



Love
Another
Day

Regina
Hanel

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by

Regina A. Hanel

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Dedication

For Veronica, My Forever Love

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Chapter One

EYES FROZEN OPEN on a bloodstained face, shredded pieces of a raincoat clenched between white-knuckled fists--

"Four-two-zero, Teton Dispatch," crackled Toby's voice over the radio.

Startled, Samantha Takoda Tyler sprung up in her seat. For a brief moment, she wasn't sure where she was. She'd drifted off like this before, but never while working. Eyes glassy, she shook her head, hoping to clear away the cobwebs cluttering her thoughts. Less than a hundred yards from the road a herd of pronghorn deer grazed on grass and wildflowers. She hadn't noticed them until that moment. Frustrated, she ran her fingers through her hair and sighed before responding to Toby. "Teton Dispatch, four-two-zero, go ahead."

"We've got a domestic dispute at Foxhole Campground."

"Roger that. On my way." Angry with herself for allowing her thoughts to wander, she breathed deep and loosened her vise-like grip on the steering wheel. When the road was clear in both directions, she swung the Expedition around and headed north on Outer Park Road, traveling slightly above the posted speed limit.

Sam started as a full time law enforcement park ranger at Grand Teton National Park five years earlier. Her job began with eighteen weeks of extensive law enforcement training at a federal training center in Georgia followed by eleven weeks of field training. One of her first solo calls during field training was a domestic dispute. She couldn't count the number she'd responded to since. Most were in the campgrounds. Vacations didn't suppress the worst in some people.

The turnoff leading toward the campground appeared as if out of nowhere, marked only by a small, painted wooden sign nailed to a worn, square, wood post three feet off the ground. Unfamiliar with the northern section of the park, covering for another ranger out on sick leave, Sam hit the brakes and jerked the wheel to the right, creating a cloud of dust as she rolled onto the road's unpaved surface. She reached for her sunglasses and placed them on the bridge of her nose, covering her bloodshot eyes. She slowed the Expedition to a near crawl, mitigating the jarring effect the minefield of potholes was having on her kidneys.

Sam drove past a group of campers gathered in a semi-circle, the steam from their breaths rising in the brisk May morning air, and parked under a nearby pine tree. "Teton Dispatch, four-two-zero on scene." She took one last deep swig of her coffee, which she knew would be cold by the time she'd return, grabbed her wide-brimmed ranger hat off the passenger side seat, and stepped from the patrol vehicle. At five-foot-five-inches she stood stoic, shoulders squared, face expressionless. Her unzipped jacket covered a crisply ironed gray shirt tucked into pleated dark green pants. "Morning folks. My name's Ranger Tyler. Can anyone tell me what's been going on here?"

A young woman, who had been watching Sam with intent interest, stepped from the crowd and detailed what had transpired not far from where they stood. With no one else having anything to add, Sam asked the campers to remain where they were, then strode authoritatively toward the ratty, blue tent pointed out to her by the young female camper. She stopped several feet in front of what remained of an earlier campfire. A coffee pot lay tipped on its side, its contents having left a darkened oval in the dirt. Ants were busily carrying away crumbs of food scraps. As she stood scanning the area, yelling resumed in the tent. Sam breathed deep. *Great. Here we go.* "Hello is anyone in there?" she hollered.

The yelling stopped. Seconds later, a portly, middle-aged woman peeked out from behind the tent flaps. The woman's shoulder-length hair was tied haphazardly into a ponytail, loose strands curling outward in all directions. A six foot tall, slightly rotund and balding, yet muscular man in his late fifties followed her out. He wore torn blue jeans and a gray and black checked flannel shirt with the bottom two buttons left unfastened. He clung to the woman's arm with white-knuckled fingers. He was unshaven, his expression stern.

"I appreciate your time," Sam began, not happy with what she saw. The side of the woman's face was swollen, and her eyes were puffy and red. Trained to maintain a calm and pleasant tone, she continued. "Sorry to bother you this early, but we got a call at the station about a disturbance--"

"A what?" the man snapped as he glanced over at the crowd staring back at him. "A disturbance?" His tone was mocking. "So, what, you figured we were the cause of this 'disturbance'?"

"That's right, Mr.?"

"Parker--John Parker. And this is my wife, Rosalie Parker," he added.

After scanning the pair for visible weapons, Sam's eyes darted past them. "Is anyone else in the tent, Mr. Parker?"

"No. Why?"

"Just asking," she responded, not wanting to irritate him further. "Would you tell me what's been going on here this morning?"

"Nothing's been going on. We had a disagreement and now it's over. Ain't that right, honey?" He yanked on his wife's arm as he shifted toward her, his eyes narrow and piercing.

Rosalie Parker remained silent, eyes transfixed elsewhere.

Sam glared at John Parker's hand where he held onto his wife's arm before shifting her gaze and connecting with his eyes.

As he reluctantly let go, he spat on the ground. "See. I told you, ranger lady. There *ain't* no problem."

"So you said." Sam paused. "How about you, Mrs. Parker? Are you sure there's nothing you want to add? I'm not going anywhere until I get a statement from both of you."

Rosalie nervously glanced from Sam to the crowd, and then to her husband before returning her attention to Sam. She breathed deep, then stepped slightly away from him. Rosalie timidly recounted their earlier argument, nearly mirroring the young woman's account, but leaving out how she got the swollen cheek, and finished with, "when he left and didn't come back right away, I got worried. I picked up the cell phone and--"

"You bitch! You called the ranger station didn't you? Worried about me my ass. Where the hell's my goddamn cell phone?" John Parker bent down and lifted the iron frying pan off the smoldering campfire. Within a split second, he raised it above his shoulders and slammed it into the side of his wife's skull. Rosalie Parker crumpled to the ground like a sheet falling off a clothesline.

Sam instinctively sprang back. She grabbed her .45 caliber Sig-Sauer from its holster and pointed it at John Parker as he raised his arm a second time. "Don't move, or I swear to God I'll shoot!" She hadn't seen this coming. Why hadn't she? She was tired, distracted. The reasons were many, but none valid, at least not in her eyes.

John Parker froze; eyes glazed and wild.

"Step away from your wife," Sam ordered. "Do it now."

Smirking and scratching the stubble on the side of his chin, he slowly complied.

"Drop the weapon!" Sam hollered.

"What weapon?" he responded before tossing the pan to the side.

Sam reached for her shoulder mic. "Teton Dispatch, four-two-zero."

"Four-two-zero go ahead."

"Got one at gunpoint. Need backup and an ambulance."

"Roger that four-two-zero."

Sam redirected her attention to John Parker. "Lay down on your stomach, clasp your hands behind your head, and cross your legs at the ankles."

John Parker stood motionless, staring at Sam in defiance. Only his cheeks moved as he clenched down on his teeth.

"When I said lay down, Mr. Parker, I meant now. And place your hands behind your head. Don't make me ask you a third time."

He mumbled the word "bitch" from under his breath, then knelt on the ground and lowered himself to his stomach.

Sam approached him from behind. She slapped handcuffs on his wrists and then searched him thoroughly for concealed weapons.

"Having fun? You know you've got nothing on me. She's my wife, and I can do whatever I damn well please with her. You got no right." He attempted to rise.

Sam ignored his comments. She held him to the ground. "You'll stand when I ask you to, and not before." When she was certain he understood who was in charge, she said, "Now, get up." She escorted him to the Expedition, with him wriggling all the way, and locked him in the back seat. Then she reached for her EMS bag and ran to Mrs. Parker.

Blood gushed from the gash near Rosalie Parker's temple. Her breaths were shallow and irregular. Sam knelt beside her limp body. She placed a dressing on the wound and wrapped it with gauze, hoping the ambulance would get there soon. She kept an eye on Rosalie until Ranger Jeffrey Brown arrived on scene with the ambulance close behind. He jumped from his vehicle, leaving the door open, and ran toward Sam.

"You all right, Tyler?" he yelled.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She only half lied. Physically she was fine, mentally was debatable, but she wouldn't let it show. "What took you so long? My grandmother could've gotten here quicker than you."

"Your grandmother doesn't live anywhere near here."

"My point exactly," Sam said. "So what happened?"

"Accident on Outer Park Road--tire blow out."

Sam stepped aside to let the paramedics move Rosalie onto the stretcher. "Anyone injured?" she asked him.

"No. A half-dozen people were shaken up though."

Sam's expression revealed she was thankful no one was hurt. "I've got the husband locked in my vehicle."

"I'll take him in. The Chief wants to see you in his office as soon as you're finished here." Jeff strode toward Sam's Expedition.

"Do you know what for?" Sam called after him. As terrific as she got along with Chief Thundercloud, getting called into his office was not something she relished. The last time he'd pulled her in from the field was well over three years ago, and as she recalled, that meeting didn't end in her favor. She'd gotten shackled with administrative duties for three months, covering for another ranger who was out on maternity-leave. Sam cringed at the thought of those days, being confined indoors, hearing calls come in over the radio and knowing she was needed on patrol but not being able to respond. Her only pleasant memory of that period was that she had felt as though she still had control over her life.

"Nope, not a clue," he said, yanking John Parker none too gingerly from the truck and to his feet. "Hey, why don't you stop by The Moose later? We can shoot the breeze for a while."

The Moose was short for The Wandering Moose, a bar frequented mostly by the locals. The tourists likely stayed away because the bar wasn't aesthetically luring from the outside. Inside though, the atmosphere was warm and inviting; a hidden treasure. Sam relaxed for a moment as she remembered some of the fun times she'd had there. But that was then. Now, she had her dog Jake, and he needed her. At least that's the excuse she fed herself for not wanting to go. "Another time, Jeff, but thanks."

"Sure thing, Tyler. See ya around."

"Yeah, see ya, Jeff. I owe you one."

Chapter Two

STANDING IN FRONT of the closet door mirror, Halie slipped into the new pair of designer jeans she'd bought the week before on a whim, then buttoned her white cotton blouse. The jeans accentuated her already slim figure. She moved a curly strand of blonde hair from in front of her eyes, and after slipping on a pair of comfortable leather loafers, stepped in front of the dresser and sprayed on a light mist of her favorite perfume. She gently removed a Spring jacket from the closet hanger and hurried into the living room. Her bags sat near the doorway where she'd placed them earlier. Before walking out of her apartment in the Beacon Hill section of Boston, Halie glanced around one last time.

She was anxious about her new assignment and worried Sheila wouldn't care for her plants while she was gone. She'd reminded her roommate ten times in the last two days not to forget. The day before, Halie had given the plants a good watering, but she knew that wouldn't last them the length of the trip. She'd also cleaned the apartment, taken out the garbage, and started her packing, none of which calmed her nerves. The opportunity she'd been waiting for was finally within reach; the chance for a cover story.

After having left a full time job at *The Boston Herald* for lack of adequate recognition for her work, she'd freelanced and written several articles for *The Wild International*. Within a month of submitting her last article, the magazine offered her a full time position. What she hadn't expected was an immediate assignment this important. Halie stared at her bags, rethinking the items she might need. She knew the nights would be much colder than what she was used to. She stood in the brick archway with the key to the front door in her hand, taking mental inventory as a yellow cab idled on the street below.

"Hey, lady," the taxi driver yelled out the side window as he stretched across to the passenger side seat. "If you want to get to the airport on time, we've got to get moving."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," Halie yelled back, annoyed with his lack of patience. Then in a whisper she added, "Besides, the meter's running so what do you care?" Bad enough she had to get up at such an ungodly hour in the first place. She didn't need the added harassment from a stranger.

The flight to Jackson Hole Airport was uneventful. Once in the air, and able to use her laptop, she buried herself in her work reviewing ten years worth of visitation numbers to Grand Teton National Park, current news articles, and park releases that supported, directly or indirectly, the likelihood of the park's closure in an environment of diminishing funds. She was so engrossed in her work that she hadn't noticed when the man next to her had fallen asleep and slunk only inches from her right shoulder, until an involuntary arm movement from him in her direction

attracted her attention. She scrunched her face, leaned forward to see if he was still sleeping, and then scanned the cabin for a flight attendant. Seeing no one, she gently grabbed his wrist and placed it on his armrest. Next, she nudged him into an almost upright position away from her shoulder. Glad she hadn't woken him, she directed her attention out the window. Miles of towering mountains and fields of blooming wildflowers surrounded the airport as they approached for landing.

Finally free of the stuffy aircraft, Halie breathed in the crisp, refreshing mountain air. No humidity. That would be a definite plus. While waiting at the curb for the taxi driver to load her luggage, she left Sheila a message on their answering machine letting her know she'd landed safely. Calling Sheila and leaving the message gave her an added sense of security. And since her parents spent the majority of their time out of the house, calling them made no sense.

"Where to, Miss?"

"Oh, ah, sorry," she said, returning her cell phone to her pocketbook. She appreciated the politeness of her taxi driver. Addressing her as 'Miss' rather than 'Hey, lady' was so much nicer and so not at all what she was used to. "Grand Teton National Park. Big Bison Lodge, please."

SAM ARRIVED AT Chief Raymond Thundercloud's office after she polished off a granola bar from the vending machine down the hall. The Chief's spacious corner office was the nicest room in the building. Suspended above the door was a National Park Service emblem the size of a large clock. Inside, the floors were covered in wall to wall carpeting and furnished with newer pressed-wood shelves, a desk, and two tables. Picture windows opposite the doorway only provided a humdrum view of the parking lot, but they welcomed in ample light. In the narrow space between the windows hung several service plaques and awards, and in the corner to the Chief's left, an American flag draped from an eight-foot pole made of hard plastic painted gold, with a plastic golden eagle perched at the top. Sam stood outside the doorway, ranger hat tucked loosely under her left arm, rapping her knuckles on the metal frame.

"Morning, Chief. Jeff said you wanted to see me?"

"Oh, hey, Sam. Yeah, come on in. We've been waiting for you." The Chief stood and straightened from his high-backed, black swivel chair and motioned Sam toward one of the other two similar chairs in front of his desk.

"We?" Sam said as she entered, not seeing anyone else in the room. She stopped a foot short of the chair.

"Yes, we," the Chief confirmed. "Sam, I'd like you to meet Ms. Halie Walker. Ms. Walker's a photojournalist for *The Wild International*. Ms. Walker, I'd like you to meet Ranger Samantha Takoda Tyler."

Sam swallowed hard as the slender and stunningly attractive woman stood and stepped toward her. She was a couple inches shorter than Sam, but exuded an air of confidence that made her appear much taller. Diamond-studded earrings glistened beneath curly golden locks of hair. A cognac colored lambskin leather jacket covered a light tan cashmere sweater. A bit self-conscious in her dirtied uniform, Sam bent forward and brushed dried mud off her right pant leg near the knee before straightening and extending Halie her hand. "Nice to meet you," she managed.

Halie returned the greeting with a firm, yet gentle handshake. She held Sam's hand longer than was customary as she studied Sam's emerald green eyes. "The pleasure's mine," she replied, her tone calming. "Chief Thundercloud's told me a few things about you."

"All good I hope," Sam said. She was acutely aware of the softness of Halie's skin next to her own and the warmth of her hand.

"So far," Halie replied, a sparkle in her eyes.

Feeling unexpected heat rise within her, Sam withdrew her hand and seamlessly shifted her attention to the Chief, who had already begun explaining the reason for Halie's visit to Grand Teton. Sam listened half-heartedly, her thoughts focused on trying to figure out why she, and not one of the other rangers, had been called to his office, especially when today should have been her day off. Zoning in at the tail end of the Chief's talk, Sam said, "That's great I guess, Chief, but what does the article have to do with me?"

"I was getting to that. I want you to be Ms. Walker's assistant during her stay with us. I've offered her magazine our help. In return her manager promised me editorial rights before the article goes to print."

"What?" Sam's mind raced. She was in no mood to get shackled with a special assignment, the memory of her last one still etched in her brain. What was wrong with letting the seasonal rangers help out? Wasn't that part of what they were hired for? Plus, the last thing she needed was additional responsibility added to what felt like an already overloaded plate. She pulled her ranger hat out from under her arm as if getting ready to leave, playing nervously with the brim as the Chief's words registered fully. "I'm sorry, Chief, I don't mean to sound rude or anything, but are you asking me to babysit Ms. Walker? I mean, I'm no writer, so I don't see what good I'll do her. Plus, when am I supposed to get my own work done? This coming weekend kicks off our busiest season."

"I'd hardly call this baby-sitting, Sam, and I'm well aware what time of year it is," the Chief replied, his tone rigid. "I'm surprised at you. I know you're set in your ways, but this is a golden opportunity for the park." He glanced at Halie while motioning Sam to move closer. "Excuse us a moment if you would, Ms. Walker," he said before returning his attention to Sam. In a whisper, he said, "You're the perfect ranger for this job. Instead of giving me flack, you should be grateful for the opportunity to be involved, and for the fact that I thought so highly of you and your work. When the magazine contacted me several weeks ago, you were the first person I thought of, not only because you're a great ranger with instincts that can't be taught, but also because I care

about what happens to you. I've known you a long time now. I know the past is still bugging you. When's the last time you've been to The Moose with the other guys or done anything with them? The bottom line is, I think a change of pace is exactly what you need. I'm sorry if you don't agree, but it's my decision to make."

"May I say something?" Halie asked, but before receiving a response she addressed Sam. "I don't want to sound rude, but I'm not the one who requested a guide or 'babysitter' as you so eloquently put it. And based on your response, I think I'd be better off on my own anyway, but I don't get to make that decision. What you should try to remember here is that I'm not writing this article about me. I'm writing it about *your* park."

"Yeah, but you're involving me," Sam said gruffly, though at the same time she respected Halie's frankness and the fact she didn't cower.

"Like I said, that wasn't my choice. But as Chief Thundercloud has already told you, publication of this article is expected to benefit the park."

"And why would we need this added benefit?" Sam pressed. "Things seem fine as they are."

Halie straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. "The operative word being 'seem.' Over the years the government's slashed funding to National Parks. Now they're threatening the closure of several. Grand Teton's one of those parks at high risk of closure."

"What makes you think Teton will be shut down?" Sam asked.

"Maintaining a park is costly."

"So's maintaining the roadways and far as I can tell, they're still open."

"There's more to this than what Halie's told you," the Chief said, "but trust me, the concerns are real. A few months ago I was informed that the Secretary of the Interior had already listed Grand Teton as one of the parks being considered for closure next year."

"What?" Sam was shocked. The thought of the park closing had never entered her mind. Why should it? The closing of National Parks was unprecedented. Why shut down Grand Teton? What would happen to all the surrounding businesses? Why hadn't she heard about this before?

The Chief continued. "Visitation's been on the decline for the past several years. We've had the all too public controversy about whether or not to let snowmobiles into the park, which has cost us a huge amount of money researching a workable solution we don't yet have. Add to that the post 9-11 cost of fighting terrorism, and the situation doesn't ring favorable for us. The government's already closed select military bases to redirect funds to the fight on terror. But the magazine furnishes us with a way of reaching the public and rallying their support behind us. The visibility may boost visitation and help keep us open."

"And when were you planning on telling everyone about the possible closure?" Sam asked.

"When I felt I ultimately had to and saw no other way out, but I hadn't reached that point yet. I'm hoping I never have to." The Chief wouldn't make eye contact with her.

Sam recognized the disappointment in his voice. "I see your point," she conceded. Okay, fine. She'd play her assistant role for what, a few days or week at the most? Then life would return to normal. She addressed Halie. "I'm sorry if I came off a bit harsh before. You can count on my help."

"A bit? Yeah, well, we'll see," Halie said.

Sam's eyes narrowed. She was beyond ready to leave the meeting. Her head pounded and she still needed to see Dr. Morgan about a blood test. She placed her hat on her head. "Is that it then, Chief?" she asked, moving toward the door.

"Not yet. I'd like a weekly report on my desk, Monday mornings, detailing your activities."

Sam stopped and reversed course, a flash of disgust on her face. "Weekly? How long is--"

"Any problems, I want to know about them immediately."

You're to report directly to me until this assignment is over, *however* long that may be. You'll be off the cascading schedule, no weekends. You'll match Ms. Walker's schedule and follow her instructions when you're with her. When you're not with her, you'll resume your normal ranger duties. You can pick Ms. Walker up from Big Bison Lodge at eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

Silence followed before Sam sheepishly asked, "Can we make it seven?"

The Chief glanced at Halie for a response, then back at Sam. "No, eight o'clock. Oh, and I gave Ms. Walker one of our latest GPS, two-way radio hand receivers." He handed Sam the other unit, exhibiting a smug air. "These should keep the two of you from losing one another out there."

"Great, a definite plus," Sam mumbled.

Chapter Three

TINA STROKED SAM'S arm. "Thanks for taking these days off to go hiking with me."

"Yeah, well, you have a unique persuasiveness about you," Sam said.

"Sometimes you have to turn up the charm to get what you want." Tina paused and interlocked her fingers with Sam's. "After all," she continued, "some nuts are harder to crack than others."

"Are you calling me a nut? Never mind. Don't answer that."

"I had a harder time convincing my parents to foot this post graduate summer excursion to the National Parks than I did convincing you, but convincing you was a lot more fun," Tina said.

Sam's cheeks flushed. "I'm not commenting on that last part, but I'm glad they let you go. If they hadn't, we never would have met, and I'd have never had these incredible few days that I know I'll never forget."

"Me neither. It's been a great adventure so far. I feel such an adrenaline rush on the mountain."

"I know what you mean, but we better stop the chatter and hoof it before we get stuck in this storm. Come on, let's go," she said and patted Tina on the butt.

"Hey, cut that out or I can assure you, we won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

As the hours passed, Tina's pace up the mountain quickened. The wind whistled past them, increasing in force. The sky darkened. Purple and gray clouds swirled above. Thunder rumbled like an angry drummer. Sam's heart pounded faster. Sweat dripped between her breasts. She should have insisted on setting up shelter sooner. She should never have given in to Tina.

The hair on the back of Sam's neck stood on end. "Tina, please. Enough already. *We need to stop.*" Tina spun around and faced Sam. Her mouth opened to speak. At that moment, lightning flashed between them and slammed into the mountain. The ground rocked. Chunks of earth and stone broke free and crashed to the valley below. Sam lost her footing and fell backwards.

Gasping for air, Sam sprang upright, heart pounding, hands gripping the bed sheets. Her t-shirt was soaked through with sweat. She released her hold on the sheets and covered her face with her hands, resting her elbows on her bent knees. She sat motionless for several minutes, shaking.

Two years had passed since that day on the mountain, but Sam still couldn't shake the nightmares. She uncovered her face and ran her fingers through her long, dark hair, sighing deeply. The night was over, leaving her drained again. She wondered how much longer she'd be tormented by her past. When would the punishment be enough? Would it ever be enough? She'd broken her cardinal rule about not dating park visitors and had paid the price, and because of that, so had Tina.

The jingle of dog tags disrupted her thoughts. Through the opening of the door peeked a happy golden-brown face with big brown eyes. Jake made his way to the side of Sam's bed and whined until she reached over to pet him. He rubbed his cold, wet nose on her arm.

Her shaking slowed. "You gotta go out, don't you?"

Jake's tail thudded on the throw rug.

Sam tapped him on top of his head. "Okay, give me a minute."

He let out a bark and jumped back from the bed, then limped off toward the bedroom door, his right hind leg in a cast.

Sam slid her legs out from under the covers, dangling them off the side of the bed. She ignored the cool air against her skin and sat staring at the bare wall before standing.

In the kitchen, after letting Jake out, she poured herself a mug of coffee and sat at the table playing with the edges of the cotton place mat in front of her. She sat watching the steam rise from her mug until the coffee got cold. *I can't keep going on like this. Something has to change.*

SAM LEFT THE warmth of her meager two-bedroom cabin near the base of Grand Teton and headed to Big Bison Lodge. The Expedition was cold, but heated quickly as she drove out Teton Park Road and past Jenny Lake.

The sun streamed through the early morning fog and mist, highlighting the snow-capped peaks of an otherwise subdued mountain backdrop. As she neared the drive for the lodge, she eased her foot off the gas pedal. Tires crunched over gravel as she followed the winding road up past the front entrance and parked under a pine tree. Perched on a bluff overlooking Willow Flats, Jackson Lake, and the Teton Mountain Range, the log cabin style lodge and the several hundred guest-cottages surrounding it spread out over the ridge.

Inside, the lobby was spacious. Tall floor to ceiling windows helped illuminate the interior, as did numerous small table lamps in the lounge area. Colorful western-style throw rugs covered large sections of the ceramic tile floor. Nature photos hung on the walls, and wooden pine beams ran along high ceilings. As Sam took stock of her surroundings, her stomach grumbled, even though she'd eaten earlier. The smell of coffee and cinnamon pastries coming from the café triggered her hunger.

She was nervous seeing Halie again, especially so soon after their first meeting. She hadn't been particularly nice to her, which she took no pride in, but at the time her anger won out. She was uncertain how she'd approach her now. She expected to see her sitting near the picture windows, among the other computer zealots ferociously clicking away on their laptops, but Halie was nowhere in sight. Sam checked her watch. It read eight o'clock. *At least one of us is on time.* She glanced once more across the room before strolling to the front desk.

The receptionist eyed her quizzically through orange-framed glasses. Before she could ask the woman for Halie's room number, she heard Halie's voice.

"Up here," Halie yelled from the second floor. "Come on up, I'm just putting my things together."

"That's okay, I'll wait."

When Halie descended the stairs, Sam's eyes involuntarily followed the flow of her every movement. She willed herself not to furnish Halie the attention, but her eyes remained transfixed. Halie wore tan slacks and a turquoise cotton sweater that hugged her torso snugly. She was stunning. But at the same time, Sam found her to be stubborn, pushy, overly concerned with appearances-- dare she suggest even priggish--and oh yes, late.

"Morning, Ranger Tyler." Halie's eyes greeted Sam with unexpected sincerity.

"Morning," Sam replied flatly, untrusting. "You ready to go?"

Halie sipped her coffee. "I've been ready."

"You have?"

"Of course. I was filling in the missing pieces to my morning crossword puzzle waiting for you."

Sam pursed her lips, but said nothing. Since Halie wasn't holding a grudge from the day before, she decided she'd do her best not to quarrel with her and let the comment slide.

As they exited the lodge, Halie said, "Let me guess, the white SUV that reads 'Park Ranger' on the side, right?"

"You're good. We could use someone with your keen investigative skills."

"I don't doubt it. Fortunately, I have another job."

Sam couldn't help but enjoy the banter. The woman was clever; she'd give her that. Sam walked Halie to the passenger side of the Expedition and opened the door for her. Halie didn't get in right away. Instead, her eyes roamed over Sam's lean, muscled figure.

Sam pretended she hadn't noticed the attention and strode to the driver's side of the vehicle. She stepped in the same time Halie sat down.

Halie kicked a few loose pens aside with her feet, then leaned over, picked them off the floor, and placed them in the makeshift penholder from which they'd likely fallen.

"Thanks," Sam said, placing her key in the ignition and hooking her hat on the clamp that hung on the divider between the front and back seats. The pleasing, sweet, floral scent of Halie's perfume filled the vehicle's interior.

"You think you've got enough stuff in here?" Halie commented in jest. "Besides the pens, radio console, traveling coffee mug, clamp on lamp, papers, maps, handcuffs, speed gun, and what's this?" she said pausing to pick up a cylindrical object.

"Bear spray. I know. It does get a little crowded. This is nothing though. You should see the stuff I keep in the hatch area."

"No thanks. I can just imagine. You ever have to use those?" Halie pointed at the rifle and shotgun positioned between the seats.

Sam cleared the clutter off the cup holder. "Unfortunately, yes."

"I figured you'd say that. Better you than me." She placed her coffee cup in the holder. "By the way, thanks, Ranger Tyler."

"For what?"

"For opening the car door for me. I could've gotten it myself though."

"Your hands were full."

"Right," Halie said, dragging out the word.

"And please, from now on call me Sam," she said reluctantly. "The whole 'Ranger Tyler' thing sounds way too formal." She rifled through the maps in her patrol vehicle until locating the one she'd been searching for. "Any idea where you want to go today?"

"I'd like to take some shots of the Teton Mountain Range, and then focus on the larger animals in the park, like moose, bison, and elk."

"That's a lot to take on in one day," Sam said, unfolding the map between them. She ran her finger along its smooth, protective surface. "Okay, how about this? Bison enjoy grazing on fresh meadow grass, and moose like the willow thickets and water plants. There's a favorite spot where they both hang out about twenty miles south of here by the grassy meadows near the Snake River. I go there sometimes to watch them. On our way we can stop by the Cathedral Group Turnout. It's one of the best places to see Grand Teton, Teewinot Mountain, and Mount Owen at the same time."

"Sounds doable, but what about the elk?"

Sam didn't answer at first. She was struggling with returning the folds of the map to the way they belonged. Frustrated, she handed the disheveled mass to Halie and put the Expedition in drive.

"You mind?"

"Not at all."

Sam pulled out onto the main road. "Elk hide in the woods during the day where it's cooler. The best time to catch them's around dawn or dusk, when they come out to eat, so it's not likely we'll see any today."

"That's too bad," Halie said, folding the map together on the first try. "That's a problem."

"Why? It doesn't have to be. I could swing by the lodge early one morning and take you."

"I'm not an early bird, remember? This is early enough."

"Right." Sam slowed the vehicle as they passed a hiker plodding along the side of the road. She leaned forward glancing past Halie at him. Once he waved at her, she leaned back and resumed her normal speed. "Silly of me to think your work might take precedence over your sleeping habits."

"You don't know anything about my sleeping habits or my work habits for that matter," Halie said. "Just because I'm not up at the crack of dawn with the roosters, or whatever you have that wakes you up around here, doesn't mean I don't put my time in. I know what it takes to be successful." She leaned her elbow on the armrest of the door and peered beyond the sagebrush flats, out toward the mountains as they drew closer.

"I'm sure you do." Sam took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts, reminding herself to try and be pleasant. "Fine-- whatever. Forget what I said. If you don't want to get an early start, then our only other option is going in the evening."

Halie relaxed in her seat. "That would be better."

"Great."

"Super."

JAKE GREETED SAM at the door, whining and wagging with excitement and exuberance like he did every night she came home from work. She rubbed his sides and kissed him between the eyes, then let him out the sliding glass door to the deck. The deck was built a foot above the ground and had only one step, which Jake was able to manage with his casted leg. Though she and Jake couldn't play ball until his leg healed, per the vet's orders, he still enjoyed rolling in the grass, getting belly rubs, and sunning himself.

After feeding Jake, Sam took out a plate of leftover potato and cauliflower casserole from the fridge. She heated it in the microwave and sprinkled parmesan cheese on top. She poured herself a glass of wine to go with the meal and sat on the deck facing the woods while she ate. Jake lay next to her, waiting for scraps, his front paws dangling off the stoop. She was thankful for his company and for the fact he always made her feel better when she was down. Today, she wasn't down, though the day wasn't a great one either. She didn't feel much of anything at that moment other than an appreciation for being home with Jake. She massaged his neck until his eyes closed and breathing slowed.

Through the rays of fading sunlight, Sam saw two deer walk out from near the edge of the woods to chew on the young leaves of some smaller trees. *A mommy and her baby*. The animals were so precious. She glanced over at Jake, who thankfully remained sleeping. If he were awake, he'd have chased after them, cast or no cast.

After a few more sips of wine, Sam's thoughts drifted to Halie. She was surprised Halie hadn't commented once during their morning together about the amazing scenery and terrain that are so unique to Grand Teton. She purposely drove to the Cathedral Group Turnout via Teton Park Road, which was one of the more scenic drives in the park. In Sam's mind, Halie's silence meant that the article was nothing more than another job, which did nothing to endear her to Sam. Yet, she was amused as she recalled the expression on Halie's face during the end of one of their chats.

"I'd skip the perfume tomorrow, if I were you," Sam said, her hands on the steering wheel as the vehicle idled. "It's a huge bug magnet."

Halie rolled her eyes toward Sam and lifted her eyebrows at the same time. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. I've got bug spray. And by the way, are you always this polite to people you've just met?"

"We haven't just met. We're on a first name basis," Sam replied.

The deer bolted off into the woods as Jake shifted his head, breaking Sam's moment of recall.

"You stay here," she said as a precaution in case Jake had seen the deer. Then she finished her glass of wine and watched the sun disappear completely before heading inside.

Chapter Four

"WHAT? NO PERFUME today?" Sam said as Halie got in the Expedition.

"No. You were right. Bad idea."

"Yeah, it's too bad in a way. I did like it."

"What? Was that a compliment? And so early in the morning?" Halie asked.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't get used to it."

"No. I wouldn't dream of it," Halie said.

Their ride south on Highway 89-191 to just north of the Moose Visitor Center was painstakingly slow due to the considerable increase in park traffic from the prior week. Halie pulled a guidebook-sized notepad from her backpack and a pen. "You mind if I ask you a few questions for my article?"

"I guess that would be okay," Sam responded, keeping her eyes focused on the road. "Although I thought I might be exempt from reporter interrogation."

"Oh, no. If anything, you're more susceptible to my inquiries than most."

Sam smiled, but said nothing.

"So, do you work in one set area of the park, or do you patrol everywhere?"

"I normally work the southern end of the park, in the Jenny Lake Sub-district, unless I have to cover for someone."

"You ever get bored on patrol?"

Sam's eyes opened wide. She realized Halie had no idea of the expanse of what her job entailed. "I don't have time to get bored."

"Never?"

"Not so far, no."

"Honestly?" Halie raised her eyebrows, along with her voice. "And how long is 'so far'?"

"About five years."

"What's a typical day on patrol like? You know, when I'm not around."

"It's hard to say. For the most part I don't have a typical day. It's never the same thing twice."

"Well, give me a for instance then."

"Okay, let's see." Sam stole a moment of silence before answering. "I've had days where I've had to arrest someone, ride in the back of an ambulance to treat someone, participate in a search and rescue, and respond to a structure fire. And in between all that I've answered visitor questions, responded to reckless driving complaints, and responded to visitor call-ins."

"All in one day?"

"Yeah."

"I had no idea--"

"That's okay, a lot of people don't. Law enforcement rangers tend to be a mixture of Law Enforcement Officers, EMT's, Firefighters, Search and Rescuers, Field Biologists, and Resource Managers all rolled into one."

"The work you do is amazing," Halie said.

The compliment embarrassed Sam. "I guess," she said as she shifted uneasily in her seat. She wanted the interview to be over, but sensed Halie wasn't ready to let it end. Why she wanted to find out more about her, she had no idea.

"You work nights too?" Halie asked, turning the page.

"Sometimes."

"You like it?"

"Not particularly. I could do without night shift." Sam glanced sideways at Halie who had fixed an inquisitive eye on her. "Night shift's typically filled with emergency response calls--serious accidents, fights, first reports on missing hikers." Sam didn't want to mention the sometimes eerie feeling she'd get sitting alone in the patrol car, listening only to the cracking of tree limbs and creatures of the night. "Day shift's a little more of what people typically think of when they think of a park ranger's duties. Answering questions from visitors, enforcing speed limits and park rules, stuff like that."

Before Halie could ask another question, honking horns intervened. "Sounds like you might have one of those problems around the next bend," Halie said.

"Let's hope you're not right."

"Sorry. I hope I'm not either."

"That's okay," Sam said, thankful for the break in questioning.

THE NEXT DAY Sam accompanied Halie on her photo shoot. She drove them to the spot near where she had dropped Halie off the previous day.

"I've got to confess something to you," Halie said. "I thought I'd be fine out here on my own, but so far it's been way more challenging than I'd envisioned. I feel like a speck in the center of all that vastness when I'm out there alone."

"Three hundred thousand acres of national park land surrounded by millions of acres of national forest and wilderness will have that effect on you," Sam said.

"I suppose. I guess what I'm trying to say is, thanks for coming with me today. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome, though it's not like I have a choice, is it?" The Chief's instructions were clear. She was to follow Halie's orders and that was what she was doing, nothing more. Sam parked and exited the vehicle.

From the side of the road they descended a small incline through pinegrass and bearded wheatgrass, stepping on a rainbow of bright colored wildflowers that stretched as far as they could see. Sam led Halie northwest toward the Snake River. The air held a considerable chill, enough to redden the tips of their noses in under a minute. Sam watched the morning mist rise in the distance near the mountain's base. The sight of the jagged mountain peaks doused in beams of bright morning sun was breathtaking.

"It's incredible out here," Halie said. "There's so much to see when you're not worried about where you're going and so much worth photographing, it's hard limiting myself."

Sam's mood lightened. This was the first time Halie mentioned anything about the beauty of Grand Teton. Maybe she wasn't as bad as Sam first thought.

"Although," Halie added, "it is a bit cold today."

"Don't worry about the cold. You'll warm up as soon as we pick up the pace."

"Who said I wanted to 'pick up the pace?' This is fine." Halie's words were more crisp than the morning air.

Sam rolled her eyes. "Oh, excuse me for making a suggestion." *So much for judging her too harshly.* After that, she remained silent and walked at a slow but steady pace.

Another hour passed before Halie broke the silence.

"How much farther do we have to go?"

"Not much."

"You didn't bring lunch today, did you?"

"No, why? Hungry already?"

A half-smile crossed Halie's face. "No, not yet, but I will be soon. I packed us some sandwiches. You're doing a lot for me, so I figured it's the least I could do for you."

"That's not necessary, but thanks." Sam paused and listened to the western meadowlarks hiding in the nearby bitterbrush bush trying to out-sing the yellow warblers. She searched for the warblers and saw them tucked in the chokecherry shrubs. The free concert lifted her spirits.

Not long after, they came upon a herd of wandering moose. Halie grabbed her camera and immediately snapped some shots.

Sam stopped and watched intently as Halie adjusted the camera lens and changed angles and lenses, all within a few blinks of the eye. For a second, she thought she'd sensed Halie's excitement, but quickly dismissed the feeling.

"Let's try and get a little closer," Halie whispered.

Sam agreed. They crept toward the moose at a snail's pace. Sam had always found moose to be incredibly cute animals, but also an intimidating sight that close. Without warning, Sam thrust her arm in front of Halie's midsection, forcing her to an immediate stop. "Don't move! I thought I heard something."

With reflex speed, the startled moose herd bolted off, stopping several hundred yards away.

"Great. You scared them off," Halie said.

Sam glanced at Halie with a glint of annoyance. The eerie cry she'd heard seconds before emanated from behind a marshy patch of grass fifteen yards in front of them.

Halie grabbed hold of Sam's shirt near the waist and stood motionless. "What was that?" she whispered, eyes narrowed.

"I'm not sure. I don't think it's anything dangerous though," Sam responded in a hushed voice.

"Oh, well that's a relief, but how do you know *that* if you're not sure what it is?" Halie asked. "I'm not looking to get chased for a meal."

Just then, Sam noticed the white-knuckled grip Halie had on her shirt. For a brief moment, she enjoyed the feeling of Halie needing her. "I don't know. I just do. I'm gonna go check it out. Stay here."

"Yes, *boss*," Halie answered.

Sam's tough exterior cracked. "Cute," she said, and moved toward the sound. She pushed aside the thick reeds of grass and slipped behind the willow thickets. Her footing became unstable. The ground was soft and muddy under her feet. Twenty yards later she spotted a moose calf stuck with his hindquarters in a mud hole, dried splashes of brown muck crusted on his face, neck, and shoulders. The calf's front legs were just beyond reach of solid ground. The calf shuddered from exhaustion. Even in Sam's presence, he didn't attempt to move. Sam circled back to Halie, careful not to lose her footing. "It's a young moose," she said. "He's stuck in the mud. I'll need your help to get him out."

Halie didn't appear excited to help, but followed Sam closely. Seeing the calf, she gasped. "Yikes! He's stuck in deep. I don't think you'll be able to get him out."

"Well, not on my own I'm not, but we can't leave him here." Sam crouched down, hoping she'd be less intimidating if she appeared smaller to him. Halie squatted as well. While Sam decided on an action plan, Halie snuck in a couple photos of Sam and the calf.

"Keep inching toward him with me when I move, okay?" Sam instructed.

"Okay."

"Let's push him on his hind end. We'll rock him to the right and then the left to relieve the suction. Hopefully, that'll be enough to set him loose."

"I guess, but the ground's softer than a sponge cake around here," Halie said, her knees sinking into the sludge. She positioned herself opposite Sam and as close to the moose as possible while still maintaining firm leverage.

In unison, they rocked and pushed the calf from side to side while he cried out and struggled to gain a firm foothold.

"All set for one final shove?" Sam asked.

"About as much as I'll ever be."

"We'll lift on three. Ready?"

"Ready."

"One, two, three." The 'three' ended in a high pitch as Sam strained along with Halie to get the animal loose.

With Sam and Halie's help, the calf wriggled himself free. He stood with stalk-like legs wobbling, struggling to regain a few ounces of strength. Mud dripped off his young, reddish fur. He shook himself, sending globules flying through the air.

Sam and Halie sat in the direct line of the mud-slinging. When the onslaught was over, they stared at each other and burst into laughter.

"Look at you! You've got mud all over you!" Halie bellowed in near hysterics.

"Oh yeah?" Sam said, wiping her face with the front of her sleeve. "So do you."

Halie wiped her hands off on the front of her shirt. Undeterred she took four more pictures of the moose, and an equal number of Sam.

The moose stepped sideways and fixed his wide open chestnut brown eyes on the two women. Then he took two wobbly steps forward, and stopped. After a short pause, during which his

nostrils flared and filled with air, he took three more steps before hurrying off in the direction of his waiting family members.

Halie reached her hand out to Sam, who grabbed it and gave a gentle squeeze. "That felt so good helping him," she said, her eyes welling up with tears. "I hope he makes it."

Sam regarded Halie in a favorable light. "I think he will. He seems to have a strong will to survive."

"I don't think I realized how fortunate you were until now. You get to save animals and people every day. It must be so rewarding."

Sam felt the warmth of a blush on her cheeks. "Things like this don't happen every day, but it's days like this that make me love this job. It's what makes the crazy schedules, so-so pay, and risks we take all worthwhile." Sam stood and stretched her legs. She reached out and pulled Halie to her feet. Then she brushed as much of the remaining mud off her as practicable, recognizing for the most part her effort would be futile.

With eyes focused on Sam and revealing a gentle smile, Halie wiped her hands on the front of her shirt a second time. Then she reached over and wiped a streak of mud off Sam's cheek with her thumb.

Sam held the steady gaze into Halie's eyes, experiencing warmth that wound its way through her inner core, making her feel drunk. "Ugh, thanks." The words barely made their way out. Sam realized this was the first time she'd genuinely took Halie in, and she recognized a familiarity--a connection to her.

"Sure, my pleasure," Halie teased.

Sam cleared her throat, attempting to rein in the growing desire dominating her body and her thoughts. She hesitated, uncertain what to do next. She opted for a safe and easy escape route. "We should probably search for a place to dry off and have lunch."

"Sounds good to me. I know I've worked up an appetite."

HALIE SAT WITH legs crossed, facing Sam. She enjoyed the knowledge that she was the cause of Sam's hesitation when her comments veered suggestive. She also liked the connection she felt toward Sam when she'd grabbed her shirt earlier, and she wondered if Sam felt that closeness to her as well. Halie hoped she had, but thought probably not, as she devoured half her sandwich. While she ate, she kept picturing the innocent face of the moose calf. Reaching for the second half of her sandwich, she glanced over at Sam and noticed she hadn't taken the wrapper off her sandwich yet. "You're awfully slow over there, aren't you?"

"I was busy watching you eat, and at the rate you're going, I'm not sure if it's safe to be sitting near you," Sam replied.

"That's a reasonable concern. I'd definitely keep my eye on your sandwich if I were you."

"Yeah, but then again, I have excellent reflexes," Sam said, as she unwrapped her sandwich and took a generous bite.

"Is that so? I'll have to remember that," Halie said in a devilish tone. If Sam had heard her, Halie couldn't tell from her facial expression.

Moments later Sam asked, "You have any plans this weekend?"

Halie was surprised by the question. "No, not really, the usual--work. Why?"

Sam hesitated. "I'm thinking about going kayaking on Jackson Lake Saturday and wondered if maybe you'd like to come along."

"I'm not much into outdoor sports, other than golf, and I've never kayaked before," Halie said, placing the last piece of sandwich in her mouth and crumpling the wrapper in her hand.

"Right, well forget it then. Bad idea."

"No, no it's not. It's a good idea, it's just that I don't know how much help I'd be--you know--paddling and all."

"There's nothing to it. I'll give you a couple of pointers before we go, and I'll do the steering. I've got an extra life jacket too."

Halie hesitated, guilty about pushing off her work, but more interested in going with Sam. "All right. Sounds like a plan."

"Great, eleven o'clock okay?"

"Eleven's perfect."

Chapter Five

SAM MADE A point not to allow work to affect her on a personal level, but the incident at Foxhole Campground left her with a bad feeling she couldn't shake. It's what drove her to the parking lot of St. John's Medical Center five minutes past seven o'clock Thursday evening.

She attached the visitor's pass to the front of her shirt near the buttons. Other than having to bring the injured from the park to the emergency room several times a year, she hadn't actually walked through a hospital as a visitor in close to twenty years. Not since her father died. She hated hospitals. She moved down the hallway, avoiding empty beds and equipment left standing against the walls, hesitating in front of patients' rooms along the way. A middle aged man was helping a thin older woman out of bed in a dimly lit room with the drapes drawn. Wilted flower arrangements sat on the window sill. Sam wondered what the woman's ailment was and when, or if, she'd get better. A few doors later, a nurse was changing a clear bag on a machine that dispensed fluids into a young man's arm. The lights on the unit blinked and it beeped continuously. The beeping sounded to Sam as if it were getting louder and louder.

At the other end of the hall, a female doctor strode in Sam's direction, arms swinging at her side, a staunch expression on her face as she passed by Sam. The determination in the doctor's eyes coupled with the continuous high pitched beeping of the machine's alarm brought everything crashing back in one powerful instance. Nausea gripped her stomach as the darkness crept into the corners of her vision. Sam couldn't stay on her feet. She fell against the wall, sounds around her now distant and tinny.

Her mom had a death grip on her hand. Sam would never forget the look of defeat in her father's eyes. He was never coming home.

"Are you okay?" the doctor asked a second time.

Sam could hear the doctor speaking, but her words didn't register. A gentle hand lighted on her shoulder, and Sam took a deep breath. "I'm fine, I think, thanks. I must've lost my balance." The memory faded and emptiness replaced it.

The doctor appeared skeptical. "Does that happen often?"

"No. Never," Sam lied. "I didn't eat much today. I think I need to get some food in me."

"You should do that. There's a cafeteria around the corner at the end of the hall."

Sam thanked the doctor. She had no intention of eating and continued along the hallway to Rosalie Parker's room. She took one tentative step through the doorway and stopped.

A nurse stood beside the bed taking Rosalie's pulse and temperature. A half-empty food tray sat on the roll cart behind the nurse. "You can come in. I'm about finished here. You're doing much better, Rosalie. Try eating all your dinner so you regain your strength. If you need anything else, give me a buzz." She pushed the roll cart closer to Rosalie. "Make sure she eats all that," she said to Sam on the way out.

Rosalie shifted her position to her side and faced the window. "I'm sorry, Ranger Tyler, but I look terrible."

Sam approached the bed. "Don't worry about how you look, Mrs. Parker. I don't care. Believe me, I've seen worse."

"Please, call me Rosalie."

"Okay, Rosalie. Let me guess. Your eyes are swollen shut and have probably turned twenty shades of purple. You're not wearing any make-up, you're pale as a ghost, and your hair's a mess. Am I right so far?"

Sam heard a soft laugh before Rosalie moved onto her back. Her beaten face did shock Sam, but she was a master at hiding her feelings. "That ain't the half of it, though thankfully the hair's not an issue just yet."

Sam acknowledged what Rosalie said. Rosalie's head was covered with bandages, her hair completely hidden. "How are you feeling today--otherwise?"

"I've had better days." Rosalie paused, as if uncertain whether or not she should continue. "The worst part is that I hurt more on the inside than I do on the outside."

Sam understood, but remained silent.

"Our relationship wasn't always like this. When we first got married, John was a great guy. We were very much in love. We enjoyed romantic dinners, going on vacations together, and having stupid fun. But over time his attitude changed, and there were days he wouldn't even talk to me. He'd started drinking and staying out late. One night he slapped me across the face with the back of his hand. Chipped my tooth with his ring." She breathed deep before continuing. "He apologized more times than I can remember and promised never to hit me again. I don't know why I believed him. Lately though, I saw glimpses of his old self. I think he bought some self-help tapes and was listening to them in his truck. He hadn't hit me in months. That's why I felt comfortable enough to go with him on the camping trip. I hadn't been camping with him in years. Thought it would be good for us."

Sam didn't know what to say. She patted the top of Rosalie's hand and let her continue.

"I don't know what I was thinking. I never should've gone. I've thought about why I stayed with him for so many years, but haven't settled on an answer. Maybe I didn't want to be left alone, or maybe in some bizarre way I felt I deserved him, but I don't feel like that anymore. What he did to me this time was the last straw. He could've killed me, and I'll be damned if I'll let him get away with that." Color flooded back into Rosalie's cheeks.

"That's the attitude you'll need to see this through," Sam said.

"I know. It's just that right now I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know if he'll get jail time or not. And even if he does, one day he'll get out and be mad as hell. I'm sure he'll hunt for me until he finds me." Rosalie shifted in the bed, trying to get comfortable.

"Maybe time in jail will help him realize a few things. Do you have someone you can move in with, until the dust settles? Any family members that live close by?"

"I've got two brothers, but they're both losers in different ways. I don't think either of them will help me. One's divorced and lives in Texas with his two teenage sons. He runs an oil company. The other lives in Wilson with his teenage son, but he's also best friends with my husband, so little good he'll do me. His wife, who was like a sister to me, died in a supposed freak car accident a few years ago, but if you ask me, my brother was the one who killed her. I can't prove it. I wish I had evidence. But I know as sure as I'm lying here, he did it."

Sam recognized the pain streaked across Rosalie's face. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, dear. I still miss her. She didn't deserve to die. She was too young and too good of a person."

"It seems it's always the good ones that go too soon," Sam replied. "Try and forget about all that right now. You need to concentrate on eating and getting some rest. Things'll work out in the end. They always do."

"I hope you're right."

Chapter Six

SAM CONJURED UP a hundred better ways to spend her morning other than seeing her old therapist, but she knew she needed to make a serious effort to combat her nightmares and move on with her life.

Seconds before she reached the traffic light to make a right on Main Street in Wilson, a male driver in a cherry red Ford F-250 pick-up truck sped past her, cutting her off at the light as it changed red. Sam slammed on the brakes and banged her hand on the steering wheel. "Jackass!"

Sam sat in the Expedition in the parking lot of the small red-brick office building where Doctor Sally Cornwall had her corner office, eyes transfixed on the structure as if doing so would somehow increase her enthusiasm of going inside, or justify a reason for leaving.

The receptionist's desk, overflowing with stacks of folders and scattered papers, caught Sam's eye when she entered the room. The gum-smacking woman seated there, who had yet to make eye contact with her, was the second thing she noticed. The woman wore bright red lipstick, far too much mascara and eye liner, and had fingernails the length of bear claws. *Must be difficult to get good help these days.* Sam walked toward the desk over the unevenly worn shag carpet. "Morning. Samantha Tyler to see Doctor Cornwall. I'm a little early."

The receptionist pried her eyes from the magazine she'd been reading. "That's fine, Dr. Cornwall's in with a patient. Should only be a few more minutes. You said Tyler, right?"

Sam nodded. She didn't appreciate the receptionist's choice of using the word patient. She'd have preferred hearing the word client instead, which had no medical connotation.

"You a new patient?"

There she goes again. "No, I haven't been here in a while though."

"Contact and insurance information still the same?"

"Yup."

"Great. Please have a seat, and make yourself comfortable." She spun around in her chair, pulled Sam's file from the metal lateral cabinet behind her, placed it on top of one of the teetering stacks, and continued reading her magazine.

Sam retreated to the brown leather sofa near the wall opposite the receptionist's desk. She pulled a magazine from the table. The cushions cradled her body as she leaned into them. She had forgotten how comfortable the sofa had been. She flipped open the magazine, reading and re-reading the first few paragraphs of the article, finding it difficult to concentrate. As the minutes ticked by, her stomach muscles tightened. She breathed deep, trying to calm her insides. The door to the adjacent room opened, and Dr. Cornwall exited.

"Hello, Sam. It's good to see you again. How long's it been?"

Dr. Sally Cornwall was in her mid-forties, five-foot-four with a rounded belly and dark black hair streaked with a few white strands.

"Hi, Sally. It's been about a year," she said.

"I thought so. Go on in and have a seat. I'm going to grab your file and a cup of coffee. Would you like some?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks." As Sally made her way over to the coffee machine, Sam stood and walked into the other room. She sat in the chair she'd previously coined the "hot seat," across from Sally's brown leather chair. Uncomfortable with the small distance between the chairs, she

pushed hers back another foot. She settled into the seat, hands clasped on her lap. The office had a separate door for clients to leave after a session. Sam could escape unnoticed.

Sally entered the office with a steaming cup of coffee in her right hand and a worn manila folder in her left. "So, here we are again," she said, shutting the door behind her. She placed her coffee cup on the desk and opened the folder in her lap, taking a few moments to scan her notes and refresh her memory. On her desk, pictures of her children and husband remained proudly displayed.

Sally's wrinkled brows did nothing to ease Sam's nerves. As the smell of fresh coffee made its way over, she wished she had agreed to a cup.

"Okay, why don't you tell me why you're here," Sally began.

Sam gathered her thoughts and courage before she spoke. "I'm still having nightmares. I thought they were over, but about a month after I ended our sessions I started having the dreams again, and they haven't gone away. In fact, I'm having them more often. No matter what I do or try to tell myself to make them go away, they don't." She paused. "The nightmare's always the exact same dream, but it affects me differently now."

"Explain."

Sam shifted in her seat. "Before, I used to wake up feeling guilty, like I could've done something different, even though I know I couldn't. Now when I wake up, I feel an aching sadness or emptiness all the way into the pit of my stomach. It's hard to explain."

"Try."

Sam rubbed her forehead while searching for the right words. She knew Sally wouldn't let her off the hook easily. "I feel like there's a vise squeezing down on my life, and it won't let go."

Sally studied Sam thoughtfully. "I see. Well, I'm encouraged you decided to come see me. We can work through this, but the process may be a slow one. You've likely repressed a great deal. Do you recall if anything significant happened to you around the time the nightmares began recurring?"

"I don't think so, not that I can remember."

"And how about now? What's been going on recently?"

"Not much."

Sally eyed Sam. "I've forgotten how forthright you are. Let me try another way. How's your job, your mom, your love life?"

Sam let a sigh escape. "I still work at the park. I take care of the cabin and Jake. My mom's fine, and that's it. And quite frankly, that's enough. I'm exhausted most days of the week."

"I know you're not in your early twenties anymore, but you're way too young to have work exhaust you. Lack of sleep obviously isn't helping, but uncovering the reason for not sleeping will. What else?" Sally Cornwall pressed on as she jotted notes on the pages in front of her.

"I don't know. Jake hurt his leg during the winter, but it's nearly healed."

"And your love life?" Sally said. She sipped her coffee, waiting for Sam's response.

"Non-existent."

"Any particular reason?"

"I don't know. I guess I like having time to myself and not being bothered with someone telling me what to do or how to act."

"Fair enough. How's that working for you?"

Sam diverted her eyes from Dr. Cornwall to watch a bird fly past the window. "Fine."

"Truthfully?"

"Yeah," Sam said. She paused and took a deep breath. "Besides, why would I want to put myself out there and take the chance of--"

"Of what? Allowing yourself to fall in love and be happy, or of loving and losing?" Sally tapped the end of her pen on the paper.

Sam clenched her hands and teeth.

"Everyone wants to be happy, but happiness is transitional, it ebbs and flows. It comes with risks. You don't want to take any risks, do you, Sam?"

"I take risks every day in my job. I took a risk when I moved out here. I'm not afraid of risks, but I don't see what any of this has to do with helping me get rid of my nightmares. I came in to solve a problem, not create a new one that doesn't exist." Sam's blood pressure was quickly rising to a boiling point.

"I'm not creating anything. I'm trying to get a sense of what's going on inside you. I wouldn't have asked the questions if they weren't relevant. You should know that by now. Your nightmares are a manifestation of fear. The fear could be a direct result of the accident, indirectly related--a trigger if you will--or it may not be related to the accident at all."

"Not related? I'm sorry, but that sounds ludicrous. The nightmares started right after the accident. The accident *has* to be the cause."

"Not necessarily. Most phobias have no obvious causes and often surface early in life. Yours appears to have surfaced later, but we don't know that for sure. The accident may have released a trigger that was already cocked. That's why we need to consider all the possibilities."

Sam let the words marinate. The comments made sense to her, but her stubbornness won over. "I still see only one reason."

"I'd expect that. That's part of why you're here. Now, how about you let me get back to doing my job the way I know best?"

Sam agreed with reluctance and listened for the remainder of the session, speaking only when asked a direct question.

Sally finished by saying, "I'd like to see you for at least the next several weeks, once a week, and then we'll see how you progress from there." She glanced at her notes. "Last time you said you didn't want medication. You still feel the same way about that?"

"Yeah, no meds."

"That's fine. We have lots of other options open to us without resorting to medication. We have the therapy sessions like today, we can try hypnotherapy, and there's even virtual reality. A combination of the three might work well for you. The important thing is you stay committed to meeting with me this time until we see this thing through."

"I will," Sam heard herself say, though not completely convinced she meant it.

Chapter Seven

SAM PARKED NEAR one of the pathways leading to Jackson Lake, surprised the lot wasn't more full. After undoing the tie-downs, Halie helped her lift the kayak off the roof of the Expedition. "This thing is way heavier than it appears," Halie exclaimed, setting her end of the kayak on the ground.

"I know. It weighs about sixty pounds. The worst part's getting it on and off the roof. The rest isn't too bad."

Halie's facial expression indicated she didn't believe Sam.

"It's not, really. Besides, there's no better view of the Teton's anywhere in the park than from the center of the lake. It'll be worth it." Sam pulled the seat rests and paddles from out of the back of the Expedition.

"As long as I don't end up in the lake. Don't forget, I've never done this before," Halie said.

"You'll be fine. There's nothing to it. The kayak's well balanced and the water's calm. Not likely you'll fall in. And even if you did, the lake's only four-hundred feet deep."

"Is that all? Thanks for that extra bit of information I'd rather not have had."

"You kind of set yourself up for that one," Sam replied in a joking manner as she grabbed the life vests and handed one to Halie. Then she gave Halie a few pointers on how to row and best conserve her energy while doing so. After her session with Dr. Cornwall, she'd debated over whether or not she'd made a mistake inviting Halie to go kayaking with her. At first she thought she might have stepped too close to the line she'd promised herself never to cross again--the one about not dating park visitors--but then she'd quickly shrugged off the indecision, convincing herself that their planned outing was in no way a date.

"I guess this thing doesn't come with a motor then, does it?" Halie asked.

Sam was amused by the question. "You can buy add on motors for kayaks, but you won't need one. Besides, we wouldn't get any exercise if we let the motor do all the work."

Halie shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know about that. A motor still sounds good to me."

The two women lifted the kayak and set off toward the lake. A few strides later, a female voice hollered, "Ranger Tyler, is that you?" Sam and Halie set the kayak down and glanced around to locate where the voice was coming from. They quickly spotted three attractive young women making their way toward them. The woman in the front was waving.

"Friends of yours?" Halie asked.

"I don't think so," Sam replied, squinting for better focus.

"Really? They seem to know you."

"Yes, they do, don't they, but I'm not sure why."

"Hey, Ranger Tyler! It's Jessie. Remember me? Foxhole Campground?"

Now Sam realized who the woman was. "Yeah, Jessie. Hi. Good to see you again."

"Same here. These are my friends Nancy and Sally."

"Hello, ladies," Sam said, peering out over at the lake as if the lake were going to pick itself up and move. "It's nice to meet you both." Sam motioned her hand toward Halie. "This is Halie Walker. She's from--" Sam paused, realizing she didn't remember where Halie lived.

"Boston," Halie said, finishing Sam's sentence.

The women signaled understanding with a slight tilt of the head. Jessie asked, "Red Sox fan?"

"Oh, no. I don't watch baseball, although most of my friends are fans. The games are too long and boring to suit my fancy. They put me to sleep. I limit my baseball intake to the World Series."

"Yeah, I'm more of a football fan myself," Jessie said. Then she redirected her attention at Sam. "Does this look familiar?" she asked, tugging on her sweatshirt. Before Sam could answer, she added, "It's the sweatshirt you left me. You *did* leave this in front of my tent, didn't you?"

Halie produced a quizzical facial expression; her right eyebrow rising. "That *does* look like the sweatshirt you bought at the gift shop in the lodge earlier this week, Sam."

"Yeah, that's the one. I left it for Jessie. She let me borrow her other one to lay over a woman who'd been injured and bleeding at the campground until the ambulance arrived, but it got blood all over it. I bought her that shirt to replace the one that got ruined." Sam realized her explanation probably didn't clarify anything because Halie's questioning stare hadn't changed. She also noted that shy Jessie, who uttered her words sparingly a week ago, was suddenly lively and boisterous when she wished she weren't.

"Yeah, I told both these guys what they'd missed that day," Jessie added, pointing at her friends. "But they didn't believe me." She gazed adoringly at Sam before reconstructing the events leading up to Mrs. Parker being hit across the side of the head, finishing with "and if Ranger Tyler hadn't been there to stop him, I'm sure he'd have killed her. The guy gave me the creeps."

After a few more minutes of small talk, the women parted. Once they were out of earshot, Halie said, "They seemed very nice."

"Yeah, they did."

"Sounded like that day at the campground was pretty rough."

"It was. It also happened to be the day the Chief introduced us."

"Well that explains it then."

"Explains what?"

"Nothing." Halie smirked. "By the way, I don't know if you noticed or not, but Jessie was completely smitten with you."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, please! Don't tell me you didn't see how giddy she was around you and how she stared at you with those big brown puppy eyes?"

"No--can't say I did. You must be seeing things."

"Oh, no, I don't think so. She barely took her eyes off you. And from what I can tell, her *friend* Nancy wasn't too happy about the attention she was doting on you either."

"Well--maybe--but I don't usually notice stuff like that."

"Is that so?" Then under her breath she mumbled, "I'll have to remember that."

"What?"

"I said--are you taking me kayaking today, or are there more friends of yours waiting in the bushes to surprise us?"

With perfect weather and a warm seventy degrees, Sam and Halie paddled out into the lake. The breeze rustled past their ears and created small whitecaps on the water's surface. The water sparkled as if strewn with diamonds. A few hundred feet to their left, a sleek two-person sailboat with a white, purple, and turquoise striped sail sped away from them. In the opposite direction near the shoreline, a gaggle of mergansers floated carelessly along. Sam watched as they dashed about in search of fish.

"I need a break," Halie said after twenty minutes of vigorous paddling. They let the kayak glide through the water until it rested in a bobbing stop. Drifting eastward, they gazed at the awe-inspiring mountains.

Sam sensed Halie was having a nice time and relaxing. She watched her lean back to watch air bubbles rise to the surface near the side of the kayak, released from the fish swimming below.

Halie dabbed her hand into the lake, but pulled it out just as quickly. "Jeez, that's cold." Then, a pair of dragonflies buzzed past her head. "Yikes!" she yelled, ducking jerkily to one side and grabbing hold of the kayak as it rocked.

Halie's aversion to the dragonflies amused Sam. "Whoa, don't worry, they don't bite. They're definitely not worth ending up in the lake over. They're curious is all."

"Oh yeah, then how come they're not curious about you?"

"They've seen me before, but you're new."

"Is that so? I'm not buying that. Although--they do seem content just hovering. It's weird, but it's kind of like they're watching us."

"They are." Sam was enjoying teasing Halie.

"I don't mind if they watch, but they'd better not sit on me."

"If they rest, it'll probably be on the kayak. They like the bright yellow color. Besides, they're harmless."

"So you say."

The dragonflies didn't hover around them for long and soon darted off. After their short break, Sam and Halie paddled for another half hour. The sun was warming and the glistening deep blue water serene.

"You were right. This is a lot of fun," Halie conceded, as she glanced behind her at her rowing partner. "It's so peaceful out here. I'm surprised there aren't more people out."

"That's probably because it's a bit chilly out yet. Give it a couple more hours. To be honest though, I like the lake better with less people on it."

"Me too," Halie said. A few moments later, she pointed to a small land mass about three hundred yards to her right. "Can we row over there and check the island out?"

"Sure, whatever you want," Sam said. When she didn't have to take orders from Halie, she actually enjoyed pleasing her.

As they reached the shoreline, small waves they'd created splashed against the rocks. Sam let Halie get out first, then stepped out and pulled the kayak up the gentle slope, out of the water.

"My bottom's numb," Halie said as she stood and stretched her back. "My neck's all knotted up too," she added, kneading her neck with both hands as she tilted her head from left to right.

"That's because you're not used to rowing. I can massage that out for you later if you want."

"I'd like that a lot."

"Great," Sam said. "How about a snack first?" Before Halie answered, Sam unzipped the back pocket on her seat cushion and pulled out a bottle of water and a zip-lock bag filled with peanuts, raisins, and dried cranberries.

"Sounds good," Halie said, taking a handful of the trail mix. After chewing and swallowing, she took a deep swig from the water bottle. "I definitely needed the energy boost."

Sam popped a handful of trail mix in her mouth as well. She finished off the remaining water.

"How about a walk along the shoreline?" she offered.

"Sure, anything that doesn't require more paddling."

They'd covered over half the island when they came upon a mass of large flat rocks intermingled with expansive patches of moss. Western tanager and Cassin's finches chirped loudly in the aspen stands surrounding them. Halie sat on the soft moss and faced the water, legs crossed in front of her. "I can't believe you have access to places like this every day."

"I know. It's hard for me to believe sometimes too." Sam positioned herself behind Halie and knelt down on a patch of moss. The clean, mango fresh scent of Halie's shampoo tickled her nostrils, and her curly golden blonde hair appeared so soft she was tempted to touch it, but didn't. Instead she placed her hands on Halie's shoulders and massaged her tight muscles slow and firm. "Let me know if this is okay."

Halie let out a nearly imperceptible groan. "So far it's better than okay."

Sam massaged Halie's neck for about five minutes more. After she stopped Halie said, "That was incredible, Sam. I feel like a new person."

"I'm glad." Sam rose to her feet. "That means I won't have to row back by myself now."

"I should've known you had an ulterior motive," Halie said. She followed Sam's lead and stood. As she stretched, two white swans swooped down onto the surface of the lake. "Look! Aren't they stunning?"

"They're beautiful. They're Trumpeter Swans," Sam said. "They were near extinction a few years ago, although they're still not totally out of the woods yet."

"What a shame. I wish I had my camera with me. Did you know swans mate for life and if one dies, the other one stays alone for the rest of its life?"

"Yeah. I always thought that was the ultimate kind of love. Too bad people aren't like that though." Sam watched the graceful figures swimming next to each other.

"I think some people are," Halie added. "In fact, I'm sure of it."

Sam studied Halie. Her response caught her off guard. She wondered why Halie would share that inner knowledge with her, yet at the same time was elated when hearing it. Sam's line of vision wandered up Halie's arm, to her shoulder, to the throbbing pulse in her neck, and rested on her full lips. Affection and a growing desire to be near her seeped past the invisible 'no dating visitors' line she'd erected years ago; the barrier meant to prevent her from feeling anything that resembled love. Deciding she wasn't ready to entertain those feelings again, she brushed off her pants and curtly said, "We should get back."

Halie shrugged her shoulders. "If you want, but I'm in no rush," she said.

Sam didn't respond. Instead she stepped away.

"What was that?" Halie suddenly asked.

"What was what?" Sam said, spinning around.

"That noise. I thought I heard a voice. Didn't you?"

"No." Sam stood and listened, hearing nothing at first, until the wind shifted. Then she heard it too. "Over there." Sam pointed out onto the lake where a young boy was kneeling in a canoe waving his hands frantically and shouting.

"You're right, I see him!" Halie said.

The boy yelled louder. "We can't swim! My brother fell in. Please help!"

Sam grabbed her cell phone and dialed Teton Dispatch, informing them of the accident and requesting a patrol boat and ambulance. She handed Halie her cell phone, then pulled off her sweatshirt and kicked loose her water shoes. Sam knew the boy's chances of surviving the extreme cold water temperatures were slim and that her jumping into the water to rescue him was the worst choice possible, but she had no other. The boy was too far from the shoreline to extend him a branch, she had no throw bag, and they were too far away from the kayak to retrieve it. Plus, her life jacket was in the kayak. "Stay here I'll be right back! Don't follow me in. I'll be fine."

Before Halie got the opening to voice an objection, Sam dove into the water. The icy cold stung the instant her body glided under the surface. Her mind forced the numbing cold from her thoughts. When she came up for air, she caught sight of the boy struggling to stay afloat. He wore no life jacket. His head kept dipping below the water and resurfacing. His brother remained in the canoe crying and yelling for Sam to hurry.

Sam swam as fast as her body granted, but the cold made her lungs feel tight and her challenge that much greater. *Please God. Please let me get to him! Please don't let him drown! A few more strokes; almost there.* She drove herself hard, gaining on the boy with each stroke. When she managed to get within arm's reach, he disappeared once more, but this time he didn't resurface. Sam filled her lungs with air and dove beneath the surface. She ignored her lungs' cry for oxygen and overrode her mind, which screamed for her body to return to dry land. Instead, she continued deeper until the last seconds her lungs permitted. At that moment, her hand brushed against the boy's jacket. She grabbed hold with clenched fists. She struggled to reach the surface, her body straining. When she popped out of the water, she gasped for air, thankful to see the daylight. Floating on her back, she held the young boy's head on her shoulder with her one arm tucked snugly under his arm and over his chest. Sam skirted one danger, but still had to deal with another--the cold. She swam backward calling to the boy's brother in the canoe. "I need you to follow me over to the island. Can you do that?" The words came out choppy.

"I think so."

Sam knew she needed to hurry. Numbness was overtaking her hands and feet, and her teeth were chattering uncontrollably. She swam hard using her legs and her free arm. *Just a little farther, just a little farther.*

"Keep going, Sam! You've almost made it."

Propelled by the encouragement, Sam muscled forward with sheer strength and determination until her fingers touched the rocky bottom of the shoreline.

Halie ran into the water to meet her. She pulled the boy off Sam and laid him on his back, out of the water's reach.

Sam staggered from the lake breathing hard. She grabbed her crumpled sweatshirt off the ground and laid it over the boy, then knelt beside him. "I--I can't feel him. My hands--can you check to see if he's got a pulse?"

Halie put her finger next to Sam's, feeling the ice cold radiate from her hand. "He does."

"Great." Sam placed her face next to his nose and mouth. He wasn't breathing. She tilted his head to the side and opened his mouth. His airway was clear. She began mouth to mouth. No response at first, but six breaths later, he coughed and gasped for air. Sam quickly rolled him on his side until he was breathing freely, then sat him up. She glared at Halie with eyes wide open that said "Thank God," and Halie's eyes declared the same relief in return. "See if you can find out their names, then hit re-dial on my cell, and give dispatch the information," Sam said, rubbing her hands to try and get some feeling into them. "Maybe they can locate their parents."

Halie did as Sam instructed while helping the brother out of the canoe. He was so scared he could barely move. Halie kept her arm around him to comfort him, and he leaned into her. Within a few seconds he gave her his name, which was Jason, and that of his brother, Josh, and where they were staying.

In the meantime, Sam held Josh close and rubbed his back to get him warm, which helped return feeling into her hands as well. Hearing the sirens from the NPS patrol boat racing closer, she said to the boys, "Everything will be okay. Help's on the way."

Once on the patrol boat, Halie took off her sweatshirt. "Here, Sam, put this on."

Sam gratefully accepted the sweatshirt, removing her wet shirt and pulling the dry one over her head. "Thanks." The body heat from Halie, still in the sweatshirt warmed her. It smelled like her too, like a sweet mixture of mango and roses.

After wrapping Josh in one of the two wool blankets handed to her, Halie wrapped Sam in the second one. With the canoe and kayak in tow, the patrol boat reached the main dock quicker than Sam had anticipated. A hot ambulance idled in the parking lot, ready to transport the boys to the hospital.

"Lucky you were out there, Tyler," Ranger Tillis said to Sam, "or the kid probably would've drowned."

"I can't even think about that. I'm just happy they're safe."

"Amen to that. Listen, you should get yourself to the hospital too and have a doctor check you over to make sure you don't have hypothermia."

"No. I'm fine. I'll take care of it. I need to go home and get into something dry, though."

"Keep the blanket for now. You can stop by for dinner one night next week and bring it with you then. Jane'd love to see you again."

HALIE UNLOCKED THE hotel room door and motioned Sam inside. The hotel was midway between the lake and Sam's cabin, so Sam agreed to go there with Halie rather than head home. "You know, you were amazing out there today, saving Josh the way you did," Halie said. "I was so worried about both of you."

"You were? I was a little worried myself, but my training helped. You're the one who deserves the credit. If you hadn't heard Jason yelling, like Tillis said, this may have all turned out differently. Plus, you did great out there. I couldn't have saved him without you."

Halie blushed. "Thanks for saying so, but I'm confident you would have."

Sam kept the blanket clutched tightly around her. The room was simple, but nicely decorated; two double beds covered in western style comforters, wilderness pictures hanging on the wall behind each bed, a ceiling fan, desk and chair, a wet bar area with a sink and refrigerator, and a bathroom. The walls were covered in shadow-board, and western style curtains matching the bed sheets hung over a picture window that stretched the length of the room. "You've got a great view."

"I know. A room with a view was my one requirement. It's an inspiration to my writing. Here, put these on." Halie handed Sam a pair of sweatpants, socks, and sweatshirt.

"Shoot. I should've grabbed my change of clothes from the Expedition."

"Don't worry about it. Put these on for now. You're only a couple inches taller than me. They should fit fine."

Sam took the clothes and shuffled into the bathroom.

"I'll go get us some soup from the restaurant. I won't be long," Halie said.

"That sounds good. Take your time." Sam was glad Halie was getting them something warm to eat. Since she had time, she took a warm shower.

Fifteen minutes later Halie swept into the hotel room and set a tray with two steaming soup bowls on the desk.

"Smells good. Is that minestrone?" Sam asked, alternately rubbing her arms and legs.

"I think so. I was in such a rush I didn't even ask." Halie marched to the bed nearest the bathroom and pulled back the covers. "Crawl in. You need to stay warm."

Sam thought Halie read her mind. Even though she'd taken the shower, she was so cold she felt like her insides were shivering. She happily scooted into bed. "I put on the heat when you were gone. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not. I'm glad you did. I should've thought about it myself."

As soon as Sam propped up the pillows behind her, Halie handed her the bowl of soup and a spoon. She picked up the other bowl and sat at the edge of the bed. "Heck of a day it's been, hasn't it?"

Sam scooped a spoonful of the soup into her mouth. The hot liquid heated her insides. "It's been crazy, that's for sure. Definitely more than I'd bargained for."

When they finished their soups Halie said, "You still cold?"

"Believe it or not, I am."

Halie got up off the bed and collected Sam's soup bowl, placing it on top of her own, then took her spoon and set everything on top of the desk. "Okay, then move over a little," Halie said as she slipped out of her loafers and slid out of her sweats. "I'm going to warm you up if it's the last thing I do."

"I don't doubt that," Sam said. Though having Halie in bed next to her was completely innocent, Sam wished she didn't have the no dating visitors rule and that having broken it once hadn't changed her life.

"I can't believe it. Your skin's still cold as ice. You'll be lucky if you don't catch pneumonia." Halie inched closer to Sam. She placed her hand on top of Sam's thigh and pressed her leg against her to keep her warm.

Sam's body hungrily absorbed Halie's warmth. She reveled in Halie's closeness. She was surprised how much she enjoyed her company and how connected she felt to her so soon. She knew she needed to be careful. Halie was fiery, kind, and beautiful. It would be easy to get caught in a moment and then regret it later on. As she glanced at Halie, brown eyes bored through her, weakening her defenses.

Halie snuggled closer to Sam, laying her head on Sam's chest.

Sam felt as though she couldn't breathe. A part of her wanted to kiss Halie and a part wanted to run, but she felt as though she had no control of either choice.

Halie searched out Sam's eyes with searing intensity, her breathing quickened.

As if living out a dream, Sam's eyes dropped and considered Halie's lips. When she did, Halie leaned in and kissed Sam longer and more passionately than she'd been kissed before. The intensity was overwhelming, and at the same time Sam's mind was telling her no. With great difficulty, she inched away. "We can't do this. I want to, but we shouldn't."

"We're not doing anything wrong," Halie said. "I like you, Sam, a lot. You're a special person."

"So are you, but you don't understand."

"Then help me understand."

Tiredness overtook Sam. The day had been a long one. Dealing with Sally Cornwall, and trying to come to terms with some of her comments had already mentally drained her, but the added strain of potentially losing a life, and her overwhelming feelings for Halie left her emotionally spent. "I'm not sure I can. Would you just hold me for a while? I won't stay much longer," she said, but seconds after Halie wrapped her body snug around her, Sam fell asleep.

HALIE STROKED SAM'S hair. As her own heartbeat slowed, she considered the complex woman lying next to her. She admired Sam's desire to help everyone and everything she saw, while not even thinking about her own well-being. She enjoyed the strength Sam exuded, so opposite the tenderness in her eyes--and hands.

Halie's thoughts drifted back to when Sam was massaging her neck with her strong and gentle hands. She recalled having closed her eyes. As her neck and shoulder muscles uncoiled, her thoughts moved to a white sandy beach on a deserted tropical island where she and Sam were lying together on a blanket, the breeze caressing their half-naked bodies. Sam moved closer to Halie. Sam's hand, hot from the sun, glided over Halie's shoulder, and her finger gently traced down her arm and over her stomach. She wanted Sam's hands all over her. She led Sam's hands to the side of her cheeks and pulled her into a tender kiss.

When Sam shifted in her sleep, Halie snapped back to reality. What was she doing? She needed to keep things professional. She had to remain totally focused on her job, on the cover story. That's why she was there. The attraction she was feeling toward Sam would go away. Ignore the uniform. Ignore those emerald green eyes and the way they stand out against that tanned, light olive tone skin and long, dark hair. Ignore the fact that she's warm, kind, and brightens your days.

Chapter Eight

HALIE STOOD HIGH above the valley floor snapping photos from Oxbow Bend Turnout; photos of the gray mountain backdrop, the pine covered foothills, and the Snake River as it bowed out into an area of plush marshland filled with wildflowers, etching the beginnings of a new lake. From the overlook, she viewed the river otters with her high-powered camera lens. They were searching for food and playing, and were later joined by a pair of moose grazing on the water plants.

Intermittently, Halie glanced from behind her camera lens at Sam. Sam stood quiet, a few feet from her side, holding a small, gray pair of binoculars in front of her eyes. It had been six days since her unbelievable kiss with Sam, yet Sam had remained silent about the moment. As much as Halie tried ignoring her feelings for Sam, each day with her made it harder, not easier, to maintain a strictly professional relationship with her. Searching for a way to engage Sam in conversation, Halie said, "There are so many spectacular views from around here, it's hard to know where to focus."

"I know. I'm glad I don't have to choose."

"I feel like I'll never be able to capture it all," Halie added, as she watched an osprey swoop past and pluck a fish the length of a football from the water. Nabbing the opportunity, she took a photo.

"At least you know you'll get enough material for your article. You still want to go searching for those elusive elk tonight?"

Halie moved the camera away from her face. "Sure, why not?"

"I don't know. I thought you might be tired, the long week and all."

"No, I'm fine. Work invigorates me, but if you don't feel like going--"

"No, I want to go."

"Great. Me too. I'm looking forward to it." Halie smiled at Sam, then spent most of the next hour behind the lens before packing her camera away and calling it a day.

"I'm glad the week's finally over," Sam said as she started the ignition.

"And why's that?"

"I don't know. I guess I can't wait to go home and see Jake. I know that sounds silly, but I miss him. He hates it when I have to go to work and he's stuck home alone."

"Oh," Halie uttered in surprise, her eyes narrowing as she tried to unscramble the multitude of disconnected thoughts ripping through her mind, attempting to make sense out of what Sam had said. Even though they hadn't spoken about the prior weekend, about their first kiss, or made a move in that direction since, Halie sensed they had been connecting at a deeper level. Her feelings for Sam were becoming more than she'd ever imagined they would be, and she had thought maybe deep inside Sam felt the same way. "You never mentioned Jake before."

"I didn't?"

"No. I would have remembered," Halie replied.

"I thought I had. I don't know. It's no big deal. I guess he's such a constant in my life that mentioning him didn't cross my mind. Besides, he usually introduces himself before I ever get a chance, but since his accident, he hasn't been out with me much. Otherwise, I'm sure you'd have met him already."

Halie wished Sam had revealed her not so little secret about this person to her before they had kissed and before her heart got involved. Clearly, by mentioning Jake to her now, her only thought was that Sam must be keeping her at a distance. Anger and disappointment hung heavy on her. *How could she do this to me now?* Yet as conflicted as her feelings were, she possessed an unexpected need to diplomatically uncover more about Jake. "You said Jake was in an accident? What happened?" Her tone was flat and in sharp contrast to the cheeriness she'd exuded earlier.

"This is kind of a long story. You sure you want to hear it?"

Halie acknowledged that she did, even though she wasn't so sure herself.

"A couple months ago Jake and I went hiking near the entrance station in Moran, along a foot trail that paralleled one of the snowmobile trails. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, he bolted off into the woods. Then I heard this gut-wrenching scream, and I ran in after him. I found him lying in the snow, twisting back and forth, blood splattered everywhere. He had a steel trap clamped to his leg. I tried calling dispatch, but my cell phone was dead."

Halie cringed at the image. "Oh, no."

"Tell me about it. Jake had a look in his eyes I'll never forget. I tried pulling the trap apart, but the jaws were clamped too tight. The teeth cut through my gloves like they were made of paper. I'm surprised the thing didn't snap his leg in half. I had to do something. I broke off a couple tree branches and used 'em to pry the trap apart. But by that time Jake was practically unconscious. I tied his leg off to stop the bleeding." Sam slowed the patrol vehicle and stopped next to a car that was parked off the side of the road. She rolled down Halie's window and yelled out, "Excuse me folks, you're going to have to get back in your car. You can't stop along the roadway, except where it's marked. There's a turnout a couple of miles ahead on your left. You can park there."

The man, woman, and two young kids stood with their backs toward the road and didn't move immediately. Sam called to them again, and then the woman corralled her kids and got in their car. The man holding the camera responded much more slowly. He pursed his lips and rolled his eyes when he saw the national park service emblem on the side of the Expedition, then slunk toward his car.

Sam leaned back in her seat and watched. "Sorry about that. You'd think the honking horns from passing cars would be enough incentive for him to move over or at least realize he can't stop there," she said to Halie. Sam ignored the angry gestures and mumbling coming from the man. "Anyway, back to Jake. Thankfully a group of snowmobilers rode by and helped us, or I don't think he'd have survived."

Halie sat still. Her chest ached. Not because of what happened to Jake, but because he existed in Sam's life and meant so much to her. She tried to deny that finding out about Jake had any impact on her, but she was fooling herself. She watched quietly as the family pulled away.

Sam followed in the Expedition at a safe distance until they reached the turnout. "He had fractured his leg. It's been in a cast this whole time. Hates it too. He keeps picking at it. He's supposed to get it off on Tuesday. I'm sure he'll be happy as a pig in 'you know what' once that happens."

"Yeah, I'm sure he will. So you probably don't want to go searching for elk tonight then. I don't mind though, we can make it another day."

"What? What do you mean? I said I was going, didn't I?" Sam protested.

"I know, but what about Jake?"

"What about him? Don't be silly. I'll spend a few hours with him and then pick you up, say around quarter to eight?"

"Let's make it for another night. I'm not sure I'm feeling up to it anymore." The thought of Sam caring for another person on an intimate level hurt too much. She pushed it from her mind.

"An hour ago you said you were fine."

"I know, but things change."

"Fine. It doesn't matter to me," she said. "I just offered because you seemed upset that you hadn't seen any elk yet, and they were one of the first animals you wanted to photograph."

"I know, and I'm grateful for the offer, I am, but--"

"But what?"

The deafening silence between them forced the words from her mouth. "Nothing. I don't know. I'm sorry." Part of her wished she had the willpower to deny Sam, but she didn't. Halie rationalized that seeing Sam, even if she was with Jake, was better than not seeing her at all. "I still want to go. What time should I be ready?"

SAM PULLED INTO the parking lot of Big Bison Lodge fifteen minutes early and somewhat hesitant, uncertain of Halie's mood. She didn't understand why earlier Halie's demeanor and tone went from jovial to uninterested at her mention of the weekend. What was it she had said that shifted Halie's temperament, and which Halie would she be seeing now? She spotted Halie standing behind the front doors waiting for her. As she pulled up to the curb, Halie walked down the stairs and climbed into the Expedition.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," Sam replied. "Ready?"

"I suppose. Where exactly are we going anyway?"

"There's a cozy nook at the base of the Teton Mountains a mile or two south of Jenny Lake. A stream runs along the mountain and empties into the Snake River. There's a forest at the base, and sagebrush and grasses that the elk enjoy eating. It's not far off the Jenny Lake access road."

"Sounds like a nice spot," Halie said, her voice devoid of enthusiasm.

"It is. Is something bothering you?" Sam waited for a reply but received none. "Anything I can help you with?"

After a short delay, Halie said, "No, but thanks for asking. I guess part of me misses being home and being surrounded by the things that make my life comfortable."

"I'm sure your magazine must let you go home sometimes."

"They do. They'll pay for a flight every three weeks."

"There you have it. One more week to go. In the meantime, maybe I can help take your mind off missing home for a while."

"Thanks, Sam. I'm sure you can," she said.

Sam pulled off Teton Park Road onto the Jenny Lake access road.

"God, check out the tops of the Tetons! They're amazing. They're bright orange and check out that reflection in the lake," Halie commented.

"I know. It's incredible, isn't it?" Sam hadn't noticed the orange hue overlaying the mountain until Halie had mentioned it. She was too worried about what was bothering her, but once the energy returned to Halie's voice, Sam was able to enjoy the view with her. The orange color mixed with red, and as the breeze drifted over the lake, the lake appeared as though it were on fire.

"It is," Halie said. "I think I could sit and stare at these mountains in silence for hours, which really isn't like me."

"You mean being quiet for that long?"

"Funny. *No*, I mean sitting here and doing nothing for that long except enjoying what's in front of me. I'm always too busy working, and if I'm not working, I'm making sure I'm busy doing something." Halie rubbed her leg. "I don't think I've ever been comfortable enough around someone to want to do nothing with them, strange as that may sound."

Halie's comments lightened Sam's heart. "And you are now?"

Halie shrugged. "I am. Why? Shouldn't I be?"

"No, you should be. I'm glad you are, and I'm glad it's me." When she reached the end of the access road, Sam parked and got out of the Expedition. She grabbed a blanket from the hatch and tucked it under her arm.

Halie followed and yelled, "Sam, wait. I forgot my camera."

Sam circled around and unlocked the door.

"I can't believe I almost forgot this," Halie said.

"Neither can I. Am I distracting you?"

"As a matter of fact, you are. But then you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Maybe," Sam said in a self-assured tone. "You didn't really need the camera. You could've used my binoculars."

"And what good would binoculars do me? I can't take photos with them can I?"

"Not with this one, no, although I think you can buy some that do."

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least."

After walking the length of two football fields through sagebrush, being careful of where they stepped, they rested on a fallen tree trunk and waited for the elk. The unique aroma of sagebrush and the sweet smell of wildflowers hovered in the air.

Sam unfolded the blanket, setting it across their legs to cut the growing chill the evening brought with it. Sam enjoyed the silence and wondered if Halie was enjoying it too. She grabbed a tall blade of grass and placed it in her mouth, chewing on the torn end. She watched Halie without speaking a word, noticing how beautiful she looked as the sunlight faded from the sky. She pictured the two of them in the same spot, but on a different day, a day in the future. They would have come to watch the sun set together, nestled close in each other's arms like two familiar lovers.

Sam's thoughts were interrupted by the touch of Halie's leg pushing against hers. She knew it wasn't by accident, and it transported her back to the day at the lodge and their first kiss. A flash of heat surged through Sam's body from the constant pressure.

"It sure is getting warm under this blanket," Halie whispered. "The two of us could probably heat a small cabin, don't you think?"

Sam felt the flush of her cheeks. "Yeah, maybe more than that." She wanted very much to lean over and kiss Halie, but couldn't muster the courage. And before she knew it, her opportunity was gone. She heard the rustle of leaves and the crackle of twigs.

Halie heard it too, tapping Sam's leg to alert her before readying her camera.

Exercising caution, a group of ten elk made their way out of the forest. They stood sniffing the air, nostrils flaring, before settling in and grazing on sprigs of fresh, lush grass. One of the young, spotted elk decided he didn't want to eat, he wanted to play. He stood up on his hind legs, challenging the other young elk to spar with him.

Halie raised her camera with imperceptible stealth and snapped a round of photographs. The young elk had presented her with a great photo opportunity.

Without Sam noticing the time slip by, the shadows cast by the evening sky grew longer, until evening transitioned to night. When the elk's shadows against the outline of the forest were barely visible, Sam folded the blanket and walked back to the Expedition with Halie. She immediately cranked the engine and blasted the heat, flicked on the headlights, and backed out of the parking spot.

Halie placed her hand on Sam's thigh. "Thanks for that, Sam. That was one of the most peaceful and beautiful evenings I can remember having in a long time. I wish I could bottle it and save it for another day."

The sensation of Halie's hand on her leg made Sam's body spring to life. "I know what you mean, and you're welcome, but I should be the one thanking you. I don't remember feeling this relaxed in a long time."

The corners of Halie's mouth curled upward. "Neither have I."

The short ride back to the lodge remained comfortably quiet. Sam was very much aware that Halie's hand remained on her leg, and she couldn't deny she liked feeling it there. A part of her wanted to cover Halie's hand with her own, but the other part didn't want to start something she thought she couldn't finish.

When they reached the lodge, Halie gave Sam's leg a final, gentle squeeze. "Would you like to come in for a while and warm up?"

Sam swallowed hard, torn between her body screaming yes and her mind telling her no. "I'd love to, but I can't tonight. I have some things I have to do early tomorrow morning. Plus, Jake's been home alone all day. I should spend some time with him too."

"Right. Sorry. I completely forgot about Jake. I understand. Have a good night then, and thanks for this evening." Halie removed her hand from Sam's thigh and hurried from the vehicle.

Sam watched her go, wishing she had taken her up on her invitation. Halie glanced over her shoulder. The disappointment etched on her face told Sam she'd made the wrong decision. She hadn't intended on hurting Halie or holding back on her own feelings, but clearly she did both. How could she resolve this? What if they didn't date, but got together as friends? Friends would work. Before Halie was able to take four more steps, Sam opened the passenger side window and yelled out, "Hey, if you're not busy tomorrow night, would you like to come over for dinner? You must be craving some good old-fashioned home cooking by now. Although I can't promise how good it'll be."

"I'd love to, but I don't think that'd be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"What about Jake?"

"What about him? He loves company. In fact, since he hasn't gotten out much, I'm sure he'd love it even more now."

Several seconds passed before Halie spoke. "Okay, I'll be there. How can I pass on home cooking? Is there anything I can bring?"

"Just yourself. Let me give you my address." Sam grabbed a pen and tore off a piece of paper, jotting down her address and phone number.

Halie reached into the passenger side window and took the note. As she did, her fingers brushed against Sam's. Their eyes met and lingered until Halie turned and walked away.

Chapter Nine

SAM STEPPED FROM the shower, nervous energy mounting. After cracking open the window, she toweled dry, sprayed on her favorite men's cologne, and blow-dried her hair. She had thirty minutes, give or take, before Halie was due to arrive. When she finished in the bathroom, she moved into the bedroom. She dressed, slipping into dark blue jeans, a crisp, white polo shirt, and her favorite snakeskin boots before edging past Jake and into the kitchen.

Earlier that afternoon, she'd washed organic baby spinach leaves and prepared two large salads topped with cucumbers, pears, mandarin orange slices, almond slices, and crumbled blue cheese. She'd also prepared raspberry vinaigrette dressing for the salad using fresh raspberries, a dozen stuffed mushrooms, and a plate of skewered vegetables.

Sam opened the refrigerator to double check that she'd made enough food, then glanced around the cabin to make sure the place was neat and in order. "Come on, Jake. You better go outside one more time before Halie gets here. I don't want you getting too excited. We both know how much you love visitors."

Jake ran over to the sliding glass door, tail wagging.

HALIE STOOD OUTSIDE Big Bison Lodge waiting for a taxicab, her stomach muscles bunched into a knot and her expression sullen. The temperature had dropped considerably, and she was glad she'd taken her jacket with her. As much as she wanted to go to dinner, she equally wished dinner would only be with Sam. She was uncomfortable about meeting Jake. Her upset stomach was proof of that. She thought about calling Sam and canceling, but before she could, the taxi pulled up.

The ride was quiet for the most part, and Halie was thankful. She found neither point nor pleasure in talking with people she didn't know. In her opinion, strangers always wanted to know more about her than she was comfortable telling them. Better off not saying anything than revealing too much. She tried picturing what Jake might look like. She was certain he'd be tall and handsome, but couldn't envision Sam being with a man. She wondered how he treated her when no one else was watching, and if they were in love or if Sam was trying to fit herself into a 'normal' lifestyle. She figured it had to be the latter; her gaydar couldn't be that far off. She cracked her knuckles. "Are we almost there?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not much farther," the taxi driver said. He veered right off Teton Park Road, heading toward the mountains.

THE SQUEAKING BRAKES from the taxi sent Jake hobbling toward the front door, tail wagging at warp speed.

"You stay," Sam said as she peered through the screen door. When Halie came into view, the pounding of Sam's heart quickened. Keep it in check Sam, she told herself. We're just having a friendly dinner, nothing more. Then she cracked the screen door open a couple inches so Jake wouldn't run out. "Hi. We heard the taxi pull up. I see you made it okay. Come on in."

"Hi. Yeah, no problem," Halie said tentatively, her eyes connecting with Sam's. As Sam opened the door wider, Halie stepped inside. "Oh, how cute, I didn't know you had a dog," she blurted out, but as soon as she said the words, her expression froze.

"What?"

Halie stood silent.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. This is Jake, isn't it?"

"Of course. Who'd you think it was?"

Halie leaned over to pet an anxiously awaiting and well-behaved Jake. He plopped himself on the floor and rolled over for a belly rub. "I thought Jake was, you know, a person."

Sam's puzzled gaze remained.

"Well, I thought he was your, you know, boyfriend."

Then it all clicked into place for Sam--the reason for Halie's mood shifts--why she was reluctant to go out the night before and to have dinner with her tonight. She was flattered. "Oh, I see," Sam said, purposely dragging out the last word. "Although I'm not sure how you could've thought that."

"I know, me neither, but I'm glad I was wrong."

"Me too."

"What kind of dog is he anyway? He's adorable." Halie stroked the side of Jake's face.

"He's a Rhodesian Ridgeback."

"I like the strip of hair on his back that's facing the opposite direction of the rest of his hair. It makes him seem as if he's mad at first, but then you realize he's not."

"No. Jake's a big pushover. Most of the time anyway, though there have been people he hasn't liked. He never rolls over for a belly rub though for anyone, except me."

"I guess he knows I'm a good person that won't hurt him." Halie handed Sam a bottle of wine. "This is for you."

Sam wondered if the words Halie spoke were more for her benefit than about Jake. She turned the wine bottle around. "Ruffino Chianti. I love this wine. I haven't had this in a long time. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I didn't know what we were having for dinner, so I took a stab in the dark," Halie said.

"No, this is great. It's perfect actually." Sam breathed in Halie's intoxicating perfume. "Let me take your jacket and give you a quick tour. The place isn't much, but it's home." Sam's fingers brushed against the sleeve of Halie's light green V-neck sweater. The material was soft as silk and contoured Halie's body magnificently. A charge of electricity raced through Sam; her face flushed in an instant. This was going to be much harder than she thought. She forced her eyes from Halie and led her into the living room across a spotless, polished wood floor, Jake close behind.

"I didn't realize you lived in the park."

"I have to. I'm what they call a 'required occupant.' I don't have the option of living anywhere else, at least not for now."

"I never thought of that. Do they provide your housing for free?"

"No. I rent. I'd love to buy my own home one day though."

Halie glanced around the living room. There was a stone fireplace above which hung a sensual painting of a Native American Indian Squaw. A colorful southwestern style rug lay on the floor in the middle of the room. Set on the rug stood a rectangular rustic wooden table and a brown leather sofa. From the living room they moved into the kitchen. The kitchen had floors made of polished oak, newer wooden cabinets, and stainless steel appliances. The window above the sink provided a spectacular view of Grand Teton.

"Would you like a glass of wine or a beer?" Sam asked.

"I'll have wine, thanks," Halie said.

Sam placed the bottle of Chianti on the counter. "This is one of my favorite rooms."

"Why's that?"

"I guess because I love the outdoors and I love to cook, and in this room I've got both those things," she said as she grabbed a knife and bottle opener out of the drawer. Sam ran the knife along the rim of the bottle, screwed in the corkscrew, and popped the cork. She pulled two wineglasses out of the cabinet and filled them. She handed Halie a glass and raised her own. "Cheers to good food and good company."

"Cheers to good food, good company, and new beginnings," Halie replied, staring into Sam's eyes.

Halie's gaze melted Sam from the inside as they touched glasses. Sam took a sip of wine, feeling its warmth travel to her center. She watched closely as Halie's mouth touched the glass, and the wine caressed her lips. "Let me put these stuffed mushrooms in the oven, then I'll show you the rest of the place," she said, clearing her throat.

"Oh, stuffed mushrooms! Love those. Yeah, go ahead. I don't wanna be the one standing in the way of progress when it comes to food."

"No, I imagine you wouldn't," Sam said, having seen firsthand during lunches how much Halie enjoyed eating.

Sam showed Halie the rest of the cabin, ending the tour back in the kitchen.

"Did the park service remodel this place for you? Everything looks so new."

"Nope. I did that myself."

"Well, you did an amazing job."

Sam's cheeks flushed cherry-red, the compliment making her uneasy. "Thanks for saying so. Jake helped too. I don't know about you, but I'm getting kind of hungry."

"Me too. I'm starved."

"I'll get the grill started. You should probably stay in here where it's warm."

"No, that's okay. I'd rather be outside with you. I'll go get our jackets."

Sam placed the salads on the table and transferred the plate of skewered vegetables from the refrigerator to the counter. She had the oven door open and was checking on the mushrooms when Halie returned.

They put on their jackets and walked outside.

After taking a sip of wine, Halie said, "It's beautiful out here, Sam."

"Thanks. You almost can't beat the view." Sam placed the vegetables on the searing hot grill. "There is one place I've found that I like even better though. It's one of Jake and my favorite spots, a ranch home in Kelly."

Halie waited for Sam to continue.

"It's on the eastern edge of the park. There's a secluded area with a small pond and a grove of willow trees. It's so peaceful and relaxing there."

"Sounds nice. You go there a lot?"

"Not as much as I'd like. I usually go on horseback when we do go. You ride?"

"No, I'm scared of horses."

"Scared? I find that hard to believe," Sam said.

"It's true, and I don't even know why. Maybe because they're so massive and have those big teeth."

Sam laughed. "Maybe I'll get you to go one of these days and show you they're really not that bad. Stubborn, yes, and skittish sometimes, but if you ride one that was trained right you'll be fine."

"Maybe, but I'd probably need a good stiff drink before I'd give it a try." Halie took another sip of wine.

"That can be arranged."

A short silence followed, then Halie asked, "So, honestly, overall, how do you think your first couple of weeks with me went? Were they as bad as you first thought?"

Sam smiled at Halie's question. "You sure you want me to answer that?"

"Well, not if the verdict's bad. Then I'd rather you changed the subject."

Sam emptied her glass and placed it on the grill's countertop. She picked up the barbecue tongs and flipped the vegetables over. Then she rubbed her hands together, forcing back a grin. "Man, it's chilly out isn't it?" she said, and before Halie could answer, added, "So how do you like Boston?"

"Knock it off. I know you're kidding with me."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You're right. I thought the first week was a little bumpy, for me at least, but since then, the time I've spent with you has been way better than I thought it would be."

"So you're saying that you're actually glad you got this assignment."

"I'm not sure I'd go that far, but I'd say I'm glad I met you."

"How glad?" Halie stepped closer to Sam. She took Sam's hand and placed it on the palm of her own.

"Very," Sam managed, knowing she was in trouble. Her mind told her to stop and step away, not to get involved. The risk was too great. But deep down, she knew she was already involved, and anything she tried to convince herself otherwise was a farce. She swallowed hard.

The softness of Halie's lips on her own sent heat waves radiating through Sam's body. She stopped thinking. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around Halie and held her at the small of her back, pulled her close, and returned her kiss. Sam smelled something burning and backed away. "Shoot!" She lifted the lid from the grill. A puff of gray smoke billowed into the air. "I think I burnt the veggies."

"That's what you get for fraternizing with the guests," Halie said. "Don't worry about it though, I like stuff crispy. Gives it more flavor."

"That's good, because crispy is definitely what we're having." Sam knew Halie was just being nice and appreciated it. "Halie, listen. I like you a lot, probably more than I should, but I don't think this is a good idea."

Halie looked puzzled. "Meaning?"

"Us kissing, dating. I still don't think it's a good idea. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let--"

"So this was a date?"

"Well no, not really. It wasn't supposed to be."

"So why are you worried then? You didn't enjoy the kiss?"

"No, I did, too much. That's the problem. I have a rule about not dating park visitors, and you're a visitor," Sam managed.

"I understand. Believe me I do. I have similar reservations myself. We're working together, so of course we should try and keep our relationship on a professional level. I told myself that too. But when I see you, I don't know, I feel like I can't help myself. I've never felt that strong of an attraction to someone before. And then part of me thinks, what's the harm in enjoying each other's company while we have it? Soon I'll have to go back to Boston, and who knows if I'll see you again. But I'm sensing you're not seeing this the same way. I won't say I'm sorry I kissed you

because I'm not, but let's agree to forget about it and just be friends then. More importantly though, let's eat before those veggies get cold."

"Deal." Sam was relieved that Halie agreed to her request, but was at the same time saddened. She shrugged off the feeling and yelled to Jake. "Come on, boy, let's go eat."

After dinner they settled onto the sofa in the living room. Jake lay near Halie's feet. "That was such a good meal, Sam, thanks. I loved that light dressing on the vegetables, and the sweet and sour mix of flavors on the salad was wonderful."

Sam was glad Halie enjoyed the dinner. "You're welcome."

"Jake loved it too. I can't believe he eats vegetables."

"Oh yeah, he loves them. I mix 'em in with his other food to keep his diet balanced, but he'd eat them plain too."

Jake had his eyes closed and was sleeping, rolled in a ball next to the sofa.

"He seems like a satisfied customer," Halie said.

"I don't think he's got too many complaints," Sam said. "I made us some coffee. It should be ready soon."

"Great. So, I'm curious, out of all the career choices there are, what made you decide to become a park ranger?"

"That's easy, I love the outdoors. When I was little, my parents used to take my brothers and me hiking on the weekends at one of the state parks near our home. Those were some of the best times. Plus, as I got older, I wanted to help people and protect the natural beauty of the planet. Becoming a park ranger provided the perfect fit. It was either that or enlist in the military."

Halie stared adoringly into Sam's eyes. "I'm happy you didn't choose the military."

Sam knew full well that although Halie said she was fine with them being friends, her gestures and undertones suggested she desired more. Sam struggled with her longing as well, but couldn't give in. "I'll go get the dessert and coffee," she said as she stood and made a swift exit. When she reappeared, she re-directed the conversation. "So, what about your job? You like it? Does it make you happy?"

"Most of the time it does. I'd say I'm pretty happy, I guess. When I graduated college I worked as a journalist for *The Boston Herald* for a spell. I did an internship there the summer before my senior year. When I graduated, they offered me a full time job. The deadlines were crazy, and sometimes what it took to get a story was nuts, but I liked it. The fast pace was exciting."

"What made you leave?"

"The lack of money and recognition. I was offered more money with this magazine. Believe me, it took a lot of thought, especially not being a fan of the outdoors, but I couldn't reject them. They offered me everything I wanted."

Sam was taken aback by Halie's response, and it showed. "So you took the job because of the money?"

"Surprised? Yeah, I did. I worked hard through school, and I have a goal, a certain level of financial freedom I want to reach by the time I'm thirty. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I'm not saving the world or anything, but my contributions are important. Plus, this job's turning out to be more than I expected. I know I made the right move."

"It's good it worked out for you then."

"It has. If I didn't take the job, I probably would've never met you." Halie broke off a piece of the pie with her fork and placed it in her mouth. She fixed her gaze at Sam, but Sam merely shifted uneasily in her seat. Neither of them spoke for a few uncomfortable minutes.

"Mmm, apple pie. It's delicious," she said, placing another piece in her mouth. "If you hadn't become a park ranger and couldn't be a soldier, what else do you think you would have done with your life?"

Sam was happy Halie broke the silence. She said, "I think I'd run a small farm, somewhere warm, where the people are friendly and accepting. The winters around here are too rough, and the growing season's too short. I'd never survive, never mind make a profit in this area."

"A farmer, huh? I can picture you doing that. You'd make a handsome farmer."

The compliment embarrassed Sam. There was no doubt Halie wasn't going to make their 'friendship' easy on her. "No, I--what about you?"

"What about me?"

"What would you have done?"

"I'm not really sure. I think I'd have to win the lottery first." Halie contemplated the idea. "Maybe then I'd buy a vineyard and start a winery that made award winning wines."

"That sounds great. 'Award winning' wines too. Shooting straight for the top I see."

"Sure, why not? You know it's funny, but I enjoy listening to the sound of your voice."

Sam managed an, "Oh, ugh, no, I don't think--I mean, it's a nice compliment." Sam knew she should have ended her response there, but she added, "To be honest, I enjoy listening to you too."

Another awkward moment of silence followed. "How about I go get us some more pie and refresh this coffee?" Sam said.

"Sounds good. You know you'll never hear me refuse an offer for food."

Sam returned and placed the plates on the table. The noise woke Jake for a second. He stretched out and rested his head on top of Halie's feet.

"Oh, he's so cute," Halie said. "Where'd you get him from anyway?"

"I found him on foot patrol two years ago off Phelps Lake trail. I saw him about twenty feet off the trail with the corner of my eye. He'd been left tied to a tree and nearly starved. He's one of the best things that's ever happened to me. Do you own any pets?"

"No, the landlord won't allow any."

"Whereabouts in Boston do you live?"

"In the Beacon Hill section--familiar with it?"

"No, I've never been."

"You've got to go sometime. It's great. There are lots of antique shops, restaurants, and cozy pubs. It's nice. Sheila loves it too."

"Sheila?"

"My roommate."

"You have a roommate?"

"Yeah. I met Sheila my freshman year in college. We've been friends ever since. I mean, it's not always easy living together, but we do okay."

The conversation continued effortlessly into the night before Halie realized the time. "It's late. I'm so sorry," she said as she slid off the sofa and stretched her legs. "Would you mind calling me a cab?"

"I'll drive you back."

"No, that's not necessary. A cab's fine."

"It's so late already. Why don't you stay here? I've got the spare bedroom. I'll pop fresh sheets on the bed, and you'll be set."

"Not having to make the ride back sounds great, but I couldn't impose like that."

"It's no imposition. I just have to make sure I leave tomorrow morning by nine o'clock to meet a friend of mine. She lives in Jackson. I can drop you off at the lodge on my way over."

"Really? That'd work out great. I wanted to write some more tomorrow anyway--I mean later today."

"Good, it's settled then." After Sam finished making the bed, she showed Halie where the towels, toiletries, and extra blankets were, then said goodnight. Before Sam could walk away, Halie reached out and gently grabbed her hand from behind and placed it in her own. Sam spun around, her heart thumping in her chest. Her eyes drifted upward to meet Halie's, locking on them in a timeless moment.

"Thanks," Halie said warmly. "For everything." Then she released her hold on Sam and walked into the bedroom and shut the door.

Sam stood staring at the door several minutes before retiring to her own bedroom.

Chapter Ten

IN THE EARLY morning hours, Sam tossed and turned in bed while fragments of her recurring nightmare tormented her unconscious. Sam was keeping pace a few feet behind Tina along the narrow, rocky trail that wound its way up the side of Grand Teton Mountain. She knew they needed to find shelter but Tina wouldn't let up. The wind was intensifying. The clouds were darkening. Thunder rumbled louder and louder.

Finally, Sam's last-ditch plea was successful. Tina stopped. But as she turned and faced Sam, a blinding flash of lightning crashed into the earth between them. Sam tumbled, hitting her head on a rock. She awoke an hour later, dazed and confused. Her head pounded, her face and pants were soaking wet. She rubbed her forehead and attempted to stand, but her body wouldn't respond. Instead, sharp needle like pricks of pain shot through her legs and jabbed at her temples. She lay on the ground a few moments longer. Tina--where's Tina?

Fear washed over her. She strained as she raised her head, squinting from the pain. Several feet ahead of her, she saw Tina's body lying motionless on her back. Sam dug her fingers into the mud, trying to lift herself off the ground. She closed her eyes and concentrated on containing the sick feeling rising in her stomach as a wave of dizziness overcame her. Not able to stand, she crawled farther along the muddy trail on her stomach, inching her way toward the still figure.

Sam shook Tina's legs. Her skin was cold to the touch. She inched alongside her, careful not to get too close to the mountain's edge. Pieces of Tina's charred clothes clung to her lifeless body,

other pieces lay in shreds on the ground. Sam put her hand on Tina's shoulder and shook her again, begging her to wake up, but Tina's eyes were frozen open. Blood had oozed from her nostrils and left ear canal. Sam checked for a pulse, but found none. She forced herself to her knees. Trembling, she leaned over and exhaled a few futile breaths into Tina's mouth. Unable to steady herself for compressions, she yelled out in anguish before laying her head in defeat on Tina's chest and grabbing the shredded pieces of what remained of Tina's raincoat tightly in her hands.

SAM AWOKE TO Jake's wet nose touching her face. She sighed heavily. "Hey, boy," she said, reaching her arm out from under the blankets and petting him on the head. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them to clear her blurred morning vision and to erase her troubled thoughts. Sam was thankful she didn't have to work today. She sat up, rubbed her face with both hands and swung her legs out of bed. She slid her feet into her slippers, threw on a sweatshirt over her t-shirt, and shuffled into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Afterward, she grabbed an extra sweatshirt and sweatpants from the dresser draw and sneaked along the hallway to the spare bedroom, and lay the clothes on the floor in front of Halie's door. She stared at the door for a second, then continued on to get some coffee. Jake tagged along, inches behind her.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee quickly filled the cabin. Sam grabbed her mug and set it on the counter. Jake moved closer.

"No coffee for you, mister."

Jake grunted.

"No way." Sam opened the sliding glass door and let him outside while she waited in the kitchen. The morning air was brisk as usual. When Jake was finished, Sam gave him a biscuit and fed him his breakfast. While he ate, she walked into the living room and watched the news. After Jake finished breakfast, Sam heard his tags jingling away from her, rather than moving toward her. She assumed he'd disappeared up the hallway, which was a deviation from his normal routine. After breakfast he'd unfailingly lie at the base of the sofa next to her feet.

Five minutes later, Jake pranced into the living room with Halie close behind. Halie wore the sweats Sam had left by the door. The sweatshirt was now adorned with a small slobber spot Jake left on it when he'd sniffed it. Even with her hair tousled, Sam thought Halie looked beautiful.

"I got the impression someone didn't want me sleeping too long," Halie said, petting Jake on the head. "You didn't send him in after me, did you?"

"That would have been a good idea, but no, he did that on his own," Sam said, shackling the amusement she felt inside. "Morning."

"Morning. Thanks for the sweats."

"No problem. They fit nice," Sam said, noticing Halie had cuffed the sleeves. "How about some coffee? Are you hungry? I was going to make eggs and toast, if you're interested."

"I'm always interested," Halie replied. "That'll be a yes to both."

"Great, so what'll it be? Wheat or rye toast, and how do you like your eggs?"

"Sunny-side up with wheat toast." Halie ran her fingers through her hair, then followed Sam into the kitchen. "Need a hand?"

"No, I've got it. How about fresh scallions on top of your eggs?"

"Sure. Why not," she began, "it's not like I'll be kissing anyone today."

Sam walked over to the refrigerator without turning around. She purposely ignored the comment, a smirk etched on her face. Cute.

"Hey, Sam?"

"Yeah? What's up?" Sam grabbed the eggs, bread, and scallion bundle, and placed them on the counter next to the stove.

"I don't want you to think I was snooping around the room or anything, but last night I had a little trouble getting to sleep. While I was pacing around I noticed a metal animal trap on the corner bookshelf. Is that the trap Jake stepped in at the park?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh? I guess you're wondering why I kept it, right?"

"That *was* my first thought," Halie said.

"I'm not sure, to be honest. I guess a part of me thought that by keeping it, I'd still have a chance of finding the person who set it. I told my supervisor immediately, and we notified the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but without being able to identify the person who put it there, there wasn't much they could do. The day after the accident, I took the trap to the Sheriff's office. They tried lifting fingerprints off it, but no luck. Whoever set the traps was probably wearing gloves, and even if they weren't, getting a partial off the trap would have been difficult." Sam popped four slices of bread in the toaster oven, then grabbed the eggs and one by one cracked them on the side of the hot fry pan, tossing the shells into the garbage can.

"I'm sure I'd feel the same way," Halie reassured her. "Why do you think anyone would take the risk of trapping in the park though? Isn't that illegal? Why not trap somewhere else less patrolled?"

"I don't know. Trapping isn't illegal in Wyoming, as long as you follow the laws set by the Game and Fish Commission which include getting a permit, among other things, but under those same

laws, it's illegal to hunt or trap in Grand Teton. The only legalized hunting that takes place in the park happens under the Elk Reduction Program, and that's regulated. I don't like the fact there's any hunting here, but it keeps the elk populations in check. I don't even know where someone would have gotten an antiquated trap like that from." Sam scooped the eggs out of the pan and placed them next to the toast. She brought the plates over to the kitchen table and sat next to Halie. "As far as I know, stores that carry hunting gear only sell live traps and foot or leg traps that are padded."

"Maybe it's a good thing you kept the trap. The first year I worked as a reporter I was taught that anyone you're searching for can eventually be found, and if you're persistent enough, anything you're looking for can be traced back to someone. I only worked at the paper a couple of years, but in that time, I found that statement to be true. I noticed a number stamped on the clasp, on the one side of the trap where the chain comes out. I had trouble reading the last letter, or number, but I scribbled its likeness on a piece of paper anyway. I'd like to give it to an old reporter friend of mine in Boston, Mark, to see if he can find out anything about it."

"You think that'll do any good? The number's probably a part number or something. I doubt it'll tell you anything more. And if the trap truly is that old, who'd have kept records?"

"You'd be surprised what people collect. Maybe it's an antique."

"Seems like a long shot, but it may be a place to start."

"I'll call my friend tomorrow or Tuesday."

"Thanks. I appreciate your help." Sam eyed the clock on the wall and swallowed the last mouthful of her breakfast with her coffee. "I better take a shower. I don't want to be late. I told my friend April I'd be at her house by ten. Would you like to shower first?"

"No, that's okay. I'll wait until I get to the lodge. I'll need a cold one by then anyway."

Chapter Eleven

AFTER HAVING DROPPED Halie off at the lodge, Sam pulled into the driveway of April and Corrine's house which was perched on an acre lot that backed up to the National Elk Refuge. She'd called her friend April Carlton two days prior and asked if they could talk, but she hadn't mentioned about what. Sam sauntered along the red brick walkway lined with low lying, trimmed bushes and alternating purple and white flowers. A few trees graced the property and the lawn was well kept. The faint smell of lilac filled the air. She knocked on the door.

Seconds later the door opened. "Get over here, you!" April said. She bear hugged Sam as she entered the foyer. "Long time no see stranger. I darn near forgot what you looked like."

"You couldn't be that lucky," Sam said.

At five-foot-nine April was several inches taller than Sam. Her hair was shorter, but she was equally well built. "You're looking good," April said. "Are you on a new exercise regimen or something? Fess up. I want in."

"No, nothing like that."

Corrine Maxim made her way down the hall toward Sam and hugged her once April had let her go. Corrine was tanned, with wavy brown hair, and about Sam's height. "Hi, stranger. I made coffee and there's a crumb cake on the counter. I've got to go food shopping, but maybe I'll see you when I get back, if you decide to hang around a bit. And next time, don't wait six months before stopping in."

"Yes ma'am," Sam said. Sam had learned not to argue with Corrine years ago. She'd met her at a realty office in Jackson. Corrine had shown her a slew of homes in the area, even though Sam had no immediate intention of buying since she lived in government housing, something she hadn't disclosed to Corrine at that time. But Corrine had pried from her she was 'family' and later discovered the many interests Sam and her partner, April, had in common. Sam remembered Corrine wouldn't take 'no' for an answer regarding meeting April, and she was glad she hadn't.

After kissing Corrine good-bye, April swung around and faced Sam. "So what's going on? I was surprised to hear from you the other day. Corrine and I miss you, ya know. What've you been up to?"

"Not much. Busy at work mostly. I have to take Jake on Tuesday to get his cast off. I can't wait until we can go hiking again. I've missed that. I missed you guys too. I know it's been a while, but has it been six months?"

"If Corrine says so, then it's been six months. Trust me. She's got the memory of an elephant. It's not all on you, though. We could've called too. There's no excuse for either of us. I'm glad you're here though. What's going on?"

Sam followed April into the kitchen. The kitchen was small, but bright. "I went to see the psychiatrist in Wilson again."

"How come? I thought you were doing better?"

"I've been having nightmares about Tina's accident again. It's wearing me out. Sometimes I think I'll never get back to being the happy, relatively carefree old me."

April placed a coffee mug in front of Sam. "I hear you. Hey, I'm always here for you, you know that. You can talk to me whenever you want. I don't think there's anything wrong with seeing that doctor if she helps you. I think it's a good thing."

"Yeah, so did I, but she said something last week that's been bothering me."

"What?" April asked.

"I don't know, maybe it's nothing." Sam shifted her gaze over at the stove to ignore eye contact with April. "If I ask you something, will you be honest with me?"

"You know I will."

"Do you think I'm incapable of committing in a relationship?"

"What? That's an odd question. Is that what the therapist asked you?"

"Not exactly, but she implied it. I go in with one problem-- right--and she connects it to what she perceives is another problem. She thinks I fear commitment because I lost my dad so early in life and without knowing what was wrong with him." Sam's eyes welled up unexpectedly. Sally Cornwall's dragging of her dad into the reason for her nightmares struck Sam as an intrusion into the great relationship she and her dad had. The frustration of being unable to deal with the impact of her nightmares and of once again bringing the loss of her father into her daily thoughts made it feel as though she'd lost him again. "She thinks I've always 'harbored a fear of loss' deep inside, and that the accident 'exacerbated that fear.' That's exactly how she said it."

April remained quiet.

"Then I think, well, maybe she's right. I have had some decent relationships in the past, but for one reason or another, they didn't work out, and I'm usually the one who broke them off."

"I don't know, Sam. I think you'd commit if you found the right person. Maybe you haven't found her yet."

"What about Felice? Remember her? She was pretty terrific. I botched that up," Sam persisted.

"Felice was a nice person, but she had issues too. When you met her she was coming off a divorce. I don't think she was even sure if she was truly gay."

"Yeah, I guess, but is that a good enough reason to break up with someone? I don't know, maybe you're right. Maybe Dr. Cornwall's searching. She doesn't actually know what's been going on with me. How could she?" Sam took a sip of coffee and tried to relax.

"Did she mention *why* she thinks you've been having the dreams again?"

"No. I asked her that too and all she said was, 'We'll get to that, don't worry'."

April was quiet for a moment. "Look, I'm sure the lady doc has your best interests at heart. She's an excellent therapist. Sometimes bad things happen to us in our lives, and we bundle those memories away because they're too difficult to deal with when they happen. And then, as time goes by, who knows how that impacts our lives. Death isn't easy to deal with, especially when you're young. I don't know how losing one of my parents at thirteen would've impacted me, but I'd have to think it probably would've had a negative effect. I think the best thing you can do is stay open to what she's saying, and don't be too critical. Give her theories a chance of having a voice. You don't have a whole lot of other options right now."

Sam listened intently. April's words resonated, even though she didn't want to hear them. "I think you may be in the wrong job," Sam said. "I guess I do need to give this some time. I keep wondering if I hadn't cut my therapy short the last go around, if I'd still be in this situation."

"I'd like to think you wouldn't, but you can't undo the past. You need to give her a chance, and hang in there."

Sam wiped her eyes. "Yeah, I know. Sorry to unload on you."

"That's what friends are for. Now forget about all that, and tell me what else you've been up to. How's work?"

"The Chief has me on assignment helping out a photojournalist who works for a wildlife magazine in Boston. She's staying at the lodge doing a cover story on the park."

"Interesting. *She* you say?"

"I know where you're going with this. Yes, she."

"How's it going? Dish." April prodded.

"We had a bumpy start to say the least. We're very different, yet alike in a lot of ways. She appears to be honest, she's definitely organized, easy to talk to and stuff, she's very pretty--gorgeous in fact--but she can be a bit materialistic, and she's way too driven. She's stubborn too. Definitely set in her ways and bossy at times."

"Wow, that's a lot to observe about a person who you're working with on a professional level, isn't it?"

"What can I say? I'm naturally observant. I just don't know what to do about her. Dr. Cornwall's words keep floating around in my head and won't give me any rest, and neither do the nightmares."

"You've got a dilemma, that's for sure. Have you two gotten together outside of work?"

"We've been kayaking on Jackson Lake, and she's been over for dinner."

"You invited her to dinner?" April paused. "Did you kiss?"

"We did." Sam chose not to mention they'd kissed more than once and on separate occasions.

"And?"

Sam remained silent. "What?"

"What do you mean 'what'? Do I have to pull it out of you? I have ways of making people talk."

"To be honest, she took my breath away. I've never connected with someone like I connect with her, which confuses me since I haven't even known her that long. At times she seems rigid, but then she'll say or do something that shows what a huge heart she has and that she enjoys helping people and animals, which I find incredibly attractive." Sam pictured Halie's expression when she watched the young moose calf run off to meet its family. She recalled how Halie helped her with Josh and Jason and how she gave her the sweatshirt she was wearing to keep her warm and brought her soup and--

"Ah hmm," April said.

Sam snapped back to the present. "Sorry, what was I saying? Oh, yeah, and she's got a great sense of humor and a sharp mind. I feel the passion in her."

"I can see clear as day you like this woman--maybe even love her. The question is, does she like you back?"

"What? I didn't say anything about love." Sam's cheeks transformed to a rosy red. "I think you're jumping the gun. We're friends, nothing more."

"Well, then in that case I'm sure you won't mind bringing your 'friend' to dinner next Saturday, so Corrine and I can meet her. Any woman that can impress you the way she has must be something."

"Who said she impressed me?"

"You did," April said.

Chapter Twelve

AN OVERFLOWING PARKING lot at the lodge was evidence that the summer season had kicked into high gear, as was the multitude of people scurrying about. The forecast called for a nice day, seventy degrees with scattered clouds, and so far the forecast was right.

Halie approached the Expedition with her usual backpack, camera bag, and coffee cup conspicuously missing. She opened the passenger side door and peeked in. "Hi. I tried calling you at home to let you know I was staying in and doing research today, but I couldn't get a hold of you in time."

"Oh," Sam said, disappointed but trying to hide it. She'd thought a lot about her conversation with April the day before and woke finding that she couldn't wait to see Halie and spend time with her, even though they would be at work. She wanted to find out how the rest of her Sunday was, and the thought of not having her company drew some of the happiness she awoke with from her. "That's okay. I had to swing by this way anyhow. Do you think you'll be out taking pictures tomorrow?"

"Photos," Halie corrected. "I don't know for sure. I'll call you tonight. I might. I did want to photograph bears this week."

"Black or grizzly?"

"Either is fine, but preferably grizzlies. I promised my nephews I'd bring home some shots for them. They've never seen a grizzly. I planned on having the photos blown to poster size so they can hang 'em on their walls. They're little yet. They love that kind of stuff."

"I'm sure." Sam paused for a moment before adding, "Do you have plans for Saturday night? You're not working this weekend, are you?"

"No. Why, are you asking me out? I thought we weren't dating?"

"Cute. We're not, but I wondered if you'd like to meet my friends, April and Corrine. They invited us to dinner."

"They did? That's nice." Halie didn't hesitate. "I'd love to go."

"Great. They're good people. I think you'll like them."

"I'm sure I will."

"When you decide to photograph the bears, let me know. I'll come with you."

"You don't need to. I'll be fine on my own."

"Maybe, but I'd feel better if I went along. There's probably nothing to worry about. If we got any calls about an aggressive bear or an inkling there was an issue, we'd have posted warning

signs all over the place in that area anyway. But still, you don't want to run into a hungry bear or a mother and her cubs."

"I know. You don't have to worry. Besides, my understanding is that bear attacks on humans are extremely rare."

"Yeah, but they do happen. Last month a photographer got mauled in Yellowstone. Bears don't tolerate intruders very well, friendly or not. I don't think it's safe for you to be out there alone. Why not take photographs from the Expedition?"

"You're kidding right? I want something unique," Halie snapped. "Otherwise, what would be the point?"

"Right, silly of me to suggest such a stupid idea," Sam retorted. "What was it with Halie sometimes? Too driven for her own good?"

"I'm just saying I'm looking for uniqueness, and I'm not going to find that sitting in a car. That's all. I appreciate what you're doing, I do, but I'll be fine. I'm no pushover."

"I can see that."

"I'll call you tonight, okay?"

JAKE WHINED AND barked when Sam pulled up to the cabin. As soon as she opened the door he bolted out to greet her.

"Hey, fella! Have you been a good boy today?"

Jake rolled on the front lawn and wagged his tail.

Sam petted him for a few minutes before going inside. She took off her shoes, hung her hat on the pegboard, and tossed her keys on the small rectangular oak table by the door. On her way into the bedroom she undid her leather duty belt. She laid it on the dresser and stripped off her clothes and bulletproof vest before moseying into the bathroom and filling the tub with hot water. She twisted her hair into a ponytail and held it in place as she slunk under the water neck deep.

She closed her eyes, leaned her head against the tub, and willed her muscles to relax. Sam's body was tired from a long afternoon on foot patrol. Had she been with Halie, her day would have been less strenuous--more driving, less on her feet. She lay in the water until it cooled. Revitalized, she added more hot water before soaping and rinsing off. She stepped from the tub, dabbed herself dry, and changed into sweats. Smelling fresh and feeling renewed, she made dinner for her and Jake.

Sam felt Halie's absence during the day and into the evening. She wondered if Halie had missed her. But she decided it shouldn't matter and fought to push thoughts of Halie from her mind. She ate dinner while skimming through a home design magazine. Afterward, she settled into a good book on the living room sofa. Jake followed, picking up one of his favorite bones along the way. He lay on the floor, his back touching the sofa, and positioned the bone upright between his paws before he began gnawing. The muscles near his temples bulged outward each time his jaw contracted. The sound of crunching bone filled the room. Minutes later, only a small stub remained tucked under his chin, and the bone crushing noise was replaced with soft snores and twitching paws.

It'd been a while since Sam took the time to read, and she missed it. She sped through the first five chapters completely engrossed in the story, unaware of the time. She was about to take a break when the phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, Sam, it's Halie. Hope I'm not bothering you, but I've got good news."

"Hi. I was just doing a little reading. What's up? You want me to pick you up tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah, but that's not why I called. Mark called me. He got a lead on the animal trap," she announced happily.

"Are you serious?"

"Very. Ready for a long story?"

"Sure." Sam was anxious to hear the details.

"In the early nineteen hundreds, a small company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, called Victory Brothers manufactured a slew of metal products, including your animal trap. Two brothers owned the business. They were second-generation owners who, as rumor had it, took great pride in their work, so much so that they stamped each trap with an identifying code. The first four numbers represented the part number, the next four represented the number produced in the series, and the last character, which I had trouble deciphering, was a V and identified the company--'V' for Victory. After the one brother passed away, the other brother struggled maintaining the business on his own, so it folded. The surviving brother hid most of the remaining inventory in the basement of his house thinking that when his son grew older he might be able to start the business up again. In the meantime, his manufacturing plant and the land the plant was built on were sold off to pay creditors in the bankruptcy. The surviving brother never told anyone about the stash, and no one ever located it. But years later, when he died, his son found the merchandise in a hidden compartment. So the son, probably not knowing what to do with all the stuff, posted it for sale on the Internet. It turns out an antique dealer from Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania, who deals in sporting collectibles, saw the son's advertisement and bought the whole lot of goods from him. And the best news is that dealer's still in business."

"You're kidding? How'd your friend find all this out?" Sam asked, baffled.

"I'm not sure how he traced the numbers and found the company who manufactured the trap, but he got a lot of information about the history of the company from the antique dealer. The antique dealer's business had also been in his family for several generations. The guy told him that when he was younger he recalled seeing news articles in the papers on the Victory Brothers company's bankruptcy and all the controversy that went along with it. He said the creditors knew there should have been inventory left, according to the books and records, but the merchandise couldn't be found. The dealer said that the controversy surrounding the parts was one of the main reasons he bought them."

"I don't believe it."

"I know. When Mark asked him about the sales of the traps, he said he's been selling them piecemeal over the years, but that six months ago he sold the last few traps to one buyer for two-hundred dollars. When Mark asked him if he still had a record of the sale, he said he was sure he did, but that it would take too long to dig it out."

"He's probably fishing for compensation to make a search worthwhile."

"I thought the same thing and told Mark I'd get back to him tomorrow."

Sam paused for a second. "Tell Mark that I'll give the guy another two-hundred dollars if he can find the sales receipt and mail it to me."

"Great idea."

"Thanks for doing this. I appreciate it, and I'm sure Jake would too if he understood."

"Yeah, well I'm *really* only doing this for Jake because he's such a sweetie pie."

"Of course," Sam said. She knew Halie was helping her so she'd eventually have closure to what happened to Jake, and she was thankful for it. The problem was, the more giving and kindhearted Halie was, the more difficult it was for Sam to think about her platonically.

Chapter Thirteen

SAM VEERED LEFT off John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway onto Grassy Lake Road. She drove a few miles to the area she reasoned Halie would have the best chance of seeing bear for her photos and stopped. No warning signs. Good. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" she asked.

"No. I'll be fine."

"You know I'd feel a lot better if I were with you," Sam persisted.

"Yeah, I know, and I appreciate your concern, I do, but I'm going on my own. Don't worry." Halie leaned over and gave Sam a quick peck on the cheek before she opened the passenger side door and stepped out.

"What was that for?" Sam yelled out the window as Halie marched along the dusty road.

"A friend saying goodbye to a friend, that's all," Halie said in a devilish manner, waving at Sam.

Sam waved back, annoyed with the kiss, but the touch of Halie's lips still warmed her cheek and made her smile. She watched until Halie was out of sight, and the dust her boots kicked up had settled. "Be careful," she whispered.

CAMERA READIED AROUND her neck, thinking pleasant thoughts about Sam, Halie counted her lucky stars to have met someone so charming and caring, even if she was a bit overprotective. Yet she was saddened they couldn't explore their relationship further. If only she were staying longer, maybe she'd have a better chance.

The road she walked along cut through a wooded area with only a few grassy patches and shrub covered spots visible. Alongside, a ground hog waddled in search of food. Around a bend, Halie spotted three hikers approaching from the opposite side of the road. She hadn't expected to run into anyone that early in the morning. As the distance between her and the hikers shrank, she got a better look at them.

The men were in their mid-thirties. Two were unshaven and the third had a beard, but all had unkempt, greasy hair, dirt under their fingernails, and wore shirts and jeans in dire need of soap. The bearded man who lagged behind the other two also had glassy, bloodshot eyes.

For the first time in a long time, Halie was uneasy. Not since she'd covered a child abduction story and interviewed the abductor in jail had she felt this way. Even though she was protected, that same emptiness in the eyes and the way he ogled her was unsettling. She got the identical eerie vibe from these men. She recalled a news story from the previous summer when two women hikers--partners--were brutally killed during a hiking trip along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. Halie remembered it took park rangers four days to find the women after they'd been reported missing. Rangers found their dog too, lying cut up a few feet from his masters and covered in dirt. A chill ran along her spine. She was now acutely aware that she was a woman, alone in the woods, and vulnerable. She was also aware the men had stopped and were watching her. Keeping her fear in check, she concentrated on moves she learned in her self-defense classes, readying herself mentally in case she needed to act.

The mental exercise returned a shred of power to her. When she reached the area along the road where she knew she had wanted to cut in to the woods, her inner voice told her not to veer off, to keep walking until she passed the men and they continued on their way. When she was twenty feet from them, she managed a smile and as strong a "good morning" as she could muster.

Two of the hikers smiled back and greeted her, then continued walking, but the third man, the bearded one, said nothing. He merely stared at her with eyes that appeared void of emotion.

Shivers ran down Halie's spine. Should she call Sam from her GPS or not? Was she overreacting? She decided not to call. Instead, she kept moving, maintaining a strong and steady gait. She wished at that moment she hadn't been so stubborn and had agreed to let Sam go with her.

WITH THE SUN peeking in and out of the afternoon clouds, Sam drove north from Moran toward Jackson Lake campground when her GPS went off. She clicked on the talk button. "Hi, Halie, it's Sam. Go ahead." Sam waited for a response but got no answer. "Halie, it's Sam. Go ahead." Silence followed. Something wasn't right. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She tried reaching Halie one more time. No response.

Instantly, she flicked on the switch for the emergency lights and pressed her foot on the gas pedal. Sam glanced over at the GPS with one eye, keeping the other on the road. The digital screen positioned Halie as being located three miles north of where Sam had dropped her off that morning, and roughly another mile or two into the woods, but it showed no movement. Sam sped past the morning drop off point and continued along the road another mile, then slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop.

She grabbed her shotgun and a few extra shells and jumped out of the truck. She ran to the back, grabbed her EMS bag, and checked the GPS one more time--still no movement or response from Halie. Praying nothing was wrong, she started off into the woods.

Sam ran as fast as she could, zigzagging between trees and ducking around branches. Her heart beat swiftly and heavily in her chest. Sweat trickled down her face. Her eyes rocketed from left to right, fully alert of her surroundings as she raced forward. Damn it! Why didn't she listen to me? I knew I shouldn't have let her go alone!

Nearing a clearing where bright beams of sunlight streamed through the trees, Sam paused to check her GPS. She was close. She ran up an incline to the brush at the edge of a clearing where she stopped, hands on her hips, gasping for air. Her feet mobilized when she heard the distinct roar of a bear. It was close. Too close. Another few yards of sprinting and Sam found her, at the bottom of a rocky slope.

Halie was going backwards as a brown bear ran on all fours in her direction. It stood about four feet tall, but Sam knew it was much bigger than that. She watched incredulously as Halie raised her camera and pressed the shutter button, snapping a photo. The sound or movement or both

caused the bear to rise to his full height of seven feet. He let out a roar louder than the first one, the sound reverberating in Sam's chest.

"Shit!" Sam yelled, waving her arms in the air, shotgun overhead. "Over here, over here. Come get me!"

She saw Halie fall to the ground, unmoving, eyes wide with fear.

"Hey!" Sam yelled again.

The bear abruptly swung around and fell to all fours. He smelled the air for Sam's scent and location. He stood motionless for several seconds, but rather than run off into the woods, which is what Sam had hoped he would do, he remained planted.

Sam started down the incline, yelling louder and waving her arms more frantically.

The massive animal responded by stomping in her direction with powerful, long strides.

As soon as she was within shooting range Sam stopped to steady the shotgun. As she did, her boot slipped on the loose, rocky soil, sending her stumbling to her knees and further toward the bear. Her knuckles scraped against stone, exposing raw flesh and jarring the weapon from her hands.

As the brown mass rushed toward her, Sam heard Halie yell, "No! Sam, look out! Oh my God! No!" Eyes riveted on the charging beast, Sam's hands frantically searched the ground for the shotgun, but found nothing. She'd have to break eye contact, knowing it would take only a second for him to pounce.

Her eyes darted from the bear to the ground. The gun had slid down a few feet from her. With seconds remaining, she launched forward, stretching her arm far as she could toward the weapon. When she felt it, she wrapped her fingers around the barrel, rolled over, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. She considered drawing her pistol, but there was no time.

"Holy good Jesus!" Sam yelled. Fifteen, maybe twenty strides at most was all the time she'd have left before she'd meet her own demise. She slammed her hand into the side of the shotgun several times, grimacing in pain. She pushed herself to her knees and steadied it. She squeezed the trigger. The gun fired.

The bear stopped, nostrils flaring. He backed off a couple steps, his eyes fixed on Sam.

Sam's shot didn't get the response she expected. The bear hadn't run off. Nine times out of ten he would have. Nerves rattled, she readied the shotgun again and fired. This time the bear bolted off into the woods to the other side of the grassy clearing.

Sam leaned forward over her knees, the adrenaline receding and allowing her thoughts to flow clearly again. Hands shaking, she pushed herself to her feet and ran to Halie. She laid the shotgun on the ground, knelt, and embraced her.

Halie's complexion was white as a ghost. She shook in Sam's arms.

"It's okay. I'm here. Everything'll be okay." Sam held Halie and rocked her for several minutes until the shaking slowed. Thank God she's okay. She felt Halie's body heave as the sobs came pouring out of her.

"I--I thought he was going to kill you. I'm so glad you're here. H--How did you know I was in trouble?" Halie muttered.

Sam released her hold. "Shhhsh, it's okay, we're both safe now. I thought you called me on the GPS."

"I didn't. I never got a chance." Halie's response was a near whisper. She reached for her backpack. "I tried to grab the GPS when the bear got too interested in me, but I guess it must've fallen off."

"That explains why I got no answer." Sam stroked Halie's back. "I'm so glad you're here. I don't know what would've

happened if you hadn't come." Halie paused. "I--you--didn't kill the bear did you?"

Sam laughed and bent forward, gently kissing Halie on the forehead. "You're something else, you know that? That bear almost made minced meat out of you and me, and all you're worried about is if I killed him? No, I grazed him is all. If he hadn't run when he did though, the next shot would've been to the heart. It would've been him or me at that point."

"I'm glad you didn't have to kill him. I would've felt like it was my fault. So he'll be okay?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine. You, on the other hand, don't look so hot. Blood was oozing from above Halie's eyebrow, and the skin covering her cheek was scraped. Let me get you fixed up." Sam rifled through her EMS bag. "You can plan on having a beauty of a headache tonight and for the next day or two."

"My head's already pounding," Halie said, rubbing the side of her temple. "This whole day's been crazy right from the start. I should've called you this morning and packed it in from the get go, but I was too stubborn."

"Why? What happened this morning?"

"I'll tell you about it on the ride back. Right now I just wanna get out of here." When Sam finished bandaging Halie's wounds, Halie said, "Let me see that." She carefully took hold of Sam's injured hand.

Dirt and pebbles ground into the raw, torn flesh. Sam'd had worse wounds. "It's nothing. I'll take care of it when I get home," she said absently.

"You are impossible, Samantha Takoda Tyler," Halie said, shaking her head.

"I know. It's genetic." She pulled back her hand, stood, and then searched the ground for the GPS. She found it near a rock. The casing was shattered, but the device was otherwise operable. She tucked it into her pocket. "Can you stand?"

"I think so," Halie whispered.

Sam extended Halie her good hand and pulled her to her feet. She held Halie by the arms until she regained her balance.

Halie slid her hand onto Sam's forearm and looked into her eyes and said nothing. Sam wasn't sure what she saw in Halie's gaze and jumped when she softly said, "Thank you. I've never met anyone like you."

Sam swallowed hard, her face flush. A humble grin etched the corners of her mouth. She felt the same way.

Halie cupped Sam's face in her hands and kissed her on the lips.

Chapter Fourteen

THE NEXT DAY Halie lay on top of the bedcovers resting a throbbing head. The scrapes and bruises didn't bother her, only the incessant pounding because it prevented her from working. As a consequence, she spent the morning drifting in and out of sleep, replaying the bear incident over and over in her mind.

Several rapid knocks on the door woke her. "Who is it?" she groggily responded, wincing as she lifted her head from the pillow.

"It's your friendly neighborhood park ranger, with lunch for the temporarily disabled," Sam said.

"What?" she mumbled. Halie gingerly crawled out of bed and rose to her feet as if in slow motion to keep her head from punishing her, which she knew it would if she'd gotten up too fast. She straightened out her clothes and ran her fingers through her hair. "Hang on a second," she yelled as she ducked into the bathroom, took a quick swig from the bottle of mouthwash, rinsed, and spit. On her way to the door, she snatched her watch off the desktop. "Crap, it's noon

already," she whispered, slipping it on her wrist. She ran her fingers through her hair one more time, then slid the chain from its holder and unlocked the deadbolt. The pounding of her heart quickened.

Sam stood handsomely on the other side of the door, lunch bag in hand, smirking. Her eyes sparkled as she stood statuesque in her crisply pressed uniform. "Surprise!"

Halie was elated to see Sam. "Surprise is right. You're lucky you brought food or I wouldn't have let you in."

"I figured as much, which is why I came prepared. How are you feeling?"

"Not great, but it could be worse." Halie reached out and took Sam's hand in her own. "I see you listened to me and bandaged your hand."

"Of course, I said I would, didn't I?"

Halie uttered an unconvincing "hmmph" before releasing Sam.

Halie watched Sam's eyes travel across the hotel room walls. Since Sam's last visit she had hung the photos she'd shot and developed on the walls from the ceiling to the floor. Having the images surrounding her helped her with her writing.

"These photos are incredible. You've managed to capture so many different animals already, doing everything from eating and playing to caring for their young, not to mention the incredible landscape photos." Sam pointed at a cluster of photos near the entrance to the bedroom. "And there's our muddy moose pal. I like the way you caught the reflection of that tree frog in a drop of water hanging off the end of a leaf too. No wonder your magazine chose you to do the cover story."

"Thanks," Halie replied. She blushed as she took the sandwiches out of the large brown bag. Her stomach growled when she saw the food. She was hungry. She'd slept through breakfast.

"These photos would look great hanging in my cabin. Too bad the magazine gets them all."

"Well, I decided they're not getting all of them." Halie strolled over to the desk behind her, and picked up a red folder. "They're not getting this one," she said, handing Sam the folder.

Sam opened it and stared at the contents. "When did you take this?"

Halie couldn't keep from smiling. The expression on Sam's face was priceless. "Last Friday, by Jenny Lake."

"But when--"

"When we were sitting on the log waiting for the elk. You'd drifted off with your thoughts, and I wanted to capture the place you had gone to and what you were feeling there."

Sam blushed. "I remember."

"Every time I look at that photo, I wonder what you were thinking."

Before Sam would have had a chance to reply, Halie put her hand up. "Don't say anything yet. I like the mystery behind it. Besides, we gotta get some food in you before your lunch break's over."

"I brought the food more for you than for me. I'm not actually that hungry. I didn't sleep too well last night."

Halie sat on the corner of the bed. "I'm sorry. I'm glad you stopped by though. How can I thank you for coming and bringing me lunch?"

"You don't have to thank me. Truth is I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"Really? And exactly what was it you were thinking about?"

Sam opened her sandwich and took a miniscule bite, her cheeks deepening their already red color with each passing second.

Halie sat waiting for a response, her ear tilted toward Sam.

"Well--ugh--I ugh--I don't know. Lots of things."

"Such as?" Halie asked.

"Oh, no you don't. I'm not going there right now. I've only got a half hour for lunch and you're not doing that to me again."

"Doing what?"

"You know what." Sam pulled the crust from one corner of the sandwich and placed it in her mouth. "I know why I'm not eating, but what's going on with you? You haven't even touched your sandwich yet. You must've hit your head awfully hard yesterday."

"Is that a dig?"

"Maybe. Is the pounding real bad? You feeling nauseous?"

"Yeah to both. How'd you know?"

"I've been there. I know it's no fun, but you've got to eat to keep up your energy."

"What do you mean, you've been there?"

"I fell--hit my head two years ago hiking up Grand Teton. It's a long story. Too long for a lunch break." Sam put her sandwich on the desk on top of the brown bag. "I better get back to work. You think you'll be okay for dinner tomorrow, or should I call April and Corrine and cancel?"

"I hope I'll be fine by then. Don't cancel. Besides, me pass up food twice in a row? Not a chance."

"True," Sam said. "Pick you up at five-thirty?"

"Five-thirty's great. I'm looking forward to it."

Halie watched as Sam reached the door and opened it to leave. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, I definitely think you are." Halie went to Sam. Their eyes met an instant before she found Sam's lips, cradling them in her own. She kissed Sam gently at first, then firmly and hungrily until Sam stumbled backward a step, losing grip of the door. "Problem, Ranger Tyler? You haven't been drinking have you?"

Sam responded slowly. "Very funny. You know you're not playing fair. This is what I was trying to avoid."

"I know, but I can't help myself."

Chapter Fifteen

SAM PULLED INTO April and Corrine's driveway and shut off the Expedition. She glanced at Halie. "Are you okay?" "Yeah. I'm fine. I'm just a little nervous, that's all. I'm sure it'll pass as soon as I meet them."

"They're real easy to get along with. You'll see." Sam escorted Halie toward the front door and rang the bell. She thought Halie looked stunning in the tan, rib knit sweater she wore under a coral suede jacket that tapered at the waist. The jacket had a swirling pattern of suede cloverleaf appliqué and copper snap buttons that she left open. She also wore off-white jeans that hugged her hips and accentuated her slim, curvy figure. At the last second, Sam handed Halie the bottle of wine she'd been holding.

April and Corrine stood in front of the glass door smiling. Corrine held the door open. "Come on in you two, it's getting nippy out there."

The house smelled of patchouli and lemon grass. Had to be Corrine's doing, since Sam knew April wasn't a fan of incense. "April, Corrine, this is Halie," Sam said. "Halie, these are my friends April and Corrine."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Halie said, handing Corrine the bottle of wine. "For you."

"Thanks so much," Corrine said, then quickly added, "Hey, what happened to the two of you? You look like you've had a run in with a mountain lion or something."

"Close," Sam said. "A bear. We'll tell you about it later."

"Can't wait to hear this one," April interjected.

Halie scanned the room. "Your home is beautiful."

"Thank you. It's an older house, but we've done quite a bit of remodeling," Corrine said. "Let me give you a tour."

A few minutes later they joined Sam and April, who had made themselves comfortable in front of the snack trays set on the coffee table in the living room.

"Your home truly is charming," Halie said. "I can see you've put lots of love into it."

"Thanks," Corrine said. "We did do a lot with this house and continue making improvements. Sometimes it seems like the work never ends, but we wouldn't trade it for anything."

"I'm sure," Halie said. "I rent, but it would be nice to own a home one day. I'm in no rush though."

"That's smart. You don't know how often I see people buy a home that isn't right for them. Wine?" Corrine asked.

Sam and Halie both said yes. Sam motioned Halie to sit on the sofa next to her while April did the honors of uncorking the bottle and handing everyone three-quarter-full glasses.

The one snack tray was filled with various cheeses, crackers, and vegetables, and the other held a bowl of grapes and a bowl of mixed nuts. Next to the trays were placed small decorative paper plates and napkins.

"Please help yourselves," April said. "Don't be shy. We know you're not, Sam."

"I can't help myself when it comes to snacking. I'd take that over a meal any day," Sam replied.

"So that's your weakness, is it?" Halie said.

"That's one of them."

Corrine stood and lifted her glass in the air. She winked at Sam. "To love and friendship. May they both stay strong and last forever."

After the toast, April asked Halie, "Sam tells me you're a photojournalist for a magazine in Boston and you're writing an article on the park?"

"That's right. Chief Thundercloud's been gracious in allowing me to do the story, and of course, I got lucky having Sam as my guide."

Sam shifted in her seat, ignoring eye contact with April.

"What's the story going to be about?" April asked.

"I don't know if you were aware of this or not, not too many people are, but Grand Teton is one of the parks in line for closure next year."

"Are you kidding? How can they do that? That would devastate this area. What makes this park such a target? I mean we're small in comparison to Yellowstone and some of the other national parks," April said.

Sam interjected. "From what Halie and the Chief have told me, Grand Teton has had several years of significant declining visitation counts, and it's been in the public and political eye with its controversy over snowmobiling. Somehow we seem to have gotten ourselves on the radar."

"Snowmobiling," April said. "That's crazy."

"I know, it does seem crazy," Sam continued, "but millions of tax dollars have been spent on that issue. Maybe that's made Grand Teton an eye sore to the higher-ups in Washington."

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted their conversation.

"Who's that?" April asked Corrine.

"I have no idea. I wasn't expecting anyone else. I'll go see."

After Sam heard the front door open, she also overheard what sounded like arguing. Not a minute later, Corrine walked into the living room behind another woman.

"Uh, everyone. This is Jenna Mills, a friend of ours and an old friend of Sam's. She's stopped by for a quick hello," Corrine said.

Jenna walked past Sam and Halie without looking at either of them and plopped herself on the sofa near April. "Hey, April," she said, slapping her on the knee.

"Hi, Jenna," April said, her eyes darting to Corrine.

Sam watched April and Corrine exchange silent glances and raised shoulders. Jenna was visibly drunk.

"So, Sam," Jenna began, "what brings you out of seclusion? I heard you were incognito for a while but I see you're on the hunt again."

Sam was stunned by the comment flung at her. Their evening at April and Corrine's had gone so well until that point where her past stepped in uninvited and collided with her present. Sam glanced around the room at the faces of shocked disbelief staring back at her. She grappled for a tactful response, but found none. "On the hunt? What the heck's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know," Jenna said with a wink directed at Halie.

Sam's insides recoiled. She envisioned grabbing Jenna by the front of her shirt and dragging her outside. "I don't believe you. You don't know what you're talking about, and you're way out of line. Why'd you even bother stopping by?"

"I don't know. Saw your truck in the driveway. I guess the draw of seeing how my ex-lover was, the one who dumped me for no good reason, got the better of me." Jenna looked to Halie for a reaction.

"Jenna!" April said and started toward her.

"That's okay," Sam said. "That was a long time ago, and I had my reasons."

"Try three years ago, and I'd still love to know what those reasons were."

"This isn't the time or the place."

"I heard you've broken lots of hearts since we split up."

Anger lurked under the surface as Sam attempted to remain civil. This was definitely not how she expected the evening would turn out. "You're way out of line. First of all, I did explain to you why I didn't think we were a good match, and I'm not doing it again. Second, whoever I dated since we broke up shouldn't be any concern of yours, and thirdly, I haven't dated anyone in at least the last two years. What the heck's gotten into you anyway?"

Jenna didn't answer. As soon as Sam asked the question a little gray and white kitty sprang out from under the sofa. She darted across the living room floor and snuck under the dining room table before curling into a ball.

"Oh!" Halie spurted out. "I didn't see that little one earlier. She's so cute."

Sam recognized Halie's attempt to take advantage of the diversion and change the direction of the conversation, for which she was appreciative.

"Oh, thanks," Corrine said, piggybacking off Halie. "That's Lula-bell. She was a stray. Two months ago I found her standing in front of our back door, scratching at it, and soaking wet from the rain. I set out a bowl of milk and a few squares of cheddar cheese. Every day after that she stopped by for food until April caved in and let me keep her. She was such a scrawny little thing. She's still tiny, but much stronger now."

"I can see that," Halie said, "and she sure is fast."

"Yeah," April replied. "Especially when you're trying to catch her after she's done something wrong."

"Kind of like you," Corrine added.

"Nice. Pick on me already why don't you?" April said. She took a cracker with cheese off the platter, the distraction over.

"Listen, Sam," Jenna said. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me. I've been a complete ass. I was out of line. I think it's best if I get going."

Corrine stood up. "That's probably a good idea, but I'm driving you home."

"No need."

"You can stop by tomorrow to get your car, or April and I'll drop it off, but you're not driving."

"I'm fine," Jenna countered.

"Not from where I'm standing. Come on, let's go." Corrine escorted Jenna to the door.

Sam, April, and Halie all sat looking at each other in silence.

"Jenna lives pretty close," April started. "Corrine won't be long. Twenty minutes tops. Why don't I show you some pictures of the house when we first bought it? Then you'll be able to better appreciate all the work we did to it. Corrine always gets mad at me when I try to show these pictures, but I'm proud of what we did and I think it's interesting."

"I'd love to see them," Halie said. "Did Sam help?"

"Oh yeah," April said standing. "I've got a few beauties of her in here you might enjoy."

When Corrine returned, April packed up the pictures. Corrine apologized about Jenna's interruption, and the four of them picked up their conversation where they'd left off.

A SHORT WHILE later, Corrine excused herself and went into the kitchen.

Halie followed carrying the empty snack tray, paper plates, and napkins.

"Is everything okay?" Corrine asked, taking the tray from Halie. "You look like you've got something on your mind. Did Jenna rattle you?"

"Well, she didn't exactly put my mind at ease."

"Don't worry about her. She can be a bit much sometimes, and she tends to exaggerate. Deep down she's not a bad person. You just caught her on a tough day. She told me that she'd had a fight with her girlfriend, so I guess she was blowing off some steam."

"I suppose." Halie's mind was still churning. She only half listened to what Corrine was saying.

"What else is bugging you? If it's about Sam, don't be shy. April and I have been friends with her for a long time. If there's something you want to ask me, feel free. I won't tell Sam if you're worried about that. I want her to be happy, and she looks happier now than she has in a long time. I have to think it's because of you."

"I wish I knew if that were true. Sometimes I think she's happy, other times I don't know. She's holding back though and I'm not sure why."

"Sam's not one to let people into her life too easily, but she's one of the kindest, most warm-hearted people I know. She's unique. We love her to death."

"I've been seeing why," Halie said. "She has a way of grabbing onto your heart, before you even know she's there."

"And from what I can see, you seem to have gotten a hold of hers as well."

Halie's eyes widened. "You think?"

"It's written all over her face. It's all over both of you. If she's holding back, it's not because she doesn't like you. It has to be for another reason. She's been through a tough patch the last couple of years. That could be why. I wouldn't worry about it though. I'm sure she'll come around."

"I hope you're right."

From the other room, April and Sam yelled, "What are you two doing in there? We're getting hungry!"

"They sound like they're in a better mood already," Corrine whispered to Halie. "Hold your horses you two," she yelled. "Dinner'll be ready in a few minutes."

"With all the snacks they ate, I find it hard to believe they're that hungry," Halie said. "So how long have you and April been together if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't mind at all. Ten wonderful years."

"That's nice. Have you lived here all that time?"

"Most of it. We rented an apartment for a year first. The people next door were so loud though. We couldn't stand it."

"How are your neighbors now?"

"They're great. We always say hello to each other. I think they'd be there to help us if we needed it, and I know we'd be there for them."

"Who'd be there for who?" April asked, poking her head into the kitchen.

"Don't be so nosy. What are you doing in here?" Corrine asked. "If you were planning on coming into the kitchen anyway, why all the yelling two seconds ago?"

"I hadn't planned on it, but then I thought I'd see if I could help," April said.

"Good idea. You can set the dining room table."

Once the table was set, Corrine carried a steaming bowl of homemade pasta into the dining room, and Halie followed carrying warm, crisp garlic bread and a plate of fresh ground parmesan cheese.

"More wine, anyone?" April asked.

"I'd love another glass, thank you," Halie responded.

"Water for me, thanks," Sam said. "I have to drive home."

"Always doing the right thing," April said. "That's my Sam."

Halie stole glances throughout dinner at Sam. She tried to remain with the conversation, but her thoughts kept drifting. She pictured herself in the living room of Sam's cabin. It was dark. The glow of the fireplace flickered across Sam's lean body. Soft music played in the background. Sam approached her from behind, wrapped her arms around her and gently pressed their bodies together. She kissed the side of Halie's neck and slid her hands over Halie's thighs.

Halie spun around. Their eyes met. She sensed Sam's want, which matched the intensity of her own. "Are you sure?" she heard herself ask. "Because if you start, you better not stop."

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life," she heard Sam say, and then Sam tilted her head and kissed her on the lips.

Halie tuned in again when Corrine retold the story of how she and April first met.

"I'd just joined this gay outdoor bicycling club, one that April was a member of too, but I didn't know it at the time. Every time I went on a ride with the group, she wasn't there and vice-versa. It must've been two months before we both went at the same time. That day, when I rode up to the group on my bike, they were waiting for a couple more people to show before starting out.

That's when I saw this beautiful woman standing next to her bike. We felt an instant attraction to each other, or at least I did. Love at first sight. I know that sounds cliché, but it's true. I was too nervous to go over and talk to her then, and since I wasn't in the greatest of shape yet like most everyone else, I kept falling behind. I couldn't catch up to talk to her even after I'd worked up the nerve. But then, for some reason, about half-way through the trip, she slowed down and rode with me." Corrine glanced at April before continuing. "We rode and talked and laughed, and at the end of the ride she asked me for my phone number. We met for coffee the following weekend, and the rest is history."

"That's so sweet," Halie said, "I love a good romance."

"So do I. How could I resist her? I think she knew it too."

"I'm sure she did," Halie replied, knowing exactly how Corrine felt. "Do you have family that lives near you?"

"Yeah, both of ours do. My parents are pretty close, about an hour away in Idaho Falls. April's are within driving distance too, about five hours from here in Salt Lake City."

"Do they approve of your relationship?"

"Spoken like a true journalist," Corrine said. "Unfortunately, my parents barely talk to me anymore and don't visit because of April. April's parents accept us, but I'm sure they'd rather their daughter were straight too, if given a choice."

"That's too bad," Halie said. "I know what you mean though by 'if given a choice.'"

"Yeah, but having said that, I also believe that if something happened to me or I really needed them, they'd be there, especially my mom. Most mothers will do anything to protect their children if they're in trouble, no matter how old they are. I truly believe that," Corrine said.

"I do too, thankfully," Halie said. "What about your family, Sam? I don't remember you mentioning them. Do they live in the area too?"

"My dad died when I was thirteen--"

"I'm sorry," Halie said.

"That's okay. It's been a long time. My mom lives in New Jersey, which is where I grew up. We used to live up north in the mountains, but when my Uncle passed, he left her his shore house and she moved in there. She loves the ocean. My mom's great. She's totally accepting of my lifestyle and she loves Jake. Then I've got three older brothers. One's divorced with two girls, Jessie and Katelynn, one's married, and the other's single. We don't see each other much anymore, but we all get along."

"Sounds like a nice family," Halie said. "Three older brothers, huh? That couldn't have been easy."

"I did a pretty good job holding my own with them. Plus, they taught me a lot once I got older."

"What about your family, Halie?" Corrine asked.

"My parents live on the outskirts of Boston, not far from my apartment in the city. I think they're more like April's parents. They're accepting of my lifestyle to an extent, but I get the feeling they'd be happier if I found a nice guy, got married, and gave them a grandchild or two. I've got a younger sister, an older brother, and two nephews too."

"Halie's planning on giving her nephews a poster size close-up of that bear that left her scratched up too," Sam said.

"And a great story to go with it," April added.

"Kid all you want, but I got the shot of a lifetime with that one."

As the evening rolled on and they'd finished coffee and cake, Sam stood to leave. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm petering-out over here. I think we're gonna get going."

April and Corrine escorted them to the door. Halie thanked them for their hospitality, and they all exchanged hugs. "Don't be such a stranger, Sam, okay?" April pleaded.

"I won't, I promise."

"That's what you said the last time."

Chapter Sixteen

SAM HAD WANTED very much to invite Halie home with her after their dinner with April and Corrine the night before, but she didn't trust herself. She cared too much about Halie, and she was having trouble remaining only friends with her. But she also found she missed her terribly when they were apart, and kept rethinking the 'friends only' idea. They weren't even together and she could have lost her the other day, and she'd have been as devastated as if they had been a couple. The thought shook her.

Instead, the next morning, she called and invited Halie for a scenic drive. She picked her up from the lodge without telling her where they were going.

"Do you make a habit of kidnapping people on your day off?" Halie asked.

"Not usually, but for you I made an exception," Sam replied.

Halie glanced into the back seat. Jake sat with his head out the window and his ears and jowls flapping in the breeze. "Jake knows where we're going doesn't he?"

"Yeah, he knows, but you'll have to wait and trust me. That's the Gros Ventre River on your right. This part of it runs along the southeastern border of Grand Teton. On the other side, for as far as you can see, is the National Elk Refuge."

"I don't see any elk."

"They mostly stay in the mountains in the summer and migrate down for the winter before the snow gets too deep and they have trouble finding food."

"I'd go where the food is too."

"No doubt," Sam replied before receiving a gentle slap on the leg from Halie. They drove past picturesque mountains and wide-open expanses of grassland. Sam slowed the Expedition once they reached a property separated from the road by a four-foot-high, white wooden fence. The property was flat and level, the lawn green and well kept. Set back about a half-acre sat a sprawling ranch house.

Halie looked past Sam to the ranch house. "It's breathtaking here. This is the house you want, isn't it?"

"Yeah, this is it. The house listed a year ago, but was pulled off the market before it sold. Corrine went to the Realtor's open house. She said the owner withdrew the property because she got sick and decided not to sell."

"How big's the property?"

"Almost ten acres." Sam had never shown the place to anyone else before, but she was excited to show it to Halie.

"Ten acres? That's got to cost a small fortune around here."

"Everyone needs a dream," Sam said as she stepped on the gas pedal. "One day I'll own that house." Sam hadn't told Halie she had enough money to afford the house or that she didn't need to work. Neither was important to her. Her father had left her the rights to a patent on a product he created for the ski industry. She'd been collecting royalties on it for years. Other than spending money on having her mom's shore home remodeled, since her mom insisted she didn't want a new one, she invested all the remaining money.

Halie shook her head, "If you say so. What? Aren't we turning around now?"

"Nope. The surprise isn't over yet," Sam taunted. She continued north, making a left into the next property and stopping near the stables.

"Oh, no you don't. I see where this is leading. No way, I am not getting on a horse."

"Sure you are," Sam said with confidence. She placed her Stetson on her head and let Jake out the side door.

Jake bolted off toward the cow barn. Minutes later he had Sam's friend Charlie following him. Charlie Tynes was an older gentleman, skin weathered by the elements.

"Hey, Sam, I thought that was you pulling in. I see Jake's doing a lot better."

"Yeah, he's doing real well."

"You here to take Coco for a ride?"

Halie, who at first remained seated in the Expedition with the door swung open, stepped out when Charlie joined them.

"Halie, this is Charlie Tynes, owner of Tynes Sunshine Ranch. Charlie, this is Halie Walker. Halie's a photojournalist from Boston."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Walker. You came to the right place for picture taking that's for sure."

"Nice to meet you too, sir."

"No need to be so formal. You can call me Charlie. Even my help don't call me sir no more."

"Yes, sir--I mean, Charlie," she said before addressing Sam. "Is Coco your horse?"

"Yeah. Did I forget to mention that?" Sam asked rhetorically.

Halie's expression was one of confusion.

Charlie took off his straw hat, rubbed what little hair remained on his head, and set the hat back on. His fingers were thin and bony, and the veins on his hand stood out prominently.

"Halie's never ridden before. She's a little nervous," Sam confessed for her.

"You takin' her out on Coco?"

Sam nodded.

Charlie brandished a genuine, though part toothless, tobacco stained smile at Halie. "Don't you worry yourself none about it. Sam's an excellent rider and Coco's a sweetheart. They'll take good care of ya." Then to Sam he said, "Go on in. Enjoy your ride. I've got a ton of work to do yet. One of my ranch hands quit this week and I haven't found a replacement yet. You don't know anyone who's looking for work, do you Sam?"

"No, but I'll keep an ear out."

"Appreciate it." Then to Halie he added, "Enjoy your stay, young lady."

Halie waved goodbye as Charlie left. Standing defiant, right hand on her waist and eyebrows raised, she stared at Sam.

Sam ignored her while petting Jake, enjoying the moment. Jake looked up at Halie and barked. "We shouldn't keep Jake waiting," Sam said.

"You are impossible," Halie said.

Surprisingly, getting Halie mounted on Coco and riding bareback wasn't any trouble. Getting her over her fear of horses took a little longer, but Sam eventually felt her relax. Sam enjoyed Halie's closeness behind her, her warmth, her arms snugly embracing her waist, her need for Sam to protect her. Sam's feelings for Halie ran deep, deeper than she wanted to admit. She never imagined she'd care so much for someone in such a short time. The intensity scared her, but also made her feel alive, something she hadn't felt since Tina's death.

She wanted so much to kiss Halie again and hold her. She cursed her no-visitor-dating rule and was so close to throwing it away. The rule didn't change the fact that one day Halie would be leaving and her heart would be broken anyway. Sam tried not to let Halie's eventual departure ruin the day. She'd deal with that another time. Today she vowed she'd live in the moment.

They rode at a leisurely pace through open grassland, the Teton Mountains watching over them to the north. Jake spotted a sage grouse and darted off after it then circled back and pranced along Coco's side, head held high as if he'd actually caught the grouse and had it clenched between his jaws. Grassland soon gave way to patches of trees and shrub that made their home

along a winding creek crackling in the afternoon quiet. Sam reveled in the peacefulness and breathed in the crisp, fresh air.

"This has to be one of those ten best days," Halie whispered into Sam's ear. "The temperature's perfect, and the breeze blowing against my skin feels like a cool silk sheet slithering across my body."

"Thanks for sharing," Sam said. She swallowed hard as she envisioned Halie draped in nothing but a silk sheet. Halie certainly knew how to get her flustered. She felt Halie lean against her back, pressing her chest against her. Then she felt Halie nibble the lobe of her ear and kiss her neck.

Sam tilted her head. "Mmmm, you're--making me--lose my-- concentration," she groaned. "You are *not* playing fair back there."

"I thought I was being an angel, but I can change that if you like." Halie loosened her grip around Sam's waist and slid her hands onto Sam's inner thighs, stroking her gently, inching ever closer to her heated core.

Pressure built within Sam. She knew if she'd let Halie continue they'd never make it to the pond. "That's it, you asked for it. Hold on," Sam said and gave Coco a soft kick with her heels, leading him into a canter.

"Hey, no fair!" Halie yelled as she grabbed hold of Sam's waist. They rode until they reached a clearing where Sam brought Coco to a halt. She helped Halie down, then she slid off, holding onto his mane. The sun shone on the pond's surface, sending glistening flickers of light cascading back at them.

Halie squinted. "This is it, isn't it?"

To Sam this small sanctuary was a piece of paradise, untouched by the outside world. "Yeah, this is it," she said, leading Coco to the water. "It's the far end of the ranch property I showed you from the street. I love coming here. This place has such a positive and calming energy to it. I often think this is what heaven must be like."

"It's beautiful, Sam, but won't we get in trouble? What if the owner sees us?"

"She won't. She lives alone and she's old. I'm sure in her younger years she came back here, but I doubt anymore. Somehow I don't think she'd mind though, even if she knew."

"Why do you say that?"

"Rumor has it she's gay."

Jake ran off toward the pond. He pranced along the edge of the water, romping on anything that moved.

"Jake is hysterical," Halie said.

"He'll entertain himself like that for hours." Sam slid the blanket roll and loose saddlebags off Coco's back while he grazed. She moved toward Halie and unfurled the blanket on an open patch of grass. As soon as Sam straightened, Halie touched her shoulder. Sam turned and faced her.

Halie's eyes immediately searched out Sam's and held her captive. She placed her palm against Sam's chest. "Sam?" she whispered.

Sam's heartbeat quickened. Her body burned with the desire to touch Halie. "Yes?"

"Would you tell me now what you were thinking in the photo I took of you that evening near Jenny Lake?"

Sam remained silent for a moment, not certain how much to reveal at first, but then decided to tell Halie her exact thoughts. "I was picturing us in the future sitting in that same place, enjoying a picnic together. In my mind I was holding you in my arms and kissing you, like two lovers who'd been together for a long time, but feeling like it was our first time."

"I was hoping you'd say something like that." Halie took hold of Sam's hand, intertwining her fingers with her own and pulling her close until their bodies touched fully. She gently placed her lips on Sam's, kissing her softly and slowly, then with increased passion and intensity.

Sam's body tingled. She felt as though she was floating, her senses heightened to their peak. Her only focus at that moment was on Halie as all the other sounds surrounding them faded away.

Sam lifted Halie's sweater over her head and tossed it to the side. She undid the clasp of her lace bra, sliding the straps slowly from Halie's shoulder. Sam discovered the roundness and firmness of Halie's breasts and the flawless skin of her face. She removed her own shirt and sports bra and wrapped herself tighter against Halie until their breasts touched fully.

Halie took Sam's right hand and moved it toward the button of her jeans. Sam undid it, then sank to her knees on the blanket with Halie, the hum of exhilaration passing between them. Sam kissed Halie passionately as her hands hurried to remove the remaining clothing keeping them apart. Sam's breaths quickened. Her fingers traced the wonders of Halie's silken body. No unwanted thoughts about the past. Nothing else existed for Sam in that moment other than to give Halie the pleasure she was seeking. Sam's naked body entwined with Halie's on the fibers of the cool cotton blanket.

"Oh, God, Sam, I need you. I've needed you since that day on the lake. Please don't stop," Halie breathed.

"I won't. Not this time. You make me feel things I can't put into words," Sam said, her face flush as they rocked against each other. Sam coveted the warmth and softness of Halie's skin against her own. She kissed the side of Halie's neck and the tender top of her shoulder, tasting the sweetness of her. Halie's fingertips strummed down Sam's muscled back. Shivers darted through

her body. Sam let her hand glide along Halie's ribs, over her hip, and down the inside of her thigh.

"Now, Sam, now! Please don't make me wait any longer. I need you."

Sam acknowledged Halie's want. Their bodies moved together in one rhythmic motion, their souls connected. Halie dug her fingers into Sam's back, body arched, panting. She moaned as Sam felt her body shiver and pulse against her. Sam held her there as long as she could, until Halie's body relaxed and her breathing slowed.

They lay entwined together for a long moment, in silence. Then Halie whispered, "I think I'm in love with you, Samantha Takoda Tyler. I can't get enough of you."

"I feel the same way," Sam replied. "I never dreamed I'd meet someone as amazing as you." It was so easy and so right. She had never felt this complete.

The sun beat warm on Sam's skin as a mild breeze danced over her and the leaves from the trees rustled overhead. Halie caressed Sam's breasts. "Now it's my turn," Halie said in a sultry tone before kissing Sam tenderly on the lips. "I've been imagining this moment in my mind for weeks. I can't believe we're here together. It's too perfect. I don't ever want this time to end." Halie slid her thigh between Sam's legs, evoking a groan as Sam pushed against her. Halie moved her lips slowly down Sam's neck, kissing her along the way, advancing to the center of her chest. Her tongue circled Sam's right nipple, sucking and teasing it as her hand slid closer to Sam's center. Sam yearned for Halie to possess her. "God, I want you," she said.

"I want you too," Halie said. "More than you know." Halie expertly explored Sam's body, savoring the feel of every inch of her, igniting a fire in Sam that descended to her core. Sam clutched the blanket, overwhelmed by the waves of ecstasy pulsing through her, feeling as though she were going to explode. Moving as one with Halie, Sam thrust against her, savoring her touch, shuddering as her body surrendered to Halie. Flush and exhausted, Sam rolled to her side and snuggled next to Halie, pulling a corner of the blanket loosely over their shoulders.

Chapter Seventeen

THE FOLLOWING WORK week had passed calmly with no major incident. The time Sam spent with Halie was effortless and phenomenal. A few more hours and they'd be together for the weekend, in each other's arms again.

"Teton Dispatch, Four-two-zero," crackled over the radio.

Sam picked up the mic. "Four-two-zero go ahead."

"Need you to swing by Cottonwood Creek--routine check on the kids from the Teton Science School."

"Four-two-zero, on my way," Sam said, replacing the mic. "Hope you don't mind. This shouldn't take too long."

"Are you kidding?" Halie said. "This'll be great. I can definitely work this into my article if I can get in a few questions with them."

"I don't think that'll be a problem." Already having passed where she needed to be, Sam made a U-turn on Teton Park Road. She found she was having trouble concentrating, replaying her alone time with Halie in her mind and wanting nothing more than to be alone with her now, in a non-work setting. She parked in a picnic area near the trailhead leading to Cottonwood Creek next to another ranger vehicle. "That's strange. I wonder whose truck this is?"

"Why? Shouldn't it be here?"

"I don't think so."

Halie shrugged and exited the Expedition after Sam.

They hiked along the trail to Cottonwood Creek, the fresh scent of pine permeating the air. Soon they stood on a bluff overlooking a wide, shallow creek in the forefront of gray, jagged mountains, the creek's rhythmic sounds soothing to Sam's ears. The clear, swift moving water cascaded over the creek's rocky bottom, reflecting a pearl blue sky. A narrow pine tree near the bank made a nice resting-place for a red tailed hawk eyeing its prey. The view was a sight for anyone to behold. Halie was quick to take photos.

They continued making their way along to the water's edge and following it upstream along the rocky banks until they came within thirty yards of where the Teton Science School was holding class. Folding tables covered with notebooks, sampling jars, flasks, and measuring devices had been set near the water's edge and were surrounded by buckets and fishing nets. The kids didn't notice the women approaching; they were engrossed in a lecture being given by another park ranger. Sam hadn't recognized the ranger at first, but once she did, her expression altered from curious to downtrodden. Great, Sam thought, two in one week. What are the chances? More importantly, what will Halie think now?

One of the teachers spotted the women and walked over toward them. Sam whispered short introductions. The teacher gave Halie the okay to talk to the students during the next break, which she indicated should be soon. As they spoke, the lecturing ranger's eyes happened upon Sam, causing the break sooner than expected. The ranger quickly concluded her talk, thanked her audience for listening, and moved in Sam's direction.

"Okay, kids," one of the teachers yelled. "Let's set up for our next experiment and then we'll take a short break. We're lucky enough to have two more visitors with us today. You can talk with them at the break, okay?"

The kids cheered and waved at Sam and Halie, who smiled and waved back.

Halie said, "The kids seem so nice. I didn't think they'd be that excited to see us."

"Neither did I."

"Well, isn't this a cozy sight," Felice Lohan said minutes later. "Samantha Tyler. I haven't seen you around in quite some time." Felice stood five-foot-six, medium build, with short jet black hair, dark brown eyes, and full lips.

"I seem to be getting a lot of that lately. How are you Felice? And how's your son?"

"Fine--great actually."

Sam watched with irritation as Felice examined Halie from top to bottom. Felice was clearly pleased by what she saw.

"So, who's this charming woman you're with? Aren't you going to introduce us?" Felice asked.

Sam hesitated knowing she had no choice but to introduce Halie to Felice. "This is Halie Walker. She's a photojournalist from Boston. I'm assisting her during her stay at the park."

"Yes, I bet you are." Felice extended Halie her hand. "Hi, I'm Felice Lohan. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Felice is a wildlife biologist at Grand Teton," Sam added.

Halie reached out and shook Felice's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure. So what exactly is a photojournalist from Boston doing in Grand Teton anyway?"

"I'm writing an article on the uniqueness and importance of this park. I've been photographing the wildlife and interviewing visitors and staff."

"If you'd like to interview me, I can make myself available to you at any hour. I can probably give you a different perspective on things around here, other than what Sam's probably already provided." Felice winked at Sam.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Felice, do you?" Sam said.

"I don't see why not. I mean, this," she said, waving her hand between Sam and Halie, "is a professional relationship, isn't it, Sam? Not like the one we had, no?"

Sam ground her teeth. There it was, the opportunity Felice was waiting for, and she snatched it. "I don't think we should get into this now." Sam eyed the duffel bag clenched in Felice's hand. "What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn't you be over by the river? I got the call to check in on the kids. Did dispatch call you too? I must have missed that."

"What's the matter, did I touch on a nerve?" Felice asked.

"No, but you still didn't answer my questions."

"Not that I need to answer to you, but I was taking water samples to study in the lab when the kids came by and set up camp. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I'd been requisitioned into giving a lecture. Anymore questions? If not, I need to get back to work." Felice redirected her attention to Halie, and after flaunting one of the most charming smiles Sam had ever seen, said to her, "It was an unexpected pleasure meeting you, Halie. Remember what I said. If you need anything while you're here, or if Sam's busy one of these days, please let the Chief know. I'd be more than happy to make myself available to you."

"That won't be necessary," Sam replied.

Halie shot Sam a dirty look. Then to Felice she said, "Thanks for the offer, I may take you up on it."

"I hope you do," Felice added.

As soon as Felice was out of earshot, Halie attacked Sam. "What was that all about? Why were you so rude?"

"Me? She was the one being rude. You don't know her like I do. She can be a shark when she wants something, and that something appears to be you."

Halie shook her head. "Why would you say that?"

"Because I know her. I can see it in her eyes. You should stay away from her."

"That's ridiculous. You're just being possessive. I'm my own person. I can make my own informed decisions. No one's my boss."

"Oh, don't I know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You love doling out commands at your end, but as soon as someone even suggests something to you, you don't like it. And possessive? Not the term I'd use. I'd say it's merely concern."

"Would you? There's a fine line between the two, and right now I'm not so sure which one fits better. All I know is, I don't like

this side of you."

"And I didn't like the way you eyed Felice," Sam said.

"The way I what?"

Before Sam could elaborate, the teacher waved them over to meet the kids.

Chapter Eighteen

AFTER FEEDING JAKE dinner, Sam retreated into the bedroom and changed into more comfortable clothes. By all indications, her squabble with Halie meant she'd be spending the evening alone. They hadn't talked much the rest of the day following the run in with Felice. Sam shuffled into the living room and checked the answering machine, hoping that maybe Halie had called. The red light was blinking. She hesitated, then depressed the message recall button.

"Hello, Ms. Tyler? This is John Brenner, from Brenner Antiques in Shrewsbury. I'm sorry I haven't gotten in touch with you sooner, but I finally found that sales invoice you were interested in. The man who bought the traps from me several months ago is named David Reingold. The shipping address on the invoice is 1215 Main Street, Wilson, Wyoming. When you mail me the remaining money, I'll mail you the invoice. Thanks and have a nice day."

Sam stood and stared at the answering machine. She wanted to tell Halie the good news but wasn't sure if her call would be welcome. After a few seconds of deliberation, she reached for the phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Halie, it's Sam."

"Hi, what's up?" The response was lethargic.

"Nothing," Sam lied. She wanted to say more, but the words caught in her throat. She was stuck. She wanted to hang up but couldn't; she was the one who'd called. She'd have to say something and soon. "You still mad at me?"

"I'm not mad at you. It's just that sometimes I don't understand you. Let's forget about it, okay? I'm leaving tomorrow to see my folks for the weekend and I don't want us parting on bad terms. Can we let it go?"

"When did you decide you were going to your parents'?"

"Not until today. I was going to call you later. It's Father's Day on Sunday. I thought I should go."

Sam tried concealing her disappointment. "I see. Well, I didn't call just to find out if you were mad at me or not."

"No? Then why?"

Sam disliked Halie's tone, but conceded its legitimacy. After all, she hadn't apologized for her rash actions. She softened her approach. "You won't believe who left a message on my answering machine."

"Who? Jenna--Felice--or maybe another woman I haven't met yet?"

"Ouch. That wasn't fair."

Halie remained silent for a moment. "You're right, it wasn't. I'm sorry. Forget about what I said. I have a past too. So, who called you?"

"The guy from the antiques store in Pennsylvania. He found the invoice. He's going to mail it to me after I send him the rest of the money."

"That's great!"

Sam was surprised by Halie's unabridged excitement; it rekindled her own. "Yeah, but it gets better. He already told me who bought the traps and where the guy lives. The guy's name is David Reingold. He lives in Wilson. Part of me wants to drive over there now, but I haven't even eaten yet. I'll probably take a ride past in the morning."

"If you do, will you call me at my apartment and let me know what you find out?"

"I will."

"Promise?"

"I promise. By the way, I miss you."

"I miss you too," Halie confessed.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING Sam awoke forty-five minutes earlier than usual. She was so excited to uncover what was at 1215 Main Street that she wasn't obsessing about her impending session with Dr. Sally Cornwall, or pining over her otherwise continuous thoughts of Halie.

Once entering Wilson and passing the Mercer Medical Building, Sam drove slowly along the main drag, checking all the building numbers. Her first thought was that the address would be a private residence, but she soon found that was not the case. The address belonged to David's Sporting Goods, Tackle, and Trade.

HALIE PAID THE taxi driver. She picked up her luggage off the sidewalk and climbed the half-dozen steps to her apartment. Keys in hand, she was ready to surprise Sheila. As she reached for the brass doorknob to insert the key, the door to the apartment popped open on its own. Although the neighborhood was relatively safe, Halie's mind screamed 'caution.' She glanced behind her and across the street for signs of anything unusual. Not noticing anything or anyone out of place, she pushed the door open and peeked inside. Seeing no one, she stepped into the foyer from under the brick archway and set down her bags.

The apartment had a foul odor. Halie walked out of the foyer and into the living room, where she received a shock. The living room was a mess. She barely recognized it. The room was strewn with the remnants of post-party debris. Halie grit her teeth, having by now ruled out a break-in. The longer she stood surveying the disarray that was once her living room, the more she felt like a tea kettle about to vent. She entered the kitchen and saw that the plants on the windowsill had withered and turned brown. The tea kettle went off. "Sheila! Sheila! What in god's name's been going on here?" Receiving no answer, she stormed into Sheila's room. A large, dirty pile of clothes lay on the bed. More dirty clothes were strewn everywhere, except in the hamper where they belonged, and no Sheila.

Halie spun around in disgust and marched toward her bedroom. The door was shut. She reached for the doorknob as "ooh's" and "aaah's" and "oh, god's" hammered into her ear. Her blood pressure had reached its boiling point. She pushed the door open so hard that it slammed into the wall and dented it before swinging shut. She pushed the door open a second time. "What in the *hell* do you two think you're doing? No, wait! What in the *hell* do you two think you're doing in my bed?" Halie asked. "You *do* realize you're in my bed, don't you?"

Sheila and her boyfriend jumped out of bed and grabbed whatever pieces of clothing lay within their reach in a lame attempt to cover up their nakedness. "Halie," Sheila began, trying to shield her boyfriend from Halie's angry glare. "What, what are you doing home? I know this looks bad, but if I knew you were coming, I would've cleaned this place up. You know I wouldn't have left such a mess. I wasn't expecting you for weeks, and--"

"And nothing! It's obvious you weren't expecting me. How could you do this in my room? In my bed? This is my room!"

"Well, I--"

"Well, nothing! I don't want to hear it." Halie raised her hand to her forehead in disbelief of what she was seeing and hearing. "What I want right now is for both of you to get out of my room this minute, and fast. Then I strongly suggest you get dressed and clean up the mess in the living

room. I'll clean this room myself. I'm visiting my parents later, but when I get back, this place better be spotless."

Sheila agreed. Her boyfriend glanced over at her and then scooted out the door past Halie, holding his clothes bunched in front of his privates.

"We'll talk more about this tomorrow," Halie added as Sheila edged past her without uttering another word. Halie stood shaking her head. *Welcome home. Yeah, right.* She spent the next two hours cleaning her room. When she finished she walked down the block and around the corner to the parking lot of an antiques shop where she leased a parking space from the owner. She settled into the firm leather seats of her not-quite-one-year-old BMW 325i and cranked the engine to life. After winding through a few side streets, she shot onto 93 South. The ride renewed her energy level and provided a sense of freedom.

Her parents' home, the same one she'd grown up in, was a completely refurbished five bedroom colonial with three baths. The house had a two-and-one-half-car garage and a porch covered in polished redwood that stretched all along the front. Halie parked in front of the garage and moseyed along the red brick walkway lined with Lilies of the Valley. She scanned the front lawn, which was manicured to perfection and weed-free. *I'm glad to see some things don't change.* She rang the doorbell and was greeted by both parents who eagerly ushered her in the door. The smell of lemon-scented Pledge filled the foyer until her mom's sweet perfume overpowered it.

Ceila Walker was a half-head taller than her daughter, slim, and impeccably dressed in a turquoise blouse, black slacks, and low heels. Her father, Charles Walker, wore casual tan Khakis, a knit sport shirt, and loafers. He stood six-foot-two, cleanly shaven, with eyes as dark brown as his daughter's, but smaller and rounder.

Before Halie could utter a word, her mom grabbed her hand and kissed the side of her cheek, in a way that would not flatten her salon fresh hairdo or scuff her manicured nails. "Hi, honey. It's so good to see you. We've missed you."

"Hey, sweetie," her dad interjected, reading glasses swinging in his hand.

"Hi, you guys. I missed you too," Halie barely managed to say as she hugged her dad who was squeezing the air out of her.

"Careful, Charles," her mother said. "You'll break her ribs, the poor dear."

Halie's father loosened his grip.

"That's okay, Mom. I'm tougher than I look."

"No doubt, dear," her mom said, shaking her head. "So how was your flight?"

"The flight was okay. We were delayed over Logan about twenty minutes, but otherwise it went well. I sat next to a reporter from Channel Seven. We had a lot to chat about. Made the time pass."

"A reporter you say? Was this reporter male or female?"

"Male, Mom. What difference does that make?"

"No difference dear, just asking. How's Sheila been surviving without you? Was she surprised to see you?"

"Her boyfriend seems to have moved in while I've been away. The place was a mess."

"Really? Seems so unlike her."

"In college she wasn't the neatest either, but since we got the apartment together, she's been fine. I think a lot has to do with Bill. I like him, but he's unreliable. He can't hold onto a decent job for more than a month or two, plus he acts like a high school kid with no responsibility."

"I thank God every night that you have the sense not to get involved with someone like that."

"Why don't you let our daughter relax and settle in first," Halie's father said as he placed his arm around his daughter's waist.

"You're right. You two go in the living room and relax, and I'll get us something to drink."

"Thanks, Mom. Could I have a glass of red wine, and do you have anything to snack on?" On their way into the living room, Halie asked, "Hey, Dad, why don't we sit outside on the patio instead of in the house?"

Charles Walker set his reading glasses on the table next to his leather recliner. "Sure, sweetie, but I thought you weren't too keen on being outside, with the bugs and all."

"I guess I've learned to appreciate the outdoors in the past few weeks."

Out on the porch, he pulled a patio chair out from under the table for his daughter and one for himself. As he sat in the chair, he placed his hand on top of hers. "Thanks so much for coming to visit this weekend, sweetie. I love you."

"I love you too, Dad, but you don't have to thank me. I wouldn't have missed Father's Day for anything." Halie glanced out over the ocean. The weather was perfect, but she missed Sam.

"So, how's work? The last time you called, you said the hotel was nice and the people you've met were friendly. Is that still the case?"

"Oh, yeah, everyone's been great so far, and I've gotten some fabulous photos."

"How's the article coming along?"

"I have a good portion of it written already and have a pretty good idea how I'm going to handle the ending."

"That's great. Maybe you'll be home earlier than you planned."

"I don't think so," Halie said. "I'll have to see."

Halie's mom stepped onto the patio carrying a tray of snacks, wineglasses, plates, and cloth napkins. She set the tray on the table and sat opposite Charles.

"Thanks, Mom. That looks great."

"Dig in then. Your father and I are so glad you were able to make it home this weekend."

Halie blushed. "Thanks, it's nice to be back."

"Did I tell you Joanie will be here tomorrow with her new boyfriend, Chad?" Celia asked.

"I knew Joanie was coming, but you hadn't mentioned Chad."

"Oh, yes. He's a lawyer for one of the big law firms in the city. I forget the name of the place, but that doesn't really matter anyway. Your brother and the kids are coming too. He says they won't stop talking about you. Says they keep pestering him about you bringing them a present back."

"Yeah, I promised them one the last time I called." Halie took a sip of wine, spread some Brie on a cracker, and placed it in her mouth upside down. "I can't wait to see everyone."

"I'm sure they can't wait to see you either," Halie's dad said before addressing his wife. "Halie told me her article on Grand Teton's coming along great."

"That's wonderful," she said, but her tone was lethargic. "I just wish you didn't have to go off on these trips for so long. How are you ever going to meet someone if you're always away? Men don't like that you know."

"Mom! Really. I'm gay remember? Why do you always have to talk as if I'm not?"

"What? I'm just saying. I mean you're not *with* anyone. The whole gay thing could be a phase. Harriet's cousin--"

"We've been through this before. It's not a phase. It's not a choice. I wish you'd understand that. And while we're on the subject, I may as well tell you I've met someone--someone special." She looked to her dad for reassurance. "Her name's Sam and I think I may have fallen in love with her."

Halie's mom avoided her daughter's eyes. She grabbed a celery stick and bit down on it, chewing vigorously. "What kind of a woman's name is Sam, and what do you mean you *may* have fallen in love with her? Either you have or you haven't."

"Celia, let her speak."

"Thanks, Dad," Halie said, not believing she blurted out her feelings about Sam to her parents. "Her name's Samantha Tyler. She's a park ranger. She's been assigned to help me while I'm at Teton. She's kind, honest, and caring."

"Great, a park ranger," her mom butted in. "There's lots of money in that. I see she certainly jumped at the opportunity to 'assist' you, didn't she?"

"Mom, that's not fair. In all honesty, I was the one who pursued her. And as far as the money goes, I don't care." "Well, you should care. Everything costs money. Will you be happy living on a park ranger's salary?" "I think you're jumping ahead a little, Mom. Besides, I'm not planning on giving up my job. I'm still going to pursue my goals." "Maybe so, but you'd have a lot more out of life if you chose someone like your sister did."

"Celia! I think that's enough now," Halie's father said. Then to his daughter he added, "We're both very proud of you, and although we may not be giving you that impression right now, your mother and I just want you to be happy. If that means it will be with Samantha, then so be it. She sounds like a very nice person, and if you think highly of her, then I'm sure there are plenty of reasons why you do."

Tears welled up in Halie's eyes. "Thanks, Dad," she managed to say. She looked over at her mom, who'd raised an eyebrow at her father while tilting her head to the side.

"After your assignment in Teton is over, if you still feel the same way about this woman, we'd like you to bring her by so we can meet her," her father added.

"That means a lot to me." After her dad's comment, Halie expected to see a grim face of disapproval from her mom, but instead found she couldn't read her one way or the other.

ON HER DRIVE home from her parents', Halie stopped at a garden center that was about to close and selected a half-dozen indoor plants to replace the ones Sheila had let die. She made her choices quickly, wanting to hurry back to the apartment and call Sam. She had missed her all day, even more than she thought she would. As soon as she'd carried all the plants into the kitchen, she dialed Sam's number. The phone rang three times before she heard that familiar voice she was longing for on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Sam. Hi, it's Halie."

"Hey, I'm glad you called. I tried you earlier, but no one answered. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. I just got home from seeing my folks."

"How was it?"

"Okay. They missed me. Mom was a little overbearing as usual--still holding on to the hope that my gayness is a phase."

"Must be difficult. How's your roommate?"

"That's a tough question. Let me backtrack for you so you get the benefit of the whole picture. First of all, I didn't sleep well last night, probably because I knew I had to get up so early, then my flight was delayed, and then, when I finally got to the apartment, the place was a mess. Sheila and her boyfriend left junk lying all over. Even her bedroom resembled a war zone, which is why I'm guessing they found the need to 'do it' in my bed."

"What? You've *got* to be kidding," Sam said.

"I wish I were. I was horrified. It's an image I'm having a hard time erasing. Needless to say, I spent most of the afternoon doing laundry and cleaning." The thought of the ordeal made Halie's blood pressure rise again. "Enough about my troubles. How was your day?"

"Okay, I guess. I stopped by the address the antiques dealer gave me. It's a sporting goods store. I'm not sure what to do now."

"Don't worry, we'll figure something out. Did you eat yet?"

"No. I'm guessing you did though."

"Yeah, Mom made my favorite, pot roast with mashed potatoes and gravy and asparagus."

"Asparagus? Yikes! That's almost as bad as Brussels sprouts. Please don't tell me you like those too," Sam said.

"No, I'm with you on that one. Never could get past the taste. Hey, how's Jake?"

"Jake's good. He misses you though. He didn't eat his dinner last night."

"Ohhh, that's so cute. I miss him too. Give him a big hug for me."

"I will. He keeps nudging me, like I should do something about your not being here."

"Well, maybe you should."

"Like what? All I can say is I miss you and I wish you were here in my arms."

"That's plenty. I miss you too." Halie paused. She pictured Sam's face and warm, inviting eyes. The corners of her mouth curled upward. "A lot."

"I'm tempted to ask you 'how much,' but I'd rather you show me when you get back."

"I'll do both," Halie replied.

"No doubt."

Chapter Nineteen

WITH HALIE AWAY and her curiosity smoldering, Sam drove to the sporting goods store in Wilson after work on Monday. She parked in the front lot and watched the activity outside for a while, then got out and walked over to the coffee shop. Earlier in the morning she'd stopped by dispatch to request a warrant check from NCIC on David Reingold, as well as had them run a driver's license and vehicle registration check. Contrary to the list of violations she had expected seeing, nothing irregular surfaced.

The coffee shop was surprisingly busy for early evening. While waiting to pay, her thoughts drifted to Halie and to what she might be doing and whether she had already packed for her flight back to Jackson Hole. Sam hoped so. She longed to hold her in her arms, to feel her warmth and softness.

"Large decaf hazelnut!" the male cashier yelled out a second time.

Sam's eyes shifted to the young man staring at her with an annoyed expression. A shade embarrassed, she pushed her way to the counter and paid. If I miss Halie this badly already, what am I going to do when she leaves for good? Better not think too far ahead, she concluded.

Outside, the air was cooling. Sam strode briskly to the sporting goods store with cautious anticipation. Before entering, she breathed deep and exhaled long and slow. Old-fashioned bells jingled above the entranceway as she pushed the door open and stepped inside. She stood glancing around the store, sipping her coffee, uncertain what to do next.

"Hi. Something I can help you with?" a man called out as he exited the back room.

Sam recognized him from his driver's license photo; it was David Reingold. "No, not yet. Just looking," she said, giving herself time to think. Should she engage him in conversation or not? She made her decision quickly. "I've never been in here before. You the owner?"

"Sure am," he replied in a proud tone, in sharp contrast to his otherwise melancholy appearance. David Reingold possessed no unique features. He stood behind the counter at just over six-foot, average build, with narrow brown eyes and short brown hair.

Sam wasn't sure who she was expecting to find, perhaps someone more contemptible looking, but David Reingold didn't fit the vision in her mind. "This place is impressive. You've packed a lot of nice stuff into a fairly small space."

"I do what I can," he said.

Uncomfortable with the sudden curt tone in his voice, Sam moved toward the center aisle and slowly traipsed down it. That didn't go well, she thought. Hidden from Reingold's direct view, she continued her search undaunted. To this point, she hadn't uncovered anything unusual, only the normal run-of-the-mill items one would expect to find in a sporting goods store. Merchandise even hung from the ceiling. Sam studied the items suspended above her. Many appeared quite old, but also in mint condition. Continuing down the aisle and up the next, she stopped before the entrance to the storage room. Two animal traps resembling the one Jake had stepped in hung high on the wall. Sensing someone close, she spun around.

David Reingold had moved to within arms reach of her. Appearing vexed by her presence, he checked his wristwatch a second time since she'd entered the store.

Sam decided not to push her luck. She cracked a half-smile, then walked past him to the front end of the nearest aisle and pulled a pair of hiking socks from off the hook. She flipped them over in her hand, pretending to read the label. Safe for now, she thought, and then heard a rapid set of knocks emanating from somewhere in the storage room.

"Excuse me a minute," Reingold said, in a polite tone. "I'll be right back. Holler if you need me."

"Thanks, I will." Sam watched as he walked past the animal traps and into the back room. She waited a few seconds longer to make sure he didn't reappear, then rushed toward where the animal traps were hanging, stopping in front of the entrance to the storage room. She reached up and grabbed the clasp on one of the traps. Stamped into the metal was the familiar number sequence ending in a "V." *Victory Brothers. Great, now what?* Before formulating an answer, she heard muffled voices coming from the room where Reingold had disappeared into.

Sam poked her head in under the entranceway. The storage room was dimly lit. With no one in sight, she advanced stealthily until she caught a glimpse of a stocky man with black hair in a dark suit. Worried he might see her, she backed out of sight, but remained within earshot.

"Give me a minute," Reingold said. "I'm trying to get rid of her."

"Well, hurry up, we don't have all day. I wanna deal," responded a second male voice.

After a few more words were exchanged and the room fell silent, Sam heard footsteps approaching. She spun around and swiftly, but silently, hurried out of the storage room toward

the cash register. She tossed her pair of socks on the counter, then leaned forward on her right elbow as if she'd been waiting there the whole time.

The door jingled. Another customer walked in.

"I'll be right with you, sir. We close in five minutes," Reingold yelled as he made his way toward the counter and picked up Sam's hiking socks. "Is this it?"

"Yeah, that's it." She sipped her coffee while he rang her purchase into the register. "I noticed you had a few antique looking items in here."

"They are antiques. They're not 'antique looking.'"

"Right. Sorry. Do you sell them?"

"I sell everything in here."

"It's odd, but I've never been in a sporting goods store that sold antiques."

"Yeah, well," he started, then paused with a downcast look she'd seen earlier, "my wife used to collect antiques, and since she died, I don't know, I sort of got into it myself."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

"Thank you. They're not big sellers, but they give the place charm."

"Yes, they do."

"Five-fifty for the socks."

"Right." Sam fumbled for her money. "The animal traps you have on the wall over there, you sell those too?"

"I just told you, I sell everything in this store," he replied, seemingly annoyed once again.

"Have you sold any recently?"

"Why so interested? You want 'em? If you want 'em, I'll get 'em for you, otherwise I have another customer to help."

"Right, sorry. No, I don't want them. Thanks for your time."

THE FOLLOWING MORNING on her way to the lodge, the only thing on Sam's mind was Halie. She longed to see her, to stare into those fiery chestnut brown eyes and take in her

illuminating smile. The longer she waited in the parking lot, the more the butterflies churned in her stomach.

As soon as Halie spotted Sam's patrol vehicle, she sprinted down the front steps waving. She swung open the passenger side door and hopped in the front seat. "Hey, you! God, I missed you," she said leaning in toward Sam. She placed the palms of her hands on the sides of Sam's cheeks, and pulled her close into a long kiss.

Sam's left hand clung to the steering wheel as she lost herself in the ecstasy of Halie's kiss. Halie slid her hands slowly from Sam's face. Then she slouched against the seat and closed her eyes, a huge smile stretched across her face. "Mmmm, that was nice."

"That was more than nice," Sam said. She reached over and slid her right hand under Halie's golden hair near the nape of her neck, pulling her gently toward her. Sam's gaze fell on Halie's supple lips. She knew she was flirting with a yearning that would have to go partly unquenched, at least until the evening, but that didn't stop her from returning Halie's kiss with added fire. When their lips parted, Sam said, "And you thought I wouldn't miss you."

"Hardly," Halie said, "But had I known you'd miss me this much, I'd have taken the morning off so we could do something about it."

"That makes two of us. How about coming over after work? There's a full moon tonight."

"I'd love to. You'd have had a hard time keeping me away."

"We'd better get started or we won't be going anywhere, and then I'll get written up for this."

A smirk crossed Halie's face. "Well, we can't have that."

"No, we can't. So, where to?"

Halie hesitated. "I thought maybe we'd head over to the Snake River."

Sam's eyes narrowed, wrinkling her forehead. "The Snake River? Why there?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd take Felice up on her invitation for an interview."

"You're kidding, right? You're trying to get me riled, aren't you?"

"What? No, I'm not. Why do you care if I interview Felice? I thought we were over this."

"Because I can tell she likes you, that's why. Besides, there are plenty of other people to interview, why her?"

"I think she'll add interest to my piece."

Sam didn't answer. She couldn't understand why the first thing Halie wanted to do on her return to work was talk with Felice. Had Halie thought about Felice while she was away? What had she thought about? What interest or insight could Felice provide that she hadn't already given Halie?

Halie continued. "Do you know whereabouts along the river she's working today?"

Sam breathed deep. "I can find out," she replied.

"Great."

"Great." Sam radioed dispatch. Her promising reunion with Halie was turning out to be anything but. She drove them to the river in awkward silence. Fidgeting in her seat, she began thinking that maybe she'd overreacted. Why would Halie's interest in Felice be anything but business related? In her heart, she knew it was all business. Eventually, the length of Halie's silence broke her own. "How was the rest of your weekend?" Sam asked in a softer tone.

"Fine, I was happy to see everyone."

"How was Father's Day?"

"Father's Day was crazy," Halie said.

Sam could see Halie wasn't going to make conversation simple. "How so?"

"Our family has huge gatherings that usually last well into the night and this one was no exception. I stayed over and helped Mom clean up. The next morning, Dad and I played nine holes of golf."

"Golf, huh? Hadn't pictured you as a golfer."

"No? Why not?"

"Don't know really. That was nice though. I'm sure your dad enjoyed it."

"He did. What about you? Do anything interesting?"

"Not really. I visited the sporting goods store to see if I could find out anything."

"And did you?"

"Not much. The place appeared normal enough, but I didn't get a good vibe from the owner. He sells antique sporting equipment too. He had two of those animal traps. I checked to make sure they were from the same company. He wouldn't tell me anything about them though and got testy when I asked."

"Interesting."

"I thought so." Sam unwillingly pulled to the side of the road next to Felice Lohan's truck. "Here we are," she said before getting out. "She should be north of here, somewhere along the river. I'm sure she's not that far ahead of us."

"Great," Halie said, grabbing her bags and following Sam through the brush toward the river. "Did you say anything to him?"

"To Reingold?"

"Yes."

"Not really. What was I supposed to say at that point, 'I think you're full of crap.'? A couple of guys came in through the rear door while I was there. I caught a glimpse of one of them. They were in a rush to get him to close the store. I heard the one guy say something about wanting to deal. The whole thing was strange."

"Do you think those men would show up again? If you want, I'll go with you next time and stake out the place. I can take photographs."

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't know." Sam noticed Halie cock her head as if to indicate 'what's not to know?' "I don't want you getting hurt."

"That's sweet, but I can handle myself pretty well. I mean, it's not like I'll be shooting a grizzly or anything."

"Right." Sam traipsed onward with Halie in tow for close to a mile over the rocky shoreline before stopping to watch several rafts float past, part of a guided scenic tour.

"That looks like fun," she said, as one of the tour guides waved at them. Halie waved back.

"It is fun," Felice Lohan interjected. "I could take you sometime."

Halie jumped. "Felice! I didn't know you were there. We didn't hear you. Where were you hiding?"

Sam wasn't at all startled by Felice or surprised she'd try to make a grand entrance.

Felice pointed to a large rock formation twenty-five feet from them. "I was sitting behind that boulder watching a mother-bear show her cubs how to fish before the rafters spooked them."

"Oh, how cute. No wonder we didn't see you," Halie said.

"Sam."

"Felice."

"So what brings you out here today? Did you happen upon me, or were you seeking me out?" Felice asked with a half-cocked grin.

The words were difficult for Sam to speak. "We were looking for you. Halie wanted to interview you if you have the time."

"Of course I have the time."

"Great," Sam muttered.

"It is, isn't it?" Felice replied. "So, where do you want to start?" she asked Halie.

"If you two don't mind," Sam said, "I'm going to take a walk down river. Why don't you come get me when you've finished."

"Happy to," Felice said. Then she channeled all her attention and charm on Halie.

SAM KNEW SHE shouldn't have let Felice get under her skin or have any reason to be jealous, but she couldn't help how she felt. And rather than remain quiet in the Expedition on the ride back, Sam tore into Halie. "I can't see why your interview with Felice lasted so long. I mean, what did the two of you talk about?"

"Her work mostly, and changes the park's undergone in the past several years," Halie responded. "Why? What do you think we talked about?"

"I don't know. I just don't see why you had to interview her. I know plenty of other people you could have talked to. You knew how I felt about her."

"Not this again."

"Yeah, this again. So I guess you got everything you needed today?" Sam said with sarcasm in her voice.

"Yeah, I did."

"Great."

The remainder of their ride was spent in silence. As Sam pulled alongside the curb to let Halie out, she said, "I have a feeling you're not coming over tonight, are you?"

"Yeah, I think I'll pass." Halie didn't get out of the Expedition right away.

Sam knew she should try and explain why she'd acted like she had, but she couldn't. Instead she merely asked, "The offer you made to go with me to Wilson and stake out the sporting goods store, is that offer still good?"

"I said I'd go. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. You still seem mad."

"Look, Sam, I'm crazy about you, but you don't give me enough credit. I gave you no reason to get all bent outta shape about Felice. You took a perfectly good day and--" Halie's cell phone went off. She checked to see who the caller was. "Sorry, I have to take this, it's my boss."

Sam couldn't hear what was being said on the other end of the phone, but by the expression on Halie's face it wasn't good.

"No," Halie replied into the phone, "that shouldn't be a problem. I just wish you had given me a little more notice." She paused, then "Right, I understand. No, it's no problem at all. I'll make sure I'm finished. Okay, see you then." She flipped the cell phone closed and faced Sam. "I've got bad news. My coworker who's doing the other half of our article on another National Park is ahead of schedule. He's wrapping it up, so now my management doesn't want to wait until the fall issue to get our story out. They want to release a special edition next month. They're upping my deadline by two weeks. I'll have to leave July 4th."

Sam didn't know how to respond. Suddenly the day was going from bad to worse and she had no control over it. "On the holiday?"

"They don't care, as long as I'm at work on Tuesday."

"I thought we'd have more time--"

"I know. So did I. We'll have to take it as it comes, that's all," Halie said. "There's not much else we can do."

"No, I suppose not. I feel like we should talk though."

"I pretty much said what I wanted to say, Sam. If you want to add anything--"

A long silence followed before Sam answered. "No. I'll see you tomorrow."

Halie sighed. "See you tomorrow."

Sam watched as Halie walked into the lodge. This was not how she wanted their day to end.

Chapter Twenty

"ABOUT THE OTHER day," Sam started tentatively. "I'm sorry for the way I acted--you know--about Felice. You were right, I was being ridiculous."

Sam and Halie sat in one of Charlie Tynes' old beat up trucks in the rear parking lot of a strip mall adjacent the sporting goods store. Sam had borrowed the truck, knowing her ranger vehicle was too obvious a sight. Even still, the number of cars in the lot were substantially fewer than had been there the prior two evenings when she'd driven over with Jake, which gave Sam an uneasy feeling, especially with Halie in the car.

"I never said you were ridiculous. I said you had no reason to get bent out of shape. I told you I'd rather be with you than with Felice. I don't know why you don't believe me."

"I do, it's just that I got jealous. It's not one of my better qualities."

"You're right, it's not, but in a way I guess it's kind of cute. I'll think about forgiving you, but it'll cost you."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Dinner Saturday night at a restaurant of my choosing."

"Is that all?"

"Well, and dessert, of course," Halie said, placing her hand on Sam's thigh.

Sam swallowed hard, wishing she hadn't wasted the last couple of days being so stubborn. As they sat quietly in the car watching people come and go, the minutes stretched into an hour.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"How come you don't like talking about your job much?"

"What's to talk about?"

"I don't know. Like is there anything you worry about while you're on patrol?"

No one had ever asked Sam that question before, and she wasn't sure how to answer at first. The worries always lingered under the surface, she'd just never verbalized them before. And now that someone asked, she wasn't sure she wanted to share, but the words made their way out. "I worry

about a few things. First, that I don't make it home one night. Not so much because of me, but for Jake and Mom. Second, that I'll call for backup and because of personnel shortages no one'll respond, and third, that I'll be called to a scene one day where I'll be helpless to save someone, and I'll have to watch them die."

Silence followed Sam's response. She stared out the driver's side window. She thought of the many close encounters she'd had where those fears were thankfully never realized. Then she thought about Tina.

"Thanks for sharing that part of you with me, Sam," Halie said in a hushed voice. "I'm sorry."

Sam nodded. "It is what it is." She glanced at her watch, then at the back door of the sporting goods store. "Looks like another bust. We may as well go home."

"Hang on, someone's coming out," Halie said, as a sliver of light shone through the back door as it cracked open. She readied her camera. While they sat and watched, two men exited the store, followed by David Reingold. One of the men, who appeared to be in his fifties, wore navy dress pants, a blue and white striped dress shirt with gold cufflinks, and black shoes. He was about six-foot tall, but clearly overweight. He sported black hair and a salt and pepper color beard. The other man was probably ten years younger, a good fifty pounds lighter, and clean shaven. He wore dark blue jeans with a brown leather belt, brown loafers, and a white cotton dress shirt with the cuffs rolled up. He also had black hair, but his was tied into a ponytail.

"That must be them," Sam said. "Reingold's the guy in the back."

Halie snapped a photo. "I hope they don't see us," she whispered, then snapped a few more. "That must be their car parked next to Reingold's truck. Guess they got here before we did."

"Can you get a picture of the license plate?"

"Not from this angle. Maybe when they pull out."

"Wonder what he's got in the briefcase," Sam said. "Something's sticking out on the side, but I can't make it out."

"I'll see if I can zoom in on it." Halie adjusted the camera lens. Several seconds passed. "Looks like part of an animal tail. Makes sense. They're probably trading furs."

"Did you get a picture?"

"I got a few. I'll develop them tonight so we can show the Chief tomorrow. Maybe he'll agree to go to the Sheriff with the photos."

"I hope so," Sam said, after which she noticed the men had stopped talking and were now glaring in their direction. There was one of the few vehicles left in the parking lot. "Something's going on. I think they've seen us."

"Let's get out of here then," Halie said, her voice shaking.

"We can't pull out now. We'd have to drive right past them."

The wheels in Sam's head spun quickly. "Kiss me."

"What?"

"Hide the camera behind your back and kiss me."

Halie placed the camera behind her and kissed Sam.

Sam glanced out of the corner of her eye and saw the men talking again, and laughing. She saw Reingold slap the older man on the shoulder before he got into the car. She pulled away from Halie. "It's okay now, they're leaving."

"That's too bad, I was beginning to like where this was going. We'll have to pick it up from here later. Also, I think you'd better kiss me again when they drive by. We don't want them getting suspicious."

"Worried about that are you?"

"Very."

Sam gladly kissed Halie again as the men passed by. With one eye focused on the car, Halie lifted her camera and shot a picture of the license plate. Then she set the camera on the seat next to her and continued kissing Sam.

THE NEXT MORNING, Sam arrived at the lodge fifteen minutes early, eager to view the photographs Halie had taken. A half eaten raisin bun sat on a napkin on top of the end table near the far bed, and spread out on the cover were the photos.

"These are great," Sam said. She leaned over and kissed Halie on the cheek. "I can't wait to show them to the Chief. Thanks for staying up last night to do this."

"That's it? I risk life and limb and work half the night on these photos and that's all I get is a peck on the cheek?"

"What did you want?"

"I can't have what I want right now, but I'll take seconds," she said, pushing Sam against the wall and pressing her body into her. She ran her fingers through Sam's hair, pulled her close, and kissed her wildly.

Sam's knees weakened and she groaned with pleasure. Halie slid her leg between Sam's thighs. Sam leaned into her. When lips parted, Sam managed in a half whisper, "You're killing me. Why do you always do this to me before we have to go to work?"

"To keep me in your thoughts all day."

"You're always in my thoughts," Sam replied, her face flushed. "Come on, we better see the Chief before I decide not to go at all."

"Mmm, I wish you would," Halie egged her on, "decide not to go that is, but I know what catching these guys will mean to you."

SAM AND HALIE entered the maintenance building and shot straight for the Chief's office with long, quick strides. Sam reconstructed the events of the prior evening, and before Halie could hand him the photos and the sales invoice for the traps, he got up, shut the door, and then ripped into Sam.

"Are you out of your mind? What were you thinking taking a civilian along on a stakeout?"

"That was my fault, Chief." Halie broke in. "I told Sam I wanted to go."

"It doesn't matter. She should have known better. You could have gotten hurt. Who knows what would've happened if they'd discovered you photographing them."

"The Chief's right," Sam said. "I wasn't thinking. It won't happen again."

"You're darn right it won't. And the next time you decide to go off on your own to investigate anything, I better know about it *and* have approved it first."

"Yes, sir. Though in my defense, I wasn't on duty at the time."

"That may be so, but I still should have known about it."

"I agree. Do you still want to see the photos?" Sam asked.

The Chief said nothing at first, then extended his hand toward Halie. He studied each photo and the sales invoice. "Hmm, it does appear that something underhanded is going on. I'll give the Sheriff a call and prod him to start an investigation. I don't think I have to repeat myself that you two hang low in the meantime." After a short pause he added, "Nice work, though."

"Thanks, Chief," Sam said. "Is that it then?"

"No, have a seat while I call the Sheriff."

Halie watched Sam walk over to the far chair before she sat. She enjoyed watching her move, the way she exuded strength and determination, but with a warm, approachable attitude, even after the Chief yelled at her. Yet, less than five weeks ago she was sitting in the same chair, next to this ranger she didn't know and who at the time she didn't exactly like. And now, all she could do was think about being with her every second of every day.

The Chief depressed the speaker button and dialed the Sheriff's office. His eyes darted between Halie, Sam, and the phone.

"Teton County Sheriff's Office, how may I direct your call?"

"This is Chief Thundercloud over at Grand Teton National Park. I need to speak with the Sheriff."

"Yes, sir, please hold one minute. I'll transfer you."

Seconds later, the Sheriff was on the phone. "Hello, Raymond. John here, what can I do for you?"

"Morning, John, thanks for taking my call. I have you on speakerphone. I'm in my office with one of my rangers, Samantha Tyler, and a visiting photojournalist, Ms. Halie Walker, who's doing a story on the park for us."

"Hello, ladies."

"Hello, Sheriff," the women replied in unison.

"So what's this all about, Raymond?"

"John, I know you've met Sam before. She's the ranger whose dog got injured a few months ago when it stepped into an animal trap on park grounds."

"Yeah, sure, I remember."

"She's been trying to catch the person who injured her dog, on her own time, and in the process, she and Ms. Walker appear to have stumbled into what we believe may be an illegal fur trading business involving the park."

"What makes you think that?"

The Chief recounted the women's story, ending with, "At a minimum, please run the plates for me and the photos against your database and call me if you find anything. I'd feel better."

"Sure, Raymond, no problem. Now that I've got the entire picture, I agree. The whole thing seems a bit suspicious. I'll look into it. If anything shows up on my search, I'll get an investigator

on the case immediately. You have my word. In the meantime, step up car searches at the park entrances, but don't have anyone go near the sporting goods store."

"Thanks. I'll talk to you soon." The Chief disconnected the call. "Looks like that's about all we can do at this point. At least we've got him curious. Let's hope something surfaces during the search. So what do you two have on your agendas for today?"

Although she hadn't discussed her plans with Sam yet, Halie responded, "I'd like to stay at the station today, if that's okay, and finish my article."

"That's fine. Then you'll be on patrol today, Sam."

"Yes, sir."

"That works out well. Tim Baker called in sick this morning. You can cover his patrol over at Pinebluff Mountain."

"Okay," Sam said. "See you later." Then to Halie she added, "I'll be by around four-thirty to pick you up. Try and behave until then."

"I don't have much choice, do I? Be careful."

"I will." Sam walked out of the office.

As Halie stood to leave, the Chief said, "Hold on a minute, if you don't mind. I heard you'll be cutting your stay with us short, is that true?"

"Bad news travels quickly I see. My boss upped my deadline."

"That's a shame. We enjoyed having you here. We're going to miss you. You know you're welcome back anytime."

"Thanks, Chief. I'm sure I'll be back. I can't imagine being away from Sam for too long." She paused for a few seconds, the thought of leaving Sam depressing her. She shifted gears 180 degrees. "Regarding my article, I'm planning on having my final draft to you by Monday morning. If you'd go through it and have your edits to me by say Thursday morning, that'd be great. It'll give me enough time to make changes and e-mail my final copy to the magazine by close of business Friday." Halie waited for a response, but received none. She sensed the Chief was looking right through her. She scratched the back of her neck and added, "I was planning on staying through next weekend and spending those days with Sam. I'll be flying home that Monday."

"Sam will be very disappointed."

"Believe me, so will I. I'm not sure how I'm going to manage, but somehow I'll have to. My job and my family are in Boston. I don't have a choice."

"You always have a choice, but you also have to know what's right for you. Just remember, family takes many different forms."

Halie pursed her lips. "Thanks, Chief. Sam's lucky to have you for a boss."

"I'm not so sure she'd agree with you after today, but ultimately, I am responsible for everything that goes on around here and we can't afford to take those kinds of risks."

"I'm sure she understands that too."

"I hope so," the Chief said.

AT HALF PAST four in the afternoon, Sam pulled up to the maintenance building. Halie was waiting outside and jumped into the patrol vehicle. "Missed you."

"Missed you too," Sam said.

"Boy, have I got some news for you."

"Fire away," Sam said. "I'm all ears." She put the vehicle in reverse, swung the Expedition around and exited the parking lot.

"The Sheriff ran the photos of Reingold's buddies through a nationwide criminal database. Both had prior arrests; assault with a deadly weapon, disorderly conduct, and a couple of petty theft charges. He also found they had ties to the Garciano crime family in Chicago."

"Chicago? Then what in the heck are they doing all the way out here?" Sam asked.

"The Sheriff doesn't know. I guess he's going to find out though."

"This is getting more and more bizarre. At least he's got an investigator on the case now, right?"

"Definitely."

"Good. Hopefully something'll break. So, did you finish your article?"

"Not exactly."

"No? I was hoping we could spend the weekend together."

"I can spend part of it with you, but tomorrow morning you have to promise to bring me back to the lodge early so I can work on it for a few hours. After that, I'm all yours."

"Sounds good to me. Then we can have that dinner I owe you. I've got a doctor's appointment in the morning anyway, so it works out okay."

"Another one? You've got a lot of Saturday morning appointments. Is everything okay?" Halie asked with concern.

"Oh. Yeah, everything's fine, just check-up stuff." Sam shifted in her seat. "You sure you don't want to bring the computer with you tonight? Then you wouldn't have to leave tomorrow morning. You could keep Jake company while I'm gone."

"If I bring the computer, I might get tempted to work on the article."

"You'd consider working tonight?"

"When I'm on a roll I get obsessed. I know myself, so if the computer's not there my mind will be freer. And then maybe next week, while the Chief's editing the article, I'll tag along with you on patrol."

"You'd want to go with me?" Sam paused. "Well--I suppose I could manage with you for a few days, but then you may have to take orders from me for a change."

"Is that so? I like the sound of that," Halie said.

Chapter Twenty-One

HALIE SAT IN front of her laptop, her thoughts drifting to her evening with Sam and the special times she'd spent with her during the past few weeks, reliving each moment. Despite her daydreaming and continued need to refocus, she finished what she had to do in the four hours she'd allotted. Giving in to the growling noises her stomach was making, she saved her file, shut off the laptop, and left the hotel room for the restaurant. She didn't wait long before the hostess greeted her and escorted her to a table overlooking the lake. After scanning the menu and making a mental note of her choice, she glanced out over the lake through the large picture window.

"Ready to order?" a waiter asked.

Startled, Halie responded, "Ugh, yeah. I'll have the garden salad with the raspberry vinaigrette dressing." She ordered light, planning to leave plenty of space for her dinner with Sam.

"Very well."

"That comes with garlic bread sticks, correct?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Oh, and may I have the dressing on the side?"

"Sure, no problem." The waiter scribbled on his notepad, then walked away.

As Halie watched him leave, her eyes darted to a man in his early forties sitting three tables away. The man wore a large rimmed cowboy hat and a white silk shirt, and smiled at her from his table. Halie smiled back, not wanting to appear rude, but she wished she had brought a newspaper or book with her so she could hide behind it and appear to be reading. Since she had nothing with her, she simply glanced out the window at the lake. From the corner of her eye, she saw the man in the cowboy hat stand and move toward her table.

"Excuse me little lady, I noticed you sitting alone and was wondering if you might join me at my table."

Halie appreciated the offer, but had no intention of eating with a stranger. In a kind tone she said, "Thank you, but I'm just taking a quick lunch break. I'm working, so I don't have much time to sit and chat, but thanks anyway."

"As it turns out, I'm here on business too. My name's William

H. Reingold." "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Reingold, and I'm flattered, really I am, but I like to use my break time to think. I'm a writer." Halie couldn't believe she'd run into another Reingold. She wondered if he and David Reingold were related, but figured they probably weren't. What would be the chance of that? But his name rang another bell, like he was a celebrity or something, she just couldn't place where.

"I understand. I usually work through my lunches too, but it's not healthy."

Halie smiled but didn't respond.

"Well, I thought this was going to be my lucky day, but I guess it's not. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, miss. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"You too," Halie said. After he'd returned to his table, she remembered where she thought she'd heard the name William H. Reingold before. She was anxious to check the internet and see if her assumptions were correct.

SAM SAT ON the sofa with the phone in her hand and Jake by her side. For the last hour and a half she debated over whether or not she should call Halie and cancel their dinner. She didn't want to hurt Halie's feelings, but after her horrific visit with Sally Cornwall, she didn't feel much

like going out either. What she wanted most was to crawl into bed and sleep. During her therapy session she'd had a flashback to the day of the accident on Grand Teton. Her hands had started shaking beyond her control, and she broke out in a cold sweat. She felt paralyzed, the look of terror frozen in Tina's eyes haunting her. Sam dialed the phone.

"Big Bison Lodge, how may I help you?"

"Yeah, hi. Halie Walker, please."

"One moment."

Sam ran her fingers through her hair. She didn't want to cancel dinner, but she knew she'd feel worse if she bummed Halie out too. She figured she'd be better off alone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Halie? It's me, Sam."

"Hey, you. You just caught me coming out of the shower. I almost didn't hear the phone ring. What's the matter, missed me so much you couldn't wait a second longer?"

"I do miss you, but--"

"But nothing. You won't believe who I ran into today."

Sam really didn't want to get into a long conversation.

"William H. Reingold, the Texas oil billionaire," Halie spurted out.

"You did? I don't believe it. Did he call you 'little lady' and try hitting on you?"

A short moment of silence followed. "Actually, he did both, how'd you know?"

"Because I had a run in with 'Big Willy' myself a few months ago at the visitor center. The man was relentless. When I dropped you off this morning I noticed the familiar face of a man walking from the parking lot toward the lodge. I knew I'd seen him somewhere before. When I remembered, I got goose bumps on my arms, and not in a good way. He'd bumped into me at the Moose Visitor Center, introduced himself as William H. Reingold, but insisted I call him 'Big Willy' the way his friends did. He tried to get me to go on a date with him; tried to impress me by boasting about his oil business in Texas. I hope I don't have the pleasure of running into him during this visit."

"Sounds familiar. I wonder what brings him to Grand Teton?"

"I don't know, but I know there's drilling going on to the south and east of Teton, in Bridger-Teton National Forest, and to the north in the U.S. Forest Service land. Maybe he's got his hands in that."

"Do you think he's related to David Reingold?" Halie asked.

"I doubt it. They don't look anything alike. Regardless, the guy's bad news though. He's only interested in one thing. If I were you, I'd stay away from him."

"I wasn't planning on dining with the man. Speaking of which, I am getting hungry, aren't you?"

"No, I called because I was wondering if you'd mind if I canceled our dinner tonight. I hate doing this, but I'm not feeling that great. I had a bad day. I promise you a rain check for next weekend though."

"We don't have to go out. I'll order Chinese and get it on the way over."

"Thanks, but I'm not up to it tonight."

"Not up to it? What's that supposed to mean?" Halie asked.

Sam didn't answer. She heard the quiver in Halie's voice and felt horrible about it. What could she say?

"Fine then, do whatever you want. It's not like I have a choice anyway. I should have known better. I guess you have better things to do, is that it?"

"No, that's not it at all. I don't--I just don't want to be a downer tonight, that's all."

"Really, well guess what? You're too late. I don't get you. On the one hand you act as though you care about me, and on the other, you keep things from me and tell me half-truths. What? You don't think I know you've been keeping something from me? If you have secrets you want to keep to yourself, fine, but when those secrets impact the both of us, then it's not okay. We only have a week left to be together, but you know what? I'll make it easy for you. As it turns out, I have things to do too, so no foul. Thanks for taking the time out of your busy day to call me and let me know you can't make it. Oh, and I'll pass on the rain check. I'll see you at work on Monday."

The sound of the receiver being slammed down rang in Sam's ear. She called Halie at the lodge again, but received no answer.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE FOLLOWING WEEK had been awash with tiredness and confusion. Fire had broken out in the Targhee National Forest. The park provided additional ranger and rescue support to the U.S. Forest Service personnel, leaving Sam and the remaining crew at Grand Teton stretched to their limits. Sam worked all the hours offered, and why not, given the circumstances. Working kept her from having to face why she couldn't tell Halie the truth--why her insecurity was breaking them apart. The solution was simple, work. Sam was thankful her neighbor's wife had offered to let Jake out for her in the afternoons and feed him during the week while she was on extended hours.

Thursday evening, when Sam opened the cabin door Jake bolted toward her. Although she was exhausted, she was equally happy to see him. She rubbed his belly briefly, then dragged herself inside and onto the sofa. She fell asleep instantly. An hour later, Jake's clawing at her leg woke her. Only then did she hear the phone ringing over the eleven o'clock evening news. She propped herself upright and reached for the phone. "Hello," she said groggily.

"Hi, Sam, it's Halie. I didn't wake you, did I?"

Sam noticed the light blinking on the answering machine as she bent over to untie her boots.

"No. I'm awake. What's the matter?"

"I was wondering if you could stop by at ten tomorrow morning instead of our usual time. There are a few things I want to do here before I see the Chief."

With the phone pressed between her cheek and shoulder, Sam tussled through her hair quickly with both hands as a means to help herself wake up. "Yeah, sure. I suppose so," she said, unbuttoning her shirt, "as long as I'm not stuck in the middle of something by then."

Halie breathed in a long breath and let it out slowly. "You okay?"

Sam lied. "Yeah, I'm fine. You?"

"Fine."

"Great. I'll see you tomorrow then." Sam waited a few moments before hanging up the phone. When she heard the click on the other end, she gingerly placed the phone on the receiver. She glanced dejectedly at Jake, who sat staring at her, his head tilted to one side. "Don't give me that look. Come on. Let's get you a cookie, okay?"

WITH A QUIET morning on patrol, Sam was able to swing by the lodge at ten a.m. She waited in the patrol vehicle with the window open. The smell of smoke hung in the air, and although not

an immediate threat, the smoke from Targhee was a constant reminder of the fire that was still not under control. Sam's radio crackled to life.

"Four-two-zero, Teton Dispatch."

"Teton Dispatch, four-two-zero, go ahead."

"Report to the CRO's office at your first available opportunity."

"Roger that," Sam responded as she watched Halie amble toward the Expedition.

"Thanks for picking me up," Halie said, her tone emotionless, as she sat next to Sam.

"Not a problem. I have to see the Chief anyway."

Their ride to the maintenance building was quiet. Sam glanced at the animals grazing on the plain. Many appeared skittish. Some stood with noses pointed toward the sky, nostrils flaring. Others scratched at the ground with their hoofs or took off in short spurts, alternately starting and stopping. The calm in the valley had been disturbed. "We need rain," Sam heard herself say.

Halie's eyes locked on Sam as if studying her, but she said nothing.

When they reached the maintenance building, Sam stayed in the patrol vehicle for a few minutes, pretending she had to sort through some papers. Once Halie was inside the building, Sam darted to the Chief's office.

The Chief was alone, for which Sam was thankful. "Hey, Chief, what's up?"

"Hi-ya, Sam. I got an update on the Sheriff's investigation. They put surveillance on the shop and got an Affidavit for Search Warrant signed. They're on their way there now."

"That's great. I hope they find what they need and nail these guys." Sam got a vibe from the Chief that he wasn't quite finished and was withholding information from her. "Is there something else?"

The hesitation was obvious but brief. "I'm afraid so Sam. I know how much this last weekend with Halie means to you and you know I wouldn't ask if I wasn't in desperate need, but with the fire and all, I have to ask you to come in to work tomorrow. I'm sorry."

Sam remained quiet at first. "Does Halie know?"

"I told her."

"Did she say anything?"

The Chief lowered his eyes.

"That's fine then--not a problem. I'll be in tomorrow. If you need me Sunday, I can do that too."

"No, I wouldn't do that to you. Tomorrow'll be fine. I'll be in too. A storm's expected to roll in. The rain should help with the fires."

"Let's hope so. Would it be a problem if I brought Jake along tomorrow? I'd hate to leave him cooped up another day."

"That's fine. He's practically the park mascot anyway."

"Thanks, Chief. I'll see you later. If anything else breaks on the fur trading thing, please let me know."

"I will."

SAM GOT HOME from work at a decent hour for a change. After letting Jake out, she called Dr. Cornwall's office and canceled her Saturday morning appointment. Then she mixed Jake's food and popped a frozen dinner in the microwave for herself. After dinner, she soaked in hot water with lavender bubbles until her skin became prune-like. She lay under the blanket of warmth, trying to soothe her aching insides, rethinking the relationship she'd had with Halie, what Sally Cornwall had been trying to tell her the past few weeks, and what she wanted from the rest of her life. After drying off and slipping into a pair of sweats, she shuffled into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. She rested on the sofa in the living room, legs curled tight against her chest.

Jake plopped himself on the floor alongside her. He rolled upside down with his paws stretched in the air in her direction.

Sam enjoyed his antics. She grabbed his one paw and shook it, then let it go and grabbed the phone. After a few rings, Sam heard a welcoming "Hello?" on the other end. "Hi, Mom, it's me. How are you?"

"Hey, honey! I'm fine. What's going on? I wasn't expecting to hear from you until tomorrow," June Tyler said.

"I know. I wanted to hear your voice. Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, absolutely not. I'm trying my hand at a little painting, but haven't been too successful at it. Is something the matter?"

Sam forced back the tears welling up. She breathed deep, trying to sort out where she should start. "Looking back, knowing what you know now, were you ever sorry that you met Dad?"

Silence initially followed Sam's question. "No, honey, of course not. Without your dad, I never would have had you or your brothers, and I don't know what I'd do without all of you."

"Yeah, but with everything that you had to go through when Dad was sick, and his leaving you, if you knew your life would have turned out that way, would you still have followed the same path?"

"Of course. Your dad was a good man. We had our differences, but most of them didn't have anything to do with our relationship or you kids. And your dad didn't leave me, Sam. He died. He didn't have a choice. You know that."

"I know, but--"

"I didn't tell you this when you were younger because I didn't want you to worry about it the rest of your life, but your father died of a rare blood disease. He was born with it."

Sam didn't know what to say.

"The doctors said there was only the slightest chance that you or your brothers would have inherited it, and I didn't want to burden you kids with that. They said if there was no sign of the disease by the time you reached your teens, you'd be fine. I made sure you all had your blood checked every year, well into your teens, and thank God, nothing developed."

"All this time I couldn't figure out why Dad was snatched away from us. One day he's fine, and the next he's in the hospital, and then he's gone. Losing him while I was still so young wasn't fair. I never got to say goodbye to him. I don't even remember if I told him I loved him," Sam said, sobbing uncontrollably.

"You didn't have to tell him, Sam. He knew."

"And then that bizarre accident with Tina. I couldn't believe it. It happened all over again. Another person I cared for ripped from me. It seems like everyone I get close to dies."

"It only feels that way to you. I'm still here. Your brothers are still alive. And now you have Halie. Unfortunately, death is a part of life, Sam, but you can't let it stop you from living."

"Halie doesn't want to see me anymore. It's my fault. I pushed her away. She knew I wasn't being honest with her, that I was holding back."

"I'm sorry," her mom replied. "Maybe it's not as bad as you think. You love her, don't you?"

"I do."

"And she loves you, right?"

"She did. I don't know about now."

"I think you need to share your feelings with her. After your dad died, a close friend of mine told me I needed to let the tears out and allow the hurt to do its job. She said our emotions are what let us know we're human and expressing those emotions is what makes us stronger. At the time I thought she was crazy, but looking back I realized grieving is a part of what shapes us. At least how we handle it is. You don't have a lot of choices. You can either grow from what happened or let it destroy you, and I don't think your father or Tina would be happy with the latter choice. Allow yourself to grieve, but then you have to let them go. And if Halie loves you as much as you love her, she'll forgive you."

"I don't know. I think it's too late."

"It's never too late."

Sam clung to the phone as if holding onto a lifeline. She said nothing. Anguish poured from her. Her body heaved as the sobs tumbled free.

"Look, honey, you can't control life. The best you can do is roll with it. If you were lucky enough to find someone to love who loves you, then enjoy every minute you can with that person. Love is always worth it. Think about what I said, okay? And keep your chin up."

"I will, Mom, thanks," Sam said, as a thread of hope returned to her.

HALIE WASN'T IN the mood to write after work, but she couldn't stand being alone in her room with her thoughts either. She was hungry, so she grabbed her camera and went to the hotel bar for an early dinner. The sign on the door read closed. She asked a housekeeper where to go for a good burger and he told her The Wandering Moose.

When Halie's cab neared the parking lot of The Wandering Moose, she noticed gray smoke billowing from the chimney, but as they drove toward the front door she saw that the one story wooden cabin-like structure screamed for paint. Glistening spider webs surrounded the bar's sign above the door, and the parking lot needed numerous potholes filled. "Are you sure this is the place?" Halie asked the cab driver.

"Yes, ma'am. Best ribs in the state if you ask me."

Halie wasn't planning on eating ribs, but with praise like that she figured the place couldn't be that bad. Plus the smell of the food coming through the open cab window was making her stomach grumble. She paid the taxi driver and went inside. The interior was kept in sharp contrast to the exterior; surprisingly clean, polished, and inviting. The oak floors sparkled, as did the glasses hanging from a rack suspended from the ceiling behind the bar. Halie moved toward the counter. Heads swiveled in her direction.

"What's your poison?" the bartender asked.

"I'm not actually in the mood to drink," Halie said, placing her camera on the counter, "but I'm craving a good burger."

"Then you've come to the right place. You're that reporter from Boston, aren't you?"

Halie donned a surprised expression. "Yes. My name's Halie."

"I know. Halie Walker. Nice to meet you." She extended her hand. "Molly T. Moose--I own the place. Where's your partner, Sam?"

Halie's eyes lit up. "You know Sam?"

"Sure. Everyone knows everyone around here, especially the rangers. Been a long time since I've seen Sam around here though. I remember the first time she came in here. She had the place in stitches. First, she wants a glass of wine, not beer. I didn't even carry wine. She's the only ranger who's ever come in here who didn't want a beer. Raymond Thundercloud was her district super at the time, and he ribbed her bad for that. But it got better. When they were ordering, she asked me if I had any vegetarian meals. By that time, we were rolling on the floor. There wasn't a vegetarian for miles, at least not one that came to this bar. She had to settle for fries and a side salad. Eventually, she did have me making her some of those veggie dishes, and let me tell you, I enjoyed them, though I never admitted that to her. Wine?"

"I thought you said you didn't carry any," Halie said.

"Yeah, well, what can I say? I keep a few bottles on hand, just in case, and it's a good thing. When I saw Sam the other night, I nearly fainted. It's been years."

"Why'd she stop coming?"

"She didn't tell you? I don't want to go into it too far if she hasn't said anything, but there was an accident a few years ago, on Grand Teton. It affected Sam badly. She hasn't been in here since, well, until the other night. I was happy to see her, but she looked so tired. We chatted about old times." Molly went on telling Halie all kinds of stories about Sam while Halie ate. As much as Halie wanted to hear the stories, it hurt listening. As soon as she finished eating and was about to leave, Molly said, "Hold on. Do me a favor, would you? Give this to Sam the next time you see her."

Halie didn't look at the rolled up magazine Molly placed in her hand. "But I don't know if I'll--"

"She left it here the other night and I'm sure she'd want it back, the way she was engrossed in the thing. I got this feeling she wouldn't be by again, at least not for a while, so I'd appreciate your getting it to her."

"I will," Halie said. It was nice meeting you, Molly, but I gotta go." She grabbed her camera and rushed out the door. Outside, she unfolded the magazine. She held last month's issue of *The Wild*

International. Halie opened it to her article. She stood silent for half a minute, then started walking along Teton Park Road in the direction of the lodge. "Damn you, Sam."

Halie kept moving, hoping to clear her mind and forget the hurt. She'd worked off a good part of her dinner by means of a healthy sweat when she caught a glimpse of a yellow-bellied marmot sunning itself between two rocks in an outcropping. The marmot wiggled his nose, smelled the air, and rubbed his feet over his squirrel-like, but more rounded, face. The corners of Halie's mouth turned upward as she took a photo. She knew that if Sam were with her, she would have enjoyed seeing the little guy too. She felt a lump tighten in her throat. What was she still doing in Teton anyway? Her article was technically complete. Did she think Sam would suddenly apologize or open up to her? Heartache encroached on her bump with happiness, but she pushed the ache away, not allowing it in.

"Halie, is that you?"

The voice sounded familiar. Halie spun around. Across the street, Felice sat in her truck, arm hanging confidently out the window. "I came from the ranger station. I'm on my way home. Where's your shadow?"

"I don't know."

An immediate sign of relief crossed Felice's face. "Have you eaten yet? My treat."

"Thanks," Halie said, moving a strand of hair off her face as two cars slowed to pass safely between them, "but I did already."

Felice pulled her truck onto the shoulder. "Maybe another time. How much longer are you staying?"

"I'm not sure. Technically, my work's done. I might get a flight out tomorrow or Sunday."

"That'd be a shame. If you decide to stay and you're not doing anything tomorrow, I could take you to Teton Village. Have you been there yet?"

"No, I haven't."

"There's an Aerial Tram that takes you to the top of the mountain. You'd get some great pictures from that height. A different perspective. There's a fabulous restaurant they built there last year that we can go to if we get hungry."

"There'd be a good chance of that," Halie said.

"Great. So you're game?"

She hesitated for a moment. Her heart wasn't in it, but she wasn't ready to leave yet either. "Okay, I guess so."

"It's a date then. Can I give you a ride? You're staying at Big Bison Lodge, right?"

"Yeah, but I'll walk, thanks. I need the exercise."

"Not from where I'm sitting," Felice said. "Okay, I'll leave you to it. I'll be by tomorrow morning then--nine o'clock."

LYING AWAKE IN bed, Sam thought about what her mom had said and how she was living her life, or not living it. She missed Halie. Her heart ached. Tears streamed down her cheeks onto her pillow. She'd cried so hard and long she couldn't breathe through her nose anymore and her head throbbed. The hopelessness inside spread like a fast growing fungus, pouncing on her until sheer mental exhaustion and the quiet darkness finally brought her much-needed sleep.

Sam's grandmother used to tell Sam when she was little, that the spirits would talk to her at night if she'd let them in, but Sam never believed her. Yet when Sam woke the next morning, her mood and sense of self changed. She carried an inner peace and stillness she hadn't felt in years. She tried recalling her dreams that night, but was unsuccessful. She sensed her dad and Tina were with her that evening, watching her sleep. Had they visited from the spirit world? Had she spoken to them? Had she told them she loved them and missed them? Something was telling her that she had.

Chapter Twenty-Three

SAM INCHED OUT of bed and shuffled into the bathroom. She glanced in the mirror at her red, puffy eyes and tired face, saddened she'd been so foolish with Halie and praying that Halie would give her another chance. She leaned over the sink, turned on the faucet, splashed icy cold water on her face, and dried off. Then she hurried into the kitchen to let Jake out and made them breakfast.

Jake was given his usual cup of dry food and vitamin; she had her coffee and made herself two toasted muffins with eggs and American cheese. While cooking, she arranged her thoughts on what she'd say to Halie. Breakfast finished, she quickly showered and dressed, then shot out the door grabbing her ranger hat. Three steps later, she'd remembered she forgot about Jake. She spun around and ran in the cabin to get him. Jake jumped up, tail wagging and ran to her.

Later that morning, as soon as Sam had the opportunity to take a short break, she pulled to the side of the road and called Halie from her cell phone, hoping she wasn't too late. If she'd give her the chance, she'd apologize and explain about her father and Tina and her nightmares, and why

she'd pushed her away. After four rings that went unanswered, Sam whispered, "Pick up, pick up."

EXITING THE HOTEL room, Halie shut the door behind her, but held onto the handle. She leaned against the door, her insides numb, her heart aching. *What am I doing? I should just get out of here already.* She remained frozen in place until the deadbolt to the door across the hall clanked into its unlocked position. Not wanting to be seen so out of sorts, she released her hold on the handle as the phone in her room rang. She ignored it and walked down the stairs that led to the lobby.

The moment Halie exited the lodge she saw Felice was already parked outside in her pick-up truck. Part of her wanted to retreat, but another part couldn't fathom spending the day alone. Either way, canceling was no longer an option; Felice had seen her. She'd waved to her. Halie waved back. As soon as she did, Felice jumped out of the truck and ran to the passenger side door, opening it.

Felice's spiked jet-black hair was meticulously styled. She wore a short sleeve, faded yellow polo shirt and Wrangler blue jeans.

"You look fabulous," she said, her large, dark brown eyes riveted on Halie.

"Thank you," Halie said. "You look very nice too." With Felice's assistance, she stepped onto the side rail and lifted herself into the truck.

TETON VILLAGE RESEMBLED a small town in the Swiss Alps. In the center of the village were interconnected buildings of wood and stone, a clock tower, and a fishing pond. The fishing pond attracted a lot of kids. Surrounding the center of town were numerous expensive condominiums and townhouses.

Felice and Halie ate a leisurely breakfast at a quaint coffee shop owned by the former mayor of Jackson, Wyoming, and his wife. After breakfast they purchased tickets for the Aerial Tram ride which provided them a spectacular view of the valley. By the time they reached the top of the mountain, the sun had given way to partial clouds. But the clouds had scattered enough to allow the sun's rays to streak through on a herd of bison. To Halie, the sight was heavenly. After the tram ride, they made their way around the numerous gift and antiques shops and other specialty stores. Halie bought a few items to take home with her, mainly for her nephews.

As much as she found herself unexpectedly enjoying the morning, her thoughts kept drifting to Sam. In the corner of one of the stores, she spotted a wood carving of an Indian squaw. She was drawn to it. She held it in her hand, admiring its fine features. When she lifted her eyes from the figurine, she saw Felice staring at her and smiling. "What?"

"Nothing. You look so beautiful, that's all. I enjoy watching you."

Halie said nothing. She played awkwardly with the figurine in her hand, stroking its soft suede clothing.

Felice stepped closer. She took Halie's elbow and leaned in toward her.

Halie's pulse quickened. She placed the palm of her hand on the center of Felice's chest, holding Felice at bay. "I can't," she said, her voice soft but shaking.

Felice let go of Halie and stepped away. "It's because of Sam, isn't it?"

"I just can't right now, it wouldn't be fair to any of us. I like you. You seem like a nice person, but my heart's somewhere else. I'm sorry. All I can offer right now is friendship."

Disappointment was evident from Felice's expression. "I understand."

"I thought I could do this, I did, but I can't. I need to get back to the lodge. I'll be booking a flight home tonight. My being here's gotten too difficult."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. I have work I need to get done this afternoon anyway. But if you ever make it back to Grand Teton and your situation's changed, come look me up."

Halie remained silent.

AFTER FELICE DROPPED her off, Halie headed to the restaurant for a quick bite. As she surveyed the room for a quiet place to sit, her eyes found William Reingold sitting alone. She wanted to duck out, but before she could, William waved his arm in the air and motioned her over.

She didn't feel right about snubbing him twice in a row, so she waved and plodded over to his table.

"Halie. So nice to see you again," William said, beaming.

"Nice to see you too, Mr. Reingold."

"Please, call me William, or Willy if you like. You alone today?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

William Reingold pulled out a chair for her. "Please, sit. I'm sorry about the other day. I didn't mean to disturb you. It's just that I despise eating alone. Will you have lunch with me?"

Halie hesitated for a second, her hunger getting the better of her. "Thanks, I will but I need to make one thing clear. I don't want any misunderstandings. I'm in a relationship, of sorts, and I'm not interested in anything more than conversation, in case you had anything other than that in mind."

"Yes, I know. With Ranger Tyler, right?"

"How'd you know that? Sam told me she saw you, but--"

"She remembered me, did she? Yeah, well, when I saw Sam pick you up the other day, I figured with that kind of tension between you, you had to be more than just working together. Guessing you hit a rough patch?"

"Yeah, but that's not the point."

"I know what you're trying to say. I know I come on pretty strong sometimes. Conversation's fine. It's too bad though, that you chose that lifestyle. You don't know what you're missing."

Halie was in no mood to set him straight. On another occasion she would have, but not today.

When she didn't respond, William added, "So where is your Ranger Tyler today?"

"Sam had to work."

"No work for you?"

"No, I finished my story. I was supposed to leave on Monday, but I'm booking a flight out of here this afternoon or tonight."

"Good luck. I tried already. The flights out of Jackson Hole are limited, and they're suspending all flights past five o'clock until further notice."

"What?" Halie said. "Why?"

"The airport said there's a storm rolling in with high winds. I wasn't listening too closely after I heard I couldn't get out. The reason didn't matter much at that point. You could probably drive to Salt Lake City though and catch a flight from there."

"No, that's too much trouble, and too expensive. Maybe I can get something for Sunday morning."

The waiter interrupted their conversation briefly, as they placed their order.

After the waiter left, William continued. "So, you're a writer?"

"Yes and no, not the kind you're thinking of. I'm a photojournalist for *The Wild International* out of Boston."

"Interesting. What are you writing about?"

"I was doing a feature article on Grand Teton, its past, present, and future."

"I'd like to read the article when it comes out."

"It should be on the street next Thursday." Halie eyed him closely. "Do you mind if I ask what you're doing here?"

"There's a problem at one of our wells out in Bridger-Teton. Nothing major, but I need to see what's going on. I combined my trip with a short vacation," he said. He directed his attention toward the waiter as he delivered their lunches.

"A problem like water contamination?" Halie asked.

"No, why do you say that?"

"After I left the other day, I knew your name sounded familiar, but I wasn't sure why. Then I remembered an article related to a pipeline spill from several years ago that had your name attached to it. Seems like your company was busier doing damage control with the media than actual cleanup work."

"Don't remind me. That hangs over my head, but I had nothing to do with it. The spill happened during the transition of the company from my father to me. Since then I've instituted additional controls that would help keep anything like that from happening in the future."

Halie was skeptical. They talked for some time, and eventually William said, "I'm taking a helicopter ride over the area in about an hour, purely for pleasure. Why don't you join me and we can talk some more."

"I know what this is about. I already told you I wasn't interested in anything you had to offer besides conversation."

"I swear on the hide of my best steer that I'm inviting you purely because I enjoy talking with you. Not a lot of people can keep up with me on that end. I'm interested in hearing what else you have to say. I'm going with my sons. The trip's innocent, honest."

Halie hesitated. "Well, I would love to see Teton from the air. What time would we get back?"

"The helicopter has to be on the heliport by three-thirty due to the encroaching weather. The heliport's not far from here, so we should be back by four. You can't get out of here tonight anyway-- you may as well enjoy your last day."

As best I can under the circumstances, Halie thought. "Where should we meet?"

"How about the lobby--one o'clock?"

"Fine. If you don't mind my asking, if you have your kids with you on this trip, why are you always eating alone?"

"I only eat lunch alone. We usually have breakfast and dinner together, but during the day, they're too busy boating or golfing or whatever it is they get their sights into. Teenagers, what can I say? They'll be here before one though, don't worry."

Halie excused herself; she wanted to call the airlines to see what flights were available, and to see if her lunch companion had been on the level with her regarding the canceled evening flights out of Jackson Hole.

In her room, Halie noticed the message light blinking. She darted to the phone, picked up the receiver, and called the lobby to retrieve her message. As she listened, her eyes instantly filled with tears. She replayed the message three times before dialing Sam's cell phone.

SAM'S WATCH READ ten minutes past one when she reached her patrol vehicle. She and Jake spent the morning searching for a lost eleven-year-old boy. When they found him, he was dehydrated, but otherwise okay. After escorting him to the waiting ambulance, she and Jake drove to the maintenance building.

Having skipped lunch, Sam grabbed two health bars and a bottle of water for her and Jake from the vending machines. She undid the wrapper from the granola bar and took a few bites before going over to see the Chief. Sam stood in the doorway of his office with Jake by her side, knocking on the door's frame. "Hi, Chief. Can I come in?"

"Sure, Sam. Hey, Jake! I heard about your search and rescue. Good job. It's always nice when bad things end on a happy note."

"That's for sure. Any news about David Reingold?"

"The Sheriff's office called a little while ago. His investigators searched the sporting goods store late yesterday afternoon. They didn't find any evidence linking him to fur trading connected with the park, but they confiscated his computer and found evidence linking him to murder."

"Murder? Are you kidding?"

"I wish I were. According to the Sheriff, Reingold's hard drive contained deleted e-mail correspondence between himself and the two guys he's been hanging out with. Messages that go back a little over two years. The e-mails disclosed he contracted the men to kill his wife and make it look like an accident."

"I can't believe it," Sam said, the gears in her mind churning. Somewhere the pieces of this puzzle were fitting in place.

"Coincidentally enough, he and his wife increased their life insurance policies a month prior to the accident from three hundred thousand to one million dollars each. The Sheriff's deputies are going over to the sporting goods store now to arrest him."

"Why would they need a million dollars of insurance on each other? That should've been a red flag for the wife right there." Sam paused a few moments longer, trying to process what she had heard. Then she tentatively asked, "What kind of accident was it, Chief?"

"A car accident, why?"

Sam stood like a deer caught in the headlights. Her thoughts flashed to her visit with Mrs. Parker in St. John's Medical Center in May. *No, it couldn't be, could it? What did Mrs. Parker say again? Think, Sam. Think. You asked her if she had family she could stay with and what did she say?*

Chapter Twenty-Four

DRIVING ACROSS THE tarmac in William Reingold's rental car, Halie spotted a cherry red Ford F-250 parked outside a hangar not far from the helicopter.

"Uncle Dave's here already, Dad," one of the boys shouted.

William Reingold's sons were good looking fourteen and sixteen year olds, both with thick, wavy short hair and slender, yet sturdy physiques. Both were in jeans and sneakers. The younger boy wore a black T-shirt with monster-like video game figures on it, and the older boy wore a plain navy blue shirt.

Taken by surprise, Halie shifted her eyes to William.

"I forgot to mention my brother and his son are coming too. Hope you don't mind."

A wave of nausea crept over Halie. *Great, they are bothers! Now what? Think, Halie. Get yourself out of this.* "No, of course not," she lied. "The only thing is, I'm not feeling well. Maybe I shouldn't go after all. I think I'll call a cab and have them take me to the lodge."

"Nonsense," William spurted out. He parked the car next to his brother's truck. "It's probably preflight jitters. I used to get them all the time when I first started flying. Nate'll bring you a soda. If you don't feel better after a few sips, you can call a cab. How about it?"

Numb, Halie merely tilted her head in acceptance.

"Great." William stepped out of the car and greeted his brother and nephew with a bear sized hug for each. His nephew Kevin was also sixteen and had scruffy brown hair hanging into his eyes and touching his shoulder. He wore jeans and a plain dark green T-shirt. After he introduced Halie to them, he strode into the office to file their flight plan. Nate followed, lagging a few steps behind. Nate returned before his dad, holding a ginger-ale in his hand. "This is for you," he said, handing Halie the soda.

"Thanks, Nate. I appreciate it," Halie said, accepting the can.

"You're welcome."

"What do I owe you?"

"Dad said if you asked to tell you 'nothing.' Hope it makes you feel better."

Again Halie lied, "Yeah, me too." She popped open the tab, and although she rarely drank soda, took a deep sip to maintain appearances. She tapped the nail of her right index finger on the can while feigning interest in the private aircraft taking off and landing. Being the only newcomer in the bunch, she felt as though all eyes were focused on her. And the eyes she definitely didn't want focused on her were David Reingold's. What if he recognized her from the parking lot in Charlie's truck? Her heartbeat quickened. She needed to find out. She wasn't getting on that helicopter if he recognized her. "Is that your truck over there?" she managed.

"Yeah, you like it?" he asked, his eyes studying her.

"It's nice. Looks new, is it?"

"It's two-and-a-half-years old already, but I like to keep it in top shape."

"I can see that. You use it for work or only on the weekends?"

"I use it all the time. I just make sure I take good care of it, that's all."

"If you don't mind my asking, what is it you do for a living?" Halie continued.

"I don't mind." David straightened out his shoulders. The small furrow between his brows disappeared. "I own a sporting goods store, not far from here."

And how about that illegal fur trading business, Halie thought to herself in disgust, but responded with a simple, "That's nice. Must be a lot of--"

"Feeling any better yet?" William asked from behind the group. "Here, hang on to these," he added to David, handing him a roll of papers before Halie had a chance to answer.

The furrow between David's brows reappeared. He took the papers and stuck them in his back pocket, shifting his eyes away from his brother.

"I'd normally say we'd wait a little longer," William continued, "but we've got such a small window for take-off, that if we want to see everything, we really need to go now."

Having discerned that David Reingold hadn't recognized her from her evening of surveillance, she pretended she was feeling better. "Let's go then," she responded in a definitive tone. *Wait until I tell Sam about this.*

BROWS WRINKLED, SAM stood in front of the Chief, her thoughts still focused on her conversation with Rosalie Parker. Suddenly her expression changed. Blood drained from her cheeks.

Jake tilted his head in her direction and whined.

"Sam, what is it?" Raymond Thundercloud asked in a worried tone. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I know this may be a bit of a long shot, but I remember something Rosalie Parker said to me and I think it's important."

"Rosalie Parker? I remember her. She was the woman who got assaulted by her husband over at Foxhole."

"Yeah, that's her. A couple of days after she was admitted into the hospital, I visited her. She was in bad shape. We talked for a while. I found out she has two brothers."

"Yeah, so?"

"She told me her sister-in-law died in a freak car accident a few years ago. She said she thought her brother had killed her. I didn't think much of it at the time. She also told me that after his wife died he bought a store in Wilson. She didn't say what kind, but it seems all too familiar."

"I'm sure it's just a coincidence her story ties in."

"Well, last Sunday I saw a visitor at the park who I'd seen here before. He's a Texan, a womanizer, and his last name's Reingold. Halie talked to him too."

"What? Are you sure? Does he spell it the same?"

"I don't know, but I do know its 'Reingold.' He's in the oil business. We shouldn't take any chances."

"If he and David Reingold are related, I'm sure the Sheriff's office will want to talk to him."

"Do we still have records on Mr. and Mrs. Parker? They must've registered, right?"

"Yeah, hold on, let me check." The Chief's fingers rolled over his keyboard, his gaze concentrated on the screen. "I found it. Mr. and Mrs. John Parker registered at Foxhole Campground for May twentieth through the twenty-seventh. Here's their home phone number. Do you want me to call?"

"I'd rather do it, if you don't mind."

"Of course," the Chief said.

"Can I dial from here?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Sam reached for the receiver from the Chief's desk. She dialed the number. Rosalie answered. "Mrs. Parker?"

"Yes. Who's calling?"

"Mrs. Parker, its Ranger Tyler. Do you remember me?"

"Of course! How are you? It's so good to hear from you. Is something wrong? You sound upset."

"No, not exactly, but I need to ask you an important question. Would you tell me what your maiden name is?"

"Of course. It's Reingold. Why?"

Sam's eyes focused on the Chief. "You said you had two brothers, Mrs. Parker. Would you please tell me their names."

"William and David, why? Are they okay? Not that I care much about David as you know, but Willy's got a good heart, even though his priorities are out of order."

"They're both okay as far as I know. I can't tell you right now why I need this information, but I promise I'll call you in a couple of days to fill you in. Also, I'll want an update on how things are going with you and your husband. I'll be in touch."

Sam placed the phone on the receiver. "Her maiden name's Reingold. She's got two brothers, William and David. From the information the Sheriff's office uncovered it's likely she was right

about David all along. I wouldn't be surprised if her creep husband knew what David had done to his wife too. Maybe her husband was in on it. I'm going back on patrol. I'll give Halie a call to let her know what's going on."

"I'll call the Sheriff."

"William Reingold's staying at Big Bison Lodge. Call me as soon as they arrest his brother," she said.

Sam stood five steps from the exit door of the maintenance building when she heard the Chief call her name. When she stopped, Jake also stopped and sat next to her.

"Hang on a minute," the Chief said. "Sam, I've got bad news. We just received a report of a downed aircraft on Pinebluff Mountain, somewhere below the western peak with unknown injuries. The aircraft's owned by Teton Aerial Adventures. It lifted off from Winding Way Heliport fifteen minutes ago. The flight pattern had them flying north along the eastern border of the park and then into Yellowstone. There are six people aboard. William Reingold, who was piloting, his two teenage sons, his brother David, his son, and," the Chief paused for a moment before continuing, "Halie Walker."

The words pierced Sam's heart like a dagger. Her stomach felt like it moved into her throat. "That can't be," she said, holding back the tears. "Are you sure?"

"That's what was logged in at the airport. I'm sorry, Sam, but it gets worse. We don't have any choppers available to help with a search and rescue. They've been deployed to help fight the fires out west and in Targhee. The Sheriff even tried getting one once he heard David Reingold was on board, but no luck. I don't think I need to mention this, but the weather's taking a turn for the worse."

"I know! I know!" The realization hit Sam that one of her greatest fears was coming true. She tried with desperation to calm herself and keep her thoughts clear. "I'm sorry. I better respond. Thanks for telling me in person." Sam ran from the building with Jake at her heels, toward the Expedition. As soon as she started the ignition, she hit the emergency lights, backed out of the parking space, and sped north toward Pinebluff Mountain. "Teton Dispatch, four-two-zero."

"Four-two-zero, go ahead."

"Four-two-zero responding to downed aircraft on Pinebluff Mountain." Sam pressed her foot further on the accelerator, passing cars that had pulled off the side of the road in front of her, leaving them behind in a blur.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HALIE AWOKE CONFUSED and disoriented, unsure where she was or what had happened. Her hip and shoulder hurt. She hung sideways, suspended above William Reingold, held in by her seatbelt. Her head pounded. She glanced out of the cracked windows of the helicopter. She couldn't see much except an ominously dark sky looming over them. *What the--What happened?* "Boys? David? Is everyone okay back there?"

David responded, "Yeah, but there's a problem."

"I can see that," Halie said.

"Not the obvious problem," he answered, as the boys pushed each other and argued. "Take it easy you guys, and sit still!" He said to Halie, "From what I can tell, we crashed on a ledge. Our front end's hanging over. The helicopter's been teetering since."

"Jesus! How long have I been out?"

"About half an hour."

"Any rescue helicopters go by yet?"

"Haven't heard or seen any, but I managed to dial in a 9-1-1 before we crashed. I don't know if I was on long enough for them to track our location. The cell got jarred from my hand."

William opened his eyes and grunted.

Halie spoke to him, her neck stiff. "Try to be still. We've crashed. Any sudden movement might send us over the edge."

Eyes glazed, William slowly lifted his head. "What? How did--how are the kids?"

"They're fine."

"And David?"

"I'm okay, Willy. A scratch or two and a nasty headache, that's all."

William closed his eyes for a short moment before reopening them. He reached for his knee, but as he did, he hollered out in pain. He recoiled, clenching his teeth. He slid his hand over his face. Blood covered his palm.

"It's not as bad as it looks. I see a small gash above your ear, that's all," Halie reassured him. She tugged at her seatbelt, trying to lessen its strangling hold, then focused her thoughts away from a

numbing terror settling in. This was the first time she'd feared for her life and those around her. Even though she remained relatively still while formulating a plan to get them out alive, the wind whistled past, rocking the broken bird.

David snapped. "This is crazy! We're all going to die if we don't do something! We can't just sit here!"

"Shut up! You don't know what you're talking about!" William said, his voice strained. "We'll be fine. We need to stay calm until help arrives. We don't have any other choice. I can't move. My leg's stuck."

"Help? What help? You don't get it, do you? No one's coming for us. They don't even know where we are. We've been sitting here for almost an hour and nothing--nothing except that blasted wind. If we sit here any longer, we're sure as hell gonna be blown off this damn mountain!"

"Calm down goddamn it! Get a hold of yourself! I said we'll be fine, and we will. You're driving everyone crazy."

"Maybe so, but I'm not stupid. I may not own a multi-billion dollar oil company, but I sure as heck know we can't keep sitting here. Come on, Kevin, we're getting out of here. You boys can come or stay, it's your choice, but if I were you, I'd come with us."

"Hold it! If you move, you'll shift the weight to the front and we could all go over," William pleaded.

"At this point, I don't care. It's better than waiting around until Mother Nature decides to do it for us. We're outta here. Come on, son." David yanked Kevin toward him by the elbow, ignoring his brother.

"What about my leg?"

"What about it? I can't very well climb over there and help you, now can I?"

"I'll try," Halie offered, afraid to move but more worried about what would happen if she didn't. "If we're all going to have a chance of getting out of here, you'll have to stay put in the back. I'll see if I can get him free." Halie attempted to undo her seat belt, bracing her left arm near the top of William's seat and repositioning herself so she wouldn't crush him should she free herself, but as soon as she moved, the helicopter creaked and swayed in refusal.

"Stop!" David said. "It's no good! You can't help him. Kevin and I are getting out of here."

Halie took a slow, deep breath of desperation. "You can't go."

"Try and stop me." With brute force David pushed open the side door of the helicopter and lifted himself on top. He sat with his legs dangling in the opening. "Come on, Kevin, give me your hand."

With hands and body shaking, Kevin reached for his dad. David pulled him out and lowered him to the ground. The helicopter rocked.

William said, "Move as far to the rear as you can, kids, until Uncle David pulls you out." He looked at Halie. "The kids should go next, then you. It's too risky staying here. I know I don't have a chance anyway."

"No way. I agree the kids should go, but I'm staying with you. Even if I managed to get this damn harness undone, any attempt to get out'll likely send this thing over the edge." Halie's heart pounded fast, her breaths short. Was panic setting in? "You kids heard your dad. Move slowly into the back seat, one at a time, and let your uncle pull you out."

"Dad? What should we do? We don't want to leave you," Nate pleaded, his body trembling.

"Do as Ms. Walker says. I love you both very much. We'll be fine. You boys go ahead." Then he yelled to his brother, "David? Stay where you are! Nate and Trevor are coming out!"

The boys moved one by one to the back of the helicopter and were pulled out by David and safely lowered to the ground. The helicopter continued creaking and swaying.

These were the eerie sounds of strained metal Halie knew she would not soon forget. She closed her eyes. *Please get us out of here alive.* Pebbles and small stones dislodged from underneath them, free-falling until they hit the rocks below. The helicopter was sliding.

David pulled his legs out the side door. He tucked them up under his chest and sprang off the helicopter a split second before it slid away from beneath him, over the edge.

SAM DROVE THE Expedition on the hiking trail until she reached the base of the mountain. Being able to drive the distance between the main road and the mountain's base saved her over an hour of precious time she would have wasted on foot. She parked on a rocky surface to prevent the hot undercarriage from touching dry underbrush. She was facing enough trouble; she didn't need more. Then she called dispatch, informing them of her location. She jumped out of the Expedition, let Jake out, and as she rounded the truck, unbuttoned her shirt and stripped off her bulletproof vest. She tossed it in the vehicle and quickly put her shirt back on, haphazardly tucking it in her pants. She threw on rain gear in anticipation of the arriving storm, grabbed her search and rescue gear, and started-off up the mountain, Jake in the lead.

Sam was well aware that time was of the essence. They'd have to find Halie and the others before nightfall--before the cold set in. Summer nights were never much above freezing and often

dropped below freezing. *If I hadn't gone to work today, none of this would have happened. Halie probably would've never gotten on that helicopter. God please let her be safe.*

Jake tracked up the mountain with blistering speed, every so often turning around and facing Sam. Sam had a rough idea where the helicopter may have crashed, based on the information the Chief had relayed to her, and thus far, Jake was confirming her notion. She trusted his instincts, but still prayed for luck and for the spirits to guide them.

The higher they climbed, the stronger the scent of pine intertwined with the smoke from Targhee. The pine needles lessened her traction. Twice she stumbled, but kept from falling. Heart pounding, she fought to stay focused on Jake and the path ahead, blocking out irrational surges of fear. She was successful at first, but the increasing wind and darkening sky added to the gnawing knowledge that the storm was on its way and growing in intensity. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The air carried an electrical charge. Sam's pulse and breathing quickened. She trudged forward.

Visions of Tina, eyes frozen open, flashed before her. Lightheadedness overtook her and sweat exuded from every pore. Her hands shook. Her mind instructed her legs to move forward, but the connection between thought and action broke. She couldn't move. Chest constricted and her breathing tight, Sam's legs wobbled beneath her. She reached to a tree trunk for support, then recoiled as if having seen a flash of lightning that wasn't there.

Jake ran to Sam. He sat in front of her, tilted his head and whined. Then he barked, jumped on her chest, and licked her face.

Sam barely had the strength to hold him. "Hang on a minute, Jake!" she said, pushing him off her, gasping for air. She slid off her backpack and leaned against the tree behind her, tears of frustration flowing down her cheeks. She lowered herself to the ground. Jake nuzzled her side and licked her face. Guilty for having yelled at him, she petted him while focusing on slowing her breathing. She knew she had to continue on. The problem was figuring out how. Conscious that every minute wasting away was precious made finding a solution that much more difficult. She reached for her backpack and grabbed a water bottle, taking a deep sip. Jake rested his jaw on her shoulder and whined into her ear.

"I know, buddy, I'm trying. Here, have some water." Sam cupped her hand. Jake drank from her shaking palm, his tongue tickling her skin. Then a thought hit her--she'd call Sally Cornwall. Of course! Why hadn't she thought of that before? A flicker of hope restored, she grabbed her cell phone and dialed the first four numbers to Dr. Cornwall's office, stopping when the message indicator beeped. *Great, now what?* She retrieved the message.

"Hi, Sam, it's me. I got your message, and yes, yes, yes, I forgive you. In fact, I can't wait to see you. I miss you so much, you don't even know. I just finished lunch. Ran into your friend Willy. We had an interesting conversation. I'll tell you about it later. I'm going for a helicopter ride over Grand Teton and Yellowstone with him and his sons. Please don't be mad. I love you. I'll be back by four o'clock. I promise. I won't keep you waiting. We can talk then."

Sam sat, tears streaming along her face. She pressed the save key, not knowing if those words would be the last ones she would hear Halie speak. She breathed deep, her heart rate normalizing. From the message, Sam supposed Halie didn't know David Reingold would be joining them. She wished she could have told Halie to be careful, that David was more dangerous than either of them had thought. She rummaged through her backpack for the binoculars. She forced herself to her feet. Placing the lens in front of her eyes, she scanned the mountainside. She panned back and forth until a metallic object caught her eye. She strained to make out the image. *Part of the helicopter blade? Maybe, but where's the helicopter then?* She tucked the binoculars away and swung the pack over her shoulder. "We're close now, boy. I'd say another hour, tops. Let's go."

Jake sprung around with his tail wagging, barked once, and ran off into the woods.

Chapter Twenty-Six

WHEN THE DUST settled for the second time, a voice whispered to Halie. "Are you okay? Say something, please."

The voice Halie heard didn't register at first. She touched her arm to make sure she wasn't dreaming or already dead. "I'm okay, except I think I may have broken a rib. How about you?"

"I don't think I'm much worse off than before. Not sure what part of me hurts most," William replied, his face drawn and tired.

Halie stretched her tight and knotted back, but as soon as she moved, excruciating pain shot across her midsection and chest. She clenched her teeth to stop from screaming, inhaling a few shallow breaths. When the pain subsided she said, "What about your leg?"

"It's still jammed under the controls. What I don't understand is why no one's come for us. Maybe they won't. Maybe they'll never find us here."

Halie wasn't giving in as easily, but then she wasn't hurt as bad as her counterpart either. "Don't think like that. Sam's on duty. I'm sure she's on her way. She'll find us, I know she will. I'd bet my life on it."

"You may have to."

Halie pursed her lips. "Plus you're forgetting your brother and the kids are safe. They'll get help if no one comes by then."

"I hope you're right. I'm sorry about all this. If I hadn't invited you, you'd probably be in your hotel room right now getting ready for a nice dinner out or something, safe and sound."

"And dry," Halie said, the rain making it in with ease through the shattered windows and openings of the mangled aircraft.

"Yeah, and dry."

"It's not your fault. Don't blame yourself. If I weren't stuck here with you, I'd be somewhere else getting into trouble. Still think I'm missing something, not being with men?"

William managed a chuckle, followed by an "Oooh, ouch!" His eyes were smiling at Halie even as he tried shifting his weight for some type of relief. "How can you joke at a time like this?"

"What else is there to do? It could be worse. We could be hanging upside down like a couple of bats."

"Funny. How about you use this unforeseen opportunity and lay on the guilt trip about my company's lack of adequate environmental protection skills. Besides, it'll give us something constructive to do."

Halie smiled for the first time since the crash. "Sure, although I must say you're quite the glutton for punishment."

"We'll see about that."

SAM UPDATED DISPATCH regarding her location and was told to call the Chief in his office. She called him from her cell, turning her back to the wind and sheltering Jake.

"Chief Thundercloud," he answered.

"Chief, it's Sam. What's going on?"

"Two things. I got through to Idaho Falls Mountain Rescue. They've got a helicopter under repair. They think they'll have it fixed within the hour. They said they'd fly it here as soon as it's running, as long as the winds taper off by then."

"Great. And what are the chances of that happening?"

"Good as any."

"You said two things, what's the second?" Sam held her hand over the cell phone. "Jake!" she yelled, then added, "Jake just ran off. I better go. I'll call you later."

Sam slid the phone in her pocket and quickened the pace. Jake was still not in her sights. Then she heard his barking. She ran toward the sound full speed. Strong wind gusts blew past with such strength she grabbed hold of a small tree trunk to maintain her footing. Tired and straining to see through the pelting rain, she ran until she caught up to him. Jake stopped barking and went to Sam's side. Ahead, Sam saw David Reingold and three teenage boys, but no Halie. Her heart twisted in pain. Panting, she leaned over and placed her hands on her knees as the sound of the rain pounding on her raincoat grew louder and louder. Horrific visions flashed before her.

As they moved closer, one of the boys spoke. "I think it's a ranger, Dad! We're safe."

Sam lifted her head, regaining her breath. *Pull it together, Sam.*

David Reingold scowled at the boy. "Shut it already, would ya? It doesn't look to me like she'll be helping us any. By the looks of her, she'll only slow us down."

The boy's shoulders slouched and he went quiet. Even though Sam despised David Reingold and all he stood for, she knew she needed information from him and possibly his assistance. She stood upright and moved forward, introducing herself. "I'm Ranger Tyler. I'm sorry, but I needed a minute to catch my breath back there. I'm assuming you were all on the helicopter that crashed?"

"Great, a brain surgeon," Reingold mumbled under his breath, studying Sam.

"Yes, ma'am and we sure are glad to see you," one of the other boys said. The boy paused, the anguish on his face explaining his difficulty speaking. "My dad and his lady friend are still trapped in the helicopter. We think they might be dead."

Sam cringed. Her eyes darted to Reingold. "What does he mean by he 'thinks' they might be dead?"

Reingold replied, emotionless. "When the helicopter crashed, it landed with its front end hanging over the edge of a cliff. I got the kids and myself out before it slid off the mountain. There wasn't time to rescue my brother and his friend. By some miracle, the helicopter landed between two large rock formations about thirty or forty feet below where we were standing. Didn't matter though. I yelled to them. No one answered. The helicopter was badly mangled. I figured them for dead."

"So that's when you started down the mountain?"

"Hell yeah! We were stranded there for hours. No one came to rescue us. So I decided we'd rescue ourselves."

"What about your brother and Ms. Walker?"

Reingold appeared surprised that Sam knew the name of their other passenger. "What about 'em? Like I said, they're probably dead. Look at us. We're a mess. We'll be lucky to get off this damn mountain before it gets dark."

They were a mess; dirty, wet, scraped up, and tired. She felt bad for the boys, but not for Reingold. "You'll be okay. I've got rescue equipment with me. I'm heading up the mountain to see what's what. I could use your help. They may still be alive."

"Yeah, and better chances are they're not. Look, I don't care what you do, lady. I'm tired of this already. The boys and I are out of here. I'm cold, I'm hungry, I'm wet, and I'm tired of all the bullshit."

Sam watched as two of the boys exchanged glances. Then the one boy spoke. "We'd like to go with you, ma'am, if you don't mind. That okay with you, Uncle David?"

"Suit yourself. I think you'd be better off with me, but do whatever you want."

Another gust of wind blew through, causing everyone but Jake to grab hold of a tree. When the wind subsided, Sam eyed the boys and forced a smile. "What are your names?"

"I'm Nate and this is Trevor, ma'am. You said our dad might still be alive. You really think so?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't have come all this way to find you. You should go with your uncle though. You'd be safer. I can't risk you kids getting hurt."

"We'll follow you anyway if you don't take us along. Please?"

"Okay, fine. We'd better get moving though." She redirected her attention to Reingold. "I'm sorry you don't want to help us. Continue for about fifteen or twenty minutes in this direction," she said, pointing southwest. "You'll run into a hiking trail. Take the trail all the way to the end. You'll see my patrol vehicle at the bottom. Wait there. I'll call in to have someone meet you there."

"Great. I guess an ounce of help is better than none," he smirked. "Good luck, lady."

"We won't need luck, just faith," Sam said grating her teeth. She took off her raincoat and placed it over the boy's backs, even though they were already wet. "Okay, let's go."

Within roughly half an hour, Sam, Nate, and Trevor reached the clearing where Sam had seen the helicopter blade protruding from the mountain. The rain subsided, but the wind gusts remained severe. Pieces of helicopter debris lay scattered about. Sam ran over to the edge; the boys and Jake right behind her. "Don't get too close," she yelled before dropping to her knees. She held in the tears welling up inside, afraid to look down. She gathered what little inner strength remained and leaned forward. Below lay a mangled Bell 206 Long Ranger Helicopter lodged upright in a wide crevice forty feet below. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Halie! Mr. Reingold! Can you hear me? It's Sam!" The initial silence was deafening.

"We're down here! We're both okay! Please hurry!"

Halie's voice sent a wave of humbling relief rushing through Sam. *Thank you, God.* "I'm coming! Hold on!"

"Dad! Dad! We're here too," Nate and Trevor yelled. "We're okay. We're gonna help you."

William responded, "You're good boys. You listen to Ranger Tyler."

Then Halie yelled, "Hurry, Sam. He's not doing so well."

Sam stood and ran toward the tree line. She slid off her backpack and threw it to the ground. She unzipped the main compartment and pulled out her rescue gear. She called their location in to dispatch, along with the information about their current situation and the whereabouts of David Reingold and his son. After the call, she slipped on a pair of cowhide gloves and a waist harness. Nate and Trevor helped her unroll two bundles of rope while she set up a rudimentary sling and pulley system, attaching an anchor ring to a sturdy tree trunk. Finally, she secured an edge guard on the corner stone where she'd been kneeling. "Jake, you stay here with the guys," she instructed. Then she addressed Nate and Trevor. "I'll be back in a few minutes. You think you'll be able to pull Ms. Walker up, once I secure her to the line?"

Nate and Trevor didn't hesitate. They responded in unison.

"Yeah, we can do it."

"Great." Sam waited for the wind gust to subside. She tested the strength of the line, then rappelled down the face of the mountain. Mountain rescue wasn't her forte. The park had a special team for that. Unfortunately for her they were busy in Targhee. She'd rather have had backup, but regardless, her mind was strong, clear, and focused, and she knew what needed to be done. When she'd lowered herself to just above the helicopter, she placed one foot on it for support.

"Sam! Thank God," Halie said.

Sam surveyed the wreckage. "Thank God is right and thank Jake too. He got us here. We're not out of this yet, though. Sit still." The doors were jammed shut between the rocks with no way to open them, but the front window was loose. "Cover your faces. I'm going to kick the window in."

William and Halie did as they were told.

"Careful, Sam," Halie pleaded.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine." Sam pulled the rope for additional slack and kicked in the window. Lowering herself into the helicopter she said. "You two are a sight." She wasn't sure which of them looked worse. To Halie she added, "I'm getting you out first, then William."

"No, take him first. He's in worse shape than I am."

Eyes half shut, William breathed, "Absolutely not. Take her. She's been through enough thanks to me."

Sam viewed William with a new sense of respect. As she moved closer to Halie, Halie pressed her face against Sam's cheek and whispered in her ear, "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Sam whispered. "I can't tell you how thankful I am you're okay. I don't know what I would have done--"

Halie put her finger to Sam's lips, "Shhh, don't think about that now. I'm okay."

Sam held back the tears. "How are you? Did you break anything?"

"I think maybe a rib or two. It hurts like hell when I breathe or try to move."

"I'll be as careful as I can." Sam squeezed Halie's hand, then let it go. She helped her out of her seat. She slid the rescue sling, attached to the second rope, over Halie's torso and secured it tight around her chest. "I'm sorry, but this is all I have. It's going to hurt like hell once you're suspended in it."

"I don't care, as long as I get out of here."

"Nate and Trevor will pull you up. Once you clear the helicopter, keep your feet between you and the mountain."

"Okay. Where are David and his son?"

Before responding, Sam checked to see if William was conscious. She whispered, "He didn't think you two were alive. I couldn't convince him to come with me. No surprise."

"Yeah, that's a real shame. Hopefully, his son won't grow up to be like him."

"I hope not either. The guy's going to jail for his wife's murder."

"Murder? He killed his wife?"

"Had her killed. I'll tell you more about it later. Right now we need to get you out of here." Sam double checked the harness, then yelled to Nate and Trevor, "Okay, boys, we're ready!"

As the rope drew taut, Halie screamed. Sam clenched her teeth, feeling Halie's pain. Goose bumps traveled over her arms. She held onto Halie, "Hang in there," she said, directing her through the windshield opening. With Halie halfway to the top, a jet engine like roar of the wind revved in their ears.

Nervousness surged through Sam. "Hurry! Faster!"

Trevor answered, "We're trying, but it's stuck! The rope's stuck or something!"

"It can't be. Pull harder!" Sam glanced over at William. His eyes were still closed. She checked for a pulse. It was weak, but present. She climbed out of the helicopter. "Hang on, I'm coming!" Sam held onto the helicopter with one hand. She angled her face away from the wind and breathed deep, watching in horror as her lover's body slammed against the cliff like a rag doll. Below Sam, the helicopter creaked and slid an inch from its lodging. Sam hung with her feet propped on the rocky cliff, torn over which direction to go.

"Tyler! You okay down there?" Ranger Brown yelled.

"Thank God, Jeffrey! I'm okay, it's Halie! The rope's stuck! Hurry!"

Ranger Brown yanked until he'd loosened the rope. "I got her!"

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. Below her the helicopter creaked louder. "Shit," she said as she lowered herself onto the body of it and crawled inside, peering up one last time to make sure Halie had been pulled to safety.

William's eyes were now wide open. "I thought you were leaving me here."

"You're not that lucky," Sam said, trying to make light of his situation.

"Is Halie okay?"

"I hope so. Don't worry about her right now. Tell me what hurts."

"My right leg. I think it's broken. It's jammed under the damn dash. I may have broken a rib too, I don't know. Everything hurts."

"Okay, let me take a closer look." Sam reached over to release the seat belt. The mechanism was jammed. She tugged several times to no avail.

"What were you whispering about with Halie before? I heard my brother's name, and something else I hope I didn't hear right."

"You probably heard right, but we shouldn't get into that now. We need to get you out of here and to a hospital."

William grabbed Sam's arm. "Please, tell me now. I need to know."

Sam conceded. The time talking would distract him while she figured out a way of releasing his leg. "There's evidence suggesting your sister-in-law's car crash was no accident and that your brother had her killed by hiring two guys to make it appear like an accident." She watched as the

disbelief, followed by disappointment, entered his eyes. "He'll be in jail for a long time, Willy. I'm guessing the court will appoint you, or your sister, with custody of Kevin. Probably you, since your sister's on her own with no immediate source of income."

"What do you mean 'on her own?' She's married. Did something happen to her husband? Do you know my sister?"

"That's another long story that I'm sure she'll be more than happy to tell you about one day. Her husband's being held, until his trial date, for spousal abuse."

"Jesus! I should have stayed in touch with her more. I'd have known what was going on. I could've helped her."

"Maybe, but maybe not. It's not something she probably would've talked about anyway, so you may not have known. Now, enough talk."

Unsuccessful in freeing William from the seat harness after several tries, Sam reached into her pants pocket and pulled out her leatherman.

William Reingold's eyes widened.

"Don't worry," Sam said in a joking tone, "this isn't for you." She unfolded the knife and cut the seat belt with the serrated edge. Once she cut through, she pulled him by the shoulders.

William hollered. "My leg!"

The instant he yelled, Sam loosened her grip and ducked by reflex as a rock from above crashed onto the chopper. The sound of rock hitting metal blasted their ears. The helicopter creaked and moaned. The body strained as it inched further from its cradle.

"You okay?" Sam asked.

"I'm fine, but we won't make it if this thing falls again."

"Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"No, I'm telling you we won't make it. You should go. Leave me. I'm practically dead anyway."

"You're talking nonsense. You'll be fine. I'm not leaving you. You've got two great kids waiting for you. They need you." Sam inspected William's leg. The leg was badly contorted. Suddenly Sam said, "Listen."

"To what?" William replied, "I don't hear anything."

"I know. I just realized I haven't heard the wind in like the last ten minutes. I think the storm's passed us by."

"Thank God."

"Yeah, which means a helicopter should be here soon. In the meantime, I've still got to figure out a way to get your leg free." Sam searched the helicopter for anything she could use as a tool to leverage against the dash, but found nothing. "I'm going to lean against the side of this seat and push up on the dash with my legs and see if I can't get some movement. If I do, get ready to pull your leg out. It'll hurt like hell, but there's no other way. It'll take hours if they have to cut you out of this thing and time is definitely not on our side."

"Whatever we need to do, let's do it and get it over with," William said. "I'm ready."

Sam leveraged her back against the passenger seat, placed her feet on the dash, and pushed with all her might. The metal creaked as it moved a couple of inches.

"Ahhh! Dammit to hell that sucker hurts like a son of a-- yowwie!" William had his hands wrapped around his leg as he inched from his seat and fell near Sam. "Ouch, ouch, ouch!"

"It's okay, the worst is over, Willy." "It sure as heck doesn't feel like it, but I hope to blazes you're right." Sam helped him sit upright. Then she heard the distant sound of a helicopter. "Sounds like our ride." "Listen, before they get here, I want to thank you for what you've done for me and my boys. I'll never forget it."

"All in a day's work," Sam said.

"No, it's not. You did more than that, and I know it. I also wanted to apologize for the ignorant comments I made the last time we met. What I said was stupid. There should be more people in the world like you and Halie."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. You didn't turn out too bad yourself."

"Will Halie be okay? I wanted to tell her something."

"I hope she'll be fine." Sam secured the waist harness around William.

"When you get to talk to her, please tell her for me not to worry about Bridger-Teton or any of our other drilling locations.

When I get back, I'll double the protections we've got instituted. She earned that. Oh, and tell her one of the first things I'm going to do when I get better is read that article she's been writing."

"I will, thanks, Willy. Now, enough talk. Let's get you out of here. When you get better, give your sister a call."

"I will."

Sam yelled to Jeffrey, who hoisted him up. She watched him ascend thinking, you really can't judge a book by its cover.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

SAM SAT IN a chair next to Halie's hospital bed, staring at the IV in her arm, listening to the methodical beeping of the monitor. Her stomach grumbled from a lack of food, but she couldn't eat. Once William had been secured in the rescue chopper, as wet and dirty as she was, she'd left Jake with Jeffrey, who was officially off duty at the time already and headed straight to the hospital.

Sam was startled by a knocking on the door. The Chief opened it and poked his head in. Sam didn't get up, but motioned him to sit in the second chair near the foot of Halie's bed.

"How's she doing?"

"They diagnosed her with moderate traumatic brain injury. Her loss of consciousness is now almost two hours," Sam said, not taking her eyes from Halie. She stroked her hand. "They ran some tests. The CT Scan didn't show any damage to the brain--no internal injury, bruising, or swelling, but it did show a hairline fracture of the skull. Her heart rate's normal and her pressures are okay, so those are all good signs. But she's got three broken ribs too."

"How will they know if her condition improves?"

"They said the key is her waking up, and the sooner the better. Then they'd monitor her in the hospital for at least another twenty-four to forty-eight hours after that. They'd do another CT scan and compare the results to the original to see if there are any changes. Depending on her situation, they might need to take an MRI too. It's too soon to say, but none if it sounds good to me."

"Keep talking to her and being here for her. She may hear you even if she can't respond. Listen, I brought you a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Figured you probably hadn't eaten."

"Thanks, Chief." Sam slowly let go of Halie's hand and met the Chief's eyes. She wiped the tears that were falling before she took the coffee and sandwich from him. "I called Halie's roommate and got the phone number for her parents. They're trying to get a flight over. I promised I'd keep them posted and call as soon as anything changes. If I'd only known the wind would've let up when it did, I'd have waited with Halie. The rescue crew would have pulled her up safely."

"You don't know that. What if in the meantime, the helicopter slid loose or she went into shock? Plus, it's more likely the injury happened during the initial or subsequent crash. Symptoms aren't always visible right away with TBIs. You're assuming it happened while she was being hauled up the mountain."

Sam knew he was right, but she couldn't talk about Halie anymore. She found the conversation far too draining. Out of necessity, she changed the subject. "Did they arrest David Reingold?"

"Yeah, at the bottom of Pinebluff Mountain right where you told him to wait. Sad really. His son had to watch him get cuffed and taken away without knowing why. And when he finds out the why he'll probably hate his father for the rest of his life."

"I'm sure. Too bad the guy lacked forethought or a heart. What about the fur trading--did they pin that on him yet?" Sam attempted a small bite from her sandwich and helped it down with a sip of coffee. The warm liquid soothed her insides.

"No, but there's more to this than you think. You know Felice Lohan?"

The vision of Felice swooping in on Halie was not one Sam liked recalling but the first that popped to mind. "Of course. What's going on?"

"Felice was at the park today, off duty. A seasonal trainee at the south entrance didn't recognize her and searched her truck. They uncovered a half-dozen otter pelts and four fur-pelts from red foxes. They found them in a duffle bag in her truck bed."

"What? There's gotta be a mistake. Felice lives to protect wildlife like the rest of us. She'd never--"

"I know. It doesn't make any sense. She says she knows nothing about it, but then what else would you expect her to say?"

As much as Sam disliked the way Felice acted around Halie, she didn't want to believe what she was hearing. Then she remembered the duffle bag Felice had with her when they ran into her at Cottonwood Creek and how defensive she got when Sam asked what she was doing there. "What do you think will happen to her?"

"I don't know. They're still investigating. I think the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will likely get involved."

Sam held firm to Halie's hand. "What about Reingold's 'hit men'? Were they arrested? And what about the pelt we saw sticking out of the one guy's suitcase? If they had nothing to do with the furs, what was that all about?"

"The Sheriff's deputies arrested the men in Wilson. They claim they didn't know anything about the fur trapping and trading, though. They said they'd get together one or two nights a week at the sporting goods store to play poker with Reingold, dressed as if they had a client to attend to,

so their wives wouldn't know they were gambling. The one guy said he won the fox pelt from Reingold in a poker game."

"Sounds lame. Well, whatever the outcome of that investigation, at least some justice will come out of all this," Sam said.

"Yeah, and a lot of publicity too," the Chief said in a sarcastic yet kidding tone. "I don't know how you and Jake slipped by the cameras and stiffed me with those reporters again, but I'll repay you with interest for that one."

Sam laughed. "I'm sure you will."

After a few minutes of awkward silence the Chief added, "Listen, I know this may not be the best time to mention this, but then again, maybe it is. The southern district super's planning on retiring the end of next month. I think you should put in for his position when it opens. There's a lot of good you could do at that level. Plus, it's a nice increase in pay."

"It's not about the money."

"I know, but the extra cash wouldn't hurt, and the hours are better. Plus, the job description will call for seventy-five percent administrative duties and twenty-five percent hands on work, which means you could expand your current living options, though you'd still need to live within the park's boundaries."

Sam figured from what he was hinting at she wouldn't have to live in assigned housing if she didn't want to. She realized why the Chief was mentioning this to her now, but all she could think about was being able to look into Halie's warm brown eyes again, because if she couldn't, then none of that much mattered. "I'll think about it."

He stood and patted Sam on the shoulder. "You do that. I better get going. I'm surprised they even let me in here. I'll stop by tomorrow."

"Thanks, Chief," Sam said. Once he'd left, she caressed Halie's arm, watching her breathe. After a few minutes her strokes slowed. Fatigue engulfed her and she drifted to sleep, but not before she grabbed Halie's hand in hers and held it tight.

SAM WOKE WITH a stiff neck, curled up in the chair, with a blanket covering her, and a pillow tucked under her head. The sun was rising. She untangled herself from her uncomfortable sleeping quarters and stood next to Halie's bed, gazing at her lover. She took Halie's hand and stroked her forehead, hoping Halie would respond in some way, but she didn't. "The sun's up," Sam said. "Looks like it's going to be a beauty. Not a day to be hanging out in a hospital, so whatever you're doing in there, you better get it together and get up. Besides, you don't want to miss another fabulous meal, do you? Think about it. I'm going in your bathroom for a few minutes, but I expect an answer when I come out."

When Sam exited the bathroom, a middle aged man and woman walked into the room. The man had dark brown eyes the color of Halie's and the mother had her same cheeks and nose. They glanced at Sam but said nothing, heading straight for the bed.

"Oh, my baby," the woman said. "What have they done to you?" The couple hovered near the bed, expressions sullen.

"Mr. and Mrs. Walker?" Sam asked as she stepped toward them.

"Hi. I'm sorry," the man said. "You must be Samantha Tyler. I'm Charles Walker, Halie's dad, and this is my wife Celia. It's nice to meet you," he added, extending his hand.

Sam shook his hand. "Same here," she said, watching as Halie's mom's eyes evaluated her with a disdainful glare.

"There's only supposed to be two people in this room at a time, young lady, so if you care anything for my daughter's well being, I think you should leave now," Celia said.

"Celia! That's uncalled for. My wife didn't mean that, I'm sorry. We had a long flight and came straight from the airport. With the worry and all, it's been tough," Charles said.

"I understand," Sam said. "It's not a problem. I'll give you both time alone with her. There's been no change since last night. We're still waiting for her to regain consciousness." As Sam walked out the hospital room door, she glanced over her shoulder one more time. Her heart ached. She didn't want to leave Halie, not even for one second, but the look on her mom's face spoke volumes.

Sam purchased a cup of coffee and a donut in the café in the lobby, but couldn't sit still. She paced back and forth checking her watch far too often as the minutes passed painfully slow. How long would she give them alone? Ten minutes? No. Too short. Half an hour? Maybe. Maybe an hour. Yes, an hour sounded reasonable. What about Jake? Sam finally chose an empty chair near a window and sat, placing her coffee cup on an end table next to the chair. Then she dialed her neighbor, told her what had happened, and asked her to let Jake out and feed him, which she agreed to do. After finishing her donut and pacing some more, she called her mom.

Sam was thankful her mom was home. She told her everything that happened. "You were right, Mom. Halie does love me and she forgave me." But then Sam broke down sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'm such a softie it's ridiculous."

"Don't be silly. Under the circumstances I think you're holding up well."

"I'm trying. It's not easy though. And Halie's mom isn't making it any better. The way she inspected me, and the expression she had on her face, you'd think I had a disease or something."

"How was her father?"

"Much better. At least he had the courtesy to look me in the eyes and address me. Plus, he was pleasant. I think we'd get along okay, but her mother is beyond unbelievable. She practically threw me out of the room," Sam said. She was standing again and pacing. "Speaking of which, do you think giving them an hour alone with Halie is okay?"

"That sounds perfectly fine, and besides, you have a right to be there too. When are you going back in?"

"As soon as I hang up with you."

"Don't hang up. Go on back, but I want to talk to Mrs. Walker."

"What?" Sam said puzzled. "What are you going to say to her? You're not going to tell her what I thought of her, are you?"

"Oh, no. Don't you worry about it. Just a little mother to mother conversation, that's all."

WHEN SAM ENTERED Halie's room, the night nurse was just finishing taking Halie's temperature. The Walkers sat by the end of the bed. Sam could almost feel Mrs. Walker's eyes riveted on her.

"You still here?" the nurse said to Sam. "I thought you might have dashed out for a rest or a shower."

"I can't go until I know if she's going to be okay."

"I understand. You sleep okay last night?" she asked.

"I must have, because I don't remember waking up until this morning. Oh, yeah, and thanks for the blanket and pillow," Sam said. "I'm guessing you gave me those?"

"Least I could do," she said on her way out.

Sam walked over to Celia. "Excuse me, Mrs. Walker, but my mom's on the phone. She asked to speak with you." Sam held out her cell.

Celia glanced at the cell phone and then at her husband, whose expression indicated she should accept the call. She took the phone from Sam and held it to her ear.

Sam moved away and returned to Halie's side. She touched her hand. "I'm back. You miss me?"

From the corner of her eye, Sam saw Celia lower her head and cry, and her husband wrap his arm around her. A few minutes later, she closed the phone. Sam walked over and took it from

her. She didn't know what to say. She had no idea what her mom had said. "How long were you planning on staying?" Sam finally asked.

"As long as it takes," Charles said.

"Have you found a place to stay yet?"

"Not yet. We were just going to go out in the lobby and see what we could arrange," he continued.

"You're probably going to have a hard time. It's peak tourist season. I'm sure everything is booked solid." Sam hesitated for a second and then said, "If you like, you could stay with me for however long you need to. I only have a two bedroom cabin, but it's plenty roomy. It's just me and my dog, Jake, who live there."

Before Charles could respond, his wife stood up.

Sam thought for sure Celia was either going to yell at her or slap her in the face. And since Mrs. Walker stepped toward her, the latter became the more probable option. Instead, Celia grabbed Sam's hand and held it in her own. "We'd love to stay with you, at least until we can find something so we're not a bother."

Sam nearly passed out. "It's no bother," she said.

"Thank you," Celia said to Sam. Then to her husband she said, "Come on, let's go take a little break and get something to eat. That airline food was atrocious."

"Yes, dear," her husband said. As he walked behind his wife and past Sam, he tapped Sam on the shoulder. "It'll be okay," he said. "Trust me, fathers know."

ONCE THE WALKERS had left the room, Sam leaned over and kissed Halie on the cheek. "I don't know if you heard us talking earlier, but I met your mom and dad. You probably already knew your mom didn't like me much, or should I say she didn't like what I stood for since she really didn't know me, but you won't believe what just happened. I think she's had a change of heart. The woman reached out and held my hand." Sam almost expected to see some reaction from Halie, but again none came. She felt completely helpless. "Okay, I have something important to say to you, and you need to listen close. I know I almost lost you once. I don't want to lose you again. I love you. I can't imagine living without you. Hang on for us. Stay with Jake and me. We belong together. In your heart you know we do. Maybe the magazine will let you do freelance work, or maybe you'll start your own photo-gallery in Jackson. Your work's incredible, and the Internet would let you branch out as far as you liked. God willing I'll buy you that house. We'll build a life together. I know we'll be happy."

Tears trickled from Halie's eyes. Her hand twitched, then tightened around Sam's.

"What the--"

Halie's lips moved, but no sound escaped at first. Then she whispered, "Come closer."

Sam leaned in. Halie slowly raised her hand and placed it on the side of Sam's cheek. She opened her eyes and gazed into Sam's with endearing abandonment. "There you are."

Shock and joy hit Sam at the same time. "I'm here. I never left you. You don't know how happy I am to see you right now."

"Yes, I do. I love you too, Samantha Takoda Tyler," Halie whispered. She took a few strained breaths. "You are my dream come true. You and Jake are my family. I can't imagine living without either of you."

Sam caressed Halie's arm and held her hand tight.

"I don't know how we're going to work it all out yet, but I figure I can hang around a few more weeks to give us time to talk things through," Halie managed.

Sam smirked, as if Halie had a choice to leave right away. "Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes, I do. Let's see if you can behave that long."

"I don't think it's me you have to worry about."

"This is true," Halie said. "By the way, I'm starving. They got any food around here? If not, I hear The Moose has great take-out."

About the Author

Regina lives in the mountainous suburbs of Northern New Jersey with her partner of nearly ten years and their dog Scrapper, a sweet pit bull terrier. She's earned Bachelors' degrees majoring in accounting and biology, with a minor in German. She's also a Certified Public Accountant and works for the Federal Government protecting the taxpayer's interests. She loves the outdoors and enjoys hiking, kayaking, reading, watching football, and trying out new vegetarian recipes.

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