

BLIND FAITH

CJ Lyons

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CHAPTER 1

June 6, 2007: Walls Prison Unit, Huntsville, Texas

Sarah Durandt watched as the faded blue-checked gingham curtains rattled open, revealing the prisoner strapped to a gurney.

A woman behind her gasped. Sarah leaned forward, one hand resting on the glass separating her from a monster. She breathed through her mouth. The air in the tiny cement-walled room felt too heavy, so thick it needed to be choked down.

She and the other witnesses gathered behind glass that cast halos around the edges of the brightly lit objects in the white-tiled execution chamber on the other side. Bulletproof glass. Who did they think would be doing the shooting? The condemned man already woozy from sedatives or those who had come to watch him die?

Sarah curled her hands one into the other and held them still on her lap, shivering as the air-conditioning blew a frosty stream down on her. Seven others crowded into the room with

her. She barely noticed them. All her attention was focused on the prisoner beyond.

His arms were extended, needles inserted into veins on both sides of his body. Seven leather straps crossed his body and limbs, holding him in a position eerily reminiscent of a crucifixion. This man was no Messiah.

This man was the devil incarnate.

Damian Wright was a medium-sized man, one who would not stand out in a crowd with his bland face, blander features.

Sarah knew better. She knew the cunning; she knew that hidden behind his façade of normalcy lay a sick desire to torture and maim.

Damian's sweat-beaded skin glistened as he lay beneath a large round surgical light, his eyes squeezed shut against its unflinching illumination. The warden nodded to a black-suited man with a small silver cross on his lapel. The man stretched his hand, his wedding ring shimmering as it passed through the beam of light, and pulled a black microphone down. Sarah rubbed her own ring finger, tracing the plain band Sam had placed there six years ago.

Uncoiling like a cobra, the microphone bobbed hypnotically above Damian's lips. A click, like a muffled gunshot, echoed through the witness room as the warden switched on the intercom. The scratchy sound of Damian's breathing filled the room to the breaking point, forcing its way into a space already brimming over with the sobs and sighs of his victims.

Sarah found herself inhaling in time with Damian, could almost smell the antiseptic and surgical tape and the stench of sweat and nerves filling the room beyond the window. Alan Easton, who sat beside her, gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"You okay?" he asked, his tone that of a friend rather than her lawyer.

She nodded, her attention focused on the events beyond the glass. The execution chamber held only three men: the warden in his navy suit, bleached white shirt and narrow tie, the black-suited minister, and Damian Wright, the man who had destroyed her life.

If Sarah was describing the Death House to her sixth-grade students back home, she would have said that the theme of the room, of the entire building set far apart from normal prison confines, was containment.

Nothing was meant to ever escape from this tiny building with its cement walls painted an institutional green. The utilitarian execution chamber beyond the viewing window made no efforts to soften or hide its purpose. A flat surgical table, arms splayed wide, bolted to the floor was its only piece of furniture.

"Any last words?" the warden asked the condemned man.

Sarah came to attention. A fly had trespassed into the profane proceedings and beat its wings against the cage shielding two flickering fluorescent light bulbs, its buzzing deafening. Damian Wright, convicted murderer and child rapist, opened his rheumy eyes and stared directly at her. She pulled her hand from Alan's, fisted it tight.

Tell me. Say something. Give me a clue.

Her prayers went unheard. Damian remained silent, muscles slack, not fighting his restraints. Only his chest moved, rising and falling as if he were counting down to his last breath. Sarah's lungs squeezed tight, ready to burst from pressure. The minister intoned from his Bible, his eyes never rising from the written word to gaze upon the lost soul he prayed over.

The words of the Psalm, words that twenty-two months ago would have brought Sarah comfort and solace, were now reduced to meaningless noise with less significance than the buzzing of the fly. She pressed her palm flat against the cold glass, more intent on gleaning some unknown message from Damian than listening to the word of God.

She'd spent her entire life listening. Where was God when she'd needed him most? Where was He when her husband and son needed him?

"I'm sorry we couldn't stay the execution," Alan whispered. "I know how much you hoped—"

She shrugged his hand and his words away, her entire universe consisting of the gaze of a killer. The man who had confessed to killing Sam and Josh—but who refused to tell her where they were buried. Refused to grant her even that small comfort.

For a year and a half she had fought. Fought Damian Wright's silence, his refusal to see her. Fought the new Texas law that allowed executions to be "fast-tracked" with an unprecedented efficiency. Fought her own desire to see Damian die. A desire superseded only by her need to find her husband and son.

The warden strode forward, reading from a document in a monotone that floated just beyond the periphery of Sarah's awareness.

Where are they, you sonofabitch? Sarah tried to broadcast all her loathing and hatred into her glare, hoping to loosen Damian's tongue in these, his last seconds on this Earth. Her fist pounded against the thick glass, creating only the smallest of muffled thuds.

The killer didn't flinch or look away from her. Nor did he speak. Instead he gazed at her with an expression approaching pity. As if she were the one condemned, not him.

The warden finished and removed his glasses, aiming a small nod in the direction of the executioner's booth. Behind the one-way mirrored glass, an unseen man flipped a switch. Medication flowed into Damian's veins. First more sedatives, then a paralytic, finally the potassium chloride to stop his heart.

Time stopped. Sarah didn't blink. Damian didn't blink.

Three minutes later, the minister stood aside as a man clad in a white coat stepped forward and listened with a stethoscope. He straightened, reached a hand out to Damian's face and closed the killer's eyes.

The blinds snapped shut.

A collective sigh swirled through the room as the other witnesses shifted in their seats. Through the haze filling Sarah's vision she heard several women and a man sobbing, felt the rustle of their movements as the room emptied. She remained frozen, eyes burning as she fought to break through the barriers between this world and the next.

Alan touched her elbow, pulling her fist away from the glass, and drew her up onto unsteady feet. "We have to go now," he murmured.

She kept her face craned toward the darkened window until the last possible moment. Finally, Alan led her out into bright sunshine, Texas heat and humidity bearing down on her with the intensity of a ten-ton truck.

The air was too heavy to breathe, and for a moment she felt as if she were suffocating under the weight of paralyzed lungs. Her chest tightened and for an instant it was her heart that stopped.

She blinked and pain returned. An ice-pick stabbing behind her eyes, her constant companion for twenty-two months, unmitigated by any sedatives or hope of release. Unlike Damian Wright's pain.

And she knew she was alive. At least her body was. Her mind was. Her soul—that was buried in some unmarked grave back home, up on Snakehead Mountain.

Alongside Sam and Josh.

Alan Easton wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief, folded it, and slid it back into place before snapping his Gucci sunglasses open to shield his eyes from the Texas sun. He inhaled thick, humid air and counted his blessings.

The execution chamber was housed in a separate building from the main prison. Visitors had only a short distance to walk between the door and their viewing area. Still, he was glad to be out of the Death House. It reeked of sweat and fear and desperation, all things that Alan despised and refused to tolerate whenever possible.

He escorted Sarah to their rental car and helped her into the passenger seat. She'd held up better than he expected. A little wobbly towards the end, but not too bad.

As he crossed to the drivers' side of the rented Mercury Sable, wind blew whirling dervishes from the hard packed red clay, smearing the high gloss sheen of his Ferragamos. He darted a glance toward the now closed door. A guard stood before it, hands on his hips, eyes hidden by impenetrable dark shades.

Alan had thought Wright might spill it, there at the end. For a second it seemed like the bastard was looking straight at Sarah, ready to talk. *Thank God for strong drugs.*

Alan, his back to the car and Sarah, smiled.

He'd taken a gamble helping Sarah get inside there today, but it was the best way to speed things along. Almost two years he'd worked her, but he was a patient man. Now with Wright's death, the coast was clear.

Come out, come out wherever you are, the children's sing-song whistled through his mind as he opened the car door and slid inside its heat-baked embrace.

Forty-two million dollars. Two years of work. Six years of searching. All almost over. He turned on the engine, cranked up the AC, and looked over at the woman beside him. Sarah was leaning back, her eyes shut, arms crossed over her chest as if she were cold.

Compared to the sun-kissed, surgically enhanced West Coast beauties Alan was used to, she wasn't all that much to look at. Nice figure, curves in all the right places, but a bit muscular for his taste. Her hair was reddish brown, full and shiny, falling past her shoulders, but she never did anything with it except to occasionally yank it back into a ponytail. And she never wore any make up that might make her full lips stand out or highlight her rich, chocolate doe-eyes that made a man think bedroom thoughts.

He figured it must have been those eyes—eyes hidden from him now as Sarah seemed to deflate, collapse in on herself—those eyes must have been what caught Sam Durandt. Alan licked his lips, imagining Sarah hot, wet, naked. Staring at him with wide, wide eyes, as she opened those rich, full lips and lowered her head...

Ahhh...soon. He'd maneuvered things perfectly, put himself in position to play the charming, ever-patient suitor now that she'd found her closure. Once he married her, the forty-two million was as good as his.

Then he could end this charade, could have any woman he wanted. He pulled the car up alongside the guardhouse, waited for them to inspect the undercarriage with their mirrors and check the trunk for unofficial passengers, then drove through the gate. Sarah made a soft, mewling noise like a child caught doing something it shouldn't and she curled up in her seat, her back to him.

The noise stirred his desire. The fan ruffled the hem of her dress. It wasn't black. Sarah never wore black, refused to accept widow's weeds, even today on this grim occasion. Instead she wore a navy blue dress bought off the rack from the Target down in Merrill, the closest "real" town to Hopewell, twenty-eight miles away through New York's Adirondack mountains on twisty, turning roads designed by a lunatic with a death wish. Her dress had tiny polka dots scattered all over it in some silky material that clung to just the right places. In front there were two dozen buttons that would drive a man wild trying to get her out of it.

A vision of his hands grabbing the material, buttons flying in every direction, filled his mind. Sarah crossed her arms tighter, shivering, her eyes still closed.

He wondered if she ever thought of him that way, wondered if she anticipated their first night together like he did. The hem of her dress slipped, offering him a glimpse of well-tanned thigh.

Soon. If she was as good as he imagined she might be, he might even let her live for a while. A few months after the honeymoon, maybe. Then a quick "accident" and he'd be free to claim the forty-two million dollars that asshole husband of hers had stolen.

It's over, it's over, it's over... the words threaded themselves through Sarah's mind, spinning a cocoon that blocked out all feeling, providing a soft, safe place to hide. A place where there was no need to think, to do, to react. To be. *It's over, it's over, it's over...*

Sarah hugged herself tighter and leaned against the car window, her back to Alan. She'd promised herself that no matter what, she wouldn't break down, at least not in front of anyone.

But Alan wasn't anyone. Alan understood—he'd been through it himself. His wife had been killed by a drug addict who stormed their house looking for cash. That was why he'd left his corporate law practice to focus on victim's rights, to help people like Sarah.

The tires hummed as they spun against the highway, carrying her away from Damian Wright and her last chance to find Sam and Josh. *It's over, it's over, it's over...*

Her body sagged against the doorframe, her right hand automatically reaching for the single ring on her left. She had no engagement ring. Instead, Sam had given her his most valuable possession, a guitar pick used by the legendary Stevie Ray Vaughn, and promised that when he sold his first song, he'd replace it with a diamond. Seven years later, the pick still sat in its black velvet jewelry case on her dresser.

Her hand felt cold but her gold wedding band radiated warmth, as if she were touching Sam. She spun the ring in time with the words weaving their way into her soul, inviting her to surrender. *It's over, it's over, it's over....*

No! It can't be. Not like this.

Tears pressed against her closed eyelids, burning as they fought to escape. Sarah's grip on the plain, gold band tightened. Her last link to Sam, and through him Josh. She was tired, so very tired. She should give up. What more could she do?

After all, she had a life to live. Sam would want her to be happy. Someday. A ragged breath tore through her and she felt Alan stir beside her. Alan—could she imagine a future with a man like him? A man who'd devoted almost two years of his life to guiding her through this morass of pain and grief, who'd brought her back into the light, had given her this one last chance.

Last chance, last hope, last rites.

It's over, it's over, it's over.

Sarah straightened, opened her eyes and blinked against the harsh Texas sun. She uncurled her legs, stared straight ahead at the black highway stretching hypnotically into the future.

"You all right?" Alan's gaze left the road to stare at her for a long moment.

A small smile curled Sarah's lips. "Yes. I'm fine."

It's over, it's over, it's over... the words sang through her mind, pounding insistently like a toddler throwing a tantrum, banging his head against the floor when he didn't get what he wanted. Josh had thrown a few of those in his day. Until he learned that when he did, he never got what he wanted.

It's over, it's over, it's over!

Sarah's smile widened and she gave a small shake of her head—the only warning Josh needed now. She'd shake her head, smile and he'd leave his whining behind, take her hand and

snuggle against her. "Sorry, Mommy. I forgot."

But I haven't.

It's over, it's over, it's over...No. It's not.

It's just begun.

CHAPTER 2

Wednesday, June 19, 2007: Quantico, Virginia

Supervisory Special Agent Caitlyn Tierney didn't look up at the tentative knock on her open door. Instead she raised a hand, in the universal palm forward gesture of "wait," and kept reading the report on her computer screen. Her latest group of NAT's was in their final week of training. Nerves were frayed as they waited to learn their field assignments, so this hadn't been the first interruption of Caitlyn's morning.

She finished reading her New Agents in Training's scores on their critical incident projects and nodded with satisfaction. They'd done as good as she'd hoped. Even Santos, the diffident, intense twenty-six year old with a background in particle physics, had managed to integrate himself as part of the team. Caitlyn shut the lid to her laptop and looked up at her visitor, half expecting to see Santos himself.

Instead, it was one of the lab geeks—ah, man, she knew his name, he worked in DNA. Not Rogers, no, something close though. She smiled, keeping her face blandly genial as she forced her brain along its circuitous route to match the face of the man before her with his name.

Finally, it clicked—but it took at least twice as long as it would have two years ago, before her accident. Something she'd never admit to anyone.

"Hi, Clemens," she said heartily, gesturing the tech to one of the two wooden chairs beside her overflowing bookcase. "What brings you over here to Jefferson? Teaching a class?"

He shook his head. "Thought it would be easier than asking you to make the trip to the lab building." He was right, the forensic analysis center had more security than Fort Knox. Even FBI staff like Caitlyn needed a special invite and authorization for a pass to enter. Clemens glanced at the open door and shifted his weight in his chair.

She might not be as good with names as she used to be, but Caitlyn was still a pro when it came to nonverbal communication. She rose to her feet, folded her reading glasses and nonchalantly closed the door as she crossed over to sit beside him.

"What's up?" she asked, leaning forward and engaging him in direct eye contact.

He fumbled a file folder from his briefcase. It wasn't marked "top secret" or even "sensitive" so she wondered what all the cloak and dagger was about. Then she saw the name on the file. Damian Wright.

Her first assignment two years ago after she'd returned to work. She'd hated everything about that case: the crimes, the travel, the blinding migraines that blurred her thoughts and almost crippled her with their unrelenting pain and nausea, and most of all her fatuous asshole of a boss, Special Agent in Charge Jack Logan. Logan had swooped in and taken over the case from her, without any warnings or explanations.

"You know Wright's dead?" she asked the lab tech. "Executed in Texas." She glanced at the calendar. "Two weeks ago."

"I know." Clemens' voice was mournful. "I'm sorry."

Caitlyn's spine went rigid. Bright flashes of light sparked at the periphery of her vision.

"Sorry? You can't be saying you found anything exculpatory?"

Like most LEO's she felt that death was too good for a lot of these sickos—but it was the best punishment they had. That didn't mean that she, like other law enforcement officers, didn't also live in fear of putting an innocent man on death row.

Which was why she'd reviewed the Texas evidence against Wright herself, even though by that time she was off the case. It had been rock solid. Not only had he been caught with the still warm body of his last victim, butchering the boy, but Wright confessed to everything, refused to allow any appeals on his behalf and became the first person under Texas' new law to be fast-tracked to execution. Twenty-one months from arrest to death, a new record.

Clemens shook his head. "No, Wright killed those boys in Texas, Vermont, Tennessee, and Oklahoma." He paused. Caitlyn took a deep breath, forcing the flashing lights to fade into the distance. "It's that one in New York I'm not too sure about."

"Hopewell, New York. Josh Durandt and his father." Caitlyn remembered. The crime scene had been halfway up a mountain and she'd been wearing a skirt after being whisked away from a memorial service for the Vermont boy. Logan had laughed, giving her no time to change into more appropriate attire and cutting her no slack when her migraine had made her sick during the drive down. He'd joked after she puked her guts out on the side of the road, asked her if she was pregnant, adding that was the problem with "today's FBI." He never had to worry about any of the guys letting him down because they went "hormonal" on him.

"See, I was clearing the backlog and I found these samples in the pile to be disposed of," Clemens said, his tone hesitant as he shifted in his seat, obviously having second thoughts. "You know the new director's protocols. All evidence reviewed prior to disposal, even in closed cases. Turns out the results from Hopewell were never recorded. Not anywhere. Case like that, they should have been top priority. Instead they were almost trashed. If it wasn't for the new rules—"

"What do you have?" she asked, sliding the folder from his hand and spreading it open on her lap. The familiar dark lines of a DNA analysis filled the first page.

"The DNA from the Hopewell crime scene, it wasn't Wright's."

"There were two blood types found, right? The dad's and one other. We assumed it was Wright's since the field kit said it was his type and we had his prints on the memory card found there."

"Yeah, it was his print and the card came from his camera. Wright's reflection can be seen in some of the photos. He definitely took them."

"Who was at the crime scene with him? Are you saying he had an accomplice? There was no evidence of that at any of the other scenes." She ran her hand through her shoulder length hair, absently rubbing at the puckered skin above her right ear. Her hair hadn't even grown out when she was in Hopewell. Back then it had been so short, it barely covered the surgical scar.

Clemens blew his breath out. "That's where it gets a bit weird."

Caitlyn straightened. It never boded well when a lab geek called evidence weird. "How weird?"

"Conspiracy theory, cover-up, Area 51, political and career suicide kind of weird." He grimaced. "I've gone over everything a dozen times. The data is correct. It's the facts surrounding it that are wrong."

"You mean *my* facts, *my* investigation?"

He looked down at his scuffed Adidas and nodded. "Yeah." He looked up again, pushed his hair back when it fell across his forehead. "Well, yours and Special Agent in Charge Logan's. He was the agent of record. His name was on all the paperwork. But since he's retired, I thought I better come to you." He gave her a hesitant smile. "Maybe you could tell me what to do with it."

Caitlyn stared past him, through her small window that looked out over the expanse of forest that was home to the Yellow Brick Road, the academy's famed obstacle course. Sunlight streamed in, almost bringing her headache back. She'd always suspected Logan of hiding something. He'd hustled her off the Wright case as fast as he could, claiming she was needed to help with the Katrina cleanup efforts. She'd spent weeks working with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, identifying over 4800 kids and re-uniting them with their families. An area more suited to a woman's talents, in Logan's words.

She turned to Clemens. "Tell me everything."

CHAPTER 3

September 6, 2005: Hopewell, NY

Dear Sam,

The news is filled with death and destruction. The search for you has pretty much ended as all eyes turn south to Katrina's destruction and chaos. All eyes except mine, of course.

The Colonel's wife still comes every day. She says talking about you, keeping this journal is the best way for me to heal, to understand that our Lord has a plan beyond my mortal comprehension and that I must let go of you and Josh and accept that you are in a better place and soldier on.

Today for the first time, I spoke to her. I told her the truth about how I felt. I told her that she and her good Lord could go to Hell.

The Colonel hustled her out faster than a lightning bolt, her still sputtering about how I should respect her as my stepmother if not as a Christian woman.

Sometimes I swear the Colonel only married her after Mom died because she bakes the best caramel apple pie in the county and knows how to make a bed with hospital corners. Honestly, I know they've been together now for four years, but what the hell was he thinking? Don't say it—I can almost hear you humming that stupid song you wrote about her, Requiem for the Morally Superior and Personality Challenged. Anyway, she's out of my hair and my house, so more's the better.

Dr. Hedeger says pretty much the same thing as the Colonel's wife, only he feeds me Xanax with his tepid platitudes. He frowns when he sees the lack of sleep in my eyes, my hair stiff and needing to be washed. Tells me to listen to the Colonel's wife, that letting my grief and anger out is the best way to "defuse my trauma".

Defuse. As if I'm a ticking bomb ready to explode at the slightest jar or rustle. Tick, tick...boom!

He's right about one thing. That's exactly how I feel. Relentless, a constant coil of incendiary fury curled inside me like a viper ready to strike. Surrounded by a hard lead dead numb casing.

If ever I do blow, the explosion will have nowhere to go except to ricochet between my ribs, finishing the job of shredding my heart to pieces.

So, that's basically how I am. How's everything there? Are you keeping an eye on Josh? I know you are—hell, even Damian Wright knew that. I guess that's why he followed you into the woods. He knew he'd never get a better chance to catch you by surprise and get Josh.

Did I tell you the police found one of his camera cards? While I was sitting in Albany with a bunch of other teachers, being preached to about "no child left behind," that monster was

spying on Josh. The card is filled with picture after picture of you and Josh at the park, you two walking home, even a glimpse of Josh and you wrestling on the living room floor. Oh there are other little boys he'd spied on, but they quickly give way to focus solely on Josh.

Our beautiful little boy. I'm not blaming you. The police said from the amount of blood they found on the trail that you put up quite a fight. Heroic, Chief Waverly called it.

They found some blood that must have belonged to Damian as well, it was A positive and you're B negative. As long as it wasn't Josh's blood, I was happy—what a stupid thing to think! But at the time I could only grasp at straws, was hanging onto any thread of hope I could find.

I'm so damned angry—that I wasn't here, as if I could have somehow stopped what happened—angry at the stupid government wasting time and money on a stupid law with a catchy name that has condemned our children to a level of mediocracy—sorry, you've heard that rant before, haven't you?

Mostly I'm angry at God—how could he have allowed this to happen? To those two boys in Vermont? To the other one they found in Tennessee after they lost Damian here.

Then the woman from the FBI—you would have laughed at her, butch hair cut, badly fitting skirt, clunky shoes, hand always on her hip as if she couldn't decide if she was a woman or one of the boys—she told me, in her blunt, you-told-me-not-to-sugar-coat-anything way that Damian' signature was to snatch and grab his prey. That he killed them quickly, brutally, with his bare hands (she said it makes him feel like God, using his hands, feeling his flesh against theirs while they die—how the hell can she know that?). Oh yeah, she says, as if this will ease my mind, don't worry, he doesn't actually molest them until after they're dead. Then he can take his time, take them with him, find someplace with peace and quiet.

That's when Hal Waverly came in and shut her up. Thank God 'cause I was ready to do some serious damage to her myself. Hal took me by the shoulders and steered me out to his squad, found me something hot to drink that stopped my teeth from chattering. Then he told me about the blood in the clearing off the trail. About finding Josh's Tigger, ripped to pieces. That they'd called off the search because of the hurricane arriving. That once the weather cleared, they'd get the cadaver dogs out there.

Last week. Seems like another life. The search and rescue and cadaver dogs from Saranac are all down in Mississippi and New Orleans now. The FBI has come and gone but the crime scene tape still blocks the room at the Locust Inn down in Merrill where Damian Wright stayed. They just missed him in Tennessee, the news said—hot on the trail of a killer.

If I was Damian, I'd head down to Texas, blend in with the refugees there, get lost in the crowd. I wonder if the police have thought of that, if they're looking for him there? Seems like he was headed south. The mom in Tennessee at least has a body to bury—a pair of hunters interrupted Damian before he could finish hiding that boy. Nelson was his name. Cute kid from the photo in the papers. Black curls, big dark eyes, wide grin.

Just like you and Josh. I know Josh must be with you—he has to be, that hope is the only thing keeping me sane. Knowing that you two are together.

I will find you. Soon. I promise. Maybe the rain will wash you free—if Damian didn't bury you too deep. But then the animals—I can't stop thinking about what they might be doing, teeth and claws. The pictures going through my mind are almost as bad as the thought of what Damian did to Josh after he finished with you....

Sorry, I'm back now. Sometimes I just have to go shut myself in the bathroom, all the faucets running as hard as they can go and I scream and scream until my voice has run out and the room is filled with steam and I imagine you're there in the mirror and Josh is sleeping just beyond the closed door. I hold my breath until the fog clears and it becomes all too obvious to anyone sane that I'm alone. Alone with my thoughts and fears and anger and despair—I miss

you both so much that I can't even imagine words equal to the task.

Hal Waverly's been a rock. Course, as Chief of Police he's seen bad things before—and he's lost someone himself so he understands better than anyone. He keeps to himself, kind of hovers in the background, checks on me between calls, making sure there's food in the house, that I don't wear the same clothes three days running. Most of all, he doesn't judge me when I need to escape—usually out into the rain and fog that's trying to drown us out this past week.

Everyone else puckers their lips, wondering if I'm gone round the bend—or if that ticking time bomb has finally exploded. Not Hal.

I hate to admit it but even the Colonel's wife has been a help—in her own way. She shoos everyone away, cleans the house and sends me to bed after a hot bath and cup of her herbal tea that tastes like a grandmother's hug, all warmth and cinnamon. I keep kicking her out, but she sees me as her project—as if she's the only one who can redeem me. Hate to tell her it's a waste of time.

My brain feels fuzzy—the Colonel must have slipped more Xanax into my tea. Or maybe Prozac. Or both. He hovers over me like fog on the mountain. They're all watching me—the Colonel, his wife, Hal Waverly, Dr. Hedeger, everyone from school. It's as if the whole town is holding its breath, waiting for me to explode—tick, tick, boom.

They think I'll kill myself or at least hurt myself. But I could never do that—not until I find you.

Then, we'll see. I can't imagine past that.

For now, hold Josh tight, tell him not to be scared, tell him mommy loves him soooo much. Tell him I'll find you. I will find you both. Somehow, someday, someday.

I love you. God how I love you—why couldn't I have been here? Why couldn't it have been me?

I sleep with the curtains open so I can see the mountain above the fog. It makes me feel like you're watching over me from somewhere up there in the darkness. And if I leave the light on, maybe then you and Josh can find your way home.....

CHAPTER 4

Wednesday, June 19, 2007: Hopewell, New York

Sarah stepped off her porch, the screen door banging behind her, startling a flock of starlings from their perch along the roof gutter. The sun was already high enough to be peaking over the rim of Snakehead Mountain's neighbor to the east. Bright ribbons of light shredded the fog that nightly crowded the mountainside. All that remained were small swirls of floating cotton-candy mist that vanished with her every movement.

She smiled and hummed as she skimmed along the grass, gathering dew around the sides of her hiking boots and along the hems of her jeans. "It ain't morning till the coffee's brewing, and it ain't coffee unless it's Ewing's," she sang one of Sam's attempts to break into the commercial jingle market.

It was still chilly enough that she wore a fleece jacket over her tank top, but the clear sky guaranteed mild weather. She reached the lane and followed it downhill to where it intersected with Lake Road, which ran down to the reservoir and the dam. Her house perched above the rest of town, nestled in a curve of the mountain's lower ridgeline. In the summer it was hidden among the shade of maples, oaks, and beech trees. In the winter it offered spectacular views across the

valley from the front and a glimpse of the Lower Falls from the back porch. Not to mention the deer, fox, and occasional bear meandering past.

Searching for signs of scat or tracks, Sarah scanned the hard-packed dirt road. It was a habit drilled into her by the Colonel from when she was a child and learning to hunt. How many times had she and Josh stopped to gleefully poke apart mounds of seedy excrement while Sam stood by, a bemused smile crinkling his face?

She yanked her head up, forced her feet to continue their journey without her peering down at the road. Instead, she blinked into the sun filtering through freshly emerged leaves. Beyond her, a raven caught an updraft, sailing into the sky over the gorge.

There were only a few houses here on the outskirts of town. Hal Waverly was Sarah's closest neighbor, almost a mile away up a gravel track that curved around the eastern side of Snakehead, past the reservoir. Hal's house perched on the very edge of the gorge, with head-on views of the Lower Falls. Lily, his wife, had been the county hydrologist and loved living in a house constantly filled with the sound of rushing water.

Sarah passed the road leading to Hal's house, a chill overtaking her as tall hemlocks blocked out the sun. She kept heading toward town, reaching Main Street a half-mile farther down the mountain.

Main Street dead-ended at Lake Road. The Village of Hopewell had been painstakingly carved out of a plateau above a shallow section of the Snakehead River gorge. Originally it had been home to a Mohawk settlement, then French Canadian trappers, followed by loggers and a handful of hearty homesteaders. After the dam had been built by the CCC in the 30's, the town finally had room to breathe, expanding down into the basin the river left behind, growing from an unincorporated hamlet into a full-fledged village of almost five hundred souls. It still didn't show up on many maps, but the people of Hopewell took that as a badge of honor. Kept most the tourists out, unlike nearby Saranac or Lake Placid.

She turned onto Main Street, passing the Farmer's Market, two churches, and a scattering of houses, half of them vacant. Two blocks later she passed the school that housed grades K thru 8. After that, the kids were bused down the mountain to Merrill. The school board was currently discussing closing the school entirely. If they did, Sarah would have to decide to leave Hopewell or drive twenty-eight miles over treacherous, twisting roads to teach in Merrill.

She wasn't leaving. Not without finding Josh and Sam.

She paused beside Doc Hedeger's clinic. Down the street, the Colonel's wife, Victoria, raised the flag in front of the new government center, her skinny arms scissoring back and forth. Sarah waved but wasn't upset when the postmistress ignored her to stand at attention, one hand over her heart as she recited the pledge of allegiance.

Victoria's post office was the center of the latest controversy that had rocked Hopewell. Somehow Victoria had convinced the government that not only did Hopewell, NY, population 468, deserve its zip code re-instated but since the Snakehead dam was a prime terrorist target, it deserved funding for a new post office/police station.

The floods of 2005 had destroyed the old police station. The same floods that had destroyed potential evidence and stolen any hope of finding Josh and Sam.

Sarah yanked her head up, checked her posture, and continued on her path. There were plenty of other empty buildings that could have been bought by the village. Or Hopewell could have merged its police department with the county sheriff. But all of those options would have cost more money than the village had available. Victoria's creative grant writing abilities had solved the problem and allowed her to be elected Hopewell's first postmistress in fourteen years.

So, earlier this month, on Flag Day, the ugliest building this side of the Hudson River officially opened to the public. It boasted orange brick, vinyl windows, fluorescent lights and a

post-office that took up a good 3/4 of the space. Hal Waverly and his three deputies were relegated to a small area in the rear of the building with a 8 x 10 cell for all the terrorists they caught and a 10 x 10 office area for themselves, complete with access to the public drinking fountain and rest rooms on the post office side of the building.

Would be terrorists beware! had read the headline in the Hopewell Weekly. Sarah had remembered thinking that if Sam had been there, he'd have found rich fodder for one of his satirical songs. She and the Colonel had argued endlessly about the funds and how they could be better used to save the school or to hire more men for Hal's department or to maintain the treacherous dirt road leading up Snakehead, but the Colonel had staunchly supported his wife.

So far no one had used the police department's side of the building for anything other than the occasional meal break, although it was equipped with a computer and state of the art communications equipment. Since the summer tourist season had arrived, Hal and his officers were stretched far too thin to spend any time off patrol.

Sarah pulled open the Rockslide Café's door, releasing a buzz of conversation mingled with the fragrant scent of fresh brewed coffee and cinnamon buns. The Colonel was behind the counter, manning the morning rush as usual, slinging hash and flipping pancakes while never missing a beat in his conversation.

Sarah stood in the doorway for a moment. The fifties's era diner was all chrome and red vinyl, the decor consisting of photos deemed noteworthy by the Colonel. Including one of Sarah, mouthful of braces, graduating from high school and another of her, sans braces, accepting her college diploma. One day last year, without warning, The Colonel had added one of Sam and Josh in a place of honor. Josh held aloft a Northern Pike, the fish almost as tall as the three-year-old, while Sam had his arms wrapped around him, steadying him. Sam's smile was even wider than Josh's, his eyes gleaming with pride.

Hanging that photo among the pictures of the Colonel's military career highlights, the prize bucks bagged by family and the Colonel's lodge brothers, was probably the most sensitive thing Sarah had ever seen him do. She'd started coming in more often after that. Not that they spoke much—but sometimes words didn't really say what you needed them to anyway.

"Hey kiddo," he bellowed, swiping a clean spot for her at the counter. "Georgie here thinks the Martians are landing."

"I didn't say they were aliens from outer space," George Dolan protested, sloshing coffee out of his cup as he dunked his cinnamon bun. He took a bite, sopped up the coffee running down his chin, and continued, "I said them lights could mean aliens like illegal aliens."

With a measured hand, the Colonel poured batter onto the griddle, forming perfectly symmetrical pancakes, each a regulation three inches in diameter. "What the hell would illegal aliens want here?"

"They could hide out in the caves up on Snakehead. Just like in Nam."

Silence descended as The Colonel turned and stared at George for a long moment. George had the good grace to blush and look down into his coffee cup.

"You don't know nothing about nothing, George. Been watching the History channel too much is all." The Colonel turned back to finish Sarah's pancakes, flipping them onto a plate and sliding the plate in front of her in one fluid motion.

"Yeah, mebbe. But you didn't see those lights. Moving up and down, across the dam, vanishing into thin air."

"You sure it was a person? Maybe it was some kind of natural phenomena." Sarah doused her short stack with maple syrup collected from the forest behind her house. "Snakehead's known for its fog and mists, especially this time of year."

Hal Waverly came in and sat down beside her, unfolding his paper and nodding as the

Colonel poured him coffee. He and Sarah had grown up here in Hopewell together, been friends since they were eight, but these past two years, she felt like she'd lost track of Hal. He was always there, always helping, but she'd never before noticed the creases that had dug their way into the corners of his eyes or the dark circles that hung beneath them.

Guilt made her look away—how much else going on around her in the past two years had she been blind to?

"You mean like swamp gas or them northern lights we saw last year?" George said, still going on about his mysterious lights. "No sir, this was near to the ground. And it moved. Hal, when you gonna get someone up there to check it? What do we pay you good money for anyway?"

Hal snapped his newspaper. "Ask the Colonel. He's president of the village council. When are you going to give me enough money to hire another man? As it is—"

"Now Hal, don't you get started on that again. We got you the new government center, didn't we?" The Colonel's voice had a bite to it, one that in his past life would have had men snapping to attention.

"Fat lot of good it does with no one to man it. Me and my men are on patrol full time. If it wasn't for the county dispatcher handling calls and the mutual aid pact with Merrill, we wouldn't even have time to do that." A familiar edge of frustration lingered in Hal's voice. For years he'd been fighting a losing battle with the village council and his budget constraints. Sarah felt sorry for him. Hal worked hard and only wanted what was best for Hopewell. With an air of defeat, he took a drink of his coffee and buried himself in his paper.

"What are you doing today, Sarah?" The Colonel asked.

"I'm going up on Snakehead for a few days, get some hiking in."

Her announcement was met with silence. Even Hal lowered his paper, giving her an appraising look.

"You sure? Why don't you head over to Lake Placid?" The Colonel said, aligning the salt and pepper and sugar shakers into a perfect parade formation.

"Yeah. Or I hear there's a great art exhibit over in Montreal."

Sarah swiveled on her stool to stare at George. The delivery truck driver wasn't known for his love of fine culture.

"How would you know?" The Colonel asked.

George colored but didn't back down. "Because I been there. I took Lucy. It was one of them Impressionist French guys—lots of swirls and color. Kind of pretty." He brightened and smiled at Sarah. "Perfect for a relaxing holiday. Better than tramping up there." He indicated the mountain above them with a jerk of his chin.

Sarah opened her mouth, reconsidered, and jammed a forkful of pancakes in before she could say something she'd regret. It wasn't that the men were afraid for her physical safety—she'd hunted or worked search and rescue with all of them at one time or another. They were worried about her mental safety. As if after almost two years there was still something she could find on Snakehead that could push her over the edge.

It was sweet, really. But she had to do this.

"The weather's supposed to be gorgeous. Why would I want to be stuck inside with a bunch of old paintings?"

"But what about these weird people prowling the mountain at night?" The Colonel put in.

"Your aliens? Don't worry, I won't be anywhere near the dam."

"Where are you planning to be?" Hal folded his newspaper and regarded her with a serious expression. "You ought not go alone."

"I'll be fine. But I wouldn't mind borrowing one of your two-ways, just in case."

"No problem. Radios are one thing we've plenty of. You going over to the west face?"

"Thought I'd start up near the Colonel's cabin and kind of meander down. It's been awhile since I've spent a night on the mountain." Two years to be precise. The last time she and Sam had taken Josh up to the cabin. The men busied themselves with their food. Sarah's smile wilted. "Anyway, it will be a nice change of pace."

The Colonel twisted his lips. She knew he was ready to bark an order at her to cease and desist, so she met his gaze and arched an eyebrow. He put up a hand in surrender and backed off to brew a fresh pot of coffee.

"You just watch out for those aliens," George said. "Who knows what they want."

CHAPTER 5

Wednesday, June 19, 2007: Quantico, Virginia

Caitlyn and Clemens moved to the one area on base even more secure than the lab building: the picnic tables in front of the Hogan's Alley Deli. Just a block away from the most frequently robbed bank in the world, they sat surrounded by trees with a view of anyone approaching from all directions and no chance of being overheard by anyone except the tame deer and squirrels who populated the forest. The only interruption was the occasional bark of an order from an instructor leading a car-stop drill along the block past the bank.

As they walked over, talking about anything except the incendiary contents of the folders Clemens carried in his briefcase, Caitlyn had taken measure of the lab tech. He'd enthusiastically informed her that he came from Pittsburgh with a masters from CMU and a PhD from Pitt, that he loved working at Quantico and that his fiancée managed a clothing store in Fairfax. Nothing to set off warning bells, his face had been open, he'd even blushed when mentioning his fiancée and their up-coming wedding and honeymoon.

She waited until he'd finished eating before prodding him back onto the topic of the Hopewell case. Not wanting to tempt her impending migraine prematurely into life, she'd barely touched her food. Clemens didn't seem to notice.

The headaches were just another part of her new reality—one that she'd learned to manage. When she returned to the office, she would gobble down a few naproxen. If those didn't do the trick, she'd deal with it when she got home tonight: shoot up with her Imitrex, swallow a few Fiorcet and curl up in the dark.

Tonight, she promised her silent but almost constant companion, *tonight I'm all yours*.

Post-concussive syndrome, the docs at Hopkins called it. Or traumatic brain injury. TBI. Caitlyn called it hell on earth.

Since she'd sustained her original head injury—a skull fracture and an epidural hematoma—in the line of duty, she could have applied for disability. But Caitlyn refused to admit that she was in anyway disabled. Not to herself and certainly not to the Bureau. She could just imagine what Jack Logan and others like him would say if she did that. What's next? they'd laugh. Medical leave for PMS?

No, she wasn't disabled. Just disadvantaged. After the operation to remove the blood clot and repair the torn vessels in her brain, she'd learned how to do almost everything again. How to associate names and faces rather than simply memorizing them; how to read even though some of the letters still seemed jumbled, especially if they were on a computer screen; how to handle her migraines and the symptoms that accompanied them.

None of which had kept her from doing her job—and never would.

"Whose DNA was up on that mountain?" she asked Clemens as he wiped chocolate chip smears from his lips.

"That's the problem." He pulled out a stack of folders, shoved their paper plates to one side and lined up his DNA samples. Even she could see that of the four only two matched. "This is Wright's. This is your Unsub's. And this is Durandt's—verified by this exemplar collected from his home." He slid another photostat of DNA bands from the folder. "When Wright's DNA didn't match the Unsub's, I ran Durandt's, thought maybe the case numbers had gotten mixed up. But I got nothing."

"What do you mean? He's a victim. His DNA had to be in the database."

He shook his head. "See what I mean? This case is freaky weird. Samuel Durandt wasn't in *any* of our records. Like someone wiped him clean."

She frowned, slid the DNA sample from his hand and laid it beside the others. Now there were three identical DNA patterns. "So where's the problem? You must have found his file somewhere—Durandt matches Durandt matches Durandt."

"Except this one isn't Sam Durandt. It belongs to someone named Stanley Diamontes." Clemens tapped the last DNA sample.

"And who the hell is Stanley Diamontes?" she asked, one hand massaging the pressure point at the base of her thumb, certain she wouldn't like the answer.

"Well, unless Sam Durandt has an identical twin brother, Stanley is Stan. Wait. It gets worse." He slid another DNA sample and laid it on top of the Unsub's. It was a match.

"Our unknown subject has a name. Do I want to know who he is?"

"No, but I'll tell you anyway. Leo Richland. United States Federal Marshal. Richland has been missing for two years. Last seen in Fairfax, Virginia, two days before Josh and Sam—or Stan—Durandt were presumed murdered by Damian Wright."

Caitlyn sucked in her breath as the flashing bright lights returned with a vengeance and nausea twisted her gut. The gray and black lines on the DNA evidence blurred before her.

"That's all I've got. I figured since Logan is retired, the case belongs to you, so..." His voice trailed off. He closed the folder and slid it across the wooden picnic table to her.

Sam Durandt wasn't Sam Durandt? And instead of Damian Wright killing him and his son, a US Marshal had? A US Marshal who'd gone missing under mysterious circumstances and who had no earthly reason being anywhere near Hopewell, New York on the day Sam and Josh were murdered.

She blinked as sunlight blared off the glossy white folder. Reached for her sunglasses and somehow fumbled them on without poking an eye out. She never allowed her migraines to hit her at work, could always block them, keep them at bay. But this one had snuck beneath her guard.

"Thanks, Clemens," she said, trying her best to keep her voice clear of the vise of pain tightening behind her eyes.

"Don't thank me," he said. "I'm thinking I just gave you the equivalent of a ticking bomb." He brushed the crumbs from his lap and stood, grabbing his briefcase. "Good luck, Caitlyn."

She sat, staring at the closed folder with its Department of Justice crest emblazoned on the front. A crisp breeze scattered the paper plates holding the remnants of their lunch, blowing the trash into the grass. Caitlyn ignored it, allowing Clemens to rush after them as she struggled to contain the migraine before it totally crippled her. She focused on her breathing, using the DOJ crest as her focal point. *Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity*, the words beneath it read.

Finally, she forced the blasts of pain to recede enough so she could stand without wavering. She was certain it would ambush her later, ten fold.

The glossy folder almost slipped from her sweaty grasp as she walked back toward

Jefferson Hall.

Jesus, Logan, what the hell have you gotten me into?

CHAPTER 6

September 15, 2005

They caught him. Oh my lord, my hand is shaking so badly I can barely write.

They caught him! Damian Wright. He was in Texas. Hiding in a group shelter for Katrina refugees. All those little boys—he must have felt as if Katrina and the despair of a million people fleeing for their lives was a godsend, an unholy offering to his sick perversions.

A national guardsman caught him with a boy. Felix Martinique. The body was still warm, Damian was covered in his blood, the news people said. They seemed glad of yet another catastrophe to lay at Katrina's feet.

He confessed to the two boys in Vermont, the one in Tennessee, another in Oklahoma. But not to you or Josh. Why? I don't know this man—why is he trying to destroy what little life I have left? Why can't he give me any peace of mind?

Why can't he give you back to me?

Dr. Hedeger says he'll put me in a hospital if I don't start eating or sleeping. He's forbidden me to go on my hikes anymore and has Hal Waverly and the Colonel watching over me like I'm a prisoner in my own house. It's only because there was an accident at the Rockslide today—the Colonel started a grease fire while trying to sneak a fried bologna sandwich—that the Colonel's wife is gone, I have the house to myself.

No one seems to understand that it's only when I'm on the mountain, on the same path you and Josh took, following in your footsteps, the sound of Josh's laughter just out of sight, beyond the next bend, beckoning to me—it's the only time I'm alive.

The rest of the time I'm dead, dull, numb, leaden, too heavy to move even to close my eyes and sleep.

If I could only find you...are you looking for me too? Does Josh cry for his mommy? I hope not. I want to think of him happy, not remembering the horror...

A lawyer came to see me today after the Colonel's wife left. Nice guy. Works for a victims' advocacy project. He heard about us and he's willing to help anyway he can.

I almost slammed the door in his face. Almost told him the only help I needed was my husband and son back at home where they should be. But he didn't look at me like he was afraid of any sudden moves I might make. He didn't stare, waiting for me to fall apart, to shatter into bits and pieces, tick, tick, boom.

He sat and listened. And for the first time since you left, I was able to force words past this knot in my throat that's been strangling me. I talked. And talked and talked.

Poor guy, he probably thought I was nuts. But he didn't run. He listened.

I even showed him Josh's room, your piano, the songs you were working on. I told him how we met, showed him pictures. You holding Josh after the doctor handed him to you, looking scared and unsure and surprised and delighted all at once. The one of Josh sleeping naked except for his diaper on your bare chest when we were both too exhausted to do laundry. Josh's first birthday, all of us wearing enough birthday cake that we needed hosed off afterwards.

Alan, that's his name, Alan Easton. He smiled and even laughed. Like no one has in sixteen days—as if it was against the law to laugh in front of a grief-stricken mother and wife.

I think you'd like him. You know why? 'Cause once his laughter shattered the awful

silence shrouding our house I found myself smiling. And babbling. He sat at your piano and my heart squeezed so tight I thought it would burst with pain, but then he began picking out your latest masterpiece.

You remember: Your eyes remind me of the sky at night, your lips promise me a chance at life....that one.

Alan tried singing it and, believe it or not, he sounded worse than you! I couldn't help myself. The laughter sparked through me, fizzing up like a bottle of beer shook too hard and I couldn't stop it spurting out.

I laughed so hard I cried. And once the tears started—remember how I was early on when I was pregnant with Josh? Like that, only worse.

Alan didn't get that wide-eyed look of horror that everyone else gets when they're with me. He stayed, held my hand while I cried enough water to flood the Sahara. Then he left, promised to look into things and come back tomorrow.

I sat there alone in the living room, the first time I've been alone in our house in sixteen days. It felt crowded yet empty all at once. Now I know what they mean by the term: silence is deafening.

Our house, always so filled with noise and love. Your music, your godawful caterwauling when the spirit moved you—you're the only songwriter I've heard of who couldn't carry a tune in a bucket—Josh's running feet, the dryer clanking off balance, Josh's laughter, your laughter, there was none of that.

Just the creaking of frogs outside and the groans and hums of an old, empty house.

I sat there awhile, not sure what I was feeling. But it was something.

I even ate some chicken the Colonel's wife brought last night. For the first time in weeks, I could actually taste it.

I took a shower and then a long, hot bath. It's not even five yet, but I feel so very tired. I borrowed one of your T-shirts to wear to bed. One from the dirty laundry, the better to smell you, to be with you tonight. I had to empty the hamper of yours and Josh's clothes and hide them in a bag under my bed before the Colonel's wife did the laundry and sanitized you out of existence.

I'm going to sleep now, but I'll leave the window open and the light on for you. Kiss Josh for me. Goodnight my loves....

CHAPTER 7

Wednesday, June 19, 2007: Hopewell, New York

Sarah had organized her plan of attack more carefully than a general facing a superior opposition. She promised herself she'd give this everything she had—devote her entire summer to finding Sam and Josh if need be.

And then...She paused as her fingers danced over her freshly copied satellite imagery maps of Snakehead Mountain. If she found them, well maybe then, maybe finally, she could say goodbye.

She kept her campaign headquarters hidden in Sam's office. It was a bright and cheery room in the rear of the house, with its own entrance, although to be honest, Sam had written more music here than insurance policies. She'd never understood why he'd come to Hopewell to set up his independent insurance agency, but he made a steady if modest income. She taped her

topo maps and satellite images over posters of his heroes: John Lee Hooker, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton.

A cough at the door interrupted her. She looked up to see Hal standing in the hallway, a small Motorola in his hand. "I knocked—"

"Sorry, I was running the copy machine. Thanks for bringing the radio by."

"No problem." He joined her at the drafting table Sam had used as a desk. Leaning forward, he examined the topo map she'd laid out. Neon orange highlighted the areas on the map where Sam's blood was found, the spot half a mile away where Josh's Tigger was abandoned, the areas searched two years ago. A breathy whistle escaped him. "Helluva lot of territory to cover. With no guarantees. These mountains don't give up their secrets easily."

She stood beside him, her hand clenching and unclenching as she stared at the vast wilderness depicted on the map. "I know."

"I just don't want you to be getting your hopes up. Again." Silence. They both knew how Sarah had spent last summer. Down in Texas, living out of a Huntsville motel room while Alan tried unsuccessfully to get her an audience with Damian Wright. Then, once she'd come home...

Hal seemed to follow her thoughts effortlessly. Why not? He knew better than anyone what she was going through. He was still beating himself up for not being there the night his wife died. He tilted his head, met her gaze. "Sure you know what you're doing, Sarah? Sometimes it's best to leave well enough alone."

"I need to do this, Hal." She forced herself to smile, patted his arm reassuringly. "Don't worry, I'm not about to go off the deep end again. That's behind me."

"Some things you never put behind you," he said in a low tone, his hand covering hers. "Some things you just learn how to live with." He paused. "You need to find a reason, Sarah. You have to decide."

She stepped back, turning to gather the enlargements she'd just made on the copier. Lately, Sam's ancient Xerox was really getting a workout.

Hal took the top sheet from her. "This where you're looking?" He traced a finger along the ridgeline between the mountain summit and the Upper Falls. "Rugged territory—especially after the freeze-thaw cycle this spring. Been a couple rockslides off the eastern face near Snakebelly and the Devil's Elbow."

The Devil's Elbow was where the river and the mountain gorge took a sharp ninety-degree turn then dropped precipitously, creating the Upper Falls. Several deep crevasses broke through the gorge wall near there, including the infamous Snakebelly—so named because it was the river's graveyard. Any large pieces of flotsam from upstream would invariably get caught in the current and directed into the chasm, usually undetected until a rockslide or avalanche loosened the debris and freed what lay hidden beneath.

"I'll be fine. I've climbed around there all my life."

Hal nodded, his gaze still following his finger as it traced the closely stacked lines on the topo map. "Maybe you shouldn't go alone. Why don't you ask Alan to go with you?"

Sarah snatched the map away from him, began folding it, her fingers mercilessly pressing creases into the paper. "Hal Waverly, are you trying to play matchmaker? I thought you of all people would understand."

"The man's crazy about you, Sarah. Any fool can see that. Giving up his practice in the city to move up here—"

"It was only because of the case, Damian Wright. Alan was trying to set a precedent for victims' rights with my appeals. It had nothing to do with me."

"Oh really? Then why is he still here? Hanging around like a kid too shy to ask a girl to

dance."

She waved her hand to shut him up. He ignored her, propping his butt on the desk's rim. "He seems good for you. When you're around him, you seem, well, happy."

"Hal. Please. You make me sound like I'm some weepy widow trailing around in black veils. It's been a rough two years, but I'm doing all right."

"You are. And I think Alan has something to do with that. He's not the only one who wants to see you happy, Sarah. I heard the Colonel asking him his intentions."

She straightened and pivoted, the blood rushing to her face in embarrassment. "He has no right—it's my life and I'll live it the way I want!"

"That's the point, isn't it?" Hal gave her a half-smile. "Sarah, you didn't die on that mountain. Don't waste your life just because some madman killed Josh and Sam."

If anyone else had spoken those words to Sarah she would have snapped, exploded in rage and ordered them from her house. But this wasn't anyone. This was Hal who said what Sarah knew in her heart was the truth.

Hal had already faced that truth after his wife died. Only it wasn't a truth she was prepared to face. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"I need a little more time," she said, shoving the map into the pocket of her Gortex jacket. "If Alan understands, he'll wait." She finally raised her head, met his gaze. "Just a little longer."

"Sarah, you got to tell him how you feel one way or the other, put the poor guy out of his misery at least." He reached for her hand once more. "Hey, I know how he feels—remember the senior prom? Took me forever to work up the courage to ask you and by then it was too late. You went with Tommy Hopkins instead."

"All right, you made your point. Now don't you have some crooks to lock up or something?"

"Just finished a twelve, I'm not officially back on the clock until tomorrow morning. Of course," he gestured to the cell phone, pager and radio weighing down his belt, "that doesn't mean they won't call me back sooner." He blew out his breath. Dark circles shadowed his eyes. New wrinkles lined his face and his jaw muscle kept twitching. "Guess I should go home, get myself some rest."

Sounded like a good idea. He appeared close to exhaustion or a breakdown and the tourist season, Hal's busy time of year, had only just begun. "Why don't you take some time for yourself? You haven't taken a day off since Lily died. Take a vacation, go someplace far away, find a cute girl and break her heart like you did mine in high school."

That made him smile. "I'm thirty-two, if I start chasing after girls I'll have to arrest myself. Besides," his gaze speared past her to fix on the mountains framed in the view from the window, "guess we're both tied to this place."

He handed her the radio and a spare battery pack. She walked with him to the door. Together they stood on the front porch, Snakehead towering over them, casting the house in shadows.

"How long are you planning to stay up there?" he asked.

"A few days, then I'll come back, re-supply."

A frown tightened his forehead. "How 'bout if you give me a firm return time so I don't have to send people out looking for you? You be back here by Friday afternoon, all right? Maybe let Alan take you up to that Montreal art exhibit for the weekend."

Looked like the town had formed a conspiracy trying to get her and Alan together. But a weekend away, without murder as the main topic of conversation did sound nice. "All right. On one condition. That you take a vacation as well. Go, have some fun, let Hopewell take care of itself for a day or two."

He nodded, a smile crossing his face but not making it to his eyes. "Deal. Come Friday night, I'll officially take off for parts unknown."

"Just don't get yourself arrested, Chief."

"Good luck, Sarah. And have a care." He sauntered down the path to where his GMC was parked. "Call me if you need anything."

"I won't be needing you. Go home, get some rest."

He gave her a wave as he climbed into the SUV, honked once and did a rapid three point turn, spinning gravel. The hemlocks lining her lane swayed in the wind, seeming to close in behind him. Silence fell as the dust settled.

Sarah took a deep breath, filling her lungs as if preparing for a long underwater siege. Nodding to Snakehead, accepting its silent challenge, she went back inside to collect the rest of her gear.

The Colonel's hunting cabin was near the top of the mountain, the last shelter accessible by car. Her plan was to drive up, park, then work her way down the south face. No need for a tent, the weather was mild. All she needed was her sleeping bag and a ground cloth. If the weather turned, as it was prone to near the summit, she could always bivouac in the single room cabin.

Of course, the Colonel's wife would heartily disapprove of a woman staying alone in a cabin lacking plumbing or electricity—much less sleeping out under the stars. The thought made Sarah smile.

It wasn't that she disliked the Colonel's wife or felt that no one could ever replace her mother. All right, it wasn't *just* that she disliked the Colonel's wife. It was the fact that Victoria had never given Sarah a chance to know her, much less like her, before she moved in and began to run the Colonel's life for him.

The man was in charge of two hundred men during the Vietnam war, so it was surprising to Sarah that he seemed to enjoy his newfound captivity. Or at least his warden.

Sarah's head bobbed in time with the tune she hummed as she arranged her gear. One of Sam's ditties, from his country-western phase. He'd called it the No Sunshine, Stuck in the Mud, Rainy Day Blues.

I'm coming guys...don't worry, I'll find you.

JD Dolan pedaled his Diamondback furiously, straining to gain the momentum necessary to conquer the last hill standing between him and Main Street. Doc Hedeger's purple Victorian became a fuzzy blur on his left side as he rounded the corner. Brakes squealed, a horn honked, but JD didn't care. He sped past the squat orange brick post office—a building so ugly, its existence had almost caused a civil war between the inhabitants of Hopewell.

JD had covered the protests for the Hopewell school newspaper. Mrs. Durandt, the faculty adviser, submitted one of his stories to a statewide competition and it had won second place. Mrs. Durandt had been so impressed she agreed to help JD apply for an internship at a TV station in DC. If the documentary he produced this summer was good enough, then he might get paid to go to DC and learn all about journalism next summer instead of delivering appliances with his dad.

"Slow down you hooligan, you!" Victoria, the Colonel's wife, shouted as JD's bike skidded through the post office's gravel drive, spraying her freshly swept sidewalk with stones. "I'll call Chief Waverly on you, I will!"

JD's only response was a smile as he leaned further over his handlebars. Almost to the top, a new world speed record about to be broken, Lance Armstrong eat your heart out! He wasn't afraid of Hal Waverly. He knew damn well the Chief would be out on patrol, probably

helping lost tourists change a flat tire. Hal was always helping someone somewhere, spent even less time at home than he did at his new office.

That was the thing about growing up in a small town in the middle of nowhere. JD knew everything about everyone—and they knew everything about him as well.

Or at least they thought they did. His smile widened into a grin as he crested the hill and raised his hands in victory. He coasted down the other side, along Main Street, passing houses where he could name every inhabitant including dogs, cats, canaries and assorted gerbils and hamsters. He dodged the bakery's van just as Mr. Harris jumped out, right on time as St. Andrew's bell chimed the hour.

Predictable. Boring. That was Hopewell.

This was JD's last summer of freedom. Next year he'd be sixteen and would spend the rest of his summers working. Hopefully he'd make enough to be able to go to college. And after college, more work. But the next seventy-two days were his.

Summer of freedom. He tasted the words. They felt good. He wasn't about to waste a second, he was going to do more living this one summer than he had the rest of his life, cram everything he could into it.

A familiar figure leaned against the lamppost outside of the Rockslide. JD sucked his breath in, felt his head rush, and jammed on his brakes. He screeched to a stop, feigning nonchalance despite the fact that he was huffing, finding it hard to breathe.

"Hi, JD," Julia Petrino said with a smile that made his chest tighten. She was dressed in cut off jean shorts, two spaghetti strap camisoles over lapping, one red and one purple but somehow they didn't clash—not clinging to Julia's perfect body. Her long, blonde-brown hair stirred in the breeze, and he watched as her nipples rose beneath the spandex.

Oh yeah. This was going to be a summer to remember. For the rest of his life.

"I thought maybe you'd forgotten our date," Julia went on, oblivious to his inability to force his gaze away from her breasts. She swung her leg over her own bike, offering him an even more mesmerizing sight of her rear, pale strings of frayed denim brushing the back of her smooth, tanned thighs.

"Uh, no." The words emerged in a croak. JD cleared his throat and tried again, gripping the handlebars tighter to disguise his sweaty palms. "Where did you want to start?"

She shrugged, an elegant motion that set her hair swaying and made JD's mouth go dry. "We've got all day. I picked up some fried chicken from the Rockslide." He noticed the daypack she had strapped to the bike's rear fender. "Want to go up the eastern face? Maybe to the Lower Falls?"

He arched an eyebrow at her, balancing on both pedals of his bike. "That's a mighty steep trail. Sure you can make it all the way?"

Her smile radiated confidence. "I can if you can. Race you."

She pushed off, standing on her pedals, gliding along the short downhill stretch. Then she began to pump hard as she turned right, heading up Rattlesnake Pike. He let her get a head start, admiring the view and certain he could catch up.

JD licked his lips and followed after her, inhaling the intoxicating perfume of his last summer of freedom.

CHAPTER 8

A short time after Hal left, Sarah hoisted her pack on her shoulder and let the backdoor slam shut behind her. No need to lock it—she had nothing left for anyone to steal.

She craned her neck to look up at the mountain towering above her. The summit wasn't visible, not from here. A crowd of trees, just coming into their foliage, waved in the wind as if inviting her to join them. Two hawks spiraled overhead, high enough to appear as small black dots against the afternoon sun.

She shrugged her pack into place and began hiking up the trail. It would be a longer trip up, but this felt better than driving. As if she truly was following the footsteps her heart heard every night—at least on the nights when she could sleep.

The trail curved along the side of Snakehead, coming to a clearing where the Lower Falls could be seen in the distance. Sarah forced herself to stop even though she'd come less than a mile from her house. She looked out over the edge of the gorge down to the dam, the reservoir, up river to the falls. Then she turned to stare downstream at Hopewell: a hodgepodge of whitewashed siding, asphalt shingles, and brick poking through the trees. The only distinct landmark was St. Andrew's bell tower reaching heavenward.

Her heart sped up as the clearing closed around her. Trees and brush crowded together as if preparing for an ambush. This was it. This was where Wright had caught up with them.

Silence reigned here. The buzz of gnats and mosquitoes vanished, soft evergreen needles muffled her footsteps and filled the air with the damp, sweet scent of pine. All she could hear was the sound of her own breathing; even the roar of the distant waterfall was subdued. As if this was a holy place, a sacred place.

She turned in a full circle, her mind filling in physical details two years had erased. The clump of mountain laurel that had been splattered by Sam's blood, the dirt beneath the red oak that had turned into a small lake of crimson after he fell, the churned up leaves where he'd tried to fight Wright, spilling a small amount of the killer's blood, the hemlock tree where the camera card had been found....

She blinked and the sun-dappled clearing transformed into crime scene photos. Blinked again and reality returned. Sarah swallowed hard, found herself breathing through her mouth as if trying to avoid the scent of death.

Her hands gripped her pack straps so tightly the nylon webbing bit into her skin. Many times, swaddled in the mountain's mist, she'd fled here in the middle of the night, trying her best to cross over, commune with the shadows. One night last year, she'd almost made it. The night she'd given up, when she'd decided to break with this world and surrender to the next.

Sarah waved her hand in front of her face as if chasing cobwebs away. She hitched her pack, settling it into a comfortable position, and marched through the clearing without looking back.

August 30, 2006

This will probably be my last entry—who needs words when we'll be together soon? Sorry if it's hard to read, I'm sitting under an oak in the clearing above the dam. You know the place. You died here.

At least that's what the experts finally decided. The rain came too soon for them to do a complete analysis, but based on the photos Hal and his men took, they figured you tried to save Josh, fought Damian Wright, managed to hurt him a little before he killed you. They found a few tracks from a man moving slowly, possibly carrying a heavy object and decided that, for whatever reason, Wright carried you away before returning to take Josh.

Hal doesn't know that I've read the forensic reports. He keeps his copies locked up,

refuses to let me see them. But Alan was finally able to get a copy of the FBI report—Freedom of Information Act, they call it.

It sure as hell freed me. Even if Damian won't talk to me, won't look me in the eyes or give you and Josh back to me, even so....now I know.

One year today. 365 days—and nights, god, how I've come to despise those wretched lonely nights, crawling between cold sheets, my feet sliding across to your side of the bed, searching for warmth and never finding any.

Nights that stretch out to infinity, too long and too empty for any human heart to bear. Nights that too soon give way to a new day, to waking up with my stomach tight and the house too silent, too quiet, knowing that I have to face one more day pretending to be alive when really I feel already dead.

It was easier when school was in session. I stayed late, volunteered to advise any extracurricular activity I could, avoided the hallway where the kindergarten and preschool classrooms are at all costs. And this summer has been spent in and out of hot cars, too-cold courtrooms, moldy motel rooms. For awhile I thought I might find you down there in that Texas heat, I spent every moment searching for the courage to face Damian.

But I failed. Now here I am. Buried in the nighttime mist Snakehead is famous for, fog so thick you need a machete to cut through it—that's what you used to say. Now I embrace the fog. If I can't see clearly what's moving beyond it, who's to say it can't bring me you and Josh?

That's the wine talking. You know me—one glass and I'm whistling Dixie. Tonight I've almost finished an entire bottle, saving just enough to take my medicine with.

One year. That's how long mourning is meant to last. One year is all they give you. I seemed to have squandered my year with little to show for it. Instead of completing my journey via Kubler-Ross, I seemed to have taken a detour into despair. It hurts just as much today as it did that first night—maybe more. Then I was numb, in denial, shock. Now I'm awake, aware, alone.

Even Alan seems to think I'm over losing you and Josh. I feel like a secret addict, hiding my drug of choice. Melancholia they called it when the great writers, Poe, Joyce, Hemingway, Browning, Faulkner, suffered it. They used their despair to create art. What have I created?

Worse, if I give it up, if I give you up, allow myself to "move on"—what do I have left?

You wouldn't believe how popular I was today. Everyone in town asking me how I was doing, did I have plans for tonight? Even the Colonel's wife invited me over to dinner, her face all screwed up in a fake smile filled with pity. I told them all that I had plans with Alan. Told Alan I had plans with the Colonel.

When really, I have plans with you and Josh.

That's the last of the pills. See you soon, my loves....

CHAPTER 9

Wednesday, June 19, 2007: Snakehead Mountain

Brilliant shafts of sunlight lanced through the trees, dancing on the path before her. Sarah allowed them to lull her into a mindless rhythm. This area had already been searched multiple times, she knew she wouldn't find anything new around here.

The last time she'd been up here, she had awoken in the back of an ambulance, shivering, her clothes cut open, wet with vomit, an oxygen mask smelling like an old rubber tire secured

around her face, a needle pinching her as the EMT started an IV. Alan sat beside her, holding her hand. Flashing lights filled the rear of the ambulance from the GMC that carried Hal and the Colonel, following close behind.

Alan had squeezed her hand, his face tight with pain, skin pale in the bright lights. He told her how he'd called the Colonel and they drove to her house, found it empty and got Hal out of bed to help them search. That when he'd found her she'd been cold, barely breathing but had apparently had thrown up most of the pills she'd taken.

His words passed through her like the mountain mist, without her comprehending anything except she wasn't with Sam and Josh. She had failed.

The next two days were a blur of IV's, charcoal being forced down her only to be thrown up in a black slurry all over her hospital sheets; social workers and counselors and the Colonel—but not the Colonel's wife, thank God for small favors—and Dr. Hedeger, Hal, Alan, and more people poking and prodding her body and her psyche.

The third day she'd been transferred to the psych ward. The psychiatrist who met with her seemed too young to know anything about the secrets of the human soul. He sat back, fingers absently stroking his fashionably narrow stripe of hair on his chin, and smiled at her.

"You won't be here long," he said with confidence, before she said a word to him. "I've read your file. This wasn't really a suicide attempt at all, was it Sarah? It was what we call a gesture. A symbolic cry for help. For attention."

She curled herself up tighter in her chair, her knees drawn up under her chin, and stared at him. He was in his late twenties, only a few years younger than her, yet she felt ancient in comparison. He must have been fresh out of residency, still full of book learning and the unique form of paternalism fostered by the medical training system.

The room was small, silent, all noise deadened by the soundproofing tile that covered the walls and ceiling. He sat in a tweed chair meant to be comfortable yet too heavy to use as a weapon—a twin to the one she was curled up in, her hand stroking the scratchy upholstery as she tried to remember why she was still alive and why it mattered at all.

She breathed in re-conditioned air scrubbed clean of anything living and artificially flavored with vanilla and stared at the man who was so eager to heal her, to send her back out into the world. He knew nothing of her, nothing of the real world.

"After all," he continued when she didn't respond. "A smart young lady such as yourself would have researched the drugs she was taking—if she really wanted to kill herself. She would have known that drinking that much alcohol on an empty stomach would induce emesis before any of the medication could take effect. And she would realize that the clearing where her husband and son died would be the first place any would-be rescuers would look for her."

He smiled at her, smug and superior and satisfied he knew everything there was to know. That he had all the answers.

"Tell me what's really bothering you, what you want," he said, flipping a small notepad open and resting it expectantly on his knee. He seemed satisfied that he could already count her as a success, as if some unseen force was keeping score. "We'll work it through, get you out of here and back to your life."

Realizing it was her key to freedom, Sarah had answered his questions, fabricating and agreeing with his self-important theories when need be. Anything to get out of there.

But she learned three important lessons from the young Dr. Freud wannabe.

First: research, research, research.

Second: drugs first, alcohol last.

Finally: go deeper into the woods. Go where no one will find you until it's too late.

CHAPTER 10

Wednesday June 19, 2007: Manassas, Virginia

Even though it was almost dark by the time Caitlyn drove home to her apartment in Manassas, she kept her sunglasses on. The migraine pounded furiously, snarling like a beast that refused to be kept from its prey any longer.

She wrenched the steering wheel of her Subaru, parking it haphazardly in her space, grabbed her bag, and almost passed out at the noise of the car door slamming. Breathe, just breathe, she told herself as she doubled over, braced against the still warm and ticking engine compartment.

She pushed away from the car, refusing to fall apart out here where her landlady could see her, and stumbled to the steps leading up to her apartment on the second floor of the lovingly restored Victorian. Hauling herself up the twelve steps, her bag banging against her hip because she needed both hands on the railing, chips of paint splintering away in her grip, she finally made it to her door.

The key trembled in her hand. Her vision had almost completely gone black. The pounding in her head drove out any other sound, if she had screamed, she never would have heard it.

Finally the key turned and she shoved the door open. Rushing inside, dropping her bag, kicking the door shut, she ran to bathroom, barely made it before she vomited. Hugging the cool, smooth porcelain, she wrenched her guts out. The stench of burning flesh overwhelmed her—a sure sign that this migraine was going to be a bad one. As if she needed more proof.

Her best laid plans ruined. After spending the afternoon reviewing the Hopewell case, she'd thought she could outsmart the headache by using some Imitrex at her office. The powerful, injected medicine never failed her. Never.

Until now. She slid to the floor, her cheek resting on the tiles beside the foot of the toilet, one arm still draped over the seat, and surrendered. The pain overtook her like HRT storming a building: shok-rounds powerful enough to blow steel doors apart, stun grenades with blinding explosions of light so intense they shook your body, the thunder of shotgun fire.

Unlike a quick-response raid, the migraine continued its close-quarter combat, taking its time as it stampeded through her brain, her body, her mind.

Caitlyn lay there, her body shuddering, twitching, out of her control. Nausea twisted in her gut, acid burned her throat. She opened her mouth, certain she would vomit again, but nothing came. The arm resting on the toilet screamed with pins and needles. She let it slip to the ground. That small movement was like pulling the pin from a grenade, setting off another explosion of pain.

Her Imitrex and Fiorcet were in the medicine cabinet above the sink. Light years away. Alongside it was the Phenergan the doctor prescribed for when the nausea got really bad—too late for that as well.

Her arsenal. All out of reach and useless to her now.

She cried out, the sound echoing from the tile walls, reverberating through her mind. In the darkness, she inched her hand forward along the floor. She closed her eyes against the pain and the vision of her hand holding her Glock, squeezing the trigger, the bullet spiraling in slow motion towards her head.

Not even the migraine from hell would survive a forty-caliber round at point blank range,

she thought with satisfaction, glad to have devised a strategy to outwit her opponent. Like father, like daughter.

Why not? The doctors had told her if the headaches grew worse it meant one of two things. Rarely, it meant the brain was healing, the headaches escalating before burning themselves out. But more commonly it meant the scar tissue in her brain was causing more destruction, permanent damage, and things would only get worse. If the scarring weakened a blood vessel and it burst, she could die.

No. She wasn't giving up. It was only one headache. One did not a pattern make. Another strangled cry forced its way past her clenched jaws as her fingers found their target.

Not her Glock—that was in the living room in her bag, thankfully out of reach. Instead her fingers closed on the still damp washcloth she'd left on the tub's edge. Greedily she raked it in, mopping her face, inhaling the scent of lavender—anything was better than the acid stench of her vomit.

The headache pulled back, momentarily, then hit again with a sucker punch of pain. Caitlyn wadded the cloth in her mouth and bit down against her scream.

She was helpless, at its mercy, nothing to fight back with except her own stubborn will. Caitlyn concentrated on her breathing, forced herself to block out everything.

Think, focus, concentrate. Drive it back.

A woman's face appeared in her mind. Sarah Durandt, an expression of outraged disbelief twisting her features. Denial, anger that no one was searching for her lost boy and husband, and finally whimpers of pain when they showed her the proof that Wright had taken her son, killed her husband. She had crumbled, leaning heavily on the local police chief's arm, but Sarah Durandt had not fallen.

Instead, she had raised her head, eyes blazing out at Caitlyn, and said, "You find my son. You find Josh and Sam. I will not let that monster keep them. I don't care what it takes, you find them."

At the time, Caitlyn had both admired and pitied the mother for her fortitude. She knew from experience that the grief following an act of violence often destroyed the loved ones left behind. The strongest seemed most prone to snap under the burden of their emotions.

Although Sarah had spoken to her, her words weren't for Caitlyn. They were for herself. Caitlyn couldn't have done anything to help the lady anyway. Her job was to catch a killer before he struck again, not body recovery. In any case, events had quickly swept her away from Snakehead Mountain, the town of Hopewell, and Sarah Durandt's public tragedy.

Now, somehow, they had brought her back.

The migraine's grip slipped a bit. She kept her thoughts focused on the new puzzles Clemens had delivered her today. A missing US Marshal, a missing man and his missing son, a helluva lot of blood from both men at a crime scene. What did it add up to?

To find the answer, she'd gone to Durandt's previous identity, Stanley Diamontes. His records, like Durandt's, had been totally erased from the system. It was only through doing a Lexis/Nexis search that she'd been able to find enough to piece together a scenario. Thank God for the Internet.

Seemed Stan was involved in a money-laundering scheme for a Russian named Korsakov. Stan, seeing the errors of his ways—or more likely to cover his ass and avoid prison—had come to the FBI with enough information to convict Korsakov. Then Stan had promptly vanished.

Which translated to witness protection. And where better to stash a Malibu surfer boy than the mountains of the Adirondacks? That would explain Richland's involvement. Maybe.

If not for the fact that Richland had never worked WITSEC. His short, undistinguished career with the Marshals had been limited to fugitive apprehension and security details.

Her fingers and toes finally unclenched as feeling returned. She spit out her makeshift gag.

If Durandt was in the witness protection program, someone had concealed all record of it. Caitlyn had been unable to find any record of Stan Diamontes except for the single DNA sample. Collected fifteen years ago during a Stanford bone marrow donor drive, it hadn't shown up in CODIS or any of the evidence files. It was only luck Clemens had found it at all. Every other trace of Diamontes had been erased. Even the guy's prints had been removed from AFIS.

She rolled over on her back, able to breathe, the headache now a mere pounding. As she opened her eyes and stared into the darkness, she thought about the men who would have the power and ability to erase classified DOJ records.

Could be some kind of intelligence thing. NSA, CIA, somewhere in alphabet land? Nah, they wouldn't have any need for a second rate bean counter like Diamontes. And why would Richland be involved?

Maybe Richland wasn't one of the good guys? Her research on the Marshal had revealed a mediocre record. Less than mediocre if you knew how to read between the lines of the bureaucrat's wording of his fit-reps. And one curious item—he'd worked the Korsakov task force with her old boss, Jack Logan, back when they were both field agents.

She blinked and it barely hurt at all. Nothing a fistful of Toradol couldn't handle.

Caitlyn sat up, breathed out against the head rush until her vision cleared, then braced herself on the toilet and slowly climbed to her feet. She kept the lights off, feeling her way through the boxes of syringes and bottles of medicine until she had the right ones. Despite the doctor's warnings about using it too frequently, she'd shoot up with Imitrex again—couldn't risk the migraine returning.

Not now, not when she had work to do.

She used the auto-injector, the pain of the needle in her thigh was nothing compared to the remnants of the headache. Or the thought that this might be her last case for the Bureau. If the headaches persisted like this, there was no way she could remain on active duty or carry a gun. She winced and turned on the cold water. The sound of rushing water was soothing, a happy sound, bringing with it a quick flash of memory: her father and her standing at the edge of a river, his arms around her, guiding her fishing rod as she cast.

A little water splashed on her face, mouthwash rinsed and spit, and the nausea was still under control, so she swallowed a few Toradol. They would give her an ulcer, burn a hole in her stomach eventually if she didn't take them with food, but the thought of anything to eat made her break out in a cold sweat.

She focused on the Hopewell case again before the nausea had a chance to grow. One thing was for sure, whoever wanted Diamontes erased from the known record had money. Lots of it. Because the only person with access to the files and the security clearance necessary to make them vanish was Jack Logan.

And Jack Logan worshiped two things and two things only: money and power.

Her fingers were still shaking, felt numb as she stripped free of her sweat-soaked clothes. She held onto the sink for balance, kicking off her leather flats and struggling out of her khaki slacks, sleeveless cotton sweater and underwear. Barefoot and naked, she crossed the hall into her bedroom and fell into her bed, pulling the covers tight over her, blocking out the world.

Sarah Durandt, her face filled with pain and yearning, was the last thing Caitlyn saw before she finally escaped into sleep.

CHAPTER 11

Wednesday June 19, 2007: Snakehead Mountain

JD was hot, sweaty and totally starving by the time they reached the look out spot at the top of the Lower Falls. The flat viewing area was empty of any cars, all the day-tourists long gone. They were missing the best part, JD thought. Being here, the earth beneath his feet trembling from the force of the water roaring below him, the sun setting over the mountains beside them, streaking the sky red and gold, and best of all, a beautiful girl at his side.

Julia set up the tripod for her father's high-powered digital camera while he used his inexpensive hand-held video camera to film her. As she unfolded a towel and set out napkins, he unpacked the food, sneaking a chicken leg to munch on.

"Where was the last sighting?" she asked.

He wiped his greasy fingers on his jeans and unfolded his map. They'd tried to record every sighting of the mysterious lights over the past month, and now that school was out, they finally had the chance to record the phenomena firsthand. "My dad saw them last night. At the dam and along the east side of the reservoir. Said he saw them at 9:45 and again about a hour later."

"And two nights before was when Mrs. Patterson saw them along the ridgeline, just below here."

"Right. And we have that bus of church kids from Merrill who e-mailed me that they saw some around the Devil's Elbow as well, beside the Upper Falls, but no one can give me any specifics, so I'm not sure if we should count those."

He looked up from his spot on the ground. God, he loved the way she pursed her lips together, a small dimple digging into her chin when she really thought hard about something. Julia was the only person who took his project seriously. Even his dad, who had actually seen the lights, didn't think they were worth his spending his summer trying to investigate them, much less create a documentary out of the mysterious phenomenon.

Julia sat cross-legged in front of him. How the heck did she do that? One second she was standing, then the next she seemed to float through space, her legs effortlessly folding beneath her. Her knee brushed his as she leaned across him for a piece of chicken. She tore into it, her teeth bared, totally unladylike and absolutely mesmerizing.

"I think," she said, swiping her mouth with a napkin, "we should try to get one of those timers or motion sensors. We can't keep spending all our time watching when the sightings are coming from all over."

Sure he could—if it meant spending long summer nights huddled at the camera beside Julia. But she had a point. So far they'd tried for hours on end to spot the mystery lights without success. His documentary was doomed if they couldn't get actual footage.

"Seems like we're always one step behind," he said. He munched on another piece of chicken as he scrutinized the map of sightings. "They're all along this side of the gorge, but there just aren't any good vantage points. Maybe tomorrow we should go over to the other side? Up to the Devil's Elbow, there's a scenic overlook there."

Julia laid flat on her back, staring up at Snakehead's summit above and to the north of them. "It would take all day to get up there on our bikes." She scrunched her face in thought and JD wanted nothing more than to smooth his fingers across her skin, erase all the frown lines. "Why don't we camp out at the old caretaker's cabin down by the dam?"

"All the fog gathers down there below the dam, but we might see something. And there have been more sightings near the dam than anywhere else." He thought about it, liking her idea.

"Maybe the dam is the target."

JD lost himself momentarily in the fantasy: him stopping a band of wild-eyed terrorists, the gleam of pride in his father's eyes, the whole town cheering as they gave him a medal, Julia at his side.

"More likely it's kids skinny-dipping in the reservoir." Julia sprang to her feet, brushing stray strands of grass from her shorts. "It's getting dark, I'll take the first shift."

JD couldn't argue as he watched her lean over, focused on the camera's viewfinder. Darkness was gathering around them, but the night was warm, the stars bright. They both had headlights on their bikes and midnight curfews, and the ride down the mountain road was a lot easier than the ride up. Besides, no one ever drove the Rattlesnake Pike at night—the dirt road was tricky enough in the daytime.

Until then, it was just him, Julia, and the mountain. A smile stretched his face, accompanied by a warm stirring below his waist. So far he hadn't even found the courage to kiss Julia. She had class, he had to work his way up to it, do it right. That was okay. He had all summer.

"Hey!" Her voice rang out through the night clearer than a church bell. "I think I see them!"

It was dark by the time Sarah stopped. She didn't mind hiking at night, not with the full moon to guide her. But her body rebelled, near to collapse. She'd marched up the mountain like a zombie, stopping neither for food or drink or rest. She looked around, recognized where her feet had unerringly led her to.

The top of Snakebelly. The first time she'd taken Sam camping, she had brought him here. The first time they had made love was here, beneath the shimmering night sky filled with the cascading stars of the Milky Way. She remembered how frightened Sam had been when she had jumped off the cliff, rappelled down into the gorge. His face had been whiter than snow, covered with sweat as he forced himself to peer over the edge and look below. That had taken him more courage than she had understood at the time—she'd played along the cliffs of this mountain since she was a child, had never known any fear, or met anyone who was afraid of heights. But then, Sam wasn't like anyone she had ever known before.

When she realized what it had cost him to watch her blissfully teeter on the edge of the crevasse, ropes or no ropes, she discovered she had found someone who meant more to her than her first love, the mountain. She had hung up her climbing gear, using it only when needed during search and rescue missions.

Below this granite ledge was Snakebelly, the crevasse where the last body found on Snakehead had been found. Lily Waverly, Hal's wife.

Snakebelly was where the river deposited all of its dead, although it often sequestered them for a time, sometimes years, decades, or even centuries. When Sarah was ten, hunters had found the remains of what researchers from the Smithsonian eventually decided were two Native Americans dating from the twelfth century.

A man and a woman. Suicide pact? the researchers had argued. Native Romeo and Juliet? Or the real life inspiration for the Iroquois myth of Ahweyoh and the Thundergod she had sacrificed her life for?

Sarah had told Sam about the ancient bones the first night they had spent up here. A crisp fall night, it was just cold enough to require a fire and someone's arms around you to keep warm.

Even Sam had to admit that this wind-scoured ledge with its canopy of trees and front row seat to the heavens was one of the most romantic places on earth. As long as you didn't look

down.

The sound of the water had been bright and cheerful, splashing in the gorge below, a playful accompaniment to their mutual exploration. They were in love already—even though they had only known each other a few weeks—but neither was quite ready to admit it. Yet.

"So tell me about this Indian princess," Sam had asked after he put his guitar aside.

Sarah leaned back into his arms, enjoying it as his fingers strummed the skin inside her wrist as if coaxing a melody from his guitar.

"You sure you want to hear? Most versions don't have a happy ending."

"Maybe I'll write a song about her. Make up a happy ending."

"She wasn't a princess. Just a young girl who lived among the river people. But she refused to marry, despite her family's commands. Instead Ahweyoh took a lover. He was a stranger, frightening to Ahweyoh's people with his broad shoulders and booming voice that stirred ancient memories of the wars between the gods and the evil ones. They wanted no part of those ancient legends, even though the stories were their legacy, ran in their blood. No, all they wanted was peace and quiet, to live beside their river, catch the fish it provided, grow their crops."

"Hah," Sam had said with a chuckle. "I'll bet that didn't stop two horny kids in love."

Sarah nudged him with her elbow and continued, "Shunned by the river people for her affair, Ahweyoh was exiled. She packed her canoe and traveled farther than any of her people had ever journeyed before. A great fog enveloped her, storm winds buffeted her, but she followed the current and remained true to her course. When the clouds lifted, He-noh, her lover was waiting. He revealed his true form to her—he was a Thundergod. He invited her to marry him and join him in his house in the clouds."

"And they lived happily ever after," Sam put in, nuzzling her neck as his hands began to roam beneath her shirt.

"Not so fast, Music Man. He-noh told Ahweyoh of an ancient prophecy. An evil serpent demon would attack and kill the river people. She renounced immortality to journey back to her homeland and warn them.

"They scoffed and laughed, assuming the god had cast her aside once he was finished with her. Then the water demon attacked. Ahweyoh called upon her Thundergod's help and together they battled the serpent. She paddled her canoe on the river, serving as a diversion, while He-noh lanced a thunderbolt through the demon's eye."

Sam squirmed, tightening his arms around her, and Sarah knew that he was now fully engaged in her story. Typical guy—didn't care until there was blood and guts and gore.

"The writhing serpent's body carved out the gorge, re-routing the once peaceful river into a treacherous length of rapids and waterfalls. As the serpent coiled his body, ready to spring on Ahweyoh, the Thundergod emerged from the mist and severed its head from its body, flinging it to one side. Thus Snakehead mountain was born. The snake's body formed the other mountains to the east and south."

Sarah had spread her arms wide, indicating the sinuous curves of the mountains hidden in the darkness. Sam ducked beneath her arm, rolling her onto her back as he kissed her thoroughly. "See, a happy ending," he said when he came up for air.

Sarah had let it go at that, releasing herself to Sam's passion. But she knew the truth: most of the legends had no happy ending for either of the lovers.

The ancient myth played through Sarah's mind now as she spread out her tarp and drank some water. Her mouth was parched, her muscles shaking as she sat on the ledge, looking south over the gorge. Hopewell's lights were out of sight, beyond a fold in the mountain ridge and too far to the west of where she sat.

Her only companions were an owl whose hunting silhouette flitted across the moon, the

granite boulders lining the ledge, a few hardy oak and hemlock trees that dared to bury roots into the rock face, and the legend of a dead Iroquois maiden.

Like many heroes, Ahweyoh had not been well-received after saving her people's lives. Their village, their homes were destroyed and they blamed her. After all, their lives had been peaceful before she had involved them in the battles between gods and monsters.

Caught between two worlds, unable to return to her lover after refusing the gods' gift of immortality, Ahweyoh placed all her hope in one thing: her love for He-noh.

Late one night, under a full moon, she paddled her canoe through the rapids that now churned her once peaceful river. Then she calmly set her paddle aside, raising her arms out as the powerful current carried her over the Upper Falls. She called out her lover's name, certain he would descend from the mists and carry her to safety. There, in the mist that came nightly to the mountain, they could live forever, between the cloud-world of the gods and the rocks and soil of the mortals.

Sarah stretched out, allowing the tendrils of fog that spread out from the forest behind her to engulf her, wishing they were as warm and solid as Sam's arms had been. The moon winked in and out. The owl called out in victory, a whoosh of wings humming through the air over the gorge. Her body went still, the hard earth and cool night air disappearing into the mist. As if she were leaving her body behind, entering the in-between world, the limbo that was the only place where Ahweyoh and He-noh could be together.

There were several versions of the legend. One ended with the two lovers together, their spirits destined for immortality, coming to life nightly through the mountain mists even though their bodies died a mortal death, crushed by the rocks below the falls. That one emphasized the Thundergod's sacrifice of his own immortality to be with his one true love.

Another ended with the Thundergod being trapped by his brother gods before he could reach Ahweyoh. They captured him, chained him to the clouds, refusing to allow him to steal away to Earth, leaving them without his strength and protection. His cries echoing through the gorge, deafening all creatures who heard him, he watched in horror as Ahweyoh and her canoe flew through the air only to crash to earth again, battered and beaten by the rapids and rocks.

A shiver ran through Sarah's body, reminding her that she was only human. She blinked, stretched and reached for her pack. She wouldn't bother with a fire, not tonight. Instead she munched on a Powerbar and wrapped herself in her fleece jacket.

While she taught all the versions of the ancient legend to her students, Sarah much preferred the third ending. Had ever since she'd first heard it as a little girl.

In this one, the gods recognized Ahweyoh's courage in helping them defeat the serpent demon. When she launched herself off the Upper falls, the mist parted and a shaft of moonlight shimmered through the night, creating a path back up to the cloud world and her Thundergod. He waited for her on the moonbeam, reaching a hand out to catch her when she faltered and would fall.

And of course, together they lived happily ever after.

Sarah wadded up the wrapper from her makeshift dinner and shoved it back into her pack. She rolled herself up in her tarp so that she wouldn't wake up covered with dew and closed her eyes on the mystical world swirling around her.

She was too old to believe in fairytales. Especially ones with happy endings.

Wednesday, June 19, 2007: St. Doriat, Canada

"Daddy, don't go. I don't want you to go."

Sam watched as Josh blinked furiously, fighting back his tears. In two years the kid had had a lot of practice and had also quickly discovered how fruitless tears were. But that look on his face, Josh trying so hard to be so very brave, was about enough to rip Sam's heart to pieces.

He squatted down to place himself level with the five-year-old. Josh had taken a growth spurt over the spring and was now all lanky elbows and knees as Sam pulled him into a bear hug. He inhaled the fragrance of Johnson's shampoo. No more tears. Josh didn't really need the baby shampoo, not now that he took showers and washed his own hair, but it reminded Sam of Sarah, of the good days when Josh was little, when they were together.

Sam sniffed, struggling to keep his own composure. No more tears. Josh wriggled within his grasp. "Daddy, you're squeezing me."

"Oh am I?" Sam asked as he stood up, pulling Josh with him so that the boy's feet were dangling above the ground. "How's this then?" He raised Josh up, planted raspberry kisses on the bare skin above his pajama bottoms, was rewarded with an instant armful of giggling little boy. He bounced Josh onto his bed, allowed Josh to flip him over and pin him down for a full count.

"I win!" Josh cried out. He released his father. Sam sat beside him on the bed.

"You sure do, champ," Sam said as he nestled Josh into the pillows and drew the blankets up over him. He planted a kiss on Josh's forehead. "Now, remember everything we talked about. And you be good for Mrs. Beaucouers."

Josh looked up at him with a solemn expression, one far too old for a little boy to ever wear. He frowned, bit his lower lip, and nodded. "When you come home with Mommy will you sing happy songs again? Ones that make me laugh like the song about Oscar the purple toad with the wart on his tongue?"

"Better yet, we'll get Mommy to sing, she has a voice like an angel."

Josh's eyes crinkled shut as he strained to remember. "Sometimes I think I can hear her, when it's dark and quiet." He opened his eyes wide once more. "But then I wake up and it was only a dream."

Sam ruffled his son's still-wet hair. "I know what you mean, champ. That happens to me, too. I think it happens to everyone when someone you love and really care about is far away. It keeps you close to them. I'll bet Mommy hears you when she dreams, too."

"But I was just a baby back then. I didn't know any real songs."

"Doesn't matter."

"Do you think she still remembers me? Will she know who I am?" Josh's frown creased his forehead into a deep furrow.

"Of course she will."

"Maybe this will help." Josh slid a wallet-sized school photo from beneath his pillow. Sam took it solemnly, hoping Josh didn't notice the tears he couldn't blink away. Josh had cropped the picture into a heart and glued it onto a red-felt heart with a large pin sewn onto the back. "So you can show her how big I've gotten."

"And how handsome."

"Aw, Dad. Will you give it to her?"

"Of course." Sam pulled him tight once more, using the distraction to swipe his eyes dry on the back of his shirt sleeve, then kissed him again. "That one was from Mommy."

Josh blew his breath out in the saddest sigh a five-year-old ever could produce. "You're going to bring her back, right? You promise?"

Sam locked eyes with his son, holding Josh's keepsake over his chest in the flat of his

palm. "Yes sir. When I come back, I'll have Mommy with me. I promise."

If I come back.

Sam turned the lights off and shut the door behind him. He shouldered his guitar case—everything else was already in the truck—and walked down the creaky stairs to the first floor of the old farmhouse. Mrs. Beaucouers, their landlady and surrogate grandmother these past two years, was waiting. A young sixty-seven, she was still tough enough to put the fear of God into anyone who challenged her.

Most importantly, she was devoted to Josh. Would do anything to keep him safe.

Now she stood straight, her forehead creased with worry. "I don't like this, Samuel. There must be another way."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. B, there's not." He stepped towards the door, but she blocked his way. He pulled up short and took her hands in his. "I've left all the important papers, everything you need in case—" He faltered, tried again. "It's all in the lockbox, you have the key."

She squeezed his hands, her work-worn grip almost as strong as his. "But Josh—"

"You'll take good care of him." She nodded. He leaned forward, kissed both of her cheeks. "Thank you, Mrs. B. You are an angel."

She flushed and pulled her hands away, busying them by wringing the corners of her apron. She was the only woman Sam had ever seen outside of the movies actually wear an apron, but it was part of her uniform. Mrs. B simply would not be Mrs. B without her apron, or her Sunday churchgoing black hat with the discrete widow's veil, or her bright yellow Mac and Wellingtons that came out during rainstorms and nor'easters. She was the last of a dying breed of gentlewoman.

If Korsakov ever found her or Josh, he'd kill them both without batting an eye.

"All right then," she said in her crisp, no nonsense way. "Sooner you get going, sooner you'll be back to your son."

Sam swallowed hard and nodded. He opened the door, but couldn't resist one last look over his shoulder, up the stairwell. "You'll—"

"He'll be fine, Samuel. I promise."

Now it was Sam's turn to sigh. He tried a smile but it felt tight against his face muscles. He blinked hard, the scene blurring before him. Finally he relinquished his grip on the doorknob and stepped out into the darkness.

It's the only way. He climbed into the rusted Ford Ranger, laid the guitar case behind his seat, and started the engine. It turned over with its usual throaty growl. The Ranger didn't look like much, but since Sam and Josh's life depended on it, Sam kept it in prime running condition. He laid his arm across the bench seat, turned to watch out the rear window as he backed down the familiar curves of the gravel drive.

He pulled out onto the road and paused. There was no other traffic and the only lights were the golden glow of the farmhouse he'd just left. A beacon in the night. Hopefully he'd be returning soon.

Keep them safe, Lord, he prayed. It still felt awkward, this prayer thing. He'd first started after Josh was born—more one-sided conversations with Whoever was Up There than actual prayers. With everything that had happened these past two years, he'd begun to do more than simply plead his case or try to bargain with his Higher Power.

It was a miracle that any of them were still alive. Now, with Korsakov on the loose, it would take more than a miracle to keep them that way. It would take divine intervention.

Something Sam would have scoffed at eight years ago when he was still Stan Diamontes, beach bum/surfer/songwriter and sometime—when the bills needed to be paid—accountant to a Russian indy-film producer/mobster. But a man could change in eight years, could learn to love,

to care more for someone else than he did himself, could even find his faith.

Sam put the truck into Drive and gunned the engine. He had to get to Sarah before Korsakov. *Please Lord...*

CHAPTER 13

Thursday, June 20, 2007: south of Montreal

The blacktop spun out from under the Ford's wheels like dreams colliding beneath the full moon guiding Sam south. In the dark and silence he couldn't help but think of his own dreams, of the years he'd wasted before he learned the meaning of having real dreams.

Real dreams. Not the fantasies that drove him past the time when he was old enough to know better. Catching the big wave, breaking into the music biz, making a big score. He'd wasted all that time on ideas as wispy as cotton candy. Sweet to think and talk about, but nothing to live on.

Nothing like Sarah and Josh. Nothing important, nothing worth living for.
Or dying for.

Sam squinted into the rising sun as the highway jogged to the east. All he could see, though, was Sarah.

Sarah's face the first time they made love, eyes wide, feverish as their bodies collapsed on each other. Sarah looking like an angel on their wedding day, calm, radiant while Sam was certain that he'd lose it, puke his guts out, the way his stomach was churning worse than the surf at Point Arguello. Until she took his hand. After that, everything had been fine.

Sarah, her face scarlet with pain, cheeks puffed out as she strained to push-push-push-push. Him holding her hand, standing there as Doc Hedeger and the nurse yelled at her, *push!* He had felt like the world's biggest dipshit. She was in pain and he was helpless to do anything about it and it was all his fault...

Then her face relaxed. A gurgling cry filled the room. He looked down to see this pink mass of arms and legs and slime-covered hair with big blue eyes staring right at him. Sarah's face filled with joy as she laughed so hard she cried. Only time he'd ever seen her cry.

Sam cried too, couldn't cut the cord when Doc Hedeger asked him, his hands were shaking so badly.

Sarah pulled their baby to her breast and reached for Sam, guiding his hand to help her cradle their baby. This wonderful, mysterious thing they'd created. Together. As he wrapped his arms around both of them Sam had heard a roaring in his brain, stronger than a wave swamping you, the surf crashing over you, pulling you under and you get pounded, not knowing which way is up and you think...I may never see the sun again, I may never make it to the surface.

I may die.

The roar Sam felt as he held his family was more powerful than that. It filled his brain, made him hunch his shoulders like a Neanderthal. A primitive protective reflex. He would stand between what was his and the rest of the world. Always. Forever.

He remembered inhaling deeply, smelling Sarah's sweat tinged with pain and fear, smelling blood and innocence. This was his family and he would never, never let anything happen to them.

At least that was what Sam had vowed five years ago. His hands clenched over the steering wheel as the familiar knot in his gut tightened. He was a cowardly, selfish son of a bitch. He knew that now, had known it for the last two years, only wished it hadn't taken losing the best

part of himself to discover. Past time to pay the devil he'd sold his soul to eight years ago.

Except Sarah and Josh weren't part of the bargain.

The lights of a nearby town mocked him with their cheerful brightness, their untold stories of happy families, snug and warm safe in their beds, husbands and wives together, birthdays and holidays and celebrations. The stuff of normal lives and normal families. Everything he'd had for a few short years.

Everything he'd lost. It was all his fault—stupid, selfish bastard.

He'd like to think that he'd changed from the fool he'd been eight years ago, but as he pressed down on the accelerator, speeding into the dawn toward an appointment with almost certain death, he knew he was no hero.

No hero. Just a fool in love.

Sarah woke feeling groggy, punch-drunk. She sat up, head reeling, eyes gritty as she blinked them. Dehydrated. Idiot, she knew better, should have drunk more during her climb up here yesterday.

She wiped her face, forced herself to down a liter of water followed by another energy bar. As she combed her fingers through her hair and tied it back, she felt more human.

The only human. The granite ledge jutting out over Snakebelly seemed suspended in both time and space. Across the gorge the rolling ridges of the mountains to the south spread out like ripples on an ocean of grey-blue fog. Overhead, several hawks swirled, disappearing into the sun that had crested the eastern slope of Snakehead. The only sounds were the rustling of the wind through the branches and the distant rumble of water from the gorge.

Crisp air sliced through her lungs, rejuvenating her. Yesterday felt like a blur, but today had dawned clear and brilliant.

She tidied her simple camp and pulled her binoculars from her pack. After taking a moment to enjoy the antics of the hawks, she stepped to the edge of the ledge and shimmied belly down on it. She focused into the shadows that clung to the granite boulders fifty yards below. Sunlight gleamed off eddies of the river's current that twisted around the rocks. The river had carved out a niche over the millennia, a hidden trap for the unwary. Not that anything or anyone could survive the falls half a mile upstream.

Sarah scanned the treacherous inlet. Tangled tree limbs sprouted here and there like a skeleton forest. Something bright and white and gleaming caught her eye.

Correction. A forest of skeletons.

Well, at least part of one. She zoomed in, trying to tell if the bone was attached to anything human. Hal was right, there had been some recent rock falls. The ground was littered with newly fallen bits of the mountain.

Maybe it was a deer. Animal carcasses could just as easily find their way to the surface here at Snakebelly.

She felt her throat go dry, bit her lip. Could she have found Sam? After all this time?

Her fingers slipped on the focus wheel, her palms damp with sweat as they gripped the binoculars. The bones, there were two of them she saw now, were long and slender. They disappeared beneath a tangle of tree branches caught in the river's current.

Probably was a deer after all. She released her breath, unaware that she'd been holding it.

A gleam of silver sparked in the sunlight.

Deer didn't wear wristwatches.

CHAPTER 14

Thursday, June 20, 2007: Interstate 95, northbound

Now that she was past DC and the snarled wasteland of freeway surrounding it, Caitlyn had room to maneuver the Subaru. Cruising along the left hand lane, she not so subtly encouraged anyone dawdling at less than eighty miles an hour to get the hell out of her way.

One of her favorite perks of carrying a badge. Since she technically wasn't on official business, she had to use her own vehicle, but that was all right. So far the cops she'd passed seemed more interested in keeping traffic flowing smoothly than in spending time writing tickets.

She'd just passed East Brunswick when her cell phone sang out. She hit the hands free button. "Tierney here."

"Caitlyn," came a voice mellow with California sunshine, "how ya doing, girl?"

"Hey, Royal, thanks for getting back to me." Royal Hassam, an assistant US attorney based in LA, was an old friend and the one person she trusted to help her get the inside scoop on Stan Diamontes' involvement with the Korsakov case.

"When you going to come out here, spend a week on the beach with me? We could drive up to Big Sur, fresh air, sunshine, ocean, and no office politics."

"You make it sound tempting, but I need to finish this case first. Were you able to find anything on Korsakov or Diamontes?"

"Yes ma'am. Funny thing that. Korsakov is due in court today. Has my boss about stroking out."

"Why's that?" Caitlyn spied a rest area approaching and swerved into the exit lane. She cruised to a stop, all attention fixed on the phone.

"His conviction is getting overturned on a technicality. We can't re-try him without Diamontes' testimony. And of course, we don't have that, seeing as Diamontes is dead."

"So Diamontes really is Sam Durandt."

"Sweetheart, of course he is. You ought to know—your old boss, Jack Logan is the one who worked that end of the case, got Diamontes into WITSEC eight years ago."

Caitlyn pursed her lips in a silent whistle. She'd tried contacting Logan but he was either unavailable or ducking her calls. She suspected the latter. "Guess he forgot to mention that when we worked the Durandt case."

"And I thought our office politics were bad. At least we only mess with the state and local prosecutors, we don't go around screwing ourselves."

"Keep it clean, Royal." Never knew who might be listening in. She didn't need Royal to get his ass in a sling because of her—or news of their conversation making its way back to Quantico or the brass. She hadn't officially opened a case file. Because as of yet she had no proof that any crime had been committed. Just a whole lot of ugly suspicions.

"S'all right. I'm on my cell. Jogging on the beach, in fact. Here, listen to the ocean." Static as he presumably held the phone out. Caitlyn smoothed her palms against her linen slacks, arched her back and stretched in her seat. Royal's voice soon returned. "Remember the time difference? It's not even six here, way too early for any bosses to be awake."

"Still, this is touchy. You might want to keep a low profile, not let anyone know you've been asking questions about Diamontes." Bad enough she was risking her career looking into this, no sense ruining Royal's as well.

"No worries. All anyone is talking about 'round here is Korsakov. You wouldn't believe some of the things that guy has done. I worked Organized Crime out of Jersey before I came

here and it still makes my stomach turn. This is one seriously whacked out dude."

"His only convictions are for money laundering. They couldn't make the RICO charges stick." That much Caitlyn had gleaned from her Nexis/Lexis search last night.

"Only because the grand jury wouldn't convict solely on Diamontes' uncorroborated testimony."

"Let me guess. Any other witnesses were dead."

"Or missing. Those who were found, well let's just say they didn't go peacefully into the night. The autopsy reports read like a slasher movie script on steroids."

"Forensics?"

"Nope. Our Russian, Korsakov, is smarter than your average bear." The sound of his chuckling at his pun carried through the airwaves.

"Besides the trial transcripts, can you give me any info on Stan Diamontes?"

"I'll email you the only photo I could find. It's almost ten years old. He's thirty-five now, youngest of four kids, father a banker at Chase, mother a homemaker. A few run-ins with local PD's."

"He has a record?"

"Scarface this guy is not. He likes to surf—doesn't care who owns the beach. Half a dozen arrests for trespassing, no convictions. Went to Stanford, mediocre grades, BS in accounting. Oh yeah, he minored in musical composition of all things. I can try to run down former friends, relatives, see if anyone's heard from him if you'd like, but I have to tell you, if I had a freak like Korsakov gunning for me, I don't care how long of a sentence he got, I'd dig a hole to China and stay good and buried."

Caitlyn drummed her fingers along the steering wheel. Her headache was a low throb today, thanks to the double doses of drugs she'd taken. Ounce of prevention seemed a good idea after last night. She broke out in a sweat just thinking of the pain that had overwhelmed her.

"No. Email me the list and if need be, I'll follow up with them. I don't want you sticking your neck out more than necessary. And could you keep me posted on Korsakov's hearing?"

"Sure, whatever you want. Promise you'll tell me what this is all about once you're free and clear?"

"I will. Thanks, Royal."

"No prob. And hey, if you ever need a lawyer—"

"You'll be the last one I call. Take it easy."

"Don't I always?"

She hung up and reached for her Rand-McNally. A detour to Hartford would only take a few hours. And she'd gotten an early start. She shifted into gear. She'd call on Jack Logan in person, try to jar him into revealing something, and still make it to Hopewell by afternoon. As the pavement hummed beneath her tires, her right foot kept pushing down on the accelerator. Her instincts telling her that she was running out of time.

CHAPTER 14

Sarah sucked her breath in, rolled onto her back, the sky opening up above her in a dizzying vista of cerulean. She focused on her breathing. It shouldn't be that hard, she'd done it all her life, but suddenly she couldn't force any air past the knot in her throat.

Sam was down there. Which meant he was dead, really dead. And if he was gone, then

so was Josh.

She'd known it. But had never actually believed, truly believed, until this moment. She squeezed her eyes shut against the too-cheerful sunlight and the sting of her tears.

Maybe it wasn't Sam. Who could tell from this distance?

Logic told her not to be a fool, to surrender to the truth. Sam was the only adult reported missing on Snakehead and still unaccounted for in recent years. Sarah sat up, her vision clearing. She dropped the binoculars and grabbed the two-way radio Hal had lent her.

"Hal? This is Sarah, does anyone copy?" she spoke into the small handset.

Static answered her for a few long moments. Then Hal's voice cut through it, reassuring and calm. "You okay, Sarah?"

"I'm fine. I, uh, I found something up here you need to know about."

Another long pause. There was a clatter of silverware and men's laughter in the background. He was probably at the Rockslide, having breakfast. "What's up, Sarah?"

"I'm at the top of Snakebelly. There's a man down below."

"You want I should call search and rescue?" His voice sounded light-hearted, a bit distracted. He hadn't recognized the implications of what she said.

She swallowed hard. This might be Sam they were talking about. She hoped the Colonel was out of earshot. "No. I think you'd better call the coroner."

The speaker stuttered as if he'd started to say something then removed his finger from the trigger. Finally his voice returned. Slower, grimmer. The background noise had vanished. "I'm on my way."

She put the radio down on top of her pack and sat back on her heels. Gerald Merton, the eldest son and reigning heir to the Merton Funeral Home down in Merrill, was the current county coroner. He'd do a preliminary exam at his funeral home, package the remains for the State Police to take to their lab where a real medical examiner would perform a complete autopsy.

It would take Hal a good hour or more to pick up Gerald and drive up Snakehead. From there it would be another hour or so before they would reach her location if they hiked up the trail. Faster if Hal pulled off Rattlesnake Pike and left his truck on the side of the road. Then it would be a mere ten-twenty minute hike in, but it would mean bushwhacking through some dense forest and undergrowth.

No problem for Hal, he was used to it. But Gerald was a pasty-faced, overweight forty-something with a beer belly that made him look more like Santa Claus than an undertaker. And they'd have their hands full of gear—a stretcher, ropes, body bags, etc.

Either way, she had a wait on her hands. Sarah never was very good at waiting.

She sidled to the edge of the gorge and craned her head over it, assessing the damage the spring thaw and rockslides had done to the rock face. Not too bad. Definitely doable. She could rappel down, get the body—or what was left of it—ready to move, save them some time.

She'd done it before. Most every able-bodied adult in Hopewell was a member of the search and rescue team. Too many uncharted trails, inviting granite walls and unmapped caves on Snakehead. They were called out a few times every year to search for lost hunters, hikers, climbers and spelunkers.

Last time she'd done a body recovery had been right here. Last body she'd helped to bring out of Snakebelly was Lily, Hal's wife. Two years ago, almost to the day.

That made up her mind for her. Better to do everything she could to keep Hal's time in the gorge to a minimum. She could spare him those painful memories, at least.

Besides, she needed to know if it was Sam down there or not.

Sarah quickly secured her climbing rope, a 11 mm dry rope, to a boulder and stepped into her harness. She didn't have her usual SAR gear—no protective gloves or Vicks to deaden the

smell of decay. But from what she'd seen so far, didn't look like there was a whole lot left to smell on this body.

She emptied her pack, leaving only her camera, ground cloth, duct tape, flashlight, and an assortment of plastic bags. She strapped her knife and climbing gear to her harness. No helmet. The Colonel would have a cow about that, it was against regs.

The thought made Sarah smile. Breaking regs was one of her favorite past times. It was what had brought her and Sam together to start with.

The sun was now bright and warm, radiating off the granite rock face. Sarah positioned herself, double-checked her anchor, and stepped off into space.

CHAPTER 15

Thursday June 20, 2007: Hartford, Connecticut

Less than two hours later, Caitlyn arrived at Jack Logan's new workplace: a shiny high-rise tower that promised a magnificent view of downtown Hartford. Logan's position as a security consultant for a multi-national insurance company definitely paid better than the federal government, she decided as she took in his glass walled corner office adorned with vanity shots of Logan shaking hands or playing golf with a variety of celebrities. Stars whose life he had saved, no doubt.

She gave a small snort. The job suited Logan. As did the office. Big fat bunch of lies. Strip away the facade and Logan was nothing more than a glorified travel agent and hand-holder.

She'd bet he was counting the minutes, waiting until she had time to be sufficiently impressed by his new digs. Sure enough, exactly five minutes after his secretary ushered her into Logan's inner sanctum, he burst through the door, puffed up with self-importance as he rushed to his desk, too harried to spare her a glance.

"Caitlyn, good to see you. Sorry I was tied up. Arab oil sheik wanted a new security review for his family holdings in Paris, Geneva, and Milan." He dumped an ostrich skin briefcase onto his desk and finally raised his head to look at her. "Well, you're looking good. Guess desk duty at Quantico suits you. I always figured you weren't cut out for field work."

Caitlyn wouldn't call her promotion and assignment to teach at Quantico as "desk duty." Logan might be an ass, but he knew the drill. Get your shots in first, put your mark on the defensive quick, make them react without thinking. Classic old school style of interview manipulation.

Too bad for Logan, Caitlyn was new school. Despite his bluster, he couldn't hide the sheen of sweat on his upper lip or the twitch of his eyes when he mentioned Quantico. She strolled over to his immense metal and glass topped desk and settled herself in one of the uncomfortable tubular steel chairs before it. Stretching her legs out, she crossed them at the ankle. She'd worn her cornflower blue pantsuit, it matched her eyes, and a sleeveless silk blouse that buttoned in the back, allowing the material to fit smoothly against her curves. She'd changed shoes in the car, substituting sling-back heels for her more sensible Rockports. The heels revealed just the right amount of ankle and leg.

Legs that Logan was now gazing at, slowly working his way up her body. Caitlyn smiled. Talk about old school, her distraction was as old as Mata Hari. She remained silent, waiting for him to dig himself in deeper.

He settled on the corner of the desk directly before her, swinging his foot in an arc

guaranteed to bring it closer and closer to her calf. "So. What brings you here? Need help with a case? I still do consulting for the Bureau, but it will cost you, of course." He chuckled, straightening his silk tie and twisting his diamond studded watch so that the sunlight reflected off it.

"Just wanted to give you a heads up," she said, deciding it was time to put him on the defensive. If she knew Logan, he'd be more likely to make a mistake trying to cover his tracks if he thought she was on to something. "I'm re-opening the Durandt case."

His ankle twitched, jerked against the desk leg. "Really?" His voice was bland. "I thought we put that one to bed. Didn't they execute someone already, what was his name?"

"Damian Wright," Caitlyn supplied helpfully. "A few things have come up. New evidence. Wright may be innocent of the Hopewell murders."

"What kind of new evidence?" Logan asked, his gaze settled on a point past her shoulder as if he were bored and only asking to be polite.

Caitlyn smiled. "Sorry, Jack. You know the rules."

He focused on her face, mirrored her smile. "You didn't drive all the way up here simply to inform me that an old case was being re-opened. You want something from me. What's the game, Caitlyn?"

She remained silent, watching him carefully. His voice had tightened, taken on a new edge. The small wrinkles near his eyes Botox hadn't totally erased had deepened. Definitely hit a sore spot.

If what she suspected was true, she wasn't surprised.

"I can't help you without more information," he continued in a genial voice. The well-versed mentor showing the newbie the ropes. Roles that suited neither of them anymore.

Hadn't in a long time. Not since two and a half years ago when he'd almost gotten her killed.

He gazed out the window at the late morning sun, his ankle circling once more. "Let's see. Hopewell. Ahh, I remember now. The night you got sick on the drive down. Then you antagonized the local police chief and almost made the vic's mother collapse with a nervous breakdown." He slanted another smile in her direction. "Not your finest moment, Caitlyn."

Unlike the moment when he'd sent her backup team to the wrong location, leaving Caitlyn and her partner alone in the fight of their lives. A vision of glass breaking, the look of terror on Santore's face as they both plummeted out the window, the stomach lurching feeling of free fall, the pain when she'd hit the ground—these all raced through her mind at whiplash speed. She kept her face and her voice neutral, meeting his gaze effortlessly. "Maybe that's why I'm anxious to set the record straight."

"Hmpf. I remember the crime scene. It was raining monkeys and we had to hike half way up a mountain. The local yokels had tried to protect the scene as best they could, but the wind and the rain left us slim pickin's. But we had blood samples from the Unsub and one of the vics."

Caitlyn shook her head. "Wrong again, Jack. The blood didn't match."

He jerked up at that, acted startled, his mouth dropping open. But there was no crease in his brow, no other signs of surprise. "Really? You don't say? Whose blood was it, then?"

Caitlyn decided to let him think she knew nothing of Richland. "Some guy named Stanley Diamontes. Name ring a bell to you at all?"

He pursed his lips, frowned in thought. "Maybe, maybe."

"He testified against a Russian name of Korsakov. After that we lost track of him. It was a miracle we matched his DNA at all."

"Korsakov, yes, I definitely remember him. Who could forget? Crazy fucker, had two hobbies: making movies and torturing people. Can't say I'm surprised a witness against him took

off, got lost in the mountains with a new name." He straightened up. "So, mystery solved. I can try to find my old case notes on Korsakov if you like. Free of charge for old time's sake."

He slid to his feet, began walking to the door, obviously expecting her to follow him. "Sorry I don't have more time for you, Caitlyn."

She took her time, not moving from her chair until he'd already reached the door and held it open. Only then did she stand and stroll past him, coming to a stop in the doorway. "Thanks, Jack. I knew you'd have the answers I needed. I'd definitely like a look at those files. Especially since Korsakov is getting out of prison today."

His eyes widened and tiny droplets of sweat sprouted on his forehead before he could hustle her out the door. "Fine. No problem. I'll have Margery fax them down to Quantico by the day's end."

He tried to close the door but she blocked him. "It'd be better to scan and email them to me, Jack. I'm on my way to Hopewell."

She breezed out the door and through the reception area before he could respond. He banged the glass door shut behind her, his hand mopping his brow. Idiot was so used to the fancy glass walls that he'd forgotten they were there. She watched him in the mirror above the elevator call buttons. He lunged for the phone on his desk and began dialing furiously.

The elevator chimed its arrival. Caitlyn entered, looked up for one last glance at her former boss, now huddled over his phone, his face flushed. He met her glance and startled, stood, cradling the handset between his cheek and shoulder. She smiled sweetly and waved good-bye.

The doors slid shut, and she grabbed her cell phone. "Clemens? Hey, it's Caitlyn. Could you ask one of the guys in the surveillance section to dump a phone for me?"

As Sarah worked her way down the side of the cliff, memories cascaded through her mind. Her and Sam, Sam and her—always breaking the rules, two partners in crime.

The first time she'd met him, he'd been trespassing on school property. Tap-dancing down the empty corridor, whistling as he opened classroom doors, peered inside, then shut them once more.

"Can I help you?" Sarah had asked in her best "I've got eyes in the back of my head so don't try anything" teacher's voice. His nonchalance as he straightened, removed his dark sunglasses, and gave her a slow once over was annoying.

He stepped closer and flashed her a thousand-watt smile. "I'm looking for the music room. Or the auditorium. I need a piano."

"You need a piano?" she asked, not sure if she'd heard him correctly. "Excuse me, but do you have a child who is a student here, Mr—"

He stared at her blankly for a moment, then chuckled. "No ma'am. No child. Is that a problem?"

"The only problem seems to be the fact that you're trespassing."

"Wasn't today the last day of school? Aren't the kids all gone?"

"That's beside the point." Sarah scrutinized him. Very tan, which made his dark hair and dark eyes look exotic. Definitely not from around here. His accent—or lack of one—made her think West Coast. He was trim, well-muscled, just shy of six feet, wearing a white polo and jeans that fit like...her gaze trailed down, lingered a moment too long. He twisted his head to peer over one shoulder.

"What's wrong? Did I sit in something?"

Sarah went rigid, felt her face flush with a combination of embarrassment and suppressed laughter. If it had happened anywhere but here at school, she would have acknowledged her

ogling, made a joke out of it. Especially as the waggled eyebrow and over-dramatic leer he sent her way told her she wasn't fooling him.

"Let's start over. I'm Sarah Godwin." She extended her hand.

He shook it with a firm grasp, didn't push things by lingering too long. Although she did notice the way his smile deepened, wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Sam. Sam Durandt."

"Sam Durandt. Who is in desperate need of a piano?"

"Right. See, my keyboard hasn't arrived yet. I've got to," he rapped his knuckles against his temple, "get this song worked out before it drives me nuts."

"Oh. You're a composer, are you?"

"No, not a composer. I mean, not only music. I write songs."

Sarah pursed her lips. Was this guy for real? "Anything I might have heard?"

He rocked on his heels, looked down. "No, not yet. But," he brightened, beaming at her, "maybe this is the one. *If* you could show me to a piano."

She hesitated. She was alone in the building until Mr. Cole arrived to clean. He seemed friendly enough, but...

"I'll rent it from you," he blurted into the lengthening silence.

"Rent it?"

"Yeah. I don't have a lot of money, but if you let me work on my song, I'll write one just for you." He glanced up at her, his long, dark eyelashes framing even darker, larger eyes.

"Please...it's a matter of life or death."

Sarah laughed. He was worse than her students. "All right. Come with me, Sam the Music Man."

Her foot brushed against the granite rock face and Sarah fell, the rope zipping through her hands much faster than she had intended. She pulled up, her harness squeezing tight around her hips. She came to a halt a few feet above a large boulder.

She hated thinking about that first day—hated it because the memory invariably led to more memories followed by traitorous thoughts.

If she hadn't met Sam, then she might have met someone else, and they would still be alive, and if they were alive, then so would Josh still be alive, only he wouldn't be Josh because Sam wasn't his father, but she would at least have one of them...

She leaned back on her rope, squinted at the bright sunshine and cursed herself for forgetting her sunglasses. Blinking back tears, she lowered herself to a standing position on the partially submerged rock. Water lapped at her boots, trying to undermine her footing.

A fall here would leave someone beat up pretty good.

Wasn't that what she'd already done? She'd fallen in love and gotten beat up for it. Battered, bruised, broken.

The words came in a staccato that swirled through her, echoing with the pulse pounding in her temples. Sam would have made a song out of it. Not a funny song or a joke like so many of his songs were.

A ballad, a dirge. A sad, sad song. One that would coax tears from the hardest of hearts.

She blinked rapidly, told herself it was the sun reflecting from the wet mirror-like granite. She reached for the shiny white lengths of bone visible above the water.

No. She yanked her hand away. *Photos first. Document the scene.*

Everything looked more distant, impersonal through the camera's viewfinder. Like maybe this wasn't really happening, like maybe it wasn't really Sam and if it wasn't really Sam, then

maybe Josh wasn't really—

Her foot slid out from under her. She flung her weight to the opposite side before she could impale herself on the tangled tree branches jutting up against the rock. Branches the size of her wrist.

Pay attention. As she caught her breath, her pulse racing after the near-miss, she sat back and double-checked the photos on the digital screen. A few were blurry—from water spraying up from the rapids a few feet away or from her body shaking? Didn't matter, enough were clear.

With trembling hands, she put the camera away. Then she reached for the bones.

Radius and ulna, she remembered her anatomy. Gently she disentangled a layer of dead leaves and debris to unveil the remnants of three fingers and the bones connecting them to the forearm. They stretched out, now unveiled on a mat of dead hemlock, pointing, accusing her.

Her breath drew shallow as if there wasn't enough air. Despite the ozone charge of the fast-flowing water spraying around her.

It was a man's right hand. Sam always wore his watch on the left. Didn't he?

Or was she merely trying to talk herself into that?

She took more photos. Up close there were tiny teeth marks on the bones. Gingerly she moved the large, interwoven mat of debris from the other end of the arm.

A man's head, grotesque, swollen, yellow, bobbed up from the water, breaking the surface, its mouth open in a gaping grimace.

Sarah slipped. Skittering back along the boulder, unable to regain her balance, her feet flew out from under her. Dead leaves and twigs scattered through the air. She slammed back against the rock face, cracking her head. One foot slid into the water, into the grasp of slimy, decomposed vegetation that tried to suck her down.

Her rope stopped her from tumbling completely into the water where she'd be at the mercy of the current. She lay there, her left leg bent against the boulder, her right one immersed up to her knee, cold water surging in to fill her boot, her head throbbing, her vision flickering with bright lights. At first she couldn't breathe, it was as if all the air had been sucked out and her lungs collapsed.

She made an effort and drew a deep, long draught of sparkling crisp air that burned her lungs. The muscles along her right chest wall voiced their protest and she knew she'd find bruises there by morning. At least she'd live to see morning.

The river seemed to cackle at her as the water sprayed up into her face, warning her that it was always there, ready, waiting for her to screw up again. She took another deep breath and steadied herself on the rope, hauling her water-logged leg free from the mire. Her boot stayed on, thank goodness.

She flopped back onto the boulder, not caring about the water soaking the rest of her. Then slowly she sat up, focused on her gruesome discovery. Her pack had gotten slammed against the rock when she fell, but her camera seemed to be working fine.

The head was misshapen, giving it the appearance of being swollen. The lower jaw hung by one side only. The flesh, eyes, tongue were all gone as were several of the teeth, leaving a gaping hole behind. The bone was exposed in a few patchy areas but most of the skull was covered by greasy yellow-brown adipocere tissue and algae interspersed with tangles of hair.

The man's clothes were intact—which explained why his remains hadn't totally disarticulated and scattered at the river's whim. Beneath a black windbreaker, he wore what once had been a light blue shirt with a buttoned down collar.

Did Sam have a shirt like that? Maybe, probably. It was the kind of shirt that every man had hanging in his closet, even a work at home dad like Sam.

Her stomach clenched, acid bit the back of her throat as she breathed through her mouth.

Not because of the smell, although now there was enough debris stirred up to create a sweetly-sick stench. Her vision darkened and she realized she was hyperventilating.

She turned away from the head and forced herself to focus on the river. Down here, right at its surface, it looked deceptively innocent, playful. White water rushed past, breaking against the boulder she had claimed, then moving back out to the center of the current. The side of the chasm blocked her view of the falls, but she could hear them, feel them rumbling, shaking the earth.

Her breathing under control, she bent forward, her face mere inches away from the wristwatch bobbing on the water's surface.

It had a dark blue face and Roman numerals. Surely Sam's had regular numbers and a white face?

Her hand trembled as she slid the hand bones into a plastic bag and sealed it with duct tape so nothing would be lost during movement. She wasn't sure if she was more afraid this wasn't really Sam or that it was, despite her mind's constant barrage of delusions trying to convince her otherwise.

Had she totally lost it? Finally after two years of toying with the idea, had her mind finally snapped beneath the weight of her grief and despair?

It had to be Sam. He was the only adult male reported missing on Snakehead. There was no doubt. It was Sam.

She licked her lips but her mouth was too dry for it to do any good. A raven screeched, its call echoing, thundering between the narrow gap in the rock. She slid one finger beneath the silver watchband, freed it from the twig that had snagged it.

Then she turned the watch over. The two bones it encircled ground together with an unnatural clunk that made her jump. They twisted in ways that absolutely were not human.

The back of the watch was coated with bile-green algae. She rubbed it with her fingernail. Indentations of an inscription slowly emerged.

LR. She kept rubbing, hoping to reveal more. But that was it. Just the two letters.

Sarah rocked back onto her haunches, the river bubbling past her as if chuckling at a private joke. She wasn't certain if she should laugh or cry at her discovery.

Good news. It meant she wasn't insane.

Bad news. Sam was still out there somewhere. Which meant Josh was as well.

And who the hell was LR and why hadn't anyone reported him missing?

CHAPTER 16

Thursday, June 20, 2007: Albany, NY

The vibration of his cell phone startled Alan awake. He groaned and pushed the blonde off his numb arm. Somehow they'd ended up crossways over the bed, his pants balled up into a makeshift pillow.

"Leave it be, baby," she crooned, tracing a finger along his lips.

He ignored her and groped for the phone. Finally, he untangled it from the Italian silk and flipped it open, checking the caller ID. "This isn't a good time, Jack."

"Time is one thing you don't have, my friend. Tick tock."

"What do you want?" Alan couldn't wait until this deal was done and he could sever all ties to the former FBI agent. Permanently. But, even retired, Jack Logan had the connections

Alan needed, so he put up with him as a necessary evil.

"My 4.2 million for starts. Wright's been dead two weeks now. Have you made your move yet?"

Alan rolled over, placing his back to the blonde. "No. But I will, soon. It's not as easy as it sounds."

"Why not? The judge signed off on Durandt's being declared dead, didn't he? What's holding you back?"

Alan shoved off the bed and strolled into the bathroom. The blonde followed. He shut the door in her face. The room service tray from last night sat on the vanity, a half-eaten plate of fruit and two empty champagne flutes. He grabbed a piece of honeydew and sat on the toilet seat. "Why the rush? You know I can't move on the money until things cool down after the wedding."

"Better make that an elopement, lover boy," Logan replied. Alan frowned. He could hear the other man's superior grin over the airwaves. "Korsakov's getting out."

Alan choked on the piece of fruit and jumped to his feet. "What the hell. Are you sure?"

"Certain as the day is long. Seems an appellate court finally ruled in his favor, overturned his conviction on a technicality. Without the government's star witness to testify, he's going to walk."

"When?" Alan gulped, forcing the fruit down, ignoring the burn. He had more important things to worry about than choking to death in some second rate Albany hotel room.

"Hearing is this morning. Unless the US attorney can pull a rabbit out of his hat, he'll be out by afternoon."

Alan paced the small space, his hand tightening on the phone he clutched to his ear. "Still, no reason to panic. As far as he knows, Stan died on that mountain two years ago."

"Hell, as far as *we* know, that is what happened. Except for the minor fact that Leo Richland vanished as well."

Alan had a sneaking suspicion Logan knew more about Richland's disappearance than he was letting on. The FBI agent sure got to Hopewell in a hell of a hurry once they found Stan and started the Wright scam. Who's to say Logan hadn't actually been in the area before his "arrival" with that female feeb, maybe even long enough to ensure their partner in crime's silence?

But then what the hell had Logan done with Stan and the kid? He had almost as much to lose as Alan did if they showed up now. With Richland gone missing, he had to assume they were still alive. Somewhere. Which was why he'd had Logan outfit Sarah's house, computer and cell phone with the most sophisticated surveillance equipment available. She couldn't sneeze without Alan knowing about it.

"Why would Korsakov come here?" Alan asked, running all the angles in his mind. "He doesn't know about the money."

"Maybe to visit an old friend, his former lawyer. Who coincidentally has taken up with the widow of the man who betrayed him, stole seven years of his life. Or maybe to get revenge on Stan by killing his woman? Who knows, but either way we have to move fast."

"Are you sure he's coming here?"

"He's got a first class ticket on the red eye to JFK tonight. I don't think he's headed to visit the family on Brighton Beach."

"Damn. How did he find out? I haven't spoken with him in years."

"Man's connected. And he has a long memory—you know these Russians. They could teach Machivelli a thing or two about revenge served cold."

"Yeah, yeah. What are we going to do?"

"You get the wife, make up some kind of excuse. I'll pick her up, get her clear."

Alan felt his bullshit meter rev into overdrive. After Alan had hired him to find Stan,

Logan had backtracked, followed the money trail just as he had. Logan was the only other person who knew that Sarah was the key to getting the money. Was this a trick so Logan could get to Sarah, use her himself?

He glanced at his reflection in the mirror. Noted the wrinkles and worry lines creasing his forehead, the slump to his shoulders. Immediately he braced himself, pulled in his gut, rolled his shoulders back. He flashed himself a high-roller's grin. Logan had brains, but not enough to outsmart Alan.

"I'll meet you in Hopewell, usual place." The abandoned caretaker's shack below the dam was secluded and rarely used. A perfect spot for clandestine meetings. Or murders. Which it may come to if Logan tried anything.

"I'll call you when I get close. Bring the wife."

Alan snapped the phone shut without responding. Like hell he would. He wasn't letting Sarah out of his sight until they were safely wed and on a plane to the Caymans.

Damn the timing, though. It was the first day he'd taken time to have some fun in weeks. Being so close to Sarah, playing the fool in love, was nearly driving him crazy. Like two days ago when he'd surprised her by taking over a picnic lunch.

He remembered walking up the path, seeing her kneeling in the front garden, that tight ass of hers rocking back and forth as she pulled weeds. He'd wanted nothing more than to shove her face down in the dirt, plow her so hard and deep that she'd cry out, beg for more.

Except of course, Sarah didn't cry. Sarah never cried, only once in the two years he'd known her. Lately Alan's fantasies had revolved around the myriad of ways he'd someday make her cry. He yearned to see her tears of joy, tears of passion, tears of anger, and finally tears of fear when she begged for her life.

He looked down, admiring the erection his fantasies had wrought. No sense wasting such a good hard piece of wood. Not with a woman bought and paid for outside the door. A woman whose tears he could command.

He glanced at the Rolex on his wrist. Just enough time to finish his fun here, get cleaned up, grab the engagement ring he'd been waiting for the right time to present, and sweet talk his bride-to-be into eloping to an exotic Caribbean island.

He'd beat both Korsakov and Logan at their own game. If he set it up right, they'd kill each other by the time he returned with the money.

"Sarah!" Hal's voice echoed between the narrow walls of the chasm. "You all right down there?"

Sarah shielded her eyes from the sun and raised her head. During her wait, she'd been able to uncover the rest of the body's upper torso and had wrapped the head in a garbage bag so it wouldn't separate from the body. It had been slow, meticulous work, but now that she knew it wasn't Sam, somehow the time had sped by.

Hal leaned over the cliff's edge, a rope coiled in his hand.

"I'm fine," Sarah called back. "Come on down, the water's lovely."

He vanished for a moment. The rope sailed out, uncoiling above her, then fell in an arc to slap against the rock face about four feet away from Sarah. Hal dropped over the side and quickly rappelled down to join her. He wore his wetsuit beneath his climbing harness. Always a stickler for the rules, a climbing helmet was strapped to his head. He swayed above her, then finally picked a spot on a boulder on the opposite side of the skeleton to land on.

With his wet suit clinging to him, Sarah realized how gaunt he'd become since she'd last seen him in it. The memory hit her and she clapped a hand over her mouth. Idiot, how could she

have said the water was nice?

Today was June 20. Two years ago tomorrow Lily Waverly had plunged off the Upper Falls and died.

Hal said nothing, was intent on organizing his gear and assessing the situation.

Somehow, Sarah always thought of Lily's death as happening a long time—a year at least—before Sam and Josh's. In her mind, those two months she'd had with Sam and Josh were an eternity she clung to, re-living every second. But in reality, it was only a short span of seventy days that separated the two events.

Funny how she'd never thought of that before. Hal's pack lurched to one side and she steadied him with a hand braced against his back.

"I'm sorry," she said in a voice that barely carried over the sound of the rapids. "I should have called someone else."

He kept his head down, shaking it as if her words were meaningless. "Like who? There is no one else."

Sarah wished there was some way she could erase the resignation and fatigue she heard in his voice. She'd talk to the Colonel, he was president of the village council. Surely they could find funds to hire more help for Hal somewhere in the budget. Maybe send the Colonel's wife after another of those government grants.

Hal spread a body bag flat across the rock and anchored it beneath his foot. The current lapped at it, trying to yank it away.

"It's not Sam."

He glanced up at her. "Are you sure?"

"The watch. It's not Sam's."

He pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "Looks like we've a mystery on our hands. Any ideas who it might be?"

"Some guy with the initials LR, I'm guessing from the inscription on the watch."

He handed her a pair of vinyl gloves and slid a pair on himself. Then he knelt down and leaned forward, grasping the corpse by the shoulders. He gently tugged. The torso raised out of the water a few inches, then stopped.

"I think his foot is wedged beneath one of the rocks," Sarah said. "I was afraid to get too aggressive."

"He feels pretty loose." Hal felt the man's chest without opening the shirt or jacket. "Bag of bones." He released his grip and sat back. "We got everything documented?"

"Everything above the surface. How do you want to work this?"

Despite the cold water, Sarah kept her hands immersed, hoping to keep the slime and decomposed fat covering them minimized. Although regulations required her to wear them, at this point the vinyl gloves would only serve to allow the goo already coating her hands to soak into her skin. It would be days before she'd be able to totally erase the smell of acrid-too-sweet rotting organic material.

Hal's face remained neutral. He tilted his head, examined the angle of the fallen boulders, the depth of the water, the strength of the current. "I'll go under, try to free him. Then we'll keep him as close to one piece as we can, slide him into the bag." He double-checked his safety line and rolled off the rock into the current.

Sarah lay spread-eagle over her boulder, wedging one foot in a crevice, anchoring him. Although the water appeared shallow, no higher than waist deep, the currents were treacherous. Snakebelly's bottom was filled with centuries of decomposing debris, jagged fallen rocks, and snarled tree limbs covered with slick algae and mud. The real danger would be if Hal became trapped down there, wedged in and unable to surface.

He stood for a moment, testing his footing, one hand braced against the rock wall. "It drops off just here," he said, nodding to a spot about two feet before him.

He took one step forward, then another. The water pulled him under, out of sight. Sarah held her breath, scanning the dark waters anxiously. Visibility was less than a foot. The only sign of Hal was the swirl of debris bobbing up to the surface as he worked it free.

Her chest grew tight, burning with the lack of oxygen. Twenty seconds, she told herself, starting an internal countdown. If he's not back up in twenty seconds, nineteen, eighteen—

The water parted with a loud splash. Hal hauled himself back to his rock and leaned against it, waves crashing against his back, as he gasped for breath. Water sluiced off his helmet and down the sides of his face. "Think I got it. You take the top, I'll take the bottom. We'll float him up, then roll him onto the bag."

"It's a plan." Sarah had to get her other foot wet, balancing on a submerged tree limb to get in position. Icy water filled her boot. Her foot screamed with pins and needles and her balance was precarious at best as she fought the current. Hal drew in several deep breaths, preparing to submerge again when a voice called down from above.

"Hey, Chief!" Gerald Merton's bellow bounced from the cliff walls.

"What?" Hal shouted back.

Gerald held a radio over the edge, waving with it. "There's a lady calling. Says she has to talk to you right away."

"Sonofa—" Hal sputtered, his face tightening. "I'm a little busy here, Gerald."

"I told her. She says it's important."

"It will have to wait," Hal shouted, his voice taking on an angry edge Sarah had never heard before. Hal never lost his cool. Never. The muscle at his jaw began to knot then twitch.

"She says she's with the FBI."

CHAPTER 17

Sam stared through his binoculars down at the house that had once been his. It was only a little past two, he'd made good time coming down the mountain. He leaned deeper into the shadows of the pin oak, the tree's bark rough against his skin. He'd debated driving the whole way into town, but there was no way he could do that, not without being seen.

Even a sleepy town like Hopewell would notice a dead man walking.

He slid his hand across his shaved scalp, slicking away sweat born more of nerves than heat or humidity. Only one chance to get this right—and Lord knew, his track record wasn't in his favor.

No one at home. He returned the binoculars to his pack and brought out his bug detector. He knew from previous expeditions that Alan had every room covered except for the attic and the bathrooms. Hopefully he hadn't decided to invest in more of the motion-sensitive cameras.

Sam hoisted his pack onto his shoulders and crept through the foliage until he was directly behind his house. He hesitated. It was always so painful, coming home and being unable to speak with Sarah, leaving her behind. But it was too dangerous. He had to think of Josh.

Now, thanks to Korsakov's release, he no longer had the luxury of playing it safe.

An expanse of open lawn spread out between the forest and the bathroom window that was his target.

He stood still, listening. No cars approaching. He sprinted through the grass until he

reached the cluster of lilac bushes outside their bedroom windows. Dead blooms still clung to the branches. He rubbed one between his fingers, inhaling deeply. Sarah always slept with the window open, loved smelling the lilacs in the spring and the peonies and roses in the summer.

Sam duck walked along the foundation of the house until he reached the bathroom window. He activated the small palm-sized surveillance detector. The screen glowed green. Good to go.

He pried the screen loose and pushed the window up. The pack went in first, then Sam followed, swinging his leg over the windowsill. He used his foot to drop the toilet lid down, wincing at the sudden clang of porcelain in the empty house. Nothing happened. No one came. The house was silent. He eased himself the rest of the way inside.

Because of Alan's surveillance cameras he was confined to the bathroom. Even in this cramped and crowded room, he still felt Sarah's presence. The cobalt blue tiles they had chosen and laid themselves, the scent of her shampoo—honey and almonds—the way her robe hung from the door, inviting him like an old friend.

He couldn't resist, nuzzling his face deep into the folds of the soft material, pretending it was Sarah who caressed him. Soon, soon, he promised himself.

The old railroad clock in the front hall chimed the hour. Three o'clock. Josh would be coming off the bus from day camp, and for the first time in ages Sam wouldn't be there to meet him.

He blew his breath out in frustration. It would be worth it when Josh was reunited with Sarah. He leaned forward, pouring himself a glass of water from the small pedestal sink. The gun resting at the small of his back nudged him, a not so subtle reminder that you can't outrun fate.

The crunch of gravel alerted him to a car's arrival. He stood near the window, listening. The carport was on the other side of the house. He strained to hear footsteps on the porch that ended at the kitchen door Sarah always used. Nothing.

"Sarah!" A man's voice bellowed from the front room.

Sam jumped, gagging on the water. He carefully returned his glass to the sink top, his hand trembling with fury as he recognized the voice. Alan.

He drew his gun, hating the weight in his hand, but no longer feeling clumsy with the semi-automatic. It had been a learning process, one that had cost him some blood before he figured out how to work the slide without catching the skin between his thumb and finger, but he'd eventually become a half-decent shot. Nowhere near as good as Sarah or the Colonel, but he sure as hell could shoot the stuffing out of a hay bale from twenty yards.

Edging the door open a crack, he held the gun ready, the acrid smell of gun cleaner replacing Sarah's scent in his nostrils. Alan called Sarah's voice again, then pushed open the bedroom door. His footsteps echoed from the oak floorboards. Then Sam saw the man himself.

His teeth ground together and he wondered how Alan could not hear it from where he stood not six feet away. Alan stood in front of Sarah's mirror, combed one hand through his hair, then sat down on the bed. Sam watched, his finger stroking the gun's trigger guard. Alan stretched a hand beneath Sarah's pillow, pulled out a small, velvet-covered journal.

"Where would Damian have taken them?" Alan mimicked Sarah's voice, using a high-pitched whine that was nothing at all like what she really sounded like. "I'll find them. I have to." A thunk sounded as Alan hurled the book across the room, hitting the side of the dresser. It landed on the floor mere inches beyond the bathroom door. "Bitch! You're meant to be thinking about me. I'm the man right here in front of you! What have you gone and done now?"

The bedsprings creaked as Alan leaned back and reached for the telephone on the nightstand. "Colonel Godwin? Hi, it's Alan. Yeah, I know I wasn't supposed to get home from my meeting until tomorrow, but I just missed Sarah so much, that—"

Sam cringed at the other man's tone of sincerity. Hell, he'd believe him—if he didn't know the real Alan, if the man hadn't sent an assassin to kill Sam and his son.

"She's where? Up on the mountain and she found a body? Who is it?" Alan sat up, sliding off the bed and back onto his feet. "No, don't tell her I called. I want to surprise her. Yeah, maybe tonight's the night. Thanks, sir, I appreciate that."

He hung up and moved toward the bathroom. Sam tensed, held his breath. He knew he should stop looking through the cracked door, turn away to avoid detection. But the desire to confront the man who had destroyed his life, to have an opportunity to maybe even kill him, was too strong.

Alan stepped closer. Sam gripped the doorknob, really to explode into action. If Alan took one more step, if he reached for the door, if he looked up and saw Sam's eye in the tiny slit watching him...

Scenarios flew through Sam's mind faster than his pulse pounded. A bead of sweat slid from his forehead into his eye, stinging. He blinked hard, his gaze never leaving the tiny sliver that was his view into the bedroom. Just one more step.

Alan saved himself by stopping in front of the mirror, addressing his favorite audience, his own reflection. "Son of a bitch! First I have Korsakov breathing down my neck, now the cops will be crawling all over the place if that's Leo Richland they found."

He banged the bedroom door open and stalked from the room before Sam could hear any more.

Leo Richland was dead? How? When? Sam sat on the toilet and stared at his gun. Probably Alan had killed him. He raised the gun, sighted it on the roses that covered the shower curtain. Could still kill Alan now, one less person to worry about. He'd be picked up on the cameras, but who really cared if it kept Sarah and Josh safe?

He jerked his hand as if a bullet really were zooming through the gun barrel, causing it to recoil. No, he couldn't kill Alan, not until he had Sarah safe. It would raise too many questions, alert Korsakov.

But he had to get a message to her—and he couldn't risk Alan blundering into him while he was stuck here in the bathroom. He glanced around, trying to think of a way to leave a message that Alan wouldn't see. Then his gaze settled on the mirror. When he was a kid, he used to leave nasty messages for his sisters to find when they came out of the shower.

Stupid kid's trick, but it would work. Sarah always liked to take a shower after a hike, definitely before bed.

He stood and leaned over the sink, exhaling his breath onto the mirror. It wasn't the way he'd planned this, but then again nothing was.

CHAPTER 18

Sarah helped Hal wrestle the awkward package of decomposed remains through the scrub and back to the road. Gerald Merton lagged behind, wheezing as he carried the rest of their equipment and yelping every time a branch snapped back in his face.

"If you'd hurry it up, you'd catch them," Hal yelled over his shoulder, his tone harsh.

Sarah jerked to a stop, the foot of the vinyl body bag almost slipping from her hands. It wasn't like Hal to lash out like that. Hal said nothing, merely turned his glare from Gerald to her. His face was red, sweat rolling off his nose and brow. He made a noise of disgust when Gerald

stumbled on a root, then started up the trail again, pulling her along as she tried not to disturb their delicate cargo.

Sarah wasn't exactly enjoying the grisly task, even though she was certain the body didn't belong to Sam, but Hal was more upset than she'd ever seen him before. Not just upset. Angry. As if the dead man had chosen an especially inconvenient time to surface. With the anniversary of Lily's death tomorrow, she guessed he had.

They transferred the bag into the back of Gerald's Excursion. He fussed a bit about the smell and water, but Hal cut his whining short by stomping away to peel off his wetsuit and change back into jeans and his uniform shirt.

"Geez, who put a rattler in his cornflakes?" Gerald asked as he and Sarah packed rolled up blankets around the corpse to keep it from sliding around the rear of the Excursion. "Never seen him so antsy. Not even when..." he trailed off, his gaze darting from the body bag to her.

"When we pulled Lily out of Snakebelly," she finished for him, her voice low and solemn. Lily's body had been so battered and bruised, she'd rolled around inside the body bag like a rag doll. They'd lowered one of the Search and Rescue's wire mesh stretchers down and strapped Lily into it for fear of doing more damage as they hoisted her up. But still, Hal had insisted on zipping open the bag, unwrapping the plastic shroud and looking for himself.

Shuddering as she remembered the unearthly cry of despair that was the only sound Hal had uttered that long day, Sarah glanced over her shoulder. Hal was behind his GMC Jimmy, one arm rising up in the air as he tugged his t-shirt over his head. She was glad it was her rope they had left behind in case they needed to search Snakebelly further—and she'd do her best to be sure it wasn't Hal who returned to do the searching.

"Lily. Yeah, right," Gerald muttered, slamming the door on the anonymous dead man and their conversation. "Tell him I'll get everything ready and meet him down the mountain."

He drove off, giving the large SUV too much gas and fishtailing over the rutted logging road. Sarah watched the cloud of dust in his wake until she heard the chime of Hal opening the Jimmy's door.

"You coming?" he called as the engine kicked over with a low snarl. She grabbed her pack and jumped into the passenger seat. They headed down the narrow, twisting dirt road.

"Want me to drop you home?"

"No, the Rockslide will be fine."

"Suit yourself."

They jostled over the road in silence for several minutes. Even Hal's driving seemed changed—sloppy, careless, over-compensating for curves, almost dropping one wheel off the edge of the road several times. Sarah gripped the side of her seat and pumped an imaginary brake pedal with her foot.

"You and Alan should still take off, get out of here for a long weekend," he surprised her by saying.

"What's so special about this weekend that everyone is trying to get rid of me?" she asked, trying to make a joke of it.

"I'm asking the Colonel for a town council meeting tomorrow. It's past time they knew how I really feel about how things have been running around here lately."

He was hunched forward over the steering wheel as if ready to wrestle it from the dash. His teeth were clamped so tight she could see the muscle spasming at the corner of his jaw. Then it hit her—Friday, tomorrow, was June 21st.

"Hal, wait for another day. Not tomorrow."

He shook his head, his gaze riveted on the road ahead. "No. It has to be tomorrow."

"But tomorrow is the anniversary of when—" She choked on her words as he turned to

stare at her, ignoring the hairpin curve ahead of them. "When Lily died."

They almost spun off the road before he corrected their trajectory. Sarah bounced forward, into the dash, bracing both hands against it.

"That's why it has to be tomorrow," he finally said. "And why I don't want you around to get caught in the middle." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, twice. "At first I was angry, real angry. When Sam came and told me the insurance wouldn't pay up, that I was going to lose the house after all—"

"It wasn't his fault," Sarah protested. "No company will pay on a...when someone takes their own life. He tried to help you."

"I don't need charity!"

His words barraged her. This wasn't Hal, the man who never raised his voice, who always shunned the spotlight, simply doing his job without fanfare or complaint. Sarah stared at him in concern. She'd been so buried by her own grief that she had been blind to the changes going on in her friend. What else had she missed?

"Never did need no charity. Not now, not then. What I need," he drew in a ragged breath and his voice lowered, "is for people to see the consequences of their actions. They need to know they can't just treat people like they're nothing."

"Hal, be careful, you might lose your job."

He snorted a short-lived laugh. "I don't give a shit about the job. This is about the town and the people in it. It's got nothing to do with any job. Come tomorrow, they'll see that. They'll understand."

She drew back in her seat, wrapping one hand around the armrest as they bounced onto the paved road leading into town. He braked hard, pulling up with a jerk in front of the Rockslide.

"You mind what I say, Sarah," he said as she opened her door and slid free from the passenger seat. "Tomorrow morning, you and Alan take off for the weekend. Don't try to interfere."

The staccato clacking of a man's boots against linoleum jolted Caitlyn awake. She rubbed her eyes, took a breath, trying to re-orient herself. Her heart refused to listen to reason, instead it sped up in excitement, just as it had every day of her life until she was nine.

That sound meant only one thing: her father was home. Every day, she'd listen for the sound of his footsteps as he'd walk up the path, cross through the kitchen and enter the living room where she'd be waiting. She'd abandon everything to race across the floor and leap into the air, certain he would catch her no matter how high she flew.

Those few moments in his arms were always the best part of any day. She'd never again feel so safe, so warm, so loved.

Idiot, she cursed her errant memories. Just meant the Chief wore cowboy boots. Like so many of these local yokels.

She straightened in her seat behind the single desk in the spartan office. After phoning when she stopped for gas outside Albany and being told it would be a few hours before the Hopewell Chief of Police could grant her an audience, she had finished her drive through the twisting mountain roads but had still managed to arrive before Chief Waverly. She'd called ahead to give him fair warning that the FBI was coming, to let him get his house in order, maybe even pull the Durandt case files so she wouldn't be wasting her time. Instead she'd been greeted by a yakky old shrew of a postmistress who refused to allow her entry to the Chief's office.

Like that would stop her. She hadn't quite had to go to the extreme of pulling her

weapon, but after listening to the lady's yammering, it became a definite possibility. Once she convinced the postmistress, Victoria was her name, that yes, she was indeed a bonafide agent of the federal government, Caitlyn had proceeded to make herself at home in the Chief's chair while the postmistress kept up her monologue about terrorist activity and Homeland Security money and strange goings on at the dam and it was about time the government sent someone "real" to investigate it.

Finally, customers at the post office pulled the old biddy away. Caitlyn had taken advantage of the relative quiet to open her laptop and review her files.

And drift to sleep. Now she glanced through the open door that separated the post office from the police department. The afternoon sunlight backlit the man. He had a lean, Gary Cooper build, complete with a cowboy hat he hadn't yet removed, shadowing his face. His stride was that of a man accustomed to carrying the weight of responsibility on his shoulders and the weight of a gun on his hip.

He wore jeans and a khaki shirt with a small patch sewn onto the sleeve. No other insignia. A pair of aviator style sunglasses dangled from the neck of the white T-shirt visible between the unbuttoned top buttons of his uniform shirt. He came to a halt in front of his desk, his head tilting up, finally exposing his face as he raked her with an eagle-sharp gaze. He had high cheekbones, bright blue eyes, a narrow nose that had been broken at least once. A muscle twitched at the corner of his jaw as he stood, staring down at her for a long, silent moment.

"Agent Tierney," he said in a slow drawl, drawing her name out as if he were savoring it on his lips. "Nice to meet you again. You've gained some weight. Looks good on you."

Caitlyn met his gaze, watched as amusement crowded out his annoyance. A smile parted his lips and she gave him one in return. "Chief Waverly. Nice to see you as well. Looks like you've lost weight. Been busy?"

They continued their staring match, neither conceding the contest for several seconds. Usually Caitlyn would have relinquished control of his desk, his environment, back to a local law officer—any little courtesy to convince them to give her full cooperation.

But Waverly struck a chord in her. When he looked at her just now something had sparked in his eyes, in the way his glance had lingered the tiniest bit too long on her lips, her body. Damn it if her body hadn't responded with an answering spark. She shifted in her seat. No, not spark, it was more than that.

More than she'd felt in a long time. But she'd be damned if she'd let him know that. Besides, she had work to do.

Work that should have her leaping from his chair, spouting off an apology for trespassing in his space, politely thanking him for helping her. But instead, she kept her seat—his seat—and fought him for control in an adolescent staring match.

His chuckle echoed through the tiny space, breaking the silence. He spun on his heel to toss his hat on one of the hooks beside the door, grabbed a metal chair and slid into it, his long, lean legs stretching out in front of him, ankles crossed. "What brings you back to Hopewell? Does it have anything to do with the corpse I just dragged out of the river?"

"Actually I came about the Durandt case."

His smile slid away as he straightened, one eye twitching at the mention of Durandt.

"I've found some irregularities."

His gaze darted to the door. "Guess you'd better come with me, then."

She scrambled from behind the desk, grabbing her bag and hurrying to catch up with him as he marched out the door without holding it for her. *Wow, mention Sam Durandt and look who's got a bee up his butt all the sudden.* Although, she had to admit, it was a rather cute butt. She caught up with him as he turned onto Main Street. "Where we going?"

"You ate yet? I'm starved."

"Lunch? It's almost four-thirty. Yes, I've had lunch."

"Well then, you can talk with Sarah while I eat." He paused before the Rockslide café and this time he did open the door for her, held it like a proper gentleman. "Seeing as she's the one who found the body this morning."

Caitlyn laid her hand on his arm, stopping him in the doorway. "Sarah Durandt?" she asked in a low voice. "She found a body on the mountain? Today?"

"Yep. From the looks of things, it's been there sometime. I'm not sure it will help you much. She's saying it can't be Sam." He nudged past her, calling out to the man behind the counter and asking for a bacon-cheeseburger.

Caitlyn stood there for a moment, trying to twist the permutations into a clear picture. When she looked up, all eyes were on her. The man behind the counter, Sarah Durandt's father she remembered, but couldn't fix on his name, held his spatula aloft as if it were a weapon. Hal Waverly's gaze seemed weary and bemused. He sat beside an older woman, Victoria, the post-mistress who'd almost induced her to commit felony assault earlier. Victoria cocked her head and flat out glared at Caitlyn.

Caitlyn stepped inside, the door closing with a bang accompanied by a jingle of bells. Sitting alone at a booth, her face flushed with sun, a full glass of lemonade in front of her, was Sarah Durandt. Sarah met Caitlyn's eyes without flinching although her lips flattened and went pale as recognition hit.

"You all remember Agent Tierney, don't you?" Waverly said in way of introductions. "From the FBI?"

"This isn't the time—" Sarah's father started, leaving his post at the grill despite the smoking slab of bacon behind him.

Sarah held up a hand, silencing him. Caitlyn marveled at the woman's composure. As Sarah's fingers tightened around her glass, Caitlyn caught a hint of what her control was costing. Ah, a kindred spirit—keep up appearances to the outside world, even if inside you're ready to shatter into a million pieces.

"Mrs. Durandt," Caitlyn said, taking the two steps she needed to reach Sarah's booth. She ignored the others although she was very aware they were listening closely. "I think I owe you an apology."

Sarah looked up, surprise flickering over her face before she replaced it with a fake smile, the kind reserved for strangers stumbling into a private conversation. "An apology?"

"When we met two years ago, I'm afraid I wasn't as sensitive to your needs as I should have been. There were—" Caitlyn broke off, searching for the right words to explain everything that had been battering at her during the time of the Wright investigation, "extenuating circumstances."

The words sounded flat. Sarah raised an eyebrow, then looked down to concentrate on her fingers wrapped around the sweaty glass of lemonade. "What do you want, Agent Tierney?"

"Just to offer my apology. And a chance to explain. Is there a place we can go to talk?"

Sarah shot a glance at the others eagerly listening, then stared at Caitlyn for a long, hard moment. For a second, Caitlyn caught a glimpse of the steel she'd seen in Sarah two years ago, the woman who would bend to the horror of her circumstances but who would never, ever break. Sarah's eyes narrowed slightly, then she nodded and slid out of the booth.

"Come with me, Agent Tierney."

Sarah left the eager ears at the Rockslide behind and led the FBI agent outside. Two boys

zoomed past on skateboards but otherwise they had the street to themselves. She crossed Main Street to St. Andrew's. The brick church with its peaked roof and squared off bell tower would be cool and empty at this hour. She tugged on the heavy oak door and held it open for Caitlyn Tierney.

The FBI agent appeared very different from the last time Sarah had seen her. Back then, she'd looked gaunt, out of place with her ill-fitting clothes and pained expression. But now she radiated confidence and strength. Her hair was longer, styled in a shoulder length bob, her clothes simple but elegant, accentuating her curves without flaunting them.

"I was there," Sarah started, sliding into a pew beneath Josh's favorite stained glass window. St. George and the Dragon. "When they killed Damian Wright. He wouldn't tell me where he buried them." She looked down at her hands curled in her lap, her nails ragged and torn from her excursion on the mountain. Caitlyn's nails were short but smooth, her fingers slender and tapered like a musician's. She had pale, creamy skin that matched her auburn hair and blue eyes.

To her surprise, Caitlyn reached a hand to cover Sarah's. "I didn't know that. That took a lot of courage. Are you all right?"

No one had asked her that. Not in a long time, not meaning it, not wanting to know the answer. Sarah glanced up. Caitlyn's expression was open, concerned. "You really want to know?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

Sarah thought she was telling the truth. She sighed, the whooshing noise quickly devoured by the large, empty space. "I thought I would feel better, knowing that he was dead, that he couldn't hurt anyone else. I thought I would be able to, well, move on. Instead, it feels as if everything is moving on without me."

Caitlyn nodded. "Like you're trapped. Like you need to find a path out, some kind of closure."

"Exactly." Color from the stained glass window played off Caitlyn's pale skin and her blue jacket. Her silk blouse was cream colored with a watercolor splash of pale mauve flowers on it. A distinct contrast to Sarah's dirt-smudged Coolmax tank top. "But I realized no one can give me closure. I have to find it for myself. That's why I went up the mountain. I promised myself I wouldn't stop until I found Sam and Josh."

"Chief Waverly said you found a body."

Sarah shivered. She'd washed her hands about half a dozen times, sanitized them with alcohol wipes, but she still felt the greasy slick of decomposition coating them. "It wasn't Sam."

"You thought it would be?"

The question surprised her. "Of course. There hasn't been anyone else reported missing on Snakehead. It had to be Sam—I was so certain..." Her voice trailed off. "I'm still not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed." She looked up. "Is that why you're here? Because of the body? But how did you know?"

"Did your husband, Sam, did he ever mention anyone by the name of Stan Diamontes? Or Grigory Korsakov?"

Sarah frowned at the unfamiliar names. "No. I've never heard of them before. Why? What's this all about?"

"How about Leo Richland? Does that name ring a bell?"

"No. Please tell me what these people have to do with Sam. Why are you really here?"

Caitlyn's fingers tightened over hers and Sarah pulled her hands away. Caitlyn grimaced, her lips creasing into a frown as she rubbed the base of her thumb with her other hand. "Sam may not have been alone up there," she finally said, her words emerging hesitantly.

"Of course he wasn't, Damian Wright was with him. And Josh." Sarah stared at the federal agent, trying to puzzle out her meaning. "You mean there was someone else, that Damian Wright had an accomplice? One of those men you mentioned?" Caitlyn said nothing. The silence tightened around them as shadows deepened the colors streaming through the window above them. "Leo Richland. LR. Those were the initials on the watch of the man I found today. LR."

Caitlyn straightened, poised to spring from the polished oak of the pew. "Really? Are you sure? Did he have any other identification?"

"I don't know. We just packaged him and Gerald, the coroner, took him to the funeral home. The State Police will probably be picking him up tomorrow, take him to their lab."

Caitlyn stood, turned to leave, but Sarah stopped her with a hand on her arm. "If it is Richland, what does that mean? Did he kill Sam instead of Wright? What about Josh? Please, I need to know what happened to my family."

Her voice broke like one of Sam's guitar strings wound too tight. A grating sound, high pitched, and too close to pleading for Sarah's comfort. She tightened her grip on Caitlyn's arm and stood to face her. "Please."

Caitlyn didn't move to release herself. She met Sarah's gaze. "As soon as I know anything, I'll let you know. I promise."

Sarah bit her lip before she could beg some more. She gave a small nod of her head and released Caitlyn. The FBI agent walked away, her shadow dancing between the stained glass reflections like a child playing hopscotch.

The door closed behind her with a solid thud that reverberated into Sarah's bones. She sagged against the end of the pew, her gaze centered on the image of the puny, mortal slaying a monster. She thought about Ahweyoh and her Thundergod, about Sam and the way she felt invincible when he wrapped his arms around her, about Josh and the trust he gave them, assuming his parents were omnipotent.

In the color-studded silence of the church, Sarah came close to tears. But what could she cry about? She now knew less than ever. She had no facts, no bodies to bury, no theories, just a bunch of meaningless names and the confession of a madman.

Most of all she had no hope. She couldn't let Caitlyn's questions stir any. That road led only to despair. Hope was her enemy, this she had learned.

Her breath echoed through her, rattling inside her chest like the ticking of a bomb ready to explode. Sarah pursed her lips at the memory. She'd felt this way before and she'd survived.

Just had to take it one day at a time, one step at a time, one breath at a time.

Hal Waverly had been finishing a greasy mound of French fries when Caitlyn returned to the Rockslide.

"Has your coroner determined the man's identity yet?" she asked, declining his offer of both a French fry and a seat beside him at the counter.

His laughter made him snort as he choked down a mouthful. The diner was filling with patrons and all eyes were once again on her, the stranger in their midst.

"Now that's the woman I remember," Hal said. "Barking out orders as she kneels in the mud, trying to photograph a crime scene that's turned into a freaking deluge. Thought then you were only trying to impress your boss, but I guess you're always like that."

"Like what?" Caitlyn demanded. Even standing beside him as he sat, he still was tall enough that she had to tilt her head to meet his gaze. "Competent? Hard-working? Knowledgeable?"

"Intense. Hyperactive." His gaze raked over her before coming to a stop on her lips.

"Excitable."

"Don't give me any of your gee-shucks we're just a small town crap," she said, surprising herself. Usually she was the consummate diplomat, especially with smaller jurisdictions. Something about Waverly brought out the bitch in her. The man exuded sexuality, no problems there. But he also raised all sorts of alarms in her. "Give me directions to this so-called coroner of yours and I'll go myself."

He shook his head, stopped just short of rolling his eyes, and wiped his mouth. "Give me a minute to settle up here and I'll drive you myself."

The last thing Caitlyn needed was to be chauffeured. But it seemed a small concession after she'd just insulted him and his police force.

"See you tomorrow night, Colonel," Waverly said as he handed over a five-dollar bill. "You'll get the rest of the council there?"

"I'll start working on it right away, Hal. Eight o'clock."

"Sounds like a plan."

He held Caitlyn's elbow as they strolled outside to his GMC Jimmy parked in front of the post office. His touch was casual, not controlling or even flirting. The warm solidity of his hand cut through the fabric of her jacket. Although she wasn't entirely certain if she liked it or not, she didn't shrug it off.

He held the door open for her, offered a hand, which she declined, to help her climb up into the SUV's passenger seat. The car had seen much more use than his office, as evidenced by the multiple travel mugs, strewn ticket books, remnants of fast food meals, a spare set of clothes hanging from the rear window, wet suit and climbing gear arranged across the rear seat, and shaving mirror attached to the passenger sun visor.

"You got a house, Waverly?" she asked, shoving the detritus aside and fastening her seat belt.

"I vaguely remember one." He adjusted his holster and radio in an automatic movement born of frequent repetition. Nestling into the seat as if it were a well-worn recliner, he stretched his long legs into the wheel-well in front of him. After placing his cell phone into the charger, he started the engine.

Caitlyn leaned forward as he placed his arm on the back of her seat, steering the SUV into a tight reverse turn. The police scanner on the dash crackled with chatter from various units. "County-wide dispatcher?"

"Only way we can afford it. Especially during tourist season. I've got three men and myself to cover over a hundred square miles and let's face it." He gave her a self-deprecating shrug. "Superman, I'm not. As you so aptly pointed out. Both times we've met."

Caitlyn sat in silence, staring at the quaint houses and shops they passed. The sun abruptly abandoned them as they entered the forest, the road turning into a corkscrew of twists and turns.

Driving it hadn't been so bad, but riding as a passenger with nothing to focus on, the winding road brought with it a wave of nausea that awakened the sleeping giant of her migraine. Not one like last night, she prayed, swallowing hard and trying to appear nonchalant as Waverly steered them from one bone-jostling curve into the next.

"It was nice that you apologized to Sarah," he said, oblivious to the stomach-roiling rollercoaster ride. "Hope you didn't upset her again during your little talk."

Caitlyn caught the edge to his voice. Don't mess with my people, it said loud and clear. "I don't think so."

"Mind telling me what's brought you all the way up here from Virginia?"

"There's a chance your corpse might be the body of a missing US Marshal," she answered, deciding to trust him with as little of the truth as possible. Not a hard choice given that she knew

almost nothing of the truth herself. Everything she discovered, most of which weren't facts but mere speculation, seemed to make the whole mess more and more complicated.

"Hmpf. You have some kind of psychic premonition Sarah was going to find this guy? That's why you came in a private vehicle instead of one of your official FBI cars?"

She slanted a glance at him. His eyes were on the road but he wore another of those infuriating smirks. "Yep. Even us small town cops have eyes in our heads. And," he turned to give her a wide-eyed nod as if imparting news-breaking information, "we can tell time as well. C'mon, Agent Tierney, fess up. Why are you really here?"

CHAPTER 19

Sarah stopped in front of her house, stood on one foot, rubbing one ankle against the back of the other. She'd scratched herself on some branches in the water while recovering the body and now was breaking out in a prickly-heat-like reaction.

She shifted her pack and continued walking. The Colonel's wife had made the expected disapproving clucks and pumped her for information after she'd returned to the Rockslide. Hal had left to take Caitlyn down to the funeral home and the Colonel was busy organizing the emergency village council meeting Hal had requested for tomorrow. He'd paused between phone calls to come out of the back room and ask if she wanted a ride home, but she'd declined.

She needed to walk, to do something normal, prove to herself that she could. It gave her time to think. Caitlyn had named three men—could there be more bodies on Snakehead? God, what had happened up there?

The mountain loomed over her, its secrets well hidden.

Damian Wright's confession had no mention of any accomplices. It was the tale of one man and his dark obsessions. He'd spoken of his fantasies about Josh, described in loving detail what he'd done to him, but had only given a vague admission that he'd killed Sam. The most the Texas Rangers got out of him was that he'd used a knife on Sam and moved the body so he could take his time with Josh.

It had been the stuff of nightmares, the evil Wright sowed with gleeful abandon. The evil he forced others to live with. Last summer Sarah had vomited after reading the transcript, retching her guts out in the claustrophobic cinder block police station restroom. When she'd returned to the motel in Huntsville, she'd showered repeatedly then stayed in bed the next day, drapes drawn, door barricaded against a world that created a man like Wright.

Now, for the first time she wondered if he had told the truth. If he had even known the truth. Why would he lie?

"Sarah." Alan's voice sounded eerily like the Colonel's wife as he called out from her front door. He held an empty saucepan in his hand and wore one of her aprons. She stepped past him, tossing her pack into the corner. "Look at you! You're dehydrated, exhausted, sunburned and is that poison ivy?"

Sarah glanced down at the welts on her ankle. "Nonsense. I've tramped through these woods all my life and never got poison ivy. Not once."

She reached down to itch the collection of red scratches and almost fell over as the world darkened and spun her around like a whirligig. Alan dropped the pot with a clatter and was immediately at her side.

"The Colonel told me what happened. You promised you'd take better care of yourself,"

he chided as his arms wrapped around her, hugging her to him.

"It wasn't my fault," she protested but she couldn't resist leaning back into his warmth. Her eyes were still closed and for a moment she imagined Sam's arms around her. "I'm not the one who put the body there."

"Or the cliff you jumped off of," he finished in a wry voice that was most definitely not Sam's.

Sarah startled, sat upright. The room swam around her for a moment before her vision cleared. This was the closest she'd been to a man in almost two years. Her heart revved into full throttle as a memory of Sam's hands spread flat against her belly flashed through her, reminding her how good a man could make her feel. How good Sam had made her feel.

Could she find that again with Alan? With any man?

Alan seemed to read her mind as he pulled her tight against him once more, squeezing her. He lay his chin on her shoulder, his breath rustling the sweaty tangles of her hair. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you."

He released her before she could think of a reply or pull away. Some part of her body had responded to his touch, his warm whisper of comfort. It was as if part of her had been in a coma and was now fighting its way back to life, a stirring, a tingling that made her break out in a sweat. She caught her breath and allowed him to take her hand and pull her upright.

She wobbled slightly, but not too bad. Nothing that a few liters of water wouldn't cure. Then she looked at Alan again. Beneath her red-checkered apron, he wore his best suit, the blue one that made him look like he'd just stepped out of *GQ*. He held her hand still, staring at her with an expression of concern and...desire?

She wanted to look away, to deny the need in his eyes, the need in her body, but she couldn't. Alan broke the spell, dropping her hand and darting to the kitchen. "Damn! My pasta Arrabbiata!"

A clamor of pots and pans followed. Sarah wandered into the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"It was supposed to be a surprise. I wanted to cook for you. It's a very special recipe I learned from a chef in Florence." He stirred a bubbling pot that threatened to boil over. Sarah inhaled, relishing the scents of garlic, fennel, basil and tomatoes. When Alan's sauce had simmered down and the crisis was averted, he turned to her with a sheepish grin. "I wanted everything to be perfect tonight. For you."

Sarah stared at him, one hand going to her hair, finding a cluster of nettles there. "For me?"

"Why not? You deserve to be happy, don't you?"

Before she could answer, he pressed a large glass of red wine into her hand. "Drink, you'll feel better. Then you take a nice bath, change into your most beautiful dress and we'll have a proper dinner."

He raised his own glass, clinking it against hers. She drank deeply, the rich, mellow Merlot soothing her nerves like a salve. Before she knew it, she had almost finished the glass. Alan topped it off again. With a laugh, he placed his hand on the small of her back, steering her toward the bathroom.

"After dinner, I have something special I need to ask you," he said as the door shut between them.

Sarah set the glass down on the table beside the bathtub and sagged against the sink. She had a pretty good idea what Alan wanted to ask her and she wasn't ready for it. Not at all.

He was a nice man; a dear, sweet man; a good friend. He'd waited two years for her. Could she disappoint him, hurt him like that? She cocked her head as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Somehow Alan had seen past the grief and the anger and every other excuse she'd

cloaked herself in, refusing to return to the outside world. Somehow, despite all that, he still wanted her.

She bent over to start the bath and her vision grew dark again. The wine was already hitting her hard, her toes were tingling, and she felt as if she were floating. She knew better. What she needed was water, not wine.

No, what she needed was courage. She raised the glass to her lips again. For that, wine would do better than water.

The rush of the water filling the tub echoed the whirling thoughts colliding in her brain. She didn't love Alan. But she did like him. She couldn't bear to hurt him, not after everything he'd done for her. Maybe she should say yes, let him get close, maybe with time...

Suddenly, the hair on her arms rose as if a ghost had just walked over her grave. The window was shut, the lace curtains undisturbed, no one was here except her. Yet, she could swear she felt Sam's presence, could smell the familiar tang of his sweat. It was sharper than she remembered, as if he was afraid.

She couldn't help herself. She tugged the curtains aside and stared past the lilac bushes, past the lawn into the dark shadows of Snakehead Mountain. There was no movement in the twilight. Not even a stray deer or rabbit. She was alone. Absolutely alone.

Sarah inhaled again. And smelled only the lilac bubble bath. She sank down to sit on the edge of the tub. A wave of disappointment washed over her. *Fool, it's you that's afraid, not some figment of your imagination.*

She glanced at the mirror. The steam had formed letters there. She squinted, thinking at first that she was mistaken and looked again.

Our tree, sunset—I'll explain all. I love you forever. Your MM.

Her hands clenched against the side of the tub as she stared at the letters filling her mirror. No, it couldn't be. It just couldn't. Pain stabbed between her eyes and she felt a knot tightening her throat, choking her. Her vision wavered.

She lurched up, anxious to get a closer look at the message, to show it to Alan, to prove to someone else that she wasn't crazy. She broke out in a clammy sweat. Dimly she heard the wine glass shatter on the floor as a thunderous roar overcame her. And then she felt nothing.

CHAPTER 20

Caitlyn declined to answer Hal's question about her motives. Not only because she was on shaky ground since this wasn't actually official business, but also because all her attention was focused on restraining her migraine and the accompanying nausea. She rolled her window down, sucking in the crisp evening air. After an initial attempt at further conversation, Hal left her in peace.

Finally, they arrived at a large Queen Anne house complete with a round turret and wide veranda. Hal pulled around back to where there was a gravel parking lot, a gazebo and an inviting path into a garden shielded by beech and willow trees. Serenity Grove, a sign proclaimed.

Hal grabbed his cell phone and jumped out, rocking the SUV as he slammed the door. Caitlyn closed her eyes for a brief moment, composing herself, forcing the headache into retreat, then joined him at the rear door of the mortuary.

He rang a doorbell and a moon-faced overweight man in his forties appeared a few minutes later. "Hal, didn't know you were coming down tonight."

The man's attention was focused on Caitlyn. He wore a T-shirt hidden by a large rubber apron and carried a set of black, extended length rubber gloves in his hands. "And who's your beautiful companion?"

Caitlyn was surprised by Hal's frown at Merton's leer. She offered her hand and shook his. "I'm Caitlyn Tierney, Mr. Merton. Thank you for allowing me to observe."

Merton kept her hand in his as he glanced at Hal. "Observe?"

"She's FBI," Hal answered tersely. He stepped forward, forcing Merton to both drop Caitlyn's hand and concede the point. Caitlyn followed the two men through a dark corridor to a windowless room. A stainless steel table with a sink at one end sat under the bright glare of an overhead examination light. A lighted magnification unit was poised over the head of the bed. An unopened body bag lay on the table.

Lined up on the counters were embalming chemicals, surgical instruments, a corkboard with pin ups of photographs of the recently deceased when they'd seen better days, several wigs perched on foam heads, and a multi-tiered makeup kit that would rival any Hollywood studio's.

"Sorry about the smell, ma'am." Gerald's eyes glinted with a smirk that said he wasn't sorry at all, that he was eager to see how the "lady" reacted to the stench of decomp.

"No problem," she said, meeting his eyes effortlessly. "I've been around much worse."

Which was true. The smell of body decay didn't make her stomach revolt. It was the overwhelming sickly sweet scent of carnations, roses, and a chemical room deodorizer that was meant to smell like apples and cinnamon. Combined with Merton's citrus cologne, that he apparently bathed in, Caitlyn's olfactory senses reeled.

Merton's face tightened with disappointment and he turned to address Hal, ignoring Caitlyn. "Haven't started yet, Chief. No one told me this was a rush job."

"Didn't know myself."

She took shallow breaths through her nose and stubbornly refused to reach in her bag for the jar of Vicks she always carried. Her headache began a drum roll against the back of her eyes and the bright lights didn't help any, but then she saw that Hal looked pretty wretched as well. She had the feeling those zillion or so fries he'd chowed down on weren't sitting so well right about now.

Somehow the thought eased her own discomfort. Petty, she knew, but she'd take comfort where she could find it. Spotting a box of vinyl gloves on the counter, she slid a pair on, shrugged out of her jacket and set her bag down in a safe corner. Then, as the two men watched, she approached their silent partner, the unknown corpse wrapped in its body bag.

"Mind if I do the honors?" She didn't wait for their answer, but unzipped the bag.

The corpse grinned up at her with a lopsided grimace. She didn't take it personally. Rigor mortis and post-mortem changes often created that rictus. In this case, the effect was amplified by his jaw hanging to one side and his missing teeth.

Remnants of adipocere formed greasy, brown islands of fatty tissue interposed with tufts of light-colored hair and exposed sections of skull. Caitlyn carefully worked the bag to one side, exposing only the skull.

"Ruler?" she asked, holding out a hand without looking.

She slid a neck support below the head, elevating it so she could examine the entire circumference. Merton rummaged through a drawer, eventually pulling forth a white plastic T-square with large numerals on it. He slapped it into her waiting hand and danced back, ready to pounce if she needed anything.

Caitlyn adjusted the ruler. A flash and whirl of a camera told her that Hal knew his job. He circled behind her, taking photos from every angle as she positioned the ruler. She carefully combed through the corpse's remaining hair, depositing the remnants of grey algae, dead leaves

and other organic debris into Petri dishes Hal held open for her.

Her headache retreated as she concentrated on the corpse. She liked the way Hal anticipated her needs, moving with her in a well-choreographed dance. The only sound in the room was the occasional sound of the camera and Merton's nasal wheezing.

Caitlyn parted the clump of hair above the man's left ear and straightened. "Bingo," she said, rolling her shoulders.

"Entrance wound?" Hal asked, shooting several close-ups.

Merton crowded against them, eagerly leaning over the table, blocking the light. Caitlyn used her arm to push him aside. "Excuse me, sir. You don't mind me borrowing this, do you?"

He shook his head silently, stepping back far enough for her to slide the magnifying lamp over. She clicked it on, centered it over the wound. "Entrance wound," she confirmed. "Look at the stellate damage to the bone. That wasn't done by any animal."

"What about a blow to the head?" Hal asked. "He was found at the bottom of the gorge. Lots of chances to hit rocks and such."

Caitlyn considered this. "Maybe. But that doesn't explain this." She grabbed a pipe cleaner from the canister on the counter and probed the wound. "Look now, can you see it?"

Hal's body was nestled beside hers as he leaned down and peered through the glass. "Damn. Is that what I think it is?"

"A bullet. Looks fairly large. I'm guessing a forty caliber."

Hal gave a low whistle. "I'm impressed, Agent Tierney. But you realize there's one problem with your theory. Forty caliber ammunition is usually reserved for law enforcement officers."

"And the military. If this is Leo Richland, then he could have been shot with his own gun. In which case, we'll have ballistics on file."

Hal cleared his throat, touched her arm. Caitlyn looked up, was surprised to see the muscle at his jaw twitching as he stared at her as if she was the one who'd shot Richland.

"Mind telling me just who the hell Leo Richland is?" he asked, his voice booming through the cramped room. "Seems the least you could do, seeing as how all the sudden I'm in charge of his murder investigation."

CHAPTER 21

Sarah opened her eyes. She lay on her bed, still fully clothed, a cold washcloth draped over her forehead. Black spots danced in her vision and her head throbbed. The mattress sighed as Alan sat down beside her. His eyes filled with concern as he stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers.

"Feeling better?"

She nodded and tried to sit up, but the motion made her head spin. Alan reached behind her, propped her up on a stack of pillows.

"You scared the shit out of me," he said. She glanced up at him in surprise. Alan never swore. Never. "I called Dr. Hedeger."

"Call him back," she replied, her voice as wobbly as her vision. "Tell him I'm fine." She swung her legs around and sat upright. He circled an arm around her shoulders to steady her. "Unless he has a cure for stupidity."

"It's my fault. I should have never given you that wine." His fingers drew circles on the

bare flesh of her arm. "That's all it was, right? I mean, you'd tell me if there was something else going on. Wouldn't you, Sarah?"

Her stomach tightened as she remembered the words on the mirror. She felt her breath catch and had to swallow back an ambush of tears. If Sam was alive, then was Josh?

"Sarah? You okay?"

She nodded, her mind barraged by an avalanche of thoughts. Sam alive, Josh alive, why, how, where, why—or was it all someone's idea of a sick joke? No. No one knew her nickname for Sam.

She ignored Alan and stared past him, her gaze caught by the bright cobalt and white tiles of the bathroom beyond.

Maybe she had hallucinated it? Maybe the fatigue and wine and everything else had warped her mind, made her see what she wanted to see? She pushed to her feet, staggering a step or two, then moving with steady purpose to the bathroom. Alan followed.

"Sarah, what's wrong?"

The mirror was blank. Of course it was. She turned on the taps, as hot as they would go.

Alan grabbed her waist before she could step onto broken glass. "What are you doing? At least let me clean up this mess first."

Sarah leaned against the sink, her mouth inches away from the mirror, adding her breath to the steam. The mirror fogged over but remained stubbornly blank.

"Nothing." The word emerged against her will, but once said aloud she was forced to acknowledge it. "There's nothing."

Alan glanced at her sharply. "Now you're really scaring me. What were you expecting to see?" He tugged her away from the sink, reached past her to turn the water off and guided her back to the bedroom. He sat her down on the bed once more. "Look at you, you're a mess. Exhausted. You need a good night's sleep. No more climbing alone on the mountain."

She remained silent, staring at the billows of steam escaping from the bathroom. Alan knelt before her, blocking her view. He took her hands in his and finally she looked down, met his eyes. "Promise me. No more. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you." He squeezed her hands. "Please, Sarah. Promise me."

"All right, Alan. I promise."

JD finished hiding their bikes in a clump of sumac and turned to Julia. She was spreading a blanket out in the center of the clearing. From here they would be able to see anyone approaching the caretaker's shack or traveling on the path down from the ridge.

"What did you tell your folks?" he asked her, wiping his sweaty palms on the back of his jeans. He was excited and more than a bit nervous about spending the night with her. Did she really think all they were going to do was watch for the strange lights? Was she expecting something more from him—if so, how did he make the first move without looking like a jerk?

"Told them I was spending the night at Beth's house."

Wow. She'd actually lied to her parents so she could spend the night with him. He stuck his hand in his back pocket, his fingertip tracing the edge of the well-worn condom package. Maybe tonight was the night he'd finally get a chance to use it.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder in that movement he found mesmerizing, that always seemed to slow time to a crawl, allowing each strand to fall perfectly in formation. "What did your dad say when you showed him the pictures from last night?"

He shrugged and looked away. "Basically that I was wasting my time and I'd be better off working with him and getting paid off the books. Said they had a shipment of new TV's to take

over to a motel in Saranac and he could get his boss to pay me in cash."

She pursed her lips in disappointment, that little crease forming in her chin. God, how he wanted to kiss her, see how she tasted. He knelt beside her on the blanket.

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to find out what's really going on and proof to everyone that —" He faltered, it was hard to find the right words when she was looking at him that way. "That there is something going on," he finished triumphantly.

"The lights we saw last night definitely came from down here," she said, pulling their cameras from her bag. "Maybe we'll get lucky and catch them in the act."

JD wondered who "they" were and what they might be in the act of doing, but the thoughts were quickly cast aside as he thought about the way she'd smiled at him when she said "we'll get lucky."

Oh yeah.

CHAPTER 22

Caitlyn was saved by the bell. Or rather, by the Dixie Chicks ring tone on her cell phone. She stripped off her gloves, grabbed the phone and glanced at the number. Royal, calling from California.

"Excuse me," she told the men. "I have to take this."

She stepped out of the room, closing the door behind her as she connected the call. "It's Caitlyn."

"Hi again, sweetheart. You said to update you on the Korsakov thing." He drew the last word out to two syllables, sounding like a gangsta wannabe.

"Yeah. What's up?"

Hal came out of the embalming room, joining her. Pressing the phone to her ear, she crossed the hallway, pushing another door open. She stepped inside the dark room, flicked on the light, and shut the door in Hal's face. A closed casket sat about eight feet in front of her, surrounded by linen draped folding chairs and bushels of flowers.

"Judge took a long lunch, otherwise I'd have gotten back to you sooner. Right now I'm looking at a free Russian waltzing his way down the courthouse steps."

Caitlyn leaned against the door. Her headache pounded so loud she could barely hear Royal. The smell of carnations was overpowering. "You're right there with him?"

"About ten feet away. You want a picture? Hang on." There was a pause. "Did it come through?"

Caitlyn squinted at her phone's screen. A few moments later a slightly fuzzy picture of a man dressed in a black suit with a black shirt and red tie appeared. "That's Korsakov? The monster you were telling me about? But he's so—"

"Short. Pale. Ordinary. I know. Hey, they can't all be tall, beautiful black men like me. We can't follow him, we don't have probable cause for any surveillance, but I can tell you he's headed your way."

"What's that?"

"He's booked on a flight into Kennedy, will be arriving tomorrow morning." Royal's voice grew serious—something that rarely happened in Caitlyn's experience. "Don't you mess with this guy, Cat. He's one sick, twisted bastard. I don't know what the hell you've got yourself in, but you get one whiff that Korsakov's anywhere near and I want you to promise me you'll take off

running."

"I can take care of myself," she said. It was difficult to force the words out, her stomach was in such upheaval that she had slid halfway down the door. "Bye."

"No, wait! I mean it. Caitlyn don't you dare hang up—"

His voice died as she fumbled the End button on the phone. Her vision blurred with pain. She debated between simply falling the rest of the way to the floor and trying to force herself up, escaping from the room. There were carnations everywhere she looked: lined along the walls, cascading over the closed casket in the center of the room, hemming her in on all sides.

Pain stampeded over her. She was awash in the stench of carnations, being pulled under, drowning, unable to breathe, to think, to see. Her vision darkened to a too-bright pinhole of stabbing light. Her stomach clenched and the room spun around her.

All she could do was blindly reach out, searching for something, anything to hold onto as she fell into an oblivion of pain.

Her fingers clamped onto a man's arm. Hal, the name came from somewhere in the dim recesses of her brain. His face swam before her blurred vision, creased in concern.

Merton's voice stabbed into her brain. "What's wrong with her? Did she faint?" He sounded excited by the prospect.

His voice boomed then faded as Caitlyn felt her body shrink. Everything around her became monstrously large, towering over her like she was an ant crawling on the ground, looking up at the monsters intent on stamping out its life.

She closed her eyes against the vertigo, the pain pounding against her barriers until she fled to the far recesses of her memory.

Nine, she'd been nine then. Drowning in carnations: white, pink, brilliant red, they surrounded her on all sides, spilling out from buckets as she hid, covered beneath the table in the rear of the funeral home.

Two pairs of stout, stocking clad legs blocked her escape. She wanted to scream, to cry, to just be alone, but she was trapped. She clamped her hands over her mouth, breathing through her nose, awash in the sickly sweet scent of funeral flowers.

"Too good for the likes of him, I tell you," one of the women said, green leaves and stems flying below the table top and into Caitlyn's field of vision as she spoke. "Always knew no good would come of him. She's lucky they're even letting her hold a Christian service. Of course he'll be cremated—can't be buried in consecrated ground."

"No viewing?" the second woman's voice, higher pitched and cruel in its rapacious curiosity, echoed above Caitlyn's hiding place.

"Willa! The man blew half his face off!"

"It was the daughter who found him?"

"She weren't supposed to be there—typical though." The woman clucked in disapproval. "Stubborn that one. Just like her father, she is. I had her in my Sunday school class and she stood up and argued with me about the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Eight years old and blaspheming to my face!"

"It's that red hair. What did you do?"

"I slapped her, couldn't help myself, she shocked me so. I took her by her hair and dragged her out to Pastor Paul. The girl refused to apologize, insisted she was right, her momma was about in tears with shame. Then the father stormed in, yells at me to take my hands off his child and gathers her in his arms, carries her out."

"You're kidding."

"Pastor Paul was speechless. And you know the worse? The girl looked back at me and smiled the most evil grin you've ever seen. I tell you, the devil is in that girl."

"Her poor momma."

"Mark my words, she'll come to an evil end. Just like her father."

The witches' voices faded into the past, where they belonged. Replacing them was Hal's soothing tone, coming from a distance, barely audible over the pounding in her brain. "You're all right, now. Just relax."

With the suddenness of a lightning strike, the pain collapsed, returning Caitlyn to her senses. She was bent double, vomiting into a trash bin, Hal's hands supporting her, holding her hair out of her face.

She blinked. They were outside, behind the mortuary. The early evening sun shimmered off the asphalt drive, there was a small glade of trees and bushes beyond.

"You okay now?" Hal asked. He raised her up, the hinged lid of the trash bin closing with a bang that made her wince.

The headache wasn't vanquished—merely maneuvering to out-flank her. It gathered strength at the edge of her mind. She shook her head, instantly regretting the small movement.

"Get me out of here." Each word cost her ground, the headache advancing relentlessly.

Hal straightened, looked past her to his truck, then hugged her against his body, half-carrying her in the other direction. "Come with me," he said, his voice beginning to recede into roiling mists of pain. "I know what you need."

He led her past a sign reading: Serenity Grove. Caitlyn stumbled as her vision blurred with bright flashing lights, laser beams burning holes in her brain. She squeezed her eyes shut against the assault, allowing him to lead her along a mulched path.

The sounds of water reverberated in time with the thunder and lightning storming through her mind, sweeping aside all conscious thought as she surrendered to the pain. Her body crumbled but didn't hit the ground, rather it felt as if she floated down to land on a soft, grassy pillow. She curled up into a fetal position, hands fisted over her eyes, but still the fading sunlight crept in, a sneak attack of scarlet pain.

Her whimpers of pain mixed with the roar of water. Her face pressed against the ground, the sweet scent of damp earth and grass mixing with the burnt-flesh odor accompanying her migraine.

Her body arched, trying to curl tighter into a smaller target, but the pain only gained in intensity. She reached a hand out blindly.

"My bag," she moaned, the two syllables costing her dearly.

The earth quaked as her purse thudded to the ground beside her. A shadow passed over her and she dared to squint her eyes open, her hand still fumbling, reaching for the salvation hidden within the leather confines. Through a scarlet haze of pain she watched as a man's hands, grown large and spindly as an ogre's in her distorted vision, reached into her purse.

Her gun, he had her gun. Fear sliced into her, fueling her torment. It's okay, he's one of us, a brother in arms, a whisper tried to reassure her, but it quickly died away. Caitlyn's hand slapped against the earth as she reached for her weapon and fell short. She couldn't trust him, shouldn't trust him.

Soon her credentials joined the Glock, their leather cover gleaming in the sunlight.

"What have we here?" Hal's voice came from a distance mountaintop, thundering down at her like Zeus hurling a lightning bolt. "Sumatriptiline. Phenergan. Toradol. Fiorcet." He paused. She tried to turn her head, to meet his gaze, plead her case, but she didn't have the strength. "I'm going to assume you have a legit prescription for these, seeing as you have enough to kill a horse."

He dropped the purse and walked away, his shadow abandoning her to the cruel sunlight. She cried out, pulling her head down again, trying her best to bury herself beneath the cool soil.

The ground shook as his footsteps returned, each step exploding a landmine in her brain. Sweat poured out of her, smothering her in a sour stench of fear and loathing. Her gun, where was her gun? she thought, her last remnants of sanity cowering beneath the onslaught.

Last chance, last resort.

Like father, like daughter.

Her hand shot out, groping for the familiar, comforting grip of her Glock.

Instead she found a man's hand. He moved behind her, wrapped his arms around her and lifted her into his lap. Her hands covered her face, shielding them from the cruel sunbeams, her forehead resting against the ground. Gathering her hair in his hand, he slid a cool, wet cloth over her exposed neck, circling around to her cheeks, easing it between her hands.

"It's okay, just breathe," he whispered. Explosions of pain blew apart the words, almost destroying their meaning, but some primal part of Caitlyn's brain still had the will to fight back. She took a breath.

First one, then another. The stink of burnt flesh receded, replaced by lavender.

His fingers stroked her neck, massaging away the tension there, then moved up to her scalp. She shuddered and cried out when he touched the scar buried beneath the hair on the right side of her scalp.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." The sound of rippling water and his touch returned, now accompanied by cool, soothing tendrils of water that he skimmed across her flesh. The flames burning through her consciousness began to subside, leaving Caitlyn in a smoldering wasteland of smoke, a minefield of torment. One wrong step and the pain would blast her to smithereens.

But it was her only chance for escape.

She inched her mind forward, trying to follow the trail he blazed. His fingers, cool, soothing, trailing droplets of water, moved down her shoulders, along her spine. Her sleeveless blouse buttoned in the back. He undid the buttons, unsnapped her bra. A welcome breeze combined with his touch to cool her fevered, sweat-slicked skin. His fingers continued their magic, kneading, massaging, chasing the pain from her tortured muscles, working their way back up to her scalp. This time his touch brought no further onslaught as he smoothed the puckered scar tissue above her ear.

Caitlyn felt as if she were floating, the pain easing from her, releasing her. Her hands relaxed, she opened her eyes and, when the fading sunlight didn't bring a fresh bout of pain, dared to turn her head. She was lying on a wet bandanna, a cluster of crushed lavender and other herbs in the center of it.

She drew her breath in, relishing the chance to finally fill her lungs. Still, his hands didn't stop. Her blouse and bra fell, exposing her to anyone, but there was no one except her and Hal. The only sound was the cheerful tinkle of a fountain to their left.

"Thank you." Her words came in a strained whisper as if the torrent of pain had shredded her vocal cords.

"Was it a brain tumor?" he asked, his fingers skimming her scar. "My wife—" He cleared his throat. "She had headaches like yours. Medulloblastoma, nothing helped—"

She tilted her head, looking at him upside down and tried her best to give him a comforting smile. "I'm sorry. Sorry that either of you had to go through that."

"She's gone now." He wasn't looking at her, his gaze raised up, fixed on a spot far past the tree tops. "Been gone awhile now."

He rocked back on his heels, his hands sliding away from her body. Caitlyn missed his soothing touch immediately. She gathered her strength and slowly sat up. Twisting her body, she knelt before him. "Thank you."

His eyes met hers and she was surprised to see him blush. "Sorry. Didn't mean to get so

personal." His gaze flicked down her body, to her partially exposed breasts. "Just, that was the only way I could help Lily. Thought it might help you, too."

Caitlyn reached out and took one of his hands. It took both of hers to wrap around his large palm and callused fingers. "It did. You did."

They sat there for a long, sun-drenched minute. She watched as his flush deepened and felt a familiar tingle of heat stir in her pelvis. His eyes were blue, the color of stone-washed denim. A scar crossed through his chin to end in a notch at his lower lip, his nose had been broken at least once, and his jaw was strong, bristled with the faint shadow of a beard already.

She hadn't noticed before how attractive he was—too busy sparring with him, trying to prove herself to him. Now she smiled at him, not breaking the contact, felt his palm grow sweaty in her grasp, his pulse throbbing against her fingertips. His gaze trailed down her face, focusing on her mouth as his own lips parted. He pushed himself to his feet, using his hand in hers to help her up.

She wobbled for a heartbeat, but Hal was there to steady her. Caitlyn felt drained from her battle, yet also energized by his touch, his nearness, the chance for something to happen.

He smiled, slid his hand out from hers. Then he stepped behind her, his fingers skimming over her skin as he reached for her bra and re-fastened it.

"Not here," he said in a voice so low it thrummed through her veins, a whisper of invitation—one that they could both deny and dismiss if need be. His hands lingered before they tugged her blouse shut and began to button it. "Not until you feel up to it, strong enough."

She turned within his embrace, his hands coming to rest on her hips. Raising a fingertip to his lips, she felt a playful grin stretch her face. It felt good. "Don't worry about me, Chief. I'm a fast healer."

CHAPTER 23

"Their" tree was a sprawling sugar maple standing beside the creek in a clearing behind the house. This was where she had taught Sam how to read the night sky, where Sam had debuted his songs, where she had proposed to him and he declined, where Josh had been conceived, where he had proposed to her and she accepted.

Sarah remained hidden in the stand of hemlocks about twenty yards from the maple, watching. She had allowed Alan to feed her, fuss over her and finally bade him an early, strained goodnight. They hadn't spoken much during dinner—well, maybe Alan had, she hadn't paid much attention.

As soon as Alan was gone and she had the house to herself, she'd rushed to the bathroom and examined the mirror. As before, it was empty of any hidden messages from beyond the grave. She'd taken a scalding hot shower, emerged, and it was still empty.

Too empty. Too clean. Where were the dozens of toothpaste splatters speckling the glass? She hadn't cleaned it in over a week. She'd glanced down at her now sparkling clean floor, no remnants of red wine marred its surface after Alan's efforts.

Alan. She always teased him about his touch of neat freakness. Why would he wipe away the message? Maybe he was trying to protect her from what he thought was a sick joke.

Now, close to the appointed time, Sarah crouched down, peering between the branches that concealed her. Her fingers raked through the fallen needles at her side, twirling them into patterns as she tried to make sense of everything.

Maybe Alan knew Sam was alive? *If Sam was alive.*

She shook her head, frowning. How? Alan hadn't arrived in Hopewell until two weeks after Sam and Josh had disappeared. The two men had never met.

She stared into the star-bright night, her emotions churning. She could have simply gone to the maple, waited there. After all it was her tree, her land, she had every right to be there, message or not. Fear held her back. Fear that Sam was alive—if so, then why had he hidden these past two years? Why had he taken Josh from her? Why hadn't he returned or at least sent word that they were safe?

If Sam was alive, then how could he have abandoned her to the hell she'd lived with?

Even worse—if he was dead, then Josh was as well. And whoever left that note for her did it because they wanted to hurt her, wanted to drive her back to the dark abyss of despair that had almost taken her once.

She crouched in the darkness like a thief in the night, refusing to hope, refusing to believe, refusing to move until she had some answers.

A sharp crack disturbed the night, silencing the frogs and crickets. Another followed. A man's form appeared in the edge of her vision, walking through the grass from the direction of the lane. Clouds scudded past the moon and the man turned, looking over his shoulder, revealing his profile.

Alan. He was answering the message. The message left for her. From Sam.

As if in answer to her prayers, a man's silhouette separated itself from the shadows surrounding the maple. Pine needles speared her palm as her fist tightened. It was Sam.

She almost broke cover, rushed into his arms. But she held back, torn between love and rage. The man she had loved, who had promised to love her for all eternity, could never have done the things Sam had done to her.

If he could betray her, then what had he done with Josh?

Sam strode, reaching Alan in two steps. Even from this distance Sarah could see the angry way his jaw protruded. He'd shaved his head and now had a short goatee, but it was definitely Sam. No one could mimic that stride, the way his hips rolled as if he were wading through shallow water.

Without warning he lashed out with a roundhouse punch. A loud smack sliced through the silence. Alan staggered back, shaking his head, palms up in surrender.

Sam raised his arm, readying another blow.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Alan said. "Not if you're planning to get out of this alive."

That sounded like a threat to Sarah. A threat between two men who knew each other—but Sam and Alan had never met before. Or had they?

Sam hesitated, lowered his fist. "Where's Sarah? What the hell have you done with her?"

He actually sounded worried. Sarah strained to catch every word, cursing the open space of the meadow and the cheerful night noises of the stream and insects.

"Nothing. Yet." Alan cocked his head. "You've changed, old friend. You look worried, older. These past few years haven't been kind to you, have they?" Nodding scornfully at Sam's faded jeans, flannel shirt worn over a grey T-shirt, he smoothed the cuffs of his own designer suit. "What, no surfer chicks and killer waves waiting for you wherever you ran to?" Alan laughed, a raw sound that sent shivers down Sarah's neck. This wasn't the man she knew. The man who cared about her, who had taken care of her.

Maybe neither of them were.

"You were better off dead, Stan." Moonlight glinted off a metal object in Alan's hand. A gun. Aimed at Sam.

Sarah's heart thundered against her rib cage. Her fists clenched, she watched them walk

across the meadow toward the lane. There was no cover, she wouldn't be able to follow. The two men disappeared around the bend, out of sight. Leaving her behind to puzzle out truth and lies.

She swallowed her tears of rage and frustration, almost choking on them. Sam was alive! Was Josh? Where was her son?

CHAPTER 24

As Hal led Caitlyn down the path to his truck, the euphoria of being pain free faded. "Guess I've made a mess of things, haven't I?"

"Not so much. Gerald's got the body locked up tight, the Staties are on their way to take it to be examined properly. Unless you're declaring federal jurisdiction?" He looked at her expectantly.

She slouched down on a bench beside the path. "Any way we can get prints?"

He shook his head with a rueful smile. "No ma'am. No fingers left, just a few bits of bone."

She thought as much. A body in the water for any length of time tended to attract fish. And those soft appendages like the nose, toes, ears, and fingers were usually the first to be nibbled off. She hung her hands between her knees, still feeling a bit clammy. "Then I can't prove it's Leo Richland. Unless we can extract DNA and that will take time."

He sat down beside her, his thigh touching hers. "And again I ask, who is Leo Richland?"

Caitlyn sucked her breath in. The sun had finally set, leaving them in a twilight blue punctuated by the lights of fireflies. A rich aroma of roses, lavender, and rosemary filled the air. It would have been a perfect summer's night except for one thing: as soon as she finished here, she'd have to resign her job.

The first headache last night had been a mere warning shot. Nothing compared to the head-on collision that had bowled her over tonight. There was no way she could carry a gun, do her job.

"Hey, you all right?" Hal took her hand in his. "Maybe I should call an ambulance. Get someone to drive you to the hospital in Albany?"

"No. I know all about doctors and their poking and prodding. I've been through it before and I'm not going to do it again." The knot of tension between her shoulders tightened at the thought of more strangers in white coats telling her there wasn't any hope. That the life she'd dreamed of since she was a little girl was forbidden to her.

"What I need is someone I can trust. In case I can't see this through myself. Someone to nail Logan and his crooked ass to the wall, to find the answers Sarah Durandt begged me for." The words came out in a desperate rush but she felt better once they had been spoken. As if she was taking back control over her life.

Hal sucked in his breath, whistling through his teeth. He squeezed her hand. "All right, then. Why don't you tell me what's really going on?"

And she did. Everything she did know, everything she didn't, everything she suspected but could not prove.

"So you think the Russian, what's his name?"

"Korsakov."

"Korsakov paid your boss, Logan, to send this Richland guy up here to kill Sam—I mean Stan—and frame Damian Wright for it?"

She was silent for a moment. When he said it like that, it sounded preposterous. "Yes. Do you remember who you spoke with when you placed the initial call to the FBI about Wright? Did you find anything in his motel room that made it look like there may have been a break in? Someone could have stolen that camera card, planted it. Did anyone report any strangers besides Wright in the area?"

He held up a hand. "Whoa now. That was almost two years ago. I'll have to dig out the case files."

She stood, wobbled for a moment, then steadied herself with a deep breath. No headache, just a twinge of pressure behind her eyes and a touch of dizziness. "Let's go. We—I—may not have much time."

He stood beside her, one arm wrapping around her waist as she shivered in the night breeze. "You worry me when you talk like that."

Caitlyn turned to him, their faces inches apart and met his gaze head on. "I'm no quitter."

He traced her jaw line with the tip of his finger and nodded gravely. "My wife used to say that." He broke away from her. "She was a stubborn lady, too. You'd have liked her—hated doctors 'bout as much as you do."

Sam had thought getting gut-shot hurt. But that was nothing compared to the anguish he'd suffered tonight, watching through the binoculars as Alan Easton comforted his wife. The way Alan had looked at Sarah, held her hands so tenderly, kissed her good night...

The anger had kept him warm while he waited behind the maple. A breeze rippling down from the mountain cooled the night air but Sam still found himself sweating as he tried to think of what he would say to Sarah, how to explain everything.

How to beg for her forgiveness.

When he heard footsteps approaching, he'd almost vomited, he was that nervous. More so than when he'd proposed to her, almost on this very spot. He rubbed the scar on his right side, the repetitive motion soothing his nerves, and had turned to face his wife.

Only to see Alan Easton approaching instead. Alan wearing a designer suit and a smirk that made Sam's scar burn as anger roiled through him. He didn't think, he couldn't think as he met his old friend. Words failed him, as they seldom did, so he'd used his fist instead.

The bloody lip only made Alan's smirk more infuriating.

He'd forced Sam to go first, directing him across the grass back to the lane and a nondescript gray Volvo wagon.

"Hands on the roof, keep them where I can see them," Alan ordered.

Sam complied. It was the only way to get the answers he needed. "This your car, Alan? What happened to the Beamer?"

"Had to leave it on the coast when I moved out here to this godforsaken frozen armpit. How did you stand living here for so long, Stan? Must have been hell for a surfer boy like you." When Sam remained silent, Alan crossed around to the other side of the car, resting his gun along the roof, aiming at Sam. "These folks think I'm a goody-two shoes victims' rights lawyer, so had to look the part. Of course, when I started I had no idea it would take two fucking years out of my life. But now," he rapped the gun against the roof top, "you're about to make it worth my while. Give me the account passwords. Tell me and I'll let you live."

"Yeah, right. Just long enough for Korsakov to kill me. Don't try to kid a kidder, Alan. I learned from a master, remember?"

Alan nodded, accepting Sam's backhanded compliment. "And here I thought you were too lazy to pay attention to anything but where your next wave and next lay were coming from."

You set this up from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Most of it," Sam admitted. Best way to get the information he needed was to keep Alan talking. Lord knew, Alan loved nothing more than to hear himself talking.

"Once I figured out what was going on, I went back, re-traced your steps. You took your time—maneuvering, pinching a little here and there. Once you had the money, why not just take it and go? Why turn Korsakov into the Feds? You knew that was signing your death warrant."

Sam's fingers scratched along the roof, curling with frustration. He needed to get to Sarah, get her out of here, to safety. But he couldn't—not without coming to an accommodation with Alan. Or killing him.

Of course, the nine millimeter semi-automatic hovering three feet away from him made the last option a bit more difficult. He still had Richland's gun tucked in his waistband beneath his flannel shirt. Every time he touched the weapon he felt the burn of a bullet slamming into his own side. Sam had never killed anyone in his life. He wondered if he had the nerve to do it now.

His scar itched and sweat gathered where his T-shirt was tucked into his jeans. If the choice came down to Sarah's life and Alan's it would be an easy one to make. Even if it might mean his death as well.

But what he really needed were answers. And time. Time to talk to Sarah, let her know where to go to find Josh, who to trust—and who not to. "It was the Feds that led you here, two years ago, wasn't it?"

Alan nodded. "I know some people in the FBI and they have connections. Marshal Richland was becoming disillusioned protecting crooks and thieves like you. He set you up. Only cost me a hundred thousand. Cheap when you think of the payoff waiting for me."

"How'd you get Damian Wright to come here? Why'd you let him kill those other boys?"

"Richland orchestrated that—I only paid the bills. Although I did sweet-talk Damian into lying his way onto the fast track to lethal injection once Richland went missing and everything fell apart." Alan shrugged. "Nothing went as planned, but things still worked out my way. Just like they always do."

"Why did Wright confess to killing me and Josh?" Sam asked the questions that had been nagging at him ever since that awful, bloody night two years ago. "And how did you get him to waive his appeals, plead guilty?"

Alan's teeth gleamed like a predator's in the moonlight. "That was the easiest part of all. Didn't cost me anything. Turns out Damian always knew he'd be caught someday. He had a fantasy of his life story becoming the next Hollywood blockbuster. Even knew who he wanted to play the lead—Tom Cruise. So all I had to do was dummy up some contracts guaranteeing Tom Cruise as the star of the Damian Wright Story, production to begin no later than one year after Damian' death." Alan's laughter sliced through the night. "After that, Damian was in a rush to die, couldn't wait to get the needle so ol' Tom could make him immortal."

Darkness gathered around them. Two old friends chatting under a full moon. Except one of them was a heartless killer and the other was running for his life.

"Poor Sarah," Alan continued. "You should have seen her after Wright died without telling her where you and little Josh were buried. It almost broke her. Good thing I'm here to pick up the pieces. We're getting married."

"Like hell you are!"

"Who's going to stop us? A dead husband with a price on his head? You going to run shouting up the church aisle, stop the wedding and put her in Korsakov's sights? No way, you know what Korsakov is capable of, you've seen it first hand."

Acid burned Sam's throat as he fought against a wave of nausea. He did indeed know what the Russian was capable of. He'd watched and listened for over two hours as a man

screamed and begged for mercy. Korsakov's response had been to peel the flesh from the man's face and then burn his eyes out with a plumber's torch.

"You can't let him get Sarah." He forced the words past his clenched jaws. "Please, if you care anything at all about her—"

Alan's chuckle wasn't the answer he'd hoped for. "Oh my heavens! You dumb bastard. You really did come back for her, and not the money? Hell must be freezing over because I would have bet good money that no woman would ever make you think about anyone but yourself." He cocked his head, staring at Sam as if he were a zoo specimen.

Sam bit back his retort, not wanting to make things worse than they already were. Alan now knew his weakness and that was dangerous for both him and Sarah. He was tempted to reach for his gun, had never felt more ready to kill a man. But he needed to know what Korsakov had planned, who else knew he was alive. Just taking Sarah wouldn't be enough, even if he were able to get her across the border—not if Korsakov had the Feds in his pocket.

After everything they'd been through, Korsakov was going to win after all. But maybe he could at least save Sarah and Josh. Give Sarah back her son, Josh back his mother, earn a small piece of redemption for himself.

Sam stared into the soulless eyes of his former best friend. The only way to ensure Sarah and Josh's safety was to buy Alan's loyalty. Sam knew all too well the price he'd have to pay.

"Is that why you didn't touch the money all this time?" Alan continued. "I thought you were being especially careful, were suspicious that someone was on to you. But that wasn't it, was it? You were waiting until you could come back for the girl. How deliciously romantic!"

"You want the money, you can have it. All of it." Sam tried giving Alan what he wanted. "Just leave Sarah out of it. Let her go and I'll get you the money."

"Fool me once, old boy," Alan replied with a shake of his head. "Besides, you've been legally declared dead. Far easier for me to kill you, marry her, arrange a little accident and then claim the money as her heir. A lot less worry and hassle for me that way."

Alan raised the gun, aiming it between Sam's eyes. Sam stood his ground, met his oldest friend's gaze. Jeez, if Alan was ready to kill Sarah for forty-two million dollars, how much would it take to convince him to let her live? His scar began to throb as he forced himself to smile at Alan.

"A lot less hassle, but a lot less money." Sam stopped there, dangling the bait. The only time he'd ever seen Alan make a mistake it had been fueled by greed. That was how Alan had gotten in deep with Korsakov to start with.

Alan's eyes narrowed. He licked his lips. "What are you talking about?"

"You found one account—my safety net. How'd you like access to three times as much money?"

The gun didn't waver but Alan went rigid. "A hundred twenty million? How?"

"Probably a bit more than that by now. The feds didn't get all of Korsakov's funds—and I'm the only one who knows where they are." He paused, watching as Alan's mouth tightened with greed. Gotcha. "Of course, we'll have to hurry. Korsakov's getting out."

"Got out. Today," Alan said absently. He drummed the fingers of his free hand against the Volvo's roof.

Sam weighed the odds of his being able to reach his gun and kill Alan before Alan could fire. Pretty damn poor. And if he was dead, who would save Sarah? Time to push the lie. "I'll make you a bargain. You let me take Sarah to Josh and I'll get you the money and I'll make sure Korsakov never knows you have it."

"No way I'm letting you out of my sight."

Sam shrugged. "Fine. Kill me now. Korsakov will find you and kill you long before you

have a chance to enjoy a dime."

Alan tapped the gun in annoyance as he considered Sam's offer. A stray wrinkle appeared between his brows, a sign of real concern. The only other time Sam had seen him this worried was after Alan's Grand Jury testimony during Korsakov's trial. The lawyer had tap-danced his way out of that, protecting both himself and his employer in the process.

The wrinkle quickly disappeared and Alan's customary expression of smug superiority slid back over his features. "No. You go get the kid, bring him here."

Sam wasn't about to bring Josh anywhere near here. Not with Korsakov on the way and Alan on a rampage. "I'm not going anywhere until I talk to Sarah and see her safely out of here. Away from Korsakov."

Alan shook his head sadly. "No can do. That little lady is my ace in the hole." He tapped the gun on the roof, producing a hollow thud that sent a ripple of fear down Sam's spine. "I like Sarah, I really do. But if I don't have the money in twenty-four hours, I'll tell Korsakov where to find her. She can run, but she can't hide, not from Korsakov. She'll die cursing your name with her last breath."

Sam swallowed hard. Alan's expression and voice never varied even as he condemned Sarah to an unimaginable death. Sam tried to speak but couldn't force words past the knot in his throat as an image of Sarah, her skin ravaged and raw, her screams shrill with terror, filled his mind.

"Don't even think about trying to kill me," Alan continued. "I'm not in this alone. Anything happens to me, Sarah dies."

Alan opened his car door. "Now that we have an understanding, get in the car. We'll do this together."

Sam knew that if he did, he was as good as dead. Probably Sarah as well. "No."

Alan jerked up, surprised at Sam's defiance. "Excuse me? Do you really want me to go get Sarah? Shoot her here and now?"

Now it was Sam's turn to smile. It was a fake grin, took all his will power to keep his mouth stretched wide. "You can't do that, Alan. She's your ace in the hole. I just need a little time. I'll meet you back here tomorrow night."

"Not good enough. Korsakov could be here by then. Why should I risk letting you out of my sight?"

"What have you got to lose? You still have Sarah. You know I won't let anything happen to her."

"If you're not back here by midnight tomorrow, I swear, money or no money, I'll kill her myself."

Sam's pulse beat in his temples as a red haze of rage swept over him. "Not going to happen, Alan."

"It will if you try anything funny. That's a promise, old friend. One wrong move and Sarah's dead."

CHAPTER 25

Caitlyn and Hal reached his SUV. Darkness had fallen swiftly, transforming the funeral home into a looming hulk casting a menacing shadow. This time she allowed Hal to hold the door open for her and accepted his hand as she climbed into the passenger's seat. He spread her suit

jacket across the rear seat, dwarfed by the folds of Hal's black and blue neoprene wetsuit.

"You still look a little queasy," he said, standing in the open door, his hand lingering on her arm.

The raised seat allowed Caitlyn to finally meet his gaze head on. "A little," she admitted, surprising herself.

"Mind if I try something?" Before she could answer, he reached for her wrist and used his fingers to press down on two areas on either side.

At first all she felt was the pressure against her wrist bones. Then slowly, like a breeze traveling down a mountain ridge, forcing the trees before it to bow to its will, her nausea vanished.

She gasped. It was the first time in two years she hadn't felt turbulence splashing through her gut. Hal smiled, his teeth were a little crooked and stained yellow, but the dimple his smile unmasked overshadowed those small imperfections. He strolled around to the driver's side, his boots crunching in the gravel like a gunslinger's.

"How did you do that?" she asked after he climbed in and began to pilot them back up the mountain to Hopewell.

"My wife, Lily, she taught me lots of stuff like that. Holistic healing. We'd go to seminars on yoga, acupuncture, tantric sex, herbal medicine. She even had her a bee hive, used to harvest the queen's jelly, make a special tonic from it." He paused for a moment, the dashboard lights revealing the spasm of his jaw muscle. "When she left, so did the bees."

Caitlyn laid a hand on his leg. Nothing sexual, merely a comforting touch. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Well." He gripped the wheel in silence, then abruptly turned to her, his voice bright. "So, where are you from, Agent Tierney?"

She sat back in her seat feeling blissfully free. No headache, no nausea, no motion sickness. She felt almost normal. "Believe it or not, Chief, I'm from a town even smaller than Hopewell."

"No sir."

"Yes. Evergreen, North Carolina. Population 318. We didn't have our own police force. Cherokee County Sheriff was the best we had to bring law and order to our mountain."

"You don't sound like a Southerner."

She swallowed hard against the memories the funeral carnations had resurrected. "When I was nine, we moved up to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania to live with my father's mother."

"Chambersburg. That's right outside of Gettysburg, right?"

"I soon learned my accent didn't endear me to the locals. But it was all right. My dad grew up there and he never had a Southern accent. So I learned to talk like he did."

"Your dad a law man?"

"Deputy Sheriff."

"Uh huh. Thought as much." His hands gracefully steered them around a hairpin curve. "Killed in the line, was he?"

"Something like that. How'd you know?" She'd been asked the question so many times that avoiding the truth came natural. But for some reason, this time, she felt a twinge of guilt after lying to him.

"Told you, you had the look of someone trying to prove something. Now that I know it wasn't your boss, Logan—"

"Hey, where are we going?" she interrupted as they passed the Hopewell Government center. He continued through town, ignoring the speed limit on the deserted streets. Seemed Hopewell closed down after dark.

"You said you wanted to see the old case files." He turned onto Lake Road, taking them

along the ridge that followed the gorge around the east face of the mountain. "They're in storage. Up at my place."

"Why?"

He shrugged but she noted that his grip on the wheel tightened. "Small town, small budget. When the old police station was condemned and torn down, we needed some place to keep them. Haven't had a chance to move them back—not that there's a whole lot of room to move them to. Storage was one of the things Victoria Godwin forgot when she designed her Government Center." His tone made it clear that he hadn't been consulted on the new police department's quarters.

He turned onto a gravel road. Large hemlock trees swayed in the breeze, reaching out with their branches to skim along the sides of the truck. A single story house with a squared off tin roof came into view. "So here we are, home sweet home."

The frame house had a wide veranda encircling it. Steps made of river rock and a handicap ramp led up to wide French doors. Caitlyn followed Hal up to the porch.

"My grandfather built it," he explained. "Back in the fifties. He probably was one of the first people to ever design a fully wheelchair accessible house. Modeled it on houses he saw in Australia during the war." He held the door open wide. It was oak, lovingly hand carved with flowing vines and morning glories.

"Was he wounded?" she asked as she stepped inside the foyer.

"No. Not gramps. His beautiful bride, Eloise, had polio. She was in a wheelchair. But she used to say this house freed her." He led her down a hallway twice as wide as the one in the shotgun cottage she'd grown up in and into a kitchen, flicking lights on as he went.

The decor was distressingly familiar. Single cop. A uniform shirt hung on the back of a chair. The table was strewn with newspapers. On top of them sat a gun cleaning kit and a disassembled forty caliber Glock 22. Caitlyn smiled at the familiar scent of gun bluing. On the counter, a scanner nestled between a well-used microwave and a coffee maker. Several inches of black liquid sat in the bottom of a glass pot that was more yellowed than a smoker's fingers.

Dishes piled in the sink mirrored the stack of frozen dinner containers in the waste can beside the back door. She liked that Hal didn't apologize for the clutter or lack of ambiance. He recognized that a fellow in arms would understand.

"I'll get the records," he said, hanging his duty belt on a hook beside the door and depositing his pager, radio and phone into respective chargers before moving into the next room. When he flicked the lights on, Caitlyn saw a paneled den cluttered with cardboard storage boxes. The only furniture was an old fashioned console TV and a beat up tweed recliner.

She held back her laughter, rolling her eyes as she thought of her own apartment cramped with crime scene photos, training exercises, workout equipment and the gun safe she'd inherited from her father. It was the only piece of furniture she'd kept with her on her travels from one assignment to the next. Everything else she owned was quickly disposed of at the nearest Goodwill and replaced with a quick trip to her new locale's Target or IKEA.

Hal shuffled boxes, trying to unearth the records from the Durandt case. She rinsed out the coffee pot and rummaged through his cupboards until she found a can of Folgers. She set it beside the sugar bowl on the counter and started a fresh pot brewing. It finished just as she heard his footsteps approach on the oak floorboards.

"Hope you don't mind," she said, turning to him with a cup in each hand.

He dropped the document box onto the table and stared at her, his mouth agape. His eyes were wide but his face had gone pale, as if something had frightened him. Then he stepped towards her and his expression changed to that bewitching smile she had glimpsed earlier. The one that made him look like Gary Cooper in those old movies her father had loved so much.

"I don't mind," he said, his voice so low it approached a whisper. He reached behind her for the sugar bowl, his other hand sliding down to rest on her hip. "I don't mind at all."

Caitlyn met his gaze, not moving to free herself from his embrace. He lowered his face to hers, then stopped, hovering a mere inch away, his eyes searching hers. He hesitated, silently asking her permission. He looked so vulnerable, as if he were entrusting her with a precious gift.

She tilted her face and closed the distance between them, accepting his kiss and startling herself with her own reticence. Her usual approach with men was one of brutal competition, forcing them to win her—then just as quickly leaving them when they failed to meet her standards. But not with Hal. He was as wounded as she was, there was no need for machismo or bravado with him.

Hal feathered his fingers along her jaw, tousling her hair, tucking a stray strand behind her ears, tickling her with his breath as his mouth followed his hand. He returned to her lips, taking his time as he kissed her again.

Caitlyn felt dizzy—but it wasn't the gut wrenching vertigo born of her migraines. This light-headedness was something that tingled along her nerves, straight down to her toes, curling them until she almost stepped out of her shoes.

The scanner behind them squawked. "Hopewell-2 to dispatch. On scene, three vehicle TC. Minor casualties, backup, EMS, and fire requested, milepost 24, route 374."

Hal jumped back, breaking the spell. He reached past her for his radio in its charger, then drew his hand back.

"Your guy?" Caitlyn asked, watching the wariness that came to his face. Like a father watching his kid climb across the top of the jungle gym for the first time.

"Yeah. We run short in summer, alternating twelves." His face closed down as the dispatcher responded.

"Hopewell-2, I have County Unit 12 en route. ETA fourteen minutes. EMS and fire dispatched, ten minutes out."

Hal tilted his head, listening closely to his officer's reply. "Sounds good. Ten-four, dispatch."

"I guess Tucker has it covered," he said, but his gaze was still fixed on the radio, his jaws clenched.

Caitlyn noted the hollows etched below his eyes. "You just finished a long day with that recovery on the mountain and I'll bet you worked a shift before that," she said, recognizing a compulsive over-achiever when she saw one. "When's the last night you got a full night's sleep, Chief?"

He tugged his gaze back to her, his index finger rubbing at an eyebrow as if seeking an answer. "Too long to count. But that's why I get paid the big bucks."

"Why don't you hit the sack? I can go through these records myself."

A slight smile curled his lips. "Nah, you've got my curiosity riled up now." His hands came to a rest on her waist. "Besides I want a chance to see a big time Federal Agent in action. Might just learn something." He paused, his hands pressing against her hips with a promise of things to come. "Unless you were considering joining me? In the sack?"

Caitlyn laughed. "Don't push your luck. Let's get to work."

Sarah had watched in frustration as the two men spoke. The nearest cover she'd been able to make it to was too far away for her to be able to hear Sam at all. Alan faced her, and the wind carried some of his words to her. Enough to stir the cauldron of fear churning in her gut. The sight of Alan raising a gun, looking for all the world ready to use it on Sam hadn't helped either.

She raced through the trees, following Sam. Alan had driven off and Sam had melted into the forest, but she'd quickly caught sight of him on the trail leading over to Lake Road and the reservoir below the lower falls.

Thankful for the full moon and scant cloud cover, she jogged over the trail, dodging tree roots and downed branches with practiced ease. Sam kept up a steady pace himself, although she heard him curse and swear at times as he stumbled and once fell. His lead diminished as she grimly pushed herself along the trail. Finally, at the clearing above the dam, she drew close enough to stop him with a shout.

"Sam!"

He lurched to a stop and spun around. His mouth dropped open at the sight of her and he stepped forward. Sarah raced toward him, launching herself at him, pounding him with her fists as they slammed to the ground.

"You bastard! Where's Josh? What have you done with him?" Tears strangled her words until they were barely audible. Sam did nothing to defend himself other than to ward off her blows before they could inflict too much damage. Finally she was sobbing so hard she couldn't breathe. Blinded by tears and anger, she collapsed onto his chest.

Sam sat up, cradling her against him in a tight embrace. Every breath brought with it his scent—that unique, tangy musk that was his and his alone. Sarah hated herself for it, but she couldn't resist her overwhelming need. She curled her arms around his shoulders, clutching him with all her strength.

God, how many thousands of times over the past two years had she dreamt of him holding her like this, had she wished for this? Now she was terrified to let go, afraid that he might break her heart again.

What if Josh was really dead? She couldn't bear it, would rather die than hear it.

Sam's tears mixed with hers, warm against her face and neck. He was trembling, shaking uncontrollably. She caught her breath, wiped her face and nose against his flannel-clad shoulder.

"Josh?" she asked, closing her eyes, bracing herself against his answer.

"He's fine." Sam's voice broke. He laid his palm flat against her cheek, caressing her face. "Safe. He's waiting for me to bring you back to him."

Sarah choked on her tears. She slid off his lap, away from his embrace and caught her breath. Then she slapped him as hard as she could. The crack of flesh striking flesh ran out like a shot.

"You goddamned, shit-faced, sonofabitch!" Her words thundered through the few inches that separated them. "How dare you? Who gave you the right to take my son away? To put me through that?"

Sam sat, one hand covering his cheek, tears still streaming down his face. He looked pale and gaunt. As if all his smooth edges had been filed sharp.

Sarah pushed herself to her feet, standing over him, not bothering to hold back any of her fury. "Get up, you bastard. You're going to take me to my son, right now, this very instant. And then we're leaving you."

He met her gaze. God, his eyes looked ancient. Ancient and overwhelmed with sorrow. With his shaved scalp and the moonlight casting him in an unearthly glow, he looked like a skeleton of the man she'd known and loved.

Slowly, he shook his head. "I can't take you to Josh."

Her breath caught in her throat, leaving her speechless. She aimed a kick at his side, but he caught her leg and pulled her down on top of him. Once again she tried to pummel him, bite, scratch, kick, but this time he wrapped his hands around her wrists and held her at bay.

Finally she was reduced to snarling at him like a wounded animal. She would have spit at him but her mouth was too dry. "Bastard. Let me go."

"Not until you calm down. Listen to me, Sarah. We don't have much time. Does Alan know you're here?"

"What do you care?"

He gave her a shake. "Josh's life may depend on it. And yours."

"Josh? Is Alan going after Josh? I saw his gun—" She struggled anew to free herself from his grip.

"Josh is fine. Alan doesn't know where he is. But he can't know we've spoken. It may be our only hope."

The hated word froze Sarah's blood. How many times had people told her not to give up hope those first few days before Wright confessed? Even as they were bringing in cadaver dogs and calling off the search and rescue crew, replacing them with evidence recovery teams. How many times had she dared to whisper secret hopes in the darkness, muffling them with her pillow and tears?

"There's no such thing as hope." She practically spat out the words. "Just tell me where Josh is, take me to him." She was begging now, but she didn't care.

Sam pulled her close again but this time she held herself rigid, an immovable object within his embrace. "Where. Is. My. Son!"

He relaxed his grip and she pulled away from him as if he were toxic. "Promise me you'll listen to everything I have to say." He gazed up at her, his eyes wide with pleading. "Please, Sarah."

She rolled off his lap and onto her knees. "Tell me what I need to know."

He exhaled, his breath a shaky sigh, and rubbed at his right side. "I'll tell you everything. Then," he reached for her hand but she snatched it away, "you decide what to do."

His voice trembled, his entire body was shaking again. She wanted nothing more than to pull him into her arms and offer comfort. Instead, she fisted her hands, held them rigidly at her side, denying him anything. A single tear slid down his cheek.

"You'll have to decide. I don't know what's right or wrong anymore. It's all up to you, Sarah."

JD hated this feeling. His body was tingling with the urge—no, the need—to touch Julia, his mouth was dry, and every time he tried to say anything it came out totally lame. They sat together on the blanket, watching for the mysterious lights, their jean-clad legs touching. She was so casual, sometimes leaning towards him, brushing his skin with her hair, touching him to emphasize a point as they talked about home, their parents with their hopeless, retro ways, school, their hopes and dreams.

God, what was he doing wrong here? He couldn't stop rubbing his sweaty palms along his pants legs when his fingers were itching to stroke her creamy, smooth skin. He wished it was colder, he could wrap his arms around her.

But the night was warm enough that Julia's jean jacket was plenty. They sat in silence for a few minutes, JD thinking of the way the guys would laugh at him not even able to make it to first base, when she turned to him, her neck arched back, exposing a lovely expanse of skin just waiting for him to—do what? Kiss her? What if he did it wrong? Or touch her—an image of her

convulsing in laughter at his incompetent fumbling made him yank back the tentative hand he'd begun to stretch out toward her.

It wasn't like this in the movies. Or to hear the guys talk in the locker room. Why couldn't he just be normal? Know what he was supposed to do with a girl?

"Why is this so important to you?" Julia's voice slid through the silence like warm maple syrup, calming his jitters. "It's got to be more than just a chance to win that internship if you're giving up your entire summer to it. And why the lights? Why not make a film about something easier?"

He slid his gaze up to meet hers and sat up straight. She was looking at him with such an earnest expression—like she really cared, like what he said made a difference. To her.

His heart revved up and he licked his lips twice before he was able to answer. He needed to tell her the truth, not the lies he'd told everyone else. "I wanted to figure out what was going on with the lights because," he looked away, certain that he was probably making a fool out of himself, "I needed to make up for what happened two years ago. See, it was because of me that that guy Damian Wright got away."

CHAPTER 27

Julia looked at him, her mouth open in surprise. JD hung his head, his face flushing with shame. He hadn't told anyone about what happened that night—and now here he was blurting it out to her of all people.

Smooth move, Casanova. Way to get the girl.

"Damian Wright?" she asked, her voice tight. "The guy who killed Mrs. Durandt's little boy?"

"And her husband. And those other kids after he left here." JD drew his knees up to his chest and hugged them. His body shook but he refused to give into his tears. Not in front of her. "It's all my fault."

To his surprise, Julia slid closer to him, wrapping her arms around him and pulling his head to rest on her shoulder. "No. JD, you can't think that. How could it possibly be your fault?"

JD's shoulders sagged with the weight of the burden he'd been carrying for two years. "I saw him. Damian Wright. I saw him that day. Me and Tommy Bowmaster were hanging out at the park, skateboarding, practicing some moves. Tommy fell and banged up his wrist, so he had to leave, but I stayed. I saw this guy, hanging around where the little kids play, taking pictures."

"You couldn't have known who he was or what he was going to do," she protested, defending JD better than he could himself.

"I saw him, Julia. I knew he was doing something creepy. I even saw the car he drove—a white Honda Accord. I watched him leave and I didn't tell anyone. Then he went and killed all those kids but I could have stopped him. I should have stopped him."

She held him tight as his shoulders heaved with the effort not to break down and cry. "All I can think about is the faces of those kids—it could have been my little brother. The police came by my house a few days later, said Kenny had been in the pictures they found. That creep was taking pictures of my kid brother. What if he'd gone after Kenny? All because I was too lazy to stop him."

"You were only thirteen then, the police probably wouldn't have listened to you anyway."

Besides what would you have done? Followed him on your skateboard?" Julia's voice was calm, soothing. The voice of reason he'd been searching for for two years.

"I don't know," he admitted. "In my dreams, I clobber him with my board, pin him down, hold him until Hal Waverly or one of his men can come. People cheer and give me a big medal." Not to mention kisses from beautiful girls.

"In my nightmares," he continued, determined to tell her the whole truth, "I watch him drive off and too late I realize Kenny's in the back seat, pounding on the window, trapped. And I run and I run and I can never catch them."

"But those are just dreams. They don't mean anything. In real life, there's no way you could have known he was getting ready to hurt anyone. He was just a creepy grownup and you were glad to see him leave."

JD blew his breath out and relaxed in her embrace. She smelled so good—how did girls do that? Like fresh rain and vanilla. He raised his face, nuzzled her neck, drinking in her scent.

"So that's why you want to figure out what's making these lights? To make sure no one else gets hurt?" Julia's voice now held a trace of pride.

JD pulled away just far enough to look into her face, to confirm that she wasn't making fun of him. Far from it, she gazed at him with a wide smile accompanied by a look of admiration.

"Something like that," he mumbled, not sure what to make of this girl who didn't call him a fool like the rest of his world did.

"Wow. I mean, everyone else is just wondering about stuff like their music or clothes, stuff that means nothing but you—wow. JD, you're like a real hero. You think about what's really important."

Before JD's stunned brain could formulate an answer, Julia had her arms wrapped around his neck and her lips clamped over his, smothering him in a breathless embrace. She tasted just as good as she smelled. He returned her kiss and dared to part his lips against hers, inviting her.

Julia responded eagerly and soon he couldn't remember why he'd been so nervous.

Sam watched as Sarah stared down at him. She'd changed. Lost weight, but somehow it didn't make her look skinny or weak. Rather it had defined her muscles, made her look strong, capable of anything. He searched her face, saw the purple circles etched below her eyes, eyes that used to light up whenever they looked at him but now were narrowed with loathing.

As if the mere sight of him made her sick. "Don't look at me like that," he pleaded.

"Don't look at you?" Her voice took on a brittle edge ready to splinter into a thousand pieces. "I don't even know who you are. I gave you six years of my life, I gave you a son—"

Her voice broke and so did something inside of him. It was as if a sliver of glass had pierced through his scar, stabbing and twisting in his gut, leaving wickedly sharp shards in its wake.

Sarah stood, head bowed, arms wide open in surrender—or defeat. Sam couldn't bear to look at her. That wasn't his wife, his Sarah. She never gave up. Never.

Moonlight reflected from her tear-stained face, giving her a ghostly glow. She swiped at her eyes with the arm of her fleece jacket. But the tears didn't stop.

Spears of pain spiraled into his heart, making it hard for him to breathe. He'd done this to save her, to save Josh, but his actions had killed the woman he loved. Or at least part of her. He pulled his knees to his chest and looked away.

"Tell me, Sam," she commanded, her voice a strangled whisper barely able to penetrate the empty night air between them. "Tell me everything."

He took a breath, surprised himself by not exploding with the pain that sliced through his

body, then took another. Still alive. Couldn't get out of it that easily. That was Stan, always looking for the easy way out.

Not this time.

"My name's not Sam," he started, talking to the shadows before him.

"It's not—" Her exhalation of frustration circled through the clearing. "Then who the hell are you?"

"My real name is Stan Diamontes. I was—I am—a lot of things. I liked to surf, I liked to write songs, I picked up girls on the beach when the waves were slow. I didn't like to work, but my dad wouldn't pay for college unless I majored in something marketable so I have a degree in accounting."

Her footsteps scuffed through the dirt as she spun around. "You're an accountant? You can't even balance our checkbook."

"I didn't say I enjoyed it. But actually I was—am—pretty good at it. Not the adding machine bookkeeping stuff, but the computer stuff. Moving money around, making it work for you, hiding it." He almost smiled, remembering his "perfect" crime. A victimless crime since he replaced all the money he borrowed from Korsakov's accounts, just not the interest he earned from it. Well, all but that last few million—the money that had allowed Alan to track him.

He almost choked on his frustration. All he'd wanted was to protect his future—and now all that he wanted for his future was in danger because of that one decision. An image of what Korsakov would do to Josh and Sarah if he ever got near them swamped his vision. Fire lanced along his scar. Turning his head away, he took shallow breaths through his mouth, swallowing bile.

"So who did you make all this money work for?" Sarah asked, her voice closer now.

Sam swallowed once more before he could trust his voice. "A guy named Korsakov. He wanted to break into the film biz, bad. Was determined to be the next Tarantino. He had money but he needed it—ah—legitimized before he could use it for his production company."

"Legitimized? You mean laundered. So this guy Korsakov, what was he really? A drug dealer?" She paced across the clearing, her head swinging, scanning the woods surrounding them, a caged animal searching for an escape.

Sam couldn't keep his eyes off her, watching as she regrouped. Her head was high now, there was no air of defeat around her. Instead she seemed to radiate a heat, white hot fury.

"Drugs, prostitutes, smuggling, gambling." He shrugged. "Any and all of the above."

With a sudden, quick movement, she spun in her tracks and came to a halt a few feet in front of him. Her glare blazed through him like a flash of lightning.

"You worked for a drug dealer and a pimp?"

"No. I worked for a guy whose family happens to be part of the Russian Mafia. They're the drug dealers and pimps. Although Korsakov is the most dangerous of the bunch. I didn't know it at first. By the time I did, it was too late. I was in too deep."

She leaned forward, impaling him with her gaze. "Excuse me, but it seems you found a way to get in deeper. And to take your son and me down with you."

He flinched at her words. Not because of her sharp tone, a tone he'd never heard from her before, but because of the truth it carried. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"It? What it?"

"My life, you, Josh—none of it was meant to happen this way. I had a plan."

"You had a plan?" Her laughter was shrill, a hairbreadth away from hysteria. Sam watched her with concern. She stood rigid, hands curled into white knuckled fists, her mouth tight with anger. "And just what was this grand plan of yours, *Stan*?"

He hated hearing his old name, hated even more the way she spat it out as if it had a bad

taste. Hated that she of all people would ever know the truth about his life.

Kneading his side, fingers probing his scar as if seeking answers from an oracle, he tried to find the words to answer her.

"It all began eight years ago. I was twenty-seven and still living like a kid. No worries, no responsibilities, no plan—no need to plan. And then I watched a man die."

CHAPTER 28

Most of the people aboard United flight 803 from LAX to JFK slept. Not Grigory Korsakov. He'd had more than enough time to sleep during the past seven years. He wasn't about to waste another second to dreamland.

Not when he was about to make all his dreams come true.

"You know what really kills people in prison, Dawson?" he asked the grey-suited lawyer sitting beside him. The babysitter his uncle had sent along. As if even his own family no longer trusted Grigory to play by the rules.

Dawson didn't bother to cover his yawn as he pried his bleary eyes open and focused on Grigory. "Fights?"

"No. Boredom. Sheer boredom."

"Sure. Boredom starts the fights." Typical lawyer, Dawson always had to have the last word.

Korsakov looked out his window into a black emptiness. "Know how I fought the boredom?"

"Directing plays for the prison drama society?" There was no mistaking Dawson's tone of disgust. Evidently, word of Grigory's "entertainments" had made it back to the family.

Even those diversions had grown weary after a while. Nothing to compare with the dramas played out in his mind. Intimate explorations of the human psyche. All starring Stan Diamontes.

Grigory had almost wet his pants when Logan told him Stan had a wife and kid. Too bad Stan and the kid were gone. But that still left the wife...

His palm grew sweaty as it clenched the armrest. A small noise caught in his throat.

"Grigory, you know what your uncle said. The family doesn't want any more trouble or," Dawson's tone grew sharp, "embarrassment."

"If my father was still alive—"

"Your father's dead, your uncle is in charge now. And he considers you a liability."

"No one felt that way when I was making them money."

"They lost all that money and more when they had to close down operations after your arrest. Business is going well now and your uncle doesn't want anything to jeopardize that."

Grigory slit his eyes, glancing at the lawyer with disdain. He was an artist stranded among money-grubbing pagans. They'd never understood that—no one did.

"Now, what's this town you wanted to buy property in?"

Grigory's smile bared his teeth. "Hopewell? It's up in the mountains. Very peaceful and quiet. I'm going to be able to do some of my best work there."

Sarah's sharp intake of breath echoed through the clearing. Sam couldn't sit still any longer. He

stood and paced to the edge of the overhang. Moonlight glittered off the dark water of the reservoir nestled in the folds of the mountain. Below the dam, the lights of Hopewell twinkled like beacons surrounded by dark forest.

Sam gathered his strength and told his story. Speaking to the empty air before him was easier than facing her. "Alan was my roommate in college. He was the ambitious one, made it through law school, worked in corporate law long enough to realize there were easier ways to make money than toadying to partners and left to set up his own practice—with a very specialized clientele."

"Crooks?"

"Not all of them. More like independent financiers who weren't afraid to gamble if it meant a large return. Power brokers. Producers, agents—the men behind the scenes of Hollywood. He hired me to help skirt any tax issues. At first it was all legit—questionable maybe, but nothing illegal. It was kind of fun, outwitting Uncle Sam at his own game, using his own rules against him. Then Alan began to deal with people who liked to play with higher stakes. People with very large sums of money."

"People like your Russian." Sarah's disdain colored her voice.

"Yeah. People like Korsakov. I should have just walked away, but it was kind of... intoxicating. Seeing how far I could push the edge. And then, all the sudden I was over the edge and I didn't even know it." He turned to her, she had crossed to the center of the clearing, was closer than he'd expected. The moonlight danced around her and he wondered for a moment if this wasn't all some kind of dream.

Nightmare was more like it.

"When I realized what was going on, I was going to call the cops. But before I could, Korsakov invited me to his house for dinner. Feast, really. Like something out of a movie—caviar and champagne, truffles, vodka, a parade of beautiful women, gold platters. Then he took me to another room for dessert."

He fell silent and turned away once more, gagging as he remembered what that "dessert" had consisted of. The edge of the cliff was so close, he was half-tempted to step over, fly away—except the next stop was the dam about 500 feet below. He cleared his throat and gathered his courage. He had to tell her everything, prepare her for what had to happen next.

"There was a man waiting for us. He was tied to a chair, stripped naked. Bruised up, a wild look in his eyes, his voice was hoarse from screaming. He kept asking us who we were, what we wanted, why him. I tried to run, but Korsakov's men held me in place, made me watch as Korsakov ignored the man's pleas for mercy and tortured him. He kept up a running commentary on the history of each technique, who invented it, modifications he'd made, the success rate."

Sarah made a choking noise from behind him. He felt his words tumble out, he was so eager to finish. "I begged Korsakov to stop. He demanded an oath of loyalty to him and I gave it to him. I would have done anything to stop the screaming—well, almost anything. He handed me a gun, told me to go ahead, shoot the poor bastard, put him out of his misery. Held my arm to steady my aim. Told me it was the only way to end the suffering, that I'd be doing the man a favor."

He had to stop, his teeth were chattering too hard for the words to come out. He pulled his arms around him, goosebumps lined up along his arms. Then he felt her warmth as she added her arms to his, turning him into her embrace. He let her hold him until his shivering stopped.

"What happened?" she whispered.

He kept his face buried in her neck, refusing to release her. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't shoot him. So Korsakov took a plumber's torch and used it to burn out the guy's eyes. He must

have hit an artery or something, because all this blood came gushing out and then he was dead."

His head ached with the memory of the awful silence that had descended over the room. A silence broken too quickly by Korsakov's laughter.

"I asked him who the man was, what he'd done to deserve such punishment. Korsakov told me he had no idea. The guy was someone they pulled off the street. Just to impress me with how seriously they took an oath of loyalty." His mouth was parched, he swallowed but his throat was dry and scratchy. "So that's when I came up with my plan. I began collecting information about Korsakov's activities and building a new identity for myself in Canada. When I had everything I needed, I went to the FBI. After Korsakov was convicted, they sent me here. Stan Diamontes accountant to the mob and world class snitch became Sam Durandt, mediocre songwriter and insurance salesman."

"You never told me." She pulled away from him, her expression clouded. "You let me believe...you brought a child into this world, knowing that someday we might all be in danger because of your past." Anger edged her voice once more. "Sam, how could you not tell me?"

"I wanted a new life, a new beginning. For us all. I was planning to tell you as soon as I had a new identity set up for you."

A frown wrinkled her forehead. "New identity? From the FBI?"

"No. I knew sooner or later Korsakov would get out of jail. So I set up an escape route. New passport, driver's license, even medical card, work history. Meet Samuel Deschamps, Canadian citizen."

"Deschamps?"

"When Josh came, I set up an ID for him too. It's easy for a baby. I used to take him across the border while you were working, he's even had several checkups by a pediatrician in Canada. But, after 9/11, I couldn't get a new passport or anything for you—at least nothing that was good enough to risk your life on."

"So you planned this? You took Josh and ran, left me behind? Why? How? There was all that blood and Damian Wright confessed. Sam, what the hell happened?"

CHAPTER 29

Caitlyn opened the first box of files and sat at the table while Hal freshened their now-cold coffee. He brought the mugs over and sat beside her, a stack of papers piled before them. She kicked her shoes off and knelt on her chair so that she could sort the papers into categories.

Hal licked his fingers clean of white powder. "Spilled the sugar. You want any in yours? Sorry, I don't have any milk."

"Black's fine. I've found the evidence reports and crime scene photos. See those blood smears? Those belong to Richland. Looks like he hit his head on that big rock, rolled around a bit."

"That's what you said happened to Wright. Then he dragged Sam's body away and took Josh. But if Richland was sent to kill Sam, why hide the body? And what did he do with Josh?"

Caitlyn pursed her lips, her thumb massaging her palm. Wow, still no headache, she could definitely get used to this. Just the faintest pressure behind her eyes, easy to rein in. "That's the big question, isn't it?" She glanced at him, his eyes bright as they met hers. "Maybe Richland didn't kill Josh? Maybe he and Sam are both still alive?"

Hal sucked in his breath, his right eye twitching as he pulled back. "No," he said, shaking

his head. "Sam wouldn't do that, not to Sarah. He'd never betray her like that, steal her son away. Look at all that blood. It'd be a miracle for anyone to survive that. Not to mention having enough strength to kill a federal marshal and dispose of his body."

"You're right, Sam couldn't have moved Richland." She frowned, staring at the photos. It was a hell of a lot of blood, but it was also raining—could have been diluted. Still, there was no way, unless— "Maybe Sam had an accomplice?"

"Couldn't be Sarah, she was in Albany."

"We've been looking at this like a crime of opportunity because we thought Wright did it. What if this was a well-thought out, orchestrated plan and the only opportune part of it was Wright's arrival to act as patsy?"

"I don't understand. You think someone planned to kill Sam and Josh, planned to hide their bodies, then framed Wright as an after thought?"

"Murder 101—look to the family first."

He straightened, his jaw muscle spasming again. "I told you, Sarah had an iron clad alibi."

"Doesn't mean she couldn't have hired someone to do it for her. Maybe she's the one who called Logan, got him to send Richland? Or maybe poor old Richland really was just caught in the middle like Wright. Maybe she hired someone to kill Sam and Josh and things got out of hand."

For a moment Sam couldn't breathe. It was as if the darkness had entered his lungs, smothering him from the inside out. Surrendering to the flood of memories, he gazed around the clearing. His steps were jerky as he walked to the tree line and squatted, patting the ground.

"Here." The syllable sounded as shaky as the leaves rustling in the night breeze. "This is where it happened."

Sarah rushed to his side, joining him on the ground, her hands encircling his arm. He was trembling but her touch released the constriction in his chest and he could breathe again. He had to tell her everything, he knew that. At least he wouldn't be re-living it alone.

"There was a man. I saw him taking pictures of the kids, spying. I told Hal about it, he told me he'd call the feds, keep an eye on him." He shrugged. "I guess he must've used my name and it sent a signal to the wrong person. Anyway, two days later a US Marshal named Richland came knocking, said I had to leave immediately."

"You were in Albany, so of course, I said no, I couldn't. Then he drew his gun." He slapped his palm against the dirt at his feet, the memory of his helplessness surging through him. "That's when Josh came in, distracting Richland. I tackled him, yelled at Josh to run, run up to our safe place."

"Your safe place?" Her grip tightened painfully on his arm. Anger flooded her voice. Not much he could do about it except explain.

"I was always worried something like this might happen, so Josh and I had a secret hiding spot up the trail a bit. I taught him to go there if anything ever happened—it's a cave stocked with supplies. Just in case."

"Just in case." The words came in a whisper tight with fury. "And you never thought to tell me?"

"I thought about it every second of every day," he protested. "But how could I ask you to accept the risks of a life like that? How could you ever love the man I was? The man I am," he added with regret.

Her hands dropped and suddenly he felt light-years away from her. "Just tell me what happened."

"I knocked Richland down, scrambled out the door, figured I'd lose him in the woods. Or at least slow him down, take him in a different direction from Josh."

"Why didn't you go into town? Flag down help?"

"Who was I supposed to trust? I still have no idea how Richland found me, I'm not sure if it had anything to do with Damian Wright or not. At least I wasn't then. So I did the best I could."

"You ran."

"Yeah. But he caught up with me here. Shot me."

The scar on his side burned with the memory. His hand rose to rub it, silence it, but the pain spiraled into his gut, as vivid as the day it happened.

"The movies have it wrong," he continued, his gaze fixed on the small patch of earth that had almost become his grave. "You don't fly back or crumple to the ground. I didn't even hear the shot at first—it was like my brain was roaring, I couldn't hear anything. Then I felt this burning and I looked down and blood was everywhere."

Her hand covered his, gently tugged it away from his shirt. He sat on the cold ground and allowed her to pull his flannel aside, raise his T-shirt up. The scar tissue glistened an ugly pale silver in the moonlight, the heaped up edges twining around his side like a viper. He flinched when she reached her hand to it, drew back from anticipated pain.

She traced the area with her fingers, ever so gentle. The area was wider than two widths of her palms. It had taken a skin graft to cover it. Sunken like a crater from the missing band of tissue, it was a misshapen hollow the rigid muscles of his abdomen defining its boundaries.

"Here," she whispered. To his surprise, her touch soothed the angry burning.

"Yes. I was in the hospital almost ten weeks—by the time I got to a doctor, it was infected. Took three surgeries to get it looking this good. I was in a coma for a lot of the time, delirious most of the rest. It was three months before I could walk farther than the bathroom without falling down."

She tilted her face up to meet his gaze, her palm laying flat over the center of the wound. "You're lucky to be alive."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. I had to stay alive. I was Josh's only hope."

CHAPTER 30

Sarah snatched her hand away. She rocked up to her feet and looked down at the man sitting on the ground below her. Who was this man she had married and begun a family with? A stranger, a total stranger—yet somewhere inside him was the man she had loved, the man who risked his life to save his son.

But also the man who had placed her and Josh in danger.

She backed up, anxious to have some breathing room. As the temperature plummeted, the mist the mountain was famous for swirled around her ankles. A cloud covered the moon, plunging them into near-total darkness. With a blink of an eye, Sam had vanished.

Her throat tightened and she reached out a hand—her body wanted him back, wanted him near. Leaves rustled nearby and in the darkness the nocturnal stirrings of the forest seemed magnified. Moonlight filtered through the cloud as it passed and Sam's outline came slowly into focus. He remained where she had left him, staring up at her with eyes filled with sorrow and regret.

An owl called out its mournful dirge. Tears welled up behind her eyes. God, how she wanted to take him into her arms, run away with him, forgive him everything. Her heart told her to trust him, to have faith in the man she loved.

She blinked back her tears and held her ground. She'd been fooled before by her heart and its urgings. Never again.

"Richland shot you." The words dried her mouth out. She swallowed and started again. "What happened next?"

Sam climbed to his feet, stared at her a long moment before backing into the shadows, leaning against an oak trunk. "Richland came close, ready to shoot again. I tackled him—well, fell on top of him would be more like it. We struggled and he hit his head on a rock, was knocked out. I grabbed his gun and headed up the mountain to where Josh was waiting." He tilted his head and smiled at her. "He's so much like you. Practical, no-nonsense. He helped me patch up my wound, never panicked. I think he thought it was an adventure."

The thought of Josh needing to cope with any of this made her stomach heave. She crossed her arms over her chest. "How'd you get over the border?"

"I kept a four-wheeler in the cave. We rode it over the mountain to Merrill where I had a storage locker. There I had all our paperwork, some cash, and a truck ready. Then it was just a question of not passing out before we made it across the border. My landlady found me the next day, burning up with a fever, delirious. The infection was so bad, eating away at the skin and muscles that the doctors thought it was caused by a burn."

"Who watched over Josh?"

"Mrs. Beaucours. My landlady. You'd like her—she's a grandmother four times over and loves Josh like he's one of her own." He shuffled his feet as she glared at him, waiting for him to answer her unspoken question.

He said nothing, so she asked it. "Why didn't you call me? Tell me? Let me know you were alive?"

"I did—I tried," he faltered, withdrawing deeper into the shadows. Tendrils of fog began to swirl between them, forming a ghostly barrier. "I tried calling, but Alan answered, so I hung up. Then when I got out of the hospital, I drove here to see what was going on." He paused. The wind whipped at Sarah's hair and she hugged herself in earnest, shivering. "I snuck up to the house. You and Alan were laughing, having dinner—candles and wine and everything."

Her head snapped up at his wounded tone. "That was November. We were celebrating the first day I was able to go back to work, to start my life again. Alan called it my return to the world."

"Anyway, I couldn't risk your letting Alan know the truth—he'd kill you."

"To hell with Alan. What about telling me the truth? Letting me know my son was still alive?"

"How could I with Alan all over you? He has your house bugged as well as your phone and computer. I went to your school once, was going to reach you there, but then I realized it wouldn't work. If you had suddenly disappeared, Alan would immediately know it had something to do with me, come looking.

"I kept coming back, I couldn't stay away. Until one night Alan almost spotted me. I realized that by coming here I was endangering both you and Josh. A thousand times I thought about getting a message to you. But let's face it, Sarah, you're about the world's worst poker player. I couldn't risk Josh's life on that."

Her fingers curled into themselves as his frustration poured over her. He was right, she couldn't act her way out of the proverbial paper bag. If he had told her the truth there was no way she could have kept it hidden from Alan.

"If it was just the two of us," he went on, "I could have figured something out. But not with Josh in the mix. I just couldn't chance it. Then I heard Korsakov was getting out, so I didn't have a choice."

"And here you are, back in my life."

He stepped out from beneath the tree, his strides separating the mist between them. "Here I am." He opened his arms wide, palms up, in surrender. His voice was earnest, honest. "I'm still the man you loved, I'm still the man who loves you. I wish you'd believe me—give me that small comfort before you leave."

Sarah could hold back no longer. She rushed forward into his arms, buried her head against his chest, holding him tight. "Before I leave? I'm not going anywhere without you. We need to go get Josh, get away from all this."

His sigh caught in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and for a moment they stood there, wrapped in moonlight and fog, together for the first time in two years. "Josh. You need to leave, go get him, take the money I've set aside and run as far as you can."

She shook her head, felt her hair trail through his fingers, and tilted her head back to meet his gaze. "Alan said he would kill you."

"He'll keep me alive long enough to get his money."

"What money?"

"I told him I could get him Korsakov's money. A hundred million."

"Money?" She stepped back, fury simmering through her once again. "That's what this is all about, money? Is that why he came here, why he—" She choked on the thought of how she'd given Alan her trust, her friendship.

"He wanted the forty-two million I stole from Korsakov before I sent him to prison. It's in a Cayman Islands bank and Alan couldn't get to it without you."

"Me? What do I have to do with this? I didn't even know about the money—"

"Since I'm legally dead, you inherit it. Once you're dead, your husband..."

Sarah put her hand up to stop his words. Her pulse hammered against her temples and the swirling mist threatened to swallow her whole as her vision blurred. She blinked, drew in a breath of cool, crisp air.

"Sonofabitch!" She whirled, would have raced down the trail, hunted Alan like the animal he was, but Sam's fingers wrapped around her arm, held her in place. Her breath came in short gasps. He pulled her to him, his warmth waking her from her visions of vengeance. *Josh*. She had to get to Josh before any of this ugly mess could touch him.

"It's not Alan I'm worried about." Sam's words penetrated her haze. "It's Korsakov. He won't care about the money. He'll come for revenge. On me and everyone I love."

"So we need to make sure Korsakov never learns you're really alive."

He pressed his lips against hers. Her body responded with a hunger that was unquenchable. She wrapped her hands behind his neck, drawing him into her, devouring him, savoring his taste, his scent, his warmth.

How could she risk losing this again?

When they finally parted, she was shivering. Mist filled the clearing, insinuating its chilly fingers around her heart. When she was a kid they used to make stories about the ghostly figures the mist formed, stories about Indian princesses, heroic warriors, lovers betrayed.

Sam held her close, sharing his warmth, banishing the ghosts. At least the ones from her childhood memories. They had something far more dangerous to face here and now. "I left my truck up the mountain, at the Colonel's cabin. If you hurry, you'll be with Josh when he wakes up in the morning."

The thought of seeing the look on Josh's face when she woke him, the feeling of him filling

her arms, lanced through her. She stepped out of Sam's embrace, her jaw tightening as she tried to puzzle a way through the labyrinth they had landed in. "What about Alan?"

"He's not getting anywhere near you. Ever again. You're going to leave. Now."

She snapped her head up, glared at him. As if he had any right to give her orders, or even suggestions, after what he'd done. "And you will? Do what?"

"I can't come with you. Once Alan tells him I'm alive, Korsakov won't stop until he hunts me down. There's only one way out of this."

"So you have a plan?"

He ignored the sarcasm in her voice. "I have a plan. It's so simple nothing can go wrong."

"Go on."

He pulled a gun from behind his back. It wasn't shiny like the one Alan had held earlier, this weapon was flat black, squared off, utilitarian. "I kill Alan, Korsakov, and anyone else who comes after me. While you take Josh and run."

CHAPTER 31

Alan drove through town and down into Hopewell's newer, if you could call seventy-odd years being newer, neighborhood where his rented bungalow was situated. He'd chosen this house because of the privacy screen of evergreens on one side and a seven-foot tall fence on the other. It also had an attached garage with no windows. He could care less about the stunning views of the gorge above the dam to the east or the spectacular sunsets to the west.

He left his car in the driveway, knowing that by this time Logan's would be hidden in the garage. Sure enough when he entered, he found Logan lounging beside the fireplace, a glass of Alan's Johnny Walker Blue in his hand.

"I've got a job for you," he told the former FBI agent. "Let's go."

Logan took a final sip of his whiskey and climbed to his feet. "What's the rush? Korsakov can't be here already."

"I need you to babysit Sarah."

"Ahhh...is the groom getting jitters? Don't tell me she said no!"

Alan held the front door open, forcing a smile when what he really wanted to do was to slap the smirk off Logan's face. "I didn't have a chance to ask. Stan is back from the dead."

That got Logan's attention. The former FBI agent did a slow pivot, his eyes narrowed. "Son of a bitch. He must have killed Richland."

"Maybe. What I need now is for you to keep an eye on Sarah so he doesn't get a chance to talk to her or take her away."

Logan followed him through the darkness to his car. They began driving back up the mountain to Sarah's house. "Did Stan say what he did with Leo Richland? Where's his body? How'd he get the drop on him?"

"Your lazy ass associate is no concern of mine. Except that he owes me a hundred grand for my having to clean up after his mess."

"You realize that if Stan is still alive—"

"I know, I know. We're screwed if he tells Korsakov what really happened. Don't worry, I have a plan."

"Yeah, you always do. That's why it's taken us two years to get close to the money."

Don't fuck it up now, Easton."

Alan stopped the car in front of Sarah's house and pivoted in his seat to stare at Logan. "Is that a threat? You have just as much to lose in this as I do, so shut up and let's finish the job your associate screwed up two years ago."

He left the car and slammed the door on whatever reply Logan made. Sarah's house was dark. Good. He'd fed her enough wine during dinner that she should have been out for the night.

"What line are you giving her?" Logan asked as Alan opened the unlocked front door.

"I'm not. She's had her chance. You just keep her here, out of sight, and off the phone, until I figure a way to get the money from Stan."

"Hope you're not planning to take off and leave me holding the bag. 'Cause that would be a major, major miscalculation on your behalf, counselor."

"Can it." Alan paused outside Sarah's bedroom and listened. Nothing. He turned the knob and pushed the door open. Logan drew his gun. "Put that away," he whispered, "we still need her alive."

Logan frowned but re-holstered his weapon. Alan crept inside the dark room. The bedcovers were rumpled, drawn up over the pillows. Poor Sarah, must have had another one of her night terrors. Her flailing often activated the camera in here, to the point where he routinely ran out of storage space on its disk.

Alan froze as a floorboard creaked beneath his weight. The huddled mass on the bed didn't stir. He reached out and yanked back the quilt, ready to throw his weight on her if she resisted.

All he found was a pile of blankets.

"Where the hell is she, Easton?" Logan demanded, flicking the light switch on. The room was empty. Alan rushed into the bathroom. Empty as well.

"Search the house. We need to find her before Stan does."

"And what if we're too late? What if your bird has flown the coop?"

Hal and Caitlyn argued about Sarah's possible involvement in the deaths of her husband and son, finally agreeing to disagree as they waded through the boxes of paperwork and evidence. After several hours and two pots of coffee, Hal excused himself to use the restroom while Caitlyn hauled the box of phone records that he'd left her with onto the table.

She finished her coffee as she sifted through the musty reams of paper. These were no good, they were the reports from the tips called into the hotline, not the actual records of Hal's departmental phone conversations.

She stifled a yawn. The coffee pot was empty but Hal's almost full cup sat mere inches away. He wouldn't mind. She'd make him a fresh cup once a new pot was brewed. She grabbed his mug with one hand, sipping it as she quickly started a new pot. Despite the clumps of powdered sugar that clung to the inside of the mug, the coffee was still as strong and bitter as ever. Maybe even more so than hers, although it had been the dregs of the last batch.

Once coffee was bubbling through the machine and enticing her with its aroma, she wandered into the living room. More like storage room. Stacks of boxes were arranged haphazardly on every free inch of floor space, creating a precarious maze between the TV and recliner and doorway. They were marked with dates and the occasional hieroglyphic notation as to their contents and stood higher than her waist.

She finished Hal's coffee, set the cup on the small TV tray beside the recliner, and shuffled the dusty boxes, searching for anything that might contain the records of Hal's initial contact with the FBI. Her eyes began to water and a sneezing fit bent her double as her cell phone rang.

"Tierney," she answered with a sniff, trying to suppress another fit of sneezing.

"Hi Caitlyn, it's Clemens." The lab tech's voice was bright and cheery. Caitlyn peered at the cuckoo clock on the wall through bleary eyes. Didn't the man know it was one-forty in the morning?

"What've you got for me, Clemens?"

"The guys tracked a number on that dump you wanted."

"Great. Who's it belong to?"

"Actually, Logan made two calls within five minutes of your leaving his office."

"Fine." Caitlyn hoisted a box and tilted it to peer at the one below. "Who to?"

"We used public databases, so we didn't like break the law or anything, so it might be admissible if you need it—"

"Clemens," Caitlyn snapped, her patience frayed. "Forget the legal bullshit. Who did Logan call?"

"Oh. Okay. The first call lasted two minutes and forty-one seconds and went to a Grigory Korsakov."

Caitlyn dropped the box, releasing a fresh wave of dust and triggering a new bout of sneezing. "Man, he worked fast. Korsakov just got released from prison today and already he has his own cell phone?"

"The contract is in his name, but the purchase party was a law firm in Los Angeles," Clemens supplied helpfully. "Do you need their contact info?"

"No, no thank you. Who was the second call to?" Caitlyn brushed the dust from her shirt and slacks. Her skin was itchy, crawling like little dust critters had burrowed under it and her mouth was parched after her sneezing spells. Clemens said something, but his voice sounded sparkly and far away.

"Caitlyn, did you get that?" The tech's voice finally broke through to her.

She almost dropped the phone, she was so entranced by the dust motes dancing through the air, shimmering gold and silver and red, distracting her.

"Caitlyn?"

"Yeah, sorry. Bad connection." She scratched at her arm, transfixed by the bright colors of the dust specks surrounding her. Everything was so vibrant, vivid. Her head throbbed, but it wasn't a migraine—at least not like any migraine she'd ever had before. "What did you say?"

"I said the second call was to an attorney. Alan Easton. He's there in Hopewell."

"That's nice." Easton. She'd heard that name before, hadn't she? She spotted a box in the far corner of the room that had the date she was looking for on it. "Thanks, Clemens. Have a nice night."

She hung up and dropped her phone onto the nearest stack of boxes. Then she climbed over one wall of document boxes to reach the one she was interested in. She had to balance on another stack and lean over, her legs leaving the ground.

"I'm flying," she sang out to no one in particular just as she lost her balance and slipped forward.

A pair of strong hands grabbed her by the waist. "Where I come from, we call that falling," Hal said, pulling her back onto her feet. "What'cha doing down there, anyway?"

She leaned against another stack, almost toppling it, and he pivoted her around, plopping her into the recliner. He stood over her, his features hidden by the kitchen lights behind him, casting him into a tall, gangly shadow. The thin man. She covered her mouth, forcing back a laugh.

"Are you all right? Your face is all flushed," he said, bending down and smoothing his palm over her forehead. His hand was rough, calloused against her skin, sending tingles of

electricity through her. "You do feel warm."

His voice came from far down a tunnel of bright light. She squinted up at him. What was he worried about?

"Never felt better," she told him, pushing herself back onto her feet. It was the truth. Energy surged through her veins. Caitlyn Tierney, superwoman.

A memory of her fall two years ago, the feeling of free fall, flying, tumbling through space made her gut lurch. Maybe not so super—at least not the flying part. She closed her eyes, but that only made the feeling of vertigo feel worse, like Alice falling down the rabbit hole.

Alice in Wonderland. Aw hell, that explained it. She rubbed her temples, remembering what one of the neurologists at Hopkins had told her about migraines. Specifically a variant that caused sensory distortion, known as the Alice in Wonderland syndrome. He'd called it "LSD without the hangover."

"Shit," she muttered, reaching for the coffee cup beside her, her throat parched.

Hal took the empty cup from her. "What's wrong?"

"I finished your coffee."

"You sure did." He shook his head at her, his eyes squinting with amusement.

"You really should use real sugar instead of that powdered stuff. It gets all clumpy."

He dipped his finger into the cup, emerging with a coating of coffee-stained sugar, "I like it."

She watched, mesmerized as if in slow motion he raised his finger to his mouth, his lips parting, his tongue flicking out to lick it clean. A shock wave of desire surged through her as her own lips opened, mirroring him. His eyes met hers and he smiled as he scooped his finger into his cup once more and offered it to her. Greedily, she licked the powder clean, surprised it tasted bitter like coffee, not sweet at all.

He smelled of wintergreen—he'd brushed his teeth and used mouthwash while in the bathroom. In a trance, she reached out her hand and stroked his smooth cheek. Shaved too. No wonder he was gone for so long.

"This for me?" she asked, sliding her fingers along his jaw line.

"Yes ma'am." He angled his face so that his cheek rested in the palm of her hand.

The touch of his flesh against hers was overwhelming. She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew his face down to meet hers. She could feel his heartbeat, the stir of his breath on her skin, his hands as they stroked her back, rustling the silk of her blouse. Every sensation was amplified, more vivid and arousing than anything she'd ever experienced before.

Damn, if this was a new kind of migraine, or even a sign that the scar tissue had broken down, that her brain was even now beginning to leak precious blood, well, all she could say was it wasn't a terrible way to go.

Hal dropped the empty cup onto the recliner, his hands now pressed flat against her back as his mouth devoured her. A small animal noise caught in her throat. She rubbed her body against the chiseled length of his, her hips arching against his pelvis. Ripples of pleasure turned into tidal waves as he began to unbutton her blouse.

"Just tear it," she cried out in a hoarse whisper, reaching her hands behind her to tangle with his in the fight to release her body from the silk. Her clothes, her skin, everything felt too tight, she wanted to burst free.

His teeth clenched together in a grimace as he tore the buttons loose and tugged the blouse away from her. Her bra soon followed and finally, she had her wish, his flesh pressed against hers, his rough palms stimulating and exciting her even further. He lowered his mouth, trailing whispers down her neck to her breasts.

When he finally captured her, taking her into his mouth, Caitlyn cried out and arched back,

her fingers digging into his arms, the only things holding her upright.

CHAPTER 32

Sarah stared at the semi-automatic in Sam's hand and lost it. A shrill laugh escaped her, accompanied by tears of frustration and amazement.

"Give me that before you hurt someone." She grabbed the gun. "I couldn't even take you hunting with me and the Colonel. As soon as I sighted on a deer you'd start making enough noise to wake the dead."

He stared at her, lips tightening. He wasn't laughing. He reached a hand out, palm up, for the pistol. "A man can change in two years."

She refused to relinquish the gun, instead sliding it into the pocket of her fleece jacket. It looked like a Glock, the same kind Hal and his men used. Glocks had no safeties, making them treacherous weapons for amateurs like Sam.

"Not that much, Sam. No one can change that much. You're no killer." She slid her fingers across his jaw, felt it clench beneath her touch. He grabbed her hand, pulled it away.

"I may be a total fuck-up," he said, the words emerging in a strangled whisper as his grip tightened around her fingers, "but I'm not going to screw up again. I'll do whatever it takes to protect you and Josh. To make sure you are safe."

"Good, then we're on the same page. Leave, get Josh. Use your new identities to go some place where no one will ever find you. I'll find a way to join you later." It took every ounce of her will power to force the words past her lips.

Josh...God, how could she sacrifice the chance to see him again? She had no choice. Sam had been Josh's whole world for two years. Josh may not even remember her. She couldn't put her son through the trauma of losing Sam. Even if it meant ripping her heart apart in the process.

"We'll meet," she bit her lip, trying to quiet the quivering in her voice, "we'll meet in Costa Rica."

She turned away from him, wrenching her hand from his grasp. She shoved both hands in her pockets before he could see how desperately she was shaking. Her hand brushed against the semi-automatic. "That will work. Costa Rica on the fourth of July. In front of the American consulate."

She wasn't even sure if there was an American consulate in Costa Rica but it sounded good. She curled her fingers around the pistol's grip, caressing its solid, lethal trigger.

Sam circled around her, shaking his head, coming to a stop within an arm's length. "No way. It won't work. Not now that Alan and Korsakov know I'm alive. Give me the gun. You go get Josh, and I'll take care of everything."

"Like you did two years ago?"

He went rigid, a wounded look twisting his features. But Sarah didn't apologize for her spiteful words. They were the truth.

"I guess I deserved that," he said in a quiet tone that barely traveled the distance between them. "Sarah, you have to believe I did the best I could—"

"That's exactly what worries me, Sam." He flinched at her words. Sarah stepped closer, unable to control her anger. "Seems to me you've been screwing up your entire life. You'll never understand how you hurt me, what losing you and Josh did to me."

He looked down at the ground as if searching for answers in the tendrils of fog swirling around their feet. "I know what you went through. I read your journal."

Sarah stared at him, stunned. "You bastard. How—"

"Today, when I went into your house to leave you the message. Alan had it, was reading it aloud, mocking you. I couldn't stand it, so after he left, I took it with me. Read it while I was waiting for you."

She opened and closed her mouth twice before she could force any words past the knot in her throat. "You had no right, those were my private thoughts."

"I should have found a way to come back sooner." His voice broke. A single tear slipped down his cheek. "I'm so sorry. I never knew, about your trying to kill yourself, I mean I imagined, but you were always so strong, the one taking care of everyone else, I never dreamed..."

She raised a hand to silence him, then turned her back, hugging herself. The sharp outline of the gun dug into her belly. Anger, sorrow, fury, bitterness, fear—a cauldron of emotions whipped through her in a frenzy.

He stepped up to her, wrapping her in his arms. Part of her wanted to lunge away from his embrace, pummel him, make him feel a fraction of the pain she'd suffered these past two years.

Another part of her responded instinctively to his touch, wanted to curl up into his arms and never leave again.

She couldn't have it both ways. She needed to focus on the present danger, not past wounds.

"How do you know Korsakov knows you're alive? If Alan wants this money for himself, he wouldn't risk it by telling Korsakov, would he?"

He raised his fists to knuckle his temples. Sarah felt a fluttering behind her eyes. How many times had she seen him do that when a lyric frustrated him? Strange emotions stampeded through her, overwhelming her.

Sam looked up at her, his eyes wide and filled with confusion that mirrored her own. His lower lip quivered, just like Josh's did when he was trying to be brave. "I don't know. I can't take the chance. It's *me* they're looking for. You go get Josh."

She paced the clearing once more, searching for answers in the shadows that flickered in the moonlight and mist. It would be so easy to do as he asked, to run, be with Josh—and so very hard. She would never see her family again, would never be sure she and Josh were totally safe—always looking over her shoulder, no one to trust...

That was no life. And Sam—she had no doubt he intended to sacrifice himself for her and Josh, but who knew if that would be enough? Who knew if he'd actually be able to do what needed to be done to save them? She'd trusted him once. Could she risk trusting him again?

"No." The single syllable echoed through the darkness like a bullet. "No. There must be another way."

"There isn't. Just give me back my gun and go before it's too late."

The sharp crack of a twig snapping ripped through the night. Sarah whirled around. "Someone's coming. Get out of here," she whispered to Sam.

He grabbed her by her waist and pulled her close, kissing her deeply. The footsteps were growing closer, drowning out all the other night sounds. But even they faded as Sarah's body responded to Sam's touch. The kiss was brutally quick, but it reawakened feelings she thought long dead and buried.

"Go. Keep Josh safe. I love you." He darted from the shadows and into the clearing where the beam of a flashlight immediately impaled him.

Her chest was so tight she couldn't breathe, couldn't talk. All she could do was to hang

onto his gaze like a lifeline.

Another flashlight swept through the trees and stopped, aimed at Sam's heart. "Stop right there or I'll shoot," a man's voice shouted.

CHAPTER 33

November 24, 2005

Thanksgiving. Without you and Josh here it's hard to find anything to be thankful for. I mean, yes, I'm thankful they caught Damian Wright—but why couldn't it have been here, before he got to you and Josh? Yes, I'm thankful for the Colonel and Hal and Alan—even the Colonel's wife—everyone who's helped out these past few months while I've been a wreck.

But I'd trade all of their good intentions and casseroles and Hallmark sympathies for one more minute with the two of you.

Lately I've been haunted by that day. I almost came home early, you know. Would have if you hadn't talked me out of storming out of that nonsensical conference, hadn't convinced me that my job was worth wasting a few more hours of my time.

You and Josh were worth everything I had, everything I have. If I had come home, maybe this never would have happened.

You've heard all the clichés: sudden violence, senseless violence, random violence. People think the key word is violence. It's not.

What changes your life forever are the other three words, words you can never understand until you experience that shock, that slap in the face, belly-flopping, heart stabbing, impact that blindsides you until you can't hear or see or feel anything. Sudden, senseless, random.

One minute you're relaxing with friends over dinner in a hotel restaurant, nursing a glass of Merlot—because you know how wine makes me—laughing about the ridiculous imperatives that have just come from the State Board of Education's office. Then a handsome, clean-faced young man wearing a State Trooper's uniform approaches and asks for Mrs. Sarah Durandt.

He looks too young to be a real police officer, despite the gun at his belt and the pinched expression on his face. He has none of that world-weary look of competence that Hal Waverly has—of course, ever since Lily died, Hal isn't always able to muster that expression either.

My friends titter, laugh about him hauling me away for drinking on the job. Cindy even suggests that someone sent me a male stripper as a gag although my birthday is a month away.

He remains solemnly silent during our ribbing, then asks me for ID. Now everyone looks away, squirms a bit. Maybe this is for real. I hand him my driver's license. "What's this about? Did someone hit my car or something?"

As he scrutinizes my photo, I feel my stomach do a slow roil, like being swamped in a class V rapid. You know time is moving normally, but everything seems to happen in slow, anguishing motion. You see the danger coming but you're powerless to stop it.

In my mind, a distant warning bell peals, making my teeth clench, could it be the Colonel? Maybe the house caught on fire and burned down—I told Sam the toaster was sparking. A thousand and one calamities race through my thoughts and none of them involve you and Josh—not because nothing could ever happen to you but because my brain had already begun to shut down, had decided that nothing would ever happen to you—that just was not possible in the universe I lived in.

The trooper invited me outside to talk with him. I stood up, had to grab the table from the wine rushing through me, making me woozy. I followed him, swaying, unbalanced, still refusing to believe that anything wrong could actually be happening.

But it was. It had.

And I was too far away to do a damned thing about it.

He drove me back through blinding rain. He explained what had happened, but I don't remember what he said. A few words caught in the frenzied chaos that my brain had devolved into: child predator, missing, photos, blood, too much blood, no body found yet. No bodies.

Yet. That's what he kept saying. We don't know for certain yet. There's evidence of foul play but no body found yet. We don't know where Damian Wright is yet. The FBI have been called but haven't arrived yet. We can't be certain that your son is dead—yet.

Yet. Such a tiny word that I would grow to despise.

No, we haven't caught Wright yet. Yes, we caught him but no, he hasn't confessed yet. Yes, he confessed to brutally slaughtering your husband and son, but he won't say where they are buried yet. No, you can't see him, yet.

That one small word encompassed all the hope I possessed. But then slowly, finally, over the past month people stopped using it. They have moved on with their lives and implied that I should do the same. I go through the motions, even went back to work. But it's not really me up there talking about Sonnets of the Portuguese. I have no idea who the woman is, but she's not me.

Me, the real me, I'm still waiting for you and Josh to come bouncing through the door, tracking muddy footprints, leaving a trail of coats and hats behind you, Josh riding on your shoulders, laughing, you balancing as you bend over to kiss me without up-dumping him.

But you're not home. Not yet. And I can't give up. Not yet. Can't "move on", forget you, forget Josh, get on with life.

Not yet. I can't. Not yet.

CHAPTER 34

Sarah shrank back into the shadows, flanked by two mature hemlocks, her back pressed against an oak. Two men approached Sam. They kept their flashlights aimed at him so she couldn't see their faces at first. Sam stood, hands over his head, squinting into the light.

The first one rushed forward and kicked Sam's legs out from under him. Sam went down with a grunt. The man followed up with an elbow driven between Sam's shoulder blades. He held Sam down on the ground while the second man stepped closer and lowered his flashlight.

It was Alan. Sarah pressed back against the tree, her fleece jacket snagging on the bark. Alan held a gun on Sam while the first man searched his pockets, taking a cell phone and flashlight. Sam remained silent, his face pale in the light that danced over him.

"Where's Sarah?" Alan shouted at Sam.

Sam opened his eyes, a smile twisting his face. It wasn't any smile she'd ever seen from him before; it was the nasty, fooled-you smirk common to playground bullies. "She's long gone. Gone to get Josh. You're stuck with me."

Alan aimed a kick at Sam's ribs. "Sonofabitch. You'd better make it worth my while or I'll—"

"Got a wallet," the first man interrupted. Alan lowered his light and Sarah got her first

look at the other man's face. He looked familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. He was older, mid fifties at least, and handled his gun and flashlight effortlessly. Like a professional.

She slid the semi-automatic from her pocket. If only they moved away from Sam, she could get a clear shot at one of them.

She froze. And what about the other? They both had their weapons aimed at Sam, they couldn't miss at that close range.

"Let's see where you've and your kid have been hiding," Alan said, yanking the wallet away from the other man's hand. He flipped it open. "St. Doriat, Quebec. Samuel Deschamps." He squatted down, taking care not to smudge his slacks, and aimed the flashlight back at Sam's eyes. "Well, Samuel Deschamps, you made a big mistake coming back here. Should have just cut your losses and run."

"Our deal's still good," Sam said. Sarah caught the undercurrent of desperation in his voice and was certain Alan did as well. "I'll get you Korsakov's money, you leave Sarah and Josh alone."

Alan and the other man exchanged glances. "Pick him up, Logan. Let's take him somewhere we can have a nice, long chat."

Logan. Sarah leaned forward, straining for another glimpse of the first man's face. Jack Logan, the FBI agent in charge of Sam and Josh's case.

She clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle her gasp. Sam was right, they couldn't trust the police—not if they'd been involved since the beginning. They couldn't trust anyone.

Which meant it was up to her.

Logan hoisted Sam to his feet, twisting one arm behind his back until Sam had no choice but to bend forward before the bone snapped. Logan marched Sam onto the trail leading down to the reservoir. Alan swept his light around, pivoting with his gun arm crossed over his opposite wrist as if he'd seen too many bad Steven Segal movies. Then he followed the others.

When she could no longer see their lights reflecting from the fog, Sarah stepped free of her hiding place. She glanced at the path leading up the mountain, to Sam's truck and then to Josh. She stepped forward, following a low-riding trail of mist that beckoned her deeper into the woods.

The weight of Sam's gun pulled at her jacket, bouncing against her hip with her every movement. Alan and that man, Logan, they would kill Sam—or let the Russian, Korsakov, do it, torture him.

She stopped. The mist swirled around her, taunting her. She could be with Josh by morning.

Or she could save Sam.

Was there a way she could do both?

CHAPTER 35

Someone poked JD. Hard. In the ribs. He groaned and burrowed farther into the soft, warm pillow he had rested his head on.

"JD. Wake up."

The urgency in Julia's voice jarred him awake. He was lying on her lap—until she pushed him off. He sat up, blinking. Damn, they had fallen asleep. His folks were going to kill him. He smiled, remembering how they'd occupied themselves earlier. She'd only let him kiss her, allowed

the merest brush of his hand against her breast, nothing more, but it was still better than anything he'd ever imagined. "What time is it?"

"There's someone out there. Look." Julia placed her hands on both his shoulders, twisting him around so he could see a parade of lights emerging from the forest.

A parade of three men. One of them was bent over, being prodded along by another. They were too far for him to see their faces, but when they stopped at the cabin and a man turned on the light inside, he saw the guns. Big guns, silhouetted by the stark light, aimed at the first man.

"What should we do?" Julia asked, her fingers clamped around his arm. She pulled herself up close to him. JD liked that she was asking him, trusting him to make the right decisions. He just wished he knew what to do.

"Call 911. I'm going to go get a closer look."

"No. Don't. What if they see you?"

JD swallowed hard, felt his heart flutter. Too late to back down now, he couldn't let Julia think he was scared or anything. "Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen."

It would have sounded a lot better if his voice hadn't had that squeak in it. He disentangled himself from Julia and began to belly crawl across the dew-laden grass separating their hiding place from the shed. He stopped, looked over his shoulder, saw Julia's face glowing blue from the light of her cell phone.

Nothing to worry about, all he had to do was keep an eye on things until Hal Waverly or one of his guys got there. Man, he'd forgotten his camera! Damn, damn, damn! That was all right, it was still going to be a hell of a story—most excitement this place had ever seen.

His nose itching from brushing against dandelions and wet grass, he finally reached the side of the shack. Inching his way up the cinderblock wall, he knelt at the base of the window.

The men were talking, he could almost but not quite make out their words. Not five feet away from him, the door opened, light spilling out onto the grass. One of the men, the skinny one came out. JD flattened against the ground, hoping the shed's shadow and the gathering fog concealed him.

The man slammed the door and turned on his flashlight, blinding JD when JD tried to look at his face. He took off at a brisk pace, following the dirt path around to the other side of the shack and up to Lake Road.

JD covered his mouth with his hands, trying to slow and quiet his breathing. Christ, he'd never been so afraid in his life! His heart was thudding so loud that it drowned out all other noise. He forced himself to creep back up to the window, see if the prisoner was all right. He hadn't heard a gunshot, but...

He edged his eyes over the windowsill. The prisoner was Sam Durandt! He was sitting on the ground, facing JD, aliver than life! How could that be? Sure, the guy had shaved his head and grown a beard but it was Sam. Mrs. Durandt was going to be so happy. But what about the big guy with the bigger gun?

JD wished there was a way he could let Sam know everything was all right. Wished he could be certain that everything would be all right. He lowered himself back down, huddled with his back to the wall. He didn't have any weapons, if he tried to rush in, surprise the guy it was for certain either he or Sam would get shot.

A hand grabbed his arm. He almost jumped out of his skin. He looked over, it was Julia. She was shivering, goosebumps covering her exposed skin as she leaned across and placed her mouth next to his ear. "I called the police. They thought I was joking at first, but finally said they'd send someone around."

Her words were so soft that he barely caught them. He nodded his understanding.

Somehow having her there, beside him, made him feel braver—but also more frightened. What if something happened to Julia because of him?

A man's laughter rattled the window above them. It didn't sound like a funny ha-ha kind of laugh. It sounded like the kind of laugh you heard in the movies right before Hannibal Lecter cut someone's heart out with a spoon and served it with a nice Chianti.

Julia heard it as well, her arm wrapping around his. "What should we do?" she whispered, her breath stirring the small hairs on his neck.

JD wished like hell he knew.

Hal backed Caitlyn up against the door jam as they continued their dance of passion. She clawed at his shirt, as anxious to touch him as he was her. Intermittent, anonymous voices on the scanner were their audience, occasionally breaking their momentum.

At one point, he had lurched up, pulling away, listening.

"What?" she murmured, her teeth gently tugging at his ear, drawing his attention back to her.

"Nothing, sounds like some kids saw some more lights near the dam. The county can handle it."

She finally coaxed him free of his uniform shirt and started in on the T-shirt he wore below it, feathering her fingers under the cotton, tantalizing him as she drew it over his head. He grabbed it from her, wadded it in a ball and aimed it at the counter where the scanner sat.

Their lips collided once more. Caitlyn pushed him back a step, came up for air. "Well, this has been real nice, Chief," she said, her fingers twisting in his sparse chest hair, "but maybe we should retire to the comforts of your bed?"

Hal turned his head away from her, his gaze searching the shadows of the hallway beyond the kitchen. As if he were asking the ghost of his dead wife for permission.

"Here's fine," she reassured him, curling one leg around his hips, drawing him back to her.

She was enjoying the cascade of sensations that every touch, every sound brought. Wished she could have had one of these Alice in Wonderland type of migraines before—there was no pain, just a surge of conflicting feelings. As if she were all-powerful, in charge of the universe but at the same time hopelessly spiraling out of control.

Her depth perception had returned to normal, but everything still seemed too bright, too vivid, colors so intense they burnt her eyes. And touch—her skin was sensitive to the slightest brush, the heat of Hal's hands, the whisper of his tongue had already brought her close to climax several times.

If this was her last night on the job, she sure as hell was going out with a bang. Caitlyn laughed out loud at her pun. Hal didn't notice, he was too busy working her belt free of her slacks.

Sarah scrambled down the path at breakneck speed. She hadn't heard a shot, but that didn't mean Sam was still alive. She came to the edge of the grassy slope below the dam and stopped. Light from the caretaker's cabin cascaded onto the fog like a searchlight.

The cabin only had one window. She approached it quietly, the gun clenched in her hand. The grass was wet, slippery, the fog swirling in the breeze so thickly that it obscured the building only fifty feet away. She didn't really have a plan, but she couldn't let Sam die. How could she possibly face Josh again, knowing she could have saved his father?

And even though she was still angry—no, furious—at Sam for taking Josh from her, she

couldn't deny the fact that she had once loved the man. Or the way it had felt so right, so natural, to be back in his arms.

Crouching, she rounded the corner to the side of the shack with the window and door. And almost tripped over someone lying on the ground.

"Ayyy," came a cry that was quickly muffled. Sarah flattened against the wall, holding her breath as she waited to see if anyone inside had heard. A long minute passed and she slid down to crouch beside a boy and a girl.

"Julia, JD—what are you doing here?" she whispered. JD removed his hand from where it covered Julia's mouth and opened his own. Sarah held a palm up to stop him and gestured to them to follow her.

Just what she didn't need: two kids in the line of fire. They quietly moved back to the edge of the woods, far enough away that they could talk freely.

"Mrs. Durandt," JD began in a rush, "your husband, he's—"

"You saw Sam?"

He nodded as the words bubbled out. "Yes. He's alive. Kind of beat up. But he's in there." He jerked his head back at the cabin. "Two men—"

"One of them left," Julia put in. "We called the cops."

"They had guns."

Both teens stopped as they locked gazes on the gun in Sarah's hand. "It's all right," she was quick to reassure them. "Everything is going to be all right."

"But, Mrs. D, how did—"

"He was dead, everyone knew—"

Sarah was buffeted by their questions. Questions that she didn't have time for. "You called the police?"

"Yes, but I don't know if they believed me. Everyone knows that JD and I have been following the mystery lights."

"Julia thinks the cops thought she was playing a gag, trying to get them to rush out here for my documentary or something. 'Cause that was about twenty minutes ago and no one's shown up."

"You guys go home. And please don't tell anyone about seeing Sam. It's important that no one knows he's alive." The words emerged in a raspy whisper, an echo of all those sleepless nights when she'd cried herself hoarse hoping that somehow Sam and Josh would come back to her.

Beware what you wish for. The gun felt heavy in her hand. Sam was right. The only way to keep Josh safe now that Alan and Logan knew where he was was to silence both men. Permanently.

"But Mrs. D—"

"No buts, Julia. This is really, really important. Do you understand?" The girl nodded her head. Sarah leveled her stare onto JD. He'd be the bigger problem, the boy was a born journalist, questioning everything. "How about you, JD? Can you keep a secret?"

He met her stare then nodded solemnly. "Yes ma'am. But will you be all right? That man in there, he still has a gun."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"Still, we're not going anywhere until we're sure you're safe." Julia wrapped her arm in JD's, standing firm with him.

"All right then, but wait here."

"Want me to call Chief Waverly?"

"No, I want you two to get the hell out of here."

Both jumped at her sharp tone, but Sarah didn't have time for apologies. She crept through the heavy layer of fog and returned to the cabin. She sidled up to the window and peered through it. Sam was lying on the ground, eyes closed. Was he dead?

Her heart stuttered and she realized she couldn't wait. Logan was leaning against a tool bench, legs stretched out before him, his gun ready.

Sarah crouched down and crawled to the door, then stood again, her hand on the knob. She raised her gun. Now or never.

CHAPTER 36

Sam inhaled the wet fragrance of damp earth and fertilizer. The longer he played possum, the more time Sarah would have to escape. Once she was in the clear, it wouldn't matter what happened to him. Sarah and Josh would be safe.

He forced himself to ignore the pain in his shoulder and ribs and tried to melt into the packed dirt floor as Logan approached.

"C'mon, I didn't hit you that hard," the FBI agent nudged him with his foot. "Sit up, we have important things to discuss before Easton returns with the car."

Sam debated his options and slowly sat up. Logan lounged against the tool bench across the room from him, between Sam and the door. Fine by Sam, he wasn't looking for a way out, he was looking for a way to stop Logan and Alan before Korsakov arrived.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, leaning back against the cinder block wall, one hand knuckling his temple as he scoured the tiny space for possible weapons.

A rake and a shovel stood in the corner behind the door. A few hand tools on the bench beside Logan. But on Sam's side of the cabin there was nothing but bags of fertilizer stacked to the ceiling and an overturned galvanized steel bucket. Not a whole lot to work with. He fantasized about throwing the bucket over Logan's head or blinding him with fertilizer, but in the cramped space there was no way Logan would miss him once he began shooting.

"Same as Alan. A way to the Russian's money and a scapegoat once he finds it missing. Seems to me like you might be the key to both."

Sam thought about that. Alan had given him the impression that Logan was working for him, but it seemed Logan had larger ambitions. "You've been in touch with Korsakov?"

"Let's just say that I like to cover my bets. How hard is it to get to the money?"

"Not very." Sam watched as Logan's eyes glittered in the light from the bare bulb over head. "For someone who knows the pass codes. Like me."

Logan pursed his lips. "You stick with me and I'll let your kid and wife live."

"That's the same deal I made with Alan. Why should I trust you more than him?"

"Alan hired me to track you down two years ago. He didn't care if the kid or the missus got caught in the crossfire, just as long as he got his hands on the money."

Sam had already guessed as much, but it still made his gut twist to hear of his friend's betrayal. "You sent Richland to kill me?"

Logan shook his head, frowning as if he thought Sam was smarter than that. "Idiot wasn't supposed to kill you. He was supposed to grab you, take you somewhere private until we convinced you to get the money for us."

"And then you would have killed me."

"Price of playing in the big league. You knew that when you decided to steal from the

Russian to start with. So," he pursed his lips, regarding Sam with narrowed eyes, "how'd you do it? How did you kill Richland?"

Sam met the other man's gaze. "You won't believe me, but I didn't. When I left him, he was still alive."

"Don't get smart with me. I'm offering you a fair deal." He stalked over to where Sam sat on the floor. He raised the gun over his head, ready to strike at Sam. "Tell me what happened to Richland."

"Can't tell you what I don't know," Sam replied, his voice calm as he tightened his muscles, preparing to tackle Logan.

The door flew open, banging off the cinder block wall. Logan's gun went off, the sound deafening in the tiny space. Sam flinched, then realized Logan had been aiming at the ceiling. The only casualty was a bag of fertilizer above his head, now spilling out a steady stream of brown powder.

"Drop it, Logan," Sarah shouted from her position in the doorway. Sam looked over at her in amazement. She held Richland's gun, weight balanced, arms steady as she aimed at Logan's chest. "Now!"

The FBI agent slowly turned to face his new threat. He kept hold of the gun, his grip tight as he held it over his head. Sam climbed to his feet, ignoring the pins and needles that lanced through his leg. Logan still hadn't dropped his gun. He lunged forward, grabbing Logan in a chokehold.

Logan struggled, trying to aim at Sarah while clawing at Sam with his free hand. Sam held firm, slowly tightening his grip. "Give it up," he told Logan. "Stan Diamontes might have been an accountant, but Sam Deschamps works in a lumber mill, hefting and wrestling with uncut timber all day."

Logan made a gurgling noise in reply. The gun clattered to the floor as he turned a dark shade of red and crumpled in Sam's grasp. Sarah rushed forward, grabbing the gun, never losing her aim as Sam slowly lowered the other man to the ground.

"Stand back," Sarah said, her voice low and deadly.

"No. Get me that twine," Sam said. She reached for the ball of twine and tossed it to him, her eyes still on Logan. You'd think she'd done this a million times, Sam thought as he quickly tied Logan's hands behind him. Only after Logan was restrained did Sarah relax her guard.

"I thought you were going to get Josh," he said, standing once more.

"Right." The bitterness and anger in her voice made him take a step back. "Like I could tell my son that his father was dead, after everything Josh has been through." She gave a small shake of her head, her eyes tightening, revealing worry lines that hadn't been there two years ago. "Damn you, Sam. I hate that you've forced me into this. That you brought Josh into it. What the hell are we going to do?"

Caitlyn was about ready to explode with frustration. Every nerve in her body screamed for release, yet Hal persisted in slowly torturing her with pleasure. She'd never before met a man who liked to take his time so much. Part of her wondered if he was avoiding actual sex out of some misguided loyalty to his wife. It was certainly obvious that she was the first woman he'd been intimate with since Lily's death.

They had made it as far as the kitchen table. She lay on her back, writhing, ignoring the cold steel of the dismantled Glock digging into her shoulder. Hal was peeling her out of her slacks, his tongue teasing the skin around her belly button.

A squawking noise burst through the room as both his radio and the scanner erupted with a high pitched alert. "Dispatch to Hopewell One, do you copy?"

Her fingers were fisted in his hair, encouraging him to finish what he'd started. "Don't stop," she urged. He paused, then began stroking her once more, his fingers moving in time with his tongue.

The dispatcher didn't give up so easily. "Chief, you there? We've a report of shots fired your vicinity. Closest responder is twenty minutes out."

Hal scrambled to his feet, lunging for his radio as Caitlyn slid from the table and tugged her slacks back up.

"Waverly here," he said into the radio, turning the scanner off with his other hand. "What's the twenty?"

Caitlyn grabbed the uniform shirt draped on the chair beside her and slipped it on. She tossed Hal his own shirt. He snagged it one-handed, a frown creasing his face, listening to the dispatcher. She slid into her shoes as she reached for her bag and the special compartment where she carried her Glock.

She snapped her holster on her hip. Hal yanked his duty belt from the peg near the door. "I'll be there in five," he said, grabbing his cell phone and pager as she opened the door for him. Once he had his belt in place, she asked, "What's the story?"

"Probably nothing," he said, jumping into the GMC and starting it. She climbed into the passenger side. "Kids down near the dam saw some strange lights and called in that a shot had been fired."

He sped the SUV down his drive and spun out onto the dirt road, turning in the opposite direction of town. As he steered with one hand, the other checking the equipment on his belt, he spared a glance at her. "Can I just say how damn sexy you looked back there? Gun on your hip, wearing my shirt and not much else, good God, I almost lost it then and there."

Caitlyn snorted a short laugh. Now she knew how to make him finish the job. The adrenalin rush of heading into action multiplied the desire still coursing through her. Hal effortlessly steered them onto a bumpy dirt road. His chiseled jaw, intense expression, even the twitching around his eye and white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel seemed to make him all the more desirable and ruggedly handsome.

Damn, this wasn't her. Almost having sex with a stranger. It was as if she were possessed, having an out of body experience. Had she actually been ready to jump him, right there in his kitchen when they should have been working? Impossible. Work always came first.

At least that's what her rational side said. The rest of her body and mind told it to take the night off.

Hal stopped the car. Fog enveloped them in an opaque mass that was claustrophobic. "No sense shooting each other in this pea soup," he drawled, reaching over to hand her a small LED flashlight. "There's a cabin about fifty yards straight ahead. Single door, single window."

"I'll clear it," she told him. "You know the terrain better, you secure the perimeter."

He chewed on his lower lip, considering. She could see he didn't like it, but with this blinding fog, there was no other way. Not with only two people.

"Maybe we should wait for backup."

"The dispatcher said they were twenty minutes out," she argued. "Besides, the more people running around with guns in this," she gestured to the white cloud smothering them, "more chance someone's going to get hurt."

He nodded, then surprised her by squeezing her hand. "All right, but be careful out there. I've got big plans for you."

Caitlyn slid from her seat, leaving the car door open to avoid any sound. She took two

steps forward and looked to her left, where Hal should be. He and the car had vanished, swallowed whole by the fog.

Blind leading the blind. She jogged forward toward the unseen cabin. Her feet found a smooth, well-worn path so she followed it, alone in the whiteout. Then she froze. Voices carried through the night air, but too faint for her to pinpoint their location.

She had no way to communicate with Hal. Rookie mistake, she chided herself. That's what rushing in got her. She held her gun at the ready and took one step, then another toward the voices and presumably whoever had fired the shot.

Her palms were sweaty. She alternated her grip on the Glock, wiping one hand on her shirt, then the other. Damn fog was so clammy it stuck to her like a second skin, coating her with drops of moisture.

Her foot hit a concrete wall. Still blinded by swirls of mist, she reached out. There was a short stoop and above it, a wooden door. She squinted, thankful her migraine had subsided and her vision was restored to normal. As she strained to decipher the murmuring voices beyond the door, the handle rattled.

Caitlyn jumped off the stoop and took up position on the blind side of the door. Her heartbeat pounded through her head, fueled by adrenalin.

She raised her gun and waited.

CHAPTER 37

"Sam, get out of here. The police are on their way," Sarah tried to reason with him. One of them had to get Josh to safety. He wouldn't be safe now that Alan and Logan knew where he was.

"No. Not without you." She'd forgotten how damned stubborn he could be. He reached a hand out, palm up. "Give me the gun. I'll take care of him."

His lips were white and his hand trembled, but conviction filled his voice. She hesitated, ashamed that she actually thought twice about pulling the trigger and silencing Logan herself. This was different than rushing in, facing an armed man. This would be an execution. Damian Wright's face filled her vision. "No. I'm not going to kill an unarmed man and you can't either. You know that as well as I do, Sam Durandt."

He looked up at the sound of his name. Well, *her* name for him, Sarah thought wryly. "It's not who you are," she continued. "I don't care what name you go by."

"You don't know me," he persisted, emphasizing with his outstretched hand. "I can do it. I have to. To save you and Josh."

"Don't be an idiot," Logan said from his position on the floor between them. "You can't do it. That would make you as bad as Korsakov. Isn't that why you went through all this? To prove you're nothing like him, that you're not a killer."

"Shut up," Sam snapped. Sarah watched as he rubbed his hand along his side where his scar was.

"He's right, Sam." She laid a hand on his arm. His muscles bunched beneath her touch.

"Listen to the pretty lady. Besides, you need me. If you both want to get out of this alive, that is."

"And how do you intend to do that?" Sarah asked.

"Simple. Alan and I aren't your real problem. The Russian is. You let me go, get me the

money, and I'll kill him for you. No fuss, no muss. You two ride into the sunset with little Josh and live happily ever after."

Sam frowned. "What about Alan?"

Logan shrugged as if Alan were of no consequence. "No problem. I'll take care of him for free."

Sarah tightened her fingers around Sam's arm, trying to pull him back to reality. "Sam. We're talking about killing people here. Cold blooded murder."

"Is it murder if they'd kill us without thinking twice?" he argued. "Or if they've already tried?"

The sound of tires crunching on gravel and the growl of an engine echoed through the night. Sarah glanced out the window, but it was obscured by droplets of mist and the impenetrable fog. All she could see were her and Sam's reflections. She, holding a large gun, more scared and worried than she'd ever remembered, and Sam looking absolutely desperate and lost.

Some pair they made.

"No time to bargain," Logan interrupted her thoughts. "Sam, you get out of here and meet me later today, take me to the money."

"Not here," Sam said, obviously not liking his bargain with the devil. "Up at the Colonel's cabin." He locked his fingers around Sarah's hand.

"No. She stays here," Logan ordered, an edge to his voice. "How else can I guarantee you'll hold up your side of the deal?"

Sam started forward, fists raised, but Sarah stepped between the two men, placing her hand flat on Sam's chest. "He's right. I need to stay." She whipped her head around to stare down at Logan. "To make sure he and Alan don't tell anyone where Josh is."

Logan nodded, a superior smirk forming on his face. She raised her gun, aiming it directly between his eyes. "Sam might not be able to kill a man in cold blood, Agent Logan. But don't you dare think you can gamble with my son's life. If you try to double-cross us, I will pull this trigger without hesitation."

The steel in her voice surprised even her. The Colonel would have been proud, but it made her ill to think of the possibility of being forced to end a life. Logan swallowed hard, the muscles edging his eyes tightening.

Then he nodded. "Deal."

"Go, Sam. Now."

He glared at Logan, shaking his head stubbornly, but then relented. "Tonight," he promised her, planting a quick kiss on her forehead. He yanked the door open and raced out into the night.

Sarah ran after him. He was already lost in the fog.

A rustling sounded beyond her. The beam of a flashlight danced through the mist.

"Drop the gun. Now!" A woman appeared beside her, a ghost conjured from the shadows and fog. When Sarah didn't immediately obey, the woman stepped closer, revealing a gun aimed at Sarah's chest. It was Caitlyn Tierney. Wearing one of Hal's khaki uniform shirts. "Drop it, Mrs. Durandt."

Sarah couldn't stall any longer. Hal Waverly emerged from the fog in front of her, his gun drawn as well. "Sarah, give me the gun."

Hal slowly walked toward her, approaching her from the side opposite from Caitlyn. Staying out of her line of fire, Sarah realized. Good God, did they actually think she might be dangerous?

She crouched down and placed Sam's gun on the damp earth, jerking back from it as if it

was a viper. Hal stretched out with his leg and kicked it toward Caitlyn.

"Hold still, hands up," Caitlyn shouted, keeping her gun aimed at Sarah's heart.

Sarah jumped at her tone, then stood shock still, her hand hovering in mid air. Hal circled behind her and patted her down. She winced as he removed Logan's gun from her waistband. "I can explain all this."

"That'll be fine," he said. His voice was distant, held none of the warmth that she was used to from him. "But in the meantime, for everyone's safety, I'm going to have to put these handcuffs on you. You really shouldn't say anything more until you get a lawyer."

Sarah felt all the energy and fight drain from her. He tugged her arms behind her. Her throat went dry. There had to be a way out of this. She flinched at the bite of the cold steel handcuffs as they ratcheted around her wrists. Only then did Caitlyn relax her guard and come closer.

"There was another one," she told Hal. "Ran out before her, disappeared into the fog."

"No, there wasn't," Sarah argued. "It was the fog, when I opened the door it made it look like a shadow. It was just me, Hal. Honest."

He stared at her as if she'd just told him the moon was made of blue cheese. No wonder, she sounded like a blithering idiot. Better shut up now before she said something that made things worse.

Caitlyn stepped forward, peering around the edge of the doorway, her gun raised as she scanned the cabin. "Just you, huh?"

"Hi, Caitlyn," Logan called out in a cheerful voice. "You mind untying me, sweetheart? My arms are getting cramped."

CHAPTER 38

Grigory parted company with the lawyer at JFK. He came very close to killing the man, sending his uncle a message, but he didn't want to take the time to do it right. An artist should never compromise. So Dawson left to take a limo into the city while Grigory headed toward the early shuttle to Albany.

"Good luck with your house hunting," Dawson said in lieu of a farewell.

Grigory hadn't bothered with an answer. He fidgeted throughout the short flight to Albany, enjoying the bucolic view from his window. He had no luggage, he didn't need any. Waiting for him in the terminal were two hulking men dressed in identical black suits and white shirts.

"Grigory," the first said, embracing him European style. "It is good to have you back with us."

"Thanks, Max. Were you able to get everything I require?"

"Yes sir. I believe you'll be pleased."

The second man remained silent. Alexi never spoke, but in Grigory's mind that was a plus. Both men were distant cousins from his mother's side and had joined in on his entertainments since they were teens cruising the seedier and more interesting neighborhoods of LA.

They strolled out into the morning light where a black Chevy Tahoe waited. Alexi drove them ten miles out of town and pulled over at a vacant parking lot of a scenic overlook. Max took obvious pleasure in demonstrating the new toys they had collected for Grigory. He sprung out of the Tahoe after flipping a switch on the dash.

"Flashing lights, hidden behind the grill," he said. "Just like the police." He vaulted around to the rear of the SUV and lowered the rear cargo door. From the hidden compartments surrounding the spare tire he pulled out a small arsenal, handing two .45 caliber semi-automatics to Alexi and taking one for himself. Then he unveiled a bundle wrapped in black silk. "Your favorite, Grigory. Walther PPK, just like James Bond. A complete set of surgical scalpels, German steel of course. And," he gestured with a flourish to the small golden object remaining, "voila."

Grigory frowned at first, handling the lightweight handgrip. Then he fired it up. A brilliant blue flame blazed from the end of the blow torch. "Magnificent. Where did you find it?"

"Martha Stewart makes it. It's designed for cooks. So much nicer than the plumber's torch, yes?"

Grigory laughed, a gleeful noise that bubbled forth as he twirled the lightweight blowtorch like a holiday sparkler. "It's brilliant. Excellent work."

Max gave a small nod and Grigory could tell that he was pleased by the praise. "What have you discovered about our target?"

"Everything," Max assured him as they resumed their positions in the Tahoe and continued north to the mountains. "Hopewell, New York. Population under 500. Police department consists of three officers and a chief, only two vehicles. They do have a mutual aid pact with the county sheriff department. No fire department. No major highways, only a single county road leading in and out. Our target, Sarah Durandt, lives at 312 Lake Road and teaches English in the local middle school—"

Grigory pivoted in his seat, interrupting Max's litany. "How did you discover this? There was no time for reconnaissance."

Another beaming smile from Max. "Didn't need to." He unearthed a computer the size of a notebook and opened it. "Welcome to the Hopewell Chamber of Commerce website. And the county sheriff has their own site as well. We have maps, building plans, satellite imagery. Everything you ever wanted to know."

Grigory scanned the photos and reams of information scrolling down the screen. He despised computers, they were for peons like Diamontes to use, not an artist like himself. But now he saw that perhaps there was something more to the machines and cyberspace. Nothing close to the level of artistic achievement he had attained, but poetic. In an ironic way.

"We have everything you need. Including," Max smirked at Alexi, "enough Semtex to destroy the dam above the town and bury any evidence that we were ever there. Once we block the road and cut off communication, the entire town of Hopewell is our playground."

Cold fire burned through Grigory's gut at the image of five hundred souls, huddled together for his enjoyment. His mother's father had claimed a distant relationship to Stalin, had bounced Grigory on his knee, extolling the dictator's virtues and whispering tales of his "diversions." Ever since he was a child, Grigory had been fascinated by torture and mass murderers, had studied the masters back to the days of ancient Persia and Sparta.

Now he would surpass them all. Five hundred lives, his to command. His masterpiece—bigger, bolder than Picasso's Guernica. A living, breathing, bleeding testament to his genius.

"I want to see this place for myself. Then we'll pay Miss Sarah a visit. Get a look at the lovely lady up close and personal."

"Since I only have the one holding cell," Hal said as he escorted Sarah inside the police department's cramped office, "I'm afraid I'll have to handcuff you to a chair. It's only until we get this all straightened out."

Sarah didn't argue, she was still too stunned by the turn of events. Josh and Sam alive, Alan a crook who wanted to kill her, Sam a crook who had other crooks trying to kill him, the FBI in on it all, Sam lying to her, hiding her son from her, stealing two years of her life from her. Not to mention the biggest shock of all: the realization that he was the only one she could trust to save Josh.

Her body felt heavy and she was glad to sit in the chair Hal guided her to. Thank goodness he'd returned to his usual self after finding Logan. Hal seemed to assume Logan was to blame for this mess.

"Hey, that's not right," Logan protested as Caitlyn opened the door to the holding cell and motioned him inside. "I'm the victim here. She was holding the gun on me. If anyone gets locked up, it should be her, not me."

"Go on, Jack," Caitlyn said, giving him a small shove.

Logan dug in his heels. "C'mon, cut me some slack here, Caitlyn. I'm a federal agent, just like you."

"Former federal agent. Get in."

Hal finished restraining Sarah's left wrist to the chair arm and strode over to confront Logan. He stood, hands on his hips, leaning forward so that his face was mere inches from Logan's. "My house, my rules. If I want you locked up, you get locked up. Now!"

The last came out as a bark that made Sarah jump. Hal never lost his cool, never. But then lots of things that she'd never expected seemed to be happening tonight.

Hal placed his hand on the small of Logan's back and before Sarah could blink, the former FBI agent was locked in the cell. Caitlyn held out her hand and Hal dropped a set of keys into her palm. She crooked her finger at Logan who thrust his hands through the bars and waited impatiently while she removed his cuffs.

"Terroristic threats, false imprisonment, assault," he said in a petulant tone, shaking his head at Caitlyn. "This isn't going to end well. You can kiss your career good-bye, Caitlyn."

Sarah was surprised to see Caitlyn grin at that. "Already have, Jack. Already have. Shut up while I talk with Mrs. Durandt, will you?"

"You're wasting time, Caitlyn. I'm the one you should be talking with. After you do, you'll be wishing you'd cooperated with me, shown me some respect."

Sarah ignored Logan as she watched Hal unclip his gun and lock it in his bottom desk drawer. He took the two wallets he'd taken from Logan and quickly flipped through them. Her heart stuttered when he opened Sam's but he said nothing, merely dropped it in his desk drawer, leaving Logan's wallet on the desk in plain sight. He raised his head, his gaze piercing as he stared at her and gave her a small nod.

She released the breath she'd been holding and mouthed the words, *thank you*. When Caitlyn joined him at the desk, he was thumbing through Logan's credentials. "He does have a permit for the HK. But not for the Glock."

Caitlyn cleared the magazine and rounds from both guns. Her hands seemed to float effortlessly over the weapons, as if she could perform the maneuver in her sleep.

"Expensive," she said as she sighted down the Heckler-Koch's barrel, breaking every rule of gun safety by aiming it at Logan. "And it's been fired recently. Hope those insurance folks give you a nice severance package, 'cause I don't think you'll be working much in the future, Jack."

"Caitlyn, we need to talk," Logan replied, exasperation coloring his tone.

"I'm all ears," Hal answered. Logan curled his lips in a frown and turned his back on the police officer. "Agent Tierney has no jurisdiction in this matter, so until you decide to speak with me, I'm afraid that cell will be your home."

"We'll see about that, you shit-kicking redneck," Logan muttered.

Hal's face flushed. He scooped Logan's gun and ammunition into an evidence bag. Caitlyn was examining Richland's gun, frowning as she traced a fingernail along the bottom of the grip. "This one hasn't been fired but it looks like government issue. I can have our guys at Quantico run it through the system."

Hal reached for the gun and took it from her, dropping it into a separate evidence bag. "It's four in the morning. It can wait."

Sarah saw the narrowed look Caitlyn shot him. Hal had his back turned, locking all the evidence in the small safe that sat behind his desk. "Matter of fact," he said, his back still to her, "why don't you head down the mountain to your motel, get some rest? We can straighten all this out by the light of day."

Caitlyn settled into the other chair, stretching her legs out before her. "Sorry. You're stuck with me. I never had a chance to check into a motel." She turned to Sarah. "So, Mrs. Durandt. Do you want to exercise your right to an attorney or would you like to clear this all up right here and now?"

"Don't say anything, Sarah," Logan called out. "Call Alan. He'll straighten this out."

Caitlyn swiveled to stare at him. "A minute ago you were calling her a desperate criminal who kidnapped you at gunpoint. Now you're helping her with her legal rights?"

Logan shrugged and smiled. "You know the Bureau's motto, Caitlyn. Truth, justice, and the American way."

"Bull shit. What in hell is going on here?"

Hal intervened. "Calm down everyone. If Sarah wants a lawyer, she has every right to call one. And she deserves some privacy while she does. Agent Tierney, would you mind joining me out in the hallway?"

Sarah was grateful for his help, but the look of suspicion that settled onto Caitlyn's face made her nervous. Hal pushed the phone over to where she could reach it and tapped Caitlyn on the shoulder, nodding toward the door leading into the post office.

"We can't leave prisoners unattended," Caitlyn protested.

"They're not going anywhere. Besides, I'd like to have a word with you. Now."

Sarah hesitated, her hand on the phone receiver. Caitlyn stood but her eyes were narrowed and her brow creased as she stalked from the room. Hal followed her and closed the door behind them.

"Alone at last," Logan sang out. "That police chief of yours is a real rube. He must have a soft spot for you, though. So Sarah, here's how we play this. You saw lights on in the cabin, found me there. When you saw the gun in my hand, you jumped me, took me by surprise, and tied me up. You were just getting ready to call the police when Chief Bozo and the girl-wonder showed up all hot and bothered."

Sarah listened, hating to lie to Hal, but accepting the necessity. Logan's eyes glittered as he craned his head to look through the small window in the door Caitlyn and Hal had passed through.

"Your chief does have good taste, though. I tried for years to get Caitlyn in the sack and all I got for my troubles were threats of reporting me for harassment. Hmm, hmm. I wonder if she was worth it. I'd expect her to be a ball-buster. Maybe that's why he's willing to serve her up now."

Logan's stare raked over Sarah. She felt dirty, clammy as if he'd had his hands on her. "Or do you two have something going? Has Chief Bozo been knocking on your door, comforting the poor, widow lady?"

"Go to hell."

He laughed. "Just don't forget our deal. Call Alan, play it like Sam jumped me and you heard the gunshot, stumbled in on everything. Act all sweet and innocent. I'm sure you know the routine." He leered at her, one eyebrow arched. "Our favorite lawyer still has ideas about getting you in the sack, he'll forget everything else if you play along. Promise him the world. Tell him you don't care about Sam, that you ran away because he betrayed you. Tell him all you care about is getting your son back, that you'll do anything if he helps you."

Sarah swallowed hard. She would do anything to get Josh back, but pretending she cared about Alan made her skin crawl. He'd see right through her, she was certain.

No. She'd have to get it right. She raised the receiver and dialed Alan's number. Sam and Josh's lives depended on it.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Caitlyn wheeled on Hal as soon as the door shut behind him. "You can't leave prisoners unattended."

"Maybe you haven't noticed, Agent Tierney, but this isn't the FBI. You get me a budget that lets me do everything by the book and I'll be happy to. But my only other option is to drive them down to the county lockup in Plattsburgh and I'm not ready to do that. In fact, I'm betting there won't even be any charges brought on all this."

He leaned against the wall beside the bulletin board with the Wanted posters as if this was a normal day's work. His face was relaxed, but she saw his hand working, opening and closing into a tight fist. He followed her glance and his hand froze, then he began scratching at the inside of one wrist like something had crawled under his skin.

"You're betting on your friend, Sarah Durandt," she said. "Look, Hal. I like her too. But there's something going on here. And I think she's in it, up to her pretty little eyeballs."

"I've known Sarah practically all her life. Trust me, she wasn't involved in what happened to Sam and Josh."

"What about Logan? I told you what I'd found at Quantico—"

"Which is why he's the one behind bars." He pushed off the wall and raised both hands, placing them on her shoulders, squeezing lightly. "You sure this isn't about what happened earlier? I'm sorry if I put you in a compromising position." He flicked the collar of her shirt, lowered his head, and kissed her. "But it was worth it, Caitlyn. Every minute. It was a precious gift, and my only regret is that we don't have more time."

Caitlyn hated the way his touch made her blood surge, almost causing her to forget the reason why she'd come to Hopewell to start with. She turned her face away from his without returning his passion. He stepped back, arms spread wide in surrender.

"All right, if that's how it's going to be. But I meant every word of what I said."

"I'm more worried about what you're not saying. What's going on here, Hal?"

He hung his head, shaking it slightly. "I only wish I knew. But you have to trust me. Your heavy-handed FBI ways aren't going to work around here—just like they didn't two years ago. Leave it to me and I promise, I'll get you all the answers you need."

She frowned, felt the pressure begin to build behind her eyes. Damn, she'd been pain free for hours and now she'd pay the price. If this headache was anywhere near as bad or disorienting as the last ones, then she would have no choice but to trust Hal to finish what she started.

Hal brushed his hand along her forehead, soothing the furrows there as if he could sense her headache as well. "Guess we gave Sarah enough time."

"You mean gave *them* enough time to get their stories straight."

He strode to the door, his boots clacking on the linoleum, the noise driving into her brain like a sledgehammer. She had no choice but to follow.

Sam stumbled through the fog, thoroughly lost. He was searching for the fork in the trail that would take him back to Sarah's, but instead found himself on the main trail leading to Lake Road.

"Sam, over here!" A strange voice called out his name and he wondered if he was hallucinating. Then two figures walking bicycles appeared from the mist, beckoning to him. "This way!"

He wasn't sure if he should run and hide or trust them. Then he drew close enough to see who they were. "JD and—" He faltered, searching for the girl's name.

"Julia, Mr. Durandt. Julia Petrino." She held her hand out as if they were meeting in a receiving line.

He took it in both of his. "Julia, of course. You wrote that beautiful sonnet about the Indian Princess and her Thundergod. Won the middle-school writing contest two years ago. My wife was very proud of you."

Even in the thinning fog he could see the blush creep over her face. "It's my favorite story, Ahweyoh flying into the air, so sure of their love that she knows her Thundergod will save her," she said with a shy smile.

Sam knew the legend well. "Sarah loves that story, too."

He remembered the first time Sarah had told him about the two Indian lovers. The first time they had made love, on top of the mountain where it felt as if they had owned the world, that anything was possible. He had promised himself he would tell her the truth that night, but after falling beneath her spell, he convinced himself that a woman like Sarah would never have fallen in love with a stupid, selfish idiot like Stan Diamontes.

Surrounded by her arms, comforted in the warm embrace of the mountain and the stars above them, he had decided that he was now a different man, a new man. And the next morning as the sun began to seduce the mountains with its golden glow, he had risen and found the last piece of Stan still remaining. A photo of him surfing when he'd chased the big waves to Oahu. Until then, he'd thought that was the happiest day of his life.

Sam had breathed life back into the fading embers of their campfire. He held the photo out to the dancing flames, watching as they licked its edges, turning from yellow to red to blue, before greedily devouring Stan's image. Small curlicues of ash had risen into the air, flying out over the gorge until they vanished.

Stan Diamontes was dead. And Sam Durandt had the rest of his life to look forward to.

He had woken Sarah. The rising sun bathed her in streams of ruby and gold. They had made love again and as they clung together, shivering in the morning breeze, tears had warmed Sam's face.

Sam choked back the memory and returned his focus to the two kids in front of him.

"Are you all right?" Julia asked.

Sam didn't trust his voice yet, so he merely nodded.

JD grabbed Sam by the arm, squeezing his biceps. "Wow," he said breathlessly. "What happened to you? Skinhead and all bulked up—were you in jail?"

Sam said nothing. What could he say? It didn't matter because JD and Julia filled in all the gaps in conversation.

"Was it you causing all the lights? We've been following them for days, they've been spotted down by the dam and two spots up on the ridge."

"Near the upper falls and just past Hal Waverly's house. Where'd you go, Mr. D? Why'd you come back? Who were those men with the guns?"

"Do you need a doctor?" Julia asked.

"Yeah. Looks like they beat the crap out of you."

Sam had to admit he was limping a bit and he was certain he'd cracked a rib. "No doctor, thanks." He stopped and turned to the two teens. "You two can't tell anyone you saw me or that I'm still alive."

JD waved him off. "Sure, we know that. Mrs. D said the same thing. I'm thinking those guys with the guns are holding your son for ransom. So what are they making you and Mrs. D do? Blow up the dam or something?"

"Are they terrorists? Al Queda?" Julia asked breathlessly. Sam noted the way JD's arm wrapped around her waist protectively. Guess he didn't need to ask what these two were doing out all night while watching for their mysterious lights.

"They are very dangerous men, that's all you need to know. All right?"

They nodded in unison, their eyes wide with excitement. Good Lord, was he going to have to lock them up somewhere to keep them out of trouble? "Do you know what happened to my wife?"

"Hal Waverly and the FBI lady took her and the man to the police station."

Sam blew his breath out in exasperation. No way he could show his face anywhere near town. Now that both Alan and Logan knew where Josh was, he couldn't waste any time. "Do either of you have a cell phone?"

Julia pulled one from her pocket. "The reception up here isn't very good," she cautioned him.

He flipped it open and dialed Mrs. B's number. She answered after the second ring, her voice crackling with static. "It's me," he said. "Everything all right there?"

"Speak up, Sam, I can barely hear you."

"Josh, is he all right?" he was practically shouting now, pacing up and down the path in search of a reliable signal.

"Up all night with one of his bad dreams, he just fell asleep a short while ago. Are you okay?"

"No. Things are," he darted a glance at the two teens, eagerly listening to his side of the conversation, "more complicated than I thought. I need you to take Josh and leave. Go to that place I told you about. There's money in the lockbox."

"The motel outside of Montreal? I have to tell you, Sam, I don't like this. Not one bit. That boy needs his parents, both of them."

Sam raised his head, beseeching the heavens. The fog was lifting and the sky lightening, but he still was no closer to saving Sarah and Josh than he had been yesterday. If anything, he'd made things worse. "I know, I know. Please, Mrs. B, I need you to do this. I need you to keep Josh safe."

Her sigh was punctuated by static. "All right. We'll go this morning."

"Thank you. Tell him I love him—" The line went dead before he could finish. He stared at the phone for a moment, then flipped it shut.

Julia gave him a half-hearted smile. "Your boy, Josh, he's all right?"

"He is for now," Sam muttered, trying to think of a way out of this mess. His brain was fried with lack of sleep and every thought he had seemed fuzzy and out of focus. Mrs. B would keep Josh safe. All he had to do was save Sarah, and stop Alan, Logan and Korsakov from going after her. A bitter laugh escaped him. Alone, unarmed, how was he going to stop three killers? "Could you guys keep an eye on Sarah? Call me on Julia's phone when she leaves the police station, let me know where she goes?"

JD's eyes went wide. "You mean tail her? Sure."

"You couldn't let anyone know what you're doing. Not even Chief Waverly. Don't try to

talk to her. Just let me know where she is."

"My dad would kill me if I lose my phone," Julia said.

"I just want to borrow it," Sam reassured her. "Just for today." He considered his options. "Can you get a message to the Colonel for me?"

"The Rockslide will be open in a little bit, he's probably already there. What do you want us to tell him?"

"Don't tell him it's from me. Ask him to come to," he thought for a moment, "the caretaker's cabin below the dam."

"That's no good," JD put in. "What if the cops come back to search it or something?"

"Or maybe the terrorists have been using it as a base of operations," Julia added. "You'd be walking into a trap."

"All right. You tell me where. I can't be seen in town."

They exchanged glances. "How about the clearing above the dam?" JD suggested. "You know, the one where—"

"The one where I almost died. Yeah, think I remember it." An expression of chagrin clouded JD's face and Sam regretted his harsh tone. "I'm sorry. Okay, the clearing above the dam after the lunch rush is done." He paused, knuckling his temple, trying to force a coherent thought into his frazzled brain. Much as he hated the damned thing, he felt naked without the gun. "Ask him to bring a gun—a pistol, not a rifle. Got it?"

"Sure thing, Mr. D." They swung onto their bikes, balancing as they turned to look at him. "You going to be all right until then?"

"We have some left over sandwiches if you want them." Julia rummaged around in her backpack and handed over a brown paper bag.

Sam had to smile at their combination of youthful enthusiasm and heart-warming naivety. He'd just risen from the dead, been beaten up, had his wife and child threatened at gunpoint, and they thought a few bologna sandwiches would make everything all right.

"Thanks, kids. Don't let anyone hear you when you talk with the Colonel."

"Not even his wife?" JD said with a grin.

Sam rolled his eyes and both kids smiled. "Lordamighty. Especially not the Colonel's wife."

They pedaled down the trail. He began his lonely tramp through the woods and back to his hidey-hole of a cave. It was warm and dry and safe enough that he'd be able to catch a few hours of sleep before meeting the Colonel. To Sam that made it worth more than any five star hotel.

He just wished he knew what the hell he was going to do afterwards.

CHAPTER 39

The sun was rising as Alan steered his Volvo onto the Interstate. He headed south, thinking that a guy like him could find plenty of places to hide in a big city like New York. And plenty of opportunities.

It wasn't a setback, he'd told himself after almost running into the police when he'd returned to pick up Sam and Logan. No, rather an opportunity.

Because there was no way in hell Korsakov would let Sam or Logan live. Hell, having seen the Russian when he worked himself into a frenzy, he wouldn't be surprised if Korsakov

torched the entire town in retribution for Hopewell giving sanctuary to Sam all these years.

But Alan still had a chance. He'd hightailed it back to his house, tossed everything of value into the car and headed off into the fog. Alive without a hundred million was better than being a dead man with it.

Still, all that money...the things he could do with it cascaded through his mind, torturing him with could-have-been scenarios.

His cell phone rang, breaking his reverie. He looked at it in its perch on the dashboard and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. What if it was Korsakov? Or what if Logan rolled on him? The cops could track those phones.

It rang again and again. What if it was Sam? Maybe he'd gotten clear of the cops and still wanted to deal? After all, as far as he knew, Alan was on his way to Bumfuck, Quebec right now, ready to kill his kid.

His hand hovered over the phone. He knew the safest bet was to ignore it, toss it out the window and buy a new one at the next Walmart. But one hundred million dollars, that was a helluva payoff. Least he deserved after spending two years setting this up.

He grabbed the phone and flipped it open. "Yeah."

"Alan?"

Christ, it was Sarah. What the hell did she want? He didn't have time to play Sir Galahad—but she might still be a key to get him the money. "Yes? What's up, sweetheart? Having trouble sleeping again?"

"I'm in jail. With your friend, Logan." Her voice was clipped, rushed.

"Logan?" What the fuck had gone wrong? How had Logan and Sarah ended up together, much less in jail? And where the hell was Sam?

"It's a long story. I need your help, Alan. Can you come down to the station? Please?" He couldn't resist a smile when he heard her pleading. In two years, she had never asked anything of him, had always been the one taking care of everything herself. But now Miss Self-sufficiency was begging him for help.

"I'm on the road. It will take me awhile to get back. Maybe you should call someone else." There was an emergency vehicle turn-around ahead. He slowed the Volvo and pulled onto the gravel path that connected both sides of the interstate.

There was a long pause before she answered. He could hear her breathing, it sounded raspy as if she was panicking. Good. The more desperate she was, the more she would follow his orders. All of them.

He stepped on the accelerator, now anxious to return to Hopewell.

"I'm scared, so much is going on. I can't trust anyone but you, Alan," she said. He pumped a fist in the air, excited that he finally had her exactly where he wanted her. "Please, Alan. I'll do anything. Please come and get me out of this."

"I'm on my way, sweetheart. Don't worry, I'll take care of everything."

Sarah hung up the phone feeling as if she needed a long, hot shower. Even then she might never feel clean again. The tone in Alan's voice...she shivered at the memory. It had been as if he'd been fantasizing about taking control over her, owning her body and soul.

Sam had said he'd been planning to kill her. She hugged herself with her free arm. To kill her after the marriage—after she shared his bed, vowed to love, honor, and cherish.

"What happened to my life?" she whispered.

Her only answer was Logan's cackle coming from behind her. She covered her face with her hand and rested her elbow on the edge of the desk.

Hal knocked and came in. "All done?" he asked in a too-bright voice.

Sarah raised her head and nodded. "Alan's coming. I don't know how long he'll be."

Caitlyn appeared behind Hal, hands on her hips in a defiant posture reminding Sarah of the first time she'd first seen her two years ago. She and Hal had clashed then as well. Caitlyn remained at the door, standing apart from the rest.

Hal plopped down in his desk chair. "This is how we're going to work this. Mr. Logan, do you still want to press charges?"

"I'm not sure. I'm going to wait until the lawyer gets here and see what my options are."

"Uh-huh," Hal said as if expecting this. "In the meantime, as soon as the government offices are open at nine, I'll check out your permit and gun registration. If that's all clear, you'll be free to go."

"That's not for hours," Logan protested.

"I know. So, I'd suggest you get comfortable." Hal looked across his cluttered desk at Sarah. "You all right? I can move the cuffs, if you'd like."

She noticed that he didn't say "remove" the cuffs. Caitlyn tensed, watching. "I'm fine."

"All right, then." He settled back, propping his feet on the desk, and crossed his arms behind his head. "So we wait."

Sarah looked up as Caitlyn made a disgusted snort and left, banging the door behind her.

"Nicely done, Chief," Logan said, applauding. "Now you want to let me out of here?"

"Shut up," Hal snapped. He dropped his feet to the floor with a thump and came around to Sarah's chair. "Sarah, I've covered all I can for you. What the hell is going on?"

Caitlyn turned on the lights to the post office section of the building and considered her options. She glanced back through the window into the police department. Hal was crouched down on the floor, head to head with Sarah Durandt.

Definitely something fishy. She wished she hadn't left her cell phone behind at Hal's house. Ahh, there was a phone jack right beside the computer on the service counter. Even better, there was a phone attached to it, cleverly hidden on a shelf behind the counter. Sitting on top of the thinnest municipal phone book Caitlyn had ever seen.

She'd written field reports that took more pages than the Clinton county directory. Within minutes she had Gerald Merton on the line.

"The bullet?" he asked, his voice groggy. "It's gone."

"I know," Caitlyn repeated for what felt like the tenth time. "I need the name and contact information on the officer who signed for it."

"No one signed for it."

"Sure they did. When the state police came to collect the evidence and the body."

"They haven't. They won't—not until Chief Waverly calls them."

Her grip on the receiver tightened. "They haven't been called yet?"

"Nope. And I'd know because as county coroner, I have to release the body to them."

"What happened to the bullet?"

"The Chief's got it." He sounded exasperated as if he were explaining the obvious. "He dug it out while you were on the phone. Took it with him. Guess you were so sick, he didn't want to bother you."

She could almost hear Merton's sneer through the phone. A junior Jack Logan in the making. "You're sure about that? The bullet isn't there?"

"Of course I'm sure. Saw him button it in his pocket, didn't I?"

She hung up and patted the breast pockets of Hal's shirt that she had appropriated. No,

couldn't be that lucky. She'd grabbed one from a kitchen chair, he'd ended up with the same one he'd had one last night.

Caitlyn pursed her lips, glared at the closed door to the police office. Her headache was gathering, but wasn't any more than a dull roar. Nothing she couldn't handle. Yet.

She called Clemens. His voice was muffled and she could hear someone snoring in the background when he answered. The fiancée, no doubt.

"It's Caitlyn," she said, pacing as far as the phone cord would allow her. She couldn't sit still, felt as jittery as if she'd devoured a gallon of espresso. "I need another favor."

"Sure." His voice emerged in a sleep-choked rasp. He cleared his throat. "What do you need?"

"A trace on a gun's serial number." She dug out the scrap of paper she'd scrawled the Glock's registration onto before Hal whisked the gun out of sight. "How long will it take you?"

"A few days or so."

"Sooner would be better."

"I could put a rush on it if you have a priority case number."

She was silent. She should have contacted the nearest field office as soon as she suspected the body Sarah found might be Leo Richland. But she hadn't and now she was screwed until she had his identity confirmed.

"I take it you're still off the books," he said when she didn't answer. "On that camping trip up in the mountains."

"More like a fishing expedition. And I'm hooking some whoppers, just nothing concrete yet."

His sigh resonated over the phone line. "I'll get it as fast as I can."

"Thanks, Clemens."

"Just be careful. All right?"

"Always." She hung up. If Hal was stuck in the office waiting with his prisoners, then that gave her a chance to go to his house. To pick up her phone, of course. And maybe get a look at those files he'd distracted her from last night.

CHAPTER 40

JD flew down Main Street, screeching to a halt in front of the Rockslide, feeling like James Bond. Julia pulled up alongside him, looking prettier than any Bond girl he'd ever seen—even Hallie Berry in her skimpy bikini.

"What are you going to say?" she asked, her cheeks flushed with the wind and excitement.

"I'll tell him I need his help with the documentary."

"All right. I'll go check and see if Sarah is at the police station."

JD leaned his bike against the lamppost and sauntered inside the café. Once he was out of Julia's sight, he wiped his palms on the legs of his jeans. Even James Bond got nervous, he thought. The trick was to never let 'em see you sweat.

"Hey, kid," his dad called from his usual place at the counter. "Come to have breakfast with your old man?"

JD nodded and smiled, taking a seat beside his dad. The Colonel was manning the grill, running his spatula through a mound of hash browns.

"You want the same as your dad?"

"Yes, please."

"How's the movie coming?" The Colonel asked. "You figure out where those lights come from yet?"

"Maybe." JD nodded his thanks as the Colonel poured him a glass of orange juice. He hadn't realized how dry his mouth was until he had finished it in three quick gulps.

"Don't encourage him," his dad put in between bites of sausage and French toast. "Kid's wasting his whole summer tramping through the woods when he could be making decent money working with me."

"Dad—"

"Don't you 'Dad' me. I told you—"

The Colonel raised an eyebrow and they both fell silent. "Seems to me that your dad and I wasted a lot of our summers tramping through these woods when we were kids. Didn't hurt us any."

"That was different. We didn't have big dreams of going to some fancy college. And college costs money. Lots of it."

"I know what I'm doing, Dad," JD said, exasperated that these old guys just didn't get it. "I'll find the money. My way."

His dad threw his hands up in the air. "Your way. Running through the woods, chasing ghosts and thinking anyone would want to buy a movie of it."

"Excuse me, dad. Ever hear of *The Blair Witch Project*? Anyway, I'm not trying to sell my movie. It's to help me get a job next summer. If I can get that internship Mrs. Durandt told me about—"

He stopped, suddenly remembering why he was there. Grown ups, why couldn't they stay on track?

The Colonel set his plate down in front of him. "Actually, that's why I came in this morning. Do you think you could spare a few hours this afternoon to help me out? No one knows these woods better than you do."

The Colonel actually smiled at the suggestion. Gee, maybe he should think about acting or something instead of journalism. "Course not. That all right with you, George?"

His dad speared a piece of French toast and dunked it into his coffee. "Sure, why not? Sooner the kid's finished with this crazy movie of his, sooner he'll be ready to see reality."

"Dad—"

George Dolan spun off his stool and threw a ten-dollar bill on the counter top. "I've got to get to work."

He stalked out, his back rigid. The Colonel stared down at JD, making him feel like a cockroach under a microscope.

"I asked him for help first," JD muttered, his head hung low. "He said no."

"Yeah, well, you gotta remember he just wants what's best for you."

"Then why won't he ever listen to me?"

The Colonel laughed. "You figure that one out, you let me know. My kid's all grown up and she still never listens to me. Finish your breakfast. I'll meet you after lunch."

"Up in the clearing above the dam. At two?"

"Deal. Then tomorrow you help your dad out with his deliveries. Maybe he can knock off early and you guys can go fishing or something."

JD shoveled his food in. He was starving. Then he remembered the second part of Sam's request. How the heck was he going to get the Colonel to bring a gun with him?

Before he could think of anything, the door opened and a short man with a full head of dark hair entered. He didn't just walk in, he made an entrance as if he owned the place. With his

black suit, black shirt and ruby red tie, he looked rich enough to plunk down enough cash on the counter to buy the cafe here and now. Hell, buy the whole damn town.

The Colonel straightened and approached the man, placing himself between the stranger and JD as if he sensed something wrong with the guy.

Was this one of the terrorists? The hash browns and sausage JD had devoured now threatened to come back up. A lump formed in his throat and he couldn't swallow, leaving him gulping.

"Can I help you?" the Colonel asked.

The stranger smiled. Perfect white teeth. He looked like he'd stepped out of a movie: James Cagney meets *Jaws*.

"I seem to be lost," he said with a deprecating shrug of one shoulder. "Can you tell me what town this is? I was following the road and it just," he shrugged again, but his eyes remained lasered on the Colonel's, "dead-ended here."

The Colonel laughed at that and seemed to relax. "People often miss the turn off at the base of the mountain. This is the Village of Hopewell and you're right, the road stops here. Only one way in and one way out. Unless you're a mountain goat. Why don't you pull up a stool, have some breakfast before you head back down?"

"That sounds good." The man eased himself onto a stool at the end of the counter and perused a menu. His voice had a slight accent, one that JD couldn't place. He seemed in no rush. Didn't act like a terrorist, just another dumb, lost tourist from the city.

But those eyes, deader than a fish's left in the sun for too long. The stranger slid his glance over to examine JD, lingering longer than need be, taking in the sweat that had broken out on JD's brow, the quiver of his pulse along the sides of his neck, the sound of his heartbeat ratcheting into overdrive.

The guy opened his mouth in another one of those wide and blinding smiles and a horrifying thought struck JD. Had the terrorists already gotten Julia?

He bolted from his stool.

"Hey," the Colonel called out. JD froze, didn't turn for fear that his eyes would betray him if he faced the stranger. "Don't forget. Two o'clock."

"No sir," JD stuttered. "Thank you, sir."

He ran out, banging the door behind him.

Caitlyn told herself she had every right to be inside Hal's house. After all, she was retrieving her property. And the door was unlocked. Still, the house seemed creepier than it had last night. No longer warm and welcoming, it vibrated with a hostile presence.

"Scared of ghosts, Tierney?" she chided herself as she walked through the main hallway to the living room. She grabbed her cell phone and pocketed it. Her blouse lay on the floor in a wrinkled heap, surrounded by small pearl buttons.

It had been one of her favorites, but she made no move to retrieve it. The cuckoo clock chimed the hour and she jumped. The house fell into eerie silence.

Not silence. An undercurrent radiated through the foundation, setting her teeth on edge. A noise below the threshold of her hearing but loud enough to raise the hairs on the back of her neck.

"The waterfall." Talking aloud helped to dispel the gloom. "It's so close it makes the entire mountainside tremble. Imagine living with that all the time. You'd go crazy."

Satisfied that she'd solved one mystery, she proceeded to work on the next. She climbed over the boxes that stood between her and the one she wanted in the far corner. As she

suspected, the departmental phone records were nestled inside, gathered in a neat log book. She quickly flipped through it, searching for the days preceding Sam and Josh's murders.

And came up blank. The dates in question had been neatly razored out of the ledger.

She sat back on her haunches. Sometimes she hated when she was right. No one except Hal Waverly could have tampered with the phone records and expected to get away with it.

Had Logan bribed him? She reached for her cell phone.

"Clemens here," the lab tech sounded resigned as if he knew it was her before he answered the phone.

"Me again." She ignored his tone. "Any hits on the gun registration?"

"Caitlyn, I just walked in the door."

"Right. Well, this one is easy. Got your computer on?"

"Yes."

"Run a quick financial on Hal Waverly, Hopewell's Chief of Police. If you need his social and date of birth—"

"No, I have them. Aren't that many Hallenforth Waverlys in Hopewell, New York."

"Hallenforth? Really?" God, she'd almost slept with the guy and she didn't even know his real name. Maybe there was a lot she didn't know about Chief Waverly. She held the phone between her ear and shoulder as she restacked the boxes, leaving them just as she had found them. Except for the tampered log book shoved into her bag.

"Got it," Clemens' voice broke into the silence. "What did you want? Everything current looks clean."

"Go back two years. Summer of 2005." She wove her way back through the boxes, heading toward the front door.

"Okay. Wow, you're right. The guy was in debt up to his eyeballs. Hospital and medical companies threatening to sue, bank ready to foreclose on the house, major league problems."

"And?" She paused in the main hallway near the front door, waiting for his answer, even though the sinking feeling in her stomach told her she already knew what he would say.

"And it all vanished. Paid about \$100,000 in cash, cleared it all except the second mortgage and he's kept up with that."

"When did he pay the cash?"

"August 31, 2005. Good thing, too. The bank was going to seize his house on September first. Made it in the nick of time, lucky guy."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Thanks, Clemens."

"You're welcome. Hey, after all this is done, think you could help me apply to the academy? Don't get me wrong, I love working here in the lab, but I want to get out in the field like you do."

Caitlyn almost laughed. Tried to picture the lab tech out in the field where you never knew who you could trust. "Be careful what you wish for. Call me with those results."

She hung up and stepped outside onto the porch. The sun was now high enough to cast a bright swath of brilliance on the yard and the drive but left the porch cloaked in shadows. Caitlyn shivered and couldn't resist looking back over her shoulder.

Was surprised to see no one watching her from the front windows. She squared her shoulders and headed back to her car.

Time to get some answers.

CHAPTER 41

Sarah watched the minute hand on the clock over Hal's desk slowly tick off the time. He'd uncuffed her long enough for her to go to the bathroom, but after she refused to explain what was happening, he'd otherwise ignored her and Logan.

All she could think was that each passing minute brought Josh closer to safety and this nightmare closer to ending. Although she doubted the ending would be a happy one. Logan would kill Sam once he got the money. If Alan didn't kill him first.

Not to mention the Russian.

She shuddered, remembering Sam's expression when he'd told her the horror story of how Korsakov had tortured and killed a man for the sheer pleasure of it. If it was true, she could begin to understand why he'd felt compelled to keep Josh safely hidden.

Understand, maybe. Forgive? Never.

Finally the door burst open. Alan breezed in, a smile creasing his face. "So what's all this about then?" he asked. He approached Sarah and clucked his tongue when he saw her handcuffs. "False imprisonment, Chief? Please, you know my client is innocent."

Hal slowly climbed to his feet. His eyelids drooped with fatigue and his shoulders slumped. "Want to hear what the charges are before you go making any decisions, counselor?"

Alan waved aside such technicalities. "Just give me a few minutes alone with my client and we'll have this all sorted out."

"Client or clients?" Hal asked, his arms crossed over his chest.

"He means me," Logan sang out from where he lounged across the cot in the holding cell. "I'm the innocent party in all this."

"It was your weapon that was discharged," Hal reminded him.

"Accident. I was startled. That's no crime."

"So you keep saying." Hal leveled his gaze onto Alan. "I'm tired of this bullshit. You talk to your clients long as you want. No one's going anywhere until I make sure he has a license to carry those guns and someone gives me a reasonable explanation. Understand?"

"Of course, Chief Waverly. Do you mind if we use the room?"

Hal rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. "I need some fresh air anyway. I'm leaving the door open, so don't get any stupid ideas."

He bent down, took his gun from his desk drawer, and walked outside, propping the door open. A fresh breeze rushed in, stirring the papers on Hal's desk and clearing the stuffy atmosphere.

Alan quickly turned Sarah's chair around so that she faced Logan and scooted his own close to hers. "What the hell happened?"

Sarah listened as Logan spun the tale he'd prepared for the two of them. Alan narrowed his eyes at one point, then faced her head on, his hands covering both of hers, squeezing them against the arms of her chair.

"Is this true? Sam was already gone when you got there?"

She nodded, forcing herself to meet his gaze.

"Sam tackled Logan and just ran away? He didn't try to find you or kill Logan or anything?"

She heard the disbelief in his voice and knew this was her only chance. "We'd argued. In the woods before you came. I told him I never wanted to see him again, that all I wanted was Josh. I made him promise that he'd go get Josh, bring him to me."

Alan tilted his head, one eye squinting as if he saw the lies she'd woven between her truths. "Why didn't he just send you to Josh? He knows Korsakov is coming, why risk him finding you?"

"He did," Sarah stuttered. "He was. But you came and took him before he could tell me where Josh was."

"So you followed us down to the cabin?"

She nodded and looked down, not trusting her voice.

"You heard a gunshot and rushed in, found Logan lying there?"

She nodded again, found herself biting her lip and forced herself to relax.

"Where was Sam?"

"It was foggy," Logan put in. "You couldn't see your hand in front of your face."

"I'm asking her," Alan said, his voice level but his hands squeezing her wrists so hard the bones ground together. "Sarah, where is Sam?"

That she could answer truthfully. She choked back a sob of pain and frustration and raised her head to meet his gaze. "I don't know."

Caitlyn was surprised to find Hal slouched against his SUV, watching the open door of the police station.

"Did they escape?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light.

He glanced over at her. God, he looked wrecked. Dark hollows had formed below his eyes, his lips were pinched, and a tremor shook one hand as he drummed it on the hood of the GMC. What happened to the vibrant man who had literally swept her off her feet last night?

Maybe that Alice in Wonderland migraine had clouded her judgment in more ways than one. Something sure as hell had.

"Alan's here," he said, jerking his chin at the open door.

She waited but he didn't follow up with any explanation. "Alan?"

"Alan Easton. Oh yeah, he came to town after you were here last time. Big shot victims' right lawyer, tried to help Sarah get in to see Damian Wright so she could find out where Sam and Josh were buried."

She leaned against her still warm car. A victims' rights lawyer out here in the middle of nowhere, helping Sarah interview the man who most likely did not kill her husband and child? This was getting stranger and stranger.

"Did you say Alan Easton?" she asked, her memory finally putting two and two together.

"Yeah. You heard of him?"

"Sure. He's supposed to be really good," Caitlyn lied. Really good at talking his way out of a grand jury indictment while simultaneously not adding to the evidence against his Russian boss, that was. "I'd love to meet him."

She strolled into the station, startling the three people who sat huddled together near the holding cell. "Don't let me interrupt anything," she said, drawing on every ounce of southern charm she'd learned from her mother. She held her hand out to the stranger in the group. "You must be Alan Easton. It's nice to meet you."

The lawyer looked up in surprise, ready to expel her from his private client conference, but she smiled at him and watched as his expression changed. He took her hand and rose to his feet. "And you are?"

"Supervisory Special Agent Caitlyn Tierney," she said, holding his hand a moment too long. "I used to work with Jack."

Easton nodded. "I recognize your name from the case files, Agent Tierney."

"It's Caitlyn, please. I understand you actually interviewed Damian Wright?"

"Briefly. I was trying to convince him to meet with Sarah, give her some closure." He shook his head mournfully. "I'm afraid I failed."

"Still, I'd love to hear about it sometime. I mean," she smiled again, "you had a chance to see firsthand how the mind of a predator works. Any insight you could offer would be most valuable."

She felt Jack's BS meter start to rev up, as he leaned his weight against the bars of the holding cell. She turned to him. "I'm so sorry this is taking so long, Jack. I did call Quantico, asked them to expedite the records search." Now she favored him with a long, lingering glance, was rewarded when he smiled at her in return. "Least I could do after giving you such a hard time earlier. You know how slow things can go in these small town jurisdictions."

"Thanks, Caitlyn. I appreciate it."

"Now, Mrs. Durandt, it seems I owe you another apology." Caitlyn fished out her handcuff key and unsnapped the bracelet on Sarah's arm. "The gun they found you with was reported as being lost during the search for your husband and son two years ago. The deputy who dropped it is thankful you recovered it, but I'm afraid he'll be facing disciplinary action for being so careless."

"Wait a minute," Alan protested as she held a hand out to Sarah, helping her to her feet. "She needs to stay here. There's paperwork to sort out, I might file a cross-complaint—"

Caitlyn wrapped her arm around Sarah's waist and waved off Alan's objections. "Chief Waverly will help you with all that. But I have a favor to ask Mrs. Durandt. Do you think it would be possible for me to transport you home and make use of your shower? I'm in desperate need of a place to clean up."

She watched, holding her breath to see if Sarah would take the bait. Sarah's glance darted from Logan to Easton and back again. Ahh, it was Logan she was most afraid of. She'd have to see what hold he had over Sarah. She gave a gentle tug on Sarah's waist, aiming her toward the door.

"Sure, I guess," Sarah said, almost stumbling. "That would be fine. Ah, thank you."

"No, thank you."

Now came the hard part. Caitlyn kept her hand on Sarah's elbow as she escorted her out to the Subaru. Hal stepped forward when he saw them emerge from the station.

"What the hell you doing? That's my prisoner!"

"Not anymore," she said, opening Sarah's door and helping her into the car as if she were in custody. Caitlyn quickly jogged around to the other side of the car. "Federal jurisdiction. Sorry, Hal."

She started the car and spun out of the gravel parking lot before he could say anything. As she glanced in the rearview mirror she saw him standing gape-mouthed, an expression of twisted anger and distrust on his face.

The man she'd been attracted to last night had totally vanished. Had he ever truly existed?

"Was that true?" Sarah asked. "What you said in there about the gun being lost?"

Caitlyn heard an undercurrent of hope in the woman's voice. "That gun was lost by an law enforcement officer, yes ma'am. It's the truth."

Sarah's lips tightened and she crossed her arms over her chest as she sat back and considered Caitlyn's words.

"So the officer, he wasn't hurt?" she persisted.

Caitlyn twisted the wheel, turning onto Lake Road. Sarah obviously knew more than she'd let on, but not everything.

"I think he's down in Merrill right now," she answered truthfully. Only she left out the part about him being zipped up tight in a body bag.

CHAPTER 42

"This smells delicious," Caitlyn said, taking the mug of tea from Sarah. It felt so good to have showered and cleared some of the cobwebs out of her mind. Sarah had been a gracious hostess, cooking them both a late breakfast and now serving tea. "It doesn't smell like tea, but like," she sniffed, "I don't know, my grandmother's kitchen."

"It's called Good Earth. Supposed to be calming, soothing. The Colonel's wife brought it after..." Sarah gave a brittle laugh as she filled her own cup. Caitlyn looked up, caught a strange expression trace over the other woman's face. Amusement mixed with anger.

"Thanks for letting me clean up here." She'd already re-packed her bag and stowed it back in her car while Sarah had taken her own quick shower. Now they sat, running out of polite conversation as Caitlyn decided on the best angle to take.

She sipped the steaming tea. It tasted of cinnamon and spices. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about Chief Waverly?"

Sarah straightened, leaned against the counter, her mug in her hands. "Guess not, since that was his shirt you were wearing this morning. But shouldn't you be asking him?" She paused and joined Caitlyn at the table, giving Caitlyn a discerning look. "If you're that interested, I mean."

Last thing Caitlyn was about to explain was her interest in the police chief. Or how she came to be wearing his uniform shirt. Somehow Hal had played a role in Sarah's tragedy. She just wished she could figure out exactly what. "He said his wife died of cancer. Right before you lost your husband and son."

Sarah's spoon clanked against the mug as she bent over her tea, stirring furiously. She looked up and met Caitlyn's gaze. Her eyes were clear but her lips were pinched. "I shouldn't say—it's none of my business—it couldn't be connected to Sam and Josh, but..."

Caitlyn waited. Sarah's words had rushed out in a single breath then drifted away. The clock ticked, the refrigerator hummed, and a stray rose branch scratched against the window over the kitchen sink. Finally, Sarah gave a small nod, as if giving herself permission to think unforgivable thoughts.

"Hal and I grew up here. Me since I was eight, he lived here all his life. We've been friends forever. I should have seen it—"

"Seen what, Sarah? How did Hal's wife really die?"

Sarah dropped her spoon into the tea. "She drove up to the Upper Falls, stripped naked and jumped."

Caitlyn pushed her mug aside and leaned forward, elbows on the table. "She killed herself? And Hal? Where was he?"

"He would have stopped her if he could. See, those last weeks, he was taking care of her full time. Oh, the rest of us, we stopped in, brought him food, tried our best to help. But Lily, she was—" She gave a little shrug, her lips blanching as they pressed together. "Towards the end there, she wasn't the woman we knew. She was out of control from the pain. It was like she was possessed. Hal was the only one who could sooth her, keep her from hurting herself or someone else."

"Couldn't the doctors?"

"Hal's insurance had long since ran out, and besides the doctors said the only hope was to give her enough morphine that she'd probably die from it. Hal couldn't bring himself to let them do that—even if he could afford to take her back to the hospital. They set up hospice workers to

visit but they just made Lily worse. She was out of her mind, said they were trying to kill her, to poison the entire town, that she was the only one who could save us."

"Save you from what?"

"Lily was the county hydrologist. She loved being outdoors, especially anything to do with water. She checked the reservoir, monitored all the local wells, kept an eye on the ground water. After she got sick, she got the notion that something in the water had poisoned her, given her the cancer. That someone wanted to poison the entire town. She began spying on people at night, even confronted a few of the village council like the Colonel."

"But it was really the cancer causing her delusions, change of personality, right?" Caitlyn wondered if Lily hadn't been at least partially right. Hal seemed to have the same mood swings, paranoid ideas his wife had suffered from.

Sarah nodded, was silent for another long moment. "Hal's never forgiven himself for answering the call that night. He couldn't afford any more sick leave, the village had already given him an extension on his pay so that he could keep the bank from foreclosing, so he tried his best to work from home. By that time, Lily would go crazy at the sight of anyone else, so we couldn't even really help.

"Some kids went skinny-dipping in the reservoir. Got stuck naked in the water, forgot that the way the bank is sloped there'd be no way for them to climb out again from the other side. That was two years ago tonight."

"And Lily?"

"She must have left right after Hal did. I don't know how she made it up the Pike without driving off the side of the mountain. The autopsy showed enough painkillers and sedatives in her to kill a grizzly. When Hal found her missing, he went nuts. We found the truck and we knew what happened." She raised her now cold tea to her lips, her fingers white as they gripped the cup.

"We found her body two days later. In Snakebelly—same place I found that body yesterday."

Caitlyn sat back, her own drink forgotten as she plucked at an itchy patch of skin on her arm. Her veins were still buzzing—with fatigue or sexual excitement left over from last night, she wasn't sure. But her skin felt so tight she wanted to claw her way out of it.

"Must be long hours for a Police Chief around here," she said, shifting in her seat. "Especially one so committed as Hal."

"It's nonstop when the tourists are here in the summer and fall. I've tried to get Hal to take a break, but he's a stubborn man. Just loves this town too much to trust it to anyone else, I guess."

Caitlyn looked down, her fingers still worrying at her forearm. There was no rash or signs of a bug bite, but she couldn't stop. It was as if angry gnats had crawled under her skin and were now trying to burrow further. The same gnats kept buzzing through her mind with a suspicious and ugly thought of how Sarah's loss and Hal's might be connected. "I guess the insurance must have still paid off? That's how he kept his house, right?"

There was a knock of porcelain hitting the wood too hard. Caitlyn looked up, saw the blood had drained from Sarah's face. Ahh, no one ever said the woman was stupid. She'd obviously put two and two together almost as fast as Caitlyn had.

"No," she stumbled out the single syllable. "Sam said it was the worse thing he'd ever had to do, telling Hal that because it was suicide, the company wouldn't pay. Sam even offered to give Hal money to tide him over, help him with the mortgage. He knew how much that house meant to Hal."

"When was this, Sarah?"

"August, just a few days before Sam and Josh..." She looked past Caitlyn, her gaze focused on the refrigerator festooned with its colorful finger paintings, their edges yellowed and curling with age. She made a choking sound, then cleared her throat. "Sam said he talked to Hal about Damian Wright, that he warned him—it would have been the same time."

"Sam said?" Caitlyn leaned forward, engaging the woman's attention. It was the second time Sarah Durandt had referred to her husband as if she'd just spoken with him. "Sarah, what do you mean, Sam said?"

Sarah stared at Caitlyn for a long moment. Her chest tightened and she felt sweat break out all over her. Sam had managed to keep Josh and his secret safe for almost two years. She'd known for only a few hours and first Alan and now Caitlyn were reading her like a neon sign flashing in Times Square.

She closed her eyes, utterly exhausted. Physically, mentally, emotionally exhausted. No, that wasn't the right word. What came after exhaustion? Breakdown.

Not a bad idea. Sarah slumped forward, resting her head on the kitchen table, and allowed her emotions to swarm over her like a nest of angry timber rattlers. Tears she'd held back for so very long, a torrent of fear and anger and more fear. Her body shook, her shoulders heaved, her head rocked against the tabletop.

Caitlyn's chair scraped back and the FBI agent crouched beside Sarah, wrapping her arms around her. "Jesus, I'm so sorry. I did it again. Mrs. Durandt, Sarah, I'm sorry. Just take a deep breath. That's it, you'll be all right."

Sarah almost felt guilty about tricking Caitlyn into a show of sympathy. Or was it just a show? Caitlyn had come that night with Jack Logan—who obviously knew more about Sam than he was telling anyone. Except Alan.

Now her breath came in ragged gasps for real. Sam was right. There was no one they could trust. If Caitlyn's suspicions about Hal were correct, then Sarah couldn't even trust the man she'd known for over twenty years.

It was all up to her. And so far she'd failed miserably. How the hell had Sam managed to keep his sanity while living in this world of deceit and treachery?

The enormity of what he had sacrificed, what doing the right thing had cost him, eased her anger towards him. A little. Maybe. He'd still had no right to take her son away from her, to let her think they were both dead...

"I talk to Sam every day," Sarah said, finally raising her head. Caitlyn grabbed a dishtowel from the oven door and Sarah used it to wipe her tears and blow her nose. "I'm sorry. I've never lost it like that before. It must have been finding the body yesterday. I really thought it would be Sam. That maybe if I had found him and Josh I could find some peace."

Sarah stared into the yellow daisies that covered the cotton towel, hoping Caitlyn bought her performance. The agent was silent for a long moment before resuming her seat at the table.

"Sam told you he'd spoken with Chief Waverly about Damian Wright. When exactly did you speak with him, Mrs. Durandt?"

Sarah noticed the way Caitlyn lowered her voice and raised her inflection, to soften any hint of accusation in her question. She could feel the agent's eyes on her as she left the table and busied herself by clearing the cups and silverware.

"Whenever either one of us traveled, we talked every night. On the phone. So it must have been whatever night Sam told Hal. Surely it's in the files somewhere. I must have told you this before. After all, a father would tell his wife that a pervert was trying to take photos of their child, wouldn't he?"

Caitlyn was silent and Sarah realized the agent was allowing her to incriminate herself. The strident tone she'd fallen into, the bitterness she'd revealed with her last statement was all too obvious. No, Sam hadn't told her about Damian Wright. She wasn't sure if that was because Hal asked him not to or because Sam really hadn't believed there was a threat to Josh after all.

Or because that last time they'd spoken that summer, she'd spent all their time ranting about the educational system and the dunderheads in the government who were wasting her time and had threatened to walk out of the mandatory seminar and quit her job. She'd been so upset that it had taken Sam twenty minutes to calm her down, convince her to stay in Albany.

Oh God, was this all her fault? If she'd given him a chance, would he have told her? Would she have raced home, been able to prevent all this?

Sarah banged the ceramic mug onto the counter top. It exploded in her hand. "Damn it!"

Caitlyn rushed to her side, but Sarah waved her away.

"This isn't a good time to talk," Sarah said, trying to sound calm. Instead she sounded demented, a raving lunatic trying to hold the beast within her in check. More tears burned at the back of her throat, as if once started it would take a lifetime to drain them all.

"So I see," Caitlyn said, her tone now neutral and professional. "But it really would be best if we spoke now. Cleared everything up." She paused and Sarah focused on the broken bits in the sink, looking anywhere but into Caitlyn's all-knowing eyes. "Once and for all."

Caitlyn's cell phone trilled. Sarah was grateful for the reprieve. She cleaned out the sink, dumping the shards of glass into the garbage. Grabbed a sponge to take care of the puddle on the floor. Before she could start, she looked up to see Caitlyn hanging up. She'd only said three words during the entire conversation: "Are you sure?"

Now Caitlyn was staring at Sarah the same way she had glared at Logan earlier. "Mrs. Durandt, I'm afraid we definitely do need to question you further."

"Why? I haven't done anything wrong."

"That was Quantico. The gun you had in your possession belonged to US Marshal Leo Richland."

Sarah shrank back against the counter. "You think I killed him?"

Caitlyn took a step toward her. "What makes you think he's dead?"

She couldn't tell them how Sam had come by the gun, not without exposing him and Josh. Her vision began to darken with red spots as her head throbbed. What was she going to tell them?

She couldn't be arrested. Not now, not today. She had to keep Alan and Logan from going after Sam or telling Korsakov where to find Josh. She couldn't do that if she was in jail, deflecting questions she had no answers for.

Sam had been right. Her only choice was to run.

She dried her hands on the dishtowel and turned her back to Caitlyn as she hung it on the oven door. Then, faster than a whipsnake, she grabbed the cast iron skillet and swung it at Caitlyn.

CHAPTER 43

Caitlyn saw the skillet coming at her an instant too late. She blocked the blow with her arm, but lost her balance, her feet slipping on the wet floor. She did a banana peel slide, landing on her back with a thud.

She thumped her head against the table edge going down, but didn't black out. As she reached for her weapon, Sarah threw the skillet down, a look of horror on her face, and raced out the back door. By the time Caitlyn regained her feet and chased after her, she was a distant blur at the forest's edge, vanishing into the trees.

Caitlyn ran a few steps then stopped in disgust. No way in hell she'd ever catch Sarah. The woman was like a deer or some kind of wild creature. She rubbed her forearm where the skillet hit her. No major damage except to her pride. She should have seen it coming, but Sarah Durandt was the one person she'd believed to be innocent in all this.

Now she wasn't sure of anything—especially Hal Waverly's motives and actions.

Caitlyn pursed her lips, squinted at the sun. High noon. Just like Gary Cooper she was on her own. In a town where nobody could be trusted and everybody lied.

She stared at the spot where Sarah had disappeared. Sarah had been telling the truth during most of their interview, Caitlyn was sure of it. Right up to the point where Caitlyn had practically accused Hal Waverly of being involved in her husband's disappearance. Had they been in it together?

Caitlyn had seen a lot of things in her law enforcement career, including mothers capable of harming their children, but Sarah Durandt didn't fit the profile. Maybe the kid had been an accident, had gotten in the way.

Then where did Leo Richland fit in? And this lawyer dude, Alan Easton. Was he the one who had blown Sam's witness protection identity? Maybe Richland was an innocent victim and it was Easton who had killed him. Easton obviously had something on Logan. What the hell did those two want?

Caitlyn bounced on her heels, pacing the wooden floorboards of Sarah's veranda. She listened to the way her footsteps echoed, liking the tap-tap-ratta-tap. She sped up, then slowed again. Her skin had stopped crawling and itching, now she felt energized, jazzed...

Actually, she had been pretty edgy, hyper since last night. But it wasn't the sex—or almost sex. What the hell had she been thinking, considering having unprotected sex with a total stranger? The way she'd practically attacked Waverly—that wasn't her. She kept her feelings under control, just like she kept her migraines under control...

Oh shit. She stopped before a planter bustling with snapdragons. Their vibrant colors blurred before her as the breeze swept through them. Were these strange feelings, her recent irrational behavior, more reactions from her migraines? Maybe she couldn't even trust herself.

She pursed her lips and turned back into the kitchen. Grabbing her bag, she strode through the house, ignoring the photos of Sarah, Sam, and Josh, the lovingly balanced comfortable décor, or the sweet scent of cinnamon. She needed the bullet Hal had taken from Richland's body. If it matched Richland's gun, she'd charge Sarah Durandt with the murder of a Federal Agent.

"The old man was right," Grigory said as they cruised along Lake Road, coming to a stop where it dead-ended at the dam. "Only one way out of town."

"Except for that old dirt road leading up the mountain," Max supplied helpfully. "But according to the map, it don't go nowhere either."

Counting the cook and the kid at the dinner, they'd seen only a dozen people on the streets. Only three vehicles, two commercial vans and all leaving Hopewell, going down the mountain. Some morning rush hour.

There was a small shed near the dam. A twelve-foot tall chain link fence topped by razor wire surrounded the reservoir. At the far edge of the clearing stood a rickety fire tower.

Mountains crowded them on both sides, leaving the bottom of the gorge soaked in a cool, dark twilight. Far above the sky opened out again, revealing a cloudless blue canvas. Nothing stirred except the occasional ripple of water driven by a stray breeze.

Peaceful. Calm. A place where no one would hear you scream.

He rubbed his thumb and fore-finger together in anticipation. "Let's go visit Stan's lady friend."

CHAPTER 44

Caitlyn spotted the lone man standing near Sarah's car as soon as she turned down the path leading from the house. Who could miss him? Even if it weren't for the black suit and flashy red tie, energy radiated from him, flashing a neon warning sign: Beware.

As she drew near, he stopped his quick-jerk pacing to lounge against Sarah's Ford Explorer. His stare as he watched her approach was palpable, intensely compelling. The hairs on the back of her neck cringed.

So this was the infamous Grigory Korsakov.

How could she have thought him ordinary when she'd seen his picture? A short man, no more than an inch taller than her own five-foot-six, he was anything but ordinary. Energy danced from him, swirling like storm clouds before a bolt of lightning. He smiled, drawing back rich, full lips to reveal a perfect set of brilliant white teeth.

Not bad for a guy who'd just spent seven years in the pen. She wondered how much it had cost to protect that perfect smile and face while he was inside. Using her peripheral vision, she scanned the area. No signs of another vehicle, no signs of other men. She kept her focus on Korsakov. Definitely not ordinary. He was as mesmerizing as a hooded cobra and just as deadly.

"Are you Sarah Durandt?" he asked in a richly mellowed voice sounding of fine wine and caviar.

"Sorry, no." She stopped an arm's length away from him, sliding her hand inside the outer compartment of her bag to rest on her gun.

He cocked his head, his smile growing wider as if she'd made a joke. "Are you sure? I was told that she lived here alone."

"She's not at home right now." A fleeting frown creased his features and Caitlyn saw the only flaw in his facade. His eyes were leaden, flat, with irises so dark it was impossible to tell where the pupils stopped and the color began. She'd faced off with gang-bangers, sociopaths, psychopaths, even a serial killer—but none of them had eyes as dead as Grigory Korsakov's.

Eyes that penetrated to your very soul and then with a flicker condemned you to the depths of hell.

Caitlyn suppressed a shudder, forcing her smile to remain plastered on her face. She edged to one side, heading for her car. Korsakov moved with her, blocking her path.

"You must understand. It's extremely important that I find Mrs. Durandt."

He hadn't touched her, his hands were still slouched in his jacket pockets, but Caitlyn felt her muscles tighten in anticipation of an attack. "I'm sorry I can't help you," she said, keeping her voice level and her gaze even with his. "I was just dropping a few things off for her. The door's open, I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you waited inside."

He nodded at that and almost turned away, then smiled even more charmingly and spun back to her. "I'm so sorry. I don't mean to be a pest. But you see, I've never met Mrs. Durandt."

I don't suppose you could show me some proof that you're not her?"

Caitlyn was half-tempted to pull her weapon as evidence of who she was. Instead, she kept her hand firmly wrapped around the Glock's handle as she slid her wallet from the inside pocket of her bag. She held up her drivers' license, glad there was no mention of her being a federal agent on it.

"Caitlyn Tierney, Manassas, Virginia," he leaned close to her and read. Without moving back, their faces mere inches away from each other, he looked into her eyes, his smile now rigid. "That's a long way from home. You're quite certain Mrs. Durandt isn't at home?"

"Quite," Caitlyn said, snapping her wallet shut and dropping it back into her purse. "I'm running late, so you'll please excuse me."

He blinked slowly, like a reptile, and she knew he was considering restraining her until he could verify her identity. She tensed, half-hoping he would make a move. As she looked into his dead, dark eyes a flutter of fear spun through her and she realized she wasn't certain that, gun or no gun, she could take him down.

Finally he stepped back, granting his permission for her to leave with a flourish of his hand. "Good day, Miss Tierney," he called as she slammed her car door shut and started the engine.

Caitlyn barely looked at the road as she sped away, her attention riveted by Korsakov's reflection in the rearview mirror. She gripped the wheel tight, her breathing rapid, heart pounding as if she'd just had a close escape from death.

Sam pressed the binoculars into the flesh of his face as if they would provide some way for him to be miraculously transported from his hiding place down to the drive. He wished he had kept his gun. If he had, this would all be over now.

A blur of motion from the back of Sarah's house caught his eye. He moved his binoculars and saw her racing across the yard and up into the woods. No one followed her although another woman appeared on the back porch a few moments later.

What the hell was going on? He pivoted and aimed his focus back toward the drive. Korsakov hadn't moved, didn't act as if he had heard or seen anything.

Sam cursed silently. He grabbed his pack and sprinted through the trees to catch Sarah.

He intercepted her just as she hit the trail leading down to the dam. "Sarah! Stop!"

She spun around, her sides heaving with effort. She carried nothing with her, wore only regular sneakers, not her hiking boots.

"Where are you going? Why are you running?" He drew close and wrapped his arms around her. "What happened?"

She shoved him back. "They think I killed Leo Richland."

"Who does?"

"The FBI. They were going to arrest me. That would have messed up everything, so I hit her and ran." She began jogging down the trail.

"Wait, where are you going?"

"To find Logan. If we don't keep our end of the bargain, he'll kill Josh."

"We've got worse problems than Logan. Come with me." He led her back to the ridge where he'd been spying on her house. "Look through there."

She took the binoculars he handed her and stared through them. "There's a man standing by my car. He's talking with Caitlyn." She paused. "Caitlyn looks angry—no, scared. She's backing away."

He wanted to wrench the binoculars from her, to watch for himself, but he didn't. She

paused, her fingers clenched around the binoculars. "She's getting in her car. He's letting her go." She moved her head, following the man's progress. "He's going into the house."

She lowered the binoculars and turned to Sam. "Who is that? What does he want?"

"That's Grigory Korsakov. He wants to kill me. And you."

CHAPTER 45

"How did you find me?" Sarah asked as Sam led her to his cave.

"I ran into those kids—JD and Julia. They gave me a cell phone and called me when you left the police station. I've been watching for Alan and Logan, thought we could settle things before Korsakov got here."

"Too late now."

"Yeah. Look on the bright side. If he thinks Alan and Logan have betrayed him, he'll kill them for us."

"Great, so we'll have one psychopathic killer on our trail instead of three."

"Maybe they'll all kill each other."

They stopped at a large boulder angled away from a limestone outcropping. "I showed you this place," Sarah said as he threw his pack into the crevice behind the boulder.

"It's come in handy over the years." His voice was grim.

"What are we going to do?" she asked him.

He looked past her, down the mountain towards the town. "We can't go through town. Korsakov is sure to have the road blocked." He paused. "You go up to the Colonel's cabin, get my truck and go get Josh. I called my landlady, she's taking him to a motel outside of Montreal."

"And you'll be?"

He rubbed at his side, turned away from her. "I'll create a distraction. Give you time. Go down there and give them what they want. Me."

She was shaking her head before he even had a chance to finish. "No. We've already covered this. I'm not going to tell Josh his father is dead. I can't put him through that."

"So we're back to square one. You want me to call Hal? Maybe he can get reinforcements?" His tone revealed his doubt that Hal and his small force could take on the Russian mobster.

Sarah had other doubts. "Caitlyn thinks Hal was bribed to frame Damian Wright for your murder. Thinks maybe he was involved from the start."

He tensed. "It would explain a lot. But where does that leave us?"

She raised her head, nodded up the mountain. "Looks like the only way out is up. We'll climb the mountain, get your truck, go after Josh."

"We can't. Not with three killers and their hired guns trailing us."

"What do you want to do? Meet Logan like we agreed, let him take care of the rest?"

He wouldn't meet her gaze. "I don't trust him, but it would get you and Josh out of the line of fire."

"There's no time to argue. Grab your stuff and let's go."

Grigory inhaled deeply. Sarah Durandt's house smelled like a woman. Soft and comfortable, no sharp edges. He ran his fingertips across the chenille blanket that draped the back of an

overstuffed chair and imagined how the house would smell when he was done with her. That delicious scent of sweat and terror.

He wasn't solely a visual artist, he enjoyed evoking all of the senses during his entertainments.

The mess in the kitchen puzzled him. Two mugs, one shattered in the sink, two plates... so Manassas Red hadn't been here alone. She'd lied to him.

He took his time wandering through the house, peering into private nooks and crannies, absorbing the essence of the woman who lived here. By the time Max returned, he was lounging on Sarah Durandt's couch, leafing through a family photo album. Happy people, laughing people, beautiful people all caught, timeless.

Once he got his hands on Sarah Durandt, she'd never be happy, laughing or beautiful again. Not when he was through with her.

"The lady went down the road a mile or so, turned into another house. Name on the mailbox was Waverly," Max reported after clumping into Sarah's house, destroying the blissful silence.

Grigory merely nodded at Max's words. "The fascinating lady from Virginia lied to me. She wasn't afraid, yet she also asked no questions. As if she already had the answers."

"I'll check her out. Not like she can go far if we want her back again. Not with Alexi blocking the road."

That coaxed a smile from Grigory. Alexi was a wizard with a sniper rifle, would stop anyone trying to flee from Hopewell.

The pale redhead with the creamy smooth skin and the husky voice...he imagined her screams intertwined with Sarah's. A symphony of horror.

"Waverly. That's the sheriff's name, isn't it?"

"Chief of police. Yeah. Think she's a cop?"

"A Virginia cop who just happens to be visiting a small town police chief the same day I arrive?"

Max was good at getting things done, but sometimes he missed the big picture. Grigory held his hands up as if composing a portrait. The big picture was what he was all about. Most people never realized they were mere points of light on the universe's canvas, but Grigory knew that. More, he knew he had the power to indelibly change that canvas, to draw his own portrait by pulling enough anonymous dots into his control.

Grigory was destined for great things, to leave his mark on the world, on history. Just as his grandfather had. Just as Stalin had. A mark the color of blood and terror, a mark forever etched into the stories passed from one generation to the next. Grigory's story would be his ticket to immortality.

Max fidgeted, uncomfortable as Grigory's thumbs and index fingers framed him. "You okay, boss?"

A lazy smile widened Grigory's mouth. "I'm fine. Fine and dandy. I think I understand why I'm here, what I'm meant to do."

"Uh, I thought you wanted to grab the girl, find out where Stan hid the money he stole from you," Max said as if uncertain of Grigory's mental capacity. Then he jerked his body away from Grigory's piercing stare and gestured at an array of photos lining the walls and fireplace mantle. "There's Sarah. Hey look, it's the old man from the diner. Looks like he's her father. That might come in handy."

"Definitely."

"Cute kid, though."

"Very cute," Grigory allowed, stroking one finger along the image of Stan holding a

bright-eyed toddler. "You remember that night we went driving on Mulholland? When Alexi clipped the dog and Stan jumped out, trying to save it?"

"Yeah. Pouring rain, mud sliding all around, cars skidding—Stan almost got killed. All for a mutt who ended up dying anyway."

"All for a mutt." Grigory inspected the other photos of the happy family. Noted the gleam in Stan's eyes, the way he never looked at the camera, instead remained constantly focused on his family. As if they were the center of his universe. "Logan said Alan came here right after Stan and the kid were killed."

"Guess he wanted to see if the missus knew anything about the money Stan stole."

"What if Stan isn't dead? What if he knew Alan was getting close, took the kid and ran?"

"Gutsy move. Why leave the wife behind? They sure do look happy."

"Maybe he had no choice, no time." Grigory tapped his finger on the glass right over Sarah Durandt's pretty, heart-shaped face. "And now his luck has run out."

"You think he'll come back? Now that he knows you're looking for him—it would be suicide."

"The man already died once, what's he care?" Grigory laughed at the thought, the noise scraping past his throat. It'd been a long time since he'd laughed, a longer time since he saw anything as humorous. "Logan said he got here as soon as he heard Stan was here, then he and Alan both conveniently call to let me know they're doing their best to find my money—do they think I'm that stupid? That I don't know betrayal when I hear it?"

Max flinched at the sharp edge in Grigory's voice. "We'll get them too, Grigory. Don't worry, we'll get everyone."

"My family has disowned me, my people have betrayed me—everyone in this town is guilty, they all hid what was rightfully mine! She," he swept his arm across the mantle, dashing the photos to the floor where they shattered, Sarah's face smiling up at him through glass shards, mocking him, "she married the bastard who did this to me, she bore him a son."

"Grigory, calm down. You know me and Alexi are here for you, man. Just tell us what you need us to do and we'll do it."

"I need," his breath snagged in his throat, burning, "my cameras. Let's get out of here. We're going to start a new project. I'm going to title it: Death of a Treacherous Town."

"All right then, JD," the Colonel said once they reached the clearing, "what did you need help with?"

JD walked around the clearing, peering into the forest and over the ledge on the far side. No signs of anyone. "Sam?" he called quietly, his voice echoing through the trees. "Sam, you there?"

The Colonel marched over and grabbed him by the arm. "What's going on? You know this is the place where Sam and my grandson...What kind of game is this? Answer me!"

The old man's face was scarlet with fury and his voice made JD jump. "No game. Honest, Colonel. Sam's alive and so is your grandson. I saw him this morning."

The Colonel's grip tightened like a tourniquet. As he stared into JD's eyes, JD knew what it would be like to face a firing squad. Then the Colonel let go. "Tell me everything."

JD gave him a quick run down of what he and Julia had seen. "Julia's watching Mrs. D at her house, just like Sam asked us to."

"So Sarah knows?"

"Yes sir." The Colonel frowned then began to jog down the path towards Mrs. Durandt's house. "But sir. What about Sam?"

"Face it, boy. There's no one here. Which means either they got Sam or they got to him. Maybe through Sarah."

"But Julia, she's at Sarah's house." JD broke into a panicked sprint, passing the Colonel as he raced down the mountain. He stayed on the path, past Mrs. D's house until he hit Lake Road. Then he turned and ran to the clearing across from Mrs. D's driveway where he'd left Julia eating the lunch he'd brought her from the Rockslide.

Their bikes were still both there. His cell phone that he'd lent Julia was lying on the ground, open and on. The towel she'd been using as a tablecloth was crumpled up and muddy as if someone had dragged it and the food that was on it through the bushes. On one edge a large, muddy footprint was imprinted. Much too large to be Julia's.

JD's heart slammed into his throat, threatening to choke him. Pounding footsteps down the gravel drive signaled the Colonel's arrival. "Sarah's gone."

"They got Julia," JD said, his voice cracking. "They took her."

"C'mon. We need to get Hal and his men working on this."

JD shook his head. "Sam said not to tell Chief Waverly. Said the bad guys would know." His eyes burned with tears. He blinked furiously, refusing to give in to the feeling that this was all his fault.

"We can't handle this alone. We need to get the police involved. Now."

The Colonel's barked order broke through JD's shock. He glanced around the clearing one final time, hoping he'd see Julia, her familiar, beautiful smile in place, returning with a great story of how she'd outwitted the bad guys.

But the clearing remained empty. No Julia. No one except one frightened teenager and one scared old man, both trying to pretend everything was going to be all right.

CHAPTER 46

"Hal?" Caitlyn shouted again, her voice echoing through his house. Still no answer. When she'd called him, asked to meet, he'd said he'd be home.

She walked down the hallway, gun drawn and ready, feeling dirty for suspecting him, dirty for allowing him to get so close to her. God, she'd almost slept with a man she now believed was involved with a murder.

The kitchen and living room were empty. The hallway had three doors. One open to an empty bathroom. At the far end, another door was closed, but the second door in the hallway was ajar. Hal's bedroom, empty. After clearing it, she stepped into the final room, her gun sweeping from one side to the other. No one.

Thick curtains pulled tight over the only window. There were dark smudges on the wall forming drawings and some sort of words in a strange language. She turned on the light and stepped closer. The words had been drawn in blood.

The only furniture in the room was a card table covered with maps, a bureau, and an old brass frame twin bed. On top of the bureau lay an antique gilded hand mirror. Odd for a man to have, she thought as she traced a finger across its surface. A fine, white powder coated her fingertip.

Shit. That explained a lot. Like why she'd been jittery, irritable all day, the way she'd jumped him last night, her inability to concentrate or stay still. She brushed the finger onto her jeans. Not heroin, probably not cocaine—the effects had lasted too long. Meth. He'd dumped

methamphetamine into her drink last night.

No, it had been in *his* drink. The powder he used for his coffee instead of sugar.

She turned to the maps on the makeshift desk. They were topographic maps of Snakehead Mountain with detailed areas of the area around the dam and the water falls. Four places were circled in red.

"I see you found my project."

Caitlyn jumped at the sound of Hal's voice. How the hell had he managed to sneak up on her like that? Then she saw the open closet door behind him. In his hand was his Glock. Aimed at her.

"Drop your gun and step away from it, Caitlyn," he ordered as he locked the door behind him.

She hesitated, debating on a course of action. But there really was no choice. Obey or take a bullet in the face. She bent down, lowered the gun to the floor.

She didn't move away, hoping for a chance to regain her weapon. The only other potential weapon in the room was the mirror.

"How long have you been using?" she asked, nodding at the mirror.

"Since before Lily died. I used to have to lock her in here when things got too bad." He grabbed her arm, pushed her toward the bed. "We had hospice workers for a while, but once the insurance ran out, so did they. I had to keep working, had already taken too much time off. And Lily—sometimes the pain would be so bad it'd drive her to hurt herself." He shoved Caitlyn onto the bed. Too late she spotted the handcuffs fastened to the railing at the edge of the mattress.

Now she fought. She rammed a knee into his groin. He grunted and gave her the few inches she needed. She broke free and raced to the window, her only escape. She jerked away the heavy velvet curtains. And came face to face with a wall of plywood.

"Lily tried to jump through it," Hal explained in a gentle voice as he fastened his hand around her wrist, crushing her bones together. He held the gun to her head. "Lie down on the bed, Caitlyn. We've a while before it's time."

"Time for what?" she asked, stalling, doing anything to prevent being chained helpless to the bed.

He pushed her down and in one swift motion handcuffed one wrist above her head to the metal bar. Then he knelt on top of her, holstered his gun and reached for her other hand. Caitlyn struck out, aiming at his eyes. His laughter mocked her as he dodged her with a practiced move and grabbed her arm. The handcuffs ratcheted shut, clamping around her wrist.

"Lily used to fight too. Some nights she'd howl and scream like a banshee," he whispered as he stretched his body out over top of Caitlyn's, his face angled away from her mouth so she couldn't bite him. "All I could do was lie here like this, let her know I was still here, that I loved her no matter what. Course, I wasn't getting much sleep and I still had to work, so I took some meth I'd confiscated from a trucker. It did the trick. I saved it for the really bad nights, but it got to the point where I was actually hoping Lily would have one of her spells. That way I'd have an excuse to use some more."

He paused. Caitlyn squirmed beneath his weight, trying her best to throw him off of her. His breath was hot against her neck. "Those nights after I had her restrained, we'd make love. Over and over again. It helped get rid of some of her bad energy, like an exorcism of sorts. After, she'd talk, tell me the same story every time. Did you know that Ahweyoh means 'Lily' in Iroquois? Lily loved that story, dreamed of it. Used to say I was her Thundergod."

Caitlyn felt his erection prod her stomach. She recoiled in disgust and held very still, hoping not to provoke him.

"Last night," she swallowed hard, wishing she could block out the memory of last night,

"you said you cared about me. That you wanted to help me."

He raised up on his elbows, looking down at her with that Huckleberry Finn look of earnest innocence. Except his eyes now gleamed like a mad man's. How could she have missed the signs? His rapid mood changes, disjointed thoughts, dilated pupils, constant fidgeting? She'd been so vain—thought it was sexual attraction that had him so distracted.

"I do care about you. I am going to help you. That's why Lily sent you to me. Why she gave us last night."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Lily and the Thundergod. She went over the falls for his love. This time he'll be there to catch her. And just like before, he'll move heaven and earth, send the mountain toppling down on the serpent and the unbelievers."

She didn't like the sound of that. Not at all. "How? How will he move heaven and earth?"

His smile widened to a ghastly grin. He leapt off of her, rummaged under the bed for a large box. "With this. And more like it."

He opened the box and tilted it so that she could see inside. Neatly duct-taped together were half a dozen bricks of C-4 complete with a detonator cap.

Enough to blow a good-sized chunk out of a mountain.

CHAPTER 47

Sam allowed Sarah to lead the way. Instead of following the winding trail, she set off on a trajectory that seemed to lead straight up the side of the mountain. As they climbed, alternating between traveling through dense forest, shrouded in darkness, and scrambling over exposed ledges, the sun beating down on them, Sam decided Sarah had taken this route so he'd be so out of breath that they couldn't speak with each other.

Pain speared his side with each breath and his legs had gone past pain to a rubbery numbness as he forced them to keep moving. Finally he simply stopped, sank down onto a wind-scoured ledge, gasping for breath. Sarah didn't even notice until she was half way around the next bend in the trail, then she returned, standing over him her hands on her hips.

"Thought you said you were a lumber jack or something."

"I work in a lumber yard," he corrected her. He pulled out his Camelbak and took a deep drink then handed it to her. "But Superman couldn't keep up with you when you're in a mood like this."

Her eyes grew dark and stormy as she glowered at him. "Superman wouldn't have left me fighting for the life of my son."

Not a whole helluva lot he could say to that. He kicked life back into his legs, letting them dangle over the cliff edge. Dimly in the distance he could see Hopewell and the bright expanse of the reservoir above it. For the first time, his fear of heights didn't bother him. There were so many other fears overwhelming it right now that it was crowded out.

"I have something for you," he said. She was silent for a moment before joining him on the ledge. He unbuttoned his shirt pocket and slipped Josh's photo from it. Wordlessly, he handed it to her.

She took it, her fingers trembling. Her entire body began to shake. He circled an arm around her shoulders and was surprised when she tolerated his touch, allowed him to pull her

close.

"We'll make it." The words were meaningless and they both knew it, but he felt better for having said them aloud.

Before she could respond, Julia's cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Sam the man, how the hell are you? Where the hell are you?" Alan's chipper tones smacked him like a sucker punch.

"How'd you get this number?" Sam asked cautiously.

"From the fair maiden, Miss Julia. She's currently enjoying our hospitality up at the Colonel's cabin. Logan says hello, by the way."

"Don't you dare hurt her—"

Sarah yanked at his hand, pulling the phone away from his ear so she could listen as well.

"That's up to you, now isn't it? I'm figuring Sarah is with you, so don't try anything stupid. I want to see both of you here by nightfall. Leave everything except the clothes on your backs behind. Then you and Logan will take a ride down the mountain while I entertain the ladies."

"No. I'm not going anywhere until you let Julia and Sarah go."

Alan's laughter was his only answer.

"How in the hell did you get so much C4?" Caitlyn asked Hal.

"It's not too hard when you've got one of these." He fished in his back pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. He flipped it open. A US Marshal's badge and identification. Richland's. Only it was Hal's face now on the photo.

"You killed Richland. Why?" Keep him talking, establish rapport, make him see her as a person. All the lessons in hostage negotiation that she drilled into her new agents in training ran through her mind now.

He dropped the box onto the maps and walked over to the wall smeared in blood. His finger traced over several of the drawings and she realized now that the strange figures represented the story of Lily and her god.

"She got real quiet toward the end," he said, his voice a low sing-song. The voice of a man who no longer knew what reality was. "Stopped eating, would only drink when I forced her to. Lay there, wide awake for days but not moving. We both knew the end was coming."

He spun around, his eyes blazing in the lamplight. "You know they did this to her, you know that don't you? They poisoned her and when she tried to fix the problem they ridiculed her, ignored her. They gave her the tumor." He was pacing now, voice raising. He swept the maps from the table. The box of explosives skidded across the floor. "They killed my Lily. They deserve to die."

"Of course they do," she said in a calm voice. He was more than high. He was in a full-blown meth-fueled psychotic break. "But not like this. It's too fast, too quick and easy. Why don't you let them keep drinking the water? Then they'll die of the same poison Lily died from."

His gaze darted around the room and locked on hers. "That's exactly what I told Lily. I knew you and I were kindred spirits, meant to finish this together."

He stopped pacing, perched on the edge of her bed, his body twitching so hard the bed frame bounced with his movement. He reached a hand out to stroke her jaw and she had to force herself not to flinch at his touch. "But Lily said we need to end it once and for all. Kill the serpent and destroy the poisoned well. She said a god must show more compassion than a man."

"What did Richland have to do with it?" she tried a different tack.

He laughed. His mouth opened wide enough for her to see his stained teeth, another

symptom she had missed. She knew the statistics. Over a third of meth addicts held down steady jobs, quite a few of them in law enforcement. Hell, how could she have been so blind?

"Lily sent Richland to give me the means to deliver us all!" He leapt up again, began pacing once more. His speech revved up until it was almost incomprehensible. "That last day, I got a call. Bunch of kids partying up by the reservoir. I almost didn't go—hell, they'd abandoned us, I was about ready to lose the house, I knew Lily wasn't going to last long. But she spoke, for the first time in days, she looked at me and she spoke. Told me to go, do my duty." He hung his head low. "And I did."

Silence filled the room for several long moments. "I left her in here but she was so calm, so quiet that I didn't restrain her. That's when she used her own blood to leave me her final message. She jumped through the window, took the truck up to the upper falls. It was a full moon that night. A blue moon, just like tonight. She folded her clothes, set them on the hood of the truck, climbed out over the edge, and flew.

"But I wasn't there to catch her." A ragged sob choked through him. "This time I need to do it right."

Caitlyn lay there, uncertain if she should try to steer him back on topic or just let him keep rambling on. Best thing was to let him keep talking, forget she was there.

"The bank gave me a ninety day extension, but I was still drowning in unpaid medical bills, so come the end of August I knew I was going to lose the house—and with it all that was left of Lily. Then Sam came, told me about some pervert following his kid around. I called the FBI, reported it. Before I knew it, some asshole named Logan is calling me back, telling me to sit tight, make no move on Wright, that he was sending a US Marshal to assess the situation. He ordered me to give full cooperation. Said no Mayberry hick was going to screw up his operation."

Sounded like Logan and his winning ways. Hal slumped down on the bed once more, his foot tapping a staccato rhythm on the floor.

"Richland showed up, I took him to Sam's place. He said Sam was in witness protection and it was his job to get him out of Hopewell before any reporters caught on, leaked his name and face to the wrong people. He told me to start surveillance on Wright, do nothing until he told me the coast was clear.

"I had the feeling something was up, it just didn't feel right." His face twisted into a wry grin. "Not even to a Mayberry hick like me. So when I saw Sam running from his house and Richland following, waving a gun, I went after them. I saw Richland shoot Sam, Sam fought back, hit Richland on the head, took his gun and got away.

"While Richland was out, I searched his pockets, found ten thousand in cash. I was waiting when Richland came to. Told him I could find Sam for him if he told me the truth and cut me in on the deal. He was woozy and angry but he told me everything. Said he'd give me the ten thousand if I'd help. I held out for twenty and when he agreed, I knew there had to be a lot more cash. It was my chance to save the house—all that I had left of Lily."

"So you took Richland up the mountain?"

"Yeah, it was easy. Man didn't know his way around the woods at all. Kept whining the whole way. It was a pleasure to shoot him, put him out of his misery. I dumped him into Snakebelly, hiked back down to the clearing, stashed the camera card I'd taken from Damian Wright's room there, and kept going down to Richland's car. In the trunk I found 90,000 cash. I drove the car over to the quarry in Merrill, ditched it in the deep water where no one would find it, and came back here."

He shook his head. "My only regret is that I didn't make it back in time to stop Damian Wright from running. He must have realized someone had been in his motel room, messing with

his camera, skipped out before I could get back. I was just starting a search for him when Logan and you showed up that first time, throwing around orders like we were a bunch of buffoons. Then the rains came..."

He shrugged, still smiling. "Lily sent them, I'm sure of it. Without the rain messing with the crime scene evidence, I might not have got away with it."

"It was you. The lights by the dam, that was you?"

"Had to find the right spots. Lily led me to them." He looked down at her with fondness that made Caitlyn's stomach roil with disgust. "Just like she led me to you. Everything is in place."

The radio at his belt squawked. He ignored it, his gaze centered on hers, both palms framing her face as if she was the center of his universe. Caitlyn held her breath, trying to decide if she should break the spell or not. He had obviously just used, was twitching with the meth, what could she say to convince him to let her go?

The radio squawked again. "Come in, Chief. We have an urgent situation at the station."

He grabbed the radio, his gaze never leaving hers. His hand moved to cover her mouth, squelching any sound she could make. "I'll be there in ten," he said into the radio. He touched one finger to her lips, a bittersweet smile twisting his mouth. "Afraid I'm going to have to leave you for awhile, Caitlyn. You look tired." He stroked her forehead. "Wouldn't want to risk another migraine. Don't worry, I've got something that will put you right to sleep. You won't feel a thing."

CHAPTER 48

JD looked up in relief when Hal Waverly came storming into the police station, breaking up the knot of people who had crowded inside. Martin Fletcher, the officer on duty, was trying to write down what the Colonel was telling him while also fending off questions from the Colonel's wife and JD's father. Julia's folks worked down in Merrill and Martin had decided to hold off on notifying them until he knew what was going on.

Which would take him till about next century, JD decided after getting fed up with the officer's stupid questions. In the meantime anything could be happening to Julia.

But Chief Waverly would fix everything. He came in, took control, got the vital information from JD—actually listened to JD instead of blowing him off like Martin had. Hal had immediately begun to dispatch his men as well as the Sheriff's deputies and sent out a call for volunteers from Search and Rescue to accompany them.

"I'll need a few people to stay here and coordinate things," he said as he prepared to leave to coordinate the search himself. "Any volunteers?"

"I want to go with you," JD said as all eyes turned to him.

"I need you here, you're my only witness. Can the rest of you stay with him?" Hal asked.

"Of course we will." As usual the Colonel's wife spoke for both of them. JD's dad just nodded, his face paler and tighter than JD had ever seen it before.

"All right then. We're all on Channel 4 if you need or hear anything."

The search for Julia had begun. JD sank down to sit on the floor, his knees pulled up to his chest. Outside, in the afternoon sunshine kids were playing hopscotch, riding bikes, wasting time. But just like two years ago when he realized he'd let a killer go, JD had no interest in any of those childhood activities. He squeezed his fingers around his knees, tight enough to leave

furrows in his jeans, but he felt nothing.

Grigory licked his lips after finishing a delicious lunch of leftover pasta courtesy of Sarah Durandt. She kept a well-stocked kitchen, had an admirable set of well-used but sharply hone cutlery and a cache of climbing equipment that created a myriad of interesting possibilities.

"I don't think she's coming back," Max said as he entered the kitchen.

"Why not?"

"Alexi's monitoring the police scanner. Some kid is missing and everyone's going out to look for her. She'll probably be with the rest of the others."

Grigory considered that. "All right then. Let's go speak with her father."

The drive to the café took less than ten minutes even though the SUV never made it out of second gear on the twisting road. "Looks empty," Max observed as they idled in front of the Rockslide. "Whole town does."

There was a sign on the café's door. Grigory rolled down his window and peered out. "Says they're closed for some kind of emergency—searching for a lost kid."

"What do we do now, boss? Want us to see where the searchers are based, try to find her there?"

"No need. We'll go straight to the top."

"How's that?"

"We'll ask the police." He ignored Max's look of panic and gestured for Alexi to continue driving. The squat, ugly building that housed the police station and the post office was only two blocks away. "I'll handle this. You two stay out of sight."

Without waiting for their answer, he jumped out of the Tahoe. Before he could reach the building, he spotted the police chief inside the post office. He turned the Open sign to Closed, stepped outside, then pulled the door behind him, jingling it to see if it was locked. The door stood fast.

"A little early to be closing, isn't it Chief?"

Waverly jerked up as if he'd been caught doing something illegal. Or worse. "There's been an emergency. Can't be helped." He strolled towards Grigory, one hand resting on his gun. Grigory took no offense. Police officers had a tendency to respond to him that way. "Do I know you?"

"Korsakov, Grigory Korsakov. I believe you may have done some work for one of my associates a few years ago. Jack Logan."

Waverly squinted, then nodded. "Yeah, I know Logan. Why are you here?"

"I'm looking for a few old friends. Sarah Durandt for one."

"Sorry. Can't help you there. She's gone for the weekend. To Montreal with a friend. Who else you looking for?"

Grigory gave a casual shrug as if it didn't matter if he found Sarah or not. "A few other members of her family. I believe her father owns the café down the street?"

"The Colonel? Sure. He and his wife are inside. You got business with them?"

"I was hoping they could lead me to Sam Durandt. I believe he may still be alive."

That got a reaction. Waverly's squint narrowed until his eyes were barely visible while his mouth stretched into a warped grin. "So you know Sam's alive?" A breathy whistle escaped his lips. "That changes a few things."

"How so?" Grigory was totally improvising, ready to gun down the lawman if he posed a threat, but this conversation was becoming more interesting by the minute.

"I got a grudge to pick with Sam. As well as the folks inside." He jerked his head in the

direction of the building behind them. "Be nice to flush him out. Before tonight."

"I might be able to help with that."

Waverly scrutinized him and gave a slow nod. "You might at that. But I want to leave Sarah out of it. Deal?"

Grigory extended his hand. "Deal."

CHAPTER 49

"We have to do what he wants," Sam was insisting as they hiked the last hundred yards to the Colonel's cabin.

Sarah ignored him, trying to puzzle out alternative options. She wanted so badly to stop Alan and Logan that she dreamed up scenarios more fanciful than any Hollywood could ever devise.

For once, Sam had been the voice of reason, pointing out each of her plan's flaws.

"How can you be so calm?" she snapped.

"Josh is safe. If I get them their money, you and Julia will be safe too," he said in a confident tone. "That's all I care about anymore."

She stopped short, grabbed his arm. "You'd better care about more than that. You'd sure as hell better care about getting out of this alive." She swiped away unbidden tears as he stared down at her with a sorrowful expression. "Damn you, Sam Durandt, don't you give up on me, not after all the shit you've put me through. It's going to take me a lifetime to pay you back for the hell I've gone through and I want you to suffer every minute!"

He threw his head back and laughed. "That's my Sarah. You sure know how to make me an offer I can't refuse."

"If you won't fight for me, then fight for your son. To see Josh again."

"I am fighting for Josh," he said, one finger tracing her cheekbone, wiping the single tear that escaped her eye. "And you. No matter what happens, promise me you'll remember that? And maybe tell Josh that his old man wasn't as bad as everyone says."

He left her, began walking past the two cars and his truck to the cabin. Sarah ran after him. "Sam, no! Wait."

The cabin door opened and Alan emerged, aiming a gun at them. "Just in time, Sam. Come on in."

The stench of vinyl overwhelmed Caitlyn, gagging her. She opened her eyes to absolute black. She was being carried, lifted by someone. Hal.

He laid her on something hard. She struggled, but her arms felt leaden, her hands distant, as if they were floating in space, unattached to her. She flailed, kicked, trying to will her stubborn limbs to obey her.

He'd drugged her, the thought came through a veil of scarlet panic. Said he was going to kill her—was going to kill everyone.

She took a deep breath and a clammy sheet of material clung to her face. She kicked out. Heavy vinyl was wrapped all around her.

Then her fingers found a small seam of metal.

A body bag. He'd put her in a body bag.

Panic reunited her body and mind. Her fingers still tingled but she forced them to follow the zipper, find its origin.

A weight clamped down over her chest, holding her in place. A harsh sound grated through the darkness. Then a flap of the black material fell aside and cool, fresh air streamed over her face. Hal straddled her, his face filled with concern as he stroked the sweaty strands of her hair away from her mouth and nose.

"I was hoping you wouldn't wake up until the end," he said. Brilliant ribbons of crimson and purple streamed through the sky behind him. Caitlyn realized the rushing sound that filled her head was real. The sound of a waterfall.

"That's where she went in," he was shouting above the sound of the falls, pointing downstream. "I can't carry you that close, but this will do just fine." He looked past her to the churning water and a small smile twisted his face. "Yes, this is all going to work just fine."

"Hal, don't do this." Her words slurred, her tongue still thick with the after effects of the drugs. "This isn't what Lily would want."

"Sure it is," he said, his voice dreamy as if he weren't really talking to Caitlyn but to a ghost. "This is exactly how she wants it. How it was meant to be, foretold in the ancient legends. That's why she sent you to me—there has to be a maiden sacrificed. Just like there needs to be a god to save her." He looked down at her, touched a finger to her lips before she could protest. "This is how it must be."

He zipped the body bag shut.

CHAPTER 50

Sarah followed the men into the cabin. There was no light except what came from the single Coleman lantern and the setting sun. Julia huddled in a corner, crying, but otherwise appeared unhurt.

"Are you all right?" Sarah asked, crouching down to the teenager's level. Julia nodded tearfully and threw her arms around Sarah, clutching her so hard she could barely catch her breath.

"Did you hurt her?" Sam demanded.

"Relax, we didn't touch her. Good thing it was us who found her and not the Russian," Logan answered.

Sarah looked over Julia's shoulder as Logan clamped his fingers around Sam's arm and began to muscle him out the door. Sam dug in his heels, his fists tight.

"I'm not going anywhere until you let them go. They're no threat to you. It'll take them all night to get down the mountain."

Alan moved to stand beside Sarah, patting her hair as if she were a pet. If it wasn't for Julia holding her tight, Sarah would have gladly broken his hand for him. Followed by a nice eye-gouge and a knee to the groin.

"I'm not risking any double cross," Alan said. "Go on, get out of here. If the money isn't in my account by morning, I'll kill them both."

His voice was normal, that was the amazing thing about it. They all sounded so normal, so rational as if they were discussing the day's stock quotes.

"Leave them and come with us," Sam tried one last time, his gaze locking with Sarah's. "How can you be sure Logan won't take the money and run?"

Alan laughed and Logan's face turned dark with fury. "He thought he could, but no worries. Logan isn't going to betray me. Not unless he wants to be running from Korsakov the rest of his life." He waved the two men off, pulling Sarah to her feet. Julia reluctantly let go, remaining on the floor. "Go on, Sarah and I have a lot to," he smiled at Sarah and she felt her stomach clench in disgust, "discuss. Privately."

He held Sarah in a close embrace, his body pressed against her back. Sarah drew her breath in, forced herself to remain calm. "Go on, Sam. Remember what I said."

He gave her a sad half smile. "Your lips promise me a chance at life."

The song he'd left unfinished two years ago. She opened her mouth, wanting to say more, but it was too late. He was gone.

Caitlyn struggled as Hal lifted her, but the body bag wrapped itself around her, tangling her limbs. His laughter cut through her fear and the roar of the rapids. She felt him lurch, struggle for his balance, jostling her as the sound of the river grew louder.

"Goodbye Caitlyn," he shouted as he heaved her into space.

Caitlyn's stomach lurched. She flew through the air. The impact as she hit the water jarred through her. Then she was moving, careening in all directions, the water yanking her in one direction then another. She crashed into a rock, hitting her hip so hard her breath was stolen. The vinyl bag hadn't filled with water yet, leaving her with precious little oxygen.

The rapids pounded her against the rock, wedging her in place as they battered her. But it gave her time to search for the body bag's zipper. She clawed her fingers along the unyielding material, finally finding the metal seam.

Her movement freed her from the eddy and she catapulted back out into the main current, tumbled in all directions until she wasn't sure if she was facing up or down. Another boulder slammed against her, then another.

The roar of the falls was louder now, drowning out everything, even the panicked pounding of her heart. Icy fingers of water seeped into the bag. She sucked in the last bit of oxygen.

The bag filled quickly now, pulling her down, slowing her passage down the river. Cold, it was so very cold. Her fingers fumbled, tracking the zipper down, down. Her lungs screamed for oxygen as she twisted her body within the black confines of her prison.

She snagged the zipper pull, yanked it. A small opening, only enough to allow one hand through, appeared before the small bit of metal slipped from her numb fingers. She wrenched at the material. Slowly it parted.

The current tumbled her upside down once more, tearing the fabric away from her hands, pulling her through the narrow opening. Caitlyn opened her eyes but the water was almost as dark as it had been inside the bag.

A red sheen glimmered below her—was that the surface? Or her vision dimming from lack of oxygen?

A submerged tree limb snagged her, freeing her momentarily from the current. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. She was overwhelmed by the impulse to exhale, to release her remaining oxygen, surrender to the water.

The idea brought with it a sensation of peace, of calm.

Caitlyn kicked away from the tree's embrace, fought to gain the darkening red gleam. Her legs could barely move as they fought against the current, her arms flailed through the churning water and her chest felt ready to explode.

The smudge of red was dimming, growing farther away. Panic seized her and she kicked

harder, one last try.

Her mind grew hazy, she couldn't feel her arms or legs. She was floating, floating through space. Was this what her father had felt in that instant before his brain shut down?

Her body slammed into a rock bed, scraping her back raw. She pulled away, gasped for air, drew in water and began to choke and sputter. Heaving her chest forward, her face broke through the water and she sucked in fresh air.

After several deep breaths, she was able to focus, to look around. Her leg was caught under a rock outcropping, trapping her. Good thing, too, because she was in an eddy just above the falls. The spray from the angry water filled the air with starry sparkles caught in the moonlight.

She raised her head, looked across the river. She was on the opposite bank from where she'd begun. The red taillights of Hal's truck were vanishing in the distance. He was either following his plan to set the explosives or he was driving down to the bridge and coming back to finish her off. Either way, she had to get moving.

She blinked water from her eyes and looked into the face of the blue moon hanging so low that she was certain she could reach out and touch it. *You haven't won yet, Lily.*

JD was ready to hit someone. Or something. He was so damned tired of waiting. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing time to fly past and Julia to be there, safe and sound when he opened them. But all he saw were visions of awful things happening to her, things that made him feel sick.

He lurched to his feet and ran to the door.

"You okay?" his dad asked as JD tugged at the door handle.

"Just going to the restroom." JD frowned, pulled against the door. It rattled but didn't move more than a quarter of an inch or so. "It's stuck."

"What's the problem, son?" The Colonel asked.

"The door. It's locked or something." JD shook it to demonstrate.

"Nonsense," the Colonel's wife said. "There's no lock on that door. Fire code." She marched over, the men moving aside for her four-foot-ten frame and reached for the door handle. The door didn't open for her either. "Look through the window, can you see anything?"

JD craned his head, pressing it against the glass. "No."

"Just go out the other way," his dad said, walking to the outside door. He pushed against it. "It's locked as well."

"No. It locks from the inside," the Colonel pointed out. He added his weight and the two men heaved against the door. There was no window in the outside door, so the men joined JD and Victoria at the inside door, craning to peer through it. "Looks like a bar or something. One of those police locks that push against a door."

"Like a traffic boot?" JD asked.

The Colonel nodded. "Who the hell would want to lock us in here?"

"Stop standing there and call Hal. That's what he's paid for," his wife ordered.

JD's father was nearest the phone. He raised the receiver. "Dead." He grabbed the radio, pressed the button. "Nothing." JD noted that his words were coming fast, like they were under pressure. He sat down in Hal's seat and turned on the computer. "It's dead as well."

Then the lights went out.

"Don't panic," Victoria said. "The building has an emergency generator. It should kick in any minute."

They stood still, the only sound their breathing in the small, cave-like room. For the first time JD noticed there were no outside windows. How could Hal stand working in here?

"The generator should have kicked in," the Colonel said. JD felt him brush past as he fumbled his way across the room. "Hell," he muttered as there was a slam of flesh striking a hard object. One of the chairs skidded across the room, then a beam of light circled around the room from the flashlight he held, spotlighting their faces in a high-powered glare. "Let me have a look."

The Colonel and JD's father began to search the desk. "Anyone have a cell phone?" JD asked. He'd given his to Hal for evidence and it was locked in the safe.

Both older men looked at him like he was crazy. His father refused to carry one except in his delivery truck for emergencies. And who was the Colonel going to call when everyone in town came to him to gossip?

They turned to look at Victoria. A frown furrowed her face. "It's in my purse," she said, pressing her face against the window, staring out into the darkened post office. "Behind the counter."

"That's all right," JD's dad said, bending over the bottom desk drawer. "I think I found—"

"Get away from that!" the Colonel barked.

"What the hell is it? Those look like," JD's dad was stuttering, backing away from the desk in horror, "like, but they can't be—"

"They are. Enough C4 to blow up half the town. It's a bomb."

CHAPTER 51

Sam wanted to walk out the door without looking back. It would be easier for everyone that way. He couldn't do it. His feet tripped on the threshold and he turned his head, glanced back.

And froze in place, unable to break free of the sight of Sarah. Her eyes blazed out in defiance until she locked gazes with Sam.

His pulse beat in his throat, he would have screamed if he could have gotten a breath. The heartbreak in her eyes told him she knew as well as he did that they both wouldn't survive this day. But then, she smiled. Not one of her brighter-than-the-sun grins that had first made him fall in love with her. No, one of her twisted, "hey this is the real world, deal with it," half-smiles to let him know she had faith in him. That she knew if there was a way for him to make sure she and Julia made it out of this hell alive, then he would do it.

The blood drained from his face. How could she place her hope in him? A fucked up loser who should have been washed up on some Santa Monica beach years ago?

He gave her a tiny nod. Let her know that he understood. He stepped out the door and out of her sight.

As soon as his foot hit the hard-packed dirt of the parking area, a plan began forming. He pursed his lips, whistled a little diddy he'd called "The Idiot's Guide to Driving Drunk" and strolled towards Logan's Taurus, his plan shaping up.

It was a suicide mission, but it would buy Sarah the time she needed. From the gleam in her eye, he was certain she had her own plan cooking. That was his girl. She never stopped thinking about ways to make things better and she never, ever gave up. Not even on a hopeless beach bum like him.

He reached a hand for Logan's driver's door.

"No," Logan said, waving his gun. "We'll take the truck. You drive."

Sure thing. Sam forced himself to hang his head so that Logan wouldn't see the grin he

couldn't suppress. He slumped his shoulders, his diddy still swirling through his head as he opened the truck's door and climbed up onto the seat, springs squeaking and groaning beneath his weight.

Sorry old friend, he thought to the Ford Ranger. We've had some good times together, but now those good times are about to come to an end.

For one of us at least. Logan yanked open the passenger door and tore Josh's booster seat from the truck, hurling it to the ground. "What's that?" he asked, craning a look into the small compartment behind the seats.

"My guitar. Want me to open it for you?"

"Leave it," he said as he hoisted himself up into the passenger seat and slammed the door. He didn't bother with the seatbelt, instead turned to keep his gun trained on Sam. "You pretending to be a cowboy with your truck and guitar? Hide the truth of what you really are to the world? A liar and a thief."

When Sam was silent, Logan gestured for him to start the truck. Sam made a three point turn, narrowly avoiding the tree trunks clustered around the tiny clearing and bumped the Ford over the rutted dirt track.

"What's Alan got on you?" Sam asked as he began to accelerate.

"Easton's going to get himself a bullet if he's not careful." Logan craned his head, looking through the windshield at the thick foliage whipping against the sides of the truck surrounding them. "The man's a fool. He sees a hundred million dollars and thinks of the shit he can buy with it. A new car. A boat. Idiot. Money is power. Control. With money you can own anything—or anyone."

"You couldn't buy me," Sam argued.

"Which is why we can't let you live. Otherwise you might blab to Korsakov. But," he turned to Sam with a grin revealing teeth as crooked as the logging road they were driving on, "I'll let you decide where you want to be buried and how you want to die."

Sam shifted down, the truck growling in response. He pressed down on the accelerator, taking the first curve so fast that the rear tires nearly spun off the side of the road. The only thing on that side of the road was a whole lot of nothing. That was the point, right?

"You're not really going to let Sarah and Julia go, are you?" Sam asked. "They know too much."

"Oh we'll let them go," Logan said. "Promise. Just no guarantees Korsakov won't pick them up and make an example of them." He shifted in his seat, leaning toward Sam. "So, what's it gonna be? A bullet in the head? Or one to the heart?"

One more turn and Sam saw the spot he wanted. He gunned the engine, slamming down on the accelerator until he thought his foot would break through the floorboard and find empty air. Logan was flung back in his seat as they careered over the edge of the road and off the side of the mountain.

"How about none of the above?"

CHAPTER 52

Alan was actually licking his lips in anticipation of getting his hands on the money. Could care less about what happened to Sarah or Julia.

Julia. She had to focus on her, do whatever it took to get her out of here alive. No

matter the cost.

Sarah backed up, leaving Julia in the corner, until she was pinned against the wall beside the fireplace. The only light was the flickering of the lantern, casting the mounted antlers hanging just above the mantle next to her into ghostly shadows. She remembered how proud the Colonel was. That buck had been her first kill, a four pointer. She had polished and sharpened those antlers herself, mounting them to a sturdy piece of oak and hanging them with pride as the Colonel watched. Now she was the one as trapped as a deer in a hunter's sights.

A chill wind blew in through the still open door, taunting her with freedom. Alan sidled closer, his eyes wide in anticipation. "We don't have much time left, Sarah. Let's not waste any more."

He stopped inches away from her, his gaze dropping from her eyes to her lips then down to her breasts. She shifted her weight, inching along the wall, one hand behind her, gripping the wall.

Alan slid the gun barrel across her stomach. Her muscles clenched, trying to pull away from his noxious touch. His smile widened and now his eyes fastened on hers as the gun inched below her shirt, caressing her bare skin. The metal was cold, rough as it crept up, coming to a rest between her breasts.

"Say something, Sarah. Tell me how much you want it, how much you want me. Tell me the right thing and I'll let the girl go." He raised his free hand to smooth her hair back from her face and Sarah saw her opening.

She kept her eyes locked on his, parted her lips, teasing him as she ran her tongue across them. His body tensed in anticipation. She held her breath as he leaned forward, angling his mouth to meet hers.

Then she plunged the razor sharp antlers into his side, twisting them up, gutting him. His scream split the air.

"Run, Julia," she shouted, keeping her grip on the antlers. The gun clattered to the floor as he tried to push her away. She didn't see where it landed, only had eyes for the sight of Julia racing to safety.

Alan slumped, his weight wrenching the antlers from her grasp. "You—bitch—" The words emerged a harsh groan as he clutched his side.

Sarah didn't wait. She ran to the door. She had to find Julia. And Sam.

Just before the last tire left the ground, Sam twisted the wheel furiously and the truck spun sideways, flying into the air.

"Sonofabitch!" Logan's gun went off, the bullet crashing through the windshield. The front passenger corner of the truck smashed into the trunk of a two hundred year old hemlock. The seat belt grabbed Sam so hard he thought it was about to cut him in two. His vision went white as the airbag exploded in his face, pushing him back.

Logan blasted through the windshield as they came to an abrupt halt. His foot caught on the dash, torquing his body sideways and propelling him head first into the tree.

The wheels of the truck hit the ground. It landed, resting at a thirty degree angle on its side. The tree stood in the middle of the engine compartment like an ungainly hood ornament with Logan pinned between two hundred years of wood and two thousand pounds of steel.

The pounding in Sam's ears made him dizzy. Conking his head against the steering wheel after the air bag deflated didn't help any. He blinked hard. Blood was running into his eyes, but his vision was clear. Clear enough to see Logan's body twisted like a rag doll in unearthly directions that had literally torn the leg with the foot caught in the dash from his body.

Sam swallowed hard against the wave of nausea accompanying that sight. Thank God Logan's slacks were still relatively intact, there was little blood on the surface. It was knowing what lay beneath that made his stomach heave.

He turned his head away and took stock. His hands were wrapped around the steering wheel in a death grip. He focused on releasing them. When he opened his hands, his fingers stubbornly remained curled and pain rumbled through his wrists. The air was curiously still and quiet as if the forest held its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

His chest hurt like he'd been kicked by a mule and he couldn't feel his right foot at all. Had it gone through the floorboard like he'd imagined? Maybe it was lying a hundred feet above them on the side of the road?

Aw hell, maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there, trying to remember how to breathe, but it was long enough for the last remnants of the setting sun to fade. Dim sparkles of moonlight filtered through the tree branches, just enough to convince him he really was still alive.

Focus, Sam. Alan still has Sarah.

That thought cleared his mind. He heaved his weight against the door. At first it wouldn't budge, then slowly with a groan of metal scraping against metal, it gave an inch. He slumped back, panting, sweat pouring from him. He still couldn't feel his right foot, but the pain cascading over the rest of his body more than made up for that.

He took a deep breath and tried again. This time the door popped open. He fell sideways, almost all the way out of the truck. Until his foot caught.

"Mother of God!" His yell tore through the night. No one seemed to care. As loud as his shout was, his foot was screaming louder. God, he'd rather cut it off than feel this. Bone scraped against bone, sending shockwaves through his body.

Now he really was going to vomit. He caught the doorframe with his hands, hauled his weight back onto the seat, releasing the pressure from his trapped leg. But once woken, the pain wouldn't stop its clamoring. He wrapped his fingers around his calf trying in vain to stabilize the leg, to free it, or yank it totally off—anything to stop the pain.

A searing light stabbed into his eyes. He held up his hands to block it.

"Sam? Are you all right?"

Sarah. It was Sarah. Sam didn't try to fight the tears of joy that overwhelmed him. He cleared his throat, wiped a hand over his face and caught his breath as she maneuvered through the brush to his side of the truck. Her flashlight bobbed through the darkness, flashing on Logan—or what remained of him—then on Sam, then over his head and back again.

"Are you okay?" he asked as she joined him.

"I'm fine. Julia's in the car, waiting. I stole Logan's car," she said with a trace of pride in her voice. Then a shadow covered her face.

"And Alan?"

She leaned across him to examine the situation more closely. "Hold this," she handed him the flashlight. She leaned forward, her fingers gently probing his leg. "I think maybe I killed him."

Her tone was flat and he didn't ask any questions. She wiggled something and he bit his lip against a shriek of pain. She turned her head to look up at him. "Your foot is wedged under the gas pedal. It's bleeding, probably broken. I can slide it out if I can twist it to one side—but it's gonna hurt."

He sucked in his breath. "Do it."

CHAPTER 53

Sarah craned her head to look up at her husband. The bright light of the flashlight etched his face into crevices of pain. And she was about to cause him more.

She realized for the first time that her anger was gone. Sam had made mistakes. Many of them. But he was a different man now and everything he'd done in the past two years had been done in the hopes of keeping her and Josh safe. She hadn't totally forgiven him—she might never—but she was beginning to understand.

Reaching a hand out, she took his and gave it a strong squeeze. "I love you, Music Man."

His eyes widened as he looked down at her in surprise. She took that opportunity to wrench his leg out in one quick, firm movement.

His scream echoed through the small space. The color drained from his face and his hand gripped hers so tight she couldn't feel it. Then he released her and slumped back. "You've got some bedside manner there."

"It worked, didn't it?" She turned back to examine his ankle. It was already swollen, purple and scraped raw, oozing blood from several areas. But it was in one piece. "Let's get you out of here."

Together they maneuvered him out of the truck. Sam couldn't put any pressure on his leg, so he leaned on her.

"Wait," she said, handing him the flashlight. She reached back into the truck and grabbed his guitar case, hauling it over the seat and then slinging it over her free arm.

In response, he grabbed her waist, pulling her close and planted a wide-open kiss on her mouth.

"C'mon. Julia is waiting." She guided him down the mountain to where she'd parked the car. The truck had flown off the topside of a switchback and landed close to the straightaway on the downhill side, saving them the need to climb back up the mountain.

Julia was waiting, hiding in some bushes off the edge of the road. She leapt out to help Sarah wrangle Sam the rest of the way to the car.

Sarah lowered the guitar, ready to toss it into the back, when the glitter of headlights on a curve above them came into view. "Julia, can you drive?"

"No ma'am."

"All right, get into the back," she ordered, trying to ignore the knot of fear in her throat. "Sam, take the wheel."

Sam tensed beside her, craned his head to stare up at the lights. "No. It's me he wants."

"Listen to me. You can drive. Get Julia out of here." She firmly pushed him down into the drivers' seat. "I'll take care of Alan."

"How?" Sam asked as he maneuvered his injured leg to the side and slid into place behind the wheel.

Sarah propped the guitar case against the side of the car and unsnapped the small pouch attached to its lid. "With a little help from the dark and the woods." She pulled out a package of wire guitar strings. "And these. Now go. If this works, I'll meet you down at the Rockslide."

"No. I'm not leaving you again. I'll wait for you."

The lights above them were moving slowly but steadily in their direction. As if the man behind the wheel was having a hard time maneuvering the car. She hoped he'd have a harder time walking.

Sam snagged her waistband, pulling her forward into the car for a quick kiss. "Did you

mean what you said?"

"I'll always love you, you're the father of my son," she said. "That doesn't mean I always like you. Or that I've totally forgiven you. Yet."

She slammed the door shut before he could wrench any more confessions from her.

"Keep your lights off so he doesn't see you. Now go!"

The Taurus slid past her, lights off, engine purring as Sam eased it down the road. She wanted to race after them, jump in, tell him to just drive as fast as he could.

Instead she tore open the package of wire guitar strings and found the longest length. She coiled it around her palm. The bite of metal against her flesh took her mind off Sam and Josh as she considered her plan. She had to finish this, now, tonight.

No more running, no more hiding. She couldn't let Alan off this mountain alive.

The glare of headlights impaled her. She fainted, running along the road as the car behind her sped up, aiming for her. She turned to look over her shoulder, saw Alan, hunched over the wheel of his Volvo, his face filled with hate.

Good. He was focused on her. Not Sam or Julia.

She could smell the fumes, felt the rumble of the engine hurtling towards her. At the last possible moment, she leapt off the road and into the shrubs. The car braked and fish tailed, spinning sideways to land with two wheels off the road fifty feet away from her.

Alan opened his door, staggered out. He'd removed his jacket. His white shirt was drenched in blood, but she'd obviously not wounded him as seriously as she'd hoped. Damn silk suit. The extra layers of fabric blunted her blow. His tie was missing as well and his hair stuck out from his head as if he'd turned into a wild man.

"Sarah!" He called into the night, brandishing the gun. "Come out, Sarah! I won't hurt you if you give me what I want."

His voice was cajoling, but the gleam in his eyes was murderous. Her fingers tightened on the guitar string. She'd finally found something more important to Alan Easton than money.

Killing her.

She broke from cover, rustling through the bushes with enough noise to wake the dead. Sorry, Colonel, she thought as she continued to break a trail that a blind grandmother could follow. Or a city-slicker lawyer.

She knew exactly where she needed to go. Snakebelly. Was it really only two nights ago that she'd camped on this ledge, dreaming of Indian princesses and Sam? Alan's footsteps broke through the night, following her trail.

She quickened her pace until she reached the spot where she'd anchored her climbing rope. Good, it was still there. She drew the rope through her fingers until she had a good length coiled and ready to go. Then, spinning the length of wire before her, she wrapped one end of wire around a sapling at ground level and kept hold of the other end. She crouched down in the shadow of a boulder and waited.

"Sarah! Don't make this harder than it has to be. Come out now like a good girl. You know I'll find you. Or if not you, I'll find Julia." He stepped into the small clearing. "Now you've nowhere to go." He swept his hand with the gun from one side to the other, squinting in the moonlight as he scanned the shadows. There was only one hiding place large enough. He aimed the gun directly at her.

"Come out Sarah. It's over." He stepped forward, now only five paces from the ledge.

He took another step, raised the gun. And fired.

Sarah jumped at the crack of noise that shattered the night. The bullet struck the rock above her, splintering her with shards of granite.

"Now, Sarah!" He commanded, his tone one of victory as he took another step closer to

her.

She stood, keeping her hand behind her. He leered at her, the gun centered on her chest. "That's a good girl."

He took one last step. Now he stood before her, almost touching her. His breath came in gasps, his chest heaved with adrenalin and exertion. "Now I know why people hunt. The thrill of the chase. It's exhilarating."

The whites of his eyes gleamed in the moonlight. Sarah stood still, waiting for her opening. The abyss waited less than a foot away from them both.

He prodded at her with the gun. "You've been a bad girl," he whispered. "You're going to pay for what you've done."

Sarah forced herself to meet his gaze. "Like hell I will."

His slap rocked her back against the edge of the boulder. She grabbed his belt and pivoted her weight against him, yanking the wire tight with her other hand. At first he allowed her to use his weight to get up. Then he reached for her as he realized that she was leveraging him over the edge. His foot caught in the wire, his hand with the gun jumped up, slamming against her jaw.

The wire sliced into her palm, but she refused to release it. She rammed her body against his, pushing him over the edge. He stutter-stepped, still trying to catch his balance. For one frozen moment her face was a mere inch away from his. His mouth was open wide but no sound came. Just a rush of breath as he reached out for her.

She toppled over the edge with him, the wire finally slipping from her grasp.

CHAPTER 54

Together Sarah and Alan hurtled through the darkness. Her stomach lurched with the feeling of free fall. Then, after an agonizing moment, her rope yanked her to a stop.

Alan plummeted past her, his screams fading into the darkness long after his body vanished from her sight.

Sarah hung at the end of her rope for a long moment before she could catch her breath. Then she rocked her weight forward, nudging the rock face, until she found purchase for her feet. She placed her weight back against the rope and climbed out.

It was awkward driving with one leg stretched out beside the other, using his left foot. Every time he jostled his right foot a fresh explosion of pain would crash over him. But the worst part was when he lost sight of Sarah in the rearview mirror. It was as if he'd lost part of himself.

Daddy? He imagined Josh's voice if he returned without Sarah. *Why couldn't Mommy stay with us? Didn't she want to come home?*

Okay, he was wrong. Now he really knew what pain was—the thought of shattering his son's heart.

Sam couldn't really blame Josh if he never forgave him. Just as he couldn't blame Sarah. He'd made a complete mess of things.

But if Sarah came back, they could start over. No Korsakov, no Alan—just her and Josh and Sam. A family. Again.

"You okay back there, Julia?" he asked, more to try to distract himself from his morbid

fears of Sarah's death than anything.

"Y-yes sir." Her voice was muffled by tears.

"We're going to get out of this. All right?" Then he remembered that he still had her cell phone. He pulled it from his pocket and handed it to her over the back seat. "Why don't you call your parents, let them know you're all right?"

She took the phone. He slowed the car as they approached a hairpin turn, dared to turn the lights on. Not much farther.

"Can't. The battery's dead," Julia said leaning over the back seat, her voice more normal now.

"It's all right. We're almost there."

Sarah made it back to the Volvo and started down the mountain. Her hands could barely grip the steering wheel, they were so torn up from holding the wire and the rope. But other than that, she was pretty much in one piece.

She rolled her shoulders, daring to relax for the first time in days. Sam was safe, Josh was safe, they were going to make it—

A woman's form jumped out from the shadows. Sarah stomped on the brakes, the car spinning out on the dirt road. She felt the brake pedal pump against her foot as she wrestled the steering wheel, trying to keep the car from plummeting over the side of the mountain.

The car came to a stop mere inches away from the woman. She didn't seem to notice, was already sprinting to the driver's side, pounding on the door with one hand.

It was Caitlyn. The car rocked with the force of her blows. She looked like a madwoman, her hair wet, shoved in all directions, clothing soaked and clinging to her. Her face was white in the moonlight, one eye almost swollen shut, blood smeared over her cheek and forehead.

"Let me in! Federal Agent!"

Sarah rolled down her window. "Caitlyn, it's me. What happened?"

Caitlyn fell against the car, her chest heaving as she gasped for air. "Hal Waverly. He tried to kill me."

"Hal?"

"We've got to get to town. He's got bombs. He's planning to blow up the dam!"

CHAPTER 55

Sam pulled up to the curb in front of the Rockslide. Julia hopped out, obviously anxious to be free of today's adventures. He debated sitting here, waiting for Sarah, rather than leaving the car. His foot hurt so much he'd almost bitten his tongue in half to keep from crying out.

The dome light came on when Julia opened the door. He was surprised by the puddle of blood his leg sat in. Every time he moved, more blood squished out from beneath his sock.

"Sam, I think you need Doc Hedeger," Julia said, leaning in to peer at him and his leg. "I'll go get him."

"Help me inside the café first," Sam said. "The Colonel can help me wrap it up, stop the bleeding until the doc gets here."

She nodded and sprinted around to his side of the car, letting him lean his weight against

her as he slid out. As soon as his leg left the seat and swung to the ground, pain catapulted through him. His stomach reeled and he felt like he was going to black out. He leaned heavily against Julia, thankful for her youthful strength, as she half-dragged him to the café door.

"Over at the gov center, help yourself," a note on the door read. It wasn't the Colonel's usual precise hand-writing, but rather a jagged scrawl.

Julia pushed the door open. The café was dark, but the light switch was right inside the door. She flicked it on, the bright fluorescent lights sending flashes through the dark swirls clouding Sam's vision. He swayed as she loosened her grip long enough to hold the door open for him.

"Just a little farther," she said.

Sam nodded, his entire being focused on the black and white linoleum beneath his feet. Smears of blood splattered the gleaming surface below his foot.

"Good evening, Stan," came the voice from his darkest nightmares. Sam jerked his head up as Julia came to an abrupt halt. "I knew if I waited patiently, sooner or later you'd catch up with me."

Grigory Korsakov slid out from the booth where he sat in the farthest corner of the café. Sam could barely keep his head held high enough to meet the Russian's gaze. His body swayed, if it wasn't for Julia, he would have fallen. Still, he unwrapped his arms from her body.

"Go," he whispered to her. "Run. Now."

Sarah rocketed the car down the dirt logging road. They came to the intersection with Lake Road. To the right was Hopewell, to the left the road to the dam.

One way led to Sam. The other to probable death—and the chance to maybe save lives.

"What are you waiting for?" Caitlyn asked, tugging at the wheel with her good hand.
"Go."

Sarah spun the wheel, heading toward the dam. For the first time she appreciated the awful decision Sam had to make that night two years ago. Injured, almost dead, he'd still found the strength to get off the mountain and take Josh to a safe place.

She pushed down on the accelerator, gravel spraying the road behind her, pinging against the undercarriage. Caitlyn kept talking, repeating the instructions about how to dismantle the bombs for the fourth time, as if the more she talked, the less likely they were to die tonight.

A fact they both knew was a lie.

"He'll detonate them using a radio to get the widest range. You guys don't have good enough coverage for a cell phone to work. But any radio frequency would work with those detonators. All it takes is one spark of electricity to the blasting cap and—" She threw up her hand for emphasis.

"He could be anywhere," Sarah said.

"He'll need line of sight."

"The southeast corner of the dam," Sarah said, still reeling from the fact that one of her oldest friends was a drug addict. "There's an observation tower. From the top you can see the entire reservoir and even down into part of town. He could see everything."

"And it's high up, just like the Thundergod legend. That's where he'll be," Caitlyn said grimly. "You leave Hal to me. Just get to those bombs, there were four on the map. I'll keep him busy as long as I can."

Sarah bounced the Volvo onto the dirt track leading down to the dam. They cruised to a stop at the caretaker's cabin.

"He'll know we're here," she said, killing the engine.

"He'll know *I'm* here," Caitlyn replied, reaching up to turn the dome light off. "That's what I'm counting on. Wait for me to get clear of the car then you sneak over to the dam wall, start on the bombs."

Sarah watched as Caitlyn crept out of the car. The FBI agent was hidden by shadows for a moment, then appeared on the other side of the cabin, bathed in the radiant moonlight. Despite her injuries, she walked tall, proud.

Sarah slipped out of the car and hugged the shadows cast by the cabin as Caitlyn waltzed through the grass, calling Hal's name in a singsong.

Then Sarah realized that Caitlyn wasn't calling Hal. She was calling to the Thundergod, He-noh.

Sarah crawled on her belly through the short expanse of moonlit grass that lay between the rear of the cabin and the shadows below the dam. Caitlyn had told her Hal had four bombs planted along the dam wall. She started at the far end, searching through the dark shadows until she found the first.

He hadn't even tried to conceal it. It was a mound of clay-colored bricks with several wires leading to an electronic receiver and some blasting caps. Sarah reached out her hand, then yanked it back when she realized it was trembling.

Her breath left her in a whoosh and she felt lightheaded. All she had to do was to pull the blasting cap away from the C4. If Hal triggered the bomb, the blasting cap would still explode but it wouldn't do any serious damage. As long as Sarah wasn't holding it when it went off.

She squinted her eyes, double checking where the blasting cap was inserted into the putty-like explosive. Piece of cake. Just a little tug and...she sat back, suddenly holding the detonator in her hand.

It was easier than she had dreamed. Able to breathe again, she threw the detonator as far away from her as she could. It landed in the grass with a soft thud.

She crawled through the darkness searching for the next bomb. One down, three to go.

CHAPTER 56

Sam lurched forward, trying to block Kosakov's aim of Julia. The Russian merely smiled and sidled to his left, the gun in his hand pointed directly at the girl. She'd started for the door, stopped when she realized she couldn't make it without getting shot.

"Smart girl," Kosakov said. "Friend of yours?"

"She was just helping me out of a jam," Sam said, keeping his voice casual as he slumped against the counter top near the cash register. "Let her go."

He realized his mistake as soon as the words left his mouth. Kosakov raised an eyebrow. "You giving me orders now, Stan?" He crooked his little finger at Julia. "Come here, little girl. Get comfortable. We'll be here a little while."

"Why?" Sam said, as Julia took a hesitant step forward then stopped again. "Don't you want to get out of town before the cops come? Anyone could pass by these windows, see you with a gun and call them."

"Ever hear of a police scanner? The cops and most of your town are searching for a lost girl. From the description, I'd say it's your friend here. They won't be back for awhile." He smiled at Julia. "Long enough for us to get acquainted."

Julia crossed her arms over her chest, hiding her breasts from the Russian's rapacious leer.

While Korsakov ogled her, Sam closed his fist around a napkin dispenser. "Julia, run!" he shouted, hurling it at Korsakov.

The Russian fired, hitting Sam in his injured leg. He pivoted to fire again, but Julia was too fast, she'd darted out the door and vanished in the night.

Sam grabbed onto the counter, fighting to remain upright. He didn't feel anything—the pain from his broken ankle had already overwhelmed him. Blood spread out over the lower thigh of his jeans. Suddenly he wasn't sure which way was up and he slowly toppled to the ground.

"That was stupid, Stan," Korsakov said, approaching him and placing an Italian clad foot on his wound, pressing down to both stop the blood flow and inflict as much pain as possible. "As always, you were trying to take the easy way out. You thought I would kill you quickly, that you would die an easy death."

He crouched down until his face filled Sam's vision. "Sorry, old friend. That's not what I have in mind for you." He paused, glanced out the door as if expecting someone else to appear there. "Or your lovely wife."

Caitlyn was sore from head to toe, the pain radiating through her body all consuming as she hauled herself up the steps leading to the top of the two story tall tower. She'd done something to her left arm, probably broken it or her collar bone, she couldn't raise it at all, it hung useless at her side.

Hal hadn't fired a shot or called out any warning to stop her from joining him, so she took that as a good sign. Especially as he hadn't detonated the bombs either.

The only part of her body that didn't hurt was her head. Oh she had a few lumps and bumps, but no headache and certainly no steamroller of a migraine. In the past exertion and fatigue had been prime triggers, but she'd been relatively pain free all day.

Go figure. She grabbed the splintery wood railing and climbed another step up. She tried not to look down where the only visible object in the darkness was the Volvo. Otherwise the darkness swallowed everything except for the cascade of moonlight on the reservoir waters. The sound of the falls was louder up here and the ancient fire tower swayed with their vibration.

She rounded the last landing and took the final steps leading to the top. Hal waited there. All he had to do was to give her a hard shove and she'd fall to her death. Time to earn her salary.

Caitlyn smiled up at Hal. "I returned," she crooned, risking letting go of the railing to extend her hand to him. "Just as I promised."

His frown deepened as he stared down at her. "How?" his whisper barely carried to her. "No, it's meant to be Lily—"

"Lily sent me," she said in a throaty whisper. "Sent me to bring you to her."

He blinked slowly. Then he reached down and took her hand. Caitlyn tensed, certain he was about to throw her off the tower. His eyes glittered in the moonlight and he seemed oblivious to everything except her.

Just the way she wanted it. He guided her up the remaining steps and pulled her onto the top landing.

"You're just in time," he said, pivoting her so she faced away from the dam and toward Hopewell.

He wore his gun in his holster but he was angled so that it was out of her reach. Caitlyn glanced around, searching the landing for any other weapons but found none. "Time for what?"

"Watch." He pressed his chest against her back, resting his chin on her shoulder so that their faces were side by side as they stared out into the night.

A bright light filled the sky, a thousand fireworks exploding. A rush of wind blasted them

followed by a noise louder than a banshee's howl. The tower jerked violently. Caitlyn reached out and grabbed for the railing as the night splintered into fire.

CHAPTER 57

JD watched the men pry open the gun cabinet, only to find it empty. The Colonel's wife tried hitting the window of the inside door with a baton but all she got for her efforts was a noise as if they were trapped inside a drum.

"Probably bullet proof," the Colonel said. But that didn't stop him and JD's dad from smashing a chair and trying to punch out the window with the legs.

JD backed up out of their way. The only place to go was near the desk. He glanced down at the bomb in the drawer. It had a complicated nest of wires and components that looked like the inside of a video game. Suddenly one of the displays lit up.

"Dad?" he called out, shouting to make himself heard over the noise of their pounding. "Hey!"

The grownups all stopped and stared at him.

"It's doing some kind of count down," JD said, the calmness in his voice surprising him. He knew he was scared, but somehow he couldn't feel it any longer. It was as if he was floating, ready to accept whatever happened next.

"Let me see," Victoria said. "Oh Lord. It's counting down seconds."

"How many?" the Colonel asked.

"92-91—"

"JD, get away from there," his dad said, pulling him away. "Here, get under the bunk, it will shield you."

"What about you, dad?"

"Never mind me, just get under there. I'll cover you with the mattress."

"You too, Victoria," the Colonel ordered.

"No. Wither thou goest, so do I."

"Victoria!"

It was plain to see that no measly two-inch mattress was going to stop a bomb and no way JD was going out hiding under a bed like a baby. He stood beside his father, reaching for his hand. "I'm fine right here, Dad."

"I never told you how proud I was of you, son."

JD looked up to see tears glittering on his father's cheeks. Before he could say anything, there was a pounding on the door.

The door opened and Julia stood there. "What's the deal?" she asked holding the pressure lock in her hand.

JD grabbed her arm and pulled her away. "Just run."

Together they raced down the hill followed closely by the three adults.

Sarah looked numbly at the detonator in her hand. Had she done that? she wondered as the sky began to rain dirt and gravel down on her. In front of her, the dam trembled but did not break. Light blazed through the sky farther south.

Town. Something in town had exploded.

She shook her head, images of Sam and Julia and the Colonel at the café filling her mind. Her vision darkened and she felt faint for a moment, as if all the blood had been drained from her. She shook herself hard. No time for that. She still had one more bomb to find and disarm.

Before the same thing happened here.

Sam felt the floor heave below him and his head explode. No, not his head, he realized as cutlery and glass flew to the floor around him, peppering him with shards of glass. Korsakov was thrown off balance, landing on his back, slamming his head against one of the booths. Sam barely had time to roll over and cover his head before the plate glass window blew out. A howling wind blasted through the café, toppling stools. Crashes ricocheted from the rear room and several tables overturned. Sam couldn't hear anything over the roaring in his head.

The wind subsided and silence ensued. He raised his head. One of the pedestal tables in the booth had flipped over onto Korsakov. It wouldn't slow him down for long, but maybe long enough.

Sam ignored the pain lancing through his leg and dragged himself across the debris-strewn floor. Korsakov's gun lay just a few feet away. The Russian was already moving, struggling to haul the table off his chest. He saw what Sam was doing and a ghastly smile played over his face, lit in flickering half shadows by the single remaining fluorescent light dangling overhead.

"One thing about you, Stan. You're never boring."

Korsakov gave a grunt and heaved the table away from him. He rolled and darted a hand out for the gun that Sam was struggling to reach. Sam pushed himself as hard as he could, sliding on his own blood and grabbed the gun first.

Korsakov's laughter echoed through the pounding in Sam's brain. "Go ahead," he taunted. "Shoot me. If you have the guts."

Sam leveraged himself up to a sitting position. "No problem," he said, raising the gun.

Korsakov's smile only widened. "Well, actually there's two very big problems."

Sam ignored the Russian's words, curling his finger around the trigger. A large shadow fell over him and the cold hard muzzle of a gun pressed against the side of his head.

"What's it going to be, Stan? Both of us dead or both of us alive?"

CHAPTER 58

Caitlyn lurched against the railing, almost slipping through it. Hal's grasp pulled her back. Blood streamed from one of his ears yet he was grinning, his teeth gleaming in the moonlight like the yellow maw of a jack-o-lantern.

"I took care of them, Lily," he cried out into the night, head thrown back as he shouted at the moon. "All the naysayers and doubters. The ones who poisoned and denied, kept us in captivity. They're all dead. I can come home to you now, at last."

He had his back to the railing, arms spread wide in celebration. Caitlyn lunged, tackling her shoulder against his chest, spinning him off balance so that she could reach his gun. He reared forward, slapping her with the back of his hand. The movement gave her the opening she needed to grab his gun.

He didn't seem to care when she raised the forty caliber Glock and aimed it dead center. "You can't deny me!"

Caitlyn raised the gun and fired point blank. Hal stepped forward, his arm raised, ready to push her over the railing. She fired again, twice more, hitting center mass each time. He swayed, mere inches away from her and the edge of the platform. A puzzled expression crossed his face as he looked down at the blood coloring his khaki shirt.

He held his arms out to her, beseeching her. "Lily. I did it all for Lily..."

The night shredded his words as he toppled backwards over the railing.

Sarah had just found the last bomb when Hal's body hurtled to the ground beside her. Her heart lurched as he hit the ground with a heavy thunk. She craned her neck back. No sign of Caitlyn following. Thank God. She yanked the detonator out and ran to the foot of the tower. "Are you all right?" she called up to Caitlyn.

"I'm fine," came the breathless reply.

"Sam is in town, I need to go to him, get help."

Caitlyn appeared on the top landing, swaying and holding her one arm. Sarah watched as she sank onto the steps. "You go. I'll just slow you down."

Sarah hesitated. "You sure?"

"Go. Get your husband. Wait. Here." A dull thud as Caitlyn tossed Hal's gun down, followed by the magazine of bullets. "Be careful."

Sarah scooped the gun up, rammed the magazine home, and ran to the Volvo. "I'll send help," she called over her shoulder. Caitlyn merely gave a weak wave.

The blast hadn't hurt the car, Sarah was pleased to see. The engine turned over smoothly. She gunned it and headed back up the dirt road into town. To her surprise, the streets were empty and relatively clear. A few mailboxes and trash cans were overturned amid broken glass, but even most of the street lights were still working. Some shingles had blown off the church across from the Rockslide. Other than missing its window, the café appeared intact.

She blew out a sigh of relief. Her headlights revealed a wall of smoke farther down the street where the government center stood. Or used to stand.

The sheriff had been quick to respond. A Tahoe with grille lights flashing red and blue stood in front of the café. She pulled up alongside it. Two men were helping a third inside the Rockslide while a fourth one staggered to his feet under his own power.

The man slumped between the burly deputies was Sam. She left the car and ran over the broken glass to the doorway. Then she saw the guns.

Neither of the men wore uniforms, rather they wore dark suits. One held a gun against the back of Sam's neck while the other had one aimed at his body. Sam lost his footing, almost falling to the floor and the second man holstered his gun to use both hands to grab him and haul him onto his feet. His cry of pain wrenched at her but the last man in the café simply laughed.

Sarah had never shot at a person, never been in combat, but it was as if she heard all the Colonel's war stories rush through her head. *It's like you're in a trance*, he'd told her the one time they'd seriously discussed it when she was a girl. *You don't even realize you're shooting at men, you're just trying hard to stay alive and protect your own.*

She raised and fired at one of the men holding Sam, hitting him square in the chest as he was pivoting to face her.

"Drop it!" she shouted to the second man, the one whose gun was still in its holster.

The fourth man aimed at her, had a clear shot. She whirled to face him. Sam lurched forward, throwing himself at the man. They fell to the ground. The man fired his gun. Sarah felt a rush of air as the bullet passed her.

Sam tried to roll his weight onto the man. The second "deputy" went for his gun. Sarah

fired twice, both shots hitting him before he could clear it from his holster.

She spun back to where Sam and the other man struggled on the floor. Blood was smeared everywhere, both men sliding in it as they fought to gain the upper hand. The man with the gun was trying to aim it at Sam, blocking any shot Sarah might take.

"Sam, move!" she shouted. "I've got him."

Instead of rolling off the man, Sam grabbed the stranger's shirt collar and used it to bash the guy's head on the edge of the bench behind them. At first the man flailed, trying to break Sam's hold on him. Sam didn't let go, he kept banging and banging the other man's head against the bench until the gun clattered to the floor and the man's eyes rolled back into his head.

Sarah ran forward, kicking the gun clear. "It's all right, Sam. Stop."

Sam gasped, his breath rattling through him in a sick wheeze as he leveraged his weight back, still trying to knock the other man against the bench. Sarah knelt beside him, placed her arms around him. "Sshhh," she whispered into his ear. "It's okay. You can let go now."

He dropped the man, who fell to the floor, lifeless. Then Sam slumped into her arms. She held him tight, supporting him.

"I tried," he sobbed. "I tried so hard..."

His eyes closed and he collapsed.

CHAPTER 59

December 24, 2007: Hopewell, NY

I still hear Alan's screams, sometimes I'm not even asleep. When I do, I go up to Josh's room and watch him as he lays sleeping. He hasn't had any nightmares in months, sleeps so deep and peacefully that even his snoring doesn't wake him.

Just like his father.

When I do dream, I often see Damian Wright's face, that ghastly smile he gave me right before he died. As if he pitied me, knew what was coming. He opens his mouth and it's Alan's scream that I hear. What scares me the most is that I don't feel guilty about killing Alan or the other two men—I took three lives that night, shouldn't I feel something more than relief? Than joy at the sight of Josh and Sam alive and whole?

I tell myself that I'm not the monster Damian was or anything like Alan. The Colonel and I have been taking long walks now that hunting season has begun. We've yet to shoot anything or even draw a bead on our prey, instead we've been content to merely track and watch them. Sometimes we'll talk—for the first time he's told me the truth about his war. Maybe someday I'll be ready to tell him about mine.

Sam says I'm spoiling Josh but—

Sarah dropped her pen and the journal as the phone rang again. She looked to her bedroom door. Sam and Josh were in the kitchen decorating sugar cookies. It rang a third time. She rolled her eyes and grabbed the receiver.

"Sarah? It's Caitlyn. Sorry to disturb you on the holiday."

Sarah tensed but Caitlyn's voice was lighthearted. She forced herself to take a deep breath and eased her grip on the phone. "Hi, Caitlyn. Merry Christmas. Have you gotten any snow down there?"

"No, but I heard you got dumped on. Listen, I just wanted to let you know. Korsakov is dead."

"What? How?"

"His own family took a hit out on him. Heard that he was going to make a deal now that he was facing the death penalty. They'd pretty much already disowned him after he lost all that money eight years ago, but I guess this was the last straw."

Sarah's gaze darted around the room. Nothing had changed. But everything had changed. "So, we don't have to worry—I mean, they're not going to—"

"No. Y'all are safe and in the clear."

Sarah slumped on the edge of the bed. Blew her breath out. "Wow. Thanks, Caitlyn. That's about the best Christmas present anyone could ever give us."

"You're quite welcome."

There was a pause as Sarah gathered her thoughts. "Caitlyn, do you ever dream? About that night? About Hal?"

Caitlyn's breath rasped across the phone line.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked—"

"Yeah, I do," came Caitlyn's quiet reply. "They're getting better. It's not exactly something you forget about overnight."

Sarah paced the length of the room and closed her door. "That's what I thought. But Sam, he doesn't dream, not since he got home from the hospital."

"You and Sam are sleeping together now?" Caitlyn's tone held a note of surprise.

"No, he's still sleeping in the office. But some nights I just need to know he's there, so I go in and I watch him." She leaned against her dresser scrutinizing her face in the mirror. "Am I crazy?"

"You're not crazy, Sarah. For you the nightmare began last summer. For Sam and Josh it was finally over. They're home again, safe and sound. Well, except for the pins in Sam's ankle that is. Plus, I think it's different for guys. They don't worry as much about the could-haves or should-haves as we do."

"I was such a fool, trusting Alan."

"No. You were human. So," her voice took on a note of jocularly, "when you gonna cut Sam a break, forgive him? After all the guy risked his life and almost died for you and Josh how many times?"

"You don't have kids, you can't understand. To do what he did..." Sarah trailed off. It was the same argument she'd been using for six months now and the words no longer had the impact they once did. She changed the subject. "I still can't believe I didn't see what was going on with Hal. How could I have missed that?"

"Don't beat yourself up. Over a third of meth addicts are professionals holding down steady jobs. Including teachers, lawyers, doctors, and law enforcement officers."

"Speaking of doctors, what's up with you and the neuro-surgeon?"

"Neurologist," Caitlyn corrected. "Things are good."

Sarah could hear the smile in her voice and guessed the doctor who had saved Caitlyn's life by clipping the leaking blood vessel that had caused her severe migraines must be close by.

"How's Sam like teaching music?" Caitlyn asked.

"He's a natural." Sarah brightened. "You should see him with those kids. And he's loving playing Santa Claus, dividing up the finder's fee the government gave him among Katrina victims, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and more. He's like a kid again. And guess what? He finally sold a song!"

"No kidding. Which one?"

"The one he was working on when he left. Sold it to a daytime soap opera of all places."

"I don't want to hold you up. Give him and Josh a kiss and hug for me, all right?"

"Thanks, Caitlyn. Merry Christmas."

Sarah hung up and glanced into the mirror again. A broad smile creased her face. She stared at her reflection, realizing it wasn't the news of Korsakov's death that had brought that gleam of joy to her eyes. It had happened while she was telling Caitlyn about Sam—it was the same light, floaty feeling she'd felt seven years ago when she'd first fallen in love with him.

Nonsense. She grabbed her hairbrush, pulled her hair back, and set it back down on the dresser. And realized something was missing. Puzzled, she left the bedroom and joined Sam and Josh in the kitchen. As usual, they'd managed to get more of the icing and candy sprinkles on the floor and themselves than on the cookies. Josh's mouth was ringed with pink as he licked frosting from his finger.

"Josh, were you in my room?" she asked. "Did you take the ring box from my dresser?" He giggled and shook his head back and forth.

"I did," Sam said. Josh's laughter grew as Sam turned to him and placed a finger over his lips. Obviously they shared a secret. "I didn't think you'd notice so quickly. Here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small black velvet box.

Sarah looked from one of them to the other, both grinning like idiots. They were so much alike with their dark hair and dark eyes crinkled with delight.

"What's going on?" she asked as she took the box. Then she opened it. Nestled inside was a gleaming diamond engagement ring. Sarah felt her mouth drop open in surprise.

"I promised you I'd get you a real one as soon as I sold a song," Sam said, startling her further by dropping to one knee and reaching for her hand. "The only question is, will you wear it? Sarah Godwin, will you be my bride? Again?"

His voice cracked and Sarah saw the fear in his eyes. She stared at him for a long moment, trying to settle her own emotions.

Josh broke the solemn spell.

Laughing, he ran and threw himself into both their arms. Sam stood, taking Josh with him, sandwiching him in his favorite kind of hug. Sarah felt a calming warmth settle over her as she clutched both her men. Never again would she take this for granted, neglect this.

Josh giggled from between them as Sarah leaned forward and kissed Sam. "I already am your wife," she answered Sam. "For always."

About CJ:

As a pediatric ER doctor, CJ Lyons has lived the life she writes about in her cutting edge suspense novels. She has assisted police and prosecutors with cases involving child abuse, rape, homicide and Munchausen by Proxy and has worked in numerous trauma centers, as a crisis counselor, victim advocate, as well as a flight physician for Life Flight. CJ credits her patients and their families for teaching her the art of medicine and giving her the courage to pursue her dream of becoming a novelist.

Her first novel, *LIFELINES* (Berkley, March 2008), received praise as a "breathtakingly fast-paced medical thriller" from Publishers Weekly, was reviewed favorably by the Baltimore Sun and Newsday, named a Top Pick by Romantic Times Book Review Magazine, and became a National Bestseller. *LIFELINES* also won a Readers' Choice Award for Best First Novel.

Her award-winning, critically acclaimed Angels of Mercy series (LIFELINES, WARNING SIGNS, and URGENT CARE) is available in stores now. Her newest project is as co-author of a new suspense series with Erin Brockovich. To learn more about CJ and her work, go to www.cjlyons.net.

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