

SAGE PARKER

HOPE'S  
HAVEN

*Secrets*

A SMOKY MOUNTAIN RETREAT

# Hope's Haven Secrets

A Smoky Mountain Retreat



Book Two

SAGE PARKER



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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Continue the Series!](#)

[More Books by Sage Parker](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Chapter 1

The man sat at his desk, sweeping his hand over his slowly balding forehead. He was tired and ready to call it a day, but there was one more item of business that needed to be taken care of before he would allow himself that first drink.

Years ago, he had learned to discipline himself, only permitting himself to indulge in his favorite liquor once a day, and then only when he had taken care of the entire day's business. He had watched how brighter, more ambitious men than himself had failed, all because they allowed themselves to indulge too often, and credited that discipline for the success that he now enjoyed.

Looking down, he saw that the only items on the large, opulent mahogany desk he was sitting at were a blank check, a pen, and an old phone. He hated clutter of any kind and went to great lengths to avoid it. He had just received word that the woman was short on money again, and he would need to take care of it today. Sometimes he wondered if she was inept, or if it was just the nature of her business that caused her to be perpetually short on funds.

Regardless, all he needed to do now was to decide on the amount, and then he could finally sit on his Italian leather easy chair overlooking the city, put his feet up on the matching ottoman, and savor his imported whiskey. He picked up the pen, considering one more time, and then wrote a number on the check. When he was done, he picked it up and smiled, as if he were admiring a fine piece of art he had just created. The sum was more than he normally gave, and he hoped it would last her for a while.

Now that the task was done, he felt the tension leaving his body. The actual act of writing the check irked him more than the money leaving his account. It was a constant reminder of a mess in his life that he just never seemed to fully clean up. As he signed his sweeping signature, it occurred to him it was

a pity she would never see it. The money would travel through many channels before it reached her account, and by then his original signature would long be destroyed.

As irksome as the task was, he always felt cleansed after completing it, at least for a few days. It reminded him of when he had been a kid, and his mother had made him go to confession. Back then, he had still felt extreme trepidation whenever he entered the confessional.

“What is it, my son?”

The voice behind the curtain had always caused his heart to quicken, even though he had known it was the same priest that gave the long, never-ending Sunday sermons he attended with his mother.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” he would recite, just like his mother had taught him.

“And what have you done this time, boy?” the voice always sounded weary and long-suffering.

“I stole Billy’s lunch, ate it, and then punched him in the nose when he accused me of taking it.”

“And are you sorry?” the voice behind the curtain would ask.

Of course, he wasn’t sorry. He had been hungry, having given his own lunch to his sisters so they would have enough to eat. Besides, Billy had that punch coming to him anyway, just for being annoying.

“Yes, Father,” he would answer.

“Five Hail Marys,” the voice would announce.

Then he would leave the booth, hands folded in front of him, with a look of genuine penance on his face. Five Hail Marys and he was once again absolved. The mess was taken care of.

The only sound Tessa Graves heard as she made her way up the steep path was the soft crunch of her own feet against the crisp, snow-covered leaves that were covering the uneven path. She breathed in and out deeply, watching her

breath leave a faint wisp of vapor as she took in the view from the trail's first vantage point. She hadn't been on the mountain in several years, and it felt good to be in familiar territory again.

As a child, she had spent lots of time up here in the Smokies with her father, and on very rare occasions, even with her mother. Her father had thought nothing of bringing his four-year-old daughter on a brisk, all-day hike, and they had spent many weekends camping up here as well, cooking over an open fire and roasting marshmallows at night. Even as she had grown older and her father had grown busier, she had come up here often with her friends to either camp or just hike.

Tessa wondered what had ever attracted her parents to each other. As loving and kind as her father had been, her mother had been the polar opposite. Reversing the traditional roles in their marriage, her mother had been the driven, high-powered lawyer, and her father the fun-loving and devoted family man.

Unfortunately, her mother's disappointment in him had caused her to push her husband so much that, in the end, he had left them both. She was ten years old when her father took her aside and told her he couldn't stay with them anymore. He confided in her that he was emotionally drained and had lost himself in the marriage. Tessa didn't really understand what all that meant. All she knew was that she was losing her rock and her ally.

Ironically, shortly after he left them, he had become an extremely well-to-do stockbroker, working long hours and traveling all over the country. Even though he still tried to make time for her, their hikes and times together had become more and more infrequent. It was on one of these frequent trips that he chartered the plane that crashed and killed him.

She stopped and looked out over the valley below, just listening to the silence that was only occasionally broken by the call of a bird or the crack of some branches coming from the woods that surrounded this part of the trail. Her eyes misted over, thinking about all the time that had passed and all that had happened since she had been the happy little girl

frolicking on this very path, joyfully dragging her father or her friends to this very vantage point to point out the sights.

Even though her heart had always wanted to come back, and she had dreamed of showing her own daughter the same trails and mountains that she had enjoyed with her father, there had always been something more important to do. She had mistakenly believed that there was still plenty of time to come back. Plenty of time to bring Hope, and plenty of time for the camping trips and the marshmallows. But she had been mistaken. Time had run out for all of them, and now many years had passed. She was finally back, but this time completely alone.

She couldn't explain, even to herself, what had pushed her so hard to come up here this week. Angela, her longtime resident and helper at Hope's Haven, the women's shelter that Tessa ran with her best friend Stephanie, had urged her to postpone her hike until the weather improved. She had insisted the weatherman was predicting a warm-up by the end of the week, and it would be safer for Tessa to go then. But Tessa had ignored all the weather warnings, packed up her gear, and struck out this morning, anyway.

Maybe it was because it was the anniversary of her and Luke's first kiss, or maybe it was the unusually cold weather they were experiencing, reminding her of the first time the two of them had been caught up here in a snowstorm. But she had been driven to come. The last few months had been full of stress. The shelter was once again low on money, and the flow of women needing help seemed never-ending.

She had convinced herself that only the solitude and the peace she remembered feeling in the mountains would ease the burden she was feeling, and there had been no holding her back. But now that she was finally here, she knew why she had avoided it for so long. Memories of her and Luke flooded back, painfully reminding her of his absence. She felt his presence in every crevice she passed, and she could hear his breath with every gust of wind.

He had taken her breath away from the very first time she had seen him, sweeping into her life like a whirlwind and



taking her mind off the loss of her father and her problematic relationship with her mother. Luke had been the very essence of her life almost from the moment he had entered it. She would have done anything for Luke back then. He was the love of her life, and just like Stephanie had predicted, she and Luke had eventually married and settled down in Atlanta.

Luke had started, and eventually excelled in his career in law enforcement, quickly becoming the youngest person to be promoted to detective. She had been busy with her own career. Their life had been a whirlwind, and there had been no time to come back to her beloved mountains in those early days.

She drew her eyes away from the valley and focused on the trail in front of her, avoiding the roots. She noticed how the trees seemed to have grown taller and denser since she had last been here. Growing up, she would have never imagined living anywhere but here in Tennessee, in the shadow of her beloved mountains.

Before she, Stephanie, and Carter, the other members of their threesome, had left for their separate colleges, they had all pledged to come back every break to reconvene and reconnect. At first, she had really tried. She had dutifully visited her mother and joyfully met with Stephanie and Carter to exchange stories about their college adventures. However, Luke had preferred the more exciting lure of the city, begging her to meet up with him and his friends instead. So slowly, over time, she had just stopped coming home.

She was walking along in the complete stillness of the mountain, lost in her memories when she heard a loud crash that made her jump. Looking around in panic, she realized a branch had cracked and fallen just off to her left. The newly fallen snow was wet and heavy and had apparently become too much for the poor tree to handle.

With her heart still beating from the sudden assault of noise, she wished she had brought Cash, the big wolf-dog that lived at the estate where she rented her cottage, for company. Early this morning, she had looked for Beau, her landlord, hoping to ask his permission to take Cash with her. Even

though she and the dog had a rocky beginning, they had formed a bond that even Beau was jealous of, and she was relying on Cash's company more and more.

Instead of finding Beau, she had run into Ellie, his perky little housekeeper. Ellie had informed her that Beau had been gone for a few days, and she wasn't sure when he would return. Tessa didn't want to take the dog without permission, so she abandoned the idea and bid the dog goodbye with a firm command to stay, even though his eyes had followed her sadly as she left.

Now, with the quiet and solitude encroaching on her, she wished that she had asked Ellie for permission instead. The young woman ran the estate in Beau's absence and handled Cash's care whenever he was out of town, but there was something about asking the pretty young housekeeper for anything that put Tessa off.

The younger woman had been nothing but kind and accommodating to her ever since Tessa had moved in. Tessa had told her it wasn't necessary for her to come and clean the little cottage or bring her meals, but every few days, a casserole or some other tasty dish just seemed to show up in her refrigerator, and the cottage stayed immaculate despite Tessa never having cleaned it.

She knew she was being petty, and she knew she had no right to feel this way, but the idea of the pretty, voluptuous young woman being around Beau all day inexplicably irked her, and she couldn't bring herself to like the young woman no matter how nice she seemed.

Since Luke's death, Tessa had never even entertained the idea of starting a new relationship. In her mind, that would have been betraying his memory, and she was afraid she had sanctified him in a way that wasn't healthy or realistic.

Despite their problems, though, he really had been a wonderful husband. When she had been unable to bear him the child they both wanted, Luke had been supportive and loving. He had assured her over and over how proud he was of the

work she was doing, helping other women and children in need.

While Luke had worked his way up in the police department, being promoted rapidly through the ranks until he started work as an undercover agent, Tessa had worked as a social worker. She had mainly helped abused women escape from their abusive situations, and most times, it wasn't just grown women but also younger girls who came seeking help.

Hope's mother had been one of those girls. Sandy was different from the other girls. She was still attractive and well-spoken, not yet ravaged by drug use and life on the street like most of the other girls Tessa met. She had been pregnant, begging Tessa to help her find a safe place to give birth to her daughter.

Sandy had told Tessa that growing up, her mother had been forced to work as a stripper to earn money to take care of Sandy. The girl's father had been killed in a farming accident, and her mother had no skills other than her apparent good looks. She had done well for herself in her new profession, making it possible for Sandy to attend private schools and grow up relatively privileged.

Unfortunately, as was so often the case, things had changed for Sandy when her mother met a new man who introduced her to drugs. After that, things had gone downhill rapidly until Sandy worked as a strip dancer as well, just to survive. She had continued going to school while dancing, determined to give herself a better life, until she herself had met a man. He had been well-off and promised her the world. She considered herself lucky until she became pregnant with his child.

Tessa could still see the tear-stained face of the pretty young girl clearly in her mind as she begged for her help. Since Sandy didn't fall into the normal category of abused women, the department wasn't able to provide her with many resources, and she was being sent out on her own again. She pleaded with Tessa to help her, saying that she didn't want her daughter to be raised on the street by a stripper like she had been.

Tessa called Luke, hoping she could convince him to allow Sandy to stay with them, at least until she could find a place for the girl to stay until she gave birth. Tessa was determined that if she couldn't have her own child, at least she would help Sandy's baby come safely into this world.

Luke had been heavily involved in his work by then and out of the house often, and he agreed it would be good for both Sandy and Tessa if she came to live with them for a while. Sandy stayed with Tessa until Hope was born, helping wherever she could around the house and even volunteering at the shelter.

When the baby was born, she begged Tessa and Luke to adopt her, saying that she was much too young to raise a child on her own. She still wanted to go to school and make a better life for herself, and it wouldn't be fair to the baby if she tried to raise it herself. Of course, Tessa was delighted, and it was agreed that she and Luke would become the legal parents of Hope, while Sandy would go to school and come back to see Hope as often as she could, staying an important part of the child's life.

Tessa embraced motherhood ecstatically. She finally had the family she had always wanted and cut back on her hours at work to be home for both Hope and Sandy. Unfortunately, it didn't take long before Sandy was coming less and less to see them. Tessa had suspected that Sandy was going back to her old lifestyle and eventually contacted Sandy's mother to find her. Her mother told her that Sandy had stayed with her for a while, but when Sandy wanted to get back together with the baby's father, they argued, and Sandy had stormed out. She hadn't heard from her since.

Tessa had asked her to notify her if she ever heard from her daughter. And when Hope was barely six months old, Sandy's mother finally did call, informing her that her daughter had been killed in a car accident. As Tessa listened to her own footfalls rhythmically falling on the path, she thought back to the horrible day that she'd heard the news about Sandy.

She had loved her as if she were part of her own family and had always believed that she would be part of Hope's life. She should have realized already then that tomorrows were never guaranteed. Sandy's mother had told her she believed her daughter's accident was suspicious, but the police were not taking the word of a stripper and refused to investigate the accident any further.

When Tessa tried pressing her for the name of Sandy's boyfriend and more details about the accident, Sandy's mother cut off communication with her abruptly, and she could not find out more. After Sandy's death, Tessa had been determined to make Hope's life as happy as she could, and she threw her entire being and grief into raising Hope. They had been inseparable, and she had been so preoccupied with Hope that she barely noticed Luke had spent many days and nights away, busy at work. Tessa wondered if, even then, she should have seen the signs of trouble.

## Chapter 2

Tessa clapped her hands briskly together as she walked, trying to warm them as well as to rouse herself from her melancholy memories. It really was unusually cold for this time of year, and although she was happy she'd brought her gloves, she now wished she had brought the warmer pair.

Looking down at the trail, she trudged through the light snow resolutely. The desire for adventure and the solitude that she'd had this morning was quickly dissipating, and she was feeling depressed and cold. She wished she had on warmer boots, but in her rush to leave, she'd opted to wear the pair she had borrowed from Stephanie, rather than taking the time to purchase some warmer ones.

Most of her clothes had been burned when her apartment had been set on fire earlier this year, as well as many of her precious pictures and mementos of Hope and Luke. Now, all she had to rely on were the memories in her head, and she fought hard to keep them from fading. It had already been six long years since she'd lost them, and she thought she'd survived the worst of the grief.

After a year of counseling and wallowing in a pit of despair so deep she was sure she would never emerge, Stephanie, who had stood by her side through it all, had taken her aside. She'd told her in no uncertain terms that she couldn't continue living this way and had urged her to find a new purpose in life, some kind of legacy that would have made Luke and Hope proud.

That's how Hope's Haven had come about, and Tessa was certain that if she hadn't opened the shelter to help other abused mothers, she wouldn't have been able to go on living. Somehow, she had survived the five years since then, if not happily, at least with numbness and acceptance.

Why now, suddenly, all the feelings of pain and despair had returned was something she couldn't understand. She only knew that lately, the very act of getting out of bed was excruciatingly painful, and it was getting more and more difficult for her to face the day.

When she had looked at the mountains from her cottage in the morning, they seemed to beckon her, promising her solitude, peace, and tranquility, and today, the anniversary of the first kiss she had shared with Luke, had seemed like the right one to heed the call.

She was so deep in her own thoughts that when she first heard sounds of laughter coming from up on the trail, she needed a second to remember where she was, and that she was up here alone, with Luke and Hope long gone.

Feeling the numbing cold seeping through her thin gloves, she wished with all her being that she was holding her sweet child's mitten-covered little hand in her own numb one. Hope's incessant chatter and delighted laughter were burrowed in her mind, sounding just like the laughter she was hearing. Her heart constricted painfully, knowing that she would never hear her sweet voice again.

Off in the distance, she saw two little boys racing towards her, the younger one desperately trying to catch his older brother.

"Wait up Ben! It's not fair! You've got longer legs than me. Mom said we're supposed to stay together, remember?"

The older boy just laughed, slowing down just enough to let the little boy almost catch up to him, and then dodging out of the way right before he reached him. "You'll have to be faster than that if you ever want to catch me," he taunted.

As soon as the older boy saw Tessa, he pulled up short quickly, causing his younger brother to plow into him. Stopping in the middle of the path to stare at her, he grabbed his brother by the arm and pulled him in close behind him.

"Hi there," Tessa said, smiling at them reassuringly. "You two are out for a hike today, too, huh?"

“My parents are right behind us,” Ben answered hesitantly, pushing his brother further back, protectively.

Tessa took a step back and said, “Well, that’s good. It wouldn’t be safe for you two to be out here all alone.” She could now see the figures of a man and a woman coming from around the bend, and as they got closer, Tessa nodded to them and smiled.

“Hi,” the woman said in a friendly voice. “I hope that these two clowns didn’t plow into you. They are such ruffians out here. It’s hard to keep them close.”

“Not at all,” Tessa assured her. “In fact, I think I may have been the one to startle them.”

The hood from the older boy’s jacket had fallen down his back, and his father reached out to pull it up, ruffling his hair first. “I told you to keep that hood up, Ben. I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

“Oh yeah, sorry,” the boy obediently pulled his hood back up.

Tessa remembered how Hope had always fought her about wearing her coat and mittens. Her little girl had been a free spirit, and her favorite way of being was stark naked and running around the yard with abandon, much to the dismay of their elderly neighbors.

Her baby had only been four years old, much younger than the boys standing in front of her now, when someone had come into their home, attacking her, and killing Luke and Hope. Then they would set the house on fire, and if a neighbor hadn’t been home and seen the smoke, she would have likely perished that day as well. There were still times she wished the neighbor had gone to work that day.

Tessa’s eyes were watering, but she wasn’t sure if it was from the cold wind or because of her raw emotions. When the woman noticed, she looked at Tessa’s attire doubtfully.

“It’s getting chillier out today than we thought,” she remarked, and then nodded her head towards the man. “Matt, my husband, says it smells like more snow is coming. He



thought it was best that we cut our hike short and head back before we get caught in a storm.” She smiled at him fondly. “He has a way of predicting weather, and he’s rarely wrong,” she announced proudly. She glanced down at Tessa’s short hiking boots. “It’s none of my business, of course, but consider doing the same. It can get hairy up here if you’re not prepared, you know.”

Tessa smiled at her indulgently, doubting that the woman had spent nearly as much time as she had in these mountains. No one knew better than her how to prepare for the unpredictable weather. “Yes, it sure can, but don’t worry about me. I have a backpack full of essentials, and I only plan to go a little further before I turn around and head back anyway. Thanks for the warning, though.”

The man gave her a smile as he hoisted his youngest son on his shoulders. “Well, we’re heading back to our car for some hot cocoa. You have a nice hike, but please be mindful of the weather and be careful. We haven’t run into many people today. We only saw two, and they were quite a way off in the distance. I imagine most people are waiting it out until the weather breaks at the end of the week.”

“I guess they are,” said Tessa, smiling again at the boys as she walked past the family. She could hear their footsteps receding behind her and sighed. The couple was right. This trail could branch off into some really long, tough trails. It was often frequented by adventure seekers looking to follow the famous Appalachian trail, and many of them weren’t as prepared as they should be.

Tessa couldn’t really blame the man for advising her to turn back. It was never a good thing when people went missing up here, but her pride wasn’t about to allow her to turn back now. She knew that in her youth, she had hiked these mountains more than anyone, and she wasn’t about to let the young couple best her in her knowledge.

Hiking just a little further so the family would have had enough time to leave and not see her, she turned around and headed back. She remembered how, when she and her friends had been in middle school, a couple had gone missing.

At that time, the weather had been extremely hot, not cold like today. The elderly couple's daughter had become concerned when they hadn't returned like they had planned and called for help.

Carter's father had been the chief of the volunteer fire company, and it had been his responsibility to send out search parties looking for missing or lost hikers. He had recruited Carter, Tessa, and Stephanie to help search, knowing that they knew these trails better than anyone. Handing his son a two-way radio, he had warned them that this was not a game but serious business. They were only to use the radio if they needed help themselves or if they found the missing couple.

Carter had been delighted to have been given such an enormous responsibility, and the three of them had set off on the search, feeling important and grown-up. The three of them had spent most of the day splashing in the rivers and having a grand time until the hikers were found later that day, dehydrated but safe, by someone else.

It wasn't the first time they had joined in a search, but this one was memorable to her because it was the first time Carter had taken her aside and admitted he was in love with her. She'd laughed it off, saying they were much too young to even think about things like that, but Carter had proclaimed thirteen was old enough to know when you were in love. Stephanie had wholeheartedly backed Carter up, delighted at his confession and saying she knew that the two of them would end up together.

"You're just like two peas in a pod," she had squealed. "Wherever one is, there is the other. You both think exactly alike and look..." She had pointed her finger at them. "You even dress alike."

Tessa had looked at her hiking boots, khaki shorts, and gray t-shirt, noting that she and Carter were wearing almost identical attire.

"Oh, whatever," she had exclaimed. "Everyone wears this outfit when they go on a hike. Stop it, Steph, we're just friends. Let's not spoil what we have!"

That was when Carter had leaned in close and kissed her directly on the lips. It was her first kiss ever, and her eyes had widened in shock and, she had to admit, in pleasure. His lips were soft, kind, and welcoming. He had looked her straight in the eyes, saying, "I will marry you one day, Tessa Graves. That's one thing I'm certain of."

Two years later, Luke had moved to town, entering their lives and changing everything. What had started out as a friendly addition to their little group of three had blossomed quickly into an infatuation between her and Luke. Even at sixteen, he was muscular and tall, and he'd plowed into their threesome like a blonde, tousled-haired tornado.

The exact antithesis of Carter, Luke was always jovial, boisterous, and laughing. He was full of ideas, and he kept them jumping from one adventure to the next throughout their years in high school. They were no longer known as the three musketeers but were now referred to as the Fun Foursome. Everyone wanted to join in when they were heading out somewhere, and their previously solitary little group quickly became the group to hang around with.

Carter had slowly retreated into himself, only joining in their adventures occasionally. He studied for long hours, saying that he wanted to get into a prestigious school and become a successful lawyer, and true to his word, he received hefty scholarships and then went on to Harvard. As proud as she was of his accomplishments, Tessa often wondered what had happened to the adventurous and outdoorsy young man he had once been. Was it Luke's overpowering presence that changed him, or had he just grown up to be who he was always meant to be?

She and Luke had also moved on with their lives, finishing college, and then Luke had joined the police force in Atlanta. They had married a few years later, and Tessa had been ready to start a family almost immediately, but Luke was still a restless spirit, saying he wasn't ready to settle down into family life yet. He had actually toyed with the idea of joining the FBI, but Tessa had put her foot down, and Luke had contented himself by volunteering for every dangerous

assignment the local police force could offer him, finally working himself up to be the best undercover agent they had.

When he finally was ready for a family, they had found out that starting one wasn't a possibility for them. The frustration of not being able to get pregnant and the stress of Luke's risky job had quickly become a major source of contention between them, with her spending countless hours worrying and nagging him.

It wasn't until Sandy, and then Hope, came into their lives that things had settled somewhat between them. With Hope's arrival, Tessa channeled her energy and attention into the little girl. Luke was as smitten with their new daughter as she was, and their relationship seemed to improve. But sometimes, even now, Tessa wondered if the newfound truce they had developed would have continued if Luke had lived, or if Stephanie had been right all along, and she and Luke were just too different to make it work long term.

The therapist she had seen after Luke and Hope's death had told her it was good for her to be honest and analytical about their relationship, but Tessa still felt incredibly disloyal to Luke's memory at even the slightest hint that all had not been perfect in their relationship.

She walked on, and just like the man and his wife had predicted, the snow was falling harder, and the temperature was rapidly dropping. She shivered, wishing that she had listened to Angela and waited for warmer weather. The solace and peace that she had hoped for were eluding her. Instead, she was only finding painful memories.

Her mother would have questioned her decision as well and told her she was a fool to come up here expecting anything from the mountain. She never had understood why Tessa and her father had been so drawn to these mountains. In fact, her mother had resented the Smokies and the draw they held for her father. She'd often lamented that if it weren't for his love of this place, they could have all had a happier life in the city. Tessa wondered if things would have been different had her mother gotten her way.

Once again, her eyes watered, whether from unshed tears or the raw wind, Tessa wasn't sure. She'd been devastated by her father's death, and the news of the crash had changed her mother as well. Tessa suspected that underneath that hard exterior shell, she had loved her husband a great deal, possibly even hoping that one day they would come together again.

There came a time, long after his death, that her mother confided to Tessa that she blamed herself for his having left them. She admitted she had pushed too much and too hard, and as a result, she had lost him. It was shortly after that confession, as she and her mother were finally growing closer, that Tessa found out her mother was dying. She wondered if her mother had already been aware of the cancer that had been ravaging her body and had tried to make amends before it was too late.

Tessa had been 24 years old when her mother had finally lost her battle and succumbed. She and Luke had buried her next to her husband, under the large magnolia tree that had shaded his grave for so many years. Tessa prayed that at least in death they would have the love they had denied themselves in life.

She heard the screech of a hawk circling above her in the clouds. It was still snowing, but somehow the sun was miraculously shining through the snow, shimmering on the wet, snow-covered limbs of the large trees around her like silver. Tessa stopped and looked around her, taking in the full beauty of the scenery for the first time that day. This was why she had come, and this was what she had always loved. The raw beauty of these mountains had been what had always made her feel alive, and slowly, she allowed that feeling to seep back into her soul.

She thought of her mother and father, buried under that large magnolia, and how they had denied themselves true happiness for so long. A branch softly snapped in front of her, and she watched as a little chipmunk scurried up the tree. Everywhere around her, there were signs of life and hope, despite the cold and the snow.

Tessa realized it was her decision to either join in and live or waste her life wallowing in despair until it was her time to be buried. While Hope had been growing up, Tessa had told her about these mountains and all the escapades she'd enjoyed here with her father. Hope had listened to her stories with her big brown eyes, begging Tessa to take her so she could see the mountains for herself.

Tessa had assured her she would, truly believing that the time would come when she could share all of her childhood adventures with her own child. She couldn't have known then that the time would run out so quickly.

She listened to the hawk still circling above her and decided that she would not let time run out again. It was time to honor Luke and Hope and live her life again. She would start by enjoying the day, just like she had originally planned. She pulled out the camera she had brought with her and fitted it with the new lens that she had just purchased. Taking pictures should spark some creativity that she had been missing recently for her paintings and rid herself of the funk that she was finding herself in. She started looking around for something unique and interesting to photograph, focusing on an old and rotten tree stump she thought could make an interesting backdrop for a new painting.

Suddenly, something or someone leaped up from the shadows and came charging at her.

## Chapter 3

With her heart racing, Tessa leaped back, looking around for something she could brandish as a weapon. She dropped her camera in her panic and almost tripped over a root in her rush to back away from whatever was coming at her.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” a young man exclaimed, reaching out to grab her arm and steady her before she could fully fall backwards. He was slender and slight, only a few inches taller than she was. Tessa was surprised at the strong, almost painful grip he had on her arm.

“Here, let me help you,” he was saying. “Please accept my apology for scaring you. I was a bit startled myself when I saw you. I didn’t expect to see anyone out on the trail today, what with the weather and all. I hope you’re all right.”

Once Tessa regained her footing, she looked at him critically, deciding whether to scold him for scaring her or apologize for startling him. She was still flustered from the initial scare, but the friendly smile on the young man’s face seemed genuine, and he sounded truly apologetic. He seemed friendly enough, but in the back of her head, she could feel the beginnings of a slight warning buzzing sound.

Removing herself from his tight grip, she straightened up and looked at him sternly. “I’m fine, thanks, but you gave me quite the scare, rushing at me like that. Whatever were you doing all crouched down in the bushes, anyway?” As she spoke, Tessa looked at the spot he had come from, noting a slight little clearing in the underbrush, and wondered what on earth he could have been up to back there.

“Nothing at all, really,” he answered lightly. “I just thought that I saw something and walked over to see what it was.” As he spoke, he started heading away from the little clearing and walking towards the main path. Tessa had to turn her body to keep him in her sight.

“I was trying to find the right trail that leads to the trail to the Appalachian trail. I was intending to hike that trail, at least for a few days,” he explained.

Tessa watched as he retrieved a backpack from the bushes on the side of the trail. She hadn't noticed it when she had passed, and she wondered if it had been hidden or if she had just been too intense taking her pictures to see it.

“Well, you are off by a little way,” she told him. “The locals use this path mainly for small day trips. The trail you're looking for is further up and veers off for a bit until you hit the main Appalachian trail.”

The attack on her and her family had resulted in a blow to her head and had almost killed her. Although she had fully recovered, it had somehow opened up a sixth sense for her, allowing her to discern if someone was being deceitful. Right now, the buzz in her head was becoming persistent and irritating, and she wondered what was going on with this young man and what he was hiding. Maybe he had needed a bathroom break and was too embarrassed to tell her?

She looked at the man's backpack and noted that it seemed to be packed fuller than her own, but she doubted he was carrying enough supplies in it to last him for a few days on the trail in the winter.

“Where did you park?” she asked, wondering how far he had already gotten.

“I parked at the North End, where the woman at the general store told me to, and I thought I followed her directions pretty well, but I must have wandered in the wrong direction at some point. Maybe you'd be kind enough to steer me in the right direction?” he said.

She remembered seeing two other cars at the lot when she had pulled in. One would have belonged to the family she had met earlier, so the other was more than likely his. The couple had said they'd only seen two other people off in the distance, and she wondered if it could have been him.

“Are you hiking alone?” she asked.



“Oh yes, I like the solitude,” he answered, grinning.

She thought she could detect a slight accent as he spoke, and as she was trying to figure out where he could be from, he reached out, trying to take her arm and steer her along with him towards the trail, and away from the clearing. She instinctively stepped back, at the same time noticing that her camera was still lying on the ground, just inches from where the man’s heavy hiking boot was about to step down.

“Stop!” she commanded, startling the young man so much he paused with one foot in the air, looking at her like she was deranged.

Tessa leaned down and retrieved her camera quickly. “Sorry, but you were about to step on my camera. I just bought the lens, and I can’t afford a new camera or a new lens right now. I didn’t want them to get crushed,” she explained apologetically.

She thought she detected a fleeting look of annoyance on his face, but it was just as quickly replaced by an amused grin.

“Well, we both have a way of startling each other, isn’t it?” he said, stepping back and sticking out his hand at her. “Shall we start over, then? My name is Henri LeBlanc, and I’m pleased to meet you.”

Tessa smiled back at him, took his hand, and shook it. “I’m Tessa Graves, and I’m pleased to meet you as well, Henri. Tell me, where are you from?”

He smiled at her engagingly, and although the buzzing in her head continued, she couldn’t help but be taken in by his pleasing, boyish demeanor.

“Ahhh, so you detected my accent. I thought I was covering it well actually, but I guess I wasn’t,” he said, laughing. “I’m from France, originally, but I’ve been here for a few months now. I’m normally quite good at imitating the local dialogue of places I’m staying at, so I’m admittedly disappointed in myself that you noticed it so quickly.”

“Oh, it’s really only a very slight accent,” Tessa hastened to assure him. “It’s hardly noticeable at all.” Then she added, “Wow, you’re here all the way from France. That’s exciting. Whatever brings you to our part of the world?”

“I imagine that just like everyone else who visits. I came to clear my mind for a bit in these beautiful mountains. There’s just nothing quite like the beauty of nature to drive away the grief and sorrow that life sometimes throws at us, don’t you agree?” As he spoke, he was creeping away from the clearing and back to the trail, away from where he had jumped out and startled her.

*Yes, absolutely a bathroom break,* she thought, smiling to herself.

“Oh, yes, I agree with you.” Tessa hastened her own steps to catch up with him. “There’s definitely something soothing about these woods. In fact, that’s exactly why I’m here today as well. Just trying to clear my mind and think things through.”

He glanced over at her curiously and hesitated a moment, as if considering something, and then he said, “I hate to impose on you, and I know this is a lot to ask, especially since you just mentioned you are also here to clear your mind, but perhaps if you are heading the same way I am, you could let me accompany you for a bit? At least until I get my bearings again and find my way to the right trail.”

He looked so unsure and sheepish that although Tessa had been planning to head back to her car soon and warm up, she didn’t have the heart to refuse him. “Well, I’m not really planning on going that far today. It’s colder than I expected, but I suppose it would be okay if I go a few more miles and let you tag along. I’ll try to get you at least to the fork where you’ll need to turn back to get to the correct trail.”

“Really? You would do that for me? That would be so kind of you, and I would be ever so grateful.” Henri looked so happy and relieved that she felt guilty for having hesitated even for a minute.

Throughout their conversation, she had been holding her camera, but now she stowed it away in the side pocket of her pack. She hoisted the backpack to a more comfortable position, securing it tightly.

“Well, all right then, we had better get going,” she announced. “You’ll want to get on the main trail as soon as possible. You might even consider setting up your camp a little earlier tonight before the weather gets too cold.” She eyed his backpack doubtfully again. “Are you sure that you brought enough supplies to last you for a few days? This time of year, the trail can be a little unrelenting, and the weather is supposed to be unusually cold this week.”

Patting his backpack, he said confidently, “Don’t worry, I’m very experienced with camping, and I can get by with very little. I’ll be just fine.”

Shrugging, she led the way down the path. After all, it wasn’t her business to decide what someone should bring and how they should camp. She had been resentful when the young couple had given her advice as well. Besides that, as soon as he got to his destination, she was confident he would run into other adventurers following the same trail anyway, and they could help him if he needed it.

They hiked in silence for a few minutes before Henri asked, “So, tell me, Tessa. What is it you need to clear your mind from? Nothing too horrible, I hope?”

She smiled ruefully, thinking, *How much time do you have?* But she said aloud, “Oh, you know, just the usual everyday pressures of life we all have. What about you? What would bring someone like you all the way from France to hike our woods?”

“Back in France, I read all about the Smoky Mountains and how cathartic hiking here was for those dealing with sorrow, so I decided it might be exactly what I needed in my life,” he informed her solemnly.

Concerned at his sorrowful voice, she asked, “What’s happened? Maybe you’d like to talk about it? Talking things through sometimes works wonders.”

He sighed heavily before answering, “Yes, I actually think I would like to talk about it. They say that expressing your sorrow helps to cleanse the soul, don’t they?” He gave her a tragic look. “Sadly, a while back, I lost both of my parents in a plane crash. It was an extreme shock and very difficult for me to handle,” he admitted.

“Oh! I’m so sorry.” Tessa’s heart ached for the young man. Having lost her own father to a plane crash, she knew firsthand how anguished the young man must feel. “That must have been so awful for you.”

“Yes, it was,” he agreed. “My father had chartered a plane for a business trip to Greece, and this one time my mother had joined him. Once up in the air, the plane suffered engine trouble and went down. Both my parents and the pilot were killed on impact.”

“That’s just awful. That must have been absolutely devastating for your family,” she said.

“Yes, well, there’s really only my sister and me left,” Henri announced.

She looked at him curiously. “Oh, I see. Where is she now? Did she come with you?” Tessa thought again about how the couple had said they had seen two people. “It must have been extremely devastating for her as well.”

He looked at her strangely. “No, she didn’t come with me. In fact, she is one of the reasons I’m here. I desperately needed to get away from her and her money-snatching ways. She was, unfortunately, not as devastated as one might think. A part of me would believe that she was rather happy about the demise of my parents.”

“You can’t be serious, Henri?” Tessa asked, shocked. “We all have our own unique way of dealing with grief. She was probably just processing her sorrow differently than you are.” She watched him shaking his head slowly.

“I really wish that you were right, my dear new friend, but I’m afraid not. My dear sister Nicolette has always been a little more, shall we say, interested in money and material

things than the average person, and I'm afraid that my parents' constant habit of spoiling her did nothing to help the situation."

Tessa trudged along beside the crestfallen young man, wondering what, if anything, she could say to comfort him. She was certain that he was wrong about his sister's grief, or lack thereof, when it came to the death of his parents. After all, no one could ever see what was in another person's heart, not even a brother, but of course, it wasn't her place to correct him.

Suddenly, he turned to her with a bright smile on his face. "You know, I don't mean to sound like I'm bragging, but in France, my family was considered nobility. We were also one of the few families who had still kept our families' original wealth." He then nodded his head knowingly. "I sometimes wonder if that might have been the very thing that caused my dear sister to become so shallow."

"Nobility?" She wasn't really sure what that even meant. As far as she remembered from her history class, the French nobility had not been recognized since the late 1800s.

"Well, of course it's no longer recognized officially," Henri explained, as if he guessed what she was thinking, "but there is quite a bit of aristocracy in my lineage, and my dear mother was very proud of it. She would always say that they can ban us or outlaw our titles, but they can never change what we truly are inside."

Tessa looked at him out of the side of her eye, noting that despite his grief, he was clearly still very proud of his lineage. Hoping to further distract him from his despondency, she asked, "What business were your parents in, anyway?" She thought it might be better for him to talk about their life and not just dwell on their death. He seemed to perk right up as he was talking about them.

"My father was an extremely successful businessman in the import and export business, and my mother was, of course, a very grand lady of the house. It was she that kept the family running and kept their busy social life intact while my

father was busy at work,” he said. She noticed his cheerful smile at their memory. “My dear father was a bit of a workhorse, but of course, that’s not uncommon nowadays, is it?” he asked, looking over at her for confirmation before continuing. “Of course, he loved my mother dearly, and he was always more than willing to break from work to accompany her to whatever party or event she wanted to attend. The two of them really enjoyed an enviable marriage.”

As they walked, Henri talked continually and lovingly about his parents, and the incessant buzzing in her head was subsiding, somewhat, being replaced instead by a softer mix of buzzing and whirring. Mostly, especially when meeting someone new, she was forced to deal with the constant buzzing or the softer whirring in her head that showed a person’s intent or integrity. The sounds were usually faint and unintrusive, especially around people she knew well. Only Beau seemed to elude her senses entirely, giving her no sign of his thoughts at all. Many times she welcomed the feedback it gave her, but there were times she wished she could just turn it off.

Today, her head seemed louder and busier than ever, distracting her and making her wonder if she was overtired or if the mountains had just brought back too many memories for her to process. Henri continued to ramble on about his parents, while Tessa listened silently, ignoring the sounds in her own head, knowing that it was more than likely therapeutic for him to talk about them, and it didn’t really matter what parts were true or false anyway.

He told her how both of his parents had been the only children in their respective families and how both sets of grandparents had passed on too. Henri lamented about how the true bluebloods, as he called them, were slowly dying out. He claimed it would be his duty to find someone of his own background, get married, and have children, so his own lineage wouldn’t disappear.

“What about your sister?” Tessa asked curiously. She was sure that even if they now had a strained relationship, he had to have at least some wonderful memories with her as a

child. She found it odd that the entire time he had talked, he hadn't brought her up even once. "Is she married, and does she have any children?" she asked him. Since he hadn't mentioned if she was older or younger than he was, she supposed it was possible that she could have children.

"No," he answered curtly, frowning at the interruption.

He remained silent for the next few minutes, and Tessa regretted having brought it up. While he had been talking about himself and his parents, he had seemed extremely animated. Now she was afraid she had ruined his mood.

He halted abruptly, turning towards her with a clouded look. "I don't understand why you had to bring her up. We were having such a good time, and now you've spoiled it." He glowered at her, continuing, "She was an evil and selfish person, and I don't want to talk about her. I don't think her name should even be mentioned in the same breath as my parents."

"Was?" Tessa queried, surprised at his outburst but curious about his choice of tense. He hadn't mentioned that his sister was deceased. Just as abruptly as it had started, Henri's mood seemed to change again.

"No, not was. She still is an evil and angry person," he said, much more calmly. Then he looked at her placatingly and said, "Of course you can't know this, but I really get upset just thinking about her. My parents and I had to disown that money-snatching creature a long time ago. In my mind, I like to forget that she ever existed, so let's just leave it at that and talk about more pleasant things, okay?"

"Of course," Tessa agreed, walking quietly next to Henri and thinking that he had brought up his sister first. She was just as baffled at Henri's sudden mood changes as she was bothered by the buzzing that had now returned in her head.

Trudging on, she tried to reason out his conflicting moods in her mind. It stood to reason that Henri would be upset after having just lost his parents. She herself had just said that people grieved in different ways, and he probably had had little chance to process his sorrow. Although she already

suspected that he was lying about some of the things he had told her, she realized that most of the people she met seemed prone to embellish or even lie when they told stories about their past. She finally decided it was time to break the silence between them.

“How long ago did your parents die, Henri? Your pain still seems very fresh and raw. You know, it might even be helpful for you to see a grief counselor when you return to France. I mean, just to help you process it all.”

Looking at her curiously, he answered, “They’ve been dead for about two years now. But why ever would you think I need a grief counselor?”

For a minute, Tessa was stunned into silence. From the way he had been talking, she had assumed that his loss had been fairly recent.

“Oh, well, really no reason. It’s just been my experience that grief counseling has helped many people learn to deal with their emotions, that’s all.”

“I don’t need help to deal with anything.” He snorted derisively. “Least of all from some clueless shrink who knows nothing.” He gave her a cool look and said, “What would you know about grief and loss, anyway? I’ll wager that you’ve never even lost your pet goldfish.”

His words stung. He knew absolutely nothing about her, and he was being incredibly rude and childish. She bit back the angry retort lingering on her lips and instead faintly said, “I lost my husband and daughter about six years ago, so yes, I know what it feels like to lose the people you love the most.”

“Oh.” Henri trudged along beside her, as if digesting this sudden bit of news. “That was a long time ago though, huh? Six years you said? You seem to handle things pretty well now.”

Looking up at him, she wondered about this strange man walking next to her. Sometimes, his angry outbursts were



a little frightening, and then suddenly he acted like a clueless child.

“I’m not sure that time ever completely heals the pain of losing your entire family, but yeah, I’m handling it okay now,” she conceded.

“Good,” Henri smiled, satisfied. “Should I tell you about the time that the neighbor’s cat fell into the storm drain, and I helped the local firemen rescue it?”

Tessa shook her head in disbelief. Henri seemed to have no ability to empathize, and his emotions were almost childlike. She wondered if it was because of the unprocessed grief he might still hold in or if maybe there was something else lacking in him.

Seeing her shake her head, Henri took it as a sign that he had not yet regaled her with that charming story, and for the next few minutes, he told her all about the adventure of rescuing the poor cat from a pipe, including multiple times how heroic and useful he’d been in the endeavor.

She marched on beside him and listened to him talk, becoming more and more convinced that the buzzing in her head meant that Henri probably lived in a fantasy world. She remembered having studied the phenomenon in college years ago but had never actually come across it in real life.

She had worked as a social worker ever since graduation, and the women that she dealt with daily didn’t have the luxury to live in a made-up world. They were too busy surviving the everyday nightmares of reality.

As Henri chatted on, Tessa determined that at the next outlook, she would part ways with him. They were now far enough along that Henri should be able to find the main trail on his own, and her head was pounding from the constant buzz. When she had left this morning, she had been hoping for a calming and peaceful walk in the mountains. She had dealt with enough emotions on her own already, and she was finding Henri and his constant chatter rather unsettling.

Besides that, the weather was deteriorating with the wind picking up and whipping the upper branches of the trees into a frenzy. She was already regretting her decision to come this far with Henri. She should have left when the nice family with the boys had suggested it, and she hoped that the weather further down the mountain would be better so she wouldn't need to navigate any icy roads to get back home.

Meanwhile, Henri seemed oblivious to the worsening weather, now chatting on about how he had always wanted to be a firefighter, and she watched as the wind whipped his dark hair about. He continued to meander along, completely lost in his own narrative. When there was finally a pause in his constant dialogue, Tessa took her opportunity to let him know they would soon part ways.

"The weather seems to have gotten worse, don't you think?" she asked. "I'm going to have to turn around and head back soon. You might also want to think about setting up your camp as soon as you get to the main trail," she suggested.

Henri looked around as if he were just now realizing that the weather had turned colder and windier. "Oh, you need to head back already?" He seemed extremely disappointed. "I thought you were going to take me all the way?"

She shook her head but quickly assured him, "You really can't get lost from here, Henri. The trail you need is just ahead." Then she pointed at her boots. "I'm not dressed for weather like this, and I think it's best if I head back right now. Besides," she smiled at him, "I thought you said you were looking forward to a solitary hike to clear your mind?"

He grinned back at her. "Oh, I was originally, but you are such a delightful traveling companion, and I'm finding our conversations so stimulating, that I would really love if you would go a bit further with me."

Hiding her smile, Tessa thought that the only conversation that had been happening had been coming from Henri himself. She suspected he was one of those people who liked to hear themselves talking all the time.

Spotting a tiny overlook in the trees up ahead, right next to a bluff, she showed Henri the majestic scenery before taking her leave from him and headed to the bluff, saying over her shoulder, “Come over here, Henri. The view from this spot is amazing.”

She looked out as she stood by the cliff, admiring the grand view herself, and said, “It’s a little bit overcast, but you can still see into the valley below a little, even through the clouds.” Stepping slightly aside to make room for him to see, she turned just in time to see him hurtling his body towards her, a look of anger and determination on his face.

## Chapter 4

In an instant, Henri was on her, and Tessa lost her balance with the sudden impact. She toppled backwards, almost falling over the bluff and tumbling to a certain death. But just as she was falling, Henri grabbed at her backpack, trying to rip it from her back.

Twisting her body quickly, she used the leverage Henri inadvertently gave her to throw herself to the side and landed heavily in the brush on the side of the overhang. She could still feel him tugging at her pack, trying to rip it off her, while at the same time dragging her back towards the steep overhang.

Her heart was pounding in terror, and her adrenaline surged as she desperately tried to find something, anything, that she could use as a weapon to ward him off. Luckily for her, she had fastened her pack securely around her waist after returning her camera to its protective pouch earlier. Despite Henri's desperate tugging, it was holding fast, buying her a few more precious seconds of time.

Finally, she could grab a tree branch, and she pulled herself upright, facing Henri, who seemed to be in a wild frenzy at this point. Screaming at him with everything she had, she yelled, "Stop it, Henri! What are you doing? I don't have any money with me! If you need something, just tell me. You don't have to do this!"

"Shut up!" he snarled, lunging at her again. With a hefty push, he shoved her back to the ground, pulling a large knife from a side pocket in his own pack at the same time.

Her eyes widened in fear, and she pleaded, "Henri, don't! You can have my backpack if you want it. Just give me a chance to loosen it, and you can take it. I'll just go back to my car, and I won't say anything to anyone, I promise. Please don't do something you're going to regret."

She could hear him breathing heavily as he paused for a minute, watching her try to get her footing in the slippery snow. Then he gave her a pitying smile. “One thing you should really learn about me, Tessa dear, is that I regret nothing I do.”

She shuddered at the bitter tone of his voice. All the boyish charm that she had seen earlier had left his face, and in its place was a sinister and evil-looking man. She finally found enough footing to scramble to her feet, and she started inching away from the bluff, her eyes never leaving his face.

“Oh Tessa, you really shouldn’t bother to struggle so hard. You can’t get away from me. You’re making this so much harder than it has to be for both of us.”

The branch that Tessa had used to pull herself upright had snapped off in her hand, but now she gripped it in front of herself.

“What am I making harder on you, Henri? Just tell me what you want. If you need my backpack, you can have it, along with everything in it, but I assure you I’m not carrying any money with me.”

His face looked disappointed. “Weren’t you listening to me at all? I have all the money I need now that my dear parents are deceased. I already told you that. I don’t want any money from you.”

He seemed genuinely hurt, and she tried to make the smile she gave him sympathetic and reassuring.

“Of course, I was listening to you, Henri. I remember every word you said. I’m just trying to figure out what it is you want from me.”

Her heart was hammering in her chest as she watched him walk slowly towards her. He was holding the knife down by his side.

“I really want nothing from you, dear Tessa. The fact is, I think you’re a very nice woman. This is just a very unfortunate circumstance for you.” Then he gave her a friendly, boyish little smile. “Now, I would really appreciate it if you would just remove your backpack, lay it on the ground,

and then mosey your way back over to the edge of this lovely cliff.”

His voice sounded congenial and friendly, not at all in keeping with the bizarre demands that he was making, but as he was talking, he was making his way steadily closer to her.

When she was certain that he was within reach, she gathered every ounce of her strength and swung the thick branch at him full force. Unfortunately for Tessa, he expected what she was planning just a split second before she connected with his head, and he dodged the blow, with the branch hitting him in the arm instead.

She heard the “oooof” he let out as the branch connected, and the knife he had been holding fell softly into the snow-dusted leaves at his feet. He gave her a shocked look.

“Ouch, that hurt. Why would you do that? That really wasn’t very nice of you.”

As he stooped down to retrieve his knife, Tessa scrambled back further, trying to find enough distance, footing, and courage to run. She saw him pick up the knife, and when she finally felt solid ground under her feet, she turned and started sprinting away from him as fast as she could. Behind her, she could hear him gaining on her, but she refrained from turning around to look, afraid to slow down for even one second.

Just as she was about to dodge into the woods, he grabbed her, jerking her to the ground. She landed hard, and as she tried to scramble back to her feet, his kick to her side sent her sprawling again, and waves of pain went through her body. He looked down at her with raging eyes, but she saw he was breathing heavily and clutching his side, trying to regain his breath.

She was equally winded and having a hard time breathing with the searing pain in her side. She wondered if he could have broken a rib when he kicked her. Still panting, he watched her as she again struggled to get back on her feet. Before she was fully upright, he pushed her back down, and

she landed full on her knees. Wincing in pain, she looked at him in confusion.

“Why?” she gasped, hardly able to get the word out of her mouth.

“Well obviously because I’m out of breath and I don’t want to run anymore,” he wheezed at her, matter-of-factly. Then he added, “This is all your fault. You could have made this easy on both of us, but you had to run away. All it would have taken was a simple push, and you would have had a peaceful, graceful descent to your final resting place.”

As he spoke, she could see him smiling inwardly, almost as if he were imagining the flight of a bird or an angel. Then his face grew dark. “But now it’s got to get messy, and I’ll have to work harder. I don’t like to work hard, Tessa,” he announced. “Why can’t people just accept the inevitable and go gracefully? Back in the days of the nobility, everyone had so much more grace and beauty than they do now, don’t you agree?” he asked her.

She was still crouched down on her scraped knees, afraid to move an inch, while she looked at him in disbelief. She suspected that Henri LeBlanc was seriously insane and wondered what she should do next. Clearly, she would not be able to outrun him. She only hoped to humor him.

“Yes, Henri, you’re right. We seemed to have lost that old-world grace that your ancestors had. Maybe you could tell me some more about it?”

He smiled at her. “I would have really enjoyed that, you know. You should have walked longer with me. I still had lots more stories to tell you. I’m sure you would have found them interesting.” Then he frowned sadly, “I’m afraid it’s too late for that now, though.”

He had been pacing back and forth, trying to catch his breath while he talked, and he now started advancing towards her again, the knife clutched tightly at his side, ready to strike.

Scrambling to her feet yet again, she stood in front of him on shaking feet and held out her hands. “Wait, it doesn’t

have to be too late. We can still walk and talk a bit, can't we? I want to hear your stories. You can still finish..." She paused mid-sentence, looking at the knife he was holding. "Whatever it is you need to do, you can do a little later, can't you? What's the rush? We're the only ones up here."

Henri hesitated for a moment, seriously thinking about her suggestion. She could tell that the idea of having a captive audience for a few more hours sounded appealing to him. She watched his expression as he contemplated her offer while trying to gauge the distance between them. Stuffing her hand deeper into her pocket, she firmly clutched a large rock she had grabbed while struggling to her feet. She knew she would likely have only one chance to strike and run, so she couldn't afford to miss.

"Well, maybe we could chat on the way back to the cliff?" Henri suggested agreeably. "I could tell you a few more stories while we walk." He reached out his hand towards her and said, "Why don't you hand me your pack now, and I'll just take what I need, and then you can carry it back yourself." He giggled, "No sense in you walking empty-handed, now is there?"

Nodding eagerly, Tessa pretended to loosen the buckles on her pack as she slowly made her way towards him, trying to get within striking distance. Henri was busy watching her fiddle with her buckle, and he didn't notice as she pulled the large rock out of her pocket, hiding it by her side until she was close.

She lunged at him swiftly, her hand up and trying to strike the top of his head. But at the last minute, he dodged, and the blow only hit him on the side of the face, creating a bloody gash but not rendering him unconscious like she had hoped. He cursed and knocked her back against a tree with such force that Tessa once again found herself on her knees, struggling for air.

As he wiped at his cheek and examined the blood that was now all over his hand, he stared at her in a mixture of shock and disbelief. "Look what you did! I'm bleeding! What



kind of person would do that?! You might have ruined my face for life! I'd better not have a permanent scar!"

*You're worried about a scar, while I'm fighting for my life?!* Tessa thought, almost laughing out loud at the irony, as she slowly rose back to her feet.

Henri had dropped his pack to retrieve a towel from it and was frantically scrubbing at himself, determined to remove the blood staining his face, but only smearing it further. She knew if she didn't act fast, she would lose her chance to run while he was distracted.

Slowly, she inched her way just a little further away and then took off again. Only this time, she veered from the trail and crashed through the bushes, desperately looking for a place to hide. Behind her, she could hear Henri curse, and it seemed to take only mere moments for him to retrieve his own backpack before she heard him crashing through the brush right behind her.

She purposely ran through the thickest and thorniest part of the woods she could find, not caring in which direction she was going, just intent on finding cover and somewhere she could hide. Thorns were slashing her hands and legs as she ran, and she pulled the hood of her jacket down low to protect her face. Behind her, she could hear Henri swearing as he crashed through the woods, and she hoped he was getting equally cut up.

She could hear the footfalls behind her falling further back, but she knew she couldn't keep up this pace for long either. Her lungs were gasping for air, her ribs were screaming in pain, and her own steps were faltering. If she didn't find a place to hide soon, he would catch her.

She tripped on a root, landing on her hands and knees. But as she scrambled back to her feet, she spotted a log lying over a crevice in the ground. It was well hidden in the underbrush. She crawled swiftly under it, pulling the brush around it close, and listened as Henri came up behind her.

Trying desperately to silence her own ragged breathing, she heard him crash past her. She ducked her head

deep down into the crevice, praying he had missed her. But less than a few seconds after he had run past, she could hear him stop. Then she heard him slowly returning. He must have realized that she was no longer in front of him.

“Come out, come out wherever you are!” he called tauntingly, as if the two were only playing an innocent game of hide and seek. She smothered a moan of fear as she heard him walking around, pulling away brush and looking for any sign of where she could be hiding. “Come on out, Tessa! I’m going to find you. We both know that, so you might as well give up now. I’ve always been great at this game!” It sounded to Tessa almost as if he were laughing.

Just a few feet from her hiding spot, she watched his feet come to a stop. His back was to her, and he crouched down to look into a hollow log close by. Her heart was beating so loud and fast in her chest that she was certain he could hear it. She stuffed her fist into her mouth to keep herself from crying.

After what seemed like an eternity, she finally saw him move on, back towards the way they had come. She almost sobbed aloud in relief. She laid her head on her arms and focused on calming her breath as she tried to gather her wits again.

She stayed hidden for a few more minutes until she was sure he was out of earshot. Then she would make her way as quietly as she could further into the woods, hoping to stay hidden until he gave up looking for her completely.

The sleeves of her coat cushioned her head, and when she looked at her hands just underneath her face, she could see the ugly and painful gashes left by the thorns. *I hope he looks as bad as I do*, she thought maliciously. But at the thought of Henri, her heart raced again, so she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing instead. *Breathe in deep, exhale slowly. Breathe in deep, exhale slowly. Breathe in deep, exhale slowly.* She kept repeating the words over and over, silently in her head, almost trancelike, until she felt her heart rate slow down and the panic subside.

Her head was resting on her forearms with her eyes closed, and she was so focused on her breathing that she almost missed the steady and ascending buzzing that had once again started in her head. Before she realized what was happening, her feet were grabbed, and she was being roughly dragged back out of her hiding space, scraping her face and ripping her coat on the thorns.

As he dragged her fully out of the crevice, Henri twisted her body until she was flopped onto her back, and then he plopped down on her chest, gripping her in place and crushing her rib cage where he had kicked her earlier. He was looking down at her with a childlike, triumphant grin on his face.

“See, I told you I would find you, Tessa! I always find what I’m looking for!” he announced proudly.

Tessa could hardly breathe, much less talk with him sitting on her chest, so she just nodded miserably and closed her eyes. It was snowing harder, just like the nice man with the family had predicted, and she could feel the wet flakes falling on her exposed face, cold and unrelenting.

Henri nudged her. “You’re not falling asleep, are you? The game’s not over yet. Open your eyes, otherwise you’ll miss all the fun.”

*Fun?* Tessa was now convinced that Henri really was completely insane. *Did he really think that any of this was fun?*

“Come on, Tessa, open your eyes.” His voice was whiny and cajoling at the same time.

She could almost picture him as a child, trying to coax his sister into a game she didn’t want to play. Squeezing her eyes shut even tighter, she wondered if he would stab her right here, leaving her body to be buried under the snow, or drag it to the cliff and throw it over, like he seemed to have planned.

She felt him getting off her, and she thought, *This is it*, hoping it would be quick, but he pulled her upright until she was in a sitting position.

“Get up!” he commanded shrilly, shaking her.

She could smell the awful, sweet scent of his cologne as he got close to her face and announced, “I don’t like it when you ignore me. Open your eyes.”

She cracked open her eyes a smidgeon and watched him looking around the thorny underbrush they were in, and then at his own hands.

“I’m all scraped up. It’s going to take me forever to clean up all these cuts,” he whined pitifully. Then he reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her up till she was standing and pushed her forward. “You’ll have to walk out of here on your own. It’s too thick for me to carry you, and besides, I’m tired.”

“No,” Tessa said resolutely.

“What?” Henri looked at her incredulously. “You can’t say no to me.” He held his knife menacingly in front of her. “I’ve got this, remember.”

She just closed her eyes, knowing that she could not overpower him, nor could she outrun him, but she was also not going to walk herself to her own execution. Images of Luke and Hope flooded into her mind, and she wondered what they had felt before they were killed. Had they too known that their death had been imminent?

Then she opened her eyes and looked at Henri. Could he be the same man that had slaughtered them, and was that why he had hunted her down? Had she escaped him once already, and he now intended to finish what he had started and failed to do 6 years ago? It was ironic that only this morning she had decided she was ready to live and love again, or was the real irony that the same man who had robbed her of that chance six years ago was about to rob her of it again? She gritted her teeth in determination. *I will not make it easy for him.*

Before she died, she needed to know why he had killed her daughter. What kind of reason could he have for killing an innocent child?

She looked at him and asked, “Why Hope, Henri?”

He sighed and just looked at her with weary eyes. “We’ve already been through this, Tessa. It’s nothing personal, really. Just a matter of circumstances, that’s all. Now let’s just get out of these brambles, okay?”

*Just a matter of circumstances?* Was he trying to tell her that Hope had been robbed of her life because of a matter of circumstances, or did he not even know what she was asking?

He nudged her again. “Come on, it’s getting cold. Let’s get going.”

“No,” she repeated, observing him.

Sighing deeply once more, he looked at her like a parent would look at an obstinate child. “It’s getting cold, and I want to head back to the trail where there aren’t so many thorns and prickers. Just be a good girl and start walking. After all, you’re the one who got us into this mess.”

She looked around her, deciding what to do. She wasn’t keen on the idea of making it easier for him to kill her, but every second that she stayed alive afforded her another chance, however slim it was, to escape. Without saying anything, she walked towards the trail, via the way they had come. Henri followed close behind her, holding onto her hood so she couldn’t get too far ahead of him.

As she walked and skirted some thorns and prickers, she realized Henri was just following her blindly. *Was it possible he didn’t know which way led back to the trail?* Testing her theory, she slowly wandered further from the trail and deeper into the woods. If she could get him lost, she might get away after all.

“Why is it taking so long to get back to the main path?” he asked, jerking on her hood and almost pulling her off her feet.

“Is it taking long?” she asked innocently. “I’m only trying to avoid the worst of the thorns. I thought you said you were pretty cut up?”

Impatiently, he pushed her forward. “Just keep going. I want to get back to that overhang while there’s still daylight.”

She walked on, meandering her way further from the trail while trying to keep her own bearings. She was heading so far into the woods that she was worried she might get lost herself.

Suddenly, Henri yanked on her again. “We’re going around in circles. I know that we’ve passed this spot before. You’re deliberately keeping us off the path!”

*Well, yeah, but we’re not going in circles,* she thought, *just not to your path.* She said aloud, “No, I’m pretty sure that this is the way.”

“Hold up.” He pushed her against a tree and stood back, surveying the area. “No, I’m sure this is not the way back. That is,” he announced, pointing back the way they had just come.

Tessa shrugged. “Okay, you can lead the way then if you think you know where you’re going. I’ll just follow you.”

Henri turned, as if he was ready to lead the way out but then turned back abruptly, slamming against her body so hard that her head hit the tree and she saw stars.

“Actually, I’m tired and I’m cold,” he said calmly. “You would have been beautiful flying off the cliff, but I guess this place will do.” He pulled out the knife he had sheathed in his backpack when they had walked. “No one is going to find you here for quite a while, dear Tessa, if ever. I can cover up a body pretty well, you know,” he told her proudly.

Her heart was racing madly, and she was desperately trying to think of some way to save herself. “Henri, please. Don’t do this.” She held out her hands, pleading with him, but he held the knife at his waist, advancing on her.

“Don’t worry,” he told her, sounding reassuring. “I’ll make sure that you look nice when I lay you out and cover you up. You can trust me.”

Desperately, she charged at him, grabbing at the arm wielding the knife, but he pushed her back effortlessly,

grabbing her throat with his free hand and pressing mercilessly down on her jugular. Once more, as she struggled with him, she was amazed at his strength. She was choking and desperately clawing at the hand clutching her throat, while with her other hand she was pushing back against the arm holding the knife.

Henri grinned at her gleefully. Now that he was certain he had the upper hand, he seemed to enjoy himself. He backed her into the tree, pushing against her throat until she could feel the rough bark scraping the back of her head and neck. Through her fog, she saw his eyes widen in anticipation, and as she weakened from the lack of air, he easily pushed her hand from his arm.

“Goodbye Tessa, it’s been a pleasure,” he said, raising the knife.

She closed her eyes, waiting for him to strike, when she heard a roar and a crashing sound coming from the bushes just behind Henri. Startled, she forced her eyes back open and watched as a dark shape hurtled at them from the woods.

## Chapter 5

The force of the onslaught pushed her backward, and as Henri lost his grip on her throat, she gasped for air, watching him struggle with a mass of fur and fangs. She thought she recognized Cash's dark fur and face and whispered almost inaudibly, "Cash."

The dog's gaze left Henri only for a split second, and he wagged his tail slightly. Then his focus went back to the man lying on the ground and started growling at him.

Henri lunged up at the dog with the knife, and Tessa screamed, "No!"

She looked around for something to defend herself and Cash with, but the dog, who now had Henri's arm firmly in his grip, threw her a quick look. It was almost as if he was telling her to take the opportunity and run. With one last look, she took the chance that Cash had given her and sprinted off as fast as she could.

Choosing to go deeper into the trees and the bushes, away from where she thought the main trail was, she ran. The sounds of the battle between the dog and the man faded behind her, until finally, all she could hear was her own racing heart. She ran frantically, as if her life depended on it, which indeed it did, not stopping until her foot caught an exposed root and sent her sprawling.

She landed on the ground hard and immediately felt a sharp pain in her ankle. Her foot was still caught in the root, and it had twisted painfully. She lay there for a full minute, trying to catch her breath and absorb the pain radiating through her ankle and now making its way up her leg.

Finally, she gathered enough strength to lift herself up to look at it. Her ankle was already swelling, and she could feel it throbbing hotly inside her boot. *Oh shoot, shoot, shoot!* Why did she have to be such a klutz? As if she didn't have



enough problems getting away from a clearly insane man, she now had to do it with an injured ankle.

From the few first aid classes she had taken, she knew she should probably remove the boot, letting her ankle expand freely and do its thing. But judging by the intense throbbing she felt, she doubted that once the boot was off, she could get it back on. Looking around her at the snow-covered, rocky ground, and then up at the darkening sky, she decided that right now she needed her boot firmly on her foot. She wasn't about to tromp around in a snow-covered mountain in nothing but her socks.

She stood up gingerly, testing how her swollen ankle would hold her weight, and gasped in pain. Doing her best to stay upright and hoping that it wasn't broken, she looked around for something she could use to help support herself.

Finally, she saw a large, thick stick that she could use as a crutch. However, when she tried to move, her ankle buckled, and she sank back to the cold, hard ground. As she sat there in the cold snow, despair overwhelmed her. Her ribs hurt from where Henri had kicked her, and her cut-up hands and legs stung. She was also cold and hungry, and more than anything, she wished she had heeded Angela's warning this morning and postponed her hike.

At the very least, she should have walked back with the nice family and made it safely to her car before the snow started. As she brushed away the hot tears of self-pity from her face, she wondered if any of that would have even made any difference. Was Henri just an insane man she had been unlucky enough to have run into, or had he followed her deliberately? If so, he would have eventually found her anyway.

Despite his constant reassurances they weren't, his attack on her certainly had seemed personal, and she again wondered if or how he was tied to the murder of her family. The thought that she might finally be close to finding out who killed her family spurred her determination, and she started to crawl and drag her way over to the sturdy branch she'd selected.

If Henri was responsible or involved in Hope and Luke's murders, then she was going to see that she got out of these woods alive, find him, and make him pay. Painfully, inch by inch, she struggled until she reached the spot where the branch lay. She cleared it of its smaller branches as much as she could and then pulled herself up on a nearby tree, testing to see if she could balance herself now that she had the branch as a crutch. Finally, she was standing. Teetering, wobbling, and with pain shooting up her entire leg like daggers, but she was standing.

She surveyed her surroundings, trying to decide what to do next. It would be safer for her to stay hidden deep in the brush, trying to bushwhack her way through the thorns. She also knew that with her injured ankle, her hope of making it out alive if Henri got away from the dog was if she tried to find a more beaten path.

*Poor Cash*, she thought, worried. What if Henri had stabbed him, and he was bleeding, lying somewhere in the bush, helpless? She was in no doubt that even with her ankle, she needed to find a way out of here if she stood any hope of finding and helping the dog, as well as capturing Henri.

She leaned her body and the makeshift crutch against the tree to help steady herself and painfully reached around behind her into her pack, digging until she found the cell phone she had stashed in her waterproof pouch at the beginning of the hike. After several minutes of painful maneuvering, with her ribs screaming in pain, she finally located it and pulled it out. Thankfully, it didn't seem to have been damaged with her frequent falls and fights with Henri, but she could see that her battery was close to empty.

*Dumb of me*, she thought. *I should have turned it off before I started*. She knew from experience that it was hard to get reception up here. She should have tried to conserve the battery, but she had intended to be back at her car, where she had a charger, long before it should have run out.

Knowing it was probably futile, she tried to call or text both Stephanie and Jack, but she was too far in the woods. As long as she was this far up, it would be impossible for her to

get hold of anyone or even send out an SOS to the local police. Paradoxically, that had been one of the deciding factors for her choosing this trail. She knew that reception was poor here, and when she set out this morning, she had hoped to leave the world, along with all her calls and messages, behind for a while.

Knowing it was useless to keep trying, the battery would only run down further, she turned off the phone and painfully stowed it away again. By now, the brief break in the snowfall had ended, and it was snowing again. This time, the flakes were coming down even harder and thicker than before. She was deep in the trees, and any lingering light from the hazy sun was having a hard time penetrating the deep thickets and trees she was hiding in.

The darker it got, the colder it was getting, and the wind had picked up as well. When it got even darker, she knew it would be impossible for her to find a way out, so she decided it would be better to find a place to camp and make her way back in the morning.

Painfully, she hobbled along on her twisted ankle, using her homemade crutch, and looked around for a place where she could find at least some shelter from the snow and the wind. She was thankful that she'd at least had the foresight to pack her light sleeping bag, a little bit of food, and enough water.

When Tessa's father had taken her out hiking as a child, he had taught her to never leave the house unless she was prepared to survive at least one night in the woods, even if she only intended to take a day hike. She had learned well and always packed enough for any emergency.

She finally discovered a slight crevice in the mountain that had a ledge overhang and decided that would do for the night. That, and the dense covering of trees and bushes, should keep her out of the wind and hopefully hide her in case Henri came looking for her. She gathered as many pine branches as she could, hobbling on her twisted ankle, and then used her hands to pile as many soft needles as she could. When she was

satisfied, she pulled her sleeping bag out of her backpack and placed it down on the ground, wearily sinking down next to it.

She was thankful that Henri had failed in taking her backpack, but as she took stock of her supplies, she wondered what it had been that he had seemed to have wanted so desperately from it. She drank some of her water, saving what little food she had until the morning.

Then, she lay down in her sleeping bag, curling into it as best as she could to try to stay warm. Her ankle was now full-on throbbing, and she contemplated taking off her boot, hoping to relieve some of the pressure, but once again decided that the risk of not being able to get it back on was just too great. She needed her boots on if she had any hope of making her own way down the mountain, losing none of her toes to frostbite.

As she settled back, covering her head against the snow that was falling through the trees, she mulled over what Henri could have possibly wanted from her. He had seemed so determined to kill her that she was believing he must have been involved in the attack on her and her family six years ago. But, if she were to believe his story, then he would have been a young man living in France when she and her family had been attacked. What motive could he have had? He had treated the entire attack on her like a game, fluctuating between enjoyment and aggravation, just like a child would. Was it even possible for someone who seemed to have no grip on reality to have orchestrated the murders of Luke and Hope?

If he wasn't involved in the previous attack on her, then why had he attacked her so suddenly, or at all? She couldn't think of anything she had done or said that would have made him that angry. Was it possible that she was just unfortunate enough to have run into some sort of serial killer?

*Congratulations, Mrs. Graves. No, you haven't won the lottery, but you've had the rare fortune and luck of running into the only serial killer ever on record in this part of the mountains.*

She racked her brain, trying to remember if Jack had said anything to her in the past weeks about the disappearances of any women or any unexplained deaths, but she couldn't think of anything. He didn't tell her everything about ongoing investigations, but she felt certain that if there were women who were missing, he would have at least mentioned it to her. She shuddered at the thought that maybe she was Henri's first intended victim. It was possible he was so distraught by the death of his parents and the cruelty of his sister that something had just snapped in him. She had studied different types of psychosis back in college, and she felt it was entirely possible for a man to become so upset over a loss that it could cause him to do horrible things.

She was worried that if she didn't get back to warn Jack quickly, Henri may well run into some other hapless woman and do the same to them. Thankfully, with the weather being bad, there would probably not be many hikers out right now, but she needed to do everything she could to get help and stop him.

Huddling down further in her sleeping bag, she wondered where he was right now. She didn't think that Cash would have injured him too seriously. As ferocious as Cash looked and sounded, Beau had once told her he was trained to only hold and detain, causing as little damage to a person as possible.

Henri had almost certainly made his escape from Cash's attack by now. But did that mean he would give up on her and look for another victim instead, or would he try to follow her? Without knowing his true motives for attacking her in the first place, it was impossible to even guess.

In her desperation to get away, she had certainly not been covering her tracks very well, especially with her twisted ankle. If he was looking for her, he could easily follow her trail and find her. She shuddered at the thought of him tracking her even now. It had been hard enough to fight him off when she had been healthy; now she was hurt and exhausted. She wasn't sure that she could fight him off again.

The sun was completely gone now, and it was hard to see anything around her. The wind was causing the tree branches to creak and make shadows that danced faintly around her. Every time she heard a snap, she cowered down lower, afraid that Henri would jump out at her. She tried to calm her nerves and grabbed at the heavy branch she was using as a crutch, holding it at the ready in case he suddenly appeared.

Almost intuitively, she felt he would be back to finish what he had started, and there was a small part of her that didn't want him to just disappear. She needed to know why he had attacked her and if he had been involved in the murder of her family. Henri might be the only chance she would ever have to know if the murderers had been after Luke or if it had been her they had been after. Most of all, she needed to know why anyone would have harmed a precious little girl like Hope.

Over the past years, she had daydreamed about finding whoever had killed them. She had envisioned how she would face them head-on, demanding answers, and bravely bringing them to justice, determined that everyone who was involved would pay for what they'd done. Tessa shivered. After having come face to face with a madman like Henri, she was not nearly as brave as she had always envisioned she would be, and another part of her fervently hoped Henri was far away. Right now, she wasn't feeling brave or determined. She was just cold and terrified.

With a start, Tessa woke up from the fitful dream she had been having. She was freezing, and it took her a moment to remember where she was. Her ankle was throbbing, her ribs hurt, and she was stiff from lying on the cold ground. She listened carefully, wondering what had woken her. The dream she had before she woke up had been so real.

Henri was dragging her by the ankle through the trees, scraping her hands and face. He was heading towards a cliff, and she had been struggling hard to get away. Her ankle had been burning painfully as she had tried to pull out of his grasp, but try as she could, she just couldn't seem to get away.

When they reached the cliff, he had shoved her face down to look over into the abyss, grinning at her with an evil sneer.

“There, look down there!” he had commanded.

At first, all she could see was darkness, until finally, she could make out the faint sound of a child crying.

“Hope? Hope, where are you?” Tessa’s heart had pounded in terror as she had frantically scanned the darkness for any sign of her child. She had turned to look at Henri. “Where is she? Where’s my child? What have you done with her?” But Henri had only looked at her silently, pushing her closer and closer to the abyss.

She heard the crack again, nearer this time. Now she was certain that was the sound that had awakened her. She pulled herself up as quickly as she could, struggling to kneel while her injured ankle protested every movement. Grabbing the thick crutch, she held it out defensively.

She heard rustling coming nearer, and she tried to crouch low, keeping as quiet as she could. But whoever or whatever was approaching knew exactly where she was and kept coming, silently but steadily. She kept her eyes trained towards the sound, ready to strike at whatever came at her.

When the figure finally emerged, she almost cried in relief. “Cash, oh Cash, am I ever glad to see you.”

He came to her, his tail wagging happily, and licked at her face like a puppy. She tried to look him over for any injuries, but the moonlight was sparse in the trees, and it was hard for her to see. He seemed exhausted and plopped himself heavily down next to her.

She took out her water bottle, giving him half of it, which he thirstily lapped up. Then she kissed the top of his head, deciding that for tonight, it was best for them both to settle back down and get some sleep.

She lay back down, gathering the sleeping bag snugly around her again. Patting the ground by her side, she encouraged Cash to slip in even closer, hoping to use some of

his body heat to warm her. He willingly obliged, and soon she felt him relaxing, smiling in amusement when she thought she could hear the big dog snoring.

As she looked at the large dark form cuddled next to her, she suddenly felt better and safer than she had since she had run into Henri. She wished Cash could tell her what had happened to Henri in the fight, and she hoped that the dog's attack would deter him from coming after her, at least for the night. But now, even if he was still determined to find her, she was certain that Cash would hear him coming, and he would help her fight him off.

She put her head down close to his and closed her eyes, finally feeling safe enough to sleep. The sun was barely peaking over the horizon when she woke up to Cash licking her face.

“Okay, Okay, I'm up already. Stop slobbering on me. Whew, you have bad breath,” she said, groaning as she stretched her frozen and aching limbs.

When she tried to get up, she gasped in pain, almost toppling back down as her ankle gave way immediately. Cash whined and sniffed at her face, encouraging her to try again. She finally got herself up and sitting on a rock. Taking out the bottle of water, she took a few sips herself, and then let Cash drink some.

“Sorry buddy, we've got to conserve a little until we find a stream to replenish. There's no telling how long we're going to be stuck here.”

Cash sat at her feet, looking at her face expectantly.

“You're hungry, aren't you?” She rummaged around her backpack and took stock of what she still had left. There was still one sandwich and a few granola bars to eat. She was also happy to see they had one more bottle of water, as well as the quarter bottle she was holding now. She looked down at the dog. “It's not much, but we'll have to make do.”

She removed the sandwich and took a few small bites, then gave Cash the rest. He thumped his tail in pleasure as she



ripped off chunks and fed them to him.

While he ate, she tried to look him over closer. With the coming dawn, the sky was getting light enough for her to examine the dog for any signs of injury or distress. She noticed blood on his muzzle, and when she touched his side, she saw him wince.

“What is it, boy? Are you hurt? Here, just let me take a quick look.” Leaning down the best she could, and with her twisted ankle protesting, she felt around. Finally, she detected a small puncture wound, and when she pulled her hand away, she could see that it was covered in blood.

“Oh no, he stabbed you!” she cried. She quickly retrieved the small first aid kit that she always carried with her and applied some disinfectant to it, but Cash was fidgeting and not cooperating well. “Stand still, Cash, at least let me try to disinfect it.” Praying he was okay and that he wouldn’t need stitches, she was now more determined than ever that they find help soon.

Cash was not cooperating with any more examinations or first aid ministrations, so there was no way for her to assess just how deep the wound was. She pulled herself to her feet, clamping her lips tightly together to keep from crying out in pain, as she tried to stand. Pulling her backpack over her back, she took her makeshift crutch and struggled painfully through the thickets once more, calling out to the dog.

“Let’s go, Cash. Let’s find the way home.”

Cash wagged his tail and dutifully took the lead, walking slowly so she could keep up, sniffing the ground now and then. She hobbled along after him, her ankle protesting painfully with every step. A few times she tripped on a root or a stone, and each time she did, it took everything she had to stay on her feet and not cry out.

They trudged on like that for most of the day, with Tessa only stopping once to eat a granola bar and share some water with Cash. When she broke some of the granola bar off for him, Cash disdainfully turned his nose up at it, refusing to even taste it.

It was snowing again, and Tessa followed Cash almost trance-like. She wondered if he actually had any idea where he was going or if he was just as lost as she felt.

From time to time, she pulled out her cell phone to see if she could get any reception, but the result was always the same. She was still too far in to get a signal. Finally, after hours of hobbling along with her wooden stick and with the snow getting deeper, she felt she couldn't go on any further.

As much as she dreaded it, she realized that they were going to be spending the night outside in the woods again. She looked around for a place to shelter. She was miserable and cold but thankful, at least for the time being, that there had been no sign of Henri.

When she spotted a little clearing under another pine tree, she called out to the dog, "Cash, come here boy," and started heading to her chosen spot. Cash stood where he was, refusing to come. "Come on, Cash," she pleaded with him, "I know that you're probably starving and want to keep on going, but I can't walk anymore today. Just one more night, boy. Hopefully, we'll get out of here tomorrow." She patted her leg and whistled to him, but he still refused to follow her, standing his ground and barking at her.

The sound of his bark pierced the stillness of the woods, and Tessa froze in fright. "Cash, be quiet! Henri will hear you!"

Painfully, she struggled to make her way over to the dog, hoping that if she took his collar, she could pull on it and somehow convince the stubborn creature to come with her. However, as she got closer to him, he wagged his tail and turned away, continuing to walk along.

Sighing in resignation, she trudged along behind him, not knowing what else to do. She was certainly not willing to spend the night without him. The sun set further down, and the frigid night air was setting in. Tessa once again looked around for a place where they could spend the night. *Even Cash wouldn't be able to keep going forever*, she thought.

She finally saw a scattering of trees ahead and hoped their branches could provide some cover. Freezing and in pain, she wondered if she should risk making a fire tonight to warm up. She was just about to call Cash over to her when she spotted something up ahead. Cash saw it too, quickening his steps and looking back at her, as if to tell her to hurry.

When she was finally close enough to see what it was, she cried out in relief. They wouldn't need to spend the night outside after all. There, just up ahead, sat a small cabin.

Stephanie stomped around the kitchen, feeling both aggravated and worried at the same time. Looking over at Angela, who was busily stirring a pot on the stove, she asked yet again, "Still nothing?"

Angela shook her head, "No, Miss Stephanie. Trust me, I'm checking my phone every few minutes as well. I promise, as soon as I hear anything from Miss Tessa, I'll let you know." She stopped stirring and looked over at Stephanie, "Do you think maybe I misunderstood her, and she said that she was camping out for a few nights? It's just not like Miss Tessa to disappear like this, saying nothing."

Angela was trying to sound hopeful, but she couldn't shake the feeling of dread that she had had for most of the day. Despite trying to convince herself and Miss Stephanie otherwise, she was certain that Miss Tessa had told her she would be back by yesterday evening, but neither she nor Miss Stephanie had heard from her last night or all day.

Stephanie chewed on her lip. In her younger years, it hadn't been so out of character for Tessa to disappear to the mountains for a few days. Unlike Luke, who had thrived in the company of others, Tessa had always needed her times of solitude to regroup and recharge. She glanced down at her cell phone again, feeling her gut clench in annoyance and concern.

She knew Tessa had been having a difficult time recently. Just the other night, they had talked about Tessa's conflicted feelings for dating again. Both Jack and Carter were eager to spend time alone with her, but Tessa still felt a strong loyalty to Luke's memory. She had tried to convince Tessa that

it was alright to move on. She had even suggested that Tessa take a few days off to gather her thoughts, but she hadn't meant for her to just leave without letting her know and checking in with her.

"I'm going to look around her office to see if she left a note or if I can find anything at all about where she might have gone. Who knows, maybe she came home last night, and something came up she needed to take care of right away," Stephanie said, hurrying down the long hallway towards the adjoining offices she and Tessa had.

She was already scolding herself for not having checked right away this morning. If Tessa had popped in late last night, she would almost certainly have left a note, knowing what a worrier Stephanie was. Growing up, they had often argued about Tessa's penchant for heading off on her own up the mountain. As often as Tessa had told her she could fully take care of herself in the woods, Stephanie had worried. They had finally agreed that Stephanie was never to worry or search unless two full days had gone by, but this was different.

Tessa hadn't been in the mountains by herself since Luke and Hope had died, and Stephanie was worried. Besides that, it was cold, and she suspected it would snow up in the mountains, even if it wasn't snowing down here. If Tessa had spent a few days in the mountains, it had been years since she'd camped out, and Tessa should know that she would worry. It wasn't fair for her to not at least check in. Stephanie could feel the resentment building in her.

She walked to the desk in Tessa's office, looking around for a note or any sign that Tessa might have been there. Tessa was extremely organized when it came to her workspace, unlike Stephanie whose desk looked to be in a constant state of confusion, so it was easy to see that everything was exactly where Tessa had left it. She couldn't find any notes or anything lying around, and it didn't look as if Tessa had popped in and out last night like she'd been hoping.

As she turned to leave, wondering at what point she should call Jack, the local sheriff, she noticed the light on Tessa's answering machine was blinking. Although the two of

them were partners, they didn't normally listen to each other's calls, but in this case, Stephanie felt justified to check the machine. There was always the possibility that Tessa had been hurt and someone may have tried to contact them through her business card number.

She scooted herself back around the desk, sitting on Tessa's chair, and hit the playback button. The angry voice that came through the machine was enough to leave chills running down her spine.

“Listen up, I know what you're up to, and I will not let you get away with it! You had better back off now, or you'll be sorry, and that's a promise!”

## Chapter 6

The minute that she heard the threat, Stephanie panicked. Berating herself for waiting so long to check Tessa's messages, she now feared that whoever had left the message might have already had a chance to find and hurt Tessa. She also wondered if Tessa could have listened to the message before she left, and if that would have anything to do with why she hadn't returned like she had planned.

*Had she maybe met with the caller?* Stephanie reached for her phone and started dialing. She was determined not to let another minute pass without doing something.

Jack answered her call on the second ring. "Hi Stephanie, what's up? Are you having trouble at the Shelter?" He was used to the women calling when one of the residents was having an issue with a spouse or partner.

"No, well not exactly. I mean, yes, or maybe. Actually, I'm not really sure Jack. It's just that Tessa didn't come back from her hike yesterday at the time she said she would, and now I just found a threatening message on her answering machine. I mean, it could be nothing. It's not the first time either of us have gotten an angry threat that never amounted to anything, and maybe she just spent a little more time alone, but I just have a bad feeling about all of this, and I'm not sure what I should do."

Jack felt his pulse quicken as he listened to Stephanie. He had known Tessa long enough to know that she was very independent, and that sometimes her reckless independence could get her into trouble.

"Hang tight, Stephanie. I'll head over there right now. There's probably no need to panic, but I want to hear this message for myself."

"Oh, thank you, Jack. I really am sorry to bother you, but when I heard it, I just kind of panicked what with her

being gone still. Besides that, the weather's been so cold. It's probably snowing up in the mountains. I know she is experienced and all, but she hasn't camped on her own in so long. It just seems strange that she's not back yet."

"I'm on my way," he said, hanging up before he had even finished his sentence.

Relieved that Jack was coming, but still anxious, Stephanie dialed another phone number.

"Hey Steph, what's up? I'm on my way to a client briefing so I've only got a few minutes. You'll have to talk fast." Carter's friendly but rushed voice came through the phone.

"Hey Carter. Listen, I don't want to worry you, but Tessa never came home last night from her hike, and I just wanted you to know. I was kind of hoping that she might have called you and told you if she changed her plans and went somewhere else?"

There was a small part of her that hoped that Tessa may have reconsidered Carter's invitation, and she met up with him last night instead of returning to the shelter. As annoyed as she would be if they hadn't told her, it would be a relief to know that Tessa was at least safe.

"No, she said nothing to me. I knew she was thinking about taking a day off and going on a hike to clear her mind, but I didn't know she went yesterday. I haven't talked to her in a day or two." He looked outside the window of the tall building he was in, rubbing his eyes. "I remember when it wasn't that unusual for her to decide to spend the night in the mountains if she was having fun, but you're right. It's been a long time since she's been up there alone, and it is kind of cold to spend the night."

"Yes, I know, she used to do that, and that's why I didn't panic immediately this morning when she wasn't back. I can't get hold of her on her phone, and it's getting later and even colder. I should have heard something from her by now."

Carter glanced at the closed door he was standing in front of, knowing that an expectant client was behind that door, impatiently waiting for him. “She’s probably too far into the mountains for service, Steph, so I doubt she could call even if she wanted to. You know yourself how hard it is to get any kind of reception up there. I’m sure she’ll call you as soon as she can.”

Stephanie hesitated, not wanting to worry him, but she could not dispel the panic that was rising in her gut. She and Tessa had been best friends since grade school, and they knew each other perfectly. She just felt that something was wrong, and Tessa needed her.

“When I went to check her office to see if she might have left a note, I found a threatening message on her answering machine. Jack is on his way over, and it’s probably nothing, but I can’t shake the feeling something is wrong, Carter. I just know that Tessa is in some kind of trouble.”

Carter had known them both almost as long as they had known each other, and he could hear the panic in Stephanie’s voice without her needing to explain anything further to him.

“Okay, I’m on my way, Steph. Just hang in there. I can be there in about an hour. If you hear anything before I get there, call me right away.”

Relieved that reinforcements were coming, Stephanie said, “Oh, Carter, thank you. I hate to drag you away, but I just know that something is wrong.”

Carter hung up and turned away from the door and the client behind it, dialing the phone as he walked down to the parking garage. “Hey, Bruce? Yeah, listen, something came up and I can’t make the meeting on the Clemon’s case right now. I need you to come up right away and cover for me.”

As he hurried to his car, he could feel his own sense of panic rising. After weaving his way in and out of traffic, Carter finally arrived at the shelter, stopping short when he saw Jack Lewis already sitting in Tessa’s office with Stephanie. As usual, he was finding it hard to push down the



taste of jealousy and aversion he felt whenever he saw the sheriff.

“Oh, how are you, Sheriff? Thanks for coming out, but I’m sure we’ll hear from Tessa at any minute,” he said, trying to sound friendlier than he felt.

Jack looked up briefly, gave him a nod, and continued to write something in his notepad. Stephanie looked up at Carter, her face apologetic. She could sense Carter’s displeasure.

“I called Jack to get a professional opinion on the recording. I’m trying not to overreact, but I really am afraid for Tessa.”

“Okay, so let’s hear the tape. I want to hear what it says as well,” Carter said, striding over to where the answering machine sat on Tessa’s desk. Since Jack was seated at the desk, he had no option other than to stand in front of the desk in the cramped little office.

Stephanie looked at Jack first, and when he nodded at her, she hit the play button for Carter. The man’s angry and ominous voice quickly filled the little room.

“Listen up, I know what you’re up to, and I will not let you get away with it! You had better back off now, or you’ll be sorry, and that’s a promise!”

Carter looked at Stephanie questioningly. “Do you know what he’s talking about? What was Tessa supposedly up to?”

“I honestly do not know, Carter. As far as I know, nothing unusual has been happening at the shelter lately. Jack and I are wondering if it has something to do with one of the residents. Maybe a disgruntled husband or boyfriend?”

Carter looked over at Jack and asked, “Have you spoken to any of the women here yet? It sounds like it’s something ongoing, and one of the women might recognize the voice.”

Jack shook his head, “No, I haven’t had the chance yet. I just got here shortly before you did, but I agree we need to

talk to the women and ask them.”

“Well, I suggest we should probably do that immediately,” Carter snapped. “Tessa’s been gone now for a day and a half. If this caller has anything to do with her being missing, then we shouldn’t be wasting time sitting here dilly-dallying with notebooks, don’t you agree?”

Carter knew he sounded just as irritated as he felt. The caller had sounded angry and threatening, and if he really meant to harm Tessa, Carter wanted to find him fast.

Jack looked up at Carter coldly. Although he spoke softly and patiently, he could not hide his own dislike for the lawyer. “We’re going to do everything in our power to find out who this caller is, but we first need to get all the facts, and then come up with a game plan. We can’t all just start running around looking for a voice on the phone. There are protocols to follow that have already been established and proven for these kinds of situations.”

Carter was just about to tell the Sheriff what he could do with his protocols when they all heard a commotion in the kitchen, which was quickly followed by voices making their way down the hall towards them. Angela’s voice sounded breathless as she tried to keep up with Beau’s long strides.

“The sheriff and Mr. Carter are already here, Beau. I’m sure they’re doing everything they can to locate Miss Tessa.”

Beau wasted no time with the usual pleasantries; his voice sounding curt and straight to the point. “Have you heard anything from Tessa yet?”

“No, not yet Beau,” Stephanie answered, looking at him in surprise. “I thought you were out of town?”

“I was, and now I’m back. I came by to see if Cash was over here since my housekeeper says he’s been gone for at least a day. Angela just told me that Tessa is missing as well.”

Both of the men already in the cramped office were now united in the irritated looks they threw at the interloper. However, Stephanie seemed to be unaware of the animosity that was quickly permeating the room.

Looking over to Angela, she asked, “You saw Tessa when she left yesterday. Did she have Cash with her or say anything about taking him?”

“No, Miss Stephanie,” Angela replied nervously, wringing her hands. “Although she mentioned that she would have liked to take him. But since Mr. Beau was away, she couldn’t ask him, and of course, she would never take him without permission.”

Now Jack looked over at her. “As long as you’re here, Angela, you may as well listen to this recording and see if you recognize the voice or if you know what he’s talking about. Maybe Tessa said something to you about what he’s saying.” He pressed the play button, and as they all listened to the message, Jack watched Beau as well as Angela. Angela’s face paled, and she wrung her hands in despair.

“Oh my! No, I don’t recognize that voice, but it sure sounds like that man is furious with poor Miss Tessa. You don’t think that she’s with him right now, do you?”

Beau looked at Angela sharply. “Why do you say that? Did she say something to you before she left about meeting someone or getting a call?”

“No, no, Mr. Beau, nothing like that. She just said she was going for a hike and was packing a few sandwiches and some essentials. She mentioned nothing about meeting anyone to me.”

Beau turned his attention back to Jack. “What makes you think this call even has anything to do with Tessa being missing?”

Now it was Beau’s turn to receive Jack’s cool and irritated gaze. “I didn’t say that it does, Beau, but I also don’t believe in coincidences. I just think it’s odd that she’s missing at the same time she’s receiving threats. Besides, it was this call that prompted Stephanie to call me for help, so I’m assuming it has some importance.”

Beau looked at Stephanie. “Why would you wait to hear this message before you looked for Tessa?”

Stephanie squirmed. The look Beau was giving her was making her feel like she was now in the hot seat.

“I don’t know why I waited. Mainly because I know Tessa doesn’t like it when I overreact and smother her. It’s not really that strange for her to spend the night out in the mountains. We used to do it all the time when we were younger, and she always goes prepared for any emergency.” She looked to Carter for support and continued, “But with the weather turning colder, and this being the first time in a long time that she’s gone alone, I just had a funny feeling about her not coming back on time. When I heard the message, I panicked and called Jack and Carter.”

Carter looked at Beau angrily. “Steph doesn’t need to explain herself to you or anyone else. She did what she thought was right. She’s known Tessa longer than any of us, and I trust her judgment, so don’t start grilling her like she did something wrong.”

Beau gave Carter a cold stare. “I’m not grilling anyone. I’m just trying to figure out the timeline and what the best course of action is now. I’m also wondering why, if Stephanie already thought it was strange that Tessa didn’t come home yesterday, she waited to say anything until this morning. Maybe a search party should have already been dispatched, and Tessa would be home by now.”

Jack was glaring at Beau, and now he said, “Hold on there, Beau. It’s not up to you to decide when, and even if, a search party is going to be sent. That takes a lot of resources and planning. That’s why we take time to assess the situation and the facts, and then decide what we’re going to do.” He gave both Beau and Carter a stern look. “It will be my decision what we’re going to do, not yours.”

Carter looked smugly over at Beau. Despite his dislike and jealousy for Jack, he thoroughly enjoyed the tongue-lashing that Beau had just received, ignoring the fact that he himself had just questioned Jack’s systems and procedures.

“Let’s all just stay calm and figure this out together, okay?” Stephanie said.

She was looking from one man to the other, wondering if she had made a mistake calling in both Jack and Carter. Jack was in a better position to send help for Tessa if needed, but Carter would have never forgiven her if she had not informed him that Tessa was missing. Besides, she had also hoped that he might have heard from her already. She could never have guessed that Beau would arrive back today, of all days, and then immediately come looking for his dog either. Now, it was all she could do to rein in all the jealousy and testosterone she sensed flowing between the three of them so they could focus on finding Tessa.

Jack nodded at her in agreement and looked back at his notes, while the other two men stood silently in the cramped room, waiting to see what he would decide.

Finally, Jack looked up. “Angela, I’d like for you to gather the women in here one at a time, and then we’ll ask them if any of them can identify the voice on the tape.” He looked at the two men. “Meanwhile, I’ll notify the forensics team so they can analyze it and see if they can find anything, and check with the phone company so they can try to trace where the call came from through their records.” He ignored the scowls that the two men were throwing him and continued, “I’ll put out an APB on Tessa in case anyone spots her, and I’ll send a unit to check the parking lots of the closest trails.” He looked each man in the face. “Look, I know you both want to send out a search party, but we don’t even know which trail she took, and I can’t file a missing person’s report yet, not until she’s been missing for 48 hours.”

Beau shook his head emphatically. “That’s not good enough, Jack. The most likely explanation is that she went for a hike and ran into some kind of trouble. The longer we waste time following a lead that probably won’t even pan out, the more time she spends up in those mountains alone and potentially hurt. For all we know, this call is just a prank.” He looked over at Stephanie. “I’m going up after her. I want you to tell me her normal routes, so I at least know where to start.”

Jack shot him an irritated look. “I will not let you go running around up in those mountains blindly, Beau. You said

yourself that the weather is deteriorating fast, and I don't want to send out a rescue party to get you down as well. You don't know these mountains, and you're bound to get lost or hurt yourself if I let you go."

Carter had been standing with his arms crossed, watching Beau, and now he spoke up, "Maybe he doesn't, but I know these mountains and all its trails like the back of my hand, Jack. This time I have to agree with Beau. The longer we wait, the longer Tess is up there by herself and possibly hurt. I'm going with Beau to look for her."

Beau shook his head at Carter, scoffing, "Do you really think I'm going into those mountains with you?" He looked at Carter's expensively tailored suit and shiny shoes disparagingly. "Tell me, are you planning to hike up the mountain dressed like that?"

Carter looked at Beau with daggers flashing from his eyes. "Don't worry about that. I always carry my hiking gear with me, and I have clothes in my car. I can be ready within half an hour."

Beau shook his head again, "No thanks. I don't want to babysit you up there."

Carter looked at him coldly. "You'll need me up there. I know more about those mountains than you'll ever know, buddy, and if anyone is going to do any babysitting, I'm betting it'll be me. Someone like you, with no experience, is just going to get lost or hurt, and even though I couldn't care less what you do with yourself, I don't want to waste manpower helping you. I want to find Tessa."

"I'm not sending a search party up for either of you fools if you go," Jack retorted. "There's still a good chance she will show up here any minute, or that she's not even up there at all. She may have run into trouble before she had time to leave, and I'm not wasting time and manpower going on a wild goose chase. I want to know for sure where she is first."

Beau glared at Jack, saying, "I have more experience out in the wilderness than either one of you will ever have, so you don't need to worry about sending anyone out after me."

Then he looked at Carter, “The only reason I’m even entertaining the thought of taking you with me is because you probably know the route that Tessa would have taken, and I don’t want to waste any more time. But I’m warning you, if you slow me down even a little, I’ll leave you behind without a second thought.”

“Stop it, all of you! We don’t need to be bickering with one another right now. What we need to do is figure out where Tessa is!”

Stephanie was fluctuating between worry for Tessa and annoyance with all the men. She was just hoping that Tessa would walk in the door any minute now and put an end to all their arguing.

Jack turned to Angela, ignoring the other two men in the room, and was about to ask her to bring in the other women when his phone rang. When he answered it, Stephanie watched his face as he listened to the voice on the other end. She felt an icy fear rising in her gut. The look on his face did not bode well for good news.

As soon as he hung up, she asked, “What is it, Jack? Was that about Tess? Did they find something?”

He looked at Stephanie and then at the two men. “They found her car at one of the trailheads.”

Carter sprang up from where he had been perched on the edge of Tessa’s desk. “So now we know for sure which trail she’s on! Let’s go, we’re wasting time!”

Jack nodded in agreement. “Judging from the snow cover on it, it looked like it’s been sitting there at least since yesterday, so she never came back off the mountain last night.”

“What else, Jack? What are you not saying?” Stephanie was sure by the look on his face that there was more. He threw them all a worried look.

“Her car wasn’t the only one there. Parked close to hers, they found a rental that looked like it had been there all night as well.”

## Chapter 7

“There are people hiking up there all the time,” Stephanie said. “It’s not that unusual for someone to rent a car to get there.”

Jack looked at her. “True, but apparently the rental company reported this car as stolen when it wasn’t returned yesterday. It’s a bit too coincidental for my liking that it was found at the same parking area as Tessa’s car. I’ll need to find out who it was rented to. There might even be a connection to our caller.”

Beau started moving out the door. “I really don’t care one way or the other about a rental car right now. It’s clear that she’s still up there somewhere, and chances are good she needs help. We’re just wasting time now. I want to get up there and start looking.”

Carter started to the door as well. “Give me fifteen minutes, and I’ll meet you in front of your place. I want to take two cars. We start up the mountain together, but if we decide to split up, then we both have a car to get back or get help.” Seeing Beau’s hesitation, he added, “Look, I don’t particularly like the idea of tramping through the woods with you either, but we both want to find Tessa, and at least for now, two heads are better than one.”

“Hold on, you two,” Jack said. “I already told you I don’t want you two going rogue on me and tromping around up there alone. Now that we’ve found her car and we know where she is, I’ll organize a search party to go up. You two can coordinate with them.” Jack’s voice made it clear that the subject wasn’t up for debate.

“Forget it, Jack. I’m not waiting for you to coordinate any search party. If Tessa is up there and in trouble, we don’t have the time to wait.” Beau looked over at Carter. “I’m going up, and if you want to come, then you better hurry and get your gear together.”



“Like I said, fifteen minutes.” Carter followed Beau out of the room before Jack could say another word. Jack watched them leave, clearly annoyed.

“Those two fools better not get themselves into trouble up there. I don’t want to waste manpower on them as well,” he grumbled.

Stephanie watched as he got to work on the phone, coordinating what needed to be done, quickly and efficiently. But she could see that he continued to look frustrated. She wondered if the cause of his aggravation was more because he himself wanted to just leave immediately and start searching as well.

Carter pulled into the trailhead a few minutes after Beau, parking a few spots away. The two men had been driving down the highway as fast as they could, with Carter going just a little slower, not wanting to jeopardize his clean driving record, while Beau raced ahead, seemingly oblivious to the speed signs that they passed.

“About time that you got here,” Beau said, barely glancing up from where he was busily packing up last-minute supplies into his backpack. “I was just about to leave without you.”

“I’m ready.” Carter grabbed his own backpack, which he had already packed up at the shelter. He had included the supplies and food that Angela had hurriedly prepared for both the men. Walking over to Beau, he threw him a brown bag filled with sandwiches and other food. “Here, Angela said to give this to you.”

Beau grabbed it expertly before it fell into the fresh snow. Smiling slightly, he said, “Thanks. I brought my own supplies, but I may as well pack it.” Then he looked at Carter. “I don’t suppose you thought to bring any medical supplies with you?”

Carter grimaced. “No, I didn’t.”

Separating out some supplies for himself, Beau handed a pack to Carter. “I didn’t really think you would, so I brought

extra. If we split up and you find her first, she might need some medical care. I want you to be prepared.”

Carter bit his tongue and silently packed the supplies into his own pack. He hated the condescending way that Beau was talking to him, but he was right. Tessa might very well need some emergency care, and he was angry with himself that he hadn't thought of it.

The snow was falling, and Beau said, “Let's get going. It's supposed to get even colder tonight, and I'd like to see if we can find her before she has to spend another night out here.” Glancing at Carter's little sports car, he said, “If she makes it down on her own, she should recognize your car, as well as my SUV. She'll know that we went after her and can contact Jack or Stephanie.”

Carter looked at the abandoned rental car as they walked by on the way to the start of the trailhead. “I wonder if Jack's found out anything about who rented that thing yet.”

“If he hasn't, I'm sure he will soon enough. It's unfortunate that we'll likely lose reception as we climb, and he won't be able to let us know. It would be helpful to know who else we might be dealing with.” Beau rummaged around in his coat, pulling out a two-way radio. “By the way, I brought these so we could try to stay in touch in case we get separated. They should have a pretty good range, and that way we can let the other know if either of us finds her.”

Carter accepted the radio and stuffed it into his jacket without saying a word. Beau had a way of making him feel incompetent, and he didn't like it one bit. He'd been hiking these mountains since he was a kid. He should have had the upper hand here, and he didn't relish an outsider making him look inept.

“Let's just get going,” he said gruffly. “I'll bet I know the direction she took. She's a creature of habit.”

The two walked the trail for a bit in silence. Carter was lost in his own thoughts, and Beau was scouring around for any signs showing that Cash might have been around here in the last few hours. He was convinced that the dog had gone

after Tessa. Cash had never left the property before, and it had become increasingly clear over the last few months that he had developed a deep loyalty to her.

When they reached a slight fork in the trail, Carter said, “This way,” pointing to the right. “I’m fairly certain that this is the way she would have gone.”

Beau looked at him doubtfully. “Are you sure? That slopes downward slightly, and it gets slippery that way. I doubt she would have picked a way that’s harder to keep your footing.”

“It’s the way we always used to go, and it slopes back up about a mile in. There’s a lookout about 3 miles in that Tessa loves. I’m certain that’s the way she would have gone. Besides, it wasn’t snowing this bad yesterday when she started out.”

Beau hesitated, looking at Carter and then at both trails, trying to decide. It wasn’t the way he would have chosen, and he thought he could see some trampled bushes down the other path, indicating that Cash might have gone to the left.

“I think I see signs the dog went this way,” he said. “He would have been tracking her scent, which means she took this route.”

Carter looked at him in amusement. “You can’t really believe that beast of yours tracked her all the way from the shelter to this trailhead, can you? What did he do, borrow a car to get here?”

“You’d be surprised how fast that dog can go when he has something in mind. Don’t underestimate him,” Beau said, annoyed at how Carter dismissed him.

Unfortunately, he himself wasn’t sure if Cash had really made it to the trailhead yet. He knew the dog was capable of some amazing feats, but even he wondered if he could have tracked Tessa this far or this fast.

“Okay, we’ll go your way for now, but if I see any more signs leading a different way, I’m following the dog’s

lead. I trust him more than I trust you, that's for sure." Beau walked up the trail as he spoke, taking the lead again. After he had positioned his pack tighter, Carter followed Beau, irritated that he was once again following, even though it was his idea to go this way.

"What's your interest in her, anyway? Why are you so intent on finding her? After all, you're just a neighbor. You barely even know her," Carter grumbled, not sure if he actually expected an answer.

"She's not just a neighbor. She's become a friend. I've gotten the chance to really get to know her since she moved into the cottage. She's always giving to everyone and helps people unselfishly. That's a rare thing nowadays. I want to make sure that she gets back safely. Besides, I had nothing better to do today anyway," Beau announced, without ever turning around.

Tessa had moved into the old gardener's cottage that Beau had renovated on his property a few months ago, after her own apartment had been burned down. Carter had proposed that she move into his penthouse, and he was still not happy that she had moved onto Beau's property instead.

"If she stayed with me, she probably wouldn't be missing right now. I would have convinced her to let me come with her. It's not safe to come up here alone when the weather is like this," he said.

"She likes to be alone. If you know her at all, you should know that. That's probably why she likes it at the cottage. It gives her a chance to get away from all the pressure of running the shelter. She has the space and peace to paint or do whatever else she wants to do."

"She spends way too much time alone there. She's becoming a hermit. And she can paint at the penthouse as well. She'd have a view of the city from up there, and she'd be even farther away from the shelter, so she could really escape the pressure," Carter countered.

Beau just walked on, keeping a sharp eye out on the vegetation, trying to find any sign of disturbance. "Well, I

guess that's not what she was looking for, was it? She chose to stay at the cottage, and she seems happy there."

"From the way I remember it, she didn't choose anything. You moved her in when she was vulnerable and homeless after she'd just lost everything in that fire. She was so traumatized that she wasn't thinking clearly," Carter said. He hated the smug look Beau threw at him over his shoulder, and he hated the familiarity with which he was talking about Tessa even more. "You might think you know her," he said, "but there's a lot more to her than you can find out in a few short months. I've known her ever since she was in grade school. Trust me when I say I know her better than she knows herself."

"And yet, despite all of that, she's still living in the cottage and loving it," Beau countered.

"Which, in my opinion, is a mistake. I still think that she needs to have someone she can talk to at the end of the day and not spend so much time by herself. If Tessa has too much time alone, she gets into her own head too much and starts reflecting on what happened to her family. There's still the fear that kind of thinking could send her back into a downward spiral."

Beau looked back at him. "I've heard both you and Stephanie say that to her before, but I've never seen her be anything but optimistic and upbeat. What kind of spiral are you talking about?"

"After she lost her family, she was understandably very distraught. So much so, in fact, that both Steph and I were afraid we would lose her as well. We pushed her to check herself into a clinic so they could help her learn to cope with her loss," Carter said.

"And did it help? From what I can tell, she seems to be coping pretty well," Beau remarked.

"Yeah, it helped a little, but there's still a lot more going on under the surface that she hasn't dealt with. She just hides it really well. Of course, someone who hasn't known her long wouldn't be able to see it, but it's plain as day to both

Steph and me. They warned us after she left the clinic not to let her ruminate too much on her own in case it caused her to spiral backwards again.”

“She hardly has time to spend any time alone,” Beau said. “She devotes pretty much every waking moment to the shelter, helping others. I think she needs to have more time to herself. That’s probably why she went out on her own and hiked yesterday, even though the conditions weren’t exactly ideal.”

“That shelter gives her purpose in her life. Without it, she might never have recovered. In my opinion, she needs to spend more time around other people, not less. Trust me, you don’t know a lot about her. What Tessa really needs is someone to talk to at the end of the day, and she would have that if she was staying at the penthouse with me.”

“She didn’t want to stay there though, did she? Or else she would have taken you up on your offer at least one of the hundred times you’ve already suggested it.” Beau leered back again at Carter, who was tromping right behind him. “But you don’t need to worry, I check in with her most evenings when I’m home, and we’ve had lots of very interesting talks.”

“From what I hear, you aren’t there all that often though, are you? You seem to disappear fairly often without a word of warning or letting anyone know how long you’re going to be away,” Carter said, trying not to take the bait. “If she’s counting on you to talk to, she’s going to be disappointed.” Carter glared at the back of Beau’s head. “Where is it that you run off to all the time, anyway? Are you hiding a wife from us, or maybe a career in crime? What’s all the secrecy about, Beau?”

Beau said coolly, “I’m not hiding anything, but it’s none of your business where I go and what I’m doing.”

“It is if it affects Tessa. Then it’s definitely my business what kind of shady stuff you’re into.”

“You seem to forget that Tessa is a grown woman and can take care of herself. I think you’d better start minding your own business and deal with your own shady affairs.” Beau

looked over his shoulder. “How is it that a crack lawyer like you still hasn’t been able to find out where all of that donated money is coming from? You’re the one who knows when she needs it, and then it always miraculously appears in her account. Tell me, Carter, who are you in cahoots with, and why not just tell her the truth about her donor? How much of it really gets to her?”

Carter grabbed Beau, pulling him back. “What exactly are you trying to say? Are you accusing me of using Tessa to get money, or worse yet, stealing from her?!” He glared at Beau. “There’s no one more loyal to Tessa than I am, and you would do best to stay out of her life and our relationship. Just move on with your own life. She doesn’t need someone as unstable as you are in hers.”

They had reached another fork in the path, and Beau stopped, glaring right back at Carter. “I’ll stay in Tessa’s life for as long as I want to. It’s time you stepped back and accepted the fact that if she wanted you in her life, she would have taken you up on your pathetic offers a long time ago.” He looked down both trails. “I think it’s time for us to split ways. I’ll even let you pick the direction you want to go, so you can’t whine about how I sent you on the wrong path later. We have a better chance of finding her separately, and I won’t have to punch you for grabbing me. I just hope that you’re as competent in the outdoors as you brag about being.”

Carter scowled at Beau. “That suits me fine.” He pointed down one of the trails. “Her favorite lookout is this way, so that’s the way I’m going. You go whatever way you want.”

Carter stomped off, and Beau watched him for a few minutes, relieved that he had chosen the trail he had hoped he would. He was certain that he had once again seen some beaten-down bushes on the top path, and if Cash was the cause, he was sure he’d find the dog with Tessa.

Tessa lay in the cot, shivering under her sleeping bag, with Cash lying on top of her. The cabin was only slightly getting lighter with the clouds covering the sun this morning. Once she had found the cabin, she had looked around it, hobbling as

best she could, and found a small pile of wood stacked neatly in the back. She had contemplated trying to bring some in and start a fire, but she was afraid the smoke from the chimney might attract Henri and decided against it. Besides that, she couldn't walk without the help of her crutch, and she wasn't sure how she could even bring the wood inside.

Instead, she had tried to stay warm using the threadbare blankets she'd found in the cabin, her own sleeping bag, and the dog's body heat. She was grateful that at least she had been able to spend the night inside and not out in the snow, but the chill in the unused cabin had made it impossible for her to get warm, and she had spent a long night shivering. She had also done her best to patch up the wounds that Cash had sustained from his fight with Henri and was satisfied that he would be alright, at least for now. He hadn't lost too much blood, but she wished a vet could look at him and make sure nothing got infected.

After scrounging through the cupboards, she had been able to find a few cans of tuna, opening them and feeding them to Cash. He still showed absolutely no interest in the few remaining granola bars that she had, and she had eaten the last one herself last night. Now she could hear both of their stomachs growling.

"I guess you're pretty hungry too, huh boy?" He looked at her with his big soulful eyes and gave her a sloppy lick on the face. She sighed. "I guess I should find a way to get us both some water today, and maybe even some food." She pushed him off, painfully trying to pull herself up.

By now, the throbbing was so bad that her entire leg ached, and she was sure that blood was pooling in her thighs. Her ankle had swollen to the point where she couldn't remove her boot even if she wanted to, although she still thought it best to leave it on. She wanted to find water for herself and Cash, and she needed boots on her feet to do it.

Grabbing the crutch that she had leaned against the wall by the cot, she groaned loudly as she struggled to her feet. Cash stayed close, allowing her to use him as leverage to help balance herself. She slowly hobbled to the door, opening it just



a crack and carefully looked outside. The snow was falling heavier, and once again she thanked God that she had found this cabin. She wasn't sure how long she could have survived sleeping out in the cold and snow, even with her weatherproof sleeping bag.

“Well, come on boy, I thought I might have seen a little stream not too far away when we made our way here last night. Let's grab a bucket and see if I was right.” She picked up the bucket she saw in the building's corner, holding it with one hand while she gripped her crutch with the other. Leaning on Cash, she used him on one side for balance and painfully made her way down to where she thought she had seen a stream.

As they walked, she slipped a few times and wondered if she could fill the bucket with enough snow to melt for water just in case she couldn't make it to the stream. Cash needed water, and she was more concerned for him than for herself. She inched her way slowly along, keeping a sharp eye out for any movement and watched Cash for any sign that he heard anything out of the ordinary. If Henri came upon her in this condition, she was afraid that there wasn't much she could do to fight him off.

The terror of her encounter with the madman came flooding back to her, and she breathed in relief when she finally came close enough to see the flowing stream without a sign of Henri. She let herself sink down at the edge of the stream, and both she and Cash put down their heads, drinking deeply from the clear flowing water.

When they had drunk their fill, Tessa dipped the bucket in the water, filling it as much as she could, and hoped that she could carry it up to the cabin. As she struggled to right herself, balancing on her homemade crutch, and leaning down to lift the bucket, she noticed Cash was looking around in excitement.

Instantly, she went on high alert, almost spilling the entire contents of water as she slammed down the bucket and took the crutch into both hands, ready to use it as a weapon if necessary.

“What is it Cash, what do you hear?” she asked him, looking around her in panic.

He whined at her and wagged his tail in answer, all the while looking up at the sky through the trees, until she finally heard it as well.

“A helicopter! Oh Cash, they’re looking for us!”

## Chapter 8

Tessa dropped the bucket, hobbling with her crutch and crashing through trees and underbrush, using anything she could to support herself to get to a clearing where the helicopter could see her.

After only a few minutes, she heard the chopping sound of the helicopter fading away. She sank to the ground, with tears of despair running down her face, and buried her face into Cash's snow-covered fur, overcome with misery and frustration.

“Oh Cash, what are we going to do now? We can't get in the open because of the cold, the snow, and Henri, but if we stay hidden, no one is ever going to find us.”

Cash licked her face in sympathy, whining softly, as if he fully understood their dilemma.

After a few more minutes of crying, she wiped her face with her soaking wet gloves, deciding it would do her no good to just sit here and feel sorry for herself. She needed to get back to the cabin and reassess her situation. It was becoming clearer to her that if she wanted to get out of these mountains soon, she would have to figure a way out on her own.

Looking down at the dog, she gave him a kiss on the top of his soft head, “Okay Cash. I'm done crying now. Let's get out of here and figure out how to save ourselves.” She struggled to her feet, wincing as her weight pressed on her ankle, but as she looked around, she realized that in her haste to get to a clearing and flag down the helicopter, she had run blindly. Now she wasn't so sure which direction was the way back to the creek, or worse yet, the cabin.

Sighing, she looked for any signs of where she had crashed through the underbrush. “Okay Cash, you found me, now do you think you could find your way back?” He wagged his tail and danced around in front of her. “Go, find the way

back, boy!” she commanded, pointing her finger in the way she thought they had just come.

Cash jumped up and ran into the brush, wagged his tail, and retrieved a stick, bringing it back proudly to lie at her feet.

“No, no, not a stick. I need you to find the way back to the creek or the cabin. Do you think you could do that for me?”

The dog barked and bounced around, picking up the stick and throwing it into the air playfully. Shaking her head at him in exasperation, Tessa balanced herself on her crutch and started toward where she thought she could see some disturbed underbrush, hoping it was the right way.

As she painstakingly tried to find her way back, Cash bounced around her playfully. Occasionally, he ran off to chase a squirrel or a rabbit, only to return a short time later, happily jumping around her and beating down the brush, making it difficult for her to tell where they had come through earlier and where Cash was running around now.

“Cash, you stop that now. Stay here! If you keep running around, I’m never going to find the way back.”

At her sharp reprimand, he immediately crouched at her feet, watching her with his doleful eyes. She instantly felt horrible for having yelled at him.

“Sorry buddy, I didn’t mean to yell at you. It’s alright.” She patted his head. “But we need to work together here, okay? I really am thankful that you’re here, but you’re not helping the situation right now, are you?”

He whined at her apologetically, and for the next half hour, he stayed close while Tessa slowly struggled along on her crutch, trying to get her bearings.

As much time as she had spent in these mountains, it had been several years ago, and she doubted she had ever ventured this far off the beaten path. Besides that, landmarks changed over the years, and she wasn’t seeing much that looked familiar to her. Trying to use the sun, which was barely

visible through the haze, and her memory, she tried to figure out where the cabin would be.

By now, she had given up the idea of finding her way back to the creek. Her ankle was throbbing miserably, and it was so swollen she was certain it wouldn't be long before it popped right out of the boot. Even if she found her way back to the creek, she doubted she could carry a bucket of water and support herself anyway.

The snow and wind had picked up, and she was getting cold. Her gloves had gotten soaked getting water and crashing through the brush, and her fingers were turning to ice. All she could think of now was finding her way back to the cabin and covering herself up with the blankets she had left behind.

She stumbled along miserably for a while longer until she finally sat down on a log, deciding she was just stumbling along blindly. Cash came and lay down at her feet, looking just as cold and tired as she was. While she stroked his head, she looked around her to see if she could get her bearings at all, trying to remember what her father had taught her as a child about how to read the sun to figure out where she was.

*Just remember Tess, whenever you leave a place, take note of the time and where the sun is. If you just pay attention to that one detail, you will always know at least the general direction you should head towards.*

His voice rang clear in her head, and she tried to remember where she had seen the sun, or at least a brightening of the sky before she had left the cabin earlier.

*Oh Daddy, she thought sadly, if only you would be here to help me right now.*

She looked around her critically, trying to follow her father's advice and decide which way she should go. She looked behind her, saw a steep hill, and groaned. According to her calculations, she would need to climb up that very hill to be heading in the direction she believed she needed to go.

She looked down at her throbbing ankle, and then at Cash. "I don't think I can make it, boy. The pain is just too

much.”

He licked her hand and settled back down, blissfully unaware of her plight, while she sat miserably cold, unable to muster the strength to even stand up. She wondered how long he would stay with her if she just sat here until she froze to death. What would that even feel like? She had read once that after a while, your mind just went numb and you went to sleep. Right now, that didn't even sound like such a terrible option to her.

As a last hope, she pulled out her phone, praying that this time she might get some kind of signal and call for help, but the result was the same as it had been. She was just too far up to get anything. As she sat wondering what she should do now, Cash suddenly became alert, and she could hear a low, menacing growl coming from his throat. His hackles were up, and Tessa knew they were in danger. Her heart beat frantically as she carefully and silently eased her way further back into the woods, trying to make herself as small as possible and blend in with the brush. Cash tried to stand, and she quickly pulled him down towards her, silently shushing him and commanding him to lie down.

As she listened carefully to the surrounding sounds, she could hear the distinct snapping of a twig and the quiet crunch of a boot on some fallen leaves. Someone was slowly and stealthily walking around, searching for something.

Pulling Cash even closer towards her, she tried to make them both invisible, willing herself to blend in with the background. The steps she heard didn't sound like a normal hiker randomly roaming in the woods, and it certainly didn't sound like a search party looking for her. She knew that there was only one person on the mountain right now who would be stealthily walking around the woods.

She buried her head in Cash's fur, and thankfully he was lying as still as she was, although she was terrified that the beating of her heart was so loud that Henri would be sure to hear it. She raised her head ever so slightly to look around. It took a minute, but then she saw his dark green jacket in the

distance. Thankfully, he was still several yards away, and she could just barely make him out through the trees.

She felt, rather than heard, the silent rumble of a growl coming out of Cash as his eyes followed the man who was slowly tracking them in the woods. She put her hand on his head ever so quietly, willing him with her mind to stay quiet. Cash already had a nasty stab wound from his fight yesterday, and she feared that neither one of them would survive another encounter with Henri and his knife.

She watched him walk by, just yards away, when she suddenly heard the buzz of her phone. Reception! By some miracle, her phone must have detected some kind of signal. The buzzing was coming only a few feet away from where she was hiding. She must have dropped her phone as she scrambled away to hide from Henri. She could barely hear the buzz, but it was so still right now, she was certain there was no way he couldn't hear it as well.

She sensed, rather than saw, his footsteps pause, coming closer to where the phone was buzzing and where she and Cash were hiding. Her heart almost stopped in terror, and she didn't dare move a muscle for fear that he would hear the rustle of the leaves she was sitting on. All she could do was crouch down as far as possible and hope that whoever was calling would give up before Henri got closer.

The phone went silent as suddenly as it had buzzed, and Tessa almost cried out in relief. She sunk her head into Cash's fur, like a child burying her head under the covers to get away from a monster.

As cowardly as it was, if Henri was going to find them, she didn't want to see him approach. She could hear him methodically scouring the woods all around her. He had a stick, and he was silently brushing against every bush and tree, digging around in the ground, trying to find the phone and her.

Peeking from behind the dog's icy fur, she watched him move further down the embankment and tried to still her heart, feeling her panic somewhat subside. Maybe he would just keep moving. Maybe he didn't know that she and Cash

were just yards away, and he would continue to look elsewhere.

Just as she was relaxing, he suddenly stopped, and she saw him stand straight up. Tessa hadn't even realized how he had been crouched down in such a predatory posture until he stood. She could just barely make out his features, but she thought she could see blood on his jacket. He looked all around him, and Tessa's heart stopped as he seemed to look right at her through the underbrush. She imagined she could see a delighted smile slowly spreading across his face.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!" he called in his taunting, sing-song voice.

Her gut clenched in cold hard terror, and she could feel her body shake. She clutched at Cash, terrified that he would make some noise and give them away, but the dog seemed to understand the necessity for silence.

"I know that you're here somewhere, sweet Tessa, so you might as well show yourself. We didn't finish our game yet!"

As he spoke, Tessa could see that he was turning away from her, his voice projecting out in the opposite direction of where she lay hidden. He hadn't seen her! He was just taunting, hoping that she was around, but he didn't know where she was after all.

She watched as he went back to hitting the bushes with his stick and slowly made his way further away from her. She lay still for at least another half hour, well after she had stopped hearing him, clutching Cash as if her life depended on it.

When she finally garnered enough courage to move, she crawled over to where she had dropped the phone, digging through the snow to find it, praying she could still contact whoever it had been that had tried to call her. When she finally uncovered it, she couldn't stop the tears of frustration. She was looking at a blank screen. The battery had finally gone dead, and she had lost her one chance at rescue.



After a few minutes of crying and wallowing in self-pity, Tessa felt an unfamiliar emotion welling up in her gut. Anger was replacing the utter despair she had felt a minute ago. He would not win. She was going to fight on and live. Then she was going to do everything in her power to hunt him down like he had hunted her and make sure he hurt no one else.

She raised herself up, and Cash stood with her, whining eagerly as if to encourage her. She looked at the embankment behind her with determination. "I guess I'm not ready to give up after all, am I, boy?" Still staying as quiet as she could, she gathered her makeshift crutch and clutched at the fur on Cash's neck. "Come on, let's see if we can get up this little hill together."

Painfully, Tessa half-crawled and dragged her way painstakingly up the embankment, using the crutch and Cash to help pull herself along. Finally, after what seemed to Tessa like hours, they were at the top and back on even ground. To her left, Tessa thought she could hear the babble of the creek they'd been at this morning, and she recognized a rock formation that they had passed on their way to get water.

Heading in the opposite direction of the creek, she prayed that this time she was going the right way, and when she finally saw the little cabin tucked into the woods, she laughed aloud. Leaning heavily on her crutch, she hobbled the rest of the way until she finally reached the door. When she made it inside, she sank down on the bed, completely exhausted.

She shivered violently as the events of the day came flooding back to her. Feeling lightheaded and dizzy, she was afraid that she was about to pass out. But before she lay down, she had to think of some way that she could barricade the door. She had no more delusions that Henri had given up trying to find her, and she needed to stop him from surprising her in the middle of the night.

She made her way to the door, clutching her crutch for support and because she felt so dizzy. She dragged over a chair, propping it against the door and prayed that it would at

least give her and Cash enough time to prepare for his attack if he tried to break in. Maneuvering the chair into place, she looked around to see where Cash had settled. When she didn't see him, she was overcome with dread.

She thought back to when she had made her way into the cabin and realized that the dog had not walked in with her. Opening the cabin door once more, she looked outside. "Cash, where are you? Come here, boy!" She kept her voice low and hushed. She was too afraid Henri would hear her to call out any louder. It was dusk, the wind was picking up, and the snow that had fallen earlier was blowing around, covering any tracks that may have been there a few minutes ago. All she could make out in the distance were the shadows of the trees and bushes surrounding the cabin. Cash was gone.

Resolutely, she shut the door and jammed the chair under the handle. She had been worried that the dog would need food and water, and she could not provide it for him. He had probably decided that she was a hindrance to his survival and struck out on his own. She hoped he would find his way back home and wished she had attached something of hers to his collar. That way, maybe Beau would realize that he had been with her, and someone would come looking.

Then she remembered Beau was gone. If Cash made his way home, Ellie probably wouldn't even realize that he had been gone. She might not even know that she was missing either. Maybe no one realized she was missing yet. The helicopter that she had heard earlier may not have been looking for her. It was entirely possible that no one was looking for her.

She went over to the bed and curled up under the covers, her ankle throbbing. Her head was spinning, and now it was throbbing as well. Maybe she would just die here alone in this cabin until some hapless person found her body in a few months or years. Or worse, maybe Henri would make his way back and find her. The thought of Henri made her shiver even more.

She lay in bed trembling and wondered if Stephanie and the boys would even miss her. After she was gone, would

Carter finally move on and find someone new to love? Did she even really want him to move on? How was she ever going to warn Jack about Henri? What if Henri really was a serial killer? Would he continue to attack other women while she lay in this cabin, slowly dying by herself? Somehow, she needed to let Jack know about him so that he could catch him and stop him.

Eventually, Tessa sank into a fitful sleep, dreaming about Cash. She kept trying to grab onto him, but he kept eluding her. She would just about reach him when he would bound away again. Finally, she spotted him in the woods, standing close to a tree. But as she reached the tree, Henri popped out, sneering at her while he stabbed Cash over and over with his knife.

Tessa screamed, waking herself up in the cold and dark cabin. It took a few minutes for her to still her heart and remember where she was, and when she looked towards the door, she could see that the handle of the door was shaking. Oh dear God, Henri was trying to break into the cabin! Stifling the scream that was threatening to rise out of her throat, she grabbed the poker that she had laid next to her before she went to bed, and with sheer willpower and adrenaline, she hobbled over to the door without her crutch.

Leaning against the wall for support, she positioned herself behind the door and held the heavy poker over her head, ready to strike, praying with all of her might that the makeshift barricade would stop him. She could hear Henri on the other side cursing and calling out, and then the door shuddered violently as he must have heaved his shoulder against it, causing the rickety chair holding it shut to rock and threaten to break free.

“Oh God, please hold,” she whimpered, bracing herself for the attack that she knew was imminent. She could hear him yelling, “For God’s sake, open this door,” as he heaved himself against the door again.

She watched in horror as the flimsy chair shattered into pieces and the door flew open violently, almost knocking her down with the force.

## Chapter 9

She could barely make out his silhouette as he stood in the doorway. He paused before coming in and seemed to examine his surroundings. Then she saw him cautiously taking a step forward. She didn't think that he had seen her yet, so she still had the element of surprise. At least she hoped she did.

Her heart was in her throat, and her chest was so constricted in fear that she could barely breathe. Her ankle throbbed horribly, and she was sure that at any moment, it would burst out of her boot and explode all over the room. She quietly watched as he took one more step forward, and then she swung the poker down towards his head as hard as she could.

Just as she swung, her ankle gave way, and that, along with the momentum of her swing, caused her to lose her balance. She missed his head by mere inches, and the poker clattered uselessly to the ground. As she fell, she flailed her arms around wildly, trying to grip at anything that would keep her from falling.

The sudden movement alerted him to where she was, and he spun around swiftly, grabbing her arms in a viselike grip, stopping her fall while holding her firm. She shrieked in absolute terror, kicking and pounding on him with every ounce of strength left in her. But his powerful arms held her fast, and she flailed around like a helpless toddler, sobbing in despair.

She closed her eyes as she fought against him, sure that he would finally make good on his threats and stab her at any moment. She prayed it would be quick and he wouldn't drag it out. As she fought, all she could hear was the roaring in her head from the blood that had rushed there during her frantic and helpless struggle.

After what seemed like an eternity of fighting him, she could hear him yelling into her ear. "Tessa, stop it! It's me,

Beau!” The voice in her ear sounded vaguely familiar, but it wasn’t until she finally opened her eyes and saw the dark form of the dog that she realized she was pounding on Beau, and not Henri. She immediately stopped her attack, sinking down into his arms as the adrenaline left her body, almost passing out in relief.

Beau held her tight to keep her from falling to the floor, scooping her up into his arms and carrying her over to the bed. Once he had gently placed her down, he leaned over her, holding her tight until she could finally gather herself enough to stare at him and stammer out, “Beau, it’s you. How did you find me?”

She was still shaking, so he sat on the bed next to her, stroking her hair and trying to calm her down.

“We’ve all been out looking for you for almost two days. Cash finally found me and led me here to this cabin,” he explained. She pushed her head against his chest, sobbing, and he held her, just waiting for her crying to subside.

After she had finally quieted down, he leaned back and looked at her face. “Are you alone?” She nodded, and he said, “I heard you scream. Why didn’t you open the door for me when I knocked and called you?”

“I thought it was him trying to get me,” she stammered, looking at Beau with wide fearful eyes, shivering from fright as much as the cold. She could feel his arms tighten around her body, and he held her securely, trying to offer whatever comfort he could. He felt so warm and so safe. She wanted to stay this way forever.

Beau looked around the dark cabin, taking it all in, and said, “It’s freezing in here. You should have made a fire to stay warm.” Then he looked at her, as if he had just thought of something. “Are you hurt?” His eyes clouded with worry as she nodded her head up and down. “Where? How badly are you hurt?”

She pointed to her ankle, barely able to stop her whimpering long enough to say, “It’s my ankle.”

He looked down at her ankle and swore under his breath. "I'll need to light a lantern or candle so I can examine it properly."

As he stood up and left her to get his flashlight out of his pack and rummage around the cabin to find a lantern, Tessa felt cold and empty where his body had been, and she shivered again. She instinctively reached out after him, almost begging him to come back and hold her, while the cold and the fear permeated her body again.

Beau located the lantern, lighting it, and brought it closer to her. He saw her shivering and set it down. "For heaven's sake, Tessa, you're absolutely frozen through. I'd better get a fire going even before I look at that ankle of yours." As he walked away, she grabbed at his arm in terror, moaning out the word, "No!"

When he looked at her curiously, she continued, "You can't. He'll see the smoke."

"Who? Who'll see the smoke?"

Her teeth chattered so hard she almost couldn't speak, but she finally said, "Henri. He'll find us." Her voice sounded terrified even to her own ears.

She saw him look at her for a moment, and she thought she would need to tell him about Henri. She didn't want to think of that monster just yet. She just wanted to be back in Beau's arms and feel safe and warm.

Beau wanted to question her. He wanted to know who this Henri was and why she was so terrified of him, but she was shivering so hard he was worried she might go into shock if he didn't get her warmed up. Whoever Henri was and why she was afraid of him would need to wait until he could stop her shivering.

"It's dark outside, Tessa. You don't have to worry. No one can see any smoke right now," he said reassuringly.

Gently, he extricated himself from her grasp and stepped outside to look for some wood. He hoped that the owners of this cabin had been diligent in stocking up before

they had left and was relieved to see that they had been. He made a mental note to thank them and pay them back as soon as they made their way back down the mountain.

As Tessa watched him go outside, the feeling of panic and terror was overwhelming. In her mind, she imagined Henri waiting outside the cabin, ready to pounce on Beau and stab him. Her chest constricted painfully, and just as she was sure she would pass out, she felt the weight of the big dog on her jumping up on her. He licked her face and then placed his head on her chest. With his presence, her heart began slowing down.

When Beau walked back in with his arms piled high with wood, he could see that Cash had jumped on top of Tessa on the bed, and she was slowly and lovingly stroking his fur. He couldn't stop his slight frown of disapproval as he surveyed the scene, but since her shaking had lessened and since she seemed to take comfort in his presence, he let it go for now.

After he had a fire blazing in the cabin's little stove, he returned to Tessa, deciding that the first order of business would need to be looking after her ankle. As he pulled back the covers, the sight of her massively swollen ankle stuffed into her hiking boot shocked and alarmed him. He was certain that the boot must be slowly cutting off the circulation to her leg.

“Geez, what happened, Tess? This looks awful. You should have taken your boot off right away. I think I'm going to have to cut it off now.”

He retrieved a small pocketknife out of the holder he had on his belt.

At the sight of the knife, Tessa shrank back in fear and whimpered, “No, don't.” The memory of Henri holding his knife up, ready to strike down at her, came rushing back in an instant.

Puzzled, Beau hesitated. “It's okay, Tessa. It's only a boot, and it's pretty shot at this point, anyway. I promise I'll

buy you a new pair, but it has to come off. We've got to get the blood flowing again before you lose your entire leg."

Beau's soft and practical voice banished any thought of Henri, but she still shook her head no. "I need it on my foot, Beau. How else will I get off this mountain? I need to walk."

He reached out and gently stroked her hair back from her face, understanding why she hadn't taken it off right away. "Everything is going to be alright now. I'm here, and we'll figure out how to get you down off this mountain. But for now, it needs to come off. Lay back and try to be still, okay?"

Tessa hesitated only for a second before she nodded at him and lay back down against the pillow. She trusted him implicitly, but she still closed her eyes so she wouldn't need to look at the knife that Beau was wielding. She swallowed several times, trying to calm her fears, as she felt him tugging and cutting on the boot.

After he was done, and he had pulled the boot off her foot, she felt her ankle almost exploding, and she was certain that it must have ballooned to at least three times its size. If she had thought it was painful before, that had been nothing compared to the pain that she felt now, and she gasped in agony.

"I'm sorry, Tessa. I know this must hurt like crazy. Just a few more minutes, and I'll have it doctored up." He reached into his pack again, thankful he had brought his first aid kit. He fashioned two splints from some wood that he found, and then wrapped the ankle securely, but not too tightly. When he was done, he gently laid her ankle down on a pillow to keep it elevated.

"Does it feel any better now?" he asked, watching her pale face with concern.

*No*, she thought, fighting down the nausea she was feeling, but nodding anyway.

"Yeah, I think it does. Thanks." He rummaged around some more and then held out two aspirin. "Here. Maybe you should take these. It might help dull the pain at least a little."



She took the pills gratefully, willing to try anything to numb the horrible pain, and then looked around in despair, remembering the empty water bucket lying by the creek.

“I couldn’t get the water,” she mumbled, almost crying again at this new dilemma. How was she supposed to take the aspirin if she didn’t have any water to wash it down with?

“Geez, don’t cry, I brought some water with me.” He smiled at her as he handed her the canteen. “It’s okay. Drink as much as you want, I have more.”

As she swallowed the aspirin and slowly quenched her thirst with the fresh cold water from the canteen, she watched mesmerized as he pulled out some sandwiches and unwrapped them, thinking he had the most amazing hands she had ever seen.

The cabin was still chilly, but the fire was slowly doing its job, and Beau had tucked her sleeping bag around her securely. She finally felt herself warming up after what seemed to have been an eternity of being cold.

“Hungry?” he asked, handing her one of the sandwiches and settling back against the bedpost, ready to eat his own. “Ellie made a bunch of these for me before I left, and she also packed some other stuff, so eat as much as you can.”

*Ellie.* The last thing she wanted to hear right now was the name of his pretty young housekeeper. She almost handed back the sandwich in protest, but she knew she was being silly. She had no business feeling jealous of Beau’s housekeeper, and besides that, she was starving. She took a big bite, chewing it slowly, convinced it was the best sandwich she had ever eaten. She even forgave Ellie her voluptuous good looks.

Cash looked at them with doleful eyes and whimpered. Beau grinned down at his pitiful countenance, saying, “Don’t worry, bud, I didn’t forget you.” He got up and pulled a bag of dried dog food out of his pack, pouring it into a bowl he found on the shelf by the fire.

Tessa thought he was looking like Mary Poppins, continually pulling things out of his bag, and she held back a

giggle as she pictured him in one of her hats. She looked over at Cash, watching as he wolfed down the food. “I bet the poor thing is starved. I tried to share my last granola bar with him yesterday, but he wouldn’t have any of it. I think that’s why he left. He was probably trying to find food and water.”

Beau looked at Cash and then at her. “So he has been here with you? How long ago did he find you?”

Thinking back on the timely appearance of the dog and how he had saved her, she tried to keep her voice even, suppressing the instant panic she felt at the memory of Henri’s attack.

“Since the first night, he saved my life and then kept me company and warmed me up. I wouldn’t have made it without him. I was so sad when he left me earlier. I know he had to find food and water, of course, but I felt so alone when he left. He’s been my rock.”

“I don’t think that’s why he left, Tessa. When I got back home and found out that you were both missing, I suspected he might be out looking for you. I was calling and whistling for him for the whole time I was searching for you. I’m guessing he must have finally heard me and came to show me where you were. I don’t think he would have left you alone otherwise.”

“I owe him my life,” Tessa said, her eyes filling with tears.

By now, they had finished their sandwiches, and Beau leaned forward, taking her hand in his and looked deep into her eyes.

“What happened up here, Tess? How did you get hurt, and who is Henri? Why are you afraid of him?”

Tessa didn’t want to think of Henri. The very mention of his name caused her chest to constrict in fear, but the aspirin was taking effect, and she was finally warming up. She knew she had to warn Beau about Henri. She was certain that he was still out there somewhere, and Beau would need to be prepared to defend himself.

“I met a man while I was hiking. He told me that his name was Henri LeBlanc and that he was looking to hike the Appalachian Trail for a few days and clear his head. He claimed that he had gotten lost and asked me to help him find his way back to where he needed to be.” Tessa paused for a minute, closed her eyes, and then continued, “And then he tried to kill me, Beau.”

She opened her eyes, registering the shock and horror in his eyes, feeling bad that she was causing him distress, but he had to know the entire story. Relaying the entire story of what had happened over the last few days, she repeated as many of the details as she could remember. She told him how Cash had intervened, attacked Henri, and given her time to run, and how she had hurt her ankle.

Beau sat quietly, listening to her without interruption, waiting for her to finish the rest of her story.

“I don’t know where Cash came from, but as soon as I saw the two of them fighting, I took my chance and started running again. I hoped that when Cash saw me leave, he would get away as well. I was running blindly, just trying to get as far away as possible, and that’s when I got caught up in the underbrush and twisted my ankle.”

Beau looked at Cash, stroking his gigantic head, no longer angry that he had once again escaped his kennel and run off. And as far as Beau was concerned, the dog could spend the rest of his life on Tessa’s bed if he wanted. She continued with the story, including how Henri had taunted her, letting Beau know she felt Henri was truly insane.

“I think he’s still looking for me, Beau. I went out yesterday to find some water for Cash, and we heard a helicopter.”

“You went out to look for water with that ankle of yours?” he asked, incredulous. “How were you planning to carry it back with you?”

Embarrassed, she looked away. “I’m not sure. I just knew that I needed to get Cash some water, and I needed some

too. I thought I could figure out how to get it back here once I found it.”

“You never cease to surprise me, Tessa. I don’t think that I’ve ever met anyone as brave or determined as you are.”

She looked at Cash to hide her discomfort. She hadn’t felt brave or determined at all yesterday, just scared, but she didn’t say that to Beau.

“Anyway, when I heard the helicopter, I tried to run to a clearing so I could flag it down, but it left before I got a chance. I got disoriented trying to find my way back, and that’s when I saw him looking through the woods for me.” She paused, thinking how close he had come to finding her. “He almost found me too. I’d dropped my cell phone when I pulled it out trying to see if I could get a signal, and of course, right when he was close by, it finally found one. It buzzed, but thank God, it ran out of battery and went silent before he found us.”

“He’s crazy, Beau. I’m sure of it. We have to get out of here before he finds us and kills us.”

Beau stood up and secured the door to the cabin, placing the heavy table in front of it. He looked at her and said, “There, that should help stop him from coming in.” He walked back over. “That phone call was probably me trying to see if I could get a signal from your phone to help pinpoint where you were. Your battery lasted long enough for me to get a read on where it was when it died, and I tracked you as far as about a mile away from here, but by then it was dark and I couldn’t tell which way you’d gone. I was just about to bed down when Cash came running, and I followed him up to this cabin.”

“You can track my phone?” she asked doubtfully.

Smiling, he admitted, “Yeah, well, let’s just say that in my line of work, I’m privy to some pretty cool technology. Just leave it at that.”

She was finally feeling warm and full, and she decided that for now, she was too tired to ask any more questions. She

would just have to trust what Beau was telling her. She tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn.

Beau said, "I think we should try to get some sleep. I'd like to leave as early as we can and try to get you off this mountain tomorrow."

"What about Henri? He's out there somewhere. What if he finds the cabin tonight?" she said fearfully.

"He'll be bedded down by now as well. Not even a madman goes stumbling around the mountains in the dark. First thing in the morning, I'll head out and look around. I'll find that creek of yours and fill up our waters for the trip as well." He was taking off his jacket, patting the pocket. "In the morning, I'll contact Carter on the radio and tell him to get to somewhere he can get cell phone reception to let Jack know we found you. The search party might meet us as we make our way down."

"Carter is out there looking for me? And Jack sent out a search party?" she asked, surprised that they had called in so many resources just to find her.

"You've got half the town looking for you right now, Ragazza Perduta!" Beau laughed.

"Oh no, that's awful. I didn't mean to cause so much trouble for everyone," Tessa wailed. She hated being the center of attention. She was much more comfortable on the sidelines and helping others than being in the limelight and needing the help herself.

"It's okay. Everyone was worried when you didn't show up and insisted on helping in the search. I know you would never intentionally burden anyone. It's Henri who is to blame here, not you," Beau assured her.

At the mention of Henri's name, Tessa's heart started to pound again, and she clutched at Beau's arm.

"We have to find him, Beau, before he hurts someone else," she said urgently.

"We will find him, don't worry. I'll let Jack know that there's a madman wandering around here as soon as I can. I

agree that the sooner we find him, the better,” Beau reassured her.

He had settled back in the bed with Tessa, his back propped against a pillow, and he was cradling her in his arms, absently stroking her shoulder as she leaned on him.

“Any idea what prompted him to attack you? Did he ever say what he wanted from you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I told him I wasn’t carrying any money. I kept asking him what he wanted. I told him he could have anything that I had, but he just kept saying that he wanted nothing from me. He said he didn’t have anything against me personally, but he had to kill me anyway, and that it was just an unfortunate set of events.”

She turned her head to look up at Beau. “You know how Jack always says he doesn’t believe in coincidence? I’ve been trying to figure out the reason for his attack. Do you think he could have something to do with Luke and Hope’s murder? Maybe Henri was involved in that attack as well, and now he’s looking to finish me off. Maybe this wasn’t just a chance meeting like he told me. He could have followed me and set this all up so he could kill me and make it look like an accident.”

Beau thought about the abandoned rental parked close to Tessa’s car and the threatening phone call that had prompted Stephanie to call Jack and Carter in the first place. She could be right, he thought. Before he and Carter had left, Jack had preached that there were no coincidences. It was possible that this Henri really had been following her since she left the shelter. Of course, she didn’t know about the call or the rental car yet, and he decided that for now, it was best to keep that information to himself. She was traumatized enough, and he didn’t want to worry her more.

“That could be a possibility, and I’m sure that Jack will look into it. The first thing we need to do is get you off this mountain in one piece, and then we can find this Henri guy and question him personally about his motives,” Beau replied.

Tessa suppressed another yawn. She was feeling extremely comfortable in his arms and hoped he would stay with her on the bed all night. “I can scootch over, and you can sleep next to me in your own sleeping bag,” she offered, sliding over to the wall.

“Are you sure?” Beau asked uncertainly. He wasn’t particularly looking forward to sleeping on the cold wooden floor.

“Of course I’m sure. The bed is plenty big, and we can keep each other warm that way as well.”

He got up to unroll his sleeping bag, then gently eased his way onto the bed, covering himself up. Tessa eased half her body on him and put her head on his shoulder, giving them both more room.

“Are you sure that you’re comfortable?” he asked.

“Mmmhmmm,” Tessa murmured, already half asleep. The truth was, she hadn’t been this comfortable in a very long time.

The sun wasn’t fully out yet when Tessa finally woke up, and she could barely see in the still dark cabin. Stretching stiffly, she realized she was alone in bed. In the corner, she could see that the little stove was burning bright and cheerily with a freshly stoked fire. Cash had been stretched out in front of it when she fell asleep, but he must have moved sometime in the night. His spot there was empty.

She was just about to close her eyes again and fall back asleep when she saw a shape coming towards the bed.

“Morning Beau, how did you sleep?” she asked drowsily.

“Good morning, Tessa dear. How nice to see that you were warm last night. I was rather cold.”

She recognized his voice immediately and let out a scream of terror. Henri approached the bed slowly, holding the knife above his head, with an evil glint in his eyes.

“I think it’s finally time we finish our business, don’t you?”



## Chapter 10

Tessa sat up, her heart in her throat, and flung the sleeping bag that Beau had left lying next to her up at Henri. He batted at it, but the tip of the knife caught the fabric as he tried to flick it off, getting tangled around his knife and his arm.

Her adrenaline was surging, and as he struggled to free himself, she pulled herself up to hobble towards the door, screaming as loudly as she could for Beau and Cash. Before she could get even a few steps in, Cash came bursting through the door with a roar. The dog immediately flew at Henri, biting into the arm that held the knife. Beau was just steps behind, and as soon as she saw him, Tessa fell into his arms. He gripped her to keep her from falling and carried her over to the little wooden bench by the door.

As soon as he had deposited her safely onto the bench, he turned and headed back to Henri and the dog. Tessa watched in horror as Henri lifted the dog that was still clinging to him, and with a mighty heave flung him at Beau. Cash's body hit him in the chest and knocked him backwards. The impact caused Cash and Beau to hit the wall behind them hard and in the time it took them to regain their footing, Henri raced to the door to make his escape. On his way out the door, he passed her and took one last frantic swipe at her with the knife he was still holding. She felt a sharp pain on her arm and saw it turn red before he was fully out of sight.

Beau scrambled to his feet, ready to pursue Henri, but when he saw Tessa clutching her arm, he stopped, while Cash flew past him and out the door.

“What’s wrong, did he get you?” he asked, picking her up and carrying her back over to the bed. Tessa groaned, and when Beau saw the blood trickling from her arm, he swore under his breath. “Lay back, Tessa. I need to look at your arm.”

She did as he said, certain that she wouldn't have been able to sit upright much longer anyhow. Her ankle was throbbing from the attempt to escape, and now she felt a new, burning sensation on her arm. Beau quickly took out the first aid kit again and cleaned the wound on her arm.

She yelped, "Ouch, that stings!"

"Thank God, it's fairly superficial," he informed her. "I just need to make sure we've stopped the bleeding and wrap it up."

As he worked, he apologized over and over for having left her and the door unlocked.

"I was only gone for a minute. I wanted to contact Carter on the radio and let him know you were safe. You were sleeping so peacefully that I didn't want to wake you. Then, while I was out there anyway, I thought it was a perfect opportunity to get some water and some more wood," he explained. He looked at her, clearly angry with himself. "I checked around before I left and saw no sign of him, but I should have left Cash here with you. I'm so sorry, Tessa."

She took her good arm and put it on his, wanting to reassure him. No one knew better than her how cunning and devious Henri could be. He always popped up right when she felt safe.

"It's okay, Beau. It's not your fault. You couldn't have known he was out there. He always just materializes out of nowhere."

"I won't leave you alone again, I promise, but we need to get out of here as soon as we can. I'm thinking that you're right. That guy really is insane," Beau said, finishing wrapping her arm. Tessa leaned back heavily against the cushion.

Now that the adrenaline had worn off, she felt tired and completely beat up again. She didn't know how she was going to muster up the strength she'd need to make her way down the mountain.

Beau had gone to the door to make sure that Henri wasn't still lurking around and called for Cash. When there

was no sign of either the dog or Henri, he secured the door again.

“I let Carter know I found you, and he’s going to get somewhere where he can get enough signal to contact Jack with his cell and tell him to meet us with an ambulance at the trailhead. We need to pack up whatever supplies we can and get you to safety as soon as possible.”

Nodding weakly, Tessa croaked out, “Where’s Cash?”

Beau glanced at the door, concern etched on his face. He was worried about the dog as well but said, “Don’t worry about him. He can take care of himself. I’m sure he’ll be back soon. He’s probably having some fun and giving Henri a run for his money.”

Beau handed Tessa another sandwich and a granola bar, telling her to eat as much as she could, and then started packing things together for the descent down the mountain. She tried to eat the sandwich, but she felt so spent and exhausted that she could barely chew. She knew she didn’t have the strength to walk all the way down the mountain.

“I don’t think I have the strength to walk all that way, Beau. It will be faster for you to go on ahead by yourself and tell Jack where I am. Maybe he can send some people up here to get me.”

He looked at her. “There’s not a chance in the world of that happening. I’m not leaving you here alone for even a minute, much less the time it would take me to bring help back up. Not while that maniac is still around.” He had been packing up his gear and also messing around with a sheet he had taken from the bed while she rested and tried to eat, and now he came over and sat next to her. “You won’t need to walk anyway, my Ragazza Perduta. I’ll be carrying you down.”

Tessa gasped. “You can’t carry me all the way down the mountain, Beau. I’m much too heavy.”

Beau held out the sheet he had been working on. “Nonsense, you hardly weigh anything. Anyway, I made a

sling. You know, like the kind that women carry their babies in. I'll just put you in it to help me carry you."

She looked at him doubtfully. "What do you know about baby slings? And I'm sure that I'm still going to be too heavy for you to carry and walk all that way."

He just laughed at her. "Don't worry, I've been practicing my benching. I'll manage." He examined his sling one more time and said, "Now come on, we need to get going. I moved all our supplies into my backpack, and I tied both of our sleeping bags on it as well, just in case. But I plan to make it all the way down before we're forced to camp out again."

Before she could protest, he swung the backpack on his back, positioned his homemade sling over his shoulder, and gently placed her inside of it. The tightness of the sling forced her snugly against his chest, and she could feel his heart beating as she placed her head against it. He smelled faintly of soap and sweat, and she inhaled deeply. She remembered how she had protested whenever Luke had tried to pull her close after working out. She had wrinkled her nose at him and swiftly sent him off to shower. Now Tessa was surprised that she found the scent of Beau's sweat appealing, and she wondered if it was just the relief of having him near her. She pressed her head in closer and relaxed.

Effortlessly, Beau stood up and headed for the door, opening it and then latching it carefully behind him. "See, just like I said, you hardly weigh anything," he reassured her as he made his way from the cabin.

As he looked around, he finally announced, "I think I see the faint remnants of a path that we can follow and hope it leads out of here, but I sure hope Cash makes it back soon. I would feel better if we had his nose at our disposal."

"Maybe we should wait for him? He might not find us if we leave him," she asked, worried.

"He has had no trouble finding us yet, has he?"

"No, I guess not," she grudgingly agreed, although she would have felt better knowing he was safe and unhurt.

Beau walked for a bit, and Tessa could see that he was taking the more open routes, veering away from the trees that had provided her coverage over the last few days. She was still afraid if they didn't hide themselves better, they would be an open target for Henri.

"Don't you think it would be safer if we stick to a more secluded way down the mountain? Henri would have no problem seeing us and stalking us if we stay out in the open."

"It probably would be," Beau agreed. "But I don't know these mountains that well, and I don't want to get lost. You need to get to the ambulance as soon as possible, so I think I'll stick to a more open route where it's easier to walk."

"I'm pretty sure that I can find the way down even if we stick to the woods a little more," she volunteered.

Beau looked down at her with an amused, but doubtful look. "Aren't you the one who got lost to begin with?"

"Well, yes. But that was because I was running for my life, remember? I wasn't exactly looking at which way I was going." She saw his grin, even though he tried to hide it by keeping his gaze on the way ahead.

"Beau, please, I just don't want Henri to find us. We're not making any attempt to hide at all, and we do not know where he or Cash is right now. For all we know, he could be right behind us right now, and come at us with that big knife of his."

Beau kept walking, but when he looked down at her, he saw the genuine fear in her face. "Relax Tessa. Even if he does, it will be okay. Knife or not, I will make sure that he doesn't hurt you again."

She shook her head, not convinced. There was no doubt in her mind that Beau was strong, but she didn't think that anyone was a match for a veritable monster like Henri.

"I know you would try, Beau, but I honestly don't think you understand just what a monster he really is. I believe he has superhuman powers."

Beau eased her up easily in his arms so she could see him better as he spoke. “I know he terrorized you, and I don’t doubt that, to you anyway, it probably seems like he’s superhuman. But trust me, he’s not. He’s a bully who victimizes those weaker than him. I’ve seen his kind a lot in the work that I do.”

“What work, Beau? What kind of work could possibly prepare you for the kind of man Henri really is? I’m fairly sure it will take an entire army to stop him.”

“I can stop him,” Beau said simply, continuing to walk easily over the uneven ground.

Tessa was certain that he didn’t really understand the magnitude of Henri’s madness and what he was capable of. If she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes, she would never have believed it either. But she knew it was imperative that Beau not underestimate him. As much as she was afraid of what Henri would do to her, she couldn’t bear the thought of him hurting Beau.

“Beau, please listen to me. He’s not just an ordinary man. It’s like he has this superhuman sense to find me. He seems to know exactly where I am all the time, and he’s ruthless and dangerous. Maybe he has some kind of extra ability just like I do. And he’s so much worse than any of the husbands and boyfriends that we usually deal with at the shelter.”

Beau let out an audible sigh. He glanced down at her, as if he was deciding whether he should reveal something. Finally, he said, “Henri LeBlanc is not the first monster that I’ve run into, and unfortunately, he won’t be the last. Please believe me when I tell you I can keep you safe.” He grinned down at her as if he was telling her a joke, “It’s kind of what I do.”

“What do you mean, Beau? Not even Luke, who dealt with some of the most dangerous elements on the street, ran into monsters like Henri.”

“The CIA trained me. I learned fast how to fight and deal with monsters. In fact, I was the best agent they had for

that. Now I work as a mercenary, and I'm hired to track down these 'monsters' and stop them. It's pretty normal for me to chase down men just like Henri, so trust me, I know how to stop him."

"Is that where you go when you leave so suddenly?"

"Mostly, yes. I usually get called at the last minute when someone is desperate for help, and I need to leave at a moment's notice. Since I rarely know who or what I'm dealing with until I get there, it's hard to know how long I'll be gone."

While she processed what he had just told her, Tessa was silent, just listening to his footsteps crunching on the frozen leaves and branches under his feet. *Was that the reason he didn't seem to have any kind of personal relationships?* She imagined it would be hard for a woman to accept him being gone for long periods of time, not knowing when or even if he would be back. That had been an enormous problem for her and Luke. When he had gone undercover, she sometimes didn't hear from him for days. The not knowing if he was safe or when he would return had been agony for her and had taken a toll on their relationship.

"Is that why you're not married?" She knew she shouldn't be delving into his private life like this, but this seemed to be the one chance she finally had to satisfy her curiosity. After all, she was attached to him with the sling, and he couldn't just walk off.

Beau kept going, saying nothing, and Tessa thought he would not answer her when he finally spoke.

"I had a relationship while I was still in the CIA, before I became a mercenary. In fact, she was the reason that I quit my career."

"Oh, I see." Tessa wasn't sure if she was more shocked at the revelation itself or that he was sharing it with her. "What happened? Where is she now?"

Beau glanced down at Tessa, and she was sure that she detected a trace of sadness in his eyes.

“I don’t know where she is now. I’m still trying to find her. When I leave suddenly, I’m not always leaving for a job. Sometimes I’m chasing down a lead where she might be,” he admitted.

*Did she run off?* Tessa wondered, and if she had, maybe she didn’t want Beau to find her. She suddenly realized that she really knew little about Beau. *Why was he trying to hunt this woman down? Was he a madman like Henri was as well?*

Almost as if he could read her mind, Beau suddenly laughed. “That sounds bad, doesn’t it?” he said. “She didn’t just leave me, Tessa. I would have been okay with that. She disappeared, and no one seems to know what happened to her. At least that’s what they’re telling me.”

He shifted her weight around again and continued, “We both worked for the CIA as special agents when I met her. I know it sounds cheesy, but it really was love at first sight for us. I finally found someone who could fully understand me and my career, and she was feeling the same way. We both just really got each other.” He smiled and said, “And the fact that she was the most beautiful creature that I’d ever seen didn’t hurt either. She was all toned muscle and dark shiny hair, with a figure to die for. Kind of like one of those princesses out of a Disney movie, just a lot tougher. I was completely smitten.”

“How did she disappear?” she asked, wondering what could have happened to this remarkable woman.

“We were talking about marriage, and even about starting a family one day. We both realized if we did, one of us was going to have to quit our career and stay home with the kid, at least until it went to school. While we were still arguing about which one of us that would be, she told me she had to leave on a top-secret mission that she couldn’t tell me about. She promised me that as she got back, we would plan our future.” Beau grew silent, and she thought he was done talking until he said, “Then she kissed me goodbye and left, and I never saw her again.”



“What do you mean you never saw her again? Where did she go?”

“I don’t know where she went. I tried to contact her boss, my boss, the government, and anyone else that I could think of, trying to find out where they sent her. I needed to know if she’d been hurt.” He shook his head and continued, “We both knew that there were risks involved with our jobs, and that it could get dangerous, but I never thought that she would just disappear without a trace.”

Tessa frowned. “And no one could tell you what happened to her?”

Beau sounded bitter as he answered, “Because we weren’t officially married, the government refused to tell me anything. I tried to find her family and find out what they knew, but it turns out that her entire identity had been a sham. Everything she told me had been a cover story. She’d been undercover the whole time I knew her. I didn’t even have her real name.” He shrugged and said, “Ever since then, I’ve been trying to find out her true identity and what happened to her.”

“Oh Beau, I’m so sorry. That must be awful for you,” she murmured.

“After I couldn’t get anyone at the agency to help me, I grew disillusioned and left the CIA. I decided that if I offered my services on the open market, I could earn a living and still have the time to look for her.”

Beau paused walking for a moment, searched the area, and then continued walking and talking. It seemed to Tessa that now that he had finally started, he was eager to tell her his whole story.

“As it turns out, there’s quite a market for people with my specialized training and talents, and I’ve done pretty well for myself. That’s something they never told us while we were at the agency.” He chuckled before continuing, “It’s been ten years, and I’m still just running into dead ends and chasing down any leads that I can find. I can’t believe that she would have just left without telling me. If she is in trouble

somewhere, I still feel that I owe it to her to find her and help her.”

Before she could comment, they both heard something crashing through the brush and running fast behind them. Beau turned quickly, taking the hand that had been supporting her to reach for the knife he had sheathed at his side. When they saw Cash’s gigantic form emerge from the trees, they both breathed a sigh of relief.

“Cash!” The joy that Tessa felt was palpable. She had been terrified that Henri might have hurt him.

As Cash sat down in front of them wagging his tail, Beau leaned down to ruff up his head, saying, “Well, finally you mutt. What took you so long?” He eased Tessa down on the ground, removing her from her sling and setting her down gently on a tree stump. “I want to check him out and make sure that he’s not hurt before we go further. We may as well take a break anyway and drink some water. I still have some granola bars for us and a little food for Cash.”

He examined Cash carefully, and much to Tessa’s relief, announced that there didn’t seem to be any new injuries to him. He poured some water into a small bowl he had brought for the dog, and while he lapped away happily, Tessa and Beau also took turns drinking. Beau handed out the food, and they spent a few more minutes in silence, eating and lost in their own thoughts.

As painful as losing Luke and Hope had been, and still was for her, she couldn’t even imagine the anguish Beau must feel, not knowing why the love of his life had left him or even if she was still alive.

As if he, too, had been thinking of her, Beau stood up abruptly, packing everything away and saying, “Okay, let’s get going. Now that Cash is here, I’ll let him take the lead, and hopefully, we can make some better time. I’m still hopeful we can make it down the mountain tonight. I really want to get you looked at by a doctor as soon as possible.” He picked her back up and placed her securely in his homemade sling, but

Tessa noticed he made sure the knife at his side was easily accessible.

They walked in silence for a while. Tessa wondered if Beau was thinking about his lost love, and she wondered what she would have been like. It seemed to Tessa that now that he had stopped, he wasn't as eager to keep talking about her.

"What was her name?" she finally ventured to ask.

He strode on a few more steps, and Tessa wondered if he had even heard her when he finally said, "I called her Rachel, but that probably wasn't her real name, so it doesn't really count, right?"

Tessa detected a hint of bitterness in his voice and decided it was best to leave him in his own thoughts for now. She fell silent again.

It was Beau who finally spoke first. "What about you? Have you ever considered getting into a new relationship with anyone? I know you lost your husband tragically, but you're still a young woman. You can't really spend the rest of your life alone." Looking up at him, she glimpsed his amused smile as he said, "It's no secret that your friend Carter is interested, and it wouldn't surprise me a bit to find out that the sheriff in this town also has more than just a friendly interest."

Tessa grimaced, "You're probably right about Carter. He certainly wears his heart on his sleeve, although I sometimes wonder if he's more stuck on his feelings from the past than what he's actually feeling now." Then she shook her head against Beau's chest, "As for Jack, I don't think he's interested in anything more than a working relationship and possibly a friendship. He's a very dedicated man, and I doubt he's looking for any kind of relationship." She paused for a minute, contemplating his question. "I'm not ready to move on from Luke yet, and I don't know that I ever will be. I've been trying to tell Carter that all along." She looked up at him. "I think maybe you would understand more than anyone that until I know the whys of what happened to Luke and to Hope, I don't think I'll ever be able to move on from the past."

Beau nodded. "I can understand that, but there is a difference in our situations. I do not know if Rachel is still alive or if she's dead. Until I know for sure, a part of me will always feel like I'm betraying her if I move on." He looked down. "You, on the other hand, know that Luke is gone, and I believe that if he really loved you, he would want you to find someone else to love. You're much too young to stay alone forever."

She chuckled into his chest. "I could say the same about you, you know. You make yourself sound like an old man, but you're not. You're still young enough to find someone new as well."

"Maybe, but in the line of work I do, that wouldn't really be fair to anyone. I doubt I could even find someone who would put up with my coming and going, and to be honest, I'm just not really interested in looking." He grinned.

"You don't even have to look very far. You only need to give Carter a nod, and he'll leap into action." Tessa smiled.

"I'm not so sure that's entirely accurate. Like I said, I'm not convinced that Carter is being entirely honest with himself about his feelings. We've known each other for a very long time, and of course, there's a lot of affection there on both sides. Sometimes I think it would be easy to take him up on his offer, but I'm not sure that would be fair to either of us."

"I don't think he cares about being fair. The guy seems smitten," Beau remarked.

"I care for him a great deal as well, but I'm just not sure that what we feel is the same love that a woman and a man should have for someone they plan to spend the rest of their life with." She stopped for a minute, and then continued, "Maybe it's because Carter and Luke were such good friends, or maybe it's because I'm just not ready, but Luke's memory just seems to lurk like a cloud over us, making it impossible for me to consider his advances."

She was feeling annoyed and wondered why Beau was trying to push her into a relationship with Carter. Was he comparing her to Rachel, who had been so strong and

independent? He was probably already tired of looking after her and couldn't wait to hand her off to someone else. She squirmed uncomfortably in his arms, wishing she could just hop down and walk the rest of the way. She was fully convinced that Rachel would have somehow managed.

Suddenly Cash stopped abruptly. Until now, he had been joyfully sniffing about and wagging his tail, clearly enjoying his role as their scout. They had been following him closely, allowing him to choose the way. Now, he stood ramrod still, staring out at the trail in front of them with his hackles up, and a low, menacing growl emanating from his throat.

## Chapter 11

Tessa felt Beau's chest tighten up like a coil spring as he stood stock still, looking in the same direction as Cash.

*Oh no, no no! Please, not again. I can't face him again,* Tessa's mind screamed silently, her heart threatening to pound right out of her chest.

Beau quietly and carefully walked over to a fallen tree, removed her from the sling, and gently put her down. "I'm going to see what has Cash so riled," he said silently. "But I'll leave him here with you."

She knew she should try to be brave, but instead she whimpered, "No Beau, don't leave me here alone."

"It'll be alright Tessa, I promise you. I'll be right back." He straightened up before saying, "Cash, here," and pointed to where he had placed her on the log. The dog took one last look in the direction he had been alerting to, and then, emitting a low growl, he obediently went and sat next to Tessa. "Stay! Stay with Tessa," Beau commanded, pulling out his knife and then heading down the trail.

Cash went to get up and follow him, but Tessa desperately hung on to his collar. "No, Cash, stay here, don't leave me alone." She watched as Beau carefully made his way down the barely visible deer path they had been following, listening as the crunch of his boots slowly died away until she could only hear the quiet drip of ice melting from the trees overhead.

Hugging the big shaggy dog closer to her, she tried to quell her panic. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, she chanted to herself, trying to loosen the knot in her stomach. Every snap of a tree branch and every rustle of leaves caused her to jump and her heart to speed up. Her imagination went wild, envisioning how Henri was at this very moment sneaking up on Beau and stabbing him, and she could

picture with clarity his grinning face as he leaned over Beau's lifeless body.

After what seemed like forever, Cash, who had been laying alert but quietly at her feet, still watching the path that Beau had taken, stood up, his tail straight out behind him. She couldn't stop the whimper of fear that escaped her lips as she stared down the trail, sure that she was about to see Henri walking up and brandishing his deadly knife at her. She cried out in relief when she saw Carter's familiar figure coming up the trail with Beau following right behind.

"Carter, oh thank God, it's you! I'm so glad to see you," she exclaimed.

Carter walked over to where she was sitting and leaned down, giving her an enormous hug. "Thank God, you're safe, Tessa. Everyone has been in a panic looking for you."

"I'm so sorry, Carter. I feel awful that I caused you all to worry like that."

He looked at her sternly. "You've got to promise never to just leave like that again, Tessa. Jack even has the search and rescue team scouring the mountain for you."

She was taken aback by his harsh tone. After all, she hadn't just left, telling no one where she was going, and it wasn't her fault that she had run into a madman who had attacked her.

"I didn't exactly leave, telling no one and just wander off, getting lost, Carter," she said defensively. "Didn't Beau explain to you what happened?" She saw Carter looking over at Beau and flinching slightly.

"Sorry, Tess, I didn't mean it like that. I'm just so relieved that we found you safe. I guess I'm letting my emotions get the better of me." He hugged her again.

"I know you did nothing wrong. I just can't help feeling like an overprotective parent. All I want to do is get you back home and make sure that you never venture out alone again."

“It’s not fair to be mad at Tessa for what happened, and it’s just as wrong to tell her she shouldn’t go out alone again,” Beau chimed in, giving Carter a sour look.

“I know that. I’m just saying that we were all worried sick about her, and we need to make sure this doesn’t happen again,” Carter said.

“She doesn’t need to be accountable to you or any of us. It’s not her fault that she ran into a psycho killer, and she doesn’t need you reprimanding her for it right now either. You’re not her parent. She’s been through enough.”

Carter stood up, balling his fists at his side in the familiar way that Tessa recognized as him trying to contain his anger. “I’m not reprimanding her,” he barked out, “and I didn’t say she needs to be accountable to any of us, so stop putting words in my mouth. Tessa knows me well enough to know that I’m just trying to protect her. But I don’t expect a stranger like you to understand our relationship.”

Tessa could see the two men eyeing each other with dislike, and she tried to boost herself into a standing position.

“Please, you two, let’s not fight right now. Henri is still out here somewhere, and for all we know, he could be right around the corner. Can we just get going?”

Carter looked at her apologetically. “Of course we can, Tessa. You’re right. The sooner we get you to the ambulance, the better. You look awful.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” she said wryly, watching as Beau walked over and shouldered Carter aside as he prepared to pick her up.

“Let’s get moving,” Beau said, glaring at Carter. Then he told Tessa, “I found your friend here walking on the main trail. It’s right over the next hill, so at least we were heading in the right direction. It shouldn’t take us too long to get back down the mountain now.”

As Beau readied his sling, Carter watched him and said, “I can carry her.” Beau ignored him and continued to



situate Tessa into a comfortable carrying position. Carter walked over. “Did you hear me? I said that I can carry her.”

“I’m sure that you can,” Beau said coldly, “but I’m going to carry her.”

Tessa wanted to scream at them both to stop being childish and acting like she wasn’t even there, but the men were glaring at each other angrily, and the last thing she wanted to do was escalate the situation. Even Cash was getting in on the argument, growling at Carter menacingly.

“Okay then,” she said, trying to sound cheerful, “let’s get a move on.”

The three of them continued on, heading for the main trail, with Cash leading the way, and Carter walking behind them. When she finally saw it, Tessa sighed in relief. She could tell the walking was much easier now for Beau, and the ride for her was smoother as well.

After a few hours of steady walking, Carter suddenly stopped and looked down at his phone.

“What is it?” Beau asked.

“It looks like I’ve finally got some service. Jack got my message, and he has an ambulance ready and waiting.” Carter grinned at Tessa. “You’ll be safe and warm soon, Tessa.”

Tessa nodded wearily. Cuddled up against Beau, she was actually quite warm, but despite the bandage job Beau had done, her ankle was still throbbing horribly, and her ribs were aching from where Henri had kicked her. Every time that Beau stepped over some uneven ground, it sent a jolt of pain throughout her entire body.

“That’s great,” she said, “What about Henri? Are they going to look for him?”

“I don’t think so. I haven’t had the chance to tell him too much about any of that yet. I’ll see if I can call him and explain the situation while we walk,” Carter told her.

Tessa leaned her head on Beau’s chest as he kept walking, closing her eyes and trying to keep her mind off the

constant pain she was feeling. She was lucky to be making it out alive and didn't want to complain or feel sorry for herself, but she was struggling to keep her tears at bay.

Now that the ordeal was almost over, her emotions were threatening to spill over. The sun was high overhead when Tessa, who had finally dozed off, woke up to shouts coming at them from the path. She could hear someone yelling, "We see them, get the stretcher ready." The quiet trail was suddenly alive with activity and instructions.

She felt hands grabbing at the sling, insisting that she be laid on the stretcher, while Beau argued they were almost at the ambulance anyway, and they could just transfer her there. Then she heard Jack's voice telling Beau to let the professionals do their job, and she was taken away from Beau's warm, protective arms and put on a cold stretcher, where she was securely strapped in. The straps cut into her aching ribs painfully, and the men carrying the stretcher jostled it around as they stumbled the rest of the way down the trail. Her ankle kept bumping against the man in the lead, sending waves of pain up her leg until she feared she was going to faint.

They finally made it to the parking lot, where she could see the flashing lights of an ambulance. The lot that had been so empty just a few days ago when she had started out on her hike was now alive with people and cars. There were police everywhere, and Tessa could see a few curious hikers looking over at her curiously.

"Just hang on a few more minutes, Tessa, and you'll be in the ambulance and on the way to the hospital." Jack was peering down at her while he spoke, his face full of concern. "You look like you're in a lot of pain, do you want the medics to give you something?"

Tessa shook her head. Right now, she just wanted to get off this stretcher and away from all the people and the surrounding commotion. After having spent almost 3 days completely on her own, the noise and the bustle were just too much for her senses. She closed her eyes, trying to shut it all out, and felt herself once again being transferred from the

stretcher to a gurney, with the medics once again inadvertently bumping her ribs and ankle painfully. She wished they would have just let Beau carry her the rest of the way like he had wanted. She could have avoided all the discomfort.

The ambulance door was about to close when she heard Jack calling out, “Hold up, I’m riding to the hospital with her.” She opened her eyes, watching as he crawled in and sat on the little bench next to the gurney she had been strapped onto.

The medic who had originally been sitting next to her obediently vacated his seat, moving up front next to the driver. Jack gave them a nod, and Tessa felt the jolt as the ambulance took off.

“Geez Tessa, you look like you’ve been through a meat grinder. It looks like this creep did quite a number on you,” he said, looking down at her with a frown.

“What do you mean? What do I look like?” she asked in alarm. Beau had said nothing to her about her looking that bad.

Jack reached out, softly touching her cheek. “Your poor face is all bruised up,” he informed her.

She frowned. She had felt her ribs the entire time since Henri had attacked her, but she hadn’t realized the blows that Henri had administered would have left visible marks on her face.

“Don’t worry about it, Tessa. You’ll be back to your normal beautiful self in no time,” Jack said comfortingly.

“I’m not worried about that. I’m honestly just happy to get out alive, but I think Henri is insane, Jack. We need to find him.”

Jack nodded, “Yes, and we will find him. I don’t want to grill you right now, but if you feel up to it, maybe you can give me a short version of what he looks like and what happened up there?”

Tessa sighed. Despite being infinitely tired and just wanting to forget the entire ordeal for a while, she knew how

important it was to find Henri and stop him from hurting anyone else. She told Jack as much as she could remember.

When she was done, he took her hand in his. His touch was tender and soft, but his eyes looked stormy and angry. “I’m going to find him, Tessa, and he’s going to pay for what he did to you. I promise you that.”

“I know you will, Jack. If anyone can track him down, I know you can. We need to stop him quickly, so he can’t hurt anyone else.”

“We’ll start looking for him right away, but is it possible that he could have been targeting you personally? I can’t be certain until we find out more, but I think it might not have just been a chance meeting, and he randomly attacked you. It sounds more like he either wanted something from you or was trying to stop you from doing something.”

Tessa looked up at him, confused, and asked, “Stop me from doing what? I’ve never even seen him before. What could I possibly do to him?”

“I don’t want to worry you, but Stephanie found a threatening message on your answering machine. I can’t help but think it has something to do with why you were attacked.”

“What kind of threatening message? You think Henri left me a threatening message?” she asked, wondering how this could all hang together.

“I don’t know yet. We’re still trying to trace it and find out who the caller was. Right now, all we know is it was a male, and he wanted you to back off.”

Tessa’s head was spinning, and she couldn’t even begin to fathom who would call to threaten her or what she was supposed to back off from. Jack gently stroked her forehead, trying to smooth away the worry lines that he saw.

“Don’t worry about that now, Tessa. We’ll figure it all out. The main thing is that we have you back and you’re safe.” The look he gave her was a mixture of tenderness and anguish.

“I was so afraid for you when Stephanie told me you were up there in the mountains, alone and missing.” He took

her hand and held it. “It took everything in me to stay professional and not take off immediately to look for you myself. I hated that Beau and Carter could just leave while I had to stay behind and coordinate everything from here.”

He took her hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. “I didn’t think I could even feel so deeply anymore. When my ex walked out on me, I thought my feelings went with her, and I’d never care for anyone again.”

Tessa watched him as he opened up to her in surprise. She had often questioned if the cool and calm Jack Lewis was capable of feeling emotions.

“I really am sorry that I worried everyone,” she said softly, still watching his face and feeling the warmth of his hand that was still holding hers.

“No, no, don’t be. None of this is your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. If anything, I didn’t do enough to make sure you and the shelter were safe. I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“Jack, you couldn’t possibly have known that a madman was going to attack me. And we don’t even know if any of this has anything to do with the shelter or even me personally. He kept repeating that he had nothing against me, but he needed to get rid of me, anyway. You can’t blame yourself.”

He smiled sadly at her, his hand reaching out, almost involuntarily, and Tessa could feel his calloused hands stroking the hair back from her face.

“But I do blame myself, and I promise I won’t let anything happen to you again. I’ve already set up surveillance all around the shelter, and an officer is going to be with you at all times until we find this guy.”

“No, Jack.” Tessa remembered the last time he had tried to keep her under surveillance, and how restrained she had felt. “I don’t want anyone following me around. You don’t have the manpower to do that anyway, and I don’t enjoy feeling trapped like that. If it makes you feel better, I promise I’ll check in with you every day, but I don’t want anyone

trailing after me. Please, Jack, promise me you won't do that," she pleaded.

Jack sighed. "Okay if you feel that strongly about it, I won't. But I will keep the surveillance cars at the shelter. I want you to check in with me a few times a day and let me know where you're going. If you agree to that, I won't assign you a bodyguard."

Tessa smiled. "I can agree to those terms, Jack." The ambulance hit a pothole and jolted her, causing her to wince in pain. "I don't think I'll be going anywhere for a while anyway. I'm not so great on crutches," she grumbled, remembering when she had sprained her ankle back in high school, and how awkward it had been for her to get around.

Jack grinned at her. "That's even better. I can help you get around when you want to go somewhere myself then. It'll give me a good reason to spend some time with you." As he looked down at her, his eyes grew darker, and he seemed to squeeze her hand ever so slightly harder.

"If you really want to spend time with me, you don't need an excuse, Jack. You just need to ask," she murmured, pleased at his words, but a little embarrassed.

Smiling, he said, "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm just a little rusty at this whole thing. I think I'm going to need a little practice brushing up on my people skills." His face clouded over, and he shook his head sadly. "I've completely immersed myself in my job, thinking that made me a good cop. Maybe it did, but it probably left me a lousy person." A few days ago, she would have never imagined seeing such a tender look on his face. "Something has changed in me since I met you, Tessa. Just watching how selfless you are, and how much compassion and kindness you show to others, makes me want to rejoin the world again."

Tessa felt her own heart opening up to him. She wanted to tell him she was happy for him and that she cared for him as well, but she stayed silent, just squeezing his hand slightly. She was still struggling with her feelings for Carter and the

immense feelings of loyalty and guilt regarding Luke. She didn't know how to handle Jack's confession right now.

"I'm glad that you're willing to open up more. I know how hard it is to move on after a devastating and sudden loss. I'm still struggling with that myself. I question myself all the time if I'll ever be able to move on from Luke, even though I know he's no longer here."

"I'm sorry, Tessa. I didn't mean to unload all of this on you right now. You have enough to worry about. I know it's no excuse, but I was so worried and scared for you. When I saw you, I let my emotions get the better of me." He smiled at her. "I'm actually feeling more human than I have in years, and I'm pretty sure that you're the reason for that."

As he leaned towards her, she could feel his lips brush against her grimy forehead ever so softly. "I'm honestly not trying to pressure you into anything. I need to process these newfound feelings myself."

Tessa was trying to think of how to respond when Jack's phone rang. She blocked out his voice as she mulled over what he had just told her, both surprised and touched by his confession that he cared for her.

The idea that Jack cared for her was so new to her she couldn't yet fathom considering him as a potential replacement for Luke. Even as the term 'replacement' sprang to mind, she flinched. Nothing and no one could ever replace Luke, but recently, the rose-colored shroud she had placed over her memories was wearing off, and she remembered that their fairytale love story had been a genuine marriage, with real flaws. The cracks in their relationship had stemmed mostly from the work that he had been involved in. Never knowing where Luke was and the constant worry about his safety had weighed on her heavily, and they had argued bitterly over it. After his death, she had been prone to put all of that out of her mind, choosing instead to remember only the good times, erasing the arguments and loneliness she had felt from her memories.

Recently, she was coming to terms with the fact that Luke had been a normal man, and their marriage had the same flaws as anyone's. Maybe, if she accepted Luke hadn't been perfect, she had a chance to find love with someone else.

But if she did open herself up to Jack, would she be inviting in the same worries that she had had with Luke? Would she once again be spending her nights sleeplessly afraid that he wouldn't be walking through the door in the morning?

"They found out who that abandoned rental car was registered to." Jack's voice broke through her reverie like a jolt, bringing her back into reality.

"Let me guess. Henri LeBlanc?" she asked, shuddering at the very sound of his name. His eyes were shaded, and his forehead wrinkled as he looked down at her.

"No. It was leased out three days ago by a woman named Nicole White."



## Chapter 12

Jack looked at her with a puzzled expression. “Strange, I was so sure that it would be registered to your Henri LeBlanc. I guess he must have parked at a different trailhead. I’ll send out some men to check that out, but I wonder where Nicole White is. I really hope that we don’t have another missing hiker up there.”

Just thinking of Henri LeBlanc was making Tessa’s head pound, and luckily they had finally arrived at the hospital. The ambulance became a bustle of activity as the medical personnel moved her inside and into an examination room. The attending doctor checked her everywhere. She was relieved to find out that despite her ribs being bruised, several contusions, and various bruises all over her body, nothing was broken, not even her ankle. She had twisted it badly, and it would take a few days for the swelling to go down, but as long as she stayed off it and kept it elevated, the doctor assured her she would be mobile again in a few weeks. Until then, he put her ankle in a boot and handed her a pair of crutches to help her get around.

When he was finished, she was wheeled into a room to recover for the night and was shocked to see Jack waiting for her.

“Jack! I’m surprised to see you still here. I’m happy, of course, but you really didn’t need to wait around for me.”

“I wanted to make sure that you were okay before I left. I’m not the only visitor who is waiting to check on you, but they only allowed one of us at a time. The other two are down in the waiting room.” He gave her a sheepish grin. “I pulled rank and said I needed to question you further, so they let me wait up here in your room.”

She saw Jack was blushing at his confession and couldn’t help but smile, feeling flattered that he cared enough

to have waited.

“How long did the doctor say you needed to stay here?” Jack asked.

“He said as long as nothing swells or changes overnight, then I can go home tomorrow. They just want to make sure that my ankle goes back to a somewhat normal size. He scolded me for walking on it, but I didn’t really have much choice.”

“No, you didn’t. But you should stay off it for a few days at least. I contacted the car rental agency, and the kid who rented the car to Nicole is working tomorrow. I thought you might want to come with me to interview him?”

Tessa nodded her head eagerly. “Yes, Jack, I’d be happy to come with you.”

“I might have some more information on Nicole White by then as well,” he said, standing up from the chair by her bed and heading for the door. “You should try to get some rest now, though. You really look tired.”

Tessa chewed her lip, thinking, and then said, “Jack, remember how I told you that Henri has a sister named Nicolette?”

“Yes, I remember you mentioning that.”

“Well, do you think that Henri’s sister Nicolette could have rented the car? I mean, it seems like a coincidence that the car was abandoned at the same time Henri was up on the mountain, and Nicole White and Nicolette LeBlanc are basically the same name. Maybe she used an alias to rent the car for him?” She watched as he wrinkled his brow.

“You might have something there. I should have made the connection myself. I’m happy you’re coming with me. I’ll be curious what you think about the answers the kid gives us, and you may ask some questions as well. We can check if there was a secondary driver registered to the car, and since they usually photocopy the licenses, you can check out the pictures on them.”

“I’ll be ready to go in the morning, Jack. The sooner we get this guy off the street, the safer it is for everyone.”

Jack smiled at her sympathetically. “Get some rest for now, Tessa, and try not to think about him, at least for the night. You’re safe here. I’m stationing an officer to do some paperwork right across from your room.”

She wanted to argue, but the thought of having an officer close by made her feel safer. She just couldn’t shake the memory of Henri’s face every time she closed her eyes, so she just nodded her head gratefully.

Before Jack closed the door, he looked back at her and said, “You really look tired, Tessa. Would you like me to ask Carter and Beau to leave and come back tomorrow?”

Tessa wasn’t sure if it was just her imagination, but she thought she could see a slightly mischievous glint in his eyes.

“No, Jack, I’m fine. I want to thank them for helping me, and I don’t want them to have waited this long for nothing. I’m sure they’ll just stay for a few minutes, anyway.”

“Of course, I understand that, but try to get some rest, Tessa. You look like you really need it. I won’t be too early tomorrow, so you can sleep a little longer.”

A short time after he left, the door opened, and Carter walked in carrying a gigantic bouquet.

“Oh Carter, they’re beautiful, but that really wasn’t necessary. I’m being discharged first thing in the morning anyway,” she exclaimed.

“Well, you can take them with you, or you can leave them for someone else if you like, but I wanted to brighten up your room at least for the night. I know how much you love flowers, and I thought after everything you’ve been through, you needed something pleasant to look at.”

Carter’s sincere explanation touched her, and she smiled at him thankfully. Somehow, he always had a way of cheering her up and making her smile. It was his habit to spare no expense if he thought it would make her happy.

Setting the flowers down over by the window, he came to the bed and sat down on its edge, taking one of her hands in his soft, well-manicured ones.

“I’m so glad to see you all patched up and with some color back in your cheeks. You looked so pale up there. I was worried you might not make it back without passing out on us.”

Grinning at him she said, “I really was in a lot of pain out there, but right now they have me so hyped up on painkillers, I could do a jig for you.”

Carter laughed with her and said, “I think I’ll take a raincheck on that for now. You can jig for me when the doctor clears your ankle.” Then his demeanor became more serious, and he absently rubbed her palm between his thumb and forefinger. “Seriously though Tessa, you’ve had me scared in the past, but this time was the worst. I really thought we might have lost you for good, and the thought that you were at the mercy of a madman drives me crazy.”

“I’m sorry that you were worried, Carter, honestly. But I’m safe now, and I have you and Beau to thank for it. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you both.”

“I know I shouldn’t say this, and of course I’m happy that Beau found you as quickly as he did, but if I’m really honest, I wish I would have found you first.” He took her other hand in his hands, clutching them both tightly. “I want to be your hero, Tessa. I want to be the one that saves you and always keeps you safe.”

Poor Carter looked so sad and forlorn, just like a little kid, that she almost laughed at him. Instead, she smiled kindly.

“Oh Carter, you have to know by now that you are my hero, and you always will be. You don’t have to be the first one to ride in like a knight in shining armor to be that. You’re my best and oldest friend, and you’ve always been there for me. You make me smile, and you’re always there to pick me up when I fall. You’re one of the most important people in my life, and you always will be.”

Carter smiled at her, albeit a bit sadly. “That’s very sweet of you to say, although it doesn’t sound as romantic and heroic as I wish it did. The thing is, I want to be with you every day. I want to be the first one that you greet in the morning and the last one you say goodnight to when you go to sleep. I want to be the one to protect you 24/7.”

She knew he was serious, but this was all just too much for her right now. She wasn’t ready to commit to anyone like that, and maybe she never would be. She knew that one day she would have to talk about her feelings with him, but right now she was just too tired. So instead, she grinned mischievously and said, “That would be a full-time job, Carter. I thought that the consensus was it’s impossible to keep me out of trouble.”

“Well, I can’t deny that’s true, but at least I want to be there and try,” he conceded, thankfully understanding that now was not the time to delve further into his feelings. He kissed her forehead and said, “You look exhausted, so I’ll get going and let you rest now. Do you need me to get you anything before I go?”

Standing up, he started tucking the covers around her securely.

“Carter! Leave me some room to move and breathe,” she complained, laughing.

“Sorry, I guess I got a little carried away,” he said sheepishly. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning to take you home.”

“Oh, thanks Carter, but Jack is coming by to pick me up. He asked me to go with him to talk to the kid that leased out that abandoned rental car we found. Besides, you’ve taken enough time off from work. I don’t want you to lose all of your clients because of me.”

He frowned at the mention of Jack. “I already moved my schedule around for tomorrow while I was waiting to come up, so it wouldn’t be a problem. Are you sure you’re up to going with Jack on an interview already?”

“Yes, I really want to talk to the kid. I’m very curious about what he has to say about Nicole White. It just seems strange that she would have abandoned her car, and her name could mean LeBlanc, just like Henri’s name.”

She looked at Carter. “Maybe I should ask Beau to come along with us as well. He always seems to have connections when it comes to finding information about people.”

“Well, he left the hospital a while ago, so if you want to ask him, you’ll have to call him on his phone,” Carter announced.

“Oh, he left?” Tessa couldn’t help feeling disappointed at the news. “Did he say where he was going?”

Carter just shrugged. “I guess he’s not one to be very patient and just sit around waiting. He was pretty upset when Jack insisted he was going to wait in your room, and we’d just need to wait our turn. He mumbled something about how he would not waste any more time sitting around when there was a madman on the loose. Then he stormed out.”

Tessa’s stomach clenched again in fear. “Carter, you don’t think that he is planning to try to find Henri on his own, do you?”

“Who knows? Maybe he is. If you ask me, that guy is a loose cannon and completely unpredictable,” Carter said. “But I will bet you any money that Jack won’t be happy if he hears that he’s up there playing hero by himself.”

It took a long time after Carter left for Tessa to fall asleep. Henri and his face kept creeping into her mind, and when she did finally sleep, she dreamt of Beau running into a knife-wielding madman, who suddenly turned into a raven-haired beauty trying to seduce him.

Jack didn’t come to pick her up until late in the morning, and Tessa had taken his advice and slept until a nurse finally woke her, bringing her a tray with her breakfast.

“Good morning, how did you sleep? You look great, by the way, so the rest must have done you some good,” he said,

walking in with two cups of coffee.

“I actually feel great, thanks. Much better than yesterday. Thanks for the coffee, by the way. I guess I’ll never understand why they can’t seem to make a decent cup of coffee in a hospital.” She laughed.

“Because if they did, they would get no one to leave,” he answered, smiling. “If you’re ready, we can drink these in the car.”

“I’m ready,” she said, shrugging into the jacket that Stephanie had dropped off, along with a change of clothes for her early this morning while she was still sleeping.

They made it to the car rental location, and as Tessa clumsily leaned on the crutches she had been given at the hospital, Jack pulled out his badge and introduced himself to a man standing behind the counter. He stated that he had an appointment with Todd Evans, suspecting the man to be the manager. The man directed them to a small lounge area. As they sat down, Tessa noticed him talking to a young, pimple-faced man and pointing over at them.

The young man approached, nervously eyeing them, with his hands awkwardly stuffed in his pockets.

Jack stood up, holding out his hand, and said, “Hi, I’m Sheriff Lewis, and this is Miss Tessa Graves. We would just like to ask you a few questions about the car that you rented out a few days ago to a Miss Nicole White.”

The kid pulled his hands out of his pockets, shook Jack’s hand, and gave Tessa a friendly nod and a shy smile simultaneously.

“Sure, Sheriff. I’m Todd Evans. My manager already told me you were coming. I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but I’ll be more than happy to answer any questions you have,” Todd replied, fidgeting more than necessary, which made Tessa wonder what was making him so uncomfortable.

“Great, Todd. Thanks. We won’t take too much of your time. I know you need to get back to work, and I appreciate you talking to us,” Jack said, motioning for him to sit down.

“So, what is it you want to know?” Todd seemed to fidget even more, and Tessa watched him carefully.

“Nice” was not how Henri had described his sister, and she wondered if she was wrong about Nicole White and Nicolette LeBlanc being the same person.

“Did she say why she needed the car and where she was going?” Jack asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember her. Really pretty girl and really nice too. That’s a rare combo, you know. Most of the time, the pretty ones are kind of stuck up,” Todd eagerly volunteered. Tessa raised her eyebrow, observing him closely. “Yeah, she said that she only needed it for the day. She was all excited about going hiking. She also said she wanted to take a look around the area. She said that she had just moved here a few months ago, and she didn’t have a car yet. She had been taking the bus and public transportation, and she wanted to drive around the city and then take a short hike in the mountains. She had heard so much about them, and she wanted to have a look for herself,” Todd answered Jack’s question.

“Was she going alone?” asked Jack.

“I assumed she was, at first, anyhow. She kept saying that she didn’t know too many people. She was planning to stay in town for a while, but she wanted to get to know her surroundings before she invested in a car of her own.” Todd squirmed and glanced over at his boss. “Look, I kind of got the impression that she was single and looking to make friends, so I offered to take her around town sometime and show her some sights.”

Jack looked interested now. “And did she take you up on the offer?”

“Yeah, she did,” Todd nodded eagerly. “I mean, I was excited about it. Like I said, she was really pretty, and kind of out of my league, you know what I mean?” he said, looking at Jack for affirmation.



Jack nodded at him empathetically. “Well, I wanted to do something for her, so I gave her my family discount, you know, even though she wasn’t family, and I gave her an upgrade too. I took her license and made a copy, but more because I wanted her address. I kind of let a lot of the other paperwork slide, you know?” Todd glanced over at his manager. It looked like poor Todd had circumvented some formalities, and now he was in trouble.

“Okay, I get it, Todd. You wanted to impress her. Nothing wrong with that. So what else happened?” Jack pressed.

“Well, I was kind of already handing her the keys when I just asked, real casual-like because I didn’t really think she would say anything, if someone else was going to be driving the car.” Tessa saw he was squirming again. “And then she says, right out of the blue like, ‘Oh yeah, my brother will probably drive us.’ She said she gets nervous on those curvy mountain roads sometimes, and she hasn’t driven in a while. Then she pointed out the window at a car that was parked in front of the building.”

Jack glanced at Tessa and then looked back at Todd. “The records you gave us don’t show anyone else on the rental agreement, Todd. Aren’t you supposed to get the license of every driver before you hand over the car?”

Todd’s face grew red. “Well yeah, I am, but she kind of took me by surprise when she said someone else would be driving. I figured it would just be her, and I kind of made it sound like I was the manager here. Just like you said, Sheriff, I was just trying to impress her a bit. I mean, I wanted her to go out with me, and I kind of thought that as a manager, I had more of a chance, so I wanted her to think that I could bend the rules a little, you know.”

“So you didn’t get the name or driver’s license of the other person in the car?” Jack sounded disappointed. “Did you at least get a look at the person in the car?”

“Well, no, I didn’t. The car had really dark tinted windows, you know, and whoever was in the car never got out.

Whoever it was just followed Nicole when she drove away.” He looked at Jack hopefully. “I would really appreciate it if you didn’t mention that to my boss. He’s already pretty mad I gave her a discount and didn’t fill out all the paperwork. If he finds out I authorized another driver without getting any information, he’ll probably fire me.” Todd looked at Tessa for support, shrugging helplessly. “I mean, how was I to know that she wouldn’t show up with the car again? She really seemed like a nice person, you know?”

Jack cleared his throat. “Is there anything else that you need to tell us, Todd?” The kid shook his head. “No, not really. Just that she seemed to be thrilled, you know. Almost giddy. She seemed to really be looking forward to some sightseeing and hiking. I still can’t believe that she would just abandon the car. I mean, she seemed honest, like someone that would never do something like that.”

When they were back in the car, Tessa looked at Jack. “So, what do you think? Where is our Nicole White, and do you think that she and Henri have anything to do with one another?”

Jack shrugged. “You know me, Tessa, I don’t believe in coincidences, so yeah, I think there has to be a connection somewhere. I have her license and address now, so the next step is to follow up and find out more about her. Right now though, I’m going to get you back home. You’re looking worn out again, and you need to get off that ankle.”

Tessa sank back in her seat, noting that her ankle really was throbbing again. “Okay, you’re probably right. But promise you’ll keep me updated when you find something, Jack, please.”

Jack grinned at her. “Don’t you worry, I will. You know, sometimes I think that you should have been a cop, Tessa.”

The next day was bright and sunny, and it looked like the cold weather was taking a break, at least for a while. After their interview with Todd, Jack had brought her back to her little cottage, and Tessa had spent most of the day with her feet

up and resting. Stephanie had stopped by for a quick visit, bringing along food and the boys, and then she had gone to bed early, sleeping soundly through the night.

This morning, with the sun finally shining and waking up in her own pleasant home, Tessa felt much better. She noticed that the swelling in her ankle had gone down somewhat, and it was close to a normal size. With the help of some aspirin, even her bruised ribs seemed to give her some relief.

Right now, she was wrapped in blankets on her outside settee, her foot elevated on the table in front of her, and a nice warm cup of tea in her hand, basking in the limited warmth of the fall sun.

“You finally look like you’re relaxing a little,” said Stephanie, who was sitting next to her, also wrapped up in a blanket. “I swear that when I got home yesterday, I thought you were going to jump out of your skin at every little noise.”

“Sorry, I guess maybe I was a little jumpy. Thanks for the tea and the company today, Steph. With your help, I really am feeling a little better.”

“Well, that’s good, but I still don’t understand why we need to sit out here in the cold when you have a perfectly nice warm living room with a nice little wood stove,” she griped, pulling the blanket closer.

Tessa smiled at her, stroking Cash, who had joined them just a few minutes ago, on his soft head as he laid it on her lap. “We’ll go in soon, Steph, I promise. I just wanted to see Cash and thank him for finding me. After all, I owe him my life. If he hadn’t jumped in when he did, I might not even be here. Besides, it feels nice and calming to be outside in the sun.”

Stephanie looked at her friend sympathetically. “Well, even though I personally don’t see what you see in that wolf, I like him just a little since he saved your life. Maybe you should talk to Beau about his rule on not allowing him in the cottage? I mean, they allow service dogs inside, and you might

need a little emotional support after everything you've been through."

Tessa frowned. "Speaking of support, Carter mentioned yesterday when he called that he thinks it would be a good idea for me to go to therapy and talk things through with a professional." She gave Stephanie a worried look. "You don't think that this business with Henri is going to send me back into the same dark spiral I was in after Luke and Hope were killed, do you? I don't think I have the strength to face all of those emotions again."

Stephanie stood up and sat close to Tessa, hugging her. "No, Tess, I don't. You're strong, and you can get through this. I'll do whatever I can to make sure you don't end up like that again, even if it means saddling you with the boys for the next few months just to keep you too busy to think about anything else!" she declared.

"Are you sure that would be for my sanity, and not yours?" Tessa asked, laughing.

"Well, maybe a little of both," Stephanie admitted with a smile. "They have been quite a handful lately." She walked back over to her chair and pulled the blanket back around herself. "Really though, it might not be a bad idea for you to talk things over with someone. What you've been through really is pretty awful, and it would be normal to have some lingering trauma because of it."

"Maybe," Tessa said thoughtfully, still stroking the soft fur on the dog's head. "But for now, as long as Cash stays fairly close, I think I'll be okay."

Stephanie looked at her uncertainly for a minute, and then said, "You know, it might not be a bad idea if you spend some time with Carter in his penthouse. It would certainly be safer there, and there would also be enough people around to help you until you can get around better with your ankle. Between the doorman, the housekeeper, and his assistant, I don't think you would need to move on your own at all."

Tessa shook her head. "That sounds like my worst nightmare, Steph. You know I need to have my space. Besides,

even if Carter would allow him to come, I don't think Cash would like it there, and Beau probably wouldn't let me take him anyway. I really don't want to go anywhere without him right now. I just feel safer having him around."

"Okay, that's fair, and I can understand that. Like I said, you've been through a lot. But I think that you're underestimating just how much Carter would do to make you feel safe and secure. I'm pretty sure if it makes you feel better, Carter will allow you to bring anything you wanted with you." Stephanie looked at the dog. "It's true that Beau might not let you take Cash, but there are other, smaller service dogs you could look into that might be better suited for apartment living than him anyhow. I think I read that some of them can even get you drinks, food, and the TV remote if you need it."

"Stop it Stephanie! You're getting way ahead of yourself here. I'm not some crazy invalid who needs a dog to fetch the remote yet. Besides, I don't even watch TV. All I need is a few more days for this ankle to heal, and then I'll be back on my feet and back over at the shelter working."

Stephanie grimaced, "Sorry, I guess I've been listening to Carter too much. He spent the entire night on the phone trying to convince me to convince you to stay with him."

"I know you only want the best for me, but I don't want to move in with Carter, not even temporarily. I know how you feel about Carter and I being destined to be together, but I've already told you that I'm not ready to start a relationship yet, and if I ever am, I'm not as sure as you are that Carter and I are suited for each other."

"I know all that. It's just that this time, he was terrified for you, Tess. I've honestly never seen him in such a panic. I always knew he was in love with you, but this really drove home to me how much he really does care for you. I really don't think that you'll ever find anyone more loyal and loving than Carter."

"I know that and believe me when I say I care a great deal for him as well. I just don't want to rush into anything or make any promises until I can be one hundred percent sure

that it's the right thing for both of us." Tessa's eyes implored Stephanie to understand.

Before Stephanie could argue Carter's case any further, Cash lifted his head, emitting a low growl as Carter himself walked through the glass doors from the living room.

"I can't believe that you two are out here," he said, acting shocked. "It's absolutely freezing."

"We're only still here because we're frozen to the spot," Stephanie quipped. "Please tell me you've brought us some warm lunch and that the fire is going inside so I can thaw out."

Carter laughed. "The fire is going, and Angela sent over some hot soup and sandwiches." He leaned down and scooped Tessa up to carry her inside, eyeing Cash mistrustfully as the dog let out a warning rumble. "Relax mutt, I'm just taking her inside to warm up and eat lunch." He looked down at Tessa. "Could you ask him to back off a bit, please?" he asked.

"Down Cash, it's okay," she said, giving the dog a warning look as Carter carried her inside. "You stay here for now, and maybe later I can convince Beau to let you in."

"Geez, I hope not," Carter mumbled under his breath.

While Carter settled her comfortably on the couch with her ankle elevated on some pillows, Stephanie bustled about, refreshing Tessa's tea and setting out the soup and sandwiches.

"Did you get the audio from Tessa's answering machine back from Jack?" she asked, sitting down on the chair closest to the little stove that was now crackling cheerfully.

"Not yet, but he should be here at any minute. He wanted to bring it over himself so Tessa could hear it and see if she recognizes the voice," Carter replied, settling himself on a chair he'd dragged over from the tiny round dining table in the corner.

"I wonder who it could be," Tessa's forehead was wrinkled in consternation. "It would be much too odd for two

men to be threatening me at the same time. Do you think it was Henri who left that message?"

"I don't know, but it was a pretty creepy message," Stephanie commented. "I sure hope that Jack has some leads on it."

"Speaking of Jack, I think I hear his car now," said Carter, getting up to open the door. He was still miffed at how Jack had pulled rank on him and parked himself in Tessa's room after she got to the hospital. He wanted to know if Jack had found anything about the caller.

Jack just nodded at Carter as he walked in, giving Stephanie a smile as he said, "Good afternoon, Stephanie, how are you?" Then he looked warmly at Tessa. "You look a bit more rested than you did yesterday, that's for sure. How are you feeling?" he asked, as Stephanie pulled another chair over so he could join them.

"I'm feeling great, thanks." Tessa didn't mention that now that the painkillers were wearing off and her bruised ribs were causing her to flinch every time she breathed too deeply.

"That's good to hear." He sat down next to her, refusing Stephanie's offer of tea. "Let's just get down to business," he said.

After his heartfelt confessions yesterday, Tessa was a bit surprised at his business-like tone, but she suspected he was embarrassed, and he didn't want Carter or Stephanie to suspect his feelings for her.

Looking around at all of them, Jack asked, "Have any of you seen Beau at all today?"

They all looked at each other and said, almost in unison, "No."

Frowning in displeasure, Jack said, "That's too bad, I had hoped he would have checked in. I stopped at the house before I came here, and his housekeeper says she hasn't seen him since yesterday. She told me he packed up some supplies and left with a backpack and sleeping gear. She claims when

she asked him where he was going, he told her he was going camping.”

Tessa sucked in her lower lip in dismay. “You don’t think he went looking for Henri by himself, do you?” she asked.

“That’s what it sounds like to me. The fool,” Carter said, disagreeably. “If he has, he’s going to be in a heap of trouble with me,” said Jack. “I don’t want any vigilantes up in those mountains right now. The last thing I need is him running around rogue and getting himself, or someone else, hurt.”

“I’m sure that he only went to see if he could return the supplies we took from the cabin we found.” Tessa could see Jack was angry that Beau had gone off on his own. “He said he wanted to replace what we had used. That’s probably all he’s doing.”

“If I find out he’s up there chasing Henri around, I’ll have him arrested for hindering my investigation, so if any of you hear from him, it would be advisable for you to tell him to get back down here immediately.”

Stephanie looked at Jack shocked. “Jack, Beau is the one who found Tessa. Surely you wouldn’t arrest him after everything that he’s done to help?”

“I’ll arrest anyone that impedes my investigation,” Jack said. “Now, let’s get down to the business of this voice recording.” He turned to Tessa and said, “I’d like you to listen carefully and tell me if you recognize the voice at all.”

Tessa nodded at him numbly, surprised at how he could change from such a kind and caring person into the cold and heartless cop that he was portraying now. She couldn’t help but wonder which persona was actually the real one.

Jack played the recording for her without further comment, and when it was done, he asked, “Do you recognize the voice? Does it sound like Henri, the man who attacked you?”



She shook her head. “No, it doesn’t. Henri had an accent. I assumed it was a French accent since he told me he was from France, but now that I think about it, he spoke English remarkably well for a foreigner. Maybe he was exaggerating his accent, or maybe it was a different accent.”

“Could the voice on the recording have been Henri’s without the accent?” Jack asked.

Tessa thought for a moment, trying to picture Henri saying the words that she had just heard, and shook her head again. “No, I don’t think so. Henri had an incredibly smooth and silky-sounding voice. The voice on the tape is much harsher, and to me at least, it sounds like it’s coming from a man much older than Henri was.”

Jack looked disappointed. “Well, I guess I’m not surprised. I have a tracer on your phone, so hopefully he’ll call again. If he does, try to keep him talking as long as possible so we can hopefully get a trace on him.” He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his forehead wearily, and Tessa wondered if he had gotten any sleep at all in the last few days.

“I guess the call could be completely unrelated to Henri and his attack on you. It might just have been some crackpot who gets his kicks out of scaring people,” Jack said tiredly.

“Well, if it was, it certainly worked on me. It scared me enough to call everyone to help and find you, Tessa, so maybe I should be grateful the crackpot called,” Stephanie said.

“I guess so,” Tessa agreed, although she couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that whoever had left the message was deadly serious and not just playing games.

When Jack’s phone rang, he looked down and said, “It’s the station, I’ll be right back.” Tessa watched as he walked out to the veranda to take the call.

“He doesn’t exactly look to be his usual chipper self, does he?” Stephanie asked, watching him as well.

“You’re kidding, right? Chipper is not how I would have ever described that man,” Carter remarked, looking at her

doubtfully.

“Of course, I was kidding. But you have to admit, he looks even more serious and unapproachable than normal,” Stephanie said.

“It looks like he didn’t get much sleep last night,” Tessa agreed. “I imagine it’s pretty stressful for him to know that there’s a crazy man running loose around his town.

“Yeah, I guess you have a point. It probably is. I keep forgetting that he’s supposed to be responsible for the safety of everyone who lives here. I suppose my time as a defense lawyer still has me looking at the police like adversaries,” Carter admitted.

Tessa watched Jack hang up the phone and waited until he came back inside before asking, “Is there news about Henri or our mysterious Nicole White?”

Jack nodded solemnly. “Yes, they tracked down her address. Turns out her roommate just reported her missing. Apparently, Nicole White has been missing since she left to go hiking four days ago.”

## Chapter 13

For a minute, they all stayed silent, digesting what Jack had just said.

“Where do you think she is, Jack?” Stephanie asked. “Do you think she’s still up on the mountain somewhere?”

Jack sighed. “I guess that’s possible. Or, if she is connected to Henri LeBlanc, she could have left with him.”

Jack looked at Tessa. “If you’re feeling up to it, I’m going to get an interview with Nicole White’s roommate tomorrow. I wouldn’t mind having you come and get your take on what she has to say.”

Tessa nodded her head in agreement. She was just as eager to hear what the roommate had to say as Jack was. Hopefully, they would finally find out if Nicole White was Nicolette LeBlanc, Henri’s sister, or if there was even any connection at all between them.

Stephanie threw a worried look at Jack. “Don’t you think you should be out looking for this woman? I mean, if she is missing in the same area that Tessa was attacked, maybe Henri attacked her as well. What if there’s a serial killer on the loose?”

“Please don’t start jumping to conclusions, Stephanie. We don’t even know if Nicole is really missing or just took some time off and didn’t tell her roommate. We need to investigate and follow the leads. That’s how it’s done,” Jack said curtly. He gave them all a warning look. “And I would appreciate if you would keep this confidential. I don’t want the public to hear that there is even a possibility of a serial killer. I want to avoid having a full-blown panic on our hands before we have all the facts.”

“But Jack, what if he is just randomly attacking people? Don’t we need to warn everyone?” Tessa looked at

him distressed.

Carter threw Jack a glare of his own. “Seems to me, Jack, that the facts are that Tessa was attacked and almost killed, and now there’s another woman missing, whose car is at the same trailhead as Tessa’s was. That looks just a little coincidental and suspicious, don’t you think?”

Jack glared right back at him. “I didn’t say it wasn’t suspicious. I said that we don’t even know if Miss White left on her own accord or not yet. We can’t just jump to the conclusion that she’s the victim of a serial killer because her roommate doesn’t know where she is. Don’t you think we had better establish what happened to her before we panic an entire town? It’s entirely possible that she could show up at any minute perfectly healthy and tanned from a vacation she took.”

“It might be possible, but pretty unlikely,” Carter grumbled.

“There is also the possibility that she and Mr. LeBlanc are working together,” Jack said, turning away from Carter and looking to Tessa.

“Tell me again about the sister he was talking about. Like you already mentioned, it is possible that Nicole White is an alias for Nicolette LeBlanc. Maybe the two of them were up to something up there, and you surprised them. Henri could have panicked, and she could have taken off. There are a dozen possibilities that don’t necessarily point to Henri LeBlanc being a serial killer.”

Tessa nodded. “That’s true, Jack, and you’re right. We really need to follow all the evidence and leads before we jump to conclusions.” She paused and thought back to the stories that Henri had been rambling on about before he attacked her. “From what I remember, they were the only two siblings. They had gotten along fairly well as children, although he described her as having been quite spoiled and entitled. He mentioned that the entire family had issues with her as she grew older, but it wasn’t until their parents were killed that she had apparently become completely insufferable and wanted the money they left all for herself.”

Jack had pulled out his notebook and was once again scribbling furiously in it. “Did he ever tell you exactly what city he came from in France?” he asked. “Or where he’d been staying since he’s been here in the US?”

Tessa tried hard to think but could only come up with a blank. “He might have told me, but if he did, I don’t remember. My head was buzzing and just a mess with all his stories. I was having a hard time concentrating,” she admitted.

“Wait, what? You didn’t tell me that your head was buzzing,” Jack said.

Stephanie was one of the few people Tessa had explained to how she would hear a buzz in her head if someone was lying.

“I forgot all about that after he attacked me,” Tessa admitted. “Now that I think back on it, though, I remember thinking that he was lying to me about himself as soon as he started talking. I didn’t think that much of it. People sometimes lie about things when they meet someone new. And then later, as it became clear how much he liked to elaborate on his stories, I wrote it off to that.”

“You suspected he was lying to you when you first met him?” Jack asked, now giving her his full attention.

“Well, yes, in the beginning, I did question how truthful he was being, but as he was telling me more and more, the warning signs were fading in and out, and I just kind of thought I might have imagined it.”

Stephanie looked at Tessa strangely. “This is strange for you, Tessa. You can usually tell if someone is lying or covering up right away. What if Henri LeBlanc really is insane? What if, as he was telling you his stories, he was really believing them himself? Do you think you could still tell if he was lying or not?”

Tessa wrinkled her forehead. “I don’t know, Stephanie. I’m not sure I’ve ever had that happen before, and if it has, I wouldn’t have known it.”

Carter was nodding his head. "Like with one of those lie detector machines," he said excitedly. "They aren't foolproof either. If the person being interviewed really believes what they're saying, then the machine can't detect anything either."

"Tessa is hardly a machine, Carter," Stephanie said. "But that could be a possibility, right Tessa? Maybe he was lying to you about his name and a lot of other things as well?"

Tessa sank back into her pillow feeling defeated. "I guess that's possible. But if so, then we don't even know what part of his story is true, or where to even start looking." She looked at Jack desperately. "I'm sorry, Jack. I'm not sure that I'm being any help at all in finding him."

"Don't worry, Tessa, you're still a big help. Even people who lie usually disperse some truth into their lies. We'll follow up on this Nicole White and try to find her. My gut tells me that somehow she is involved with Henri LeBlanc, and if we find her, maybe we'll be able to find him. In the meantime, we'll keep looking and follow up on the threatening phone call. This may all be connected somehow." He closed his notebook and walked over to Tessa, looking down at her compassionately. "We'll find him, Tessa, I promise you. You rest for now, and I'll come by tomorrow and pick you up for the interview. In the meantime, call me if you think of anything else."

He looked tired, but Tessa could finally detect a glimpse of the kind and gentle man that had confessed his innermost thoughts to her last night. Her heart reached out to him, and she wished that there was some way she could ease his mind the same way he was trying to ease hers.

"I know that you'll find him, Jack. If anyone can find and stop him, you can," Tessa said. "And I'll help you in any way that I can."

"There might actually be something you can do. I've been so busy looking into a connection between the call you got and Henri, I might be missing something. When you go back to the shelter, can you look at your records and see if

you've ever had anyone by the name of Nicole White pass through? Even if her name just pops up as being related to someone that you helped, it might give us a lead."

"Of course, I'll do that, Jack. I'll start looking as soon as I can." Tessa was excited Jack had given her a task she could finally help with. She would have headed to the shelter immediately if Stephanie and Carter hadn't put their foot down and said no. They insisted she needed at least one more day to rest before she went back.

Once Jack had left, Carter excused himself as well, saying that he had better check in with his firm, but promising that he would call later. Stephanie walked him to the door, and when they were out of earshot of Tessa, she said to him, "I know that you're worried about her and want to spend as much time as you can with her, but I really believe you'd better leave her some space. Trust me, Carter, I really am on your side with her staying at your place, at least for a while, but she's been through a lot in the last few days, and she needs some time alone to process it all."

"Okay, Steph, maybe you're right, but I am coming back here tomorrow to see her," he said, walking away before Stephanie could try to dissuade him.

She walked back into the cottage and sat down in her chair by the little stove, sighing, "I'm afraid you're going to have your hands full with him, Tessa. He's bound and determined that you'd be safer with him, at least until Henri LeBlanc and that mysterious caller are found."

"I know, Steph, but I'm counting on you to have my back on this one. You have to help me convince him I'm safe here," Tessa replied.

Stephanie looked at her doubtfully. "But I'm not sure that I agree with you about that, Tessa. I really think that you would be better off in the city with Carter. Even Dan's been saying he's worried. He's afraid that until Henri is found, we may both be in danger if he comes looking for you."

Tessa frowned. Stephanie's husband, Dan, was not usually prone to worry excessively about them, unlike Carter.

“I don’t want to put you or any of the other women in danger, Stephanie. You know I would never do that. But even if all of you are right, and it would be safer if I stayed in the city with Carter, I just can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Stephanie asked.

“Because I don’t want to lead him on or give him the wrong idea, that’s why. I already told you I’m not ready to move on to a new relationship yet, and Carter wants so much more from me than I can give him right now. Please Steph, help me on this one. I really need both of you in my life, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize my friendship with Carter. Especially not now.”

“Okay, Tessa, I understand that. I just feel so bad for Carter. He’s been in love with you for so long, and I know that it’s driving him crazy not being around when he thinks you’re in danger. He knows also that Jack’s been showing some interest in you as well, and I know he would feel a lot more secure if you were closer to him than out here with Jack.”

“Stephanie, I assure you I’m not interested in a relationship with anyone right now, Jack or Carter. All I really want to do is figure out why this madman came after me, and what it has to do with Luke and Hope’s murder.”

“Wait, you think Henri was involved in Luke and Hope’s murder?” Stephanie asked, shocked.

“I don’t know, but I think it’s entirely possible. He kept saying that it wasn’t personal, but he needed to kill me. Why would someone I’ve never met before need to kill me? Maybe he meant he needed to get rid of me now, because he let me live the last time. It’s possible that someone hired him to kill Luke and now they want to tie up loose ends.”

Stephanie shook her head. “I don’t know, Tessa, that makes little sense to me. I mean, why would he chase you down now, after all these years?”

“Maybe it has something to do with that call on my machine. Jack could be right, and it really does all tie together. If someone thinks that I know something, even if I don’t, they



might be trying to silence me for good.” Tessa clasped her hands in anguish. “Oh Steph, I just don’t know anything anymore. All I know is we need to find Henri, and if he has anything to do with destroying my family, I need to know. Until I do, I can’t even think about moving on with my life.”

Stephanie volunteered to stay with Tessa for a few more hours, helping her get into bed, elevating her ankle to reduce the swelling, and bringing her whatever she needed. As she bustled about, Tessa felt wrung out and distraught, and she started wishing that her friend would just leave. As grateful as she was for everyone’s help, she was overcome with all the emotions that the trauma of the last few days had brought back to the surface, and she was craving some quiet and solitude.

“Just call me if you need anything. I can be here in a half hour, and I told Angela to be on standby as well,” Stephanie instructed her as she left.

Against Stephanie’s better judgment, Tessa had convinced her to let Cash in. The dog had been staring into the glass window for the last hour, woefully watching as Stephanie bustled about and whining to come in. Now she lay in her bed, stroking his head, and promised Stephanie that she would call the minute she needed anything.

As she listened to the tires crunching on the gravel outside as Stephanie drove off, Tessa was almost immediately overcome with a feeling of sadness and loneliness. She had to resist the urge to call Stephanie on her phone and beg her to come back and spend the night with her after all.

“Oh Cash, what’s wrong with me? First, I can’t wait to be alone, and now I’m an emotional mess because I am alone,” she wailed.

Suddenly she froze, convinced that she heard someone entering the door. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she watched Cash for his reaction, hoping that it was just her imagination, but the dog whined and got up, looking at the door expectantly.

“Miss Tessa, are you in here?”

Tessa could hear the sweet singsong voice of Beau's housekeeper Ellie calling out, and she heard footsteps coming to the door of the darkened bedroom.

"There you are," said Ellie, holding what seemed to be yet another of her endless casserole dishes. She was looking as young, cheerful, and spry as ever, with her dark, shiny hair hanging over her shoulders and cascading down her very well-formed yet slender figure.

Even at her best, Tessa always felt old, unkempt, and inferior when she was around the confident young woman, and at the moment, she was anything but at her best. Ellie was the epitome of everything she wasn't. She looked amazing, could cook, bake, and she kept an immaculate house. She even came and cleaned the tiny cottage for Tessa whenever she got the chance.

Tessa cringed every time she thought of Ellie serving Beau one of her casseroles, and she couldn't stop that nasty little feeling of jealousy whenever he relayed to her the prowess of the younger woman's baking ability. In short, Ellie was the last person who Tessa wanted to see tonight.

Unaware of Tessa's discomfort, Ellie gave her a bright, wide smile. "I saw everyone left, and I thought I'd better check in on you and make sure that you had some supper. I figured you couldn't get around too well with that ankle of yours."

*She's trying to make me fat,* Tessa thought unkindly, but outwardly she smiled and said, "That's very kind of you, but I'm really not hungry. My best friend Stephanie made sure to get me everything I need before she left, thanks."

"Well, I can at least make you some tea, then. I'll put this in the fridge, and you can always warm it up in the microwave if you get hungry," Ellie said. She turned to walk to the kitchen when she spotted Cash lying on the floor next to her bed. "Oh, there you are," she said, clearly surprised to see him there. "I wondered where you had taken off to again." She looked at Tessa. "I really don't think Beau would like him to be in here. He has some very strict rules about Cash staying

out of the house, and he likes him to be in his kennel when he's not out guarding the grounds at night."

Ellie bustled out of the bedroom, and Tessa could hear her rummaging around for a few minutes until she reappeared, holding a leash that she had miraculously procured from somewhere in the cottage. "Here, I'll take him, lock him back in his kennel, and then I'll be right back to make you some tea. Beau never has to know he was ever inside," she said, smiling at Tessa conspiratorially.

"No. Leave him where he is. He's staying here with me tonight," Tessa commanded sharply. The tone of her voice stopped the younger woman in her tracks, and she looked at Tessa in surprise.

"But I really don't think that's a good idea, ma'am. Beau has strict rules about that dog, and I don't know if he'll be back tonight. He's going to be pretty angry if he finds out he was in the cottage all night." Ellie was clearly uneasy as she spoke.

"If Beau has a problem with Cash being here, I'll deal with him. It's not your concern."

Tessa knew she sounded curt and unfriendly, but she couldn't seem to muster the strength she needed to put on a kind demeanor right now. It irked her that Ellie thought she could tell her what she could and couldn't do in her own cottage.

Ellie hesitated for another second, glancing at Cash, and then just shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever you want. I was just trying to help. I'll just get that tea for you."

Tessa could tell that the younger woman was hurt, and she regretted her outburst. Her own mixed-up feelings certainly weren't the young woman's fault.

When Ellie brought her the tea, she had already decided that she would do what she could to make amends. "Thank you for the tea, Ellie. I really appreciate it. I'm sorry that I snapped at you about the dog. It's just that, for now, I feel safer with him around."

Ellie flashed her usual bright and attractive smile. “Sure, I understand. I don’t know everything that happened, but Angela and Beau filled me in on some of the details. It must have been terrifying for you on that mountain alone with a crazy man.”

“You talked to Beau? When? Have you seen him today?”

Ignoring how anxious Tessa sounded, Ellie calmly said, “No, not today. I only spoke with him briefly before he left to go, um, camping. I helped get some food and drinks for him to take along, and he told me some of what happened to you up there.”

“Camping?” Tessa raised one eyebrow quizzically.

Ellie shrugged her shoulders. “That’s what he told me, so that’s what I told the sheriff when he asked.” Looking at Tessa, she said, “I would hate to think he was doing anything else. It would be incredibly dangerous for someone to go after a madman all by himself, and I would be devastated if he got hurt. Beau has been so kind and generous to me and my family.”

From the reproachful way that Ellie looked at her, Tessa got the distinct feeling that if anything were to happen to Beau, she would hold Tessa responsible.

The next morning, Tessa was up early and restless. She had spent the night with Cash lying by her side, and for the first time in days, she had woken up without a feeling of panic. Jack had called to let her know they would meet with Nicole’s roommate late morning, so she had a few hours before Jack came to pick her up.

It had been weeks since she had touched her paints, so Tessa thought it would be a good idea to spend her few free hours at least setting up her easel to paint. Painting had always been cathartic for her, and she hoped it would help bring her some peace and clarity. However, so far, she hadn’t been able to quiet her mind enough to actually start.

At the moment, she was sitting in her chair, looking through her camera to see if she could find any pictures that would inspire her to want to paint. As she listlessly shuffled through them, she heard a knock on the door and called out, "Come on in, Ellie."

Despite Tessa's protests, Ellie had insisted she would be back in the morning with some muffins. Thankfully, Tessa had shoed Cash out the door a few minutes earlier. After her outburst last night, she wanted to avoid any more conflict regarding the dog.

"Well, I'm not Ellie, but I brought muffins," Beau's voice sounded amused, and Tessa spun to see him walking in, carrying a basket of baked goods.

"Beau! You're back!" Tessa's heart leaped, and she tried to spring up from her chair, forgetting her ankle until she was reminded by the sharp protest as it buckled under her weight.

"Sit down, Tessa, you're going to fall over!" Beau reprimanded her, seeing her teeter and then sink back down in her seat. "I'm only back for a little while," he said. "I wanted to check in on you and see how you're doing."

She watched as he went into her little kitchen, his powerful presence making it seem almost small. "I'm doing great," she answered, watching him take a mug from her cupboard and fill it from her coffee pot. She couldn't help the feeling of excitement as she noticed the ease with which he helped himself in her cottage.

"You look better," he commented, walking over behind her and looking at her blank canvas. "What are you painting?" he asked.

"Nothing, as you can see. I'm not feeling particularly inspired today, I guess. I was hoping I could look through some of my pictures and get some ideas," she admitted. Smiling, he said, "I've heard it happens to all artists at one time or another. Here, let me look. Maybe I can find something for you."

Her fingers tingled where he touched them as he reached for her camera, and her breath caught in her throat. She hoped he hadn't noticed her reaction, chastising herself for feeling like a schoolgirl who hadn't seen her childhood crush in a while. She couldn't understand why her body betrayed her like this whenever he was in her vicinity, but she knew she needed to control it. She had enough issues with men right now, and she didn't need to be fawning over one who wasn't even interested in her. She could see his interested smile turning into a frown as he looked through her camera.

“Some of these are from a few days ago when you were up on the mountain, aren't they?” he asked.

“Yes, they are. One of the reasons I went hiking was to take pictures I wanted to use as a backdrop for some of my paintings, why?” She held out her camera and showed him one picture she had snapped. It was the picture she had been taking of the interesting-looking stump, just before Henri had startled her. As soon as she saw it, her heart started beating faster.

“That's one I took when I first ran into Henri. He jumped out right about there and scared me,” she told him, vividly remembering the moment.

He looked at it closer, and then pointed at something. “There, do you see that?” he asked.

Bringing the camera up closer to her face, she looked carefully. “I see something, but I'm not sure what it is,” she said. “I wondered at the time if maybe Henri had been relieving himself back there, and I caught him at it. It would explain why he wouldn't say what he was doing.”

Beau took her camera and expanded the picture as much as it would go, looked at it, and then stood up abruptly. “I've got to see this spot for myself. Can you tell me exactly how to get there?”

“I can, but you can't go back by yourself, Beau. It's dangerous. What if Henri goes back there as well? If he was hiding something, he might go back and retrieve it. Besides, Jack already threatened to have you arrested if you got in his

way. Please just call him and have him send some people with you!” she begged.

He gave her a half-hearted grin and said, “No thanks. Nothing against Jack, but I do better on my own. Just tell me how to get there, and I’ll be back soon. I promise.” He stood over her and gently squeezed her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll find him.”

The rush of excitement she felt at his touch made it hard to resist the urge to take his hand in hers. What she really wanted to do was tell him she didn’t want him to find Henri on his own. She wanted him to stay with her and let Jack and the police catch him. Instead, she gave him the best directions she could and watched quietly as he left her cottage just as quickly as he’d entered it.

As soon as he was gone, the feeling of dread hit her like an avalanche, and she choked back a cry of despair. Something told her that whatever Beau found on that mountain would not be good.

## Chapter 14

Jack was due to arrive any minute now, but Tessa was struggling with deciding whether to tell him about Beau. She would have told him without hesitation if she could be certain he would be the same understanding and compassionate man she had seen the night she was rescued. However, he seemed to have turned back into the no-nonsense cop. She was afraid of what he would do if he found out.

When Jack finally arrived, she had decided that, at least for now, she would keep her meeting with Beau to herself. Hopefully, Beau would be back soon, and Jack would never need to know that he had stopped to see her.

“So, what did you think of the car rental kid yesterday?” he asked her as they started driving. “He seemed to tell the truth about everything, don’t you think?”

Tessa nodded. “He was, and I give him credit for admitting that he had messed up about not getting the information for the other driver. He could have tried to keep it a secret from us as well as his boss.”

Jack grinned over at her. “You would have found him out though, even if he had, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Well, yes, I think I would have known he was lying about something, and then you would have probably been able to get it out of him. But it’s good that he told us on his own. It’s refreshing to find a kid who owns up to his mistakes, even if it could get him into trouble.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “Yeah, it is nice. I feel like I’m around so many liars, I’m losing faith in people.”

Tessa sighed, trying to quell her guilty conscience. “You may be right, Jack.”

“We should be at Nicole’s apartment soon. Who knows, maybe her roommate will continue the streak and tell



us the truth as well. Hopefully, she'll give us something useful."

Tessa looked over at his serious face. "Why wouldn't she tell the truth? She's the one who reported Nicole missing. I doubt she would have anything to hide."

Jack pulled the car into the parking space in front of a two-story older building. "People always seem to hide stuff, Tessa. But I guess we'll find out soon enough if she does. We're here." He helped her get out of the car with her crutches. Even though she had spent the last few days with her ankle elevated, it was throbbing again, and seeing her discomfort, Jack carefully took her arm, helping her to walk.

The young woman who came to the door was a petite, friendly-looking redhead who introduced herself as Chrissy Davis. As soon as the introductions were done, she also noticed Tessa's discomfort and invited them into a spacious and well-kept apartment.

"Sit here on the couch, Miss Graves, and let me get a cushion for that ankle. Goodness, it looks bad. I'm not sure that you should even walk on it," she said. As she propped the cushion under her foot, Chrissy explained, "I broke my ankle about a year ago on a ski trip. It was horribly painful, and it took forever to heal, so I know what you're going through."

"That's rough," said Tessa. "I used to ski when I was younger and took some falls myself, but thankfully I never broke anything."

Chrissy grimaced. "Oh, I didn't break it skiing, although that would have been a lot more glamorous. I broke it climbing out of an Uber after a night of celebrating. I caught my ankle on the door and ended up sprawled out on the sidewalk." She laughed and said, "Trust me, that wasn't a glamorous sight at all."

Tessa immediately felt a kinship and liking for this outgoing, friendly young woman. As she looked around the bright and cheerful apartment, she could almost imagine two women laughing and talking with one another, much like she

and Stephanie had done while they were rooming together shortly after college.

Jack had sat on a chair next to the couch, and Tessa could see that he had already pulled out his notebook, bringing her back to the reality of why they were here and reminding her that the other half of this duo was missing.

“Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Chrissy. We’ll try not to take too much of your time,” Tessa said.

“I have as much time as you need,” Chrissy answered. “I want to find Nicky. I’m really worrying about her. She was supposed to start her new job yesterday, and she was so excited about it. It’s not like her to just up and disappear like this.” She looked over at Tessa. “She’s the kind of person you just fall in love with from the minute you meet her. We had this instant kinship, you know? She’s always so vibrant and full of life. And she’s one of those rare people who are extremely considerate. I know that even if something urgent came up, she would let me know. She wouldn’t want me to worry about her.”

“Would you mind telling us how you two met and why you became roommates?” Jack asked.

“We met through an ad in the paper,” Chrissy explained. “My old roommate suddenly left me high and dry, holding the lease to an apartment I couldn’t possibly afford on my own.” She looked at Tessa again. “She found a boyfriend and insisted she had to move in with him right away. They broke up already, but at the time she thought it was true love, and she didn’t really care too much about her obligations to me.” She continued, “Anyway, I couldn’t afford the rent here by myself, but I really like the place and I wanted to stay. It’s tough to find a nice apartment in a safe area, so I figured I’d run an ad and see if I could find a new roommate that way. My parents thought I was crazy, and that I was sure to attract a bunch of creeps, but Nicky was the first one who responded. She told me she’d just moved to town and she needed a place to stay immediately and wasn’t too bothered by the security deposit or the rent amount. I liked her, so she moved in within two days of us having met each other.”

“And everything was okay between the two of you?” Jack asked.

Chrissy smiled fondly. “It’s been better than okay. I feel like I’ve known her my whole life. She’s the type of girl you can instantly connect to, you know? The kind of friend that you can pour your heart out to and know they’ll never betray your secrets to anyone.”

“She sounds like a great person,” Tessa said.

“Oh, she is. And she’s been so excited to start this new job that she recently landed. Can you believe that she’s never had a real job before? That’s why she wanted to go hiking last weekend. She expected she’d be working a lot and was afraid she wouldn’t have much time to do much else once she started. I tried to tell her that having a job doesn’t mean that all the fun in your life was over, but she was pretty convinced that she was going to be wiped out.”

“If she never worked before, what has she been doing for money? How did she pay the rent?” Jack asked.

“She doesn’t really talk too much about her family, but I got the impression that her parents were pretty well off and she never really needed to work, at least not until now. They were both killed in a plane crash a year or so ago, and maybe she’s finally running out of money.”

Chrissy smiled a little shamefacedly. “She sometimes gives off the vibe of being a spoiled little rich kid, you know? I mean, she’s always really sweet, but sometimes I have to remind her to pick up after herself and stuff like that. It’s like she’s used to having a maid or someone picking up after her all the time. Sometimes I feel like I have to teach her how to take care of herself.”

“I see.” Jack looked up from his notebook. “So she’s never told you anything at all about her family? Like names or where she was born?”

“No, not really. When I ask her about them, she gets closed-lipped about the whole thing and acts really sad. I haven’t pressed her too hard. She’s so open about everything

else that I figure she'll talk about them when she's ready." Chrissy puckered her brow and then continued, "There was one time, after we drank a little wine, where she said she wished she and her mother could have talked before she died. I feel like there are a lot of things that Nicky wanted to kind of get off her chest, and she feels like she missed her opportunity."

Tessa glanced at Jack, and then back at Chrissy. "Did she ever mention any other siblings? Maybe a sister or a brother?" she prompted.

Chrissy thought for a minute. "I'm not really sure, but one time she told me a story about how she had fallen out of a tree. She said her brother had talked her into climbing it, even though she was scared, and she shouldn't have listened to him. But that's really all she ever told me. She just absolutely avoided talking about her family at all."

Tessa looked at Jack before she asked, "I know you said that she never told you where she was born, but is it possible that she was born or raised in France?"

Chrissy grinned, "Oh goodness no, not Nicky! She has the most charming southern drawl that you've ever heard. There is no mistaking that she comes from the States, that's for sure."

"Is Chrissy the type of girl to just go off hiking on her own in the mountains? Did she mention to you if she was meeting up with anyone else before she left?" Jack asked.

"No, it's really not like her to go anywhere alone, so I thought it was odd that she didn't ask me to come with her. But she was so super giddy and excited about going that I didn't think to ask her too many details. I just lent her some of my warmer clothes and shoes because she had nothing to hike in, and then I had to hurry and leave myself." Chrissy looked at the two of them. "I know I sound kind of disinterested, but I'm trying to juggle school and work, and I had a big assignment to prepare for last week. I was actually pretty glad she didn't ask me to come with her, because I was preoccupied with that." She sighed sadly. "Now, of course, I really wish

that I had asked her more questions. I shouldn't have just let her go off alone like that. She might be lost somewhere or even hurt. I wish I would have at least asked her if she was going with that guy I saw her with."

"What guy?" Jack asked sharply. "You never mentioned a guy."

"Oh, I didn't?" she said, looking at him, confused. "It really wasn't anything. I just looked out the window last week, and I saw her talking to some man outside. When she came in, she seemed kind of pensive but happy, you know. I asked her who he was, thinking it might be some old fling of hers, but she just changed the subject, and I guess I forgot about it until just now."

"Did you get a good look at him?" Jack asked. "Can you describe him to me?"

Chrissy shook her head. "Not really. I only saw the top of his head. I think he had dark hair, and he didn't seem to be super tall, but he was taller than Nicky." She looked at Jack apologetically. "I'm really sorry, but I just wasn't paying that much attention. She's a pretty girl, and guys are always hitting on her."

"Chrissy, do you know if Nicole has a journal or anything like that? Also, if it's okay with you, I'd like to look at her room. Maybe there's something in there that would clue us in as to whether she was meeting someone or not."

"Well, yes, Chrissy is actually always journaling. I know she hides it in her room somewhere, but I don't think she would be very happy if I let you look at it. I mean, a journal is pretty private, you know?"

Jack looked at her sternly. "Chrissy, your friend is missing, and she might be hurt or in danger. If there's anything in her journal that would help us find her, don't you think she would want you to help her?"

For a minute, Chrissy looked torn, but then she stood up resolutely. "I can probably guess where she keeps it. If you

want to come with me, you can look around her room while I try to find it.”

“That would be great.” Jack got up and looked down at Tessa. “You better stay here. I don’t think you should walk too much yet. I’ll be right back.”

After declining Chrissy’s offer of tea or coffee, Tessa watched as Jack and Chrissy disappeared into a room towards the back of the apartment.

“Stupid ankle,” she said under her breath, looking down at the boot on her foot with disgust. She would have liked to see the bedroom herself, to help her get an idea of the kind of woman Nicole White was.

As she looked around the parts of the apartment that she could see from where she sat, she wondered if they could be mistaken about Nicole being Nicolette. The image of a vivacious and carefree young woman just didn’t mesh with the image of the cold-hearted, money-hungry woman Henri had described. It had been during the times he talked about his family that the buzzing in her head had subsided, so she was apt to believe that what he had told her had been the truth.

*Or at least, he believed it was true,* she thought suddenly. Maybe Stephanie was on to something. Maybe her senses only worked when the person she was talking to knew they were lying. If they themselves believed what they said, even if it wasn’t true, she might not detect it.

*What really had happened to the young, carefree woman that had lived here,* Tessa wondered. *Was she even still alive?*

When Jack and Chrissy exited Nicki’s room, Tessa could see Jack was holding a small brown book. “It looks like you found it,” said Tessa, trying not to sound happy. She could see by the look on poor Chrissy’s face that the young woman seemed upset.

“I just don’t feel right about you taking her journal,” Chrissy confessed. “It seems like such a betrayal. She has

always been so secretive about it, and I'm sure there are things in there that she doesn't want anyone else to see."

Tessa watched her sink down into a chair, clearly distressed. She could fully understand the woman's misgivings. If she were in similar circumstances, she would feel an obligation to protect Stephanie's secrets as well.

"I can imagine how you feel, Chrissy, and I completely understand. I would have a hard time handing over my friend's journal as well, and believe me, I would never even ask you to do anything like that, except for the fact that it might help us find Nicole. If there's anything in that journal that can help us do that, you want us to find it, don't you?"

As Chrissy looked at her, Tessa noticed that the tears Chrissy had been bravely trying to repress all afternoon were threatening to flow.

"Could you please read it in private, Miss Graves?" Chrissy pleaded. "And then, if you think there's something relevant in there that needs to be shared with the police, maybe you could just share that part?"

Tessa looked at Jack, her eyes silently pleading with him. Then she looked at Chrissy and smiled. "Yes, I'm sure we could do that. I'll read it privately first, and then I'll only share what's relevant with Sheriff Lewis. Will that make you feel better?"

Chrissy instantly brightened. "Oh yes, thank you. I won't feel so awful about betraying poor Nicki then. I'll feel so much better about handing over her journal if you're the only one reading it, and I know she'll forgive me if it helps us find her."

A few minutes later, Tessa was settled back in Jack's car, clutching the journal in her hands. Jack threw her a quick glance as he pulled away from the curb.

"You know I can't do what you promised Chrissy, right? That journal is now evidence in a missing person's investigation, and it's going to be gone over with a fine-tooth comb. There's no way that I can keep any of it private."

Tessa sighed. “I know that,” she admitted, “but the poor girl was so distraught and upset about betraying her best friend. I know we need to see what’s in here, but I just felt I had to do something to make her feel better about giving it to us. If it helps her to think that I’m the only one who reads it, then I’m willing to bend the truth a little.”

Jack suppressed a smile. “It’s a good thing that your abilities to detect a lie don’t affect your ability to lie.”

Tessa grimaced. “Don’t make it sound so harsh. I’m thinking of it more as bending the truth to save her feelings than telling an outright lie.”

“Why don’t you look through it now? Start with the latest entries. Maybe she mentions the guy she met the other night, and we can start looking into that right away,” Jack suggested.

Thankfully, Nicki hadn’t been one to just scribble her daily routine down, however unremarkable, every day. She only journaled about events and days that she found important or disturbing, so it was relatively easy for Tessa to discern what she had been up to for the last year.

Jack pulled the car onto a curb and put it in park, leaving her to read while he went to get them some coffee. She accepted the cup he handed her absently and continued to read while he sat patiently next to her, shuffling through his own notes. She finally looked up, rubbing her eyes.

“Well”—Jack looked at her expectantly—“is there anything that will help us in there, or just a bunch of jibber jabber from a young girl?”

Tessa threw him a scathing look. “First of all, Jack, if it’s important enough for a young woman to write down, then it isn’t jibber jabber.”

“Okay, you’re right. Sorry,” he conceded. “But is there anything in there that can help us find her?”

She nodded her head as she handed him the journal. “Yes, I think so. I can give you the synopsis while you drive,



but I agree it needs to be read through more carefully. I might have missed some pertinent details.”

Jack looked grim as he set the journal next to him and started up the car. “Okay, shoot. What did you read that I need to know?”

Tessa leaned back, closed her eyes, and tried to envision the words she had just read. “I started reading from where she dated it about a year ago. I hoped she would give some insight on what made her move here.”

Jack glanced over but stayed quiet. “She apparently came from quite a bit of money, but she doesn’t get into how her parents earned it. She might mention that in some earlier entries.”

“So Chrissy’s instinct was right,” Jack commented.

“Yes. She was concerned her parents might have recently started doing something illegal. She says that she loves them, and she’s worried about an ongoing investigation into their finances. She also wrote that she can’t even imagine that they would ever do anything unlawful, but when she questioned her mother, she told her not to worry. Her father could handle it.”

“Interesting,” Jack said. “Anyway, there are quite a few entries about how she thinks both of her parents seem extremely preoccupied and how she feels they’re trying to protect her, but she knows that something is wrong. She also laments how she’s worried about them losing all of their money and how that might mean that she’ll need to go to work and change her lifestyle.”

“So she was a little princess,” Jack said wryly.

“You can’t really blame her for growing up privileged,” Tessa replied. “It’s not her fault her parents spoiled her, and she turned out pretty good despite it.”

“Sorry, okay. What else does it say?”

“She skips quite a few weeks and then writes kind of panicked. She says that her dad has gotten a lawyer, but it

looks like someone he trusted has embezzled money, and the investigators think it's him."

"Does she mention who he thinks embezzled it?" Jack looked over at her, his interest now thoroughly piqued.

"She doesn't say any names, but she does say that she suspects it was 'him' again, and how she had tried to warn her parents that he was always up to no good, but she doesn't write who 'him' might be."

"Hopefully, she mentions 'him' in some of her earlier posts. Go on," Jack said.

"Well, there's nothing again for a few months, and then she writes about how forlorn she is without her parents, and how she wishes that her mother hadn't flown with her dad that day."

Now Jack looked at her with interest, "You said that Henri said his parents had been killed in a plane crash, didn't you?"

Tessa nodded. "I really believe Nicki is the sister he was talking about, Jack, but she's not the cold-hearted monster that he described to me. She says that once the estate is settled, she intends to give a large part of it to charity. She writes she wants to start a new life and work, and in her own words, become a productive member of society and make her parents proud."

"Wow, so that's why she moved in with Chrissy?" Jack asked.

"It appears so. Her entries get a bit more regular once she moves in with Chrissy. Apparently, she was trying to journal to work through her feelings of grief and anxiety."

"She probably watched Dr. Phil," Jack said wryly.

"What do you know about Dr. Phil?" Tessa asked, looking at him with amusement.

"About as much as you do," he countered, grinning. "Go on, what else did it say?"

“She writes more about how happy she is to be living with Chrissy, and how much she’s learning and how excited she is to be starting a new job.” Then Tessa looked over at Jack. “Her last entry is the one that I think will interest you the most, though.”

He looked at her curiously. “Okay, so what does it say?”

“She writes her brother stopped by unexpectedly, and that she did not know how he found her, but she was excited because he told her he wanted to make amends. Apparently, they had been fighting about what would happen with their parents’ estate, and he was finally willing to work with her on some compromises.”

“Hmmm, I wonder if that was the man Chrissy saw her talking to.”

“It could have been. She writes how excited she is at the prospect of the reconciliation, and how she hopes they can be a family again and get along like when they were kids.”

Jack was getting an uneasy feeling. “What happened then? Did she ever reconcile with him?”

“I don’t think so,” Tessa said sadly. “Her last entry says that he asked her to spend some time with him, and how happy and excited she is to see him.” She looked at Jack and said, “He asked her to rent a car for them, so they could go to the mountains to hike and talk about their plans.”

## Chapter 15

The next day, Tessa searched her computer for the name Nicole White, hoping to find any references to her in her files. She tried various spellings and names, even experimenting with variations of Nicolette LeBlanc.

“So, you think there’s a possibility that Nicolette and Nicole are the same person?” Stephanie asked.

“Yes, I do,” Tessa replied. “They are essentially the same name, just different versions. Maybe Nicolette used an alias when signing her lease.”

Stephanie pondered for a moment. “Hmm, based on what you’ve told me, Nicole and Chrissy seemed to get along well, and they’ve been living together for a few months now. I don’t think Nicole would have kept an alias a secret from her roommate for that long. I mean, think about it, Tessa. Have you and I ever been able to keep a secret from each other?”

Tessa smiled. “No, I guess we haven’t. And I agree with you. Besides, Nicole had a distinct southern drawl, according to Chrissy. It would be difficult for someone to fake that accent consistently with their roommate.”

Stephanie nodded. “You mentioned that Henri had a French accent, right? If they are siblings, it’s strange that they would have different accents, don’t you think?”

Tessa recalled how Henri sounded when they first met. “Yes, it’s quite peculiar. But it’s probably easier to fake a French accent for a short period than to maintain a southern drawl for months. And now I can’t even remember if Henri still had an accent when he attacked me,” she said.

“So, they could be related, and Henri was the one faking his accent?” Stephanie speculated. “In that case, he might have also been using a fake name. It’s possible that he

went by LeBlanc when his real name is White, don't you think?"

Tessa rubbed her forehead, feeling anxious and unsettled just thinking about Henri. "I suppose you're right, Steph. I'll need to discuss all of this with Jack again. I'm just not sure what to believe anymore. I genuinely wish we could find Nicole and Henri and resolve this whole situation soon. Every time I think about him, I become jittery and nervous."

Stephanie approached Tessa and gave her a comforting hug. "I can understand why you would feel that way, and I'm sorry for bringing it up. I didn't mean to upset you. On a positive note, you look a bit better today, Tessa. How did you sleep last night?"

*Not very good*, she thought to herself, but she said aloud, "I slept fine, thanks. I'm pretty sure that I'm finally on the mend."

The truth was, after her discussion with Ellie, Tessa was dreaming about Ellie's reproachful gaze as well, reprimanding herself for having been so rude to her. It was just that she couldn't help but wonder if Ellie's concern for her employer stemmed from a more personal connection. And even if it did, why did that bother her so much?

The phone on her desk rang, and Tessa picked it up absently with her usual greeting, getting ready to take a name and number in case it was yet another woman needing help. Her face paled, and she switched the phone to speaker, motioning for Stephanie to stay silent while she listened to the caller. They both heard the same angry voice they had heard on the recording.

"Listen up, I already told you to stay out of my business. You need to stop meddling in things that don't concern you and just leave well enough alone. You're messing with a lot more lives than you know, and I won't stand around and watch you ruin everything."

Stephanie motioned for her to keep talking so they could try to get a trace on where the call was coming from.

Jack had said the longer the caller stayed on the phone, the better chance they had.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ll need to be more specific. What is it you want me to stop?” Tessa said.

The caller gave her a derisive laugh. “Just how many lives are you messing around with anyway, lady? You know exactly what I’m talking about. Back off.”

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t know what you mean. I’d like to help you, but you’ll need to tell me more. What is it you think I’m messing up for you?” she asked, trying to keep him talking.

“You think I’m stupid, don’t you? I know that you’re trying to trace me, but it won’t do you any good. I don’t want to hurt you, I really don’t, but if you don’t back down, I’ll do what I have to do. Don’t doubt me on that. Don’t force my hand,” the caller said, hanging up abruptly.

Tessa was shaking by the time she placed the receiver back into the holder.

“Did you recognize the voice?” Stephanie asked her, watching her with concern.

Tessa shook her head and shakily said, “No, I don’t recognize the voice, but Henri kept saying that he really didn’t want to hurt me, but it was my fault, and I had forced him into it.”

“That’s kind of what this guy is saying,” said Stephanie in alarm. “Maybe Henri and this caller are working together after all.” She pulled out her cell phone. “That’s it, we’re going to call Jack. He needs to know about this.”

Jack was busily taking notes while Stephanie and Tessa relayed what the caller had said, and also how it had been very similar to what Henri had told Tessa during his attacks on her. As he scribbled on his notepad, he was watching Tessa with concern, worried about her shaking, and wondering if he should insist that she go back to the cottage.

Before he could say anything, his own phone rang. He quickly excused himself and walked out of the office. Stephanie turned to Tessa, trying to calm her shaking friend. She was shocked at how much the call had rattled her.

“It’s okay, Tessa. He can’t get to you here. He’s just a voice on the other side of the phone, shouting out threats that are meaningless. Jack will find out who it is and put a stop to it. Please Tessa, stop shaking.”

Tessa only heard Stephanie’s voice through a muffled tunnel, and the ringing in her ears was getting louder. She was trying desperately to quell the rising panic that was threatening to overcome her, so she focused her entire attention on Jack, who was standing just outside her door, talking on the phone. She watched as he furrowed his brow, and then brushed his hand over the crew cut that he invariably wore. Then she saw him glance at her, and slowly put the phone back in his pocket, coming back into her office with a solemn look. Tessa knew that whatever news he had just received, it wasn’t good.

“What? What is it Jack?” she whispered, not entirely sure that she even wanted to know.

“That was one of my officers. They just received a call from Beau’s housekeeper.”

“Ellie?” Tessa’s voice sounded hollow in her ears, and her heart threatened to burst out of her chest. *Oh please no, please don’t let Beau be hurt*, she prayed desperately and silently.

Jack nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s what he said her name was.” He looked at Tessa. “She said that Beau contacted her this morning.”

“He’s back? He’s safe?” Tessa almost choked in relief.

Jack looked at her suspiciously. “He’s safe, but no he’s not back. He wants me to meet him up at the same spot he says that you first ran into Henri LeBlanc.”

“But why?” Stephanie asked, puzzled and wondering why everyone seemed so intent on dredging up these awful memories for Tessa.

“He found a body,” Jack announced. “A woman’s body.”

Tessa felt her heart constrict to where she found it hard to breathe, and she could see that the blood had also drained from Stephanie’s face.

“The Rangers have dispatched a group to retrieve the body already. I’m going to meet them at the trailhead, and then go up and see the place Beau found her,” Jack said.

Tessa swallowed the lump in her throat and asked, “Do you know if it’s Nicole White?”

“It could be,” Jack conceded. “I’ll use her license from the car rental place to make a comparison. Hopefully, the body isn’t too decomposed.”

Tessa felt her breakfast threatening to come up at the thought of the poor woman’s decomposing body.

Jack saw Tessa’s reaction and said, “You’re looking kind of peaked again. Why don’t I drop you at your cottage on my way out? I really think that you need to rest again for a bit.”

Tessa protested, even though she really was feeling awful. She still had days of work to catch up on, and some of her current residents had court cases she needed to brush up on.

Stephanie stopped her before she could go into the long list of things she still needed to do. “No Tessa, Jack is right. What you need to do is go home and rest. You’re no good to anyone if you don’t get your strength back. I’ll come over later, after you’ve slept for a bit, and bring some of the case files to you. You can look them over at your cottage with your ankle elevated.” She eyed her sternly. “Remember, if we don’t get the swelling down, the doctor said you’ll need to go back into the hospital, and then you’ll be out of commission even longer.”

At the thought of going back to the hospital, Tessa conceded. She was looking forward to getting her



independence back and wasn't about to do anything that would jeopardize the opportunity.

Jack helped her hobble down the hallway to the door when he finally seemed to lose patience with her slow and painful progress and just scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the door. Startled at the sudden movement, her head fell into his collarbone. She let it stay there for a minute, taking in the slight smell of the aftershave he had used this morning.

“Sorry,” he said. “I think it’s better for me to carry you. I don’t want to put any more strain on that ankle than we need to.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Tessa mumbled, unabashedly enjoying the free ride. She could feel the ripple of muscle under his dress shirt, and she had to restrain herself from lifting her hands to feel his arms. Jack was shorter than either Beau or Carter, and she had never thought of him as a muscular man, but she was thinking his looks had been deceiving. The arms holding her tight were a lot more powerful than she had thought.

When they reached his car, Jack set her inside carefully, leaning in to buckle her seat belt. She once again caught a whiff of his aftershave, and it made her nose tickle slightly.

Holding back a giggle, Tessa said, “We’re literally just going next door, Jack. I don’t think we need to do up all the bells and whistles, do you?”

Jack settled in, pulling his own seatbelt on deliberately and threw her a stern look. “Have you never heard that most accidents happen just a few feet away from your own door?”

Duly chastised, Tessa settled back and sighed.

As they passed through the gates of the shelter, Jack turned to her grinning. “Besides, when I’m carrying precious cargo, I like to make sure it’s safe.”

Tessa blushed at the compliment and awkwardly looked out the window, suddenly extremely interested in the

passing landscape. To cover her embarrassment, she asked, “Will you let me know what you find out later today?”

“Yes, of course I will. If you want, I’ll come by and bring you dinner? I could give you a full report then.”

“Oh, that would be nice,” she exclaimed. “I mean, you don’t need to bring dinner, of course, but I would love to see you. I mean, I would love to hear what it is you find out today,” she stammered uncomfortably.

Suddenly she thought of Ellie, and she was sure that the younger woman would handle this situation in the same cool and collected way that she seemed to handle everything, and she once again felt completely inadequate. She wasn’t sure if his intent on coming to see her tonight was in the capacity of sheriff, friend, or potential suitor, and she didn’t want to lead him. *At least not yet*, she thought, remembering the feel of the powerful arms that had been holding her earlier.

They pulled into the gated driveway, past the tree line and main house, until they reached the little gravel turnaround in front of her cottage.

“Give me your keys, I’ll go open the door before I get you out,” Jack said. He unlocked her door, then came back to extricate her from his car, being careful not to bump her ankle. Gently, he set her on the couch, reaching for the blanket that was folded neatly on the back of it and tucked it around her carefully. He then walked to the little iron stove and sparked up the fire in it.

“There, that should keep you warm for a bit. I have to get going, but if you need anything, I can stop at the main house and ask Ellie to come over and make you some tea or something? I’m sure that she would be more than happy to. She seems like a sweet girl.”

*What is it with that woman that everyone just seems to be so smitten with her?* she thought.

Tessa was extremely touched by the kindness and concern from the gruff sheriff, but the last person she wanted to see today was Ellie.

“No, no. Thank you so much for helping me, but I think that I’ll just rest for now like Stephanie suggested. She’ll be over shortly anyway to bring those papers and help me out.”

“Okay then, if you’re sure you’re okay?” For a second, Jack stood over her awkwardly, and Tessa almost thought he was going to lean down and kiss her goodbye when he abruptly turned and left, closing the door behind him.

“So, you thought he might go in for the kiss, huh?” Stephanie asked.

She was sitting with her knees pulled up under her chin, in what was fast becoming her favorite spot in the cottage. The comfortable little chair she was perched on was the closest one to the stove, and she was perpetually cold unless it was the hottest day of the summer. Right now, she was looking at Tessa with a bemused look on her face.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tessa replied, carefully sipping from the cup of piping hot cocoa Stephanie had prepared for them. “I could just as well have imagined it. My head seems to be in such a muddle lately. Maybe my anxiety about being alone is just making me see potential protectors everywhere.”

“Well, if it’s a protector you’re looking for, we both know who would be more than eager to take that role.” Stephanie was grinning. “I almost think that Carter would have preferred you stay up in the mountains another night if it would have meant that he could be the one that found you.”

Tessa shuddered. “Well, I, for one, am glad that I didn’t need to spend another night up there alone. I was terrified.”

Stephanie’s grin immediately vanished. “I’m sorry, Tessa. I was only teasing you. I can’t even imagine how terrified you must have been. It’s only natural that your feelings are all over the place right now.”

Tessa absently sipped at her cup. “Maybe, but I vowed I wouldn’t move on until I found out what really happened to Luke and to Hope, and now look at me. I’m seeing a potential life partner in every male that shows me any kindness at all.”

Stephanie laughed. “That’s not true, Tessa. You haven’t gone after the gardener or Dan yet, have you?”

Tessa gave her a wicked look and grinned. “No, not yet anyway, but just give me some time, Steph. You never know. Speaking of that charming husband of yours, didn’t you say he should be here soon?”

Nodding, Stephanie looked at the time. “Yup, exactly ten minutes ago, as a matter of fact. I guess he got hung up at work again. He seems to be late all the time lately.”

“Cut him a little slack, Steph. It can’t be easy starting his own company. He’s just trying his best to take care of you and the family.”

“Spending some time with us would be more helpful than his working all the time,” Stephanie grumbled, standing up to glance impatiently out the window. “Well, here he comes now, tearing down the driveway at top speed, as if that’s going to make any difference at this point.”

As Stephanie walked to the door to open it for her husband, Tessa called out, “Remember, Steph, not a word to Dan about what we talked about. That is covered by the best friend confidentiality clause.”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry,” Stephanie shouted back, opening the door for Dan.

“Don’t worry about what?” he asked, shedding his coat as soon as he walked in the door. “Geez, are you two trying to create a sauna in here?”

“No, we’re just trying to keep from freezing to death,” Stephanie replied. “Tessa was worried that she doesn’t look presentable enough for you, that’s all.”

Dan walked over and gave Tessa a kiss on the forehead. “You look amazing,” he assured her and then looked at her critically. “Who knew that the colors black and blue were so becoming with your complexion.”

Tessa touched the biggest bruise on her face self-consciously. “It’s still pretty visible, huh?”

“No, not really, just a little,” Dan said, sitting down on the opposite side of Stephanie. “I’m kind of surprised not to see Carter here today.”

“I told him to stay in the city and tend to his business today. There is no reason for him to be sitting in front of me all day. Frankly, it’s kind of annoying how he hovers over me as if I’m invalid. I told him I needed my rest today, and he could come back and hover tomorrow if he insists on it,” Tessa informed him.

Dan grinned, “Yeah, he has that tendency, doesn’t he?”

Stephanie looked at her husband. “I personally would love it if you would hover occasionally. But of course, you would need to be around to do that, wouldn’t you?”

Ignoring the dig, Dan turned to Tessa. “Have you gotten any updates from Beau or Jack yet?”

“No, not yet. Jack left a while ago, and I haven’t heard from Beau all day. I’m sure they’re busy getting that poor woman’s body off the mountain right now,” Tessa replied.

Dan shook his head, looking upset. “I know Jack would say we don’t have the facts yet, and we need to see what that poor woman actually died from, but it’s pretty frightening to think that she might actually have been murdered up there. We spent so much time up in those mountains as kids, and it always seemed so safe.”

Tessa nodded at Dan. “I know what you mean. I always thought that the biggest danger up there was running into a bunch of older troublemakers like you and your friends. It’s almost unimaginable to think that there might be a serial killer on the loose in our mountains.”

“So, you’re leaning towards the serial killer theory now? I thought Jack has been thinking the attack on you was linked to that strange phone call from the scratchy-voiced guy,” Dan said.

Tessa smiled absently at Dan’s description. He always seemed to come up with some kind of nickname for people.

“To be honest, I don’t know what to believe. I certainly felt targeted, but your wife seems to think he is definitely a serial killer, especially now that another female body has been found,” she said.

“From what you told me, it makes the most sense, Tessa. You said he kept telling you he had nothing against you personally. That just doesn’t sound like someone who tracked you up there. It sounds more like someone who saw you by chance,” Stephanie explained.

“That’s true, but it is quite a coincidence for me to be attacked by a serial killer and get threatening phone calls all at the same time. At least that’s what Jack thinks,” Tessa said.

“Maybe you’re just lucky?” Stephanie said. “I, for one, still hope that it was just a random attack. That way, we don’t need to worry about him trying to track you down to finish the job. Don’t serial killers just attack and then move on?”

“Once they’ve killed, they do, but Tessa got away, remember? He might be worried that she can identify him,” Dan reflected.

“What is wrong with you, Daniel?” Stephanie threw him a stern look. “Are you trying to scare Tessa even more?” She looked over to Tessa. “He’s not after you anymore, Tessa, so don’t worry. Henri LeBlanc has to know that you’ve already told the police everything you know anyway, so hunting you down now wouldn’t do him any good anyhow. I’m sure that he’s moved on or crawled back into whatever hole serial killers hide in. Besides, he wouldn’t know how to find you even if he did still want to get to you.”

“I don’t know, Steph. We were walking and talking for quite a while before he attacked me. Granted, he was doing most of the talking, but he asked me a few questions as well, and I’m not sure what I told him. Maybe I mentioned the shelter. Remember, at that point, I didn’t think that I would ever see him again, so I wasn’t all that careful about what I said,” Tessa admitted.

Dan frowned. “You think you might have mentioned Hope’s Haven? If you did, it wouldn’t be too hard to find it,

even if you don't advertise. Let's be honest, most of the townspeople know where you are and what you do here. If he asked around, it wouldn't be hard to locate the shelter and find out who runs it."

"Now you're scaring me too, Dan," Stephanie said. She turned to Tessa. "Do you think you told him about Hope's Haven?"

Tessa tried to think, but all that came to mind when she thought about that day was Henri's silky smooth voice, his sneering smile, and the big glinting knife. "I'm sorry, I just don't remember if I did or not. I guess it's possible that I did, though."

"I think it would be safer if both you and Stephanie stay away from the shelter for a while. At least until they find this guy. He could try to attack either of you." Dan frowned.

"The women might not be safe there then either," Stephanie announced. "But we can't just close the whole shelter and move everyone on a hunch, Dan."

"I think that you and Tessa should just stay away from there for a while. I don't think he'll hurt any of the other women, but if he's looking for Tessa and knows that she runs the shelter, he might target you as well," Dan said, throwing Stephanie worried looks as he spoke.

"I doubt I'm in any bigger danger than any of the other women, Dan. Tessa and I look nothing alike. He's hardly going to mix us up," Stephanie replied, grinning mischievously at Dan. "It's nice to know that you still care, though, darling."

Dan shrugged and laughed. "Well, I do still need you to look after the boys, remember?" He ducked as Stephanie threw a pillow at him, then turned to Tessa with a more serious look on his face. "I still think you should go stay at Carter's penthouse until he's found, Tessa. Carter has a doorman and all kinds of security there. It wouldn't be very easy to sneak into his place. If you stay here, there's no one around to protect you."

Tessa glanced at Cash, who had been lying next to the glass door on the mat Stephanie had brought over. The dog had been watching the three friends talking with a watchful eye, especially since Dan had arrived.

“I have Cash here. He’s the best security around. Besides, you’re assuming that I would stay cooped up in the penthouse all day, Dan, and we both know that’s not possible. I’ll have to leave and go out at one point, and I’m just as vulnerable in the city as I am here,” she pointed out, gesturing towards the dog. “More so, actually. Here, I at least have Cash to watch out for me. Besides, what if they never find Henri? I can’t hide out forever. Sometimes bad people do horrible things and never get caught. Remember, they still haven’t found the people who destroyed my family.”

“Hopefully, Carter will find out something about that soon. I know that he’s been looking into it really hard again,” Dan remarked absentmindedly.

Tessa looked at him in surprise, and Stephanie threw him an angry glare. “What do you mean Carter has been looking really hard again? What’s he been looking really hard into?”

Stephanie scowled at her husband. “You were supposed to stay mum about this for now, remember?” she hissed at him.

“Stay mum about what? What has Carter been up to, and why don’t I know anything about this?” Tessa demanded, looking from one to the other angrily.

Sighing, Stephanie said, “Carter asked us not to say anything to you just yet. Not until he had found something concrete, anyway. He’s been trying to trace where these mysterious funds keep coming from, hoping it will somehow lead us to the killer.”

“Those funds have saved our butts several times, Stephanie, you know that as well as I do. What would they have to do with Hope and Luke’s killers? I don’t think that someone who tried to kill me would now send us money.”



“Well, Carter thinks it could somehow be a guilt thing, or even a payoff of sorts. You know, someone trying to absolve themselves of the crime or something like that,” Dan said, trying to appease her angry look.

“The police have already looked into that and dismissed the idea as improbable. If Carter believes differently, why hasn’t he come to me before he digs around again? And for that matter”—Tessa looked directly at Stephanie—“why haven’t you come to me and let me know what Carter is up to?”

Stephanie gave her a sheepish look. “Because he asked me not to, and, well, you know, that best friend confidentiality thing counts with him too, doesn’t it?”

Tessa snorted, “No, it doesn’t. You can only have one best friend, Stephanie Woods, and you had better figure out which one of us it is.”

“I’m sorry, Tessa, really I am. Of course it’s you. I just hoped that maybe this time, if we looked at everything again, Carter might find something that the police missed before,” Stephanie explained. “We all just want to solve this and for you to move on with your life again.”

“You want me to move on with Carter, you mean,” Tessa retorted, still mad that her friends had been conspiring behind her back.

“No, not necessarily with Carter, or even with anyone else, Tessa. I just want you to move on and figure out a way to be truly happy again, without this dark cloud hanging over you all the time,” Stephanie confessed.

“I’m happy enough. I lost my entire family, that’s never going to change, and it doesn’t help one bit to have my best friends sneaking around behind my back and meddling in my life.” Tessa was hurt. She had thought that she was doing a great job pretending that everything was just fine with her, and now Stephanie was informing her she had fooled no one.

“Come on, Tessa, don’t be mad at us,” Dan said. “Every one of us loves you dearly, and we also loved Luke and

Hope. There's not a day that goes by that I don't stop and send a prayer up to them. But it's no secret that when they died, some of your old spark died too. If it would help bring that back by getting you some closure, then you can't blame us for trying, can you?"

Tessa wanted to be mad and she wanted to lash out, but she knew her friends were sincere in their concern. As betrayed as she felt, she also knew that they only wanted the best for her. Thinking of what happened to Luke and Hope just made her feel tired and completely drained. Laying her head back on the pillow, she tried hard to keep the tears from flowing.

Stephanie crouched in front of her, holding her hand and stroking her forehead. "Oh, Tessa, I'm so sorry we had to get into this right now. I would have talked to you about this at a different time, honest, but you've been through so much lately and it just never seemed like the right time. Carter's heart is in the right place, and he's just trying to help."

Tessa nodded, and then, curious despite herself, she asked, "Has he found anything yet? Anything different, I mean?"

"Not yet, but he thinks he might be onto something," Dan answered.

Tessa opened her eyes and looked at him closely. "What do you mean? Tell me everything, Dan."

Dan sighed and said, "He should be the one telling you, but okay, I guess you have a right to know what's going on as well. He's hired a detective, with his own money, so don't worry, to follow Hope's grandmother and Hope's father."

"What! Why? What's he hoping to find by following them?" Tessa asked, perplexed.

"He wants to see if they're having you followed or watched," Stephanie interjected.

"Oh my," Tessa said softly, "I never thought of that." She looked at them. "And are they?"

“We don’t know yet. He just hired the detective a few weeks ago, and he said he would need a little time,” Stephanie said.

“Well, I’m going to talk to Carter about all of this later. And from now on, I want no more secrets between us. I want to know exactly what’s going on with this detective and what you’re all talking about behind my back,” Tessa announced.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, we weren’t talking behind your back. We were just trying not to worry you or get your hopes up,” Stephanie said defensively.

Before they could argue any more, Tessa’s phone rang. Dan got up to retrieve it from the counter and brought it to her, watching her as she answered. After a few minutes, he heard Tessa say, “Okay, I’ll try. I’ll let you know.”

After she hung up, Stephanie looked at her curiously. “Who was that?”

Tessa’s forehead crinkled. “It was Victoria Bannan. She says she needs to talk to me, and it’s urgent.”

## Chapter 16

“Victoria?” Stephanie sputtered. “You mean the same Victoria that gave us so much trouble a few months ago? Patty’s mother?”

“It wasn’t really her that gave us the trouble, it was her daughter Patty, but yes, that Victoria,” Tessa said absently, thinking about the call she had just received.

“What did she want? Has she heard from Patty?” Dan asked.

Patty Brinker, Victoria’s daughter had shown up at the shelter a few months back, pregnant and involved with two men that had been trying to rob Tessa and the shelter. Dan knew that at one point Tessa had hoped that she might adopt Patty’s unborn baby, but the girl had since gone into hiding and disappeared.

Tessa shook her head. “I’m not sure. All she would say was that she urgently needed to talk to me, and she begged me to meet her somewhere other than her house.”

“So she’s still hiding things from her husband? I wonder if she’s finally ready to leave him,” Stephanie mused.

“Maybe. But she’s insisting that she needs to meet me somewhere public, so she seems nervous about something. I am curious what it is she wants to tell me.”

Stephanie looked at her with a worried frown. “Please don’t get your hopes up again, Tessa. You’ve been through so much, and you’re really fragile right now. I don’t want you to have to face yet another disappointment.”

Tessa smiled ruefully. “I’m not that fragile, and don’t worry Steph, I won’t get my hopes up. I already know how the system that helped Patty works. It’s fairly certain that I won’t hear from her again. Victoria must need help with something else.”

“Well, make sure you let us know before you meet with her. I think that someone should probably go with you,” Stephanie said, standing up and motioning for Dan to do the same.

“We had better get going now and rescue the poor babysitter from our two ruffians, or she’ll quit on us. They’re getting stir-crazy since they haven’t been able to get outside.”

At the mention of her two godsons, Tessa smiled lovingly. “Maybe you could bring them here to see me tomorrow? I feel like I haven’t seen those two in ages, and I could use some cheery smiles and hugs.”

Stephanie snorted. “You just saw them a few days ago, and they’re likely to bowl you right over with their overzealous embraces, but I will try to stop by with them soon. They’ll be thrilled to get out and see you as well.”

“Thanks, Stephanie, I would love that,” Tessa said enthusiastically, already looking forward to seeing them.

“Do you want me to carry you into the bedroom so you can rest better?” Dan asked.

“No, thanks, Dan.” Tessa eyed the crutches leaning against the corner. “But if you wouldn’t mind, can you bring my crutches a little closer? I’m actually getting pretty good at moving around with them.”

After Dan and Stephanie had gotten her situated and left, Tessa grabbed her crutches and made her way to the veranda, hoping to catch the last of the sunset. Cash stood up, following her outside. She leaned against the railing, trailing her hand over his soft head while he whined in pleasure. As she watched the last of the sun dip down over the horizon, she felt an odd mixture of tranquility and loneliness.

“Maybe that’s my problem,” she mused, talking to the dog standing by her feet. “I don’t even know what I want. A part of me just wants to be alone and lick my wounds, and another part of me doesn’t like to be alone at all.”

Cash looked up at her as if he understood every word. She sighed down at him. “I guess I really am a complete mess,

huh boy?”

It was still cold out, so she grabbed her crutches and made her way back inside.

“Come on, let’s see if we can get some rest tonight. Maybe with your help, I can exchange the memory of Henri’s face for the memory of tonight’s sunset.”

The next morning found Tessa sitting at the little chair she had dragged in front of the glass doors with a perfect view of the mountains. She felt stronger today and had made a few rounds with the crutches around her cottage, hoping to improve her stamina. Now, she opted away from laying back on the couch with her foot elevated, choosing to sit on a chair instead.

“Enough of this invalid stuff,” she had announced to Cash when he had watched her hobbling around. “I need to get strong enough to meet with Victoria and find out what she so wants from me.”

She was munching on the scone that Ellie had left at the front door and enjoying it much more than she wanted to admit. Since she had stopped by with the casserole, Ellie hadn’t entered the cottage anymore, opting instead to leave food at the door without disturbing her, and Tessa wondered if it was because Ellie had sensed her bad attitude towards her, or if she was just being considerate.

“I’m sure that she’s just being her usual perfect and considerate self,” Tessa mumbled, looking to Cash for affirmation.

“Who’s being considerate?”

At the sound of Beau’s voice, Cash jumped up, wagging his tail but staying protectively close to Tessa.

“Well certainly not you,” Tessa answered, trying to sound annoyed but smiling in delight at seeing him, a surge of excitement running through her.

“Don’t you knock or announce yourself anymore? I could have been in the shower or walking about in a compromised state.”

Beau looked at her, his eyes smoldering. “One can only hope,” he said suggestively, sending shock waves of excitement through her body.

Tessa blushed and scolded him further to cover her discomfort. “I’ve told you a hundred times that you can’t just walk in. You need to at least knock.”

“I knocked,” he said, but when she looked at him dubiously, he just grinned back. “Well, maybe not very loudly, but I knocked.” He looked at Cash, who was still standing protectively next to Tessa. “I see that he’s moved indoors. Did you both forget I have a strict rule about him staying outside? He’s supposed to be the ground’s guard dog, not a lap dog, and he has a perfectly nice kennel to sleep in.”

Tessa straightened her chin and sat up as tall as she could in her chair, thinking about how Ellie had warned her that Beau would not like that Cash was inside.

“No, we did not forget that. But I deliberately ignored your rule. I like him to be in here with me. I feel safer with him close,” she said. She looked him squarely in the eye as she spoke, and noticed that, despite his cocky attitude, he looked tired and unkempt. He must have come straight to the cottage and not stopped at the main house to clean up first. “You look tired like you haven’t slept in a while,” she said, looking at him concerned. “Did you just get back?”

Nodding he replied, “Yeah, I did just get back.” He walked over to the kitchen. “Got any of that coffee left? I sure could use some.”

“Of course, help yourself,” she said, watching him as he pulled a mug out of her cupboard with a familiarity that made her glow inside.

As he poured, he asked, “Did you make this pot, or did Ellie?”

The glow instantly left her, and she retorted, “I did. Why?”

He smiled. “Good. I was hoping you had. Your coffee is the best I’ve ever tasted. Strong and bold. I sure could use

that today.”

She glowed again at his praise while chiding herself for being so silly. *What did it matter if he liked her coffee better than he did Ellie’s?* But the radiant glow remained. He walked over to the couch and sank down wearily.

“It was pretty rough up there, huh?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah, it’s never a good thing to find a body, much less if it belongs to a young woman in her prime.” He sighed.

“So you could tell that she was young?”

“Yeah, she hasn’t been dead that long, and most of her was still pretty recognizable. I guess the cold helped to preserve her a bit as well.”

Tessa hesitated before asking, “Was it Nicole White?”

His brow furrowed. “The body was a young female, and the driver’s license found on her said Nicole White. Jack is busy looking into whether the license is valid, but it matches the picture on the license he got from the car rental place, so it seems like it’s the missing woman Nicole White.”

He brushed back his hair tiredly. “The coroner is looking into the cause of death right now. I’m sure that Jack will fill you in on everything as soon as he knows more.”

Tessa shook her head sadly. “Henri probably murdered her. I wonder who else he’s killed.”

“We can’t jump to conclusions Tessa. We won’t know her cause of death until we get the coroner’s report,” Beau cautioned.

“Now you sound just like Jack. You don’t think she was purposely killed then?”

He looked down at his coffee. “No, from what I saw, I’m pretty certain someone killed her. She didn’t bury herself. Someone else had to do that, and it was obvious someone had tried to hide where she was buried.

Tessa watched him curiously. “What made you go to that spot?”



“When you showed me the picture you took where Henri LeBlanc jumped out at you, I thought I saw something in the background. It looked like a mound or some disturbed dirt. I wasn’t sure, but something just looked off. You said that it was strange to see him crouching there, and you weren’t sure why he would be lying to you about why he was back there, so I figured he had to have been hiding something.”

“What did you think you would find there?” she asked.

Sighing tiredly, he again ran his hands through his shaggy dark hair. “I didn’t know what I expected to find, but it wasn’t a dead body.”

Watching him sympathetically, Tessa said, “That must have been awful for you.”

“It was,” he replied, “but at least she was found, and she’s not just laying up there alone to be food for the wild animals. No one deserves that.”

Tessa thought back to the attacks on herself, thinking that’s exactly what Henri had intended for her as well.

“Do you think that’s why he tried to kill me, Beau? Maybe he thought I saw him bury her?”

“Jack and I talked about that, and we both think it’s entirely possible that he thought that. He might have thought that you caught something in the picture you took. Maybe he thought the grave he dug was more visible than it was. Did he try to get your camera?”

Tessa tried to think back, but she couldn’t remember him ever asking her for her camera. “I don’t know, Beau, he never asked me for it, but maybe that’s what he wanted to get from my backpack. He seemed pretty determined to get something that was in it.”

Beau sat thinking and sipping his coffee. He was slouched tiredly in his chair, and he had propped his feet up on her coffee table. Tessa thought he looked like he would fall asleep at any minute.

“You really look tired, Beau. You should shower and get some sleep,” she suggested.

“Yeah, I’ll just grab another cup of coffee, and then I’ll try to catch a few hours of sleep before I head back up there,” he said, getting up to refill his coffee.

“You’re going back up?” Tessa was alarmed. “But you can’t! Jack wants you to stay away from the investigation. He even threatened to have you arrested if you get involved! Besides, it’s dangerous. What if Henri is still around? You could be hurt.”

Beau looked at her sardonically. “Your faith in my abilities is overwhelming,” he announced wryly. Before Tessa could protest more, he asked, “What’s been going on around here? To be honest, I’m kind of surprised to find you here alone. I thought for sure your friends would have hustled you off to the city for safekeeping.”

“I do still have a will of my own,” Tessa replied, looking at him hotly. “I told them I feel perfectly safe here and I don’t intend to be stuffed into some penthouse in the city.”

Beau grinned. “So he tried to hustle you off then, huh? I figured as much. If he spent half as much time helping look for Henri as he does trying to smother you, we might actually get somewhere.”

Tessa fumed at his dismissal of Carter. “Carter’s doing all that he can to help me. Right now, he’s even hired a detective to find out who the mystery donor is just in case this all ties together somehow.”

“How’s a lousy detective supposed to find that out? I would think that Carter has more access than anyone to your banking records? What does he need to hire anyone for? He should be the one looking into that.”

“He has tried, but he hasn’t been able to trace the money back yet. He thinks that maybe Hope’s grandmother or birth father could have something to do with it, so he hired a detective to find out if they were following me or watching the shelter.”

Beau frowned. “Do you think they’re the ones behind that threatening call you got? I find it hard to believe that they

would have murdered their own grandchild or child, but I guess it is possible that they're angry with you about something and hired someone to call you. Maybe they found out Carter hired a detective?"

He leaned back and looked at her. "Did Jack ever trace the call or figure anything out about the caller yet?"

"No," she admitted. "But while you were gone, I got another call, with the same threats. Whoever it is, he keeps insisting that I'm trying to destroy him or at least his life. I still think it has to have something to do with the shelter though, and not with Hope or Luke's murder."

"I think your right, Ragazza Perduta. It seems odd that you get these calls at the same time that you run into a maniac, but I agree with you. It sounds like the caller has more to do with someone that you helped at the shelter."

Tessa smiled. "It's nice to hear that someone agrees with me at least. But tell me Beau, what does Ragazza Perduta mean? You've called me that a few times now." She grimaced. "Please tell me it doesn't mean smelly girl or something like that?"

Beau laughed loudly, and finally said, "No, it doesn't mean that. It means Lost Girl in Italian." Giving her a mischievous smile, he said, "Why, do you stink?"

Tessa made a show of smelling herself. "Nope, not at the moment anyway. But I'm not lost anymore, either."

He looked at her critically. "Hmmm. You're not stinky, you're not lost anymore, and you don't understand Italian. But you look a little pitiful right now, with your bruises and your sweatpants with your swollen ankle. You know, I think the name Rags would work better for you right now."

"RAGS!?! Really, Beau? A woman doesn't get dressed or put on makeup for one day, and you name her Rags?"

Beau just shrugged at her, grinning. "I think it works. Besides, you look kind of cute in your rags."

She scowled at him, but he just got up laughing and walked to the kitchen.

“I’m having one of these muffins before I leave, and I’ll butter one for you as well. You look like you could use some food to fill out those clothes, Rags.”

She threw a pillow at him, and watched as he ducked, caught it, and expertly threw it back onto the couch. Then he took two of Ellie’s decadent muffins and smothered them with butter.

They ate in silence, each in their own thoughts, with Tessa enjoying the muffin more than she wanted to admit. After they were done, Beau took their plates, went to the kitchen, and refilled their coffee cups. Tessa was secretly thrilled that he was staying longer to drink his coffee and asked him his thoughts on Victoria. Admittedly, more to keep him with her for a while longer than anything else.

“Do you remember the whole incident with Patty Brinker, and her mother Victoria Bannan from a few months ago?”

“Of course I do,” he replied with a wry smile. “Patty was the reason that your apartment was burned down and why you came to live here. How could I forget that?”

“Yes, well, anyway, Victoria called me last night insisting that I need to meet with her somewhere other than her house or the shelter as soon as possible. She said it was urgent that she talk to me.”

Beau looked at her with a frown. “That’s odd. I don’t like it. What could she possibly want from you now?”

“I’m honestly not sure. I told her to call me when she was ready to meet. I guess I’ll need to wait until then to find out.

“Someone needs to go with you when you go to meet her. Maybe Carter can finally make himself useful and go with you.”

“No, Victoria specifically asked to meet me alone. I’ll meet her by myself.”

“I don’t think that you should meet with her by yourself.”

“Well, I don’t think that you should go back up the mountain by yourself either, so I guess we’re at an impasse,” she said impudently.

“You shouldn’t be driving with that ankle anyway, so you need someone to take you.”

“The doctor didn’t tell me not to drive. I’ll manage just fine. I plan on going as soon as I hear from her. She may have some news about Patty.”

Beau sat on the couch, his head back with his hands behind his neck, looking extremely weary. Tessa really wanted to go to him, put her arms around him, and let him rest his head on her, but she just sat quietly and watched him. When he finally looked at her, she thought his eyes looked infinitely tired and tortured.

“I don’t want to go back up there, Tessa. With everything that’s going on down here with you, with the threatening phone calls, and now with Victoria, believe me, I would rather stay here and watch out for you.”

“So, stay,” she told him, her heart soaring at his words.

Beau stood up and walked over to her, kneeling in front of her chair and grasping her hands in his.

“I would never forgive myself if something happened to you and I could have prevented it. That’s why I need to go back up there and see if I can track down this guy. If he is targeting you, I need to find him before he finds you.” He sighed. “And if he really is a serial killer, then he needs to be stopped before he hurts anyone else.” He gazed up at her with such emotion that her heart hammered and her hands tingled. “Just promise me you will listen to Jack and Carter this once. Let them protect you until I get back. Please Rags, promise me that.”

She nodded numbly and watched in despair as he stood up.

“I’m going to get some rest and then set back out as soon as possible. I need to find him fast, so I can get back.” He looked at Cash. “Just keep that mutt close to you at all times.

If he's not going to guard the grounds, at least he can make himself useful watching out for you."

After Beau left, Tessa sat for a long time staring out the window. What had Beau meant when he said he wanted to protect her? Did he really care for her, or was he just being the good neighbor and friend that he always was? And why was her heart still skipping beats when she remembered how he had held her and looked into her eyes? A future with Beau wasn't even a possibility for her. His line of work was just as dangerous as Luke's had been, and she vowed she would never go through that agony again. Besides, he was still in love with the mysterious and missing Rachel. She didn't stand a chance against a woman like that. But it seemed no matter how much she reasoned with herself, her body and her heart weren't listening.

## Chapter 17

The next morning Tessa woke up to a call from Victoria.

“Hi, Miss Graves? It’s me, Victoria Bannan again.”

Tessa was immediately wide awake.

“Victoria, hi. I’ve been waiting for your call. How are you?”

“I guess I’m okay. I really need to meet with you. I need to tell you something, and it has to be today.” It wasn’t hard to hear the urgency in Victoria’s voice.

“What is it? Has something happened to Patty?” She must have had her baby by now, and there was always that nagging worry in the back of her mind that something would go wrong.

“No, no. I haven’t heard from Patty in months, not since she left with that social worker. This has nothing to do with her, or even me really. I need to warn you about something.”

“Warn me? Victoria, what are you talking about?” Tessa asked, alarmed. She really needed no more problems right now.

“I can’t talk right now. I have to get going. Can we meet in about 2 hours?”

“Today?” Tessa thought of the warning she had gotten from Jack and Carter about going alone, and also about the promise that Beau had elicited from her. Besides, she really wasn’t so sure she could drive with her ankle yet. “I’m not sure that I can meet with you on such short notice Victoria.”

“It has to be today, Miss Graves. It’s the only time that I can meet you, and it’s really important for you to see me. You’ve done a lot to help me and Patty, and I feel like I owe it to you to warn you.”

Tessa sighed. Whatever Victoria wanted to tell her, it sounded important, and she would just need to do her best to meet up with her on her own.

“Okay, Victoria, I’ll meet you. Tell me where you are.”

After Victoria had instructed her where to meet, Tessa hung up the phone and hustled to get ready. They had agreed to meet at a little café in Gatlinburg, and it would take Tessa close to an hour to get there.

When she finally arrived, she searched for a parking spot as close to the café as she could, wishing she had a handicap sticker, and wondering if she should risk getting a ticket when she finally found a spot fairly close. As she clumped her way down the sidewalk, she could see Victoria walking towards her at a fast clip.

“Miss Graves, what on earth happened to you!” Victoria exclaimed, grabbing at her arm. “Never mind, come on, we need to get inside and off the street as soon as possible. I think I’m being followed.”

Victoria almost dragged her inside, with Tessa doing her best to keep up. When they were finally seated, Tessa asked, “Okay Victoria, who’s following you and what have you gotten yourself into now?”

“Oh, it’s okay. It’s only Wyatt. I’ve left him again and I think that he’s following me to talk me out of it.” She looked at Tessa guiltily. “You know that I always get talked into staying, so this time I just want to get as far away as I can before he finds me. I have a cousin that Wyatt doesn’t know about, and she said she’s willing to take me in. They’re meeting me here in Gatlinburg in an hour to get me. That’s why you had to meet me here and now. In another hour, I’ll be on my way to a new life.”

*Once again*, Tessa thought quietly, but aloud she said, “And where’s Wyatt Junior?”

“He’s fine. You don’t need to worry about him at all, but I’d better tell you what I need to tell you fast so I can get out of here fast if I need to,” Victoria said looking around her.



“Okay, Victoria, what is it you need to warn me about? Is it about Wyatt? Will he be blaming me for your leaving him again?” Tessa asked, wondering how many more people she was going to alienate.

“Oh, no.” Victoria looked genuinely surprised. “It’s not about Wyatt, although now that you mention it, he probably is going to blame you. But no, this is about Allen and Regina.”

“Who?”

“Allen and Regina Smart. Do you remember when I told you that Harley insisted I send out my first son to be adopted?” she asked.

Tessa nodded, and Victoria continued, “Well, like I told you then, the only reason I did that is because the people that Harley chose were really, really rich, and I knew my little boy would have a great life with them.”

“I see,” Tessa said, still confused about what this had to do with her right now.

“I mean, I knew Regina from when I was younger, and I know she wanted a baby really bad, and that she would take really good care of him, you know?”

Victoria seemed to wait for her approval, so Tessa said, “Of course, I’m sure you meant to do the best for him. But why are you telling me all of this now?”

“Well, Allen Smart just recently contacted Harley, saying that the police were digging into the details of the adoption, and he’s pretty upset about that. It was supposed to be a private adoption, and no one was supposed to know about him adopting my kid.”

“I see.” Tessa chewed on her lower lip. Jack had told her he was determined to see if the boy was safe, but he had said nothing to her about it recently, and she hadn’t thought about it recently. It seemed Jack hadn’t stopped digging after all.

“Well, Harley called Wyatt and asked him who I was talking to, and Wyatt figured I must have said something to you. That’s what started us fighting again, and I decided that I

just didn't need to put up with any more abuse about something that happened years ago, so I decided I would just leave."

"That's your right. You don't need to put up with abuse from anyone, but I still don't understand what this has to do with me?" Tessa asked, still perplexed.

"Oh yeah, right? Well, Wyatt told Harley that I probably told you, and Harley told Allen that I told you, so now Allen says he's going to make you back away from trying to destroy his family." She smiled at Tessa, clearly happy she had finally relayed her message.

"But I'm not trying to destroy anyone's family," Tessa protested. "I've never even heard of Allen Smart before today. You never told me who adopted your son, remember?"

Victoria frowned. "Oh, I didn't?" She brightened. "Wow, I really kept it a secret then, didn't I?" Then she looked around hurriedly. "Well, no matter. I don't know who found out that Allen and Regina adopted my son, but they all think you're the one digging around and trying to find the boy. Allen is pretty rich and powerful, so he has a lot of people he can call to make you stop. I just thought that you should know." She stood up. "I really need to get going now, Miss Graves. Thanks for all of your help over the years, but I probably won't be seeing you again. This time I really am leaving for good."

Before Tessa could say anything, Victoria hurried to the door and disappeared. *Great*, Tessa thought, *so there really is someone looking for me*. She would call Jack as soon as possible and have him look into this Allen and Regina Smart.

Before she could struggle out of her chair, the waitress came rushing over.

"Will there be anything else, Miss?" the waitress asked. She was dangling a check in her hands.

"No, thank you," Tessa replied hesitantly, thinking that she hadn't even ordered coffee yet.

The waitress placed a check on the table with a smile and bounced off. Tessa picked it up and looked it over. Apparently, Victoria had enjoyed a hearty breakfast before embarking on her journey. Sighing, she laid some money on the table and then pushed her way out of the crowded café and out onto an equally crowded street, deciding to wait to call Jack until she at least made it to the sanctity of her car and off her tender ankle.

When she finally saw her car parked on the curb where she had left it, she was thankful there was no ticket on it, but before she could get in, a man stepped in front of her, almost causing her to lose her balance as she tried to avoid bumping into him.

“Where is she?” Wyatt’s angry face peered down at her, only inches away from her own face.

Now that she was standing so close to him, she realized he was much taller and bigger than she had initially thought. Vowing not to be bullied by his presence, she pulled herself as tall as she could with her crutches and stared at him.

“Hello Wyatt, I’m surprised to see you here in Tennessee.”

“Cut the small talk. You know why I’m here. I’m looking for Victoria and I know she came here to meet you, so where is she?”

*Oh my, Victoria really isn’t very good at keeping secrets, is she?* Tessa thought. She looked at the angry face towering above her and decided that it was probably best to be as honest as she could. Maybe she could reason with him.

“I don’t know where she went, Wyatt. I really don’t. It’s true that I met with her, but she left without telling me where she was going.” She tried to keep her voice as calm as possible.

“I don’t believe you. You set her up somewhere again, didn’t you? Why else would she need to meet you here?” he yelled at her loud enough for one or two people to slow down and take notice.

“I didn’t help her with anything, Wyatt, and that’s the truth. She insisted on meeting me here to warn me,” Tessa said honestly.

“Warn you? About what?” This time it was Wyatt that looked surprised.

“Apparently, there’s a man named Allen Smart who thinks that I’m trying to get involved with his family,” she said, wondering how much Wyatt already knew about all of this.

At the mention of Allen Smart, Tessa could see Wyatt’s face light up, and he wore a half smile on his face when he looked at her.

“Yeah, that’s right. I kind of figured that he wouldn’t be too happy with you. You have a way of making a lot of enemies, don’t you, Miss Graves?”

“I’m not trying to make any enemies; I’m only trying to help women who need help,” Tessa replied defiantly. “The only men who consider me an enemy are those that are abusing their wives.”

She knew she was pushing it, and there was a good chance she was going to get a punch in the face from those massive fists, but she wasn’t about to cower down when she knew she was the one in the right here. She was shocked to see the stricken look on Wyatt’s face.

“Look, I don’t know what she told you, but I never abused Victoria in any way. I’m the one that saved her from Harley. I love her, and all I’ve ever tried to do was help her and give her a better life than the one she had.”

“If that’s true, then why were you keeping such a close watch on her? She felt like a prisoner in her own house, Wyatt. That’s not how men are supposed to treat their wives.”

He stepped one step back and looked down at her. “You know nothing about me, so it’s best you just keep your mouth shut. I had to keep an eye on her. It was for her own good. Victoria doesn’t always make the best decisions for herself, and she has a way of getting involved with people who

are no good for her, or for our son, Wyatt Junior. I was trying to protect our family, and everything was going just fine until you showed up.”

“Victoria didn’t seem to think that everything was just fine, Wyatt. You’re the one that forced her daughter Patty to leave, and you’re the one that wouldn’t let Victoria out of the house without you,” she snapped at him.

Wyatt ran his hands through his hair, visibly distraught. “Look, I love Victoria. I’m probably the only person in the world that has ever loved her, but she’s just too stubborn and set in her ways to see that. I do the best I can.” He glared at her. “If you hadn’t gone and opened up that whole can of worms with Allen Smart, then Harley wouldn’t have contacted us and brought up Regina and that kid of hers. That is your fault.” He pounded his fists together in frustration. “I don’t have the money that Allen Smart has. Now Victoria is always comparing herself to Regina, saying Regina has that and Regina has this. I gave her what I could, but it’s never enough.”

“Does she still have contact with Regina?”

“No, not since Regina adopted the kid. Maybe before that, they were still friends, but I think Regina didn’t want to have anything much to do with Victoria, especially after she adopted the boy from her. She was probably afraid that the kid would find out what they used to do, and so she kept him away from Victoria.”

“What do you mean what they did? Was Allen a part of this gang of yours?”

Wyatt smiled sourly. “Nah, not really. Allen is his own man, a self-made millionaire, you know. He never dabbled in the piddly stuff that Harley is involved in. He went for the bigger fish, the more lucrative stuff, but he didn’t have a problem using Harley if he needed to, or any of us for that matter.”

Slowly, Tessa was getting a picture of how Harley, Wyatt, and this Allen Smart all hung together.

“And how did Regina and Victoria know each other?” she asked.

“They were friends since they were teenagers. Used to be strippers together, and they were both pretty attractive and good at what they did. Only thing was, Regina walked off with Allen, while Victoria got Harley. I think that’s been bugging her ever since. She’s told me a few times how her life would be different if she hadn’t picked the wrong one.”

Tessa looked at him sympathetically. “But she had to have been happy with you after you helped her get away from Harley.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. But I was just a means of escape for her. If you hadn’t gotten involved back then and got her away from him, I don’t think she would have ever considered going with me. You got the ball rolling with those two, and kind of forced him to let her go with me, just so he could save face. That’s why Harley is more pissed at you than he is at me. You were the one that filled her head with all that crap about how she could have a better life and all that. And then you made him look like a fool by hiding her from him for months. He’s still just biding his time until he gets his revenge.”

Tessa shuddered. Could the threatening voice have belonged to Allen Smart, or was it Harley that was threatening her?

“So, does Allen Smart know how to get hold of me? Victoria seems to think so,” she said.

“Yeah, I bet he does. He’s got contacts all over the place.” Wyatt shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to make him mad, that’s for sure. He will not come after you all out in the open like Harley. I’ll bet he’s one of those guys that just grabs you all sneaky, like when you least expect it!”

Tessa looked at him. “Look, maybe you could talk to him? Tell him I really don’t intend to mess up his family life, and the only thing that the police want is to make sure that Victoria’s son is safe?”

“Ha, yeah right! No way I am getting involved with that!” Wyatt said. Then he got quiet like he was thinking of something.

“Look, I can’t do anything about Allen, but I think I know how you can get hold of Regina. Maybe if you talk to her, she can talk some sense into Alen. I figure she doesn’t want any trouble with the police either.”

Tessa eyed him suspiciously. “Why are you willing to help me all of a sudden?”

Wyatt looked down and kicked his foot on the sidewalk, looking like a sullen child. “Because maybe you can talk to Victoria for me. You know, let her know I love her, and that Wyatt Junior really needs her. Maybe you can tell her I’ll go to counseling with her, like she wanted.”

“You mean she left Wyatt Junior with you? She didn’t take him?”

He shook his head. “Naw, she left him at the house all by himself in front of the TV. The kid didn’t even know she’d walked out on him. Now, I gotta find somewhere for him to go while I work. She just left us both high and dry. I can’t take care of a kid all by myself.”

Tessa shook her head sadly. There were so many women, herself included, who desperately wanted children, and then there were women like Victoria, who seemed to have no problem abandoning her children whenever the mood struck her. For the first time, Tessa actually identified more with Wyatt than Victoria and thought Wyatt might be better off without Vicki.

“Look Wyatt, I’m going to be honest with you. I really wish I could tell Victoria all of this, but I honestly don’t know where she is, and from what she said, I don’t think she intends to get a hold of me soon.” Tessa shifted, uncertain of how to continue. “But I can help you if you let me. There are agencies that will help you find a place for little Wyatt Junior during the day when you work, and there are counseling centers you can attend by yourself.” She looked at him carefully. “They could

help you move on without Victoria, and maybe help you learn how to cope in different ways than what you are used to.”

Wyatt glared at her. “You trying to say that I’m crazy or something? I don’t need some shrink telling me how to run my life. I was only saying I’d go to counseling so that Vicki would agree to come home. She seemed to have it in her head that all we needed was to talk to some quack and all our problems would be over.”

Tessa shook her head. “I’m not saying that you’re crazy at all Wyatt. I’m just saying that talking to a counselor can help you move on from a loss, and maybe any other trauma that you’ve had.” She looked at him kindly. “It sounds like maybe life hasn’t always given you a fair shake Wyatt, and it might help you raise Wyatt Junior better if you had someone you could talk to about it, that’s all.” She reached into her purse. “Here’s my card with my number on it. Just think about it. If you’re interested, I can find someone in your area to help you with Wyatt Junior and get you started in counseling. If you don’t like it, you just stop going. It’s all free too. For once, you can have the government doing something good for you.”

Wyatt stood glaring at her for a minute, and then looked up and down the street, before taking her card. “Yeah, well maybe. I’ll take this and think about it. You can find Regina at the Reagan Terrace Mall at about 3 p.m. every day. She takes the kid there to play arcade games after school.”

Before she could ask him anything else, he pivoted and walked back the opposite way, leaving Tessa to wonder what had just happened.



## Chapter 18

“I have to go alone,” Tessa insisted, looking at Jack with determination.

“No, I’d be crazy to allow that,” Jack said looking at her equally determined. “We don’t have a clue what kind of person she is and how she’ll react to seeing you.”

Tessa looked at Carter and Jack, who were now watching her like hawks, and wondered if maybe they were right and she shouldn’t go to find Regina Smart on her own. Yesterday, after she had gotten home, she had thought about what Wyatt had said and what he had told her about Regina and Allen Smart. It had seemed to her that the best way to handle this new problem was to talk to Regina and convince her she was not responsible for the inquiry into the adoption of her child and neither she nor her husband had anything to worry about from the authorities as long as the child was safe and cared for. If Allen Smart had as much money and influence as Wyatt seemed to think he did, it should be no problem for him to file all the proper paperwork they needed for the child.

The more she thought about it, the more she was becoming convinced it was Victoria who was behind most of the drama involving Patty, Harley, and even Wyatt. It seemed as if Victoria had been using her as a scapegoat for many years now, and Tessa was determined to put a stop to it. The start would be to have a conversation with Regina Smart. However, when she had proposed the idea to Carter and Jack, neither one of them seemed to approve of the idea, despite her assuring them she would talk to Regina in a public location.

“From what I could find out about Allen Smart, he hangs out with some unsavory characters,” Jack informed her.

Carter, who had stopped by to check on her this morning and was there when she had talked to Jack, had

pursed his lips, looking at Jack.

“Well, maybe he did at one point, but the guy is pretty well-known in the business world. I’ve had a few encounters with some of his companies on behalf of some of my clients, and he seems to have endless money to spend.

“Yeah, I guess the Feds have been looking into his business for a while, thinking he has to have ties with the local mob or cartel. They’re suspecting that at the very least, he got his start through drug dealing or money laundering. Unfortunately, so far they haven’t been able to find anything on him,” Jack said.

“He’s probably trying to keep things on the up and up now that he’s established, but I have to agree with Jack. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to meet with this woman.” Carter looked down at Tessa’s ankle. “Especially not in your condition. If they are up to something, it wouldn’t take much for anyone to overpower you.”

Tessa smiled halfheartedly, pointing to the crutches that were leaning against the wall in her cottage. “I’ll have a readymade weapon with me. Besides, she’ll be in a public space, and she’ll have the child with her. No one is going to risk doing anything, especially not in front of her child and a lot of people.”

“Well, maybe I could send an officer there to just keep an eye on things,” Jack said, looking at her expectantly.

“No, Jack. I’m going alone. How am I supposed to convince her I don’t mean them any harm if I have a cop tailing me? I need her to trust me and tell her husband that it’s best to just cooperate with the authorities. If she sees police, she will think that you’re going to swoop in and grab the kid from her.”

“Well, now that we think we know who made the calls, and why, I don’t even see why you need to meet with her at all,” Carter said. Then he looked over at Jack before continuing, “You can haul him in and charge him with making threatening calls. Social services will then take over and make

sure the kid is taken care of and this adoption was nice and legal.”

Tessa shook her head. “Geez Carter. How long do you think that Allen Smart is going to be in jail, especially if he has the money that Wyatt claims he had? You should know better than anyone how fast a lawyer can get him out, and then he’s going to be after me for real.” She looked at Jack. “I think if I can just talk to her, we can solve all of this so much easier and without disrupting that poor little boy’s life. Making sure the child is safe and happy has been the goal right from the beginning, hasn’t it?”

“It was Tessa, but that changed when they started making threatening phone calls. They should have just adopted the kid going through the proper channels to begin with.” Jack looked at her sternly. “We can’t just have people exchanging babies like they were some kind of commodity. There are reasons that we have agencies in place for adoptions. It’s to protect the safety of the children. And now he can add threatening your welfare to his list of wrongdoings.”

Tessa herself had been known to circumvent the proper agencies from time to time when she found it necessary, so she shook her head in disagreement.

“Look Jack, I know that you and all these agencies mean well, but I know from experience that sometimes it’s better to leave well enough alone. If the boy is cared for and safe, I don’t see why the authorities need to go steamrolling in, traumatize him, and upset his life. Heaven knows that it was probably rough enough for him when he was with Victoria.” She looked at Jack, pleading, “If I go, I can convince her to tell her husband to leave me alone, and that’s all I want. If he stops threatening me and leaves me alone, I don’t want to have him charged or jailed. And then, if they go through the proper agencies, social services can make sure that the boy is cared for and they’ll be happy as well.” She gave them both a convincing smile. “See, this can still turn out to be a win-win for everyone, and the boy continues living his happy little life.”

Jack looked at her. “I can’t make those kind of promises to you Tessa, you know that. And besides, how do you even know that the boy is having a happy life?”

“Because I’m convinced that Wyatt would have said something if he wasn’t. Besides, I’m a social worker myself. I’ve been trained to spot if a child is not cared for. I’ll see the boy for myself and if he’s not being properly taken care of, I’ll let you know and you can swoop right in and rescue him. Just give me a chance to try it my way first, please?” She could see that Jack was not convinced and was shaking his head and frowning at her. Sighing, Tessa said, “Well, I can certainly see why so many people see me as trouble. I seem to do more harm than good lately.”

Carter threw her a shocked look. “That’s not true, Tessa and you know it. All you’ve ever tried to do was help these people.”

“Really Carter? It seems to me what I’ve done is help Victoria abandon three of her children. I can’t help Patty anymore. All I can do for her is pray that she and her baby are somewhere safe. But I can still make it right with Wyatt Junior and her first boy. I still have the opportunity to see that he suffers no more trauma than he already has.”

Tessa looked at Jack. “And I think we owe it to Wyatt to see that he gets the help he needs raising his son. I’m as guilty as anyone for putting the blame on the men when a relationship seems abusive and doesn’t work, but this time I think that I may have helped the wrong person. I want to make it up to him and help him raise his son safely and securely.”

Jack sighed. “Look, I don’t have a problem with Wyatt Bannan. Maybe you’re right and he really is trying his best to get his life back in order and take care of his kid.” He ran his head through his crew cut. “And if this Regina Smart is doing her part and taking care of Victoria’s other kid, I don’t really have a problem with that either. But it’s my job to make sure that he really is safe and cared for.”

“Well, why can’t we do that without turning the boy’s world upside down?” Tessa asked. “We don’t always need to

go storming in like a bunch of paratroopers, do we? Maybe, just once, we can check on the boy quietly, and even if they didn't go through the proper channels the first time, we can rectify that without disrupting their entire lives." She looked at him pleadingly. "Please Jack, just this once, could we try not to get the police involved just yet?"

Jack glared at her. "Look Tessa, the guy is a criminal. He's threatened you! Just because we haven't been able to nail him on anything yet doesn't make him the good guy."

"Jack"—Tessa looked at him shocked—"whatever happened to collecting proof and evidence before you convict someone? Even if you believe he got his start by dealing in somewhat shady things, he really could have turned his life around. At least it looks like he's trying to better himself and take care of his family." She sighed. "I'm just asking that we not tear this family apart without a just reason, that's all."

Jack threw up his hands. "Fine Tessa, you win. I'll have my men stand down in the investigation into the kid's adoption, at least for now. You can talk to the wife about quietly going through the proper channels with social services and making the adoption legal." He looked at her sternly. "But if I find that Allen Smart is still involved in criminal activity, then all bets are off and I'm going to throw the book at him."

Tessa smiled, satisfied for the time being. "Great, I'll fill you in on everything right after I meet with Regina."

"You're not going alone!" Both men yelled at the same time.

Later that day, Tessa walked into the arcade, looking around. In the end, both Carter and Jack had had no option other than to relent and let her go to find Regina by herself, as she simply hadn't told them when or where she was planning to meet with her.

Tessa watched from the entrance, wishing she had asked Wyatt for a description of the woman. Luckily, the arcade wasn't too crowded in the afternoon. She spotted a woman in a fur coat, standing next to one of the games, watching a little boy with a doting smile on her face. The

woman was attractive, albeit over made up and flashy, but her entire countenance reeked of excessive money. Tessa was convinced that it had to be Regina Smart.

She stayed where she was for a minute, watching as the woman said something to the boy, and she could see him looking up at his mother, clearly annoyed. His hair was dark and well groomed. He seemed big for his age, or maybe it was just the clothes he was wearing. It seemed to Tessa that he was dressed as a much younger child would be, as she estimated that Victoria's first son would have to be about 9 or 10 by now. When she had established to her own satisfaction that Regina and the boy were alone, she took her crutches and made her way painfully towards the woman.

"Regina Smart?" Tessa asked when she got within hearing distance of the woman.

The boy gave her a quick glance, and then continued his game, ignoring her.

"Yes, that's right." Regina looked at her with suspicion. "What do you want?"

Tessa thought she detected a slight slur in her speech, and she wondered if it was possible that the woman had already been drinking.

"I'd like to have a word with you, Regina." She could tell that the woman was looking at her critically, eyeing her crutches, and wondering if she knew her or if Tessa was looking to her for money or a handout. Tessa balanced herself awkwardly and held out her hand. "I'm Tessa Graves," she said. "I think you may have heard of me?"

She could see the woman's pupils widen in recognition, and the woman looked around her quickly. Tessa thought she was looking to see if there were any police around, but the woman said, "I can't talk here. You'll attract too much attention with those crutches of yours. There's a little spot in the corner where we can grab some coffee. Meet me over there."

Tessa looked at the woman's fur coat, flashy jewelry and clothing, and her brightly dyed hair, and thought it wasn't her crutches that were going to attract any attention to them.

Regina looked at her son. "All right then sweetie, you'll have to stop playing now and I'll buy you some ice cream. You behave and play with your new toys while I talk to this nice lady for a few minutes, okay?"

The boy gave her a bright smile, agreeing that if she added sprinkles to the ice cream, he would indeed give them some time to talk. She followed Regina and the boy over to the corner cafe, and sat down, resting her ankle gratefully, and waited for the boy to settle in with his new toys and ice cream. She watched as the boy slurped his ice cream and ripped open the packaging on one of the toys Regina had just handed him, dropping the papers on the floor and almost immediately dripping a sticky mess all over the toy.

"He's cute," Tessa commented, trying to break the ice.

"Yes, he is." Regina smiled at the child indulgently. "He's been a major blessing to my husband and I." She looked at Tessa. "We adopted him when he was just two." Narrowing her eyes she said, "But you already know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Victoria told me," Tessa admitted.

Regina reached into the large pocket of her fur coat and took out a small, discreet bottle, drinking deeply and then returning it into the folds of her coat.

"She never lets me forget it, you know," she said bitterly.

"What?"

"That I can't have any kids on my own, and she has so many she can even give them away."

"So you still see Victoria?"

"She runs into me sometimes. I think she does it on purpose because she knows I don't want the boy to see her." Regina looked at the boy. "I wish she had just left town when

she first said she would. He doesn't remember her, and I don't want him to know about her."

"I guess I can understand that," Tessa said, looking at the chubby boy who was now licking the gooey mess off his fingers.

"She's trash, and I don't want him thinking he's associated with that. He's destined for better things."

Tessa looked at her, surprised. "I thought that you and Victoria used to be friends?"

Regina pulled out her bottle, taking another discreet drink. "Ha, not likely. We started out working in a strip club together, and we kind of stuck together for safety reasons, but I wouldn't say that we were, or are, friends." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "She's not a good person. She's kind of mean really, and selfish. She's the kind of person who'll drag you down into the gutter with her if she gets the chance." She looked at the boy. "Maxwell, honey, why don't you go over to that fountain and play with your toy boat there for a bit, okay."

Regina watched him take his boat and walk to a large display shooting water through a fountain in the middle. Almost immediately he sank the boat and started splashing water everywhere to retrieve it. "He has her looks though, that's for sure. He really is such a handsome little boy, isn't he?"

Tessa just nodded. She supposed that in a mother's eyes, their children were always the best looking.

"I think it was her looks that kept the men interested," Regina continued. "Even Allen fell under her spell at first, and she never lets me forget that either."

"Your husband, Allen?" Tessa asked.

Nodding, Regina said, "Yeah, but she dumped him in favor of Harley Brinker. At the time, we were all young and Harley and Allen were just establishing themselves. She thought Harley was tougher, meaner and smarter, and she bet on him making the money she was looking for." Taking



another drink, she laughed mirthlessly. “I guess the joke was on her though, wasn’t it? As for me, I wasn’t too proud to take her leftovers, and now look at me. I’ve got money, cars, and a husband that adores me.” She looked at Maxwell. “And I have her kid, too.”

Tessa nodded, wondering why, if her life was so perfect, Regina felt the need to drink, and sounded so bitter.

“And now you and her are trying to ruin it for me!” Regina spat out, suddenly glaring at her. Her voice was angry and slurred. “Maxxy is the only thing still keeping Allen around, and I’m not about to lose either of them.”

Taken aback at the outburst, Tessa said, “Why would I want to ruin anything for you?”

“Victoria told me you wanted to take him from me. She said that you wanted to return him back to her.” Regina looked at Maxwell, who was now splashing water all over a little girl sitting next to him, and her eyes misted over. “He’s my life. He’s the only reason that I get up in the morning. I love that boy, and I won’t lose him, even if I have to take him and hide him away,” she said fiercely.

“I never told her I wanted to take him from you, much less have him live with her. That’s not even something I would control over. The only thing anyone wants is to make sure that the boy is safe and taken care of.”

Regina’s eyes hardened as she listened to Tessa. “It figures. She lied to me again. She’s always trying to split me and Allen up, you know?” She took another discreet drink before announcing, “She’s jealous. She knows she picked the wrong guy, and now she wants my life instead of the one she has.” Regina shook her head vehemently. “But she’s not going to get it! Allen doesn’t even want her anymore. He saw her for what she was a long time ago.” She leaned in towards Tessa, smelling strongly of alcohol. “You know what? She’s going back to Harley. Did she tell you that? She’s leaving Wyatt, her kid Wyatt Junior, and heading right back to that scum Harley because Allen doesn’t want her.”

Tessa was shocked at the news. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. One thing that Victoria Brinker, or should I say Bannan, can’t do is keep her mouth shut. She loves to brag to me about how exciting her life is, and how many men she can keep dangling, while I can barely hold on to one.”

“Maxxy, come here now, honey. You leave that little girl alone.” Regina yelled out suddenly, sending a sunny smile at the angry-looking father who had just scooped up his wet daughter. Maxwell obediently trotted over, and Regina handed him another toy. “Here honey, you play with this one now. The nice lady and I are almost done, and then I’ll take you to the park.” With the boy sitting at her feet, rolling his new truck around, she turned back to Tessa. “I do kind of feel bad for Wyatt. I think he really loves her and his kid.” She looked at Tessa with a superior smile. “Although if you ask me, the kid is better off without her.”

Tessa secretly agreed with Regina on that. If Victoria called her again, she intended to ignore it.

“There’s just one more thing, Regina. Was it Allen who called me at the shelter?”

Regna looked down. “I know nothing about a call,” she said, and then looked up at her, “but if I knew about one, I’d say that Allen only did it because he was pretty desperate to protect Maxwell and our family.” She looked at Tessa imploringly. “Look, he’s struggled hard to get out of the trenches. People like us don’t get too many breaks in life; you know? It’s hard enough to keep the scum like Harley and his kind away. All Allen wants is to be left alone to live an honest life and to raise little Maxwell.”

Tessa nodded sympathetically. “I can understand that Regina, I really can. And I assure you that no one wants to split up your family or take away your son.” She looked at Regina. “Just let social services make sure that Maxwell is safe, cared for, and that all the adoption paperwork is legal. If you do that, they’ll leave you alone to go on with your life, and Victoria can’t do a thing about it.

“That’s it? That’s all you want?” Regina asked, surprised.

“I wanted nothing from you, Regina, and as long as Allen isn’t doing anything illegal, that’s all that the authorities want from you.”

Regina stood up, looking more relieved and at ease than when they had first started talking.

“Okay, I’ll talk to Allen and let him know what we need to do, and that then everything will be alright again.” She bundled up little Maxwell and then turned to Tessa, who was still sitting in her chair, watching Regina and the boy. “Allen wasn’t really going to do anything to hurt you. That was all just a bunch of empty bluster. He’s a businessman, not a thug.” She took the boy’s hand and then gave Tessa an ominous look. “You don’t need to worry about Allen, but if I were you, I’d watch my back when it comes to Harley Brinker. He’s a snake.

## Chapter 19

Instead of heading straight back to the shelter, Tessa stopped off at the police station to see Jack. She wanted to let him know she had met with Regina, and what had transpired. It was important that she could get him to agree with what she had promised her.

The clerk at the desk greeted her warmly when she walked in, asking her how her ankle was, and saying they had all missed her. Normally she stopped by at least once a week taking care of business having to do with one of her residents, or to help with the questioning of a suspect, but she hadn't been here in almost two weeks now. An officer she knew well walked by and offered to take her down to Jack's office.

"Glad to see that you're on the mend," he said. Then he looked at her with an amused grin. "Are you sure that you really want to see the boss today? He's been barking at anyone who comes near him."

Tessa laughed and assured him she was up for the job, but when they got to Jack's office and she peeked in, she could tell that he indeed had a grumpy look on his face.

Knocking first, she looked in and said, "Hey Jack, do you have a minute to chat?"

When he looked up and saw her, he immediately stood up, a wide, welcoming smile replacing the frown.

"Tessa! I always have time for you. Why didn't you tell me you'd be coming in? I could have had someone drive you. I don't think it's a good idea for you to be driving or walking on that ankle yet." He ushered her in and sat her down on a chair, perching on his desk next to her. "I have some news as well, but first, what can I help you with?"

She looked at him. "Well, I know that you and Carter were against it, but I met with Regina this afternoon at the

mall.”

He sat quietly for a minute and then sighed. “Okay, well I guess you got out of there safe, so there’s no point scolding you anymore. What did she have to say?”

She told him about her meeting with Regina, and everything the woman had told her about Victoria, Harley, and her husband Allen. Tessa explained the child seemed well-cared for, albeit slightly spoiled and maybe a bit babied by his doting mother. She left out the part about Regina’s drinking. Jack didn’t need to know that right now.

Jack, in turn, agreed that as long as Maxwell’s adoption was legally finalized, he would leave Regina and Allen alone to raise their son. His primary concern from the very beginning had been that Victoria’s son was safe and cared for. Tessa had also asked him to stop the investigation into the threatening phone call, telling Jack that she would not testify against Allen anyway, and she felt that now that he knew his family was safe and no one was trying to take his son, he would stop harassing her. After some argument, Jack agreed.

She smiled at him. “Okay, now that we have all of that settled, what is it you wanted to tell me?”

He looked at her carefully. “It’s about Henri LeBlanc. Are you sure you’re up for it now? I thought that I’d come by your cottage later and tell you there.”

She frowned. Her heart was already beginning its familiar hammer at the mention of his name. “I don’t think I’ll ever be up to hearing about him, so you may as well tell me now. I won’t get a moment of peace until I hear what you have to say, anyway.”

He nodded, pulling out his notebook. “Okay, let me just start then. Nicole White’s name checks out. That is her real name. She was born in the French Quarter to a wealthy businessman named Peter White, who was married to Betty White. The couple had two children, Nicole, and an older son named Henry.” He looked up at her, trying to gauge her reaction.

She looked down at her hands, her heart hammering. “So Henri LeBlanc is an alias? His real name is Henry White?” she murmured.

Jack nodded. “That’s right. There’s no French nobility in his background either. They were just a typical Louisiana family. In fact, both Peter and Betty were born not far from where they raised their children.”

“I see. So it was all made up? Everything he told me?” she asked, her eyes troubled. “It looks like my special sense is fading on me.”

“Maybe not, Tessa. Stephanie could be right on her hunch about him believing his own lies. Turns out that his school records reflect that he often told his teachers and classmates the same story he told you. He was a mediocre student, except with his French class. He apparently excelled in that.”

“I see,” she said. “So you think he’s delusional?”

Jack nodded. “I think he’s certifiably crazy, actually. His parents had him institutionalized many times while he was growing up for his bouts of uncontrolled anger and violence. He mostly seemed to target his little sister, and according to the records we found, his father and mother even lived separately for a time, each taking a child in an attempt to keep her safe from him.”

“Oh my. Poor Nicole.”

“He was released from a stay at a mental institution just a few months before his parents were killed in the plane crash. Coincidentally, just a week before the plane crashed, his father was petitioning the court to return him to the institution, saying he was concerned for the safety of his family, as well as for Henry’s own well-being. Obviously, after his death, the petition was dropped, and no one has bothered to check in with Henry again.”

“Do you think he had anything to do with his parents’ accident?” she asked, shocked.

“Yes, I think it’s a definite possibility. It turns out that the FDA is actually still looking into the cause of the crash, claiming there may have been some tampering with safety controls on the plane. That’s why the estate from the parents still hasn’t been settled,” Jack said.

“I see. Do we know who was named in the will? Henry said it was a split between him and his sister, but she wanted it all.”

“Actually, the White’s will states that Nicole had full conservatorship of everything. She was supposed to give Henry a livable stipend, but he didn’t have control of the money himself. There was also a sizable chunk that was put in a trust for his care in case he was committed to an institution again.” Jack snapped his notebook closed. “Apparently Henry’s craziness was no secret to his family.”

“So he asked poor Nicole up to the mountain, planning to kill her and take over the estate himself?” she asked quietly.

“It looks that way, but the irony is that the will had a clause that with Nicole White’s death, the entire estate would go to a trust that would be handled by the family lawyer, with a large sum of the money going to the family’s favorite charity. Henry will not get control of any money, anyway.”

Tessa shuddered. “I wonder if he even knows that?”

“There’s a good chance he doesn’t. We’ve already contacted the family lawyer, and he hasn’t heard from Henry yet. Of course, as soon as he does he’ll let us know.”

She looked at Jack sadly. “It’s such a waste of a beautiful soul. Poor Nicole could have really made a difference for the better in this world.”

Jack walked over and took her hand. “Well, we can thank God that he didn’t take you that day as well. We think you disturbed him while he was trying to bury and hide his sister’s body. He may have suspected that you caught him on your camera. That’s why he wanted you dead and the camera destroyed.”

Tessa shook her head. “He did so many awful things, and all for nothing. Poor Nicole is dead, and he won’t get any money anyway, and he tried to kill me when I probably would have never even noticed him on my camera.”

Jack nodded. “That goes to show just how truly ruthless and insane Henry White really is. The sooner we get him off the street, the better it is for everyone.”

The next day, Tessa headed back to the shelter, Cash at her side. She still hadn’t heard from Beau, but Carter wanted to stop by and talk to her and Stephanie about their finances. Besides that, she needed to catch up on an enormous amount of paperwork that had been neglected over the past week.

Stephanie greeted her with a big smile when she walked back to her office. “Hey Tessa, you’re looking better today. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, thanks, Stephanie. I just figured that I’d better come in and catch up on some of this paperwork.” She looked at her desk stacked high with files and groaned. It was going to be a long day. “It looks like I’m going to be here longer than I thought,” she grumbled.

Stephanie danced over to her office, a big smile on her face, and waving something in the air. “Well, I have something here that’s bound to cheer you up. Look at the deposit that we found in our account this morning!”

Tessa looked at the statement and gasped. “Oh my! That’s twice as much as we normally get!”

“I know! Isn’t it great!” Stephanie laughed. “Tessa, just think, with this money, we might finally put in that veranda off the back of the main house that you’ve been dreaming about!”

Inspired by her own little veranda at the cottage, Tessa had told Stephanie she thought it would be nice to build something similar for the women at the shelter. Many of them came here completely traumatized and in need of some calm and peace. At the moment, all the shelter could offer was a simple picnic table. It was Tessa’s hope that they could create a calming oasis for the women to enjoy the outside when the



weather was nice, as well as a play area for their children. She smiled, just as delighted at Stephanie's enthusiasm as she was at the prospect of making her dream a reality.

"You're right. That is good news! When did you find out?"

"This morning. Carter saw it when he went over our account earlier. That's what he wants to come over and discuss. He apparently doesn't agree that we should spend it on home improvements. Per usual, he'd prefer that we put it into savings, in case the account runs low again," Stephanie informed her.

Tessa frowned. "Yeah that doesn't surprise me, and honestly, what with him now digging around and trying to find out who our benefactor is, he may be right. This could very well be the last check we get."

"I sure hope not. We just don't get that much government or grant money. I don't know how we would keep the lights on without our donor."

"I guess we'd just have to learn how to do a lot more fundraising, and frankly, neither one of us is any good at that." Tessa smirked humorously. "If Carter messes this up for us, we should put him in charge of raising the money we need. That would teach him to ruin a good thing."

Stephanie frowned. "I don't think that Carter is digging into this because he wants us to lose out on money. He's still convinced that these donations somehow tie together with the attacks on Hope, Luke, and yourself." She looked at Tessa. "It is a possibility you know. I mean, if we're honest, no other leads have panned out yet. This one is as good as any of the other ideas we've had."

"I know he means well but I just can't think of a reason in the world why anyone would attack us, kill Hope and Luke, and then give me endless sums of money, at the risk that they could be discovered?" She shook her head. "I think this time he's wrong, and I don't want to lose the only benefactor we have right now. The women here need us. Where would they go if they couldn't come here for help?"

Before Stephanie could answer, they both heard a commotion coming from the hall, and Cash jumped up, wagging his tail and looking out the door expectantly.

“Mom, Aunt Tessa!” Two little heads appeared, and both women were almost bowled over by the rambunctious greetings of Stephanie’s seven- and nine-year-old boys.

“Goodness,” Stephanie exclaimed. “What on earth are you two doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be home with your babysitter?”

The boys squealed in delight as Carter and Dan made their way into the already crowded office.

Dan smiled apologetically. “The babysitter called and said she was feeling sick, so I figured I would go home instead of calling you. I wanted to show you I could handle things on my own sometimes too.”

Stephanie threw him an annoyed look. “So you brought them here?” she asked. “You realize this isn’t a playground, right?”

“Please Stephanie, only for an hour or so. I have to meet with a customer at a job sight, and then I’ll come right back and get them. I promise I won’t be long. I’ll even take them fishing or something later,” Dan said, dropping a backpack full of toys on Tessa’s desk.

Seeing the annoyed look on her friend’s face, Tessa chimed in, “Of course, they can stay here for a while, Dan. I’ve missed them and I can’t think of a better way to spend the morning than playing with my two favorite godsons.”

Dan gave her a thankful grin and left before Stephanie had a chance to say anything else. So she turned her attention to Carter, who was standing quietly off to the side.

“And what are you doing here? Did Dan try to rope you into babysitting as well?” she asked.

Carter held his hands up defensively. “Whoa there, leave me out of this. I just happened to run into them outside. I have an appointment to discuss finances with you two, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. You wanted to talk to us about our latest donation. I guess I was expecting you later this afternoon.” She looked at her two boys, who were busily wrestling with one another on the floor. “It’s going to have to wait now anyway, Carter. I don’t think anyone is going to be able to think with these two here.”

Tessa stood up. “I think we should discuss the idea of a veranda while you’re here Carter, and the boys are one of the exact reasons why I think it would be a good idea. Let’s take them out, and I’ll show you what I’m thinking.” She grabbed her crutches, and hobbled out, leaving Carter no choice but to follow her. Stephanie gathered the boys and hustled them out after Carter and Tessa, glad to get them out of the office before they caused too much destruction.

Once outside, Tessa showed Carter where she planned to build the veranda, and how well it would accommodate a peaceful place for the women to sit, as well as a clean and safe play area for their children. Even Carter had to admit that if there was a place for the kids to play safely, it would be easier for Stephanie to bring the boys with her occasionally and let them blow off some steam.

Tessa watched fondly as the boys played with Cash, noting how the normally stoic and dignified dog melted and turned into a puppy around them. DJ, who at nine years old, always took the lead, had taken to Cash immediately, enticing the dog to prance and roll around in the dirt with him. Charly was taking a little longer to warm up, but when Cash repeatedly insisted on dropping a ball at his feet to throw, he finally warmed up enough to join in the play. Even Carter joined the three in playing, ignoring the fact that his three-piece designer suit was getting ruffled and muddy.

Stephanie threw Tessa a knowing glance. “You know, despite how indifferent Carter acts, he really would make a great father.”

As Tessa watched him playing, she felt some of her annoyance with him dissipate. She had to admit that underneath his professional demeanor, Carter really was a

great guy, with only her and Stephanie's best interests in mind, and Stephanie was right, he really would make a great father.

"I agree, he's really great with the boys." She grinned over at her friend. "Hopefully he's seeing our point with the children's area and the veranda and agrees with us on using some of that money to build it!"

By the time Dan came back to collect the boys, both Carter and Cash were exhausted. Carter took his leave, saying he needed to clean up before his next meeting, but he conceded that a play area would be a fantastic idea. As Tessa gave him a friendly hug goodbye, she could hear the boys pestering their mother about bringing Cash home with them.

"We can't do that," Stephanie explained. "Cash is Aunt Tessa's dog, and she would be sad if he left her."

She gathered them together, ready to hand them off to Dan, when DJ chimed in, insisting that in that case, they needed to stop at the dog store immediately and pick up a dog just like him to bring home.

"Thanks," Stephanie said, ushering the two nagging children into her car. "Just what I needed. Now they're convinced we need a dog."

Tessa laughed at Stephanie's defeated expression. "They'll get over it. Just tell them they can come and play with Cash anytime they want." She watched her friend help Dan buckle the kids into the car, and then turned back to her office, refreshed after the visit from the boys and ready to tackle the stacks of paperwork still sitting on her desk. As she walked in, her phone rang, and she absently picked it up, sitting down at her desk.

When Stephanie walked back in, she took one look at Tessa's disturbed face and asked, "What's wrong Tessa? What happened?"

Tessa held up her phone. "It's Victoria. She just called. She says she absolutely has to see me."

Stephanie looked surprised. "I thought you said that she was leaving town?"

“She said she didn’t leave yet after all. She says she needs to talk to me first.”

“You told me you would not meet with her again, even if she called, remember?” Stephanie reminded her sternly.

Tessa chewed her lower lip. “I know but”—she looked at Stephanie helplessly—“I have to go talk to her. She said it was about Patty.”

Tessa looked around the almost deserted park, looking for Victoria, hoping that she wasn’t too late. It had taken her almost three hours to get here, and she had gotten lost twice. Just like last time, Victoria had insisted that Tessa had to come today, and as soon as possible. When Tessa had told Stephanie where Victoria wanted to meet, she had protested telling her she was crazy for even considering coming this far to meet a woman who had been nothing but trouble. But Tessa insisted and hobbled out the door to her car before Stephanie could figure out a way to stop her.

What she had neglected to tell Stephanie until she’d called her and was well on her way, was that Victoria had told her they had to meet here to see Patty. At the thought of seeing Patty, and possibly her baby, Tessa knew she had to come. If there was even the slightest chance Patty wanted to let her adopt the child after all, Tessa would risk anything. Just as she had suspected, as soon as Stephanie found out what Victoria had said, she had told her to turn around and come back.

“Tessa, she’s playing you. I’m sure of it. It’s her MO to use her children to get what she wants, and I’ll bet anything she’s using Patty and her baby to get something from you.”

“What could she possibly want from me she couldn’t have asked me for already? I know you think I’m crazy, but if there’s even the slightest chance that Patty needs help with that baby, I have to go, you know that.”

Tessa had hung up before Stephanie could argue more with her, and driven on until she finally arrived at the designated meeting place, where she had parked her car and hobbled over to one of the few benches in sight. It was almost dusk. There was only one mother left at the playground, and

she was packing up her two kids and heading for the parking lot. After she left, Tessa would be here all alone.

She shivered, not sure if it was from the cold or the thought of being in a deserted park by herself. Ever since the incident with Henry, she was afraid of being alone. Now she wished she had brought Cash, but she hadn't wanted to subject him to such a long car ride, and there was a part of her that was hoping she would bundle Patty and her baby into the car and bring them home with her.

As the sun slowly sank, she saw a lone figure walking towards her through the playground, and she thought she recognized Victoria's now familiar shuffle. Tessa pulled her coat closer around her neck and hobbled towards her.

"I see you've ditched the crutches," Victoria said as she came nearer.

"They're in the car. I don't plan to walk too far," Tessa answered.

Shrugging, Victoria said, "Okay, let's just sit here for a minute then." She indicated the bench Tessa had just vacated. "This shouldn't take too long."

Tessa walked over and sank down, sitting sideways so she could face Victoria. "You're alone? I thought we were meeting Patty here. Isn't that what you told me?"

"I did? No, I'm pretty sure what I said was that I heard she was okay. I just figured that you would want to know."

Tessa sighed and closed her eyes to hide her exasperation. Stephanie had been right. "Okay, so why did you call me, and why did we need to meet here? The last time we talked you said you were disappearing for good. You were going to start over and get away from both Wyatt and Harley, remember?"

Victoria gave her a sheepish smile. "Oh yeah, well, I was, but you know how that goes. My cousin never showed up, and that left me kind of stranded, as you can imagine. I couldn't go back to Wyatt, he was pretty mad about me leaving, so I made my way to this town, where I still have

some friends I can crash with.” She looked at Tessa. “I called Harley to come and get me here tonight. It’s pretty much my best bet right now, you know?”

Tessa just stared at Victoria. It was sinking in that no matter what she did, Victoria didn’t really want the help that Tessa could offer her, and now she wondered just how right Stephanie had been about her. What did Victoria want now?

“Why did you leave Wyatt and Wyatt Junior?” Tessa asked. “He seemed to be pretty devastated that you would just walk out on the two of them like that.”

Victoria’s eyes widened in surprise. “You talked to him? When?”

“He cornered me right after I talked to you. He was convinced that I was helping you get away and leave your child behind. He also told me some of what happened between the two of you,” Tessa said and then looked sternly at Victoria. “Wyatt never really abused you, did he? He seemed to be pretty genuine when he said that he loves you and he was only trying to protect you from Harley...and from yourself.”

“Yeah, right,” Victoria scoffed. “He’s always trying to be the knight in shining armor, isn’t he? Well, the truth is he’s got a rusty sword and a boring castle. I don’t need him to protect me anymore. Look, I really tried to make it work with him in the beginning. I thought I could just settle into being the good little wifey, living in a rundown tiny ranch house, and waiting for him every night with a hot dinner ready at the end of his shift at the factory. But let’s be honest, that’s just not me. I couldn’t keep it up. The very sight of him and his filthy clothes every night makes me gag. I just can’t handle his constant questions and overbearing personality anymore.” She looked around the now-dark park, waving her arm around. “This kind of stuff just isn’t for me. I need to have a little more excitement in my life, and Harley can give me that.”

“He beat you up, Victoria!” Tessa reminded her, shocked. “That can’t possibly be the kind of excitement you want? Besides, what about your son Wyatt Junior? He needs you.”

“The kid will be okay with Wyatt,” she said. “And Harley swears that he’s a changed man, and this time things are going to be different. I’ll be his partner, right at his side the whole time, helping him run his operations.”

Sighing in defeat, Tessa said, “Just how many times has he told you that?”

“This time it’s different though!” Victoria retorted. “I know this time it’s going to work out. This time I don’t have any kids dragging me down. It’ll be just like it was in the beginning, just me and him.”

Tessa shook her head, realizing it was no use arguing with her. “Why did you call me? If everything is so good with you, what do you need me for?”

Victoria glanced at her slyly. “Well, you know Harley is still pretty mad at you, right? I mean, he’s pretty bitter about how you made him look stupid in front of his guys.”

“I wasn’t the one that took you to the safe house and hid you from him, you know that. Why would he hate me?”

“Well, let’s just say that I had to tell him something when I got back. Harley always wants a confession and some information before he allows anyone back into the gang. Anyway, yours was the first name that came to mind, and I just told him it was you that helped me disappear.”

Tessa stared at Victoria. “Well, now you can clear it up with him, and tell him it wasn’t me who helped you disappear. It’s time he stops hating me for something you did.”

Victoria looked over at her. “Well, see, that’s why I’m here. Like I just said, before Harley takes anyone back, they have to have something to offer him, and what he wants from me, is revenge on you.”

Tessa felt an icy jolt of fear run through her body, and she looked around the now deserted playground wondering where he was hiding and when would he pounce.

Victoria saw her look around and grinned in amusement. “Don’t be so dramatic, you goose. He’s not here. I didn’t bring him with me. I haven’t even really talked to him



too much yet. I just let him know I want to come back.” She looked down at her hands, and then back at Tessa. “I was just thinking, you know, that maybe if you gave me a little money, sort of like make it worth my while, I could try to convince Harley that it wasn’t you that embarrassed him after all.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me?” Tessa gasped in surprise.

“No, of course not. I just thought you probably always get donation money and stuff for that charity thing of yours, and maybe you could funnel some of that my way, and then I wouldn’t be so dependent on Harley and I could maybe give him some too.” She smiled at Tessa. “You know, like friends. You help me get out of trouble, and then I’ll help you get out of trouble.”

“But you’re the reason I’m in trouble with Harley to begin with!” Tessa exclaimed, standing up as best she could with her ankle. “Look Victoria, even if I had money to give you, which I don’t, I wouldn’t give it to you. That’s just not how this works. I helped you back when you needed it, and now you need to do the right thing and tell Harley the truth.”

“Yeah, I dunno. Like I said, I’ve got to do something to get back into his good graces, and nothing speaks to him like a bit of money. I just figured that you’d be willing to help me out, that’s all.” Victoria stood up and looked at her. “Anyway, you don’t need to look so insulted, it was just an idea.”

As Tessa looked at her in disbelief, she saw her glance at something behind her, narrowing her eyes at whomever it was.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Victoria asked.

Tessa turned, trying to see who she was talking to, and praying that she hadn’t lied and brought Harley with her after all. The figure behind her moved quickly, smashing Victoria over the head before she ever had the chance to scream.

## Chapter 20

Tessa watched in horror as Victoria's lifeless body fell to the ground. The shadowy figure grabbed her arm and started pulling her away from the bench and the body, towards a secluded area behind an outbuilding.

"No, oh no, please God, no!" Tessa mumbled, as she struggled to get her terrified body to fight, and her injured, cumbersome ankle to cooperate. She had recognized Henri's squat, stocky figure almost immediately. Her heart was beating almost out of her chest, and although she struggled and pounded on him with her fists, he succeeded in dragging her behind the building and out of sight of anyone entering the park or the parking lot. Then, he let her go and surveyed her with an amused grin.

"I see that you're still struggling with that ankle, Tessa. That's too bad. It must hurt." He stepped in close, kicking out with his heavy boot and hitting her painfully in her injured ankle. She smashed to the ground hard as her ankle buckled and gave way. Her eyes widened in shock and pain as she felt a new jarring pain in the elbow that had hit the pavement, as well as the now familiar searing pain in her ankle. He looked down at her, his eyes full of pity. "You really should have known that you wouldn't get away from me. Henri always gets what he wants. There's really no point in struggling."

"You mean Henry, don't you?" she said, gritting her teeth against the pain.

"Ah, I see that you've been busy since we last met. You've also discovered my poor little sister up there, haven't you?" He pointed toward the mountain. "I went back to visit her, only to discover that someone already took her. It's such a shame. I had picked out a nice little resting place for her. I really think she would have liked it."

“Why, Henry? Why did you kill her? She did nothing to you. Everything you told me was a lie.” She looked back toward the parking lot. “Why did you hit Victoria? We need to help her, and why hunt me down now? The police already know you killed Nicole. They found her body, so what do you still want from me?” she asked, trying to crawl away from him.

“Hmm,” he said, sitting down casually on her chest, effectively immobilizing her and crushing her already bruised ribs. It was all she could do not to cry out in agony. “So many questions you have my little friend, Tessa.” He looked around the now dark and deserted park. “Well, we seem to have a little time, don’t we.” He looked back to where they had left Victoria. “Don’t worry about her. We don’t need to help her. She’s dead.” Then he said, “And as far as my dear little sister Nicki, I might as well let you in on a little secret before you die.”

He leaned in close to her face. She could once again smell the sickly sweet scent of his aftershave, along with the distinct odor of breath mints.

“I hated her.” He hissed.

She moved her face to the side, trying to get as far from him as she could, and he readjusted himself heavily on her chest.

“Why did I hate her, you ask?” he continued conversationally. “Because she was a meddling little brat who took all of my parent’s attention.” He shook his head sadly and looked at her. “She should have never been born. I knew that right from the minute that my dear mother announced she was pregnant. I even tried to end it right there and then, but a five-year-old can only push so much, and my dear mother was able to stop the fall.” He shook his head at the memory. “Of course, she couldn’t know that the baby would be such trouble, or she would have never had her. I don’t blame her. She was just a silly woman who didn’t know any better.”

“How could you hate an unborn baby?” Tessa gasped. Talking was painful, but if she could keep him talking, she

could buy time to get away.

“I already told you that. She was a selfish brat. From the minute I saw my mother’s swollen belly, I could see how she was sapping her strength and keeping her away from me. Mother wouldn’t even carry me around anymore. She spent so much time sleeping and lying down instead of playing with me.” He glanced down at the boot still on her ankle, and, picking up a stick, started poking at it. “When are they going to take this thing off? I must tell you, it really is quite unattractive, Tessa.”

As he talked, he was poking the stick inside the cast, and the pain was causing waves of nausea to wash over her, but she still refused to cry out. Even if he killed her, she vowed she would not give him the satisfaction of even a whimper.

“Surely you changed your mind after she was born.” Tessa gasped through clenched teeth.

“No, not really,” he said, focusing on her face again. “She just got worse and my parents spoiled her. My mother even took her to live in a separate house for a while, leaving me and my father alone to fend for ourselves.” He shook his head. “See, she really was a selfish thing. My father and I both needed mother, and there she was again, keeping her away from us.” He reached his hand out and gently wiped a spot of dirt off her cheek. “You really should take better care of yourself,” he remarked, and then he slapped her. He watched her curiously, no show of emotion on his face. “You’re a lot better at this game than Nicole was. She whined and cried a lot,” he announced. Then he smiled a self-satisfied smile. “She was pretty good at the game up in the mountain though. She hardly cried at all. She went much more gracefully than you.”

Tessa shuddered, realizing once again just how insane Henry must be.

He looked at her. “Oh, are you cold?” he asked, straddling her with his body. “Here, this should warm you up.”

Tessa bit her tongue to keep from crying out as his body now crushed both sides of her ribs, and it became hard to

breathe. *Was he going to crush me to death?* she wondered. “Why me?” she managed to whisper. “I did nothing to you.”

“Yes, that is such a shame, isn’t it?” he said. “I think that we could have been really good friends too, don’t you?”

Tessa struggled to breathe as she slowly blinked her eyes.

“You shouldn’t have been there. I was just tucking my dear little sister in when you came by and snapped that picture of me.” He looked at her accusingly. “And even then, I wanted to just let you go. I thought I would just crush the camera and then send you on your way.” He shook his head, making a tsk-tsk sound. “But you were just like Nicole. Selfish. You had to have that camera, didn’t you? That’s when I realized I didn’t have a choice, and I knew you would look so beautiful, flying over that cliff just like an angel.” He smiled at her adoringly. “Did anyone ever tell you just how beautiful you are, with that dark hair cascading around your face? The snowflakes were slowly gathering on it, just like tiny little jewels that day. I was mesmerized.” He looked at her lovingly and took a strand of hair in his hand. “You could have floated out of this world like an ethereal fairy.” Then he frowned, “But look at you now. All dirty and beat up.” He yanked on her hair painfully. “Such a shame, you’re not even nice to look at anymore. I’m just doing you a favor.”

When he stood up, the release of pressure made Tessa gasp for air, and her ribs contracted painfully. Henry stood over her and looked down with a sorrowful smile.

“It really is too bad you let yourself go like that, Tessa. You really were very beautiful.” He pulled the knife out from behind his back. “Goodbye, Tessa,” he said, plunging it down.

She closed her eyes, waiting to feel the knife enter her chest, when she heard the thump of a body falling. When she opened them, she saw Beau’s anxious face looking at her.

“Tessa, are you all right? I’m sorry, I would have attacked sooner, but he was too close to you, and I was afraid you’d get hurt in the struggle.”

As she looked at him, the relief and emotions she felt came flooding out and she let her tears flow freely. Beau gently eased her up off the ground and cradled her on his lap until she had calmed down. After a few minutes, she could hear the faint wail of sirens in the distance, and she looked at Beau questioningly.

“I saw a woman stumbling around when I first got here. She told me where he had taken you and I told her to call for help.” He grinned down at her. “I’m sure that’s the cops rushing in to save the day.”

She looked up at him and touched his face, testing to see if it was really him. “How did you find me? How did you know where I was?”

He smiled down at her. “I must have arrived at the shelter just a few minutes after you left. Stephanie was pretty frantic and said that you had gone to meet up with Victoria Bannan. She was pretty sure that the woman was up to no good and asked me to go after you. So of course, I did.” He looked at the still body of the man lying just a few feet away. “And it’s a good thing I did.” He held her close and sighed. “You know, your friends are right, Rags, you really have a knack for getting yourself into trouble.”

“What about Henry? Is he alive?” she asked, looking over at Henry’s lifeless form.

Beau shrugged indifferently. “No idea,” he admitted. “He might be, but I guarantee he won’t be getting up on his own anytime soon.”

Tessa could feel her ribs aching, her ankle was throbbing, and she was certain that her elbow was also sporting a brand-new whopper of a bruise, but none of that mattered right now. Victoria was alive, and Henry had been caught. Her nightmare was over, at least for a little while.

She closed her eyes, forgetting Henry, and forgetting the pain, leaning back against Beau’s muscular chest, and shutting out everything but his smell and the feel of his arms around her. She was safe here.

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The man put the phone back into its cradle and stood up slowly, his balding forehead glistening against the fluorescent light. He still preferred to take his calls from the old-fashioned landline. There was just something about holding the large solid receiver that made him feel powerful. Now, however, he frowned as he looked at it. Today's news was upsetting. She had been hurt, but somehow had once again survived the attack. He was wondering how many chances she would get before her luck finally ran out. He'd also been told there was a detective looking for him. Well, not him directly, but looking to find out who he was.

He walked over to his window and looked out. The sun had already set, and he sighed sadly. The phone call had taken longer, and he had missed the actual sunset. Now the trees were fading into the shadows, and he could barely make out the figures bustling about below. He wished she would just leave well enough alone. Anyone else would accept the money without question and absolve him of the guilt he felt. Instead, he now had to worry about covering his tracks even further.

He took the coat he had hung by the door earlier, and put his hat on his head, heading out into the gloomy, chilly evening. As he walked, he thought about the safeguards that he had put in place and smiled. No, he was certain that even the best detective wouldn't be able to trace where the money came from. Then he frowned, but there were other ways to trace him, and he would need to make sure that all loose ends were neatly tied up.

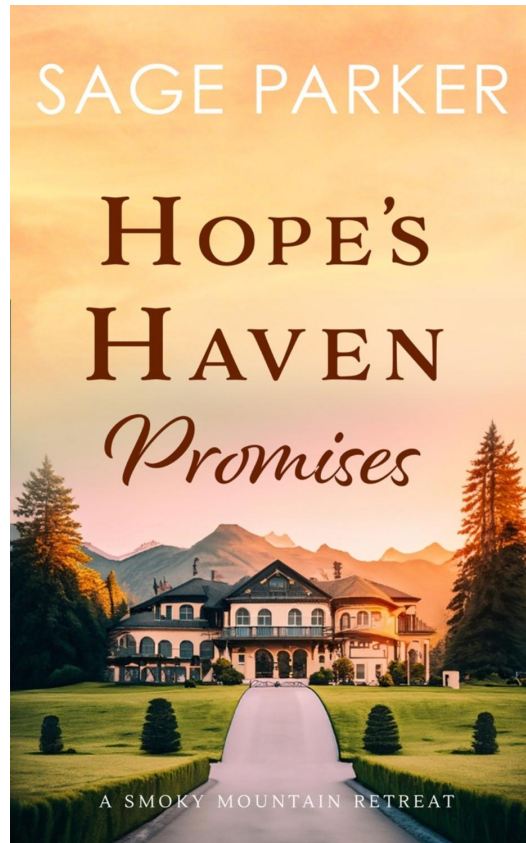
He walked through the heavy doors of the church, removing his hat from his head, and kneeling in front of the altar before making his way to the familiar booth on the side of the church. He walked through the curtain, and sat down, glancing only casually at the shadowy figure on the other side of the screen.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” he said in his solemn voice.

CONTINUE THE STORY!

BOOK 3 in the Hopes Haven Series will be releasing  
on

November 21<sup>st</sup> 2023...



*Book 3 Teaser...*



## Chapter 1

The balding man gave the woman a kiss on the forehead as he rose to leave, noticing that her once dewy and glowing skin was now parched and withered. She gave him a pleased, but blank look, and he realized that she didn't recognize him. The days she did remember him were becoming fewer and fewer, and he wondered how much longer it would be before he lost her completely.

As he walked out the door, he made a conscious effort to straighten his creaking back, trying not to slouch over. For some reason, whenever he visited her, he found himself shuffling like an old man. He wasn't ready to accept old age yet, and he strode purposefully to his car, as if by the very act of his denial he could stave off the inevitable.

His new BMW roared to life, when he turned the ignition key, and he sat for a minute, hand on the wheel, relishing the feeling of power it gave him. He smiled a self-satisfied smile. As long as he had money, he had power, and with that power came respect. He was still feared and obeyed, and he didn't intend to lose either his power or money any time soon. He alone knew his vulnerability, and of course, the woman that he had just left inside.

He looked out his rear-view mirror at the large, imposing facility with its sunny and cheerful façade and sighed sadly, not fooled by the bright and welcoming building. He knew better than anyone that once a person entered those doors, they wouldn't be leaving again.

Sometimes, rarely, he still fantasized about how he would get her out. He knew he had the power and the money to make it happen if he really wanted to, but he wondered if that's still what he really wanted.

Recently he left the visits with her feeling depressed and uneasy. The secrets they shared were fading in her mind, and soon he would be their sole keeper. He wondered if it was even worth the effort of keeping them anymore. As she drifted further and further into her own mind, and away from him, she would be beyond any repercussions anyway.

That social worker, Tessa Graves, was still looking for answers, and he couldn't really blame her. She wanted to know what happened to her family, and why someone was sending her money. He and the old woman were the only ones who had the answers. There was a part of him that pitied her, and wanted to release her from her torment, but another part enjoyed the power that his secrets gave him.

As he pushed down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward, he shook his head. *No*, he thought. *Not yet*. He wasn't ready to betray the woman's trust quite yet. She might be only a shell of the woman he loved, but she was still in there somewhere. The social worker would need to wait a little while longer for her answers. He frowned as he thought of his own mortality. *She might even need to wait forever*.

Tessa looked at the man sitting across from her and thought how different, and even attractive, he looked tonight. He was wearing a snug pair of khakis and a dark blue polo shirt, a far cry from the sheriff's uniform that she was used to seeing him in. The only other time she remembered seeing him out of uniform was when she had accompanied him to a fundraiser, and then he had been dressed in formal attire.

Jack Lewis, the sheriff in charge of her town, was telling her about a particularly funny case he had been working on involving a woman locking her husband in his mancave for a few days to keep him from seeing his mistress. She smiled, watching him warmly as he spoke. As he spoke, his face lit up, and she marveled at how much more animated he was with her lately. When she had first met the clean shaven, crew cut, professional sheriff five years ago, she had

been just as nervous around him as her best friend and business partner Stephanie Woods had been.

He had stopped by Hope's Haven, the women's shelter they had just opened on the outskirts of town, introducing himself and offering his help if they needed it. He'd assured them that they could call him, or the station, any time, but both Tessa and Stephanie had been so daunted by his cool and unfeeling manner that it had taken them weeks to warm up to him.

After five years of working with him and even lending him her own assistance, Tessa had suspected that there was a deeper and kinder man underneath the tough exterior, but it was only recently that Jack had opened up to her. After she had been attacked earlier in the year while hiking, Jack had become much more protective and caring with her, even admitting to her that his feelings ran much deeper than just friends.

Tessa herself had only recently allowed herself to be open to any kind of relationship. After the murders of her husband Luke and her young daughter Hope, she had guarded her heart and closed off any advances from anyone, feeling it would have been a betrayal to their memory to move on in her life. Now, as she watched Jack speaking, she realized, she liked the feeling of comfort when she was around him, and wondered if he was the one that she would finally be able to spend her life with.

She laughed as he finished his story and asked, "What about your ex-wife? Did she ever try to lock you in your man cave to keep you home?"

He smiled back at her, but she noticed a hint of sadness in his eyes. "No. To be honest, if either of us was going to try and lock anyone away, it would have been me. Audrey would have been thrilled if I would have spent more time on my own instead of pestering her to go out with me all the time."

"I guess as town prosecutor she would have been pretty busy," Tessa conceded sympathetically.

Jack had only recently confided some of the details of his divorce and what had led up to it.

He nodded saying, “Yes, of course she was busy, but I was also trying to build my career, and we did have the two kids as well. I just wanted us to be able to find a way to balance it all, I guess.”

Tessa thought about Jack’s kids, remembering how hard it had been on her with a mother who had been a lawyer, and how neglected she had felt. At least in her younger years, she’d had her father around to spend time with. She wondered if Jack had been as attentive a father as her own father had been.

“It must have been tough for them, with you both so busy?” she ventured.

Jack swirled the wine around his glass absent mindedly. The restaurant he had brought her to was one of the fancier ones in town, and it had surprised her when he ordered a bottle of wine for them. Tessa had never seen the straightlaced sheriff drink, and wondered if the alcohol was the reason he was so willing to open up to her now.

“I suppose that it was tough on them,” he said morosely. “Thinking back on it now, Audrey and I were too busy competing with each other’s success to even notice.”

He smiled at her, “Thankfully, both of them seem to have turned out okay with no hidden resentments towards either one of us.”

Tessa smiled, but wondered how true that was. He rarely saw either one of his children. They were staying with their mother, and Jack explained his lack of attention to them by telling her that his son Jack Junior, JJ for short, was now eighteen, and busy with his own life. Carly, his daughter, was following in her mother’s footsteps and busy studying to make it to law school. He told her they were too busy to see him, but she knew he’s been hurt when he hadn’t been invited to her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Deciding that now was not the time to bring it up she said, “You must be so proud of Carly. You said she’s doing really well in school.”

Jack looked at her, “Yeah, I am proud, although I’ve never doubted she’d do well. She’s just like her mother. It amazes me how she can be the life of every party, and still find the time to get straight A’s.”

“So Audrey was pretty outgoing then?” Tessa asked. Ever since her attack, when Henry White, her attacker, had told her that she was no longer attractive, she found herself comparing herself to other women. Compared to the popular outgoing woman that Audrey was, it seemed she was once again falling short.

Jack laughed, “You can definitely say that. She was the Ying to my yang. We were polar opposites, but even though it seemed to work for us in the beginning, I wonder if in the end that’s what drove us apart.”

He pushed his plate back, picked up his glass and said, “I guess I do have to give her a lot of credit for my own success. If it hadn’t been for the constant competition between us, and her pushing so hard, I would probably not have risen in the ranks so fast in my own career.”

She watched as his eyes clouded over, “What I still don’t understand though, is that as soon as I achieved what she was pushing me towards, she decided I wasn’t enough and left me for someone else.”

“I’m sorry Jack, that must have been very hard for you.” said Tessa softly.

Jack sighed, “It was hard, especially when I found out that she was pregnant again. She insisted we were too old and too busy to have any more kids, and then she gets pregnant with an old judge who’s ten years older than I am.”

He looked over the rim of his glass at her, “I think that’s what stings the worst.”

Tessa looked at him surprised. “I didn’t know you’d wanted more children.”

Nodding, Jack said, “I come from a family with six kids, all boys. I loved growing up with that many kids around, and I always wanted my kids to have lots of brothers and sisters, but Audrey was absolutely against it. She said we had our hands full with the two kids we already had, and wouldn’t hear of having more.”

Tessa remained silent, digesting what he’d just told her. She was finding it hard to imagine the hard-hearted, analytical Jack Lewis as a fun loving father of six.

He reached for her hand across the table, folding his own over it, “But that’s all water under the bridge now anyway. I’m blessed to have the two kids that I do have, and I’m ready to leave the past behind me.”

He watched her curiously asking, “What about you? Have you thought about starting a family again?”

At the mention of starting a family, visions of Hope and how long she had waited for her, only to be snatched away again, flooded her mind. Tessa felt the familiar lump in her throat start to form.

Trying to shrug nonchalantly, she said, “Of course I’ve thought about it. Unfortunately, I can’t have children of my own, so I would need to go the adoption route.” There, she’d said it and now he knew. She didn’t have the ability to carry a child. “With everything going on in my life right now, I’m not sure that I would be eligible.”

What Tessa didn’t tell him, was that she had spent nearly a year under psychiatric care after the murders, and she doubted that any reputable agency would ever consider her a viable adoption candidate.

She saw Jack look behind her and registered the look of surprise on his face. “Isn’t that Carter walking in?” he asked.

Tessa turned in her chair and watched as Carter Williams, her longtime friend and the other third of her and Stephanie’s little group, walked in, holding onto the elbow of a young woman as he guided her to a table by bar.

“Isn’t that Beau’s housekeeper Ellie Reyes?” asked Jack, narrowing his eyes.

Tessa turned and looked back at Jack nodding, and she could almost see the wheels in his head turning. She was just as curious what Carter was doing at a nice restaurant with Ellie and was annoyed with the now familiar feeling of jealous inadequacy whenever she saw the attractive young woman.

The mysterious and secretive Beau Reeves had become her landlord after her apartment had been burned down in an arson fire and had insisted that she stay on his property in the small cottage he’d just refurbished. Since it was conveniently connected to Hope’s Haven via the backyard, the situation had seemed an ideal solution to Tessa’s housing crisis at the time.

Unfortunately for Tessa, it not only meant that she frequently ran into Beau, but also into his attractive housekeeper Ellie.

“I’m surprised to see them together. I didn’t even know that Carter knew Ellie.” she mused out loud.

“I’m sure he’s run into her at the shelter.” said Jack. “I’ve seen her there talking to Angela a lot. Doesn’t her husband work for Beau as well?”

“Yes, but only occasionally from what I’ve heard. I think he works at some night club as a bouncer most of the time.” Tessa said, wondering if Ellie’s husband knew she was out at a restaurant with Carter.

“They seem kind of cozy,” Jack was unabashedly watching them over Tessa’s shoulder.

He turned his attention back to her, “To be honest, I thought the guy was all besotted with you. Did you two have a fight? I think it’s a little odd to bring a married woman to a nice romantic dinner, don’t you?”

“I’m sure that he’s just helping Ellie and her husband with some kind of legal issue,” she said, ignoring the nagging little voice in her head that agreed with Jack’s assessment of the situation. It was odd for Carter to be here with Ellie and not tell her.

She turned again to glance over her shoulder, and just as she did, Carter looked her way. When their eyes met, Tessa registered the embarrassment on his face, and her inner nagging voice grew louder.

She quickly turned back to Jack, wondering if Carter would ignore her and pretend he hadn't seen her, when Jack grinned and said, "Well, he's on his way over so I guess I'll have my chance to ask him what he's doing with a married woman."

Glaring at Jack, Tessa said, "You'll do no such thing. It's none of our business why he brought her here!"

"Oh come on, aren't you even a little bit curious why a man who proclaims his profound devotion to you on a daily bases brought someone else to a romantic restaurant?" he asked.

Before she could answer, Carter had reached their table and leaned over her, giving her a light kiss on the cheek.

"Hey Tessa, I'm surprised to see you out tonight. I thought you were going to be working late all week?" as he spoke, he looked coldly at Jack barely nodding a greeting to him.

Tessa's cheeks colored as she remembered she'd told him that hoping he would stop pestering her to go out, and gain a few days of peace at least.

"Yes, I was planning to work late every night, but Jack called and invited me to dinner, and since I was hungry I decided to come at the last minute," she sheepishly admitted.

As she glanced back at Ellie, who was intently studying the menu, acting like she didn't see them, her own curiosity bubbled up and she said, "To be honest, I'm kind of surprised to see you and Ellie here as well."

"Yeah, well, I've been wanting to try this place for a long time and since you wouldn't come with me, and Ellie's been asking me for advice on some legal issues, I figured I'd just kill two birds with one stone so to speak, you know?"



Tessa could hear the buzz in her head as soon as Carter started talking, letting her know that he wasn't being entirely honest with her. Of all people, Carter should know he couldn't hide anything from her. The night of the attack on her family, Tessa had received a blow to her head that had nearly killed her as well. Since then, Tessa had acquired an ability to know when others were being deceptive, and Carter was one of the few people who knew about it.

From the way Carter was looking at her, she knew that he knew she knew he was not telling her everything, and now it was his turn to flush. She wondered what he was really up to with Ellie. Carter wasn't the type of man who dated married women.

"Ummm, I'd better get back," he said quickly. "I'll call you tomorrow, Tess." Nodding curtly at Jack, he turned and walked quickly back to his table.

Jack grinned, and she saw the amusement on his face. She heard a buzz coming from his phone, but he silenced it without looking down and said, "Well, that was awkward, wasn't it? Even I could see he wasn't telling the truth."

Tessa chewed on her lower lip. She should be happy that some of Carter's attention was off her, and he was paying attention to someone else. She had, in fact, been wishing that he would meet another woman that sparked his interest. She loved Carter as a friend, but as much as he had been trying to convince her differently, she knew there was no chance of a future with him.

But instead of feeling relief, now that he was sitting behind her with Ellie, she couldn't stop the feeling of distaste and jealousy welling up in her. Of all the women he could choose from, why would he choose a married woman? And why did it have to be Ellie, she wondered.

"I can see why would be attracted to her." Said Jack, still watching them, "She really is a good-looking woman, and she seems nice and genuine as well. That's a tough combination to find. It does make you wonder if she and her husband are having some trouble though, doesn't it?"

Tessa looked directly at Jack, resisting the urge to turn around. No, she didn't think Ellie was all that nice at all. In fact, the woman's very presence irked her whenever she came around. Of course, that might only be because everyone else seemed so smitten with her, and whenever Tessa compared herself to the near perfect Ellie, she always came up short.

Jack continued, "If they are having problems, it's only natural for her to want a second chance at love, especially since she's still so young."

He looked at Tessa and his eyes were smoldering, "I know if I find the right woman, and she's interested, I'd jump at a second chance too."

Tessa heard his phone vibrating in his pocket again, and for some reason the sound was really bothering her tonight. Grumpily she thought, *well, if you're looking for second chances, then answer your phone and stop talking about Ellie.*

"Don't you think you should answer that?" she asked sweetly, hoping to finally steer the conversation away from the virtuous Ellie.

He frowned and looked at his phone, "I promised myself that I wouldn't let myself get distracted from you tonight, but you're right. I think I better answer it. It's the station and they seem persistent."

He excused himself and walked out into the hallway, while Tessa stared at her wine glass, thinking about what Jack had said.

*Was it natural to want a second chance at love?* Until recently, she hadn't thought that she was looking for a second chance. She'd convinced herself that Luke had been the love of her life, and that when he died, her chance at love anyone was gone as well.

She looked over to where Jack was talking on the phone with a frown on his face, and wondered if she should take the chance and try her luck with love one more time. Jack had made it clear that he was willing and ready to start a

relationship with her. She definitely felt something for the tough and wizened cop, but she still wasn't sure if she was ready, or if he was the right man.

She thought she'd been certain that Carter wasn't the right man either, but now, as she slyly glanced around to see him laughing at something Ellie was saying, she wondered. Maybe she wasn't as ready as she had thought to just send Carter on his way. After all, he was one of the few people in the world who knew her best, and she trusted him implicitly. Maybe she didn't really want him to find someone else.

Jack strode over, interrupting her musings with an annoyed look on his face, and said, "I'm sorry Tessa, but I've got to cut our dinner short. Can I give you a rain check on dessert? Unfortunately, I'm needed at the station right away."

"Of course, Jack, I understand. Is there anything I can help you with," she asked, actually relieved to be leaving the restaurant and the sight of Carter with Ellie.

Suddenly smiling Jack said, "You know what? I think maybe you can help. The station is telling me they have a very irate woman causing all kinds of headaches and demanding that we help her. That's right up your alley, isn't it?"

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## NOTE FROM SAGE PARKER

*Hi lovelies.*

*I love writing sweet and clean contemporary romance novels. I was born and raised in a small town in South Carolina, but you can almost always find me at the beach...usually reading a book. I hope my writing brings joy and inspiration to everyone that uses their precious time to read my stories.*

*Thanks for stopping by!*

*Stay safe and happy x*

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