



His Lucky
Paige

Rosa Mink

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Chapter 1

“Paige, there’s been an accident.”

“Neal, what happened? Where’s Father?” she said sitting up in her bed and glancing at the clock. The three a.m. glowing from it told her whatever it was, wasn’t good.

“There was a problem down in the mine last night, your father, Ed, Sam, and...Joel, all went down to help get some trapped men out,” Neal explained.

“Joel’s down there so there’s no one to help up top?” Her heart raced wildly hearing that, anxious for it to be untrue.

“Along with your dad and the others, yes. Paige, I know you said you’d never come back here to the mine, but we need you. We need your help, none of us know what to do.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” She slid out of the bed and tossed on an old pair of jeans as she pulled out the go-bag she hadn’t touched in almost four years. “Go to the computer and try to pick up their GPS signals. See if you can pinpoint their location and call Jerry Hart. He’ll be able to survey the damage before I get there.”

“You’re coming home?” The shock in his tone would be amusing in any other circumstance, but not knowing her family was trapped in the mine.

“I’m coming home, and I want every single person who’s not part of the crew off the property. Medical personnel, police, firefighters are fine but I want a perimeter set up around the entire, and I mean entire, area. Once reporters are on the story it’ll be hell getting anything in or out around them. Neal, I mean it if they’re not outside of the gate you’ll hear it from me.”

“Don’t worry there won’t be anyone here,” Neal promised.

“I have to call the pilot and have him bring me there. Keep me posted on what Jerry says,” she stated hanging up on him. She let out a sigh as she walked down to the helipad

dialing the number for her pilot, he wouldn't be thrilled with her waking him at this time of day, or night as it really was.

Twenty minutes later, they were in the air, and she prayed she'd get there in time.



“Wait,” Paige said as the pilot began to head to the landing pad, “go around one more time something didn't look right back there.”

“Paige, they're waiting on you down there,” Caleb stated.

“One more pass, it's getting lighter and I just want to make sure it wasn't a shadow, it could mean the difference in success in getting them out and potentially killing them Caleb.”

“One more pass,” he agreed.

“Crap,” she groaned noting the caved in ground as they swung around again. She pulled out her camera and took some shots knowing they'd come in handy. “Let's put her down.”

“You're the boss,” Caleb told her.

He set the helicopter down without a jolt and she was out before the rotors had begun to completely slow. She took her bags and hurried over to Neal, her father's assistant, and asked for a progress report.

“We've gotten coordinates from their trackers, they haven't moved since we started watching,” he warned as she strode into the building and straight into the conference room taking over a computer. She uploaded the photos of the cave-in she took before locating the trackers.

“What did Jerry say?” she inquired.

“Shaft's completely blocked love,” he answered coming in behind her. “I'm so sorry sweetheart,” he added hugging her tightly.

“Nothing to be sorry about yet Jer. The trackers haven’t moved because they haven’t Neal, it doesn’t mean they’re dead. What equipment did they take with them last night?”

“I’m not sure, they were all wearing helmets and had air tanks with them but I’m not sure what else,” Neal admitted.

“You were with them while they got their things?” Paige asked trying not to choke the man. He knew nothing about the company despite the years of being her father’s assistant. He was brilliant in organizing, but awful at anything mechanical.

“I was.”

“Then show me what they took,” she stated heading towards the prep room down by the front entrance of the mine. Neal began pointing to what they’d taken, and she felt a tiny sliver of hope form.

“You’re positive they took these?” she asked holding up the older set of walkies that were hanging there.

“Your dad wanted to take the others but, uh, Joel insisted,” Neal explained.

“Neal, I know you’re trying to be sensitive and all but stop hesitating when you say his name alright? Joel’s down there, so is my father, my brother and my godfather. I’m getting them out and after that you can go back to not saying his name in my presence alright?” she told him. She took a walkie and headed back to the conference room to do some research on the new lines.

“Excuse me,” an official sounding voice called out to them as they crossed the area between the building and the mine.

“Can I help you?” Paige demanded impatiently.

“I’m looking for who’s in charge,” the man said.

“That’d be me,” Paige answered. “Who are you and how’d you get in here?”

“I think that’s my line miss,” the guy stated as Jerry walked over towards them.

“Gus,” Jerry said shaking his hand.

“You know him?” Paige inquired.

“Gus Stanton,” the man said holding out his hand to her. “And you are?”

“Paige *Brighton*,” she replied ignoring the hand. “What are you doing here?”

“Gus is the regional safety manager for the government,” Jerry explained. “Gus, Paige is...”

“The infamous Brighton daughter, your father’s spoken of you before,” Gus said in a dismissive way. “I’m sorry about your brother and father being trapped in this accident but there’s really nothing you can do to help, perhaps it would be best if you went home and waited.”

“Like hell I will,” Paige raged. “If anyone leaves, it’ll be you Mr. Safety Man. Maybe you don’t understand but ask any of the men out there waiting for the plan of action and they’ll tell you who’s in charge, and it won’t be you. So either, get out of my way so I can figure out how to get my family out of there, or I’ll have you arrested for trespassing, and yes, I can do it. You may be a government employee but you have no control over this place during an emergency.”

“I’d listen to her,” Jerry said trying to soothe Gus’ darkening gaze. “Paige knows what she’s doing.”

“I don’t feel comfortable letting a woman who knows nothing and doesn’t even work for the company be in charge of a rescue operation,” Gus stated boldly.

“Then how about letting the best rescue coordinator in the world have a shot at it,” Douglas suggested as some of the men approached.

“Tell me their name and I’ll get them here,” Gus said.

“Won’t take too long,” Lenny chuckled.

“What’s the name?” Gus inquired.

“Paige Brighton,” Bobby grinned as they enveloped her in a hug that nearly suffocated her.

“Damned shame it took a cave-in to get you home little girl,” Doug chided.

“I know,” she said letting his strength flow to her. “Well *Gus*, are you going to get out of my way now?”

“I’ll be watching,” he stated.

“Of course, you’ll be watching,” she sneered, adding as he moved away taking out his phone and making a call, “Watching my ass that is.”

“Your daddy would tan your hide if he heard you say that,” Bobby told her.

“If he wants to try after I get him out of there I’ll gladly let him,” she said with a smile that was only mildly real. Her worries were too high to hold it for long and she let out a silent sigh, shaking her head a bit. “Come on boys, we’ve got work to do.”

When they arrived back in the conference room, she began compiling the information that her father had been going over when the second cave-in happened.

“Okay who knows what caused the first accident?” she inquired of the men she trusted the most. “Dad barely put anything on here before they went in.”

“Honestly Paige we don’t know,” Doug said. “We went off shift and things were fine, we got the call after dinner that there’d been a problem and then Neal’s saying there’d been another problem.”

“So the only ones who know what happened are stuck more than three hundred feet below ground...” she said mostly to herself. “Guess I’ll have to get it from the horses’ mouth then.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” Gus inquired.

“Easy,” she stated holding up the walkie and turning it on. “Let’s just hope they’re conserving power and only have one on at a time...”

She fiddled with the channels on it and heard nothing but static.

Come on Paige think, she told herself. What was she thinking? It was Joel and there was only one channel he'd put it on.

"Alphas, anyone there?" she asked pressing the button.
"Alphas, this is base, can anyone hear me?"

Silence followed each of her requests and she tried again,
"Alphas, this is base, can anyone hear me?"

More silence caused her to lose her cool and she added,
"Alphas I swear you'd better answer me; I don't get out of bed at three a.m. for just anyone..."

"Paige?" came a static reply and she smiled pushing the tears that threatened her back.

"Joel? Is that you? Are the four of you okay?" she managed to get out.

"Paige, honey," her father's voice sounded and felt her tension ease the tiniest millimeter. "You picked a crappy time to come home for a visit angel."

"You picked a crappy time to make me come home for a visit, Dad," she returned, her heart racing with relief and adrenaline now that she knew for certain they were still alive.
"Are you all okay? Sam, Uncle Ed?"

"Fine Sis," Sam answered her. "Ed's got a bit of a limp but we're okay."

"Where exactly are you?" she inquired.

"Past the blunt rocks," Joel replied.

"The high side or the low?" she asked unrolling the map of the mine and locating the place he was talking about with ease.

"The low," he answered, "didn't you check our locators?"

"No Joel, I didn't have them turn the locators on before I'd even gotten dressed and hopped on a helicopter giving up sleep because I was worried about you morons because you'd gone into a mine that'd already had one accident," she threw out letting her fear pour out through her frustration. "What the

hell were you thinking letting my father in there? You promised me you wouldn't..."

"Paige, would you shut the hell up for once?" Joel demanded. "I'm sorry," he added when there was silence on her end. "It's been a long night and I didn't think. But I know I can speak for all of us down here when I say I'm glad you're up there working on getting us out."

"Yeah Sis, I'd like to get home to my wife, you remember her, right? Your good friend who you haven't spoken to in nearly two years...she's almost due so if you and your ex here could wait until we're all topside to have it out I'd like to be there when our kid's born."

"Sam, shut up. I need to know what happened to cause the first accident. When I flew in there was a major cave-in over the east corridor, I'd say between the gulf and the rabbit."

"How major are we talking Paige?" Joel asked telling her everything she needed to know.

"Epic Joel...I'm guessing you were trying to clear the path on four with the explosives and that's what trapped you?" she stated.

"You always were too damned smart for your own good," Ed said, answering her question with a slight laugh.

"Told you that stuff would get you one of these days," she teased trying to lighten the mood for them. "Luckily I'm still brilliant enough to come up with a way to get you out of there, all of you."

"You've come up with a plan already honey?" her father asked.

"It's coming to me," she said with a forced chuckle. "Just please tell me you all have enough water to tide you until we get down there."

"We've got plenty of water Sis," Sam assured her. "The lines are still working, and we've got bottles."

"Okay, hey Joel, can you do a bit of scouting for me?" she asked needing to get some harsh facts without worrying

that her father would hear her fear.

“Yeah, which way do you want me to go?” he stated.

“Towards the bluff,” she said knowing the voices travelled less that way.

“I’ll be right back guys,” Joel said letting her know he was moving.

“Saving power?” she asked as his tracker began to move.

“Always...it’s good to hear your voice Paige.”

“Joel, don’t...just don’t.” She sighed waiting until he was around the curve. “How bad is it down there?”

“It’s bad Paige. The main shaft’s blocked now and the ventilation unit’s stopped working. I don’t know how long we have,” he admitted bluntly.

“Was there anything going on down there that caused the first problem? Don’t lie to me, you have my entire family down there with you, and honestly, I’d rather know that someone messed up and it’d been covered up than for you to lie to me right now. If I don’t know what happened to bring that section down, I won’t know how to make sure I can get to you without bringing the rest of it down too.”

“Paige, I swear on Nana’s life, nothing was going on down here that shouldn’t have been. I inspected that section last week myself. I never would have brought your father down here if I thought this might happen,” Joel assured her.

“Okay,” she said. “Were you able to communicate with the others before you got yourselves trapped?”

“They were all safe, no deaths, but I don’t know if our blasting did any more damage to their area...if I’d known the length of the cave-in I wouldn’t have tried it Paige.”

“I know Joel, I know,” she stated closing her eyes and rubbing them as the beginnings of a headache attacked her. “Let me do some thinking and checking on things up here and see what I can come up with.”

“Sure,” he said lightly and she knew he wanted to apologize again for the past but she couldn’t hear that right now. “Paige...”

“Take care of my father, if he gets hurt I swear you won’t be able to run fast enough from me,” she cut in. If he started apologizing she’d know he was giving up, fighting was what they did best, so that was what she’d make him do.

“You’d never catch me Paige,” he teased.

“I wouldn’t make the woman who’s standing between you and a bed of rocks annoyed,” she said harshly though a smile crossed her face.

“Never,” he stated and she could picture him shaking his head at her.

“I’ll let you know what I come up with,” she repeated then set the walkie down and stared at the maps.

“Neal, stay here and watch their trackers, if something happens let me know immediately,” she said taking the walkie with her and heading outside for a drive.

“Where are you going?” Gus asked as she hopped into the driver’s seat of a company Jeep.

“To see firsthand the problem area,” she said. “Jerry, Doug, Bobby, you coming?” she added when no one moved. “Lenny, take care of Kendra for me.”

“She’s at home,” Lenny stated. “You need me with you.”

“She’s coming through the gate right now Len, I can’t deal with her and try to save them, please...for me,” Paige pleaded.

“You owe me doll,” he said agreeing to do what she asked.

“I’ll make sure it’s worth it,” she smiled throwing the Jeep into reverse and speeding off towards the damage.

Lord, please keep them safe, she pleaded silently knowing every moment they were underground was one off their lives. Get me to them in time.

Chapter 2

Paige stopped the Jeep on the north bluff and got out. From the air, it'd looked bad but from here, it was worse.

"Holy hell," Jerry muttered.

"Dear mother of god," Bobby added.

"Who could survive this?" Doug asked taking off his glasses and wiping them.

"They did," she stated. "There's some gear in the Jeep for readings, right?"

"Yeah," Jerry answered. "Wait you're not going down there, are you?"

"I need to get closer," she told them. "I'll be fine," she added when they sent worrying glances amongst themselves.

"I'm coming down with you," Bobby said. "There's some climbing gear in there and I want you harnessed in. Your dad will kill me if I let anything happen to you."

"That is if Joel doesn't get to you first," Doug joked.

"Enough guys," Paige said knowing they were simply trying to get through this and ragging on her was the easiest way. "Let's go."

Once they were on the ground Paige got to work getting samples and assessing the ground layout. They were nearly done when the ground began to move again, shifting the rocks beneath their feet and throwing them off balance. Paige glanced back towards the south bluff and yelled out a warning.

"We need move Bobby," she shouted grabbing the bags and heading back to the north bluff where the other two were waiting. She hooked the older man to the rope and gave him a push helping to keep the rope steady as he climbed up.

"Move it Paige," Doug shouted as she tossed the bags up to them.

She saw the ground shifting and thanked the guys for their suggestion of the ropes as she hurried up. Jerry had the Jeep running as she hopped in the back along with Bobby and watched as the road behind them disappeared as the ground continued to shift.

“What the hell was that?” Bobby asked once they were back at the mine’s headquarters.

“Paige!” Lenny shouted seeing them. The rest of the staff who were anxious to know what had happened surrounded them instantly.

“I need to know *everything* that was going on down there,” Paige demanded of the men. “Who were the last groups in sections five through nine?”

“We were in seven yesterday afternoon Paige,” Doug admitted.

“Harry and his men were on eight when the accident happened,” Lenny answered.

“I was on six,” Mike added, “and Tim’s group was on five.”

“Who was on nine?” Paige asked.

“No one was scheduled to be on nine in the last two weeks,” Ken said checking the logs. “Why?”

“Because that’s where the cave-in came from, it’s the only way that ground would have shifted the way it did,” she answered hitting the side of the Jeep.

“Paige are you there?” she heard her father ask through the walkie.

“Yeah Dad, I’m here,” she replied taking the item from her belt. “You all okay?”

“We felt the shift and the north passage is now blocked,” Joel stated. “Have you heard anything from the others?”

“Signal’s still jammed, I’m trying to get the air cleared so we can get through but it’s taking some time,” she told him.

“Joel, I need you to check on the west shaft, if it’s clear I think I can get you all out.”

“The west shaft?” Sam asked. “That won’t help the others.”

“One thing at a time,” Paige responded. “Until I can get a picture of what’s going on down where they’re at I don’t know if we’ll be able to get to them. I know that’s not what you want to hear but you don’t know what we’re facing.”

“What aren’t you saying Paige?” her father inquired. “How bad is the damage?”

“Truth?” She paused knowing it wouldn’t make them feel any better, but they needed to know what they were up against. “The entire area between the north and south bluffs as well as the north passage road is now caved in...”

Around her, the mood grew dim as the men realized the situation they were facing. The silence stretched on until she heard Joel finally state, “Paige let me check the west shaft.”

“Good,” she replied stepping away from the group who was going over the map again. “Joel as bad as it sounds...it’s worse.”

“How could it possibly be worse Paige?” he inquired.

“I’ve seen earthquake damage, accidental punch throughs, methane pockets, plain old stupid accidents but this...it wasn’t an accident Joel,” she admitted. “This kind of damage is only possible from one thing.”

“Sabotage?” Joel stated.

“Explosive sabotage,” Paige agreed. “How well do you know a Gus Stanton?”

“Gus?” Joel said. “You’re not thinking he had anything to do with it are you?”

“It’s too convenient, his unexpected appearance here when no one called him. I know you don’t understand or believe in what I do but there’s something about him that doesn’t ring true. The man’s hiding something.”

“Paige don’t go around accusing someone before you have proof. It could have been an accident still.”

“And if you really believe that you’d be risking your neck to get to the men trapped down there and not looking for the west shaft. Aren’t you there yet?” she added as the irritation he aroused inside her magnified with his attempt to make her second-guess herself again.

“It’s clear as far as I can tell but it’s nearly impossible to get a drill out this way,” he told her.

“Leave that to me, hold on,” she added as Neal neared.

“Paige, they’ve cleared the air we should be able to get in touch with the men down there,” he said and she nearly kissed him.

“Did you hear that Joel?” she asked moving into the base communicator unit room.

“I heard,” he answered.

“Good, now let’s hope it’ll work,” she stated turning the unit up. “Nate, see if you can get them.”

He began calling the crew a tedious task having to wait long enough on each channel to ensure no reply came across. Paige grew tenser as each channel gave them no reply and hope was fading quickly.

“Start over,” Paige instructed when they finished the last channel and came up empty.

“Paige,” Jerry said gently knowing no one wanted to give up but conscious that they did have four men who were responsive.

“Try them again, every single channel,” she said strictly. “I don’t care how many times it takes, keep trying.”

“Sure thing Paige,” Nate replied. He tried the channels again as Paige began to develop a plan to get the others out.

She was checking the layout of the west shaft calculating the depth at various places along it when the reply finally came through.

“Base this is Harry,” he said coughing.

“Harry its Nate,” he said, “what’s the situation down there?”

“Dusty but we’re all accounted for, though that last slider had us worried,” Harry admitted, and a cheer rang out amongst the men standing at the edge of the doorway. “Did the boss and the others get out?”

“They’re down there but safe currently,” Nate answered.

“If they’re down here still, who’s in charge up there?” Harry inquired.

“That’d be Paige,” he told him.

“Paige is there?” Harry asked.

“I’m right here Harry,” she said leaning over Nate.

“Did you hear that boys?” Harry shouted at his crew. “Miss Paige is home.”

The shouts and replies were barely audible, but the tone held enough joy to keep her going.

“Thanks for the welcome Harry,” she stated, “we can do the catching up later, right now I need your eyes to tell me what I’m facing.”

“What do you need Paige?” he inquired.

“We show your trackers as being under section six, is that right?” she questioned.

“We’re about a hundred yards from section five right now, the upper shaft is blocked preventing us from going anywhere but down,” he admitted.

“Okay I need two of you to go check the tunnels to three and the micro shaft,” she said slowly to let them understand.

“Got it,” Harry said breaking up a bit.

“What are you thinking Paige?” he added once the two scouts left.

“You don’t want to know right now Harry,” she told him. “Take it easy and call us when you’ve got the answers.”

“Will do Paige,” Harry replied.

“You’ve got a plan, don’t you?” Jerry asked.

“Depending on the answers yeah,” she said. “Joel, can you check further down the west shaft? See if you can reach the number two passage.”

“Paige, are you insane?” Doug stated staring at the map. “That’s over four hundred feet down, there’s no way we’ll be able to reach number two.”

“I don’t plan on having them drill on number two,” she told them putting a pin into the map. “I’m planning on drilling here.”

“Good lord girl, that’ll never work,” Bobby argued.

“Would one of you like to tell me what she’s up to?” Joel demanded through the walkie.

“She wants to drill the rescue tunnel down to the micro where it intersects the west shaft,” Mike said taking the walkie from her. “Please tell her that it’s impossible.”

“Does Paige ever listen when someone says it’s impossible?” Joel laughed. “Paige that will only work if we’re all out of the shaft; so, how do you plan to ensure that?”

“Harry’s guys are checking on the tunnel to three and the micro shaft from their point on five. Is two open?” she added seeing his tracker nearing the intersection.

“It’s open Paige,” he replied.

“Good, go back and get the others,” she instructed. “Once you’re all into passage two let me know.”

“Did I ever tell you you’re insanely bossy?” he countered.

“All the time Joel and once you’re back up top you can tell me just how nuts this idea was and then give me a huge thank you,” she said with a smile.

“I’ll give you something,” he muttered but she let it pass being trapped underground for over twelve hours gave him the right to grouch.

“Paige,” Harry sounded. “The tunnel’s clear to the micro shaft until you hit seven from what we can tell.”

“Alright, I need everyone to move to tunnel three, once you’ve reached it follow the micro shaft down to two. You should meet up with the others near the west shaft,” she instructed.

“Why do I get the feeling that won’t be the end of it?” Harry inquired.

“Because it’s not,” she admitted. “There’s no way to get a drill down to you on two but I’m planning on sending the tunnel down where the west shaft and section three meet.”

“It’s brilliant if you can get the drill down that far,” Harry told her. “I don’t think you’ve thought about the terrain up top where you’re talking about.”

“It’s the only place I can be confident that the drilling won’t disrupt the rest of the sections. I can’t risk the rest of the mine collapsing in while we’re trying to get you out,” she replied. “I’ve got a few friends on their way with a drill that I’m sure will be able to get down there, trust me, Harry.”

“Always do,” he answered, “might lose you for a bit, this area was always crap for reception.”

“Got it Harry,” she said checking the clock. Eleven forty-five, the drill should be there in another hour and once it was, she hoped the others would back her. She didn’t need a mutiny on her hands about her choice of shaft placement.

“We have a drill here,” Lenny offered.

“It won’t reach the depth we need,” Doug argued. “The bit will get stuck in that rock.”

“They’ll be here in about an hour,” she assured the group.

“An hour?” Mike said with a bit of shock. “You’ve only been here a few yourself.”

“I called my guys while waiting on the helicopter they were close, so we’ll be ready when they get here,” she stated.

“I need everyone to get things ready to transport over to the dig site.

“Come on,” she added when they stood still. “That’s our family down there guys. I don’t particularly relish the idea of a mass funeral so unless you want my anger directed at you, move it,” she ordered.

“You heard her,” Mike said pushing the men nearest him into action. “Get your gear.”

“I must admit you haven’t lost any of your pull around here,” Doug said to her with a hug.

“Can’t have them thinking that just because I’m a woman I don’t know what I’m talking about,” she sighed as the room cleared.

“You know the mine well for someone who doesn’t work in it,” Gus stated surveying her work.

“I guarantee I could find my way through it blind,” she told him. “I grew up in this place I know every twist and turn that would have been put in because I know the men who set up the plans.”

“You think you can make this work?” he questioned pointing at the map.

“There’s no thinking,” she said more confidently than she truly was. “Since it seems that you don’t have any relevant ideas or knowledge to help me get them out why don’t you go and wrangle the press that’s outside the gates. I don’t want my guys waiting to get in because they’re in the way. And when you’re done with that check on the families and let them know that currently everyone is accounted for.”

“I’m not your errand boy,” Gus tossed at her.

“Neal, make sure he does what I told him to or escort him from the property,” Paige stated heading back to the office building to grab her other bag.

Once inside and alone, she allowed herself a moment to let her fears overtake her. In here, she could fret about the placement she’d chosen. She could barter with God for the

lives trapped below the ground. She could even let herself remember everything about the men she loved. The moment she stepped back outside, she would once again be in charge and that would entail her pushing her fears aside and focusing on keeping everyone else going.

“Lord, I haven’t prayed in a long time,” she whispered to the empty room after washing the traces of tears that had flown freely from her face. “I’m asking, *begging*, you now please keep them safe and show me how to save them. If this is the right place give me a sign,” she added gripping the sides of the sink.

“Paige!” she heard someone shouting.

“Is that my sign?” she asked her reflection before heading out to see what was going on.

“Paige!” Bobby shouted seeing her. “The drill’s here...”

“Already?” she said checking her watch. Five after twelve it read, and she sent a silent thank you heavenward. She hurried outside spying the truck and its operators Moose and Rabbit, nicknames they’d received when they were young.

“Someone need a hole dug?” Moose shouted over the rumble of the engine.

“If you were down on the ground, I’d gladly kiss that ugly mug of yours,” Paige shouted back.

“How about one for the backup driver who got us here faster than you expected?” Rabbit teased.

“If your wife gives me permission,” she joked back. “Follow me...and I’d buckle up, it’s not going to be an easy trip.”

“When is anything you come up with easy Paigey?” Moose inquired.

“Never,” she agreed taking both of the communicators and relaying the good news.

“Drill’s here and we’re on our way,” she stated and the relief in the replies she heard settled her qualms on the

decision.

Here goes nothing, she sighed driving off leaving Gus behind to deal with the frantic families.

Chapter 3

Paige surveyed the work they'd managed to do, it'd taken them longer to get to the drill site than she anticipated and she knew things were beginning to get worse down in the mine. The last cave-in compromised the air supply. Combining the two groups made it easier to get them out but it limited the amount of breathable air and increased the carbon dioxide output. They were in a smaller area, the amount of free air getting in was limited and the air they were pumping in through the now shut-off water line couldn't fully cover everyone.

They were closing in on midnight and the night air had grown cold and still. She accepted the cup of coffee Mike offered knowing she'd never drink it, she was wired enough without the added caffeine, but the warmth would keep her fingers from going numb. She glanced at her watch again as the drill burrowed deeper into the ground.

"It's been over twenty-four hours for the four and twenty-eight for the others," Doug stated needlessly.

"I know," she said urging the drill to dig faster.

"We've got the first airport through," Jerry interrupted with squeezing her shoulder. "We're going to start sending warm air down to them, then we can turn the water back on in case they need it."

"Hold on," Paige said as he made a move to get the machine started. "Check the air to make sure there aren't any pockets down there. I don't want to kill them or risk another cave-in with an explosion."

"It'll take us a bit to determine if there's anything flammable down there," he stated. "Their air supply is getting thinner Paige."

"I know," she said, "I guess we'll have to take the chance...unless."

“Unless what Paige?” Lenny asked with a worried expression on his face.

“Joel, it’s Paige...come on Joel I’m not going to shut up until you answer me you stupid irresponsible jer...”

“What do you want now Paige?” Joel said cutting off her stream.

“Please tell me you took a monitor with you,” she said with a grin at his annoyance.

“Air monitor?” Joel guessed. “We’ve got one.”

“Use it and tell me what it says, we’ve got a vent tube about twenty yards from you and we’re getting ready to send air down,” she explained.

“Since you asked so politely,” he grunted. “It looks clear...wait I’m picking up some hints.”

“What kind of hints?” Jerry asked.

“They’re barely registering,” Joel answered. “I’d say we’re good.”

“Alright tell everyone to get down just in case it hits enough of those hints to create a problem,” she said. “We’re going to count it down...”

“Everyone hear that?” Joel asked. “On your go Paige.”

“Three, two, go,” Paige said loudly as they fitted the mechanics together and the air began to pump down to them.

A light popping sound alerted her to the problem and she gripped the walkie tighter, “Joel? What’s the situation down there?”

“A small blip on the radar,” he said coughing. “We’re good.”

“Thank god,” she whispered accepting the light hug from Bobby.

“Drilling’s coming along guys, we’re going to have you home before you know it,” she said into the walkie. “Keep your heads up and let me know if anything changes.”

“Hey Sis, how are the families holding up?” Sam inquired.

“Kendra’s fine, I’ve had Neal keeping tabs on everyone. Most of them are at HQ until we know when your butts are getting out of there. I don’t want any issues down here to worry them more,” she answered.

“That’s my girl,” her father said and she could hear the smile of pride in his voice.

“What else would you expect from the tomboy you had running around the mines from the time she could walk?” she stated.

“You loved it Paige, so don’t even try to claim you didn’t.” Uncle Ed laughed and she could hear the chuckles of several others down with them.

“I loved it as much as I loved getting kissed by Scary Steve when I was eight,” she joked attempting to keep their spirits up. She could take anything they threw at her as long as they didn’t give up.

“Scary Steve was your first kiss?” Sam asked.

“Where did the nickname Scary come from?” Harry added.

“You’d have to ask Sam and Joel about the nickname but as far as the first kiss...well he missed that mark by three days, my first kiss was at my birthday party,” she grinned knowing the other end of that kiss was down in the mine.

“I’m honored you remembered Paige,” Ben shouted.

“You gave me a cold, of course I’d remember,” she replied.

“Okay enough about kissing my daughter, I want to know about this drill crew you managed to get here. Where’d they come from?”

“They were members of the rescue crew I worked on. Don’t worry they know what they’re doing, they were part of the team that got to the miners in Donovan,” she explained. “Moose and Rabbit will get us to you.”

“Hold on, you, were part of the Donovan rescue?” Sam asked.

“It was my plan,” she admitted reluctantly. “Not quite as inventive as this one but...”

“But it got them out alive,” Ed said with pride.

“I knew we were in good hands,” Harry added, “I just didn’t realize how good.”

“Flatterers,” she laughed pushing the rescue work thoughts out of her mind.

“Were you on the cave-in last year over near Meredith County?” Sam inquired.

“No...I stopped working with them four years ago,” she answered. “Now I’ve got some work to do up here still so please enjoy being lazy and sitting on your butts while I’m being a busy bee.”

“You okay Paige?” Joel asked hearing the odd note in her voice.

“Yeah, just a nice whiff of exhaust fumes trying to gag me,” she lied.

“Stay warm honey,” her father stated.

“You too,” she replied putting the walkie down and walking over to check the status of the dig.

“What was that?” Doug inquired coming over to her.

“What was what?”

“That lie about the exhaust and you quitting the rescue team four years ago?” he questioned.

“After the Donovan situation people started questioning my abilities, including me, it didn’t help that I was the only one available when the quarry at Fairway fell into that sinkhole. I hadn’t touched my bag until Neal called me. I’m surprised the clothes in it were even wearable,” she sighed as memories flashed through her mind.

“You can’t be blaming yourself for the Fairway debacle,” Doug said gently. “The men were gone before anyone even called you in.”

“I know but seeing them...finding the entire place practically operational it made me realize that no matter how hard I try, how much I want to predict the outcome, I can’t anticipate everything. The next call that came in had me running away in tears. My analytical brain was gone and in its place was an emotional wreck. If it wasn’t for my family being down there I don’t know if I’d be able to do this right now,” she admitted.

“You seem like our Paige to me,” he told her with another hug.

“Let’s just hope it’s the Paige who gets her way.” She sighed bracing herself for the confrontation she was about to face.

“I take it you know the man coming towards us,” Doug said seeing the group that’d just arrived.

“Oh I do...he was my boss and it looks like he’s still pissed,” she told him.

“Wayne, nice to see you,” she said moving towards the newcomers.

“What the hell are you playing at Paige? You commandeer our resources and two of our men without an official request and by the time we get here you’ve already put them to work. Do I have to remind you that you no longer work for us,” he demanded.

“Get over yourself Wayne, you’re just mad because I left,” she stated.

“You were easy to replace Paige,” he retorted snidely telling her he was still holding a huge grudge for her leaving him as well as the team.

“Is that why your budget’s been reduced by almost ten percent each year since, and the requests for help have also gone down?” she countered pulling the maps from his grasp.

“I don’t need your permission to request my drill or to have Moose and Rabbit operate it on their days off.”

“Your drill?” he laughed. “Show me the ownership paperwork.”

“It’s in the cab,” she stated crossing her arms in annoyance. “Check until you’re blue in the face Wayne and then get off my property.”

“She’s gotten quite territorial in her advancing years,” Wayne threw over his shoulder at the others who remained silent during the exchange.

“Advancing years?” Tom said stepping between them. “You heard her buddy you’re not welcome or needed.”

“How sweet you’ve found a new lap dog,” Wayne laughed. “Obviously you haven’t let him in your bed yet or he’d know it’s not worth the efforts.”

Paige’s mouth dropped open in shock at not only his words but also the massive dog pile that suddenly appeared near her feet. It was the perfect reason for her to let out the laughter that was masking the panic gripping her stomach and she was doubled over when Tom and Gary hauled him upwards with murder in their eyes.

“If you know what’s good for you,” she said wiping the stray tears from the corner of her eyes, “you’d get out of here and never show your face again. See I grew up with most of these guys and they’re naturally protective, add on the fact that all of my family is down in that mine along with their brothers, sons, uncles, and friends and you’re looking at an accident no one saw Wayne.”

“Threatening a government employee Paige?” he asked.

“A slime ball is more appropriate,” she said with a smirk as Tom and Gary’s holds tightened on him. “We haven’t asked for government intervention, it’s being handled within house so get out before I ask Travis to throw you in jail for trespassing.”

“I’m not going to stand by and let you kill these people Paige,” he stated.

“Tom, Gary, make sure he’s delivered outside the gate and if he makes his way back in have Travis arrest him,” she said turning away. “As for the rest of you, if you want to help we’d welcome the added hands, but if you’re inclined to side with Wayne I’d suggest following him out.”

She walked over to the tent set up as their base and turned on the small TV checking the weather forecast for the next day and the reports of the accident.

“What are they saying?” Jesse asked coming in behind her along with the rest of her old team.

“The bare minimum we’ve given them,” she answered sending them genuine smiles. “Everyone down there’s accounted for, I’m in contact with them and they know the plan. Right now we’re just waiting for the drill to reach the right depth.”

“How are you?” Hillary inquired coming over and putting her arm around her shoulder pulling her to her side.

“Considering my father, my brother, my godfather, the man who was...is like an uncle to me and a load of guys who treat me like a little sister are stuck down there and I have this gut feeling that this wasn’t an accident...pretty good,” she answered.

“What do you mean you don’t think it was an accident?” Craig said lowering his voice.

“You all wouldn’t have seen the extent of the damage coming in on the road,” she stated checking the area for Gus. She opened her laptop and pulled up the photos she’d taken from the air and then those she’d taken from the Jeep. “Tell me this was a natural or accidental break through...”

“This was the cave-in?” Jesse asked.

“There’s no way this came from a single rupture or seal break. This was successive. I know these guys, know how they shore up their tunnels. No even that methane pocket at Hudson caused this much damage and that was massive,” she said. “We’ve seen enough accidents to know when it’s not.”

“You think someone deliberately caused this?” Hillary questioned.

“I also think I know who did it but I don’t have my access anymore...if you want to help, find out everything you can on Gus Stanton. He’s the regional safety manager for the mining industry.”

“And he rubs you the wrong way?” Craig asked.

“Yeah he does, I know I can get them out of there as long as there aren’t any more problems but if that wasn’t the extent of the sabotage I don’t know if anything will help,” Paige said. “This is personal for me. I’m not going to let some jackass kill the only family I have.”

“They weren’t your only family Paige,” Jesse reminded her. “We were your family for the longest time too.”

“I know, and I’m sorry I left the way I did...on top of the last few accident sites I was dealing with some personal stuff too, it just...”

“Got to be too much?” Hillary suggested. “I took a six month break after the Meredith incident so I get it. Let me see what I can pull up on the guy.”

“Thanks,” she said feeling more confident with her team watching her back.

“Paige you should see this,” Craig said chuckling a bit later glancing at the TV monitor.

“What is it Craig?” she inquired before stopping short and turning the volume up.

Lead Rescue Consultant Wayne Higgins was escorted off the property moments ago by two of the men working the rescue site. We’ve been told the federal rescue team was not called in but the remaining members of the team have stayed at the site working with the person in charge, someone the people of Jennings know very well, our very own Paige Brighton, daughter of Brighton Mining owner and operator, Cord Brighton. We’ve recently learned Paige was the leading member of the rescue team but left for other opportunities.

Paige has constructed a plan that is currently underway to rescue the men trapped several hundred feet below the surface since late Friday evening. Drilling of the emergency shaft has been underway for hours and there are hopes of reaching the trapped miners sometime tomorrow. Included in those trapped are owner and operator, Cord Brighton and his son Samuel along with Edward Rushings, Harrison Dalton, and current Chief Security Operations Manager, Joel Wright, as well as several other members of Mr. Dalton's team.

Our thoughts and prayers remain with those trapped and with their rescuers working diligently to bring them back alive. This is Cassandra Johnson, bringing you updates as they become available of this tragic accident.

“Good old Cassie,” Paige grinned. She picked up the phone and called Neal. “Tell Cassie she can come in as long as she doesn’t intrude. Yes, Neal I’m serious. The other stations can just deal with it. I know Cassie will understand the situation, her dad worked here for thirty-five years.”

“Will do,” he said, and she hung up.

“What?” she said noting the stares coming from her friends.

“Joel Wright? He wouldn’t happen to be your Joel, would he?” Jesse questioned.

“He’s not *my* Joel, he never was, but yeah, it’s him,” she answered.

“When you said your whole family you really meant it didn’t you,” Craig said rubbing her back.

“We’re getting them out,” she said firmly, “so wipe those looks off your faces and help me get to the bottom of this alright?”

“Good to have you back boss,” Jesse teased.

“I’m not back...” she said turning around to watch the people rushing around her. What would they say if they knew the truth? If they knew that, she was barely holding it together, barely managing to keep breathing. They’d surely

stop and choose someone else to follow, and that she knew would ruin their chances of getting them out safely.

Chapter 4

“Something on your mind sweetie?” Doug asked handing her another cup of coffee, the ninth or tenth she’d taken but not touched.

“I just can’t believe they’re all down there,” Paige stated letting out a sigh. “It’s one thing to do this for people you don’t know but when it’s the people you love...even ones you said you’d never forgive, never wanted to see again or a place you never expected to return to...it certainly puts things into perspective...”

“And what are you two slackers doing over here?” Moose inquired heading over to them.

“Is there a problem?” she said praying the answer was no. They’d already had enough delays and they were quickly nearing the fifty-hour marker for the group.

“Not a one...we’re about to punch through actually,” he answered.

“You’re kidding...Moose you are the best,” she told him kissing his cheek as a smile crossed her face. She walked back into the tent and grabbed the walkie as she headed out to where the shaft was.

“Anyone feel like coming home?” she questioned sending her voice through the instrument.

“Paige?” Joel replied. “Care to say that again?”

“I asked if anyone felt like coming home...I need you to get everyone down to the intersection of the west shaft. We’re about to punch through.”

“About time Sis,” Sam stated but she couldn’t begin to complain.

“Faster than anyone else could have gotten you out that’s for sure,” she retorted.

“Okay Paige we’re on our way,” Joel said taking the walkie back.

“Good, we’ll see you soon.” She took a deep breath before she turned to face the group. “We’re halfway there. Let’s let the others know we’re bringing them home.”

“Want me to deal with the families?” Hillary asked handing her a file. “I think you’re going to find page three interesting.”

“Thanks, and that’d be great. I don’t mind if they get bused down here but I don’t want them near the hole. If my gut’s anything to go by we haven’t seen the last of it down here,” she admitted.

“Want me to keep an eye on this Gus person?” Jesse questioned.

“I’d rather have you be the one down there with them. I know you can assess better than the others who needs to get up faster. Craig, I need you to run point up here, transferring them out to the medics.”

“Will do boss,” they answered, and she laughed.

“I’m not your boss...but thanks. Let’s get them home.”

Nearly an hour later they were lowering Jesse down the shaft holding their breaths until he reached the trapped miners and for the word that they were all going to make it. The moment the first person appeared the cheers began and for the next hour, they continued as man after man was brought up. Tears of joy were evident on the faces of the family members and worry on the ones of the men who hadn’t been brought up yet.

She saw Ed appear at the top of the shaft and her worry eased. She stepped into his hug before the medics could look at his leg and she waited for the next to appear. Sam exited the capsule and hugged her before rushing over to see Kendra who was weeping again and all she could think was thank god she wasn’t as much of a mess as she was. There were two men left other than Jesse, Joel and her father and she knew Joel would insist on her father being next and when the capsule appeared she could see the white of his beard, tinged gray with dust, and she found herself once again enveloped in a hug.

“I’m glad to see you home baby girl,” he said kissing her head.

“I’m glad to see you period, Dad.” She sighed allowing him to keep his arm around her as they waited for the last two trips to be made.

When the capsule reappeared she was shocked to see that it was Jesse and not Joel but she knew Joel would be right after him and so she shook her head with a grin asking, “Wouldn’t let you be the last one out would he?”

“Nope...he’s not what I expected Paige...but he’s a good guy and he should be...what?” Jesse said as Paige moved closer towards the chute.

“I don’t know...I can’t tell,” she stated. She was trying to figure out what she’d just felt or heard but with the commotion going on she wasn’t sure if it was something or not. Most of the men and their families were headed towards them to ensure that the big man was safe but before they could reach them, all hell broke loose.

The cable connected to the capsule snapped as the ground began to shake and her old team quickly moved everyone to safety fearing the ground was going to cave-in. She saw Joel’s mother, Elaine, and grandmother, Rebecca, heading straight for her and she couldn’t begin to think of how to explain this as the rest of the north passage disappeared from sight and the ground settled once more.

All around her, she heard voices but their words didn’t make sense as she stepped out of the protective circle her father and Jesse had made around her and headed straight for the shaft nearly collapsing when she saw it was full of debris.

“What the hell was that?” Rabbit called from the cab of the drill.

“The shaft caved in when the rest of the passage went,” Sam said as the dust began to settle on the horizon. “Paige what were you thinking drilling here?”

“This isn’t her fault,” Jesse said stepping in to defend her.

“There’s no way she could have known this could happen,” Craig added.

“It’s still her plan and now who knows where Joel is,” Sam stated.

“It’s also the plan that saved your ass, as well as your father’s and if I calculated correctly ten others,” Moose replied.

“Paige...Joel?” his mother inquired as she reached her. She couldn’t bring herself to admit what she feared and she hurried back into the tent and grabbed the walkie, if he hadn’t been holding his when the cave-in happened, she’d gladly give away all of her money and her beach house.

“Joel,” she called as a hush fell over the crowd as they waited for a reply. “Joel, it’s Paige...answer me...”

She waited a few moments and called again, “Joel, can you hear me? Joel...”

As the silence stretched, a few snuffles could be heard and she refused to allow this to happen. She promised that she’d get them out and she wasn’t going to stop until Joel was home.

“Joel, it’s Paige, can you hear me?” she tried again. “Joel...base to Joel...come in Joel...”

“Paige honey,” her father said trying to pry the walkie out of her grasp. “I know...we all know you did your best. We’re all here because of you.”

“No,” she told him shaking her head as she moved out of the tent and went back to survey the area. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

“Accidents happen, we all know that, Paige,” Harry stated.

“You don’t understand, *this*,” she said motioning to the caved-in shaft, “should not have happened because of the north passage caving the rest of the way. I chose this spot because it *wouldn’t* happen...” she added before calling into the walkie again. “Joel, god damn it, if you can hear me you

better answer you idiot. I did not get out of bed at three a.m. fly all the way out here to stay up over forty-eight hours for you to take the coward's way out and not face me...so you better well talk to me..."

"Jesus Paige give a guy a break," he replied and she nearly wept with relief. "I almost had my head taken off by a beam down here."

"What? Those beams should not have been affected," Paige stated.

"They are if someone placed C4 on them," he answered.

"Joel," her father said taking the walkie, "did you say C4? There was an explosion down there?"

"It's what I'd guess was used from the looks of them. At least what I saw before I started running and getting knocked to the ground."

"Then this entire thing was sabotage?" Cord questioned.

"Looks like it, you were right Paige. Everyone up there okay?" Joel questioned.

"We're fine," Cord stated turning to look at Paige as everyone else did. "We'll find a way to get you out of there."

"I don't think that's going to happen, Cord," Joel told him.

"Let me speak with my daughter and then we'll see what we can do," he said before giving her the look he'd always worn when he knew she wasn't telling him the whole story.

"I didn't want to worry you all," she tried aware that everyone was listening. "I wanted to get you up here and not have anyone sneaking off to uncover the truth."

"So you blatantly kept your theory to yourself?" he questioned.

"Dad...I didn't have proof, other than some photos which I'd be glad to get your opinion on, but nothing concrete that said someone started this on purpose. And I think that's the reason the part down there was blown, so we couldn't get it

but I have to ask, who were you talking to just now so intently Gus?" she said turning to stare at the man who was slowly backing away. "Telling them they were too quick on the uptake and that there's still someone trapped down there?"

"I think your sleep deprivation is getting to you," Gus replied looking spooked.

"I don't think so. See, I've managed to get by on less than two hours of sleep for an entire week without my mind going any so I'll ask again, *who* were you on the phone with...or better yet, why don't I just check?" she stated taking the phone from him. He tried to retrieve it but Jesse and Craig were faster than he was and blocked his way before keeping hold of him.

"Interesting...seems the last number called belongs to Davidson Controlling, your biggest competitor right Dad?"

"Right," he answered as he and the others began to inch towards Gus. She took advantage of the distraction, grabbed the walkie along with a set of keys to the Jeep, and quickly headed back to headquarters.

"Okay Joel, it's just me and you," she said as she shoved things into a bag. "From the looks of your tracker you're not too far from the shaft over to four."

"What good will that do? Paige, honey, I'm sorry..."

"Stop it. I don't want to hear another apology and I'm not letting you off so easily. You got my father stuck down there and made me come back to this place when you knew it was the last thing on earth I'd ever willingly do. You're not dying on me before I get the chance to smack you on the head and make it hurt."

"That's my girl, love 'em or hate 'em, the only way she knows..." he said with a sigh she could hear. "Paige we both know I'm not getting out of here. The road ahead is blocked the road behind is now blocked and the air is going to run out pretty soon."

"Then the only place to go is up," she said sternly. "So get your ass to four and start climbing, meet me in our spot..."

you remember it, don't you?"

"Paige, you're crazy. I might be able to make it, but you never will. If the north passage is gone the only way to get there..."

"Is to climb the bluff, already have the gear and the walkies, one set to you and the other for the rest to find when they realize I'm gone. But don't hold your breath on that being anytime soon because they're kind of busy with Gus right now, seems moments after the cave-in he called Davidson's."

"How do you know that?"

"I grabbed his phone. Come on Joel, we both know how to get there so just do it, if not for me then for your mother. I am not going to be the one to tell her that you gave up. I know that you don't have the fight in you but your mom doesn't. She still believes in you so shut the hell up and get your ass climbing."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean Paige? I don't have the fight in me? What do you think I've been doing for the last fifty or so hours?"

"That was different, you had my father down there, couldn't disappoint him or let him get hurt because you know I'd kill you myself but now...now it's just you and when the hell did you ever fight for anything?"

"Does this have anything to do with the reason you broke up with me?"

"We were never together Joel, not really, so there was no break up, just a wising up on my part."

"But yet you're still determined to bring me home?" he questioned skeptically.

"I'll bring you home; I just won't guarantee that you'll be in one piece by the time I'm finished kicking your ass for allowing a man with a known heart condition down in the mine to look for trapped miners."

He laughed but it didn't sound amused, and that was what she wanted, needed. She could make him mad enough he'd do it, whether he thought it feasible or not. "What happened to the sweet girl I used to know Paige?"

"She found out that the boy she liked didn't want to risk himself for her and instead of admitting to her father that he loved her, wanted a life with her, he said there was someone else in his life and let her walk out the door and didn't bother to come after her."

"That's not what happened, Paige. You were so determined to prove yourself...to prove that you could be as good as your father that I had to let you go, for your own safety."

"That's bullshit and you know it. Jesus Joel...all I wanted was for you to admit to yourself and everyone else that you wanted me but you chose the safety of your job...ironic right? One little phrase was all it would have taken to convince me to stay."

"What are you saying Paige?"

"I'm saying that had you asked me to stay I would have."

"You wouldn't...you'd have grown bored and resentful trying to prove that you could do the work but never being allowed the chance to and you would have done something stupid like masquerading as a boy to get a position down here. I mean look at what you've done...the rescue work...that's who you are, you wouldn't have been happy staying here and what? Getting married and having kids? Sure, it sounds great, but you would have died doing it."

"Instead I nearly died not doing it," she countered then regretted her rash words. "I've been in plenty of situations where my safety was an issue so forcing me out didn't help there any," she added covering the truth he didn't need to know.

"Paige, just forget it...if you're so determined to do this then I'll meet you but I don't know how safe those passages

are anymore, if they're even open still. I haven't been up there since you left."

"I'm used to danger Joel. I lived with it constantly for years. Just let me know if you run into problems," she stated setting the walkie down when the road began to get rougher as she drove as high as she could. When there was no other option she got out and grabbed the pack she'd brought settling it on her shoulders and buckling the straps to keep it on as she began to walk up the steep side of the path.

The higher she went the more she remembered of the past and the more she wished things had been different. She'd been in love, truly in love, with Joel from the day she turned sixteen and he'd finally admitted to her that he'd been dying to kiss her for ages. He was almost four years older than she was and was attending college while working the summers in the mine but before that he'd been her friend and her brother's best friend, allowing her to tag along as they went exploring the mine much to her father's delight.

Her mother had died when she was eight, leaving her alone with too many men and too few women to help raise her so she'd been a tomboy until the night Joel had kissed her. After that, she alternated from being that tomboy when he wasn't around to being something different when he was. The night she heard him admit to her father that they were just friends was the last night she'd stayed in this town. She transferred to a new college, far from there and didn't bother coming home on breaks, instead she used it to expedite her college graduation and then she joined the rescue team.

It'd been ten years since she made this climb but the route was engraved on her heart and her feet never faltered as she made her way to face the man she had never been able to let go of, stop wanting. She didn't know if that was a good thing or not but when she saw him she was certainly going to get a real answer once and for all.

Chapter 5

“Paige Elizabeth Brighton, are you out of your mind?” her father’s voice came across the walkie. “Where are you and what do you think you’re doing?”

“Sorry Dad...hold on for a sec okay?” she said gripping the ledge and lowering herself back down. “Alright...what was that?”

“Where are you?” he repeated.

“And what are you doing?” Jesse added.

“I think I’m going to plead the fifth on both of those at least until we’re on our way back.”

“Our?” Sam said catching the word. “Are you going after Joel?”

“How are you going after Joel? If you need us to drill somewhere...” Moose stated.

“No drilling required, just a bit of a hike. I’d love to stay and chat but unfortunately I need both hands and feet to get there...don’t worry, I’m fine and I’ll be back sometime after the sun comes up...bye,” she told them replacing the walkie.

“I was really hoping to be there before now...stupid overcast sky...” she muttered to herself as she made her way up the last of the cliff and into the cavern that would lead her to Joel. She gathered her climbing rope back up and put it in her bag, they’d need it to get back up to the cavern to get out.

The walk through the cavern and down the paths was strange, she wasn’t used to making it alone and by the time she reached the spot, she was anxious to see Joel. He wasn’t there and she grew impatient. She had to climb the side of the cliff and she’d managed to get there so where was he?

She took the walkie and inquired about it, “Joel...where are you?”

“About a hundred or so yards out, ran into a blocked passage and had to backtrack a bit, you?”

“I’m here,” she admitted.

“Couldn’t wait to see me huh?” he asked as he rounded the corner and saw the light from her flashlight glowing along the wall.

“Shut up...” she said turning when she heard the light echo of his walkie. Her breathing slowed as he walked the last hundred feet and stopped in front of her.

“Damn Paige...I’d forgotten how beautiful you really are,” he stated as he reached out to touch her and ensure that she was real.

“Joel, don’t...” she said looking away.

“Can’t help it baby, I haven’t seen you in almost ten years, other than flashing passes here and there, and those don’t satisfy a person.”

“I’m not here to satisfy you. I’m here because the brilliant idiot I grew up with managed to get himself trapped in the mine...with my father no less,” she stated lifting her hand and smacking the back of his head.

“Ow...what was that for?”

“For letting him go down there and getting him stuck by blasting and causing more of a cave-in. If that didn’t let it sink in I’ll be glad to do it again. Damn it Joel, you promised me four years ago that you’d keep him safe...”

“And I did, he’s fine right?”

“No thanks to you. I could gladly strangle you,”

“But you won’t because you’re too sweet for that,” he countered.

“Try me...let’s just go. I’d like to get out of here before my body begins to shut down, speaking of which, here,” she said digging in the pack and pulling out a bottle of water and a handful of granola bars. “But first I think you’ll need these...” she added removing the pack of wipes.

“Think of everything, don’t you?” he teased as he wiped the worse of the dirt and grime from his hands and face

placing the used ones in the small bag she'd pulled out and laughing when she placed the bag into her pack.

She shrugged seeing him watching her movements. "No reason to litter. Here...you've got some more..." she told him as she wiped around his nose and then down the side of his mouth.

"Thanks," he smiled as he ate the granola and drank the new water. "I ran out back there."

"Figured you wouldn't have much by now," she replied. "You up for this? The climb out can be brutal."

"I'm good, but tell me the truth, are you?" he asked staring into her eyes. "You look like hell Paige, beautiful no doubt but still, you've got circles under your eyes..."

"Gee thanks for reminding me that I'm no raging beauty," she said sarcastically letting out all of her pent up frustration on him. "See if I ever bother to save your sorry ass again. I should have let you rot down there."

He smiled grabbing her hand and pulling her towards him. "You'd never do that Paige."

"Try me..."

"Gladly," he winked covering her mouth with his, invading her mouth with his tongue as she gasped in surprise. "Ah baby, I've missed you..." he told her as they parted to draw in air.

She reached up and pushed him back from her. "You pig. You think you can kiss me like that because I once let you? News flash, that Paige is gone."

"No, she's not," he countered pulling her back to him as she began to move away, "she's right here...come on Paige, you're the one who suggested we meet here."

"Because I knew you'd be able to find it not because I wanted to visit the place."

"So you're saying you don't feel anything being here? It's all in my head? The way your eyes lit up when you saw me?"

“I’m glad you’re alive it means I don’t have to tell your mom you’re dead.”

“Tell me I imagined the way your lips responded to mine, or the way your tongue danced with mine. Tell me you didn’t feel the pull Paige.”

“So what if I did? It’s been a hellacious fifty-four hours. I haven’t slept and it’s only natural I’d feel the ghosts of this place popping up.”

“Ghosts? There were never any ghosts here Paige the only thing that was ever found here was magic.”

“Stop it, Joel.”

“You don’t remember Paige? The way our bodies melted into one another and found heaven right here underneath this diamond sparkle?” he asked lowering his mouth to the curve of her neck.

“We were kids, stupid kids. This place is dangerous, getting here was no walk on the beach. Why do you think I refused to even contemplate using it to get everyone out?”

“Because you wanted to keep it for us?”

“Because drilling a hole into the ground is safer than trying to get twelve people up here without those tunnels collapsing, then out of here and down that cliff,” she retorted trying to resist his touch. “Joel, stop it.”

“Tell me that you don’t want this and I will.”

“I don’t want this,” she repeated blandly.

“Liar, you forget I know you Paigey. I know by the look in your eyes that you’re aroused. I know by the way your breath catches that your body’s responding to mine and I know that if I slipped my hand inside your jeans you’d be wet and begging for my touch...” he said watching her closely.

She snorted hoping she could work herself up with anger to avoid this. “I seriously hope you hit your head on something down there and that’s why you’re talking to me like that because you never did before...”

“You were eighteen and a virgin the first time we were here. I wasn’t going to scare you off with talk like that. Even the last time we were together, I held back because you weren’t ready for it, but your tongue showed me that wasn’t the truth anymore. So tell me again you don’t want this. That you don’t want me to touch you here...” he said sliding his hands to cup her breasts. “Or here,” he added moving one down and into her back pocket to squeeze her butt. “Or here,” he finished moving the other down to rub against the seam of her pants.

“You just want sex. Who it’s with won’t matter,” she argued unable to hide the truth.

“I want sex with you Paige. I want to bury myself inside you and let us both get past this incident. You’d be amazed at how much better you’ll feel if you allow yourself to release some of this tension inside you.”

“Just sex?” she questioned feeling the need to feel him inside her reach a maximum.

“Whatever you want Paige.” He grinned as she let out her breath and pulled his mouth down to hers. Their kisses were demanding, each wanting more from the other than they were giving and soon their clothes began to litter the ground. He pulled her tightly against him and started to lower them to the ground on top of the clothes when she stopped him.

“Paige?” he groaned as she reached for her pack but that groan soon faded when he saw the small folded blanket she pulled out of the bottom pocket. “Tell me to never mock your ability to think of everything ever again,” he whispered as she knelt down on the blanket she’d finished spreading out.

“You’ll never change,” she laughed jerking him off balance and down beside her.

“But you have,” he replied when she pushed his chest down and climbed onto his waist.

“Maybe I haven’t. Maybe you just never found the real me,” she countered as his hands began to roam her body again. He used his hands and mouth to excite her, bring her to

the brink before pulling back until she was clenching his shoulders in sweet agony.

“Joel...” she groaned lowering her head slightly as his lips left her breast.

“Tell me what you want Paige,” he ordered.

“You...inside me,” she admitted.

“I can do that,” he whispered against her nipple as his teeth nipped at it and his tongue soothed it away. He slipped a single finger into the moist center of her curls and laughed when she groaned again. He slipped another in and began to increase the rhythm as she gripped his shoulders tighter.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she sighed biting her lip as the release began to appear.

“No?” he teased removing them just before she got there. “Maybe I should taste you? Hmm?”

“Joel...I swear you are the most irritating, annoying, foolish...mmm,” she said as he covered her mouth with his hand.

“Anyone tell you, you talk too much?” he questioned before letting out his own groan as she began to suck on his finger. “Taste good? That was the one that was inside you.”

“Joel, shut up and take off your shorts,” she ordered, “before I’m forced to take extreme measures.”

“Like what?”

“Like this,” she stated slipping her hand inside his boxers and pulling out his engorged flesh. She gripped him tightly and began to move her hand up and down his shaft. She suddenly found herself being lifted slightly and then he was inside her as he put her down onto his length bit by bit until he was fully enveloped by the moist heat of her being.

“Jesus Paige,” he groaned as she began to move her hips in a small circular motion.

“You like that?” she teased leaning forward slightly to dangle her breasts over his mouth as she lifted herself until

only his tip was still inside her and then before his mouth could reach her tightly budded tips she moved back and slid back down him.

“Witch...” he stated raising his legs forcing her to shift and he raised his head to take the tip of her breast into his mouth and sucked on it as he began to move underneath her. When she joined in the movement, they both gasped at the sensations sent throughout them both and soon his hands were on her hips urging her on.

“Mhmm,” she whispered as her body coiled tighter and tighter around him.

“Yes...” he returned when she arched her back and brought him deeper inside her. “Come for me Paige...come baby, come...”

“Faster,” she urged.

“Yes, come baby,” he stated as her body tightened.

“More...” she gasped as he pulled her head down to his before returning his hand to her hip moving her quickly up and down on his shaft. “Yes...yes...more...” she continued against his mouth until she felt the first wave of her release take her and her muscles tightened around him demanding he fill her.

“Yes...Paige...” he groaned turning them over as she slackened against him. “More...I want more,” he told her, as she wrapped her legs around him and lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

“Joel...I can’t...” she stated but her body proved her wrong as the tension coiled again tighter and tighter until she couldn’t think and barely breathed.

“Come for me,” he said increasing his movements. “I want you to come for me again Paige.”

“More...oh god...there,” she cried when his thrusts hit the spot inside her that sent sparks throughout her and left her tingling.

“There?” he laughed as she began to squirm. “How can I when you keep moving away?”

“Yes...Joel, oh god...” she gasped when his hand gently pressed against her stomach to keep her from moving away as the sensations began to be too much for her brain to handle. “More...”

“More what,” he demanded as he moved in and out. “Tell me Paige, more what?”

“More of you...all of you,” she stated. “Faster...yes...god, harder...yes...yes...*Joel*...”

“God baby,” he said as she shattered around him, and he could no longer hold himself back. He released his seed inside her as her body constricted around him, pulsing, demanding every bit of it he had.

“Ah Paige,” he groaned into her hair as he collapsed on her, rolling onto his side to keep his weight off of her.

“Mmm...” she sighed as her entire body tingled with an afterglow.

“You were right,” she said a while later after her breathing had returned to normal and the tension eased. “I do feel better and from that grin I’d say so do you but there’s an entire group of people anxiously waiting to see if I return with you or if I’ve completely lost it so what do you say we start back?”

“Can’t say I relish spending any more time underground than I have to now,” he told her with a grin, “but I’d gladly do it if it meant we could continue doing this.”

“Joel, no. This has to stop. It’s bad enough I let it happen after Dad had his heart attack and I flew in finding you there with him but this...this was just a release of the tension and worry that’s been building since I got that phone call.”

“It was more than that and you know it, Paige.”

“No, it wasn’t, it can’t be,” she stated sliding into her shirt and buttoning it up.

“Why not? Give me one good reason why this shouldn’t have happened or why it shouldn’t happen again.”

“It just shouldn’t okay. We’re not together, we’ve never really been together, but it’s not going to happen again.”

“This is always going to happen when we’re in a room together. It’s been this way since the night of your sixteenth birthday and the only reason I stopped then was because you weren’t ready for what this entailed and because your father would have killed me.”

“So instead, you wait until I turn eighteen and then let it happen, gee thanks Joel.”

“Who brought who here that night Paige? Who was it who said she was ready?”

“What did I know? I was eighteen, had been ‘secretly’ dating you from the time I turned sixteen though the only people who weren’t aware of that were my father and brother, what the hell did I know about any of this back then?”

“Meaning you do now?” he questioned. “Who was he? Who opened you up so well?”

“No one...”

“No? You just woke up one day and decided that sex could be more than just the sweet words of love and the slow build? Then you shouldn’t have any problems seeing where this is heading.”

“That’s not going to happen,” she said turning to face him. “As far as I’m concerned this *never* happened, it shouldn’t have, and it didn’t.”

“Why not? Why is this so bad that you’re nearly beating yourself up over it?”

“Because I’m engaged! *Damn it*,” she groaned covering her face with her hands.

“You’re *engaged*?” he shouted at her.

“Yes, now can we please just go?” she stated and luckily, she didn’t get any arguments.

Chapter 6

“Paige slow down before you fall,” Joel called up to her as she climbed.

“I’m a big girl Joel. I can handle a bit of a climb,” she stated angry with herself for giving into the carnal feelings when she shouldn’t have. In a little over two days, she’d managed to mess up her entire life again. If Aaron found out that she’d slept with Joel, he’d never forgive her or if he did, it would only be because he still needed her money to fund his research.

“I just don’t want to have to carry you down if you break your leg. Easy Paige...move to your left that rock doesn’t look safe.”

“Thanks,” she said when the rock she grasped began to crumble. A few more steps and she was at the top. She tossed the rope aside and waited for him to begin his climb. Once he was beside her, she coiled his rope up and put it in the pack but before she could pick it up, he took it and began to walk.

“So, you’re engaged?” he asked after three quarters a mile of silence as they wound their way up to the cavern.

“Joel, I really don’t want to discuss this with you. I’m sorry but I can’t.”

“Seems strange that you wouldn’t mention to anyone that you’re engaged. Then again, I bet you didn’t even know Kendra was pregnant, did you?”

“What I do or don’t know about my family is my business Joel and since you’re technically not part of that family you don’t get a say in any of it. Why don’t we simply forget everything that happened in here including my little slip about my engagement? I don’t want a fuss or tons of questions especially since I’m planning on going home as soon as I get you back.”

“You’re not even going to spend five minutes with your family? To stick around for Kendra, the girl who’d been your

best friend since you could walk, to have your nephew?"

"I can't. I have to get home."

"Paige you are home."

"No, I'm not, my home is in Maine on the beach and I need to get back to it. This place stopped being home when I left ten years ago. Now what do you say we shut up and start climbing down?"

"Whatever you say Miss Brighton," he mocked taking the pack off to unfurl the ropes. "Let me go first that way I can guide you down easily. I'm not about to let you fall off the side of this cliff and have your father kill me."

"Whatever, just go."

She watched as he began to descend, and her mind kept flashing back to the first time they'd made this trek. She'd been thirteen and Joel had said pretty much the exact same thing to her as they went down. Her trip down was easy thanks to him holding the rope steady as she repelled down. The sun was up by now and the walk to the Jeep was peaceful, the countryside glowing in the rays.

She slid behind the steering wheel and turned the key ecstatic when it started immediately, and a warm blast of air hit them.

"Ready to go home?" she asked glancing at him out of the corner of her eye.

"More than you know," he replied as he settled back into the seat and closed his eyes.

The drive took her another hour and she was glad to see that most of the crowd had disbursed likely taking their loved ones home for hot baths and sleep, two things she'd kill for about now. She covered the yawn she'd felt coming on and shook her head slightly to clear out the bugs.

"Need me to drive there Paige?" Joel inquired startling her.

"Nope, we're here, aren't we?"

“So, we are...” he stated as she cut the engine and hopped out. He caught up to her as she rounded the corner and stopped her, “Paige, thank you. I honestly had forgotten about that shaft leading up to the tunnels and if you hadn’t...”

“Well, I did so you’re welcome and let’s call it even shall we? You saved my dad’s life four years ago and now I saved yours,” she said letting his thanks slide past her. She didn’t need it and she didn’t want it. All it would do was cause more problems than she already had.

“Why don’t you head on in? I’ll be right behind you. I just need to grab something from the Jeep,” she lied as she checked the message from Caleb regarding the helicopter being ready to take her home.

“No way, I’m not going in there without you and risking your father having a heart attack thinking that I somehow got out, but you didn’t. We go in together or not at all,” he said taking her arm and pulling her towards the center of the complex.

“Fine...” She sighed knowing he was half-right. If she didn’t go in and at least say goodbye, no one would let her off the hook and she had to go, any more time spent here, and she’d likely spill everything and then she’d never be able to leave.

They turned the last corner and stopped in surprise. Every single person who worked for the company was present; the men who had been trapped were clean, dressed in new clothes, and were enjoying a large selection of food that smelled like heaven. It took a few moments for them to resume their walk towards the tents and just before they reached them Paige grinned up at Joel and called out, “Leave anything for us?”

“Paige!” her father shouted standing up and seeing them. “Joel...my god...how?”

He and several others raced over to them, and she was glad she hadn’t left yet.

“Okay Paige how did you manage this one?” Jesse asked raising an eyebrow.

“What can I say I know the mine,” she shrugged.

“And the mountain,” Joel added, “which is damned lucky for me. If Paige hadn’t remembered the climbing shaft that led to the mountain path I’d still be down there.”

“Wait a minute,” Sam said joining them with Kendra. “You went up the side of the mountain in the dark, alone? Good lord Paige, are you insane?”

“Really why does everyone ask me that?” she joked. “Yes, I went up the side of the mountain and climbed the cliff to the cavern, walked the path through it and climbed down the inside of the place in order to get this joker out. I did it alone because it was a hell of a lot faster than if I’d waited for anyone else and I had butts to kick...speaking of which what happened to the wonderful Gus?”

“He’s been transported to the county jail until the DA can decide on the charges, he confessed after a bit of prodding and Davidson is also being brought in,” Travis answered. “How’d you know it was sabotage Paige?”

“It’s what I do...which leads me to my next line which is I’ve got to go.”

“Where?” Craig asked. “Unless you’re taking on cases solo, we haven’t heard of any disasters.”

“Just because you haven’t heard of them doesn’t mean they haven’t happened, but I just need to get home. I’ve got to get back to work and I’m pretty sure my dog’s torn up the place by now,” she said with a laugh.

“*You* have a dog?” Sam stated skeptically. “You couldn’t keep a goldfish alive for two days and you have a dog?”

“I do and I’ve also got a job that hasn’t gone away. It’s going to take you all ages to get the place put back together so I’ll leave you all to it. I’ve got a helicopter waiting,” she admitted stepping away from the group. “I’m so glad you’re all okay...I love you all, but I’ll see you.”

She turned and went inside to get her bag and camera knowing she couldn't keep it together much longer.

"You're just going to let her leave?" Joel asked as no one moved.

"Not a chance buddy," Sam grinned.

"She can look for her stuff, but she won't find it here," Cord added. "I know my girl Joel and I knew the moment she got you back here she'd be gone in a flash so we took her things and I'm not telling her where they are until she's stayed for a proper visit."

"You think that's going to work?" he inquired.

"Paige loves her camera there's no way she's going to leave without it," Moose stated.

"A camera?" Joel laughed. "You think she's going to stay for a camera?"

"You'd be surprised what she'd do for that camera," Rabbit said.

"I think you're underestimating what she'll do to get home," Hillary said shaking her head at them.

"Look Paige hasn't been home for a visit in years, and we're not going to sit around and let her vanish now," Cord stated. "I'm not letting my daughter disappear out of my life again and only have her come back because of me having a heart attack or a cave-in at the mine."

"I still think you're all crazy if you think this will keep her here," Hillary replied taking a step back when she saw Paige come out the building.

"Where is it?" she demanded looking at the cluster.

"Where's what Paige?" Sam asked.

"Not that you really need me to explain but where's my bag and my camera?" she said glaring at them.

"They're not here," her father answered. "And you're not getting them back until you've stayed for a visit."

“You *stole* my things? I swear you people are nuts. I come here because you needed me to get you out of the mine and this is how you repay me? By stealing my stuff and making ultimatums? Guess what Dad...it’s not going to work. The bag...whatever. My camera on the other hand had better be sent up to me immediately or next time I’ll leave you to find your own way out and trust me a little climb up the mountain might sound easy but ask Joel what it’s really like.”

“Paige calm down,” Joel said trying to ease the tension. “Your family just wants to spend some time with you...and that family includes everyone here. They want to thank you and your friends for helping get everyone home safely and for figuring out how it happened in the first place.”

“So instead of *asking* like normal people they steal my stuff and I’m supposed to be happy about it? Sorry to burst your bubble but I can’t stay. I have a life in Maine that I need to get back to so if you all want to thank me for getting everyone home safely get me my stuff and let me get back to my life.”

“Paige why are you so insistent on getting back there now?” Cord asked.

“Yeah Sis, you’ve been here for a little over two days now...what’s the rush to get back?” Sam added.

“It’s none of your business why I need or want to get back. The simple matter is that I do, so get me my bags and get out of my way,” she said crossing her arms across her chest.

“Joel, can’t you talk some sense into her?” Sam inquired turning to his friend. “You were the only one who ever could around here.”

“I’m pretty sure this one’s out of my hands,” he stated meeting her gaze and seeing the determination there. “I think we all need to simply thank her and let her go, after all she obviously doesn’t think of this place as home anymore.”

“No, I don’t,” she agreed. “Sorry if it hurts Dad but it’s true. You didn’t want me anywhere near the mine so I left and

found something else, something you couldn't control and now I've found something in Maine that needs my attention which is why I'm going back there...*today*."

"Good lord Paige you're more stubborn than your mother was," Cord sighed. "What is there that could be so important that you need to rush back to immediately? Spend the day with us, get a good night's rest and see what tomorrow holds."

"For the millionth time...I am leaving today."

"Self-centered brat like always, aren't you Paige?" Sam said narrowing his eyes at her. "When things don't go your way, you run. You left because Dad told you that no matter what career you choose, you'd never work for the company, and in doing that, you ran out on everyone here including Joel. Then when your best friend and I get married, you have this mysterious emergency at the last second that keeps you away and hell you only went to see Dad after his heart attack because he was in Boston at the time. Your cards, letters, and phone calls started coming fewer and fewer in between until you stopped talking to pretty much everyone. Did you even bother to open the email that told you Kendra and I were having a baby? Or were you too wrapped up in your own selfish self to care about anyone else?"

"Don't you *dare* Samuel Joshua Brighton. You don't know the half of it so don't stand there and lecture me about leaving...if you want to know why I left there're two people here who know that truth and one of them is the guy you say I left but guess what everyone...we were never together. At least not officially, were we Joel? No, so you can spout off all you want but when it comes right down to it you don't know anything Sam. As far as not talking to you and Kendra...again there're two people who know the reason why, so why don't you ask your wife about that one. Now since you've decided to turn this entire thing into me being selfish, I might as well live up to it, shouldn't I? Don't bother calling me if things here are hitting the fan Neal...I *won't* come," she stated stalking away.

"Paige Elizabeth Brighton stop right there," her father said sternly. "I will not watch you walk away from this family

again.”

“Then don’t watch Dad, because that’s exactly what I’m doing. I have to be in Maine this weekend and I’d prefer to sleep in my own bed before it,” she told him as she turned back towards the group.

“Again what is so important that you can’t spend a day with your family?” he questioned.

“This isn’t my family anymore despite what I’ve portrayed the last few days. Yes, the part of me that was the girl who grew up here still cares for you all and doesn’t want to see anything horrible happen to you but she’s not me anymore. I did what you never thought I’d do Dad...I grew up and discovered I’d grown away from here. This place...it sucks the life out of you, it did to Mom, Grandma, and Granddad...and to be honest it was sucking the life out of me until I was forced to choose a different path. I don’t belong here.”

“That is the biggest load of crock and bull I’ve heard come out of your mouth the entire time I’ve known you Paige,” Jesse stated crossing the distance between them. “You don’t believe one single bit of what you just said, and we all know it. We worked with you for five years Paige, we saw your brilliance, saw your pain when things didn’t go right, but never once did we see you give up.”

“Jesse’s right Paige, even when we got to that scene in Granit and we all thought it was hopeless, you didn’t and because of you we saved a hundred lives from the rubble,” Hillary added.

“So what?” Paige shrugged. “It doesn’t mean anything anymore. I left that world four years ago and never looked back. After all, my sanity was brought into question as it has been several times since I’ve been here. Maybe I just got tired of people calling me a loony and decided to simply disappear.”

“Paige Brighton doesn’t run from anything,” Moose countered.

“Nope she runs straight to it,” Rabbit added.

“Precisely what I’m doing now,” she stated.

“So, what are you running to?” Cord inquired.

“Nothing anyone here would understand,” she answered.

“Try us,” Sam said.

“Fine...I have to be in Maine this weekend, preferably tonight, so I can sleep peacefully and get some things caught up on because I’ve got big plans for Saturday.”

“What sort of plans?” Joel asked.

“None that concern you,” she told him.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not part of my life,” she said as he took a step towards her.

“Then why not just tell us?”

“Maybe I don’t want anyone here to know...”

“Why? Afraid someone here would do something?”

“Honestly yes...I’m not letting anyone ruin what I’ve built.”

“And how would we do that Paige?”

“Oh, I don’t know Joel...by showing up uninvited.”

“To what?”

“My wedding...” she threw out shocking everyone into silence for two seconds.

Chapter 7

“What?!” Cord shouted not letting Paige finish as the entire crowd began to buzz.

“You’re getting married?” Sam questioned.

“No, she’s not,” Cord stated. “Not without us and not without me meeting this person. I *will* freeze your trust fund if you so much as think about going through with this.”

“I don’t need *your* trust, Dad. I’ve got the one Gran left me and you don’t have any control over it but had any of you let me finish you’d know that the actual wedding isn’t this weekend, my wedding *shower* is and I fully intend to be at it so I bid you *adieu*,” she said sweetly enjoying the looks that crossed their faces.

“Oh, no you don’t,” her father stated stepping around to block her way. “You’re staying right here until we meet this man. I’m not letting anyone take advantage of you.”

“Oh, good lord Dad, I’m thirty. No one’s taking advantage of me.”

“I’m with Dad on this. The Brighton name carries a lot of weight Sis, and pretty much everyone knows that you’re the only daughter. What’s to say this guy isn’t using you to get his hands on the family money?”

“Because *this guy*, as you put it, has been nothing but up front with me. Now please just get out of my way and let me go home,” she sighed.

“Paige...what was that?” Cord asked as a loud bark sounded.

“It was just Maggie,” Paige replied. “Wait...Maggie?” she repeated looking around as the huge animal came bounding over to her. “Hey girl, how’d you get here?”

“She drove,” a male voice said coming around the side of the crowd towards her.

“Aaron! I thought you were staying in Maine,” she replied as he walked over and pulled her into a hug planting a kiss on her surprised lips.

“We were but the news said they weren’t sure how long it would take, and Maggie was getting nervous.”

“She was, was she?” she questioned raising an eyebrow at him.

“Absolutely, we heard they’d gotten everyone out except for one as we got closer. Why are you so dusty?”

“Because my stupid sister decided to go mountain climbing in the dark,” Sam said sizing the man up.

“You did what? I thought you said you were done with that Paige. After what happened in Colorado...”

“Aaron it was nothing, I’ve climbed those rocks a million times, I could do it blindfolded,” she said hurriedly. She didn’t want everyone asking about Colorado. She didn’t want anyone asking anything.

“It’s true,” Joel stated stepping forward. “No amount of arguing will get Paige to not do something and she’s been climbing since she was little. If anyone can handle that climb it’s Paige.”

“And you’re the expert?” Aaron chafed giving him a long look. “Ah...you must be Joel, the missing miner. Paige went up there to find you, didn’t she?”

“Paige saved his butt,” Sam stated.

“Paige saved all our butts,” Ben called out.

“Well Paige promised to cut out this nonsense,” Aaron informed them.

She shook her head and patted her leg to get Maggie’s attention. She jerked her head and Maggie bounded after her towards the waiting helicopter. They were all arguing and trying to one up the other that they weren’t paying any attention to her, and she was fully ready to take advantage of it.

They were all crazy, every single one of them and she was not going to stick around and watch them argue over her as though she couldn't make up her own mind. She patted the floor of the copter and Maggie jumped right in. She followed her in and was about to close the door when a hand snagged her arm and she found herself being lifted out.

“Put me down,” she said pushing at Joel's chest. “God... next time I *will* let you rot down there.”

A deep growl stopped her struggle as Maggie jumped out of the helicopter and advanced on Joel. “Joel, put me down.”

He released her and Maggie stepped between them staring the man down until she snapped her fingers and called out to her. “Maggie...easy girl.”

“Your dog's as nuts as you are?” he questioned.

“Me? What about you? You forcefully remove me from my own helicopter and think my dog's not going to be annoyed by it? Jesus Joel...you had *no* right to do that,” she whispered harshly.

“No? How about this then Paige, you either stay for a visit, with or without the fiancé or I tell him *exactly* what happened when you came after me,” he replied just as quietly, “or maybe I should say how you came *for* me. What would he say if he knew about our little dalliance in the cave? Would you even have a wedding shower to go back for?”

“You're blackmailing me? Really? Of course, you are... you're no better than anyone else from that stupid mine, and to think there was a time I actually thought I loved you. Thank you, Joel, for reminding me exactly why I left in the first place. None of you can tell the truth when it really matters, only when it'll get you something,” she said whipping around and stalking back towards the crowd.

“Paige,” Aaron stated trying to get her attention.

“Paige honey,” Cord also tried as she walked through the gathered group towards the main building.

“Paige, would you stop being such a drama queen?” Sam said.

“Paige, where are you going now?” Jesse inquired.

“Paige is tired of hearing everyone *else* tell her what to do or what she should be doing. Paige is irritated beyond belief that no one here is bothering to ask what *she* wants. But mostly Paige is tired and is going inside to take a shower so if you’d be nice enough to bring my bag up to the washroom, I’d appreciate it because I’m not talking to *any* of you until after that,” she said holding the door open for Maggie to follow her. “I also wouldn’t suggest trying to get through Maggie. She’s sensitive to my moods and right now it’s highly unlikely that I’ll call her off.”

She disappeared inside and stalked up to the washroom. Maggie laid down in front of the door after she closed it and she knelt to kiss the top of her head laughing as she was rewarded with a wet kiss in return.

The shower pulsed down her shoulders and she relaxed into the wall as the heat began to soothe away the tension. Aaron might have surprised her, but she was the one who’d surprise him if he found out about her activities in the past six hours. Keeping him from finding out was the only thing she was truly concerned with because losing him would leave her open to Joel’s advances and another go around with him would most likely destroy her. The last time it had killed the largest part of her and she knew she wouldn’t make it out again.



“Want to share how you got my sister to stay?” Sam asked as Joel exited the shower. “Because less than twenty minutes before you seemed to not care if she stayed and made it seem as though you didn’t have any pull with her.”

“Let’s just say we came to an understanding and leave it at that,” he stated pulling on the clean pair of clothes he’d pulled from his locker.

“Come on it’s me...Sam, your friend, the guy who could always tell when you were lying. The one who knows that you’re still in love with my little sister.”

“I used a bit of knowledge to blackmail her into staying. Told her I’d tell her *fiancé*...” he said the scoffing on the word, “all about it if she didn’t at least stay and let your dad get to know him.”

“So you’re just going to sit back and let this guy schmooze his way into our family? Let him take her back to Maine where we’ll likely never see her again?” Sam asked watching closely to see if he could get a reaction out of him. “Let him sweep her away on a honeymoon and make babies that should have been yours?”

“Sam, shut it,” he said harshly as he turned away, his dark eyes glowering at the ideas Sam had just planted.

“Not over her are you? Not that I blame you my sister did get her looks from our mom and every guy from a hundred miles around was crushing on her, but she only had eyes for you until now. But I guess that doesn’t bother you, does it? The idea of them going back to Maine, sleeping together, having sex...”

“I said shut it Sam,” he said slamming his fist into the metal box that held the paper towels.

“Whoa there Rambo. What was that for? Holy hell,” Sam said catching sight of Joel’s tense face. “What happened in the mountain cause you weren’t the least bit surprised when she said she was getting married. How’d you know?”

“Let’s just say we had our own argument before coming down.”

“I know Paige, she wouldn’t just volunteer the fact that she was engaged, especially not to you, so what do you have on her that got her to stay?” he asked watching Joel, his face didn’t change but the slightest hint of something flashed through his eyes and Sam knew. “Oh my god...” he added laughing, “you two did it again, didn’t you? You argued until the only thing left to do was either strangle the other or have sex. Christ Joel, you had sex with my sister in the mountain after being trapped down in the mine for sixty hours or so and then climbing all the way up there? Tell me, was this before or after you found out about the dweeb out there?”

“Before, and yes I threatened to tell him that we’d had a very carnal reunion if she didn’t stay,” Joel admitted crossing his arms in a ‘what about it’ gesture.

“When do you plan on dropping the bomb? Cause the Joel Wright I know wouldn’t sit around and let someone else take what he wants.”

“I’m beginning to see why Paige stays away. You do realize she’s human, don’t you? She’s not a pawn to be shifted around the chess board.”

“Isn’t she? Okay, maybe it’s us who are the pawns and Paige is as always, the Queen, are you going to let that bishop run away with her or are you going to step it up and be the King to protect her?”

“Remind me not to mention anything remotely related to chess to you ever again. Come on let’s go see what Cord’s found out about this Aaron Duvet character.”

When they returned to the fold they found him sitting with Cord, Ed, Bobby, and a dozen others who would likely snap his neck if he so much as hinted that he didn’t truly care about Paige.

“Joel...there you are,” Cord said turning towards him. “You look a million times better; hopefully a nice shower does the trick for Paige too.”

“Can’t argue with you there, she certainly seemed to be in a tizzy on our climb,” he stated and Sam hid a chuckle behind a cough.

“Speaking of climbing Aaron,” Cord said, “what did you mean when you said Paige had agreed to give it up? What happened in Colorado?”

“Nothing Dad,” she answered as she finished braiding her wet hair and twisting it up to stay off her neck. “Hope they haven’t grilled you,” she said offering her cheek to Aaron as she slid onto the empty chair beside him and Maggie settled between them placing her head on Paige’s lap.

“We know every little secret Paige,” Ed joked.

“I know that’s a lie because you’re all still sitting here,” she joked pulling the sleeve of her shirt up to keep it from getting in the food Elaine just delivered.

“What was that?” Cord stated as she turned her arm to reach for the utensils.

“Hmm?” she said pushing the sleeve down to hide the light scar that still showed on her arm.

“On your arm,” he said giving her a questioning look.

“Nothing...a scratch from the climb I think,” she lied.

“You didn’t scratch yourself out there Paige,” Joel argued snatching her wrist and pushing the sleeve up to her elbow. “What the hell?”

“It’s nothing, honestly,” she stated taking her arm back and pulling the sleeve down again. “Fine, I was out in Colorado, on vacation, when we heard that some people had gone missing. I knew a few members of the local search and rescue team, they were the ones I was out there seeing...Tami and Tristan,” she said knowing her team would remember them. “They asked for help so Maggie and I joined them.”

“Maggie?” Sam said looking at the dog. “That thing helped find missing people?”

“It’s what she’s trained to do Sam and the next time you call her a thing I’ll make sure she knows she’s allowed to jump on you whenever she wants,” she threatened ruffling the top of the dog’s head.

“That’s not a dog it’s a mini-horse,” Ed stated.

“She’s a mastiff, and the best one around,” she argued.

“I don’t care about the dog,” her father stated, “how did you get that scar?”

“Well, long story short...I got cut,” she answered.

“Hmph,” Aaron scoffed at her answer.

“Why don’t you bore us with the long version there Paige?” Sam suggested.

“Why? My arm was cut, I got stitches to sew it up and now there’s a light scar that’s still fading.”

“Aaron?” Cord said glancing towards the man who was gripping the butter knife in his hand tightly.

“Don’t look at him to give you anything else, it didn’t happen to him,” she stated.

“No but I was the one who...”

“Aaron!” she said sending him a gaze that said ‘shut up’ loud and clear.

“Paige, tell us what happened,” Joel told her with his own gaze that said ‘or else’.

“Fine...the missing campers weren’t just missing; they’d been taken by a psychopath who wasn’t happy to be interrupted before he could kill them, okay? Maggie had tracked them to the base of a mountain and I relayed the info back and started climbing. I was to the top before I realized that they weren’t there voluntarily.”

“Good lord Paige,” Bobby gasped.

“What happened?” Cord demanded.

“He had them in this small inlet and when I started searching, he jumped me. In the process my arm was cut,” she said stopping there.

“That’s how you’re going to put it?” Aaron inquired shaking his head. “What she’s leaving out is the fact that before the guy slashed her arm, down to the bone, he shoved her over the edge of the cliff and if she hadn’t been wearing her harness, she’d be dead.”

“Aaron!”

“Paige Elizabeth Brighton...what in the hell?” Cord shouted. “I want to know *exactly* what happened.”

“Alright since someone can’t keep his mouth shut,” she said glaring at Aaron, “he knocked me over the edge, but my rope caught me and when I reached up to pull myself back onto the landing, he cut my arm. Guess he didn’t realize that

I'd climbed with a broken arm before so I could still manage it one handed. Anyway, I let myself down partially until he couldn't see me and then moved over to climb back up. He wasn't expecting me to show back up and I surprised him. Knocked him out with his shovel and then informed the team of the exact location on the mountain to find him."

"How'd he get them up there?" Sam asked.

"Made them climb," she answered. "Honestly it's not as bad as it sounds."

"Really?" Aaron questioned. "Had he cut your arm closer to the wrist you would have bled to death Paige, and you didn't help by insisting on climbing back down with the two in case that psycho got up before the others reached you. You should have waited for the medics to get there and then you wouldn't have spent three days in the hospital because of blood loss."

"Aaron how many times are you going to harp on this? I'm fine, my arm is fine, the two missing people are fine despite what they went through, and the guy who abducted them is behind bars on death row. I've moved on, it's time you did too," she sighed.

"I think it's time you tell us what exactly you've been up to the last ten years Paige. We've heard from your friends about your work with them but there seems to be four years no one can account for," her father stated, and she knew she was walking a thin line.

Chapter 8

“Dad,” Paige said trying to soothe his mood. “There’s nothing to tell. Other than the work sites my life is quite boring, most of the time I’m simply hanging out at home. I’ve only been to the hospital a couple times, the worst being the cut. I broke my leg six years ago at an earthquake site but that’s it. Despite what people claim I’m not crazy and I don’t have a death wish.”

“That’s true,” Rabbit stated. “She was always the first one to caution us on taking risks.”

“Then turn right around and do it herself,” Craig added.

“Very funny,” Paige scoffed. “Out of us who was the only qualified one to do the surveys?”

“You but that doesn’t mean you didn’t take risks,” Jesse argued.

“Like what?” she questioned.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hillary laughed, “how about going up to the top of that volcano in Indonesia that blew not five hours later?”

“You did what?!” Cord shouted.

“Hold on I thought you all worked mainly inside the US?” Joel inquired.

“We do, occasionally we help outside the US if we’re really needed,” Jesse answered, “but that was Paige’s idea of a vacation with her boyfriend back then.”

“Your boyfriend took you to a volcano that was active?” Sam said letting out a peal of laughter.

“He was a scientist who studied volcanos. We weren’t planning on going there but we were in the vicinity and stopped in. No one else had climbing experience so I helped,” she stated. “You know if you want a rundown as to my adventures why don’t you simply pick up your phones and

search for the team's website, go back about eight, almost nine years, and read up to the last four?"

"That wouldn't begin to cover it Paige and you know it," Moose chuckled.

"It's all they're going to get unless you plan on regaling them with our expeditions because the only thing, I'm going to do is head to the hotel and slip into a bed," she sighed as her body began to give into the need to sleep.

"You're not checking into a hotel," her father stated. "You're coming home with me, and I suppose that dog can come too if she stays outside."

"She's better inside," Paige laughed. "Ask Aaron."

"She's right, I had her at my place for a week when Paige was in New York and my back yard was never the same," he admitted.

"Fine, but she stays in your room," Cord told her.

"No problem there, she's a better blanket than anything you've probably got," she teased.

"You let that dog sleep in your bed?" Sam asked. "Doesn't it get a bit crowded?"

"Isn't that none of your business?" she retorted as she stood up to receive the mile of hugs that she knew were coming.

"Touchy subject there, Sis?" he questioned sending a knowing look to Joel who said nothing.

"Personal subject that you're not going to be privy to and one I'm certainly not discussing in front of all of these jokers," she stated. She allowed Aaron to escort her to her father's car and gave him a chaste kiss. "Are you staying in town or heading back? I can have Caleb take you back if you need to get back to work. I can drive the car tomorrow."

"I'll stay. I stopped at the hotel and freshened up before coming here so I already have a room, though I might take you up on the ride if something crops up at work," he added giving her a hug before heading to his own car.

“Not a very warm reception there considering,” Joel mocked as the others returned to the gathering. “Not nearly as warm as the one as you gave me.”

“You know exactly what that was and what it wasn’t and it’s *never* going to happen again, I can guarantee that.”

“Your mouth says one thing but your eyes Paige...they’re what’s really talking and they’re begging me to take you again. To lean down and kiss you. Oh, don’t bother to deny it baby, as I said, your mouth says what your head says but your eyes...that’s where your heart’s always been. I was prepared to be noble here because you seemed *so* passionate about him back in the cave but seeing you together...all bets are off Paige. You don’t love him. Deny it all you like but you don’t and I’d hazard a guess that he’s *not* the man who showed you what sex can be. In fact, I’d wager half a mil that the two of you haven’t even...you haven’t, have you?” Joel laughed as his gaze simmered in her direction. “You’ve never slept with him but yet you’re marrying him. Why Paige? What are you running from?”

“Who says I’m running from anything Joel. I’m running *to* something. Something you’d never understand. So back off or I’ll be forced to tell my father exactly what his number one guy was up to when his daughter was only sixteen.”

“Water under the bridge now Paige...water under the bridge. Don’t think I won’t play dirty to get what I want. You’re right when you say we’re not the same people we used to be. The old Paige would have stayed today and bared her soul, but you have a million secrets inside you and I’m going to pull each and every one of them out. So welcome home Paige. Welcome home, baby.”

“I’m *not* home Joel, and I’m not your baby,” she said raising her voice as he walked away.

“I’m not...” she whispered to Maggie as she slid into the passenger seat and waited for her father. Maggie raised her head and barked a sure sign that she didn’t believe her, and she prayed to get out of town before Joel could come through on his threat.

So, she didn't *love* Aaron. She liked him, they got along well, though he could be a bit overprotective when it came to some of her favorite pastimes, but she didn't want another piece of her soul stolen and there was no way Joel could ever find out the truth. He'd be furious and so would her family.



It was late Thursday morning before Paige was able to convince her father that she was sure about Aaron and now that she had he was willing to let her go home. Something Aaron had already been forced to do as he had a problem pop up at the lab and now, she was prepared to drive the car back up with Maggie as her companion.

The mine was slowly being cleared of debris and her old team had stayed on to help ensure that the new structure was sound before they allowed anyone to proceed further into the mine. Each night her father shut himself in the study with Joel, Sam, Ed, and Harry and they constructed new ideas to get back to work but they didn't bother asking her opinion and so she remained silent.

Her phone buzzed and she checked the caller id before answering. "Hey, Aaron, everything okay?"

"No, it's not. Not with the lab and...you're not going to believe this, but the club had a fire last night. They won't be able to hold the shower this weekend and from the sound of it our wedding next month."

"And everywhere else is booked," she sighed.

"I'm sorry Paige."

"Why? You didn't set the fire to get out of this, did you?" she teased knowing he wouldn't be the one to back out. Every set back at the lab meant more money being lost... money which she could replace.

"Not a chance. Paige, I don't mean to run but I've got to get back in there. If you want to spend a few more days down there, I won't mind. I'll probably just catch some sleep here."

“Alright, thanks for letting me know Aaron. I’ll send you a message about when I’m leaving.”

“Bye Paige,” he said ending the call. She stared down at the phone wanting to throw it and take out her frustration on it. How could the universe be conspiring against her this much?

“Problems in lover’s lane?” Joel stated sneaking up on her.

“No, problems with bad wiring...the club where we were supposed to have the wedding shower this weekend and the wedding next month had a fire last night. Don’t laugh Joel, it’s not funny,” she said smacking his arm as he doubled over.

“Come on Paige...you seriously cannot tell me that the world’s not conspiring against the two of you. First, you’re forced to come back here because of the accident putting you directly back in my path and in my arms, then the one reason you had for rushing back is taken away, and you’re looking at not being able to even hold the wedding. Tell me you don’t see that.”

“All I see is a couple extra days to catch up with my old team and make sure that they can get you all into the front part of the mine without fearing another cave-in and a slight delay on the wedding. *Delay* Joel, not cancellation.”

“Cancellation on what?” Sam inquired stepping out onto the patio with them.

“Paige’s wedding,” Joel snickered.

“You called it off?” Cord asked joining them. “I thought you were happy that I at least marginally approve.”

“I am happy Dad and the wedding’s *not* cancelled. Unfortunately, the place where we were going to hold it had a major fire last night and we have to postpone it and the shower this weekend. There’re too many people to fit anywhere else.”

“I see,” her father said thoughtfully. “Why not move it down here then?”

“You’re kidding right? There’s no way all of our guests are going to come down here for the wedding let alone the shower. No, we’ll just push it back. It’s no big deal...really.”

“I told you,” Joel whispered to Sam who handed him a twenty.

“What was that?” Paige inquired catching the exchange.

“Joel bet me twenty that you wouldn’t be back up there this weekend for the shower. Don’t worry Sis; I’ve got more riding on a big day happening.”

“Another bet you’ll lose,” Joel stated adamantly.

“Why would that be Joel?” Cord questioned.

“I swear you all never change. Did you ever bother to ask *me*...the one who’s getting married whether or not it’s going to happen? No, why did I ever think you all would change. I’m just a girl to all of you. I couldn’t possibly make a decision as important as who I’m going to spend the rest of my life with by myself could I?”

“No,” Joel replied, “because you always make the wrong choice before the right one appears as the only option left. Paige, you’re not going to marry that joker, he only wants you for your funding...you deserve better than that.”

“Meaning what? You?” she countered. “The guy who couldn’t admit to my father that, despite everyone remaining mum on the subject for years, we were in fact seeing each other when he asked point blank and you gave him some bogus story about dating someone else? You couldn’t man up back then what makes now any different?”

“I did that *for* you Paige. I didn’t want you getting hurt doing something crazy. I thought if you transferred out like you had talked about that you’d find something else to obsess over instead of the mine,” Joel argued. “Your father knew *exactly* how I felt about you, he wasn’t blind.”

“No just you were. Actually, that’s not true because you’re all still blind to the simplest fact around.” She turned to walk away but her father stopped her with a hand.

“What does that mean Paige? I think it’s past time we all had a rational discussion about the past.”

“I don’t. The past is dead and over with and so is the girl who lived it. I’m *not* her. If you don’t like the new Paige that’s your problem but I refuse to revert back to being her. She couldn’t make any of you see but I will. Now shouldn’t you all scurry inside and close the door to figure out what to do with the mess that’s the north passage?”

“What are you doing?” Sam questioned as she and Maggie started down the back path.

“I’m going to fly to the moon...what does it look like we’re doing? We’re going for a walk,” she tossed over her shoulder at them. When they rounded the corner, she slipped inside the back door and ran up to her room taking the maps of the mine and her bag full of notepads and made her way over to the area that had once been the north passage.

Maggie rested beside her as she worked, mapping out the damaged areas and the potential for the area that was currently nothing but a gulf of rocks. Repairing the north passage road would be easier once she knew exactly what was underneath that hadn’t been damaged but to learn that she’d need to get back into the mine. She checked her watch, ten after two...if she went now she’d be able to get to the bottom entrance of the cavern by three and from there she could see how bad the passage was.

When she arrived at the cavern, she dug out her camera and slung it over her shoulder as she picked up a few items, including her cell and an old walkie, and began to make her way through it. The damage she found didn’t surprise her too much, but it wasn’t anywhere near as bad as she had expected and if they got a crew out here, they could get the road functioning within a month she estimated.

“Want to see something interesting Maggie?” she questioned the dog plodding along beside her.

She headed back up to the cavern but when they reached the opening, she walked past it and continued up another half-mile until they reached a tiny opening barely big enough for a

grown man to fit through. She ducked though there was no reason to she wouldn't hit her head on the top anytime soon, and went towards the fading light. She lifted her camera and began to snap pictures of the area. She could remember clearly the first time she'd stood in this tiny crevice and looked out at the land that her family owned.

The feeling of pride and happiness she felt then washed through her again and she tried to compare it to the feeling she had when she saw her own home in Maine. It was nothing compared to this, and it seemed Maggie agreed as she woofed contently despite the danger that one wrong step spelled. The light was continuing to fade and she knew it was time to head back. She didn't want to get caught working on her plans before she was ready. She'd show them how they could turn the accident into an advantage and expand their lines.

The walk back to the house gave her plenty of time to come to terms with her unfazed desire for Joel. Every time they were together all she wanted was another touch, another kiss...but she couldn't give into it. There were so many things he didn't know, so many things that would only tear them apart if he did but she couldn't deny the heat that radiated between them or the constant need to be with him.

"So, what do I do Maggie Mae?" she asked the dog. "Do I see where this is going with him behind Aaron's back? No, then I'd be no better than Kendra, would I? So, tell me girl... what do I do?"

"I suppose talking to a dog is a step up from talking to yourself," Joel said startling her for the second time that day.

"What did you hear?"

"You asking that mutt of yours what to do...about what though I'm not sure, I'm a pretty good listener when you're not yelling at me, if you want to give me a try."

She laughed knowing what his answer would be. "I don't think that's wise."

"When have we ever done the wise thing Paige? Come on try me...we talked about everything once."

“But you never really listened Joel, if you had you never would have drove me away. I never wanted to work *in* the mines. I wanted someone to see that I could understand it without actually being down there. Physics, geology, plain old science...I’m a stinkin’ genius in them but none of you bothered to check what *I* wanted to do. You all assumed that I wanted to be down there so it’d be nice if you could at least hear me out now.”

“Then tell me. What did you want back then Paige and what do you want now?”

“Back then I wanted two things, for you, Dad, and Sam to get that I could help without being regulated to a secretarial position and you—permanently. Now, I want you all to respect my abilities. I’ve earned that respect.”

“You have. I notice you left out your fiancée in all of that though.”

“Aaron and I aren’t up for discussion.”

“Oh, there you are,” Kendra interrupted, “dinner’s almost ready. Are you staying Joel?”

“Yeah, I think it should be interesting,” he replied as Paige slipped past him and into the house. He caught sight of her bag as she went and wondered what she’d been up to. He dismissed it as Kendra motioned him inside, but he was going to figure out what Paige really wanted, and he hoped it was him.

Chapter 9

“Paige someone’s here to see you,” Kendra told her late Saturday afternoon. She and Sam had been over every night and Paige was getting annoyed seeing her. The last thing she wanted was to have her sister-in-law under her feet and watching her constantly.

“Who is it?” she called down the hallway from the library.

“Your fiancée,” Aaron stated heading towards her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked shutting the door behind him.

“I got things cleaned up at the lab and since I’ve been without my two favorite things for almost a week I decided to come get them.”

“Your car and your iPod? I found it under the middle console.”

“My car yes but you’re my other favorite thing...well other than work that is.”

“Well, I think you might have to hold off on that determination. Aaron there’s something I need to tell you,” she said working up her nerve to admit what she hadn’t before they moved forward with any additional plans.

“Oh, I almost forgot, I heard from the club, they should be reopened about six weeks after our initial date and they’re willing to give us any opening we want.”

“That’s great but I really have to tell you something before we go any further with this...”

“What is it love?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this without just coming right out and saying it.”

“Saying what Paige?” he questioned looking around the room.

“When I went up to the mountain to get Joel...”

“What Paige? You hurt yourself, didn’t you? I knew you shouldn’t be climbing again. Your arm isn’t the same as it was, is it? Your muscles didn’t heal because you wouldn’t let it rest.”

“I slept with Joel,” she blurted out silencing him.

“What? When?”

“I told you, when I went up to get him. I didn’t mean for it to happen it just did. Aaron, I just couldn’t keep it from you. Joel and I had a bad ending and we never really had the whole it’s done bit.”

“So, you decided to do it in the mountain?”

“No, I didn’t plan it. We were arguing and it just happened, Aaron. I couldn’t, not tell you...where are you going?”

“Anywhere that’s not here,” he stated walking out. She watched him go and wondered if she’d just made the biggest mistake of her life.

“Everything okay Paige?” Kendra asked poking her head around the corner.

“Fine.”

“No, it’s not Paige. You’ve been my friend long enough for me to know when you’re not okay.”

“We’re not friends anymore Kendra. That ended two years ago when I found you in bed with someone who *wasn’t* my brother.”

“Alright I deserve that, but you don’t have much room to talk Paige. From what I hear you and Joel didn’t waste any time getting together.”

“But unlike you I told Aaron. So no, I’m not okay, but you can forget it. I don’t need you or your help.”

“Paige, can’t we get past this? There’re a lot of things you don’t know. Sam and I...we weren’t in a good place. About six months before we’d lost a baby, I was almost three

months along and afterwards I wanted to try again but Sam didn't, and we started arguing constantly. It's not an excuse it's the truth."

"That doesn't make it any better Kendra."

"You wouldn't understand Paige, the feeling you get when you lose a baby...it's heartbreaking. I just wanted something to make that pain go away and that's what you found."

"You're not the only person in the world to have a miscarriage Kendra and most of them don't go out and cheat on their husbands afterwards. At least when I slept with Joel it was someone I knew, had a connection to, you picked up some random guy from the street and did it."

"Why do I bother with you? If it wasn't about Paige, you didn't care."

"Christ Kendra, you cheated on my *brother* and didn't bother to tell him. He's still as clueless today as he was two years ago. Oh, and by the way I know *exactly* what it feels like to lose a child, I lost two and nearly died while losing the last one so don't start the whole I wouldn't understand because I do and if you utter one word of that to anyone, I will make sure my brother finds out what you did. Unlike you I can't deal with a marriage full of lies."

"Paige?" she gasped taking a step towards her. "When... who?"

"I'm *not* talking about it, I've dealt with it and the fact that I will never have children, but I will not watch you ruin my brother's life. That's only a small part of why I haven't come back. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to see if there's even going to be a wedding." She walked down the hall and up to her bedroom passing by her brother and Joel in the process.

"What was that about?" Sam asked going into the library and hugging his wife.

"Seems Paige has a thing about telling the truth, Aaron showed up and they spoke. She told him about the dalliance in

the mountain with Joel...he stormed out and as always, we argued.”

“She told Aaron about us?” Joel said turning to leave.

“Yeah, seems he wasn’t pleased about it,” Kendra stated watching him go. “Think something’s about to happen up there?” she added to her husband.

“I’m willing to bet on it but what I really want to know is what you and Paige have been fighting about for the last two years.”

“Sam, I can’t.”

“Wait, Paige was upset because she told Aaron about her cheating on him and then you two argued...because Paige knows you cheated on me?” Sam asked. “How did she find out?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Sam.”

“Kendra honey did you really think I didn’t know? You were beating yourself up and I couldn’t figure out why until I found a condom wrapper under the bed about a week after I got home. We haven’t used those since we were dating...”

“You’ve known all this time?” she asked tearing up. “And you still?”

“Love you, always honey. We all make mistakes; I did when I refused to talk about trying for another baby. How did Paige find out though?”

“She caught me. She was nearby, knew you were out of town and let herself in with the spare key when I didn’t answer. She heard a noise upstairs and went to check on it and found us...it was only that one time I swear. I felt so sick afterwards...”

“Honey, I don’t care. We’ve moved on and I’d like to think we’re stronger now than we’ve ever been. We’re about to become parents.”

“I love you Sam, so much. I was so afraid I’d lose you if you found out and I’m so sorry that you and Paige lost out on two years because of me. She told me to tell you, but I told

her it was none of her business and to get out because she wasn't part of this family anymore...that she hadn't been for years."

"It's okay honey. It's all going to work out some way. I never thought I'd admit it, but I do like having her around, makes things more entertaining especially with Joel. He almost took out the paper towel holder in the changing room at the mine because he was ticked that she was marrying Aaron. Wonder what this is going to do for his attitude?"

"Guess we'll just have to wait and see, and then apologize to Paige. She's a great sister you know, loyal through and through."

"Too much sometimes I'm afraid," Sam admitted. "If Aaron forgives her she's not going to change her mind unless Joel can change it for her."

"Who knows maybe he'll be able to do just that?" she sighed leaning into him as the baby kicked. "What do you think? Will Auntie Paige and Uncle Joel give you some cousins to play with? Oh god...Sam...she's never going to say yes to Joel."

"Why not?"

"She'll kill me for telling you, but your sister told me just now that she's lost two pregnancies. I don't know how but she said the last one nearly killed her and she can't have kids. She knows Joel wants them."

"He wants her more," Sam assured her. "Besides I've already put my bet on Joel and Paige to walk down the aisle within the next three months."

"You idiots down there made a pool as to who she's going to marry?"

"Hey, a man's gotta make some money somehow."

"You're lucky I'm pregnant and can't lift my leg high enough to kick your butt, Samuel Brighton."

"But you can lift them to do other things," he teased wiggling his eyebrows and making her laugh.

“If I have the right incentive perhaps...”

“You mean something like this?” he questioned pulling her tightly to him and showing her exactly how much he loved her.



“Paige? You in here?” Joel asked knocking on her bedroom door. He pushed the door open when she didn’t answer and saw her lying face down on the bed. “You told him?”

She didn’t respond and he crossed the room to her.

“Paige come on he’s not worth the tears...wait, why aren’t you crying?” he asked as he rolled her over and saw her dry face.

“Because I’m not, I’m mad at myself for thinking that telling the truth would make me feel better because it hasn’t. I still feel awful.”

“Paige, it doesn’t matter. He’s not the right guy for you. He can’t make you smile, and I’ve never seen you react to him the way you do when you’re in my arms.”

“Stop it, Joel. You should leave, you can’t be in here.”

“Why not, Paige? Why can’t I be in your bedroom sitting on your bed with you? Because it reminds you of the days when I would sneak in here and make love to you so quietly that no one even knew I was here? Does it remind you of what you’re going to be missing if you stupidly marry Aaron? Or is it because what you really want is for me to do this?” he questioned pulling her onto his lap and burying his hands in her hair as he kissed her.

Her arms reached up and wound themselves around his neck bringing them closer together as they both began to burn. “Joel we can’t...”

“Why not? Paige we both want this. There’s no denying this. You are in my blood baby and every time I see you, I

want you. I want to be with you, next to you, inside you. Let me show you what it should be like Paige. Let me love you the way you should be loved.”

“Just kiss me you stupid man,” she sighed as his words wrapped around her. “You always could make me sing.”

“You have a beautiful voice Paige, why deny it?” he teased sliding the buttons on her shirt open one at a time and placing a kiss on each portion of skin that was revealed beneath. “God you’re beautiful...what’s this?” he asked finding the tiny scar on her lower abdomen.

“Appendix...”

“I thought the appendix was on the other side,” he stated looking up at her.

“Fine, I had a tiny operation a few years ago, nothing to worry about. Now, are you going to inspect my body for scars or are you going to chase a few away?”

“I’ll chase them all away baby,” he laughed returning his mouth to hers.

She pulled at the bottom of his shirt and lifted it over his head breaking their kiss just long enough to get it off before seeking the warm lips that did chase away the scars that hadn’t cut too deep into her soul. She knew there were some that would never be chased away, and she was fine with that, but this was pure heaven. His touch ignited a fire inside her and she couldn’t control it.

“God baby, I don’t know who he was but if I meet him remind me to thank him,” Joel groaned as she allowed her hands to explore his body.

“Who says it was a he?” she teased scooting off the bed and to the door.

“Paige, where are you going?”

“To lock the door and turn on the radio,” she answered taking her time with both. She stood just out of reach and shimmed out of her jeans leaving her underwear for Joel to

remove himself before undoing the snap on her bra and letting her breasts fall free of their confinement.

“Baby...you were joking about the whole not a he thing right? Because if you weren't I might just explode right now,” he stated leaning forward and grabbing her by the waist.

“Oh, there was no he involved in my sexual awakening,” she whispered into his ear as he began to roll the tight bud of her nipple in his fingers.

“Jesus woman...you're going to kill me. The idea of you with another woman...that's burned into my brain Paige, and I don't know if I'll ever get it out.”

“Too bad it's not true,” she laughed.

“What?”

“There was only one person involved in that awakening Joel...me,” she told him kissing his neck as he lifted her up onto his lap letting her straddle him and feel his hardness beneath his jeans.

“You? How did you...”

“With a girl's best friend, my friend Hillary thought it'd be amusing to buy me a vibrator for a gag gift on my birthday, little did she know...”

“Who's better?” he asked sliding his fingers inside her panties and rubbing lightly on the sweet spot hidden beneath her curls. “A vibrator...or me?”

“Tough choice,” she said through a sigh. “A vibrator doesn't stop until the batteries die but it certainly can't do that...mmm yes, Joel...” she moaned as his fingers found the perfect spot to send her wild.

“And a vibrator can't cover your body with his, can't give you pleasure and a tiny hint of pain all at once like this...” he stated lightly biting her hardened nipple then soothing it with his tongue causing her to squirm and his fingers to slip inside her more grazing her clit with his nail sending shivers down her spine.

“Joel...please,” she cried as he did it again and again until she shattered.

“I’ll please you over and over until the only person in your memory is me,” he told her as he laid her on the bed and removed her underwear.

“Joel?” she said as he kissed his way down from her mouth to the nestle of curls. The instant his tongue touched her there she gripped the covers knowing he wouldn’t stop until he had removed anyone else from her body. What would he say if he knew the only one who had ever touched her like that was him?

“Joel...please I want you now.” She groaned after he made her world shatter again.

“Good because I plan on being inside you very soon,” he stated kissing her, letting her taste herself on his lips driving her crazier.

“Now...I want you now,” she urged him as he left her long enough to remove his jeans and boxers and then he was on top of her nudging her legs further apart and driving himself into her, filling her until she thought she’d die of fulfillment.

“Baby, ah baby,” he whispered into her ear as she wrapped her legs around him and let him in a bit further.

“Love me Joel,” she returned digging her nails into his back as the world began to spin. She pulled his mouth back down to hers and lifted her hips swallowing his moan of pleasure as they both rolled over the edge and into the blissful darkness, that was the peak of pleasure.

Chapter 10

“What are you thinking?” Joel inquired running his hand up and down her arm as she laid nestled against his chest.

“That I’m completely insane,” Paige admitted with a grin. “Why can’t I ever put a stop to this? It’s just like four years ago.”

“Except you hadn’t responded nearly as much then, you were thinking too much.”

“Maybe I was but not anymore. Thinking is the last thing I want to do right now. Thinking led me to tell Aaron about what happened in the mountain and him walking out and then this. Thinking is way overrated.”

“I won’t argue with you if it means that this will happen again and again,” he said chuckling. “I take it the wedding’s off?”

“I don’t know...sorry,” she added as her phone began to ring. She rolled over and checked the caller id stifling a groan before answering, “Aaron...hi.”

Joel cast her a curious gaze as she slid out of the bed and into a robe. She hurried into the bathroom and closed the door knowing she didn’t want the conversation overheard.

“I’m sorry Paige; I didn’t mean to run out like that.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry Aaron, for not telling you sooner and for...”

“Don’t worry about it Paige. I thought about it, and it makes sense that it would happen. You were tired and overcome with relief that he hadn’t died, and old feelings crept up. It happens but that doesn’t mean we can’t work through it. It was one time, right? What we have is solid Paige.”

“Yeah...Aaron, oh god...I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I thought I could, but I can’t.”

“Paige don’t be silly. I understand, I’m not a sexual person and that’s not going to change so if from time to time

you feel the need to...”

“Aaron, you did not just imply that you’d be fine with me sleeping with whomever while we’re married did you?” she gasped not noticing the door open slightly behind her.

“As long as you’re discreet I see no problem with it.”

“So, you’re telling me that you wouldn’t care if I was, oh I don’t know, in bed right now with Joel?”

“Honestly no. I just didn’t think you were the passionate sort but if you are then I’m willing to let you do what you need to do.”

“You know what? I’ll set up funding for your research because I do believe in it, but I won’t be marrying you. Anyone who can be okay with their spouse sleeping with anyone other than them is not for me. Goodbye Aaron, I’ll have Dennis set up the funds next week.”

Paige ended the call and rested her head against the coolness of the mirror closing her eyes. Her body began to shake as she tried to hold back the laughter. God she’d been stupid to not see the truth before now about Aaron.

“You okay?” Joel asked sliding his arms around her. “I know I shouldn’t have eavesdropped but baby it’s okay. He’s an idiot.”

“No, I am. The truth? The marriage was supposed to be a business arrangement and a way to keep greedy and sleazy men away from me. I just didn’t realize how far he’d actually go to ensure he kept my funding.”

“Forgiving you for sleeping with me wasn’t the end of it?”

“He was willing to give me carte blanche to do whatever I wanted, sleep with whoever I wanted to.”

“He said that?” Joel asked amazed at the man’s stupidity.

“And more, god this is a mess.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone here’s going to think that I called it off because of you and that’s not it at all. This...you and me, we aren’t getting together in any way again.”

“You’re telling me this is goodbye too?” he questioned as his hands tightened into fists.

“Yeah, look...Joel just hear me out before you go slamming out of here, would you?” she said as he turned to walk back to the bedroom.

“Fine, what exactly is your issue with us doing this now?”

“We’re not the same people we were Joel. Yes, this... connection between us is amazing but it doesn’t last. We can’t make it continue outside of the bedroom or mountain. Out there, we’re on opposite ends and if we’re honest, we always have been. I know what I want, and you know what you want, and they don’t match up.”

“What do you want Paige because I’ve got to tell you I have no clue. One minute I think you want the exact same things as I do and the next...you’re pushing me and everyone else away so quickly that we can’t catch our breath. What are you hiding?”

“Nothing, I simply don’t think this will work. I want someone who will let me be me.”

“Seems to me that Aaron wasn’t letting you be you Paige, he was trying to keep you from climbing and that use to be a huge part of you so what changed?”

“Nothing, I’ve been climbing I just didn’t tell Aaron, it’s not like he paid that much attention anyway.”

“So, let me get this straight...you were willing to marry a man you didn’t have any feelings for but you’re not willing to give *us* a shot? That makes no sense Paige. Why are you being so stubborn here? The only reason we fight so much outside of the bedroom is because we both know we want to be in it, and you’ve been adamant that it not happen.”

“It won’t work Joel. I’m just saving us a load of heartache down the road.”

“This is ridiculous Paige. We both know we’re going to end up in bed together again and again so for the sake of your father just admit it and marry me.”

“Oh my god...is that supposed to be your idea of a proposal?”

“I can do the flowers and romance if you want. I haven’t forgotten how Paige I’m simply trying to figure out if your refusal is coming from your head or if you’re hiding from your heart. It’s always belonged to me I’m just trying to get you to see that it’s also the smart move. We’ve had sex twice in a week Paige, both times without protection and I’m guessing you’re not on the pill if you and the idiot fiancé weren’t sleeping together...”

“So?”

“So...I think your father would prefer any child of ours to be born nine months *after* the wedding.”

“There won’t be any children Joel.” She sighed turning away from him.

“What? Paige look at me. What do you mean there won’t be any children?”

“That scar on my stomach...it wasn’t as tiny of an operation as I said. I had an ectopic pregnancy and there were complications,” she said not daring to look him directly in the eyes because she knew he’d see what she was hiding.

“Paige, I don’t—I’m sorry baby, you would have made a wonderful mother. Is that why you were going to marry Aaron?”

“He doesn’t want kids and I can’t have them...a match made in heaven,” she laughed. “That’s why we’d never work Joel, you’d resent me, and I can’t deal with that.”

“Damn it Paige do you really think I’d care if you can’t have kids? I don’t, besides if we do want children there are plenty of other ways to go about it, adoption for one...between your rescue credentials and the money you’d be a shoo in to be approved. But if you don’t want kids at all, I don’t care. All I’ve ever wanted was you.”

“You can say that now that you’re the number two at the mine, ten years ago was another story.”

“Are we back to that *again*? Paige, I wanted...you know what? Get dressed,” he stated walking over to his clothes and pulling them on.

“Excuse me?”

“Get dressed. You’re not going to believe me so you might as well see it for yourself,” he told her. “Please Paige?”

“Fine,” she grumbled pulling out a clean set of undergarments and slipping into them. She searched in the dresser for a pair of jeans that would fit; most of what was there was a size or two too big for her anymore. She finally found a pair of skinny jeans that should do the trick and slid into them easily, adding a belt to keep them up, and then pulled on a pair of her old boots and a sweater to ward off the chill that had begun to descend on them.

He took her down the back stairs and to his car without running into anyone and for that, she was grateful. She didn’t know what he was up to, and she didn’t want questions she didn’t have an answer to right now. They drove a short distance until they were on the other side of the Brighton property line, and he turned up the road to the old Jasper place.

“Joel, where are we going? There’s nothing out here but the Jasper place...”

“You’ll see,” he stated coming up around the last curve. He stopped the car and let her take in the sight of the house no longer run down and in disarray but clean and welcoming.

“Someone bought this place? *You*?” she asked as he crept slowly towards the house. She got out and stared up at the refurbished porch that wrapped around three sides of the house.

“Welcome to my home Paige,” he stated opening the door and showing her inside.

She slowly walked through the rooms, her heart constricting a bit as each showed her that he had remembered

her comments about the place, little hints she'd given him about a future she wanted to share with him.

"When did you do all this?" she asked at the foot of the stairs. "Why?"

"Let me show you," he said taking her hand and heading up the stairs. He opened the door to the master suite he'd remodeled and headed to the desk pulling the deed out of the safe in the bottom drawer.

"Wait...Joel, this was before I left," she said confused as she sat down on the edge of the bed. "Why would you buy this place...redo it the way..."

"The way you wanted to see it?" he finished for her. "Because I had planned on asking you to marry me, rebuild this place with me. I went to see your dad that night to tell him...ask him for permission I guess, and as much as he wanted to say yes, he told me that you weren't ready. For the first time I argued with Cord but eventually I saw his point. You had everything growing up except for your mom and you were always getting your way until he said no to you working at the mine. If we had gotten married back then we would have fought about it constantly and that would have hurt us."

"So, you two plotted against me? You knew I wanted you to stand up and tell my dad the truth. Knew that if I heard you lie to him about seeing someone else, I'd transfer to another school to finish my degree because I'd already given you the ultimatum...you set me up."

"We wanted you to go somewhere new to see if you really wanted this life. We never thought you'd leave and not come back."

"Well, I did and I'm damn sure glad I did. Do you have *any* idea how much the two of you messed up my life? Had you all just listened to me, really listened you would have known why I pushed you to that choice. What sort of life I wanted but because of that...no, you don't deserve to know," she said stopping herself from revealing what their decisions had cost her.

“Know what Paige?”

“Not a damned thing Joel. Thank you for telling me, I was right all these years to stay away from the two most conniving men I’ve ever known. I thought Kendra was the lowest one around here but you two...you make her look angelic by default,” she scoffed heading towards the door. “Enjoy your house Joel because it’s the last thing you’ll ever have because of me.”

“Paige, wait,” he said hurrying out after her, but she was already out the front door, and his phone was ringing. “Cord, this had better be good...Kendra’s in labor? No everything’s not alright, I have to go, I’ll see if Paige will come but it won’t be easy. If I can find her that is.”

“You lost my daughter?” Cord asked amused.

“We both did. I showed her the house, told her the truth...”

“What did you do that for Joel? Kendra and Sam said she and Aaron were headed for a split.”

“They’re over; apparently he was okay with Paige having dalliances outside of the marriage, approved of it in fact.”

“Why tell her then?”

“She’d never understand if I didn’t, I just hope she’ll forgive us.”

“She loves you, Joel. I saw it in her eyes when the shaft caved in, and we couldn’t get through to you. She looked like someone had punched her in the gut and sat on her chest.”

“You might think that, but she doesn’t want to admit it and until she does we can’t move forward. She keeps telling me that we never listened to her. Maybe we didn’t.”

“Nonsense, she’s just headstrong. What you need to do is find her, toss her over your shoulder and get her here. Maybe it’ll entice her to have one of her own,” Cord chuckled hanging up.

“I’m pretty sure it’d do the exact opposite,” Joel muttered starting the car. He looked up and down the road, but she

wasn't on it and there was no way he'd be able to find her until she was ready for him to. His best option was to go back to the Brighton's house and wait for her to show up he decided.



“Stupid, arrogant, jerks,” Paige said kicking the rocks from her path. “Did they honestly think that sending me away was the best thing? Alright maybe I should have told Joel the reason I gave him the ultimatum before I left and gave him one last chance, but it wouldn't have changed anything that happened afterwards. I would have lost the baby, anyway, wouldn't I?”

She felt like shouting, throwing something, anything to shut out the reply that formed in her head. The doctor had told her stress had worked to bring on the premature labor a day shy of twenty weeks. She'd been numb after that, knowing that it was her fault, and she'd transferred that blame to Joel for not standing up for her but now...how could she look her father in the eyes again and not hate him?

Her entire reason for joining the rescue team had been to prove that she could be useful without being inside the mine and the numbness had been beneficial at first. Slowly she'd started coming back to life and that was because of her team, minus Wayne, who hadn't liked her constant refusal of taking their relationship further. They'd dated casually but they'd never gotten past a few kisses before something inside her had shut down.

Then had come the call that her father had suffered a heart attack and she'd gone to see him, running into Joel in the emergency room and for two days, they'd sat beside his bed praying he'd pull through. Much like when she found Joel in the mountain they'd fallen into bed when the news came that he'd be fine, the stint they'd put in should alleviate the problem that led to the attack and a healthier lifestyle would ensure he see his grandchildren.

A few weeks later, she received another surprise when the line on the pregnancy test showed positive results. She was alternating between whether or not to tell Joel when the Fairway incident happened. That day still haunted her, but it wasn't until after she'd decided to leave the team and come home that her world had truly been shattered.

The cramps had come on suddenly and she was scared history was repeating itself, she'd been almost twelve weeks along and when the doctor discovered what was causing the cramping she'd been devastated. Then her fallopian tube had ruptured forcing her into emergency surgery and the resulting diagnosis that she'd never have children.

She hadn't thought anything could be worse than that day but now she knew that she'd been wrong and what was worse were the 'if onlys' flying through her head reminding her of exactly what she was missing out on now. The two men she'd trusted to be honest with her had lied to her and set her on the path that led her here...alone and miserable.

Chapter 11

“I’m sorry guys,” Kendra stated smiling up at her husband, father-in-law and Joel.

“False labor has labor in it for a reason,” Cord said kissing her cheek. “We went to the hospital at least ten times before Sam made his way into the world.”

“What about with Paige?” Sam questioned with a laugh.

“She was stubborn, almost two weeks *overdue*. Doctor said she simply wasn’t ready, but don’t worry, she’ll come around. She always does,” Cord answered with a direct look for Joel.

“I think I’m going to go out and see if I can find Paige,” Joel said backing out of the room.

“No need to go looking for me,” Paige stated poking her head around the door. “Just stopping in to say goodbye, I’m going home in the morning.”

“Paige wait,” Cord called out to her. “I understand if you’re angry that we overstepped but honestly we thought it was for the best.”

“Too bad you didn’t have a crystal ball *Cord* because you would have seen that what you thought was *best* for me was the worst thing you could have ever done. It would have been gentler to simply shoot me.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake Paige, do you have to be so overdramatic?” Sam complained. “You’ve argued with Kendra for two years for no reason.”

“If that’s what you want to believe fine, I’m done with all of you,” she said heading up to her room and shutting the door enjoying the click the lock made as she packed her camera bag and folded the clothes, she’d brought with her. She wasn’t leaving anything this time because she wasn’t going to be back.

The knock that sounded at six dragged her from her dreams where she'd never left and where she and Joel had gotten married giving her father that first grandchild.

“Paige, it’s Sam. Listen Jim’s kids went out camping last night but when he went to check on them, they weren’t there. We’re going to go out...”

“I’ll be right there,” she replied sliding out of bed. Fifteen minutes later, they pulled into the camping area near Johnson Trailhead, and she slid her backpack on calling Maggie to follow.

She spied the grim looking parents, Jim and Brittany, as the rest of her team pulled in. She let Maggie investigate the camping gear while she checked the map Joel had brought. They were sectioning it off when Maggie began to dance anxious to move and she checked her watch. If Lenny had left at the same time as them to get the coms it’d be another twenty to thirty minutes before he arrived, time she didn’t want to waste as clouds began to roll in.

“Rabbit, Moose, there’s a path that leads through the park area, take the Jeeps and spread out. Rabbit, you set up here with Harry and his group. Moose you take this section with Ed and Bobby. I’ll have Sam and Joel cover these areas with their groups and Hillary you stay here with Brittany, there’s no point in telling Jim to stay put but there’s rain coming our way and she doesn’t need to be out in it.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Rabbit said with a grin. “Cell services any good out here?”

“No, spotty at best, Lenny’s bringing the coms from the mine and should be here soon. Just as a warning, see this light blue line here? It’s a creek, typically mild but if this storm hits the way it looks like it will, it won’t be a gentle creek anymore. It starts up here and runs all the way through the park down below these mountains and then to this lake,” she said showing them the path. “Don’t get caught in it if it starts to storm, the water on a good day is freezing but add in the excess from the higher altitude on the mountain up there and you’re looking at hypothermia in no time.”

“Any ideas where they might have gone? Jim said they had come out here last weekend and they wandered around a bit, but they were back at their tent before dark,” Craig inquired.

“Honestly there’re too many places they could have gone. We could be out here for days if they’re hurt. I’m going to let Joel and Sam know where they should take their Jeeps pack blankets in the back as well as the rain gear,” she told them, quickly moving away to give her brother and Joel their directions. When the group was busy getting their things ready, she quietly slipped away following Maggie who raced off as the thunder began to roll in, by the time anyone realized she was gone it’d be too late to try and track her.

As they walked through the brush, she realized she knew exactly where Maggie was heading, and she hoped they hadn’t crossed the creek. If they did Maggie would lose their scent and there were miles and miles of paths, they could have taken along with the array of mountains they could have tried to climb. The wind began to whip, and she dug her ball cap out of her bag tying her long chestnut brown hair back out of the way as they neared the creek. Maggie stopped and she cursed the universe for making things so difficult. Crossing the creek wasn’t difficult but it meant slowing down to ensure she didn’t fall in and get soaked.

“Let’s just hope we can figure out which way they went Maggie Mae,” she sighed starting out over it. Why did boys always insist on crossing the creek in the deepest part and not at one of the many bridges along the way?



“Has anyone seen Paige?” Hillary asked as Lenny arrived with the coms.

“I thought she was with you,” Sam stated as they took enough for their group.

“She said she was going to tell you which area to search and that’s the last I saw of her,” she replied. “Hey Jesse have

you seen Paige?” she shouted across the group.

“Nope, don’t tell me she’s disappeared again,” he said coming over.

“What do you mean again?” Joel asked.

“It’s not the first time Paige has gone out ahead of everyone else,” Craig answered.

“Maggie’s not here,” Rabbit told them.

“And her pack’s not in the Jeep anymore,” Moose added.

“We’ll just have to hope she knows what she’s doing,” Sam stated.

“We’ll just have to hope she doesn’t do anything stupid,” Craig muttered.

“What was that?” Joel questioned.

“Let’s just say Paige has a way of getting the job done with no regard to her own safety,” Jesse stated.

“So you’re saying not only should we be looking for two missing boys but also my sister and her dumb dog?” Sam laughed. “Great.”

“Paige will be fine,” Joel stated. “She knows this area by heart and that dumb dog won’t let anything happen to her. Come on, we should get going this rain’s not going to hold off for long.”

“Right behind you,” Rabbit said heading to the Jeep as Moose and the others moved towards theirs.

“If anyone sees Paige make sure she sticks with the group the rest of the day,” Joel called out to them. “We all know what this area does when it rains, so be sharp and don’t get caught in the creek.”



“So, what do you think Maggie Mae? Think they’re in there?” she asked staring up at the mountain. Maggie danced

as though she agreed, and Paige nodded pulling out a treat for her as the rain began to fall. She hoped they weren't down in the bottom cavern, getting them out if they were hurt would be impossible on her own and for the first time she regretted her decision to head out by herself. What she wouldn't give to have someone else with her.

She took out the walkie that she'd been carrying since the mine accident and thought about everything that had happened since that phone call from Neal. Her life was completely different, her feelings for her father were stretched, and she was once again alone, this time completely by her choice, but it still hurt. "Okay Maggie Mae, I'm going to head up that way, you be a good girl and stay here; I don't want to go searching for you too."

Maggie barked as she took the treat and found herself a dry place in a small inlet in the base of the mountain.

"Good girl, wish me luck," she added to herself as she pulled out her gear.

Her harness was on, and she began to climb the rain forcing her to use the rope as it made the handholds slippery. When she reached the top, she tried to remember if it'd always been that high or if it had just seemed easier when she was a kid. She slipped the rope back into her bag and started down the pathways that led deep into the base of the mountain.

There were several she could take and by instinct, she guided herself down the shortest of them, reaching the first of the cliffs she'd need to climb down, the larger of the two and the harder of them. She didn't want to waste time uncoiling the rope, so she carefully made her way down the rougher side that gave her easier access to multiple feet and hand holes. She saw the flashlight sitting on the flat rock table she, Joel and Sam had played on when they were around Brent and Greg's ages, and she knew they were down here; the where was the question she had to ask herself.

She could hear a dripping sound coming from further inside the mountain and knew the rain was beginning to come down harder which meant the bottom cavern would be filling

up with water and if the boys were down there, they'd be in more danger than they knew. She quickly walked down the pathway checking a few of the smaller areas where they might have snuck into and with each passing moment, she knew the only place she'd find them was in the bottom part of the cavern.

The second cliff took half the time getting down and as she jumped the final twenty some feet to the bottom, she could smell the mustiness of the water that was coming into the cave. She rushed down the final pathways and through the hole that opened into the magnificent cavern that she had always loved.

“Brent, Greg...are you in here? It's Paige,” she called out scanning the different levels until she saw the flash of red in the far corner.

“Miss Paige?” Greg shouted. “We're over here...Brent's hurt and there's water coming in.”

“It's okay Greg,” she said calmly, picking her way over as the rocks began to become slippery with the water dripping in from above as well as coming up from the creek that ran below the mountain.

She knelt down in the half-foot of water and checked to see how bad Brent was. His foot was trapped in between a rock and a small crevice and she looked around to see what she could use to get him out with.

“Greg, can you hand me that log over there?”

He nodded and scurried away to get it. She took it and lodged it between the base of the rock and the crevice.

“When I push down on it, I need you to help move your brother out of the way. Brent this might hurt,” she warned gently. “Ready...alright, three, two, go...”

She pushed down with all her strength and the rock wobbled up slightly allowing Greg to help Brent move backwards before she had to lower the rock. She moved Brent back towards the wall and checked his ankle, “I think it's broken. I'm going to wrap your foot, so it doesn't move as

much. Greg there should be a couple harnesses in my pack; can you help your brother into one and then yourself?”

“Yeah,” he answered as she handed the bag to him. She opened the case of medical items and pulled out an ace bandage to wrap around Brent’s ankle to still it as they made their way out. She took his wet sock off, replaced it with a dry one from her bag, and then broke a few sticks to make a temporary brace. Greg had slipped the harness on his brother and was working on his own when she finished wrapping Brent’s ankle. She pulled out a smaller rope attaching it to her harness and when he had tightened his harness, she attached the other end to it.

“Whatever you do, do *not* remove that understood?” she ordered. “Alright, Brent, feel like a piggy back ride?”

“Okay,” he said as his eyes widened. “Miss Paige, the water...”

“I know,” she told him easily. “Greg, I’m going to need you to help me attach Brent to my harness, think you can help?”

“Yeah...are we going to be okay?” he whispered showing that his thirteen-year-old bravado was quickly fading.

“We’re going to be fine, I promise,” she replied lifting the smaller eleven-year-old up and making sure he held on tightly as they started back towards the opening, by the time they reached it the water had risen exponentially. It was almost to her waist, and she pushed Greg ahead of her.

They reached the base of the first cliff, and she unhooked Greg from her harness. “Can you manage without the rope?”

“Yeah, we’ve done this tons,” he said, and she let him go ahead as she took out her rope. She wouldn’t be able to pull both of them up without it and she began to slowly make her way up after Greg. Her lungs were burning when she reached the top and she cringed at the strain in her muscles. She was sorely out of shape for this kind of thing.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said after regaining her breath. She checked the water level and knew they were far from safe as

the cavern below them began to fill. The light rain must have turned to a downpour and the added runoff was flooding the cave faster than she'd ever seen.

When they reached the base of the second cliff, the water was lapping at their ankles, and she decided to take a chance and have Greg climb beside her leaving him clipped to her harness. They were halfway up when a loud crash sounded below, and she saw water start gushing in from one of the old pathways that had been blocked.

"Greg keep going," she said when he balked. "Don't look down."

"Miss Paige...we're not going to make it, are we?" he asked, and her heart dropped.

"Hey, I made a promise, and I don't back out of them. I will get you and your brother out of here," she said with a mixture of gentleness and force. "Now get moving, there's a hand grip just above your head see it? Go on up, I'm going to need it in just a minute."

The boy nodded trustingly, and she prayed she wasn't fooling them all. He moved up using the hole she'd suggested and then he stretched, reaching for the next so he could move out of her way. His hand made contact with the wall, but as he began to pull himself up, the rock crumbled a piece of it coming down on her as she moved slightly to shield Brent from being hit.

Greg scrambled to regain his balance, but he couldn't hold on and fell. She reached out and grabbed his wrist tightening her hold on the wall as she braced herself for the impact of his weight. She gritted her teeth and tried to lift him back to the safety of the wall, but she couldn't do it with one hand.

"Greg, I need you to help me here...calm down you're not going to fall, you're connected to my harness remember? Okay, see if you can swing your feet back towards the wall... good. Now I need you to do it again, this time see if you can find a spot where you can get a hand grip." She took a deep breath, swung him back towards her, and then lifted enough

for him to get his feet on the tiny ledge that jutted out below her.

“See, nothing to it,” she said as he let go of her hand and gripped the wall. “What do you say we get out of here?”

“I want to go home,” Brent said weakly.

“That’s where we’re headed,” she assured him, moving over where Greg had been and carefully testing the rest of the rock wall before going on up. She reached the top and pulled herself over then knelt down to pull Greg the rest of the way up. He gave her a huge hug the instant his feet hit the ground and she felt her heart constrict. There was nothing she wouldn’t give to have something like this in her life...not the danger or peril but a child who put their trust in her explicitly, someone to love her as much as she loved them.

“You okay Brent?” she asked rubbing his leg lightly.

“Uh huh,” he answered.

“Good, we’ve still got a bit of a hike, but we should be out of the worst of the danger from the water. I’ve never seen it get any higher than it is now,” she told them glancing at the still rising waters. She hoped she was right because if the entire cavern flooded the only place left for the water to go was up the pathways after them.

Chapter 12

“Miss Paige, what was that noise?” Greg asked as they neared the outside opening.

“I’d say the rain,” she stated glancing towards the pounding rain. No wonder the cavern was flooding so much. The storm was worse than anything she’d seen in years, here or anywhere. “There’s no way we’ll make it down this side safely, think you can reach the crook?”

“Yeah, I can make it,” he answered her as the sound of static came to her ears. “That wasn’t rain.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she agreed digging into the pack he was wearing and pulling out the walkie that was squawking.

“Paige...Paige are you there?” Joel’s voice sounded over it.

“Joel took you long enough,” she teased as relief hit her.

“Whose fault is that? You’re the one who left without getting one of the coms we were using.”

“Come on Joel, it took me less than five minutes to figure out you’d taken one of the old walkies into the mine. You know I wouldn’t trust one of those coms.”

“No but you could have at least waited for the rest of us. Where are you? This storm’s getting worse by the minute, and it’s expected to last late into the night.”

“We’re headed to Crooked Point. The rain’s coming down too hard to get out on the Eagle Nest side.”

“We? Paige, did you find the boys?” Jim asked with barely controlled hope.

“Oh lord...Jim, I’m so sorry, *yes*, the boys are with me. Greg’s fine but Brent’s got a broken ankle and I’d say a concussion judging by the goose egg on his head.”

“Thank God,” he replied, and she heard the faintest echo of cheers. “We’ll be out there as fast as we can.”

“Guys, unless you’re on this side of the creek I don’t think you’ll make it, not even in your Jeeps.”

“Paige what’s going on up there?” Sam asked.

“It’s what’s going on down there. The caverns are flooded, both of them, and the water was still rising.”

“Christ,” Joel stated taking the walkie back. “Where did you find the boys?”

“Later, right now you need to head around the back way.”

“We’ll send Moose and Rabbit,” Jesse told her. “They’d crossed the creek earlier this afternoon to expand the search. Be careful Paige this weather is insane.”

“Alright, let me know if they need any directions. Tell them to pick up Maggie too, she’s at the base of the Nest. We can meet you at the emergency room faster than you all could make it out here. Tell Brittany and Jim I won’t let anything happen to them, okay?”

“Will do Paige, take it easy,” Joel replied relieved that they were all safe, at least remotely.

“Alright Greg, ready?” she asked adjusting Brent on her back slightly.

“Sure thing, Miss Paige. Thanks for saving us,” he added with his slightly crooked smile, and she felt a sadness pull at her again. It’d been four years since she’d learnt that she wouldn’t be able to have children, but it wasn’t until now that she realized how much her world would be shattered because of it.

She sent him a smile and started towards the point. The walk didn’t take long, and she was happy to see that the peak blocked the majority of the rain. She surveyed the decline and when she was sure that they’d be able to make it, she set up their ropes.

“Greg, I’m going to head down first, I don’t want you to move until I tell you to, okay? Good,” she stated when he nodded as she stepped carefully over the edge and began to head down.

“Greg...come on down,” she yelled once she’d cleared her line.

“Just take it nice and easy. You’re okay...that’s it. Greg slow down...” she shouted as the wind kicked up and caught him tossing him sideways. She grabbed the rope tightly trying to untangle it from the tree where it landed.

“Greg, just sit still, okay? I’m going to have to come up and get you...” she told him several minutes later as it refused to budge.

“Brent will you be okay down here?” she added over her shoulder to the boy.

“Yeah...what was that?” he asked as a flash of light caught them.

“That’d be our ride,” she said with a smile. She saw Rabbit and Moose jump out of their Jeeps at nearly the same time and rush over.

“Someone need a ride out here?” Moose teased helping to unbuckle Brent from her harness.

“I thought there were two boys,” Rabbit said as he wrapped one of the blankets around Brent and hurried him to the waiting vehicle.

“Greg’s rope is caught in the tree,” she said aiming her flashlight up towards the boy. “I’m going back up.”

“Paige you’re soaked, let me do it,” Moose urged her.

“I’ve already got the harness on and as much as I appreciate the offer and your skills I’m better suited for this climb,” she told him. “Maggie’s in the Jeep, right? Good, do me a favor and keep this rope from whipping in this wind.”

She started back up, taking half the time as she didn’t have an extra seventy pounds on her back, and she quickly untangled the rope checking to make sure Moose had hold of them as she headed further up to Greg. She unclipped the short rope from her harness and attached it to Greg’s then transferred herself to his line.

“Okay Greg, come down towards me,” she told him and once he was standing on the small ledge with her, she wrapped her arm around his waist and pulled him back against her.

“Just lean back into me, I’ve got you,” she stated as she headed back down. She reached the ground and unhooked them as Rabbit wrapped a blanket around Greg and herded him to the waiting Jeep.

“Go on,” Moose told her, “I’ll grab the stuff.”

“Thanks,” she said squeezing his arm. “There’s some more treats for Maggie in the bottom pocket of my bag, make sure she gets a few.”

“Will do,” he said as Rabbit helped her up into the Jeep giving her a dry warm blanket.

Heat blasted from the dash, and she realized how cold she was. She turned looking at the boys huddled together in the back seat and pulled out another blanket and spread it out over them.

“You guys did great,” she told them with a smile. “Your mom and dad will be at the hospital.”

“They’re gonna be so mad,” Brent said barely audible.

“They’re not going to be mad, I promise. They might be upset but the fact that you’re both safe will help ease it over,” Paige said gently. “Just rest it’s been a rough day.”

“For you mostly,” Rabbit said quietly to her squeezing her cold hand. “Do you always have to do things on your own?”

“Typically,” she grinned. “I’m fine. Let’s just get them to their parents then I’ll let you all harp on and on about me being foolish.”

“Count on it,” he stated, and she knew he was right.

They pulled up outside the ER forty minutes later and the moment they stepped inside, Jim, Brittany, and half of the searchers who’d been out that morning swarmed them. The doctor on duty immediately took Brent and began checking him over. The head nurse took Greg’s vitals and conferred

with the doctor before she went searching for something dry for them to wear.

“Paige,” Brittany cried spying her once she had assured herself that her boys were safe. “Good lord you’re soaked/”

“And bleeding,” Jim added.

“It’s fine,” she told them.

“No, it’s not Paige,” Joel stated lifting the strands of her hair that had fallen out when she’d taken her hat off away from the cut on her neck.

“Honestly it’s just a scratch,” she argued as they pushed her over to the doctor who took one look at her and shook his head.

“Put her in the second cube there and bring me a suture kit,” the doctor called out to the nurse before he signed off on the orders for Brent.

“Really, I’m fine,” she tried again.

“Sit down Paige,” Sam ordered as though that would work.

“You’re taking the wrong approach with her,” Jesse said poking his head around the curtain.

“Then what’s the *right* approach?” Joel inquired as she dabbed at the scratch with a paper towel and tried to leave.

“There isn’t one,” Craig laughed. “Paige always refuses medical attention, orders it for everyone except for herself.”

“That’s too bad,” Joel stated, “because she’s going to have that cut looked at, good grief Paige, what happened?”

“I don’t know...a rock or something,” she shrugged.

“Or try a boulder,” Jim said coming back over to them. “Greg said you took half the rock wall to the shoulder when he slipped and then you caught him.”

“What?” Jesse said staring at her. “With that arm?”

“My arm is fine. The muscles healed perfectly,” she sighed. “Now would you all please let me through? I want to

check on Maggie and then get home and out of these wet clothes.”

“Maggie’s fine,” Moose said coming in. “She’s happily chomping on a bone.”

“I’ve got an extra pair of shoes in the Jeep,” Hillary offered.

“And I’ve got some dry clothes,” Nurse Joan stated handing her a pair of new scrubs. “Everyone out while I help Paige get dried off,” she ordered shooing everyone away and closing the curtain. “No arguments young lady.”

Paige knew better than to argue with Joan and she wasn’t going to complain about not having to wear wet clothes. She was peeling her pants off when Hillary stuck her head inside the curtain and grinned handing her a bag. Paige glanced in it and sent her a curious glance.

“What, you haven’t grown that much,” she shrugged. “I had one of my bags in the Jeep still so it’s all clean.”

“Thanks Hil,” she said glancing at the undergarments. Joan wrapped a towel around her as she slipped out of her wet ones, replaced them with the ones from Hillary, and then shook out the bottoms of the scrubs holding her steady as she put them on. She was about to pull the top on when Joan saw the bruising on her shoulder, and she clucked at her.

“Fine my hinny Paige Elizabeth...leave the tank on but you’re going to let the doctor look at that shoulder.”

She rolled her eyes thankful Joan couldn’t see it and gave in, hopping up onto the bed and sliding her feet into the dry socks. Joan opened the curtain and she found herself face to face with her entire old crew, her brother, Joel, Ed, Harry, Bobby, Lenny and Doug. Across the room, she saw Jim and Brittany listening to the doctor as he finished checking out Greg.

“Holy cow Paige,” Craig whistled seeing the bruise that had formed on her shoulder.

“Why don’t you all do something useful and go get me something warm to drink? Not coffee though...”

“It’ll warm you up quicker,” Harry told her.

“Except I don’t drink it, never have, never will,” she laughed. “Tea, hot chocolate whatever...and bring some for Brittany and Greg. I’m sure Jim would accept the coffee.”

The guys from the mine headed out to get drinks for everyone with the money Sam slipped them and she tried again, “Hil, guys, you don’t have to stay. A few stitches and I’ll be out of here. Sam, can you get Maggie for me?”

“Sure Sis,” he answered forcing Moose to go with him and the others agreed to go check on the equipment leaving her alone with Joel.

“Joel, please go.”

“Not on your life Paige,” he said stepping into the cube and over to her. “Baby, don’t *ever* go off on your own again do you hear me? If I’d lost you...”

“You don’t have me, Joel. You never did, now why don’t you walk away so the doctor can get in here and stitch this stupid cut up so I can get home?”

“Paige...”

“Wow Joan said you had a whopper but really Paige, that’s going to hurt like hell in the morning and if what Greg and Brent had told me about your little adventure is true I wouldn’t be surprised if you can’t move tomorrow,” Matt said slipping into the cube and sitting down to check the cut.

“Go away Joel,” she stated ignoring Matt’s inquiring gaze.

“I’m not going anywhere until one of you all explains that comment. What exactly happened Paige?”

“Nothing other than me finding the boys and trying to get them out of there before it flooded. I’m *sure* the boys embellished enormously.”

“Not if this bruise is anything to go by,” Matt said. “First, I’m going to clean up that cut and then we’ll check out your shoulder. You’re lucky Paige a bit deeper and you could have...”

“Let me guess...bled to death?” she laughed. “Not the first time I’ve heard that one, especially after a fun climb.”

“Don’t be so flippant Paige,” Joel stated.

“Oh, come on, nothing’s wrong and we’re all home safe and sound,” she sighed. “Why don’t you go home?”

“Because I need him to give you a ride home,” Sam said. “Kendra called and she’s not feeling the greatest. I’m going to go and check on her, I’ll take Maggie home for you and Joel can drop you off later alright? Great, I’ll see you later Sis.”

“Gee thanks,” she groaned half out of annoyance and half because Matt had given her a shot to numb the area around the cut. He waited until it was numbed before deftly sewing her up and then began to manipulate her shoulder until he was assured that there was no lasting damage.

“Well, it looks like everything’s okay but if you feel anything that doesn’t feel normal come in and we can do some scans. Now, when was your last tetanus shot?”

“About eighteen months ago after my arm was cut so I’m good to go, aren’t I?”

“Can’t hold you here any longer if you don’t want to enjoy our hospitality,” Matt said squeezing her good shoulder and heading out.

“Ah...” she hummed slipping off the bed, “that’s so much better.”

“What is?” Joel asked.

“Being off the chopping block. Every time I get out of one of these places whole is another reason to smile.”

“Tell me that in the morning,” he said helping her into the top of the scrubs.

“I plan on taking a nice long hot bath when I get home, downing about half a bottle of pain killers, and going to sleep.”

“You down half a bottle of those pain killers and all you’re going to do is sleep,” he warned.

“I was exaggerating Joel. I don’t have any plans on dying. I made sure of that today.”

“Let’s keep it at that Paige. Ready to head home?”

“More than ready,” she sighed. Twenty minutes later, they were in the Jeep and pulling out of the hospital parking lot after Jim and Brittany stopped her yet again.

“Paige...wait,” Joel said stopping her as she went to open the door.

“What do you want Joel?”

“I’m sorry about the past I wish I could change it, but I can’t. I’m hoping you can give me another chance because I know we can do this Paige. We can make this work this time.”

“No, we can’t. Look, I’m still going home, it was just delayed by Greg and Brent going missing. Take care of my father. You two seem to have a better relationship than we ever did.”

“Paige, baby, would you stop it? We belong together and you damned well know it.”

“I don’t know that, and I don’t care to know it,” she stated hurrying into the house. She hated feeling this way, half of her wanting to reach out and kiss him and the other wanting to run as fast as she could and never look back. Leaving was the only way she could figure out what she wanted...it was the only way she could survive.

Chapter 13

“Are you going to get over here and stop her or what?” Cord inquired the moment Joel answered the phone.

“Damn it man, its five o’clock in the morning. How do you think I’m going to be able to stop her anyway? She was pretty damned insistent on leaving when I dropped her off.”

“But she’s sore and you can use that to your advantage. Look, get over here and do whatever you have to in order to keep her around here. I’ve lost too many years with my little girl and I don’t want to lose anymore. She’s hurting and it’s more than just physical. You were always the one to soothe her, comfort her, whatever she needed back then...get over here and do it now.”

“Cord, she doesn’t want me, not anymore.”

“When did you become a quitter Joel Wright? If I thought you’d changed your mind about my little girl I’d have kicked your butt out of my mine years ago but I knew you hadn’t. She’s stubborn I’ll give you that, but she’s still head over heels in love with you boy. She always has been.”

“She’s stayed away for ten years because of us Cord, because we interfered and wouldn’t listen to her. So, this time I’m going to, no matter what happens I’m going to let her be. Let her decide. If she decides to stay then I’ll pursue her, there’s no way I’d be able not to, but if she goes...that’s her choice. It’ll be completely up to her this time.”

“If you let her go, she’s not going to come back, not unless I have another heart attack and I don’t plan on that happening. I’ve avoided bacon for far too long to ensure that. So, get off your ass and get over here. I don’t know what’s going on with her but she’s not Paige. She’s a shell of herself and I want her back.”

“Alright...” Joel sighed knowing the man wouldn’t give up. “I’ll see what I can do. Just don’t get your hopes up that I’ll make a difference.”

“Just get over here, would you? She’s likely to be up anytime and I don’t want her calling the chopper to come pick her up,” Cord said hanging up.

“Damn it, Paige, can’t I get one night’s sleep?” he muttered under his breath though no one was around to hear. He quickly got dressed, grabbed the plans they’d worked on since the cave-in, and jumped in the Jeep. It didn’t take him long to pull up in front of the Brighton house and he found the front door open. Cord was in the study eating his breakfast and he nodded towards the stairs.

“She’s still asleep. What little of it she got I’d say,” he told him.

“Sam and Kendra?”

“They’re in the east wing, decided to stay here until the baby comes so someone will be with Kendra all the time.”

“Got it...you have no qualms about sending me into your daughter’s room while she’s still sleeping?” Joel asked folding his arms across his chest.

“None at all. I’m not senile, I know exactly what’s likely to happen. Well one of two things is likely to happen. She’ll either throw you out on your ass waking the entire house as she yells at you or she’s going to give in and the two of you will find some bliss between the sheets.”

“Cord Brighton...you would have skinned me alive if I’d snuck into her room ten years ago.”

“That was then; I know she’s not a little girl though to me she’ll always be one. The two of you need to find that spark you had back then. I’ve seen shades of it this last week, but I want her happy and if the only way to get her there is for you to sneak into her room, then so be it. You two seemed to enjoy your interlude in the mountain just fine and she was engaged at the time.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Cord,” Joel stated feeling a faint flush on his neck.

“Sure you do boy. Most people wouldn’t have noticed but I saw the soot on Paige’s skin. Places where soot wouldn’t

have smeared like it did without some help. Now go before she completely wakes up.”

Joel couldn't believe the audacity of the man, but he wasn't going to complain. He'd take all the help getting through to Paige he could. He didn't want to lose her again, not after the confirmation of the attraction they still felt and the connection they still had in bed shown to him. He'd do whatever it took to convince her to stay but she had to make the choice. It had to be her decision this time.

He turned the doorknob and pushed it open, thankful that sometime in the last ten years they'd fixed the squeaky hinges, and shut it without a sound, flipping the lock so they wouldn't be disturbed. Maggie lifted her head from her spot at the foot of the bed and gave him a glare almost daring him to send her away. He eased across the room to the balcony doors and opened them bringing a fresh breeze into the room hoping the dog would get the hint. After a few moments, Maggie got up and walked outside but not before ensuring that her owner was okay and giving him another look that said to behave or deal with her.

Paige looked tiny lying in the huge bed and the hollowness in her cheeks worried him. She'd lost weight this last week and the bruise on her shoulder seemed to have grown three times as big overnight. He wanted to pick her up and take her home with him. Wrap her in the down comforter on his bed and hold her until she promised to stay...promised to take care of herself the way she took care of everyone else.

The alarm on the bedside table began to buzz and he hurriedly turned it off, not wanting her fully awake yet. He still needed to think of a way to convince her to stay, a way to get her to forgive him and her father for trying to do what they thought at the time was best for her.

She rolled over flinging her arm out to hit the alarm and instead found his hand still resting on it. Her eyes fluttered open and, in her sleepiness, she smiled up at him. “You're not supposed to be here.”

“Shh, we’ll wake your dad,” he told her as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

“He’d be mad at you for sneaking in here again... oww...” she groaned as she tried to push herself up with her hurt shoulder.

“Easy there baby, you have a nasty bruise,” he stated kicking off his shoes and sliding into the bed with her. He brushed the hairs that’d fallen out of her bun away from her neck to survey the bandage.

“Mmm...it hurts,” she cringed when his fingers quickly checked to ensure there wasn’t any swelling.

“Let me get your pills. The doctor prescribed some pain medicine last night for you,” he reminded her when her face blanked.

“No, I can’t. It wouldn’t be good for the baby...”

“Sweetie, what are you talking about?” he asked as confusion hit him in the gut.

“I shouldn’t have told you...not yet anyway,” she muttered before drifting back to sleep.

He held her awhile trying to figure out what that had been about but he had no clue and so he stewed over it until she woke again. This time when her eyes opened, they didn’t hold the smile they had before, but the pain was still there.

“Joel?” she said moving away as she glanced at the clock. “What are you doing here?”

“Making sure you’re okay. Paige, do you remember what happened yesterday?”

“Yeah, Jim’s kids were missing. I found them in the cavern and now...now I feel like I was hit by a brick wall. Why are you here?”

“Your dad was worried. Said you were having trouble sleeping, that you tossed and turned all night, so I came to check on you. Do you remember waking up earlier?”

“No, the last thing I remember is taking one of those pain killers and having Maggie jump up beside me to sleep, why?”

“You seemed to be out of it. You didn’t want to take the pain medicine because of the baby...”

“Joel, that’s insane. It was the medicine talking; it’s always affected my head.”

“It didn’t seem like it. You seemed happy. You said you knew you shouldn’t have told me yet.”

“Joel, I have no idea what I’ve said in the last eight hours or so. Ask anyone who’s been around me when I’ve been on medicine. It makes me loopy, and I say or dream all kinds of things. I’m not pregnant or ever going to be. I’ve already told you that. Now can you get me some Tylenol or something? Anything other than the pain killers because I don’t want to go up in the chopper woozy.”

“You’re not going anywhere until you’ve healed. Paige, that bruise is about three times as big as it was. Your father will have a heart attack if you leave now.”

“Fine...just go away. Take Maggie out for me please? She’ll be fine running in the back yard all day.”

“Meet me downstairs for breakfast in fifteen or I’m coming back in here and dragging you down there dressed or not,” he warned calling for Maggie.

Paige watched him go and after the door closed, she let out the breath she’d been holding in since he’d started questioning her. She knew lying was stupid especially about something like not remembering what she played off as a hallucination but she didn’t want the truth in that hallucination coming out. Something about Joel showing up in her bedroom, turning off the alarm and warning her they’d wake her dad had pulled her back in time to a morning so similar that she’d felt as though she were twenty again.

Telling him about her miscarriages wouldn’t do them any good. She’d had enough time to think over the actions of her father and Joel and though she was still mad at them, angry that they had decided to make a choice for her about her life

that caused a ripple effect that still caused problems, she didn't want them or anyone in her family feeling sorry for her.

She had a good life. Granted she was alone but maybe that was simply the way it was supposed to be.

She got ready and was about to head down the stairs when she realized that she was doing exactly what Joel and her father wanted again. She'd agreed to stay today when she shouldn't have but she couldn't exactly call up her pilot and have him land in the backyard without someone hearing and stopping her.

Her camera bag caught her eye, and she moved back into the room, changing into her hiking boots and grabbed her bag with her sketchpad and ideas she had about the mine. It wouldn't take her long to get there if she cut through the woods and she could go over the information one more time. It would keep her away from her family and well away from Joel until she could slip back into the house unnoticed and into her bed.

She continued to leave the house earlier and earlier over the next few days, knowing she should simply go home but unable to pull herself away from the mine and the ideas that had flowed through her head. Last night no one had been around when she got back and she'd slipped into her bedroom and slept soundly for the first time in two weeks. She was out of the house before the sun had fully peeked above the horizon and she'd grabbed everything, knowing it was time to put her ideas all together and onto her computer.

Sometime over the last five days, her goal of leaving and getting back to her 'life' had changed into staying and making her father listen to her and her ideas. She could have the mine back in running order sooner than anyone else could. Her knowledge of the place had given her a unique edge to finding the solution and she just hoped that they'd see the error of their ways. She was the only person who would be able to do it.

She felt her phone buzz in her pocket and checked the number. Joel again. She wasn't ready to talk to him, wasn't

ready to admit that he was still in her head and her heart. She would but first they had to see that she was right and that she always had been.



“You didn’t find Paige?” Sam asked Joel as they stood outside the nursery staring at the little baby boy that bore the Brighton name. He’d been born early that morning after a relatively short labor of eight hours that both his parents were thankful regarding.

“I checked her room, her camera bag and things were gone.”

“You think she left? Like *left* left?”

“I wouldn’t know how. She doesn’t have a car and I didn’t hear the helicopter. She either walked somewhere or called a taxi to get her.”

“I’m guessing she won’t show, most women in her position probably wouldn’t.”

“What position is that, Sam?”

“Kendra told me Paige said she couldn’t have kids. We didn’t tell Dad. We’ll just have to hope she shows up at home sooner or later.”

“I’d prefer sooner, I can’t wait another ten years for her to come back,” Joel stated as Cord strolled down the hallway towards them.

“Checking out my grandchild there Joel?” he said with a huge smile. “I’d always thought the first one would come from you and Paige, but I suppose I could wait another nine to ten months for you two to catch up, granted you have to catch up to Paige first...”

“Dad, that’s not going to happen,” Sam said carefully.

“Of course, it is, she’ll come back around, it’s Paige.”

“Dad...Paige can’t have children.”

“What are you talking about?” Cord questioned. “We talked about it when I had my heart attack. I told her I wasn’t going anywhere until I held her child and she said she’d make sure I didn’t and made me promise. She wouldn’t have done that if she knew.”

“All we know is she had a miscarriage at some point, and she had complications,” Sam told him.

“No, Paige would have said something. She wouldn’t have kept a pregnancy from us,” Cord argued. “That girl has been talking about having babies since she was twenty.”

“Holy hell,” Joel muttered.

“Joel what is it?” Sam said turning to his now pale friend.

“Paige said we didn’t listen to her back then and maybe we didn’t.”

“What are you talking about Joel?” Cord stated.

“Paige had given me the equivalent of an ultimatum, tell you that we were together, or she was going to leave. I’d already bought the house and had the ring but then we had decided it’d be better for her to go and figure out something out there besides the mine. Before that Paige had been dropping hints about a future with children. I thought she meant distance future but what if she hadn’t?”

“You think Paige was pregnant when she left?” Sam asked. “No, she wouldn’t have left if she’d known, and it wouldn’t have been what caused her to not be able to have kids.”

“How would you know that?” Cord questioned.

“Paige told Kendra she’d lost two pregnancies when they were arguing over why they’ve been arguing for the past two years.”

“Two?” Joel questioned as his stomach dropped. A tiny piece of himself died as the fear that he was the one who’d caused both of those issues took hold and wouldn’t let go.

Over the last few days, he'd been stretched thin, between the mine and trying to figure out where and how Paige was disappearing every morning. Her story about hallucinating about the baby had seemed believable at first but now...now he didn't know what to think. What if Paige had been pregnant when she left? When he and Cord had forced her to go.

Her words came back to haunt him.

Do you have any idea how much the two of you messed up my life?

That's what she'd asked him after he'd told her the truth.

"What is it, Joel?" Sam questioned.

"Everything...I need to find Paige, now..."

"Well good luck boy," Cord laughed. "When has anyone ever been able to find Paige when she didn't want to be found? It took Neal five tries to get a number for the girl when the cave-in happened."

"Yeah, well, it's about time Paige and I had a full out and out discussion about the past."

And about time I learn whether or not if our decisions caused the problems Paige is dealing with, he added to himself as he left the hospital and got into his Jeep. He had no idea where he was going...or where Paige would be this time, but he continued to drive, thinking back over everything she'd said, everything she'd done since coming back. The wheels turned into the mine and back along the route towards what used to be the north passage. Maybe seeing the disaster would help them now.

Chapter 14

“Paige?” the word whipped across the rocky area towards her, and she looked up. On the other side of the now rock filled valley stood Joel, his face looking haunted, and yet a relief seeped through him she could tell.

She refused to acknowledge him. He didn't deserve for her to, not really, but she waited as he picked his way across the once grass filled valley towards her. He stopped next to her and sat down, taking in her sketchpad, camera bag and computer in a single glance and let out a sigh.

“We thought you'd left.”

“Thought or hoped?”

“Why the hell would we hope you had left? We want you to stay Paige. All of us, including your new nephew.”

“So, Kendra finally had the kid?” she asked shooting for what she hoped was an indifferent tone.

“He's pretty cute; they'd all like to see you.”

“No interest in seeing him, not as long as Kendra's around. Besides, I've got work to do.”

“So I see. Is this where you've been disappearing to all week?” he questioned not quite understanding where the animosity between her and Kendra came from still.

“Maybe, look, you found me, I'm safe. You can go tell everyone I haven't gotten myself killed and I haven't left, though with the new kid here I'm sure they really don't care.”

“Do you know how pathetic you sound? What's wrong Paige? You're no longer the baby and it's getting to you?”

“I don't give a damned about being the baby of the family. I just don't think the entire family is being honest right now and that's why I refuse to go see Kendra or her precious little bundle.”

Not to mention the fact that seeing him and them happy will only highlight what I will never have...can't have, she added to herself.

“But you’ve been so upfront about everything haven’t you? You and your *two* miscarriages? Your inability to have children? Tell me Paige, who was the father of these babies? Did they even know about them?” he questioned unable to let it go.

“No, he didn’t, because he didn’t care enough to open his eyes and see.”

“Paige...was it mine? Were they both mine?” he asked forcing her to look at him.

“Why does it matter whose they were? Neither of them made it into the world. Saves I’d say considering the fact that I never wanted them,” she lied unable to meet his gaze.

“Liar, you kept dropping hints about a future and kids before you gave me the ultimatum...because you were already pregnant, weren’t you?”

“Maybe I was; would it have made a difference? Would you or my father have listened to me, *really* listened? I doubt it. You would have both thought I was making it up to get my own way; after all, I’d always had before, hadn’t I? Neither of you got what I really wanted. What I’d always wanted. For you to hear me, so I left to make things happen myself.”

“You haven’t answered me, Paige. *Were* you pregnant when you left?” he demanded gripping her hand tightly when she went to pick up her bags.

“Yes, are you happy now? I was about ten weeks along. I knew the instant it happened basically, but I didn’t want to believe it. I mean, I was twenty, we had everything ahead of us, but it didn’t matter, did it? *I* didn’t matter enough for you to tell me the truth.”

“That’s not true Paige. If we’d known...do you think I would have willingly let you leave knowing you were carrying my child? I wanted you then. I want you now.”

“Wanting isn’t enough Joel!” she shouted stalking away as tears assaulted her. “You wanted to control me just like my father. You wanted to do what was right for me and because of that...because of that, I left and got myself so worked up that I went into labor just shy of twenty weeks. They couldn’t stop it and then the baby’s heart stopped. Do you have *any* idea what that’s like? To know now that it could have all been avoided if you all had just come to me with your concerns? I hated myself for the longest time until I finally had to push my feelings away so I could sleep. Then I started working with the rescue squad and not feeling was a blessing. Until it all came crashing down on me with a phone call, saying my father’d had a heart attack.”

“The second baby was mine too, wasn’t it? I’m the reason you can’t have kids.”

“Fate’s a real bitch. We get together for one night and I end up pregnant again. Then came the Fairway incident and I couldn’t deal with it. All of the emotions I’d tried to push away came crashing in on me heightened because of the excess hormones and I knew I needed a break.”

“So, you left? Were you ever going to tell me?” he questioned walking over to her as she looked over the valley.

“I was on my way here. I was coming home when fate decided to be nasty. Everything was fine one minute and the next I started having cramps. I knew something was wrong and by the time that I’d gotten to the hospital, I knew whatever it was wasn’t good. They did an ultrasound but couldn’t find the baby and decided it was ectopic. Then my fallopian tube burst, and they had to do surgery.”

“Jesus Christ Paige...baby, I’m sorry,” he said reaching out and pulling her towards him.

She shook his hold off and took a step back. “So am I. I’m sorry I ever thought you and my father could be reasoned with. Sorry that I thought the two of you would ever be on my side. Sorry that because of the two men I loved most I’ll never have the one thing I really want. A real family...”

“Paige, baby, please don’t say that. We’re your family we always have been.”

“No...not really. Not one of you ever asked me what I wanted. You assumed Joel. You all still are. I don’t care what you think you know. You don’t know anything about how I feel. How I’ve felt these last ten years...but I’ll tell you one thing. I’m tired of blaming myself for what happened, especially when it turns out that you and my father conspired behind my back. The two of you are as much to blame for what happened as I am, and I’ll be damned if I forgive either of you for it.”

“I’m not a mind reader Paige. You should have just come out and told me you were pregnant baby. If you had I never would have let you go.”

“And what? We’d have just told my dad to stick it? I think not. You weren’t going to jeopardize your career for me.”

“Damn it, Paige. You want me to stop speaking for you then you need to stop speaking for me. All I wanted...all I’ve *ever* wanted was you. I don’t care if we have a hundred or no kids. Then and now, I want you.”

“So much so that you let me go? Tricked me into going really. Yeah, that speaks so well of your intentions Joel,” she scoffed.

“I did it for you. Maybe I was wrong, your father and I were wrong, but you could have said something Paige.”

“What? ‘Oh, by the way Dad, the guy who just told you he wasn’t dating me is actually the father of the child I’m carrying?’ Yeah, that would have gone over really well, besides I didn’t know you *hadn’t* chickened out. I heard exactly what you wanted me to and by doing that, you pushed me away. You should have known Joel, but you didn’t and that’s on you, not me.”

“Fine...we’ve all made mistakes. Your father and I might be more to blame for all of this than we’d care to admit but that doesn’t mean we can’t go forward.”

“And going forward doesn’t mean we have to follow old paths. Don’t worry, I’m not planning on going anywhere anytime soon. I learned the hard way that life throws you on your ass when you don’t want it to, and I’ve made a hell of a living picking up the pieces afterwards. I haven’t been slacking off for four years since leaving the team. I’ve been working sometimes day and night helping people create plans to get past the disaster and move on.”

“Even though you can’t?” he inquired snidely annoyed that she wouldn’t budge.

“I’ve moved on Joel; I just won’t move backwards. See all of that, my camera, sketchpad, maps, computer...it’s my work on this place, done for free I might add, when my normal clients pay out the nose for my skills. You, Dad, and Sam *are* going to sit down and listen to what I have to say. It’s the least you can do after pushing me down this path.”

“When?”

“The sooner you listen, the sooner you’ll be back at work fulltime, so it’s your call. I’m sure Sam can find a few hours to slip away from his new little bundle of joy to come. If what they say about newborns is right, he just might enjoy the quietness of the office’s conference room.”

“You’re not going to come to the hospital, are you?”

“Not a chance, tell Sam congrats but don’t expect me to show...and not because I’m jealous or upset that it’ll never be me. I’ve had four years to come to terms with it, I’m good, I just don’t care to deal with my father or Kendra and the nauseating way they’re going to coo over her.”

“What is your beef with Kendra? You were going to be in their wedding until something delayed you from getting there.”

“It was the earthquake that hit Virginia, do you remember that? Well, that led to cave-ins at mines all over the place and we were spread thin...really thin. I was flying between sites with no sleep and no clue what to find when I landed. So, I’m sorry if I missed out on a wedding but I was trying to save

hundreds of people and their families from having to bury their loved ones.”

“You could have told us that instead of just giving us a pathetic excuse.”

“Pathetic excuse? I had an emergency situation and I said so. Who cares if I spelled it out or not? An emergency is an emergency Joel; I’d think you’d get that after getting trapped in the mine trying to get the others out.”

“You’re not going to let me live that down are you?”

“Not in this life or the fact that you got my father trapped down there with you. You’re just lucky that you took a walkie so we could find you. God do you know what could have happened if we hadn’t found you?”

“I take it you do,” he said as her face went white.

“Unfortunately yes...we weren’t always lucky. Sometimes we’d simply get the call too late, others...it was too late to begin with. That’s what happened at Fairway.”

“I read about that, there was no mention of you or the rescue team.”

“That’s because there was nothing we could do. By the time we arrived, I surveyed the area and decided to take a trek down into the sinkhole. Finding them...that place was enough to make me sick, and it didn’t help that I was newly pregnant and in the throes of morning sickness, it was horrible Joel. Its sights I’ll never get out of my head.”

“I’m sorry Paige,” he stated pulling her towards him. “I swear baby I would never have taken him down there if I’d thought that something was going to happen to him. I honestly had no idea that they’d set us up.”

“I know...I just wish it hadn’t happened. That I hadn’t had to come back here and deal with all of this.”

“Baby you’re meant to be here, right here with me and your family.”

“God, you don’t give up do you? What do you want Joel? Sex? If I stripped naked right here and went at it would

that be enough for you?"

"No," he answered grabbing her tightly and wrapping his arms around her. "Yes, I want you in my bed every single night, but I also want more from you than that. I want you to wake up next to me when the sun comes up. I want you to fall asleep beside me, in my arms after we're both exhausted from making love. I want to come home and see you sleeping on the couch and kiss you awake so I can entice you into the bedroom...or wherever we make it to."

"All about sex isn't it Joel, it always was with you."

"You know that's a lie. Two entire years without touching you was torture yes, but I'd do it again if I had to."

"You're seriously saying you would wait two years to have sex with me if you had to?"

"It'd be hell, but I'd wait for as long as you want me to, though you'd have to give me a wide berth with some petting."

"No need to wait that long Joel...in fact why are we even talking still?"

"You're kidding right? Paige...are you saying that you want to...here?"

"No, not here. Take me home Joel. We both know what's going to happen if we stay here any longer. We both want it so why deny ourselves? In the morning we can go back to arguing and hating each other."

"You're serious? You want to come home with me and let me make love to you all night and then we're going to pretend like nothing happened and go back to me wanting something more and you denying this? You sound completely crazy Paige."

"Nothing new there," she laughed letting her hands roam over his shoulders and up to the back of his head twining her fingers into his thick hair and pulling his mouth down to hers.

"Paige, stop," he groaned against her mouth.

"That's not what you really want to say is it?"

“No...fine, we’ll play it your way but I’m not going to promise to stop until the sun comes up. We have ten years to make up for.”

“That’s an awfully big statement there. Sure, you can back it up?”

“It’s a promise baby,” he said kissing her deeply before picking her things up and helping her across the valley to his car. He sped down the roads until he reached the house and strode around the car, pulling her into his arms and carrying her inside, noting that she weighed less than he’d ever felt a grown woman with a generous bust weigh.

“In a hurry there?” she teased kissing his neck.

“When it comes to being inside you always, don’t worry, I won’t skip any steps...except for those on the staircase if you keep doing that,” he stated as she began to nibble on his ear.

“I hope so.”

He growled and lifted her higher, taking the stairs two at a time until he reached the bedroom. Her clothes quickly hit the floor as he undressed her piece by piece until she was naked in front of him, and she returned the favor until he was just as naked. She ran her hands down his chest and watched as the muscles contracted at her touch.

“Keep touching me like that and I won’t guarantee the first time will last,” he warned as her hands dipped lower.

“Maybe I don’t want it to...Joel kiss me now.”

“Bossy, aren’t we?” he said pulling her against him and lowering his mouth over hers. His tongue invaded her mouth and began a duel with hers as his hands began their own exploration.

She was dying for more and when he lifted her, she wrapped her legs around his waist as he filled her completely. She moved her hips against him letting him slide a bit further as her body stretched to accommodate his size.

“Ah baby...” he groaned as she moved against him harder as a coil began to tighten inside her. “You’re asking for

it Paige...” he added when she grounded her hips against his pelvis taking him in even further.

“Please show me,” she said against his neck as she kissed it before lifting her hips until he was poised at her opening. She slowly lowered herself bit by bit down him until he was fully inside her then started it all over again until he toppled them onto the bed and took control.

His hands began to make an exploration over her body until it found a home beneath her curls, and he began to press against her until she was squirming beneath him.

“Joel...” she gasped as the coil broke inside her and she dove over the cliff, a few seconds later he joined her on the journey.

Chapter 15

“Hold on...you’re telling me that you spent the last two days in bed with my sister but she’s still refusing to admit that you’re in a relationship? Man, that’s harsh,” Sam said, before covering a yawn as he and Joel climbed the stairs towards the conference room.

“That’s Paige, stubborn as hell,” Joel stated. He pushed the door open, and his eyes instantly searched for her. She’d left early that morning without saying a word to him about her plans or ideas for this meeting and he was curious as to what she’d been up to with it.

Cord, Ed, Harry, Bobby and Jerry came in behind them stalling his chance to talk to her and he knew she’d be furious if he tried to pull her into his arms and kiss her the way he was dying to, so he sat waiting for Cord to ask where she’d been.

“Well girl what’d you want to show us?” Cord questioned as she sat still waiting for something.

“We’re missing a few people still,” she stated as the sound of footsteps bounding down the hallway sounded. Hillary, Jesse, Craig, Moose and Rabbit appeared in the doorway, and she smiled warmly at them.

“Sorry we got held up as we tried to leave the site,” Hillary apologized.

“They weren’t quite as generous as your crew, but they did make some pretty good coffee,” Craig added.

“Thanks for sending the chopper for us. Wayne wasn’t happy to see it, but we were,” Jesse stated giving her a kiss on the side of her head as he took a seat near her.

“So, what’s this all about?” Sam asked. “I’d like to get home to my wife and child before my mother-in-law completely redoes our house. Kendra would like to see you too, and as for the thing the two of you have been arguing about for the last two years, it’s never been a secret to me so it’s about time you got over it Sis.”

“Really?” Paige said as he crossed the room to her side.

“Really, I love you for being a half-way good sister to me. A really good one would have said something by now, but I get you were caught between being a sister and a friend, but you don’t have to worry about it. Let it go Paige, isn’t it time we all move on?” he said softly giving her a hug.

“We’ll see. Okay, I know you’re all wondering what I’ve been up to for the last four years and the truth is I’ve been working on the other side of the disaster situations,” she stated glancing at her old team.

“The other side?” Harry inquired. “What does that mean?”

“It means that when I was working for the team our job would be done once the situation was under control, when the people were found or the crisis diverted, we’d leave. Now... that’s when I show up. Why do you all think I have a private helicopter and pilot?” she said with a grin.

“Because it’s cool?” Rabbit laughed.

“Well, it is that but, this is what I do,” she told them clicking on the mouse and changing the screen to show them the before and after photos of one of the sites she’d worked.

“*You* did that?” Sam asked staring at the pictures of the miles of rubble from the bombing site she’d worked on three years before and then at the newly remodeled business park that’d been constructed.

“I did...with a lot of help from some wonderful builders I know but it was my concept.”

“Okay, so what does this have to do with us?” Cord questioned.

“You’ve all been cloistering yourselves in the study almost every night trying to figure out what to do and you’ve come up with what? Nothing?”

“It’s not nothing,” Ed argued.

“Really? From what I saw on Dad’s desk, no one has a clue where to go from here. You’re all brilliant when it comes

to the day-to-day mining operations but none of you know how to handle this, and since you're likely to hurt everyone around by refusing to ask for help I took it upon myself to put a little something together."

"You put what together?" Joel asked. "Is that why you were disappearing to what use to be the valley all last week?"

"Perhaps...first thing is to get the north passageway rebuilt. Before you all start arguing that it can't be done sit back, shut up and *listen*," Paige stated sending each of them a pointed look.

"Bossy, isn't she?" Sam snickered towards Jesse sitting beside him.

"She's the best though," he replied.

"Alright Paige, we're all ears," her father said. "How can we turn this mess around?"

"By turning it into an advantage. I took a bit of a hike and did a bit of structural investigating of the passageways under what used to be the north passage and it won't take as long to rebuild the road as you might expect. If you listen and follow my plan it can be functional in less than a month I'd say."

"You went into the passageways down there...how?" Joel demanded.

"Through the mountain entrance. Relax Joel I was perfectly safe doing it. If we take some supplies in, we can reinforce the bottom passageways and then clear the debris to rebuild the road."

"Hold on, I thought the passageways down there were blocked and that's why you couldn't get anyone out through them," Craig said glancing towards her.

"She's not talking about the passageways for the mine. She's talking about the mountain passageways that are below it," Sam explained as Joel scowled at her. "Sis, getting the road rebuilt would be great but are you really qualified to make that determination?"

“You’re kidding right?” Hillary said glancing around the table. “They don’t know?”

“Know what?” Cord asked.

“Paige holds a degree in structural engineering, geology, physics, and mathematics,” she told them. “If anyone would know if it was safe, it’s Paige. Why do you think she was hired to be the lead on the team over all of us?”

“Never really thought about it,” Bobby answered. “You weren’t going for all of those when you were here.”

“No, but I had a bit of extra time on my hands once I was away from here and it turns out that you don’t have to take all the classes to get the degrees, I took CLEP tests to earn the credits without having to sit through the boring lectures,” Paige admitted. “I also have a minor in chemistry and English. And if we’re pulling it all out...I have certifications in basically everything else related to emergency response issues, first aid, search and rescue, scuba diving...”

“You’ve been busy,” Jerry said.

“I have, so can I get on with this?” Paige inquired, smiling inwardly as they agreed. “From what I’ve seen and have found from the valley is interesting. And I have an idea that will not only get the old lines back open but allow for additional ones to be reached easier.”

“Sure Sis,” Sam laughed, “and I’m going to wear a dress when you get married.”

“Don’t make promises or bets you can’t keep Sam,” she warned as she clicked the mouse again and brought up the plans, she’d created over the last two weeks. “As you can see, this is what used to be the valley, and as most of you know there are several passageways underneath that gives us an estimate of what’s hidden down there.”

“Your plan is to put HQ where the valley used to be?” Cord asked in surprise.

“No, this is a new lab actually, with access to lines that are down there and from which you can expand out for miles.

It will also help if a cave-in ever happens again because there will be two main shafts to get down or up.”

“A lab?” Joel asked. “Why do we need a lab at the mines?”

“Because of what I found in the passageway underneath Regal Bluff,” she stated pulling out a small box that held slides and samples.

“What is that?” Cord questioned as she slid it down between them.

“What does it look like?” she replied.

“Holy Christ...is that lithium?” Joel inquired.

“Got it on the first try even,” she teased with a smile.

“Where’d you find this?” Sam asked.

“Underneath Regal Bluff, but I’m not the first person to come across it. I also found these down there,” she stated showing them the photos of the extra slides. “I sent them to Travis to be fingerprinted and guess whose prints are all over them?”

“Gus Stanton’s?” Joel stated.

“Ding, ding, ding...it makes sense now. If line nine was expanded further towards the bluff we’d eventually come across this and they wanted to ensure that didn’t happen, only he doesn’t know the mountain like I do and didn’t know about the series of passageways that leads down there from the outside.”

“You’re telling us that Gus Stanton snuck down into the mine and purposely went looking for this?” Cord asked in disbelief. “How would he even find it?”

“A lucky break I’d say...he somehow got from nine into the passageways that eventually led up to the main area where this was. I’ve been going over the maps and there’s more of it I know,” Paige told them.

“Another of those gut feelings?” Jesse teased.

“Don’t mock them Jesse, they’ve saved your butt how many times?” Moose asked sending her a smile.

“Let’s just say I feel it in my gut and the maps show me.”

“You’re telling us that we have a lithium vein running underneath the mountain?” Sam stated.

“Something like that...look that’s a long way away from what we should be focusing on right now. For now, the biggest issue is getting everyone back down into the mine to continue regular operations,” she said clicking the mouse again. “This is my estimation of how long that’ll take. Going from just the main entrance and re-clearing all the lines is going to take too long, you’re likely to end up bankrupt before that happens. Which is what I’d say Davidson was aiming for, a way to steal the mine from you.”

“Damn son of a...” Cord muttered, and Paige laughed.

“Exactly. You know, he, Gus and Wayne should get together, I’m sure they could have a good old time cursing me out,” she said giving her old team a wink.

“Oh Wayne’s done that plenty without anyone else,” Hillary stated.

“Your old boyfriend doesn’t seem to like you too much there Paige. What’s the story?” Jerry asked.

“No story...he was mad when I left the team.”

“He was mad long before that,” Rabbit stated.

“Well, he did seem to have some nasty things to say to you...but it’d probably be best if we don’t repeat them seeing as how the men up here would probably going tearing after him if we did,” Bobby said.

“Who exactly is this Wayne?” Joel inquired sending her a look that was full of questions as to why she’d never spoken of him before.

“Wayne’s the supervisor of the team. He thinks he’s god’s gift to everything and everyone,” Hillary answered for her.

“Except to Paige, he never did like the fact that she wouldn’t actually *go out*, go out with him,” Jesse added, and she could have screamed.

“You were dating your supervisor?” Sam asked in amazement.

“No, we went out casually. It’s not my fault he wanted something that was never going to happen and that’s all I’m going to say on the subject. Although if he’s ever at the bottom of a dog pile again you all must take pictures of it for me,” she said with a smirk that lit her eyes.

“Dog pile?” Joel questioned raising an eyebrow her way.

“Let’s just say Wayne made the wrong comment that some of the guys around here didn’t take too kindly,” Craig stated.

“What sort of comment?” Cord asked.

“One he’d have no actual knowledge regarding,” Paige said hoping to move away from the subject. She didn’t want the conversation coming around to her sex life and letting it slip that she’d only been with Joel. The fact still bugged her but there was nothing she could do about it right now.

“I suggest you tell us exactly what happened, Paige,” Joel warned. “Unless you want me to go down into the mine and ask them.”

“Nothing happened,” she sighed.

“And that’s Wayne’s problem,” Moose said wiggling his eyebrows suggestively letting the others in on the topic.

“What’d he say Bobby?” Joel asked the other man.

“Well, I can’t right say...I wasn’t there,” he hedged.

“Oh, good lord...fine...he was being a jerk and Tom defended me prompting Wayne to ask if I had a new lap dog. He also added a snark about him obviously not being in my bed yet because he’d know it would be a letdown, is that what you wanted to know?” Paige asked turning to Joel who was looking murderous.

“That’s when they jumped him and then two guys escorted him off the property,” Jesse said seeing the flush that appeared on her neck. “So, what else have you planned for this place Paige?” he added trying to move the subject beyond their current spot for her sake.

“Yes, Paige what other brilliant ideas are laying in that head of yours?” Joel asked folding his arms across his chest in what she could tell was annoyance, though why she didn’t know.

“And where did this come from in the first place?” Cord added. “All you ever talked about was the mine and helping run it so how did that turn into this?”

“This is what it’s always been about Dad. I swear none of you ever listened, did you? So let me spell it out as plainly as I can. I don’t and have never been interested in being down in the mine picking coal out of the rocks or anything else like that. I didn’t want to lug around things, and I didn’t want to overrule the decisions regarding the digging. I wanted to help make decisions, plan new lines, help get them built. I didn’t want to be your secretary or run payroll but that’s all you would have let me do because you wouldn’t *listen*,” she said slamming a binder against the table between her father and Joel.

“Paige, what is this?” Cord asked opening it.

“That’s what I went to school for, why I was pursuing what I was. *That’s* what I wanted to contribute to this place but since neither of you would listen...what’s the point?” she said moving back to the computer and outlining her plan before sitting down and waiting for them to speak.

“I’d say we have a really great opportunity here boss,” Harry said shaking his head in admiration. “That little girl of yours has a brilliant mind.”

“That she does,” Cord agreed, “and it seems she always has. Paige honey, I’m sorry...”

“So, am I Dad...more than you’ll ever know but it doesn’t really matter, does it? We can’t change the past, so we

go forward. That's what I learnt working the sites we did. Looking back will only drive you crazy, wondering where you went wrong. People always said my ideas were insane, until they worked and then it was genius."

"You've got to admit Paige there were times when what you concocted came out of thin air and no one thought it'd be able to be accomplished let alone safely," Jesse told her.

"But what's the point in not trying simply because it's a bit out there?" she asked him. "When the only options are to not try and die, or to try and possibly live what would you choose?"

"Whatever you suggested," he answered, reaching out and slipping a piece of her hair that had escaped her ponytail behind her ear. "We always will."

"I think we've got some work to do, don't we Joel?" Cord said holding onto the binder still. "Are you going to stick around and help us Paige?"

"Considering I don't trust you all to follow through I guess I'd better. I need to go home for a few days though, get some things settled up there. Caleb is going to drop me off after we deliver these guys at home."

"We're in no rush," Jesse said looping his arm around her waist. "Want some help shoring up that road?"

"The more the merrier," she answered him with a smile that nearly gutted Joel as he watched them interact. There was something between them and he wanted to know what. He'd sensed it the first time the guy was there and when he'd assessed him down in the mine but now...now there was something else at play and he'd be damned if he was going to lose Paige now.

Chapter 16

“Paige...the crew’s here,” Jesse shouted across the valley towards her. A smile spread across her face, and she carefully picked her way through the mess until she reached him.

“I can’t believe you’re all still here,” she told him accepting the water he handed her.

“Someone’s got to make sure you eat,” he stated handing her a bag that smelled like heaven. “Besides there’ve been no requests in the last two weeks for our assistance and you’re prettier to look at than Wayne’s glum face.”

“Yo Paige, where do want us?” Moose asked from the cab of the dozer he was moving.

“If you’d move that thing out of my way I could get to work,” Rabbit shouted at him from the backhoe.

“It’s getting too dark to do anything tonight,” she stated motioning towards the far end of the clearing they’d made during the two weeks since they’d started in with her plan. The road was passable and tomorrow would begin the clearing phase of the valley, a good two weeks ahead of her proposed schedule thanks to her friends.

“You’re kidding right?” Craig said turning to her. “We’ve got at least an hour until sunset and you’re always the last one to leave a site. Unless you have a hot date, we don’t know about.”

“Nope...I just thought I’d drop in and visit with the crew for a few minutes. They’ll be out here putting up lights so they can work later and they don’t need us interfering with them,” she said spotting the foreman as he headed their way.

“Paige, damn angel, you said this place was a disaster area but come on...this is insane,” he stated as he wrapped her in a hug and laughed deeply.

“You like a challenge and you’re the best.”

“Well that is true, I’m still trying to get you to accept my proposal, aren’t I?” he teased dipping his head and planting a kiss on her lips.

“Whoa!” Hillary said as she pulled up beside them in the Jeep with her father, Sam and Joel.

Jesse gave a polite cough trying to interrupt them as Joel jumped out of the vehicle and began to round it. Sam stopped him as Paige took a step backwards her eyes full of unmistakable laughter.

“You finally threw that bum doc over then?” Dawson asked checking out her bare hands.

“You had a ring?” Sam asked pressing tightly against Joel’s shoulder to keep him still.

“I did...I just wasn’t wearing it here. Everyone this is Dawson Andrews, he’s the best foreman for any construction or demolition crew you’ll find. He helped me with the business park you saw.”

“Seems he’s helping himself to a bit more than that,” Craig stated with a glance towards Joel whose hands were clenched.

“Dawson’s harmless,” she said before taking his arm. “Give us a few minutes?”

“I’ll give him something,” Joel huffed under his breath, and Sam chuckled as Paige and the other man moved off.

“Well seems you’ve got more competition,” Sam said releasing him.

“I’ve got to agree,” Hillary stated. “I’ve never seen Paige look like that after someone’s kissed her.”

“Has anyone ever seen Paige look like that?” Craig questioned.

“I have,” Jesse answered them, “but not for a long time.”

“What exactly is your relationship with my daughter?” Cord asked. “She seems more at ease with you than anyone, not even the people she grew up with.”

“She’s the best thing that ever happened to me,” Jesse told him. “You can’t help but fall in love with her, can you?” he added to Craig who shrugged in agreement.

“That doesn’t answer the question,” Joel stated.

“I think the better question to ask is how does Paige feel about me or anyone else,” Jesse told him. “For a while there, I thought she was what I wanted, in a way she still is, but unlike some people I listened to what she wanted.”

“And that wasn’t you?” Sam asked.

“Not by a long shot, but when you work on a team like we do you become family. When Paige left, our family was shattered, we’ll do anything to protect her,” Jesse stated bluntly.

“But if she decided she wanted you you’d be fine with that?” Cord inquired.

“Nah...we’re friends, family. There are things about Paige only I know I’m sure and the same can be said vice versa. Don’t worry; none of us are going to steal her away from you all much as we’d like her back on the team with us.”

“Him you might have to worry about,” Hillary added nodding towards the pair where Paige was laughing again, her face outlined by the sun adding a glow around her they hadn’t seen for a long time.

“I might need to redo my bet back at HQ,” Sam said following her gaze and grabbing Joel before he did something stupid like go after the other man. “Easy there buddy, we don’t need another Rambo appearance.”

“If he thinks he’s going to step in simply because Aaron’s gone the man has another thing coming to him,” Joel said glaring at the picture they presented.

“Four weeks ago I’d have agreed with you,” Jesse said, “but this...that’s the Paige we’ve been missing.”

“Meaning what?” Joel inquired.

“Meaning she hasn’t been too happy the last few weeks, it was pretty obvious when Aaron showed that they weren’t a

love match and I figured if you played your cards right, you'd win her back despite everything, but she hasn't seemed like she's about to budge during the last three or so," he stated.

"Not since I told her the truth you mean?" Joel said trying to see if Paige had talked to him.

"Yeah...that was pretty dumb of the two of you. Then again, Paige wasn't completely upfront with you about why she'd pushed."

"How much do you know?" Joel asked.

"Would one of you explain what you're talking about?" Cord stated as confusion rolled around the group.

"I don't think Paige would like us discussing this out in the open," Jesse said. "But to answer your question...I know everything about pretty much everything that happened in her life up until she left the team, though I know why she did and what happened afterwards too."

"How's that?" Joel stated.

"She spent a month at my place after and then one morning I woke up and she was gone. She'd left a note saying she needed to start over, and we got a call, by the time I got back she'd emptied out her place and her phone had been disconnected."

"Hold on...Paige was staying with you after she left the team?" Hillary asked. "The entire time when we were trying to get in touch with her, make sure she was okay...you kept telling us she was fine. You sounded so sure, because she was with you. How could you keep something like that to yourself?"

"She asked me to. She knew if you all found out what'd happened, you'd suffocate her and she needed some space, time to heal."

"Heal from what?" Moose asked.

"From an ectopic pregnancy that nearly killed her," Joel stated. "She turned to *you*? Instead of coming home and telling me, telling any of us...she turned to you."

“Paige was pregnant?” Rabbit said looking around the group. “Who...when?”

“Christ...” Cord stated. “That would have been right after my heart attack. You both were at the hospital.”

“She found out she was pregnant and then we were called to Fairway and that situation was completely unexpected. The combination of the two and your heart attack changed something inside her and she couldn’t separate her emotions. We talked it out and she decided to leave the team and come back here but then she lost the baby,” Jesse admitted. “She was crushed, and it changed her again. You’re not the only ones she cut out of her life so don’t expect us to disappear anytime soon.”

“Jesse...” Paige yelled across the distance towards him as she ended a phone call. “Sorry Dawson...hey,” she said hurrying over to the group. “I need your help.”

“What’s wrong Paige?” Joel asked noting the paleness that had overtaken her.

“You know when I said I was out of the disaster business? Well...I wasn’t completely honest. I still have a few contacts who come to me first, but I usually just consult, I don’t go on site anymore.”

“Paige, what’s going on?” Jesse said prying her fingers lose from the grip on her phone.

“There’s a huge fire ravaging northern California.”

“They don’t typically call us in for them,” Craig said confused.

“No, but when the daughter and granddaughter of the fire marshal in the area are trapped on a mountain, he’ll call anyone who can help.”

“Isn’t that something a regular search and rescue crew would handle?” Hillary said. “Why call you?”

“Because the granddaughter is my goddaughter. It’s Tami and her daughter Nicole. They were down visiting, went climbing and before they knew it the fire was surrounding

them. I'm going whether anyone else is, but I could use your help on the climb Jesse."

"Absolutely, what's the plan?"

"Right now, I don't know. Hold on...yeah Caleb... twenty minutes? Thanks, I'm not sure how many of us there'll be yet. We're at the valley now...great," she said hanging up as her friends started at her. "So, who's coming?"

"I'm right beside you as always, girl," Jesse stated hugging her to his side. "Where are they?"

"In the middle of a burning forest, Caleb thinks he can get us low enough to the peak so we can get down to them, but the only way out is back up. It's not an easy climb and I have no idea how difficult it'll be or if Tami and Nicole will be able to climb at all."

"Which mountain?" Craig asked.

"It's probably better if I don't say," she admitted shying away from their stares.

"That bad?" Moose said.

Jesse reached out and took her phone pulling up the map she'd loaded. "Whoa...they would choose to go up the craziest mountain in all of California."

He handed the phone to Craig and the man gawked. "Ah I love ya Paige and I'd do almost anything for you but there's no way I'll make it down that peak let alone back up."

"I know but they could use you on the ground to help find places to set up breaks...so what do you say?"

"Count me in...but I'm not going on that mountain."

"Moose, Rabbit? I'm sure there's some equipment out there you can man and Hil, no one's better with planning evacs than you are," Paige said turning to them as they passed the phone around.

"We'll be there," Rabbit agreed. "They can manage without us for a few days."

"That we can," Cord agreed.

“Hold on,” Joel said taking the phone from Rabbit and checking the location. “You seriously think the two of you can get down to them and back up? Come on Paige, what if they’re hurt or worse?”

“I’ll deal with it, we always do,” she said not about to admit the terror that flowed through her at the idea of them being hurt. She couldn’t stand around and do nothing though or stand around arguing with Joel over this all day. She had to do something fast. “Look if you’re that worried come with us. If you think you can hack the climb that is. Being down in the mine or working in the office is a lot different than sweating it out on the side of a mountain.”

“You’d be surprised what I can hack, so I think I will come, make sure you get back here safely.”

“Now that sounds like a good idea,” Cord said with a smile at them.

“It does and it’ll give us a chance to get to know this Dawson character. Looked like the two of you were quite chummy just now,” Sam added as Joel moved over towards her.

“Wait you all thought...oh my god, now that is funny,” Paige laughed until tears ran down her cheeks as she attempted to push away the fear gripping her.

“What?” Hillary said staring at her.

“Dawson would you like to explain, or should I?” she asked turning to him with a grin.

“Oh, the kiss?” he said stepping behind her and pulling her back against him. “I don’t think they’d be able to handle the truth. It might scar them for life.”

“Hush...Dawson and I are friends and there is no way we’re ever going to be together like that is there babe?”

“Nope...at least not unless my wife leaves me.”

“You’re married and you kissed Paige like that?” Sam asked shooting her a look that spoke of irony.

“It’s okay my wife’s given me permission. After all she kisses her pretty much the same way whenever she sees her, to thank her for saving my life.”

“You saved his life?” Jesse asked with a grin.

“Yup he was trying to check the structural integrity of a building and it collapsed on him. Took me a day to get to him and then another to get his dumb ass out.”

“Okay, so you’re not...” Joel questioned looking into her eyes.

“Nope. Now, we’ve got plenty of gear, but you might want a different pair of shoes,” Paige said glancing down at his dress shoes and pants.

“I’ve got some gear in my locker at HQ.”

“Call Lenny and see if he can bring it down unless you’re worried about him finding something in it,” she teased.

“I’ve got nothing to hide Paige, but it seems you still do. One of these days you’re going to tell me the truth about everything baby, I can guarantee that,” he stated pulling her into his arms and kissing her to leave no doubt in anyone’s mind that she was his.

“Cool it Joel,” she said pushing him away before heading to her Jeep to grab her bag of gear.

She checked the clock and started repacking as she double-checked everything inside aware that Joel was watching her closely. The last two weeks had been hectic as they began to rebuild the road. Joel had refused to let her push him away and had begun sneaking into her room nightly fighting until they fell onto the bed ripping their clothes off.

They still were at odds about everything, and she refused to give in and tell him her final secret. That one she wouldn’t begin to divulge no matter how much he wanted her to.

“You okay with him coming...really?” Jesse inquired heading over to her.

“Surprisingly yes, maybe if he sees for himself exactly what I can do, how I do it, that I’m not putting myself out

there for no reason he'll get it finally."

"Or maybe you just don't want to be away from him for that long? You've been at it again, haven't you? How long did it take for the two of you to fall back into a bed?"

"Who said anything about it being in a bed?" she said turning around to give him the look.

"Holy hell...in the mountain when you went up there to get him? Jesus girl, weren't you engaged to someone else?"

"Yeah so? It didn't mean anything, it still doesn't."

"That's a load of crap and you know it. Does he know about the first miscarriage?"

"Yup...and the ectopic one and the results of it; don't worry Jesse I'm a big girl I can handle it."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Let him in Paige, he's head over heels in love with you, and he's not going to hurt you. He knows what you want in terms of your work now. They all know what you can do, so give them the chance to be your family. Does he know he's still the only man you've ever been with?"

"Does it matter? I mean what's he really going to do with that piece of information. Come on, we need to get going the chopper will be here in no time."

"Alright but this isn't over Paige. He still deserves to know."

"I'll think about it," she lied kissing his cheek.

Chapter 17

The moment the helicopter set down they were out and hurrying towards the makeshift headquarters that had been set up to try and get in front of the fires. Paige pushed at the opening of the tent and studied the scene before her. The gust of wind that blew past her disturbed some of the maps spread out across the table and brought the attention of those inside towards her.

“Paige,” a tall man with blonde hair said giving her a half smile as he crossed the area and crushed her to him.

“Tristan, any word?” she asked as he sat her back down.

“Nothing...Dad, this is Paige Brighton,” he said leading her towards the man situated in the middle of the group. “Paige, this is my father-in-law and the head of this mess, Steven Zacks.”

“Nice to meet you finally,” Steven said glancing over her. “I wish it’d been under better circumstances.”

“So do I, these are some of my friends,” Paige said as the others filed in behind her. She began to introduce them one by one. “Craig is available to consult on where to put the breaks in at, he’s worked with multiple agencies and the military in handling fire outbreaks. Hillary can help with anything public related, she knows what she’s doing. These two...Moose and Rabbit are licensed to operate any machinery around and believe me they’re the best. Caleb is my pilot and he’s sure he can get me, Jesse, and Joel close enough to the peak for us.”

“Paige I’m sorry but your plan is insane,” Tristan stated. “I’d do anything I could to get Tami and Nicole home but this...it’s impossible.”

“Dude, I thought you knew Paige,” Rabbit said with a laugh.

“Impossible is her specialty,” Moose added squeezing her shoulder.

“It’s true Tristan,” she said gently.

“I have to agree with Tristan,” Steven stated. “The way these winds have been kicking up there is no way to get close enough to that mountain. We’ve tried to send choppers over to kill it, but they can’t get down far enough to do any good. The entire bottom part of the mountain is now on fire and it’s climbing fast. I want my girls home as much as Tristan but...I don’t see how.”

“We flew past the mountain,” Caleb said checking the weather reports, “and while it’s not ideal I can get them in there.”

“I can’t allow it. You’re a civilian pilot and while part of you may work for the government, here that doesn’t matter. I can’t risk sending you in,” Steven told them.

“I get that your hands are tied with bureaucracy but mine aren’t,” Paige stated. “Caleb’s the best pilot in the world. I fully trust him with my life, as well as Jesse’s and Joel’s. I wouldn’t send us anywhere near that peak if I thought it was dangerous...well more dangerous than what it is.”

“Paige, maybe we can find another way in?” Jesse suggested.

“There isn’t another way, I’ve checked,” she said straightening her back with determination. “Look right now I have a friend flying his helicopter in for us to use. Caleb can fly anything, and this chopper is specially designed to withstand heat and ash.”

“You called Billy?” Hillary asked in surprise. “I thought you said you’d never speak to him again.”

“For Tami and Nicole, I’ll do whatever it takes. Tristan, you *know* I can do this,” she said turning to him. “I have to—have to at least try, even if it’s just me going in.”

“Okay, I don’t like it, but I’ll accept it on one condition... I’m coming with you,” he stated.

“No, I love you but no. I’m not going to let you get up there and fall apart on me if something bad happened. I need you to stay here Tris.”

“And you won’t—fall apart—if something’s happened to them?” Steven questioned barely able to get the words out.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Joel said nodding towards Jesse who agreed.

“Who are you again?” Tristan asked. “I remember the others, but you weren’t with them.”

“Joel Wright, I taught Paige to climb.”

“Joel...as in *Joel* Joel, the Joel?” Tristan asked sending her a curious look.

“I’d love to sit and chat about old times Tris but we’re kind of in a hurry here, aren’t we?” Paige stated as all gazes turned towards her. “If I’m not mistaken that’s Billy’s chopper now.”

“I still don’t feel I should allow you out there,” Steven stated rubbing his hand across his face. “I can’t send you in there knowing what I do about this fire.”

“What if the choice was taken out of your hands?” Paige inquired flipping through her phone’s contact list to find the number she needed. “You were directed to me for a reason, right? Well, that reason is I’m still the best and this...this I can handle.”

“You’re going to replace me as head here?” Steven asked a bit annoyed. “If you think anyone else around here is going to agree to send you out there, you’re sorely mistaken. Much as they want to bring my girls home, they know better than to send someone out into the middle of this mess.”

Paige nodded at his ramblings as the line picked up quickly. She no more had the initial part of the problem and her solution out before she was handing the phone to Steven who took it with serious trepidation. He ground out a few short answers before handing it back to her and turning around to pull out some gear from boxes behind him.

“Thanks Mic,” Paige said ending the call.

“Sneaky thing there, impressive, but sneaky,” Steven stated handing them long-sleeved shirts and gloves. “Seems I

have no choice but to allow you to go but I did promise that I'd do my best to keep you safe so these are fire retardant and heat resistant clothing. Wear them in case the fire jumps."

They were headed to the chopper when Jesse finally inquired how she'd managed to get the approval. "Who was that on the phone?"

"Mic...but you all would probably know him better as Vice President Michael Grant," she said avoiding their gazes.

"Did you just say the vice president...as in of the United States of America?" Craig asked as his jaw dropped.

"Maybe," she shrugged.

"Why...how the hell do you have what appears to be the vice president's personal number?" Joel questioned turning her around to face him.

"Because he owed me a favor."

"The vice president owed *you* a favor?" Hillary stated laughing. "Good lord Paige who on earth don't you know?"

"The Queen of England? Fine since we're in a hurry, during their campaign trail his daughter got into a bit of trouble and I helped out."

"You're going to have to explain that better because all that does is whet my appetite for details," Hillary told her.

"It was kept out of the news to protect her, but her boyfriend was a member of an underground club and he wanted to ensure Mic and Peter didn't win the election, so he kidnapped her before one of their stops."

"How did you end up helping them out?" Jesse questioned.

"Why did they ask you?" Joel added.

"Did you just call the president Peter as casually as you could?" Craig stated with a grin.

"I was in town. We'd been repairing damages to an area that had fallen into a sinkhole, not as bad as Fairway but still pretty massive...anyway one of the members of the Secret

Service knew me. His father was a miner we'd rescued a few years before I left the team. He thought I might be able to help when they discovered where they were holding her."

"When you say an underground club, you're not talking about them being located underground are you?" Jesse stated.

"Nope...look the only reason I was asked was because I could get in unnoticed. As you mentioned before Joel, I don't look too much older than I did in high school which worked out well since these guys were into that sort of thing."

"Jesus Christ please tell me you didn't..." he said staring at her.

"No, the only way to get to them was from the back side of the mountain if they'd approached from the front, it would have been a heyday and who knows if she'd have survived. So, after we climbed up, I slipped out of my gear and into a more revealing ensemble and quietly made my way around the place trying to find her."

"Did you get caught?" Hillary questioned.

"I'm standing in front of you, aren't I? I was stopped by a few people but what can I say, I can bluff my way through anything. I finally found her, let the others know, got her untied and we slipped out before the brawny guys came out with their big toys."

"I really hope that's your way of saying the army showed up with guns and not your way of covering something sleazy," Craig said sending her a questioning look.

"That's what I meant. I got her around to the back of the mountain and we were halfway down before they showed, the idiots hadn't even noticed she was missing and by then it was too late for them to do anything to stop us. We were whisked away the second our feet touched the ground."

"Wow...so what happened to the club?" Moose inquired.

"Let's just say they were quietly dealt with. Seems Darcy wasn't the first underage girl they'd abducted. Most of them are in jail a few might have gotten lighter sentences, but I

doubt it. Mic and Peter went on to win and he told me to call him if I ever needed anything.”

“But you had his personal number and the way you talked to him...that wasn’t the way someone would speak if you were just calling to redeem a favor,” Joel said crossing his arms across his chest.

“No, it wasn’t. Did I mention I spent last Christmas at the White House?” she asked hurrying into the chopper as Caleb motioned that they were ready to go.

“You what!?” they asked in unison, and she couldn’t hold in the laughter.

“I spent Christmas at the White House and Peter asked me to be on his cabinet but I’m not into the whole political scheme of things. They tend to get my info into the hands of people who need my help rebuilding but they’ve called me in to consult on FEMA matters here and there.”

“What else are you hiding Paige?” Joel inquired climbing in beside her.

“You’ll never know, at least not until the book comes out,” she teased.

“Book...you’re not serious are you, Paige?” Hillary questioned holding the door open.

“What can I say I know everyone, including some publishers who want me to write for them. Maybe one of these days, I will sit down and write it all out but for now I like flying under the radar. Oh, come on guys how do you think I’m able to fly anywhere I want on a moment’s notice? I know the right people and they keep my secrets safe. Now we need to go so get to work. That’s an order from me and the vice president.”

“Good to have you calling the shots boss,” Rabbit said sending her a salute.

“Welcome back boss,” Moose added.

“I’m not back,” she said settling back into the seat as Joel and Jesse watched her closely. “What?”

“Nothing,” Jesse said shaking his head.

“You love this, the unknown danger that might be lurking around the corner...I can’t believe I didn’t see it before,” Joel stated. “That light in your eyes when Dawson showed up wasn’t because of him, it was because you were remembering what you’d done to get him out of his mess. The way you looked when we met up in the mountain...it’s the same excitement.”

“God Joel, that’s crazy. Why the hell would I love knowing that my friends or family’s in danger? I love it when things work out, when my ideas do exactly what they’re meant to, but I don’t go seeking it. I’m not an adrenaline junky. If I never had to work a disaster scene again, I’d happily sit back with my toes in the sand drinking wine all day. I mean really, did you enjoy being trapped in the mine for sixty some hours? No, this doesn’t excite me. Every time I work a scene or go looking for a missing person, I’m terrified but when that person is someone, I care about...never mind you wouldn’t get it.”

“What wouldn’t I get? Damn it Paige, would you just talk to me for once in your life?”

“What’s the point when you never listen? I say one thing and you hear the exact opposite. One of my best friends is out there and I have no clue if she’s alive. If her daughter, my *goddaughter* is alive. You wouldn’t understand even if I try and explain.”

“Try me, you apparently love them both although you’ve barely looked at your own nephew, so what’s the story here Paige? Why are you willing to risk your own neck to save them?”

“Tami was my roommate when I left. Little did we know we were both pregnant. She was next to me holding my hand while I lost the baby all the while terrified that it might happen to her. It didn’t, thank god, and she finally told me. Unlike us Tristan had stood up to his family and asked her to marry him. I was their witness and despite it being held in the courthouse

it was the most beautiful wedding I'd ever seen because they loved each other beyond anything else."

"How did you end up as godmother?"

"Tristan had went out of town for a weekend to check on his grandmother and I was staying with Tami...it was dark, rainy and the power went out right about the time her water broke. We called for an ambulance because we didn't want to risk driving, not with that storm raging, which was a good thing considering she went from no to go in about five minutes. I delivered Nicole in the middle of the living room about ten minutes before the ambulance finally arrived."

"You..." Joel said looking at her.

"Yeah me. I was the first person to hold her so there's no way on earth I'll let someone else do this. Nicole is a beautiful little girl who deserves to grow up with two parents who love her. She's nine."

"Ah baby, I get it," he said moving over next to her and hugging her tightly to his side. "Are you sure you're up to this? If we do find them and they're not..."

"Don't say it, Joel. I can't begin to think of that right now. If I start, then it's not going to stop, and you haven't seen this mountain up close. Honestly, I'd prefer Everest to this one on fire."

"That bad?"

"Worse," Jesse stated. "We'd better get ready though, Caleb's bringing us in."

She nodded and pushed herself past the emotions that clogged her throat. She'd find them and they'd be fine...they had to be.

"I'll hold her steady as long as I can," Caleb stated, "but this wind's kicking up more each second that passes by. Don't unhook yourself until you're firmly on the ground and tethered to something. If it gets too rough, I'll have to pull up and I don't want you falling."

“Got it Caleb, you want your paycheck,” she joked knowing it would help alleviate the worry that was coursing through her. They unrolled the ladder and rope and began to climb down one by one. Jesse insisted on going first and he signaled once he was clear, and she started after him.

The wind kicked the ladder back and forth despite Jesse’s hold on it and she closed her eyes swallowing the fear. She could climb anything anywhere but dangling on a ladder from a chopper was not within her comfort zone. The wind died down a hint and she hurried the rest of the way down reaching Jesse and accepting his help as he unhooked her from the chopper and steadied her while she adjusted to being on the ground.

Joel followed, moving quickly despite the wind. He landed beside them nodding to Craig who wound the ladder and rope back up, and Caleb pulled up as the flames began to flare upward towards them.

“Damn,” Jesse muttered looking around at the thick smoke that hung above them.

“Double damn,” Joel agreed as the heat began to seep into their senses.

“Come on, if it’s this bad up here it’ll be worse where they’re at. I’m bringing them home so let’s get a move on.”

Jesse and Joel casted worried glances at each other as she began to ease herself down the side of the peak.

“Whose grand idea was this again?” Joel said following her progress.

“The girl that you love’s...one more thing she didn’t tell you, the baby she lost was a girl. Paige won’t admit it, but she always wonders what she’d look like now and seeing how big Nicole’s gotten is going to hit her, especially if something happened to her.”

“In other words be prepared to catch her when she falls?” Joel said before easing himself after her.

“You got it,” Jesse agreed.

Chapter 18

“Take a break Paige,” Joel insisted hours later as they reached a wider ledge and the air cleared momentarily.

“I’m fine,” she argued as her lungs burned from breathing in the smoke filled air.

“He’s right Paige,” Jesse stated handing her the canteen of water. “We’re going to need the oxygen later so the more fresh air we can get the better.”

She knew they were right, but she was anxious. The longer it took them to get down meant Tami and Nicole were alone, possibly hurt, and she needed to find them.

They resumed their climb and she had to admit that Joel wasn’t missing a beat. He was in perfect shape. She already knew his body was but seeing him like this made it hard to resist him. They’d climbed enough together growing up to develop a sixth sense regarding the other and it seemed that hadn’t lessened in the ten years since they’d parted.

The sun was gone but she refused to stop. The light and heat from the fire now felt welcomed and she thought of the irony in that statement.

“Come on Paige, we should stop here for the night,” Jesse said as they found a small cave that would provide shelter from the fire and anything else that crept upon them.

She wanted to argue but decided to hedge her battles for now. The sooner they boys fell asleep the faster she’d be able to slip away and continue on without their hindrances. It might not sound like the best plan but sitting around the dark hole wasn’t going to provide her with any answers. She took off her pack and sank down onto the ground before stretching her arms out along the length of her legs to release the tension in her back.

She sat back up seeing the questioning glances from the two men who knew entirely too much about her. “What?”

“Nothing...I was just expecting more of an argument from you,” Jesse answered.

“What’s the point? It’s the two of you against me and it’s getting darker out there. We stay here, get some rest and we’ll be good to go at dawn.”

“Uh huh...then you won’t mind taking your shoes off and letting me hold onto them, will you?” Joel said glancing at her feet.

“You’re kidding right? You know how cold my feet get and I don’t think Jesse would appreciate the way you typically warm them up,” she said letting her gaze travel down the length of his body.

“Okay there will be none of that. You two can cuddle together but all clothes are to stay on is that understood?” Jesse said sending her a wink.

“But we like having an audience don’t we Joel?” she teased as he settled down beside her.

“An exhibitionist you’re not...I can’t even kiss you in front of our friends without bracing myself for the whiplash of your glare afterwards,” he said pulling her up against his side surprised when she rested her head against his shoulder.

“Mmm well what can I say they’re all expecting us to walk down the aisle any day and that’s not going to happen. So why bother having to explain that while we get along well enough in the bedroom outside of it, we generally tend to be on opposing sides of the situation?”

“Really, you’re going to have this discussion now? I am sitting just feet away you know,” Jesse said pretending to be uninterested.

“Yeah, I’m sure you just have nothing to add. Come on Jess, I know you and you’re just dying to say something,” she sighed.

“Alright, I think you’re being an idiot here Paige. Did you or did you not finally get what you wanted? For them to actually listen to you, to see what you’re capable of, so why are you being so stinking stubborn? Fine, they lied to you,

manipulated you and things didn't work out well but aren't you the one who's always said you can't live in the past? So why are you?"

"I'm not I'm just being realistic. Once the mine's fully operational again and the new additions are finished what else will they need me for? I'll be pushed back to the outside and when that happens, I'll be leaving, oh I might come back for visits this time but I'm not needed there."

"Bull, we all need you Paige," Joel said grasping her chin, so she was forced to look at him. "When the hell are you going to get it through your head, without you we're just a bunch of people working together. Do you honestly think that breakfast was thrown together for us? I can tell you it wasn't. We've had some minor problems before, guys getting stuck when a ceiling punctures or something and the moment they're out everyone rushes home. It took the guys less than five minutes to know you were in charge and to ensure no one went against you."

"It's always been that way Paige," Jesse added. "Everywhere you go you leave a trail of broken hearts and admirers who would gladly lay down across a puddle to keep you from getting wet in it. You are this unbelievable mixture of strength and vulnerability that tempts even the sanest man to try and unravel your mysteries."

"It's been that way as long as I can remember. You were such a tomboy growing up but there was no denying you were a girl, Paige. You'd be running around in dresses, climbing over fences faster than anyone else and there was this freeness about you that was and is breathtaking. Do you have any idea why I stayed away so much during breaks my first year of college?"

"You were having too much fun with the girls there?" she said remembering Sam's comments about needing a rotating door for their dorm room.

"Alright I was a bit desperate because I was trying to keep my hands off of you. You were fifteen Paige and you'd blossomed into a woman, but you still had that freeness about

you and I couldn't risk it. I stayed away because I knew if I didn't, I'd do something stupid like kissing you before you were ready."

"Again, you were making choices for me. Do you know why I work for myself? Because I was sick to death of everyone thinking they knew what was right and always telling me I was wrong or crazy or insane. I'll admit it I take risks, but they're calculated risks. I don't go bungee jumping without something strapped to my feet. I don't go climbing without a rope. I'm not suicidal so why don't we just cool the crappy intervention and get some rest? The next part of the climb gets worse."

"How the hell can anything be worse than that jumble up there?" Joel inquired gently rubbing her shoulder to calm her down.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she chuckled with a smile that chilled his need to kiss her.

"Paige, what do you know about this mountain that I don't?"

"Let's just say it might look whole but it's not. Get some sleep, we'll need it," she said closing her eyes and ignoring their attempts to talk. She dozed for a bit and woke as the sky began to lighten far in the distance. She slipped out of their cave with her things and scouted the area. She'd only been up the mountain one other time and she needed to reassure herself that the climb was as difficult as she remembered.

The last climb had been emotional too, Jesse had conned her into coming with him hoping something would happen between them, but she knew it wouldn't. They'd been working together for two years and despite her friendship with him, he didn't know about her past. They'd been working on the section they were now about to go down when he broached the subject of whether she was seeing someone.

When he wouldn't stop, she'd finally spilled her secrets to him, one by one as her hands and feet constantly moved upwards one over the other as they negotiated the pass. She

hadn't realized she was crying until they got to the top of it, and he'd pulled her into his arms wiping them away.

She was still staring down the section when a noise behind her made her flip around.

"Told you she'd try and ditch us," Jesse said with a stifled yawn.

"Going somewhere?" Joel questioned with a glare.

"Just scouting the climb while you two slept. Ready to get to it?" she inquired nodding towards the twisted garble of rocks laid out below them.

"Jesus Christ...you did this climb for fun?"

"For my sanity I'd say," Paige told him with a smile towards Jesse who dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

"Care to explain that?"

"Not right now, ask me once we're home and I'll think about it," she sighed glancing around the burning forest. Flames licked the sky as far as she could see and when she looked down, she could see the fires had started to climb higher on the mountain. "We should get moving before this fire decides to spread any faster."

"Let me go down first Paige," Jesse suggested, "you follow, and Joel can guide you from up here."

"I'm not a newbie here remember?"

"No but the last time we did this you were pretty emotional. How you managed it I don't know but I'm not going to risk you falling. So back up and let me go first," he stated moving her back into Joel's arms while he prepared his ropes.

It was nearly afternoon before they got to the location Tami and Nicole had indicated during their call. She was hot and sweaty, the heat from the fires made it hard to breathe comfortably and she wondered how they could have lasted two days in this.

“I don’t see anything Paige,” Jesse said as he searched the area. “Maybe they went lower?”

“No, she would have followed the light to try to get away from the fire. Tami knows how to take care of herself, and she’d never let anything happen to Nicole,” Paige said glancing around them. She saw a path nearly obscured by the overgrown bushes dotting the ground. “There...she wouldn’t risk climbing if she thought the fires were going to jump but she’d get to higher ground all the same.”

They followed her up the path as it twisted inward and away from the blazing heat. It snaked between two large rock walls and the coolness hit her sending goosebumps up and down her flesh. They came out the other side and saw the small lean-to type of rocks structure.

“Tami...Nicole,” she shouted praying for an answer. “Tami...Nicole!”

“Auntie Paige?” a tiny voice wavered a bit higher, and she looked up as relief hit her.

“Nicole, oh sweetie...” She nearly cried hurrying up the lean-to and towards her. The little girl launched herself into her arms as tears began to stream down her face.

“Shh,” she whispered over and over as she stroked her hair. “Aw sweetie, you don’t know how glad I am to see you. Where’s Mom?”

“She got hurt. We were going back down when the fires burst through. She was okay yesterday but now...she can’t stay awake, Auntie Paige.”

“Well, who’s the best around of waking people up?” Paige asked tweaking her nose as she cast worried glances at the two men.

Nicole led them to another lean-to and she was happy to find the air was clearer, at least they hadn’t been breathing in the heaviest of the smoke. She took one look at Tami and her heart sank. A fiery red mark ran down the length of her arms and a small cut above her eye told her something heavy and hot had hit her.

“Nic, this is Joel, he’s a friend of mine and he’s got some water and food. Why don’t you two sit out here while I check on Mom?” she suggested kissing the girl’s forehead in reassurance she didn’t feel.

Nicole nodded and Paige slipped over to him whispering in his ear, “Don’t let her in.”

“Paige...” he replied as he placed a hand on Nicole’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I’d say she tried to block something that was burning with her arms. She’s possibly gone into shock, and she’s got a huge knot on her head...just promise me you’ll keep Nicole from seeing something she shouldn’t.”

“Of course,” he replied swiping the tear that fell from her eye away. “Paige, you found them.”

“Let’s hope it’s not too late.” She sighed heading back into the covered area. She tried to rouse Tami and her heart leapt into her throat when her eyes finally fluttered open.

“Paige...” she said hoarsely as her eyes filled with confusion. “How...where’s Nic?”

“She’s fine; Joel’s taking care of her. Aw Tams...what happened?” she asked pulling the first aid kit from her bag and taking out the burn cream and clean cloths.

“Stupid rock slipped, hit me on the head and then a log followed...guess I’m not invincible huh...”

“You’re a tough girl. This is probably going to hurt honey,” Paige warned as she began to clean the burns.

“Hurt? Who gave birth in the middle of a power outage with only her best friend?” Tami asked clenching her fists as she tried to laugh through the pain.

“You did and because of that you have a gorgeous little girl out there who needs you to come home with her so look at me Tams...keep your eyes focused on me. You remember Jesse, right?” she added nodding towards the man sitting beside her.

“She convinced you to come up here again? How’d you get here anyway? Last time I checked it was wall to wall flames.”

“We came down the peak, and that’s how we’re going to get out of here,” Paige warned, and Tami began to laugh more.

“You are as crazy as ever, aren’t you? Who on earth was dumb enough to let you do this? I thought you were the sane one Jesse.”

“It’s pretty hard to say no to Paige when she asks for help. Your dad called her, and she dragged all of us out here with little more than a look.”

“My dad agreed to this? Now I know this is a dream,” Tami said letting out a stifled groan as Paige moved to the other arm.

“He wanted to say no but Paige has some friends in some pretty high places apparently.”

“Let me guess you called the governor?”

“Nope,” Paige said with a grin.

“A representative...no...a senator?”

“The vice president of the country on his personal line,” Jesse told her pulling out some more bandages for Paige.

“You’re kidding. You did that for me?”

“You and Nicole...if something happened to you, I’d lose it you know,” Paige said helping her sit up. She wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tightly. “Now we need to get some fluids in you and then we need to move. The fires are starting to climb higher Tams.”

“I can’t do it Paige, not like this,” she said holding up her bandaged arms.

“Oh yes you can, and you will. I did not come all the way down here for you to wimp out. I know it hurts like hell, but you can do it Tams, I’ll be right there with you and so will Jesse and Joel and Nic.”

“Wait did you say Joel...as in *the* Joel?” Tami asked pushing herself up onto her feet.

“Yeah, he refused to let me come without him.”

“Sounds kinky,” Tami chuckled, and Paige let out a laugh.

“Now that’s my Tams.”

“Oookay,” Jesse drawled looking a bit uncomfortable.

“Ignore him and tell me everything,” Tami demanded as they moved into the sun. Nicole ran over and hugged her mother’s waist tightly.

“Tami this is Joel, Joel my best friend Tami Martin.”

“So...do I kick your butt now or later?” Tami asked with a furious look.

“Depends on if you mean for the past or the present?” Joel countered. “For the past I’ll accept it but for right now, I think that butt kicking belongs to Paige. She’s the one refusing to take a chance.”

“Now that’s a load of bulls...crock,” Tami said as Nicole giggled. “Paige never shies away from taking chances, she thrives on them.”

“Unless they come to her heart or possible happiness,” Jesse stated.

“You know I think I’m going to get off this mountain before I throw someone off it,” Paige said sending the two men glares. “Who wants to go home?”

“Me...is Daddy here?” Nicole said with such hope her heart tightened painfully.

“He’s waiting for you back with Grandpa. So why don’t we get a move on so we can see him hmm?”

Nicole nodded and the others followed not quite ready to give up their conversation.

Chapter 19

The climb up took three times as long on a good day but with an injured Tami and the inexperienced Nicole, it took even longer. The sun was beginning to set when they reached the base of the twisted pass.

“There’s no way to make it up that like this,” Tami said sinking down onto the ground. “And there’s no way I’m going to let Nic try and climb that.”

“She’s not going to climb it, and neither are you,” Paige told her. “Joel and Jesse are going to go up to the first level there and they’re going to pull you up while you walk the wall.”

“What about Nic?” she asked brushing her daughter’s hair from her tired face.

“I’m going to carry her.”

“No way,” Tami gasped.

“Like hell you are,” Jesse stated.

“I’ll do it,” Joel added at the same time as the other two.

“No, Tams the day you asked me to be her godmother you said it was because you knew I’d protect her with my life just as you would and that’s what I’m going to do. The two of you can make it up faster singularly. I’m lighter than you are which means I won’t put as much stress on the rocks carrying her. Clip her to my harness the way I did Brent and we’ll be good, after all I’ll have two super strong men to make sure I don’t fall, right?” she tagged on with a smile.

“Alright, first thing in the morning we’ll go,” Jesse agreed.

“Nope, now,” Paige instructed. “We’re not stopping; the fires are getting too close for us to comfortably rest. Once we’re up the pass it’ll have to jump to continue following us.”

The two men checked behind them and she saw the unmistakable look of acceptance pass between them. She

settled down beside Tami and Nicole as they began to climb. When they reached the top of the first section, she helped secure Tami to the rope and watched as she slowly made her way up as Joel and Jesse pulled the rope backwards. Then it was their turn. She connected Nicole to her harness and took a deep breath before beginning to follow the jumble of rocks up.

The pass was a series of levels thrown together in a twisted mess and they sectioned it off in four parts. The first two were fairly simple and they had no issues navigating them but the third threw a curve at them and that required tiny moves to get around or a large leap of faith. She was glad to see that Tami hadn't lost all of her nerve as she threw herself around it and settled on the other side as Jesse and Joel held tightly onto the ropes. It took her longer as she negotiated the curve slowly with deliberate steps unwilling to take a chance with Nicole on her back.

The last section was the worst, with footholds and handgrips far and few between and a smoothness that was unexpected and fooled climbers into thinking it was safe. Nicole held on tightly to her neck as she calculated the best route up for them. Tami made her way over the final ledge and hugged the two men tightly in a rush of thanks. It was then up to her to get Nicole over safely and she prayed her arms would hold out. The girl was slight but the physical exertion on top of the emotional one was pulling at her.

Three-fourths the way up she paused to re-grip and something wet hit her palm. Just what they needed...rain. It wouldn't do any good putting out the fire, it evaporated almost before it hit it and made steam converge on them.

"You okay Paige?" Joel called down and she nodded.

"We're good," she replied as she pressed on. Two set of hands reached down and hauled her over the ledge as the rain started coming down harder. Joel unhooked Nicole from her back and carried her as they rushed to the cave from the night before.

Tami hugged her daughter tightly as it sliced through the air like arrows trying to pierce the ground.

“Doing alright?” she asked Nicole.

“Yeah...but I’m tired,” Nicole yawned.

“Get some sleep,” Paige said kissing the top of her head and hugging Tami then pulled out a blanket for them to cuddle. She ran her hands up and down her arms where the drops of water had seared her skin.

“Come here,” Joel told her as he brought her up against his back and wrapped his arms around her. “You’re shivering.”

“I’m okay, just tired too I guess,” she stated trying to ignore the ache that seared through her arms.

“Bull,” he whispered against her ear. “Your arms hurt like hell, don’t they?”

“So-what if they do? I’m sure you and Jesse are sore too. You pulled Tami up the entire pass and we’ve still got more of a climb before we reach the peak.”

“Do you know what I’d do if we were home right now? I’d go run you a bath hot as you could stand it and then slowly undress you,” he said so softly she barely heard him. “Then I’d help you into it listening for your sigh of bliss as the heat surrounded you. Then I’d undress myself and join you...slide in behind you until our bodies were pressed tightly together and let my hands wander from your neck to your shoulders and down your arms until the only thing you felt was the heat pooling deep inside you.”

“Joel...” she sighed turning to face him as her face flushed. “Would you stop it? We’re not exactly alone here.”

“But you’re all warmed up now, aren’t you?” he asked glancing down into her eyes.

“You’re evil and you know it.”

“Gotta take my chances somehow Paige, I figure if I get you addicted to my body enough, you’ll eventually give in and stay by me forever.”

She sighed resting her head against his chest. She wanted to do exactly that but today more than ever told her she couldn't. Nothing had changed. She loved him...that much she'd admitted to herself, but it wouldn't mean anything when he finally realized that he couldn't live without kids after all. He'd been great with Nicole the entire day and seeing him carrying her, had broken her heart all over again. The thought that it could have been him with their daughter kept creeping through her mind and destroying any chance of contentment that she had found.

"We should get some sleep," she said unable to meet his gaze fearing he's see the truth in her eyes.

He nodded and slid down the wall holding his hand out to her, "Come here Paige."

She knew she shouldn't. She should make a break right here...right now...but she couldn't. One more night sleeping in his arms, that's what she wanted, well she wanted more than one, but it was what she would have to settle for. One more night and then she'd push him away for his own sake as well as hers, she mused as her eyes closed and sleep overtook her.



"Come on Paigey, time to wake up," Joel whispered against her ear giving it a light nibble.

She sighed and stretched as she sat up flushing slightly when she realized she was the last one awake. Tami's eyes met hers and she grinned despite the pain that was fresh behind her gaze.

"Mmm...sun's up?" she asked.

"Just barely, the wind's picked up and so have the fires. We need to get going," Jesse answered with his own smug look.

"Lead the way," Paige said as Joel pulled her up dropping a light kiss on her lips. "What was that for?"

“For not running away, sleeping in my arms all night. That’s a first for us Paige.”

“Whose fault is that?” she countered waspishly trying to stick to her plan of pushing him away.

“Okay so someone didn’t wake up on the right side of the cave, no need to rip my head off baby.”

“Sorry, I just want to get Tami and Nicole home. Tami needs her arms checked out to keep an infection away.”

“We’ll get them there. You found them that was all you Paige.”

“Helped to know where they were to begin with,” she shrugged as they followed the path as far up as they could without climbing.

She was keeping a close eye on the timber burning below them, one good gust of wind and the fire would no doubt jump the pass and ignite the top section of the mountain on fire. They were still an hour away from the peak when it finally did and the section below them began to sizzle as the flames searched for more fuel. Jesse stopped at the top of the section and activated the tracker for the others to come get them before he and Joel pulled Tami up.

She followed aware that the flames were spreading further towards them, and she moved faster taking chances on her footholds she shouldn’t have. She placed her foot into an opening and went higher looking for a handgrip. She found one but it wasn’t as sturdy as she’d thought and before she could adjust her grip, the rocks were sliding down her body. She twisted to keep Nicole safe and felt something slam against her foot.

“Paige...Nicole,” Tami shouted glancing down at them.

“We’re okay...just give me a minute,” she said gritting her teeth as she attempted to get her foot out. It was stuck between a pile of rocks and the wall and no matter how much she tried, it wouldn’t budge.

“What’s wrong Paige,” Joel said moving closer to the edge.

“My foot’s stuck...”

“Paige, I don’t mean to state the obvious but it’s getting kind of hot down there.”

“Thanks Jesse, like I didn’t know that,” she muttered under her breath as the heat he’d been talking about began to grow hotter and closer. “Okay Nic we’re going to have to make some adjustments here.”

“Auntie Paige, what does that mean?”

“That means that I’m going to transfer you to my rope and they’re going to pull you up then I’m going to get myself out of this mess.”

“But how are they going to do that with you down here on the line?”

“We’ll manage it honey,” she said moving a single clip at a time until Nicole was resting between her and the wall.

“Paige what’s going on?” Jesse asked as he and Joel glanced back over. “The chopper’s almost here.”

“I need you all to do something for me...”

“What is it baby?” Joel questioned.

“Don’t ask questions just pull the rope up now.”

“What?” Joel said moving further over the edge. “Paige, what the hell are you doing?”

“Just pull the rope up,” she told them, and they complied. “Okay stop...”

She reached for the clips holding her to the rope.

“Paige Elizabeth Brighton don’t you dare touch that clip,” Joel shouted but she ignored him and quickly undid it and tied the rope so Nicole wouldn’t fall off.

“Take her up now,” she called out moving away from Nicole. “Do it,” she said firmly when they didn’t budge. “I can’t get unstuck if you don’t pull her up. Throw me down another rope and I’ll be good to go.”

Joel tossed another down to her and they pulled Nicole up. She wrapped the rope around her and clipped herself on while attempting to loosen her foot from its trap. She heard the chopper close in and felt the fire lick higher and higher towards her.

“Get them on the chopper,” she said looking up at Joel.
“Please...just get them on the chopper.”

“I’m not leaving you Paige.”

“Joel, get them on the chopper. If you loved me get them home.”

He gave her a final gaze before hurrying the others up to the top of the peak as Caleb settled overhead. She watched as the door slid open and they lowered a basket down and lifted Nicole up and into the chopper. They sent it back down again and she watched as Tami made her way up.

She tried again and again to pull her foot out, but it wouldn’t budge. She heard the whine on the motors and saw it sway as Jesse hung onto the ladder. Her breath caught and she prayed they’d make it out safely.

Another whine pulled her gaze upwards, and she watched as the chopper swayed as flames shot up around the bottom of it narrowly missing the person who had just climbed inside... Joel, she was sure. It was time to get to work on getting herself out of her predicament and back home.



Joel waved the chopper off. There was no way in hell he was going anywhere without Paige. He’d lost her once he wasn’t going to let it happen again. He hurried back to the cliff where he’d left her furious with himself for doing it. He edged over it and stared down pulling his face back when the flames shot up towards him.

“Paige!” he shouted as his heart fell into his gut and a sick empty feeling overtook him. “No...god please no...”

He glanced back over but the flames continued to shoot up towards him. “Paige!”

“What?” she groaned launching herself up and over the edge on the other side.

“Paige? Sweet Jesus,” he groaned rushing over to her. “God, baby I thought I’d lost you.”

“Not that lucky, you’re all stuck with me still.”

“And I’ve never been happier to find that out,” he said covering her mouth with his and showing her exactly what she meant to him.

“Why aren’t you on the chopper?”

“There was no way in hell I was going to leave here without you. You should know that by now baby girl.”

“Mmm...” she sighed as his hands roamed over her body as he assured himself that she was safe.

“How? When I looked over there were flames everywhere.”

“Yeah, it was close and my ankle hurts like hell but I lowered myself enough so I could shift some rocks and get my foot out. At that point the fire was starting to gain on this side so instead of going up I went sideways.”

“I don’t care how you did it. I should have never left you baby girl; never let you leave me.”

“Joel don’t...”

“I have to baby. I need you to know how much I loved you. How much I still love you, Paige.”

“If you keep saying things like that to me, we’re likely to put on a hell of a show if Caleb can make it back for us tonight.”

“Perhaps I should try and find us somewhere more private to discuss the proposition of that further.”

“I won’t argue, not really,” she said surprising herself. What was one more night really? It wasn’t likely to change

anything. She was still going to leave him once they were back home. It was only fair to the both of them.

Chapter 20

“Earth to Paige...we’d better get dressed. The wind’s died down so Caleb should be able to get back out here to pick us up.”

“Mmm...” she sighed reluctantly sitting up. “Stop looking at me like that Joel.”

“I can’t help it; you’re too gorgeous for your own good.”

“Well as you said Caleb will probably be back anytime.”

“First I need one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“This,” he said pulling her close and kissing her until her entire body tingled and hummed to life again. “Alright, get dressed before I can’t control myself.”

Paige laughed as she pulled on her clothing and hurried up to the peak. Joel stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her dropping light kisses on her neck and ears as the sound of a chopper grew. The ladder dropped down and she hooked her harness to the rope hoping her ankle would hold up until she was inside.

“Can you make it?” Joel questioned.

“I’ll be fine. I climbed all the way up here on it, didn’t I?”

“You did but this is a bit more difficult.”

“I’ve got it.” She just hoped she did.

She started climbing clenching her jaw every time she had to put weight on her ankle. Her body was shaking as she reached the top and she wasn’t sure she could find the strength to push herself inside the chopper.

“Need a hand?” Craig said as he and Jesse appeared in the doorway and hauled her in.

“Don’t have a death wish huh?” Jesse asked wrapping his arms around her and helping her to a seat. “Why didn’t you

tell us you were hurt we could have sent the basket down for you.”

“I’m fine, it’s a sprain nothing else.”

“Yeah, that’s why you were about to collapse before they hauled your skinny, stubborn ass in here,” Joel said coming in behind her.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all a million times before. Get us out of here Caleb,” she called.

They landed and she sighed with relief that he hadn’t taken her to the hospital as the boys had requested. Joel slid out and reached in for her, lifting her down and keeping her in his arms as he crossed the area towards the tent. He sat her down on a chair as a medic hurried in after them.

“Really?” she sighed.

“You refused to go to the hospital so we made sure there was someone who could assess your injury,” Jesse stated.

She gave in, allowed the medic to check her ankle, and wasn’t surprised when he suggested she visit a doctor for x-rays. Having suffered a broken leg before she knew what it felt like and there was a good possibility that it was fractured. The look in Joel’s eyes when he heard that pushed away any arguments, she might feel like putting up and she allowed him to come with her to the hospital to see Tami and to get her ankle checked out fully.

She refused the wheelchair they offered her in lieu of a pair of crutches after they’d determined that there was a small hairline fracture. She knew everyone would make a big deal out of it, which was one of the reasons why she chose the crutches. She wasn’t an invalid who needed someone to cater to her. She’d managed to do her job with a broken femur she could deal with a hairline fracture.

“Paige, take it easy. There isn’t a race to see who can get there faster,” Joel said as she made her way towards Tami’s room.

“I’m fine. You don’t have to come with me Joel.”

“And let you find a way to hurt yourself some more? I don’t think so. Your dad’s going to kill me for leaving you there in the first place.”

“Not unless you tell him...slides happen. I got out and Tami and Nicole are safe. That’s what’s important,” she said turning to him as they reached the room.

“Damn it Paige...”

“Ooh sounds like Paige is being her normal self,” Tristan laughed as he spied them in the doorway.

“Auntie Paige?!” Nicole said scrambling off the bed where she’d been sitting with her mother. She raced over and threw her arms around her waist burying her face in her chest as she squeezed.

“Easy there Nic,” Tami said lightly sending her a smile.

“I thought you were gone. I told Daddy what you did, and he said that was typical Paige and that you were too stubborn to not make it back, but the helicopter was bouncing around so much, and we couldn’t see anything but the fire...”

“Breathe Nic,” Paige laughed leaning over and kissing the top of her head. “I’m fine. How are you and Mom?”

“Clean bill of health for this little one,” Tristan said picking up his daughter and kissing her cheek, “and Mom’s going to be just fine thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she shrugged as they headed into the room, and she accepted the chair he offered.

“Bull, you carried Nic up the pass and protected her when that slide happened not to mention risking your own life by unbuckling yourself from the rope to get her up. Paige...half of me wants to yell at you for being so stupid but the other half can’t help but love you more for it,” Tami sighed.

“Now you know how I’ve always felt,” Joel laughed as he sat down on the arm of the chair and massaged the tension from her shoulders.

“Is that why you refused to admit that you were a couple to her dad?” Tami said shooting him a look that said she

wasn't sure about him.

“That wasn't exactly what went down, it's a bit more complicated than that Tams. I'll tell you all about it later,” Paige said reaching out and squeezing her hand. “Right now, I think you need to get some rest and Nicole and I have a pizza date don't we sweetie?”

“Pizza? Can I Mom? Please...” Nicole said looking up at her parents.

“I suppose we can allow that. Behave for your Aunt Paige though, she might be an old pro on those things, but it's been a couple of long days,” Tristan said hugging her.

“I promise,” Nicole said dancing around the room.

“Why don't you and Joel go grab the car while your dad helps Paige down?” Tami suggested. “They'll be right behind you.”

Nicole nodded and Joel reluctantly agreed but she tensed waiting for whatever her friends were about to say.

“Paige...” Tami stated staring at her as tears welled in her eyes.

“Tams don't.”

“Don't tell me not to cry, you stupid woman. Do you know how worried I've been? I thought we'd lost you and it would have been my fault.”

“Tams it wasn't. You didn't know the place was going to go up in flames and even if something had happened to me, it would have been because I made a choice, okay? I wasn't going to let anything happen to you or Nic. She needs her mother, and you need her.”

“You need someone too Paige,” she stated. “You're still in love with him, aren't you?”

“It doesn't matter, okay? As soon as I get the mine in order I'm going back to Maine.”

“Why in hell would you do something as dumb as that Paige? Joel is crazy about you. I saw it when he sent us on.

He was tearing himself in two making sure we got on the chopper safely while wanting to get you. So why aren't you with him completely? Jesse filled me in on the way here that you're refusing to admit that you're a couple that you're sleeping with him, but you can barely acknowledge him in public."

"It's not that simple Tams."

"No? You're in love with him, he's in love with you, what else matters? I've seen you with Nic you're beyond amazing with her and Joel...he surprised me with how much he protected her without even knowing her. You just need to get off your butt and marry that man. Then maybe I can become Aunt Tami and spoil your kids then send them back."

"That's never going to happen, Tams."

"It would if you'd let it."

"No, it won't. I can't have children, not anymore," she sighed unable to look at her best friend.

"What? Paigey, please tell me this doesn't have to do with the miscarriage ten years ago."

"No, when Dad had his heart attack Joel was there. We sat in almost total silence for two days just willing him to make it and then he woke up. I was exhausted and so was Joel...add in the statement from the doctors that he should be fine, and one thing led to another."

"You never said a word about him being there," Tristan said kneeling between the bed and the chair.

"I know...a couple weeks later I realized I was late, and it turns out I was pregnant."

"What? Holy Christ Paige," Tami gasped. "Oh, honey what happened?"

"It was an ectopic pregnancy. I'd just made the decision to go home and tell Joel about it, about everything, but fate stepped in. There were complications and as a result I can't have kids."

“Wait, you mean to tell me, you’re refusing to have a complete relationship with Joel because you can’t have kids?” Tristan questioned.

“As Tami said he’s great with kids and I know he wants them. I can’t be the one to give them to him.”

“Do you really think that matters to him?” Tami said shaking her head.

“He’ll end up regretting not having children of his own and that’ll lead him to hate me. It’s over between us. It has been for ten years.”

“Oh bullshit, Paige,” Tristan stated angrily. “We’ve watched you for ten years. Every time someone would try and get close to you, you’d push them away. No one was good enough for you. You’re constantly talking about moving forward but you can’t. You’re still stuck as the twenty-year-old girl who’s too scared to tell the man she loves she’s pregnant, who’s too angry that no one will listen to her. You take the stupidest chances of anyone around but yet you always come through. How I don’t know because your luck should have been up long ago.”

“Tris is right Paige. What are you so scared of?”

“I’m not scared of anything...” *Liar*, flew through her own mind but she pushed it away.

“Yes, you are. You’re scared of failing, aren’t you? That’s it,” Tami said as her eyes lit up with understanding. “You take the chances you do because if they fail it’s not really your fault. It was impossible to start with so it’s easier to let it roll off your back. You push people away because then you can’t fail them, don’t you?”

“So-what if I do? God, why did I answer that phone call? If I’d never gone back there then I wouldn’t be tearing myself apart right now trying to do the right thing.”

“Leaving Joel before he can leave you?” Tristan inquired. “That’s not going to happen, Paige. He didn’t leave you on the mountain by yourself and I don’t think he left you ten years ago either, what really happened?”

“Seems Joel had bought the old Jasper place, the house I’d told you about...”

“The old farmhouse that was falling down?” Tami asked.

“Yeah, he bought it and went to tell my dad that he wanted to marry me. Dad told him it was a bad idea, that I needed to grow up, away from the mine before marrying him. Do you know how crazy that is? I was pushing Joel because I was pregnant, and my father talks him out of it.”

“And because you wouldn’t tell him the truth you ended up at school with me and then lost the baby,” Tami said taking her hand.

“Yeah, I hated myself for *so* long because I didn’t tell Joel, and I hated him for being a coward. Now I find out how much they manipulated me and it just...I can’t do it. I can’t let them in again knowing what I do. I can’t love them when the entire time I know it’s going to end.”

“Okay they overstepped but Paige it’s over. Look at what you’ve done with your life, how many lives you’ve saved.”

“All the while mine’s being destroyed bit by bit...ironic huh? I can rescue everyone but myself.”

“That’s not true. You got yourself unstuck and away from the fire without any help. Slow down Paige...you rush through life trying to get to the next moment before the current one’s over. You say you can’t be with Joel because you can’t give him a child well, that’s stupid. Who cares if the child doesn’t come from you? You love Nicole like your own and if anything happened to Tris and me, you’d be the first one to take her in.”

“Tami’s right, Paige, biology doesn’t matter love does.”

“Please don’t give me the whole ‘love makes the world go round’ speech because I might physically hurt you if you do.”

“Come on Paige, you don’t run from things so why this? Why can’t you just let Joel love you? Why can’t you let yourself be happy with him?” Tami questioned.

“Because it hurts too much when I lose him, and I know I will. Do you think I like being alone? I hate it but it’s easier than waiting for the other shoe to drop. When I lost him ten years ago, I didn’t think I’d survive and then I lost the baby... you were there, you know how much that hurt. I just can’t do it. I can’t give him my heart again because I don’t even know if it works.”

“Yes, it does Paige, everything you’ve done to bring me and Nic home, to get your family out of the mine...you have the biggest heart in the world.”

“Is that why it hurts all the time?” she laughed trying to blink back her own tears. “I’ve tried to be okay with never having kids of my own but I’m not...I can’t be.”

“So that’s the real reason? You don’t want to open your heart up to Joel to see him love you and be okay with having only you because you do want a family. Aw sweetie, it sucks but you can have a family without carrying a child,” Tami said squeezing her hand tightly.

“And when or if we find a child, we want to adopt, and something happens at the last minute to tear them away from me too...what then?”

“That won’t happen but if it does, you’ll get through it together. You lean on the other for support and your Joel has some pretty fine shoulders,” she said with a grin.

“I can’t. I’m a magnet for danger. Look at the last five weeks, the cave-in at the mine where my entire family is trapped. Brent and Greg nearly drowning in the cavern because Brent got trapped. You and Nic...no one should be close to me for their own safety.”

“Really? To me it looks like you’re a magnet for a positive outcome,” Tristan said giving her a hug. “You got everyone out of the mine safely. You brought Brent and Greg back to their parents and you brought Tami and Nic back to me.”

“You don’t know the nickname everyone has for you do you Paige?” Tami inquired.

“You mean the crazy and insane wacko?”

“The Lucky ‘Page’ that’s what they call you sweetie, you know why? Because you always write down your plans on paper before you hand out the instructions, so everyone knows what to do...dumb but true,” Tami smiled at her.

“I can’t...I can’t deal with losing someone again or losing more of myself so let’s just drop it so I can go get some pizza with my favorite goddaughter, okay?”

“Alright, we’ll drop it for now, but this isn’t over Paige, is it Tris?”

“Not by a long shot and don’t think your Joel’s going to let you go so easily this time Paige. I’d say they’ve finally seen you’ve grown up. Even if you haven’t grown out of being that girl.”

She sighed knowing they wouldn’t let up and kissed Tami’s cheek before turning to go. “I’ll see you before we head home. I’m not sure when that’ll be but I’ll let you know.”

“Damned straight you will,” she said shooting her husband a glance that he shook his head at. “Go on, I think a nap’s in order.”

Paige laughed. Tami didn’t take naps she just wanted to talk to Tristan alone.

Chapter 21

“Paige how many times have we said to stay out of here?” Dawson yelled at her as she picked her way through the half-cleared valley. “One wrong move and you’ll tumble head first into the boulders.”

“How many times have I told you that I can manage?” she countered tightening her grip on the handles of the crutches. She had a doctor’s appointment in a bit, and she hoped to get rid of them and come home with a walking boot. It would make her life much better. Four weeks of using them was enough.

“Paige, what the hell are you doing here?” Joel asked marching up behind her. “We wanted you to stay at the office not come down here and tell us what we’re doing wrong.”

“But it’s so much more fun to do that than sit in a stuffy office all day where either no one talks to you, or they hover so much you can’t do anything. You should know by now that I don’t take orders.”

“You don’t take orders. You don’t listen. You don’t think. You don’t change your mind either, do you?” he stated glaring at her.

“Really? You’re still going on about this? It was fun but it’s not real. I’m not twenty and you’re no longer that first love, we’ve grown apart.”

“Then why do you burn for me every time I touch you?”

“I’m *not* talking about this right now Joel. I have a doctor’s appointment in about an hour so I’m simply stopping in to check on the progress. It’s looking pretty good considering.”

“You have another doctor’s appointment?” Joel asked concerned.

“They want to see how it’s healing and if all goes well, I’ll get rid of these useless things,” she said indicating the crutches.

“Want some company?” he asked.

“No thanks, I hate doctors and hospitals and all of that stuff so the shorter the visit the better. Besides don’t you have work to do?”

“I’m sure the boss wouldn’t mind if I skipped out early. He’s trying his damndest to get me married off to his daughter.”

“Yeah, well that’s not going to happen,” she said with a snort of laughter. Why couldn’t they get it? She wasn’t staying. She couldn’t let herself get that close to anyone again...she’d already messed up by allowing Joel into her heart, anymore and she’d be trapped.

She gave a last look around assuring herself that they were following her plans and headed back to the Jeep where Neal sat waiting for her.

“Ready?” he asked.

“All set.”

They pulled out but she couldn’t help but look back at Joel one more time. She just couldn’t give him up completely no matter how hard she tried he continued to creep back in. She couldn’t count the number of times she’d slipped in the last few weeks allowing him to pull her close and kiss her before sanity reared its head and she put a stop to it. Her body was craving his and the more she pushed him away the more it grew. Why couldn’t she get him out of her head...her body... her heart?



“You’re making me look like a fool here Joel,” Sam said slapping a hand against his shoulder. “I put good money down that she’d be married within three months. By my calculations that give you less than three weeks to make it happen.”

“You mean you’re tired of losing money because you bet against me?”

“Huh?” Sam said confused.

“I told you she wouldn’t be back in Maine for the wedding shower, and you lost twenty on it. How much did you lose by betting she’d marry that fool?”

“I didn’t put anything down on her marry Aaron. I said I put money down that a wedding would happen...your wedding to her. She doesn’t sleep anymore you know.”

“Huh?” apparently it was Joel’s turn to be confused now.

“Dad says he hears her tossing and turning all night. She hasn’t slept a full night since you all went to California. I thought I was going to be the only member of the family with months of sleepless nights, but Paige is winning that one it seems.”

“Other than tossing her over my shoulder and then tying her to the bed I don’t think she’s going to willingly let me find that out.”

“I do not want to hear about your sex life with my sister. The only reason I didn’t beat the hell out of you ten years ago when I found out you’d been carrying on for two years behind my back was because I saw firsthand that you were in love with her.”

“You mean for four years.”

“Two...you all started getting together after her eighteenth birthday, right?”

“What do you mean by getting together?”

“It was after her eighteenth birthday when something about her changed. I thought that meant she’d finally found someone special, but she didn’t want Dad to interfere, so she kept it to herself. Four years would have put her at sixteen... you son of a...”

“Sam, easy there, who always wins in a fist fight?”

“You bastard. You started sleeping with my sister when she was sixteen?” he said shoving Joel.

“No, Sam I swear I didn’t touch her. All right, we started ‘dating’ if you want to call it that when she was sixteen but nothing outside of kisses happened. I knew your dad would go ballistic if something happened to her and I wasn’t going to take that chance.”

“But the changes when she was eighteen...you stopped waiting.”

“She came to me Sam, not the other way around. I will wait for the rest of my life for her if I have to just as I would have back then.”

“I should still kick your ass. No wonder she picks such losers. She never had a chance to date around growing up.”

“She did though if you recall. Her entire freshman year was nothing but a string of dates.”

“Like your entire freshman and sophomore years in college...the revolving door at the dorm certainly got a workout from you.”

“I was trying to forget Paige my freshman year and most of those were single dates that didn’t last more than ten minutes because they weren’t her. Our sophomore year... Paige and I were together then, the girls were for show, so you wouldn’t get suspicious. If you think back, you’ll remember there were three of them and they all were in on the secret.”

“What secret?”

“That I was dating my roommate and best friend’s little sister and he’d kill me if he found out. They found it amusing but after meeting Paige they offered to help us out.”

“Why the hell would they do that?”

“Because no one can say no to Paige, and they knew I was crazy about her.”

“You all were crazy. You’re seriously telling me that you waited two entire years for my sister?”

“Three really when you count the fact that once she found her way into my mind and heart I couldn’t...didn’t want anyone else.”

“What about after the two of you split? You haven’t been celibate the past ten years.”

“No but there hasn’t been that many and none of them were Paige.”

“Come on, Jolene?”

“Too clingy...”

“Stephanie?”

“Too...wimpy, she didn’t want to do anything, in or out of bed.”

“Megan, the one with the huge...”

“Fake boobs? Not my style.”

“Man, you’re really hooked on her, aren’t you?” Sam laughed shaking his head at his friend.

“Hooked and waiting to be reeled in. I don’t care what she says. That’s not what’s the most important when it comes to Paige and being honest about her feelings, emotions. It’s what she does and how her eyes look when she’s doing it.”

“I don’t think I want to hear anything about ‘doing it’ when it comes to my little sister. Love her, hate her...lord knows there were plenty of times I wanted to strangle her growing up, she’s my sister and if you hurt her, I’ll hurt you.”

“Then tell her to stop hurting herself and come back to me. I’ve lost her twice. I can’t do it again.”

“Twice...oh when Dad had his heart attack.”

“Yeah, I went looking for her about four months afterwards because I couldn’t get her out of my head, but she was gone. I couldn’t find anyone who knew her much less where she’d gone, and I swore if I ever found her again I’d hold on until we were old, gray and senile.”

“You should tell her that.”

“I’ve tired but every time I bring up anything regarding feelings she runs. Speaking of which, I should get going.”

Your dad and I are meeting with some people at the insurance agency and a lawyer Paige suggested.”

“Ah yeah, the beast. I wonder if he’s another of Paige’s conquests,” Sam said trying to rile him.

“I don’t care who’s in her past as long as I’m the only one in her future.”

“Good luck and if you can get a ring on her finger by the twentieth...Kendra and I are thinking of taking a nice long second honeymoon with Josh.”

“We’ll see, what’re the odds?”

“About twenty-to-one...but hey, they were forty-to-one.”

“I’ll check in at the office later. See how Paige’s doctor’s appointment went and if she’s in a better mood,” Joel stated with a grin. He was going to win her over. He had to.



“Neal...hold on there,” Sam called out as he headed to the door getting ready to leave for the night. “Did you take Paige home or something after her appointment? We wanted to check with her about the drill.”

“She went home,” Neal said hesitantly as Joel and Cord appeared in the doorway.

“Can you get her on her cell?” Cord inquired. “We’d like to get this taken care of tonight.”

“Why don’t we just run to the house and do it?” Sam suggested. “That way we can let her look over this stuff too?”

“Why not? Go on home Neal, we’ll see you in the morning,” Cord stated.

“Uh...sir?” Neal said knowing he was about to be fired.

“What is it, Neal?”

“Paige isn’t at your house. She went home.”

“Home? As in her house in Maine?” Cord questioned.

“Yes sir...”

“How the hell could you let her leave?” Joel demanded.

“I was waiting for her in the coffee shop when I noticed the helicopter landing. She was inside and in the air before I could stop her. She sent me a message if you want to see it.”

Joel took the outstretched phone and tried not to crush it as he read.

Neal, something's come up and I need to go home. Sorry to put this off on you but it's unavoidable. Tell the stooges that I'm fine and I'll call them tomorrow to see how things with the insurance people went ~ Paige.

“Something came up?” Joel scoffed. He pulled out his phone and dialed her number, but it went straight to voicemail. He tried calling with Neal’s phone, but it rang until it also went to voicemail.

Sam tried as did Cord but it continued to go to voicemail, and he was furious. He stormed out the door and headed straight to his car. He wasn’t going to let her run away, not again.

“Joel what are you doing?” Sam questioned.

“I’m going to go drag her butt back here. She said she was going to stay until this was finished and there’s no way in hell, she’s backing out of it now.”

“Shouldn’t we wait to see what she says tomorrow?” Cord inquired.

“And give her a head start of being long gone? No way.”

“Joel, take it easy. She could have just gone up there to get something for her team. They’ve been gone for three days at that explosion site,” Sam warned.

“One day isn’t enough for her to empty a house,” Neal added wishing he hadn’t when Joel’s furious gaze turned back to him.

“You have no idea what Paige is capable of when she puts her mind to something.”

“She promised she’d be here to get the mine back in order. When does she go back on her promises?” Sam asked.

“How about when she promised to love me forever or when she promised that Cord would one day hold her child?”

“That’s not fair Joel; she didn’t know that she wouldn’t be able to have kids when she said that,” he countered.

“Fine, but tell me one thing, why would she suddenly fly all the way to Maine? She couldn’t stay long enough to pick up her dog...wait she didn’t pick up Maggie, did she?” he asked as a smile spread across his face.

“I didn’t see her in the chopper,” Neal stated.

“She wouldn’t run out on Maggie,” Cord said with a sigh of relief. “She treats that dog like a child.”

“Then we need to see if she’s still here,” Joel stated pulling away. He drove as fast as he could and gave a shout of joy when the dog bounded down the stairs towards him. “Paige wouldn’t leave you, would she?”

The dog licked his face then put her front paws on his chest as though she were hugging him.

“So, what would cause Paige to fly out of here with only that cryptic message? Huh girl? What the hell is going on?”

“Talking to a dog?” Sam laughed as he and Cord pulled up behind him. “You should check your phone.”

He pushed the dog down and grabbed his phone.

Joel, no need to panic. I’ll be back in a few days. We need to talk. Seriously talk ~ Paige.

“You get one?” Cord asked seeing his face blank.

“I got a bit. No need to panic and we need to talk is what it amounts to. Still think there’s nothing up?”

“You don’t think she flew back to Maine to marry that doctor, do you?” Sam stated.

“Not a chance,” Cord laughed.

“I don’t think she went there for Aaron,” Joel said still looking at his phone.

“Then why’d she go?” Sam questioned.

“I don’t know and that’s what worries me,” he sighed. Why would Paige run off like this? She had gone shopping and bought new clothes a few days after they’d gotten back from California instead of going to Maine and packing a suitcase. There was something strange going on and he wondered what it was and when she’d be back.

Chapter 22

“I’m sorry but can you repeat that,” Paige said sure she’d misheard yet again. She hadn’t paid much attention at her doctor’s appointment after hearing that her house had been broken into and that the police weren’t sure what if anything had been taken.

“You’re pregnant,” Matt stated, and she was positive that the line had gotten crossed or else they had the wrong file.

“That’s impossible.”

“You’re telling me you haven’t had sex?” he asked amused.

“I know *how* babies are made Matt, but *I* can’t have any.”

“I know you thought that, but it was obviously wrong. The bloodwork is conclusive, you’re pregnant Paige.”

“No, I heard the doctor clearly, she said I can’t have kids.”

“I think you should go back to them and see what they say now. I know you were distracted after getting that call but I’m saying it loud and clear, you are pregnant.”

She hung up the phone dazed and completely confused. She checked the missed calls seeing Joel’s name there made her suck in a deep breath as dizziness rolled over her. She dropped the phone as it began to buzz. Neal’s name appeared on the screen, and she shook her head. She couldn’t talk to them now.

Her father called as did her brother and she knew they were worried. She sent them texts but trying to figure out what to say to Joel wasn’t easy. She couldn’t tell him what Matt had said...what if it was all a mistake? There were such things as false positives even with bloodwork weren’t there?

She glanced at the clock and decided to call her old doctor, maybe she could squeeze her in somehow. A cancellation made not ten minutes before she called got her in

at ten the next morning and a quick call to Caleb assured her, he'd get her there. Now all she had to do was make it through the night without going completely nuts.

By the time she got to the office, she was bouncing off the walls. She needed answers and needed them now. Telling Joel, she needed to seriously talk to him had been stupid. It left her open to a billion hurts if this was what her head was warning her against.

“Paige, I haven't seen you in...four years,” Bella said glancing at her last appointment date. “What's going on? Have you moved back?”

“No, this is going to sound crazy, but I got a phone call from my doctor yesterday. I'd went in for a check on my ankle and I almost passed out after getting up and he insisted on running some bloodwork and when he called...”

“Paige, take a deep breath,” Bella said watching her agitation build. “What did he say?”

“I'm pregnant. I know that's impossible...”

“Why would you say that? You haven't been seeing anyone?”

“Yes, I've had sex recently, but you said I wouldn't be able to have children after the issues from the ectopic pregnancy.”

“I don't remember saying that. Paige, I was the one who did the operation. You lost one of your fallopian tubes but there was nothing evidently wrong with the other.”

“When I came back in for my follow up you said it,” Paige said as hope began to dance inside her.

“Paige, I reviewed my notes before you came in and there was nothing about you not being able to have children due to the loss. There are some women who lose the ability to have children after such events and it's possible that I said something to that affect, but it wasn't in regard to you.”

“You're telling me I've been tearing myself up for four years thinking I can't have kids because I didn't listen closely

enough?" she asked as laughter welled up. She couldn't hold it back and she laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

Bella walked around her desk and handed her a tissue a bit confused. "Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry, it's just I accused my father and Joel of never listening to me and now..."

"You didn't listen to me?" Bella caught on. "Why don't we do an exam? We can do an ultrasound to determine how far along you are unless you know when conception happened."

"I don't. The last nine weeks I've been home, *home* home. There was a cave-in at the mine, and everyone was trapped including Joel..."

"The same Joel who was the father of the last one?"

"Two, he's the only one who could ever be the father."

"Are you telling me you've only had sex with one man your entire life?" Bella asked, her eyes a bit wider even as she attempted to control it Paige suspected.

"My first time was with him the night of my eighteenth birthday and he's the only one who's ever made me want to be with someone. Guess that should have told me something a long time ago huh?"

"Alright so what do you say to that exam? Let me prove to you that you are indeed pregnant?" Bella suggested.

An hour later, she was armed with a sonogram picture and a huge smile.

"So, are you feeling better now?" Bella laughed giving her a hug.

"So much better, thank you. Now I just have to find the words to tell Joel that I'm having his baby."

"I think those will work pretty well. Everything looks fine and if you have any questions feel free to call me. I may not be your doctor, but I am your friend and a doctor."

“Thanks Bella, let’s just cross our fingers that nothing goes wrong.”

“I’ve read your file Paige. Your miscarriage was tragic but once the baby’s heart stopped beating there was nothing they could do and four years ago...”

“There was nothing that could be done either, I know. I just hope that it doesn’t happen this time.”

“Positive thinking Paige that’s what this situation needs, lots of positive thinking.”

“Well then, it’s nothing but positives from here on out. I’ll see you around.”

“I better get an invitation to the wedding.”

Paige laughed as the weight of the world lifted from her shoulders. “Not sure there’s going to be one but why not?”

She smiled the entire way back home and couldn’t keep it out of her voice as she called the office to speak with her father.

“What is going on Paige?” Cord asked as soon as they answered.

“Hello to you too Dad. I’m sorry for just taking off but I got a phone call from the police saying someone had broken into my place, but they couldn’t tell if anything had been taken and needed me to come check on things.”

“Is everything okay Paige?” Sam questioned.

“Fine, some kids broke in, but I guess the alarm scared them off. So, since I’m here I’m going to grab some of my stuff and then drive back. I’ll leave in the morning and should be there by late Sunday.”

“Why drive? Paige what did the doctor say about your ankle?” Joel stated.

“Took off the cast and replaced it with a boot. I want my own car, that’s why I’m going to drive back.”

“If you want your car, just hire someone to bring it out. You don’t need to be sitting behind the wheel for seventeen

hours.”

“Joel...fine. I actually have a couple employees who can pack up my place and bring my stuff home. I’ll call them tomorrow and have them do it while I fly back...will that work?”

“Are you moving home Paige?” Sam inquired.

“For now, unless you all have objections to that.”

“None from me Paige,” Joel said, “the sooner you get home the better baby.”

“Enough of the mushy stuff we have work to do,” Cord chuckled patting Joel on the back.

“Well, I’ll let you all go while I figure out what to bring with me right now,” she stated.

“Get home soon Paige,” Joel told her, and her body flushed with warmth.

She prayed he’d be happy with her news and that he wouldn’t kill her for wasting so much time.



“You’d tell me if there was something wrong, wouldn’t you Paige?” Caleb inquired as he sat the helicopter down.

“Why would you think something’s wrong Caleb?”

“Oh, I don’t know, you leave one doctor’s office and go directly to another. What’s going on Paige.”

“I didn’t have you fly me to Maine for a doctor’s appointment Caleb. We went there because I needed to check on the house.”

“What was DC then?”

“Okay...I did go see a doctor, but I promise there’s nothing wrong. I’m good, great really.”

“Paige, what’s going on?”

“You cannot breathe a word of this to anyone and I mean *anyone* got it?”

“How many of your secrets have I kept?”

“Basically all of them...I’m pregnant.”

“But I thought...never mind none of my business,” he said clearing his throat. “Congratulations I guess.”

“Surprise beyond belief is more like it. I didn’t think I could have kids you know that, but it seems I inherited my father’s inability to listen. Now I just have to tell Joel.”

“I don’t think he’ll have a problem with it in fact I’d say he’s going to be downright thrilled unless you say no to his proposal.”

“If I get one. He might decide he doesn’t want me, us,” she corrected placing her hand over her stomach.

“If that happens then he’s going to have to find somewhere new to live because this town will tear him to bits. Let me know if you need me for anything.”

“Go home...I don’t think I’m going to go anywhere any time soon.”

“Except to the bedroom at Joel’s to stay?” he asked leaning over to kiss her cheek.

She laughed getting out as her father appeared beside her. “Now that would be a new experience.”

“There’s something different about you.”

“Nope, just glad to be home. Is Joel here?”

“No but your friends are, including a little girl who is absolutely gorgeous, and her middle name happens to be the same as yours.”

“Tami, Tristan and Nicole are here?” she gasped turning towards the house and seeing them.

“Surprised?” Tami grinned.

“Completely and I so need to talk to you, but I have to see Joel first.”

“What’s so important there that you’re practically running away from us Sis?” Sam asked as he and Kendra came out with Josh.

“I’ll tell you later, but let me see this little guy first,” she said with a smile taking him from her. She loved the feel of him in her arms so tiny and in need of protection. It had been too long since she’d allowed herself to hold a baby and the second his finger wrapped around hers, he stole her heart.

He was fussy but she didn’t care. She swayed lightly and patted his bottom waiting for him to calm down. She lowered her head down and began to sing so softly only he could hear. His eyes opened and focused on her. “Hey there handsome... how’s my big boy?”

“Whoa...what’s gotten into you?” Sam stated watching her expertly shush him as he continued to cry.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait and find out...mmm... okay go back to mommy sweetie. It’s a good thing he looks like Kendra because I really wouldn’t want to have to offer him plastic surgery before he was five,” she teased kissing his cheek as she handed him back to Kendra.

“Ha, ha, ha...seriously what is up with you?”

“Let me borrow your car and I’ll tell you when I get back.”

“Get back from where?” a new voice asked, and she flipped around as her smile grew.

“Seeing you, we need to talk. Privately.”

“No arguments from me, Cord mind if we use the study?”

“Take all the time you need but my baby girl better be smiling as brightly as she is now, or you’ll answer to me.”

“If I had my way, she wouldn’t have been frowning at all these last few weeks,” he stated sliding his hand along her back and leading her inside.

“Any guesses as to what’s going on with Paige?” Kendra questioned.

“I don’t know but that was our girl the old Paige,” Cord told her.

“What do you think Jesse? You know her best out of us,” Hillary said looking over at him.

“I’ve only seen her smile like that once and I’m pretty sure it’s not that but whatever it is I hope it doesn’t go anywhere.”

“Well, I know Paige and that is not the same Paige who told me in the hospital that she was only sticking around long enough to get the mine in order and then she was leaving,” Tami stated.

“I’d say that’s not true anymore,” Sam smirked. “I may win the pool after all.”

“That again? Kendra said smacking his arm. “Don’t you boys do anything besides make bets?”

“Nope never...”

“You know I think I should call Walter and see how long he’ll need to prepare for a wedding,” Cord stated.

“I’d hold off on that for just now,” Tristan warned. “Paige might be happy right now, but I think we need to know why she’s so happy to know how long it’ll last.”

“He’s right,” Jesse agreed. “Paige can get moody, I’m sure that’s nothing new to anyone here, but happiness like that...something big is going on and I’d like to know what.”

“Maybe she finally came to her senses and realized that Joel loves her as much as she loves him and always has,” Kendra suggested.

“I don’t know but it’s certainly something to hope for,” Craig said.

“Think we could convince her to give us jobs?” Moose asked.

“I sure as hell hope so because I cannot work for Wayne anymore. That guy is a piece of work. I thought he was an ass when Paige was around but now, I don’t care what I drive or

where I drive it, if I don't get away from him, I'm gonna run him over with something and make it look like an accident," Rabbit agreed.

"I'm sure you could but I think it'd be better if we could pull Paige back onto the team and oust Wayne," Hillary stated.

"Actually, Wayne's on his way out," Jesse told them. "Paige made a call to someone higher up than him and he's being given the option of leaving or having the team shut down and privatized."

"Mic?" Tristan asked.

"Peter, I think," he replied.

"Huh?" Sam said confused.

"Seems Paige spent Christmas at the White House with our county's leaders, and he wants her running things. Offered her a spot on his cabinet, the head of FEMA...whatever she wants all she has to do is ask," Jesse explained.

"And she asked for Wayne to be removed?" Craig said. "Well damn, guess we can't be mad at her for leaving us anymore, can we?"

"Nope," Kendra said with a smile, "because if there's one thing I know, Paige always comes back."

Chapter 23

“Paige...”

“Joel...”

“You go first,” he said leaning back against the desk watching as she paced back and forth in front of him.

“There are so many thing I should say...need to say...but none of them sound right in my head...”

“Paige, come here,” he sighed reaching out and grabbing her wrists. He pulled her to him and soothed his hands down her arms. “Pacing can’t be good for that ankle.”

“No, it’s not,” she agreed letting out a deep breath. “Joel, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Too much...”

“Paige baby, what’s going on? Two days ago, you refused to let me touch you, then you up and leave, and then... I get that text saying we need to talk seriously. Paige what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, at least I hope you feel the same way.”

“Would you please just tell me what’s gotten you so worked up all of a sudden? Outside you were happy and light...you’re scaring me, baby.”

“Maybe we should sit,” she suggested heading towards the couch. When she was in his arms, she didn’t feel like talking and she needed to say this...had to say it.

“Paige whatever it is just tell me,” he said remaining still. “What changed?”

“Everything...”

“Paige are you telling me that you want this...us?” he asked moving slowly towards her. “You want to go out there and tell them that we are together? Let me kiss you and touch you whenever the mood strikes me, no matter where we are?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts, if we do this there’s no turning back Paige. I love you. I always have and always will. I don’t care if we have children or if the only thing, we take care of is Maggie, who’s made herself at home on my couch by the way. I want you. Are you all in? No doubts, no regrets...”

“Only one...that I didn’t come here four years ago after what happened the way my heart told me to. Joel, I love you, you are the only man for me. You’re the only man who’s ever been in my life that I couldn’t let go. Truth is you’re the only man who knows everything about me.”

His arms crushed her as his mouth descended onto hers and she knew that she’d finally found her home. The minutes slipped past them, and he continued to kiss her with a hunger that sent shivers through her but a gentleness that brought tears to her eyes she couldn’t stop. She wanted him.

He pulled back cradling her face in his hands as he stared into her eyes.

“What changed Paige? Why did you suddenly...baby, what is it?” he asked as a tear slipped down her cheek and he gently palmed it away.

“I think you’re going to have to find something new to call me other than baby Joel.”

“You don’t like it anymore?” he asked as she slipped her arms around his waist.

“I love it and you, but...”

“But what Paige? Just tell me what is going on.”

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out and his entire body froze. “Joel...”

“I thought you said...how...is it mine? Of course, it’s mine...Paige how?”

“Seems you and Dad aren’t the only ones who didn’t fully listen I thought the doctor had said I couldn’t have kids, but she was actually telling me that some women have more difficulties or are unable to have children after going through

what I had but she never said I was one of them that's what changed Joel."

"So, you're only here with me because you're pregnant?"

"No, Joel, I love you. I've loved you since I was sixteen. You are the *only* man I have *ever* slept with..."

"What?"

"The only one. I wasn't pushing you away because of you. I was pushing you away because of me. I couldn't bear the thought of being with you but not being able to have your baby. I wanted it so badly, though in my dreams it was a little further into the future. I didn't want to disappoint you but mostly I didn't want to disappoint myself, break my own heart the way I did ten years ago."

"So, you pushed me away? How does that make sense?"

"Without you I don't have to worry about being with someone because I don't want anyone else. I didn't have to think about what I was being forced to give up, but with you it was right there and that house...I dreamt of rebuilding it exactly the way you did and filling it with our children, and I couldn't let those dreams go. Being with you and thinking I couldn't have them was killing me and the thought that you would put your own wishes for a family aside for me was too much. I didn't want you to suffer because of me. I didn't want to kill your dreams."

"The only dream I've ever had was being married to you. Baby, no baby, I don't care. I can't let you go again. The first-time sucker punched me in the gut and the second shredded my heart. When I got to your place and found it empty, that you had gone...I wanted to find you and bring you back here, but I couldn't leave your father. I'd promised you that and I wasn't going to break that promise."

"We have so much to talk about, but I don't want to right now Joel. All I want is for you to hold me...us. Oh...I have something for you," she said moving away from him to grab her bag. She rummaged through and pulled out the sonogram

pictures before returning to him. “Proof...that I’m not crazy,” she laughed handing them over.

“I never said you were,” he stated staring at the photos. “What’s this...” he asked pointing to the date.

“The anticipated due date,” she said sliding onto his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck. “Guess there’s no doubting your manliness or that it only takes one time unprotected since it’s happened three times now.”

“Are you saying...in the mountain?” he asked raising an eyebrow.

She nodded giving him a grin. “So, what do you think we should do?”

“I’d say there’s only one thing we can do, get married and fill that house with as many babies as you’ll let me saddle you with. That way there’ll be no chance to run away again.”

“Who says I want to?”

“You did just last week,” he countered holding her tightly to him.

“I’m so sorry. You have no idea how much I wanted to give in and let go of the pain, but I couldn’t. I’ve blamed so many people over the years to avoid hurting or being hurt. I know no one’s to blame...things happen and there’s nothing you can do about it, but I wanted that baby. I wanted her and I wanted you.”

“And your father and I messed it up, made you feel as though you weren’t wanted around here because we were so worried something would happen to you. Can you forgive us?”

“I already have. I can’t stay mad at you no matter how much I want to. Dad was trying to protect me, I get it. I wished you would have just sat down with me and listened but maybe this is what was supposed to happen. I’ve saved thousands of lives doing what I do. Without you and Dad interfering that may not have happened. Look at what happened with Tami and Nicole...if I hadn’t led the life, I have

we may not have gotten to them,” she stated leaning into his body as he lifted her slightly to elevate her leg.

“I love you Paige and I would do anything to protect you. I know you’re brilliant at what you do but the thought of you risking your life the way you did for Nicole...I will never let you go by yourself into something like that. You’re stuck with me and if the only way to keep you safe is to keep you pregnant you better believe I’ll do it,” he teased lowering his mouth to hers again.

“You’re welcome to try,” she replied when they finally parted.

“The fun is in the trying, isn’t it?”

“It is when it’s with you.” She sighed loving the way his arms surrounded her. “We should probably head back out there, shouldn’t we?”

“In a bit...first I have something for you,” he said digging into his pocket. He held up the small velvet box and she felt her breath stall.

“Joel?”

“I was hopeful. When you sent me that text I went and dug this out. Now, you’ll have to remember that this ten years old so if you don’t like it, we can always exchange it,” he commented as he opened the box and let her see the ring.

A small gasp escaped through her open mouth before her hand covered it. “Joel...it’s gorgeous. How could you afford that ten years ago?”

“The diamond was mostly free,” he told her as he lifted it from its velvet holder and slipped it onto her finger. “Perfect fit.”

“Naturally but what do you mean the diamond was mostly free?” she questioned turning towards him as she continued to stare at the gem.

“A little hard work to dig it out and a bit to get it cut specially for you, but it was worth every minute of it.”

“Dig it out? From where?”

“The mountain...our mountain.”

“But it only has diamond flecks, there aren’t any full stones in there.”

“You’d be surprised at what is buried a bit deeper inside,” he said dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“It’s...I love it, Joel. I love you.”

“Good, then I’m hoping your answer to this next question will be yes.”

“I don’t know, I can’t say yes without knowing what it is,” she teased twisting the ring on her finger a bit, as though she wasn’t quite sure of what he was going to say.

“Paige Elizabeth Brighton, I have loved you for fifteen years. You are in my mind, my heart, and you own my soul. Will you please stop running and marry me? Be my wife, the one I’ve wanted you to be for so long. Let us put the past fully behind us and move forward with this miracle we’ve been given?”

“I can’t,” she stated shaking her head slightly.

“Paige!” he half shouted but she laughed and covered his mouth with her hand stopping anything else he was about to spit out.

“I can’t put the past behind us. It’s made us who we are, made us fall in love for the first time and it’s what put us here. Joel, I love you and I want to be with you forever, but we can’t just forget about everything before now,” she said shielding her gaze from him until she was finished. When she turned her face back to him, there was no mistaking the love shining in them.

“You had me worried there for a minute,” he muttered against her lips as he claimed them. “I don’t want to forget the past Paige I want to go forward from it.”

“So do I.”

“Then can you please for once just say yes?”

“Hmm...I will without a doubt marry you Joel Andrew Wright. You stole my heart the first time you kissed me, and you never gave it back.”

Joel laughed wrapping her in his arms as he kissed her again and again. They were both breathing heavily when they parted, and Joel dropped feather light kisses across her face as he cupped her chin and tilted her head back to look into her eyes.

“You just can’t say yes to me, can you?” he asked. “You managed to accept my proposal without using those three little letters.”

“How about ‘I do’? That’s three letters,” she countered with a smile.

“Why don’t we save that one for the wedding? Speaking of which, any preferences on when? I’m thinking the sooner better if you’re about nine weeks along.”

“Eleven technically but who’s counting?”

“Huh? The cave-in was just over two months ago.”

“Well technically you’re two weeks along at conception. Don’t look at me like that I didn’t make rules and though it’s called ‘nine months’ it’s actually forty weeks,” she told him watching the questions that flashed across his face.

“That makes no sense.”

“Well if you think about it there’s an extra week in at least two ‘months’ during the time you’re pregnant and when you take off the first two it’s down to thirty-six and divided by four it’s...”

“Nine months, okay. So, now that I’ve had an anatomy lesson *when* do you want to get married because I’ll be damned if I let you wait until after the baby’s here or let you drag it out while you try and find a way out of this.”

“Never going to happen. Face it Joel, you’re stuck with me.”

“As long as you look at me the way you are right now, I’ll die a happy man.”

“Don’t you dare talk about dying. It’s taken me ten years to find the tiniest bit of happiness, real happiness, and I’m not going to let you off the hook. You have ten years to make up for Joel.”

“Which I’ll be more than happy to if you’d just tell me when.”

“Well, there isn’t a waiting period to get the license and since everyone I’d want to invite is already here, minus a spouse or two, what would you say about next Saturday? I know this amazing house with a garden big enough to accommodate everyone and the best part? It’s free.”

“Paige, are you serious? You don’t want the big drawn out affair?”

“I don’t care about the opulence of it, all I want is you. I’ve been dreaming of you slipping a wedding band on my hand for eleven years. I’d say it’s about damned time it happens, wouldn’t you?”

“Exactly, I want you to have the perfect wedding because it’s the only one you’ll ever have. I’m not letting you go again.”

“It will be perfect Joel. I would fly to Vegas with you right now and go to one of those Elvis impersonator wedding chapels and not complain one little bit. As long as you’re there it’ll be perfect.”

“Are you sure? What about the white dress, bridesmaids, flower girls...cake?”

“Don’t worry it’ll have all of that. Come on Joel, it’s me. I have connections out the wazoo. I can pull off a wedding in a week to rival anything. In fact, I’m sure Caroline can get me the perfect dress by then.”

“Caroline?”

“Spears...the fashion designer. Really Joel?” she mused with a laugh at his blank expression. “She’s the hottest designer out there right now. Her things cost a fortune, but they fit like a glove no matter who you are, even if it’s a shorty like me.”

“You’re not short. You’re perfect for me,” he teased pulling her up against him and proving how well their bodies meshed together.

“Mmm, Joel...as much as I want to, we have a backyard full of people anxious to know why I’m suddenly happy. What do you say we head out there and tell them the good news?”

“You want to tell them about the baby?”

“Maybe we should leave that for the wedding. I’m sure we can come up with something to hold them off for a week... in fact, I think I know what. Come on,” she said scooting off his lap and hold out her hand to him as she checked the text that had just appeared.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” she smiled pulling him out of the room behind her, their fingers laced together with a strength that she knew wouldn’t break.

Chapter 24

They walked out to a sea of expectant faces, including Joel's mother and grandmother. He squeezed her hand and turned her towards him.

"Ready for this?" he asked cupping her cheek with the other.

"I was born ready," she stated reaching up as best she could with the boot on and kissed him. Catcalls and whistling finally drove them apart but she refused to let go of his hand even as he moved behind her and hugged her tightly to him.

"Well," Cord said looking expectantly at them. "Would one of you like to tell us what that display meant? We all know the two of you have been going back and forth between you are and you aren't but until now you haven't done that, at least not so publicly."

"We'd like to invite you all to stick around town because next Saturday we're going to be throwing a party," Paige stated.

"What sort of party," Jesse inquired.

"A sort of engagement, wedding shower and wedding all rolled into one," she said flashing her ring to them. "Tami, Hil, Kendra...how would you like to be bridesmaids?"

"Are you kidding?"

"It's about damned time..."

"I just might win the pool after all..."

"Hold on," Jesse stated quieting everyone. "What the hell changed your tune so quickly? It was just the other day that you were telling me you weren't going back to him ever."

"I did say that, didn't I?" she sighed. "Well, I found something while I was out of town that made everything fall into place."

"Okay what is that supposed to mean?" Sam asked.

“That means she found me,” a new voice stated, and all eyes turned to stare.

“Sweet mother of god...Grant?” Elaine gasped.

“Elaine...Rebecca...Joel my god you’ve grown.”

“What the hell?” Joel said turning to her. “How did you...”

“I have some really good connections,” she told him. “You’d be surprised at what I can get accomplished when I put my mind to it.”

“But...no...this is impossible...” Elaine said still in shock.

“Where have you been for the last twenty years?” Joel asked tensing.

Paige stilled him with a gentle hand to the arm. “Joel, listen to him...for me?”

“You kept this from me in there, *this* is what else you wanted to tell me before we got sidetracked?”

“Joel, just listen.”

“Okay Dad, where’ve you been?”

“In prison...” Grant began but Joel cut him off.

“Ooohh that’s rich...”

“Joel, it’s not what you think,” Paige warned.

“It’s alright Paige. I understand Joel being angry. It’s what’s kept me going during the long years. I was in prison in some obscure Middle Eastern country after being captured when our plane went down. There was two of us who survived, and we were held for the past twenty years until last week when the cavalry showed up.”

“Last week?” Joel asked.

“How did you get out?” Elaine questioned.

“Who found you?” Rebecca added.

“They found him and Cal six years ago, but it was deemed too risky to go after them. I sent through an inquiry a few weeks ago to see about his status. If they’d ever found anything,” Paige said looking to Joel’s mother.

“I’ve tried hundreds of times and never got the slightest hint that they had found him,” Elaine stated.

“It helps having friends in high places and when the vice president and the president tell you to get them out, they’d better listen. And when you hit a brick wall turning to them for help getting through it is the only way to roll,” Paige said with a smile.

“I don’t know how you managed to do it but I’m glad you did and now you’re marrying my son. A beautiful daughter-in-law and hopefully a son and wife who can forgive me,” Grant said giving her a kiss on the forehead. “How are you feeling by the way?” he added in a whisper. “Does Joel know?”

“Yes, and I’m fine. I can’t believe you were in DC when I was and that we were able to talk,” she said accepting his hug easily. She’d used all her favors to get answers to what happened to him, wanting Joel and Elaine to have them, have peace about it finally. The last thing she ever expected was that he was still alive, mostly forgotten about in that prison after so long, so many changes in guards and regimes.

“So am I Paige.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Sam asked suspiciously.

“Whether or not he likes our country’s leaders,” Paige told them. “Now, who’s going to come to the wedding?”

She laughed as her friends converged on her and her eyes met Joel’s. It was going to be okay; she knew it.



“Relax dude, there is no way Paige is going to skip out on you now,” Sam said as Joel waited anxiously beside the

preacher.

“Easy for you to say, Kendra was ready and waiting on you,” he replied as he adjusted the neck of his tux. How he let Paige talk him into it was unknown, but he had to admit, she’d pulled it all off. The garden was magnificent and from what he’d heard of the dress from the girls, it was beyond expectations.

He was also nervous thanks to the last-minute arrival of the vice president and his family along with the president’s. Now that was the last thing, he’d expected but once they’d heard about the ceremony there was no way to keep them away. Everyone loved Paige but he’d somehow won her heart.

“Dude you’re gonna make me sweat if you don’t cool it,” Sam stated with a grin to his best friend. “Paige will be here any second and everything will be cool...see here comes Hillary now.”

Joel breathed a bit easier as Hillary then Kendra began to move towards them. Her dress was cut to conceal her slight tummy from having Josh and he knew Paige had chosen the off the shoulder style with sleeves for Tami’s sake. She wanted all of her friends besides her to look their best and she had poured through magazine after magazine trying to find the perfect design. When Tami appeared, his breathing became even easier and when Nicole began skipping up the aisle stopping every few feet to toss rose petals on the ground a smile broke out on his face. Maggie followed behind her as Tristan held onto a leash, the small pillow with the rings securely attached to her.

“Last chance to run,” Sam whispered as Paige and their father appeared.

“Not a chance,” he stated unable to take his eyes off her. She looked breathtaking and more beautiful than any woman he’d ever seen, but there was something about the dress that seemed familiar.

“Is that...Mom’s dress?” Sam asked looking at him.

“I don’t know. It could be,” he told him wondering if that’s why it felt familiar to him. Paige and Cord reached the end of the aisle and the pastor stepped up.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We’re here today to celebrate the union of Paige and Joel, a union that I’ve wondered about for many years and one that I’m sure everyone here can agree took far too long to arrive at. But as we all know, God works in mysterious ways and as Paige and Joel told me themselves this past week, was the right path for them and for countless others. So, with that, who gives this woman to be wed?”

“I do,” Cord stated as her brother, Ed, Bobby, Harry, Jesse, Craig, Moose, Rabbit, and Tristan added their own ‘we dos’.

“You always did have a large following Paige,” Pastor Walter laughed. “I can remember the first time I met Paige, she was about ten, headstrong as anyone could be.”

“No change there,” one of the miners called out eliciting laughs.

“She was also up on the very top of the church’s roof, walking across it as though it was a balance beam to get the multitude of sports equipment that had gotten stuck there over the years. It was also the first day I met Joel and Sam because they were standing on the ground below, Sam trying to get her to fall and Joel telling her to get down before she broke her neck. It was interesting because there was no fear in her tiny little body. Paige was without a doubt defying gravity at that moment and years later, I asked her if she had ever worried about the things she’d attempted not working out. She smiled, tilted her head and told me, God put the ideas in her head and wanted her to try them, so she put herself in his hands and he guided her every step of the way. Now she and Joel are putting their lives in his hands and are following him down this aisle together.”

Paige smiled into Joel’s eyes and felt everything he did surround her and pull her in.

“Paige and Joel would like to say a few words. I’m sure that’s not surprising to anyone here...Joel, if you’d like to start,” Pastor Walter said nodding to him.

“Paige, you stole my heart fifteen years ago the same way you stole Sam and my treasure when we were kids...with a smile that proved you had nothing to hide and a laugh that said everything would be okay. I’ve loved you perhaps too much at times, so much that I let you go no matter how much it hurt to do it. Then you reappeared in my life so momentarily that it nearly destroyed my faith. When we were trapped below the ground, I told myself I would do whatever it took to find you and bring you home and then out of nowhere your voice called out to us and I knew in that instant that my prayers had been answered. We had some obstacles getting here... misunderstandings, overstepped boundaries...but every moment that I wasn’t with you I was thinking about you.

“I never knew why you chose me back then. You were the prized girl, everyone loved you, everyone wanted to be with you, and you chose me. You have given me so many things Paige without a single demand but there are two things that I treasure most. You gave me my father back and you gave me your heart. I will work every single day to be the man who deserves that because it is so precious and open. Everyone here knows that and I will never question the why, as long as you never tell me to not worry, because I always will. I love you baby, and I will love you long after this life ends.”

Paige took a small breath as she gazed up at the man who she’d love for so long.

“Paige...” Pastor Walter said when she remained silent.

She gave him a nod and squeezed Joel’s hands. “Joel, you were always there for me. Whether it was at my mom’s funeral, or climbing a cliff, or holding me close when something didn’t feel right, you were always there. Falling in love with you was easy, trusting you felt so natural, but you did have one *huge* flaw...you wouldn’t listen. After I left, I wondered if you had every really listened to a single thing I’d said because I waited for you to come get me, bring me home,

but you didn't, and I began to see that there was a world outside of the mine...shocking I know. When I joined the rescue team, I was still trying to prove something to you and Dad even though I didn't let you know what I was doing but somewhere along the way it stopped being about proving something and became the single thing in my life that I knew without a doubt I could handle. When the pain of working the disasters got to be too much, I decided to change it up and start rebuilding them but really I was trying to rebuild myself. I felt this sense of dread when I got the call that you were trapped but I also knew there was no way I was going to let anyone else try and bring you all home.

“No matter how many times I tried to tell myself it wasn't, this is my home, *you* are my home. I will never be the type to sit on the sidelines when something goes wrong, but I will promise to always think of you and our family before I react. You needed me to rescue you from the mine, but I never expected you to rescue me from the shadow that my life had become. I always thought my mom was a bit crazy, but she was right, you and I were meant to be. She told me the day she died that one day I was going to find the man who would make me laugh, cry, want to scream and tear my hair out, all the while wanting to hold him as tightly as I could and never let go.

“I never thought I could feel like that, so completely out of control but that was the way I felt the first time you kissed me. We'd been arguing...naturally, and I honestly had no idea why until you kissed me and then everything became clear. I will never stop wanting to feel like this because it means that I'm alive and you're beside me. Without you I can survive but I can't live and now that you've finally learnt how to listen, well, be prepared to feel the exact same way that my mother said I would about you. I love you. I've never stopped. If you don't believe me there's a whole group of people out there who can vouch for that statement but you're wrong about being the lucky winner. That was me the day you gave me your heart. I will never run away from you or my feelings again that I promise you.”

Pastor Walter cleared his throat and she saw a shimmer of moisture in his eyes as he looked between her and Joel. “Do you, Joel Andrew, take this woman, Paige Elizabeth, to be your wife; do you promise to be a loving and loyal husband, to cherish and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, to be faithful only to her as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” he stated.

“Do you, Paige Elizabeth, take this man, Joel Andrew, to be your husband; do you promise to be a loving and loyal wife, to cherish and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, to be faithful only to him as long as you both shall live?”

Paige looked up into Joel’s face and pasted a smile so bright onto her lips that he wondered what she was up to. “Yes...I do.”

Joel threw back his head and laughed before breaking tradition and kissing her.

“We’re not quite there yet,” Pastor Walter stated. “Could we have the rings? Joel, please repeat after me. With this ring I thee wed.”

“With this ring,” he repeated sliding the band onto her finger, “I thee wed.”

“Paige, with this ring I thee wed,” Pastor Walter led.

“With *this* ring, I thee wed,” she stated sliding the matching band onto his hand.

“Now by the grace of God I finally get to say what this entire town has been waiting for, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride,” Pastor Walter stated.

The eruption of cheers began before his lips touched hers and she couldn’t help but laugh. She heard Sam shout out across the yard, “Hey Lenny I won!”

“Unfair advantage...” Ben stated.

“Nothing’s unfair when it comes to love,” Joel said as he cupped her face in his hands.

“I’m surprised there even was a pool. After all, we’re a sure thing,” she returned.

“That we are,” he agreed as he kissed her again.

The evening sped by, and her cheeks hurt from smiling but she couldn’t help it. They were about to leave and the crowd had gathered around the back of the Jeep waiting for her to throw the bouquet. She grinned spying Matt and Hillary talking away and aimed the flowers towards her.

“When can we expect you back at work?” Sam inquired as his arm snaked around Kendra’s waist. “Some of us have families to get home to at night.”

“Well, some of us have wives who we’re going to have to watch so closely that I don’t know if I’ll have a spare minute to breathe. After all I can’t have my baby doing something stupid like walking across a valley full of machinery and building materials,” Joel countered kissing her temple.

“Why do you have to watch her so closely?” Jesse asked suspiciously.

“Because I’m not going to let anything happen to my babies,” he replied.

“Wait did you just say...” Tami questioned sending Paige a look. “You’re *pregnant*?”

“I thought that was...” Kendra said pausing before she finished the sentence.

“Seems I got Dad’s selective hearing.”

“So, it’s true?” Cord asked as his entire body began to liven.

“Yes Dad, you’ll get to hold my baby long before you ever think of leaving us.”

“Take care of my little girl, Joel,” Cord stated giving her another hug.

“Always,” Joel promised. “Always.”

Epilogue

“Checking out my grandchild there,” Cord asked the group standing in front of the nursery window.

“I can’t believe it, after everything, Paige did it,” Jesse said.

“How is she?” Hillary inquired as Matt joined them wrapping his arm around her waist.

“She’s Paige,” Joel answered, “though she is resting.”

“Paige resting?” Sam stated. “Now that’s something I’ve got to see.”

“Hush, she’s gotten the mine back to being operational, gotten the lab nearly built and it’s well on its way to being certified, and carried twins without resembling a whale,” Kendra said lightly smacking his chest, “give her a break.”

“Bet you didn’t know what you were getting into with her did you?” Craig said to Joel.

“Oh, I knew and I’ve yet to complain.”

“Really?” Moose questioned.

“I thought you were the one who was yelling at the office the other day about not having the contracts on your desk,” Neal stated.

“Or that the drivers of the big trucks were making a mess,” Rabbit added.

“Alright, so I complained some. A guy can’t live with Paige and her lack of regard for her safety without getting on edge.”

“And now you have two little girls who not only resemble Paige but seem to have her spunk too,” Jesse told him. “Man am I glad I’m not in your shoes. When those two get old enough to date you’re gonna lose it.”

“As long as they treat them the way I treated Paige I think it’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, not sure how well that one was thought out there Joel,” Sam said with a pat on the back. “After all you were the one sneaking Paige into the mountain when she was sixteen.”

“Not to mention sneaking into her room,” Kendra added.

“Alright so they’re not going to date until they’re thirty, look how well that’s turned out for me and Paige.”

“You are in so much trouble,” Tristan told him. “One daughter is hard enough but two...you have three women to take care of now and all three will own every single inch of your heart.”

“They already do,” Joel assured him. “Paige always has and always will and now we have Amelia and Angela, and they are so much like her it’s hard to believe how lucky I am.”

“Well, you did marry the ‘Lucky Page’,” Hillary stated.

“I guess I did, didn’t I?” he laughed turning to head back to her. “I’ll let her know you all stopped by. I’m sure she’ll feel up to visitors tomorrow.”

He slipped inside the hospital room quietly trying not to disturb her.

“Hi, let me guess there’s a dozen or so out there?” she asked turning her head towards him.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping,” he stated bending over to kiss her.

“Who needs sleep?”

“You will. Have I mentioned how much I love you?” he inquired as he sat on the edge of the bed.

“Not in the last couple of hours. You’ve been too busy drooling all over our girls. How are they?”

“Perfect just like their mother.”

“I’ll remind you that you said that the next time you start yelling at me for taking a risk,” she laughed as he stretched out beside her and held her tightly. She closed her eyes and wondered if anything could be better than this.

A few hours later, she knew it could be as she sat up in the bed holding her daughters as Joel held her. A happy sigh left her lips, and she sent a silent thank you to her mother for always watching over her.

“You okay?” he asked running his hand down her back.

“Never better, I mean what more could a girl want? I have two beautiful daughters, friends seeping out of the woodwork, three jobs I love, my family back, and you. I love you so much Joel and you have given me everything I could ever need.”

“Always baby...always.”

She leaned into him as Amelia started to fuss and the smile that settled on her face as she wrapped her tiny fingers around Joel’s larger one told her that it would be an interesting life. Their girls already had him wrapped around their little fingers just as she did, but they were the lucky ones...because they had his heart and she knew no matter what tragedies struck far or near they’d muddle through them, with laughter and tears, and a few harsh words but she would never doubt he loved them.

“I can’t imagine my world without you Joel and I never want to,” she told him as he kissed her gently. “You are stuck with us think you can handle that?”

“Just try and leave, you wouldn’t make it out the door Paige.”

“Good, but there’s one more thing I should tell you,” she said with a smirk.

“What did you do now?”

“Nothing big...”

“Paige...”

“I might have put in an offer, or purchased, the Cooper’s old place.”

“You did what?”

“Well, you said I should think about working from home and it does border our place. I figured it’d be the perfect spot to put the Rescue and Restoration headquarters.”

“You did, did you? So did I, which is why I put in a bid on the place but was mysteriously outbid by some unknown entity,” he said kissing her forehead lightly.

“You did not? Great minds think alike I guess.”

“When it comes to you, we’re always in alignment.”

“Not always but I can usually get you around to my way of thinking. In fact, I was thinking we should put these two in their bassinets and you can tell me how much you love me,” she suggested. A few minutes later the girls were snug in them, and she was snug in his arms, her ear pressed up against his chest and his heartbeat soothing her to sleep.

“I love you baby,” he whispered into her hair.

“I’ve always loved you, Joel. Thank you for bringing me back to life.”

“Always baby...always,” he assured her, and she knew he was telling her the truth. She’d finally found her place and she would protect it with everything she had.

Thanks

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