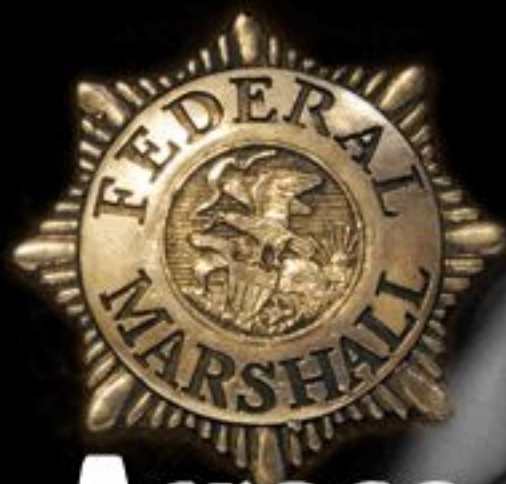


Dark Eden Press Presents



# Across THE LAKE

Capri Montgomery

A Dark Eden Press Publication



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# **Across The Lake**

Capri Montgomery

**April 1, 2006**

Sage's body hit the floor hard. She struggled, trying to pull herself up from the wooden floor, but panic had overtaken her limbs. It was all happening so fast. She barely had time to process the events, but she knew she had to fight.

Her five foot five, one hundred twenty pound frame was no match for his strength. He grabbed the ax from the counter, raised his arms above his head, taking one last look at the beautiful vixen sprawled on the floor. "What a waste," he mumbled.

Before he could wield the ax, a loud sound, like thunder came, and a sharp blast pushed him back into the marble table. Sage looked up to the door to see a man standing in front of her with a shot gun. The lightning cracked behind him, illuminating his navy raincoat. It wasn't until he pushed the hood away from his face that she saw who he was. "Logan," she whispered. He bent down, helping her up to her feet and pulling her trembling body into his arms. She looked back. The man she'd known would kill her lay bleeding on her floor.

"It's okay," Logan said as he pulled her in tight, shielding her eyes from the horror before her. "It's okay now."

## Chapter One

June 7, 2005

“Two years ago I moved here from Cleveland. I was looking for calm and stability and this is what I got,” Sage pointed to the inn. Chaos reigned. The Baker twins ran haphazardly through the lobby. Mr. and Mrs. Saunders argued louder with each breath, and yet another guest was complaining about a leaking sink. “Well, at least I got stability,” she smiled at the handsome man who’d rescued her more than once.

Financially, she’d been a mess when she came to Creede. Constantly moving around, and leaving the Dig without another job in place, had finally taxed her resources. She had very few options in the small town, but when she saw Nature’s Inn she had the idea that she could take it and turn it into a thriving business. Making the best out of bad situations had always been her strong point, and if she wasn’t planning on moving to a bigger city, then running an inn would have to be her new life.

Nature’s Inn had been empty for too long. The last owner had let it run into the ground. Logan had bought the inn with the full intention of tearing it down, but Sage had convinced him to do otherwise. He was willing to give her a chance, even though she had no experience. He figured it was almost a win-win situation for him. If she succeeded, then he had a thriving business with a beautiful woman living across the lake. If she failed he could still tear the place down.

The preparations had been costly, but it wasn’t as if he couldn’t afford it—not that he wanted to waste money, but Sage had it all figured out. Every time she approached him with a new request she made it sound so perfectly planned

that he couldn't resist. Or maybe it was just that he couldn't resist her. He remembered the day the inn finally started to take on its new shape.

It was five in the morning and already Sage had the sitting room lights on. He wondered if five o'clock was too early to go over. Deciding it was, he walked back inside, poured his first cup of coffee, and sat at the table. Sage had worked hard. She decorated, and even tried her hand at some of the repair work, until Lenny showed up, and was ready to go to work on fixing up the old place.

Every time Logan went over, she seemed to have a new idea. "Bigger and better" than the last idea is what she had always said and she had been right.

The idea to add a classic feel, more than a rustic one, made Nature's Inn look like a place that could appeal to more than just the hunting crowd, and that was exactly what she was going for.

"Fill the inn for a season or all year, it's up to you," she had said, but he knew it really wasn't up to him, because she had already made up her mind.

After waiting a few hours, Logan picked up his keys and drove over to see Sage. Of course, when he got there, he made sure she knew he was checking up on the inn. She merely smiled and offered him breakfast.

"I made them this morning." She waited for him to take a bite. He looked pleased, so she sat back on her heels and said, "I'm thinking of serving breakfast and maybe lunch."

He took another bite of the apple-cinnamon muffin, and savored the sweet taste. "You're going to be doing an awful lot of work."

"I don't have anything else to do," she smiled. Staying busy kept her going, and she needed to keep the inn going, so why not serve breakfast at least?

"I know this isn't a bed and breakfast type deal, but I thought it would be nice to add in at least one meal. Of course muffins aren't a meal, and I'd have to reconsider offering something else, but maybe —"

“You should stick to one meal, that way you’ll have time to rest and handle the books and the guest at the same time. Muffins are fine. If they want more, Bell’s is just down the hill.”

“True, but they might not have time for that. Maybe cereal and...” Her voice always trailed off when she was getting another idea. “Pancakes and bacon would be better, don’t you think?”

“No.” He sat down on the table—the only furniture in the room at the time. “Listen, take it easy. Trust me, if you jump into this and take on more than you can handle, you’ll burn yourself out.”

“Oh I can handle it. I’ve been cooking for years.”

She wasn’t listening, so he thought he’d try a different approach. “For ten to fifteen people? Maybe more?”

She thought for a moment. Seven rooms—assuming they were all occupied at the same time.

“Good point,” she said, and returned her attention to measuring the floor.

“Need some help?”

“Nope.” She was used to doing things on her own, and this wasn’t much different. “Movers are bringing the rest of my furniture out of storage, so it should be here today. We’ll have a beautiful French Provencal sofa here,” she pointed to the corner wall. “And I have two chairs that I can sit either by the fireplace or the window—haven’t decided that yet. The kitchen set can go in the kitchen obviously and then I’ll put the dining set in there.” She pointed to the big room off the sitting room.

Thanks to Logan, all the beds were being replaced with new bedroom sets and crisp sheets. She had ordered two king beds for the two largest rooms—one of which she was prepared to call the honeymoon suite, because it had both the garden tub and the walk-in shower. She ordered three queen beds and then four twin beds. Two to a room in the smaller rooms. It would be perfect for kids, or

even for friends traveling together. All the other necessary furniture would be her furniture.

Her bedroom set obviously would go in her room. She couldn't imagine anybody else sleeping on it. In fact, she couldn't imagine sleeping on it herself – that's why it had been in storage for all those years. That, and she didn't have a space big enough. Then there was the chaise that would go in her room, and a few ottomans would go in the sitting room. She had it all figured out, everybody else was just coming along for the ride.

"I have two pictures I'd love to hang, but I should hold off on that," she stated without looking up from her present task. She pulled back on the measuring tape. The mechanism to lock the spool in place failed, and the tape shot back at lightning speed.

"Ouch!" She dropped the measure. Logan had appeared by her side just as quickly, and was already pulling her up to take care of her wound.

"It's just a cut." She pulled her hand free from his in order to rinse it off and go back to work, but he insisted on helping. He grabbed her wrist again, and gently pulled her over to the sink.

"Cuts can get infected," he said, without leaving room for protest. She liked the feel of his hand. Rough yet soft. He was a man who wasn't a stranger to work, but at the same time, he was so gentle with her.

"Thanks," she whispered, looking up in his eyes.

He wanted to kiss her. Wanted to, but he resisted. He thought about the inn, business, repairs, anything and everything to keep his mind off his growing state of arousal.

"Hey," Lenny stopped short when he saw the two, thinking he might just be interrupting something.

"Sage cut her hand," Logan said.

"Hi Lenny." Sage waved with her free hand, while Logan pulled the first aid kit out and started applying a thin layer of cream.



"I was just trying to get some measuring done."

"I could have done that."

She tried not to roll her eyes. Lenny had a way of thinking she was less than capable of handling herself around the house. Of course, compared to him she was. Then again, she was a fast learner and she planned to shadow the hell out of him until she figured out how to make all the minor repairs herself.

"Well I figured you would be busy, and I really wanted to get all the measuring done before the movers get here."

"They're already here." He sat his tool box down on the kitchen floor, roped his belt around his waist and gave her a look that said he needed to get to the counter if she planned to have it finished in time.

"Are you serious?"

"Van Lines?"

"Oh gosh." She pulled free from Logan's grasp.

"Your cut!" He yelled after her.

"My furniture is more important," she yelled back, and ran out of the inn, stopping abruptly when she realized the movers hadn't even started to unload the truck.

"Now be careful with the couch. It's an antique. So is the rest of it, so be careful with those too." She seemed more frantic than bossy.

"We got this speech before we left the storage facility, Miss Landers." He presumed it was her, because the owner, who had been more than attentive, had mentioned her name often. He also mentioned how much she would want all of her furniture to arrive in impeccable shape.

"We're the best, and it shows because we take care of your furniture as if it were our own."

She hadn't found that comforting. She took better care of this furniture than she ever would furniture she had bought herself.

“Sage, let them work.” Logan placed his hands on her shoulders, and pulled her back.

“It’s just this was my parents’ furniture. It’s been in my dad’s family for years, and when he died, he left it all to me. I kind of feel obligated to see it’s kept safe.”

She felt her heart pounding. She knew she must have seemed over dramatic, but this was her daddy’s furniture and she wanted to keep it from being harmed.

“He left it to me,” she said absently. She had made her father several promises in the short time they had together, and when the lawyer read the will and she’d been left the furniture, she promised him then that she would take good care of it.

“I know, and it’ll be fine,” Logan tried to say, until one of the movers – the big burly guy – almost fell. Sage gasped and turned to Logan, covering her eyes with her hand.

“Is my table okay?”

He would have laughed if she hadn’t been shaking in his arms. “It’s fine,” he said. “He managed his footing and the table is just fine.”

She sighed and looked up at him. “I really do care about people too.” She smiled, realizing she hadn’t asked about the mover.

By the end of the day, her furniture was in the appropriate rooms, set up to the specifications she wanted and the movers were pulling out. Logan had stayed all day. Not that he had to, she had said several times that he could leave if he needed to, but he waited. “Still have to get the kitchen table set,” he said. The truth was he just wanted to spend some extra time with her.

By eleven o’clock, Lenny had finished with the kitchen and they were able to move the table and chairs in. The place looked great. Better than great, and the beaming smile on Sage’s face made all of the expense worth it.

“Okay Lenny, I’ll take you home.” Her offer was greeted with a succinct “No you won’t” by both gentlemen.

“You can’t walk. It’s too dark. I’ll just get my keys.”

“I’ll take him home,” Logan said, while giving her a look that told her she could protest as long as she wanted, but she still wasn’t leaving the inn that late at night.

“Fine.” She tossed her hands up as if to say she’d done with the argument and they could do what they like. “I’ll just get some work done...”

“You’ll get some rest,” he said, before realizing he seemed more like he was ordering her around than giving her advice. But the truth was, she’d been up too long and if she didn’t get in the bed, she probably wouldn’t be sleeping at all.

“Well, I have to make the bed before I can get some rest.” She smiled as if she’d just won some major competition, when in actuality she’d only proven her point.

“Fine, make the bed and then go to bed,” he said.

“Yes sir.” She tried a stern look, but it faltered into a smile.

She spent the following weeks figuring out marketing. Which magazines to submit her “open for business” letter to and which travel papers to invest in putting an ad. Word of mouth and a good review would be the catalyst for her inn, and she aimed to get both.

Within six months she’d had the place fixed up and filled with guests.

“How’d you manage this on such short notice?” Logan asked.

“Blonde by the fire place is Aida, my best friend since high school. Brunette down by the lake flirting shamelessly with Mack MacPhee is my sister Paige, and the sexy young guy over there is Matt, my former college boyfriend, in town to help an old friend out.”

“Can’t count on friends all the time,” he said.

“Nope, that would be what the rather rounded gent over there is for. He’s from *B&B* and *Beyond Magazine*. He’s reviewing our little inn.”

She spent the entire day trying to make sure things ran smoothly, and half the night and most of the morning. Once the reviewer from *B&B* left, she figured she could breathe. Possibly breathe if it weren’t for the two “mystery guest,” as she called them. Of course, they were out now, and that suited her just fine. Would have suited her just fine, if they had left at a decent hour too, but who was she to complain?

Matt sat still by the fireplace. Things had changed so much over those past two years, but some things had stayed the same. Sage was still as beautiful as the day he first set eyes on her, and she was just as lonely. He wanted her back in his life as more than a friend, but she had made it clear that she wasn’t interested in more. She kept herself busy instead of catching up on old times, and when he had leaned in close he could have sworn he had felt her pull away from him.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, and she plastered on another fake smile.

“I’m just tired,” she said. “I have to prove this is the best inn this side of Veil, and try to keep it going if I plan to make a life here.”

“So come back to Africa. I’ll have my own dig soon and things are...well they’re going to be different.” He cupped her hand in his, and she hadn’t retracted it—not right away at least.

“I can’t just give up on this,” she said as she turned to busy herself with more cleaning. “If I keep running, then I’ll never hit home,” she said in one of her famous baseball euphemisms. “This is worth seeing it through Matt. And just think about it, you’ll have a place to stay when you come this side of the...” She stopped, noticing he hadn’t seemed to be paying much attention. Well hell, he had started the conversation.

“Why’d you stop?”

“You seem preoccupied.”

"I just thought I saw something out there in the woods, that's all."

"Probably some of my mysterious hikers. I swear they leave before the rooster starts crowing and they get back so late. I swear though, I'm going to have to make some rules—like if you're not back by midnight don't bother." She laughed.

Aiden and Jerry had gone hiking the past two mornings, leaving at three in the morning and getting back closer to one the next morning. She wondered what the point of coming back to the inn was, until she realized she'd want to come back for a hot shower too. Of course, had they really cared, they would realize that she had to stay up to let them in and get back up to let them out.

"I can say something to them if you want," Matt offered. She could tell he was serious. For all of his flaws Matt really did seem to take care of her the best he could.

"No, it's okay. They're only here for a few more days. I can take it." She smiled.

"You know," he said, while taking her hand again. He led her to the table in his usual *you need to take a break* fashion. "I was hurt when you left Africa."

"I left because I value my life," she said sharply.

"I didn't have anything to do with that."

"I know. You would never hurt me like that Matthew." She looked at him. In fact, if it were at all possible, she would have ventured he was more upset than she was when things went down the way they had.

He had been the one to see the rocks cascading down on her. He had been the one to call out a warning, and he had been the first one by her side when it was all over.

"So come back," he pleaded and once again she declined.

"Matthew, I'm happy here," she said. He loved it when she called him Matthew. From the others it sounded simple, but from her lips his name sounded almost angelic. He wished she used it more often instead of calling him

Matt all the time, but then he wondered if it would still sound as sweet if she used it more frequently.

"I could use your help on the new site." He smiled, but it was forced. He wasn't accustomed to begging. Even less accustomed to not getting his way.

"Nope, I'm going to make this work. And when it does, I'm going to send you the longest letter thanking you for all your support and goodness." She gave a slight squeeze of his hand. "And then I'll say...I told you so." She laughed and he laughed too. "Seriously, if I can make this work I'll actually feel some sense of accomplishment in my life."

He hadn't understood that. She had her doctorate, she worked in Africa. She was the brightest person he knew on all things Egyptian and ancient. She had to be the next big explorer of the modern world and that hadn't been enough. As if she had read his thoughts she said, "School was a step. Africa was an even bigger step, but this scares me out of mind, and if I can put down roots and find a way to live my life, then that's gotta be the biggest accomplishment in my young life."

He smiled, a real one this time. As long as she was happy, he could wait. He could wait because he didn't have a choice. Rush her, and she'd flee. Stay patiently by her side, and she'd come back. He needed a way into her life, the only way he knew to get all the information he needed was through Paige. He could find out whatever he wanted to know just by talking to Paige. Sage was the first relationship he'd actually wanted to preserve. She was the first woman he'd actually loved. He would get her back, whatever it took.

\* \* \* \* \*

For Sage, the opening of the inn seemed like months ago instead of a couple years. Two years and she was still pining after one Logan Hunter. But God he was the right man for her and she knew it.

"I'll get somebody on the sink," Logan stood to leave.

"You're coming back for dinner right." She smiled. Since the first time she met him she had a school girl crush on him, but he had always kept things professional. She never stopped trying for more, and he never seemed to notice. Her approach was subtle, but she figured it wasn't so subtle that he wouldn't have noticed.

"Can't. I have plans." She tried to keep the jealousy from registering on her face.

"With a business partner," he added.

"Of course." She gave him a fake smile before returning to her guest.

He followed behind her, "It really is business." He couldn't let her walk away thinking he was having some clandestine affair.

"Sure." She smiled again. He knew it wasn't sincere by the way her lips forced the curve instead of her usual effortless smile. "Listen, I'm going to go see about that leaky sink, don't worry about sending anybody over. Two years and I've learned a thing or two about keeping this place up."

She had watched Lenny as he made routine maintenance on the house, and she asked as many questions as she could. Of course it didn't make her a plumber, electrician or expert in home repairs, but it had saved her money a few times.

He always left his tools behind. He said he spent more time at the inn than he did anywhere else, so having one set of tools there just seemed like the smart thing to do. If he'd known how often she used his tools he probably would have taken them home. Lenny was a nice guy, but losing money because Sage had decided to handle repairs herself, wasn't exactly something he would have taken lying down.

The Baker twins ran past her, almost knocking her over. She instinctively reached out to grab for the wall. "Whoa, slow down," she yelled as nicely as she could. She turned around to see Logan stopping the fierce set of boys.

“There’s no fire, slow it down before you hurt somebody. Understand?” His tone wasn’t callous, but the words carried enough power to shut the two little monsters down. Mickey Baker widened his baby blue eyes, brushed his hand through his curly red hair, and nodded his head, yes, so slowly Sage almost felt sorry for them. Almost, but not entirely, as she had dealt with their running, screaming and terrorizing all week. Logan squared his eyes on Knox Baker, and got the same response before letting them go about their play.

At six-five with broad shoulders and well defined muscles, Logan could intimidate just by standing up. He was a rare breed of man. Not overtly gorgeous, but attractive, sexy and confident. He didn’t have a supermodel look or Hollywood mega star façade. He was the kind of guy who would stand out in a crowd simply because he had the confidence to do so. His eyes could seduce at one glance, undress at another. There was something about him that drove her wild, and when it came down to it, she’d swear he was the most handsome man alive, though she’d known there were probably cuter in Denver. If *sexy* had a picture next to it in the dictionary, Logan Hunter would be front and center.

He worked out. She could tell by the nice physique he had. Beautiful muscles were hidden underneath his sweaters in the winter, but come summer she’d always get a glimpse of his sexy biceps with those hot t-shirts he’d often wear. He hadn’t had a six pack, she’d caught sight of him swimming in the lake shirtless one summer day, and she’d got a full glimpse of his upper body. It might not have been Hollywood perfect, with rock hard abs, but it was close, and enough give her hot fantasies for weeks.

He handled himself well, and she had no doubt he would be the victor in a bar brawl. He had a way of sending signals with his body that scared most men half out of their mind, but the softness in his deep brown eyes told her he wouldn’t hurt anybody unless he had to. There was something about him, half protector, half lover and she wanted to explore both sides.



“Thanks.” She waved bye and walked away. The fact that she had been fiercely jealous had not escaped her notice, but she had hoped it had escaped his. Two years and it was quite clear they were going to be business associates. Though she would fantasize about more, she didn’t want to embarrass herself either. She hadn’t been in the habit of showing her true emotions, and she wasn’t ready to start now.

## Chapter Two

Sage sat on the porch drinking her evening dose of lemon and chamomile tea. With everybody asleep, she never had to worry about being disturbed by a guest wanting extra towels, kids running through the halls, loud chatter or arguments to break her thought. It was the perfect nightly ritual to wrap up a chaotic day.

She watched as Logan drove up the drive. "Crap." She hadn't expected anyone. She pulled the rubber band from her hair, letting it fall softly on her back. She straightened up, and tried to stop fidgeting before he reached the porch.

"Evening." She smiled.

He sat next to her on the wooden swing. "How have things been around here?"

"Well, since everybody went to sleep, quiet. Before that, the usual chaos. Baker twins started back to their usual play, but I reminded them I could get the big man to come back. They stopped. They seem a little afraid of you actually."

He laughed. "Well, I don't mind being the bad guy this time around."

"Would you like some tea?" She started to move, but he placed his hand on her thigh to stop her. Heat radiated through her body like lightning in the midnight sky. His skin felt electric as his fingers pressed gently into her flesh. She sat back slowly, wanting to savor the moment, the emotions and the desire. Hell, she could think of other places she'd like to have that hand, but she was sure he hadn't felt the same.

"So what are you thinking about out here?" He let his hand linger just a little longer before removing it. He already knew the answer. She was thinking about her sister. Since Paige had died six months ago, Sage had spent many

nights thinking about the void in her life. "Paige was all I had left in this world," she had said. "The only family I had."

He had known her pain. Her eyes would tear over, but she refused to cry. For a while he thought she had still been holding on to some hope that her sister was still alive, that she had survived that car wreck, and that she was out there and would come home soon. Hell, maybe a part of her still believed that, but he imagined with each passing day, things had to get a little harder to believe.

"Never mind about me, how was your dinner?" She changed the subject, hoping he would follow. She knew he must have thought she was crazy for believing her sister was still alive. Nobody would believe her, they probably would all think it was grief turning into madness, and they would all want her to seek help. She didn't need help. She had no doubt that Paige was still alive, and she had no doubt that she would find her again.

They heard a scream and then glass shattering.

"Oh my God." She bolted from the swing and ran inside only to find one of the Baker boys standing in a pool of broken glass. "Don't move honey." She slipped on her shoes she'd left by the door.

"Mickey Baker!" Suzann screamed causing Mickey to jump.

Sage lifted him. "It's okay," she said as he started to squirm. "We're just going to get you out of this mess." Just in time to get in a bigger mess with his mom.

"I'm so sorry; I only turned my back for a minute."

Sage smiled. "Accidents happen." She looked at Mickey. "It was an accident right?"

He nodded his head. "I was playing with my cars and I bumped the table. It tipped and I tried to catch it, but it was too heavy." He sniffled.

"That was some bump," Sage mumbled. She had brought that statue back from Africa. Two years in the same place, and it was brought down by one of the Baker boys.

"I'll clean this up. Why don't you take him on to bed?" Though she couldn't imagine why he was up so late in the first place, she watched Suzann walk Mickey back down the hall and to their room.

"Expensive?" Logan knelt beside her.

"No, just irreplaceable." She carefully picked up the glass. "One of the shopkeepers in Africa made her for me. He said it would bring me much happiness and good luck. I just thought it was a nice going away gift. Probably would have sold for a hundred dollars or so. It's not really what most collectors would consider an outstanding antiquity." Not even the locals thought much of the statue. It just didn't seem to fit in – and neither did her décor.

Once the inn had been completed, the town members had graciously made their way up to see it. "It's lovely," Sandy had said. "But it doesn't quite fit in with the mountain and hunting," she said. Sage smiled politely and kept her mouth shut. It didn't fit in because she was trying to attract a different crowd. Not the hunters and bar crashing men, but families and artist and hikers and people who would truly appreciate staying in such a beautiful retreat.

Creede, Colorado had to be one of the most peaceful places on Earth. The summers were busy. Families vacationing and the corporate types up for a retreat usually filled the inn, but the winters were equally as pleasant. The colder temperatures kept most guests at bay, but when the lake was frozen over, and the first snow hit the mountain peaks, the air crisp and fresh, Sage could barely contain the little girl rush to go out and play in the snow. She'd missed that growing up.

After her father died the snow kept falling, but she'd rarely been outside to play in it. Her life consisted of school, homework and taking care of the family. Paige always needed a little extra care. She seemed to get sick so easily, and she always needed more attention. Her mother rarely left the bedroom and between helping Paige with her homework, studying for her own geometry test and cooking dinner, life didn't leave room for being a child.

Logan had happened upon her after her first snowfall at the inn. He stood back and watched her make a snow angel, roll around in the snow giggling like a child and then she caught sight of him. She had been embarrassed and kept apologizing. Sure there were things in the inn she could have attended to, but none of them were so important that she couldn't enjoy the first snowfall. He had assured her it was okay, and she merely apologized again, saying, "It's been a long time since I've done that." He assumed she missed out on snow in Africa, and she hadn't stayed back in Cleveland past the start of autumn.

He could never figure her out. At one moment she was almost child-like, responding to an ordinary event as if she'd seen it and experienced it for the first time. At other times, she was so organized, structured and take-charge. She rarely seemed vulnerable, except for in those few unguarded moments. He always caught a glimpse of those moments when she hadn't expected his company, but in public, when she knew she wasn't alone, she was a completely different person. He wondered why. He wondered what secrets her life had held, and why she'd left Africa. He let his suspicions go, knowing he too had his own secrets, secrets he'd rather keep buried.

Still, she was an enigma worth figuring out, he thought. From the moment he'd seen her in Bell's Café, he'd felt an attraction to her. He'd instantly wanted to get to know her. It was why he had sat at the bar instead of his usual table. It was why he'd listened to every word, hanging on to the subtle nuances in her voice. When she said she was interested in speaking to the owner of the inn, he'd instantly found his way in. "I'm the owner," he'd said. For the first time she'd turned to meet his gaze. Her beautiful brown eyes captured him from the first moment. Still he'd been reluctant to pursue her. She'd wanted to inquire about working at the inn, and he'd assured her that he hadn't bought it to keep it going.

"Obvious by the way you've let it go," she'd said. There was a hint of sarcasm in her voice, and it instantly put him on guard.

“Just bought it,” he said. “Was run down when I got it and I damn well intend to get rid of that eye sore.” He could see the inn from his cabin across the lake and he’d hated looking at it everyday. When Jake Anderson offered to sell the land for considerably less than it was worth, he’d taken it right away.

“Well then, before you make that mistake, just hear me out.” She pushed her plate over and moved to sit closer to him. She explained that she could run the inn, fill it with customers and make him a profit in less than a year. It was a bold move, but her confidence had aroused more than his curiosity.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” he’d said. Hell, he’d looked at that mess of a building for almost six years, one more couldn’t hurt anything.

With one handshake he managed to suppress the feelings he’d felt for her at first glance. This was business and mixing it with pleasure was never an option for him. It had worked too.

For the first year he’d been so busy handling business he’d rarely thought about the feeling he got in his gut when he watched her draw up her design plan, or when she’d hang a painting. He ignored the need to move closer whenever they went over business documents. He could even rationalize dropping by each day as a way of checking up on his investment. With some time, he’d been less able to ignore his need to see her. The inn was holding its own and making a profit. Sage had a level business head on her shoulders, and he didn’t need to drop by everyday. He couldn’t stop. So instead of checking up on his investment, he would rationalize it as checking to make sure she was safe. After all, it was his inn, and anything that went wrong would reflect poorly on him. It’s what he told himself, and for a year and a half, it had worked—well almost worked.

“Well that about does it.” She turned the vacuum off and wrapped the cord neatly around hooks.

“We’ll get something else to go there.” He looked to the empty Victorian table. Sage had insisted on bringing some of her furniture into the inn. She

hated the idea of leaving it in storage somewhere, and it really did fit with the décor she had chosen. “It’s spent far too little time in use,” she had said.

Since she’d inherited the furniture from her mother, it had seen the inside of a storage unit more than it had seen the light of day. She’d had it shipped to Seattle when she went away for college, and then she had to put it back in storage when she went to Africa.

“Don’t bother; I’ll leave it as is,” she whispered. He suddenly realized losing that statue had rekindled something in her that he hadn’t quite grasped, until she spoke again.

“I guess I shouldn’t get attached to anything, I’ll just end up losing it later.”

“We’ll replace it anyway. You lose things in life, but at some point, you have to let something else in.”

“Are you a religious man Logan?”

He couldn’t say that he was. He’d read the Bible once, and he vaguely remembered something in there about not coveting thy neighbors ass. He sure as hell was breaking that rule because he’d been coveting her ass for a long time.

“It’s a simple question, either you are or you aren’t.”

“Can’t say that I am,” he mumbled, a little annoyed that she’d broken the fantasy slowly surfacing in his mind. His fantasies were the only place he could have her, and he wasn’t too eager to give those up. Business was business, and for a while, that line of thinking kept the x-rated thoughts from his mind while he was around her. Now, he’d try to think about business, and all he could think of was finding a new way to close the agreement, and a handshake was far from what he had in mind.

“Some cultures in ancient civilization believed that our present lives were a direct result of what we did when we were alive in the spirit realm. I guess if that’s true, I must not have been a very good person.”

She was trying hard to not let life shape her into a bitter woman, but every time she'd had one challenge figured out, life threw her into more chaos.

He slipped his fingers through her hair, feeling the soft, even texture caress his fingertips. "I know you've been through hell recently, but you're not a bad person, and if there is such a thing as preexistence, you weren't a bad person then either."

She wrapped her arms tight around her stomach, trying to hold in the void she felt in her life. He tried to comfort her and she backed away.

"Right," she straightened and smiled. Hell if he could understand why she stayed so emotionally detached when she needed somebody the most. He had seen it when her sister died. For one brief moment she had let go, but she quickly pushed him away.

When Paige died, Sage avoided talking about the loss. She came right back to work three days after the funeral in New York. She hadn't said much, only to say that she had a feeling her sister was still alive. The assurance from the coroner that the car had burned so rapidly and so hot that there was nothing left to identify did nothing to alleviate her insistence.

The police had told her of the eye-witnesses who had seen her sister's car swerve into the fuel truck, and still she'd felt that Paige couldn't be gone. Logan had known the feeling. It was the feeling of holding on when every fiber in her body was trying to tell her she needed to let go.

"Well, I should go to bed. There's so much to do in the morning. Breakfast and cleaning, and..." she kept talking as she walked to the door. She had expected to see Logan behind her and ready to leave, but what she'd seen was him sitting on the couch. "Logan, you have to go now."

"Is that your solution to your pain?" He hadn't exactly known what she was going through because she hadn't really talked about it, about any of it. Every time he'd seen a tear in her eyes she had quickly suppressed it,



straightened up and pretended she had something more important to do than deal with her feelings.

"I just need sleep. I'll feel better in the morning," she lied. Sleep hadn't helped her forget Paige. It hadn't helped her forget about what she'd lost, nor how she'd lost it. "Please Logan," she whispered.

He walked to the door. "Fine for now. But if you think I'm giving up on trying to help you, you're wrong."

She knew what he wanted. He wanted her to talk, to breakdown so she could move on. She just couldn't do it, because she didn't know how. For so long she had been the one who had to keep a level head and keep the family strong, she couldn't fall apart. Every moment she had started to cry, her brain convinced her she needed to resist.

Logan was a great guy, but he was a business partner and her boss. He hadn't really let her forget that. She tried getting closer, and he always kept things business-as-usual. He stopped by often, not to see her, but to see how the inn was doing. Nature's Inn was what he was interested in, not her, and she finally let herself see that.

She convinced herself after their first meeting that they could be more than business partners, more than friends. He was thirty-seven, and she had just turned twenty-nine. She had thought the age difference wouldn't matter, but maybe she had been wrong. Maybe eight years was too much for him.

The more she tried to fight her feelings, the more she loved him. She wanted him in a way she hadn't wanted any man, not even Matt. She had hoped she could lie to herself, convince herself that she couldn't love him, but she couldn't.

Everyday she looked forward to his arrival. She would change her hair hoping he'd notice. She would wear the soft rose perfume that her mother used to wear to drive her father crazy. She would even spend an extra twenty minutes picking out an outfit. After a while, she noticed he hadn't noticed, and

she forgot about finding the perfect outfit and just wore what felt right for the day. She still looked beautiful, but maybe not sexy, not to him. It's what she convinced herself of anyway.

"I'll be okay Logan." She smiled her usual fake cheerleader smile. The smile she had learned long ago to plaster on her face. "Thanks, but don't worry. I'm not going to get so depressed that I abandon the inn." She laughed, but he hadn't. Tough audience, she thought.

"I'm worried about you." He brushed his finger along her cheek, and for a moment she felt her heart stop. "If you need to talk I'm just across the way."

"I know. I'll call. But I'm fine. Really," she said as she noted his apprehension. This was more concern than just a business partner she thought. Maybe they were friends. Maybe she had just been too wrapped up in the idea of a romantic interlude. She'd missed the real meaning behind his visits.

"So we're friends right," she said and immediately she wanted to kick herself.

"Yeah, we're friends," he said before leaving.

"Idiot," she mumbled to herself. If he had ever wanted anything more, she just told him she wasn't looking. "Maybe he deserves better anyway," she whispered.

Even if he had been interested, there wasn't much she could give him. She was a wreck. She was incapable of expressing her real emotions and he deserved better than that. He deserved better than her. The thoughts flooded her mind until she closed her eyes and surrendered to the night.

## Chapter Three

"Mickey Baker, stop running." Sage stood her ground. She didn't want a repeat of last night. One more thing broken and she'd charge his parents for sure.

"You're not my mom," he yelled.

"No she's not, but I'm your dad and if you don't stop running I'm going to tan your hide."

Sage looked over her shoulder to see Mr. Baker standing at the front desk. "Now go sit down," he said in a stern, fatherly voice and Mickey complied.

Sage walked back to the desk.

"I'm sorry about last night. We'll pay you whatever it's worth."

"It's not necessary." She tried to explain that it couldn't be replaced either way, but he insisted.

"Five thousand then." He wrote out a check and passed it across the desk. "I'd also like to checkout. Business calls." He smiled.

Sage was so shocked over the check she barely heard his words. "Of course." She nodded. Since he insisted, she thought. She took the check, folded it and slid it underneath the counter.

"Logan," she said more surprised than she'd intended to be. It was early, even for him. She finished checking Mr. Baker out of his room and waited until he left before conversing with Logan.

"You're here early." She checked her watch.

"Yeah, I have to go out of town today. I just wanted to stop by before I left."

"Where are you going?" She checked her tone, noting the disappointment in her own voice.

"Just away," was all he would say.

"You'll be back soon?" She reminded herself to get a grip.

"Can't say." He looked around the inn and then fixed his gaze on her. He wanted to ingrain her face in his memory. He wanted to remember every line, every detail. He wanted to remember why he had to come home.

She walked from behind the counter and slipped her arms around his neck. "Be careful," she said softly. Everybody seemed to leave, and after awhile they just stopped returning. She felt as if she was saying goodbye, and that scared her.

"I'll be home," he said as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in close. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of her. He would come home. He would come home for her.

She pulled away. "This is silly," she wiped a tear from her eye. "I'll see you when you get back."

"First thing." He smiled. "I'll have Lenny keep an eye on things. Any repairs, he'll make them and bill me when I come back."

"Okay." She smiled again. It was one last attempt at normality so she wouldn't break down completely. She didn't want him to go. "Seriously," she pulled him in one more time. "Be careful." She kissed his cheek, though she would have much rather tasted his lips. "I'll keep an eye on your place."

"Don't bother, it's all locked up, the mail has been stopped and there aren't any plants that need watering." He laughed, but hadn't left until she agreed not to bother.

## Chapter Four

Two years ago Logan hadn't given a second thought to his life. Meaningful relationships were definitely lacking, but until he met Sage it never bothered him. Or maybe it had, and he just was able to ignore the gnawing empty feeling in his gut every time he returned home.

He justified his distance as doing them a favor. No lady deserved to live his life. A life that had him out on missions at the drop of a hat. A life that would keep him gone for months at a time. A life that could end at any second on any given assignment. It wasn't a life he could justify sharing with anybody.

Until he met Sage, the occasional love affair had been enough for him. Now he craved more. He wanted to spend his life with her, to give her a home, to have a family. He wanted forever. The reality was his job meant she'd be in danger every second of everyday he was away on assignment. When it came down to it, protecting a witness or Sage's life, he wasn't sure duty would come first. He couldn't imagine not giving anything, or anybody to save her life. Hell of a Marshal that made him. He'd been trained to forgo attachments, to protect the witness at all cost, including the cost of his life.

"Something on your mind, Logan?" Davies looked down to his friend's clenched fist. He'd been on edge since he reported in. He'd snapped at two of the Marshals thus far, and right now he looked as if he were ready to punch somebody out.

"This is it for me," Logan said through clenched teeth. Why the hell should he walk away from having a life just to save somebody else's? What kind of life would he come home to at the end of the day? One of loneliness and emptiness. One of his own making, but he would be bitter as a sour lemon and he would blame everybody who'd ever touched his life. That wasn't a life.

"She must be good in bed." Davies immediately assumed it was a woman. His friend had been on the team for over eighteen years, and never once had he talked of quitting.

"Wouldn't know." He picked up the snow globe on Davies desk, and tipped it around a few times. He watched absently as the little flakes fell around the tiny village.

"Careful, I'm taking that home to Lauren tonight." Lauren was Davies six year-old girl – the youngest of seven kids. He'd gone into desk duty shortly after the fourth, after he'd been shot on duty and his wife insisted he be there to see the children grow up, get married and have babies of their own. If she had anything to do with it, he'd be there until those babies had babies. Though Logan doubted Davies would make it that long. He was mid-forties and smoked like a four alarm fire. Sure, he'd spent his share of time in the gym, but the threat of lung cancer had obviously eluded his consciousness. Logan had told him once he'd better stop smoking if he planned to see Lauren hit sweet sixteen. Davies had smiled, "I'm trying," he said as he lit up another one.

"No?" Davies sat down behind his solid oak desk and surveyed his friend. "That's a first." Logan was no stranger to the ladies' bed. "What's going on Logan?"

"I love her," he said, shocked by his own admission. He was in love with Sage, had been for months. When he got back, if she'd have him, if he knew how to give her the life she deserved, he'd ask her to share her life with him.

"You love her?" Davies hopped up and slapped the desk. "Well it's about time buddy." He and Linda had been trying for years to find Logan a proper wife. "You told her yet?" He asked excitedly.

"No."

"No?" Davies fixed his eyes on Logan. "Why the hell not? You don't just tell me you love somebody without having something else to go with it." He

quieted down when he noticed Logan hadn't exactly been in the mood for his yelling.

"Look, I want to know what you intend to do about it." He pointed his pencil at Logan before sliding it behind his ear.

"I intend to leave this damn job. And if she'll have me, I intend to..." Actually he wasn't sure what he intended from there. He'd been so concerned about changing his life that he hadn't given a thought to whether or not she wanted to change hers. There was so much he didn't know about her, so much he wanted to know.

"You intend to what? You've got a plan right? You're not quitting a lucrative profession for, I don't know, a crap-brain idea?"

Logan squared his shoulders and then softened when he remembered he was dealing with his best friend. Of course he had a plan. He just hadn't figured it out yet.

"I'm going to ask her out." He said as if that would be sufficient for Davies.

"And then what?"

"I don't know. I'll figure it out as I go." He suddenly wanted to drop the conversation.

"Thinking on your feet with the ladies only works when you're not emotionally attached." Davies sat on the edge of his desk. "Look, you've got to think about this. Take her some flowers. Does she like flowers? Of course she does, every woman does," he said as if he had just asked a dumb question and needed to correct it.

Davies thought for awhile. "Take her some wine. Wine's good."

Logan noticed that Davies seemed to be giving this more thought than he had.

"I'll start the paperwork for you Logan. When you get back in town, we'll take you off duty. But I'm not letting you completely out."

Logan started to protest, but Davies quickly put a halt to that. “We like having you here. You can consult.”

“Consult.” Logan ran his hand against his freshly shaven chin. Consult wasn’t bad, as long as he didn’t have to leave Creede. And he’d get to keep his badge. He’d grown attached to that badge. Of course, having the badge made all the weapons he kept at home legal. “Okay, consult it is.” He stood, ready to leave. “Just so long as I can stay out of the city.”

“Done.” Davies pulled out a cigarette and Logan snatched it out of his mouth.

“You’re quitting too.” He took the pack from his shirt pocket and crumbled it up in the can.

“Yeah, I’m quitting too.” He pulled the pack of nicotine patches from his bottom drawer. “Lauren and Linda gave these to me three weeks ago.” He said, as he rolled up his sleeve and placed the thin, clear patch on his arm. “Guess it’s time I take the hint.”

Logan signed off on the paperwork, and picked up his witness.

“Keep him safe for us. He’s our star witness,” the DA had said. Of course, every one of his witnesses was his star witness. In fact, Logan had a theory that if the witness didn’t have the goods, Jerry Farnsworth wouldn’t give a second thought to cutting them loose—even if that meant they’d be killed for even thinking of talking.

“Yeah, what did he witness?” He asked, though he had a basic idea of the case. Antiquities dealing. Something illegal, Davies had said.

“He’s turning over on a collector. Some dig in Africa selling ancient artifacts to keep the dig going, and to load their pockets, you know. Anyway, we got him to roll over on one of the lower end collectors, but if we can get this guy, maybe we can get the next one.” Farnsworth had a smile on his face as big as the one he’d had when he won his first high profile case.



Logan knew this case was another make or break, but he hadn't exactly understood it. This wasn't mafia, it wasn't political cover up, it was academic deception, and who gave a rat's ass about that. Somebody had cared enough to make an attempt on this witness's life. Somebody had cared enough to call Logan out of a rather pleasant set up, instead of getting one of the local Marshals on the job. Somebody had cared enough to take him away from his home for the duration of the trial. He might not have cared, but somebody had, and that was all he needed to know to remind himself to stay on his toes.

"He'll be at the court house on time," Logan said. They always were. He hadn't lost a witness yet, and he didn't intend to start now.

"His name is Michael Warner. Nice guy, but not very bright. Speaks inappropriately most times, so you'll just have to ignore him." Farnsworth stopped talking as the two officers brought "his" witness out.

"Warner, this is Hunter. He'll be watching your six until after the trial."

"Logan." Logan looked over the scrawny man. He surely wasn't his idea of an expert witness. He looked three days out of the bottle, and two days off the needle.

Logan cocked his eyebrow, tossed his head to the side and gave Farnsworth a look that told him he'd better get a big bonus on this one. Warner looked Logan over once, shifted nervously and then looked back to Farnsworth.

"He don't look like no Fed." Warner looked at Logan again. He was too tall, too fit, and too serious looking to be a Fed.

"He's an agent, I assure you." Farnsworth signed off on his end of the paperwork.

"You sure?" He'd seen plenty of television, and he'd known that agents looked more like models with guns. Even the last two cops had looked more appropriate for the job than Logan had.

"I'm a U.S. Marshal, but if you're too damn drunk or too stupid to notice, then we can get you somebody else and I can go back home," Logan said.

"You're mean. I don't like mean." Warner shifted again. "Get me somebody else." He turned to Farnsworth, expecting the royal treatment.

"He's the best, and he's all you're getting, so shut your mouth and get your ass in gear."

Warner shifted nervously, picked up his jacket and followed orders.

"See you in a couple months." Farnsworth nodded, and with the satisfaction of knowing his star witness was in the best hands, he went back to work on nailing his next big conviction.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. Before Logan knew it, he was getting another call from Farnsworth saying some complication had arisen and that he'd be babysitting just a little while longer. He didn't know when he'd be escorting Warner back to Boulder, but he knew if he didn't get him back there soon he'd shoot him himself.

All day and all night, the only thing Warner could talk about was women. They either had big breasts with perfect tits, or small breasts with suck-able tits. Agent Landers had stepped out once or twice to get away. Actually, he'd stepped out more than once or twice, and left Logan in the apartment with the foul beast.

"Damn, did you see the tits on that one?"

Logan clenched his fist. "Get the hell away from the window." He fought hard to resist the urge to shoot the bastard. He thought of Sage back at the inn. He wanted to be there with her. What if somebody had come along and beat him to the punch? What if she hadn't wanted to wait for a man who hadn't called, written or even sent a postcard to say he was okay? That's normally what people did when they liked somebody. They sent postcards with "wish you were here" written on them. They called or dropped a letter or even an email.

"Man, nobody knows I'm here, there ain't no bullets waiting for me out there." Warner stepped away from the window when he saw Logan square his

shoulders. He looked angrier than he'd looked the day he'd almost knocked him out, and this time Landers wasn't there to stop him. "Okay man, I'm movin'."

"Good," he said. There might not have been a bullet waiting for him out there, but there was one waiting for him in there if Warner made Logan miss his chance with Sage. "Damn," he cursed under his breath.

He tried to think of the eligible men in Creede. There were a few. A few she wouldn't give the time of day, and he knew that, but Jack Haines had been getting a little too friendly lately, and Logan hadn't seen Sage push him away. Then there was Lenny. Lenny probably wasn't her type either, but two years is a long time to go without companionship.

The new guy, Henry, he was a problem. Logan had seen him twice. He met him once, and he hadn't bothered to remember his name. The sheriff had grabbed Logan before he could leave the general store just to introduce him to Henry, the new school teacher, but neither gentleman had been interested enough to shake hands or even stop what they were doing. Logan had seen Henry being entirely too hands-on with Sage and he hadn't liked it.

Like boys on a playground fighting over a toy, the two men had already decided they'd rather be enemies than friends. Logan hadn't known much about Henry and already he didn't like him. He knew Henry seemed to miss no opportunity to touch Sage. Henry had spent too much time rubbing her hand and finding a reason to touch her shoulder. Sage hadn't pulled away from Henry. The way Logan saw it, Henry was serious competition. Logan thought of Sage sitting in Belle's Café drinking her tea and having this teacher guy sitting next to her. Visions of Henry touching Sage, kissing her, making a move on the woman he loved, played out in his mind like a nightmare. Logan knew he hadn't given her any reason to wait for him. He mumbled a series of curses that would have shocked a sailor. If he missed his chance with Sage, heads were going to roll—starting with this crack-brained witness and moving up the chain to the DA.

## Chapter Five

Sage sat at the counter, thinking about Logan. They would go in to town together when the weather was nice. Logan never liked for her to drive “down the hill” when the roads were iced over. She never protested because down the hill really was more like down the mountain by way of curvy roads, and because she liked spending time with Logan.

Their last trip down together had been eventful. Logan had agreed to breakfast instead of their usual coffee.

“Breakfast for a change,” Sherry said. “What do you want?”

“Um, just toast.” Sage said. She wasn’t hungry, but she wanted to stay with Logan just a little longer.

“What’s he having?”

“Eggs, scrambled. A side of toast and two slices of your turkey bacon,” Sage said with a smile on her face.

“You’re in love with Logan.”

“I just ordered breakfast.”

“Yeah, but it’s the way you ordered it. Trust me; I’ve seen enough in my lifetime to recognize that unmistakable lift in your voice.”

“I have feelings for him,” Sage downplayed it, knowing it would be late afternoon at best before the information circled the town.

“The hell you do. You’re in love with that man,” Sherry stated again, just a little bit quieter than before.

“Sherry...”

“Don’t worry; I won’t say anything to anybody. I know when things are none of my business, and this is none of my business.” Of course, that only meant it wasn’t her business to share, and not that it wasn’t her business to get involved. “You have to tell him.”

"I can't." Sage looked back down at the counter. "He doesn't feel that way about me. I don't want to lose what we have."

"Shoot. Well how do you know he doesn't feel that way about you?"

"It's all business." She smiled. "Believe me, I've sent off some signals. They're just not being returned."

Sage thought that would keep Sherry at bay, but it had only served to wet her appetite. She offered to do some research of her own and find out if maybe Logan had some type of feelings, other than business, for her, but Sage quickly made her promise not to. A promise was a promise, and Sherry had no intention of going back on it.

"Shame," she said. "You're both two fine looking people, and you deserve to be happy."

Sherry left Sage to her thoughts, hoping she would realize saying something and knowing would be better than sitting around pining after a man for the rest of her life.

Logan sat down beside Sage. "So, what do you think?" He asked and it took her a minute to get his meaning.

"The books look great; the inn is doing quite well. Pretty soon you won't even need me there to run it."

"Of course I'll need you," he said. "The inn is doing so great because of you."

"Right," she mumbled.

After breakfast they went to the general store. Sage hadn't been feeling well and Logan had insisted she step outside to get some air. He had slipped the handheld basket from her hand, and he insisted on paying for the few personal items she had. That one action was the catalyst to her first meeting with Henry.

Sage had been coming out of the local knick-knack shop when she bumped into Henry.

"I'm so sorry," she said looking up to meet the deepest green eyes she'd ever seen.

"No problem. Guess I should have been looking out for beautiful women today," he said with a big smile on his face. She returned the smile trying to be polite. He brushed her shoulder with his fingers. She moved slightly. She figured moving a little would signal that she hadn't wanted to be touched, but it hadn't, he only moved closer.

It had been warmer that day and she had worn her spaghetti-strapped blue sundress. He seemed to like that sundress—a lot. She found herself wishing Logan would hurry. She looked back through the window and he was still the second person in line. Apparently Jill had to hold a conversation with Mr. Tompkin before ringing up his items.

"Oh hell, I'll just say it." He put his hand on her shoulder and slid her strap further up. There was nothing wrong with its original position; he just wanted to touch her. "I'm Henry Hastings, the new school teacher, I'm forty-five and single. No kids, not that I don't want any, and I do quite well financially." She shifted nervously managing a small laugh.

"Well that's an interesting way to introduce yourself Mr. Hastings."

"Henry, please?"

She hadn't wanted to call him Henry. Henry was too personal, and while she might have seemed naive, she knew full well when a man was making an obvious advancement toward her.

"Well, I'm the inn keeper."

He extended his hand. She vaguely remembered something about etiquette stating the woman should extend her hand first, but as she didn't want to be rude she extended her hand right back. She avoided giving her name, figuring the less he knew the less she'd have to worry about speaking with him the next time she was in town. Or maybe she'd just avoid going into town.

He held on to her hand, holding it more than shaking it. She tried to retract it, but he held on tighter. She looked back into the store. Damn, she thought. Logan was still in the same place he had been minutes ago. Or maybe it just felt like minutes.

"Well, I have to get back inside," she said, trying to pry her hand back from Henry.

"Oh, so soon?" He held tighter.

"Yes." She smiled a cordial smile, though her brain seemed to be at war with her lips. "I need my hand back." There went that nervous laugh again.

"Right." He reluctantly released her hand, said his goodbyes and stood there until she walked back into the store.

By the time she took her place by Logan's side, she could still feel Henry's eyes glued to her. She looked back out the window and sure as she had called it, he was standing outside staring. She gave a slight smile, turned and tried to focus her attention straight ahead. Logan slipped his arm around her waist. It was a moment she welcomed. She leaned into him, delighting in the feel of his strong arm around her. She wanted more, she wanted to be closer.

"Are you feeling better," he mumbled.

"Still queasy. I think I'm coming down with something." By the time she was able to glance back out the window, Henry was gone. She heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe he had seen their exchange, and thought she and Logan were together, at least she had hoped that's what happened.

"Who was the guy?" Jill happily pried. Logan released his grip. Sage felt a slight tinge of disappointment and emptiness. She missed his arm around her and it hadn't even been gone that long. Hell, he hadn't held it there that long either.

"New school teacher. Henry Hastings."

"He's yummy."

Jill thought any man single and available was yummy. She made no effort to hide the fact that she was ready to settle down, have babies and be a wife. Not that Creede had very many candidates in that department, but there were a few and she'd tried every one of them on for size – Every one of them except Logan.

“Is he single?”

“Um, yes. I think he wants kids too,” she added knowing Jill would be all over him just as soon as the shop closed. Actually, she'd probably close the shop just to catch up with him.

“He looked interested in you, though.”

Jill had an eye like a hawk. She could be talking to one person, but she'd never miss newsworthy gossip. And the very single Sage Landers with the very single new school teacher was definitely newsworthy gossip.

Logan mumbled something under his breath. It wasn't audible enough to be understood, but just enough to distract the conversation. “Can you hurry? Sage isn't feeling too well, and I'd like to get her back to the inn.”

He hadn't lifted his head to look at Jill, because he was sure there was still a healthy load of jealousy in his eyes.

“Of course.” She perked up and started ringing up their items. “You know you should take some ginger ale with lemon, it'll settle your stomach right up. Unless you have a headache,” she looked at Sage, wondering what condition she thought Sage might be in. “If you have a headache, then you'll want to place a warm egg on your forehead.”

“What on earth for?”

“I don't know really.” Jill stopped ringing long enough to ponder the question herself. “It's just something my grandma used to say and well, my grandma always had a cure for whatever ails you.”

She looked suspiciously at Sage and then Logan. “Unless you're pregnant then there's really no cure for that.”



"Sure there is," Sage mumbled in a clearly annoyed tone. "Delivery." Logan stifled a laugh.

Not that she would have mind carrying Logan's baby. In fact, the thought of it almost brought a smile to her face. Almost—as she didn't want to give Jill more fuel for her already spreading fire.

"Jill, we're in a hurry."

"Oh right." Jill happily finished ringing up their items before graciously reminding Sage that if she did happen to be pregnant, then she'd want to avoid taking medications.

It hadn't helped matters that Logan was paying for her things as well. She had protested, but at the first hint of nausea he'd sent her outside to get some air and insisted on paying for her few little items – which included her shaving cream, tampons and small glass hummingbird thermometer. She found she liked the idea of Logan buying her personal items. It seemed more like he was her man, and he was taking care of her. Of course he wasn't her man – a fact she was more than painfully aware of, though Jill hadn't been.

"I'm not pregnant," she said, finding it necessary to squash that bug before it made it out of the shop.

"Oh. Just sick then?"

"Yes, just sick." She smiled another fake smile.

It wasn't until they were out of the shop and out of earshot that she blasted out a series of curses that made Logan stop in his tracks. "Sage!"

"Sorry," she smiled sheepishly. "It's just that woman." She stopped herself before she could say something else unbecoming of a lady.

"No, it's just I've never heard you curse before."

"Well, I don't normally." She straightened her shoulders. "Not unless I'm provoked and that was definitely provoked." She looked at him, waiting to see if he had some smart comment to come back with, but he merely shook his head in agreement, opened the door, and helped her into the truck.

Sage smiled at the memory of having Logan's arm wrapped around her. She missed him more than he could ever know. She was worried, and the only way to get answers to her questions was to go back into town and ask the one person who would give her answers without needing to ask questions herself.

"Sherry he's been gone for too long. He hasn't even sent a postcard." Sage sat at the counter sipping her tea. "I just wish I knew he was all right." Sherry slipped her hand inside of Sage's hand. "He's fine darlin'. He disappears like this from time to time. Though since you've been here, this is the first time he's gone away."

Sage looked up. What secrets could Sherry tell her about this man? "Really, he just goes away for months at a time?"

"Well, yeah. Up until two years ago he'd be gone maybe once every eighteen to twenty months. Sometimes he'd be gone for a few weeks, sometimes for a few months, sometimes —"

"Sometimes for ten months?"

"Well no. This is quite long even for him." She saw the worried look in Sage's eyes. "Well no, now there was that one time back in ninety-five, ninety-six -oh shoot which one was it?" She turned back to the kitchen. "Dan, what year was it that Logan left, and was gone for all those months?"

"Ninety-six." Dan flipped a burger. "He was gone nearly a year."

"See honey." She patted Sage's hand. "Nothing to worry about. He always comes home." She smiled, but Sage hadn't found it comforting. In fact, she had more questions now than she had before. She wanted him home now, more than she had a few seconds ago.

Her mind drifted thinking of Logan and how much she missed him. How much she wished he had been across the lake this winter.

She wanted him home. Granted, he hadn't shown any romantic interest in her, but she couldn't stop the feelings she had. She missed his smile, his

touch, his voice, his laugh, even his scent. She missed the way he'd show up at the inn and inquire about the goings on.

She missed watching him chop wood in the winter. In fact, it was one of the things she'd missed all winter. That last December, he'd come over to chop fire wood for her. She didn't need any, or she would have split it herself, but she let him do it anyway. She liked watching him work, watching him move, watching him. "Hmm..." she hummed at the memory of his body. The way he felt when he wrapped his arms around her. She closed her eyes remembering his smell.

"Good tea, huh?" Sherry smiled.

"Sure," Sage said, though the tea wasn't what was on her mind. It was just regular peppermint tea. It wasn't exactly what she wanted, but peppermint would remind her of what she was drinking the first time she met Logan. "God, please let him be all right," she whispered. She couldn't bear to lose anyone else, especially not him.

Sage knew she was being a tad possessive, but since she had been in town Logan hadn't been away. Not once. In fact, in two years, she often wondered why he hadn't gone on a vacation – though she didn't know what he would be vacationing from. Other than the inn, he never seemed to be involved in any type of business. Then again, she had no idea what he did when he was at home.

"Sage?" Henry sat on the bar stump next to her. "I thought that was you."

"The new school teacher," she said.

"Henry."

"Right. How are you?"

"Just wonderful. Spring break was refreshing, and now it's just getting back to teaching. How are things at the inn?"

"Just fine." She smiled to be courteous, but she really just wanted him to go away. He was a nice guy. Middle-aged, in fairly good physical shape and

intelligent, but he wasn't Logan. She had known of his intentions from the day they had first been introduced.

"So, Mr. —"

"Henry." He interrupted.

"Right," Actually she wasn't sure where she was going with that sentence. Of course, she had a feeling it would be rude to just sit beside him and not say a word, but the longer she thought about, the more she thought rude would have been an acceptable option.

"You were saying?"

"Um, nothing." She plastered her cordial smile on her face. The one that, to a normal person, would have boldly conveyed that conversation was being held out of necessity, not want.

"I sometimes have that affect on women." He laughed and scooted a little closer to her. She started to scoot away, but scooting to her right would have landed her on the floor, and the left would have landed her on his lap.

She rolled her eyes. "Look," she started to say, before Sherry approached.

"She's spoken for," Sherry said. It wasn't the truth actually, as she wasn't spoken for, but what the hell, she would go with it.

"Really. So where is he?"

"Out of town on business, which is none of your business." Sherry's tongue was as sharp as a gator's teeth. Sage sat back and watched, knowing this was one battle she didn't need to handle. Sherry was doing just fine.

"Well while the cat's away." That one statement was the end all to her tolerance. Before Sherry could open her mouth, Sage found the voice she needed to get rid of Henry Hastings.

"I for one would rather not be grouped in the same category as a rodent. If you somehow think that's attractive to a woman, it's not. Furthermore," she continued before he could open his mouth. "Some of us actually look forward to fidelity in a relationship – obviously not you, but that is of no concern to me Mr.

Hastings. Now if you would kindly take your doused-in-cologne carcass over to the other side of the counter, I would much appreciate it.”

Henry stood tall, mumbled something under his breath—something she gathered was an insult—and left. Sherry still stood shell-shocked and with her feet firmly planted to the floor.

“Where in heaven’s name did that come from?”

“I have no idea,” Sage’s hands were shaking just a bit. “But it felt good.”

She didn’t dare pick up her tea for fear she’d give away just how on edge she’d gotten. She rationalized her outburst as being extensions of the stress she was feeling over the fact that Logan hadn’t managed to come home, write, drop an email or even call.

She had checked her phone everyday looking to see if it were still working, if the battery had gone dead. Maybe the lines were all busy. But, the fact remained that the phone at the inn was working just fine and so was her cell.

“Guess he won’t bother you again.” Sherry laughed in her usual boisterous tone and of course, Henry ducked his head.

“Sherry, be nice,” she said for good measure.

“Darlin’ that was nice. I was plum ready to make sure I told Logan about our Mr. Hastings whenever he showed up.”

“Maybe you should still tell him. Light a fire under his behind,” she laughed.

“Good idea.”

“I was kidding,” she assured her, but once Sherry had it in her head to make something happen, she made it happen.

The truth was, Logan was always there for Sage, she just hadn’t noticed how much all the little moments added up, until he wasn’t around everyday. Now that he was gone, she had time to think about the days he would stop at the inn just to chop wood, or check on the place, which she gathered meant he was

checking on her too. Even when the Sheriff came by to tell her about Paige's death, he was there. He was always there.

The day she received news of Paige's death, he had come to go over the books with her. She remembered it well. It had been exceptionally warm that day. It was December, and not even a flake of snow had fallen. The residents of the town had said that meant they were in for a harsh New Year, and they should enjoy the change while they could.

Logan had come over in a short sleeved, baby blue and navy plaid shirt. He looked amazing. She hadn't been able to keep her eyes off of him and occasionally he'd look up and ask what she had been smiling about. He was just getting ready to leave when Schaffer knocked on the door. Logan must have known something wasn't right, because he hadn't left her side. Of course, she hadn't noticed the serious look on Schaffer's face, she hadn't noticed his posture and she really hadn't noticed that the moment he looked in her eyes, he seemed to have more difficulty saying what he needed to say.

She had offered him coffee and he declined. "This is difficult," he said. "Sage." He paused again. "Officer Day called me." She hadn't understood. She didn't know an Officer Day, and she wasn't sure why she should care that he called. "He's, well he's a police officer in New York." At that moment she felt her stomach tighten.

"Is Paige okay? Is she hurt?" Paige had been having some trouble at home lately. Kids vandalizing her apartment, stealing a couple of expensive entertainment pieces, but she had insisted that things were fine, and there was no need to worry.

"No. She's dead," he managed to say, though he wasn't sure how. In all his years as an officer, this part of the job still got to him. He would have rather not have had to deliver the news, but she deserved more than a phone call from some out-of-state cop.

He watched her fall to the floor. She hadn't cried and she hadn't spoken. It was as if she stopped breathing, stopped living. Logan had wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Schaffer had continued on with what he needed to say. "Car accident," he said. She hadn't asked. She just sat on the floor, staring at the wall.

"Sage." Logan moved to face her. She hadn't flinched. She hadn't even looked at him, not even when he placed his fingers on her chin and gently turned her head to face him. He looked up to Schaffer who seemed to be next to tears himself.

"She's not dead." She broke the silence. "I know she's not dead."

"Sage, it's natural to feel... "

"She's not dead." Her voice was shaking. He could hear her anger, her unspoken sorrow and her disbelief.

"Sage." He spoke softly. "I know this is hard."

"They're sure it was your sister in the car, Sage." Schaffer cursed under his breath. He hated this part of the job. He hated it now more than he ever had before.

"No! She's not dead." Sage stood. Logan tried to pull her in, but she pulled away. "You're lying, she's not dead." She pulled harder, freeing herself from Logan's grasp. She ran out the door, nearly knocking over Linda Shay, the only guest at the inn that week. She ran off into the woods, and Logan ran after her.

She ran, thinking if she ran fast enough or far enough, then maybe once she stopped, somebody would be there to tell her they made a mistake, that Paige was alive.

Logan called after her, but she kept running until the pain hit her hard. She collapsed to her knees, and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "Paige," she cried, bending her head to her knees and grabbing at her sides. She rocked like a child in pain. Logan stopped a few steps shy of her body. He wanted to

hold her, but he wasn't sure if holding her would send her running again. "Paige, please," she cried again. He wondered if she was pleading for them to be wrong, pleading for Paige to walk up that minute and prove them all wrong.

He bent to her side, pulling her up into his arms. He held her, but he hadn't spoken. "Paige," she sobbed through broken breath. Her fingers dug into his biceps, holding tight as she cried.

Sheer exhaustion kept her from moving. He picked her up in his arms, and carried her back to the inn. He sat by her side for as long as he could. Once the initial shock wore off, she pulled herself up from the couch and started packing.

"Sage what are you doing? You don't need to do that now."

"Yes I do. I have to go to New York, and then there's the funeral and the body. Oh no, there won't be a body." She walked through the room unfolding clothes, and then folding them again before putting them in the suitcase. "Then there's her apartment. I'll have to figure out what to do with her stuff."

Logan tried to pull her into his arms, but she held him at bay. "You should go home," she said without looking at him. "I'm sure you have things you need to attend to."

"I'd rather be here," he started to say, but she hadn't listened.

"I'll need you to look after the inn until Ms. Shay checks out. It's only a couple days." She kept going with her busy work, and ignored his attempt to comfort her. He tried again, and she had asked him to go. So he left. He spent the entire night awake and worried, but he hadn't gone back to the inn. He had given her the space she wanted, but he hadn't done it willingly.

After New York, she seemed different. She came back home and started working right away. She ignored the flowers and cards and even the visitors who stopped by. She insisted she was doing just fine, but refused to let anybody in. "The inn is just a mess," she would say. She had thanked each visitor and sent them on their way.



Loni Landers had made a point of telling Logan that he better “get over there and check on that poor child,” as nobody else had been able to get in to see her. When he went, he got the shock of his life.

“I’m fine Logan.”

He had touched her arm and she immediately pulled away.

“I’m fine because I know she’s alive.” He had tried to talk to her, but the more he talked the more distant she became. “I don’t care what you think,” she had said before realizing her tone. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I know she’s alive and New York just, well it confirmed that for me.” She smiled.

What happened in New York, he wondered?

“Besides, we’re twins. I would have felt something right? I mean that’s what twins do. They sense each other.” They had always been able to tell when the other was sad or hurting, but she wasn’t sure if they’d ever really been able to sense each other’s pain. “She’s alive, I know she’s alive.” She walked past Logan, never really acknowledging him.

He wasn’t sure if catering to her fantasy was a good idea, but he didn’t want to push her away either. So instead of insisting she face reality, he listened when she would talk.

That night, he made a few phone calls and got the real story. Her sister had been seen getting into the car by several witnesses. She was seen stopping and topping off her tank at a local gas station. She was seen getting back in the car, and her car had later hit a fuel truck. The fire had taken hours to put out, and there was nothing left to identify her body other than the eyewitness. The fact that it was her car, and the fact that she was missing.

There was no doubt she was gone. No doubt for anybody except Sage.

Six months after, Sage still believed her sister was alive. She didn’t talk about it much, not even to Logan, but occasionally she’d mention Paige in the present. She’d mention that Paige would come back to her soon and then she

would remember nobody else believed Paige was alive except for her, and that would push her back into her shell.

"If she is alive, why hasn't she contacted you?" Logan didn't want to seem confrontational, but at the same time, he didn't want to lose her to her delusion. If she couldn't face reality, then she'd slowly slip away from it. She'd end up strapped down in some mental institution, and he couldn't have that.

"I don't know, maybe she can't right now," Sage had answered. She seemed to have an answer for every question he asked. Eventually she just stopped sharing her thoughts on Paige, but he knew she still believed. He had hoped the passing of time would help her mend, but it hadn't, and it wouldn't—not as long as she held on to Paige.

"You have to let her go," he had said.

"I can't." With those two words he knew what she needed. She didn't need somebody to convince her that Paige was gone; she needed somebody to be there once she convinced herself.

## Chapter Six

Logan came to Nature's Inn, fully intending to tell Sage what he felt, what he wanted and how much he wanted her. His intentions had his stomach in knots all day. "The sooner the better," he told himself. He figured going home could wait. If he didn't say what he needed to say while he still had the courage, he might chicken out.

When he got to the inn, Sage was sitting on the porch and he knew something was on her mind. It was getting colder. June had quickly faded into September and September into April. God, he'd been gone that long without a word of where he was. He wondered if she'd be pissed. He'd walked away and hadn't bothered to call. He had wanted to. He wanted to write her a letter or send her a postcard, but the program didn't really allow for that.

She had just set her cup down on the stand, when he finally reached the step.

"Logan!" She jumped up, causing her blanket to fall to the floor. She wrapped her arms around him, and he pulled her in close. "My God you've been gone so long. You didn't even call or write." She hugged him again. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," he said. "I'm sorry. It's just work keeps me away periodically."

"I get it. I imagined a lot of things you've been gone. None of it matters now that you're home. I'm just glad you're back, Logan." She pulled away and picked up her blanket. "Have a seat. Would you like some tea?"

"No." He sat down on the swing and waited for her to sit beside him.

"I know it's a little cold out here, but I feel closer to Paige when I'm out here."

"I thought you might have been thinking about Paige."

"I can't seem to stop thinking about her. Since Paige and I are...were twins." She paused. "My mom wanted us to have names that were alike. Hence, Paige and Sage. That was the joke around school for awhile, but our youngest sister..."

"I thought there were only two of you." Logan had never heard mention of a younger sister until now. He wondered where she was, and what had happened to her. He could have sworn Sage had said she had no other family.

"She died." She sipped her tea. "Three hours after she was born. The doctor's said her heart hadn't developed properly. My mom fell apart."

She started to remember her family. They were happy once, when her father was alive. When he died in that car accident, the only thing that had kept her mom going was the pregnancy. She was holding on because of the baby.

"Mom hung on—barely—for four years. Two days before Paige and I turned sixteen, Mom died. We weren't enough for her to want to live for."

"I don't think that's true."

"It is. We spent those four years taking care of her, and each other. I was older, by two minutes anyway, so I jumped right in and took care of Paige the best I could. I made sure she had breakfast and lunch and dinner. I made sure she didn't sacrifice her childhood to take care of our mother. So whenever there was a birthday party, Paige would go, and I would stay home with mom."

Paige had always seemed more fragile. After she had almost died from pneumonia at the age of eight, Sage had promised their dad she would take care of Paige. She just never knew how much those words meant until she actually had to do it. She kept her promise, even though it meant sacrificing her own happiness at times.

Logan sat back on the swing. "That's a hell of a way to grow up, but you survived it."

"I guess."

"I've always seen a protective side to you, especially around Paige. I just didn't know why, until now."

She smiled briefly. "Anyway, to keep us from becoming wards of the state, an old family friend, Professor Carr, took us in. We stayed for two years and then we left. I went to college and I took Paige along with me."

"Did he keep in touch? I can't imagine he wouldn't want to know how the two of you were doing."

"Well." She took in a deep breath, paused and considered her next words. "Let's just say the good professor never cared about how we were doing unless I was doing him."

"He started from the day the court gave him guardianship. He said I needed to thank him for taking us in. He never seemed interested in Paige. She was lucky. I didn't have to fight to keep him off of her. I did what he wanted and she was safe. We couldn't run away, she would have died on the streets, and I would have never forgiven myself for that." She took another sip of her tea and waited for Logan to process her words before she would continue. She had given him a lot of information; she hoped it wouldn't drive him away. He needed to know; she needed him to know, so she continued.

"One night, my period was so bad. It usually was, and still is sometimes. I would spend the first day in bed in pain and the next day recovering. Anyway, he wanted it real bad and because I couldn't, he said he'd take Paige. I couldn't let him do it. I think he knew I would do anything to keep him away from Paige. He didn't even want her. I asked him to just wait a night for me to feel better." He could hear her voice shaking. "He said he couldn't, but there were other ways." She cleared her throat trying to muster the strength to finish her story. She'd never told anybody before, not until now. "So, I did what he wanted. He made her watch. Kind of a lesson to me on not to refuse him again. I got so sick." She fought back the tears, her voice shaking. "Paige held my hair while I spent the night with my head in the toilet."

"The night before my eighteenth birthday, he wanted me again. Whenever he wanted me, I had to sleep in his bed you know, but when he wasn't in the mood, I got to sleep in the room with my sister. Anyway," she wiped a fallen tear from her cheek. "He rolled over in bed that morning and," she took another breath, "he kissed my neck. He told me he would buy me something pretty for that night so we could celebrate my "legally becoming a woman".

Paige and I ran away that day. It was a month after graduation and I was going to college anyway. I hadn't told him that I'd accepted an out-of-state university, so he had no idea he'd be losing me forever. I left a note." She almost laughed. "I thanked him for showing me that my life could be so much better. Told the bastard if he tried to find us or contact me in anyway I'd go to the police. My word against his, but he'd lose that wonderful job at that prestigious college he loved so much."

She had been so eager to get away that she hadn't thought about how she and Paige would make it. She just knew that they would. For the six years she studied in Seattle she hadn't ever expected to see Professor Carr again. Paige moved to New York and started working for a special effects company, and Sage was on her way to Africa to finish her doctoral dissertation.

It wasn't until she came back to the states and went to Cleveland, that her life had been forced to cross paths with Carr again. He'd accepted a teaching position at Cleveland State. Sage had gone to complete her final interview for a research position at the university when she ran into him. After that, he showed up at her house, he followed her around town and eventually she just felt like she needed to run again. So she ran to Colorado and found the smallest town she could.

"Sage." Logan's voice was calming, but not enough to ease her already convulsing body. She had ignored the pain for too long, run away and never faced her past.

"Oh." She pushed the tea cup into his hand, spilling a little on him. She ran to the banister, leaned over and started heaving. It wasn't long before she felt him rubbing her back.

"It's okay." His voice was soothing.

"Somebody should have castrated the bastard." She could hear the anger in his voice. Anger quickly changed to concern and he asked, "Does he know where you are now?"

"No." She straightened. "I'm safe here. And thanks to you," she pushed her hair back from where it had fallen. "I'm okay here. I have a life here. He can't hurt me anymore."

She turned away, "I've never told anybody this before. I was too ashamed that I let it happen." She turned back to him, but was unable to meet his gaze. "You have to know if Paige hadn't...if it were just me I would have left. I didn't want him...I didn't like what he did to me." She turned away, trying to hide herself from him like she'd hidden from the rest of the world.

"Of course you didn't." He turned her back to face him. "Nobody could honestly think that you did."

"He did."

"No. It's what he had to tell himself to justify raping you every night." Logan lifted her chin until their eyes met. The tears still stained her cheek. "This...what he did to you, it wasn't your fault. It was his."

She pressed her head against his chest and cried. For the first time since her dad died, she allowed herself to face her pain, because she knew she wouldn't have to face it alone.

She wrapped her arms tighter around him, sobbing uncontrollably as he held her tight. She felt his fingers gently slipping in and out of her hair. She heard his voice comforting her. In the midst of her pain, she realized with clarity that she was in love with Logan Hunter, and once she was able to pull herself

together and offer him more than an emotional wreck, she planned to step up to the plate and let him know just how much she loved him.

Logan held her tight, not wanting to let her go. He'd wanted so much to be there for her, but she'd never let him in. In that instant he'd felt the connection. He felt sure she was where he wanted to be forever, but he needed to give her time before he sprung that revelation on her. He would wait. He would wait because she needed him to.



## Chapter Seven

The chill in the night air had gone from crisp to downright cold. The first gust of wind started blowing, and then came the rain. Living by the lake had its advantages in the summer, but in the early spring it just made for more hostile storms.

Sage ran through the inn making sure all the windows were closed. Lenny had been in earlier to apply a fresh coat of paint to a few of the rooms, and the place reeked of fumes. She'd asked if next time he might use an odorless paint and he'd merely smiled and said, "Don't reckon they have any at the hardware shop." It was vital to get the inn ready for the summer rush, and these few weeks in April were really the only time there wouldn't be somebody staying at the inn. Nobody except for her and she'd just have to deal with the smell, or leave a window open and deal with the cold. She'd close a few doors, light the fireplace and a few candles, and then she'd heat up her room before bedtime.

It's what she had planned until the knock came at the door. Rarely were there ever any of the locals out in this kind of weather. Most had the sense to stay inside with a good book, an old movie or a cup of cocoa. Everybody knew that in the mountains, the weather might start off with a bit of rain, but it could quickly turn into a blizzard.

The knock came again. "Hold your water," she mumbled.

Sage checked the window first to see who it was. What she found was a rather attractive young man. He caught sight of her and he smiled.

"Sorry to bother you, but I can't keep driving with the storm that's coming." He yelled over the howl of the wind, and through the closed window.

She shook her head, "One minute." She smiled. Where was her hospitality, she thought?

“Um, it’s looking rather like there’s going to be a massive storm, and I’d hate to get stuck driving in that. I saw the sign for the inn, and I just thought I’d try my luck.” He smiled. She imagined he was in his late twenties. He looked young anyway. Soft blonde hair, baby blue eyes. He looked almost bookish.

“Come in.” She stepped aside to let him through the door. “Please excuse the smell. This is the time of year we renovate and get ready for the summer rush.” She locked the door behind him.

“You and your husband?” He looked around at the beautifully decorated room. Pastels of soft yellows and radiant reds combined to give the room an elegant, yet comfortable feel. Sage was sure he must have been thinking that there was no way a man had decorated it.

“Yes,” she lied. Something instinctual had prompted her to fabricate a husband, and she wasn’t quite sure why.

“A few of our rooms are wet with paint, but you’re more than welcome to either 115 or 125.” She smiled, offering him both keys.

“115 will do,” he said taking the key from her hand. He held on just a little longer than normal and she knew he must have noticed the absence of a wedding ring.

“I just need your signature here.” Sage removed her fingers from his hand. She pushed the guestbook in front of him and watched as he signed.

“Do you need help with your things?” Her curiosity had been aroused; the only way to ask the question without seeming nosey was to offer assistance with his bags. She hadn’t seen him bring any in, and he hadn’t rushed out to grab any either.

“No, um I wasn’t planning on stopping. I just thought I’d drive straight through.” He looked around once more. “Nice place.”

“Thank you.” She put the other key on the desk. “So, you just drive from point A to point B without a change of clothes huh?” She tried to keep her tone light and chatty.

"I have clothes at my parents' house. I know it's silly, but I've been away working on my doctorate, and when I go home I just wear the clothes I've left there. It's not usually this far of a drive, but I took the scenic route. Last time I listen to my best friend." He smiled. "Thanks again for opening your doors."

She pointed down the hall, giving him direction to his room, and watched as he walked away. "Cute kid," she said as she set the key for 125 back on the hook. She wondered what it felt like to go home to a family over the weekend. Until she met Matt, she'd spent school breaks in the apartment taking care of Paige and studying for the next semester. She'd hardly had a life, but that was of her doing. Given a chance, she wouldn't trade a second with Paige for all the college experiences she missed.

It hadn't taken Logan long to get his house in order. Once the heat was on, and the covers were off the furniture, there wasn't much left to do but clean the floors. Inside of twenty minutes he had finished that task, and then he sat back on the couch and stared off into space. Sage had dropped the equivalent of a bomb on him. He had never imagined she had faced so much pain, but it explained a lot. He now understood why she pulled away from everybody who tried to get close. While Paige was alive, Sage managed to hide her pain well, but after her sister's death, she had to fight each day to find a reason to keep going.

"Damn," he sat forward, pushed his hands through his hair and then sat back again. He was worried about her. He had left her because she insisted he go get settled in for the night, but he should have stayed.

He picked up the phone, set it down and picked it back up again before he finally punched in the number two, pressed talk and waited for the phone to ring.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello." Sage listened to the voice on the other end.

"Just checking on you over there."

Logan left her a couple hours ago. She smiled. He had left her after she broke down in his arms, and he wanted to make sure he hadn't left behind a total nut case, she thought.

"I'm fine," she said. She would have loved for him to stay, but he had just gotten home. Actually, he hadn't even stopped at home before he came to see her, and she knew he needed to open his house up and air it out, get the heat going and sweep off the cobwebs. It could have been ready for him if he'd let her keep an eye on the place, but he'd insisted she didn't bother.

"Well I got a surprise guest."

"Surprise guest?"

She noted the concern in Logan's voice. She was alone and surprise guest weren't the norm for that time of year. "Yeah, he's driving home to see his family and with the storm..." She continued on. Logan asked for his name. "Trace Worthington," she said.

Logan started firing off questions like an inquisition. He wanted to know where this kid was going and how many bags he'd brought with him.

"Logan you're such a guy. You worry too much." She laughed. It's not as if she hadn't had a guest at the end when she was by herself. Of course, this was a rather young male guest.

"And you're such a woman. You're too trusting. I don't like this, Sage."

"Well I wasn't leaving him out in the woods with that storm," she said

"You'd take in Ted Bundy if he knocked hard enough."

Sage ignored Logan's sarcasm. "Don't worry, I'll lock the door." She stressed her sentence like a teen challenging her parents' over protectiveness.

Trace cleared his throat. "Excuse me."

Sage looked up. "Yes?"

"Where will you be if I need anything, you know extra blankets?"

“I’m just down the hall, the room that’s not marked. Don’t worry, I turned the heat on. It’ll warm up in your room soon.” She watched him walk away and return to his room.

“So, anyway, I’m okay. Don’t worry.” She smiled, trying to make sure Logan truly understood that she didn’t feel threatened.

“Right,” he said, but she could tell by the tone in his voice that he didn’t mean it.

## Chapter Eight

Trace waited and watched the crack under the door, until he saw the light disappear. He pulled out his key light and started off down the hall. He had been sure to get the key to the room before trying the door, but it hadn't been necessary, it wasn't locked. Room 125 had been the room Paige stayed in every time she went to the inn. If she'd taken the artifact there like he had claimed, then it was in that room.

He cursed himself for not taking the room in the first place, but he had thought it would be less suspicious if he hadn't. From everything he'd heard, these sisters were close, and he had no doubt Sage would have known about its location. Though he hadn't expected she would have moved it, not until he checked the room and hadn't found it.

He cursed again. He waited until the trial was over just like he had been told to do. Now that it was over, there was nothing stopping them getting that artifact, selling it and living happily ever after in the Cayman Islands. Nothing but a missing artifact. He tossed the key on the bed and left the room.

He would just have to change his tactics. He killed for it once. He wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

Trace walked down the hall, turned the corner and came to Sage's room.

He knocked on the door, but he hadn't tried the knob. He had no desire to alarm her, to give her a chance to fight, or worse, run away with his fortune.

"Yes," she spoke without unlocking and opening the door.

"My sink seems to be stuck in the on position."

"Excuse me?"

"The faucet, it won't stop running. You know, the water won't stop," he said.

"Oh, um just give me a minute." She grabbed her shirt and hurriedly slipped it back over her shoulders. Getting that sink fixed had now moved to the top of her priority list. It had gone from leaking to just plain annoying.

She opened her door, "I'll just go down and get something to fix it." Though she wasn't quite sure how to fix this problem. She figured if she were lucky she'd just twist a few fixtures and it would stop for the night. She could call Lenny in the morning if she needed to.

She hadn't noticed Trace had followed her down to the basement. The last she'd seen he was headed back in his room.

"So where is it?" He fixed his eyes on her. She hadn't understood the question, but she understood the look. She stepped backwards.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She smiled, trying to remain friendly and unsuspecting. She looked around the basement. Except for Lenny's tools, there wasn't much she could use to defend herself.

"You know what I'm talking about. Don't play stupid with me," he yelled.

It was at that point she noticed the ax, but unfortunately, it was closer to Trace than it had been to her. He followed her gaze and he knew what she was thinking. He lunged past her, knocking her into the wall and holding her there. "Tell me where it is."

"I don't know what *it* you're referring to." She pressed her thumb into his eye just hard enough to make him move away, and then she ran. She made it up the stairs and to the kitchen, trying desperately to lock the doorway entrance. He was right behind her. She saw the ax in his hand and she knew if she didn't get him, he'd kill her.

Sage made it to the check-in counter before he caught up with her. He grabbed her and pushed her abdomen first into the counter, placing the ax right in front of her eyes.

"Now, I don't want to kill you, not before you tell me where it is." He leaned in, his scent filling her nostrils and he whispered, "Just tell me now, and I might let you go."

"All right," she said. She needed to buy herself some time.

He turned her around, careful not to let go of her wrists. "Just please don't hurt me," she said, while contemplating her next move. She had taken one self-defense course in college, and now she struggled to remember what to do. The groin was a good place to start. *No he'd be ready for that.* She had already tried the eye socket. *What was next?*

"Stop stalling," he said through gritted teeth.

Hell, it was now or never.

She lifted her knee as fast and as hard as she could, making full-on contact with his groin. He released her just long enough for her to get away, but not far.

He reached for her hair, sinking his hand in and clasping it closed. She jerked back and he had been waiting.

"It's in this damn house and I'll find it with or without you."

Sage's body hit the floor hard. She'd put up a good fight, but he had no intention of leaving her alive. He grabbed the ax from the counter, raised his arms above his head, taking one last look at the beautiful vixen sprawled on the floor. "What a waste," he mumbled. Before he could wield the ax a loud sound like thunder and a sharp blast pushed him back into the marble table. Sage looked up to the door to see a tall figure of a man standing in front of her with a shot gun. The lightning cracked behind him, illuminating his rain coat. It wasn't until he pushed the hood away from his face that she saw who he was. "Logan," she whispered. He bent down, helping her up to her feet and pulling her trembling body into his arms. She looked back, the man she'd known would kill her lay bleeding on her floor. "It's okay," he said as he pulled her in tight, shielding her eyes from the horror before her. "It's okay now."



“Oh God Logan,” she held on to him. Never in her life had she felt such fear, such terror. “He could have, he would have,” she looked up into his eyes. “He was going to kill me.” She hugged him one more time before pulling away. “How did you know?”

“Let’s just say I listened to my gut instead of you.” He looked at the man lying across from them.

“We need to call the police,” he said as he motioned for her to call. He watched her shaking fingers press the buttons.

“Um, a man tried to kill me and...”

Logan listened to her words. Her voice was shaking and her thoughts weren’t formulating a coherent sentence. She’d mentioned his name and then she’d held out the phone.

Logan walked over to the counter to take the call. “Schaffer this is Logan,” he explained in an entirely calm matter. Sage wondered how he could be so put together when he’d just killed a man. He had just killed a man for her.

“You saved my life,” she said, not caring that he was still listening to the voice on the other end. She looked up into his eyes. “Thank you.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sage hadn’t moved more than a foot away from Logan, not even when Schaffer asked her to go into the other room. Logan looked at Schaffer and then at Sage.

“Honey, I have to talk to Schaffer and you need to go talk to David over there.” He pointed. “Go on,” he said softly, as he pressed his hand gently to her back to guide her away. She hesitated. “It’s okay.” He smiled.

“All right,” she said as she walked over to David.

Schaffer waited until Sage was out of hearing range before he started with more questions. “What the hell happened here?” He looked at the scene. There was no doubt this young man had tried to kill Sage, and there certainly wasn’t a

doubt that Logan had killed him, but things like that just didn't happen in his town.

"Hell if I know. I came to check on her when she told me a man had stopped by. I don't like the thought of unexpected guests."

"So you brought your shotgun?"

"Yeah, just in case. Damn glad I did," he said.

"Me too. Look Logan, I trust you. I trust you because I've known you for years, and because I know what you do. So I'm going to say this, and then I'll leave it up to you." He paused and looked back at Sage. She looked broken. Not scared, not fragile, but broken. "You need to look after her. I know she's not one of your assignments, but she..."

"You don't have to tell me that. I hadn't planned on letting her out of my sight."

Schaffer had been the only person in town who knew about his job. Logan had kept it that way because small towns had a way of delivering news faster than the Internet could. Schaffer had been the one person he'd trusted all those years ago, and he'd only done it because he had to at that moment. He hadn't let many people into his home nor the shed in the back, but Schaffer had wormed his way in, found his stash of guns, knives and other weapons, and he'd been hell bent on arresting him. He'd called him some new age terrorist until Logan pulled out his badge and gave him the story. "

David walked back over to join the two men.

"What did she tell you," Logan asked David and David waited for the nod from Schaffer before telling him. "Well, she said he was looking for something. She said he didn't say, but he kept asking where it was." He continued on, all the while checking his notes.

Logan looked back at Sage. She was shaking, more than she had been moments earlier. "Excuse me," he said as he walked away. Sage felt his hand and she jumped. "Hey, it's okay." He sat her back down in the chair.

"I was just remembering his eyes," she said. "So dark, unconnected." She pushed her hair behind her ear. "I shouldn't have let him in."

Logan had a feeling it wouldn't have mattered. Trace would have found his way in, either way.

"You couldn't have known." He sat beside her and took her in his arms. "We need to talk about what he was looking for."

"I already told the..." She stopped when she saw the look in his eyes.

"You have an idea." He looked at her one more time before repositioning himself to sit on the coffee table in front of her. She slowly nodded her head, yes. "Is there some reason you're hiding it from the police?" She once again nodded her head yes. "Go get it," he said. She looked up into his eyes.

"I can't," she shook her head, no.

"It's not for them," he said. "Go pack your things and get whatever it is he was after." He placed his hand on her knee. "You're not staying here tonight."

"You think someone else will come don't you?" She whispered again.

"Yeah, I do."

"I didn't know." she looked in his eyes. "Logan I swear I didn't know while you were here I promise you that."

"I believe you. So when, or how, did you find out?" He kept his voice low, so as to not alert the police that there was something more they needed to know.

"About an hour after you left." She fidgeted with her hair again and he knew she was nervous. "I wanted to call you, but she told me not to tell."

"Who told you not to tell?"

She looked in his eyes and leaned in closer to him. "Paige."

## Chapter Nine

Logan walked her into the spare room. "You'll be sleeping here." He knew she would need to settle in, to shower, to calm down, but he needed answers. Paige was dead. They'd buried her over a year ago. Last he checked dead people couldn't make phone calls.

"We need to —"

"Talk." She finished his sentence as she sat down on the bed. "I know this seems crazy, Logan, and you probably think I'm certifiably nuts, but she called me. It was Paige. I know her voice."

"Sage —"

"I'm not crazy." This time she seemed less afraid. "She called me and she told me that she'd gotten involved in something, that she had found something and the last time she was at the inn, she left it hidden in her usual room. I looked exactly where she told me to look, and I found this." Sage reached back and pulled her bag closer. She opened it, slowly removing a wrapped object.

"It's not even supposed to be in the country." She unwrapped the cloths, slowly revealing the carved obelisk. "It had been on loan to the British Museum before being shipped back to Cairo. Cairo is the last place I saw it. They were cataloging it back in when I left Africa."

Logan took the object from her and studied it closely as she spoke.

"There's no way to know one hundred percent without test, but I'm almost certain it's the same artifact. I'm not sure how Paige came upon it, or why she hid it at the inn."

Logan had more questions than she had answers for. "I believe you," he said. "I'm not second guessing your integrity here, but I don't see how Paige could still be alive."

"I know. I couldn't either at first."

"We buried her."

"No, we buried an empty urn because there wasn't anything left to bury. Listen to me, Logan, she's alive. I don't know how or where or even why, but she's alive, and I have to find her. This," she took the obelisk from his hand, "this is going to lead me to her."

"Sage."

"I can do this with or without you Logan, but she's my sister. I can't abandon her."

He knew that she couldn't, but he'd also known if Paige were alive, she'd abandoned Sage for over a year. Something wasn't adding up, but he wasn't going to let Sage blindly go walking to her death either.

"Listen, I'll help you, but you've got to be honest with me from here on out. No secrets."

"No secrets," she agreed.

He wanted to know everything and she told him. Paige had called on her cell phone about an hour after Logan had left. She told Sage exactly where to find the artifact, and given her specific instructions not to tell anybody.

"She's alive, Logan," she smiled.

"Is it possible —?"

"No, it was her. It was her voice, and her laugh. She's alive." Sage wiped a tear from her cheek. "I want her here with me, but she said it's not safe. They tried to kill her once." She laid her head in Logan's lap. "I should have known when that guy showed up, but I didn't put it together." She yawned. Logan knew she was exhausted from the day's events.

"You should get some sleep." He brushed his fingers through her hair. She needed to sleep, and he needed to think through their next move.

"Uh huh." She yawned again. "Will you stay with me?" She lifted her head and turned to look in his eyes. "I don't want to be alone."

## Chapter 10

I just thought of something.” She took a seat opposite him on the couch. “I’m putting you in danger and that’s not right.” She looked away, absently tucking her hair behind her ear, pulling it away and tucking it in again.

“I shouldn’t stay here because if they come back—”

“You’re staying.” He hadn’t even looked at her. “I’m not letting you do this again. You’re not going to put somebody else’s safety before your own. I don’t need you to try to protect me. “

She started to protest. She could think of a thousand reasons for leaving, and all of them had to do with her love for him.

“I’m going to tell you this because I think you need to hear it, or you might bolt on me in the middle of the night.” He turned, moving closer to her. Instinctively she moved back, realizing there was no place else to go, when her butt hit the arm of the sofa. “I don’t need you to shield me from danger. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

She’d known that. He had shot without hesitating, and that was certainly the action of a man who could handle himself in dangerous situations. But it hadn’t given her the right to bring him into this, whatever this was.

“I’m a U.S. Marshal.”

Her eyes widened. *Marshal?*

“How long?”

“Longer than I’ve known you.”

“Oh,” she whispered, lowering her eyes to the tan couch. Well it had explained a lot about his mysterious and impromptu departures.

“I don’t tell people. My job is best handled if I don’t have an entire town walking around knowing what I do.”

“Did you think I would tell the entire town?” She realized her voice was shaking and then she realized — she was angry.

“No.” He shifted nervously.

She looked at him with tears in her eyes. Though it had taken her awhile to tell him about her personal life, she had told him about her job straight away. She had told him what she used to do, how much she enjoyed it, but how glad she was to take on the inn. He hadn’t once told her about a job. In fact, he’d led her to believe he didn’t have one. Not once did he say, “Oh and by the way I’m a U.S. Marshal.”

“It wasn’t any personal reason for my not telling you other than it just seemed like the best thing to do at the time.”

“Right.”

“Look, it wasn’t important.”

“It was important to you.” She had thought she could be important to him too, until he lied to her. He kept his secret, he kept it from her. “It’s just a job, and you couldn’t even tell me about it.” Just a job, might not have been the best words to use, but she knew what she meant.

“It’s more like my life. I’m away for months at a time protecting peoples’ lives —”

“And now I’m your next subject is that it?”

He rubbed his hand through his hair. “This is way more complicated than I thought it would be.” He took a deep breath. “You’re not part of my job.”

“Comforting —” The sarcasm dripped from her voice. He placed his finger over her lips, silencing her before she could finish her thought.

“What I’m saying is I want to keep you safe.”

“Until your next assignment.”

“There won’t be any more assignments. I’m a consultant now. It’s almost the equivalent of desk duty, only less time in the office.” He looked at her.

“Why would you do that?”

"Just felt like the right thing to do at the time."

"And now?"

"Now too." He took her hand in his. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"You didn't." She removed her hand from his. "I'm just on edge and over emotional right now." She pushed her hair back once more. "I'm sorry for spazzing out. It was none of my business anyway."

"Shit," he mumbled. "You're good at a lot of things, Sage, lying isn't one of them."

"Well, that's all I've got to give." She stood and walked away.

She hadn't known why she had been so angered by his admission, only that she had been. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realized he hadn't lied. When she asked him about work, he didn't say that he didn't work, he said, that he rarely worked professionally, and there was a big difference in the two.

"Get a grip, Sage." She paced the room, slowly trying to calm herself. She had waited before telling him her story. She had even waited before telling him about the obelisk, and, had he not figured out that she was lying, she might not have told him then either. It seemed she had more secrets than he, but still, she felt hurt.

She had just completed her final pace to the dresser and was ready to turn and start back toward the door, when she caught sight of Logan.

"What is it?" Her voice was cold, betraying the fake smile she had plastered on her face.

"We're going to talk about this."

"Nothing to talk about." She tried to step past him. She could pace the room all day, but the fact remained, she was angry, not because he'd been less than forthcoming with her, but because she had wanted love from a man who couldn't give it to her, or worse, didn't want to give it to her.



“You’ve made it perfectly clear what you think of our relationship.” Without saying a word, he had let her know where she stood. She was the lady across the lake. The lady who ran his inn, but could never hold a place in his heart. They were business partners, but she had thought they were more. At least it had felt as if they were becoming more.

“I guess it’s easy for you not to fall in love, not to want anybody, not to have any desires. Must be the training,” she heard herself say. Instantly she realized the brevity of her words, she had regretted it momentarily, but then her anger took hold again and she delighted in the small blow she had been able to deal.

He grabbed her, spinning her around and pressing her back into the wall so swiftly that she hadn’t had time to process what was happening.

“You have no idea how hard this is for me.”

Sage looked into his eyes. She could see his anger.

“If you knew how much I wanted to fuck you. Every night I looked across that lake and thought of what you might be wearing, what you might be doing, and I wanted to come inside you so bad my balls ached. I had to resort to some adolescent act of jacking off just to slake my hunger. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you. So don’t tell me that I don’t know how hard it is! It’s been nothing but hard.” He looked at her, desire seeping from his eyes, anger in his tone.

“Well if you want to fuck me, then fuck me.”

She hadn’t expected his reaction, couldn’t have prepared for the powerful way he pulled at her robe, pushing her to the bed and quickly discarding what fabric still covered her body.

Within seconds he was naked and back on top of her. Kissing her fiercely, hungrily and audaciously. His tongue slipped inside her mouth and started a sensuous dance of cat and mouse.

He pinned her hands above her head before pulling away from her. He looked down on her beautiful breast. "Beautiful," he mumbled. His voice was low, laced with desire and purely possessive.

He dipped his head, letting her hands go so he could caress her breasts while he licked and sucked her swollen nipples. One at a time, he flicked with his tongue, nipped with his teeth and sucked with the force of his mouth.

"Oh God," Sage cried. Slipping her hand to his head she held him at her nipple, wanting him to squeeze and suck some more. He gave her what she wanted, biting down gently on her nipple and tugging.

Her back arched, her breath caught. "Fuck me, Logan!"

"You want my cock?" He pressed his erection to her center. She could feel his arousal. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

"Yes." She moaned and arched into him more.

"You want to feel my cock slipping inside your cunt?"

"Yes!"

Sage wrapped her legs around his waist. God he was good. He had her body pulsating in all the right places. It had been a long time since she had willingly been touched by a man, and it had never felt that right.

Instead of giving her what she wanted, Logan pressed his lips to her lips, letting his tongue roll within her mouth. He pushed deeper with each kiss, exploring her mouth as if it were a cavernous cave that needed intense investigation.

"Logan, please!"

"Fuck!" Her cries were too much. He hammered into her. He pulled out and slid back into her.

She moaned and gyrated, arched and rocked. "Oh God, Logan," she moaned as he thrust back in harder. He slid out and thrust back into her, once, twice and then a third time sending their bodies shattering in concurrent orgasms.

Sage curled into him, burying her face in the soft folds of his neck. Explosive, was the only word she could think of to describe him as a lover. He was everything she had thought he would be and more.

Why had she waited so long? Why hadn't she told him how she felt sooner? She knew why—because she never felt worthy of being loved until he had shown her that her past wasn't her fault.

"Damn," he said and she'd wondered if he had thought about the brevity of their passion and regretted it. It wasn't damn, as in damn that was good. No it was damn, as in damn I stubbed my toe, or damn I forgot to take my card out of the reader at the gas pump. It was just damn, damn as in I fucked up, and now I have to fix it.

She looked up into his eyes, afraid of what she would find.

"I meant to do this better," he said. "I wanted to make love to you slow, not pounce on you like some uncontrolled animal."

She smiled. "You'll get no complaint from me, but if you want to go for slow just give me a few minutes to come up for air." She stroked his chest, running her fingers through the fine patch of dark hair. Her mind drifted back to the previous night at the inn.

"I'm glad you couldn't," she said. "You know, ignore your gut feeling."

"Well I didn't want you to think I was paranoid, showing up with my shot gun and all."

"Given what happened," she pushed a strand of hair from her view. "You can show up with your shot gun anytime."

He laughed, "I'll keep that in mind."

"I should have known something was wrong. Why didn't I know?"

"You were too busy trying to convince yourself that it wasn't. I could tell from your voice when you told me not to worry. I could tell from the slight hesitation you had when the kid asked where you would be. You were

suspicious, but you were exhausting so much energy in trying to get me not to worry. You ignored your own instinct.”

“Smart catch.”

“If it weren’t for the nervousness I felt coming from you I don’t know if I would have been as perceptive myself.”

“Sure you would have.” She smiled up at him. “You’re a U.S. Marshal; you’re trained to be suspicious.”

“Sage.”

“I know, I won’t tell anybody. I just can’t thank you enough for saving my life. For a few seconds there I thought I was going to die.” Until her body hit the floor, she clung to the idea that she had a chance. Then, with one move she’d known it was over. There wasn’t time to think about her life and what she would miss. “I didn’t exactly see my life flash before my eyes, but in that one second, I thought of you.” She met his intense stare with one of her own. “I don’t know why, but I thought of that moment before you left.” The moment she had hugged him and he had hugged her back.

“If the bastard had killed you, there wouldn’t have been any place on the earth he could have hidden. I would have used every resource, called in every favor and stopped at nothing, until I found him and killed him.”

Her body trembled at the memory. She tucked her face against his neck and pulled closer to him.

“It’s okay.” He stroked his fingers through her hair.

“Sorry. I just can’t seem to stop shaking.”

“Maybe I can help you with that.” He lifted her chin, bringing his lips to meet hers and kissing her softly.

“Hmm...”

“Did that help?”

“Not sure. Maybe you should do it again.” Her lips curved into a devilish smile.

“Maybe I should,” he mumbled. Parting her lips, he let his tongue masterfully explore her mouth.

## Chapter Eleven

Logan pushed away the coffee table and the ebony colored rug. He pushed aside a few layers of floor. Since Schaffer had found his stash of weapons before, he'd found a new home for everything he didn't want found.

"If anything happens to me," he noticed the protest rising on her lips. He gave her a stern look, one that told her he expected her to listen. "I'm not saying it will, but if it does. Come down here." He scooted beneath the opening and into the tiny crawl space. Placing his hands on her waist, he guided her down.

She could easily see guns, ammunition and then she caught sight of what appeared to be a small explosive.

"Don't touch that," he said calmly, not wanting to scare her. She pulled her hand back and smiled sheepishly. He fought the curve approaching his lips. She looked a lot like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "I'm placing this here," he tucked the wrapped artifact beneath a crevice on the wall. "Come back for it, sell it and get as far away from here as possible."

He knew if it came down to Sage needing to sell the artifact then he was dead, and whatever Paige had been involved in was more dangerous than either one of them thought. He knew he would give his last breath to keep her safe. If it came to that she would need to get away. To hell with legalities. She would need money to get away. He didn't care if she had to sell a rare artifact on the black market to do it.

He pulled a nine millimeter and ammunition from a metal box before leaving the crawl space and concealing it with the layers he had removed.

"Did I miss something? Are we going into battle?"

"Possibly."

If what she had told him was true—and he had no doubt that it was—then Trace was just the first. Whoever had sent Trace had been willing to viciously

kill for the artifact once. If Paige were alive, if she'd been in hiding, then whoever had died in her car had been a victim of foul play. They would surely send another.

Sage wasn't safe, and wouldn't be safe until they cut the problem off at its head. In order to do that, he needed to get to Paige – if she really were Paige. Either way, he needed to meet with her, speak with her.

"Okay, so possibly a battle," Sage said. "Have you ever been in one?" She thought about all the ammunition she had seen down in his hiding place.

"My dad was a marine." He spoke without looking up from what he'd been busy doing. "We moved around a lot, but growing up with him I always got the marine training. I became a Marshal and I'll tell you, some of those assignments go wrong, and a shootout protecting a witness can feel a hell of a lot like a war. Especially if it's with the mob. They never seem to stop coming." He talked as if being shot at was common place.

"Anyway, I moved out here and put myself on limited duty with the bureau because I wanted a home. I wanted that place that just feels right." He finally looked up and into her eyes. "I was tired of moving around I guess."

"I'm scared. And while you're used to being shot at or being around dangerous situations, I don't know how to handle somebody coming after me with an ax." She wiped away a tear. "Damn, why can't I stop crying?"

"It's okay." He pulled her down into his lap and held her. "You're still whirling from the experience. Don't expect it to stop affecting you this soon." He brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"I just wish I could stop tearing up." She wiped another tear from her cheek. "This is crazy. I mean, Paige is alive, and she's out there somewhere. I should be ecstatic, and here I am crying."

"Maybe you're feeling everything right now, and it's just coming out in tears. Don't fight them. The more you do, the longer it will take you to stop."

Logan pulled her into his arms and held her while she let the years of sorrow and pain flood her senses.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for being here.” And with those words she stopped fighting and let go. She cried and he held her.



## Chapter Twelve

“Paige, no. I had to tell him.” He listened from behind the door. He knew she didn’t know he was there. He also knew she hadn’t come to get him either. He had asked her to let him know when Paige called. He had questions, he needed answers and he needed some reason to believe as much as Sage did that her sister was still alive.

“Paige, somebody tried to kill me,” she said in an exasperated tone. As if, how dare Paige be mad at her for involving somebody else when she had almost lost her life. “How did you know?” He listened again. Know what, he wondered. He didn’t have to wait long for the answer. “It was in the paper. Are you here? Are you in Colorado?”

He shifted and the floor creaked. He hoped she hadn’t heard him. She kept talking and he knew she hadn’t. “Oh my God. Paige you have to come here. You have to. He can help us.” He heard her stating her case and he knew she was fighting to convince her sister to stop running. “What do you mean you can’t? Paige you listen to me.” Her voice stopped, and he wondered what was being said.

“Okay, all right. I’ll wait for your call,” she said. “Paige.” There was a pause. “I love you.” And then she hung up the phone. He stood at the door staring at her. She looked frustrated, tired, angry, all of that and more. She turned and caught sight of him.

“I’m sorry. I was going to come get you, but I thought I could...”

He knew what she thought. She thought she could convince Paige to come to them, but she couldn’t.

“It’s okay,” he said. It wasn’t okay, she wasn’t okay and he hated the bastards who were doing this to her.

"She said she's here in Colorado. She said she's close, but she doesn't want them to know. She," she paused, licked her lips and then shifted nervously on the bed. "She wants me to bring the artifact to her. Alone."

"Not a chance," he snapped. There was no way she was walking into a trap.

Paige or not, this scenario played like a Shakespeare piece. A piece where the lead walks into a trap, or gets betrayed and dies. He wasn't losing her. His gut outweighed her emotions, and if he had to, he'd tie her down, lock her up or – hell he didn't know what he could do, but he'd do something.

"It doesn't feel right," she said. It shocked him. She had been gung-ho about getting to Paige, and now she was having doubts. "If I meet her, I shouldn't take the artifact. I mean what if somebody follows her, or me?"

He narrowed his eyes and stood in a relaxed military stance blocking the door. "You're not going," he said, and to him that was it, end of argument, no discussion, she wasn't going.

"Logan..." He gave her a look that let her know he wasn't falling for a sweet voice or a tear soaked plea. "I'm not asking your permission," she snapped. "I'm saying we can find some way that I'm not alone, but I'm going."

"Like hell you are." He moved closer. He had kept his voice calm, but he was anything but calm.

"Listen to me. We need to meet with her right?" She didn't give him a chance to answer. "We can get her, bring her back here or wherever you think is best and we can keep her safe. We'll find out what's going on, maybe it's just a simple matter of getting her into protective custody and letting her testify against somebody."

He knew Sage thought she had it figured out. She had probably thought she would get her sister to safety; they'd get the bad guys, problem solved.

"No," he emphatically said. "It's not simple. What if this is a trap? What if it isn't even...?"

“Paige? You don’t even believe it’s her!” She tried to get off the bed, and he moved to block her. She tried a new way around him, but before she could move, he had a firm grip on her arm, guiding her down so that her back pressed firmly into the top mattress, and then he straddled her.

“What I’m saying is, Paige or not, it’s no good if you get yourself killed. What if there’s a sniper waiting to take the two of you out?” He felt her stop struggling and noticed the look in her eyes. He knew she hadn’t thought of that, but now she was thinking and now he could state his case. “I’m not saying we don’t get to Paige. I’m saying we do it smart. We think it through, we pick the spot and we work together – as a team.”

She let out a sigh. “Think, not spontaneously react,” she said and he shook his head. “I just want her here with me so bad, Logan. I guess I’m not thinking.”

“She’s your sister. It’s natural, but let me do what I do best.” He looked in her eyes. “Let me protect you.”

She looked in his eyes. “It’s been so long since somebody has wanted to protect me. I’m not sure I know how to relinquish myself to let you do that”

“I’m not asking you to relinquish anything of yourself Sage. I’m just asking you to let me help you.”

“Just don’t think I’m weak or helpless. “

“Never thought anything like that,” he said. She was one of the strongest women he knew. She had gone through hell – Dante’s fifth circle, and climbed her way back up to take care of herself and her sister. She had become the matriarch of her family at a young age and she had survived. He didn’t know many people who would have taken on that responsibility, let alone been able to get through it.

“Well, good.” She smiled. “Now, is there something I can do to help you with your problem?”

He studied her face, puzzled for a moment and then he realized. "Christ," he mumbled. He moved off her, adjusted himself and sat beside her. "You're going to pay for that."

She giggled.

Logan looked up at the ceiling. He needed a plan, a good plan, one that wouldn't get them both killed. One that wouldn't get her killed. She had agreed to do things his way, to listen to him since he had more experience with these sorts of things than she, at least that's what she'd told him. He agreed, not because he had more experience with dealing with the emergence of a dead sister and an artifact that may or may not be worth its weight in diamonds, but because he needed her to relax a little and to let him think of what they should do next.

"I have to go back to the inn," she mumbled.

He wondered if she'd forgotten something. He didn't want her to go back, not when he didn't know what they were dealing with so he figured whatever it was could wait.

"I have to clean up," she said.

He nearly laughed until he looked in her eyes and realized that she was serious. "You need to stay put," he said. "Cleaning up can wait."

"But, there was a mess when we left. There was glass and overturned furniture and - blood."

"No buts," he cautioned.

She reclined on the bed next to him. "Fine."

And that was a first. No arguments, no protest, not even the hint of defiance, just 'fine', and that bothered him.

"No I'm not secretly plotting to row across the lake and go back to the inn," she said, as if she knew his thoughts. "I just mean it's fine. For once I need to let it wait."

She hadn't elaborated but he knew she meant that for once she needed to take care of herself before anything or anybody else.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fine plan, he thought. Things were starting to hit the fan, go down the toilet, fall apart and all those other terms his dad used to use. "Well, you were always the weak link, weren't you Paige," he stated rather than asked. If she had followed the plan, if she had just kept things going like he'd told her to then they could have avoided needless death. Bad enough he'd killed Lois. Well, "she wasn't my fault," he said. Lois had the ill fate of looking like Paige from a distance, and he needed a look-alike who would be willing to jump through hoops for him.

Lois had a crush on him since they were children playing naked in her backyard paddle pool. She was a hot number in bed too. Very hot. Too bad he had to end his buffet, but when came down to sex or money, he would pick money any day. He could always find another good lay.

Trace had come in handy, but he was uncontrollable. "Serves him right because he should have done what I asked, and not gone after it so soon." Trace jumped the gun, and now the plan had shifted. Now there was the neighbor to contend with. It would have been so simple if Trace had just waited. Sage would have dropped the artifact off where she had been told to, and that would have been the end of this mess.

"Complications," he mumbled. "I hate complications." He didn't want to kill Sage if he didn't have to, but he would. He would take her life as easily as he'd taken the others.

None of it bothered him. None of it, except what Sage had said about this neighbor. "He can protect us," she had said. Why was she so sure, he wondered? "Well, if I have to kill him too, I will." He looked back out the window. "Damn storm." He was sure the roads were still slick up the mountain. Paige had told him the higher up, the worse it would get. She had

been right. He'd heard a report that the road was out for the night at least, and then morning came, and he was sure it would reopen, but apparently Creede marched to the beat of its own forecast and it was still colder than an icebox up there. He couldn't take the chance of being spotted, not after last night. "Can't send you either, can I." He wasn't asking because he didn't expect a response. "Think." He tapped his head against the window pane. Sage was receptive, believing, trusting and he'd use that to his advantage—if he could ever get up the mountain.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sage thought back to the first time she met Logan. Why hadn't she noticed? Why had he waited? She had felt the attraction at first glance, but it seemed one sided. He had been so 'business' only, that she hadn't dared attempt anything more than subtle flirtations. She had hoped he would pick up on the hints and recognize her as a woman and not a business associate, but he never seemed to. At least she hadn't thought he had, but before he made love to her he told her how much he wanted her. She had questions. She wanted answers, but he was busy trying to calculate a way to save her—to help her save Paige. Answers could wait. She knew all she needed to know at that moment, and that was that he had wanted her, that he cared about her enough to save her life and that he would never hurt her. It would have to be enough until they had time to discuss their relationship.

Logan pushed the plate back in front of her. "You need to eat. You'll need your strength for tomorrow. We'll need to prepare this place, get ourselves ready in case things go awry.

She knew they needed to prepare. She knew what that would entail. She knew once they finished they would set about the laborious task of waiting – waiting for a phone call that would catapult them into more danger.

"I'm not hungry," she said as she slid the plate away.

"You need to eat," he said without looking up from his map. "You'll need your strength. We have a lot of ground to cover if we plan to get the parameter set."

Logan slid the hand-sketched map in front of her. "Study it," he said as if she had any idea why he needed her to look at it. She took one look; it was the inn, the lake, his place, some woods. She looked at him, but he hadn't noticed.

He had been busy since early morning. She wondered where he'd learned such precision, if it had been from his father, or from his training as a Marshal.

"Logan, forgive me but I don't know what this is," she said innocently. She had never really understood maps. It was the one thing Matt had over her when it came to their dig site. She knew it better than the back of her hand after about a week, but every time he would draw a map of a new tunnel she was lost.

"It's where I think we should set up a few traps." He said, without looking up.

She frowned. Involved and downright engrossed were two different things. "Traps I get, reading a map, I don't."

Finally he looked up. "Oh," he said as if it weren't common place that everybody should know how to read a map. He started pointing out the obvious until she moaned in discontent.

"No, what's that?" She pointed to the sketch behind his place. She had never been behind his house. In fact she hadn't been to his house until now.

"That would be where the rest of my," he paused for a moment. "Hunting gear is," he said.

"Right, hunting gear." She smiled. "How do you do it? How do you sleep knowing that bomb is under there?" She pointed.

"Don't know. Never thought about it," he mumbled. She guessed it might have been common place for him, growing up on military terms, but she couldn't imagine having anything explosive under her house. Then again, cleaning supply could be explosive given the right combination of ingredients.

"Aren't you afraid it might...?" She made an explosion sign with her hands.

"No." He looked at her again. "If it makes you nervous I'll move it, again. I had to move it last time because of Schaffer snooping around

"No, it's okay," she lied. "Well, maybe we could move the ammunition and maybe the bomb too."



He laughed. "It's not that powerful of an explosive. The metal on the floor will shield any explosion, and so will the makeshift shaft I built down there. If it blows, we're not losing much. Of course, I'll move the ammunition because that will definitely heighten the impact." He smiled. She slapped his shoulder playfully.

"You could have said that in the first place." She rolled her eyes. He continued on with his explanation of the map as if she had been following right along.

"So now that you know how to read a map, study it, and when you're done, burn it."

"You can burn it now because this isn't going to work for me. Look, I need to walk it once through and I'll have it," she said as she stood to get her coat. The weather had turned quickly as it usually did in the mountains. It was cold, too cold for a sweater or a light jacket, but not cold enough for any substantial snowfall. Not at the moment anyway. From the reports she had heard, the roads were clearing up and there hadn't been any new accidents which meant they didn't have much time to prepare before the county opened the path up the mountain.

"It's cold out there," he said, as if he would have preferred for her to stay inside and study the map.

"You want me to know what I'm doing, right." She watched his eyes, but didn't wait for a verbal answer. "Well, maps and me, we don't get along too well. I can study that from now until Sunday, and I still won't have a clue. But, if I walk it through once, I've got it." She slipped on her boots. "Besides, you're going to need help setting those traps." She noticed that he was about to object, so she said, "You can't do it all yourself. I'm going to help." He could show her what to do and she would do it.

He agreed. The walk to Farmer's place was at least forty minutes northeast, which meant she'd be traveling higher up the mountain, but it was

closer than going south to the station, and on foot, at present temperatures, it was the only option. If she could get there, Farmer could call the sheriff and if the traps hadn't managed to totally incapacitate the guy, then Farmer could hold him at bay with his shotgun.

Sage insisted they set the traps on the way. She would remember where they were, and then on the way back, she would be the guide. She would assure him that she could do this on her own if she had to, but she wouldn't leave him behind if he were still breathing. He objected of course. If he was badly injured and couldn't support his own weight, he didn't want to slow her down, but she hadn't listened to his reasoning. She just turned and said, "Would you leave me behind?"

He hadn't answered because she hadn't given him time before she said, "That's what I thought. I'm not leaving you either." She could see it in his eyes. He wouldn't leave her to fend for herself while he ran off to get help and she wouldn't leave him.

They walked up to cusp of Farmer's place by noon. Sage had seen the path up to the house, and said that was enough. They walked back faster, and she remembered every curve, every step and every trap. When they finally made it back to the cabin, "see," she smiled, as if saying, "I told you so".

"I'm impressed." He pushed a strand of hair back from her eyes. "Now get inside and warm up."

"No argument there," she said, noting how cold her nose was and how cold her fingers felt. "Want to help me?" She grinned leaving no doubt about what she had in mind.

"In a few minutes," he nodded guiding her toward the front door.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sage sat down on the couch and slowly unlaced her boots. She wondered when she had last mapped out new paths. Since she had come to Creede all she could think about was getting some time away to discover a new section of the woods around her home – the inn. Well maybe not all, as Logan Hunter had occupied much of her waking fantasies. She smiled. The reality greatly overshadowed the fantasy. Then she remembered the last time she had gone exploring new paths. It was the last time Paige had come to see her.

Two months prior to her death, Paige had set foot in Nature's Inn. "Oh my god!" Sage had all but knocked over Logan's cup of coffee while trying to get up from the table. She ran to her sister, throwing her arms around her and holding her tight. "What are you –"

"Doing here?" Paige finished, delighted in the fact that for once she had finished her sister's sentence. It was always the other way around. Paige had asked Sage why she kept finishing her sentences. Sage hadn't even cracked a smile when she said, "speak faster." Paige had rolled her eyes and politely said that her sister had the patience of a two year old. But they both knew that wasn't true. Sage had more patience than a Tibetan Monk. Her patience only seemed lacking when she was eagerly anticipating the punch line to the joke, the point of the story or the "skinny," as she called it.

"Yes, what are you doing here?" Sage pulled back and looked at her sister.

"You look great."

"Thanks. I'm here to see my big sister, and thanks."

They giggled and hugged. They casually spoke about New York before Paige set her eyes on what she referred to as the "tall drink of water," sitting at

the table. "Didn't know you were busy," Paige said in a tone that told Sage she had put two and two together and came up with six.

"We're just going over some finances," Sage said quickly. "You remember Logan," but it wasn't really a question. Paige had met Logan on several occasions. The last time she had visited she flirted shamelessly until she saw the sadness in Sage's eyes. Paige had quietly pulled Sage aside and said, "You like him."

"Don't even go there. He's not interested and I have nothing to give him." She hadn't needed to elaborate because Paige had always seemed to know what she was feeling just by looking in her eyes.

"You have a lot to give him. And what happened –"

"Happened a long time ago I know," she said. "But it happened to me and I can't look at myself without remembering what he made me."

"You did it for me," Paige whispered. "You did it for me, and that wipes out any guilt or shame or anything you're feeling when you shouldn't be feeling it." She put her arm around Sage, suddenly feeling guilty for her own thoughts.

Paige had long ago seen the life her sister had been condemned to. She vowed never to be like her. Never sacrificing her happiness for the sake of anybody, never denying what she wanted, no what she needed, for the sake of her sister.

With that resolve Paige set out after Matt on the quest to claim him. Whenever he would fly into New York, she would pick him up from the airport, take him to dinner, and show him the city. Eventually she had convinced him that he didn't need a hotel because she had enough space for him at her place, and to her pleasant surprise, he hadn't needed much convincing.

It took a few months, but pretty soon he wasn't just a room away, he was in her bed. Holding her, stroking her, touching every inch of her – and she loved it. They had both agreed not to tell Sage. It was his idea more than hers, but she went along.

It wasn't until she saw the way Sage looked at Logan that the little feeling of almost guilt started to leave. Sage was moving on, slowly—but moving on, and she wouldn't care that Paige had taken Matt from her forever. Somehow, she still couldn't bring herself to tell her. So when Sage had smiled and asked about her love life, Paige had merely said, "I'm seeing someone. It's still new so I won't say his name just in case," she winked. She realized the lie had flown from her lips effortlessly. It had in fact been four months since she had started dating Matt. Despite the fact, he seemed to be looking for something more—someone else. She assumed he still had his heart set on Sage, but she aimed to show him the difference.

It had always been that way. Men had always looked at Sage and wanted her. She was petite, and well put-together on every level. She was smart. A doctor of Archaeology and she'd lived in Africa, which most men found entirely exotic. But even before that, even when they were kids and she would go to the parties and Sage would stay home, all the boys that had come up to her had asked for Sage. They were twins, but they were nothing alike.

On some level she hated Sage for that. She hated how everybody seemed to think so much of Sage. "Your sister is so devoted to you and your mother," the old lady across the street had said. Paige scoffed, thinking that she too had been devoted. Then they moved in with Carr, and he hadn't once looked at her the way he looked at Sage. She knew it was wrong, but she hated that Sage could turn a man on simply by walking in the room, while she seemed to have to seduce and play games.

As she got older, her resentment intensified. Matt had been cute and sexy, and the first time she met him he had been sitting at their kitchen table alone. He and Sage had been studying for a final, and Sage had gone to grab dinner from the local take-out place. Paige had tried hard to get Matt to notice her, but it wasn't until Sage walked back in the room that he seemed to wake up. He crossed the room, took Sage in his arms and planted a kiss on her lips that could

jumpstart a racehorse. Paige had been so angry she had left and hadn't come home.

When Paige got home, she got the tongue lashing of her life. "You scared me half to death," Sage had said. "It's five o'clock in the morning, and I've been calling everywhere. I called the police!" She was almost in tears, but Paige hadn't budged.

"You're not my mother," she replied. "If I want to go out and fuck a perfect stranger that's for me to decide." Paige caught sight of the look of shock and horror on her sister's face, and she felt like the air had been taken out of her. That's when she knew she had to leave. She had to get away, or she could never forgive Sage for being prettier, smarter, sexier and more sacrificing than she could ever be.

Two weeks later she was on a plane to New York. Clark Mason had arranged the interview at Cyber Lace and she jumped on the chance. She also had to jump him to get the job, but once she was in she set about proving herself right away.

Pretty soon, even though she had begun to forgive Sage for being more than she would ever be, she still felt the need to get even with her. Take something from her that she wanted. She fought the thoughts hard, because she knew that when it came down to it, Sage had loved her, taken care of her, and would have given her life for her. That just made Paige feel guiltier, and that was why she backed off from flirting with Logan. She had Matt and that would just have to do. It wasn't the same though, but it gave her satisfaction that a man who had been interested in the great "Sage the looker" had finally been interested in her.

Paige was tall, five ten with gorgeous brown hair and natural auburn undertones. She had blue eyes, the only one in the family to have them. She was thin too. Everybody had said she might have been a model if it weren't for her

nose. She had gotten her mother's nose—long and keen. "Witch's nose" the boys had said.

Sage had taken after dad's side of the family. She had the cute pug nose that Aunt Noreen had. Paige knew, because she had seen the photos of Aunt Noreen and she was a knockout. She, too, had died in a car accident. Sage had the hips too, and the butt, couldn't forget the behind that made the men want to reach out and cuddle it. She had it all, except the height. It was the one advantage Paige had, but she hadn't been happy with getting only that.

She always teetered between love and hate for Sage. It thrilled her that she could defy the mother hen of her new family, but it also saddened her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You haven't hit that yet?" Paige had mumbled under her breath.

"God. Can you think about anything other than sex?" But she had known the answer. Paige rarely seemed to think about anything other than sex. Sage faulted herself because she had raised her, and if Paige hadn't turned out to be the ideal lady that their dad had wanted them both to be, then that was just her fault entirely. Logan had told her she worried too much, and to let Paige live her own life and figure it out as she went, but he hadn't understood the responsibility she felt. He couldn't understand it.

Paige had come to the inn and stayed a week that time. They had gone on a new hike, followed some of the old paths and even camped out one night. Betty Tolgart had taken charge of the inn for a few days. Logan had insisted on it because Sage hadn't taken a break since she'd come there. Even in the slow season she had stayed at the inn, working and planning, but never relaxing.

They had been out that day, and Paige had looked at Sage and said, "Sometimes I hate you." Sage stopped breathing. She hadn't heard her right she figured, but even that thought had been pushed from her mind because she had heard her right. Her words echoed like a voice in a cavernous mountain side.

Paige finally smiled. "You seem to have it all." It was a fake smile, but it was one that had managed to bring a little curve to Sage's lips. "Cute guy, beautiful business with a great job. Just let me have the babies first okay?" She laughed and Sage started to relax.

"God, I thought you were serious for a minute there," Sage had said.

"Please. Like I could hate you." Paige laughed again to completely break the tension. She quickly changed the subject. "So why did you and Matt break up?"

"God that was so long ago." But she still remembered the history. "We just didn't mesh." She opted to say. Paige hadn't let it go and she wanted to know what bothered her the most.

"I always hated how he'd talk to my breasts whenever we would have a conversation."

Paige laughed.

"No, seriously. He would never look me in the eyes. He always stared at my breasts. I could never understand it because there's not that much up there for him to hold that long a conversation with." They both started to laugh hysterically and hadn't noticed the voice coming from behind them.

"Ladies." Logan spoke a bit louder. They turned sharply.

"Is something wrong with the inn?" She hadn't figured why her mind had raced back to the inn, other than the fact that it was her home, her life and she needed to be sure that it stayed safe.

"Nope. Just got a forecast that a storm could be coming through, and I wanted to get you ladies back down," he said.

"Oh, okay."

Paige figured Logan hadn't really been concerned with her, he just worried about Sage. The stinging feeling that she could hate Sage all over again surfaced. Everything was a problem now. Matt never looked at her breast when they were talking, and she had bigger breast. A nice 'C' cup, borderline 'D' and



while he touched them often, it didn't seem appreciative. Maybe he liked them small, she thought. Then of course, Matt would have never hiked up a mountain to make sure she made it back down like Logan had. No matter how hard she tried, Sage always got better. Better grades, better men, and a better life.

She had been employed by a great company, making more money in a year than some people made in five and still, every time somebody who knew the pair saw her, they would remark at how great Sage had it. Living in the mountains, running an inn. Paige would quickly add that Sage had given up a prestigious career, and she wondered how happy she actually could be. They would in turn tell her that prestigious didn't make happy, and Sage seemed happy.

Paige shuddered, suppressing her resentment and followed along.

## Chapter Fifteen

That night, after all the guests had gone to sleep, they sat by the fire place in the sitting room talking. Sage had been so attentive, listening to Paige's stories that Paige had almost completely forgotten why she had been so angry. "I think sometimes we just end up forced in situations and we do what we have to do." Paige had said.

"That's a copout." Sage took a sip of her tea. "We're all responsible for our actions. We're not born good or evil, we learn it. We choose everyday to either do what's right or do something wrong. We choose it, Paige. Not the guy next door, or the preacher in the church, not even our best friend or boyfriend. We choose it. The sooner the world realizes that, the sooner we can end senseless violence, crimes against the soul and against the heart."

Paige sat back against the sofa. "I," she started to say and then stopped. Even with prodding from Sage she hadn't continued. Sage was right. They were all responsible, she was responsible and she had to make it right. She had to make everything right.

That night, she did as Matt asked. He had wanted her to hide their treasure some place safe until he could find a buyer. So she hid it. She hid it in the first place people would think to look, but wouldn't look because they'd instantly realize it wasn't the first place she'd hide it. She had always thought of the irony. If it's the obvious, then most people just wouldn't believe anybody would be dumb enough to still do it, so they'd move elsewhere. Of course she had to keep it secure. Some place where Sage wouldn't find it right off, some place where a guest sleeping in the room couldn't damage it. Then it occurred to her. The squeaky floorboard Sage had tried to cover with the bed. It was loose, and she could easily pry it up enough to slip the artifact in. Paige knew she could leave it there until she could come back for it. It would be safe.

## Chapter Sixteen

Sage sat back on Logan's comfy suede couch. She closed her eyes and let the memories of Paige flood her senses. She went back to the time when they were a family. When her dad would pick her up and carry her on his back, take her to hockey games, and play outside in the snow with her. When he looked at her and said, "One day, not right now," he stressed, "but one day you're going to start to like boys." Sage had looked at him and giggled. "Now just go with me on this," he said as he fidgeted with his thumbs.

"But Daddy, I already like boys," she said and his mouth fell open. Not now, it was too soon. His little girl couldn't grow up that fast. "I like you, Daddy." She smiled and hugged him.

"That's not quite what I meant." He closed his mouth after suddenly realizing it was still open. "I mean you're going to like other boys."

"I like them too." She giggled again. "I like playing ball with Bobby because I always win." She laughed.

"Uh, no honey." He smiled. This was more difficult than he thought. Maybe a new topic. After all, she was only ten, and maybe it was just too soon to have this talk. Though he had to admit, he wouldn't have thought anything of it, if he hadn't seen Bobby from down the street trying to kiss another girl, and he was only ten too.

"Just don't ever smoke." He said and she frowned.

"Ewwww! Like Mr. Roland, down the street. Yuck!" She turned her face up in disgust. Mr. Roland had to be the nicest man on the street, but he always smelled and his teeth were yellow, and her mom had told her Mr. Roland would probably get something called lung cancer and die sooner than he should have. Sage wondered what it was, so she looked it up. The pictures were gross, and

the description of the disease was even worse. No, she had agreed from that day forth that she wasn't giving her lungs anything they didn't need.

"But what about boys, Daddy?" She turned the topic back around.

He shifted again, rubbed his big hand through his short blonde hair and said, "You'll like them as more than a friend."

"Daddy?" She scrunched her face up into the most crinkly frown he'd ever seen.

"Well, you'll like them romantically. Like..." He thought for a moment. "Like your mom and I like each other."

"You and Mommy love each other," she corrected and he agreed.

"All I'm saying Pumpkin..." He rubbed her hair instinctively to calm the protest he saw in her eyes. She hated being called Pumpkin, because it made her feel as if she should be orange, round and have stalk sticking out of her head, but that never stopped him from calling her that.

"You have plenty of time to live and love. Don't rush it. When you find the right guy you'll know and then you'll..."

"Make babies," she stated more enthusiastically than his heart could take.

"No!" He yelled, and then looked around at the stares his raised voice had drawn. He settled back down onto the hard wooden bench and said, "No baby making until after you're married. And no doing what you'd have to do to make babies either."

"What would I have to do?"

He shifted again nervously. God this was a conversation for her mother.

She laughed. "Oh Daddy, I already know about that stuff. Mom told me months ago." She had quite frankly asked her mother where she came from, and her mom had given her all the details she needed.

He relaxed, and then gave her a glare that told her he wasn't happy she'd put him through such torture. She merely giggled, and looked back to the

picture on the wall. "When I grow up, I want to do that." She pointed the photograph of the men digging near the pyramids.

"It's not like a movie now," he said. She smiled. She didn't care if there weren't action and adventure. She thought it was fascinating to discover something new and old at the same time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Those were the moments, the sheer moments of joy that stayed with her throughout her life. She remembered her dad, and it got her through the nights her mother wouldn't eat, the days when she had to make sure Paige studied for her test, while still trying to keep her own grades up, and the days when Carr had come inside her without any thought for the pain he caused.

"God I miss you, Dad," she said. Her eyes fluttered open when she realized she was no longer alone in the room.

Logan took in her appearance. One boot off, one boot still laced. Hat still on with the scarf hanging loosely around her neck. She smiled up at him.

"Didn't hear you come in."

He didn't say anything. He just stood there. She could tell from his appearance that he'd been there a while, because his coat was off, his boots were off, and he'd already managed to get half naked. He hadn't gone far though because his clothes were piled on the floor beneath him. She looked him over once more.

"Don't we have other things to do," she said. Of course they had other things to do, but from what she could tell, he didn't seem to have any of them on his mind.

"I worked up an appetite," he said with a low laden voice. She knew exactly what type of appetite he had worked up, and with one look in his eyes; she was willing to satisfy his hunger.

She slowly unlaced her other boot, kicking it off and standing. She took in the view. His hardened body stood waiting for her. She wondered what she

could do to make him pay for making her wait. She wondered briefly, because then she remembered how earnestly he had sought her body their first time. He hadn't wanted to wait, he couldn't wait.

She gave a devious grin, and then slowly removed her hat, grabbing the scarf in one hand and dragging it down along her body.

"Jesus." He moaned at how slow she seemed to be moving. He stalked over and tried to help her hurry along, but she stopped his hands.

"Oh no you don't. I can take my own clothes off." She smiled. One layer at a time, she peeled out of her clothes. The sensations swarmed her. She wanted to hurry, but she wanted to make him wait.

"That's it," he said as he snatched her jeans down, pulling her panties with the heavy fabric. He held her there, his face so close to her center that she thought she'd shatter with one breath.

"Oh," she moaned.

He slipped his finger through her silky sex. Pushing in with one finger and then another. She held him tight. He stroked and fondled her, sliding his fingers in and out. Her pussy contracted around his fingers, sheathing him completely. He circled her clit with his thumb, pushing and rubbing, holding and pulling back. She was close.

He ended his dance of seduction, shedding his pants and underwear and bringing her down to the floor. Bringing her right leg up, he pushed into her. His erection hard, pulsing, climbing into her deeper than she'd ever felt. He pulled back, thrusting in again, harder, deeper.

"God. Yes!" Her voice caught in her throat, her breathing heavy and in sync with his. She wanted him deeper, so she arched, letting him slide in further. "More," she cried as he thrust into her again and again. She came on a high yell that sent him into a fury. He pulled out and pushed in again, rocking harder, faster, deeper until he felt his release.

## Chapter Seventeen

“When did your sister move to New York?” He stroked his fingertips up and down her arm.

“Um.” She thought. “Well I was in my third year of grad school actually. I went into the doctorate program right after getting my BA. It’s all the same really, because you do the same amount of time in school, but it’s all in the title I guess. Anyway, I had just started my third year—Matt and I were working hard to secure our spring time dig locations.” She smiled. They both seemed to worry in advance, but all the good spots usually filled up fast. “Anyway, Paige and I quarreled, she got on a plane and found a job in New York.” It was the abridged version, but it worked just fine. “I was going to go, but I was almost done with school. You see Paige hadn’t really wanted college, but she went for a two year degree at one of those – oh what are they called, the um computer graphics animation TV schools...”

“Film program?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Anyway she never strayed too far from home, even when I told her to go to Canada and get a job on one of those hit sci-fi shows like *Stargate* or something. I think maybe she was afraid, but I never really understood it. Her training and talent, she would have been a top pick.

“I ended up going to South America to work on the Mayan ruins—which I hated by the way. I kept waiting for the guerillas to jump out and kidnap us. I worried the entire week. It didn’t help that Matt was off in Arizona working. Although I have to say that being away, having the freedom to go—I was almost,” she paused, thinking of the word to use, so he added it for her.

“Happy,” he said.

She conceded, “Happy that Paige was off in New York, and I could have a life. I know that sounds horrible, but I had dreams too, and I wanted more than anything to see if I could make a go of any of them.

“In my last year, I only had my dissertation to do, so I went to Africa to work, and Matt came along. We co-penned our work. Cut the workload, get the degree.” She laughed. “It was great. Neither one of us went back for the graduation ceremony; we just had them mail us our degrees while we stayed in Africa. I went to visit Paige, but she never went there to see me. It was too expensive,” she quickly added, though she now doubted that was the reason.

“So why leave Africa?”

She sighed heavily. She should have known this conversation was going somewhere. She hesitated. She had told him so much already, she wondered if she should or even could tell him this. Running away did not a hero make.

“Well.” She looked up into his eyes. She smiled briefly. At least his eyes could find their way north of her neck even when she was lying in his arms naked.

“Matt got caught up in the glory of it all. We call them collectors. They wanted just a few pieces of whatever we would find. We were working under Doctor Spring, Vivian Spring, actually. She had asked that we not catalogue right away. We wondered why – or at least I did. Then I noticed that pieces I found weren’t there when we passed the antiquities off to the proper parties. I questioned it. I questioned Matt for signing off on something that didn’t match what he knew to be true.

“He told me I was behaving like a child. How else did I think the dig stayed afloat, he asked. That’s when I knew he and Vivian were selling rare artifacts for money. Vivian passed it off as keeping her dig alive and Matt agreed, but with the money you’d get from the sale of one artifact, you could fund three digs for probably five years—or more! Anyway, it also became clear



to me that Matt was doing something other than mapping out the sites while I was busting my butt digging in spaces too small for comfort.

"It pissed me off. Not because he cheated on me with her—oddly enough, but because he expected me to lie. He even offered me part of the take." She laughed in a manner that told Logan she was still angry. "I declined respectfully and found myself almost being crushed by a falling piece of rock the very next day. So I packed my bags, said my goodbyes—and I do mean all of my goodbyes.

"I left. Went back to Cleveland where I almost had a job as a professor and then I saw Carr, and I left there too. I came here. Shortly after I arrived, Matt sent me a card saying he was sorry for cheating, hoped we could still be friends. He even said he was leaving Vivian's dig to work for another local contractor. He was always a good friend and a great intellectual, so..." Her voice trailed off. "Anyway, then I found out he was in New York on business, and I asked him to come out and help me get the inn spotlighted. He said okay, and that's pretty much that."

"So he just cleaned up his act?"

"I guess. I didn't speak to him much. In fact, the last time I saw him was the opening of the inn. That weekend when everybody was here. Then I got a letter every now and then. Anyway, I got a condolence letter when Paige... He didn't even come back. But he and Paige weren't close anyway, so I guess he wouldn't have."

"Not even to support you."

"Nope." She knew what he was thinking, she had thought the same. They were supposed to be friends, yet Matt hadn't even come back to support her in one of her darkest moments.

"What did he say?" He pushed her hair back from her face. "In the other letters that is."

“Um, the usual. Working hard, wish you were here to get me through the tight spots, found a new piece...that type of stuff. Nothing really long. Just about a paragraph or so, depending on what happened.”

Logan asked if she had written back, but she hadn't—not as frequently. “I didn't know how to get in touch with him in Africa. Whenever he was in New York I would send it to his hotel. They usually held his mail for one or two months because he stayed there every time he was in town. But then the letters came back. I called, but they said he was no longer staying there, and they had no way of getting his mail to him. So it pretty much just stopped after that.”

“And you never told anybody about the artifacts?”

God, he had switched back to that so quickly she hadn't had time to think. Her face flushed.

“I didn't see where it would matter. I mean, what could I do? My word for their word and I couldn't prove I had found anything other than what was there. I just...I just left, and I didn't look back.” She buried her forehead against his chest. She felt weak and stupid and she hated the feeling of both. God, if he hadn't thought she was two fries short of a happy meal already, he surely must have been heading to that conclusion, she thought.

“Probably best,” he said and her head sprung up to meet his gaze.

“Wha—what?”

“You were in danger, staying would have got you killed and talking, especially over there, might have done the same. Coming back and spilling your guts could have too, so the way I see it is, you stayed alive.”

## Chapter Eighteen

“Sage?” He whispered.

“Hmm,” she mumbled sleepily.

“Nothing,” he said. He wanted to tell her, but it was a conversation best left for when she was awake—and fully dressed. He pulled her closer to him, feeling her slow, steady breath as she drifted off to sleep.

He waited a few moments before sliding out of bed and pulling on his clothes. Davies had always been his go-to guy and he had no doubt that whatever information he needed, Davies could get. The question was could he get it quick enough? His gut told him this was bigger than Paige, it was bigger than that one artifact, and the fact that he had just protected a witness testifying against an antiquities buyer hadn’t put him at ease.

“The odds of the witness I just protected, the case and this artifact being coincidence are close to none,” Logan said. He and Davies both knew it wasn’t a coincidence that Sage had worked on a dig in Africa that had been mixed up in antiquities dealings, and that they had just wrapped up one case with the DA on the same issue. There was a connection, and for Logan it all seemed to come back to Matt.

Matt was the connection between Africa and the United States, and while he didn’t have proof and there weren’t any direct chains linking Matt to the recent case, Logan had no doubt he was involved. The question was how much.

Sage said Matt had moved on to his own dig and was no longer working with this Vivian Spring, but he wondered just how much of her influence he had left behind. People like that didn’t change their ways so easily. Once they’d compromised their morals and values, and found the thrill of quick money, they weren’t likely to turn their back on all of it.

“I can do some digging myself,” Davies said.

"I'd appreciate it."

"Keep her safe."

"I will." Logan hadn't needed anybody to tell him to keep an eye out for Sage's safety. He had no intention of doing anything less.

"I know you will." Davies said. "It's just this is the first woman we've seen you this excited about and we're all ready to see you get settled down."

By *we*, Logan was hoping he meant him and his wife, and not the entire department. He was afraid to ask. If the guys found out he was giving it all up for a woman, they would never let him live it down.

"Let me know what you come up with." Logan said before hanging up the phone. Right now, he had work to do. Unfortunately, it didn't involve ravaging the beautiful, naked woman in his bed, but he could get back to that later. Her safety was his priority. And beyond that, she was exhausted.

He let her sleep. There were a few things he wanted to ensure were in place and one of them couldn't wait. He took one more look at her. She slept peacefully, angelically. This was the woman he loved. This was the woman he would die for.

He pulled on his coat and left.

## Chapter Nineteen

Sage rolled over expecting to find Logan asleep on the other side. What she found was an empty bed. She moaned. Maybe he was in the bathroom, she thought, but she was too tired to get up to check. She ached, but it was a good ache. He had taken her to her limits and pushed her beyond them, not once, not twice but four times. He was the lover most women only read about in magazines or romance novels. He was explosive and he was hers.

She heard the phone ring, but it took a while before it registered that it was her phone. "Paige," she said immediately. There weren't many people who would have called her cell. Logan was one and he wouldn't need to, and Lenny was the other, but he usually just called the inn. Unless he had heard about what happened and had assumed she wouldn't be there. Then she'd have a hell of a hard time explaining why she'd called him Paige.

"Yeah, it's me. It's time."

Sage jumped from bed and began quickly searching the house for Logan, but he wasn't there. She stalled, knowing Logan actually wanted to be in on this conversation and this time she wasn't going to disappoint him. "Paige, are you safe? Are you all right?" She pulled open the door.

A burst of cold wind went right through her. Fortunately it didn't take long to spot Logan. He was on his way back from the shed. He looked at her, naked and shivering in the doorway. She motioned for him to hurry and he did. When he reached her side, she quickly moved out of the path of the wind and held the phone so he could hear. He pulled close to her, warming her body as much as he could.

"We need to do this now, Sage, or I'm afraid I won't have the chance."

"Okay," Sage quickly said. "We'll meet." She looked at Logan and immediately interpreted what he was telling her. "We'll meet here."

"No."

"It's the only way," she said, because she knew she wouldn't compromise on this. There was silence for a moment and then "okay," was the only word Sage heard.

"Great, it's across the lake from my place. You remember right?"

"Of course. But I'm not sure we should jeopardize anybody else."

"We're not, Paige. This will work. It's closed off, and there won't be many people who can get up here, so we'll be okay," she said, and then got a quick response, letting her know that it was a good plan.

"Occasionally your big sister is right," Sage said. "Tomorrow morning." She looked at the clock. "As soon as you can. I'll be here."

"Will he?"

"Yes, but if you don't want him here, I'll think of some reason to send him away. It's just after the other night I don't think..."

"No, it's okay. He's just looking out for you. I guess he doesn't have to work huh?"

"As far as I know the inn is really his only work." She smiled, trying to make sure it came across in her voice. "Just be careful coming up the mountain. It's been cold and the roads might be a little icy."

She said her goodbye and hung up the phone.

"So, tomorrow it is." She leaned into Logan, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"We're ready," he said. "I wish I could send you away, put you some place safe until I figure out what the hell is going on. But you wouldn't leave—not willingly."

"No, I wouldn't."

## Chapter Twenty

"I'll be right back," he said, before heading back out to the shed. Sage hadn't thought anything of it, because what they were looking for was a car coming up the road. Paige, she would be there soon and the thought of seeing her sister again had Sage on edge.

Whatever it was, whatever she was involved in, they would get through it together. And then there was Logan, he had been so kind. She knew he wouldn't abandon them once it was over. He would stay with her. Or at least she hoped he would, as she hadn't really asked him.

"Logan, I thought I'd make some breakfast to take my mind off things," she said. He hadn't been hungry and neither had she, but she couldn't sit around and just wait either. When she didn't get an answer she turned, expecting to find him, but what she found surprised her.

"Matt!" Her mind raced with thoughts. Each one connected to a new thought and pulled each piece together. She tried to run past him, and he grabbed her.

"Now, now, don't do anything stupid." He whipped out a pistol, pulling her close enough to hold the gun just at her temple. "We'll wait for your friend to get in here."

"Where's Paige?"

He hadn't answered her. He stood silent, waiting for the last piece of this messed up triangle to fall into place, and when it did he would get what he came for and get as far away from legal danger as possible.

"Sage, it started off so easy," he said in a tone that sent a chill up her spine. "Too easy I guess." He kept a firm grasp on her, pushing his mouth against the back of her head. "God I missed this."

She wanted to move, wanted to stop his touch, but she couldn't.

Logan walked into the room. “Sage I think—Shit.” Logan stopped in his tracks. Lunging for the gun wouldn’t get him there before Matt could pull the trigger, going for his own gun was out of the question.

“Nice and easy,” Matt said as if that would calm the situation down. “We’re going to go into the living room and you’re going to have a seat in one of those fine chairs.”

“Like hell I am,” Logan said.

Matt clicked the safety off the gun. Sage nearly screamed, but she bit her lip to hold back from showing her fear. “You were saying?” Matt mocked in a brazen tone. “Now, turn around slow, and walk. Don’t do anything stupid, because I’ll still have this gun at her head.” He smiled. It was a cold and distant smile, one that told Logan he’d kill Sage if he had to.

Logan did as he said. Saving Sage came first. He could rip the bastard apart second.

“Now sit.” Matt ordered, and Logan complied. “You cuff him.”

“No,” she said as if she had a choice. She couldn’t cuff him. Cuffing him would be sealing his fate, and she wouldn’t do it.

“Oh Sage. Sage, Sage, Sage. You don’t have a choice in this love.” He shoved her forward. “Now do as I say or I’ll shoot him.”

She saw his finger on the trigger, ready to pull it back, and fear gripped her. She took the cuffs from his hand and started to do as he said.

“What do you think I am—Stupid? Cuff him to the table.”

She flinched at the sheer force of his voice.

“It’s okay.” Logan spoke softly, trying to calm her. It hadn’t worked, for fear had gripped her and it wasn’t letting go. She felt her fingers shaking as she secured the cuff to his wrist, and then to the bar connecting the leg of the table to the tabletop. She looked back to Matt, who was already motioning for her to sit on the couch. Well out of Logan’s protective reach, but within his eyesight just in case he needed to handle things differently.



“Where’s Paige?”

He laughed. “Oh yes, where’s Paige? You were expecting her, I know. Sorry to disappoint you.” He grinned. “I killed her months ago.” He looked at the shock on her face. She was still just as beautiful as the last day he had fucked her.

“But...”

“Oh Yes I know, but you’ve been talking to her.” He kept the gun trained on Logan. “Well, that’s the best thing about your sister and all of her connections. Special effects companies have great toys. Trace helped out with some of the details. He worked with Paige. You see we had all planned to split the earnings three ways. Of course, that’s not really that much fun, but we needed access to the equipment and the only way to really sneak any of it out was through Trace. So, we pulled him in. He was eager. Of course, Paige was good at making the men do what she wanted.” He smiled at her again.

Logan was secure, and Matt had no doubt that if he tried anything it would take him longer than it would for him to shoot Sage. He doubted Logan would risk it. “Well.” He approached Sage, sitting down on the coffee table in front of her. “Oh yes, your dear sister was not so innocent. Not like you.” He slid the barrel of the gun over her breast and down her stomach. Logan started to move.

“You wouldn’t want me to shoot her would you?” He cut Logan a look that made him settle down. “I think he’ll enjoy the show.” He laughed.

“Paige was always jealous of you. You had the better life, people always thought you were so devoted, so wonderful,” he mocked in her tone. “She complained too much.” He frowned. “It was perfect though. Easy to convince her that stealing and selling a rare artifact would be worth the risk. She wouldn’t be under your control anymore. You should have seen how her eyes lit up.

“Just what she needed to hear and she committed. Oh, don’t worry; it wasn’t that easy for me.” He stroked her cheek and she pulled away. He

laughed. "Your sister wasn't as good a fuck as you. You," he inhaled deeply, feeling his body react to the memories. "You were good. Tight." He looked at Logan. "Does he know how it feels?" He pushed his hands to her center and she jerked back. "Paige wasn't that good. She gave it up so easily. Maybe that was the problem. I didn't have to work for her. But I had to work for you. I liked that. Turned me on something fierce."

"What did you do to her?" Her voice croaked above a whisper.

"Patience!" He settled down when he noticed the fear she had felt. "Now, where was I? Oh yes, not that good in bed your sister. She seduced me right away. Or at least she thought she had, but she's been part of my plan for a long time. I started staying with her in New York, and then she offered me a place in her bed. I used her. Used her to get equipment to get my little treasure out of Africa and back to the States. She was supposed to hide it for me. Before she came to see you, she told me it was in a safe place and that we'd talk when she got back. Unfortunately for her, she came back with a change of heart."

"Something you said about responsibility."

Sage closed her eyes, a tear falling down her cheek. "Yes, you Sage. She started to feel guilty. Wanted to tell you about us and about our treasure. I couldn't let her do that."

He sat beside her, pulling her close into his arms, but keeping the gun pointed at her side. "She would have ruined everything for us. You and me." He kissed her cheek softly. She sat, still as he ran his hand over her breast.

"Paige?"

"Oh yes, Paige. I don't know why you care so much about her. She cared nothing for you. You know she told me your secret. At first I thought she was making it up, but then I realized it's why you ended things with me. You weren't ready for what we had because of him. But you don't have to worry. He won't bother you again." He moved to sit in front of her again.

"Anyway, I gave her what she deserved don't you see? Her neck snapped so easily."

Tears trickled down Sage's face.

"Like a chicken. So easy and right. It felt so right." His voice went deeper as if he'd slipped past the edge of reason. "I hid her in a storage unit she owned. But I had to move her, so I drove upstate and dug a grave for her. It was more than she deserved," he quickly added. "She deserved less for how she talked about you." He let his hand stroke her thigh.

"What about the kid that was up here?" Logan tried to keep him talking.

"I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to my wife," he said. "Oh, not yet, but you could be," as if there was some question that hadn't been asked and he needed to answer it.

"Then tell me."

"He got too greedy. Couldn't wait just a few more days. I had it all planned. Well, serves him right." Matt stood. "Now I guess the money is all mine. And yours if you want." He smiled down at her.

"I don't," she said. "You disgust me. You with your concern for the dig and the academics, but in the end it was about you and money and greed!"

"Bitch!" He backhanded her hard, knocking her off the couch. Logan jumped so hard he sent the chair falling backwards, but he hadn't been able to move too far.

"Where is it?"

She hadn't said anything, she had barely moved before he had the gun pointed at Logan. "Tell me now or I'll kill him." He took the safety off and lightly pressed back on the trigger.

"All right!" She screamed to settle him down.

"Promise me you'll let us go."

"No."

"Please Matthew."

"Did he fuck you?" He looked back at Logan and then to Sage.

"No," she said. He hadn't, he had made love to her.

"Good." He paced the floor. "Good, because then I'd have to kill him for taking what didn't belong to him." He laughed an eerie laugh. "Now, where is it?"

"Under the floor," she said.

He motioned for her to do what she needed, but to hurry. "I'm in a hurry," he said. She moved the table slowly. It was heavy. She pushed aside the rug and then the first floor board. The second obstacle had been more difficult.

"Hurry up!"

"I'm trying!" But it wouldn't budge.

"Sage," Logan called to her. "Sage just stay calm. Press the right corner down and when the left tips up, push back and pull up."

She managed to shake her head to let him know she understood. She swiped the back of her hand across her cheek, wiping away the moisture and then proceeded as she was told. Matt's eyes widened.

He was close, so close to glory that he could taste it.

Matt had driven up and parked just a few meters down the road from the inn. He hiked in on foot, knowing nobody would be looking for him to come right up the drive. When he got to the small clearing he saw Logan walking towards the back and he waited until he was out of site before executing his plan.

"Why didn't you come up the back?" Sage stalled again.

"Figured you'd expect the wrong crowd coming up the back, but you wouldn't do anything to hurt Paige. Paige would have come right up the drive."

He smiled as if he had just outsmarted her on every level.

Sage pushed aside the remaining flooring and looked up to Matt.

"You said you killed Carr," she stated.

Matt smiled. "When I found out what he'd done to you...well he had to pay for that."

"When did you..." Her voice trailed off.

"Two weeks before Paige. I went there to talk to him." He motioned for her to hurry along.

She scooted down into the crawl space. "Don't do anything stupid," he cautioned.

"I won't," she added for good measure. Her voice sounded more assured.

"Good," he said before continuing on.

He had gone to see Carr. He professed to be a reporter with the Times. He had told them they had ran a contest and his students had nominated him to be the most influential professor of their academic career. He was so easy. The thought of seeing his name in print and Carr had welcomed Matt in with no questions.

He asked the usual non-interesting questions, and Carr belted out answers so quickly it was as if he'd been waiting his entire life for that one moment of glory.

"May I use your bathroom?" Matt had asked and Carr had willingly obliged. It was amazing how one could trust so easily, Matt thought.

"You have to know I was only going to talk to him," he said. "That was the plan until I found all of the pictures." Sage froze.

"What pictures?" She managed to say in a voice that was just barely audible.

"He took pictures of you. Pictures while you were here. He must have camped out in your backyard or something, because they were all of you while you were undressing, or sleeping. It's when I knew he would never let you go. It was only a matter of time before he would come back for you. I confronted him." He spoke more evenly.

Carr had tried to run, tried to scream for help, but Matt had the advantage. He had him pinned down so suddenly Carr hadn't had time to think.

"His neck snapped, not as easily as Paige," he said. "You should hear the sound. It's soothing."

Sage froze in her tracks. She was almost to the artifact.

"Do you have it yet?" He asked in a tone that told her stalling wasn't an option for much longer.

"Almost, it's just a little tight down here." That wasn't a lie. It was confined, and if it hadn't been for her years on the dig, she might not have figured out how to master her movements in such tight spaces.

"You know Sage. You were the first one I wanted to leave alive. All the others before you were easy to kill, the ones after you were a joy, but you—you were the only one I couldn't kill."

In that moment she felt her heart slow from a pounding terror to a medicinal calm. Sick wasn't his problem, he was evil, and he couldn't go on hurting people. It had to stop.

"Here." She slid the metal box up carefully. He bent down, opening it for just a second – just long enough to be sure his treasure was inside.

"Still wrapped in Vivian's scarf," he said as he stroked his finger along the rough, beige fabric. "Well, now. What to do with you two?" He stood, pointing his gun at Sage. "Don't suppose you'll want to come with me, and I can't really trust you to keep your mouth shut, I'm sure."

"Matt, I swear. You have what you want, just take it and go. By the time anybody gets up here, you'll be long gone. Please just go."

"I killed your sister," he said, and he knew she would want revenge.

"I know," she whispered. "But if you leave, then you take that pain with you and it won't hurt as much—not now that I know why you did it."

He pressed gently on the trigger. She closed her eyes. "Matthew please," she barely whispered.

"Fine," he said as he backed out of the cabin. "I still can't kill you." He smiled. "But if you don't mind, I'm going to take the truck just until I can get

down the hill to my car.” He picked the keys off the hook, and closed the door behind him.

Sage hurried to pull herself up from the floor as Logan kicked at the table, knocking the leg free and freeing his wrist. He started to go after him.

“Logan, no!” She pulled at his arm, jerking him around into her. They crashed to the floor. There was a large boom, and glass shattered around them. Logan threw his body over hers, reversing their positions and sheltering her from falling debris.

It wasn’t until the fragments of glass and wood finished falling that Logan pulled up enough to look in her eyes.

“It might make me as bad as him, but I couldn’t let him walk away and kill someone else. Call it retribution. Call it whatever you like, but it had to end here.” She looked up in his eyes. She studied his face, remembering every curve, every line. “I won’t ask you to wait for me,” she said.

“You going somewhere?”

She looked at him, puzzled by his casual tone. She had just murdered a man.

“Way I see it, you made a mistake. I put the artifact down there, and in your obvious state of fear, you mixed up the boxes.” He smiled at her, bringing his lips to hers and kissing her gently. “If anybody ask, that’s the story I’m giving.”

“But...”

“No buts,” he kissed her again. “Not unless you can’t live with this. Can you?”

She slowly shook her head yes.

“I’m sorry about your truck,” she looked around. “And your house. And your bomb, and your table, and...”

He muttered a curse and kissed her fiercely.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Schafer had said the way he called it, Logan's truck must have had a leak in the gas line, and that was the way he was writing up his report. None of the deputies had insisted on an in-depth investigation, and as they had just found the car Matt had been seen driving down the road with a dead body in the trunk, they figured he was their confessed killer, and by that point nobody really cared how he died.

"She went missing two nights ago, but nobody reported it until this morning," he had said. She, being the woman in the trunk. A hiker who was going up the mountain for an adventure that she never had a chance to see. Matthew had killed her for the car and her hotel room.

Once the initial shock around town wore off, things gradually faded back to normal. Summer had come and gone, the authorities in New York had finally found Paige's body and she had finally been buried properly. Life was getting back to normal with a few pleasant exceptions.

"And the artifact is back where it belongs," Sage said with a sigh of relief.

"Didn't want to hold on to it huh?"

"Well it wasn't mine to hold on to. Besides, stealing it would be robbing the world of a great treasure. It was time for it to go home."

She didn't need the millions she would have obtained from selling it, or even the thrill of collecting, she was happy as is and that said a lot. For the first time, in a long time, she was happy.

"I guess I should get back over to the inn. Get some work done and all," she said, but she hadn't moved from his arms. It was too comfortable being there, and leaving would feel as if she were tearing herself away from him. It was only across the lake, but it seemed too far away.



“Yeah, about that.” He tilted her chin up so their eyes could meet. “It really doesn’t make much sense for you to be over there and me to be over here.”

“You want to move into the inn,” she held back a laugh.

“I was rather thinking you could move in here.”

“What about the inn? I mean, I’d have to get up earlier to get over there and cook and then I’d be home late.”

“You can stop serving muffins, or we can hire on a new person to take care of the morning shift.”

“Well, it would make this easier.”

“This?”

“This.” She leaned in for a kiss. “And this.” she kissed him again—deeper and more passionately. “And what comes after this,” she giggled.

“Oh yeah,” he said in a husky voice before taking her into his arms and making love to her.

## Epilogue

"Now this is what we should do more often." Sage rested against his body on the on-deck hammock. She smiled, looking up into his eyes.

"Getting naked or the cruise?"

She was in need of a vacation and he had insisted she take one. Of course, she turned the tables on him and somehow, he ended up following along with her.

"Both," she laughed. "Vacationing with you has been fun Logan Hunter." She stretched her body long against his.

"It's been fun for me too." He kissed her lips. "But if you keep moving against me like that I'm going to take you right here."

The distant noises of water splashing, waiters serving and families conversing wafted through the air like the sweet smell of home cooked pancakes. "That would not be wise Mr. Hunter," she said in the most serious tone that she could muster given the circumstances. "You might get us kicked off the ship for lascivious behavior."

"If they were going to kick us off we would have been out of here last night—all that screaming you did." He dipped his head again to kiss her neck while his hand stroked over her stomach.

"Well if you weren't so good I wouldn't scream so much."

"So you're blaming me?"

"Absolutely," she giggled. She could get used to this.