



## **Dirty Deeds**

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## **Blurb**

Bounty hunter Louie Russell has a job to do and a fugitive to catch. James "Jamie" McDonald has jumped on a \$100,000 bond and Louie must bring him back. She always works alone—until she finds herself shadowed by sexy older brother Paul McDonald, a man who shakes up her world and touches her heart.

All Paul McDonald wants to do is coach his hockey team and enjoy his post-NHL life in Spokane, Washington. At the same time, he's sick and tired of his brother's antics and now Jamie's gone too far. Paul will drag him back by the ear if he has to. So, when he starts to shadow the beautiful bounty hunter on his brother's trail, it's only because he wants to find Jamie as quick as possible. The fact that Louie's sexy and amazing has nothing to do with it. Or so he tries to tell himself.

When Jamie is murdered, the routine hunt becomes something much darker and far more threatening. Along with passion and love comes danger. Will they be strong enough to stop a killer cutting a wide path of death and destruction? Or will the truth be the final nightmare Louie can't survive?

## Prologue

A very bad feeling sat deep in the pit of Chris Russell's stomach, but he couldn't put a finger on why. At his desk, he fastened the straps of his bullet-proof vest and wrestled in silence with the uneasiness that had stuck with him since he'd gotten out of bed in the morning. The bulky vest secure, he slipped on his black jacket with the bold yellow letters DEA stenciled on the back.

He picked up his sidearm, checked the clip, and then slipped it into the holster at his waist. He put an extra clip in the black leather mag pouch on his belt and two more in his bag. Next was his rifle. It fit into the black nylon bag that looked, to the casual glance, like an over-sized gym tote. Zipping the bag shut, he picked it up and turned to head out the door. Regardless of his discomfort, it was time to go. Without something concrete, he would move forward. No reason not to.

Chris had worked this case since the start and wanted to bring it to a successful conclusion despite the sensation at the back of his neck like cold, dead fingers brushing his skin. He didn't care what anybody else said, intuition counted for a great deal in his book. Intuition had kept him alive more than once during his time with the Army Rangers and he was not about to ignore it now. But he'd still go full bore ahead with this bust. Setting it up had taken months, and it was time to take down the key person responsible for bringing huge quantities of drugs into his city. That bad feeling, though, would keep him on his toes, and his senses on hyper-alert.

They still didn't know the name of the man they would haul into federal custody later tonight. The Medicine Man was the only i.d. they had...precious little to go on. The Medicine Man had set up his facade with such skill that law enforcement was unable to break through to discover the identity behind it. That bothered Chris as much as it pissed him off. He would know who this asshole was before the sun came up, one way or the other.

Through careful work and perfect timing, he and the others involved in the operation had put their own cast together. The bust would play like the finest symphony, flushing out the man who pulled strings like a master puppeteer. At long last, he would answer for his crimes. The Medicine Man would be out of business.

Chris would be lying if he said he wasn't curious as to the identity of the one who was able to pull off such a successful and profitable drug enterprise without his name ever being slipped even once. A pretty good feat when to offer a name in exchange for a deal was common practice. Too bad the guy didn't work on the right side of the law; he would have been a great success. Now, he was about to find his ass sitting in prison.

The warehouse appeared deserted when Chris and his partner parked the black SUV in the shadows about a block away. North of town and a scant block off Market Street, the warehouse sat near rolling hills. Those hills, dotted with low brush and pine trees, provided an excellent cover position for Chris and the other agents. The only downside was that the front of the building was wide and flat with a quick and easy escape to Market Street. There was no way to block access without tipping their hand. They had little choice except to leave the front section unprotected. If all went well, and Chris prayed it did, the unprotected front wouldn't be a problem. If it didn't? Well, he wasn't

going to think that way. It would go their way. The bastard was going down.

He pulled his rifle from the bag and attached the night scope before he slung the strap over his shoulder. His partner, also armed, motioned he would take the left side. Chris nodded and started to the hill on the right. They were near enough to the rear of the building that both would have a clear, lethal shot, while still able to maintain sufficient cover.

Kneeling behind a clump of pine seedlings, the tallest of which was only about three feet high, Chris brought the rifle to his shoulder and peered through the scope. He let out the breath he'd been holding. This was the spot. He had a clear view of the warehouse and a straight shot, if need be.

Subtle movement rippled around the warehouse. SWAT officers from the Spokane Police Department and deputies from the United States Marshal's Service were taking up posts in various locations around the perimeter. Bottom line: it was covered from every angle it could be, and by the best from each of the participating agencies. No one was about to walk out of this without handcuffs on their wrists and a federal indictment looming large on their horizon. Now all that was left to do was wait.

After over two hours of patience, a dark van rolled up to the rear door. *About damn time*. Chris shouldered his rifle and peered through the scope for a better look at the newest arrivals. Right away he recognized the two men who got out and walked around to the rear of the van. Eddy Pearson and Andy Shea were well-known and frequent visitors of the SPD's local bed and breakfast. Eddy was also the guy responsible for setting this up. He'd been given a choice: either set it up or head to Walla Walla where Washington State's notorious maximum security prison was located. Eddy wasn't eager to risk a trip back to Walla Walla and had been far more amenable to their suggested plan. The deal still held jail time for Eddy, but at the much more comfortable Geiger Corrections Center. The meeting was thus arranged and Eddy was, so far, playing his part to perfection. Amazing how the threat of time in a maximum security prison could elicit the kind of assistance needed for a bust this important.

Less than five minutes later, a late model BMW pulled up behind the van and a lone man got out. Once more Chris looked through the scope. *No, it couldn't be*. He adjusted the rifle at his shoulder again before peering through the high-powered scope for another close-up look. What was *he* doing at this warehouse in the middle of the night? He needed to get out of there before he muddled up the bust they'd spent so long pulling together. Chris started to sling his rifle back over his shoulder and then stopped. Slowly he brought the rifle around and put his eye back to the scope.

*Oh, shit*. Now he understood. He lowered the rifle and took a couple of deep steadying breaths. It didn't matter. Not in the big picture. The Medicine Man had to be stopped, regardless of his identity.

At the sound of gunshots near the building, Chris snapped the rifle back up to his shoulder in one fluid movement. In the seconds since he'd lowered his rifle, something had gone very wrong. The shots didn't stop, their sound as loud as cannons in the still night.

"Damn it," he muttered as his finger glided to the trigger. This could not go south, not now.

Chris adjusted the rifle to ready it for firing, and put his eye to his scope. Again, unease slithered through his body. He had a brief glimpse of a rifle protruding from the

driver's window of the BMW—pointed right at him—before the punch of a bullet sent him flying backward.

Then everything went black.

## Chapter One

"Bastard!"

Louie Russell shot out of her chair and through the door connecting her office to Harry's, from where the thunderous expletive had issued. His round face was red, and looked even redder because of the jet-black braids yet to play host to even one strand of white. His dark eyes were narrowed and flashing as he looked up at her.

Eyebrows raised, she shook her head. "Watch it, Harry, you know my CPR card is out of date."

Her comment was only part jest. It had been ages since she'd completed her CPR training and whether they liked it or not, neither one of them was getting any younger. The crimson flush on his neck and face didn't give her a warm and cozy feeling. She could almost hear his arteries pop and that was most definitely not a good thing.

Harry was a good fifteen pounds heavier than when she'd moved into her small office five years ago, and he hadn't been a little guy back then. The last couple of years, each time one of the clients skipped, she was certain the big one was just around the corner for her friend and co-worker. His face would get bright red, and with every successive explosion, it seemed to take longer for the flush to fade. Yeah, she pretty much figured it was past time for Harry to get a physical and way past time for her to refresh the old CPR training.

"Funny," he muttered at the same time he tossed a manila folder toward her like a Frisbee. It landed with a plop on the yellowed vinyl at her feet. "Little Canadian bastard took off."

"Which little Canadian bastard?"

A reasonable question since he seemed to have a corner on the market lately. Among other illegal product, BC bud was big business these days and for whatever reason, Spokane was destination central. Dope hadn't lost its appeal in these parts, or at least that's the way it seemed to Louie. The constant influx kept both local and federal law enforcement busy, not to mention Harry's door swinging, and by extension, hers. If Harry was busy, Louie's caseload went up in direct proportion. Nothing like good old mathematics to keep a business popping and the paychecks rolling in. If she'd known how much money there was in this business, she might have been tempted to change jobs eons ago.

"James McDonald." Harry's words were clipped as though it was painful to even say the name.

"Oh the cute Canadian bastard," Louie said and nodded. Just the mere mention of McDonald's name seemed have reignited the flush in Harry's face. She didn't like that.

"Oh yeah, Russell, he's a real cutie all right. Took off on a 100K bond. I am not inclined to cough up the dough and his parents, poor suckers, can't afford it either. Do you know what the exchange rate is right now? This will wipe them out, lock, stock, and barrel. A shame too, they seemed like real decent people to me. I hate it when this kind of shit happens."

Harry shook his head and pulled a candy bar from the middle drawer of his desk. He peeled back the wrapper and took a big bite. The scent of chocolate floated across the air.

The wrapper crackled as he balled it up and tossed it in the direction of the trash can. He missed.

"Harry..." Her eyes narrowed and she nodded her head toward the treat.

He shrugged and said through a mouth full of candy, "I'm stressed."

*Good excuse* was what she thought, though Louie kept the commentary to herself. Not that she blamed Harry for being a bit tense. When somebody skipped, it was bad all the way around. Still, she'd heard the story too many times to feel much of anything beyond annoyance. She sympathized with the parents and their potential loss, but personal feelings had no business in this business. There were good people and there were bad people, plain and simple. Her job, however, wasn't to worry about the distinction. Her job was to get James McDonald back in a courtroom before Harry was forced to forfeit the bond and, by extension, the McDonalds lost all their collateral.

"How much time?" she asked.

"Joe Harper's the Assistant U.S. Attorney on this one and he gave me a call. He'll hold off on a motion for bond forfeiture until the end of the month. I promised him you would drag the boy back so I'm counting on you not to make a liar out of me." He popped the final chunk of the candy into his mouth and licked his lips, a satisfied smile on his face.

"Great, Harry, I love it when you make promises on my behalf. Any leads on where this little fellow took off to?"

"Yeah, he went north."

There were reasons why she was the field person and Harry stayed in the office. She let out a long sigh. "You're just a bundle of information, Studhorse."

"Yeah, well, I'm the money, baby, you're the great white hunter."

"Some kind of Indian you are. You don't even pretend to try."

"Naw, too much work and I think you forget, I'm the chief so I get to order trackers around. That's what a chief does these days. Besides, I did my time, now it's my turn to sit on my fat ass and watch someone younger and much better looking do all the hard work. Does the old heart good, if you know what I mean." He tapped a finger to his chest.

Louie smiled, relieved to see the tension in his face begin to relax. The brilliant red in his cheeks finally faded to a flushed pink or whatever color it could be called underneath his latte-colored skin. Despite the candy bar, a heart attack did not appear imminent—for the moment anyway. She still intended to pester him until he made an appointment for a physical. Oh and yeah, she'd best look into that CPR refresher too.

"And you do it so well." She bent down to retrieve the folder still on the floor by her feet. "I have thirty days?"

"Don't press it." Harry tilted back in his chair to study her with a glint in his black eyes. "Make it twenty-five."

"Oh, so you want to make a challenge out of it?" To work in this business, it was impossible not have a bit of gambler's soul. A wager was their way of making a game out of the hunt. She wasn't much of a true gambler, but this was a game she loved to play. Hide and seek with a little kick-the-can thrown in for good measure, combined with rules with far more elasticity to them than when she'd been a cop.

Harry leaned forward in his chair and folded his arms on top of a pile of folders littering his desk. "Tell you what, Russell. You bring me that boy in twenty days and I will up your take another five percent."



Her smile broadened. "I so love a challenge, especially one with a little bonus attached. I'll hold you to the wager, Studhorse." She pointed a finger at him.

"It's a deal, sugar. The extra five percent is worth it if you bring me the boy. It will make this chief very happy to not have to cough up a cool hundred."

"Ah, Harry, have I ever let you down?"

"No, baby, that's why you're still here."

"You're such a sweet talker."

"So the ladies say."

"Ah ha! And what ladies would those be exactly, if you don't mind me asking?"

Harry waved his hands in the air. "A gentleman doesn't name names."

Louie shook her head and left him laughing at his own cleverness. She turned in the direction of the part of the building she called hers. The tile was faded, the woodwork a bit battered and dull. Still, it was as comfortable as an old pair of shoes, as though she'd been here all her life.

In her office, Louie spread open the folder Harry had tossed to her and started to read. The picture of James McDonald showed a youthful looking man of twenty-nine with wavy red hair and bright green eyes. No deep lines creased his face, and his skin was smooth and unblemished. She was struck by the thought his was not the face of a hardened criminal. Yet, the nature of the alleged crimes spoke of more than an amateur. He had, after all, been caught red-handed in his attempt to haul a major amount of BC bud over the border.

Still, he looked more like a Scottish throwback. It was easier for Louie to imagine the handsome face and lithe body in full Highland regalia rather than the dark glasses and black clothes of the stereotypical drug runner. She rather liked the Highland image.

A major player, she mused while she flipped through the indictment and accompanying paperwork Harry'd prepared for the bond. James McDonald was caught in possession of a serious amount of dope without any identifiable links to a known organization. Hence the theory he was the top man. A solitary run? Or, a guy with a plan to make quick piles of money without deep involvement with other established networks?

Not according to the feds. They seemed to think he was The Big Guy and were patting themselves on the back for the bust. But why would the supposed kingpin do the run himself? Solitary or not, it seemed a major flaw in the case, at least in her opinion. She'd been on the job long enough to know how it all came down. Leaders paid mules to transport their drugs; they didn't do it themselves. That James was caught with a huge load of dope in a jet black Suburban didn't make sense if he was truly the top man.

But it didn't change the facts. He was charged with some very sobering offenses, and the one hundred thousand dollar bond was a clear sign the feds were dead serious about this guy. Harry, of course, took it seriously as well. He didn't respond well to being parted from his cash or being forced to collect on collateral. Most of the time, he posted the bond and the defendant showed up. Everybody was happy, so to speak. Every once in awhile, though, a James McDonald situation popped up. Not good for anyone involved, except Louie. It's how she made a living.

She fired up her computer and logged in to do a little background work on James and his family. An hour later, her pad full of notes, Louie leaned back in her chair. Interesting. Very, very interesting.

Her chair squeaked as she stood. She opened the top drawer of her desk, took out her

gun and tucked it into her shoulder holster. The dark blue jacket she slipped into was excellent for hiding the gun. In blue jeans and leather boots, her hair cut in a short, sporty style, she blended in well with the general population. She liked Spokane with its big city size and small town friendliness. Luxury cars and pickup trucks moved together through the streets of the city without drawing a second glance. A person could fish in the afternoon and attend the symphony the same night. It was a blue-jeans-to-velvet kind of town that suited her extremely well. She was born to be in this place.

Bottom line: Louie liked it here and she liked her job. The profession had been thrown at her rather than one made from conscious choice, but sometimes things worked out very well in spite of everything. This was one of those instances. Five years ago, she would never have believed she'd end up a bail enforcement agent, let alone one of the top agents in the region. These days, she was offered more jobs than she could handle. Harry's always came first. Their relationship was much more than professional, and she for one was not about to forget it. Loyalty weighed heavy in her book.

Dropping her small spiral notebook and pen into her pocket, she waved to Harry and headed out to the parking lot, off on the hunt for James McDonald. She figured twenty days was a cakewalk with this guy, and the extra five percent Harry promised was icing on the cake.

Halfway to her car Louie heard a familiar rattle. She did an about-face and jogged over to where eighty-seven-year-old Meg English pushed a tired silver cart with a single paper sack in the bottom. Dressed in her familiar peach track suit, Meg could easily pass for a woman at least a decade or two younger. Today she wore a snappy pair of sunglasses, her always tidy hair in a single braid down her back.

"Let me," Louie said as she eased the rickety cart from Meg's firm grasp.

"Well, Miss Louise, thank you." Meg stepped aside and let Louie take control. She patted her hair with thin, slightly shaky hands and then straightened her zippered jacket. Her smile revealed even, white teeth.

"I told you I'd take you for groceries, and you promised not to walk all the way to Rosauers again," Louie said, pushing the cart across the asphalt parking lot with Meg beside her.

"Now, Louise, that was indeed a fine offer, but if I let you take me in the car, how would I get my exercise? I don't want my bottom to get as big as a balloon. I've seen what women my age look like when they get too soft."

*Fat chance.* Louie laughed and shook her head. "Like that's really going to happen to you."

Meg pursed her lips, her face serious even though her deep brown eyes twinkled. "It will if I get lazy." She lifted her chin.

Not only was Meg the most energetic octogenarian Louie ever met, she was as thin as a rail with a bottom that would never in a million years be mistaken for a balloon. At a whopping five foot three, if she stood very tall, Meg maybe weighed a hundred pounds on a good day. Her mocha skin glowed with good health and her ebony hair hosted a mere peppering of white. Few, if any, would guess her true age. Louie sure hadn't and had been floored the day she discovered how old Meg was.

More days than not Meg could be found with her silver cart on the way to the grocery store for fresh fruits and vegetables. If not the grocery store, it was Auntie's, the huge local bookstore down on the corner of Main and Washington where she'd pick up

the *Wall Street Journal*. Or, if not on her way for books or groceries, she could be found at one of the downtown charities helping those whose lives had spiraled into homelessness and despair.

Meg was one-of-a-kind. And there was little use in arguing with her. Louie'd tried many times before and each time she'd lost. Instead, just as she did today, Louie chastised Meg—though with a friendly smile—and then carried the cart up the flight of stairs from the ground floor, where Louie's office was located, to the second story, where Meg's one-bedroom apartment overlooked Monroe Street.

Louie waited for Meg to unlock the apartment door before taking the cart into the kitchen. Louie loved to spend time with Meg. She was spirited and interesting with a keen eye on current events. She didn't talk much about herself and even though Louie would love to have known more about her history, she respected Meg's privacy and didn't ask personal questions.

She was dying to know about the original paintings by artists such as Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo that graced the small apartment walls. She hadn't recognized the names on the paintings the first time she studied them. But she was an investigator, so she'd gone home and looked on her computer. The good old internet poured forth its magic. Fascinated by the history of the two twentieth-century surrealist painters, Louie spent the better part of two hours just reading. She now knew a whole lot about Kahlo and Varo. What she didn't know was how the two originals landed on the beige walls of a Monroe Street walk-up.

Even now as Louie looked around the familiar room with the older yet tasteful furniture, she felt comforted, the same way she did every time she went there. Still, she was very curious to know how a woman with such obvious grace and intelligence lived so simply in a small apartment in downtown Spokane. Curious minds want to know...

Today, like most days, Louie kept her curiosity to herself. She put away Meg's small sack of groceries and helped her settle into favorite chair. Meg's eyes were closed, the lines in her face relaxed and serene. Louie tried hard to be quiet as she moved to the door. She wasn't exactly a bull in a china shop but she wasn't quite a ballerina either. She wanted to stay for a cup of tea, except duty called. Tea would have to wait for another day.

"Thank you." Meg said, her eyes still closed.

Louie paused and smiled. "You're very welcome. Now, you call me next time you need to go to the store, promise?"

"I promise to think about it."

"You're a stubborn old lady, Meg English," Louie said with a laugh.

A smile turned up the corners of Meg's mouth, though she still didn't open her eyes. Her hands were on the arms of the chair and her fingers tapped lightly. "So I've been told at a table of kings."

Louie raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, right, and I had dinner with Prince Charles last night."

"Yes, Prince Charles, such a serious boy."

Louie raised both eyebrows. "You know Prince Charles?" *Sure she does, just about as well as I know the president.*

Meg opened her eyes, a twinkle in the deep brown gaze, and gave her a little nod. "Know him? No, not really, but I did have dinner with him once," she said and winked.

Then she settled back into the chair and closed her eyes again.

Louie was still shaking her head when she stepped into the hallway and closed the door. *Table of kings indeed.*

\* \* \* \*

"I'm gonna kill him." Paul threw the portable phone across his office. The sound of shattered plastic raining down was like that of a ghostly storm. Harsh but brief. He looked over at the mess. Gonna have to replace that out of his pocket. No big deal. Right at this moment, it was the least of his worries. He could care less about a stupid telephone or how much it would cost to replace.

The big issue pressing like a hundred-pound weight on his head right at the moment was where to find his little brother. It wasn't a big stretch to believe Jamie could get busted for something as stupid as dope dealing, but to skip out on the bail and leave their parents hanging high and dry ... even Jamie wasn't that big of an asshole. He might be a lot of things not particularly savory, but Paul had never known him to do one thing to harm the folks. Until now.

Jamie had managed to put Mom and Dad at risk to lose everything. Their home, their retirement savings, everything. Not acceptable. No way, no how.

Paul dropped to his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. Time for a haircut, he thought, and then wondered why something so inconsequential would occur to him at a time like this. He could care less what his hair looked like.

What he needed was to find Jamie before the bond was forfeited by the court. He hoped he could find him before it was too late. For all he knew, it could be too late already. The criminal justice system wasn't the arena he knew.

Paul dug through his desk drawer and found the business card the bondsman had given him the day he and his parents had bailed Jamie out, even though leaving Jamie in jail had been Paul's preference. It was high time for Jamie to face the consequences of his actions without Mommy and Daddy stepping in to pick up the pieces for him. Paul wished they'd listened to him. If they had, this call would be totally unnecessary.

He started to reach for the phone, but was interrupted by a tentative knock on his door. In the doorway, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else but in Paul's office was his goaltender, Todd Fox. At seventeen, Todd was an easy six-foot-three and one of the reasons the team was well on its way to a league championship. Until last night anyway.

"Coach, you wanted to see me?" There was just the slightest tremor in Todd's voice.

Paul waved him in. "Yeah, we gotta talk."

Todd dropped to a chair and looked at the floor. "Coach, I know I messed up last night. It won't happen again."

"I know it won't."

Todd's head snapped up and a look of horror crossed his face. "Are you cutting me?"

Paul smiled and shook his head. "No, as long as you tell me what's distracting you. Last night your game sucked big time and that's not like you. What's up?"

The panic in Todd's young face faded, replaced by sadness. Tears welled in his eyes, something Paul hadn't seen before in this very focused and tough young man. "It's my grandma, Coach. She's in the hospital."

"Is it serious?"

Todd nodded and a single tear escaped down his cheek. "I'm afraid we're gonna lose

her."

Paul swiveled his chair until he faced his computer. "Hang on a second." His fingers punched the keys in rapid succession. A couple minutes of silence passed before Paul swiveled back to look at Todd. The printer behind him whirled and a second later he grabbed the single piece of paper it spat out.

"You go pack a bag and I'll have Coach Curry pick you up."

"To do what?" Todd's eyes were bright and he didn't move.

"To go home. I just made a plane reservation for you into Vancouver. I assume your folks can pick you up there?" Paul shoved the printed ticket across the desk to Todd.

"What about Friday's game?"

"We'll make it through one game without you, I promise. There are some things more important than hockey. Go see your grandmother. I'll see you back here on Sunday."

Todd picked up the ticket and got up out of the chair. A big smile was on his face. "Thanks, Coach. I'll pay you back, I promise."

Paul stood and patted Todd on the shoulder. "Not a problem. I have a ton of frequent flier miles to use up anyway. Didn't cost me, or the team, a dime."

As soon as Todd left, Paul sat down at his desk and reached for the phone. He paused when it dawned on him that he'd made confetti out of it. He dug in his pocket and pulled out his cell. Flipping it open, he punched in the number off the business card as he wondered what he was going to say. He didn't know where to start. He'd always avoided trouble with the law. He'd never even been pulled over for a traffic ticket, let alone gotten himself thrown in jail by the federal government.

Oh, he'd been stuck with a tough-guy reputation all right, but if people really knew how much was back office propaganda, they'd be shocked. Then again, people believed what they wanted to believe, and for years he was the toughest player on the ice. Few realized, or cared for that matter, he always left his aggression at the rink. Of course the phone he just destroyed might argue the point if it could. Still, funny as it seemed, he'd been a big tough professional hockey player without a single encounter with the police at any level.

At the moment, he needed to figure out the playing field, which meant he needed to start somewhere. The man who helped his parents post the bond for Jamie had seemed reasonable. Even more than that, he was interesting and friendly. Harry Studhorse, Paul discovered, was an enrolled member of the Blackfoot Tribe. He was a tall, regal-looking man with waist-length black braids and a hearty laugh. Right now, Paul was grasping at straws and Harry Studhorse seemed as good as any place to start.

"River City Bail Bonds."

"Mr. Studhorse?" The name still made him smile when he said it. He found out after their initial meeting it was an old and distinguished name in the tribe, one that went back for many generations. Once he got beyond the novelty of it, the name conjured up an image of a large and powerful horse, sort of like the bronze sculptures lining the hills overlooking the Columbia River near Vantage, Washington. He wondered if the original bearer of the name had been a big, powerful warrior.

"Harry speaking."

"Harry, this is Paul McDonald."

"Sir, please tell me you're calling to let me know where your brother is at this

moment?"

"I wish."

"So do I. Well, what then can I do for you, Mr. McDonald?"

"Please call me Paul, and I'm calling to see what I can do to help. My parents can't afford this." There was no sense beating around the bush or pretending things weren't as they were.

"Not high on my list either, Paul."

He liked the candid response, made him feel he talked to kindred soul—sort of. "So Harry, how can I help?"

"I've got Louie Russell on it, but if you have any ideas where he might be at, it would help Louie to know."

"A bounty hunter?" Paul didn't expect that even if it was a logical progression; River City Bail Bonds surely wanted Jamie back here as much as he did. Still, a bounty hunter seemed drastic. His brother wouldn't take well to the kind of people Paul saw on reality shows. No, Jamie wouldn't do well with that at all, and much as he hated to admit it, Paul didn't want Jamie hurt. In fact, if anyone was to hurt his brother, it'd be him.

"It's bail enforcement agent these days, and just for your own safety, Louie doesn't like being called a bounty hunter. And yes, I have to get the boy back here or I'm out a hundred grand. That doesn't sit any better with me than it does your folks. So, if you have any idea where he's hiding..."

"I wish I did, I'd drag him back here myself." Paul wasn't kidding either. He'd grab Jamie by the collar and drag him in kicking and screaming if he could.

"Well, Paul, do us all a favor and start thinking, maybe make some calls to his friends. Louie will be tracking you down and any inside info you have will be real helpful."

"I don't know his friends and that's the truth. My brother and I are not what you'd call close and haven't been for a very long time. Still, I'll see what I can dig up."

"We appreciate the help, Paul. We want to get your brother back here safe and sound so my hundred grand stays where it is and your parents keep their collateral."

"You'll get no argument from me, Harry, and if I come up with anything, I'll call."

"Sounds good, keep in touch."

Paul flipped the phone shut. Laying it on the desk, he ran his fingers through his hair and massaged the back of his neck where the throb was beginning to grow stronger, a red hot hammer pounding with a steady rhythm at the base of his neck. A bounty hunter chasing down Jamie...Christ. Jamie might be a lot of things like irresponsible, immature, and yes, even stupid in some ways. But he wasn't violent.

Paul didn't have any personal knowledge of bounty hunters, but his mind conjured up an image of a bulked-up tree trunk of a guy with lots of muscle and less brains. He saw the TV images of bounty hunters and, despite his rational mind knowing Hollywood wasn't the reality, those images still made him nervous. Jamie was bound to get hurt even if the bounty hunter wasn't a tree trunk.

He wished he knew how to help or better yet, who to call. He hadn't lied to Harry when he told him he and Jamie weren't close. He hadn't even talked to Jamie in over three years. He made Paul so mad with his constant refusal to grow up that it worked better if they just didn't see each other at all. At least it worked better for Paul.

Of course, he got reports from Mom and Dad every time he was back home in

Surrey. The last time he and Jamie were face to face was three years ago on Christmas, and then he ended up so furious with his younger brother that he headed back to Spokane two days early just to get away. It was either that or take a hockey stick to Jamie's groin. Not exactly the poster children for brotherly love.

Now this. It just didn't stop with Jamie. Ever. It was one thing after another, year in and year out. At some point, it'd seem like little Jamie would have to grow up and become a man equal to the name of James. So far, it hadn't happened. He managed to roll from one stupid stunt to another.

This was different. Most of Jamie's escapades were annoying and pretty much always costly. In the big picture though, they were minor problems. This latest clash with law enforcements was the mother of all trouble. There was nothing minor about it. He'd managed to get himself brought up on federal charges, in the United States no less, and then if that alone wasn't bad enough, managed to convince the parents to bail him out. They'd put everything they owned on the line for Jamie, and now he'd left them high and dry. They'd lose their house and what little money they'd saved would be gone as well. His parents were good people whose only crime was to love their errant son just a little too much.

Paul opened the cell phone one more time and punched in the number for his accountant. He talked with Ken for a good twenty minutes before he shut the phone and put it back down on the desk. His hands folded, his eyes shut, Paul took several long, even breaths. So much for his great idea. Why couldn't it be easy?

With a sigh, he reached under his desk and pulled out his skates. Lacing them up, he stomped out of his office and to the rink. It was quiet in the arena right now; practice for the team didn't start for another hour. For the moment, the place was his alone. Nothing helped him think better than to glide across the ice, a hockey stick held in his hands.

He opened the door and stepped onto the smooth ice. Bill would grumble later when he'd be forced to run the Zamboni again to smooth out all the damage Paul would inflict. But hey, it was good for all of them to break their routines once in a while, Bill included.

As Paul's skates hit the ice, he no longer thought about Jamie or the bounty hunter on his tail.

## Chapter Two

From the rapid succession of thumps Louie could hear from the outside corridor of the Spokane Arena, she'd have sworn the entire hockey team was on the ice. Instead, one man circled the arena, methodically lining up a row of small pucks on the red line. Once they were in an order that seemed to please him, he would circle to the opposite end of the ice and then race back toward them. One by one he flew to the pucks, striking them with such force they crashed into the boards and made the glass rattle. Strength and fury roared through each and every shot. *Impressive, very impressive.*

Louie didn't need to ask who the skater was. Paul McDonald resembled his younger brother or rather, young James McDonald resembled his older brother Paul. Resembled was the key word, for they were most definitely not twins. James' stats had him at five-foot-ten and about one-sixty which pretty much jibed with her memory of the man who'd come into the office. His face was soft, and tough was definitely not the adjective she'd use to describe James.

This McDonald was well over thirty and decidedly not thin or soft. From where she stood, her best guess was at least six feet tall. She'd be able to look him pretty square in the eye, though the skates gave him a few more inches. His shoulders were broad and muscled. He wore a white workout jersey with the recognizable Chargers logo. Without all the pads normally worn under the jersey, she could see thick, strong arms flex each time he swung the stick. Oh yeah, this was a big brother in a big way.

"Not bad," Louie muttered.

She'd done a little background on Paul McDonald before heading over to the rink. She liked to know who and what she was dealing with. When she was on the job, she learned quickly that the more she knew about a situation, the better. That particular trait had made her a very good police officer; it made her an even better bail enforcement agent. She'd learned that Paul McDonald was an interesting man who, unlike his fugitive younger brother, was a pillar of excellence and achievement.

He'd begun his professional career in the major junior hockey league as a teen and moved to the NHL at age eighteen. An injury to his knee ended his playing career six years ago and now he coached the WHL team in Spokane. There was a huge following in the community for the team and he was the most popular coach ever. Spokane embraced the Canadian export as if he was a native son and from everything she read, he returned the sentiment. He held dual citizenship and spent the vast majority of his time in the United States.

The fact he was gorgeous didn't hurt either. Oh, not in a model kind of way. More like a red-haired princely Highlander who opened his arms and made his adopted homeland his kingdom. Earlier she'd decided James would do a kilt proud. Now as she stood watching big brother, Louie decided he could do more than make a kilt proud. She was pretty sure he'd make it downright sexy. She was such a sucker for a man in a skirt. And what exactly did those Highlanders wear under a kilt? The naughty girl in her hoped it was nothing.

She made her way down the steep steps to the glass topped boards surrounding the ice rink. She waited until he finished slamming the latest row of pucks into the far wall



before knocking hard on the glass.

He spun, sprays of ice shooting up from the blades of his skates. He looked over at her, his eyes hooded and stormy. An instant later they cleared. He covered the short distance to the door in a flash. Opening the door, he stepped through onto the rubber mat.

"Yes," he said in a deep, rich voice. "Can I help you?"

She put out her hand. "Coach McDonald, my name's Louie Russell." Now that he was close, she could see those stormy eyes were an enticing shade of green.

He stuck his right hand under his left arm and pulled off a bulky glove. With his hand now free, he took hers in a solid handshake. His long fingers wrapped around her hand, his grip firm, his skin warm. "The bounty hunter," he said.

God, she hated that. It made her sound like some sort of masochistic dyke who wore her wallet on a chain and sported a spiky blue hairstyle. Why did everyone insist on calling her a bounty hunter? Too many bad "reality" television shows.

She removed her hand from his. "Bail enforcement agent." Though she tried, she couldn't keep the edge from her voice. Half a decade of defending herself made Louie a bit on the touchy side.

"Oh yes," he said, her brusque words seeming to bring a twinkle to his eyes. "Harry told me you don't like being called a bounty hunter, although I've got to say you aren't exactly what I expected."

"And that would be?" *Oh, this ought to be good.*

He raised an eyebrow, shrugged his shoulders and said, "A man."

That pissed her off. She was sick and tired of people assuming bail enforcement was a man's job. She did it better than ninety-nine percent of the men in eastern Washington and she was damned tired of having to prove herself over and over again. Was this world ever going to change and stop pigeonholing women?

Her thoughts tumbled of her mouth before she could stop them. "Women are perfectly capable of doing this job, Mr. McDonald." Her cheeks were hot, and she hoped it didn't show on her face.

He put his hand up as if to shield himself. "Whoa, Ms. Russell," he said in a neutral voice. "I didn't mean it in a discriminatory way. I was expecting a man because every other Louie I've ever met was a man. It was your name that threw me, not your profession."

*Well, crap.* She didn't want to think she'd jumped to a conclusion or made the same sort of assumption she'd accused him of...except it appeared she just did. She'd sped right straight to the conclusion he was making a sexist statement. If she was truthful, she couldn't blame him for not knowing she was a woman. Her nickname was masculine and if it wasn't for the fact everyone had called her Louie since the first grade, it might have occurred to her.

So now she owed him an apology and a bigger person probably would. Louie didn't feel like it. Besides, she didn't even know the guy. He was simply the brother of a fugitive. *Yeah, a really attractive and successful brother of a fugitive.* She didn't have to explain herself to him or apologize for what she considered justifiable defensiveness. So she didn't. She shrugged and pulled a small notebook out of her jacket pocket.

"About your brother James," she began.

Darkness flowed across his face at the mention of his brother's name. *Interesting.*

"Come on," he growled. He turned head for an entryway that opened between the

rows of seats that came down all the way to the boards surrounding the ice. Once through it, a private area was revealed. She assumed it encompassed the locker rooms, equipment storage and offices for the hockey team staff. Sure enough, he pulled open one door and ushered her into a warm and inviting office.

The furniture was old though comfortable-looking in a homey way, and well-used, not put in place for simple decoration. The room smelled of sweat, old leather and, very faintly, cologne.

The desk he walked around was a cluttered mess with piles of papers and file folders. In the corner was a huge hockey bag, just like the kind his brother had used while attempting to smuggle his stash of BC bud into the States. Paul dropped into the chair behind his desk, bending over to take off the skates.

"Go ahead," he said, his attention focused on the laces.

Louie poised her pen over the as-yet-empty note pad. "Any ideas on where we might find him?"

"Not a clue," he answered.

"Friends, girlfriends?" Surely he'd have something to point her in the right direction.

"I don't know any of his friends, and I don't believe there's a girlfriend. I'm relatively certain Mom would have mentioned a woman, if there was one."

"He wouldn't tell you?"

The skates hit the floor with a thud and he pulled back upright in his chair. His green eyes narrowed. He didn't look like a happy man. "No, he wouldn't tell me. You need to understand, Ms. Russell, my brother and I aren't close. I haven't even talked to him in years."

She believed him. The frosty edge to his words spoke volumes. She nodded, scribbling with a quick hand in her notebook. "I'm Louie, please, and even if you don't talk with your brother, anything you can think of might help. In fact, sometimes I find that when people run, they don't run to the newest group of friends but to the oldest."

"Trust me, I wouldn't be the one he'd come to."

"Maybe, maybe not. I've done this long enough to discover what makes us feel safest is sometimes what's the most familiar to us, like our past. Anyone from his past who might draw him?"

Again his eyes flashed. "Like me?" he asked.

She met his gaze, her own brown eyes rock steady. He was sharp and she liked it about him. "Like you. After all, you're his rich, successful brother."

"I'm telling you again, Jamie will not come here, period. He knows better."

"You won't help him?"

"No." There was ice in that single word.

Ice didn't scare her. "And if the bond ends up forfeited?"

"I don't know." He closed his eyes and sighed. He ran a hand through his thick, red hair and she watched it as it fell around his face. "It would be disastrous for the folks."

She studied him for a moment. What about this big, successful brother? He was handsome, rich, and powerful. So what was his story?

Louie wasn't above asking. "So, Mr. McDonald, given forfeiture would be such a financial hardship to your parents, why haven't you stepped up to at least take the burden from them?" It was a reasonable question if the financial impact was indeed that great upon his parents.

His eyes grew dark and narrow. "Perhaps you don't fully understand me, Ms. Russell. There are reasons why my brother and I aren't close and trust me, I'd be the last person Jamie'd come to in any situation. As to my stepping up with my checkbook, that Ms. Russell is personal and none of your business." The ice in his voice had gone glacial.

Possibly true; it didn't mean she'd give up on this particular line of questioning. If he thought she would, he had a great deal to learn about her. "But you're family."

"Just because we're related doesn't mean we're friends and in this instance in particular, Jamie'd know better than to come to me. He wouldn't ask me for money, and he'd know in this case, I'd put him in your hands so fast, he wouldn't know what hit him. Is that clear enough for you?"

*Not really.* She shrugged. "It's a logical assumption."

"True enough, it's just an erroneous one. If I could get hold of him, right after I beat the crap out of him for what he's doing to our parents, I'd hand him over to you in a New York minute."

"The money?" She prodded in case he forgot the little detail.

His face relaxed a fraction and some of the flash went out of his eyes. "You don't give up, do you?"

She shook her head. "Not a chance. I'd make a pretty piss-poor bail enforcement agent if I did. So, about the money..."

He took a deep breath and put his hands together on the top of his desk. He leaned forward as if to get closer to her. "As far as the money goes, I'd drop a hundred grand in a heartbeat to help my parents, if I had it. Look around yourself, Ms. Russell, and you'll see my money. Every dime I made in the NHL was dumped into this facility and into the team. I look real good on paper, but as for liquidity, forget it. It's easier and quicker to find the little bastard and drag him back here than for me to come up with six figures in cash. I can do it, but I suspect it'll take more time than we have."

The truth was deep and dark in Paul's eyes. No doubt he'd do precisely what he said. She'd gotten the hard answers she came searching for. Now she needed to coax out any little detail he might remember about his brother, something to put her on the right trail.

Paul could hold the key without even realizing it. Even families that weren't close knew details about each other no one else did, and success was more often than not in those details. His fractured relationship was by no means a show-stopper.

"You call him Jamie." She made a note because that little piece of information was not in Harry's file. She liked the nickname, it was warm and friendly. Not exactly the moniker of a big, dangerous drug lord.

"Yes. I can't say what his new friends and associates call him, but we've always called him Jamie."

She didn't miss the inflection on the words new friends and associates. There was distaste in his words and it came across as clear as a bell. Paul McDonald didn't think much more of his brother's current profession than she did and it put another plus in his column.

Once she made the last note, Louie folded the notebook shut and slipped it along with the pen back into her pocket. From her other pocket she pulled a business card that she handed to Paul. His fingers brushed hers as he took it, his touch light and electric.

"If you think of anything that might help, please give me a call."

He looked down at the card and then back up to her face. "Of course."

"Seriously, Mr. McDonald."

"Paul."

She paused and then nodded. "Paul. Anything you think of could be important."

"If come up with anything, I'll call," he told her.

"Promise?"

He used his index finger to make an 'x' across the left side of his chest. "Cross my heart."

"Thank you."

She shook his hand once more, then turned and made her way back out of the office and into the public area of the arena. She didn't leave right away, but instead stood in the dim light at the top of stairs gazing down at the now quiet ice.

Paul McDonald wasn't hiding anything from her. She'd been around enough to know lies when she heard them, and he wasn't lying. He was as angry with his brother as if the bond money came right out of his pocket. Paul could prove helpful in making her job much easier.

So what was the nagging feeling rolling around in the pit of her stomach? She was missing something. But what was it?

\* \* \* \*

He watched and waited, darkness falling deep enough so he could move to the back door without detection, but he jumped every time a car drove by. Walking to Kendall's house with his hands stuffed in his pockets, he tried as best he could to look like a guy doing nothing more than taking an early evening walk. At her driveway, he looked around before he raced to the back door. Feeling around with his fingertips inside the lip of the hanging plant, he found the key she left there for emergencies.

Unlocking the door, he slipped inside. Only then did he let out a breath. The feeling of safety the dark entryway gave him almost brought him to tears. A spicy scent hung in the air and he recognized it immediately. Kendall's homemade spaghetti sauce.

"Kendall," he said in a voice quiet enough he hoped he wouldn't scare her.

She stood at the kitchen sink a few feet away from where he huddled in the shadows. At the hushed sound of her name, she jumped. With her hand over her heart, she spun toward the back door and the direction of his voice. "Jesus, Jamie, you just about gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry." He meant it too. He hated the look on her face and knowing he was the one who put it there.

He didn't move from the back door, afraid to get too close to the large dining room window with a full view of the yard. He couldn't be certain he wasn't followed, and he wasn't about to take any more chances than necessary.

Kendall seemed to sense the root of his reluctance to come further into the room and went around the counter to the window. Pulling the cord, she closed the blinds. Relieved, he moved to wrap her in his arms and dropped his head to her shoulder. God, he wanted to be strong, to be the kind of man Kendall deserved, but he just couldn't pull it off. His best intentions dissolved the moment he felt the touch of her lips against his cheek. Sobs he couldn't stop rolled out.

"Oh, baby," she cooed into his ear, her arms holding him tight. "Come on, sit down and tell me what's going on."

He managed to get himself under control long enough to follow her to the table. His head hung as he dropped into one of the high-backed chairs. His body still buzzed with emotion. At least the tears stopped. He hoped he got it out of his system. Some big tough guy he was, bawling like a baby.

"I'm so screwed." His words were muffled, his head in his hands. It was too hard to look at her. His heart told him she must be as disgusted with him as he was with himself. Any reasonable person would be. He couldn't bear to see the disappointment in her eyes.

"Your mother called looking for you. She said you failed to show up for your preliminary hearing. I don't understand, Jam, why did you jump bond? We'd have gotten through this." Her words were soft and full of caring.

He pulled his head up and turned his watery eyes to her face. There was no sense in beating around the bush. At the very least, she deserved the truth.

"I didn't have a choice, Kendall, they're going to kill me, one way or the other. If I stay in jail, somebody will put me down in there, and if I don't hide, they'll take me out here too. I'm a dead man either way."

She reached out and took his hands in hers. Her face mirrored the concern in her voice. "I still don't understand. Who are they?"

"The guys I've been working for."

She brought his hands to her lips and placed a kiss each on the back of each. "Jamie, this is crazy. Nobody's going to kill you. You're scared and over-reacting. They don't kill people for marijuana." She gave him a small encouraging smile.

Pulling his hands away, he stood up and went back to the window. He pushed aside the blinds so he could peek out between the window frame and the edge of the closed blind. Quiet darkness spread out before him with ominous shadows that quivered and shifted. Anyone could be out there right now waiting and watching for him. He wasn't safe. He'd never be safe.

"They'll find a way. I know too much and they're not going to take a chance I'll talk."

She sat back in the chair and studied him. Her eyes were bright and intelligent. Her arms were crossed over her chest. "All you were doing is a little dope running, right?"

He kept his gaze on the sliver of darkness outside searching for any sign of movement. He wasn't about to look at her face. "Depends on what you mean by little." He braved a glance at her out of the corners of his eyes.

She sat up a little straighter in the chair, her eyes flashing. She put both hands on the table. "What do you mean, Jamie? You told me it was a little easy cash. There wasn't any big risk. What did you do?"

He let go of the blind and turned. With his back against the wall he looked over at the woman he loved. She was so young and pretty, beautiful really. And, she trusted him. Just like his parents did. His way of saying "thanks for believing in me" was to lie to them all. The lies had rolled off his tongue with such ease it became second nature. Sometimes even he couldn't tell the difference between the truth and his lies anymore; why would he expect anyone else to? Except maybe Paul. He'd never been able to fool his big brother.

What a mess. He couldn't have screwed this up more if he tried. How he got caught was beyond him. He was careful. He'd made the run so many times, he could do it in his sleep. It was almost as if someone set him up, only that didn't make sense either. Who would be crazy enough to do that?

The feds now had their hands on over two hundred thousand dollars of BC bud. It was one mighty big haul by anyone's standards and losing it to the U.S. authorities was as good as signing his own death warrant. Losing a quarter of a million dollars could do that.

Now, the feds wanted names and the people he worked for wanted his hide. A lose-lose situation all the way around for him. He thought he'd gotten himself in hot water before. Compared to this, everything else was chicken-feed. He'd screwed himself big time.

"Jamie," Kendall prompted when he continued to stare at her in silence.

"Yeah?"

"How much were you running?" she asked in a quiet, steady voice.

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Way more than you want to know about."

"Oh Christ, Jamie, how could you be so stupid?" The fire in her words burned his heart.

"I wanted to make the money for us."

"Bullshit."

She didn't understand, but it was the God's honest truth. That he had debts to pay for losses at the casino was equally true. But with this last run, his take would've paid his gambling losses and still left a tidy sum for his life with Kendall. She didn't need his money; she had plenty of her own. He'd needed to prove he could take care of her. "I did."

"No, you didn't, you just wanted to be a big shot." Her words were bitter.

Man, he wasn't expecting that. "Come on, babe, I wanted to make a life for us."

"You're full of it. You know it and I know it. I turned the other way because I love you, but damn it, this is bad."

"I know and I don't want you involved."

"Right. And you're here now for exactly what reason then?"

She had a point. He didn't want her involved, but his being in this house got her involved whether he meant to or not. The problem was she was the only one he could turn to. The only one he trusted enough anyway.

"I need some cash and your car." He figured he might as well be blunt and, for a change, honest.

She took a deep breath and her gaze held his. After a second, she blinked and got up. Alone in the kitchen, he rubbed his face and choked back tears. He wouldn't cry again. A minute later she came back in and slapped three fifty-dollar bills and a set of car keys on the table in front of him.

"I'm so sorry." He stuffed the cash into his pocket with shaking hands. His whole body buzzed as if he was on speed.

She reached up and touched his face, then sighed. "You can't keep running, you know. You're going to have to make this right somehow."

He wanted to say something profound and powerful. He had nothing. "I'm scared."

"Yeah, baby, I know, and I'm scared for you but it doesn't change a thing. You go figure this out and when you do, I'll be here."

"Kendall, I love you," he whispered.

She smiled though her eyes were sad. "I know, and some day you're going to grow up enough we might even have a future together. Now go before somebody finds you

here."

"I'll bring your car back." He didn't want to stay, but he didn't want to leave either.

"Go." She turned him toward the same back door he'd come in through earlier. "And try not to get yourself killed."

Jamie kissed her and then left. Somehow he would get himself out of this mess, and come back a changed man for Kendall.

### Chapter Three

True to his word, Paul McDonald telephoned about an hour after she'd left the arena to report James did, indeed, have a girlfriend, a fact he learned only after a call to his parents. Louie thanked him for the lead, turned back to her computer, and began to dig up what she could on the newest piece of the puzzle.

The girlfriend was a reed-thin twenty-year-old from the south side of Spokane who worked at one of the hottest nightspots in town. She attended school at Gonzaga University, though Louie wasn't able to discover her major. From all accounts, she was a knockout so popular at the nightclub that her tips paid for her school expenses.

Kendall Stewart didn't seem like the kind of girl who would pal around with James McDonald, a college dropout who never knew where his next dollar was coming from. On the other hand, he was good-looking and seemed, from what Louie had gathered so far, rather sweet. Well, sweet in a not-responsible, crime is okay sort of way. There was, she'd learned from experience, no accounting for taste. Whatever it was Kendall Stewart found in James to stir her heart, it was enough to sustain a relationship almost two years strong.

Satisfied that she'd found out all she could online, Louie decided that her next stop was Kendall Stewart's home, a fair sized two-story located mid-south hill. The property records showed that she'd inherited it from her grandmother. Even in the dark, Louie could see that it looked well cared for, loved even. It was surrounded by gorgeous old growth maple trees in a tidy yard. No car was in the driveway.

Despite the lack of a vehicle, the hour was late, and Louie hoped Kendall would be home and able to provide a clue or two, but there was no telling what Louie would run into. Love affected people in many ways. She understood better than most the lengths to which one could and would go for love.

She'd left one life behind and created a brand new one all in the name of love. Well, love and revenge. She'd have liked to include justice in as well, but she wasn't all that certain when she came face to face with her brother's would-be killer she'd leave his fate in the hands of the justice system. She wanted to think she'd take the high road, though truth be told, she wasn't completely convinced she would.

Louie got out of the car and walked up to the front door. Music played behind the closed door, not loud though not soft either. She knocked and waited. And, waited a little longer. She knocked again, louder this time. Still no answer.

*Hmm, the lights are on and nobody's home?* She looked around. The driveway was empty, as was the street in front of the house. The only thing that clued her in that a car had been in the driveway not long ago was the fresh spot of dark oil on the otherwise clean concrete.

She left the front steps and walked around the house. As she did, she peered into windows. She walked with a nonchalance she hoped would raise little suspicion if anyone happened to glance out of neighboring windows. So far, so good. Nothing seemed to move near or around the house.

At the back door, she knocked again. Just as when she tried the front door, no one came to answer her knock. Again, she looked around. All quiet on the western front. She



slipped on a pair of latex gloves she'd pulled from a pocket and then tried her luck with the doorknob. It was unlocked. She pushed the door open and stuck her head inside.

"Hello," she said loud enough to be heard over the music.

Other than the beat of the song playing, not another sound greeted her. She stepped inside and stopped. Her breath caught in her throat.

An unwelcome though familiar scent hit her. Her gaze dropped to the floor where drops of blood glowed crimson against the muted sand-color of the tile floor. It was still wet.

This wasn't good. Slowly, Louie drew the gun from inside her jacket. Both hands on the grip, she slipped further into the kitchen. She watched for movement and listened for any sounds beyond the beat of the music. The house was quiet. Eerily quiet.

Kendall Stewart's still body lay half in the kitchen and half in the hallway. She'd been shot while standing at the sink, Louie decided as she studied the room. Blood splatter fanned out from the counter and at the window, a hole about the size of a quarter was surrounded by spider-web cracks.

As she gazed out the damaged window, a large maple at the back of the lot caught her attention. It would be the perfect hiding spot with a clear line of vision into the kitchen. Whoever fired the fatal shot knew exactly what he or she was doing.

Death had not been instantaneous. Even as her life faded, Kendall had tried to flee her attacker or attackers by pulling her body as far as she could out of the kitchen and into the hallway. A small wound dotted the front of her shirt while blood spread out beneath her body like a crimson cape. Louie didn't need to check for a pulse. Kendall's spirit had left long before Louie stepped foot inside the house.

Kendall's eyes were open, an expression of surprise and fear etched forever on her once beautiful face. Louie studied the body for only a moment before resuming her slow and careful search of the rest of the house. She needed to see what she could while avoiding the same person who ended the life of this pretty young woman. The overwhelming silence made her feel as though she was alone in the house. Her gut told her the same. Still, only a fool would forego a search.

Her gun lowered, Louie finished her exploration of the house and was just outside the doorway to the kitchen when a noise brought her hand back up with the gun pointed. Her back against the wall, gun held out, she sidestepped into the kitchen, taking a well-practiced shooter's stance.

For just a moment, she thought she was hallucinating. Only for a moment though and then as her finger moved slowly away from the trigger, she snapped. "What're you doing here?"

Did he have any idea how close she just came to shooting him? Damn fool. This was the last place she expected to see him. To see anyone for that matter.

Paul McDonald's face registered shock at about the same level of annoyance she was feeling. "Are you going to kill me too?"

Louie lowered the gun, clicked on the safety, and then tucked it back into the holster. "Am I going to what?"

"Kill me."

"Why on earth would I kill you?" she asked. Was the guy as nuts as his brother?

"You tell me." His gaze traveled to the hallway where Kendall lay, sprawled and bloody.

Shaking her head, Louie ran a hand through her hair. "Oh, for heaven's sake, I didn't kill her."

"You're the one with a gun."

"My handgun aside, Mr. McDonald, you're seeing the same thing I did about five minutes ago when I came in."

It should be obvious if he had two eyes in his head. She hated civilians at crime scenes. Oh yeah, she forgot, technically *she* was a civilian these days. Well, she hated the uninstructed at crime scenes like Mr. Hockey Coach here.

"You didn't shoot her?" he asked, and it sounded a bit like disbelief to Louie.

"No, Mr. McDonald. I didn't kill her."

Louie noticed the hockey stick he gripped with both hands. Raising an eyebrow, she asked. "And you were going to do what with that?" She pointed to the stick.

He possessed the good grace to look sheepish. His shoulders lifted. "I don't carry a gun."

"So I see. Come on." She motioned to the door. "We need to get out of here. Did you touch anything?"

"No."

"Good. Then let's go."

He paused at the door, his gaze on Kendall. "We can't leave her like this."

Louie put a hand on his back and pushed. "We can't be here when the police show up."

He didn't move. "We didn't do anything."

"True, but have you ever been forced to sit at the police station when you were a witness to something?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Well, I have and trust me, it's better to just get the hell out of here. We can call the police from a public phone."

"I don't know." Paul and his lethal hockey stick still weren't moving.

"Trust me. Let's go somewhere and talk." She nudged him again.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

\* \* \* \*

One down, one to go.

A smart man probably would have left the second his quarry was down. He was a smart man, though he was still compelled to stay and savor the moment. Outside it was dark, the neighborhood was quiet, and he assessed the danger level to be quite low. And so he stayed under the cover of the big old maple tree, soaking in the sweet smell of success. The air was fresh and the night sky cloudless. Stars sparkled as if turned on just for him.

He did indeed savor the moment until noise broke into his pleasant introspection. He made up his mind to call it quits at the sound of light steps. Someone was heading his way. He shook his head, not at all surprised to see the spunky bounty hunter Louie Russell. Or, rather the first visitor, Louie Russell. She was being cautious and he was convinced she was unaware of his presence.

Not long after she slipped into the darkened house, visitor number two made an

appearance and turned out to be a huge surprise. Big brother showed up on the girlfriend's doorstep. Now that made him smile. Sooner or later hockey boy was going to blaze him a trail right straight to little James and then all his problems would be solved.

It was only a matter of time before it all came together. He just hoped it was sooner rather than later. Dusting off the old rifle always brought him pleasure, though he would prefer to do it on his own schedule. This clean-up work, while entertaining, was annoying at the same time. He had things to do, people to see, and places to go.

Pinpoints of light bounced in the kitchen window like fireflies dancing in the darkness. If he were to guess, he would say they were searching for answers. How exactly did a healthy young woman end up lifeless on the kitchen floor? He knew, and it sent shivers racing up his spine. Good luck with their search for the truth. They would never guess.

How he'd missed this: the hunt and the kill. Running his hands along the stock of the rifle, he smiled. It felt so good against his palm, both familiar and comforting. It wasn't just a weapon; it was a piece of him, a part of the whole. Once perhaps he could have lived without it, but no longer. Somewhere along the line, he and the gun became part and parcel of each other.

His fingers itched to bring the rifle back up and to pull the trigger once, twice. He longed to feel again the power over life and death. The temptation was strong. His willpower was even stronger. He would like nothing better than to leave the two interlopers dead and bleeding on the kitchen floor alongside Kendall Stewart. He wouldn't though; he would walk away as he knew he must.

He would need the other two if he was to gift James McDonald with the final solution. Certainly he was skilled enough to find James on his own. It was safer and more expedient to have Russell and the other McDonald pave the way. For his own safety, he would stay in the shadows, and after all, wasn't this whole clean-up operation done to assure his safety?

Of course it was, and so now he turned and walked away from the house, the rifle clutched tight to his body in case wandering eyes were paying attention to the tall stranger who sauntered down the street. In the darkness, someone would have a hard time distinguishing what he held close to his side.

A block away, his car was parked beneath yet another of the tall maple trees. One of the things he liked about this part of the city was the ubiquitous maples that were tall, large and excellent for cover.

At the car, he laid the rifle on the rear seat and covered it with a navy blanket. Sliding in behind the wheel, he turned the key and the engine started with a purr. He whistled softly as he drove down the quiet street. The traffic was light and the traffic signals favored him with a parade of green. Yet another sign he was on the right path. Life was good.

Back at home, he sat down at the long workbench he'd built across the north end of his garage. He took the rifle apart, piece by piece, and cleaned it just as he had a hundred other times. He loved everything about the process from the feel of the metal against his fingertips to the smell of the oil on the soft cloth and brushes. He closed his eyes as he worked, seeing the weapon in his mind, feeling the shape and texture of each piece with his fingers. It had started as a game when he was a kid, a bet with his father that he, of course, won. That talent had served him well throughout the years.

His fingers moved with the caress of a lover over the stock, the barrel, the sight. Within minutes, the cleaned rifle was reassembled. He opened his eyes and smiled. Beautiful. Perfect. Just like his plan.

"Soon," he said into the silence, the rifle pressed to his cheek. "Soon."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Paul sat across from Louie at the downtown Perkins restaurant, explaining how he came to be at Kendall Stewart's house. He'd called his parents to talk, and that he'd been surprised to discover Jamie not only had a girlfriend but had been dating her for almost two years was an understatement. He was also stunned that his parents never so much as mentioned it to him. Why not? What did they think he'd do if he knew? After all, he was the good son, the one who always did the right thing. Jamie was the perpetual screw-up, the one who could never get anything right.

Yet, when he'd disconnected the call to his mother, it hit him how protected Jamie was by both of his parents as though he was a sick child who needed their tender care. That it hurt Paul really was a shock. The night had been full of surprises, and so far not a single one good.

Once he'd talked to Louie and given her the information on Kendall, he'd fully intended to leave the arena and go home. Somewhere between the two places, he changed his mind. He was curious. He'd wanted to see the woman who loved his brother despite his many faults. Paul was the one who earned it all: success, admiration, respect. Everything except for love. Jamie, who couldn't tie his shoes right, was the one who managed to not only find love but keep it alive for years. The irony wasn't lost on Paul. So, the next thing he knew, he was standing in Kendall's kitchen and Louie was pointing a gun at the middle of his chest.

Right now, about the last thing he felt like doing was sitting around drinking coffee. He went along with Louie because he didn't know what else to do. At the house, he'd been reluctant to leave. He just didn't think leaving the scene of a murder was a good idea. He still wasn't convinced, although he admitted Louie made a fairly good argument that waiting around for the police was a pretty bad idea. She was also true to her word, and called one of her friends on the police force not long after they left the house. At least it made him feel a little less like a criminal. Little being the operative word.

If running away before the police arrived wasn't bad enough, Paul had never seen a dead body before. His stomach still rolled when he thought about the pretty young girl and the dark, red blood around her body. It was nothing like television and movies portrayed it. To call it surreal was an understatement. He hoped he never encountered anything like it again and if he did, he hoped to be better armed than with his favorite hockey stick. The sight of Paul and his stick might make goalies quake in their skates, but he doubted he or the stick, would be very effective against, say, a nine-millimeter Smith and Wesson or perhaps a Colt 38.

He picked up the heavy brown mug and sipped scalding hot coffee. Terrible didn't begin to describe the taste and even worse, it burned his tongue. What he really needed was a beer or better yet, a nice stiff whiskey. Anything to dull the memory of that poor girl sprawled on the kitchen floor, surrounded by a bloody halo. *Yeah, some big macho guy I am.*

He looked up to see Louie studying him, her eyes narrowed and her mouth a thin

line. "You haven't seen anything like that before, have you?" she asked.

Great, now she was reading his mind. There were a couple of options available as far as he could see. He could lie and try to sound tough. Or, he could 'fess up and be honest. Option two seemed better. Death wasn't his business and trying to pretend otherwise was stupid. Besides, he didn't feel the need to lie to her. There was something about Louie that made him want to trust her.

The truth was simple. "No."

A sad smile crossed her face and, as odd as it was given their circumstances, it occurred to him she was really quite beautiful. Auburn hair curled around her face, and her skin was pale and flawless. She didn't wear makeup or if she did, it was so light as to not show.

She was in a tough field where nerves of steel and unflinching determination weren't optional. The job could easily harden a person both physically and mentally. He didn't see it in her. She was a dichotomy: tough as nails on one side, gentle and understanding on the other, although he suspected she'd argue about the latter. Reputations after all, were everything—something he knew from personal experience.

Louie looked down at the coffee mug she held between her hands. "I'd like to say I haven't either except I have. It's never pretty and it's never easy to take. Anybody who tells you different is lying through their teeth. And if they're not, I'm telling you right now, be very, very afraid."

He didn't have a bit of trouble agreeing with the sentiment. Still, something nagged at him and refused to accept the comfort she offered. "We should have stayed."

No matter how long they sat there, no matter how he rationalized it, he couldn't get out of his mind it was wrong for them to have left. Responsible people didn't run away. People like Paul didn't run away. Granted, he'd never been a witness at a murder scene, but it still seemed like they should have stayed until the Spokane Police arrived.

She reached out and put her hands around his. They were warm.

"In a perfect world I'd agree with you. This unfortunately is far from a perfect world and I have no intention of spending the whole night in the police station being asked questions I don't have answers to. All I can do is speculate on what happened and that's the best you'd be able to do as well. I doubt the police would believe us any time in the next, oh, say twenty-four hours. We'd sit in interrogation rooms for hours and hours repeating the same thing over and over again."

Paul pulled his hands free and leaned back in the booth. He ran his hands through his hair, stopping to massage his temples. She was right, at least in some respects. They'd stumbled on a crime scene after the fact, and wouldn't be able to provide any helpful information. Wasting a night downtown in the bowels of the Public Safety Building wouldn't help the police or get them any closer to Jamie. In reality, all it would do would be to put them further behind. Jamie already had the jump and Paul didn't want to give him any more time. If there was one thing Jamie was good at, it was running.

Paul hedged only because he wasn't ready to jump on board a hundred percent. "You might be right," he grumbled.

"Your brother..."

"He didn't do this." As angry as he was with Jamie, Paul was quick to leap to his defense, and wondered why. Maybe it was a case of old habits dying hard. He'd been defending Jamie since they were little kids. It was okay for Paul to kick the crap out of

his younger brother, but it wasn't all right for anyone else to do it.

"I didn't think he did," she told him, sounding matter-of-fact.

"Jamie might be stupid about some things ... plenty of things really. He's a fuck-up of major proportions. Thing is, as screwy as he is, he'd never hurt someone he loved."

"I believe you." Her words were calm.

Her gaze met his and the sincerity he saw reassured him. It wasn't all he noticed; there was something else on her mind. Short as their time together had been thus far, he could still detect a hold-back when he saw it. He'd spent most of his life learning to read faces on the ice. Reading them off the ice really wasn't all that much different.

He leaned forward, put his hands on the table and called her on it. "You know who did."

"I don't know the name, but I have a pretty good idea. It has to be the people your brother was working for. Violence is a routine part of the drug trade."

His laugh was bitter. "Leave it to Jamie to get himself involved with murderers."

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "Paul?"

"Yeah?" He liked the way she said his name. Liked even more the feel of her hand on his.

"We have to start thinking. If they're this quick to violence, then your brother is far from safe. Whatever he got himself mixed up in, I think it's beyond the dope the feds confiscated."

"The thought already crossed my mind." In fact, it had been on his mind since the phone call came in telling him Jamie failed to show up for his hearing. He just hadn't wanted to verbalize it. Somehow to say it out loud made it a little too real.

"Good, then we're on the same sheet of music here. We're not going to have much time. We have to find your brother and fast."

He was about to agree with her when a sudden, horrible thought occurred to him.

"What about my parents?"

## Chapter Four

Paul McDonald was the real thing: a genuine, good old-fashioned nice guy, a stark contrast to the person portrayed in the newspaper articles Louie'd pulled up on him. He was incredible on skates, a pro player with throngs of hopeful women waiting outside the locker room doors, and legions of fans with his jersey on their backs. He was the *it* guy until an injury pulled the plug on his career. Or at least his career as a player. He seemed to have made the transition from player to coach with the smoothness of a seasoned professional. Bottom line, Paul McDonald loved the game of hockey and found a way to stay in it even when he couldn't be a player.

Now, he sat in the cold light of the all-night restaurant, his face a pale testament to his discomfort with violent death. His look, one that couldn't be faked, went a long way toward easing her mind. She'd walked away from his office earlier not completely convinced he was on the up and up with her. He may have been truthful with her, but there was always the omission factor. What was it he didn't tell her? He came across sincere enough and yet, who could blame him if he tried to protect his little brother? Blood was thicker than water. She wouldn't blame him for protecting his brother; she'd be a hypocrite if she did.

Her fingers wrapped around his, and she stroked the cool skin on the back of his hand with her thumb. Though he tensed when she first touched him, he didn't pull away. She found that somehow comforting and even a little exciting. She didn't typically touch a client's family members. Not exactly professional, and it was always wise to keep things professional. Or not.

She continued to hold his hand.

"Come on." She finally, reluctantly, let go and slid out of the booth to stand. "Let's check on your parents."

"I've got my cell." He started to dig in his pocket.

She shook her head. "Not in here. Too many people."

"Yeah, maybe you're right." He followed her to the door.

Outside the night had become dark and the air cold. Fall was coming. Each day grew a little shorter and a bit cooler. Louie took a deep breath. She treasured this time of year. Loved the way the breeze kissed her skin and the air smelled clean and fresh. Not far in the distance, was the splash of ducks as they paddled in the nearby Spokane River. She felt alive and peaceful. Or, as peaceful as she ever got anyway.

Over by the SUV, Paul leaned on the rear door and flipped open his cell phone. Worry lines creased his forehead beneath locks of wavy red hair. As he talked, the fingers of his free hand rubbed at one temple as if he was trying to massage away a migraine. She had the strangest urge to go to him, slide her hands along his cheeks where just the hint of stubble darkened his skin, and try to smooth away the concern. Probably not an urge she'd act on. The man already thought her capable of murder; she didn't want him thinking she was a nut-bag as well.

His conversation was brief. When he put the phone back into his pocket, the worry lines were gone. She walked over to him and, despite her best intentions to keep her hands to herself, put one on his arm. Warm, strong muscles tensed beneath her touch.

"Are they all right?"

"Yeah. Everything's quiet in Surrey. They haven't seen Jamie or anyone else, thank God. I told them to call me the second they set eyes on little brother. If they do. I also told them they needed to leave the house and why."

"Are they going?" She hoped so. Some failed to really grasp the danger they could be in when one of their family members played with the devil, like James McDonald had managed to do. Bad things could and did happen to people whose only crime was to be related to a screw-up.

He nodded. "It surprised me Mom didn't put up more of a fight. I guess the word murder did the trick. They're heading up to the cabin. It's remote enough no one will find them, without some experienced help anyway. I'm fairly confident they'll be safe there."

"Excellent." She liked the sound of "remote cabin." It wasn't a guarantee, but the folks pursuing James might not want to work that hard to get to the family.

He shifted from foot to foot, his intent gaze on her face. "Now what?"

Good question. She wanted to know more about the dead girlfriend, but there was little chance she'd get anything tonight unless she wanted to tell the police about her pre-911 visit. She didn't, which left her not much in the way of choices. She might still have friends on the job, but if they knew she'd been at a murder scene and left, it wouldn't go over well. Even friendship had limits when murder entered into the mix. The best choice, the only choice, was to go home, get some sleep, and hit it hard tomorrow.

"We go home," she told him with a shrug as she let her hand fall away from his arm.

The expression on his face could only be described as horror. "How can we do that? I mean, look what happened to that poor girl. If they're so quick to put a bullet in her, what's going to stop them from killing Jamie?"

She could sugar coat it, but why? Louie gave it to him straight. "Nothing."

"Then we've got to keep looking." He reached for the handle of the driver's door.

She put a hand on his arm again. "Not tonight. Right now, we're working blind and that's not good considering the stakes have gone up way beyond the bond money."

He shook his head. "No, I can't just go home. You do whatever you want. I'll keep looking."

She took both of his hands in hers. They were cold. "Paul. Go home. Get some sleep and I'll call you in the morning."

"I can't."

"Please."

He let out a big sigh, his green eyes intent on her face. "It just doesn't feel right. I need to be doing something."

She did understand. She also understood how futile the effort would be right at the moment. "I promise to call you first thing. We'll find him together."

*Crap!* Why had she said that? She worked alone. It was one of the beautiful things about her kind of work. She not only worked alone, she reported to no one. Not like when she was on the job where there were partners, superiors, and lest she forget, the politicians. For the last five years, she'd worked beautifully. Alone. Now all of a sudden one look into the fabulous green eyes of tall, red-haired, and handsome, and she made him a partner. So what if he was all those things and made her body buzz the second she touched him? Didn't mean she needed to invite him to hang around all the time. It was wrong on so many levels.



"You promise?" The hope in both his voice and his eyes made any thought of backing out impossible.

Louie sighed, let go of his hands and pulled her cell phone out of her jacket pocket. She flipped it open and looked up at him. "What's your home number?"

He told her and she programmed it in. "There." She showed him the display on her phone. "Now all I have to do is hit speed-dial and voila, we'll be connected in seconds."

He nodded. "All right, I'll go home. I expect to hear from you bright and early."

"It's a deal."

She opened the car door for him and he slipped in behind the wheel. Almost without conscious thought, she reached over and touched him on the shoulder. "I'll call you in the morning."

She watched him drive away. She'd have expected him to own a flashy car, a Jag perhaps or maybe a BMW. Instead he drove what she'd describe as a soccer-mom vehicle: a late model SUV. It made her smile. She liked this guy better by the minute.

No soccer-mom rig for her either. She opened the door to her 1970 Chevelle convertible and slid in. Before long she'd have to put the muscle car into storage for the winter. For now, she was enjoying the last vestiges of good weather. The raw horsepower of the machine and the way men drooled over the Black Cherry American muscle was hard to resist. Soon enough, she'd be in her foul weather ride, a four-by-four extended cab pickup, but until then, it was speed and power all the way home.

She had one more stop before she headed home. She pulled the car into the long driveway that curved between tall evergreens before it opened into an ample parking area. She stopped the Chevelle in the far corner, as far away from any other vehicles as possible. Door dings were not an option. The cost to repair those nasty little dents was outrageously expensive and something she went to great lengths to avoid.

Inside the big brick building located on the other end of the lot, Louie waved hello at the guard seated just inside the double doors. Low, sweet music played overhead. A subtle antiseptic smell pervaded the interior. At first it had bothered her. Now, it was strangely comforting.

"Hey Joe, how's life treating you?"

"Doing fine, Lou, and you?" Six-feet-six in his socks, Joe was a fixture in her world these days. She looked forward to seeing him and cherished his warm sense of humor. He could always make her smile and there were days when a simple smile made all the difference.

"Great. How's Abby?"

"Good as gold. Says to tell you hey and wondering when you're going to settle down with some fine man. You know have a kid or three." He was grinning as he said it.

Louie laughed. "Soon. Tell her real soon." Good thing Joe didn't see the way she had her hands all over Paul McDonald. It'd be all the ammunition he'd need to start making wedding plans for her.

"I'll give you away, ya know."

"I'm sure you will." She tapped the counter as she walked by laughing.

His laughter followed her most of the way down the first long hallway. Still smiling, she made a right at the T and kept walking. A few feet down this hallway and she could no longer hear Joe or the soft music. Instead, it was quiet except for a low mechanical hum. Like the smell of the place, the hum had also become a comfort to Louie.

The door she stopped at was second to the last. Here the hum was louder. Before she went in, she tapped her fingers twice on the door. She didn't really know why except she did the same thing each time she came here. Part ritual, part prayer. In the back of her mind, she hoped one day when she tapped twice on the door, Chris would tell her to come in. Tonight wasn't that night.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside. The lights were on near the bed positioned parallel to the large picture window. One of the efficient attendants had been in to draw the blinds shut against the darkness of the evening. She grabbed a chair from the corner and pulled it next to the bed.

"Hi, Bro." She took his pale, motionless hand in hers and brought it to her lips. She kissed Christopher's hand and then put it gently down on the sheet. He was thin and pale, his short dark hair a sharp contrast to his paper-white skin. His eyes were closed, as they were most of the time. Louie was torn between wanting him to open his eyes and fear of the emptiness in them if he did. Every day of the last five years she waited for Christopher to open his eyes, sit up and ask, "What've I missed?"

It hadn't happened yet and it didn't happen now. Instead, he lay unmoving in the bed as she spent the next hour telling him about James and Paul McDonald. She talked to him of her own thoughts and concerns as if he could hear and understand every word. Deep in her heart she hoped he did, and one day they'd look back on these days with a smile about the conversations held in the light of the lamp, alone in a room at the end of the long hallway.

Someday.

## Chapter Five

Jamie was scared and didn't know what to do, so he returned to Kendall's only to find it six feet deep in police. He'd told her he'd steer clear except he loved her and just wanted to see her one more time before he headed north. The reality that he might not be able to be with her for a long time hit him really hard and so here he was.

He'd come with absolutely no intention of going up to the house. His whole plan was to sit down the street and watch. That was all. Just look at her and know she loved him. If he could see Kendall again, he'd be able to work up the courage to make a run to the border.

Now, as he drove in the opposite direction, his entire body trembled. He drove slowly because he didn't want to draw attention to himself in any way, shape or form. A few miles from the house, he found a spot on the street in Browne's Addition where he was able to park the car. This part of town was full of large homes built in the early years of the city, many of which had been converted into apartments. Cars parked on the street garnered little or no attention because everyone who lived in the area parked on the street. The only ones who didn't were the people who lived in the newer high-dollar condos shoved between the old places. No one would notice Kendall's car for at least a day or two.

He was still shaking when he took a T-shirt out of his backpack and wiped the car down, trying to reach every spot on the car he'd touched. As soon as the police discovered her car wasn't in the garage, they'd come looking. They'd never believe she loaned it to him. Whoever believed him?

Once the car was as clean as he could get it, he tossed the rag in the back of a pickup truck parked a few cars ahead of Kendall's. In the gathering darkness, his jeans and navy hooded sweatshirt helped him blend into the night. He pulled the hood up. The damn red hair was worse than a flashing neon sign.

Both hands in his pockets, he put his head down and began to walk briskly down the street. He wanted to run. People ran all the time through the streets of Browne's Addition, just not usually in jeans and a hoodie. If he was in running gear, no one would take a second look. He wasn't, and they would. He had to be content with a brisk walk to put distance between himself and Kendall's car.

On the grassy knoll near the sign that defined the start of Browne's Addition, he sat on a bench with a view of the city. What a mess. When he first saw the police at Kendall's house, Jamie hoped it was because of something as simple as a break-in. His hopes and his heart were crushed the minute he saw the body rolled out of the house on a wheeled gurney that squeaked loud enough to wake every neighbor. Nobody needed to tell him it was Kendall. Nobody needed to tell him it was his fault she was dead.

How he got himself into this? Everything went wrong. Everything. And now his beautiful, sweet Kendall was dead. Tears ran down his cheeks. He wiped at them with the back of his sleeve, not caring that the fabric soon became soaked through.

The darkness grew deeper as he sat on the bench. Overhead, stars glittered like millions of diamonds, and the moon was a mere sliver of buttery yellow. Cars passed on the street and occasionally someone would walk by, many with a dog at the end of a

leash.

He should move except he didn't know where to go. A few blocks north was the area known as Peaceful Valley and it would be easy to hide along the banks of the Spokane River. But the night was chilly and he feared hiding there would be too cold.

At last, he got up and walked east, stopping in the center of the Maple Street overpass. Even at this time of night, cars traveled the bridge both north and south. He watched them for a long time as an idea grew.

In a crouch, Jamie inched beneath the Maple Street Bridge overpass where it curved down from Riverside Avenue. It smelled of things Jamie couldn't bear to think about. The toes of his sneakers kicked empty beer cans and broken needles. The only good thing was the hiding spot turned out to be deserted. It would have to do until morning. He sank to the dirt, cramming as far back into the shadows as possible and willed himself to become invisible.

The sound of cars driving across the bridge overhead was almost comforting in its steady rhythm. Every so often, someone would walk by on the sidewalk above. He'd hold his breath and then as they passed by, would let it out. Weariness finally overcame fear, and he drifted into an uneasy rest.

The shadows were thick when the sound of footsteps snatched him from sleep. He jerked and banged his head on cold steel. "Fuck," he muttered, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

The footsteps grew closer. He shoved his hands in his pockets. Nothing. Not a single thing to use as a weapon.

A bad smell reached him before a dark mound settled into the dirt not far from Jamie's feet. He tensed and waited, praying his bladder would hold. Every sound the intruder made sent Jamie's pulse racing. Minutes ticked by like hours punctuated by the rattling coughs of the man beneath the mounds of clothing.

Finally, dawn sent shafts of thin light to puncture the darkness beneath the bridge. Hunched against the damp cool air of the early morning, Jamie crawled out into the daylight. His legs were so stiff it was hard to straighten them. His back and shoulders ached.

Dirt stuck to his jeans and he brushed it away as best he could. He started to walk away and then stopped. Crouching, he peered beneath the bridge. In the morning light he was able to get a better look at his evening's companion. Throughout the endless night, a deep, rattling cough had shaken the huddled mass of clothing. Jamie still didn't know if he was young or old. He did know the man was sick.

The other man was still curled up in the shadows though now enough light cut into the space Jamie could see his dirt-streaked face. He couldn't have been more than twenty if he was even that old. What could have driven someone this young to the underbelly of the city? The cough made him sound like he was eighty and Jamie worried he'd die lying in the dirt.

"Hey," Jamie said to him. "I think you need to see a doctor."

The kid's blue eyes were watery as he looked up and shook his head. "No, man. I'll just lay here a while."

Jamie didn't like it. What could he do? He was in so much trouble himself that he wouldn't—couldn't—be much help. He did the only thing he could think of. He dug in his pocket and pulled out one of the fifty dollar bills. He held his hand out to the sick kid.

"Maybe some food and cough medicine?" Jamie suggested.

At first, the kid didn't move. His narrowed gaze seemed to assess Jamie's face. He didn't look at the money Jamie held out. Slowly, a hand came up and took the offered cash. "Thanks." The hand and the cash disappeared into the folds of what Jamie could now recognize as a grimy plaid jacket.

Jamie nodded and walked away as the echo of the man's cough faded. He hoped the money would give him a little comfort. He was already responsible for the loss of one life; he didn't want another one on his conscience.

With his head down, he walked west with no particular destination in mind until once more he stood on the overpass. He gazed down at the traffic on the bridge. The morning commute was gearing up. Hands stuffed into his pockets, he once more stared at the cars zipping north and south on Maple Street. Everything around him continued in a business-as-usual fashion. He wished his own life could be the same. Wishes didn't count for much.

The only upside was he'd made it through the night, but now he had to come up with a plan. He had to figure out how to stay alive.

\* \* \* \*

When Louie left the house, it was still dark, and barely light by the time she pulled up to the office. She wasn't surprised to find another car in the lot. By the looks of him, Paul hadn't gotten much, if any, sleep. His red hair was damp and it curled around the collar of his shirt. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he walked closer. Damn but he looked fine, and he sent a flush of desire washing through her.

"Did you hear from your brother?" She didn't see the point of niceties or of giving him any idea that her fingers itched to run through his curly damp hair. Instead, she lifted her chin and got right to the point.

He stopped a couple feet away and shook his head. "No, but I didn't expect to. Like I told you yesterday, I'm really the last person Jamie'd come to."

"Come on." She unlocked the rear entrance to the offices and held the door open. She caught a whiff of cologne as he walked by. Not bad. "I'll make us some coffee."

He made a face. "Thanks, but I don't drink coffee. It about killed me in that restaurant last night."

She stopped and stared. "How you can live in this part of the country and not drink coffee? That's just wrong."

He shrugged. "Never acquired the taste. Now beer is another story altogether, even your wimpy American beer." He smiled and raised his eyebrows.

She shook her head as she led him into her section of the office. A smile pulled up the corners of her mouth. She bypassed Harry's door, went right to her office and flipped on the overhead lights. Harry, a night owl, wouldn't show his face for hours. Of course, it seemed as though most of the calls for his services came during either the late night or wee hours of the morning, so it was probably a good thing.

Louie, on the other hand, was a morning girl. She liked nothing better than the early hours of the day when the sun kissed the hills with golden light. She adored the quiet and the solitude, the hope that came with the dawn of each day. For a person who often saw the worst side of people, she was perpetually hopeful.

And, speaking of solitude, she'd been counting on a couple hours of it when she

rolled in. A few calls to friends who were still with the Spokane Police Department might provide the edge she needed. She even had a friend or two with the feds and hoped to tap them as well. She might've walked away from a promising career in law enforcement, but she was bright enough not to have burned any bridges. Not that she went out under any kind of cloud or had even wanted to burn bridges. Her reason for leaving the job was one-hundred-percent personal.

Pretty much everyone had understood her decision, and for the most part supported her. Her hands would've been tied if she'd stayed on the force. Independence provided her all the freedom she required these days. She still earned a living with the time she needed to investigate. Oh, she knew no one had really given up on her brother's case, despite its status as a cold case, and that was all fine and good. If they found the bastard who left Christopher for dead before she did, great. If not, she'd be the one to take the son-of-a-bitch out. She'd take great satisfaction in doing it, too.

In meantime, she worked on jobs like the search-and-return mission of young Mr. McDonald. She wasn't above hauling him back by the ear if necessary. Usually it wasn't a tall order. After last night, she wasn't so sure about this one. Normal hunts didn't include dead bodies. At least not here in Spokane.

After she and Paul had left the house last night, she'd called 9-1-1 with the location of the murder. At the time, that was about all she could do. Today was a different story. Later she'd call her brother's former partner and see what info she could pry out of him. She really wanted to know what, if anything, the techs found during their sweep of the house. Not now, but after Paul left. Some conversations didn't need to be overheard.

Reaching into the small refrigerator next to the counter, she pulled out a bottle of water and tossed it to him. "Kind of boring but it's the best I can offer besides coffee."

He caught it and nodded. "Thanks."

"Did you sleep at all?" All things considered, he looked and smelled pretty good. Except around his eyes. Most people probably wouldn't even notice. She did.

He sighed and tipped his head back. "No."

A note in his voice caught her attention. When she first approached him yesterday he'd sounded irritated. A big brother who was sick and tired of little brother's annoying antics. This was different. Now she heard fear.

"Look." She came around from behind her desk to crouch in front of him, her hand on the arm of his chair. It was better to keep her hands on the furniture and not on the man. "I'll find your brother. It's what I do and I'm very good at it. You go home and rest. Be there in case he calls you."

He turned the bottle of water in his hands, his gaze downcast. "He won't call."

"You can't be certain of that. He's in trouble. He's in a lot of trouble and people do odd things when they're backed into a corner. I've seen it more than once."

His hands stopped and he brought his gaze up to meet hers. The bright green of his eyes sent a little thrill through her. "No, you don't understand. He won't call me. Not now. Not ever."

Maybe he was right. The McDonald brothers may have had a gulf between them too wide to cross. Even so, at the moment Paul needed some rest if he was going to be any help at all. Fatigue was not a friend when it came time to think and act sharp, especially for someone not in the business.

"Then go home, get some rest and after that, call his friends. Talk to your parents

again. Talk to anyone you think he might go to." So far, so good...she'd managed to keep her hands off of him.

He sighed. "I feel like I should be able to do more."

She lost the battle and reached up to lay her hand against his cheek. His skin was cool and clean-shaven. Her body tingled in places it hadn't for a very long time. She wondered what his lips would taste like. With sheer force of will, she kept her voice calm and even. "I'll find him, I promise."

His green eyes, tired as they were, held hers with a steady gaze. "He's my brother."

"I understand." And she did. Her voice was tender as she told him, "Go home, Paul. Get some sleep and then come back. We'll find him together."

He continued to study her face. His gaze fell to her lips and for a flash of a second she wondered if he also had the crazy urge to kiss her. A second later, his eyes met hers again and the moment was lost. He pushed out of the chair and walked to the back door. "I'll be back later."

She watched him through the window as he walked to his car and drove away. *Finally.* Alone at last. Time to turn away from wild thoughts of what it would be like to kiss a man she barely knew and work on finding James McDonald. She swiveled to face her computer, powered it up, and began to work. Over the next four hours, she only moved away from the computer to fill up her coffee mug. Unlike Paul, she thrived on good, strong, black coffee. And concentrating on something besides his hot body and kissable lips didn't hurt either.

"Hey good-lookin', find my boy yet?"

Harry stood in the doorway to her office, his big bulk filling it to capacity. Today he wore an indigo shirt with his standard blue jeans and boots. The dark circles under his eyes were just about the same color as the shirt. More and more over the last year, she'd noticed those circles darkening his face. He always seemed to look tired but when she'd ask, he'd blow her off saying he was sleeping just fine and feeling great. She didn't believe him.

He wasn't fine and she worried a little more every day. If anything happened to Harry, she'd essentially be alone. Both her parents were gone and with Chris locked in a silent world, she'd have no one without Harry. The thought made her shiver.

Theirs was a special relationship. She could talk to him about things she couldn't share with others. Her friends were willing to listen, but they had no way of relating. Most of them didn't know Chris very well; some had never even met him. Not one had ever faced life with a sibling who lay in a rehab center locked away from the world, courtesy of a gunshot wound to the head.

With Harry it was different. Chris and Harry had been in the Rangers together. They'd passed the grueling training together and that had linked them for life. When they'd left the elite corps and headed home, Harry had taken to the bonding business like a fish to water, while Chris found his niche with the Drug Enforcement Agency. Chris seemed to be born to a life as a fed. At the time, Louie's own career as a Spokane Police officer had been going great guns. She'd done her time on patrol and moved forward to work as a K9 officer. The training was incredible and her dog an absolute joy. Better than she'd ever imagined. Five years ago, everything looked great for all three of them.

One night, one moment, changed it all. A bullet in Chris's head had ended his career and hers. The day the SPD gave her brother's attempted murder a cold case status was the

same day she turned in her badge and gave up her dog. If they wouldn't continue to actively track down the sonofabitch who tried to kill Chris, she would. Harry'd been there to offer the perfect solution. Unlike her failed romantic relationships, he was the one guy she could always count on.

Now she was worried. Harry looked haggard and his weight concerned her more than a little. She wasn't ready, by a long shot, to be left alone in this world, so he better damn well get with the program. There'd be no heart attack on her watch. Louie was ready to tell him as much when he turned and walked away, his cell phone pressed to his ear. Well, so much for a motherly lecture. Just like Harry to wander off before even a hello came out of her mouth.

Her gaze shifted to the clock on the far wall. It was well past eleven. Where had the morning gone? She didn't have time to ponder that one either because the doorway just vacated by Harry was just as quickly filled with another man, equally tall but with far less girth. Paul McDonald stepped inside. He looked like a new man in a dark gray shirt tucked into a nice-looking pair of black jeans. A very nice pair of jeans. He turned to close the door, giving her a fine view of his backside. Off topic, she chastised herself. The last thing she needed was to get sidetracked by long legs and a great ass.

He made himself comfortable in the chair across from her desk. "What have you found?" he asked, leaning forward, his elbows resting on long legs.

Louie settled back in her chair and crossed her arms. "And hello to you too, Mr. McDonald."

"Paul." His reminder was given with a raised eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes. "Paul."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what've you found?"

"I know I told you to get some rest but if I'd known this is what sleep did to you, I'd have suggested you stay here."

He shrugged. "I do feel better and probably look better too, eh?"

Better didn't even begin to describe how he looked to her, but she'd be damned if she'd tell him. "If you're fishing for a compliment, you're fishing in the wrong pond."

He gave her a small smile that sent a spark rushing up her back. No wonder he had such a following. Damn, he was a looker. Maybe it was the red hair, a little long with a hint of curl. She wanted to touch it, to run her fingers through it, let it wind around her hand. Oh yeah, it was definitely the hair. Or the hot body. Or the deep voice. Or...hell, it was just about everything.

Again he shrugged. "No biggie. I'm really here to find my brother. I can find him by myself, I'm pretty sure of that. I just think you can help me track him down faster. I'm all for having a professional on the team."

"A professional? Is that a compliment?"

"Of course. You know, Ms. Russell, I wasn't born yesterday. I know a cop when I see one. Or in your case, an ex-cop, I presume."

"You figured that out all by yourself?" She didn't try to hide the skepticism.

He steepled his fingers beneath his chin and grinned once more. "Sort of. I had a hunch, and a friend who happens to be on the SPD confirmed it for me."

"Anybody I know?"



"Jason James."

"Ah yes, I do indeed know Jas. Tall, blond and usually pretty quiet." She would give him an ear full next time she saw old Jason. For a quiet guy, he certainly could tell tales when he felt the urge. Or maybe he was just bucking for box seats to a hockey game or two.

"Maybe around you. The guy talks trash non-stop on the ice. Rec league," he explained before she could ask. "A regular tough guy."

"All right, so you know who I am and I know who you are. Now that we're both on the same playing field, I'll get you up to speed. I made some calls of my own and talked to *my* friends on the force."

Her cell phone rang. She flipped the phone open and put it to her ear, recognizing the baritone of Fred Hawks right away. Fred was the lead detective on the murder of Kendall Stewart. As she listened, a frown pulled down the corners of her mouth. Louie expected things could get weird or convoluted; this was a case with that kind of feel to it. Never in a million years did she expect what Fred told her. She was still reeling as she closed the tiny phone and set it slowly back down on her desk. Both of her hands shook as she gazed across at Paul.

"What?" He was looking at her with narrow green eyes.

She shook her head. It still didn't make any sense. "This is crazy. Pure crazy."

"Come on, Louie, I'm not a mind reader."

She took a deep breath. "They just received the report on the bullet they recovered from Kendall Stewart's house."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, well...the match is highly consistent with a bullet from another crime committed five years ago."

"And that means what exactly?"

Tears formed in her eyes even though she willed them away. It shouldn't affect her like this! She was a flipping professional, and it had been five years. She took another deep breath. "It means whoever killed Kendall Stewart also tried to kill my brother."

## Chapter Six

Louie spent an hour at the lab talking with the weapons expert about the gun and ammo used to kill Kendall and almost kill Chris. He was yet another friend from her SPD days who patiently explained his finding. From there she walked to the Public Safety Building, where she spent another two hours with Fred. By the time she drove back to her office, she felt like she'd been through a wringer. She hadn't stopped in front of a mirror all day and suspected she looked as bad as she felt. Not a big concern; she wasn't trying to impress anyone. This was work and nothing more, even if her new partner was a walking magazine cover. She could never live up to that anyway, and it wasn't like her mother hadn't tried.

Paul, who'd accompanied her, had been very quiet all afternoon, though he'd listened carefully to what he heard at the lab and from Fred. He seemed to take it all in, weigh it for importance, and then store it away for when he might need it. The strong, silent type; they were the ones to watch out for. And the ones who sent her blood rushing.

When they'd finished with Fred, she managed to convince Paul to go home again. He was all set to be her 24/7 shadow. Yeah, she could use his help, at the very least pick his brain for the little details on James to keep her from wasting valuable time off on the wrong track. And yeah, he was easy on the eyes. But there was something about the ex-hockey stud turned coach that set her nerves on edge, and not in a bad way. It was damned freaky, if the truth be told.

Eons had passed since she'd felt drawn to a man, and never, never when she was involved in a case. Of course, the fact she never went to bars or clubs, hardly ever hung out with her friends anymore, and worked with only one man, Harry, meant she rarely met an eligible guy these days. Assuming Paul McDonald was even eligible. The more she thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed he'd be unattached. He was just too...*everything* to be on his own. At least that's the way he seemed and she wasn't a bad judge of people. She was pretty darned good as a matter of fact.

"Cut it out, Russell," she muttered.

"Cut what out?"

Her cheeks blazed red at the sound of Harry's voice. Where did he come from? Trying to look unfazed despite the flush in her face, Louie looked up and smiled. Not a hard thing to do. Harry always made her feel safe and comfortable. Smiles came easy when she was with her best friend.

"Ah, nothing, Harry. I'm just talking things out, you know."

Harry's intense gaze stayed on her face a breath too long. He wasn't buying what she was selling. Thankfully he took the high road and didn't push. She let out the breath she held.

He said, "Gotcha. Do the same thing myself now and again. So, how's it going with our little friend McDonald? Clock's ticking, ya know."

"Trust me, Harry, I hear it ticking loud and clear." She leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Right now, it isn't going well. Last night McDonald's girlfriend or friend or whatever she was, got herself dead."

"No shit?"

"I shit you not."

He leaned against the door, his fingers turning a toothpick he held between his teeth. "Murder or suicide?"

"I'd personally put my money on murder."

"That sucks for her."

"Yeah, well, it gets worse. Whoever killed Kendall Stewart appears to be the same person who tried to kill Chris."

"Ya sure?" Harry sounded as amazed as she'd been.

Louie nodded and ran her fingers through her hair. All of a sudden she felt very tired. "It may not be the same person, but it is very definitely the same gun."

"Well, crap. What's that about?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. This James McDonald thing doesn't fit to begin with, and now this new wrinkle...well, I don't like it. This was supposed to be an easy case, Harry." She pointed an index finger in his direction. "I think you suckered me."

He continued to turn the toothpick in his mouth. "Hey, baby girl, I thought it was an easy one too. Maybe you should let the feds and the police handle it and we'll just collect on the bond." He took the toothpick out of his mouth and tossed it into her trashcan.

She frowned. "No, Harry. No. I said I'd bring James back and I will. If I quit tracking him because it's too hard or too dangerous, I might as well quit altogether. I can go back and be a desk jockey at the police department."

Harry laughed. "That'll be the day. You go back to the SPD? You may have left on good terms, baby girl, but go back? It'll never happen. The problem is now you've had a taste of this life and you'll never be able to go back to the constraints and the politics. They'd welcome you with loving arms and you, my pretty little partner, would end up hating every second of it."

She couldn't argue with him or his logic. She still had friends at the SPD who'd love nothing better than to have her return. A time or two during the last five years the thought had crossed her mind. She missed some of the action. She missed her dog. The thought of returning only lasted a few seconds. Harry was dead on. She loved what she did now and cherished the freedom it gave her. She'd never felt as empowered or alive as she did since becoming a bail enforcement agent. It would be a hard thing to give up. No, hard wasn't the right word. Impossible was more like it.

Harry continued, "Seriously, Lou, I'll pay the bond and the folks can ante up. It happens all the time. I say when folks start popping up dead, it's time to let the boys with the big guns take over. We're just the hired help, after all."

"No." She pushed up from her desk and slipped her keys into her pocket. "I'll find him and bring him back. Trust me, I'll do it."

What she didn't add was that when she got her hands on James, the two of them were going to have a nice long chat *before* she turned him into the feds. He'd tell her who wanted him bad enough to kill—a name she'd been waiting five years to hear.

She gave Harry a quick hug as she walked past him, loving the spicy scent of the spendy cologne he liked to wear. At the same time she wondered if he wore it because he had a date tonight. Good for him if he did. He was almost as bad as Louie when it came to solitude. A date wouldn't hurt either one of them.

\* \* \* \*

Time pressed at him with the force of a migraine. He never expected it of little James. If they were in the middle of a business transaction, James' cleverness would please him. He liked his people to move around unnoticed. Stealth was a good thing. Of course, if James had done that, he wouldn't have landed his little pale butt in jail. The arrest became a dangerous problem for all of them, not just for McDonald.

If he didn't get this cleaned up and soon, there'd serious and far-reaching complications. The old saying that shit rolls down hill applied here. Despite being up the food chain a fair notch, he was still a middle man, and there were others far more powerful than he. Those people wouldn't take it well if James wasn't neutralized soon. He didn't need the shit burying him. He hadn't come this far to be taken down by one careless Canadian.

He liked his life and the way things were. He had the freedom to do what he loved most and he wasn't ready or willing for a change. James would be found and taken care of. Once, there might have been choices on how to deal with him. Not any longer. James forfeited his options the same day he took off. The feds do not take it well when the indicted decide to run. Neither did he.

He was thinking about how to handle things when the phone next to him rang. His eyes narrowed. Caller ID showed a number he never expected to see on this line. He thought about not answering and then changed his mind. He didn't want to take the call. He didn't want them to think there was a problem either.

"Yeah."

"Have you found him?" The deep voice was cultured and succinct.

This was not good. "No, and why are you calling me on this line?"

The response was slow, unconcerned. "We aren't worried about calls being tracked to you; we're more concerned about Mr. McDonald."

His face felt warm. Nothing like the old blood pressure taking a spike. "So am I, and I'd appreciate it if you'd call the cell. The throw away phone can't be traced. This can."

"Are you going to handle things there or do we need to bring in someone to clean up your mess?" The mild tone to the caller's voice was gone. Venom now ran through his words.

The underlying threat wasn't hard to figure out. If they brought in a cleanup guy, he would find himself swept out with the rest of the trash. "No," he snapped. "I'll take care of this."

"Be sure that you do and make it soon."

He slammed the receiver down and took a long, deep breath. He better find the little snot and soon, or trouble would roll in like a tsunami. Turning to the computer, his fingers began to move over the keyboard. Time for a thorough search on the family of one James McDonald.

"Okay, little boy," he said to the screen. "Come out, come out wherever you are."

\* \* \* \*

When Louie walked outside, Meg was sitting on the lower step of the entry to the apartments. Her face was haggard and very unlike her normally cheerful countenance. Worry shot through Louie like a hot poker.

"Meg?" Louie changed direction and headed away from her car.

"Happy day, beautiful." Meg smiled and tipped up her face. Today she looked much

closer to her eighty-seven years than Louie could ever recall. Beneath her sparkling eyes, dark circles stained her skin. She wore an old sweater wrapped tight around her body.

Louie frowned. Meg might be smiling, but she was far from happy. "What's wrong?"

Meg reached out and touched Louie's arm with ice cold fingers. The sun was going down behind the far mountains, and the day was quickly fading into darkness. Even so, the air was still warm enough to be comfortable. Meg's hands shouldn't feel like she'd just spent the afternoon in the North Pole.

"Nothing, child. Just sitting here to enjoy a bit of fresh air. My apartment was too stuffy tonight. I needed to get out for a little while. Sometimes, the walls just close in on me."

Louie wrapped her fingers around Meg's hand. It felt tiny and fragile in hers. She hoped to infuse some warmth into her friend. "Your hands are so cold."

Meg's smile turned sad. "Chalk it up to the ravages of time. The heart is still young, child, even if the body trembles and fades with each year. Not the quick, hot young thing I used to be."

"You're not fading, but you are freezing. Come on, let me help you upstairs and get some warmth back into your bones."

"No, Louise. I just want to sit and let the last of the sun warm me for a little while before it disappears behind the mountains. There will be a day when I'll no longer be able to watch the sunset. Can you see how beautiful it will be tonight, with the brilliant blues and crimson reds? It's the majesty of the Good Lord's best work."

Louie hadn't noticed the sunset, not that it was unusual for her to be oblivious. She was typically on a dead run, and to take the time to sit and watch a sunset was not in the cards for her. Still, tonight she stopped and looked. Meg was right; it was going to be spectacular. It was as if someone hand-painted the sky in deep, magical hues. Breathtaking.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

"Nature at its finest."

Her attention didn't stay on the sunset long. Louie didn't like the way Meg sat on the hard steps all wrapped up like a frightened child. There was nothing comfortable about the staircase; it was downright painful. "If you want to stay here and watch, at least let me go grab a chair for you. It'd be so much more comfortable than the steps."

Meg shook her head. "No, again. I'm only going to sit here for a little bit and these old steps are just fine."

"Are you really all right?" She needed to leave, and yet wanted to stay here to make certain Meg was okay. It felt somehow wrong to go with Meg huddled on the bottom step.

"I'm fine, now scoot and leave this old woman to enjoy her sunset in silence. Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?" Meg smiled at her.

"Oh, Meg." Louie leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "You're a treasure. I'll check on you in the morning and I better find you upstairs with a nice cup of tea."

Meg patted Louie's hand. "I'll see you at seven. I have a lovely Earl Grey straight from jolly old England I think you'll like."

"Jet-setting again, are you?"

"No, no little one, I ordered it off the internet," she said as if it was the most natural thing in the world for her to have done.

"Of course you did." Meg never ceased to amaze Louie. Nothing passed her by, not current events, not politics, and certainly not technology. Of course, neither had time, and it was never as clear to Louie as tonight.

As Louie walked away, Meg tipped her head to the late afternoon sun, the warm light spilling onto her wizened face. Louie took one more glance at her friend before she got into the car. Meg really was a treasure and one Louie worried about. She didn't relish the thought that one day, possibly one day soon, she could come out of her office and Meg would no longer be sitting on those steps. It made her heart ache and her throat constrict.

Twenty minutes later she sat next to Christopher's bed filling him in on the day's details. She told him all about her information search on James and his girlfriend. She told him about the ballistic findings, her conversations with the lab tech and her buddy Fred. She explained it all, including her ideas on what was happening in the James McDonald case.

"It's all about the Medicine Man, Chris. The bastard got you shot and Kendall Stewart killed. You always taught me that real coincidences are few and far between. I don't believe this is one now. James McDonald is going to take me to the Medicine Man. I'll find the bastard," she promised her motionless brother. "And he'll pay for what he did to you and to Kendall Stewart."

Enough said about justice and revenge. Louie moved on to other things. She talked at length about her friend Meg and the way time was catching up with her. When Louie finished up her stories at last, silence fell. She didn't want to leave, even if she had nothing left to share. Her house was dark and quiet. No one there to keep the lights on. No one there to care if she came home or not. So, she sat with Christopher for another half an hour just holding his hand. She believed deep down Chris knew he wasn't alone and it gave her comfort.

Night settled deep and black outside the big window. The wind picked up outside, and the branch of a nearby tree tapped softly against the glass. She got up, closed the blinds and put the chair back into the corner. His cheek was warm when she leaned over and kissed him. Like their mother used to do when they were children, Louie put the back of her hand against his forehead. A little warmer than he should be. Damn. Chris didn't need a fever. Any tiny illness could be the catalyst to his final resolution, and she wasn't anywhere near ready for that.

For five years, faith had kept her afloat. Faith that one day Chris would open his eyes and return to her. He was all she had left and she wasn't about to let go of Chris ... or hope.

Before she left the care facility, Louie made a quick stop at the nurse's station to ask them to check on Chris. The care providers were the best, and she had every confidence they would keep a close eye on her brother. After five years, most of them were like family and treated Chris the same way. As much as she hated to leave him there day after day, there was a certain amount of comfort in it at the same time.

As the doors whispered shut behind her and she walked across the darkened parking lot to her car, a weariness she hadn't felt for years settled throughout her whole body. All she wanted to do was get home and sleep for days.

She pulled into her driveway and hit the button of the garage door remote. Nothing happened. "Damn it," she muttered. She'd known for days the remote battery was weak and had tried to remember to replace it. Obviously that little chore hadn't gone so well.

She wondered what she'd be like when she got old if she couldn't remember one nine volt battery at this age.

Sighing, she parked in the driveway, got out of the car, and walked to the front door. The street was quiet except for the rustle of leaves and bushes pushed around by the wind. She guessed that the cool weather had sent the kids inside as soon as darkness descended. She missed the summer days when she could hear pick-up games of basketball or the shouts of players in a street hockey game. She even liked those silly little scooters the kids would buzz by on. How much fun would she and Chris have had with one of those? Tonight, there wasn't a scooter in sight. The street was as deserted as her home. Soon, the cool days would give way to ice and snow. She didn't look forward to winter.

As she moved to unlock the door, Louie dropped the ring of keys. "Crap." Her muttered curse covered more than just the fallen keys. Would this night ever end? All she wanted to do was get inside, put her feet up, and have a good stiff drink.

When a large hand reached down from behind her to pick up the dropped keys, Louie screamed. She shoved a hand inside her jacket to grab her gun and then whirled around to find Paul McDonald on the step behind her, the dropped keys dangling from a fingertip. His green eyes were full of concern.

"Let me," he said and reached past her to put the key in the lock.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie sat on the back porch steps for a long time. The wide steps ran down to meet a tidy yard ringed by crimson fire bushes. Returning to Kendall's was beyond stupid and into dangerous, but he did it anyway. At least he took the alleyways rather than the front sidewalks. He didn't want to draw any unwanted attention. Or, any more unwanted attention than he'd already managed to get.

Chewing on a fingernail, Jamie wondered what to do next. He needed to know if the police had found anything in Kendall's house that might lead them to him. It was bad enough they'd look for him because he failed to appear in court. He didn't need them to think he was the one who killed his beautiful Kendall. They had to know he would never, ever do that.

At Kendall's, police tape was stretched across the back door. He stared at it for a long time before he went to a basement window. He knew it was loose. Even though he'd promised Kendall for months he'd fix it, he never had. Like so many other promises he made to her, he hadn't followed through.

He pushed the window open and slid through. He was as familiar with the basement as with the rest of the house, but fumbling around in the dark had him bumping into old furniture and boxes. By the time he reached the stairs to the kitchen, he'd smacked his knees at least a dozen times. His legs would be a mass of bruises.

At the door to the kitchen, he felt around the ledge just inside until his fingers touched the flashlight Kendall kept there for emergencies. He pushed the switch and the light came on. The basement looked the same as the last time he'd been here. Somehow, it didn't feel the same.

In the kitchen, he was careful not to step in the dried blood. He choked back tears. He wouldn't cry. Kendall wouldn't want him to. The smell almost made him gag, but he forced that down as well. He'd be strong for her. He owed her at least that much.

Down the short hallway was the bedroom where he spent so many nights in Kendall's arms. He swung the light in through the door, focusing it on the oak nightstand. It was empty. Jamie walked in and sank to the edge of the bed. A slight trace in the dust was the only sign a photograph once stood there. The picture was of the two of them in the Manito rose garden last year. He remembered the day because it was one of the happiest in his life. There'd been acres of green grass and roses of all colors in bloom around them. The stone fountain had sent a gentle spray of cool water through the air and onto their faces. They'd both been smiling and in love.

Now, the picture was in the hands of Spokane Police Department. If they didn't know about him before, they did now.

He looked at the phone on the nightstand for a long time before he picked up the hand set. He punched in six numbers and paused, questioning whether he should make the call. After a long moment, he punched in the final number.

With each ring, Jamie's nerves grew tauter. What would he say? What could he say? After the fourth ring, the call went into voicemail.

*"Hello, you've reached Paul McDonald. Sorry I can't catch your call right at the moment but leave me a message after the tone and I'll call you back as soon as I can. Talk to ya later."*

Jamie paused, listened to the beep and then put the receiver back down. He didn't bother to wipe his fingerprints. What'd be the point? Everyone was looking for a piece of his hide anyway. He didn't know which would be worse, the good guys or the bad guys.

When he heard the sound of voices outside the bedroom window, he jumped as if burned. Quickly, he doused the light and sat as still as a statue. What else could go wrong? He listened and let out a sigh of relief when he realized the voices came from the next door neighbor's house. He was still safe.

Then again, there was no sense tempting fate. Time to get out of Dodge. He took a quick look in the drawer where she kept spare cash. It was empty. Either she'd given him everything she had at the house or the police had seized her small stash. He was disappointed. The cash would have come in handy, and she wouldn't need it now.

Back in the kitchen, he sucked in a quick breath. No matter how much time passed, he'd always have the sight of the blood-stained tile seared into his memory. His beautiful, loving Kendall died for no other reason than that he was a fool. As long as he lived, that painful knowledge would weigh on his heart.

Tears threatened, and he stuck his hand in his pocket to pull out the napkin he'd picked up earlier at a coffee shop. With it came the business card from the bail bonding company. It floated to the floor before sliding beneath the stove. Jamie ignored the card and wiped his eyes with the napkin before putting it back in his pocket. He should probably retrieve the card but what the hell for? The thing slid so far under the stove, no one would see it anyway.

Instead, he looked around the darkened house. A vase on the table held a dozen dried, long-stemmed red roses—roses he'd given her on Valentine's Day. The look on her face the day he brought them to her was worth a million bucks. He'd felt like a king.

He glanced at the sofa where they'd sat side-by-side and watched movies, television, and hockey games. There was little better than a Saturday movie with Kendall curled up at his side. Tears filled his eyes once again.

"Goodbye, Kendall. I love you."



He put the flashlight back on the stairway ledge, closed the door to the kitchen and made his way through the basement to the same window he'd used to crawl in. Once outside, he pulled it closed and secured it as best he could. Maybe someday he'd come back and fix it

He had nowhere else to go and no one to turn to. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he pulled the hood of his sweatshirt up to keep his red hair under cover. He stood outside for a long time. The only place he could think of to go was that cold, dirty spot beneath the bridge.

\* \* \* \*

When he'd first noticed Louie at the arena, Paul initially thought was she was another no-nonsense woman doing double-time to succeed in a male-dominated world. He knew the type well: tough as nails and pushy. He understood it was difficult at best to break into a field long seen as an exclusive haven for men, and gave women credit for crashing boundaries. For breaking the old glass ceiling. Everyone deserved the chance to do what their heart called them to do.

Still, respect for their ambition aside, he also found they weren't usually his type. He was more into a friend and a lover, not a competitor. Day to day he was in a world competitive enough and had lived there since childhood. He didn't want to come home to it as well, and if that made him old-fashioned, then so be it.

Louie Russell was different from any woman he'd met before. She was tough all right and entirely focused, just like the job required. At the same time, there was a kindness to her that surprised him. She was a world away from the tough, hard-drinking, chain-smoking stereotype of a bounty hunter, man or woman. She had a gentle face and eyes as expressive as they were beautiful. Every time he looked into her eyes, he felt an insane urge to pull her into his arms and crush his lips to hers.

If she'd intrigued him that first day, today did nothing to lessen the feeling. Earlier, she'd sent him on his way, an odd thing for him, since he was typically the guy who gave the orders. Needless to say, he wasn't real good at following orders, at least not these days.

In his playing days, he'd been a team guy. It was the only way to win and winning was important to him. Now, he was the chess master; he made the decisions and called all the moves. At least until Louie had walked into his life. She seemed to be the one handing out the orders.

Except ... he hadn't exactly followed her directions. He'd gone to his car all right, but he hadn't left for the arena or home. Instead, he'd parked about a block away from Louie's office and waited. When she'd left, so did he, a discreet distance behind her. For the first time ever, he was tailing someone. A little James Bond in an SUV, though not quite as suave or cool as Bond.

He'd expected her to go home or perhaps visit one or two of Jamie's favorite haunts to try and get a bead on him. If he was the hunter, that's what he would done. Of course he wasn't the hunter, and once again his expectations were way off base. The rehabilitation facility she disappeared into raised his interest level to all an all time high. What or who was inside the low brick building?

When Louie had reappeared a little under an hour later, the pain on her face was all too clear even under the harsh glow of the parking lot lights. Her shoulders slumped as if

the weight of the world rested on them. The confidence and the bravado he'd witnessed thus far was nowhere to be seen. A curious turn of events.

Once he followed her to the house, the last thing he'd intended to do when he walked up the steps behind her was to scare her. Stealth wasn't what he'd been going for at all. She just didn't hear him. He didn't, however, miss the movement of her hand.

Considering there was a rather large gun inside her jacket, Paul was lucky he wasn't lying on the green grass of her front yard with a big fat hole in his chest.

Fortunately, her hand jerked away from her waist and he assumed she'd decided not to shoot him. Lucky for him. Provided, however, his assumption was right. He wasn't quite as good at making assumptions as he was at making goals.

"What're you doing here?" Her voice trembled with a slight edge. He wasn't sure if it was fear or anger. What he noticed was that her face still held the same hint of sorrow he'd glimpsed at the rehab center. The kind of sadness that came directly from the heart. Who had she gone to see?

With her hand still hovering near the gun, he wasn't about to ask. It was better to stick to the basics and keep her gun hand outside of the jacket. "I wanted to talk to you," he told her.

Her brow furrowed and her eyes grew even darker. "How do you know where I live?" Her words were tinged with a bit of ice.

"I didn't know." He might as well come clean. She'd find out sooner or later anyway. "I followed you."

Paul looked away from her face to turn the key in the lock and push the door open. He stepped back to let her go in first. She didn't move.

"You followed me." Her words were very slow. If she hadn't been angry before, she was now. In fact, he had the distinct impression she went right by angry and straight to furious. He didn't like the look on her face either, or the way she almost seemed to twitch. He kept one eye on the flickering hand.

He shrugged. "Yeah."

"What for?"

So much for the sadness. That was all gone in an instant and her eyes now blazed. Yup, he'd called that one. It wasn't anger he heard in her words, it was outright fury. It wasn't only in her voice, it also flashed from her dark brown eyes. This was one pissed off bounty hunter. Oops, bail enforcement agent. Great, he was just kept messing up.

The truth was his best defense. It was his only defense. "I want to be with you in case you find Jamie," he said, hoping.

\* \* \* \*

Of all the stupid, crazy things. The damn man had followed her. Who exactly did he think he was? A better question was: what wrong with her? She'd been doing this a long time now and not once had she encountered something like this. Lazy and sloppy...not to notice a tail was inexcusable. Not to notice an amateur tail was unthinkable. If this kept up, it'd be time to find a new career. She was as ticked off at herself as she was with him.

Through the haze of her anger, a sudden, uncomfortable thought occurred to her.

"How long have you been following me?"

His gaze was steady. "Since you left the office."

"Since I left the office?" She sucked in a deep breath.

He nodded. "Yeah."

Great, just flipping great. So he followed her to Christopher's care center and then here. Was nothing sacred in this world? Damn, damn, damn. It pissed her off royally. Cute as he might be, Paul McDonald didn't have the right to invade her personal life. And, he really didn't have the right to invade on her brother's life.

Only a handful of people knew where to find Chris and that was for his own safety. The asshole who'd shot him was still out there. Until he was found, Chris had to be kept safe. She worked hard to protect him. To think she was followed so easily and that she was the one responsible for putting her brother in jeopardy yet again made her furious. An unforgivable lapse.

As if he seemed to read her thoughts, he said. "I didn't mean to pry into your life. I only wanted to be with you in case you find Jamie before I do. That's all, I swear."

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. A hundred would be better. Ten would have to do. It worked, and the initial flush of fury dulled to a small roar. She opened her eyes again and met Paul's cool green ones. She could understand where he came from. If the shoe was on the other foot, she'd have done the same thing. If Chris was in trouble, she'd do whatever it took to help him. And wasn't that exactly what she'd been doing for the last five years?

She looked up at Paul and said, "It isn't a question of if, it's a case of when. I'll track down your brother and I'll bring him back to the feds." *And I'll know who tried to kill Chris.*

Paul nodded. "Good."

She stood, blocking the open doorway. "You don't have to follow me. I'll let you know when I find him."

"I believe you."

"Then why not go back home?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I just feel like I have to be here."

She wanted to stay angry with the man and couldn't. There was something very honest about him and it drew her in. His face was so sincere. She should probably remind herself that in his NHL days he was known as an ice hockey hottie with women dripping off his arms. He'd be a pro at sweet-talking and he might be playing her now. Maybe. Then again, maybe not. He seemed genuine and for the moment that was enough for her.

She should send him packing, so she surprised herself when she stepped aside and said, "Come on in."

She followed him through the open door and flipped the light switch, bathing the room in a warm luminescent glow. Even after all this time, she still wasn't accustomed to the quiet of her house at the end of a long day. After her initial stint on patrol, she'd spent her days on the force as a K9 officer and her dog, Butch, had lived with her. Butch was a fantastic drug dog, a seventy-five pound mutt she'd discovered at the Humane Society. Louie had been with Butch from day one, going through the training, the trials and the certifications. It was great, at least until Chris was shot. She left the force, but Butch hadn't. He was still working and she still missed him. The house seemed cold and empty without the spunky dog's company.

She could have gone out and found another dog to take the place of her canine partner. She hadn't; it wouldn't have been fair. The hours she kept now didn't lend themselves to sharing her life with a pet. There were times she didn't come home at all

and she wouldn't subject a dog or a cat to that kind of loneliness. She dealt with it herself.

"Nice place," Paul said, looking around.

"Thanks." She tossed her coat on a chair, took off her gun and laid it on a table with her keys. "You want a drink?"

"Well..."

"Yeah, you do. What's your poison? You like bourbon? I have a nice bottle of Jack Daniels."

He gave her a small smile. "Jack would be great. You want me to build a fire? It's little cool in here."

"Yeah, that would be nice. There's kindling on the hearth and a couple of logs. You build the fire, I'll bring the spirits."

She left him at the hearth while she headed to the kitchen. She pulled a couple of glasses from the cupboard, checked them for water spots and then filled them with ice. The glasses in one hand, the bottle of Jack Daniels in the other, she returned to the front room. An admirable fire blazed in the fireplace. Not bad for a jock. *Who would have thought he'd be so good with a fire. What else is he good at?*

The first drink went down easy and so did the second. Paul kept the fire warm and crackling while they talked like old friends for several hours. She sat on the floor in front of the hearth with her back against the sofa, the heat of both the bourbon and the flames lulling her into an easy relaxation.

Their glasses were almost empty when he got up to put another log on the fire. He didn't go back to the chair across from her. Instead he eased himself next to her on the floor. His long legs stretched out mere inches from hers, the nearness of his body sending a tingle down her arms. Had to be the Jack.

"Tell me about the rehabilitation center," he said, without taking his eyes from the blazing fire.

Louie put her head back against the sofa and closed her eyes. The air was warm and filled with the fragrant scent of the burning tamarack. Beside her, his body added to the heat. Did she want to talk about Christopher to a man she barely knew? Did she want to talk about Christopher at all, especially after the news on the bullet?

An hour ago she'd have said no way, no how. That was an hour ago. In this time and this place, she wanted to tell Paul about her brother. There were times when not talking about Christopher made her feel as though she'd explode. Next to Paul, relaxed and comfortable, Louie began to talk and the words flowed as though this moment was meant to be.

After she finished, a thick silence fell between them. He reached over and took her hand, bringing it to his lips. He pressed a kiss into her palm. Her whole body quivered at the touch, his lips hot against her skin. She didn't pull away.

"I'm sorry." He kissed her palm again.

Tears welled in her eyes and she willed herself not to cry. It wasn't like her to allow emotion to rule; it had to be the booze. Except, if that's all it was, why didn't she pull her hand away? The answer, even through the fog of bourbon was simple. Because she didn't want to. The feel of his lips was heaven.

"I wish..." He continued when she said nothing. "That I could feel the kind of love for my brother that you do for yours." The sadness in his voice touched her heart.

She opened her eyes and studied his face. He was serious. He didn't believe he loved

his brother any longer. She reached over and touched his chest with the palm of her hand. "You do, in here."

His green eyes were sad as they looked into hers, and he shook his head slowly. "No, I don't. It's just not there anymore."

Her hand stayed on his chest. She didn't believe it. His were not the eyes of a man who was cold and uncaring. She'd looked into eyes like that before. There were those who existed in the world whose hearts were, indeed, black. This man wasn't one of them.

"It is," she said. "It is."

He covered her hand with his and they stayed that way for a long moment. Then, he bent his head and kissed her, the touch of his lips as light as a feather. The sensation of his warm lips pressed against hers was unexpected, and at the same time, thrilling. She leaned into him and pressed her lips harder against his, her tongue slipping into his mouth. He tasted as good as he felt, and her pulse roared.

He pulled her close, a faint groan escaping his throat. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and her arms came around his neck. Her fingers touched the long red hair, so full and soft in her hands. It was everything she imagined. She wanted more.

She was a little shocked when he leaned away from her and brushed a stray hair from her eyes. "I think we've both had too much to drink."

He was right. Even so, she longed to kiss him again and to let herself forget the rest of the world for a little while. She'd earned it and it had been such a very long time.

But, if she did, she'd be sorry in the morning. Corny as it sounded, she wasn't that kind of girl. Hook-ups just weren't her thing.

"Maybe," she whispered.

"I should go."

She leaned her forehead against his and said, "I don't think so. You, Mr. Hockey Stud, have had too much to drink and will not be driving yourself home. I'd feel horrible if you ended up with a DUI after I fed you all the bourbon."

A smile lifted his mouth and once again she was struck by how really attractive he was. Her blood roared when he looked at her like that. Maybe she should rethink her stance on one night hook-ups.

"I'll call a cab," he told her.

"No way. I have a very comfortable sofa right here. Besides, that way you can keep an eye on me. Wasn't that what following me around was all about?"

"That it was. Well, if you don't mind..." His beaming smile made her heart skip a beat.

## Chapter Seven

It wasn't the brightest move he'd ever made and Paul felt it in every inch of his body. What in the world had they been thinking last night when they'd cracked the bottle of Jack? Jesus, how many drinks had they downed? Might not be a great idea to look at the bottle to see what was left. Argh, his head felt like someone had tap danced on his skull all night. His mouth didn't fare much better. Someone had obviously snuck in and stuffed it full of cotton while he was asleep. If he was actually asleep—hard to tell the difference between passed out and sleeping.

God, he hated feeling like this. Precisely the reason he rarely drank. He wasn't the playboy type. Hanging out in bars, picking up women, and drinking like a fish weren't his style now or during the height of his glory. It looked good in the tabloids or in the entertainment blurbs of the popular online news reports. It wasn't so hot for an athlete who was serious about the game.

These days he was lucky if he drank a single beer in a week. His life was a haze of meetings, hockey practices, spunky young players, and, of course, financial reviews with his accountants, the bean counters and their spreadsheets. It took a lot of money to keep a farm team alive and there were many days when Paul wondered what kind of insanity had gotten into him the day he bought the team. At least until he was back out on the ice with the kids, who were so full of enthusiasm and joy for nothing more than the game itself. That's when he remembered why he'd bought the team and why he stayed even when it seemed like more than one man could handle.

Last night was a rarity for him. He couldn't remember the last time he sat alone with a woman and enjoyed good bourbon and conversation. Everyone always wanted something from him. When he'd played, the coaches wanted goals and the women wanted a star along with the spotlight that came with it. Now, the parents of his young players wanted him to make their sons stars. There was no such thing as a conversation without an underlying agenda.

Until last night. Sitting by the fire with Louie had been pleasant in spite of the tragedy that had brought them together. And there was no doubt, at least in his mind, his brother's rash actions fell into the category of tragedy.

The longer he sat beside her, the more he was intrigued by her rare beauty. She wasn't the model or the beauty queen type, she was something much better. Her skin was clear and fresh, her short hair dark and full of shine. He was fascinated by her eyes when she talked, mesmerized by the life that seemed to jump and roar in them. He'd wanted to kiss her from the beginning and when their lips finally did meet, man oh man it had sent a fire right into the old pants.

That she was a willing, almost eager, participant warmed him through. She was responding to him, not the NHL star, not the coach, but to the man. And it felt fantastic, at least until rational thought shoved its way into his brain and he'd opted to take the high road. It sucked, no doubt about it, but until he had Jamie by the scruff of the neck, he needed to focus on more important things than his libido. Jamie first, and then he'd have all the time in the world to see where things could take them.

Everything in its time and the time would be later when this unpleasant task was

done. That seemed like a really good and lucid train of thought until he raised his head to see her standing in the doorway. In shorts and a plain cotton shirt, her long legs bare and golden, he just about swallowed his tongue. The high road was hard to take when a vision like that was a guy's wake-up call. One thing was certain, he wasn't about to stand up anytime soon. His eyes darted to the blanket and he raised one leg slightly. No need to broadcast what was going through his mind.

"Hey," she said with a small smile.

"Hey."

"I know you're not a coffee guy, so would you like some tea?"

"Yeah," he squeaked. Was that his voice? Great. So smooth. A little booze, a little kissy-face, and he turned into a guy with the nerves of a thirteen-year-old. *Get it together, McDonald.*

"Be with you in a sec." She turned away and disappeared back through the doorway into the kitchen.

Paul dropped his head down to the pillow and groaned. They'd better find Jamie and soon. If she kept looking like that, the high road be damned. He'd jump her bones like an over-eager frat boy.

\* \* \* \*

For a man who'd kissed her like a lover last night, he certainly was different in the light of day. Granted, he did look a little worse for wear, and she supposed the bourbon played a big hand in that. Wait, there was no supposing about it. Way too much liquor combined with cozy firelight had set the mood, and both of them had responded. She'd like to say she was sorry except she wasn't. It had been great. There were times when getting carried away with the moment was the right thing to do and last night was one such moment. She smiled all over again just thinking about the touch of his lips to hers. She'd like more of that, but maybe not right now.

Waiting for the tea to steep, Louie risked a peek around the corner. Paul's head was on the pillow, an arm thrown over his eyes. Damn, he looked good. Thinking about how he'd reacted to her a few minutes ago gave her pause. For a second there it seemed like he would jump right out of his skin. Twitchy, definitely twitchy. Never realized she had that kind of power over a man. Some tough hockey player he seemed to be. If he was going to shadow her on this hunt, he really was going to have to toughen up.

Then again, the end to last night was unexpected. She bet he felt the same way. They didn't really know each other, she was tracking his criminal brother, and they'd discovered a dead body. None of those things were particularly conducive to the start of a romantic relationship. And yet that's the way it felt the moment his lips touched hers: pure romance, not at all like a couple of strangers reaching out in an alcohol-enhanced moment. No, it truly had felt natural and real. That he pulled back and hadn't seized the advantage impressed her more than a little.

It took a lot to impress Louie; she'd seen and heard it all. If not during her days on the police force, certainly since becoming a bail enforcement agent. Every excuse known to man had been offered during the last five years, and she'd grown hardened in response. Or maybe she was just cynical. In any event, impressing her was not something done easily or often.

Before she'd announced her presence and asked Paul if he wanted tea, she'd studied

him for a few minutes. She didn't mean to spy. More than anything else, she was curious, or at least that's what she told herself. She was as intrigued with Paul McDonald as with any man. He kept surprising her, and she liked that about him.

With all the bourbon she poured down last night, she thought she'd drop like a rock once she hit the bed. Didn't happen. Instead, she kept seeing his green eyes and recalling the fabulous pressure of his lips against hers. She'd wanted more and was disappointed when he pulled away. Well, disappointed and awed. Most men she knew would have pressed the advantage and dealt with the fallout later. Not Paul McDonald, who took the gentleman's path.

This morning with his red hair tousled, and his long, muscular body stretched out on her sofa, she'd had the crazy urge to run in and jump on him. Considering the fact he was the brother of a man under federal indictment, that didn't make a whole lot of sense. Plenty of men expressed interest in Louie, and a couple who were even doggedly persistent. She'd dated one or two of them, and it had been fine. The difference between those men and the one on her sofa was simple: sparks. Not once did she experience the urge to jump on any of the others. Only one so far filled her with such want and a complete and utter disregard for consequences.

Once more the single word floated through her mind: crazy.

The tea she fixed now was little more than an excuse to get out of the same room. She'd really been afraid she'd do something to embarrass herself. A little time and a little space were in order. Give her that and she'd be rock steady Louie again.

By the time the tea had steeped, Paul was up and looking more like the man she met on the ice that first day. His green eyes were clear and though he was a bit on the pale side, he appeared to be making a full recovery.

They sat at the bar in the kitchen and drank the tea while chatting about his brother and what they'd do next. Neither one of them brought up the kiss or what it implied. It sort of hung between them, acknowledged though unspoken. As if either one of them mentioned it, the magic would be gone. So they drank tea, exchanged smiles and small talk as though nothing passed between them.

The tea polished off, Paul left and after Louie changed into jeans and a blouse, she headed over to her office. When she parked the Chevelle outside the brick building, she noticed that Paul's car wasn't in the lot.

She breathed easier. *Thank God for small favors.*

"Good morning, sunshine."

Louie turned and grinned but her smile faded as she got a good look at Meg. Her coffee-colored skin was gray and her eyes were hooded. Her whole body seemed smaller, almost folded in on itself. Louie ran to Meg's side and took one arm to help her up the stairs. Always thin, today Meg felt like little more than a shadow.

"Are you all right?" There had to be some reason her friend seemed to fade away before her eyes.

Meg patted Louie's arm. "Had better days, little one, but this too shall pass," she said.

Had better days? That was an understatement. Louie knew some really good doctors and she was certain they could do something to help Meg. "Maybe we should take a run to the doctor's office?"

Meg shook her head. "No, no, no. All I need is a little rest and I'll be good as gold."

Louie wasn't buying it. She'd never seen Meg look this haggard before. On most



days, she was a veritable ray of sunshine, a bundle of energy and good humor that Louie envied. Not today, and a feeling deep in the pit of her stomach told her this wasn't good. She couldn't just stand by and do nothing. There had to be something she could do. She helped Meg up the stairs and into the small apartment.

Louie got Meg settled into her favorite chair and made her a cup of steaming tea, the special Earl Grey ordered from England. She set it on the small table beside Meg and knelt in front of her.

"Are you sure you don't want me to call the doctor? I'll go with you."

Meg's smile held some of her usual brightness. She touched a frail hand to Louie's hair. "No, Louise, I don't want to visit the doctor."

"I think..."

Meg pressed a finger to Louie's lips, stopping her. "I'm an old woman and time, my dear sweet friend, takes its toll whether we want it to or not. The doctor cannot turn back the clock and make me young and vital again."

"He could help you feel better."

"Perhaps and perhaps not. This is what it is and I accept that. You'll have to do the same."

"I don't know."

Her smile was sad. "I've had my day, Louise, and it was good. Now, I watch time pass and wonder when I will join my dear sweet Henry. I don't believe it will be today, so please stop worrying. I'm going to be as fine as an old lady can be."

"I can't help but worry about you."

"And that's one of the reason I love you. I can't imagine how dull these last few years would have been without you around. You remind me of myself, little one. You are the kind of pistol I was in my day. You'll do something good for this world and I'll go to my maker glad you were my friend."

Louie smiled. She appreciated Meg's confidence in her even if it might be misplaced. She did know that having Meg as her friend made her a better person. "And right back at you."

Meg squeezed her hand. "Now get to work," she said. "You're wasting daylight, as my darling Henry would say."

"Yes ma'am." Louie saluted.

By the time Louie left the apartment, Meg was at rest in her chair, her eyes closed. Louie felt a little better, though not much. Despite Meg's protestations to the contrary, she looked ill and Louie didn't like it. She made a mental note to check on Meg more often and to ask Harry to keep an eye out as well. Friends like Meg were few and far between, and she didn't want anything to happen to Meg.

\* \* \* \*

Jamie knew it was stupid to even do this, but what choice did he have at this point? He had nowhere to run and no one to run to. They'd killed the one person who still believed in him. Now, she was cold and dead, and it was his fault. He was more alone than ever and he deserved to be.

Except for his brother. Paul would be furious, and even Jamie couldn't blame him at this point. Man, oh man, he'd screwed things up big time, even for a lifelong screw-up like him. Right now, he was desperate enough to risk Paul's fury.

The time Jamie'd spent underneath the city bridge was the last straw. While that nasty spot under the bridge had been an excellent place to hide, he couldn't and wouldn't spend one more second beneath the rattling concrete and asphalt. The thought of what he might find if he returned was something he couldn't deal with. No, what he needed were clothes, food, and a car, and he needed them pronto.

He would beg, he would cry...hell, he'd do whatever he needed to in order to get Paul to listen. If Jamie just stuck to the truth, even as crappy as it was, Paul would have to help him. There was a time, even if it was a long time ago, when they were close. Paul would remember. He'd have to. If he didn't, Jamie was afraid he'd be dead before the week was out. He could feel them breathing down the back of his neck already, and it had him jumping at his own shadow.

Paul might hate Jamie for a dozen different reasons, but he refused to believe Paul would turn his back and let his only brother die. He'd always been a stand-up kind of guy, the one who did the right thing every time. More important, they were blood and that had to count for something. Didn't it? Jesus, Jamie hoped so.

Early morning traffic was light as he walked on the shoulder of the narrow road toward Paul's house. Gravel crunched beneath his feet. He kept to the shadows along the ridge of the prairie they call Five Mile. Once, long ago, instead of the high-end urban developments now dotting the landscape, Five Mile had been covered with massive wheat fields and family farms. In the middle of the hundreds of acres of prairie sat an old red brick schoolhouse and the requisite clapboard-sided country grange painted bright white.

Just down the road from the schoolhouse, Paul's place was one of the few original farmhouses still on the prairie, distinctive amidst the rush of modern architecture of the surrounding homes. From the outside, it looked much like it did in days gone by. Inside was different story, with every modern convenience installed with great care and thought. The house still had an original feel to it without sacrificing its past. Jamie hadn't been invited here often, but when he did, he was in awe of the home Paul had made.

Jamie had thought it wise to come under the cover of the pre-dawn darkness, particularly considering it had been days since he'd showered or shaved. A hundred years ago, he could have moved through the area without attracting attention. Today, his clothes were dirty and he smelled. He'd stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. People would pay attention and he didn't need a nosy neighbor calling the police.

After he waited a good two hours under the fire bushes planted along one of the small out-buildings, Jamie felt confident enough to sneak up to the back door. He hadn't noticed a single sign of life during the entire time he waited. Quiet as a cemetery, there was a feeling of emptiness. He was pretty sure Paul wasn't at home.

At the back door, he tried the knob. Of course it was locked. No big surprise, since Paul was a careful guy. Jamie reached up to feel around the gutter and the planters. Hopefully, big brother tucked away an emergency key. No such luck. He eyed the door, solid wood with six panels of glass. It was attractive and designed to allow plenty of light into the kitchen. He studied it for a long moment before making his decision.

The choice was between his safety and Paul's property. Right at the moment, Jamie didn't much care about a mess or damage to the tidy house. He looked around and spied a nice big rock just on the other side of the driveway. Once he held the rock in his hand, Jamie put it through the glass of the back door panel closest to the lock. He carefully

reached through the jagged pieces to turn the deadbolt. The door whispered open. He slipped inside and held his breath. So far, so good.

No alarm screeched to announce his unauthorized entry, and he let out that withheld breath, relieved. Just in case, he zipped to the front of the house to look for an alarm panel and found it inside the front hall. He also found it was armed and the clock was ticking. Jamie started to panic, and then, just as quickly stopped and smiled. He punched in a four-digit number and voila, the lighted digital panel informed him the alarm was disengaged. All it took to shut it down was a head for trivia and the ability to recall the year of his brother's Stanley Cup winning goal. Good old dependable and, more importantly, predictable Paul.

With the alarm disengaged, Jamie stood very still and listened. Earlier, he'd had the sense the house was empty and he'd been right. Odd, though. Paul was very much a creature of habit. With the start of the new season, Paul would never consider leaving town during the season. Not without his team anyway.

Of course, Jamie hadn't talked to Paul in a long time and things change. For all he knew, Paul could have a couple of beauties on the string and might be spending a little quality time with one, or both. Didn't sound like such a bad idea to Jamie.

He remembered all too well the throngs of women that hung on his brother when he was a player. They were at every door in every city and they never seemed to have eyes for anyone but Paul McDonald. Why should it be any different now? Big brother was still tall, handsome, and successful, the holy trinity for a babe magnet.

But Jamie had no time to worry about why Paul wasn't home. Too much to do. First things first: he raced up the carpeted oak stairs, stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower in Paul's master bath. The shower itself was an absolute thing of beauty with glass walls and three massaging shower heads. After a couple of nights of torture, the warm water assaulting his body from the different directions was nothing short of heaven. He scrubbed until his skin glowed and he felt clean for the first time in days. He sure smelled a lot better.

He dug around in the bathroom drawers and was rewarded by the discovery of a brand new toothbrush, still in the package. Who'd have guessed the simple act of brushing his teeth would be this incredible? He rinsed his mouth and ran his tongue over his clean teeth. He was beginning to feel human again.

He gazed at his reflection in the mirror and gave thought to passing up a shave. The stubble he now sported sort of made him look dangerous and not much like himself. Then it occurred to him a beard wouldn't be much of a disguise. Letting his beard grow out would be a different look and that's about it. Nothing could be done about the damn red hair. Neither he nor Paul had ever been able to blend into a crowd thanks to their fine Scottish heritage. Too bad he hadn't thought about hair dye. He sighed, grabbed the razor and went to work on his face. A few minutes later, he looked up. He still didn't recognize the pale, trembling reflection that stared back him from the mirror, but at least it was clean.

Now for clothes. Paul was taller than Jamie and more muscled, thanks to plenty of time on the ice and in weight rooms. The star-turned-coach didn't expect anything of his players he wasn't willing to do himself. More than once, Jamie watched Paul in the gym side by side with his young players working just as hard as they were.

Jamie hadn't skated or worked out in years, and as much as he hated to admit the

truth, it showed. Once he'd figured out he could never become the player Paul turned out to be, he'd stopped trying. What was the point? That was pretty much the way it was between them. Paul excelled and Jamie fell a thousand miles short.

But, enough with the poor me crap. What he really needed to do was find some clean clothes. Fortunately, the size difference between them wasn't enough to be a problem. Jamie rifled through the closet, found clean jeans and a shirt. Over the shirt he slipped on an old Vancouver Canucks sweatshirt.

And now for shoes, because his sneakers were filthy. Jamie studied the row of black, brown, and tan shoes lined up with military precision on the closet floor. Where was Paul's sense of adventure? Not a decent pair of sneakers in the bunch. Jamie cocked an eyebrow and leaned down. He shouldn't do it. No, he really shouldn't. He knelt down in the closet and moved the shoes around until all the colors were mixed together. Some shoes faced forward, some backward. A couple he turned upside down. When he stood up, he was smiling. So much better.

It didn't bother him a bit to wear Paul's clothes. What Jamie couldn't deal with were the old guy shoes. He was going to have to be content with his dirty sneakers. His handiwork inside the closet completed, he went to the bed. He sat down and slipped on his own old sneakers over the nice clean socks. He stood up and stretched his arms over his head. Showered and dressed, Jamie felt like a new man and with it came a rush of hope. Maybe things would work out after all.

His stomach growled loudly in the quiet of the bedroom. He didn't realize until now how hungry he was. Downstairs, he found food and tea, exactly what he needed after the craziness of his life during the last interminable hours. While he ate breakfast and drank three cups of strong tea, he made his plans. If he played his cards right, he could make it to the border crossing north of Metaline Falls in a couple of hours.

Once he got back to Canada, what could they do to him? If he laid low long enough, they were bound to forget about him eventually. There was, after all, a statute of limitations. All he had to do was ride it out and then he'd be in fat city. It seemed to him that in spite of his arrest and Kendall's murder, patience could very well have its rewards.

The thought of Kendall made his heart ache. He didn't think that particular ache would ever leave him. He'd have to learn to live with it and without Kendall.

Cleaned up and with food in his stomach, Jamie's optimism grew as did the sunlight out the window. He left the kitchen, dishes still on the table, and walked outside. In the bright sunlight, he got another great idea. He backtracked into the kitchen and through the door connecting the kitchen to a short breezeway attached to the three-car garage. At the garage, he reached out to flip on the overhead fluorescent light. He shook his head as he looked around the garage. In typical Paul style, it was finished top to bottom and painted a bright white. Only his brother would have a garage as nice as the house. As much as he admired Paul, the guy did have some weird quirks. Wound a little tight in Jamie's opinion.

Just as he hoped, the sleek blue Harley Davidson Fat Boy sat in the corner as though it waited just for him. *Yes.*

It was a thing of beauty and he'd been impressed with it since the day Paul brought it home. Jamie remembered the day well. It was one of the last times they spoke to each other. The very next day Paul made it very clear Jamie was never to call him again. That, like his beautiful Kendall, was something he didn't want to think about. He really wasn't

stupid, and knew refusing to think about it was little more than sticking his head in the sand. He didn't care if it was stupid. He had a bigger problem: just staying alive.

He turned his attention back to the motorcycle. The paint was a deep blue that by itself was impressive. What Jamie liked most were the flames that were so realistic he could almost feel the heat of the fire coming off of them. Even with his own artistic background, he could never figure out how someone was able to create the realism of the waves of flickering fire. Paul must have spent a fortune on the paint alone. Jamie ran his fingertips across the flames. Paul was bound to be furious when he discovered the bike missing. Jamie sighed and pulled his hand away. He didn't have a choice. Or rather he didn't have a better choice. It had to be the bike.

As if to further reinforce his sense of absolute destiny, it didn't take him long to find the keys. Paul hadn't changed much over the years and was a creature of habit, at least to someone who grew up with him. Jamie remembered how Paul would line up his hockey sticks in a perfect row, and stack the pucks in piles five high. Never six, never four—always five.

Back in the garage, Jamie put the key in the ignition, pulled out the choke, and turned the throttle. The bike roared to life and with the rumble of the big engine bouncing off the garage walls, Jamie's hope rose even higher. Things were falling into place like magic. It was all going to work out.

Jamie sat on the Fat Boy and with the toe of his shoe, popped it into neutral. With his feet on the concrete, he pushed it backward out of the garage and into the driveway. It took a few minutes to maneuver it around until he and the bike faced the street. In less than ten minutes he had the house and the garage locked back up, or at least locked up as well as he could, considering he'd knocked out one of the window panes in the back door. He didn't feel great about leaving Paul's house with a broken window. Still, some things couldn't be helped and if things went as he hoped, someday he'd be able to make it up to his brother.

As soon as everything was done, Jamie once more straddled the bike and this time, put it into first gear. It lurched when he slowly released the clutch and his heart jumped with it. He pulled the clutch back in and took a breath. He could do this. After all, he and Paul spent their childhoods riding dirt bikes behind their cabin up in the mountains. If he could ride those dirt bikes, he could master the Harley. He tried again, letting the clutch out slow and easy. This time, the bike purred without jerking forward. His confidence steadied. In the bright morning sun, he glided away, his sights set on the border crossing ninety miles to the north.

The cool morning breeze kissed his face as Jamie wove in and out of traffic. Once he reached the open stretch of highway, he kicked the Harley into fifth gear and roared north.

\* \* \* \*

Paul was less than wild about the idea of leaving Louie. At the same, he couldn't fight her logic. Though she was giving him the bum's rush, she was right. He'd have to go home at some point and yes, he did have a hockey franchise to run as well. Fall was starting to roll in, pre-season games were on the agenda, and league games would start soon enough. His team was good and he was confident they'd have a stellar season. Still, if he neglected the team, it'd show and his hopes for a title would fade in a flash. It

wouldn't be fair to the young men who counted on him. For his older players, it could mean the difference between going to the NHL and going home.

So he gave Louie a quick kiss and left her on the front steps. He didn't look back, afraid if he did, he'd change his mind and pull her back into the house. It was hard work being a gentleman.

The early morning traffic was pretty light. Francis Street had a nasty habit of clogging up at peak rush hour times and he didn't want to find himself staring at a row of red lights right now. Somebody was looking out for him, because he made it across Francis and up Maple in record time.

He didn't bother with the garage and instead parked in the driveway closer to the front of the house. He wouldn't be home long enough to put the car away. A change of clothes, a quick check of emails and messages, then on to the arena for a couple hours. If everything went well, and he had no reason to believe it wouldn't, he'd make it back to Louie's office by lunch.

Jogging up the front steps, he unlocked the door and stepped inside. Paul paused the moment his feet hit the tiled entry. His eyes narrowed and his gaze swept the entry. He missed it at first. He took a breath and looked again. Then he saw that the light on the alarm box glowed pale green. It was blinking bright red when he left the house yesterday.

Did he forget to set the alarm? No way. Not once had he forgotten since his house was burglarized and his skates from his last championship were stolen. He still watched the sports memorabilia sites waiting for those skates to make an appearance. Had the thieves come back for his stick?

Except it didn't feel like as simple as a theft. The hair at the back of his neck prickled, and after what he witnessed at that poor girl's house, a knot hit like granite in the pit of his stomach. Like he didn't have enough on his plate already. He should turn around, head back outside and wait for the police to show up. He didn't have the time to be a careful man and frankly, he didn't have the patience. Instead, he stood still and listened. Nothing except the tick, tick, tick of the grandfather clock in the living room.

Relatively certain he was alone, he walked through the entire house, upstairs and down. His initial sense of disturbance was spot on. The first thing he found was a broken window in the kitchen door. Shards of glass were scattered across the cocoa-colored quarry tile like tiny glittering crystals. At least he knew how they got in.

He quickly figured out who the intruder had been and it wasn't a *they* or a stranger. The wet towels in his bathroom, the filthy clothes left on the floor, and the kitchen that looked as though a gang of teenagers assaulted the refrigerator were all achingly familiar. The handiwork possessed a signature he knew well. Jamie.

Back downstairs in the kitchen, Paul picked up the phone, and after a moment of hesitation, put it back down. Instead of a call, he left the kitchen and headed to the garage. Relief washed over him when the lights came on to reveal his treasured Mustang still parked safe and sound in its customary spot.

He was just about to leave the garage to go back in and call Louie when he stopped and did a slow turn. Son-of-a-bitch. Despite his initial observation, everything in the garage was not as he'd left it.

The little bastard had taken his Harley.

When he left the garage, his blood was boiling. This was not good, not good at all. The worst part wasn't the fact Jamie took a very expensive custom bike with trick paint

and tons of chrome. The worst part was Jamie was an inexperienced rider. All it would take to destroy both Jamie and the beautiful bike would be a tiny slip on gravel. Did Jamie's stupidity have no end? He hurried to the phone while digging out Louie's card from his pocket. She picked up on the first ring.

"We have a problem," he told her. "A big problem."

When he finished explaining what he'd found, she asked. "Where do you think he's headed?"

The answer didn't require much in the way of thought. "He's going home."

"As in Canada?"

"One and the same. He'll be heading to British Columbia. I'd bank on it."

"We have to grab him before he gets into B.C."

"That shouldn't be too hard. I mean, how's he going to get across the border? Aren't the feds looking for him too?"

Louie was quiet for a moment and then asked. "Have you seen your passport lately?"

"Damn it," he muttered as he ran up the stairs and through the door of his office.

Now he walked into the room and studied his desk. Every drawer was open at least a crack. He closed his eyes and let out a big sigh. He didn't need to open a single drawer to know what he'd find. He did anyway, his hand going to the top drawer on the left hand side. He stared at the empty spot where yesterday his passport had been.

"Jamie looks a lot like you." Louie's voice was soft. He'd forgotten he was still holding the phone to his ear.

Paul gripped the handset with one hand and rubbed his throbbing temple with the other. Yeah, he knew they looked alike. Even though Paul was older, they both had fair complexions, green eyes and the distinctive red hair. Paul was taller, though he doubted anyone would notice unless they stood side by side. Jamie's odds were better than average of breezing right through at the border and no one would be the wiser.

"We need to haul ass," he said.

"Well put."

"I'll be at your office in twenty minutes."

He was still cursing under his breath as he put the handheld's receiver back into the cradle on the kitchen counter. He had ten minutes to shower and put on clean clothes. As for his team, well, what were assistant coaches good for if not to cover for him when he couldn't be there? He called his first assistant, Michael Curry, on his cell while he sped through traffic. Michael tried to pump Paul for details. He didn't get far because Paul ended the call mid-sentence. Michael would just have to wait for all the nitty gritty.

## Chapter Eight

"Find my boy?" Harry asked when Louie raced out of her office while slipping into her jacket at the same time.

She grimaced and shrugged. "Sort of."

"And that means what? Either you got him or you don't." Harry leaned back in his big leather chair. His black braids framed his face and he held a bottle of Pepsi in one hand.

"Then it's a don't."

Harry clicked his tongue. "A shame. You might lose this one beautiful."

She smiled and shook her head. "Not a chance, Chief. I'll bring him back and maybe even today. I have a solid lead."

"Do tell." He took a big swig of the Pepsi.

"He's heading to British Columbia on a Harley. My guess is he's going to try the crossing up at Metaline Falls. It's close, small, and a relatively quick drive from here with the least amount of traffic. Paul agrees Jamie would try there because it's so much closer and smaller than the port north of Bellingham."

Harry nodded. "Not bad, not bad."

"I'll give you a call as soon as I have my hands on him."

"Please do."

Their conversation was interrupted by the screech of tires in the parking lot. Pretty impressive driving. She glanced at the time on her cell phone. Yes indeed, very impressive driving. He promised her twenty minutes and he made it in nineteen. This guy might come in handy yet.

With the keys to the Chevelle in hand, Louie jogged out the door. When she caught sight of the brand new Mustang with Paul behind the wheel, she headed straight for it. Peppy little car and it would be almost as quick as her good old Chevrolet.

She heard the cheerful comment about the same time the squeak of the rolling cart caught her attention.

"He's a cute one," Meg said brightly.

Louie turned and raced to Meg's side. "Now I'm not going to tell you again, Meg. Stop pushing this thing around and wait for me. I'll take you shopping. You know my cell phone number; all you have to do is call."

Meg stopped, ignoring Louie's reprimand, and turned a smiling face to Paul. She gave him a wave. "Hello."

"Hi." His brow wrinkled and Louie could almost see his foot tapping.

She held up her index finger. "Give me a sec," she said to him. To Meg she said, "Come on. Let's get this up to your apartment." She put a hand on the cart.

Meg pushed Louie's hand aside and put both of her own back on the handle of the cart once more. "You go take care of handsome there." Meg's head tilted to the side as she studied Paul's profile. "You know, Louise, I do believe he's the one."

"Excuse me?" Louie blinked.

"You heard me, young lady." Meg grinned and began to push the cart toward the staircase to the second story apartments.



"You're crazy. He's the brother of one of Harry's clients."

"Makes no never mind who he is related to. The boy has the shine for you. Now be off. He's itching to get away from here and you two could use a little alone time. 'Bout time you found yourself a man."

Louie resisted the urge to argue. Time was wasting. She and Meg would have a little heart to heart about this after James McDonald was behind bars.

"All right, I'm gone. You and I'll talk later."

"Of course we will." Meg smiled and resumed her trek with the noisy cart to the back stairs.

Louie jogged to Paul's car. She slid into the passenger's seat and buckled her seatbelt. "Do you know the way?"

He looked at her and rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, dumb question," she said. "You've probably made the trip once or twice."

"Once or twice." He stepped on the gas and they roared out of the parking lot.

Maneuvering through the downtown corridor and up North Division was beyond frustrating. Stoplights were plentiful and the color of choice for the morning was red. So far, their only luck was bad. Louie hoped James was having the same kind of luck. His head start was big enough that fate didn't need to give him any more of an edge.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the traffic broke and they were on the two-lane highway straight to the border. Traffic on U.S. 395 was light and the sun glowed. If they weren't in the middle of a dangerous mess, it would be a gorgeous drive. They were in the middle of it though, and enjoying the scenery was about the last thing on her mind.

*I do believe he's the one.* Leave it to Meg to say something outrageous and leave Louie to stew about it. She couldn't get the comment out of her mind. As much as she loved Meg, there were moments when Louie wanted to wring the old lady's scrawny little neck.

She looked over at Paul, his eyes behind the darkened lenses of his sunglasses intent on the road. He hadn't turned his head since they'd left Louie's office. What was it Meg saw in a minute's worth of time that prompted her to make such a pronouncement? Paul was cute enough and yeah, he had a body that made her hands want to learn Braille. But *the one*? She wasn't even looking for a good time let alone *the one*. She didn't want to think about the implications of Meg's bold announcement and decided to take things in another direction.

"What happened between you and your brother?" she asked.

Paul still didn't turn his head but kept his eyes on the road. "You have a great relationship with your brother so you wouldn't understand."

Yeah, right—if talking to a comatose patient was a great relationship. She said, "Try me."

After a lengthy silence, he glanced over at her. She couldn't read his expression, because the dark glasses pretty much hid his green eyes. His mouth was set in a grim line.

"Come on, Paul. I shared my deepest, darkest secret with you."

His laugh was not filled with humor. "If that's your deepest and darkest secret, you've led a very sheltered life."

That wasn't quite the truth. There were other secrets in her soul and perhaps someday, she'd share them with him. Not yet though. They didn't know each other that well. "Not so sheltered. Come on, tell me what happened with James."

"Oh, what the hell...It wasn't any one thing; it was a lifetime of everything until one day I had to walk away. It was either that or kill him, and I didn't feel like a trip to prison."

She reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. He tilted his head and touched his cheek to her hand before he continued.

"I think more than anything I'm furious with Jamie. He was only a fair hockey player but he was a fantastic artist. He has the kind of talent we all wish we had, and he ignores it. He could have been somebody, and instead he chooses to do things like drugs. If it requires hard work, it's not for Jamie."

"Maybe he's just confused." In her line of business, lost souls were in over-abundance.

"He was and is confused, but big deal. Everybody goes through that."

"Did you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"How long did you focus on being a professional hockey player?"

She felt the flinch beneath her hand.

"That was different."

"Why?"

"I don't know, it just was. I've lived and breathed hockey for as long as I can remember. Jamie was different. He couldn't focus on anything, ever. He jumped from one thing to another, always getting the hopes of our parents up, and then crushing them when he screwed up again. I tried to be supportive but that wasn't what Jamie wanted."

"What did he want?"

Paul said nothing for a moment. When he did, his voice was flat and emotionless. "A free ride."

Something in his voice told her not to push any further and she respected that. She didn't have the right to push anyway. A few kisses didn't grant her a license to pry. She gave his shoulder one last soft squeeze and then reluctantly put both hands in her lap. She contented herself with watching the scenery flash by as Spokane faded away to be replaced by fields, lakes and tiny towns. Paul didn't offer anything else either.

A couple miles shy of Metaline Falls, Paul started to slow and Louie leaned forward. Something was up ahead on the side of the highway though it was too far away to distinguish exactly what it was. Slowly it came into focus. By the time he pulled the Mustang to a stop on the shoulder, they both sat and stared. Leaning on the kickstand, one wheel missing and one rider short, was Paul's shiny Harley Davidson.

"I'm going to kill him." He drew each word out long and slow.

"Well, if I was to make an educated guess, I'd say he hasn't made it across the border yet."

"Brilliant deduction, Watson."

"I'm going to choose to believe you're worried about your bike and your brother, and therefore assume the sarcasm was not directed at me."

He pulled off his sunglasses and turned to look at her, his green eyes dark and flashing. "Glass half full kind of woman?"

"Not necessarily. There are many days when the glass is most definitely half empty. Today I'm feeling more optimistic. I think we're going to get him and pretty darn soon."

Paul gave her a look that betrayed his skepticism. "He's had a flat. After he managed

to get the front stable without the tire, someone must have picked him up and taken him to get it fixed."

It was her turn for sarcasm. "That's a big duh. I'm not blind."

He grimaced. "Sorry."

"We should go on into Metaline Falls. We can probably track him down at a local shop."

Paul shook his head. "I doubt it. Tires and wheels for a Fat Boy aren't something you can just pick up. He's going to have to go back to Spokane."

She groaned. "Okay, that I didn't know. Spokane's too far away to backtrack now. We'll play hell finding him. We could be passing each other on the highway and not even know it."

He nodded. "Yeah, my thought exactly. I think we stay and wait."

She looked around at the stretch of highway bordered on each side by thick pines and evergreens with mountains rising around them. For the moment, the sun was shining and the air was warm. But once the sun set, sunny and warm would be long gone.

"Wait where?"

He turned to look out the side window. "I saw a turnout half a mile or so back. I say we park the car out of view and hike back up here. We'll be plenty hidden in the trees. Then we wait. It's a twofer really. We wait to snag Jamie and keep an eye on my bike at the same time."

She wasn't particularly enthusiastic about his plan. Sure, she'd spent plenty of time waiting on her bounty. Usually it meant sitting in her car down the road with a cup of coffee, some heat, and a cushioned seat. Hiding behind trees was not a tactic she had embraced so far. Not to mention stakeouts were about as exciting as watching paint dry.

"I don't know."

"It's a really expensive bike that I don't want to lose, and you know he's gonna bolt if he sees us," he said reasonably.

"He doesn't know me."

"True. But you think he's going to trust a woman who just happens to be waiting alongside the highway in a car that just happens to be the same one his brother owns? Jamie does stupid things, but he's not stupid."

He had a point. James would be jumpy at this juncture. He was in some kind of trouble, and not only with the feds. Somebody else out there was very unhappy with James McDonald, if the murder of Kendall Stewart was any indication. If he was smart, he'd trust no one. Especially not some helpful woman who just happened to show up alongside the highway. And, it was a really pretty bike. It would be a real shame if it was stolen.

"All right," she said, frowning at the timbered landscape. "The trees it is."

\* \* \* \*

Figures it would happen to him. Jamie's earlier optimism went flat just about the same time the bike tire did. He had only two kinds of luck: bad and worse. The front tire blowing out on Paul's bike didn't come as a huge surprise. If something could go wrong, it would. Now Paul, on the other hand, he'd probably ridden tens of thousands of miles on the bike without a single mishap. All Jamie had to do was get on and cover less than a hundred miles before poof: big, fat flat tire. The only good thing to happen was he didn't

lose control and was able to get the bike to the side of the road without putting it down. Stealing his brother's bike was one thing, crashing it was another. If he wrecked it, he'd have to worry about Paul wanting to kill him too. He already had enough people trying to put him down.

Jamie tried every shop in Metaline Falls, not that there were many, and not a single place could give him a replacement. Each and every one offered the same advice: check with the dealership in Spokane. He finally snagged a ride with a Spokane-based truck driver who was making his daily egg delivery loop. Jamie not only got a ride back to town, but the man, who seemed eager for company, offered to take him back up the next morning if Jamie needed a ride. He did.

Thank goodness he'd thought to snag one of Paul's credit cards. The little bit of money he had on him wouldn't last long if he had to pop for motorcycle tires. Why couldn't Paul have a cheap import bike like most people? No, big brother had to go for the flash and get himself not only a Harley, but a custom Harley to boot. Okay, it was fun to ride, but not nearly as much fun to repair on the fly.

The replacement for the front tire was very expensive. With Paul's credit card, it wasn't an insurmountable issue. The Golden Boy also possessed a golden card. By the time Paul discovered Jamie pinched it, the bike would be back on the road and he'd be long gone in the wilds of northern British Columbia or even the Northwest Territories. Stealing the credit card was necessary and using it unavoidable, but was another wrong that Jamie'd have to make up for. He'd find a way to make it right. He would. Maybe not for a long time, but he'd make it up to Paul.

A little luck fell his way at last. The dealer had a tire in stock the right size for the Fat Boy. Within an hour, it was ready to go. He had to pay extra for the immediate service and Paul's nifty gold card took care of that too. Now all Jamie had to do was wait for his ride back up north and that wasn't going to happen for many hours. He'd have to find a place to wait.

Coming into town earlier, he'd noticed a motel less than a quarter mile away from the Harley dealership, the kind of hostelry that rented for cash by the hour with few questions asked of their guests. Perfect.

Jamie checked himself in, paid with some of his dwindling cash supply, and dropped to the bed once the door clicked shut. Exhaustion was nearly crippling. In a way, he was glad he didn't make it across the border today. He'd still be on the road and as tired as he was, that wouldn't have been safe for him or anyone else for the matter. Tomorrow morning would be soon enough. By catching a ride with Scott Aaron, the egg hauling truck driver, he'd be back at the bike and across the border before nine in the morning. Things would all still work out and with enough time for the luxury of a little rest.

As he lay across the sagging bed, his mood deflated even more. Maybe he was being stupid, thinking he could make a run across the border and find safety in the wilds of northern Canada. Maybe the best thing he could do was call Paul, tell him the truth and beg for his help. Paul always knew the right thing to do. Jamie rolled over and grabbed the receiver of the old olive green phone bedside telephone. He punched in Paul's number. His heart raced as he listened. After the fourth ring, it popped into voicemail.

Should he leave a message? He slowly replaced the receiver and stared at the phone for a long moment. It didn't matter. He didn't really know what he expected anyway. Absolution? Forgiveness? What a joke. Paul couldn't help him. No one could help him.

Jamie lay back against the flat pillows, closed his eyes, and finally drifted into an uneasy slumber.

\* \* \* \*

When the classic Mustang stopped, he pulled over as well, still far enough behind the two in the car to be confident they hadn't noticed him behind them. He was very good at what he did and he'd certain Paul McDonald had no idea he was being followed.

He sat and stared at the Ford, curious as to why they'd pulled off the highway. They were still miles away from the border crossing and by stopping, they'd give the younger McDonald more time to pull ahead. But when the Mustang did a one-eighty, he noticed the motorcycle on the side of the highway propped on its kickstand with the two front forks resting on a good-sized block of wood. Now he understood.

Little James had encountered a problem with the front tire of the big shiny bike. He smiled as he turned his own car around and began to head south. Two miles back, a dirt county access road led him far enough off the highway he could park without fear of being seen. This was going to be easier than he thought. More fun, too.

He got out and opened the back hatch. He slipped into the camouflage pants and shirt he kept folded and ready in the rear cargo area. A camo hat covered his hair. He had paint for his face as well and he picked it up before he put it right back down. They'd be hard pressed to see him under the cover of the thick pine trees and evergreens that lined both sides of the highway, especially when they weren't expecting company. The face paint would be overkill he didn't need. Besides it was a bitch to wash off. Better to go natural.

Not that he intended to get close enough to McDonald or his pretty passenger to be seen. He didn't need to. All he needed was brush for cover and a clear view of the motorcycle. Neither would be a problem in this rural, mountainous terrain. Plenty of evergreens and pines. Plenty of low brush and tall wild grasses, a perfect setting for a man with his great skills and bad intentions. Excellent for cover.

He closed the hatch and walked around to the vehicle's side. From the rear seat he took his rifle from between the folds of the navy blanket. He held it to his face, inhaling the faint scent of cleaning oil. Fresh and ready. The stock was warm against his cheek.

He pulled his rifle down and held it out in front of him. Years of routine had him checking the load. Habits were hard to break even when he knew better. He'd never go to a battle without the proper preparation. Smiling, he caressed the stock.

Locked and loaded.

Into his jacket pocket, he dropped extra rounds, just in case. He wouldn't need them, never did. He did, however, believe in always being prepared though he'd never even been a Boy Scout. Hey, a good idea was a good idea. And after all, he'd been a scout, just not the Boy Scout variety. The do-good Boy Scouts were always a little tame for him. Too by-the-rules for his tastes even as a young guy.

With the sling clipped on the rifle, he was able to hang it off his shoulder. It made carrying the precious gun easier while he hiked. From the backseat, he also grabbed a pair of night goggles. If Jamie-boy came tripping back after sunset, the goggles would prove very handy. He liked to be prepared for every contingency.

Night was dropping fast, the woods alive with the sounds of the animals that made the forested area their home. He slipped through the trees and underbrush in near silence, a quiet predator stalking its quarry. Comfortable in the rough, overgrown terrain, he

moved quickly. How much time before James returned was the only question. It could be hours or it could be minutes. He'd be in position before James came back to claim the bike.

James McDonald would never ride on the leather seat again with the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. The raw truth was that he lived on borrowed time already and while he didn't know it, his ride to the gravel shoulder of the highway would be his last. Not a threat but a written-in-stone promise.

A small rise flanked the road far enough back to provide excellent cover but not so far away he'd have trouble with the kill shot. He lined up from several different positions, sighting on the bike each time. Each was acceptable. The death gods were by his side tonight. Not only was the location perfect, but he was far enough away from Spokane to create a disconnect with Kendall Stewart's take-down. The local podunk cops would need years to make the link, if they ever did. He loved it when a plan came together.

He settled in to wait, gazing up at the moon as it rose full and milky in the clear sky. He put the rifle to his shoulder, the sight to his eye, and looked at the motorcycle where it sat empty along the side of the road.

"Bang, bang you're dead." he whispered and laughed under his breath.

## Chapter Nine

"He *is* coming back tonight, right?" Louie eyed the sky overhead, wondering how long they'd be stuck sitting against the massive pine like a couple of huggers on save-the-tree duty. The sun was going down and the air, while crisp and clean, was a little on the cold side. There was no cool about it either. The temperature had dropped from comfortable to cold in the blink of an eye, and she wasn't dressed for it. The only thing that kept the night from being a complete wilderness adventure was a couple of soft blankets retrieved from the trunk of the Mustang and spread out on the ground.

Paul leaned against the tree and watched the occasional passing car or truck. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Well, it's possible he couldn't find a tire."

She smacked him in the arm. "Now you tell me."

He shrugged. "One of the dealers will have one. The real question is whether or not they'll have it now or in the morning."

She groaned. "Great, so you're suggesting we stay here in the woods all night?"

"Why not? I thought you tough bounty hunter types were used to all sorts of stakeouts and covert operations."

She rolled her eyes. "You've been watching too much television."

"You Yanks are so soft."

She smacked him again. "I'll show you soft."

"Ouch. You hit all your partners?" He rubbed his arm though his gaze never wavered from the stretch of highway framed by the expanse of trees and brush.

"Oh, so now we're partners?" The word didn't have a bad ring to it even if she hadn't worked with a partner since leaving the police. Of course, her last partner had been a dog, so she wasn't sure if that really counted. Not that she believed he was being serious about the partner thing. Bail enforcement and hockey weren't even in the same universe.

Paul shrugged. "Sounds better than stalker."

That made her smile. She didn't think of him like that. Maybe with another man stalker might be closer to the truth. With Paul, not a chance. "True. I'd prefer partner over stalker too, and no, I don't usually hit my partners. Only the ones who deserve it."

The wind chose that moment to kick up, sending leaves and pine needles hurtling through the air. The cold air struck her face and she shivered, brushing bits of leaf from her hair. It was going to be a long night.

She jumped when Paul put an arm around her and pulled her close to his body. Lord, she acted like she'd never been touched by a man before. She wanted to keep her distance except...damn if he wasn't big and warm. She cuddled closer instead of moving away. Yeah, and how unprofessional was that anyway?

Why not? She was cold and he was warm, and they were all alone.

The hoot of an owl rippled through the still evening air. What else would the night bring? She was a city girl, comfortable in streets and alleys that bustled with constant movement. She knew Spokane like the back of her hand, from the West Plains to the South Hill to the North Division corridor. She knew where the kids cruised, the meth

makers plied their trade, and the skin merchants peddled their bodies. She'd spent countless hours on stakeouts during her time on the job, drinking crappy coffee and watching run-down brick buildings and crumbling rentals. She and Butch had crawled through tunnels, jumped fences and raced through open lots.

What she didn't know were the sights, sounds, and smells of the wilderness. She didn't hunt, didn't fish, and absolutely didn't camp. Her idea of camping had the words *concierge* and *room service* attached. She was completely out of her element out here in God's country and knew it, not that she was about to admit it to Paul. Better he think her rough and tough than a pansy.

Traffic was light on the highway, with fewer and fewer vehicles passing by their niche in the underbrush as each hour passed. Without heat or life-giving coffee, the night would be long and cold. Those many mind-numbing stakeouts in her unmarked car were beginning to look really good.

For a long time they sat in silence, side by side. Cool air slapped her face while her hands were stuffed into her pockets. Odd how comfortable she felt with his arm around her shoulder, her body pressed next to his. Comfortable though not peaceful. Every nerve tingled and heat pooled inside her. Still, curiosity trumped attraction. Besides, it was safer to act on curiosity.

"So what's the story with you and little brother? You didn't really finish explaining earlier and I'm curious. Or, maybe just nosy."

Paul sighed, a sad sound floating across the night. He leaned back to rest his head against the tall tree. Moments passed, and she didn't think he was going to answer. She'd pushed too far this time.

"That's the million dollar question," he said quietly. "I tried for years to understand Jamie and I finally gave up. He's been doing one stupid thing after another for as long as I can remember. I kept thinking one day he'd grow up. I was wrong."

"What made you stop talking to him?"

"It wasn't any one thing. More like a whole lot of little things that built up until he calls me early one morning to ask if I would come bail him out of jail. He'd been partying with some friends, driving Mom's new car, and managed to get it high-centered it on a median in downtown Vancouver. He was picked up for driving under the influence. That was the last straw for me. I left him in jail and I haven't talked to him since. I figured it was only a matter of time before he either killed himself or somebody else."

"What about your parents? Obviously they're still involved."

This time his sigh was louder. "I hoped they would make Jamie stand up and be responsible. They didn't and they haven't. Not that I blame them. It's that unconditional love thing. They keep hoping and they keep enabling. It's a vicious circle."

She put a hand on his arm and squeezed. "I see it more than you can possibly imagine. Parents come in to see Harry every day of the week. Guilt, I think. Their babies are in trouble and they wonder what they did wrong. They all want to try and make it better. They want to fix what's broken, not realizing they can't."

"I don't get that." He sounded bitter. "I grew up with Jamie. We were in the same house with the same parents. He had every chance the same as I did. Bottom line is, our parents didn't do anything wrong, yet Jamie keeps dragging them down into his mud."

"If I've seen it once, I've seen it a hundred times and it is a little thing called free will. It's all about choices, Paul. Parents want to believe that if they raise their children in a



good and loving environment, they'll be good and loving adults. They fail to factor in free will. Despite all the best intentions of parents, some children choose a path that's contrary to everything they were taught."

"Like Jamie?"

"Like Jamie."

A strong gust of wind whipped the bushes around them. She shivered again as the cold knifed right through her thin jacket. A heavier coat would have been nice.

"Damn," she said and moved closer to him. "This could be a long night."

He pulled her to him until she sat between his outstretched legs, her back against his chest. He arranged one of the blankets over the top of them both, tucking them inside a cocoon that cradled them together. The intimacy seemed wrong and right at the same time. His arms came around her and he held her close, his chin on the top of her head.

"This isn't very professional," she told him.

"No, I suppose not. Do you want to go back to the car?"

She thought about it for a split second. The nice cushy seat. The warmth of the heater to take the chill from her skin. It would be better in so many ways and so much worse a few others.

"Uh ... no."

"Good."

Louie relaxed her body and the tense muscles in her neck eased as she rested against him. When was the last time she'd felt so peaceful? Maybe never. Odd that she did now, considering they were sat wrapped up in a blanket in the chilly woods of Northeast Washington. Not the most romantic getaway.

She closed her eyes and let herself be in the moment, accepting the invitation without question or comment. When his lips touched the tip of her ear, she smiled. She tipped her head to the side and allowed his mouth to move to her neck. His touch was feather light and erotic. A rush of something she hadn't felt in eons flowed through her body. She had forgotten how it felt to be embraced by passion. Or was it lust? Didn't matter really, it felt fabulous whatever it was.

"Tell me to stop," Paul murmured against her ear.

\* \* \* \*

The dream came again, dark and evil. Chris didn't want to go through it and yet was powerless to make it stop. He tried before to wake up and couldn't. The dream refused to be denied.

The night was dark, the stars sprinkled across the black sky like a thousand sparkling diamonds. The warehouse appeared deserted and traffic on Market Street was almost non-existent. All day his gut instinct had tried to warn him, telling him to look once, twice. He'd ignored it, and the price for his neglect was very high.

Again he walked through the brush, hearing soft swishing noises as he moved. Pine cones were scattered on the ground, and he kicked them out of the way as he walked. He needed to be careful not to step on one and trip. The pine cones were big and hearty this time of year, perfect to cause a turned ankle. Usually he loved the tall pines and their beautiful brown cones. He'd been around the world and on almost every continent. None of the places he visited ever spoke to his heart like Spokane and the majesty Mother Nature had bestowed on the area.

He hated the Medicine Man. People like that sullied this beautiful place with destructive drugs and violence. No more. Not on his watch.

Chris crouched in the brush, his shoulder against the trunk of a pine. He could smell the scent of pitch as he pushed against the tree. He steadied himself as he brought the rifle up and set the scope to his right eye. Once more the feeling of disbelief slammed through his body. It didn't seem possible and yet what he saw, rather who he saw, was right there, big as life.

The sorrow that washed over him was something he hadn't felt since the day his parents were killed in an automobile accident. Snowbirds...both he and Louie worried about the long drive they continued to insist on making. Their worry that one day something terrible would happen came true, and he'd lost a piece of his heart. Now another piece fell away.

His nerves grew taut as he waited, unable to do anything about what was to come. The dream always ended the same way. The bullet hit his head and whipped his neck back. His body floated through the air toward the ground. The last thing he saw before everything went black was the twinkling stars in the night sky.

"No," he croaked. "No."

Beside his bed, one of the monitors registered the flash of a spike before it settled once more into a steady pattern—blip, blip, blip. The dream over, Chris was grateful for the sleep that took him once more into a place of peaceful silence.

Outside the room at the end of the hall, Kevin Rowe, one of the night shift nurses, stopped and listened. Did he just hear a voice inside the room of Chris Russell? No way. Russell would never come out of the coma. They all knew that. It was just a matter of time before the shell the man lived inside gave up its struggle to hold onto life.

Kevin pushed the door open and stepped inside. Only the glow from the machines around Chris' bed broke up the shadowy darkness. Kevin stepped to the bed and looked down. No, Chris looked as he always did: thin, pale and serene. The monitors gave no sign of anything unusual, just their normal steady rhythm.

Kevin figured he'd been hearing things. Wouldn't be the first time. The night shift had its own set of challenges like phantom sounds and, in his opinion, lingering souls. So many came here rolled in on a bed and rolled out in a body bag. He couldn't remember when someone had left for the last time sitting in a wheelchair. *Oh well, probably not in my lifetime.* Kevin turned and walked out, pulling the door closed behind him just as a single tear slid down Chris' cheek.

\* \* \* \*

Louie turned so she could tip her face up to Paul's. She couldn't read his expression in the darkness. She could, however, feel his need pressed against her. It was raw, it was intense, and it was very real. He paused for a heartbeat before he lowered her onto the blanket and stretched out beside her. His hand slipped beneath her jacket, beneath her shirt, and her breath caught as his hand cupped her breast, his fingers teasing the nipple to hardness.

"Don't." She pressed her lips against his, whispering. "Don't stop."

Overwhelming need rushed through her body, but why? She could blame on too many years of celibacy, of denying her body's need for release, but that would be a lie. It wasn't a case of a body too long denied the touch of a man. No, it was much deeper than

that. It was her need for this man, and this man alone. She wanted to taste him, to run her hands through his glorious red hair, to feel him inside her. From the first innocent touch, she'd known somewhere deep inside she had to have more.

His nearness fanned a slow heat into glorious flame.

"Are we crazy?" His fingers teased her nipples and she rose to his touch.

Louie put her hands on both sides of his face. "Maybe. Probably." Her eyes, grown accustomed to the darkness, could dimly see the strong lines of his face and his heavy lidded eyes.

"I don't remember ever feeling like this." His confession was whispered against her throat as his tongue seared a hot path down her soft skin. Hot shivery thrills rolled through her like ocean waves.

Neither did she, but she was afraid to put it into words. Maybe it was the magic of the full moon casting a creamy glow through the canopy of the pine trees. Maybe it was clear air carrying the fresh scents of nature. Or maybe it was desperation. Whatever it was, for this moment she'd take it in both hands and let it carry her away. For this moment, she'd forget the rest of the world and do something crazy—and wonderful.

Under the cover of darkness, the black sky sprinkled with the tiny lights of a million stars, and surrounded by thick brush and forest, they stood and slipped out of their clothes. She shivered as cool air kissed her skin but it wasn't the cold that made her quiver. It was the sight of his body in the light of full moon. Pale skin, broad muscled shoulders, a flat stomach. It took her breath away.

He held out a hand and she took it. Gently, he helped her lay back down onto the blanket. Then slowly, he pulled the second blanket over them, capturing the heat of bodies beneath. He brushed the hair from her face and their eyes met.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured as his lips pressed to hers.

At first the kiss was light but it didn't stay that way long. Her tongue met his in a dance that filled her with desire. Beneath the single blanket, her hands explored the strong lines of his back, the fine hair on his chest, the strong muscles of a toned athlete, his hard cock. It was heaven.

His hands touched and stroked her, moving from her breasts to her stomach and slipping between her legs to find her wet and wanting. Her hips lifted into his touch.

She stroked him, the smooth feel of his shaft against the palm of her hand fantastic. He groaned as her hand glided up and down. Did he taste as good as he felt? It was question she'd love to answer but not right now.

Instead, with his cock in her hand, she guided him between her legs, a groan escaping her throat as he slipped into her, first moving gently, testing how much she could take. Then, with a strong thrust, he was fully inside. Her hands cupped his buttocks and she pulled him closer trying to feel as much him as she could.

He fit her as perfectly as if they were made for each other. The sensation was wondrous and once more she thought of magic. Except how could it be? She was a careful woman, one not given to flights of fancy or casual hook-ups, and yet it was almost like coming home.

"You feel like heaven," he rasped against her skin, his hot breath washing over her.

As he moved inside her, coaxing her slowly to the peak of pleasure, she met his eyes. This was no hook-up. Sex was a great thing, a needed thing, and this was so much more than sex. Deep in her soul that acknowledgement brought tears to her eyes, and fear to

her heart.

Even so, she held him tighter, moving with him as he thrust into her with building force. She wanted it to go on forever, the touch, and feel of this man who was almost a stranger, and at the same time, a soul she felt as though she'd known for eternity.

He pressed his lips to hers. "Hold on, angel, just hold on." His whisper was ragged.

She wanted to. She wanted to hold on to the sensation of his cock sliding in and out of her with delicious, wet strokes. She couldn't. In a blinding rush of sensation, Louie came, her cry muffled as he covered her mouth, his tongue hot and probing.

A second later his body tensed and then shuddered. As the climax passed, he stilled and rolled to lie beside her, his breathing jerky. He put his arms around her and pulled her close to his hot body.

This was the craziest thing she'd ever done. Leaning her head against his chest, she closed her eyes, breathed in his earthy scent, and decided it was also the most perfect thing she'd ever done.

His panting breaths calmed, evened. A light breeze swished through the underbrush, and the hoot of an owl drifted through the night air.

"That was incredible," he whispered, his breath hot against her cheek.

She smiled in the darkness. "Yeah, it was."

## Chapter Ten

Jamie's eyes snapped open. At first he couldn't remember where he was. Then it all rushed back, sending a knot to the pit of his stomach. The crappy mattress beneath him was better than last night's rocky ground under the bridge, though not by much. The pillows, little more than thick cardboard, left his neck aching. He felt old and weary. Probably looked like crap too.

Rolling to his side, Jamie looked at the gap in the curtains on the window. It was still dark outside, and the face of the digital clock read three. Not bad, all things considered. He'd managed to snag a few hours sleep and still had enough time to shower before he was to meet Scott. He'd soon cross the border for safety in Canada, where there were plenty of places to hide in the north where they wouldn't come looking for him. Thanks to Dad and his insistence on summer days in the mountains, Jamie had no hesitation about spending some quality time there now.

He got up from the bed, stretched his arms above his head and tried to smooth out the kinks. The face that looked back at him from the mirror was almost unrecognizable. His skin was always pale; it went along with the red hair both he and Paul inherited from their Scottish ancestors. Tonight, or rather this morning, he was well beyond pale. There didn't seem to be a drop of blood in his complexion, and he wondered if this was how dead people looked. The thought sent a chill up his back as though his thoughts were somehow indicative of things to come.

Despite the fact he'd gotten himself into the mother of all bad situations, it didn't mean he was ready to die even though he already missed Kendall. He'd see her again one day—he hoped. God would forgive him, wouldn't he?

He turned away from the mirror. On the scratched and dented table that served as a desk were several pieces of stationery, the edges curled, and a pen that no longer had a cap. Anxious as he was to get on the road, he sat down at the desk and picked up the pen. He glanced over at the mirror, staring for a long minute at his deathly complexion. His green eyes were huge and ringed with dark circles. His face reminded him of the bad vampire makeup he'd sported at a long ago Halloween party. Wasn't his best look back then, made him look like shit now. Hopefully it wouldn't draw unnecessary attention from the border patrol. He'd have to come up with a plausible story like a bad case of the flu.

He ran a hand through his hair and stared at the blank paper. Paul always pissed him off with his good looks, natural athletic abilities, and success. Jamie never intended to be a screw-up. He'd dreamed of just the opposite; he wanted to be everything Paul had been. Jamie had really wanted his brother to be proud of him.

His earliest memories centered around an ice rink, skates, and the idea that one day he'd would be in the NHL. Dreams aside, all he could remember hearing were comments like "too bad he's not more like his brother" or "he'll never be the player Paul is." By the time Jamie was ten, he'd abandoned his dreams and stopped trying. He'd learned early he could never live up to his big brother, so why even make the effort?

Don't even get him started on love. Who even bothered to look at Jamie when Paul was around? Jamie was good-looking, but just wasn't Paul. And the worst part—Paul

never seemed to care. He'd been oblivious to all the attention while Jamie had been defeated. Paul didn't work for a date in his entire life while Jamie was forced to fight for every scrap of attention he got. His only real success, the only time he dared to be himself, was with Kendall. Poor, dead Kendall. He was a loser all over again.

Tapping the pen against the paper, He thought about what he wanted to write. As angry as he was with Paul, Jamie worried about the what-ifs. He was confident once he was across the border, he'd find safety in the anonymity afforded by the Northwest Territories. What worried him was the possibility something would go wrong because honestly, more often than not it did for him. Paul could take care of himself. Jamie worried more about the folks. Mom and Dad had stood by him time and time again, when they should've walked away. Anybody else would have dropped him, just like Paul did. Not their parents, who'd been there again and again and again. Jamie owed them everything and if something did go wrong, he'd need to make amends. Only one way to do that.

He leaned his head down and began to write. An hour later, he stopped by the front desk and asked the clerk to mail the letter. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances. Rolling the very heavy motorcycle tire, Jamie walked the half mile from the motel to the egg company where he found Scott busy loading his trailer for the early morning run north.

His arms screamed with pain by the time he hefted the wheel and tire to the trailer. He rubbed them as he sat in the tractor and listened to the rumble of the Freightliner's engine. Soon, he'd be on the powerful motorcycle headed for safety.

\* \* \* \*

Louie woke up alone and wondered first, how long she'd been asleep, and second, how long she'd been alone. Even on the hard ground, the cold night air all around, she'd drifted off into a warm and comforting sleep. She hadn't meant to. After all, they were here to work even if making love on the forest floor made it look otherwise. She didn't have to delve deep to figure out why she drifted off. For the first time in many long years, she'd been relaxed and comfortable. It wasn't that she'd been a nun forever, but she'd be the first to admit it had been a long dry spell.

After the shooting, she'd more or less folded into herself and her focus had been one hundred percent on finding the person responsible for her brother's condition. There'd been little time left over for personal affairs and she hadn't cared all that much. The few relationships she'd been in were over quickly and with little emotion involved. Paul was different. Something about him was different and she was afraid to delve too deeply into why.

Her hastily discarded clothes were now folded and within easy reach. Beside her clothes were handcuffs, her holster, and her gun. She lifted her head and saw him leaning against a tree, a dark shadow in the muddy light of early morning. As she dressed she watched him, his back straight, his head never moving as if something of grave importance unfolded in front of him.

What was he thinking? Was it regret? Or was it something more along the lines of what she felt ... confusion? She didn't just jump in bed with men and she didn't roll around on a forest floor buck naked for God and everyone to see. Except she had and without so much as a minute's hesitation. All the stars had aligned in that moment and

lovemaking was as right as anything had ever been. Even now she should feel ashamed of herself for being not only unprofessional, but downright indecent. Except that she didn't. It was true that all it would have taken was one passerby glancing over to see a naked butt and they'd have been busted.

Actually, that thought made her smile. Chris always told her she was a little too serious and that life had to be challenged, had to be pushed to really enjoy it. That was the philosophy that had taken him to the Army Rangers and then on to DEA. She'd been the careful one, the detail person who stayed within the bounds, who always colored within the lines.

At least until she met Paul McDonald. Now she had a bit of an idea what Chris tried to tell her. She felt wicked and alive, and not in the least bit ashamed of herself. The last couple of days her life had been filled with twists and turns she could never have imagined. Some of it was good, like making love to Paul, and some of it not so good, like the bullet killing Kendall Stewart.

For now, Louie would let things be. She'd been trying for years to make life conform to her way and that hadn't worked out so well. Just for one day, she was going to let things roll. She'd let go and let life take control.

Dressed and with her jacket slipped back on, Louie shivered, the dampness of the early morning seeping through her despite her clothing. "Hey," she said as she touched Paul's shoulder.

He didn't turn his head. "Look," he began, his tone very serious.

She stopped him before he could say anything further. "If you say you're sorry I swear to God I'll shoot you, McDonald."

His shoulders began to shake as laughter burst forth, a startling sound in the quiet brush. He turned to look at her, his eyes full of joy. "You're something else, Russell."

"I know you mean that in the best possible way."

"Absolutely."

"Have you slept at all?"

He sobered and shook his head. "It wasn't that our little tryst didn't calm me down a whole bunch, it's just I'm both furious and worried about Jamie. It's sad that with a beautiful, naked woman next to me all I could think about was Jamie."

"Aha, and here I thought you couldn't stand your brother."

He ran both hands through his hair that curled even more as the damp air worked its way in. "Yeah, I thought so too. I guess when it comes down to it, I'm furious with him because I care. I mean I'm so pissed off I could kill him, but at the same time I want to protect him. Jamie's gotten himself into more trouble than even I believed possible, and I'm scared he's gone too far this time. I don't know if anyone can help him."

She put an arm around his waist and pressed her cheek to his arm. "It'll be okay. We'll grab him when he comes for the bike and have him back in custody before lunch. He'll be safer behind bars than anywhere else."

He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She loved how warm his body was and how a slight scent of cologne still clung to him. "I hope so," he said. "I really hope so."

She heard the note of question in his voice and honestly couldn't blame him. Even her statement was more reassurance than fact. James McDonald was into something very dangerous and he was in deep. She'd been around crime all of her adult life and knew

what dangerous looked like. Putting him in jail was somewhat protective so she wasn't lying to Paul. It wasn't, however, foolproof and James might find himself in trouble inside the bars as well as outside. There were no guarantees. Some powerful people had a very long reach.

The sun was beginning to peep over the mountains and she was glad. The sooner they got their quarry and were back in the nice warm car, the better. She was ready for the hunt to be over even if she wasn't quite ready to let go of the hunter. She hugged him even tighter and waited for the sound of approaching traffic.

She didn't have to wait long. Ten minutes passed, and they heard the rumble of a big truck. Soon a semi bearing the logo of a Spokane egg company on the trailer pulled to the side of the road behind the leaning Fat Boy.

The passenger's side door opened and Louie caught a glimpse of red hair as someone jumped down and slammed the door shut.

"Thanks, Scott." The voice carried in the still morning air.

Paul's body tensed, and Louie's arm dropped away. Without conscious thought, her hand strayed to her back, her fingers closing around the handcuffs on her belt right next to her gun.

The driver also jumped out and both men went to the back of the truck. The driver swung the big door open and James appeared a moment later with the motorcycle wheel. The driver locked the trailer up again and climbed inside once more. The truck pulled away and James McDonald began to roll the tire to the motorcycle.

Paul started to walk out of the brush and toward the highway, his back straight and his green eyes focused on his younger brother. He seemed to have forgotten Louie was with him. She hurried to keep up with his long and determined strides. The gentle lover from hours earlier was nowhere to be seen in the somber man in front of her.

"Jamie." Paul's voice carried over the air with a timbre of authority that only one accustomed to being in command could carry off. The air seemed to crackle with electricity.

James stopped rolling the new tire. His head snapped up. The motorcycle wheel and tire he'd been rolling tipped over on its side. He took several steps back as if he was thinking about bolting.

"Paul?" Shock was clear in his voice.

Louie hurried to catch up with Paul. Man, could he move fast when he wanted. No wonder he was such a terror on the ice. If he could walk this fast, what could he do on skates? Her leg muscles burned with the effort of keeping pace.

They were almost to James when a loud, unmistakable sound shattered the morning quiet. Paul stopped.

"What..." Louie gasped as her right hand dug into her jacket to grab the gun at her waist. The sound came again and again. One, two, three.

His momentary paralysis gone, Paul took off at a run, screaming a single word.

"No!"

Louie's head whipped to the right, the direction the shots had come from. She dropped to a shooter's stance and scanned right to left, left to right. Nothing, not a flash, not even a rustle. Nothing. The cop in her wanted to run in the direction of the shots, to give chase. The woman in her wanted to turn and rush to Paul's side. The woman won. She abandoned the visual search and rushed to Paul, on the far side of the road next to the



motorcycle.

Paul knelt, cradling his dying brother in his arms. A red stain was growing larger and larger in the middle of Jamie's chest. His face was gray.

She'd seen that color on a man's face more than once.

## Chapter Eleven

"Oh yeah, baby," he said under his breath as he looked at his handiwork through the high-powered scope. Damn, but he was good. Sometimes he wondered why he'd given up wet work. Nobody was as good as he. He probably could have made a fortune as a gun-for-hire.

The relief that came over him as he watched James leave this earth was almost as great as the pleasure he got when he pulled the trigger. The last of his problems was bleeding out on the side of the rural highway. His troubles were over and it was full speed ahead. Some nice work here this morning.

With that piece of unfortunate business finished, there were shipments to be made and a new guy to get up to speed. This time around, he'd keep his finger on the pulse more than he had with James. He didn't want another fuck-up. As much as he liked using his special rifle, he'd prefer to do it on his own terms and on his own schedule. He didn't like the feeling of being behind the eight ball, and that's what it had been like with McDonald.

Far in the distance, the scream of a siren disturbed the quiet of the morning, his call to get out quick. He'd love to sit and watch the paramedics try to undo the damage he'd inflicted on the boy's body. It would make him laugh. If he'd wanted to wound McDonald, that's what he'd have done. He shot to kill. What was the point otherwise? No matter what they tried to do for James, it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. A kill shot was a kill shot was a kill shot. One, two, three, and dead he will be. He laughed at his own pitiful poetry.

He took one more look through the scope and then lowered the rifle. He stood, slung the rifle and the binoculars over his shoulder, and began to walk back to his car. It had been a long, cold night, and yet he'd never felt better. A perfect hunt always gave him an incredible high. Some people got it from booze and some from drugs. Not him, it was all about the pull of that trigger and a perfectly sighted shot. There wasn't a substance on earth that could equal the high.

At the car, he slipped out of the camouflage so that in his jeans and plain shirt he'd be just another guy driving down the road. He again placed the rifle between the folds of the blanket on the back seat. It was like tucking in a baby.

When the sound of the siren stopped, he was headed south. If they decided to sweep the area, not only would they fail to find a single clue he'd been there, but he'd be long gone. It would take far greater skill than local police in this area possessed to catch him. Hell, it would take more skill than anyone possessed to stop him. He was like the Holy Spirit. People could feel his presence but they never saw his face.

\* \* \* \*

This couldn't be happening. One second Jamie was next to the bike looking like a little kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar and in the next, he was on the ground with a big red hole in his chest. Paul didn't stop to think, he just reacted. He bolted from the edge of the woods and across the fifty-five mile an hour highway as fast as he could run.

Once when they'd been kids, Jamie'd crashed on his bicycle, cutting his elbow so bad it took ten stitches to close it up. Paul had been right behind him, wrapping his shirt around Jamie's bleeding arm and getting him back to the house. He'd gone to the hospital with Mom and Jamie, holding his brother's hand when they'd started on the stitches. Jamie hated needles but Paul talked to him the whole time and before Jamie realized it, the doctor was done. Paul remembered that morning as he now pulled off his shirt and held it to the hole in grown-up Jamie's chest. Within only a couple of seconds, his shirt was soaked. He pressed harder, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

"Come on, Jam, hang in there." The cloth beneath his hand was growing heavier, wetter. The smell of blood was strong. He had to make it stop.

Jamie's face wasn't pale; it was pasty. The stark white skin made his green eyes look huge. The fear in them mirrored the fear gripping Paul's heart as he held Jamie tight. He remembered how awful he'd felt for Jamie so long ago when his injured arm took away the already short summer. That was nothing compared to this horror. Paul could almost see the life slipping away from his little brother and he could do nothing to stop it. He held Jamie closer, his head against Paul's chest.

"Stay with me, little brother. Stay with me."

Louie's warm hand on his shoulder cut through the ice in his body, and he looked up, surprised to see her in a shooter's crouch with her gun drawn. She wasn't looking at either him or Jamie. Her gaze was sweeping everything around them.

Strange as it was, he'd forgotten about the shooter, if he'd even really given the invisible killer a thought. After he'd heard the first shot he'd thought only about getting to Jamie. That he might have put himself in the line of fire never even occurred to him. Judging by her stance and hardened gaze, it had occurred to Louie. At least somebody was watching his back.

"I'm sorry." Jamie's words were so low it was hard to hear him.

Paul looked back down into Jamie's face and hot tears began to sting. "It's all right Jamie, it's all right. Just stay with me, little brother."

In the distance, the sound of sirens began to get louder. Louie must have called for help, bless her heart. They'd have to hurry; the shirt he pressed to Jamie's chest was thick and heavy with his brother's blood, so soaked through that it now streamed rather than dripped from the sodden cloth. Way too much blood.

"I love you, Paulie. Tell the folks I love them too."

"You tell them yourself."

"Tell 'em..."

The tears began to slide down Paul's cheeks, hot and salty as they touched his lips. He leaned in close to hear because Jamie's words were little more than whisper. "What, little bro?"

"Tell them I'm sorry."

Jamie's eyes fluttered shut. His lips had a strange blue tinge to them as he took one final, shuddering breath. His body went still, limp and heavy in Paul's arms. He wanted to shake him, to make him open his eyes, but it wouldn't do any good.

Jamie no longer needed to worry about a federal indictment, a trip to jail, or a dead girlfriend.

\* \* \* \*

The three bullets had hit James McDonald's body with frightening accuracy. The result was like a target practice dummy where the shooter tried to line up all the shots and see how close together he could get them. This shooter was no amateur and that bothered Louie. It bothered her a lot.

Louie and Paul stood a few feet behind the paramedics while they cut away the sodden shirt and light jacket James had been wearing. Even through the mess on his chest, Louie could make out the holes, three of them, mid-chest, just left of center. They looked like three black eyes in the middle of a brilliant red face. It was a wonder he lived as long as he did. Those shots had to have torn his heart to pieces. Paul's intake of breath told her the same thought occurred to him. She reached over and squeezed his hand. Though cold, he returned the gentle pressure.

James surprised her with strength of will enough to allow him time to say goodbye to his brother. A few days ago, hell, a few hours ago, Paul'd been bitter and furious with this man who caused plenty of grief for the entire McDonald family. All of that baggage disappeared in a heartbeat the moment the gunman fired. Paul reacted on instinct rooted in love, regardless of what he might say. Good God, how she understood how things can change in a matter of seconds.

She and Christopher had never fought, hadn't been estranged as Paul and James had been. Still, tragedy changes everything. Her life hadn't been the same since a bullet put her brother into a coma. She'd had lived for two things since: revenge and hope. She hunted daily for the person who pulled the trigger, hoping she'd have the strength to merely take him into custody and not kill him. And she hoped every day she'd get a call from the care facility telling her Chris had come back to them. She was still waiting and hoping for both.

While they'd waited for the ambulance to arrive, she'd watched Paul cradle his brother's body. Her heart ached with the knowledge that his life would, like hers, never be the same. Any hope for his brother was gone, and she wondered if he'd be filled with the same sense of injustice and fury that had been with her since the day Chris was shot. Would he seek revenge as she did? Or would he find the kind of peace she never had?

It seemed as though it had taken hours for the ambulance to arrive rather than ten minutes. They were close enough to Metaline Falls that the response time was excellent. Under normal circumstances, it would have meant the difference between life and death. As it was, death had been inevitable for James McDonald. No life-saving measures could bring him back from the hat trick to his heart despite the valiant efforts of the capable EMTs. They still had him on an oxygen mask and IV drip as they moved him onto the waiting gurney.

Even knowing James was gone, Paul crawled into the ambulance with his brother, his hand on the sheet that covered him from neck to foot. She watched the back of the ambulance as it sped away down the quiet highway. Though she deeply understood Paul's loss, she couldn't offer much comfort. She'd been around death many times. It was cold and it was final. Unlike the hope offered in literature and popular movies, coming back from death was a fantasy.

Instead of following the ambulance, Louie waited for the sheriff. They had things to discuss. Louie'd met Joe Federer once or twice and liked him. He was sharp and intuitive even though he was sheriff of a small community and a mostly rural county.

He drove up in a marked cruiser and stepped out. Tall, husky, and with beautiful

silver hair, Joe commanded attention anywhere he went.

"Lou." His deep voice filled the morning. He didn't seem surprised to see her. He held out his hand and she took it. His grip was warm and sure.

"Joe, good to see you."

"What's up with this?" He inclined his toward the motorcycle and the stain on the asphalt beside it. "Drugs, I assume."

Louie nodded and grimaced at the same time. "Yes and no."

He raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

Louie filled him in on what she knew, which wasn't nearly as much as she'd have liked. There were too many holes in the story, too many unknowns. It wasn't a simple drug deal gone bad. She'd seen enough of those to know, and so had Joe. There was something bigger going on here and damned if she could figure out what it was.

"Any idea on the shooter?"

"No." That was the part that bugged her the most. She needed to know who was pulling the trigger just as much for Paul as for herself. She guessed that the bullets that pierced James McDonald's heart would match those that came from Chris and Kendall.

Joe chewed on a toothpick and narrowed his eyes taking in everything from the bloody gravel on the side of the road to the motorcycle wheel lying in the ditch. "He shot from there." Joe pointed to the same spot that Louie had been pointing her gun at earlier.

"Yeah and one of the shots was a through and through." She'd seen the blood running through Paul's hands as he held James, and had known one of the shots went all the way through his chest and out his back. "That tree." She pointed to a large pine about ten feet from the road's edge.

It had taken all her will-power not to pry the bullet from the tree when she realized it was lodged there. More than anything she wanted the ballistics run even though she was positive what the results would be. She'd been off the job a long time now, but once trained, always trained, and she wouldn't jeopardize another's investigation. Joe was a stand-up cop, and he'd share the ballistics with her. Trouble was, this was a small county and the analysis often took far longer than down in Spokane. She sensed that somewhere a clock was ticking, and she needed to be armed with as much information as she could as soon as possible.

Joe pulled a pair of latex gloves out of his jacket pocket and slipped them onto his big hands as he walked in the direction of the giant pine. Louie followed close on his heels. With a pocket knife, he dislodged the bullet from the tree without damaging it. The tree didn't fare as well, but so be it. The precious evidence was intact. Joe was all professional despite his small town arena. She watched him turn the bullet over in his hands, studying it.

"Your boy likes high caliber." He held out his hand so Louie could see.

She was certain the second she saw the bullet that it was the same. It almost hurt to be right.

"Interesting." Joe was looking from the bullet to the spot where they believed the shooter had stood.

She looked up at him. "How so?"

"Your boy is good, Lou, real good."

"You know that how?"

"Two things. This is a straight shot, an accurate shot. Put together the accuracy and

the distance and your shooter is a boy with some real skill."

Her mind raced at the possibilities. "How skilled, do you think?"

"I think special ops. He is or was either a sniper or Special Forces."

Her same thought. She appreciated the unintended validation of her own deductive reasoning. "What did James McDonald know that somebody didn't want out?" She was talking more to herself than anything.

"Good question."

Joe put the bullet into an evidence bag, marked it and handed it off to a deputy. He then walked her back to the Mustang where it still sat shielded from view.

"Nice car. Yours?"

She shook her head. "No, still got the Chevelle."

"Sweet car."

"Hard to resist a great muscle car, isn't it?"

He smiled, shook her hand and opened the door for her. "I'll keep in touch, and you have the folks in Spokane get a hold of me. Sounds like we got ourselves a little conspiracy here. Don't like finding dead bodies alongside my roads. That's for you folks down in the big city, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, right. Maybe we can put out a public announcement bulletin that all murders must stop at the Spokane County line."

"Works for me." He pushed the door shut and leaned down to the open window.

"Seriously, Lou, be careful. Something about this doesn't smell right to me."

She knew what he meant; it wasn't passing the smell test for her either. "Will do, Joe. Keep in touch."

"You do the same." He tapped his fingers against the door and then stepped back to give her room to pull out onto the highway.

She turned the key Paul had given her and the Mustang roared to life. It didn't quite have the kick her Chevelle did, but it wasn't bad driving either. Instead of heading for Metaline Falls, she turned the car and started to drive toward Mount Carmel Hospital in Colville, the closest medical facility. No doubt Paul would be waiting outside because the doctors wouldn't be able to save Jamie. The trip to the hospital would be short and bittersweet, and then James McDonald would be making one more trip. This time to the morgue.

## Chapter Twelve

After only five minutes in the emergency room, Jamie was declared DOA by a tall ER doctor with brown hair just beginning to turn gray at his temples. He had kind eyes and a gentle voice. He put a hand on Paul's shoulder as he offered his condolences.

The thoughtful staff of the small hospital left him alone to sit by Jamie, the drapes around the small emergency room cubicle pulled together for privacy. Jamie's face retained the pasty white pallor; his chest beneath the white linen was still covered with blood. Paul held Jamie's cold and lifeless hand, his own fingers speckled crimson. He didn't know how to leave him.

It could have been an hour or ten minutes, when the drapes rustled and then parted. Louie's sober face peered in. She didn't say a word and for that he was grateful. Silently, she pulled a chair close and sat down, her hand on his leg. They sat that way for a long time, the only sound the hustle and bustle of the emergency room personnel beyond the closed drapes.

"I don't know what to do," Paul finally said. He couldn't keep the raw emotion from spilling into his words.

She put an arm around his shoulders and hugged him. "Let the good people here take care of him."

He laid his head against her hair. "I can't just leave him." His voice broke.

"Oh Paul, I'm so sorry."

A sob broke loose and tears streamed down his cheeks. "I let him die."

"No," she said and held his face between her hands. Her eyes were intense. "No, you didn't. Someone else took his life."

He closed his eyes. "I should have done more."

"What more could you have done?"

A hundred memories rushed through his mind all mixed together with conflicting emotions. "I don't know."

"Paul, look at me ... please. It's not your fault and you did the best you could've done. You held him in your arms. No matter what else happens, you have to remember that he didn't die alone."

He could get lost in her eyes and the dark honesty he saw there. She wasn't simply saying the words, she meant what she said. "Thank you."

With her thumbs, Louie wiped the tears from his cheeks and then kissed him so softly it was like the touch of butterfly wings. "You're a good guy, Paul McDonald, and don't you ever think different." She kissed him again.

He still held Jamie's lifeless fingers when she reached over and ever so gently pulled his away. Just as gently, she placed Jamie's hand beneath the white sheet. Paul could almost make himself believe Jamie was simply asleep, and if he was to come back later, everything would be different.

"Come on, it's time to go." She touched his shoulder and waited.

She was right. Still, once standing he couldn't get his feet to move. He stayed beside the hospital bed, his hands gripping the silver rail, staring down at Jamie's face. Tiny specks of blood on his cheeks and across the bridge of his nose made him look like when

he was six and had contracted the chicken pox. He'd been so mad because it'd been mid-winter and Dad had constructed an ice rink in the front yard so the boys could play hockey. Jamie stood hour upon hour at the front window, his red spotted face sad while he watched Paul and his friends play hockey until they were so tired they could barely move.

Right now, Paul would give anything to have one more day with Jamie. To be the kids they once were; when all they had to worry about in their lives was whether their skates were sharp enough. He wanted to fly across the ice with his brother, to roar with laughter when they checked each other and then fell down in a tangled heap of arms, legs, skates and sticks. He wanted to sit and watch Jamie sketch the mountains of their hometown, his charcoals turning a clean piece of paper into a beautiful landscape. Paul wanted to forget that life had turned them into strangers.

He couldn't have that day. He couldn't even have an hour. Jamie was gone and Paul would always carry a piece of the blame. Perhaps that was the reason he couldn't walk away. He kept thinking if only he hadn't turned his back on Jamie then maybe, just maybe, things would be different. Maybe his brother would still be alive.

"Come on, Paul." Louie tugged at his arm, a gentle nudge toward the room beyond the white curtains.

He touched Jamie's hair, blinked back a new rush of tears and turned. With Louie holding his hand, he walked out of the emergency room and out of the hospital without another look back.

Paul didn't even give it a thought when she unlocked the passenger's side door and motioned for him to get in. She drove the Mustang back to Spokane while he sat in silence, gazing out the window without really seeing a thing. He didn't have the heart or the energy for small talk and bless her, she seemed to understand. If he liked her before, his feelings went to another level now. She seemed to have a sixth sense for what he needed and when. She was not only wise and exciting, she was intuitive.

She parked the Mustang behind her office, in the now-familiar parking lot. She looked over at him, and for the first time since they left Colville, met her gaze. Her eyes were full of concern.

"Are you going to be all right?" She laid a hand on his arm.

The touch her fingers warmed him though his heart hurt and his mind was numb. He answered her slowly. "Yes ... in time."

She nodded and gave his arm a gentle squeeze. "I'm here if you need me."

He smiled though he didn't feel very optimistic. "Thank you."

"I'm serious. I know what it's like to lose loved ones in a flash. It's hard any time someone you love is hurt. It's even worse when it comes out of nowhere. It's almost impossible to wrap your mind around it. I just want you to know, I'm here for you."

He leaned over and kissed her. The slow kiss held everything in his heart. Her lips were soft and yielding. Unlike the passion they shared under the stars, it was something more, something he'd never felt before, perhaps because of the tragedy. Perhaps not.

He took a deep breath and said, "I have to call our—my folks."

She kissed him and touched his cheek with her hand. "Yes, you need to talk with your parents. They're really going to need you now. Call me later?"

He reached up and touched her cheek. "I'd rather you be with me." She didn't owe him anything. One night under the stars didn't entitle him to what he asked of her now



and yet he hoped she'd stay.

Her gaze softened and an expression he couldn't quite define crossed her face. Her fingers stroked his cheek. "Of course."

He let out a breath and leaned his head back. *Thank you, God.*

"Do you want to make the call from my office or go back to your house?"

"Home, I think."

Louie slid out of the car as she said, "I'll follow you in my car."

Paul watched her from the rear-view mirror all the way to Five Mile and into his driveway. He waited for her before he opened the door and walked into the house. Knowing this was the last place Jamie was before...it was like a shot to the heart. Jamie came here. Came to him but Paul had turned his back. How was he going to tell the folks?

As if she read his mind, Louie wrapped her arms around him. "It's not your fault," she said softly as her cheek rested against his chest. "Jamie made a deal with the wrong devil and it wasn't you."

He hugged her back and took the strength she offered. With a deep intake of breath, he stepped back. "I'm going to make a stiff drink before I call the folks. You want one?"

She shook her head. "No."

Once he had the scotch and water in hand, he picked up the telephone handset. He sank to the sofa and stared at the numbers. She sat beside him and took the drink from his hand, setting it on the low table in front of them.

"I don't know if I can do this," he said not looking at her.

"You can," she said softly. "I'm right here with you."

Finally, he summoned the courage to punch in the numbers. The moment he heard his mother's voice, tears began to slide down his cheeks. If not for the steady comfort of Louie's hand on his leg, he might have lost it altogether.

When he clicked off and set the phone on the side table, he was numb. Louie pressed the drink into his hand and he gratefully took a big swallow. The burn of the scotch was a welcome sensation. At least he could feel something.

For a long time, they sat together in silence. He sipped from the drink and she leaned into him. He put his hand over the one she still had on his leg.

"Thank you," he said at last.

She turned his face with one finger and kissed him on the lips. "No thanks required. I'm here for you any time."

A quiet hour later, Paul stood at the window and watched Louie drive away. He had the strangest urge to run out after her, afraid that he might lose her too if she was out of his sight. He turned away from the window and went to make himself one more drink.

\* \* \* \*

Much later, Louie looked up from behind her desk to see Harry standing in the doorway. He smiled, gave her a wave, and then headed to his office. He looked good, better than she could remember seeing him for a long time. Granted, she hadn't been paying a ton of attention to him the last few days. She'd been otherwise occupied. Now she saw a calm about him that had been missing for eons. He'd been like this in the early days, back when Chris was active and Harry was in the beginning stages of setting up his bonding company. But that had been another lifetime. All three had been different people

back then, with different lives and radically different priorities.

The last five years had been tough on both Louie and Harry. Wrapped up in her own world, she rarely took full stock of what her partner was up to, though she'd noticed the escalating blood pressure, which was obvious when he looked and sounded ready to explode at any moment. Still, she hadn't really taken the time to just be with Harry like in the old days. They'd been three great friends when Chris was healthy. Harry'd been like another older brother. She wished, as she had a thousand times before, that those days hadn't disappeared.

Maybe things could be different soon. She sure felt different. Chris had always chided her about the reserve she maintained...until she'd met Paul. In the last few days everything changed for her and now, she felt it in Harry as well.

Harry didn't wish James McDonald dead, that was a given. At the same time, no one had to tell her he was happy not to have to pay the hundred thousand dollar bond and then turn around and foreclose on the McDonalds. If nothing else, Harry was a pragmatist who could see the good in every situation even if it was a bad one, and James dying alongside the scenic highway was way up on her list of bad.

She bet Harry thought that the McDonald case was over, but it wasn't, not to her. Finding James had become only a piece of the puzzle, and she didn't intend to stop until she had all the answers.

Five years. For five incredibly long years, she'd been searching for the shooter who'd put her brother into a coma up on that hillside. Now, a tall red-head had walked into her life and everything turned upside down, in more ways than one. The answer to her personal tragedy was somehow linked to the McDonald brothers and she was going to find out how and why.

That she had rolled in the hay with Paul McDonald, or rather rolled in the pine needles, was strange enough. She should feel bad about being more than a little wanton and yet she didn't. Not even a tiny little bit. They'd been great together, and if she was lucky, she'd get the chance to do it with him again. Pretty weird thinking for her. The last thing on her mind during the last five years had been sex. Too many other more important matters had cluttered her mind and consumed her energy. Now, one night of love under the stars and she couldn't stop thinking of sex.

Sex and finding a killer. What was the old adage about a fine line separating sex and violence? Didn't bode well for the beginning of a lasting relationship with Paul. Oh well, she'd worry about those details later. Right now, she wanted to know who killed James McDonald and why.

She'd think about the sex, the very great sex, later.

Louie got up and walked to the doorway between their offices. She leaned against the doorframe and watched Harry work. His head was bent in concentration, his long braids hanging down on either side of his face. Something Joe said earlier nagged at the back of her mind, like an itch that wouldn't go away. A bad penny that kept turning up. A bad rash that kept coming back. Yeah, bugging her like that.

"Hey, Harry?"

He looked up from his desk, his dark eyes alert. "Hey yourself, sugar."

"What do you know about snipers?"

He shrugged his big shoulders. "Everything."

"Come on, I'm serious."

"So am I, sugar. You forget, I'm a sniper." He held out his thumb and forefinger as if to shoot her.

She pushed away from the doorframe and walked over to his desk, dropping into a chair in front of it. She knew Harry had been a trained sniper for the Rangers. Her question was vague because she wasn't even sure at this point what she was trying to get at. She was throwing out broad questions hoping something would click to narrow her focus and get her on the right path.

"Oh, I remember. I just don't know what I need to ask."

Leaning back in his chair, he stretched out his arms, lacing his fingers together and resting his hands on the back of his head. "Why are you asking about shooters? Something to do with the McDonald kid?"

"Yes." Then she told him about her conversation with Joe and his theory that the shooter was a trained professional. "I have to agree with him. Whoever shot James knew what he was doing."

"What else, Louie? I can see it in your face. Trained shooters are a dime a dozen in these parts. This is prime hunting country and folks around here love their guns. It wouldn't take much to find a couple guys with the kind of skill you're talking about. So what else is on your mind?"

"We haven't talked much the last few days, have we? Well, the down and dirty is that the murders of James McDonald and Kendall Stewart are somehow related to what happened to Chris."

"Aw, come on. How that can be? Chris was shot five years ago. He wouldn't even have known McDonald or this Stewart gal."

"I know it sounds crazy. Doesn't make it any less true. The bullet they pulled from Chris was shot from the same gun that killed Kendall Stewart. That's a fact and it puts a completely different spin on everything."

"No shit?" He sat up straight and leaned toward her.

"No shit."

"Okay, so say that's true, how do McDonald and his girlfriend fit into this? I mean, it seems incredible they'd be connected to Chris."

She didn't have a good answer. The ballistics told her that the bullets in two of the shootings—Kendall and Chris—had been shot from the same gun. She'd put a big bet on the same match for James. Her gut also told her the shooter who had pulled the trigger was the same. Running both hands through her hair, she shook her head. She still didn't know where she was going with all of this except she felt compelled to keep pushing forward.

"Don't know, Harry. The only thing I do know is it's all connected."

"Maybe, sugar, and maybe not. I think you're tired and could be making connections where they might not exist. I'll grant you the shots could have come from the same gun but guns move, you know that as well as I do. It's possible you could have at least two shooters with no connection to each other at all beyond the gun."

Nope, she wasn't buying into his argument. She was tired, yes, but she wasn't wrong about the connection.

"Could be," she said, even though she didn't believe it. Chris was a part of whatever James McDonald had gotten caught up in and she was going to find out what it was. "I still think it's one shooter."

"A rifle killed McDonald, right?" he asked.

"True, but a trained shooter, a sniper for the sake of argument, would be skilled with a number of guns."

He nodded. "True enough, Lou. I can handle just about any gun you put in my hands. I'm best with my favorite rifle, but I can shoot anything and be damned good at it too. Shoot the wings off a fly, if you know what I mean."

She didn't doubt him. If anyone knew guns and how to handle each and every one of them, it was Harry. "Then it's possible that we have one shooter in all three cases. The ballistics state that rifle shots took Chris down and killed Kendall Stewart, so my argument is more than academic."

He nodded slowly. "You could be right, Louie. My only advice is to remember our deal is done and you'd probably be wise to leave the rest of it up to your buddies in law enforcement. You're not on the job anymore and you know how touchy they get when we civilians tread on their investigations. Let them do what the good taxpayers of this state pay them to do."

Being off the job and turning off her mind were two very different things. Harry should know that as well as anyone. She didn't believe for a second that he'd ever turned off. Once a Ranger, always a Ranger. She'd seen the same thing in Chris.

She stood, tapped his desk a couple times with her fingertips, and smiled. "I think I'll take your advice and give it a rest. Right now I'm dog tired and home has a real nice ring to it."

"Good idea, sugar. You could use some beauty sleep, if you catch my drift." He gave her an exaggerated wink.

"Thanks a lot. You know, a real gentleman wouldn't mention when a lady is looking a bit less than her usual model-ready self."

"Now, sugar, I don't think I ever claimed to be a gentleman." His laughter followed her all the way into her own office.

Ten minutes later when she left, Harry was already gone though she hadn't heard him take off. Probably hiding from her non-stop questions and "what if" scenarios. She didn't blame him. If the shoe was on the other foot, it'd likely get on her nerves as well. He was a man of few words and if she had to guess, one who'd been pushed well beyond his limit for the day.

\* \* \* \*

He watched from the shadows. She was too focused to notice him. Tall and thin with curves that proved she was all woman; when she walked by, heads turned, both male and female. The shine of her dark hair in the sunlight made him want to run his fingers through it. She was one-hundred-percent female despite her choice of a historically male profession. The fact she'd made that particular choice and flourished made her all the sexier.

He wondered again how she was in bed. He imagined her naked and filled with desire, a fine sheen of sweat giving her body an alluring shimmer. He could see it in his mind's eye and wished things had been different. How he'd love to hear her scream with pleasure. How he'd love to feel her soft skin against his. He'd never have her, but who could blame a red-blooded man for fantasizing? Louie Russell was straight up hot and she carried a gun which made her even hotter.

For the most part, he was happy about how things turned out. He never quite got over the fact Christopher Russell refused to die, but since he was locked into a world far away from the rest of them, his survival was a moot point. Short of a miracle, Christopher would never cause him trouble again. Chances were that comatose Chris would pass away without ever opening his eyes. That put the odds very much in his favor and he loved odds like that.

Little sis was a different story. So was James McDonald. James had been handy enough for a while. He'd caught on quick and turned out to be quite efficient at the drug smuggling game. He'd carried that hockey bag without the tiniest hesitation. He'd been a natural, maybe because he'd grown up with a hockey bag in his hand. The only difference between then and now was the contents of the bag.

Of course, if James had been as efficient with the cards as he was at smuggling dope across the border, he'd never have found himself working in the game. The boy couldn't gamble worth a shit and McDonald's loss was his gain. He'd paid James' markers and that allowed him to keep playing. James also put a new spin on the term losing streak. For every marker he picked up, young James made another run. The arrangement had been perfection until the little shit got himself arrested.

Long story short, McDonald had been a royal pain in the ass since the arrest. Shooting the little bastard in front of his famous big brother had been...well, fun. The third shot was the kill shot; the other two were for show. He was an artist, after all, and every artist needed to be admired. He'd have loved to be able to stay and observe their admiration for his skill except that while he was skilled, he wasn't foolish. As soon as he saw McDonald go down, he'd made tracks for Spokane. Besides, he'd endured a long night waiting for the man to get back with the missing tire and wheel. Pathetic Jamie McDonald couldn't even get an escape right. As much as he hated the thought of finding a replacement for the bumbling McDonald, he hated the thought of being caught even more. James McDonald had become a liability and liabilities couldn't be allowed to remain. The threat they posed to him wasn't acceptable.

The roar of a powerful engine brought his attention back to the here and now. From the parking lot outside her office, Russell drove away in the powerful convertible, her shiny hair catching the wind, her eyes hidden by the dark glasses. She was quite a sight in that automobile, the kind of car most guys would give a testicle to own.

Though she passed very close to where he stood, she didn't glance his way. He suspected her mind was far away on another man, one with red hair and green eyes. What drew women to guys like that? Never understood it himself. The things he could do with a gun were far more admirable than anything hockey boy could do with a stick. But women were women and there was no accounting for taste.

He stayed in the shadows until he could no longer see the taillights of her car. He would have to keep an eye on her; she could cause him real trouble. He'd like to think this little matter was all tidied up. The only reason he'd stayed alive and in business this long was because he was a careful man. He paid attention to all the details and right now, Louie Russell was a detail that would have to be watched. He couldn't afford to get sloppy at this point. He'd hate to have to take down a woman as attractive and intriguing as Russell. He'd do it though, if he was forced to. Life was all about choices, and getting caught was not a choice he'd make. If it came down to a choice between her life and his freedom, she'd lose.

For tonight, there was little more he could do and little she could do to harm him or disrupt his careful plans. She was going home, which for him opened up the night to indulge in his favorite pastime. He was whistling as he left the shadows and strode across the almost empty parking lot.

"Hey, dude, can you spare a couple bucks?"

The man who approached him was missing most of his teeth and his hair was a long matted mess. The pan-handling street person smelled worse than he looked.

He tried not to breathe as the man came near. "You need money for some food, right?"

The walking mess scrunched up his face, his eyes red-rimmed and watery. "Fuck no, I need a bottle, man. Do I look like I need to eat?"

He respected an honest man who embraced his vice. He dug in his pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill. He held it out and the dirty face lit up.

"Thanks, dude. You're all right." He grabbed the bill with grubby fingers and it disappeared into the folds of the filthy clothes. With the movement came another wave of fetid odor.

He wouldn't have believed the man he could move that fast. After that ten dollar bill was tucked away, the guy made tracks like a long-distance runner. He wondered how much that ten spot would get the grungy man at the liquor store a few blocks away. He was in a good mood tonight, so why not share the love? He continued whistling as he walked away.

He spared only a passing glance for the petite black woman with the little silver grocery cart standing in the shadows of the building, watching him with wise and understanding eyes. When he drove away, she turned and trod slowly up the stairs and to the little apartment where she kept a telephone number right next to the phone.

\* \* \* \*

"So," Louie told the unmoving Chris, "it's a huge screwed-up mess. I mean, the good part is that Harry doesn't have to cough up the bond. The bad part is several people have been killed. I wish you were here, Christopher, I could use your input. You'd see whatever it is I'm missing. You always could."

She held his hand, her warm fingers wrapped around his cool ones. What, Chris wondered, was she talking about? And, why was she babbling on and on? He was really tired. Didn't she realize a bullet punched through his head not more than a day ago? His silly little sister always did like to jabber. Even she ought to be smart enough to realize he needed a chance to recoup before she wore him out with stories about her latest exploits with that crazy dog of hers.

When he thought about it, Louie and that dog were natural partners. She'd done well enough as a patrol cop. He'd been incredibly proud of his little sister, even if he failed to tell her so. When she'd started on the K9 unit and found that goofy dog, she bloomed. She was a natural and everyone around could see it. Given time, she was bound to be the top dog in Spokane's K9 squad. No doubt about it.

He did love her stories. She could make him laugh like nobody else. Still, right now he was so incredibly tired. His whole body felt drugged and heavy. He supposed it had to do with the shot at the warehouse. Taking a hit like that was guaranteed to take a guy down for a while.

He honestly didn't feel like going over her latest raid with the dog and hearing how many they arrested. He wanted to sleep. Usually his sister had better sense. She was attuned to people and that was one of the reasons she made such a great cop. That being the case, why was she having so much trouble seeing he was exhausted and wanted to sleep?

Maybe if he just kept his eyes closed, she'd get the hint. He hoped so anyway, except that it didn't seem to be working despite his closed eyes. Maybe he should snore?

"If I had to guess, I'd say he could very well be working with the Medicine Man. I wish you'd have taken him down that night, Chris. Maybe this whole mess could have been avoided. I really wish you would wake up, bro, I really do. I need you."

She stood and fiddled with his covers, taking his hand and putting her lips to it. The soft kiss against the back of his hand was nice. His tough little sister who never wanted anyone to know she was a softie at heart. He couldn't imagine his life without Louie around. After all, these days they only had each other. She put his hand down and tucked it beneath the blanket. Such a mother hen.

"I'm probably way off base." She kept talking even as she moved around. "Paul's brother may have a whole different group of dirtballs in his racket."

Who in the world was Paul? Chris didn't recall Louie ever talking about somebody with that name. Maybe Paul was one of the new recruits. She had that way about her and made friends of everyone. Not that Chris would know who they were. Despite both of them being in law enforcement, their worlds were very different.

"I've got to go, Chris. I should let this thing with James McDonald go, but I can't and it's more than falling in lust with his brother."

Lust? That was new for little sis. About time too. It'd be nice to have some nieces and nephews, and heaven knows he wasn't making much progress in the love department. One of them ought to be thinking about marriage and kids. Maybe he could find himself a nice nurse here at the hospital. Play up the wounded agent routine. It could work for him. Well, maybe after he got enough sleep he'd actually open his eyes and scope out the field in those sexy blue scrubs. Now, that sounded like a plan. All he needed was some rest.

Louie was still talking as the weariness he couldn't seem to shake dragged him down once again into the blackness.

\* \* \* \*

What a mess. Paul had been gone for less than twenty-four hours, and it was like he'd been missing in action for a month or more. There were times when running this hockey team was more like running a giant daycare. Two players with shaky grades, two players battling with each other, and another patched up after a dislocated shoulder. All in one day. Before he could head up to Surrey to help his parents make the arrangements for Jamie, he had to meet with the team, lay down the law, and put the fear of God into a roster of players with an average age of seventeen. What'd he been thinking when he bought this team? The beginnings of a headache began to tap at his skull.

Paul sat at his desk and leaned his head into his hands. He rubbed his scalp with his fingertips. He knew exactly what he was thinking when he purchased the franchise, and on any other day he could have taken these latest developments in stride. It was all part of a young team, one just like he played on years ago. This wasn't any other day, however, and he was at loss on just about everything.

His heart literally ached over Jamie's death. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right. Jamie had been a screw-up of colossal proportions. Nobody with an ounce of intelligence could argue the fact. A screw-up was one thing, but evil was another altogether. Jamie never had been a bad guy. Stupid, yes. Evil, never. As long as he lived, Paul would never forget the moment when he felt Jamie's life ebb away. He'd never in his entire life felt as helpless and hoped to God he never did again.

He should go home and get some rest except the last thing he felt was tired. It was more than Jamie's death or the problems with the team. It had a great deal to do with tall and beautiful. Two nights they'd spent together. Two crazy nights and he felt like he found what he'd been looking for all his life without even realizing he'd been searching. He closed his eyes and he saw her face. He took a breath and he smelled her perfume. He opened his hand and he felt her breast against his fingertips.

Paul had never been in love before and wondered if it felt something like this. Not that he was in love with Louie Russell. That would be impossible. He only met her a few days ago and people, rational people, didn't fall in love over the course of a couple of days.

Still, he missed her and wished he could see her or talk to her. That too would be improbable. She'd been on the job looking for Jamie so that she could turn him over to the authorities. It had been a job for her and the job was now done. She'd collect her pay and move on to the next case. He'd be surprised if he ever saw her again.

The thought made his stomach lurch. He hadn't really thought about it like that before and it made him frown. It shouldn't. It wasn't like he hadn't done that himself a time or two. He'd played professional hockey for years. Women waited outside the locker rooms everywhere he'd played. Was this how those puck bunnies had felt? He suspected they had, and the shame he should have felt at the time now washed him over like dirty bath water. Cold, dirty bath water.

He pushed the guilt aside and thought instead of Louie. He didn't want the magic they created under the stars to be all there was to their relationship. He didn't want that one night to be the only night and yet he didn't know how to go from here. He didn't know if Louie cared one way or the other. Maybe she didn't want to see him again. Maybe it wasn't as special for her as it felt to him.

This train of thought was driving him crazy. He had many other things to worry about. He didn't have the time or the energy to waste on a woman right now. Even if she was the most special woman he ever met. Silken hair and ivory skin...He could imagine how beautiful their children would be.

Enough already. Paul shoved his chair back and kicked off his shoes. They landed on the far side of the room with a thud. He reached for his skates and jammed them on his feet. The ice never failed him. Most of the team was gone for the day and so far Bill hadn't run the Zamboni over the ice yet. This would be a great time to work off a little of the stress that had him wired. At least this time, Bill wouldn't scowl at him for messing up his pristine ice.

Today, he left his stick in the office. He hit the ice like a sprinter, moving as fast as his legs could push him. He circled the rink again and again, each loop faster than the one before it. His breath came quicker, his heart thumped and the muscles in his legs burned more with every pass. He focused only on the skating. His body buzzed and his lungs were on fire. Still he pushed harder and faster until nothing existed except the scrape of



ice beneath his skates.

He didn't want to feel anything except the burning of his muscles. When he looked up and saw Louie, he came close to crashing into the nearest board. He didn't know how long she'd been standing there, his concentration so intent on pushing his body to the absolute limit. At least she wouldn't wonder why he wasn't in the pros any longer.

He didn't crash and recovered with what he hoped was at least a little grace. His breathing was still heavy when he skated to the nearest door, stepped off the ice and onto the rubber pad with shaky legs.

"Hi." She looked a little tired and a little sad.

She looked beautiful.

He meant to say hello back and then did something that surprised him. He reached out, pulled her close, and kissed her hard and deep.

And he wasn't one bit sorry.

## Chapter Thirteen

Okay, now this was just plain nuts. They were far from alone in the huge building and anybody could walk in to see them sucking face like a couple of teenagers. So, would Louie back off? Not a chance. She returned his passion and upped the ante. His lips were sweet against hers, the taste of his sweat salty against her tongue.

Her face was flushed and her breathing ragged when Paul pulled away. She could have gone on kissing him like that for hours.

"I'm s-sorry," he stuttered. "That was out of line."

"Are you really sorry?" Louie raised an eyebrow.

He blinked and then smiled. "No."

"Me either." She returned the smile and took him by the hand, leading him back to the office she sat in the first day they'd met. They'd have privacy there.

With his skates on, Paul towered over her. Once they were in the office with the door shut, he pulled her into his arms again, his body hot and sticky. He smelled all man. "I'm glad you're here."

"Back at ya." She kissed his neck. "Mmm, salty."

A growl sounded low in his throat, like the one she'd heard under the stars and it made her pulse roar. "You're dangerous." His words were muttered against her ear, his breath hot.

"Well, I do carry a gun."

"It's not your gun I'm worried about."

She leaned away from him and studied his face. "I worry you?"

She hadn't stopped to think about how she might be affecting him. So far she'd been focused on her own feelings, how strange it was to be hot and bothered for a man she knew little about, though she'd spent more than a few minutes googling him and the reading was quite interesting. That was just the press and she knew better than to use that as measuring stick for the real man.

He let her go, walking to the battered sofa where he sat and began to take off his skates. His eyes were focused on his feet. "I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not."

"Well, that's just about as clear as mud." She went over and sat next to him on the sofa. Maybe she'd gone too far, but he'd initiated the kiss. All she'd done was reciprocate. Right?

"What brought you here?" he asked.

She could lie and make up some excuse about needing more information on James. It would save face in many ways except it wasn't true. She wanted to be up front with Paul. Honesty was important.

"I came to see you."

"Why?" He dropped the skates to the floor with a loud thud. He turned to look at her, his brilliant green eyes focused on her face. She had absolutely no idea what was going through his mind at the moment.

Damn, but he was handsome. She was surprised some supermodel hadn't snapped him up years ago. What he saw in her was a mystery. Louie was a long way from supermodel and could never compete at that level. Not that she was ugly. She was

confident in her own style and look; it worked for her without requiring too much effort on her part. She just wasn't a beautiful woman and never would be. Not to mention primping wasn't exactly her style. Way too much work when she could be doing something far more interesting.

She looked over at Paul now and wondered what she should tell him. She started with the truth so she might as well go for it—balls to the wall as Chris loved to say.

With a breath, she said quickly, "Because I was afraid you'd leave for Canada and I might never see you again."

He reached out and touched her hair. His eyes became soft, and Louie decided she'd never seen a more beautiful man. "You *will* see me again."

"Promise?" Her voice was a husky whisper.

He pulled her to him and kissed her. "Promise."

She was breathless a moment later when she came up for air. She laughed lightly. "You'd think we were both about seventeen."

He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her eyes. "I don't know about you but I feel like I'm seventeen again. Even with everything horrible that's happened, the second I touch you, nothing else matters. You make me feel hope."

She ran her hand against his cheek, liking the way fine stubble tickled her palm. "This is crazy, you know."

"Yup." He pressed his body against hers, and she could tell exactly how he was feeling. "Crazy."

She put both hands on his chest and pushed herself back. "I am not doing *that* here."

"You were game up there in the deep, dark forest." His eyes were sparkling.

She schooled her features into her I-mean-business expression. "Yes, well, I have a perfectly good bed at home and the next time you want to jump my bones, you can plan on doing it there."

"How does half an hour sound?" He winked.

She tingled from head to foot at his suggestion and hoped she didn't flush a telltale red all over. She didn't need to broadcast her willingness any more. She leaned into him and kissed him quick. "Make it an hour."

He groaned. "I don't think I can wait that long."

"All the better."

Louie jumped up and hurried to the office door. She blew him a kiss. "You have one hour."

\* \* \* \*

He had plenty of undisturbed time to go through her desk. The office was as empty as the parking lot had been when he let himself in. No one would be the wiser and he'd be all the better informed. He needed to know what Russell did. After he finished going through her records, he left everything as he found it. Gloves made certain he didn't leave fingerprints.

The search of her office and files didn't turn up much. Good for him and good for her. The less she knew, the longer she'd stay alive. Still, he had to be certain. There was far too much at stake to let anything slip at this point.

What he didn't like was the fact she not only had the files for James McDonald still on her desk, but she'd also pulled the files on her brother. Right next to those two were

photocopies of the police reports on Kendall Stewart. She wasn't closing things out like she needed to do if she wanted to stay alive.

Not that he was all that surprised. Louie Russell rarely did what she was told. Rumor had it that while with the Spokane Police Department she caused more than a few ruffled feathers with her no-nonsense style and refusal to bend to pure politics. It was probably a good thing she'd switched careers. In the long run, she may not have made it within a system that clung to its politics with such feverish dedication. She was a rogue, an individual with a strong sense of right and wrong. It was all black and white for Russell. There was never any gray.

He understood that in the real world there was much gray. He was one who embraced that shadowy land falling somewhere between right and wrong where he felt most comfortable and most at home. She'd never be able to understand and it really was a shame. She could be valuable in his business if she'd open her mind to the possibilities it presented. The real world was far more gray than black or white. She refused to grasp that reality and wishing otherwise wasn't going to change her. That was why he was here now. She must be watched and possibly stopped at the same end of the barrel that had been pointed at her brother's head.

If she was to stay alive, somehow she'd have to be guided away from pursuing the McDonald issue any further. She didn't need to stick her nose in where it wasn't needed. Besides, plenty of police were on the case. The thought of everyone looking for him, the mysterious gunman, made him smile. Even with the ballistics matches that had been made, they'd never track it back to him. So beautiful and so entertaining.

He'd planned to use an untraceable rifle on McDonald and then decided *what the hell*. Much more fun to use Old Faithful on number three. The games were the best part of the chase for him, and he took his fun wherever he could find it. Everything he did had to have an element of entertainment or what was the point? A person only went around one time, and he had every intention of making his go-around enjoyable.

Then there was the urge to put holes in chests or the occasional forehead. Hey, once a trained killer, always a trained killer. That urge wasn't something a person took on and off like a jacket. Once that particular coat was on, it was on for life. Sorry if folks didn't like it, but they were the ones who'd made him this way, so they'd just have to find a way to live with it. He sure had.

Still, he liked Louie and didn't want to have to exercise his considerable skill on her tasty little body. Few women held a candle to her either in looks or brains. Such a waste if he was forced to put her down. She could handle a gun as well as any man he'd ever run into, and that meant a great deal to him. Guns were the most alluring lover he ever encountered. He'd been entranced as a young man, and they'd never lost their luster in his heart. Unlike most people, guns were dependable. They never argued, they never aged, they never failed.

Now that James McDonald was in cold storage, the immediate pressure was off. He'd been the last link to big trouble, and probably the most dangerous. Not because he was vicious or threatening; just the opposite. McDonald had been a threat because he'd been both honest and stupid at the same time. Rather odd considering his decision to join in a criminal endeavor. He'd been a naive drug runner whose heart wasn't in it. He wanted the easy money. They all wanted money. Who didn't?

What James hadn't wanted was the criminal persona and the violence that always

lurked just beneath the surface. What he came to find out, as did all who put their toes into this particular pool, was that he couldn't have one without the other. When he tried, the price was very high. He wasn't able to swim. McDonald drowned.

He, on the other hand, found a way to reconcile the whole mess within his own heart. Sleep came quite easy and untroubled. Any doubts he had about the business and what he'd become had been managed a very long time ago.

When there was nothing left to read, he clicked off the reading lamp on the corner of Russell's desk and left her office. She'd never know he was there, never realize he'd been through every paper and file in her office. He was good. He was very, very good. If anyone harbored doubt, all they had to do was ask him.

The door closed with a quiet snap and the room was thrown into blackness. He turned in the hallway between the two offices and stopped short, halted by a presence he hadn't expected.

His heart lurched. A woman stood in the doorway, a tiny dark shadow against the golden glow filtering in from the parking lot lights. Then, as he got a good look at the other visitor, a smile crept up his face.

"Tsk, tsk." He moved slowly toward the old woman.

She backed away from him. "She'll know." Meg's voice trembled.

"Not if no one tells her," he said smugly.

Her small hand was on the handle of the outer door. "I'll tell her. I already left a message for her."

"Now that's a shame."

"I'm not scared of you." She stood tall and proud, her hand dropping away from the door. "I've faced worse than you."

He smiled and closed the distance between them with two steps. His hands circled her thin neck. "Oh, I doubt that."

\* \* \* \*

The thought she was going nutso flashed through Louie's mind more than once during the drive home from the arena. Talk about throwing herself at a man. She'd all but thrown Paul on the floor of his office and ripped his clothes off. The only thing that had held her back had been the thought of her nice, comfortable king-sized bed. After the night under the stars, she was ready for something a little more refined. Beautiful as the forest had been, bed covers and a mattress had such a nice ring.

At the same, she was also ready for more than the wildness they'd shared with nature as the backdrop. Her heart thumped and she clutched her steering wheel as she recalled the fever that seemed to have gripped both of them under the dark sky with the twinkling stars. She'd never felt that before. She'd never shimmied out of her clothes in the wide-open like that before, let alone even felt like doing it. But with Paul, she hadn't been able to get out of her clothes fast enough, even surrounded by pine trees and tiny forest dwellers.

She rushed home, jumped in the shower and then slipped into a flowing cotton dress. She smoothed it over her hips once, twice, three times. She was as nervous as if she were a virgin bride awaiting her brand new husband's arrival. Pacing in front of the window, she kept glancing out at the road, lights of the occasional car hitting the window and then passing by. What seemed like an eternity later, a pair of headlights pulled into the

driveway and then switched off. She smoothed the dress once more before she went to the door and opened it.

Even in the twilight of the early evening, Paul looked good. The sun was low over the mountains to the west lighting up the sky in brilliant ruby and deep sapphire hues, Louie's favorite. The backdrop, combined with his red hair and green eyes, made him look like something out of an Allan Ramsay painting. His strong Scottish heritage showed in his face and body. Had he lived a few centuries earlier, Paul would have been a fine subject for Ramsay.

His eyes seemed to light up when he looked her over. Probably the dress. People didn't see her in one very often. She'd never been the girliest of girls, and dresses were more a necessary evil than a staple in her wardrobe. Right now, she was glad she'd slipped it on. She liked the look in his eyes, which sent a warm shiver through her whole body.

"Come in." She stood back and motioned him in. Lordy, he not only looked good, he smelled great.

"Hi."

Ah, a man of few words. Talking could be so overrated at times. Her body buzzed, and she was about ready to jump out of her skin if he didn't touch her soon. So much for cool, calm and collected Louie Russell, Bail Enforcement Agent extraordinaire. How about jumpy and more accurately, horny Louie Russell, woman.

He seemed to read her mind because he kicked the door shut with one foot and grabbed her at the same time. She was crushed against his chest in the blink of an eye. His mouth crushed hers and he thrust his tongue inside in a wonderfully erotic kiss that had her quivering inside. Oh, he'd so read her mind.

"Bedroom?" he asked, his lips still touching hers.

Louie pointed behind her without moving her mouth away while staying tight against his hard, lean body.

It happened so fast. One second they were in the entry and the next they were in her bedroom with clothes flying in all directions. So much for the pretty dress. Just the look on his face alone was worth the price of the lovely little thing. She'd have to remember that in the future. Presuming, of course, that there was a future in store for them.

That thought was the only blight on the frenzy that took hold of them. She didn't want anything to break the mood and pushed the disturbing thought away. It had no business in the here and now. All she wanted in this moment was the beautiful man who was about to make love to her. Sometimes all that was really important was the moment. She learned five years ago that a wise person seized the opportunity when it came because without warning it could all be gone.

His lips met hers once more and the thrill that raced through her body was exhilarating. In a flash, everything came roaring back: the passion that had begun beneath a star-lit sky, the emotions bottled inside her for so many years, and the need for a man's touch. No, that wasn't entirely correct. It was the need for his touch. For Paul McDonald's touch.

The palms of his hands slid to her breasts and he cupped them, one in each hand, his thumbs rubbing over the tender nipples that responded by springing up hard and wanting. His eyes, no longer emerald but now dark and smoky, held hers as he stroked again and again over the hardened nubs. It made everything inside her go warm and soft.

Louie ran her hands up his hard chest, rising up slightly on her toes to kiss him. When he moaned into her mouth, she smiled. Good to know she wasn't the only one holding on by a thread.

"You're driving me crazy," she said against his lips.

He buried his hands in her hair and pulled her head back until they were once again staring into each other's eyes. "And you're driving me wild."

"Oh," she breathed. "I like wild."

He let go of her hair, his hands drifting down her back until he gripped her ass, pulling her hips close to him. His cock, hard and hot, pressed against the tender flesh of her stomach. She definitely wasn't in this alone. Her legs quivered and for a moment she thought her knees might buckle.

Any reserve she had, and it wasn't much to begin with, evaporated when he dropped his head to take a nipple in his mouth. The heat of his tongue against her skin had her shaking all over. He bit her nipple, not hard enough to hurt but enough to start a firestorm in her body. It was more than she could take and still she wanted more.

"Paul," she said on a sigh, her hands now on his ass urging him even closer. The feel of his body against hers was intoxicating. She moved against him, her hips shifting, rubbing.

A husky sound from deep in his throat was the only warning she had before they fell to the bed, a tangle of arms, legs, and lips. It all became blurred then, flesh against flesh, heat and growing desire. His lips met hers in a kiss so hot it singed. Then his lips moved to her neck, her shoulder, her breast and stomach. Finally, his kisses trailed down from her stomach to the soft curls between her legs. When his tongue invaded her hot, wet center, her hips lifted to his mouth. He licked, kissed and teased until she thought she'd fly apart. Just at the edge of coming, he slowly kissed his way back to her lips.

"You're trying to kill me, and I think it's working."

He smiled against her lips. "You taste as sweet as you smell."

The scent of her was on him as he kissed her deeply, his tongue dancing with hers. It was exciting. It was special.

With a move that even surprised her, Louie flipped Paul onto his back and deftly mounted him. She cried out as her body filled with him. He reached out to hold her hips as she moved on him, the feel of his cock sliding in and out, amazing. Slowly she rocked, taking every stroke into her moist folds. She wanted to make it last all night and yet with every stroke, the fire inside her body grew hotter and more demanding. She didn't know how much longer she could hang on and judging by the tension in Paul's body, he wasn't far behind.

All of a sudden, she cried out as everything in her body tightened. Paul's hand moved to her clit and he fingered it gently as she came in an explosion of sensation. A moment later, he tensed, pumped harder and came with shuddering moan.

She dropped her head to his chest as his arms came around her. His heart beat quickly against her ear and she dropped a kiss to his chest, licking the salty taste of sweat from her lips.

Louie wasn't a kid and she'd been around the block a time or two, yet as she rolled off of him to lie back damp and sated against the rumpled sheets, the realization it'd never been like this before hit her. Something in Paul touched a place no one else had ever even gotten close to. She absolutely hated the term soul mate and yet right now, she wondered

if there was more truth in the theory than she'd ever believed.

She was breathing hard and her words were little more than a whisper. "I've never felt like this before." She hadn't really intended to say it out loud and now feared he'd bolt.

He didn't. Instead he rolled on his side and propped his head on one hand. With his other hand, he brushed the damp hairs from her face. His breathing was as ragged as hers. "It's never been like this for me either."

She looked away. "You're just saying that to make me feel better. I've seen pictures of you with models and actresses." Recalling pictures of him in newspapers and magazines with beautiful women smiling up at him, actually made her heart ache.

He laughed and kissed her hair. "No doubt you have, along with a couple million other people."

How could Louie ever compete with women like that? She wasn't beautiful, model-like, or famous. She'd have to be happy with the little time they had together before their real lives intruded once more. He'd go back to his hockey and his fame; she'd go back to obscurity and the hunt for her brother's would-be killer.

Paul turned her face with his finger until she looked at him. His green eyes had gone soft. "This is special, Louie, whether you want to believe it or not."

Her eyes filled with tears and it made her want to scream. She wouldn't melt, she just wouldn't. "I'm not like those women."

He laughed and the sound was gentle, happy. "Thank the good Lord for that."

She cocked her head and studied him. His lips were full and just a hint of reddish stubble darkened his face. God, he looked good. "I don't understand."

Pulling her into his arms once more, his body was hot and hard against hers. "You're the most wonderful woman I've ever met. You're fearless and powerful."

"Thanks for the compliment. I sound like your friendly neighborhood Amazon."

His arms tightened. "You didn't let me finish. You're also beautiful and intelligent and everything a guy hopes for and rarely ever finds."

"Beautiful?" Was he blind?

"Beautiful." He kissed her softly, his tongue parting her lips, searching, tasting.

Okay, so maybe he was blind, but what the hell, blind was good. Her hands moved down his body to his hips and she drew him close. Plenty of night left to make memories, and she wasn't going to think about tomorrow. For now, she'd take what he was offering and treasure it.

\* \* \* \*

Paul stood at the kitchen sink, still naked, drinking a glass of water and staring out the window. He'd left Louie dozing in her bedroom down the hall, her dark hair splayed against the pale linen of the pillowcase, her skin flushed in the creamy moonlight spilling through the window over the bed.

After making love a second time, much slower than the first frenzied rush to pleasure, she'd drifted off to sleep while he'd laid there watching the play of moonlight on the ceiling. As comfortable as he was with Louie's head on his shoulder, her breathing easy and steady, he'd been unsettled. So much so, he'd finally slipped out of the bedroom.

It wasn't just the beautiful woman who filled him with a hot rush of desire that had him so restless. No, it was a little bit of everything. Emotions were coming at him from



all directions. Emotions he never saw coming. After their night under the stars, he'd realized how different it was with her. Even so, he wasn't prepared for how she touched his heart. He hadn't foreseen a woman like Louie walking into his life, especially now.

What he'd really like to do was go back into the bedroom and make love until both of them were so exhausted they couldn't move. Except that fantasy was too far out of reach because life wasn't going to be stalled. Soon, he'd have to leave her side to take his brother home.

How many times had he prayed for Jamie to end the constant chaos he created? Too many to count. Well, it was over now. Paul had never dreamed the solution to Jamie's errant ways was at the end of a rifle.

He finished the water, set the empty glass on the counter and turned to walk back to the bedroom. The house was dark and peaceful, the quiet broken only by the slight hum of the refrigerator. The hardwood floor was cool on the soles of his feet. A very faint scent of cinnamon floated through the air.

In the bedroom doorway, he paused and leaned against the frame. Louie shifted a little, stretching her long smooth legs like a cat. Everything about her was magnificent from those shapely legs, to her flat stomach and sensual lips. He'd seen a great many beauties in his time but not one could compare to the woman on the bed. She was beautiful and sexy in a way that none of the others could match. She made his blood roar.

In fact, the blood was roaring right now and as he watched her sleep, his cock hardened. From the first sweet taste of her lips, he'd been hooked. She made him horny with little more than the twitch of a toe. Soon, he'd have to leave but right now, he had plenty of time for love.

Paul slid back onto the bed next to Louie and ran his hand down her smooth hip. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, then licked her ear. He loved the way she smelled and tasted. Her body quivered beneath his hand as he stroked her skin, and he smiled.

"Hummm," she purred. "Can't a girl get some sleep without being mauled?"

He licked her ear again, nipping at the tender lobe. "The girl can sleep on her time. Right now, it's my time."

"Pushy." She rolled over and put her arms around his neck. "I guess I'm just a sucker for pushy men."

"My good luck."

She pulled his head down and kissed him, urging his lips open with her tongue. He obliged. The taste of her was intoxicating, and he loved drinking her in. With one knee, he nudged her legs apart. Rising on his hands, he slid slowly into her wet heat. His gaze intent on hers, he watched the emotions cross her face as he moved in and out with agonizing slowness. In her eyes, he saw everything he felt in his heart and in that moment realized through the tragedy that was his brother's life and death, something beautiful had been born.

Putting lips against hers, he murmured, "Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

When he left her in the early hours of the morning, Louie wondered if she'd ever see him again. She kissed him goodbye and watched as he backed his car out of the driveway. As he'd walked out the front door, his eyes had been filled with sadness and her heart ached for him. She knew what it felt like to lose a brother. Though Chris was

still alive, it didn't count for much. His heart continued to beat strong and steady while his mind was locked away in a silent prison. She could visit him, touch him, and talk to him, and still he was lost to her. Now, Paul was leaving to bury his brother and the grief it brought had to be deep and painful.

As he'd made love to her the last time, he'd been incredibly tender. Nothing was rushed and they came together with a sweetness so intense it had brought tears to her eyes. It was more than thinking of it as making love, it actually felt like love. Who would have guessed?

She wanted to believe that she'd see Paul again and yet no promises were made, not in the throes of passion, not in the calm afterward. She couldn't bring herself to ask and he didn't offer the words she'd wanted to hear. Of course, to be fair, he left her bed to take his dead brother home. He might have had something else on his mind.

Still...

Louie stood at the window wrapped in her old terrycloth robe until his car's taillights disappeared down the street. Outside the air was cool, a light rain giving the still dark morning a misty glow from encroaching sunrise and dimming streetlights. She loved her home and her neighborhood, yet all of a sudden it somehow seemed gloomy and lonely. She pulled her robe tighter, pushing away the chill that crept up her back.

## Chapter Fourteen

Louie found that no matter how much she tossed and turned, she couldn't get back to sleep after Paul left. She finally gave up and instead dressed and headed for the office. Traffic this early in the morning was light and it made for a great commute. She loved crossing the Monroe Street Bridge this time of year because the Spokane Falls were running hard. It was a sight that never failed to amaze her even though she'd spent her whole life in Spokane. The way the massive falls roared, white foam spraying over the huge basalt rock at the river's edge, was awe-inspiring.

The message light on her phone was blinking when she got in, and she crossed to her desk to pick up the receiver and punch the voice-mail button. The recognizable voice made her pulse quicken.

Joe Federer got straight to the point. "Lou, Joe here. Doc Septen completed his post-mortem and he's on the same page as you and me. Our shooter is a pro. The accuracy was a dead giveaway." He laughed harshly. "Lou, even our own guys aren't that good. You still keep up with the job? Well, if you do, you won't like the latest stats. Our boys and girls only hit one out of five shots. This asshole hit three for three. Sent the bullet to the Spokane folks to see if they can make a match. Call me if you come across anything on your end."

He left her his personal cell number that Louie jotted down on a piece of paper. Then she erased the voicemail. She wasn't sure why she did that. It just seemed important not to have that particular message left on her phone. Something smelled here and she was bound and determined to find out what it was if it was the last thing she did.

The second message on her phone was more cryptic. It was Amy Johnson, an old friend from the job. She didn't leave much of a message just something about a body that might be of interest to Louie. Like she needed to be around yet another death. Jotting down Amy's number, she slipped the note into her pocket. She'd call her back later.

Pulling her cell phone out of her pocket, she checked it for messages dismayed to see the display was black. The battery was dead. Probably would have been a good idea to charge it. Well, if anyone left a message on the cell, she hoped it wasn't important.

Louie wasn't surprised to find herself alone in the shared offices. Harry thrived on the night. That'd never been her thing even when she was a new recruit and stuck on the worst night patrol. Two years she spent on patrol before she was able to get off that stinky assignment although she'd have to admit that driving and walking through the city in the wee hours of the morning had taught her a great deal. By day, it was a city defined by friendly people, clear skies, and easy traffic. By night, it was a different beast altogether. Oh, people were still friendly enough; it just cost a little more to elicit the friendship. When the clear skies turned dark and the easy traffic faded to a trickle, what was left behind in the heart of the city were users, dealers, prostitutes and those who lived on the fringes of society, as well as those who fed on them. A world arose in the gloom that most of the good and proper citizens of the city didn't realize existed. They didn't want to know about that part of their world.

She'd made friends during her days on night patrol, something that had amazed her partner for those two years, Gene Baker. He was the kind of guy with a fondness for root

beer, Fritos, and cigarettes. He was neither a maverick nor a slug and had been a good partner. She'd learned a ton from Gene, though she wasn't sorry when her nights in the patrol car ended. He was still on the street and seemed happy enough to be there. Like Harry, Gene preferred the night. He didn't make friends like Louie, however, and had never quite been able to grasp the concept of mutual cooperation. Good as he was, Gene possessed the "us and them" mentality that kept him from making any real difference to the people of night. It was a shame. He had the potential; he just didn't have the heart.

Heart would make the difference now. For five years she'd been waiting for a break in her brother's case, five years of waiting in vain. She was tired of the wait and the break she'd been hoping for had at last come through.

A gun was the key and she knew guns. Anyone who worked the job knew guns, but her level of knowledge wasn't enough. She needed an expert, someone who lived and breathed weapons. Harry would be a good start except he wasn't here and he wasn't answering his phone. He knew weapons as well or better than most. They'd been his specialty in the Rangers. She could wait for Harry to show up or she could move to Plan B. She decided on Plan B.

Chucky Reisen had been a friend since grade school days. Fierce and blond, he'd been the neighborhood tough kid who in reality was about as nice as they came. Only later had she realized that tough had been his way of dealing with a hugely dysfunctional family. Toughness had kept him sane in an insane environment. Today he was the head of the crime scene unit for the Spokane Police Department. Armed with a Ph.D. and an incredible eye for detail, he'd been snapped up after completing the police academy and had never looked back. He still had the tough-guy exterior that kept everyone, except those who knew him well, at arm's length.

He'd be in. For as long as she'd known him, Chucky was in his lab early and out late. Didn't make for much a social life, but it did make him one extraordinary expert. She grabbed the reports and her notes, stuffing them into her pocket. Time to take the hunt for a killer into her own two hands. She wasn't going to wait on her sisters and brothers in blue a second longer. They'd had their chance.

\* \* \* \*

A clever man would never hold on to weapons used in a murder or two. He was a clever man, but he was also a man of superstition, and his guns were important to him. The rifle was a gift from his grandfather and a sacred blessing had been laid upon it. That his grandfather had given it to a killer was a bit of information the old man hadn't needed. He loved that weapon, although that love was only one of the reasons he could neither destroy it nor discard it. It was precious.

Besides, hadn't he heard at least one homicide detective declare that "if you ever want to get away with murder, do it yourself and never tell another living soul." Well, he had killed, and he never told a single person. Granted, those he worked for might suspect he had a hand in the "housecleaning" here and there, but they never heard that info from his lips. He didn't need to brag; he knew how good he was.

What he couldn't do under any circumstances was get rid of the rifle. As long as he kept his mouth shut, no one would ever be able to connect him to any of the shootings, either current or past. He was a careful man.

So instead of throwing it into the raging waters of the Spokane River or burying it in

an out of way spot in Riverside State Park, he took it apart, cleaned and reassembled it, then as he always did, put it in the lighted gun display case. He shut the glass door and listened for the click of the lock. It would be safer in the gun vault downstairs with all of the other weapons he collected except down there he couldn't look at it every time he walked into the room. A little bit of danger made life more exciting and so the rifle stayed upstairs in the case.

Leaving the house, he drove downtown where he treated himself to large cup of excellent coffee at Four Seasons. So far, the clean-up work appeared to be done. Time to put on his hat of respectability for the start of his day.

Of course, not being a stupid man, he realized the danger hadn't passed completely. Louie Russell could be trouble. A little smarter than the average bear, he thought with a grimace. He didn't know how many from the underside of the city knew how lucky they were she was no longer on the police force. She was certain to have kept her ties with the friends she made during her days with the department and, without the restrictions placed on law enforcement, her nosiness could be a problem. But all she'd need was a little nudge in the wrong direction and the problem might very well go away.

On the passenger's seat, a bundle of twenty dollar bills seemed to glow in the morning light. Certainly, the glow was all in his imagination and that was okay. Stacks of cash had a way of making his whole world brighter. After all, cash was what made the world go around regardless of what the Bible thumpers and Pollyannas had to say. It sure made his world go around. When he didn't have it, and there'd been more days than he'd like to admit when he'd been broke, everything was dark.

Thanks to some very ambitious folks from north of the border, bust wasn't something he'd been for a long time. The arrangement had been an act of desperation that eventually evolved into a labor of love. It worked for them, it solved problems for him. And every once in a while he got to relive his glory days at the end of high-powered rifle. He touched the stack of cash and started to whistle.

He was still whistling when he parked his car in the lot that was at least three-quarters full. Looked to be a busy day. With coffee in hand, he headed into his office. He had a strong feeling it was also going to be a very good day.

\* \* \* \*

Clouds seemed to follow Paul from the moment he pulled away from the Blaine-Pacific Highway border crossing and began the journey to the home of his youth. Any other day he'd have found both the road and the clouds comforting. Spokane was only a few hundred miles away from Surrey and yet they were a world apart. Where Spokane was dry and sunny much of the year, Surrey with its closeness to Vancouver was often cloudy and gray. Today he found the gloominess to be, well, gloomy. He dreaded having to face his parents as much as he hated the thought of Jamie lying cold and dead inside a wooden coffin.

"Damn it, Jamie," he said out loud. The whole thing just pissed him off. What Jamie put the family through wasn't right. That he'd lost his life over some stupid marijuana wasn't right either. Jesus...dope? Who really got killed over dope these days? Even premium, buzz-guaranteed dope. But, leave it to Jamie to find a way.

There had to be more to the story. People got arrested all the time for crimes far more serious than Jamie's and they weren't dying. People jumped bail all the time and

they weren't dying. So, why then did Jamie have to die? No matter how Paul looked at it, one and one kept adding up to five. He might be nothing more than a glorified jock but he could do simple addition.

He was still frowning and mulling over the quandary when he hit the outskirts of Surrey. His first stop was at the funeral home. The most important thing at the moment was that all the details were in place so that his parents' worries were minimized as much as possible. He owed them that much. He hadn't been able to protect Jamie in life. He'd make sure all was as it should be in death.

Ten minutes and a VISA Gold were all it took to wrap things up with George Halber, Jr. at Halber and Yaeger Funeral Home. A single moment more would have driven him crazy. No doubt Halber wanted to be a caring support in a time of sorrow, but everyone in the funeral home struck Paul as irritating and phony. Not to mention none of them helped him feel one damned bit better. The sickness he felt all the way to his soul couldn't be soothed by any of their proffered kindness, well-intentioned or not.

He had turned his back on his only brother and left him hanging out to die. If Paul had tried harder to understand, if he'd been there for Jamie instead of telling him to grow up, perhaps things would have turned out differently. A thousand ifs went through Paul's mind in the few miles between the funeral home and the tidy brick house where he'd grown up. The house he and Jamie had grown up in, played in, and shared their dreams in.

Dreams. They'd both had visions of glory in those days. Paul was going to be the next Wayne Gretsky. Jamie was going to be an artist. For as long as Paul could remember, Jamie made things from any substance he could mold with his hands. Mud, clay, even mashed potatoes. Remembering the dog that a ten-year-old Jamie had fashioned from a bowl of leftover mashed potatoes brought a smile to Paul's face. At the same time, he blinked back the tears that suddenly blurred his vision. "Damn it," he muttered as he wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Enough of this."

Cars crowded the driveway and both sides of the street near the McDonald house. He wasn't surprised. Unlike Paul, the rest of the family hadn't turned their backs on Jamie. They'd come en masse to mourn the loss of a gentle, if misguided, soul. Like his parents, many made the choice to see only the good side of Jamie, and they now would pay their respects.

His friends had probably turned up, too. Jamie had heart and everyone responded to that whether they approved of his antics or not. He'd had charisma, and people liked him even when they were bailing him out of jail, which had blown Paul away while infuriating him. Friends and family had enabled Jamie's slide into irresponsibility. If more had taken a tough love stance, perhaps they wouldn't be gathering together now for a funeral.

Glancing up at the house, his stomach knotted. He wished he felt confident the gathered friends and family would be glad to see him. In the past he'd returned, first as the hometown boy done good with a successful NHL career, then as the coach to a respectable team. Everyone had been happy to see him.

Unlike his childhood dreams, he hadn't become the next Wayne Gretsky, though he did distinguish himself. Despite taking on an American team when he'd left professional hockey, his family, as well as his hometown, still showed support and pride. They made a lot of Yankee jokes, but they were always delivered in good fun. They remained as true

to him as they had to his little brother throughout the good times and the bad.

Paul's professional success was in direct contrast to his personal failure. He'd met and exceeded every expectation when it came to hockey. The facade was spectacular. On the surface, he was a success as long as a person didn't look beneath the gild. He was worried that the man who would step out of the car today had become tarnished and black. The gild had come off at last, exposing a soul that was dark and ugly. His success was only skin deep.

His arms resting on the steering wheel, he dropped his head and closed his eyes. His vision became a blur of red as it spread across shredded fabric. He could smell the warm blood, could feel Jamie's body twitching in his arms. Again and again he heard Jamie's whispered words, "I love you."

"Come on out of the car, Paulie."

He jumped at the sound of his mother's tender voice. She was standing next to the now open car door. He'd been so wrapped up in guilt and remorse he hadn't heard or seen her. His heart raced. Man, he was a mess.

"It's all right, son." Her voice was gentle.

He shouldn't be surprised that she seemed to read his mind. Mom had a way of doing that. Still, she shocked him every time she hit his thoughts right on the head. She'd been able to look inside his head when they were kids and she hadn't lost her touch long into his adult years. She probably never would. He and Jamie would forever be her little boys even when they were old men. He corrected himself—when he became an old man. Old age was a rite of passage that would never come for Jamie.

"Mom, I'm sorry." He opened the car door wider and slid out to stand next to her. Her petite stature hid a powerful personality that made him proud to call her Mom. She was, and always had been, the glue that held the McDonald family together. Time and tragedy would never change that.

She put her arms around him and hugged him tight. She was tiny, like a sparrow, and he felt like a dragon. Still, he wrapped his big arms around her and felt her warmth to his heart. Until this moment, he hadn't realized how much he needed her and her strength.

"This world was always too big for our Jamie," she said with her cheek pressed against his broad chest. Slight as she was, she felt as solid as a mountain.

"I should have kept him safe." He didn't even try to stop the single tear that slid down his cheek.

She tilted her head and smiled up at him, the expression on her face sad despite the attempt at a smile. "And, I should have taught him better."

He was shocked. He was the one who let Jamie down, not his mother, not his father. She had nothing to apologize for. "Mom, you didn't do anything wrong."

Patting his arm, she stepped back and away from him, her face turned up to his. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears though her smile turned warm. "And neither did you."

## Chapter Fifteen

Chucky read for twenty full minutes before he looked up at Louie. A frown drew his brows together in a solid line across his forehead. "Have you shown this to Harry?"

She shook her head. "No. Harry's been scarce lately. I'm pretty much solo on this one."

With one hand, Chucky pushed tumbling blond hair off his forehead. "Okay, I'm gonna tell you something that's gonna sound weird." Perched on the edge of his stool, he looked nothing like a brilliant forensic scientist. His jeans were old and faded, his button-down shirt wrinkled beneath a pale blue lab coat. He resembled a mad scientist rather than a sought-after expert.

She smiled at her longtime friend. "Yeah, right. Like anything you tell me now is going to be strange. I hate to be the one to break it to you, Chucky, but you're the definition of weird. Always have been."

"Hey, I resemble that remark. Seriously, though, I think at least for now, keep this to yourself. Don't show these reports to Harry." He waved several sheets of paper in her general direction.

"Oh, come on. Not show them to Harry? He knows this crap better than anyone in the city. If anybody can make sense of them, it's Studhorse."

Chucky's deep blue eyes were not sparkling when his gaze met hers. His mouth was turned down into a slight frown. "That's my point, darling."

Okay, now she was confused. Or, rather more confused than she already was. It was more than the simple fact Harry knew both guns and the rounds they shot. Harry was, in many ways, her partner. They were a two-person team and had been for five years. He shared everything with her and she shared everything with him.

"Your point, *darling*, is over my head. Explain it in nice plain English please."

"Stay with me, junior," he said as he laid out the three reports across the long counter, side-by-side. "What I'm talking about here is more than the ballistics match. Your buddy Joe up in Metaline Falls is right; whoever did the shooting is no amateur."

She tapped her fingers on the counter. So far, he wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know. But why should she keep it secret from Harry? "I know." She couldn't keep the impatience out of her voice.

"Right. Stay with me a little longer." He reached over and squeezed her lightly on the shoulder. "Take the accuracy of the shooting and combine it with the type of rounds the shooter used and we got us a conundrum."

She was just about to open her mouth when his train of thought hit her square between the eyes. "Oh, Lord." She'd come to Chucky thinking things couldn't get any worse. She'd been wrong.

He patted her on the back. "You got it, baby."

The conclusion seemed outrageous and plausible all at the same time. "He couldn't be."

"And maybe he isn't, but the reality is there are only a handful of shooters around here who can do this."

"Harry's one of them," she said slowly, her eyes still on the reports.



"Bingo, baby sister."

She shook her head. "No, I refuse to believe it. It's got to be one of those horrible coincidences." Her hands were shaking as she picked up the last page of the report and read.

"Then again, you remember what they taught us in the academy?" he asked.

She'd never forgotten, but at the moment she didn't want to believe it could be true. "There is no such thing as a coincidence," she repeated as if she was the student just called on by the teacher to answer a test question.

He nodded. "That's the reigning philosophy here, Lou. I really think you need to err on the side of caution. For the moment anyway."

"Don't tell Harry."

Tapping the report, Chucky nodded even harder. "Don't tell Harry. I hope I'm wrong. If I'm not, well..."

She put a hand to his lips. "Don't even say it."

Harry.

Christ, Harry.

*There is no such thing as a coincidence.* The thought stayed with her on the drive back to the office. She parked in the far corner of the lot or, as she liked to call it, the ding-free zone. Near the rear entrance to the building, Harry's late model extended cab pickup was in its usual spot; he didn't have the same distaste for door dings that she did. For a moment, she sat in the car, her eyes narrowed.

Something wasn't right here and it had nothing to do with her visit to Chucky. Granted, everything around her the last few days had been out of whack. This was something else. Then she realized: Meg. Where was Meg?

Every day for the last week, Louie had found Meg pushing her silver cart across the parking lot. Now the parking lot was quiet. A rush went up Louie's spine. She hoped Meg was feeling all right. After all, time was taking its toll on the fascinating woman, which worried Louie.

He gaze rose to the second story windows. Nothing moved. She had to assume Meg was upstairs taking it easy. She hoped so anyway. Later, she'd stop in and check.

Taking a deep breath, she got of the car and headed to the office. On a normal day, she'd have charged through the door, spread everything out on her desk and picked Harry's brain. He was like Chris in a lot of ways, or rather like Chris used to be. Harry possessed a wealth of experience and could see details everyone else missed. That talent had made both Chris and Harry great Army Rangers.

The difference between the two men was evident after they'd left the Army. Chris felt his talents were still needed and was quickly snapped up by DEA. Harry turned down the DEA and every other law enforcement agency that offered him a job. He'd done his time for his country, he'd explained, and now wanted to work in his own way and on his own time. Bail bonding was a perfect profession for a wild card like Harry.

Still, he did have an eye for detail and in this instance she could use his expertise. He'd be able to look at the pictures, read the reports, and then give her the details of her prey as well as any FBI profiler. She could use his help. Except she wasn't going to ask for it.

What Chucky had told her niggled at the back of her mind, so she'd keep everything close even if she felt disloyal. Harry was the closest thing to family she had since Chris

fell into the coma. Nobody could have been more loyal or attentive. The three of them had been close before the shooting, but afterward, she and Harry had become even closer. The seed of doubt Chucky had planted made her sick to her stomach.

Stepping inside the office, Louie wrinkled her nose. "Harry!" she bellowed.

Around the corner and sitting behind his big desk, Harry leaned back in his chair all wide-eyed and innocent. "What's doing, Louie?"

Putting thumb and forefinger to her nose, she made a face. "You promised not to smoke those things in the office anymore."

"Come on, beautiful." He brought his right hand up from beneath the desk, a big, brown, smoldering cigar held tight between two fingers. "They don't smell that bad. In fact, they smell incredible."

"It'll take a month of Sundays to get that awful stink out of here. You're not the only one who has to work here, you know."

He was smiling and his good humor reached all the way to his dark eyes. He held the cigar out in her direction. "You wanna puff?" He wagged his eyebrows.

She rolled her eyes and turned away. "Put it out."

In her office, she shut the door hoping that the smell could be held at bay. Not likely since the place already smelled like a cigar lounge. She walked to the window and opened it. The fresh air helped.

As she stood breathing in the clean air, another disturbing thought flitted through her already troubled mind. The cigar. That five-inch roll of tobacco sent chills up her arms, and not because the stench made her stomach roll. Since being diagnosed with diabetes two years earlier, Harry had been forced to give up the cancer-causing indulgence that also had a tendency to exacerbate his diabetes symptoms. But she knew he hadn't walked away from his vice one-hundred percent. No, he still smoked an occasional cigar, whenever he wanted to celebrate.

So what exactly was Harry celebrating today?

Before she delved into that quandary any further, she remembered the call from Amy Johnson and dug the note with Amy's number on it out of her pocket. She really was off her game. She should have taken five minutes and stopped by Amy's desk after she'd finished with Chucky. Okay, she'd call now and see what Amy needed. Louie couldn't imagine what it would be. Homicide hadn't been her area of expertise when she'd been on the job and she rarely dealt with death now. The last few days had been grimly exceptional.

She picked up the phone and punched in the number, still standing by the open window.

"Johnson."

"Amy, it's Louie."

"Hey girl, how are you? Been a long time. You never come by just to say hello."

"Life's good, and I promise next time I'm in your neighborhood, I'll stop by. So what's up with the cryptic message?"

"Caught a DB this morning, and I'm wondering if you know her," Amy said, her voice shifting to all business.

"Me?"

"Yeah. The address in her wallet has her living in your office building."

A black thought raced across Louie's mind and her stomach sank anew. "Oh, dear

God. Please tell me it's not Meg."

"If by Meg you mean Margaret Johnson..."

Louie didn't understand. Was there someone else living in the apartments with a similar name? "My friend's name is Meg English, not Margaret Johnson."

"I think we're talking about the same woman, Margaret English Johnson."

"How?" Louie couldn't finish the question. She simply couldn't say the word "die."

"It's still preliminary, but we're treating it as a homicide."

"Oh, sweet Jesus..." Her knees buckled and she sank to the chair.

\* \* \* \*

Paul left right after the funeral. He'd been hugged, patted and consoled about all he could take. Besides, he'd promised the folks he'd stop by Jamie's apartment and pack things up. They'd take care of getting the belongings moved if he'd get things packed up and ready to go. Paul figured it was the least he could do.

Jamie had lived in a part of the city that made Paul wonder if his car would be safe for the few hours it'd take him to pack the place. The building itself was tired, the brick gray with grit and age. Sad shrubs in planters flanked the main door, its glass smudged and filthy. Protective bars were installed on all the windows as well as the glass door. That was comforting.

It took three trips from the car to carry all the boxes to the second story cube Jamie called home. Once all of the boxes were out of the car and stacked up in the middle of what passed for a living room, Paul looked around the small apartment.

It was typical Jamie. A kind of ordered chaos that made perfect sense to Jamie and no one else. It'd drive Paul crazy to live like this. Not Jamie. For as long as Paul could remember Jamie owned a whirlwind of clutter that moved with him anywhere he went. No one ever had to wonder if Jamie'd been around. He always left a trail.

For the first hour, Paul tried to make sense out of the clutter so that the packed boxes could be sorted easily when his parents got around to dealing with them. Unlike Jamie, Paul wanted a plan. He needed the structure.

At least ten different pairs of sneakers were scattered around along with dozens of magazines tossed aside in random disarray. The mess brought back memories of their childhood. The sneakers made him smile. They were so Jamie. He'd show up for Christmas dinner in nice slacks and a shirt he'd actually taken the time to press, and as likely as not, a bright red pair of sneakers.

Paul couldn't recall the last time he'd seen Jamie in dress shoes. Maybe Easter Sunday when Jamie was about six? His little brother loved a riot of color and style, which was why Paul had been less than surprised when he'd looked in his own closet to find Jamie's handiwork with the shoes. Jamie had hated Paul's compulsive tidiness. They might have had the same parents and been raised in the same household, but that didn't make them alike. They'd been different as night and day.

He'd just begun to pack up the living room when his cell phone rang. He didn't feel like talking to anyone. Not today. His hand went to his pocket anyway.

"Hello."

"Paul." Louie's gentle voice greeted him.

"Hi." He couldn't work up enthusiasm even for her though he was glad to hear her voice.

"I just wanted to see if you're okay."

He heard it then, a note, a sound in her voice that was off. His problems really didn't matter. "What's wrong, Louie?"

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you. What's happened? Is it your brother?" Wouldn't that be the mother of all ironies?

"No." He heard the catch in her voice.

"I'm here for you. Tell me what's wrong."

"It's my friend Meg. She's gone."

He had to think quickly and then remembered the spry little old lady who'd stopped Louie in the parking lot. What could have happened? The woman had looked okay to him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know her, but I'm sure she was a sweet woman."

"She was a jewel. I've never met anyone quite like her."

"Tell me what else is wrong," he said. Something in her voice made him believe there was more.

Louie let out a long sigh. "She didn't just die. She was murdered."

"What's going on?" he barked. All around them people were being killed and it didn't make sense. *One day I'm coaching young men hockey and the next I'm picking up one body after another. This crazy shit has to stop.*

"I don't know. I don't know." Her voice trailed off with a choked sob.

"Look, I'll be done here in a couple of hours and then I'm on my way back to Spokane. I'll come by as soon as I get to town."

"That'd be nice. I'm heading over to the morgue now." Her voice was a touch shaky.

"If you need me, I'm only a call away."

"Thank you."

He flipped the phone shut and began to tackle the packing with new vigor. By the end of the second hour, he'd made pretty good progress in the combined living/kitchen area. Jamie had been a man of simple needs, so there wasn't much to pack. All that remained now was the bedroom and presumably the bathroom beyond. He walked through the door that separated the bedroom from the main living area, flipped the light switch, and stopped to stare at a picture on the wall of Jamie's bedroom.

After a moment tears began to blur his vision. "Damn it," he muttered, wiping at his face with the palms of his hands. "That isn't fair."

The bedroom, like the rest of the apartment, was spare although not nearly as cluttered. A double bed, a single dresser, and only one picture that decorated the otherwise bare walls.

Matted, framed, and hung in a place where everyone who walked to the bathroom would be certain to see it, the picture was of Paul racing across the ice with his stick pulled back in the moment just before he made his Stanley Cup winning goal. That picture represented the best moment of his career, that one moment in time when he reached as high as he could. He knew who'd created the amazing charcoal version of the photograph that had been on the front page of every paper in Canada. Jamie's talent was unmistakable.

Seeing that demonstration of his young brother's pride and loyalty humbled Paul. It also brought him to a new low. Paul stared at the picture, at the man he used to be, and it hit him exactly how far he'd fallen. He'd turned his back on his only brother, but Jamie

had never turned his back on him.

\* \* \* \*

Louie's vision blurred as she stared down at her friend's body lying on the cold steel table, covered with a sterile white sheet. She looked so small and frail, her dark skin ashen in death. Louie didn't care that Meg had lived a long, full life. It still wasn't fair. Her life was stolen from her and it hadn't been Meg's time to die.

Yet, the truth of her brutal death couldn't be denied. The distinct marks on her neck showed that. Large and purple, the imprint of fingers around Meg's neck would be forever etched into Louie's memory. She'd find out who'd done this.

Louie touched Meg's hair and whispered, "Sleep well, my sweet friend."

Amy gently led Louie out of the morgue and down the hall to the elevators. Neither of them spoke until they were seated across from each other in Amy's office several floors above.

"Any ideas on who or why?" Amy asked.

Louie shook her head. "I don't understand any of it. Who'd want kill Meg? She was a delightful person who was quiet and gentle. I don't know of anyone who disliked her."

Amy's brow wrinkled. "Do you know who she was?"

"What do you mean?" Louie looked over at Amy and wrinkled her brow. Of course she knew who Meg was. She'd seen her almost every day for the last five years.

"Do you know who Margaret Johnson was?"

Okay, maybe there were some things about Meg she didn't know. Those were just details. She knew Meg's heart and that was the most important thing. "I didn't even know that was her name," she finally said. "She went by Meg English."

"English was her maiden name."

Louie studied Amy's face and then shrugged. "I hate to be dense but I'm still not following you."

Amy pushed a folder across the desk to Louie. "Margaret Johnson won the Nobel Peace prize forty years ago for her work with the civil rights movement. That tiny little woman downstairs in our morgue helped to change the world."

Louie stared at the information in the file, unable to reconcile the woman in the photographs and newspaper articles with her spunky yet private friend Meg. As she read, civics lessons from her youth came back to her and she remembered bits and pieces about a woman who stood up when no one else had the courage to do it.

Finally, she lowered one article to the file folder. "I'm seeing but I'm not believing."

"Believe it, Lou. Meg English was Margaret Johnson, and anyone who's done what she did was bound to have enemies."

"Yeah, but in all the time she's lived upstairs, I don't recall seeing many visitors. A family member now and again, and that's about it. She was the gentlest person I think I've ever met."

"But you didn't really know her."

Louie shook her head. "I thought I did. I seem to be finding out lately I've been wrong about a lot of things."

"If you think of anything that might help, call me."

"What about her arrangements?"

"We've been able to contact a niece."

Louie slid the folder back across the desk to Amy. "I'll keep in touch."

As she walked back to her car, Louie wondered how things could have gotten so screwed up in such a short amount of time. A week ago her life was rolling along and now, nothing seemed to make any sense anymore. It seemed as though there was a murder every time she turned around, she was keeping secrets from her best friend, and then there was Paul McDonald...she didn't even want to get started on that quandary. What next?

## Chapter Sixteen

Awareness began to creep in, slow and muted, something akin to a fine Monet painting. It was all muddled and out of focus for Chris, and yet it seemed like if he could stand back a foot or two, everything would finally come into focus. Somewhere far in the distance, music played, a soft and haunting melody. He concentrated, the effort almost painful, and began after a time to recognize a familiar pattern to the tune. It was a classic, a Beethoven classic, if his recollection served him right.

Remember ... remember, he told himself. It was hard, it made his head hurt, and at the same time it seemed very important to be able to recall the name of the piece. It was weird and disconcerting. It made him want to pound his fists against his forehead—if he could get his hands to move, that is. Nothing on his body wanted to move. Odd.

The music was just as strange. The last thing he remembered, he was on the job hunkered down behind a pine tree, waiting for the Medicine Man to make his appearance at the warehouse. So why now did he hear Beethoven? Somehow, it seemed more important to remember the name of the song than to move his hands.

Then it came to him and relief flowed through his body like the rush of a good stiff shot of whiskey. *Fur Elise* by Ludwig van Beethoven. Ha! Again and again both he and Louie had practiced that piece at the insistence of their mother. He'd found the obligatory piano lessons a drudgery he tolerated because, much to his surprise, his ability to play the piano impressed the girls. Louie'd hated the piano with a vengeance and took every chance she could to dodge both practice and lessons. She played beautifully despite her aversion to the instrument, and he wondered if it was Louie who played the haunting Beethoven now.

Mom had hoped her two children would be refined and gracious. She'd gone to great pains to coax them in that direction very early on. By the time they'd both hit their teens, Mom had given up. Chris had set his sights on the Army Rangers from the age of thirteen, when he'd watched a documentary on the elite special force. His vision had never wavered, and piano lessons had no part in his ultimate goal. Mom's only choice had been to capitulate.

Louie, oh, his beautiful little sister Louise, was a bundle of energy and determination that neither Mom nor Dad ever figured out. Mom had hoped for a ballerina or a teacher. For years, she'd dragged Louie to all the requisite dance and music lessons, to no avail. From the time she could talk, Louie had been determined to follow in Dad's footsteps and become a police officer. As always, headstrong Louie won, much to Dad's immense pride and Mom's dismay. No one would ever have guessed, given the huge smile on Mom's face the day Louie earned her shield, that she'd had any other wish for her daughter. Mom was proud of both her children even if the piano lessons were a bust.

Now, he relaxed and let the familiar sound of *Fur Elise* lull him. It was nice. All the sounds around him were familiar and comforting though he couldn't say why. Figuring out why, not important. At the moment he was content that it was enough. Later, when he felt a bit stronger, perhaps he'd open his eyes and figure out exactly where he was. He only knew for certain he wasn't on that hillside any longer. For now, he'd rest.

A nurse came into the room. "So what's up with you today, Chris?"

Her patient's eyes were closed, his body as still as a statue. The question was entirely rhetorical. It had been five long years of silence for the attractive man who'd intrigued all of them. She'd been here the day he'd arrived and no doubt she'd be here on the day he left. Though none of the staff ever made mention of it aloud, the pattern rarely changed.

She took a cool damp rag and blotted his forehead where tiny beads of sweat had popped out. The monitors that buzzed and whirred next to his bed jumped with activity that was a little out of the norm. She checked them to make certain they were all working as they should. Whatever made them jump could have been nothing more than a random blip of energy. It happened, not often, but it happened.

It could also signal that Chris might be nearing the end. She'd it seen time and time again—that bit of movement, a flash of activity that could give families an unfair and false sense of hope. She was glad his sister wasn't here to see the movement of the monitors.

Chris' younger sister, Louise, or Louie as she asked everyone to call her, came often to sit with her brother. All of the staff was aware of how she held on to the hope that he'd one day wake up. It was a shame because the odds were about a million to one he'd emerge from the coma. It just didn't happen.

It was really too bad he was still so far away from them. Chris Russell was a man who, before the gunshot, possessed all the potential in the world. Even emaciated from years of silence and inactivity, she could see what a handsome man he was. Such a loss that he'd never come back to this world where family and friends held on to hope. It was bound to break their hearts all over again, especially for his sister.

Shrugging, the nurse straightened his blanket, blotted his forehead one more time, and patted his cool hand. Change was in the air; she could feel it. "You rest easy, Chris. We'll be here when you need us. We won't let you go alone."

Looking at the CD player Chris' sister brought in years ago, she noticed that it had ejected the disc. She pushed the CD back in, and once more the classical strains of music began to play softly. She didn't know if he heard the music or if it even helped, but it was pretty and, at least in her opinion, brought some beauty into a world that was otherwise locked in silence.

With one last glance at the monitors that had settled into a familiar, constant pattern, she left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Louie had to wait until dark. Kendall Stewart's house still had yellow police tape across the front and back doors, which meant Louie'd have to sneak in. Couldn't do that in broad daylight, so she waited, hoping no one would notice. She had a way of blending into the background, and she was relying on that now. She seemed to pull the shadows around her like Dracula's cape.

Under the cover of darkness, she kept close to trees and bushes until she got to the back door. Picking the lock took a little longer than made her happy. What could she do? It took what it took. She wasn't a professional but it just happened it was one of those little skills that came in handy once in a while. Chris had been able to teach her all sorts of nifty tricks before his accident, and they were lessons she remembered well. When he came out of his coma, she'd thank him again.

With her hands covered by a nice pair of latex gloves, she peeled away the yellow



tape with care. When she left, she'd put it back in place and no one would be the wiser about her little nocturnal visit.

Inside, the house was as dark and quiet as a cemetery. Her penlight didn't give her much illumination, but she'd have to make do. It wouldn't be wise to turn on an overhead light and broadcast to the neighbors that the recent murder site currently hosted a visitor. Too many amateur sleuths these days, thanks to reality television and a slew of crime scene investigation shows. She didn't need either the complication or the annoyance, so penlight it would have to be.

She stepped carefully to avoid the blood-covered floor. The stains left a detailed picture of the violence that had claimed Kendall's young life. Once past the scene of the shooting, Louie went through the rest of the house, room by room. She hoped that she'd find something to help her understand both Kendall's connection to James McDonald and the reason why she was killed. As random as the killing seemed, Louie was convinced it was anything but.

Kendall had been a tidy woman. The only mess in the house had been created by her murder and the subsequent investigation. Fingerprint powder was smudged everywhere and blood stains streaked the otherwise lovely kitchen floor. She pitied the cleanup crew saddled with this job. Few people thought about the aftermath of violence and what was often left behind for the families. Another piece of the heartache Louie didn't wish upon anyone.

Her gaze went to the floor and she sucked in a breath. She didn't need an outline to remind her where the body had been. She could see it all too vividly in her mind, blood and all. Chills still went up her back at the memory. She'd seen many dead bodies in various states of decomp, but that didn't mean she ever grew accustomed to it. Death was cruel and it was ugly. There was no getting around it. Anybody who did, well, she had the name of a good shrink.

She stood in the kitchen and tried to get a sense of what had happened that night. She closed her eyes and remembered what she and Paul had seen: the trail of blood, the position of the body. Opening her eyes and turning in a slow circle, Louie walked to the kitchen sink. A window above the sink opened to the backyard. Although it wasn't a large yard, it did have several old maples big enough for a man to stand behind, unseen from inside the house. Correction ... big enough for a man and a rifle to stand behind.

When she'd been here the night Kendall died, Louie hadn't had enough time to study the window. She had the time now. Though the window didn't shatter, the hole was surrounded by a network of cracks. One big wind storm and the window would give it up.

"You son of a bitch," she muttered.

He'd been outside in the yard, probably waiting for James to run to his girlfriend. Actually, it was pretty faultless logic. But why had Kendall been killed rather than James? What did she do? Or more likely, what did she know? This was the kind of crime that pissed off Louie the most. It wasn't fair that a woman died just because she knew or was involved with a man. Kendall didn't do one single thing wrong and still she'd lost her life.

Once more Louie closed her eyes. This time she put herself in Kendall's shoes. She envisioned Kendall standing at the sink when out of the inky darkness a shot hits her in the chest. At first she doesn't understand why suddenly there's a burning sensation in the middle of her chest. She spins, lurches for the phone, and falls. As she drops, she realizes

in an instant that had to have seemed more like an eternity, that someone has shot her. She looks down in amazement at the flowering red stain as it spreads across the front of her shirt.

Louie mimicked the imagined movements, falling to the floor near where Kendall had lain while managing to avoid the police marks and dried blood. She wanted to understand, but she couldn't disturb anything. She stretched her right arm out above her head where she remembered Kendall's had been, and turned her head, so her cheek rested against the cool tile floor. She could smell the faint though unmistakable scent of blood.

Louie slowed her breathing and relaxed. She listened to the sounds of the refrigerator running, the occasional car driving by on the street outside, a dog barking. She went outside herself to become Kendall Stewart and a whole new world was revealed. Her eyes scanned the floor from where she lay looking for something, anything that the police might have missed.

It worked. The tiny speck of white was almost impossible to see from where she lay, and would have been concealed from any angle other than prone on the floor. She slid her fingers as far she could beneath the lip of the range and was able to feel just the edge of the card. She worked it until she could slide it out.

"Thank you, Kendall," she whispered.

Louie sat up and blew the dust off the business card. She recognized the name, and a chill raced through her. In her business she knew them all, from the gypsy car dealers to the loan sharks who preyed on those souls who needed money and had no where else to turn. Martin Fitz was one of the latter, or as he was known around town, Money Marty. He was the guy always willing to bail out the druggies and the gamblers...at a price. A very big price. Why would Kendall Stewart have Money Marty's card?

Something was written on the back. As Louie turned the card over, the chill turned to ice.

\* \* \* \*

The only thing left for Paul to do was pack up Jamie's desk. The scarred wreck looked as though it might have been salvaged from a Dumpster. He picked up a calendar with notes in Jamie's handwriting jotted all over it. Curious, he flipped through the months. A few phone numbers were written along the edges every month or so, and one, a Spokane number, looked vaguely familiar. More than likely Kendall Stewart's, and perhaps it looked familiar because of the area code. He looked at the number again, shrugged and dropped the calendar into one of the packing boxes.

The second drawer Paul opened had a shoebox inside. As soon as he removed the lid, his vision blurred. Ticket stubs to games he'd played in and even a fair number of games he'd coached filled the battered shoebox. He picked the stubs up, one after another, and his heart ached a little more with each one. He'd wondered for years why Jamie kept coming to the States. As he stared into the box he suddenly understood why Jamie came back over and over. More than Kendall Stewart had brought Jamie over the border.

His heart twisting, Paul put the lid back on the shoebox and placed it inside the packing box next to the calendar. There'd been so much about Jamie that Paul hadn't been willing or able to understand. Now he did and now it was too late. He'd made the conscious choice to see only the bad things about his brother and by doing so had blinded himself to the good things. What kind of man did something like that? What kind of

brother did something like that? All he could do now was right the wrong done to Jamie. His killer would be found and brought to justice.

He started to close the packing box and, prompted by some inner instinct, stopped to pick up the calendar one more time. He flipped six pages or so and looked at the phone numbers. One caught his attention, the Spokane one. He was pretty certain it wasn't Kendall's, because it looked familiar, and he didn't know Kendall Stewart's phone number. Taking a piece of scratch paper, he copied it and shoved the paper into his jacket pocket. Then, he dropped the calendar back into the box, closed the lid and ran a strip of fiber tape across the top.

Slowly, he walked around the apartment one last time. The boxes were taped, marked and stacked. Everything was ready for when his folks felt up to moving them out. The place no longer held the personality it had a few hours earlier. The sneakers were gone, the picture was gone, Jamie was gone.

Paul breathed deeply and stepped outside. The door clicked shut and he walked away.

He was on the freeway and a few hours out of Spokane when he remembered why that telephone number seemed familiar. He hit the brakes, pulled the car over to the side of the road, and clicked on the interior light. Digging in his pocket, he pulled out the piece of paper and again looked at the mysterious phone number. Then he pulled his cell phone out and punched in Louie's number, which he'd memorized about two seconds after she'd given it to him.

"Paul?" She sounded surprised.

"Yeah."

"Are you all right?" Her surprise had shifted to concern.

"Why are you whispering?"

"Give me a sec."

He heard rustling, the sound of a door closing, some more rustling and then what sounded the opening and closing of a car door. What in the world was she up to?

"Louie?"

"One more sec."

He could hear a car start and assumed she was on the road.

"Okay," she said, her voice now at a more normal pitch.

"What was that all about?"

"You don't want to know."

"I think I do."

"Why did you call me?"

He didn't miss the change in subject and while any other time he might pursue it, tonight he had something more important on his mind. "I've been in Jamie's apartment."

"Did you find something?"

"I found Harry's phone number jotted on Jamie's calendar."

"No big deal there. Harry was his bondsman, so of course he'd have his number."

"Except it was on his calendar six months ago."

There was a moment of dead silence before she asked him, "Where are you?"

"Just west of Moses Lake. I'll be Spokane in less than two hours."

"Meet me at the office."

He didn't like the way her voice sounded. "What's up?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to find out."

\* \* \* \*

Louie looked at her watch. She had some time. Enough? Could be pushing it. She was maybe a mile from Harry's house and odds were in her favor he'd be at the office for at least another hour or so. He rarely, if ever, left before eleven. Most of his business came during the night and he liked to be available. She was banking on that now.

As she anticipated, the house was dark and the street quiet. His middle-class neighbors were, from all appearances, tucked in for the night. She drove by and parked a block away, hoping to blend in with little or no notice by inquiring eyes. As quickly and quietly as she could, she closed the distance between her car and Harry's house. So far so good.

The lights were out in the neighboring houses and she managed to make it to his back door without arousing any sleepless dogs. The lock was a little challenging, yielding only after a fair amount of coaxing. She slipped into the kitchen and breathed out a sigh of relief. This breaking and entering was becoming a bad habit tonight, even if it was necessary. And to think she'd personally arrested any number of perps for B and E.

Harry was a pragmatist which meant there was an alarm mounted on the wall not far from the door. A bright red light on the small panel blinked rapidly. She'd have only a couple of minutes to get in and get out. No delusions here. She could pick a lock pretty quickly but she had no expertise at all at disarming security systems. But she'd been in Harry's house dozens of time through the years and knew exactly where to look. All she needed was sixty seconds, give or take a moment or two.

She glided out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the den. Twenty seconds later, she stood in front of a large, lighted gun display case. One bit of luck today, Harry had *it* in the display case instead of locked inside the gun vault installed in a corner of the basement.

"Oh, Harry," she murmured.

The M24 sniper rifle was his pride and joy. Valuable as it was, he tended to keep it out for guests, and himself, to admire rather than hiding it away in the much more secure vault. There was always the chance he'd have put it downstairs. Tonight luck and predictability were on her side.

One minute and counting.

Once more, Louie pulled the picks out. Was there time? After a short moment of indecision she stuffed them back in her pocket. Instead, she picked up a book from the nearby table and used it to smash the glass.

Thirty seconds gone.

She grabbed the bolt-action rifle and ran down the carpeted hallway, past the blinking alarm panel, and into the kitchen. She dashed out the back door pausing only long enough to turn the lock as she went. No sense advertising her entry into the house.

Keeping to the shadows, she ran as fast as she could to her car. She put the rifle into the trunk and covered it with a tarp. Slamming the trunk lid shut, she got into the driver's seat and started the car. Telling herself to be calm, she began to drive down Harry's street, right on the speed limit.

In the distance, a siren wailed.

## Chapter Seventeen

Harry took the call at about nine thirty. False alarm or so the patrolman who responded to the silent alarm at his house reported. He wasn't convinced. Something didn't pass the smell test here, and he couldn't afford any more slips. McDonald had cost him enough already.

He locked up the office and drove the few miles from Monroe to the Garden Springs area where his house boasted a great view of Finch Arboretum. Just as the patrolman reported, the house was locked up tight as a drum. It still stank, and he didn't care how innocent things appeared. The patrolman was wrong.

Opening the back door, he crossed to the alarm panel and punched in the code. Then he turned on the lights and looked around. Everything was as it had been earlier when he'd left for the office. Nothing that he could see had been disturbed. That all changed when he went into the den and flipped on the light. His eyes narrowed and his heart raced.

"You little bitch," he hissed.

Only one person he knew had the skills to get in and out of his house quick enough to elude the police. Only one person who knew where he kept his guns on display without having to search. Louie.

Shattered glass lay all over the rug and the ruined door hung open. A single gun was missing and he didn't have to check to know which one. Fury rose hot in his chest.

Downstairs, he turned the combination lock on the large gray gun safe. The heavy door swung open and Harry stopped to study the various weapons inside. His gaze lingered on the array of handguns on the top shelf. There was a Colt Commander, a sweet Glock 19, an even sweeter Springfield XD. He put a finger to his lips, his eyes narrowing again. Decisions, decisions.

He could always go for the ever-dependable M16, but it was far too impersonal. This had become quite personal when she'd removed his baby from the display case. And on top of that, she hadn't bothered to pick the lock. It was as though she was taunting him.

He'd kill Louise Russell and he'd do it face-to-face. He wanted to see the life flow out of her after he let her know he'd shot her precious brother.

That stupid Russell family had cost him much over the years and it wasn't fair. It wasn't like he was doing anything that horrible. Drugs were a commodity and the business needed people like Harry to keep the commerce going. Besides, the damn Army had gotten him hooked on gambling in the first place. If that hadn't happened, he wouldn't have needed the extra money. If he hadn't needed the extra money, he wouldn't have become involved with the drug trade. So, all he'd really done was use the skills the Army had provided to solve his financial problems.

When Chris had become involved, it almost cost Harry everything. Jesus, Chris had been Harry's very best friend. To turn on Harry like that was wrong and he'd had no choice but to stop him. Harry had planned to kill Chris, not put him into a coma. Not that it mattered either way, the end result was still the same, and he'd been safe for the last five years. At least until that piece of shit James McDonald messed up.

Killing didn't bother Harry, but the untidiness and the waste of his valuable time did

annoy him. Still, a man had to do what a man had to do.

He picked up the 9mm and tucked it into his belt. It'd do quite a good job of putting Louie Russell in her place once and for all. It felt warm and comfortable at his side, as natural as if it was part of his body.

He should have known this day would come. As hot as she was, Louie was far more than skin-deep looks. She was a natural on the job and didn't miss a beat when she'd stepped into the role of bounty hunter, oh, oops ... bail enforcement agent. Good was good and Louie had it in spades. Unfortunately for the talented beauty, the very brains and skills that made her so good were going to get her killed. A damn shame too. He was gonna have a hard time finding another employee with her natural ability to step and take her place.

He closed the heavy vault door, spun the dial and headed back out to his car. Adrenaline made his body buzz. He whistled as he pulled out of the driveway.

"Here I come, little girl," he said into the darkness.

The hunted now became the hunter.

\* \* \* \*

Louie dropped the M24 off with Chucky before she headed back to the office. Relief washed over her when she noticed Harry's car wasn't in the lot. All the better. Her breaking and entering for the night wasn't quite done yet. Hey, with two already under her belt, one more wasn't going to make a difference. The upside was at least she didn't have to break and enter into the building. All she had to do here was break into his desk and his files, which should be a cakewalk compared to her earlier endeavors. Besides, she was on a definite roll.

Before she got out of the car, her gaze strayed to the dark windows on the second story of the old brick building. Her heart ached at the thought of Meg and the violence that had ended her life. Who would want to hurt such a gentle soul? Of course, Amy's logic made sense considering the background that Meg had concealed. Perhaps her past was the reason she now lay cold and alone in a morgue. And maybe not.

Louie'd been around the block a time or two and whether she liked it or not, knew that often the elderly were victims of violence for no other reason than they were old. The thought of her precious friend alone and dying at the hands of an evil stranger made her heart clench. Meg didn't deserve that kind of a death.

But Louie couldn't let emotion sidetrack her. First things first. She'd deal with her sorrow later. She got out of the car and walked to the back door of the offices she shared with Harry.

Inside, she slipped on yet another pair of latex gloves and went to work in his office. His desk was clean, and she found nothing that would explain any of the current mystery. Next was the bank of files that lined the wall separating his office from hers. Louie's hopes at finding something were fading by the time she got to the fifth and final four-drawer cabinet. She didn't hold out much optimism she would come across anything here either.

She was wrong. She pulled out a plain manila envelope stuck far in the back of the third drawer. Inside was a thick bundle of paper pulled from a legal pad and held together with a binder clip. She flipped through page after page of the cryptic notes. At first glance, nothing made sense, but as she worked, she began to detect a pattern.

Papers in hand, she sat on the floor and spread the individual sheets out. Studying them carefully, she began to arrange them in a pattern that corresponded to the notes on each. Ten minutes later, she leaned back and sighed, a heavy weight sitting squarely across her shoulders.

"Harry, you sneaky bastard."

Had she not spent so much time around Harry, she'd have missed it. His shorthand by itself made little sense. Line it all up, and a schedule and timetable for drops, pick-ups, and payoffs emerged, ingenious, very clever, and very damning. But for the fiasco with James McDonald, chances were better than average Harry would have gotten away with his crimes for a lot of years.

He'd been in the drug trade since before she'd come to work for him. Since before Chris was shot. Combined with what she was certain the rifle would tell them, Harry Studhorse was about to go to jail for a very long time. Tears blurred her vision and she rubbed them away. Would there be anyone left in her world after tonight? The way things were going, no.

Louie gathered up her strength of will and all of the papers. She didn't have time to wallow in self-pity. Regardless of how she felt about Harry, she had a job to do. She put the stack of paper into the automatic document feed of the copier. She hit the button only to discover it didn't want to send her copies through; the small lighted display informed her that the machine was warming up. Shifting from foot to foot, she muttered "hurry up," while looking at the window.

An eternity later, the machine began to feed the sheets of paper through one at a time and the resulting copies collected in the tray. She wouldn't take any chances. Once the copies were done, she put Harry's originals back in the file cabinet where she'd found them, shut the drawer and pushed in the small silver knob to engage the lock. Her copies clutched to her chest, she turned on her heel intending to retreat into her own space.

"Hello, Louise."

For the first time, words failed her. She simply stood and stared. Harry filled the doorway with his imposing bulk. Dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a deep red shirt, his long black braids hanging down, he was impressive. He was the strong, handsome Harry who was such a great part of her life. He was also someone she no longer recognized. His face was hard and unflinching, his eyes coal black and opaque. And he was carrying a gun, the barrel of which was pointed at her head.

"Harry, I..."

"Don't." The single word roared in the small office and she flinched. "Do not start with the lies, Louise."

"I didn't intend to."

"Oh, and you were just about to tell me what you were doing in my private files, right?"

"I wasn't..."

"I said, don't." This time his words were low. She wasn't sure which was worse.

She couldn't snow him; she didn't know how long he'd been standing in the doorway. She hadn't heard even a tiny rustle of movement to let her know she was no longer alone in the darkened offices. He could have been there watching for quite a while and she wouldn't have known. It didn't matter. It had been long enough for Harry to realize she'd found a file he didn't want her to see.

She sighed and shrugged. He was right. Evasion was futile. He knew and so did she. Except there were a few things she didn't know, and if he was going to kill her, then the least he could do was fill in the blanks.

"Why, Harry? Why would you kill two people? What did either of them do to you? And Chris, for heaven's sake. Why would you set up my brother, your best friend?"

A wry smile turned up the corners of his mouth. The lines in his face softened, but his dark eyes still looked mean. She didn't like that.

"You don't count so well, sugar."

What was he talking about? "What do you mean?"

"You asked why I'd kill two people but that's where your math is off. I killed three, and it would have been four if your stubborn brother hadn't decided to hold on."

"Three?" Her heart sank and it was all she could do not to throw up.

"Yeah, well, here's the score. I couldn't let your brother destroy me, I couldn't let McDonald and his girlfriend expose me, and your nosy friend Meg, well, let's just say she stuck her face into my business one too many times."

"You murdered Meg?" Her voice took on a strangled tone. Bile rose in her throat.

He shrugged. "Yeah, well that little thing was hardly a challenge. No fight left in the old bat."

"You bastard."

"Sticks and stones..."

"And what about Chris? Destroy you? He was your best friend!" She was having a hard time believing what she was hearing. Harry and Chris were as close as brothers. Maybe even closer.

He shrugged again. "Friends come, friends go."

Fury rose in her chest. Chris would have given his life for Harry. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"And you're too smart to be that naive."

The hint of a picture started to form. "You're the one James McDonald was running drugs for and you're the one he was running from as well."

He nodded so slightly it was almost imperceptible.

Pieces began to fall into place, creating a terrible picture that made her stomach lurch. "Chris found out about you."

Harry shrugged. "He only figured out part of it. I'm just the big fish in this part of the pond. There are other fish further up the pond a lot bigger than me."

"You're the Medicine Man," she whispered. "Chris was going to take you down the night he was shot."

Harry smiled, the barrel of the gun never wavering from her face. "You mean the night I shot him."

\* \* \* \*

Paul pulled into the parking lot and turned the key. It was a little before eleven, and there were only two other cars in the lot. The Chevelle was easy to recognize, and he assumed the black SUV belonged to her partner, Harry Studhorse. Without the lights of the car, the lot was inky save for the one flickering streetlamp. The four light posts around the perimeter of the parking lot should have illuminated it, but they were dark. He wondered why. Shadows danced around him in a way that made him shift in his seat with



discomfort.

Looking over at the building, he frowned. If they were both there, why was only one small light visible? Like the darkened parking lot, the offices should have been bright. He didn't like this. Nothing about it felt right.

In the window, a shadow moved. "Oh shit," Paul muttered as he realized the shadow, the big shadow had to be Harry. Was he holding a handgun?

Reaching into the backseat, he grabbed his jacket. He fumbled around in his pockets until he found the card Joe Federer up in Metaline Falls had given him the day of Jamie's murder. He knew Joe was too far away to help, but he was hoping he'd know who to call here. If he dialed 9-1-1, they'd assume he was a crackpot when he told them he'd seen a shadow with a gun. Joe would be his best bet at the moment. At least the guy would believe him...he hoped.

He dialed and talked in a quick, low voice. At first Joe, and rightfully so, seemed skeptical. Somewhere along the line he got on board with Paul and assured him he'd send someone to the office in a matter of minutes. Paul felt a whole bunch better when he snapped the phone shut and stuffed it back in his pocket. Joe told him to wait and while that might be the smartest thing to do, no way. Time was a luxury he didn't have.

Paul looked around his car for something, anything he could use. He didn't own a gun. His lethal weapon was the one he'd held in his hands since about the time he learned how to walk. He was Canadian, and everyone knew not to mess with a Canadian and his hockey stick. Their bad luck if they did.

He got out of the car and went around to the trunk. Inside was not just one, but six different sticks. It took only a moment to pick the one he wanted. Wizards had their wands; he had his sticks.

He shut the trunk very carefully so as not to make any noise and draw attention to himself. If he was to have any luck tonight, he'd need the element of surprise. Harry might be older than Paul, but he'd bet a month's salary regardless of his age, Harry was one tough sonofabitch. He was not in the mood to get his ass kicked at the very least, and at the worst, shot.

Stick in hand, he moved quickly from the car to the building, keeping to south side of the parking lot so that he was as far away from the window as possible. He grasped the door handle and pulled down. The door squeaked when he pulled it open and Paul froze. After a moment of silence, he let out the breath he was holding and slipped inside, moving down the darkened hallway with his back to the wall. He stopped when he heard their voices.

"You bastard," Louie barked, her voice harsh and angry.

Harry chuckled and sound sent shivers up Paul's back. "Sticks and stones."

"Damn it, Harry, why?"

"Money, baby, it's always been about the money."

"Chris would have helped you."

Again he laughed. "You don't understand. On his public servant salary, his kind of help wouldn't even have come close. I owed money, Louie, a lot of money to people who don't take credit cards. When I couldn't pay, they offered me a way out of my problem. A solution that turned out to be very lucrative."

"Drugs."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Jesus, Harry, what happened to you?"

Now his words turned bitter. "Get off your damn moral high horse. What have you or anyone else ever done for me?"

"I've been your friend."

"Screw that. You've been my friend as long as I was the goody-two shoes you wanted to believe me to be. Not once have you ever seen me, the real me."

"That's not fair."

"And what does fair have to do with anything? This country robbed my ancestors of their birthright and stuffed them on worthless land. Now that we've found a way to make it pay, the country bitches about that. If that's not bad enough, America taught me to be a killer and then tells me not to kill. This country prides itself on the rights of citizens to bear arms as long as we don't use them. This country, that I served so well, tells me I have the right to chase the American dream and yet when I do, when I protect what's mine, you call me a killer."

"You're twisting everything!"

"I'm tired of people like you and your virtuous big brother telling me what's right and wrong. You don't know shit. I'm tired of having to watch my back because little snots like Jamie McDonald try to put a knife in it. I'm not going down because you disagree with my lifestyle."

There was silence for a moment, Harry's bitter words hanging in the air.

"The police have your rifle." Louie's voice was quiet, calm. "By tomorrow they'll be able to prove you shot not only Chris, but James McDonald and Kendall Stewart. You're going down, regardless of what you do to me."

"Yeah, well, you know what, little girl? They'll probably also figure out who killed you, and it won't make a damn bit of difference because I'll be long gone."

"They'll find you."

"No, sweetie, that's where you're wrong. It's quite amazing what money can do, and I've been preparing for the day I'd have to disappear for years. By the time they slap your body into cold storage at the morgue, I'll be laying on the beach with a drink in one hand and a nice Cuban cigar in the other."

The sound of the gun shot coincided with the reverberating force of a hockey stick against Harry's substantial arm. Louie screamed as Harry turned on Paul.

Paul raised the hockey stick again.

Harry smiled. "Just as stupid as your little brother," he sneered. "You two are the kind of guys who bring a knife to a gun fight, and who do you suppose is gonna win? Well, we know little bro didn't and guess what, Mr. N.H.L., neither are you. Nighty, night."

At the sound of the first shot, he flinched. Nothing. Shouldn't he have felt something? When the second shot sounded, pain exploded in his body and as he dropped to the ground, everything went black.

## Chapter Eighteen

Harry. Harry. Harry.

Over and over again the name flowed through Chris' consciousness. One minute he was in blissful never-never land and the next, he heard the shot of the rifle moments after he saw Harry's face through the gun's scope.

The minute Chris had arrived at the warehouse he'd had the feeling something was off. Now he understood what it was. His friend, his best friend, had been using him. They'd always been buddies, even before boot camp. Then there was their Ranger training. A person didn't go through purgatory and not become closer than brothers. He'd never been closer to anyone. That's why Chris didn't think twice about sharing work stories with him without realizing Harry had used the intel to keep his own business dealings flowing with seamless precision.

Chris had been suckered and it hurt like a sonofabitch.

He'd wanted to put down a drug operation, to once and for all stop the creep whose business blighted Spokane. He'd planned to learn the identity of the player known as Medicine Man. Now it all made sense. Why he hadn't been able to put two and two together before escaped him. It all seemed so crystal clear now.

He blinked and the light sent daggers through his skull. Jesus, how long had he been asleep? He remembered feeling the shot, a razor-sharp pain in the side of his head, and then nothing but blackness. The paramedics would have come, though he didn't have any recollection of that. Harry's shot must have kicked the living shit out of him. Figures. Harry was the best shooter Chris ever met, bar none.

He blinked again and gave himself a second to let his eyes adjust to the light that at first he thought was glaring. In fact, the lights were low in what he eventually recognized was a hospital room. A rather strange hospital room. Instead of the normal dull bedding, his adjustable bed was covered with a bright-colored comforter. He expected to see Louie here and was surprised to find himself alone in the dim room.

Maybe she'd gone down to the cafeteria for coffee. It had to make for a long night sitting up here though he wondered where "here" was. Had they taken him to Deaconess or perhaps Sacred Heart? Either one was a good choice. He just couldn't tell from his surroundings which one. The drapes were closed, blocking his line of sight to the outside. It didn't matter; one hospital was as good as the other. He just hoped he wouldn't be stuck here too long. If they didn't get the chance to grab Harry at the warehouse, Chris needed to find him as soon as possible.

He felt like crap and when he tried to push up to a sitting position, found he was too weak to get himself up. Wow, whatever happened must have kicked the crap out of him. Twitching a finger was as tough as walking through hardened concrete. He was hoping to find the nurse call button. The effort needed to move his fingers in search of the call button brought sweat popping out all over his body. Jesus, what was that about?

His movement caused a tube to fall free, and an alarm began to sound, an annoying *ping, ping, ping* that wouldn't stop. Seconds later, a nurse came rushing into the room. She was a very pretty woman with curly blonde hair and bright blue eyes. He'd get her number before he checked out. She stopped abruptly at the foot of the bed and just stared

at him.

"Water." Inside his head it sounded like he screamed the single word. To his ears it sounded like more of a croak. At first he didn't think she heard him.

She continued to stare for a second longer and then a huge smile appeared as she exclaimed, "Oh, my God."

## Epilogue

The air was warm and fresh when Louie limped out onto the sun-drenched patient courtyard on the fifth level of the hospital. In a wheelchair, turned toward a view of the city below, Chris sat seemingly unaware of her presence. She studied him for a moment. His profile really showed how thin he'd become since that night long ago. Gone were the bulky shoulders and the "guns," as he'd liked to call them. He was a shell of the man he'd been, and yet she didn't think she'd ever seen anyone look so beautiful in her life.

Today was the first time they'd been alone since he'd awakened, and strangely, she wasn't sure what to say. She'd talked to him a thousand times over the last five years. Day after day, she'd sat next to his bed and shared her world with him, wishing he'd talk back. Now that he could, she was nervous. Would he be disappointed in her? After all, she'd abandoned a promising career and ended up partner with the man who'd robbed Chris of five years. She'd been lied to and deceived. She'd almost been killed.

But he was her brother, the only family she had left. Even if he was disappointed in her, they'd find a way to get past it. They had to.

She grabbed one of the patio chairs and brought it next to his wheelchair. Before she sat, she leaned over and placed a kiss on his cheek. Chris turned his head and smiled. It lit his whole face. Every trace of her nervousness disappeared.

"About time you got your skinny little ass up here," he said with a laugh. "They've been fussing around me like the second coming."

"Ah," she said and took his hand. "Better get used to it. You're front page news, big brother."

He shook his head. "Great. Just what I need when I'm still trying to wrap my head around the five year coma thing. I could swear I've only been out for a day or two. At least when they moved me here to the hospital, I've been able to get in touch with reality little more, see a little more of real life happening."

"It's definitely been five years, bro. Trust me, I feel every one of them."

His eyes narrowed and he raised one eyebrow. "I'd say you look like it too, but..."

"I will hit a guy in a wheelchair." Her smile belied the threat.

"Naw, you look like a million bucks."

"And you lie when you're scared."

"A wise person knows when to lie."

God, how she'd missed this easy camaraderie. She sobered and sucked in a big breath. "Speaking of lies..."

He held her hand, his long bony fingers stroking her palm. "Start at the beginning, Lou. I need to know."

"It's all pretty simple. Harry lied to both of us. He shot you, tried to kill you, and then used me to make sure you were out of commission. When I figured it all out, he tried to kill me too. But damn it, I loved him like another brother." She choked back a sob.

His hand tightened on hers. "I did too."

"How could he do this us?" She wiped away the tears with her free hand. "How could he hate us this much?"

Chris stroked her hair. "He didn't hate either of us. Not really. He was lost, Louie."

She stared at him. "How can you defend him? He shot me in the goddamn foot." She held up her foot, encased in a black adjustable cast. "He was aiming for my heart. If it hadn't been for Paul and his hockey stick, Harry would have killed me."

"I'm not defending him, little sister. I'm simply stating a fact. Harry wanted to love, he wanted to be loved, but his spirit was weak and he made choices he couldn't undo. I saw hints of it before he shot me and I ignored the signs because I didn't want to see them. If I'd have done more back then—"

"Ah, shit."

"Yeah, ah shit."

"It just hurts," she said as she leaned her head lightly against his shoulder. "And I don't mean the foot."

He patted her head. "Yup, it hurts but we'll heal, both of us. By the way..." he tilted his head to study her face. "Who's Paul?"

She sat up and smiled. "How do you feel about hockey?"

"Hockey?"

"Now you're talking my game," Paul said from the courtyard doorway.

Louie's smile grew even if the nurse pushing Paul's wheelchair was a little too pretty for her taste. If anyone was going to push Paul around it was damn well going to be Louie.

She gimped over to him and kissed him on the lips. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm pretty happy about it myself."

"Hey," Chris said. "What about me?"

"He's such a baby," Louie whispered loud enough for Chris to hear.

"Takes one to know one," Chris shot back.

Paul laughed. "Easy to tell you two are related. So are you going to introduce us?" He glanced at Louie.

She pushed Paul over to where Chris waited and then sat back down on her chair gazing at the two men she loved. Oh yeah, no use even trying to deceive herself. She loved Paul and didn't care who knew it.

Looking from Paul to Chris, she said, "Paul McDonald, I'd like you to meet my brother, Christopher Russell."

"Chris. Call me Chris. Nice to meet you, Paul." Chris held out his hand.

Paul shook it. "Likewise. If not for your little sister here, I'd probably be dead."

"Hmm, that's not the way I hear it. Louie tells me you saved her life with a hockey stick."

Louie laughed at the flush that raced up Paul's face. "Let me explain. We're in the office, Harry's holding a gun pointed at my chest and Paul, who's a hockey coach by the way, sneaks in the back and smacks Harry with one of his sticks. Instead of shooting me in the chest, Harry's shot went through my foot. Broke a few bones but nothing serious."

"I think there's a little something's missing in this story." Chris nodded at Paul.

"Little something" didn't even begin to describe what happened after Harry shot her in the foot. In the seconds it took to get her back-up gun out of the ankle holster, she was enveloped in pure panic. Harry's gun was pointed at Paul's head. No way was she going to let him take Paul away from her too.

In the sunlight, Paul's eyes held hers and his fingers tightened around her hand. "She saved my life."

Something in his voice made her heart beat a little faster. "Harry was just about to shoot Paul in the head. I shot him, but as he was going down, he still managed to get a shot off at Paul."

"Thanks to your sister, his bullet only winged me instead of giving me a third eye in the middle of my forehead."

"She's okay," Chris said softly. "She's okay."

"Yes, she is." Paul lifted her hand and kissed her palm.

The touch of his lips against her skin sent electric shocks racing through her body. Louie barely noticed the pretty nurse who came out and whisked Chris away. She heard something about physical therapy but honestly, she couldn't recall the exact words. All her thoughts turned to how close she'd come to losing Paul. Even in the bright sunlight, she shivered.

"I was so scared."

"I wasn't about to leave you and I wasn't going to let him take you from me."

Her eyes filled with the tears she'd been holding back. "If you hadn't raced in with that silly hockey stick, I'd be dead."

A tear slid down her cheek, and Paul reached over to pull her close. He felt warm and best of all, alive. He kissed the top of her head and whispered, "Couldn't let that happen. You still haven't met the folks."

She stilled, not daring to hope. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, I waited a long time to meet someone like you, Louie Russell, and I'm not about to let one crazy man with a gun take you away."

A smile chased away her tears. She took his hand and kissed the palm. "I love you too."

His green eyes sparkled. "I can't tell you how happy I am to hear you say that."

"Because..."

"Because I love you too."

She leaned in and kissed him as she slid her hand slowly down his leg. "You need to get well. I've got some big plans for you."

The grin that rolled up his face sent a shot of heat through her body. "I can hardly wait."

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Sheri Lewis Wohl lives in Northeastern Washington State with her husband, Steve, two really big dogs and one little calico cat. Surrounded by mountains, pine trees, rivers and lakes, it's the perfect setting for stories of romance, intrigue and danger.

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