to take her here.

Logan’s lips didn’t tease this time, or linger. They were hard and hot, demanding entrance, plundering her mouth with wild abandon.

The thrusts of his tongue burned Julia to her center, where she was already hot and wet. His hips ground against her as she strained to get closer. When she was around Logan Walker, all she wanted was *more*.

He grabbed her hand to pull her with him. Without giving her time to think, or to protest, he pushed her back against the alley wall. The old bricks were cold and damp, and bit slightly through her thin shirt. She didn’t care, not as his hands grabbed a fistful of her long, dark hair in his two hands.

Logan couldn’t get enough of her mouth. *So wet*, he thought, *so wet a man could drown in this mouth*. He took, and took, until he felt her legs go weak and she had to grip his shoulders to stay upright.

One hand left her hair to grab a breast peeking out of the ripped shirt. His lips soon followed, down her throat, to the nipple already hard and puckered. His tongue lapped gently at it until she moaned, and then he heard her gasp as his teeth bit, hard, and he sucked as if his very life depended on it.

Julia cried out his name. “Logan, please,” she said, grabbing his ass with both hands. “Please,” she said again, as his mouth moved to her other breast. “I need you. I need you inside me. Please,” she gasped, the last syllables ending with a plea.

He let go of her so quickly she almost fell. He moved her over a few inches, then grasped the bottom rung of the fire-escape stairs next to where they stood. With one pull, muscles rippling, he managed to bring them down with a horrendous squeak.

Logan turned back to her with an unreadable look in his fiery green eyes. He reached out one hand and grabbed the front of her shirt. Julia was too startled to say a word.

He kissed her, still holding on to the ripped shirt, and lifted her skirt with his other hand. His fingers unerringly found that place that was oh so ready for his touch.

She gasped when he touched her, the feel of his fingers burning her even through her panties. She ground against him, straining. She couldn’t help it. She needed it, needed *him*. She moaned.

“Logan,” she breathed, his name escaping as a sigh.

“Yes, Julia, I know. Hard and fast this time, baby, because I can’t wait. God help me, I can’t wait any more,” he said, leaving her dripping as he moved his hand away and brought it to the snap of his fly. The zipper sounded unnaturally loud in the dark, quiet alley.

His jeans pooled around his knees, and he pushed her onto the bottom rung of the stairs. Off her panties came, ripped by his hurrying hands. Straining now, gasping his name, Julia grabbed his strong shoulders.

Throbbing, she was throbbing, aching so badly for that first thrust. But although Logan said he couldn’t wait anymore, he took time to stroke her; once, twice, three times, hard. So hard she jerked against him, urging him to do it again. And again.

Logan’s teeth fastened on to her nipple as he urged her to that first peak with his knowing fingers. Julia felt it coming, growing beyond her control, as his fingers expertly rolled her clit into a rolling, boiling frenzy. Her breathing was out of control, her nipples ached, and fire burned when she called out his name.

“Logan,” she yelled, bucking against him as she came. “Oh, Logan, Logan,” she moaned, riding the waves as she felt his cock come into contact with her still throbbing pussy.

“My turn,” he growled, and plunged himself into her up to the hilt. The stairs rocked and squeaked out a protest, but neither one of them cared.

He rode her hard, like a stallion mounting a mare, thrusting again and again until his fever reached a burning pitch. On the brink of a pleasure so strong it was almost pain, he grabbed the handrails of the stairs and plunged his tongue into her mouth.

Julia’s gasp, her moans, her twitching hips and grinding torso. Her wet, hot pussy and her hard nipples against his chest. Her thrusting tongue and hands on his ass. All of it came together in one blinding moment of awareness and need. Need so powerful he was helpless to resist it.

Logan grabbed her waist, lifting her from the stairs and pushing her back against the wall of the alley. And as the bricks of the building dug into her back, Julia wrapped her long legs around his waist, arched up, and brought him home.

\* \* \* \*

“I don’t care what the damn computer says! I’m here at her request and I know she wants to see me.”

The clerk gave Julia an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, but Ms. Parker left strict instructions not to be disturbed.”

“Can you at least tell me what room she is in?” Julia asked.

“The hotel does not give out the room numbers of our guests. It’s hotel policy.”

“Can you check to see if she left a note for me? Julia Madson.”

The desk clerk punched a few keys on the computer and shook his head. “There is no message. I’m sorry.”

Julie turned to Logan. "Great. So now what?"

Logan finished filling out the forms and passed the clerk his credit card. "We check in, get something to eat and go see the sights. You told her we were coming in tonight right?"

"Right."

"Well, my bet is by breakfast she'll be tracking you down." Logan held up the room key and smiled. "A nice cozy room, with a big king-sized bed. Are you sure you want to eat first? We can go straight to the room and take a long, long nap." He gave her a lecherous wink.

She laughed, "I'm starving. So the nap will have to wait." She watched his face fill with disappointment and laughed again. Stepping closer she whispered in his ear, "How about if we eat fast and the nap can be our dessert."

\* \* \* \*

Julia took her time in the bath after returning from dinner. They'd had an evening of pleasurable conversation and good food, and she was hoping that they'd have an even better night of great sex. She had called down to the front desk the moment she got back in the room. Cindy still had the do not disturb request up.

After drying off and pulling her hair into a clip on top of her head, she slipped on a short silk teddy and went back into the bedroom.

And there he was, the man she'd gotten so close to in such a short amount of time. Lounging on the bed wearing only his briefs, rifling through a file folder of papers as if he owned the world.

Julia smiled to herself. Damn, but he was hot. And not just his looks either, which were nothing to frown about. Just the way he carried himself, the way he took control of things in both his personal and business life, the way he made her feel safe.

"Are you busy, or can I join you?"

She watched him glance up from the paper he had been reading, and his eyes darkened with instant desire when they landed on her.

In response, Julia's nipples hardened, and she felt a stirring of desire deep down in the pit of her stomach.

"By all means, please join me." His voice was low and rough, with an edge of sexual chemistry that had Julia's toes digging into the carpet and her pussy clenching beneath the thin silk of her panties.

She made her way to the bed and gingerly sat beside him, trying not to disturb the piles of paperwork he'd made. Logan solved that problem by grabbing them all up in one large hand and dumping them over the side of the bed.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

Their kiss wasn't gentle; neither were their hands. She couldn't touch him enough, couldn't reach enough

places on his body for her hands and mouth to explore. She felt him everywhere on her body--his hands on her arms, her legs, between her thighs. His mouth devoured hers, and she felt him come up over her, between her legs.

They didn't speak. This hunger, this need, had no place for words. Julia wanted him inside of her, wanted Logan to take her to that place that only he could.

She didn't know when it happened. He was holding her hands above her head, his tongue laving her nipples into stiff points of desire, and suddenly her wrists were firmly attached to the bedposts.

"Logan." She was gasping, straining, trying to free her arm from their binds.

"Shhh, Julia, it's alright."

Her head pulled back, trying to see what was holding her to the bed. Necktie. He'd used a necktie to tie her to the bed.

"Logan? What is this?" Julia was starting to panic. She'd never been into bondage, and this was starting to scare her a little.

Logan ran a hand down the silky smoothness of her hair, which he'd freed from its clip. "Something different. I want you to give me all of you." His hand continued its journey, down her neck, across her breasts, until it stopped at the juncture of her thighs. "I want you to watch what I can do to you."

Julia's heart was pounding in her chest. She wanted to tell him to let her go, to release her, but part of her was thrilled that he wanted to try something new, something different, something that would excite them both.

Logan's mouth made its way back to hers, and she lost herself in his kiss. His fingers were teasing the curls between her spread legs, and when he urged them farther apart with one of his own, she didn't hesitate.

He abruptly pulled away from her, and she arched her head to see him making his way down her belly, to that spot that he was still flicking lightly with his thumb. She felt the fire growing in her belly, and the thought alone of where his mouth was going had an orgasm threatening to break loose.

There were once again no words as he teasingly used his tongue to lightly flick her clit. GodGod, the man knew just where to touch her, *just how* to touch her, to have her hips bucking off of the bed.

Her moans echoed in the stillness of the bedroom as he wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked. She came in a gush of wetness that he lapped up with his tongue. Julia twisted her arms in her bonds, trying, needing, to get closer. To his mouth, to his hands, to everything.

She was still feeling the aftershocks as he wasted no time in taking his place inside of her.

In one thrust he was in her to the hilt. Julia felt Logan go still as her body tightened and released around him in its own natural rhythm. She opened her eyes, only to meet his intense green stare upon her.

He started his own pace, nice and easy, using his hands to lift her hips up to meet his thrusts. She saw the passion build in him, almost as quickly as it built in her.

She couldn't reach him, couldn't touch him, because she was still tied to the bedpost. But she wrapped her legs around his waist, taking him as deep as he could go.

Julia let go of the last of her reserve, and used her pussy muscles to squeeze the head of his dick. Logan's eyes closed against the feeling, and Julia smiled. They both had power here.

She felt him growing harder, felt the blood rushing into her own ears, and dug her heels harder into his back. His hands were almost painful where he held on to her, and she arched her back up as far as it would go.

They came together, and the sounds they made were the only noises in their cabin.

It was, as vacations went, the best damn one she'd ever had.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning there was still no sign of Cindy. Julia was beginning to worry. It wasn't like Cindy to blow her off. Julia made her way to the front desk, determined this time to get the clerk to let her into Cindy's room.

Flirting, bribery; whatever it took. Luck was on her side. The morning clerk was in his twenties. She plied him with smiles. Laughed at all his jokes and batted her eyes until he finally gave in and handed over Cindy's room key.

Cindy's room was neat and tidy and her bed looked like it had not been slept in.

The clerk had assured Julia that Ms. Parker had not requested maid service for the last four days. Julia knew Cindy well enough to know her inner most secret. Cindy was a closet slob.

Cindy's outward appearance was always immaculate and her office always orderly. But there were a chosen few who made their way into the inner sanctum of Cindy's home and quickly found themselves confronted with day's worth of dirty dishes piled high in the sink, unfolded laundry scattered across the furniture. And if you knew her extremely well you got a glimpse of her never made bed.

Julia searched the room. No clues screaming out Cindy's whereabouts. Where had she gone? As far as Julia could tell, no one in the hotel had seen Cindy for at least three days.

She didn't have a choice. Julia would go to the local police department, fill out a missing person's report, and hope to God the police took her seriously.

\* \* \* \*

"You filled out the report and the police said they would be on the look out for a woman fitting Cindy's description."

"Logan, you weren't there. You didn't see the way they treated me. They acted like I was a nut job. You should have seen the Sergeant's face when I told him I was worried because her room was so clean and her bed was made. The man thinks I'm insane."

Logan reached across the table and put his hand over hers. "You've done all you can. Now it's up to the police. They handle cases like this all the time." He passed her a croissant. "You need to stop

worrying and eat something.”

“I can’t eat. Where can she be? I just talked to her on the phone the other day. At the time I thought she sounded odd, but she told me she was coming down with a cold.”

“You told me she’s impetuous, spontaneous. Maybe she met some young stud and took off boating for a few days.”

Julia still wasn’t convinced. “Maybe. Cindy enjoys having fun, but I’ve never known her to let lust or partying interfere with business.”

“There’s always a first time. Now eat something.” He poured her a cup of coffee. “Before I forget I remembered where I saw that other woman.”

“What woman?” Julia asked.

“On the news this morning there was a story about a missing woman.”

“Logan, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The other night I told you I recognized another face in one of your paintings. That same woman was on the news today. Well, her family was on the news. They just found her body.”

“What?”

“The woman’s body was found in a wooded area not far from her home. Come to think of it, the area looked similar to the background in your painting.”

“That is totally impossible!”

“My imagination might be playing tricks on me, but I know it was her face in that painting. I couldn’t remember where I’d seen her before until I saw the newscast.”

Julia frowned. “I don’t understand. Are you trying to tell me you think I’m painting women I see in the news? I told you I don’t watch the news. I don’t even own a television. How can I be painting women I’ve never seen before?” Julia demanded.

“What about the papers? You could have read the story somewhere. In newspapers or magazines.”

“I haven’t done anything for months but paint. I’ve been a recluse, a hermit. This whole thing is beyond bizarre. It has to be a coincidence my paintings resemble these women. Painting has been my whole existence. It was everything until I met you.”

He picked her hand up off the table and held it in his own. “You’re stuck with me now. I’m not going anywhere,” he said, turning her hand over and kissing her palm.

She laughed, “Good. I’m getting used to seeing your ugly mug across the breakfast table.”

“Eat up. You need your strength. We’ll go bug the cops again after breakfast. Make sure they’re taking Cindy’s disappearance seriously.”

“Julia?” A well-dressed woman in her fifties called out from across the room.

Julia plastered a smile on her face and waved. “Oh shit, it’s Sarah Branford. Whatever you do, Logan, don’t bring up the subject of dogs.”

Logan laughed. “Why on earth would I start talking about dogs?”

“I know you don’t think you will, but I swear somehow it seems to pop up in the conversation whenever she’s around. And once it does, forget it, you’re talking leashes, flea dips, and dog bones for the next two hours.”

“Julia, I just knew it was you.” Sarah turned and smacked her companion on the shoulder. “Ralph didn’t believe me, did you Ralph?”

Her companion, Ralph, dressed in a designer suit and sporting a gold Rolex, answered without an ounce of expression in his eyes or on his face. “No, dear, I didn’t believe you. My mistake.”

Sarah motioned to the empty chair next to Julia and, before she could answer, Julia collapsed into it. “He never believes me. Ralph, for goodness sake, don’t just stand there, sit down.” Sarah turned to Julia, “The man is impossible.”

Sarah placed both hands on Julia’s arm. “Darling, where on earth is Cindy?”

“You haven’t seen her?” Julia asked.

“Not since we arrived two days ago. She told me she wanted to see my newest work.” Sarah turned and gave Logan a smile. “I paint pet portraits.”

Logan kept his eyes on his food as he answered. “How interesting.”

“It really is, isn’t it? It started as a hobby. Ralph said I needed something to occupy my time. And then before I knew it, my career took off. I’ve done all the celebrities pets. But I try to do mostly dogs. I adore dogs.”

Julia quickly changed the subject. “Cindy was supposed to meet up with you?”

“She told me she was coming up here. Ralph and I needed a break, didn’t we dear? So we hopped on a plane and came up to get away. I’ve been trying to track Cindy down since we landed, haven’t I dear? I’m dying to see her new look.”

“New look?” Julia asked.

“She didn’t tell you? She’d been complaining about feeling run down and overworked. I told her, ‘Cindy you need to spoil yourself.’ You know her birthday is coming up and she was getting depressed about turning forty-five. I gave her the name of my favorite spa and most adored hairstylist. He does wonders, doesn’t he Ralph? What did you think of the new Cindy?”

“I haven’t seen her.”

“Well, she seems to be thrilled with the hair extensions. I know, it’s hard to imagine her with long brown hair. But anything is a welcome change from that ‘I love Lucy red’ she’s been sporting around for the last

couple of years.”

Julia couldn't believe what she was hearing. “Cindy has long brown hair?”

“Yes, she got the extensions a few days before she left for her vacation. She didn't tell you?” Sarah asked.

“No.”

“She probably wanted to surprise you. I hope I didn't ruin her surprise.” Sarah leaned over and patted Julia's arm. “Don't let on you know.”

“I won't.”

“Look at the time. Ralph and I booked a romantic boat ride around the lake, didn't we darling? Julia, please tell Cindy when you see her that I will only be here one more day, then we're heading home. It was nice seeing you again, Julia. And nice meeting...”

Oh Dear, I never caught your name,” Sarah said as she extended her hand in Logan's direction.

“Logan, Logan Walker.”

Sarah took his hand into hers and held it as her eyes raked up and down his body. “Logan, a true pleasure to meet you. I hope to see you again.”

Julia waited until Sarah was out of hearing range and turned to Logan. “It's not possible!”

“She never mentioned she changed her hair?”

“No.”

“It can't be a coincidence.”

“Then what?” Julia asked.

“Did you bring photos of all your new work?” he asked.

“Yes, they're all in my briefcase.”

“I think its time we tried to put the pieces of this puzzle together.”

\* \* \* \*

Back in the room Julia found her briefcase and handed it over to Logan.

Logan emptied the contents of her briefcase onto the bed. He started picking through the stack of photos and laying them out in neat lines across the bedspread.

Julia leaned over and arranged the photos in two rows. “What are we looking for?”

“I don't know.”



He picked out the two murdered women and put them aside. "There are a dozen paintings here. And you don't know any of these women?"

She studied each photo carefully before answering. "No, I don't know them at all."

"Almost all of them, with the exception of Cindy, are in their late twenties or early thirties." He picked up the closest photo, studying it intently. "Where would you say this is located?"

Julia sighed. "Logan, I just don't know."

"If you had to take a guess, what would you say?"

"Someplace desolate, rugged, cold and mountainous. Montana?" she guessed.

"Yeah, I thought so too."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He pulled out her laptop and hooked it up to the room phone line. "I'm going to search the net for missing women in Montana."

"You have got to be joking."

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later they had found matches to four of the women.

"Do you believe in ESP, in being clairvoyant?" Logan asked Julia.

"No, I've never been a believer in the supernatural."

"Anyone in your family have the second sight?"

His expression was serious, and Julia knew he wasn't joking around. "What are you saying? You think I'm a psychic? That's just nuts, Logan."

His eyes never left her face as he asked his next question. "Have you ever had visions before that came true?"

She got up and shook her head back and forth. "Never!"

His arms reached out and encompassed the spread of photos across the bed. "This all started after your accident?" When she didn't answer he continued, "They have to be tied in."

She couldn't believe it. She wouldn't. It was insane. "My accident and the visions?"

"Yeah. When did you start having them?" he asked.

"Right after I came out of the hospital." This was too much. This was too crazy. She got up and started pacing the room, trying to make sense of it all.

His eyes followed her every movement. “You were in a coma. I’ve read accounts of people gaining psychic powers after surviving an accident.”

She stopped pacing and exploded, “This is absolutely nuts, Logan. I’m not a psychic!”

He grinned. “Well, if you are, how about giving me some lotto numbers?”

She didn’t match his smile. “Not funny.”

“I’m just trying to lighten the mood. But I really do think it’s all tied together. If you’ve been a hermit and haven’t seen reports about the missing women, how do you explain the fact that you’re painting them?”

“I can’t.”

“The count now is at five women you have painted who have turned up murdered.”

A chill ran down her spine. “You really think that all these women have been murdered?”

“Yes.”

“And somehow I’ve had visions and I’m painting those women the way they’ve been found after being murdered?” she asked.

“Yes. As nuts as it sounds, it’s the only answer that makes any sense.”

“If that’s true, then that means Cindy is…” she couldn’t finish the sentence. Cindy couldn’t be dead. Julia refused to believe it.

He got up and put his arms around her. “It means Cindy disappeared. We have no idea what happened.” He picked up the photo with the figure resembling Cindy. “We just have to figure out what’s going on and how to find her before it’s too late.”

\* \* \* \*

Another day passed and still no sign of Cindy. Julia spent the day talking to the hotel staff and calling every number she had found in Cindy’s day planner. Every artist and client Cindy had dealt with for the past five years was in that planner. Cindy use to joke the planner was her life. No way Cindy would have left it behind.

Night fell and still no one had heard from Cindy. She had simply fallen off the face of the earth and disappeared.

“I don’t think I can take going to talk to the police again.” Julia said, laying her head on her arms. She couldn’t face their questions again. Her answers hadn’t changed and she didn’t have any new information. So far there were absolutely no leads. Where the hell was Cindy?

“I’ll go. You stay here and try to get some sleep. I’ll see if the night crew is any more informative than the day shift.”

Julia raised her head and smiled. “I’m sorry. I’m worn out.”

“You haven’t gotten any sleep; you’re barely eating. Stay here and try not to worry. I’ll be back in no time.”

Julia watched as Logan walked out of the room. She closed her eyes and considered moving to the bed and trying to get some sleep.

The ringing of the phone jolted her out of her stupor. Julia forced herself to her feet and picked up the receiver. “Hello.”

“Ms. Madson?”

“Yes.”

“Someone dropped off a package for you at the front desk.”

“Thank you.” She hung up the phone and wondered who would be sending her a package. No one knew where she was staying. Well, no one but Logan, Cindy, and her landlord. She only mentioned she was going out of town to her landlord so he would keep half an eye on her place.

No way could she sleep now. She might as well go see what was waiting for her at the front desk.

Julia took the elevator to the lobby and greeted the clerk behind the desk by his first name, “Hi, Ted.” She had talked to the hotel staff so much in the last twenty-four hours she now knew them all by name.

“Hello, Ms. Madson,” the clerk said, reaching under the desk and pulling out a manila envelope.

Julia put her purse on the counter and reached for the envelope. Her arm knocked against the purse, sending it and all its contents spilling onto the floor.

“Damn!”

Ted came quickly around the desk and bent down, helping her pick up her scattered belongings.

“Hey, this is Devil’s Peak,” the clerk said, handing her a photo that had fallen onto the floor.

Julia had forgotten she had crammed all the photos into her purse.

He pointed to the photo of her last painting. “I recognize this place. Devil’s Peak. About fifteen miles from here, out in the wilderness. There’s even a lake about another half-mile past the cabin. I used to go fishing there with my grandfather.”

Julia was stunned. The place in her painting really did exist. “Can you write out the directions for me?”

“Sure.” He grabbed a pen and pad off the desk.

Logan. She needed to find him right away and tell him about Devil’s Peak, its desolate wilderness, its lake and cabin. She had to see for herself if the location matched the background in her painting.

She took the paper from the clerk, thanked him and headed back to her room.

\* \* \* \*

Back in her room, she realized she had not opened the mysterious envelope. Inside there was a folded piece of yellowed paper. Julia sat down and spread it out on her lap and began to read.

*The Denver Post*. She stared at the article in front of her. *Missing College Student Found Dead*, screamed the headline.

Kerrie Wilson was found in a deserted house not three miles from her apartment complex--found, strangled to death.

Strangled. The words blazed off the pages. She went on to read about the blonde twenty-year-old college student who had been found lying across a bed in an abandoned house, a thin rope entwined around her neck.

Julia stared at the photo of the woman. It was the same face that had come out of her imagination and onto the canvas. Another woman she had painted had been found murdered. As much as she refused to believe Logan's theory, did she really have a choice?

She checked her watch. Logan would still be dealing with the cops, which meant if she hurried she could catch him at the police station. The two of them could surely convince the cops to head up to Devil's Peak. With any luck they would find Cindy alive and well. Cindy had to be alive. Julia refused to consider any other alternative.

\* \* \* \*

It was a chilly night and Julia's breath came out in small wisps. She buttoned her jacket and quickly made her way across the hotel courtyard. It was dark, and normally she would have waited for a cab inside. But if she cut across the courtyard, she could meet the cab as it came to the front gates and save herself the ten minutes it would take the cab to negotiate around the large circular driveway.

Down the cobble steps she went, two at a time. It took her a moment to realize there was another sound of footsteps being carried on the night air.

She stopped and was met with silence. A chill went up her spine and she suddenly realized there was a nagging question she should have been asking herself. Who had sent her the clipping? Who knew she was at the hotel besides Cindy, Logan, and her landlord? If she hadn't been in such a hurry to find Logan she would have stopped and really considered her next course of action. But instead she had rushed out the hotel, her only thought to get to him as quickly as possible. To get to Logan, so they could get to Cindy.

And now here she stood, alone in the dark, in a deserted corner of the courtyard.

*Moron!* The words barely crossed her mind when a strong pair of hands forced something rough across her nose and mouth and an odd smell assaulted her senses. The world around her spun out of control, and her mind plunged into darkness.

## Chapter 5

When Julia awoke, the first thing she realized was that she was in a strange room. The picture that hung on the wall of the cabin across from the bed was a snowy mountain scene--a picture that would have been peaceful if it wasn't for the fact that she knew the framed print that hung in her own room back at the hotel was of a girl on a swing, leaning into the sunshine of a summer day. She had no idea where she was, but she knew for sure that it wasn't the room she'd been staying in with Logan.

Panic set in when she tried to move her arms and, when they didn't budge, understood that they were bound, tied to a four-poster bed with neckties. *Neckties*.

*Dear God, no, it can't be true.* Her mind refused to take it in. The killer she'd been searching for could not be Logan, the same man she'd fallen in love with. Julia tried to break free, twisting and pulling at the silk that bound her arms tightly above her head, but the material simply cut into her skin and refused to budge. As she struggled harder to get free, feeling the hot slickness of blood begin to run down the undersides of her arms, she kept repeating the words like a mantra over and over again in her mind...no, it couldn't be true, Logan could not have been the one who killed those women.

The door opened suddenly as she was fighting the dual terrors of attempting to break her bonds and convince herself that Logan Walker was not a murderer. That the man who'd somehow worked his way into her heart had not brought her here simply to torment and kill her. But when a masked figure entered the room, calmly shutting the door behind him and flipping the lock, the small sound bounced around inside her head like the cocking of a gun.

She tried desperately to free herself again as the man--and it was a man, she could tell by the way he was built--watched her with cold eyes of blue through the holes cut in his ski mask.

It took her three tries before she found her voice, and even to her own ears she sounded frightened and pathetic. "Logan, don't do this. I promise I won't tell anyone, but please, you've got to stop."

The man--was it really Logan?--refused to answer her, wasn't even looking at her when he pulled a blindfold from his pocket. There were no more words exchanged as he tied it around her eyes, gently, carefully, smoothing her hair back to keep it from tangling in the fabric.

Julia's breathing was coming faster, her eyes attempting to see anything out of the corners of the blindfold. With her arms restrained above her and no way to see what he was doing, panic threatened to overwhelm her completely. It took a moment for her to realize he was touching her. The slick, cool surface of a leather glove slid slowly, seductively, across her breasts. It was only with that first touch that Julia realized she was naked--naked, just like the women in her paintings.

"You are so beautiful," the man whispered, his fingers becoming harsher as he almost painfully tugged at the nipple of her right breast. Julia felt his breath even through his mask coming harsh and ragged against her cheek, heard more than felt as he inhaled deeply the hair alongside her neck.

"Don't do this. Please I beg you," Julia pleaded, sure that he planned to rape her, to punish her, for something that she didn't understand.

His fingers encased in the glove ran through her hair, tenderly, softly. She tried to move away, tried to force her body off the bed, but she was bound and the more she squirmed the more the silk cut into her

skin. Every time she moved she was tightening the binds.

She forced herself still, even though the thought of him near her, of his hands on her, made her physically ill. He was in control and insane. He hadn't killed her, but she didn't doubt he would soon.

She had to think, to focus. All she needed was a moment, one second when he wasn't paying attention, to get away and get help. But that was only if she could get him to let her go. If she was free, she might get the chance to run or fight. Either option was better than slowing going rigid with fear as his hands ran down her arm, across her belly, around to her hip. God only knew what he would do next.

Julia realized her teeth were chattering and she forced herself to think of something else. She had to stay calm if she had any chance of surviving.

His raspy low voice forced her mind back. "I thought about killing you so many times. I would watch you and your sister every day."

*Every day.* The words echoed across her head. He had been watching her--for a very, very long time.

His fingers grazed her face and she swallowed the scream that wanted to explode from her lips. "I followed you that night you know. I'd planned for months on how I would come to the two of you and take your lives. It would have been done slowly. Watching life leave your bodies as you pledged your love to me. But then you wrecked all of my plans."

His voice suddenly filled with anger, and the hands on her sides became rough. "The two of you had to be careless! You wrecked everything! And then she was dead. Dead! And it was all your fault. The both of you. She was mine to do with as I pleased, but you took that away from me. I loved her, but I loved you more. I had always planned on making you my first. But then you ruined it all with your carelessness. Were you drunk? Did you fall asleep at the wheel?"

*It wasn't her fault!* The words screamed inside her head, bouncing around in time with the man's horrible words. The other car had swerved into their lane and she just hadn't been able to react in time.

"It wasn't my fault!" Julia screamed at him, and for the first time in her life she actually believed it.

The man slapped her, hard, across her cheek.

"Shut up! It was her fault, and yours! You left me. Went away and I had to give up my dream. My beautiful dream. I had to move down my list. I had to forget about you and your sister. You ruined all of my perfect plans, you bitch."

But then he laughed, and the sound was somehow more horrible than his screaming had been. "But then you really didn't leave, did you? Sneaky bitch. How did you do it? How did you get inside my head? It was just dumb luck that I read about one of your shows. I couldn't believe it when I saw the paintings. How did you get into my head?"

Julia took a deep breath, trying to block out everything but the thought of escape. "What are you going to do to me now?"

He slapped her again. "Kill you! It should have been done before. You should have been the first!"

Julia pleaded with him, even though she knew, even if it was Logan, that pleading probably wouldn't do

anything but make him angrier. “You don’t have to. You can let me live.”

“Why would I do that?” he demanded.

She lowered her voice and tried to sound seductive. “Because I would stay with you. I would be with you.”

“Liar!” He screamed at her, pulling at the neckties binding her arm. She screamed out as they tightened, cutting off the circulation to her hands even more. He tugged harder. “You’re lying to me, saying anything to keep yourself alive!”

His hands were suddenly on her and they slowly snaked around her neck. “Feel the rope?”

The nylon was cold against her skin. It suddenly tightened and she could no longer speak. Before long she couldn’t feel anything, except for the blood pounding in her head as her body cried out for oxygen.

“Are you ready to die?” his voice whispered into her ear.

She wanted to cry out--”no, don’t kill me, I’ll do anything you want”-- but all that came out was a small hiss.

The man laughed and let go of the rope. Julia could breathe again, and tears of relief fell down her cheeks as she gulped for air.

And then there was only silence. She heard a click, and in the back of her mind she knew it was the lock of the door. She felt a warm breeze float through the cabin and across her naked body, bringing goose bumps to her skin.

Then she was alone, and determined to get away--no matter the cost. But she was tired, so very tired, and lethargy pulled at her limbs as she weakly struggled to free her arms from their restraints.

“No, don’t fall asleep,” she pleaded with herself, but it was no use. Darkness came quickly, a black even deeper than that of the blindfold still covering her eyes, and for the first time that she could remember, Julia passed out.

\* \* \* \*

Hands were on her face. She screamed and struggled to get away. It took her a moment to realize her hands were already free. Julia scrambled from the bed and fell hard onto the floor. Her legs weren’t working. They’d been stretched out too long. Julia cried out as the circulation started pumping back into them.

She was wasting precious time. She had to get away. Whipping the blindfold off her face, she looked up and straight into Logan’s face. He was standing over her, eyeing her with concern. She screamed, a blood-curdling sound that went on and on, and began crawling away from him.

His arms reached down and pulled her to her feet. “Thank God you’re all right. We have to hurry!”

She pushed her body away from his. “Get away from me!”

“Julia, what are you doing! I’m so sorry I left you, but now is not the time to talk. We have to get out of

here before whoever did this to you comes back.”

Julia moved to the fireplace and picked up the poker. “I said stand back. I don’t know what kind of sick game you’re playing, but just stay the hell away from me.”

Logan’s eyes showed confusion as he came a few steps closer. “Julia, we have to leave. Right now! The night clerk; he’s been off duty until today. I was talking to the staff again, questioning them about you, and he remembered the conversation the two of you had. Dear God, I was out of my mind with worry when you disappeared.”

Julia raised the poker as he took another step towards her. “I said get away from me.”

”The clerk mentioned the last time he spoke to you it was about Devils Peak. I didn’t even call the police. I just panicked and headed straight up here. Julia, we have to get out of here before that maniac comes back.”

She swung the poker and it swished through the air, missing his face by inches. “I told you to get away from me, you sick fuck! Back away from the door.”

Confusion had contorted his face. “Okay, I don’t understand what’s going on, but look--I’m over here.” Logan stepped away from her and placed his back against the far wall. “The car keys are on the dashboard. Go out and get into the car and head back to the hotel. Just get out of here. Please.”

Julia made her way closer to the door, keeping her eyes on him the whole time. Three steps and she was outside. She slammed the door closed and allowed herself a short moment to rejoice. She was free. *Free*. She’d escaped, somehow. The word screamed through her head.

But Logan was still in the cabin. She needed to make sure he stayed there until the police could reach him. Julia was still a few feet from the door when the cabin door opened.

Logan stood in the doorway. “Go. Get out of here. When you get back to the hotel, send the cops.”

The cops. He really was playing this up for all it was worth. What a sick bastard. She had believed in him. Thought she was in love with him. And the whole time he was playing some kind of sick game.

One minute he was standing at the door, the next his body slumped over.

Julia screamed. The sound was startling, and it echoed through the empty land. Standing over Logan was a masked man holding the fire poker she’d dropped in her hurry to get away.

The man waved at her, then looked down at Logan’s body and laughed. At the sound of his laughter her body froze. She recognized it—it was the laughter of the madman that had held her hostage.

“Miss me?” he said, pulling off his mask.

A man she had never seen before stood over Logan’s inert body. Oh dear God, she had been wrong, so very, very wrong. Logan. She started forward.

“Don’t worry, dear, you’ll be joining him soon.”

Julia turned and ran, but only made it a few feet before the man’s hands were around her waist. She



fought, screaming and kicking, like a desperate wild animal--biting and scratching any part of his body that was exposed.

The killer didn't seem to notice as he dragged her back to the cabin. He threw her on the bed and picked up a yellow rope from a side table. Pulling the rope taut between his hands, he started towards her. "Time to die. It's such a waste. You're so beautiful, and we really didn't have enough time to play."

She tried to scream, but no noise came out. She scrambled back against the wall and started to lean off the side of the bed, but he was faster. His body pinned her down and he forced the rope around her neck. Slowly he tightened it, his eyes watching hers as the air left her body.

Julia's vision began to cloud. She struggled and he sat up, pinning her arms under his knees. The rope tightened, harder and harder against her skin. Julia began to hear music and rain, the swish of windshield wipers against a wet windshield. And then she heard the gentle sounds of her sister's voice singing.

She was dying. Her fingers scraped against his legs one last time before going motionless.

And then she suddenly could breathe.

She gasped for air. He was gone, the weight on her body missing. She struggled to take oxygen into her starving lungs, as she watched two bodies crash to the floor. For a moment she was too disoriented to figure out what was going on, but then it all made sense.

Logan and the killer were fighting. All she could do was gasp for air and watch.

Their bodies flew against the wall. Logan's head was bleeding and as his temple connected with the wall, he went down hard onto the floor, lying motionless yet again.

*Oh my God, he killed Logan.*

As Julia struggled to find her feet, she watched as Logan pushed himself off the floor and rushed the madman watching from the middle of the room.

The two men flew through the doorway into the bathroom. A sickening thud, a crash, one single scream cut off in mid-shout.

"Logan!" Julia screamed, scrambling from the bed and falling to her knees. She crawled towards the bathroom, intent on helping Logan do something--anything--to keep that killer from getting away.

"Logan, please, answer me!"

It seemed to take hours, but she finally made her way to the cool tile of the bathroom floor. Logan was there, sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. Blood still dripped from his temple, and there was another nasty gash on his cheek.

The man who'd terrorized her for so long was sprawled on the floor, halfway between the toilet and the shower. His body was twisted at an odd angle, his face slack, and his eyes open and staring at nothing. He may have been watching her from a distance, but she had been unaware. The thought that she had somehow tied into his sick mind with her paintings made her physically ill. But he was obviously dead, which meant he could no longer hurt her. He could no longer hunt and torture women. This monster was dead. And her lover, her heart and soul, was injured but still breathing. Julia crawled toward Logan.

Laying her head in his lap, she'd never been so happy to be alive.

\* \* \* \*

"Morning, sleepy head." Julia put down her paints and walked over to the bed where Logan lay sprawled under the covers.

Logan ran his hands through his hair. "What time is it?"

"Around seven...in the morning."

"Is there any coffee?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

"I made a fresh pot about an hour ago."

Logan got out of bed and came back with two cups of coffee. He handed one to Julia. "Let me see."

She led him over to her latest painting. She had been working through the night. But this time she wasn't ashamed to show him her work. "Do you think people will buy them?" she asked, taking a sip of coffee.

He studied the desert scenario for a few minutes before speaking. "Yeah, I do. They're really good." He stepped back from the easel and took a seat on the end of the bed. "Julia, there are some things we really need to talk about."

Julia sighed. "I know. And I'm so, so sorry." Tears fell down her cheeks as she took the chair a few feet away from where Logan sat.

Logan's gaze settled on her, his expression one of hurt, anger, and sorrow. "I was mad, Julia, that you could have thought I was a killer. But," he added, when she tried to interrupt, "the anger is almost gone now." He left his spot on the bed to kneel beside her chair.

"You were drugged, Julia, and led to a cabin out in the middle of nowhere. You woke up and had no idea where you were. You were tied to a bed--with neckties, just like the ones I had used during sex only a week before. You were confused, disoriented, and scared."

His fingers gently removed the tear tracks from her face. "You might have thought it was me--for a second, a minute, an hour. I understand that my showing up at Devil's Peak scared you, since you'd never had a chance to tell me where you were going. If it hadn't been for Ted here at the hotel, I wouldn't have known where to look."

Logan's eyes gazed at her tenderly. "But it wasn't me, baby. I would never, ever hurt you. And I'm pretty sure you know that."

"I do, Logan, I do. I was so scared when I woke up in that cabin with that man standing over me. All I could see were his eyes, and all I felt was the madness that radiating from him." Julia took a deep breath and framed Logan's face with her hands. "If I could have thought, really thought, for even just a minute, I would have known it wasn't you. But I was so damn terrified, and then all of a sudden that man was gone and you were there, and, oh crap, I didn't want it to be you but I didn't know what else to think."

Julia took a deep breath and leaned her forehead against Logan's. "But you saved me. You got rid of that monster, even if we still don't know who he was. I'm so sorry that I doubted you, even for an

instant. But I'm so sad, Logan, so very, very sad, that I wasn't quick enough to save Cindy."

Logan kissed her tenderly on the lips. "Baby, there was nothing you could have done to save Cindy. The police said that Cindy had already been dead for several hours before that bastard ever brought you to Devil's Peak. Julia, I swear to you, there was nothing you could have done to save her."

"I know. I know that, Logan, I do. But I'm alive, and Cindy isn't. And all those other women, they're dead to, just because that man wanted to make me pay for something I don't even understand."

Logan stood and tenderly drew her into his embrace. His arms tightened around her, wanting nothing more than to comfort her and ease her pain.

"It's going to be okay, Julia, I promise. Nothing bad is going to happen anymore. That man is dead, and he can't hurt you again. I promise you, Julia, that you don't have to be scared anymore."

She burrowed deeper into the warmth of his embrace. Her need for him was so deep, so necessary, that all she wanted right at this moment was to know she was safe, alive, far away from hurt and pain.

"You know what I want, what I need right now, at this exact moment?" Julia asked him, raising her head to look deep into his eyes.

"Me, of course. What more could you want?"

Julia smiled, just a small twitching of her lips, but she felt something break free inside of her. She loved this man, and she would spend the rest of her life making him forget the mistake she had made in doubting him when it mattered most. "Nothing. There's nothing else I want."

"Good," he said, leading her tenderly to the bed, "because there's nothing more that I want other than you. You're everything to me, Julia, and if it takes me forever, I'll prove it to you beyond a shadow of a doubt."

She climbed on top of him, pushing his boxers out of the way. It might have been nice to take their time, to go slow and easy, but the energy from painting and the horrors of the previous day was still churning in her blood.

Julia lowered herself onto him slowly, watching his eyes as he entered her. They were joined somehow, by more than just their bodies. Heart, mind, and soul--the maniac who had terrorized her for so long had somehow managed to bring them closer than they might have ever been.

She rocked against him hard and fast, and thrilled as his hands dug into the skin at her waist. Logan's head reared up, and he took a nipple into his mouth as her head fell back and hair cascaded like a silk curtain down her back.

It didn't take long, and soon only their cries and moans were the only sounds in the apartment. As Julia's climax neared, she linked her hands with his. And as she flew over the edge, she screamed out just one word.

"Logan."

The End

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