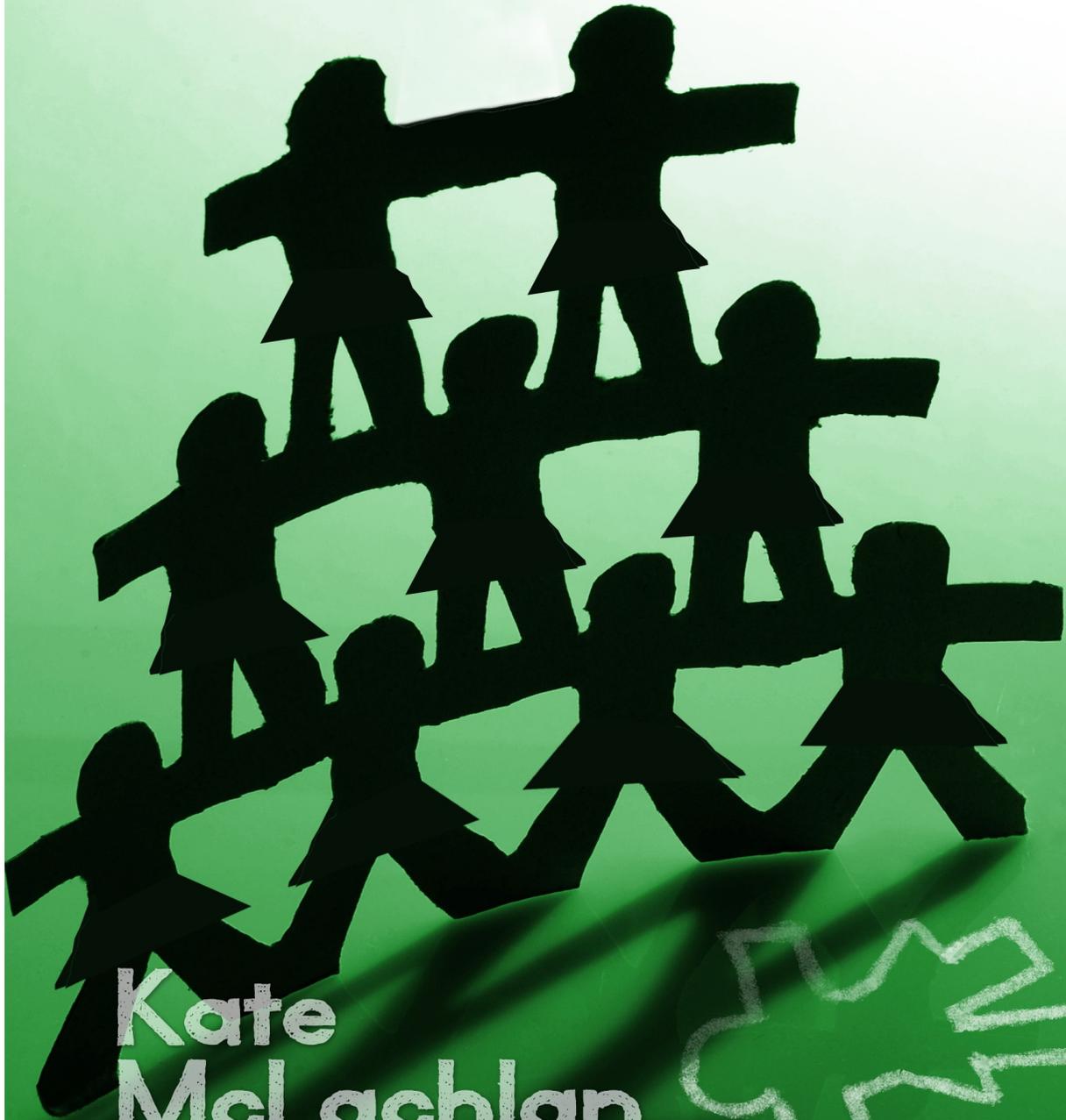


Ten Little Lesbians



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Ten Little Lesbians

by

Kate McLachlan

Quest Books
by Regal Crest
Texas

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And then there's Tonie, my multi-talented wife. She sings, she writes songs, she writes books, she creates amazing stained glass art, and she's the best women's basketball fan there is, I'm willing to bet on it. Jess's song, "Season of Hope," was actually written by Tonie several years ago. You can hear an excerpt of the song on my website, www.katemclachlan.com, or you can download the entire song from www.cdbaby.com/cd/toniechacon2. Sometimes an adventure doesn't mean you're lost. Sometimes it means you've been found. Thanks for finding me, Tonie, and sharing this great adventure with me.

Dedication

For Rebecca.
Stand tall, blind girl!

Chapter One

Ten Little Lesbians

THE HIGHWAY MEANDERED over the Cascade Mountain Range through Tumwater Canyon from the north edge of Seattle to Leavenworth, smack dab in the middle of Washington. It was narrow, winding, and infinite. The view was beautiful, apparently, at least according to those in the front seat, but Tish wasn't interested in looking at the scenery. It was bad enough to be forced to sit sideways in the back seat to support the column of plaster encasing her right leg, but to be so nauseous from the turns and curves that she couldn't even hold down a pain pill just added insult to injury. They'd already had to stop the car once so she could be sick. The second time there was no possible place to pull over, and Tish was forced to puke into Aunt Bea's litterbag.

You'd think someone who was so careful to always be correct about every little thing, right down to having an official Department of Transportation issued litterbag in her energy efficient Ford Fusion, would show a little empathy for a sick and broken niece in the back seat, but all Aunt Bea said was, "Serves you right."

Even Carmen, who rarely thought of anyone but herself, said, "She's not getting sick on purpose." Aunt Bea ignored her.

They didn't stop when they reached Leavenworth either, but continued on up into the hills north of it via a road even more steep and twisting. By the time they reached the Adelheid Inn, Tish was so shaky she could barely prop herself up on her crutches, but Aunt Bea and Carmen just left her to deal with her own backpack while they cruised their four-wheeler bags inside.

Tish leaned against the car, examined the Inn, and tried to quell her dizziness. She took deep breaths. A range of mountains formed a picturesque backdrop for the Inn, its highest tips white with snow, which seemed odd when the air was still so warm. The Inn was surrounded by trees, and the air was scented with pine. It helped calm her tummy, but she was in no mood to appreciate it.

She stared at the toes peeking out at the end of her cast. She'd needed a new pedicure even before the accident, and now the ruby polish was chipped and ugly. She wiggled her toes to make sure they were still hers. The end of the cast seemed so far away, it was hard to be certain. White plaster. No pretty pink cast protector for her. It would have been too easy to hide contraband, they said. God. It was so white it glowed, and it looked as big as a whale sticking out from beneath her skirt. It was heavy as one too. She sighed, looped her backpack over her shoulders, tucked the crutches under her arms, and lurched her way over the gravel driveway.

The Adelheid Inn was a bland two-story wooden building, its white walls and brown trim barely hinting at the Bavarian theme that was so popular in Leavenworth. Its only unusual feature was the tower on the left front corner. It wasn't much of a tower, really, but it was round and stood a full story taller than the rest of the building. It was built of volcanic rock, and a black wrought iron fence surrounded the top. Tish wondered if the fence was real and if guests were allowed up there.

She navigated her way up two shallow stairs, flanked by square rock pillars that matched the tower, and entered the lobby. It was spacious and somewhat bare. Golden wood floors gleamed, and the paneling on the bottom half of the walls matched the floor exactly. A rag rug woven in rainbow colors covered a large rectangle of floor. It was laid across a wide-open doorway, half of it in the lobby and the other half in a darkened room beyond that appeared set up for dining. The registration desk was on the right, a massive wooden bar like something from an old saloon. The woman who stood behind it was so short her shoulders barely cleared it. She was plump and had spiky hair, bleached white but dyed black at the tips, and she wore silver earplugs at least an inch around with tiny feathers dangling from them, like miniature dream catchers. Aunt Bea and Carmen waited their turns behind two girls. Hot girls, from what Tish could tell from their backs. She felt a slight lift in her spirits. Maybe this weekend wouldn't be all old people after all.

Against the wall opposite the registration desk was a long table with a computer and printer on it and a chair in front of it. Tish made her way there, shrugged out of the backpack, and lowered herself very carefully to the chair. It had wheels. The last thing she needed was for the seat to roll out from under her and drop her to the floor. She leaned the crutches against the table and examined the girls.

They were nearly perfect photographic negatives of each other, one blonde and the other dark. They were identical in shape and size, both tall and athletic and so slender they looked like they could be folded in two without straining a muscle. Volleyball players, Tish guessed, or basketball. The girl on the right had hair that fell in a shiny black plank nearly to her waist, and she wore tight jeans with a hundred rhinestones on each pocket. The other girl had short blonde curls, like a kewpie doll, and she wore a pair of shorts so skimpy that her butt cheeks would have drooped out the bottom if her rump wasn't so small and tight. Her legs were muscled, tan and smooth, but Tish found her eyes kept returning to that ass.

Aunt Bea cleared her throat. Tish looked up and saw Aunt Bea frowning at her. Tish swiveled her chair and turned her back on all of them. Jesus. Aunt Bea acted like Tish was planning to rape the girl or something, never mind that the girl was a foot taller, ten years younger, and wasn't weighted down with a twenty-pound plaster cast. Aunt Bea was letting her power kick go to her head. The terms of supervision didn't say a damn word about what Tish could look at.

The computer in front of her was old. The monitor was five inches thick. An ancient printer perched next to it, and a sign above the table read "Business Center." She'd already been warned that there would be no cell phone service up here, but she pulled her phone from her pocket anyway, just to make sure. Yep, nothing.

"I upgraded you to the third floor tower room," the short woman at the counter told the girls. "There's no elevator for it, but you look like you can handle stairs okay."

"Will it cost more?" the dark girl asked.

"No. We have a lot of singles coming in this weekend, and that room's got a king sized bed. We can't waste that on a single girl, can we?"

The dark girl giggled, and the blonde said, "No way."

Tish swiveled her chair half way around again. She had a hunch the blonde was wiggling her tush, and she was right.

"You have a hot tub, right?" the blonde asked.

"You know it," the woman at the desk said. "It's just past the patio behind the gazebo."

The blonde nudged the other girl with her elbow. "Told you so."

“Of course, no suits allowed on Women Only Weekends,” the woman at the desk said. Tish glanced up in time to see her give a quick wink.

“Oh yeah.” The blonde pumped her fist. “We’re in Washington now, baby. Same-sex marriage and legal weed and naked hot tubs. Everything’s legal here.”

Carmen laughed. “You girls let me know when you go in, okay? There’s nothing I like better than getting high in hot tubs with naked girls.”

“Are you getting married?” The woman at the desk frowned and flipped through some papers. “There’s nothing in here about—

“No,” the dark girl said with a prim reprimand in her voice that made Tish think she’d grow up to be just like Aunt Bea. “We’re not getting married and we’re not smoking pot and we’re not hot-tubbing naked.”

The blonde slipped her key into her back pocket and shook her head. “I don’t know, Amy, you heard the woman. Rules are rules.”

Tish accidentally breathed a laugh, and the blonde looked her way and grinned. She had turquoise eyes, dimples, and skin China doll smooth except for a few freckles the size of peppercorns on her cheeks and nose. The girl was lethal.

“There’s a garage on the east side of the building,” the woman at the counter said. “You can move your car after you unload your things.”

The dark girl, Amy, turned. She bit her lip like she was trying not to smile or cry. It was hard to tell if she was Asian or Indian or Spanish or something else, but whatever it was it worked for her. She had skin like a caramel latte and the bone structure of a supermodel.

Tish couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen in real life one woman as perfect as these girls were, and here she was stuck all weekend with both of them. She ignored Aunt Bea’s glares and swiveled her chair further to watch them walk out the door to retrieve their luggage.

“One of you must be Carmen Chang,” the woman at the desk said. “Three rooms?”

“That’s me,” Carmen said. “This place is adorable. Didn’t I tell you, Bea? It’s all lesbians all weekend, right?”

“It’s Women Only Weekend,” the woman said. “We get mostly lesbians, but we don’t actually check.”

“That’s okay,” Carmen said. “Any straight girl who shows up on Women Only Weekend is fair game, by my rules.”

“Do you have any adjoining rooms?” Aunt Bea asked.

“The northwest room has an adjoining room, but it only has twin beds. People put their kids there sometimes.”

“That’ll do,” Aunt Bea said. “Put my niece there.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Tish asked, but she was ignored. She turned back to the computer and turned it on. There was a long buzz, and a minute later the screen lit up.

“The password is rubyslippers,” the woman at the desk called out. “All one word. But it’s very slow.”

“Tish, don’t,” Aunt Bea said.

“I just want to check my e-mail,” Tish said.

“Why?” Aunt Bea asked.

“God, Bea, let her,” Carmen said. “She’s not twelve.”

“Then she shouldn’t act like it,” Aunt Bea said.

“Oh, never mind,” Tish said. There’s wasn’t any point to checking her e-mail with Aunt Bea peering over her shoulder. She powered the computer down. There would be time. Aunt Bea couldn’t hover forever.

HOLLY DIRECTED THEM to the elevator and watched them leave the lobby. Weird. The girl on the crutches had to be thirty years old, but her aunt treated her like she was a kid. Maybe she was mentally deficient in some way. She was kind of cute, though, and those Mormon girls who checked in first were good looking too. The average age of guests at Women Only Weekends was usually around fifty, but three of the five already checked in were young. This could be a fun weekend.

The front door opened again, and two more women entered. She gauged the age of one at sixty and the other in her thirties, so they were right on the money, age-wise. “You must be Paula and Veronica,” she said. They were the only other couple expected.

“I’m Paula,” said the older woman. The younger one merely smiled.

They were an old school butch and femme couple like you hardly ever saw any more. Paula was about five and a half feet tall, broad-shouldered, and fit-looking for such an old girl. She wore a white button-down shirt rolled up at the sleeves and tucked into low-hanging cargo shorts, with a braided belt in the loops like older women didn’t usually do. Her hair was short, steel gray, and swept to the side, and she wore black horned rim glasses. Veronica was a couple of inches taller. She had dark brown hair that fell to her shoulders, glossy and straight, like she must have soaked it for an hour in coconut oil. She ducked her head frequently, which made the hair fall forward into her face. She swept it back behind her ears at least fifteen times in the few minutes it took them to check in.

“I’ve put you in the second floor tower room,” Holly said.

“One room?” Veronica glanced from Holly to Paula and back. “I thought...I mean, I thought I would have my own room.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. She had a double earring that connected two holes with a tiny silver chain.

“Oh?” Holly flipped through the reservation book. The Adelheid Inn took reservations online, but the Internet service was so irregular that most reservations still came in over the phone.

“Yeah, check your records,” Paula said. She walked over to examine the Business Center and then cruised to peer into the dining room. She was the sort who couldn’t be still, had to prowl. “It should be for two rooms.”

“Right,” Holly said, but not like she believed her. Paula wasn’t the first person to ever play that trick on her date. She found the reservation in her own handwriting. “No, here it is. A phone reservation. One room, two people, king size bed.” She sent Paula a shitty look and made sure Veronica saw it. “Do you need a separate room? We’re full, but I could give up my room. It’s not as nice as a regular room, or as big, and it’s kind of messy. I mean, I live in it. But if you need it—”

“Oh, no, don’t do that,” Veronica said. Her fingers played with a set of charms that dangled from a chain at her neck. “I’m sure it will be fine. I just...” She gave Paula a tiny smile, raised a finger, and wagged it back and forth. “You have to be good.”

Paula smiled one of those naughty little boy smiles that femmes seemed to find so cute. “I’ll be an angel.”

AUNT BEA WOULD shit bricks if she knew what Tish could see from her window. After all her efforts to remove Tish from temptation, she'd given Tish a prime viewing spot of the two most beautiful girls she'd ever seen. The blonde hadn't been kidding about wanting to use the hot tub.

They apparently couldn't wait until dark. And they were naked.

Tish checked the lock on the adjoining door between her room and Aunt Bea's—a feature the woman at the front desk had failed to mention—and returned to the window. She perched her butt on the side of the armchair, rested her cast on the windowsill, and braced her left foot on the floor. A dirt path led to a wooden gazebo about forty feet behind the Inn, and right beside it was the hot tub. A line of small trees blocked the view of the hot tub from the lounge downstairs, but there was nothing blocking the view from Tish's room.

The two girls played like children for a while, ducking and splashing. They brought their heads together to kiss now and then, and rubbed their slippery bodies against each other. Occasionally, when they got too hot, they pulled themselves out of the water completely to sit on the edge, showing off their flat bellies, their long firm thighs, their pert breasts. They seemed completely unaware that they might be watched.

Eventually, like she knew they would, they made love, and Tish settled in to watch the show. The blonde pulled Amy to her, kissed her breasts, and dipped her hands under the water. Tish felt a tingle on her cheeks and between her legs. Amy put her hands on the blonde's shoulders, bobbed up and down a few times, head bent, then arched up and back, nearly out of the water, like a dolphin. She braced herself with her hands behind her, head thrown back and white skin shimmering in the afternoon sun as her stomach pulsed, her nipples erect and seeming to point straight at Tish.

One advantage of being forced into a skirt was that the goods were easy to reach. Tish stuck her fingers inside her panties, stroked herself, and let herself come right alongside Amy. She didn't feel guilty. When would she get a chance like that again? But Aunt Bea would shit bricks.

BEATRICE'S WINDOW HAD much the same view, and she too sat at the window and watched the girls in the hot tub. She didn't spare a thought for Tish. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she watched the girls play in the water, make love, and play some more.

"Oh, Leigh," Beatrice said aloud, but softly, as if she didn't want to wake someone up. "Were we ever that young? Were we ever that happy?"

Leigh answered. She sometimes did. "Of course we were. Remember the pool deck in Puerto Vallarta?"

Beatrice smiled through her tears. "I remember. They put something in those drinks, I swear."

"I know, I know. You only had two."

Beatrice's smile faded. "The problem is, I know we were happy. I can remember that we were happy. But I can't remember the feelings. What did that feel like, to be so happy?"

Leigh was finished talking.

Beatrice stroked the wooden box on her lap and let the tears fall on it, new water drop marks joining the old. She couldn't remember the last time she was happy.

If she couldn't remember the feelings, were they still real?

IT WAS TOO warm for a fire, but Carmen huddled by the cold fireplace anyway. The empty hearth gave her something to look at, something besides Paula and her new girl. She'd thought she was prepared. She knew Paula was going to be here, knew she was bringing a date, but she didn't expect the girl to be so pretty and polished. So thin. Everything Paula had always wanted Carmen to be.

Carmen had been watching the door to the lounge and saw the instant Paula and the girl entered. Paula's eyes met Carmen's and skittered away as if she'd accidentally met eyes with a stranger. An unpleasant stranger. She touched her hand to the girl's back in a possessive gesture and guided her to a stool at the untended bar, their backs to Carmen.

Carmen had expected a reaction, an exchange of words, a small scene, though she wasn't sure of what sort. Anger perhaps, or tears, or embarrassment. At least embarrassment. She hadn't expected to be completely ignored. Was Paula going to pretend she didn't know her? Everyone had an ex or two she was ashamed of. Was Carmen that ex for Paula? The thought made Carmen cringe.

Tish came into the lounge on her crutches. She smiled at Carmen but went to the couch to join the two young girls who had been checking in when they arrived. Carmen couldn't blame her for that. Those girls were damned attractive. And thin.

She was surrounded by thin people, she realized. Even the woman at the registration desk—Holly?—was only a little overweight. Carmen shifted in her chair and felt her thighs rub against each other. She lifted her head so any rolls in her chin would smooth out and considered sucking in her stomach, but that had really stopped having any effect years ago, so what was the point?

Beatrice entered the room. Carmen saw her glance at the women at the bar, but her gaze didn't linger. Paula was on the far side of her date, her head leaned away, so Beatrice probably couldn't see her from the door. She stopped at the couch and spoke to Tish.

"You can't mix alcohol with pain pills," Beatrice said.

"I know." Tish raised her glass of wine in salute. "That's why I didn't take a pain pill."

Beatrice shook her head and moved to the table where the wine was set out. The wine was complimentary, but guests were expected to serve themselves. She picked up a glass but hadn't yet chosen a bottle when Paula approached her from behind. Carmen strained to hear every word.

"Hello, Beatrice," Paula said. Beatrice stiffened. Paula lifted a bottle. "Red, right?" She poured the wine into Beatrice's glass. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Beatrice took a sip of wine. "I didn't expect you either."

"That's just like Carmen, isn't it?" Paula asked. "Why tell someone an honest truth when you can lie and manipulate, right?"

Beatrice had the decency not to answer that. "Thanks for the wine," she said and moved to the fireplace. She sat in the chair opposite Carmen. Paula returned to the bar.

"I didn't know she'd be here," Carmen said.

"You did too," Beatrice said. "Stop pretending."

“It’s true.” Carmen bit her lip. “I mean, I knew she might be here, but I didn’t know for sure.”

“For God’s sake, Carmen, stop it,” Beatrice said. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“So what?” Carmen said. “It’s my own business if I am.”

“It’s my business too,” Beatrice said. “You got me here under false pretenses. Tish too, poor kid.”

Carmen glanced at Tish, who was tilting her head back to get the last drip of wine from her glass. “Tish is fine,” she said. “And you know you needed a vacation. This place is perfect for you, private and quiet.”

“Until you had to go and create drama,” Beatrice said.

“Don’t worry,” Carmen said. “There won’t be any drama.”

TISH’S FIRST GLASS of wine took the edge off, but she really needed another to start a buzz. Unfortunately the bottles were on the side table against the far wall, ten feet or more from where Tish sat. The blonde girl, whose name turned out to be Dakota, recognized her plight.

“You need more wine?” She hopped up. “I’ll get it. White or red?”

“Red,” Tish said. She was tempted to tell her to bring the whole bottle. It would be easier than asking for help all evening, and people were supposed to make special accommodations for those with disabilities, after all.

“You want some, Amy?” Dakota asked.

Amy just gave her a look, and Dakota took off for the side table. “She knows I don’t drink,” Amy said, “but she keeps asking.”

“Aren’t you twenty-one?” Tish asked.

“Yes,” Amy said. “But I’m a Latter Day Saint. We don’t drink alcohol.”

“You mean a Mormon?” Tish asked. “Aren’t Mormons supposed to stay virgins until they get married?”

“I am a virgin,” Amy said with a straight face.

“Really.” A vision of Amy’s naked, pulsating body flashed in Tish’s mind. Dakota’s hands had been busy doing *something* to Amy underneath the water to make her come like that, but who was Tish to judge? She glanced over at Dakota, who was sipping wine from one glass while filling another clear to the brim. She then topped off the first one and brought them both over.

“Are you Mormon too?” Tish asked, taking the wine.

“I was raised Mormon,” Dakota said.

Tish laughed. “Yeah, I was raised Catholic. It didn’t take.”

“Dakota’s just taking a break,” Amy said.

“I wouldn’t call it a break, exactly,” Dakota said.

“Mormon lesbians,” Tish said. “Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

Dakota laughed. “That’s one of the reasons I’m not Mormon anymore.” She took a gulp of wine.

“I’m not into labels,” Amy said. “I don’t consider myself a lesbian.”

Tish raised her brows and looked at Dakota, who raised her brows too. Tish wondered if she was thinking of the hot tub scene as well.

“I’d be Mormon in a heartbeat.” The butch woman who’d poured Aunt Bea’s wine stood behind the couch. “I’d love to have six wives,” the woman said. “Name’s Paula.” She leaned

over and held a hand out to Dakota, somehow sensing a kindred butch, though Tish could see nothing in Dakota's appearance to tip her off. She held a hand to a woman standing behind her. "This is Veronica."

Paula was around Aunt Bea's age, but Tish guessed Veronica was closer to her own. They could have been mother and daughter, but the way Paula kept her hand on Veronica's back suggested something different and somewhat creepy.

Dakota grinned and shook Paula's hand. "I'm Dakota. This is my girlfriend, Amy, and this is Tish."

Veronica was tall and had great eyes and bone structure. She had a wide red mouth with thin lips, the kind of mouth Tish liked best, but when she smiled a greeting to the group, she didn't even meet anyone's eyes.

"That's really just a myth these days," Amy said. "Mormons haven't practiced polygamy in over a hundred years. But even if it weren't, you couldn't have wives. There's no same-sex marriage in the Mormon church."

"I heard you guys wear underwear all the time," Paula said. "Even when you have sex."

Dakota laughed, but Amy's cheeks turned red. "That's none of your business," she said. Tish felt qualified to answer, but instead she took a large sip of wine.

DAKOTA WAS EXCITED to meet someone like Paula. She was so blatantly butch, the way she was smooth and gallant with Veronica, who apparently was her girlfriend, though she seemed way too young. Dakota liked the way she put her hand on the small of Veronica's back and guided her across the room like she was in a movie or something. She was gallant with that other woman too, Tish's Aunt Bea, pouring her wine for her. Dakota had never had the nerve to actually treat a woman like that, but she'd just realized that she really wanted to.

Holly appeared in the doorway between the lounge and dining room. "Dinner time," she called out. "We still have one guest coming, but we can't wait to eat or we'll be late for the show." The women rose and carried their glasses into the dining room. "We eat family style here, so serve yourselves from the sideboard, except we have one vegetarian. Who's that?"

"Me," Beatrice said.

"This is yours then." Holly handed her a bowl. "You can eat anything else you like, of course, but this one's just for you. I think it's tofu spaghetti."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Beatrice said.

They gathered their plates and food from the sideboard. Paula pulled Veronica's chair out for her. Dakota tried to do the same for Amy, but Amy gave her a look like she'd lost her mind and sat herself. Tish needed help, though. She couldn't manage carrying things while using her crutches, so Dakota helped her sit down at one end of the table where she could stick her leg out. Dakota filled Tish's plate and then her own. She was the last to sit.

The table was made for ten. Dakota sat on one side between Amy and an empty chair, with Carmen on Amy's other side. Holly, Paula, Veronica, and Beatrice sat on the other side of the table. Tish sat at one end, of course, and the chair at the opposite end remained empty.

"Lila may join us in a bit," Holly said. "Sometimes she does. Sometimes she's too busy in the kitchen. She does most of the cooking around here. I made the salad." It was a simple meal, spicy lasagna, toasted garlic bread, and a tossed green salad. Everyone dug in. After a few bites, Holly started asking polite questions to get the conversation going. She was an odd little person,

Dakota thought. She wore the trappings of a stylish dyke, but her demeanor was more like Dakota's jolly grandma. Dakota fingered her ear lobe and wondered how long it would take to stretch a hole in her lobe as big as Holly's, and would it hurt?

"So how did you two girls find out about the Adelheid Inn?" she asked Amy and Dakota.

Dakota removed her fingers from her lobe and hoped Holly couldn't read her mind. "We saw an ad on-line."

"It's our graduation present," Amy said. "We just graduated from BYU."

"Yeah," Dakota said. "Our parents think it's great that we're staying at a women-only inn. They think it's sweet that we have a place to stay without any dangerous dirty old men around to bother us."

"Ho, they're right," Carmen said. "Only dirty old women, right? And naked girls in hot tubs." She stuck her tongue out and wagged it.

"I'll drink to that," Tish said, raising her glass.

Several of the other women raised their glasses in a toast. Dakota laughed, but she could tell Amy was uncomfortable with the attention, so she was glad when Holly changed the direction of her questions.

"And what brought you here, Beatrice?" Holly asked.

"Carmen," Beatrice said.

"Oh?" Holly shifted her gaze to Carmen.

"I entered that contest you had last year," Carmen said. "The one you offered at the Seattle Pride Parade. I didn't win, but that's how I learned about you, so when Beatrice wanted a quiet vacation, I told her about this place."

"Not entirely true," Paula said. "You're here because I'm here."

Dakota, who was getting happily buzzed on wine and garlic bread, looked up, surprised.

"I didn't know you'd be here," Carmen said.

"I don't believe you, ducky," Paula said. "The truth is, Holly, we entered that contest last year, Carmen and me, together. And when we didn't win we made reservations for this weekend. We broke up at Christmas, and I won the reservation in the break-up. You knew damn well I'd be here."

"I didn't." Carmen frowned. "I just thought maybe..."

"Dyke drama," Tish whispered, but loudly, and her aunt slapped her arm.

"Yeah, dyke drama follows Carmen around," Paula said.

Beatrice frowned at Paula. "There wouldn't have been any drama this time if you'd kept your mouth shut."

"Yeah, it's my fault she's stalking me," Paula said.

"Carmen's *stalking* you?" Tish asked.

Paula looked amused. "Yes, little one, me."

"I'm not," Carmen said. "I'm not stalking anyone."

"Not in the legal sense, anyway," Beatrice said. "It's not like you have a restraining order."

"So, Tish," Holly said loudly, "what made you decide to join your aunt on this trip?"

"It was better than the alternative," Tish said.

Before anyone could follow up on that strange answer the front door of the Inn opened to admit the last guest.

THE DOORWAY BETWEEN the lobby and the dining room was wide, so the front door was in easy sight of all of them, but especially Tish, who had a clear view without even turning her head.

The newcomer was tall, lean, and broad shouldered. She wore faded jeans, tan leather boots, a red felt jacket, and sunglasses, though it was too dark to need them. Shaggy brown hair hung raggedly to her shoulders and into her eyes. She wore a backpack over her shoulder and carried a guitar case in her left hand. She looked like an androgynous rock star, Tish thought, except for the thin white cane she carried in her right hand. It had a white ball at the tip of it, which she slid across the floor in a semi-circle.

Holly immediately rose to greet the new guest. "You must be Jessica Ellery. The desk is over here. To your right, that is."

The woman placed the tip of her cane on the floor before her and walked smoothly up to the counter, stopping just before she reached it. She raised the cane and tucked it underneath her arm.

"It's Jess," the woman said. Her voice was soft and low.

"You're the last to arrive," Holly said. "I only have one room left. It's on the northeast corner of the second floor. It has a beautiful view of the—I mean, it's, um, a really comfortable room."

"Right next to mine," Tish said softly, and Aunt Bea gave her a look.

"I'm sure it will be fine," Jess said. She handed over a credit card and pulled a smart phone from her pocket. When Holly slid the registration form over the counter for her signature, Jess centered the cell phone directly over it and snapped a quick photo. "Give me a minute." She tucked an earpiece into her ear, tapped the cell phone twice, and listened. Moments later she removed the earpiece and asked, "Where do I sign?"

"Right here."

Jess moved her hand across the counter until it touched Holly's, and she signed where the finger pointed.

"Here's your copy. Do you want to read it?" Holly asked uncertainly. "I mean, with your phone?"

"Not right now." Jess rolled the papers and stuck them in a back pocket, swept her cane in front of her, and picked up her guitar.

"We're having dinner," Holly said, coming out from behind the counter. "Lasagna and salad. Sort of a get acquainted meal."

Jess turned to face the women in the dining room as if she could see them. "I already ate, but thank you. I'd like to put my things away." She swiped her cane along the floor in their direction. It hit the rag rug and paused only for a second before continuing its slide. The ball snagged again on a loose loop of rag, but Jess pulled it free, seemingly untroubled by it. She moved forward, her steps slow and deliberate.

"All right." Holly hurried ahead and pushed the elevator button. The doors immediately pinged open. "The elevator's right here."

"I hear it." Jess paused before entering and ran her fingers over the elevator button.

"We'll be leaving for the show in about forty-five minutes. That is, if you plan to go?"

"Of course I do," Jess said. "It's part of the package, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, it is. Turn left when you get out of the elevator, then right, and your door's at the end on the left. Do you want me to show you?"

Jess stepped into the elevator and found the button for the second floor without any assistance. "No, I've got it. Thanks." The doors closed and she was gone.

Holly came back to the table and sat down. “Did I handle that all right? We’ve never had a blind guest before. I didn’t know they could make their phones read things to them.”

“You did just fine,” Beatrice said.

“She was cute,” Amy said.

Tish agreed. Too bad she was blind.

“I JUST DON’T get why you still care,” Beatrice said. “She’s arrogant, and she’s not nice to you.”

“She’s not really like that,” Carmen said. “She’s afraid of love. She had a girlfriend once who was killed by a drunk driver. She never got over it.”

“You’ve told me that story,” Beatrice said. “It happened more than ten years ago.”

“She was the love of her life, before me. Paula always blamed herself because they’d had a fight that night. That’s the only reason Noreen was out with that other girl. Paula never had a real girlfriend after that, until me.”

“You’re not her girlfriend,” Beatrice pointed out. “Veronica is.”

Carmen waved her hand like she was shooing a fly. “That’s not real. Haven’t you noticed? Paula keeps touching Veronica, but then she looks at me to see if I’m watching. She still loves me. She just won’t admit it.”

“Come on, Carmen, you’re worse than Tish,” Beatrice said. “At least she has the excuse of youth. You’re sixty. You should know better. If Paula doesn’t want to love you, she won’t love you. You can’t force it.”

“No,” Carmen said, “*you’re* sixty. I’m only fifty-nine, and she does love me. Let’s go. We’re going to miss the ride.”

IF EVER AMY had serious thoughts about being a lesbian, this trip had already convinced her that she absolutely was not. She was nothing like these women, with their short hair and their boy clothes and their swaggers. Well, Veronica was okay, and Beatrice just looked like somebody’s mom. But the rest of them? No way. Holly’s white and black hair was plain ugly, and those giant holes in her ears freaked Amy out. Who would do something like that to themselves? Tish was cute enough, but Amy caught her staring at her all the time, which was creepy. Jess had hardly said two words, and you couldn’t get a clue about what she was thinking, with those dark glasses. Carmen was embarrassing to be around. Everything that came out of her mouth made Amy cringe, even when it wasn’t directed at her, which it was far too often with those stupid naked girl comments. God! And Paula was just plain awful. Her hair was so short, it was practically a crew cut, and she had a tattoo of a naked woman on her left forearm, like a sailor. Worst of all, Amy had caught Dakota admiring it. Not that she could imagine Dakota ever turning into a woman like Paula. That was absurd. But still, she had an uneasy feeling that Dakota might turn out to actually be a lesbian. Sure, they had sex, and it was good, but that didn’t mean anything. It wasn’t like they used a dildo or anything.

She followed Dakota into the back seat of the van. Paula and Veronica sat in the seat in front of them, and Beatrice and Carmen took the seat in front of Paula and Veronica. The seat behind the driver was designed for two people, but Tish took up the whole thing with her cast sticking

sideways, so Jess had to sit in the front passenger seat next to Holly. It was kind of ironic that the woman who couldn't see had the best view.

"I can't believe you've never seen *Sound of Music*," Dakota said.

"There're nuns in it," Amy said. "Mom doesn't like nuns."

"How can you not like nuns? They're sweet, like penguins."

"They are not. Have you ever even met a nun?"

"No. Have you ever met a penguin?"

Amy didn't bother answering. Sometimes Dakota was aggravatingly immature.

"I didn't think so," Dakota said, like she'd won an argument.

"Mom went to Catholic school," Amy said, unable to let her get the last word. "She said the nuns were horrible."

"They're not that different than Mormons," Dakota said.

"They are too," Amy said, and she couldn't help it that her voice got a little high. What a crazy thing to say.

"Do you really think you're still Mormon?" Dakota asked.

"Of course I do," Amy said. She wondered if maybe they should have had this conversation before they took off on this vacation together. Maybe even before they had sex. "You are too. You're just going through a phase."

Dakota crinkled her nose. "You'll never be able to marry a woman in the Mormon Church."

"I never said I wanted to marry a woman. I want to have kids."

"You can still have kids if you're married to a woman," Dakota said. "Haven't you ever heard of a sperm bank? People do it all the time."

"Mormons don't."

"So you want some dude's stinky penis stuck up in you?"

"Dakota, gross."

"Well that's how Mormon's make babies," Dakota said.

"I mean it's gross to say that," Amy said. "It's probably not gross to do it."

"Yes it is," Tish called from three seats ahead.

Everyone in the van burst out laughing, and Amy realized they'd all been listening to the entire conversation. Her cheeks flamed. She stared out the window and refused to speak for the rest of the trip.

LILA WATCHED FROM her bedroom window as the van rounded the last visible curve down the mountain. Her shoulders dropped two inches as she relaxed for the first time since the earliest guests checked in. She took a deep breath and felt her lungs expand as the weight was lifted from her.

Beatrice Scott. Damn it. For once she wished she'd gone over the registration list before the guests arrived instead of leaving it all to Holly. The name meant nothing to Holly, but Lila would have noticed it immediately. She could have, well, done something. Come down with the flu maybe. No, a migraine would be better. Migraines weren't contagious. Maybe she still would. It's not like Holly couldn't handle everything by herself.

Meanwhile, she was finally alone. She turned from the window and almost smiled. Being completely alone was the closest Lila ever came to being happy. She sat down at her computer, a

much newer version than the relic in the lobby, and opened Google Scholar. She typed “First degree felony murder” and leaned in to examine the results.

JESS CLIMBED OUT of the van and waited while Holly came around to help Tish out of the back seat. Cars pulled up around them, doors slammed, and people walked past her in droves. Everyone seemed cheerful, chattering and laughing. Grumpy people didn’t attend outdoor productions of *Sound of Music*, Jess supposed. Once Tish was out, the rest of the women filed out of the van.

“Everyone have their tickets?” Holly asked. “It’s about a quarter mile to the seating area, but there’s a handicap bus for Tish and Jess.”

“I don’t need a ride,” Jess said.

“Tish will,” Beatrice said.

“No, I won’t,” Tish said. “I’m not handicapped.”

“We’d better hurry, then,” Holly said. “The seats are first come first served.” The women took off.

Jess swept her cane in a semi-circle in front of her. One minute they assumed she needed a handicap bus to walk a quarter of a mile, and the next minute they were gone, leaving her to fend for herself. They didn’t even point her in the right direction first. The parking lot was dirt, and the sound made by the cane as it swept the ground was too faint to be heard above the crowd. She’d hear about it if her cane struck someone, she supposed. It was clear from the movement of the crowd where the seating was, so Jess headed in the same direction. She kept her cane moving more to keep people from walking directly in front of her than to guide her steps.

“Jess, wait.”

Jess halted. The voice came from behind her, and it was breathless. She turned. “Tish?”

“I can’t keep up,” Tish said, catching up to her. “Will you walk with me?”

“I didn’t realize you were there,” Jess said. “I thought I was left behind.”

“You were,” Tish said. “We both were. I’m not very fast on these crutches yet.”

Jess started walking again. She made her semi-circle larger to create a path for both of them. “Why didn’t you ride in the handicap bus?”

“Because Aunt Bea wanted me to,” Tish said.

“You mean Beatrice? She’s your aunt?” Jess asked, but Tish didn’t answer. “Does anyone ever call you Opie?”

“Never twice,” Tish said.

Jess smiled. “And when she tells you to do something, you do the opposite? Sounds inconvenient.”

“Sometimes,” Tish said. “I can’t help it. She’s been very controlling lately. Oh shit.” She stopped.

“What is it?”

“It goes uphill now.” She was already gasping for breath.

“How far?”

“Not too far, maybe as far as a city block. But it’s steep.”

“Can you make it?”

“I don’t think I have any choice,” Tish said. “It’s as far back as it is forward. Let’s go.”

Jess slowed her pace even more as Tish puffed beside her. By the time they reached the top, Tish was panting so hard she could barely talk.

“Oh my God,” Tish said.

“What now?”

“Stairs,” Tish said. “Lots of them. I don’t think I can do it.” She sounded like she was about to cry.

“Excuse me, are you looking for handicap seating?” a woman asked. “It’s up at the top.”

“That’s too far,” Tish said.

“Most people take the bus,” the woman said, a reprimand in her voice. “But it’s too late now. You have to get on at the parking lot.”

“Is there anywhere down here where we can sit?” Jess asked.

“Well, I could bring you a couple of chairs,” the woman said. “We could set them up on the side of the path, but you won’t be able to see the stage.”

“I just need to sit down,” Tish said. “Right here is fine. You don’t have to stay with me.”

“Can we hear from here?” Jess asked.

“Oh, yes. This is a natural amphitheater. The sound is wonderful.”

“That’s really all I need,” Jess said.

“Oh. Yes, of course.”

Moments later Jess heard the clang of metal chairs.

“There you go,” the woman said. She took Jess’s hand and placed it on the cool smooth back of a folding chair. “Yours is right here. Enjoy.” She left.

Tish dropped into her chair. “I don’t suppose you have any water on you?”

“No,” Jess said. “Are there concessions?”

“They’re selling stuff from a table half-way up the stairs,” Tish said. “It looks like candy and bottled water, but I don’t have any money.”

Jess made her way up the stairs. There was no railing, but the stairs were wide, each step a landing for a row of chairs, she supposed. She secured her footing on each step before moving on to the next. There were enough people rustling around her that if she lost her balance someone would likely catch her. She’d hurt her dignity, but nothing worse. She finally reached the crowd around the concession table, pulled a bill from her wallet, and purchased a bottle of water. She descended and handed it to Tish.

“Thanks,” Tish said. She opened the bottle and took a long drink. “How do you know you paid the right amount of money? What if you gave that kid a twenty?”

“It was a one,” Jess said. People quieted down as they settled into their seats, and the chirp of thousands of crickets erupted sounding almost like ocean waves on the shore.

Suddenly the clear bell tones of a woman’s voice singing “The hills are alive” pierced the woods and silenced even the crickets. Jess sighed and relaxed in her seat. She had been a bit worried that the small town production might not be the best quality, but if the talent of Maria was representative of the cast, it was going to be okay.

“That’s so cool,” Tish said. “She’s coming down through the trees.”

“Shh,” Jess said softly. “Just listen.”

Jess had seen the show before, of course, many times, and she’d always loved it, but hearing it at the outdoor theater in the hills alive with music all their own was an incredible experience. The other performers did not let her down, and she wondered if the talent was local or if people came from elsewhere for the chance to perform in the show.

At intermission they elected to remain in their seats rather than fight through the crowds for a snack or a visit to a porta-potty.

“How did you break your leg?” Jess asked.

“I fell out of a tree,” Tish said.

“You were climbing a tree? How old are you?”

“Thirty. How old are you?”

“Thirty-four,” Jess said. “Why were you climbing a tree?”

“I was looking for something. Have you always been blind?”

“No.” Jess didn’t elaborate.

“Why do you wear sunglasses when it’s dark?” Tish asked.

“Is it dark?” Jess asked.

“Of course it is,” Tish said. “It’s after nine o’clock.”

“Oh.” Jess wasn’t about to tell Tish the real reason she wore the glasses, which was that she was a chicken shit. Letting people see her eyes would be a little bit like walking around naked, and she wasn’t ready to bare herself that way. “Have you ever seen someone wear sunglasses at night who wasn’t blind?”

“Not on purpose,” Tish said.

“That’s why then. When people look at me, they see the glasses, they see the cane, and they know I’m blind. It’s kind of a signal to them not to run me over if they can help it.”

“Oh,” Tish said. “That’s cool.”

“So what were you looking for in that tree?” Jess asked.

“My girlfriend.”

“Did you find her?”

“Yep.”

“In the tree?”

“No. In bed with someone else.”

“You were spying on her?”

“Spying is a harsh word,” Tish said.

“Is that when you fell? When you saw her in bed?”

“No, that’s when I yelled. I didn’t fall until they got out of bed, both of them, and came to the window stark naked, and I saw that the other person was my ex. My other ex, I mean. I wasn’t expecting that.”

Jess laughed.

“Go ahead, laugh,” Tish said. “Everybody else does.”

Jess shook her head. “No. I was just thinking that’s something I’ll never have to see.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Lucky me.”

AFTER A ROLLICKING ride back up the mountain in the van yodeling the words to “The Lonely Goatherd,” the women scattered to their rooms. This was the moment Veronica had been dreading all evening.

Paula may have had plans for the giant four-post king sized bed in the second floor tower room, but fortunately the spacious room also contained a couch, and that was where Veronica

planned to spend the night. She had no plans to sleep with Paula. She had no plans to sleep with anyone.

She took her time in the bathroom. She scrubbed her face and stood before the mirror examining her skin. She stroked it with her fingers and was satisfied with its smoothness. She peered close to the glass with her head tilted back and searched for nose hairs. She probably spent more time thinking about nose hairs than anyone else on the planet. She didn't find any this time, thank God, but she had found one just a week ago, after it had grown so long it stuck out a full centimeter from the end of her nostril. Disgusting. She would make sure that never happened again.

She ran her fingers through her hair, lifted it and let it fall, enjoying the weight of it landing on her shoulders. She licked her lips, which were pink even without lipstick, which made her smile.

She double-checked the lock on the bathroom door before she shrugged out of her dress. She removed her bra and examined her breasts. They were smaller than she liked, but the areolas were a nice size. She stroked a nipple with a finger and watched it grow. She licked the finger and stroked it again, enjoying the feel of it. She raised her arm and sniffed underneath. The faint musky aroma pleased her.

She ran her hands down her sides. They dipped in at the waist and flared out just slightly at the hips. Her belly was flat. Standing there in only her pantyhose, she thought she looked pretty hot.

She sighed, turned away from the mirror, and stripped off the hose. She turned on the shower and sat on the toilet and peed while the water got hot. She stepped into the shower without looking again in the mirror. Once the hose were off, she never looked in the mirror.

PAULA LAY BACK on the pillows with her arms crossed behind her head. She wore her white tank top and briefs, as a courtesy, and wondered what the hell was taking Veronica so long. She heard the shower start up. Fuck. She'd never known anyone to take so long to get ready for bed, especially for a first time.

But Veronica was odd. She'd been so eager to come on the trip with her, but as soon as they arrived she acted like they were strangers. Like that little scene when they'd checked in. She thought they would have separate rooms? What the hell was the point of going away for the weekend together if they didn't even sleep in the same bed? Paula hadn't waited so long for a woman since Noreen, which was a completely different thing.

And what the fuck was Carmen doing here? Paula thought she'd gotten over that shit a long time ago. Just because things were good between them for a while didn't mean it could last forever, and it was Carmen's fault they'd broken up.

Paula didn't date fat women. It was nothing personal, just a rule she had, and she didn't break it. Carmen knew that, but she kept packing on the pounds anyway. She obviously didn't really love Paula or she would have gone on a diet. For a while after Paula finally ended it, Carmen had followed her around begging to get back together, but she never did lose any weight. Paula thought she'd finally given up. And look at her now. She was as big as a truck. What did she think was going to happen by showing up here?

Beatrice was surprised to see Paula though, that was clear. Surprised and pissed, mostly at Carmen, but she'd shot daggers at Paula too, which wasn't fair. Paula never would have come

this weekend if she'd known Carmen was going to be around. It was in no way Paula's fault, and Beatrice shouldn't hold it against her.

Beatrice never did like Paula. She probably thought Paula was too low, too uneducated, too rough around the edges. Shows what Beatrice knew. Women loved those things about her.

Beatrice had aged. Paula hadn't seen her for more than three years, not since the funeral, and she'd looked like shit then, but she looked even older now. She wasn't bouncing back from Leigh's death.

The shower stopped. Paula pushed herself up and sat back against the headboard, waiting. If Veronica thought Paula was going to be satisfied with a kiss and a pet tonight, she had another think coming.

BEATRICE WAS THE first down for breakfast but someone, either Holly or the invisible Lila, had transformed the dining room into a breakfast buffet. A tray of ice on the sideboard held milk, juice, hard-boiled eggs, jam, and butter. Beside that was a coffee maker, an assortment of coffees, a toaster, three kinds of sliced bread, a tray with donuts, and several boxes of cereal. On the table were stacks of bowls, plates, utensils, glasses and cups.

Beatrice tucked a brew pack into the coffee maker and moved to the French doors. She opened them and looked out at a partially covered patio with white wicker chairs and tables. The sun was shining and the air was still and warm. Probably too warm. Heavy clouds hovered over the mountains, which were very near, and promised a storm later on. She took her coffee to a round table for four in the shaded half of the patio and sat. It might be her last chance to have coffee outside until spring, so she might as well take advantage of it.

She had been there only a moment when she heard movement from the lounge. She looked up, and Paula appeared in the doorway with a mug in her hand.

Drat. Of all people.

"Good morning, sunshine." Paula sat in a swing lounge on the edge of the patio.

"Morning," Beatrice said.

"Oh come on, Bea, you can act a little better than that. At least pretend you don't hate me."

"I don't hate you," Beatrice said.

"Well, you don't love me."

"No, I don't love you."

"Damn, you're honest." Paula kicked the ground to set her swing in motion. "Anyone else up?"

"I haven't seen anyone," Beatrice said, "but someone set out the breakfast things."

"I meant guests." Paula took a sip from her mug. "So what's the story about your niece? Trish?"

"Tish."

"She's kind of cute. Probably get fat when she's older, though. Curvy girls do."

"Leave her alone," Beatrice said. "She's too young for you. Besides, you have a date here, remember? A skinny one."

Paula made a face. "She's a dud. So how are you doing? I haven't seen you since Leigh's funeral. Are you dating yet?"

Beatrice felt like she'd just been punched. A lot of people had asked her if she was ready to date, and it was common for people to mention Leigh's death, but no one had ever linked the two

together like that, as if one were the cause of the other. "Shut up," she whispered harshly. "Don't talk about Leigh."

"Geez, I'm sorry," Paula said, but not like she was sorry at all. "It's been four years, hasn't it?"

It had been three years, seven months, two-hundred and fifteen days, but Beatrice didn't bother telling Paula that.

Jess stepped onto the patio at that moment and Beatrice was spared from having to respond. Jess carried her cane in one hand and a bowl with a spoon in the other. She wore cargo shorts and an orange T-shirt that said "Caution: Slippery When Wet."

"Good morning, Jess," Beatrice said, and added, "There are two tables out here, one round and one square, and eight chairs. And a swing."

"But I'm on it," Paula said. There was room on the swing for three people, but Paula spread her legs wide, like a man, to claim it all.

"Good morning." Jess moved forward and guided herself around the chairs until she found one in the sun. She sat and ate her cereal without speaking again.

Beatrice finished her coffee and tried to quell the painful throbbing of her heart caused by Paula's thoughtless words. She was about to rise and get another cup when Carmen appeared in the doorway. She had a glass of milk in one hand and a plate with donuts in the other, and she was grinning. She joined Beatrice at her table. Beatrice settled back down. She couldn't leave Carmen to fend with Paula by herself.

"Look," Carmen said. "They're homemade." She took a bite.

"Donuts for breakfast?" Paula asked.

Carmen looked up, saw Paula, and her face turned brick red. She spit the bite of donut out onto the plate.

Beatrice felt her stomach turn, not at the gooey mess on the plate, but at Carmen's whipped puppy demeanor around Paula.

"It's not your business what she eats," Beatrice said.

"It was my business when we were together," Paula said, "but she wouldn't listen to me then either. She just kept getting fatter and fatter."

"It was not your business then either," Beatrice said. "Unless you're feeding a small child, it's never your business what someone else puts in her body."

"No, it's all right," Carmen said, pushing the plate away. "I don't need to eat this."

"It's my business when I'm putting my business in her body," Paula said and laughed.

"God, what are you, sixteen?" Beatrice pushed the plate of donuts back at Carmen. "Eat what you want."

Carmen blinked at the plate and bit her lip.

A thumping signaled the arrival of Tish. She paused in the doorway and rested her armpits on the crutches. Her denim skirt was already short, and the crutches hiked it up even further so that her ass nearly hung out. Paula was right. Tish had a cute little body now, but she would probably be fat someday.

"Can somebody get me some breakfast?" Tish asked.

Not even a please. When did the girl become so graceless? She'd been such a sweet kid. She had rough times, of course, and her coming out had been brutal, but she'd always been polite, at least. Beatrice had let her go the last few years. Things seemed so much easier for gay and lesbian youth these days, and she'd thought Tish didn't need or want guidance from an aunt

thirty years her senior. That was a mistake, she realized now. Somehow during that time, the Tish she knew had gotten lost.

Nobody responded to Tish's plea, and Beatrice felt the others eye her. She was the correct person to help, but she didn't want to reward Tish's rudeness.

"Aunt Bea?" Tish asked, disrespect in the very tone of her voice, and Beatrice wanted to send her to her room without any breakfast at all.

Jess stood. "I'll help."

Beatrice flushed and rose from her chair. "No, no, I'll do it. Sit down, Jess. You too, Tish. I'll bring you something."

Tish clomped onto the patio and joined Jess at her table.

The breakfast room was dark after the brightness of the patio, and it took a moment for Beatrice's eyes to adjust. She popped a couple slices of raisin bread into the toaster and poured a glass of orange juice. She turned to lean against the sideboard while the bread toasted and was surprised to see Veronica sitting at the table. She wore crisp yellow capris and a white top, daisy fresh, but when she looked up Beatrice saw that her eyes were swollen. Either she hadn't slept much the night before, or she'd been crying.

"Good morning," Beatrice said.

"Good morning." Veronica's voice was husky, and Beatrice guessed crying.

"Paula's on the patio," Beatrice said.

"I know," Veronica said. "That's why I'm staying in here."

Beatrice liked Veronica, she decided. "If you need to get away from her," she said, "just let me know. I'll help."

The toast popped up, and Beatrice was still buttering it when Dakota barreled into the room clad in nothing but a thin ribbed tank top and boxer shorts.

"Have you seen Amy? Have you?"

"No," Beatrice said. "Not today."

Veronica shook her head.

Dakota ran out the French doors. "Have any of you seen Amy this morning?"

Beatrice heard a chorus of no's. She followed Dakota outside and set the toast and juice in front of Tish.

"She's gone," Dakota said.

Chapter Two

Now There Are Nine

DAKOTA'S FACE WAS tragic. "Her bag's gone. Her car's gone." She dropped into Beatrice's chair and tears poured from her eyes. "She left me here. Why would she do that?"

"Oh, no." Carmen patted her shoulder. "Did she leave a note or anything?"

"No, nothing," Dakota said. "And I can't call her. There's no cell service up here."

"They've got a landline at the front desk," Carmen said.

Dakota popped up. "I forgot about that," she said, and she was gone.

"She's better off without her," Tish said. She bit into her toast and added, with her mouth full, "Dakota could have anyone she wants."

"Yeah," Paula said. "There're plenty of mermaids in the sea for a kid like her. Why would she want to tie herself down?"

"She loves her," Carmen said with some fight in her voice. "Some people can't just go from one woman to the next like they're all the same. But you wouldn't understand that."

"I think she's scared," Jess said. "Amy, I mean. Scared of being a lesbian."

"Yeah." Beatrice resumed her seat. "She's not on the same page as Dakota, that's for sure. She may never be. Some people just can't face it."

"Why would Dakota want to be with someone who won't even come out?" Tish asked. "She could have anyone she wants."

"You keep saying that," Jess said. "What's so special about Dakota?"

"Oh, man," Tish said. "Too bad you can't see her. She's tall and sexy and cute, and she's wearing this thin little tank top that's nearly see through. Her little titties practically poked right through it."

"Tish," Beatrice said.

"Well, kill me for looking," Tish said. "How could I not, with the sun shining on them like that. Don't tell me I'm the only one who noticed."

"You're not," Paula said.

Dakota returned and slowly sat in an empty chair beside Beatrice, her expression now mournful. "She won't answer."

Veronica came out behind her and sat in the last chair at Beatrice's table, far away from Paula. "I'm sorry," she said.

Holly skipped through the doorway. "Good morning everyone," she practically sang. "How did everybody sleep?"

"Did you see Amy this morning?" Dakota asked.

"Oh dear," Holly said. "No. What's wrong?"

"She's gone. She left me here," Dakota said. "Why would she do that to me? And how am I going to get home?"

"I can drive you as far as Wenatchee," Holly said. "Buses go through there. Do you have enough money for a bus ticket?"

"We'll pitch in if you don't," Beatrice said. "We won't leave you stranded here."

“But don’t leave yet,” Holly said. “You’re paid up for the weekend, and for the paddle board class on Icicle Creek. It looks like we’re going to have to postpone that until tomorrow, though. They say there’s a storm coming in today. I thought we’d head to Leavenworth for some shopping instead.”

“Yeah, don’t leave,” Tish said. “Shopping will help take your mind off it.”

“Besides,” Carmen said, “she might come back. Sometimes people change their minds.”

TISH SAT BEHIND Holly again in the van, her leg resting on the bench seat. They were a smaller group than they were the night before. Not only was Amy gone, but Paula had decided not to join them when she learned that shopping was on the agenda for the day. Dakota sat alone in the far back, checking her phone constantly so she wouldn’t miss the first seconds of cell phone connection. Jess sat by herself in the seat in front of Dakota, staring blindly out the window. Literally, Tish thought and nearly giggled. Jess still wore her “Slippery When Wet” T-shirt, and Tish wondered if she knew what it said. Maybe she took a picture of it with her phone and had it read the words back to her with that app she had. How did a blind girl pick out her clothes anyway? She couldn’t tell what the color was by the feel of it. You’d think she’d be mismatched all the time. Of course, so far Tish had only seen her in jeans and cargo shorts. It was hard to go wrong with that.

Aunt Bea and Carmen sat right behind Tish again, and Veronica sat in the front passenger seat next to Holly. It was Veronica, surprisingly, who provided the chatter on the trip down the mountain. She’d seemed bummed that morning, but heading into town she was downright perky.

“Paula said she’d rather die than spend a day shopping,” Veronica said, “but I’d die if I couldn’t. I heard they have a Christmas store in Leavenworth. I love Christmas stores. Every time I go somewhere new, I try to buy a Christmas tree ornament to remind me. They should have some great ornaments in Leavenworth, since it’s so Bavarian.”

“You’ll have no trouble finding one,” Holly said. “They have one store that’s nothing but nutcrackers, and another one that’s all music boxes. You can even buy a pair of lederhosen and have them specially fitted.”

Veronica laughed. “I think I’ll skip the lederhosen, but I wouldn’t mind getting one of those Bavarian hats with a feather in it.”

“Yep,” Holly said, “there’s a whole store just for hats.”

Tish could tell the moment Dakota got a signal, since her fingers began flying manically over the face of the phone. She must not have seen what she wanted, though. After her first flurry, she slumped against the side of the van and stared at her silent phone as blankly as Jess stared out the window.

The town of Leavenworth was modeled after a Bavarian village. It looked more like a thousand year old village in the Swiss Alps than a one hundred year old lumber town in the Pacific Northwest. The buildings were decorated with alpine themes. Balconies with scallops and intricate wood designs projected out over the sidewalks with cascades of flowers dripping from them, and hand-painted wooden signs hung over the doorways. It was Labor Day weekend, and hordes of shoppers cruised past old-fashioned shop windows, entering more often than not as something they saw drew their attention. Holly navigated the van down busy Front Street, pausing for wagons drawn by Belgian horses and tourists dodging across the street to the park.

“There’s the hat shop,” Holly said, “and there’s the nutcracker place beside it. And there’s the beer garden over there, and there’s a candy store and a jewelry store. You name it.” She pulled the van to a stop next to the park in the center of town. Artwork was displayed underneath white flapping canopies, and four men wearing lederhosen and squeezing accordions played underneath a huge gazebo. “I’m going to let you all off here. There are shops going both ways and also on the next street over by the river. King Ludwig’s is in the middle of the next block. That’s where we’ll meet for lunch at one-thirty. You can’t really get lost, but if you do, just ask how to get back to the gazebo. I’ll look for you there if you don’t show up at King Ludwig’s.”

They climbed out of the van. The sun shone for the moment, but clouds piled in the sky, some white and some gray. Larger black clouds loomed over the mountains in the west.

“That doesn’t look good,” Aunt Bea said, nodding toward the black clouds.

“Don’t worry about it,” Holly said. “Those kind of clouds usually dump their loads in the mountains and never even reach us. Tomorrow they’ll be gone.”

“I want to go back to that hat store,” Veronica said.

“Me too,” Carmen said.

“It’s too far for Tish to walk,” Aunt Bea said.

“Don’t worry about me,” Tish said. “I’m just going to hang out here at the park and listen to the music.”

Aunt Bea’s eyes narrowed. “Polka music?”

“Come on, Aunt Bea, you don’t really plan on spending all your time with me, do you?”

“You’re not very steady on those crutches yet,” Aunt Bea said. She was such a bad liar. She just didn’t trust Tish not to hop a bus back to Seattle, crutches and all.

“I’ll stay with her,” Jess offered.

“Me too,” Dakota said. “I don’t feel like shopping anyway.”

“There you go, Bea,” Carmen said. “Let the girl hang with her friends.” She headed down the sidewalk toward the hat store, and Veronica joined her.

Aunt Bea glared at Tish like it was her fault she was conflicted. “Behave yourself,” she ordered, and took off after Carmen and Veronica.

DAKOTA HAD JUST been about to check her messages when Tish held out her hand.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Tish asked. Her aunt was barely out of sight.

Dakota put her hand protectively to her pocket. “Mine?”

“I just need it for a minute,” Tish said. “I’ll give it right back if Amy calls, I swear.”

Dakota checked to make sure nothing had come in during the last five minutes and handed it over to Tish. She craned her neck to watch what Tish did, but Tish leaned on her crutches and hunched her shoulders to hide the screen. Her fingers flew.

“Who are you writing to?” Jess asked after a moment.

“My ex,” Tish said.

“Which one?” Jess asked.

“The main one,” Tish said.

“You have more than one ex?” Dakota asked.

“Didn’t she tell you how she broke her leg?” Jess asked. “She climbed a tree to spy on one ex and found her in bed with another.”

“Another woman?” Dakota asked.

“Another ex,” Jess said. “I just assumed it was a woman. It was a woman, wasn’t it Tish?”

“Of course it was,” Tish said.

“Why are you bothering sending messages to a woman who cheated on you?” Jess asked.

“She wasn’t cheating on me,” Tish said. “She’d already dumped me by then.”

“That’s even worse,” Jess said. “Why are you chasing someone who doesn’t want you?”

“How do you know if she wants me or not?”

“She dumped you and she was sleeping with another woman,” Jess said. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“She cares about me,” Tish said. “She called the ambulance when I fell out of the tree.”

“That’s setting the bar kinda low, isn’t it?” Dakota asked.

“Who are you to talk?” Tish asked.

“Come on,” Jess said. “She hasn’t even sent you an e-mail to see how you are.”

“She might have texted me,” Tish said. “She might think I’m not answering because I’m mad at her, and I’m not. It’s not like me not to text her.”

“Where’s your phone?” Dakota asked.

“Aunt Bea confiscated it. She made me leave it at the Inn.”

“How can she do that?” Dakota said. “You’re grown up.”

“Usually when one grown woman takes another grown woman’s phone, it’s called stealing, not confiscation,” Jess said.

“Yeah, well.” Tish gave a final tap to her e-mail just as the phone beeped. “Looks like you have a message.”

Dakota grabbed the phone from Tish’s hand and looked at the screen, but it was only her mother. She closed the message app and dropped the phone back in her pocket. “Do you think there are any pot stores around here?”

Dakota felt a little bit like a disabled persons guide as they searched for a pot store. Jess and Tish both got around okay, but they were slow. If they were going to find some pot before lunch, they didn’t have a lot of time, so Dakota paved their way through the crowds and did most of the active searching. Maybe she could get a job as a guide for disabled lesbians when she got back home. Jess and Tish could give her references. She’d have to swear them to secrecy about the purpose of their current mission, of course. Pot still wasn’t legal in Idaho and wasn’t likely to be for years to come.

Tish was the best at figuring out who to ask about a pot store. It was legal, of course, but that didn’t mean they wanted to ask just anyone. Tish had pot-dar the way some people have gay-dar. Tish combined them both and found a gay couple who pointed them in the direction of a store.

“How do you do that?” Dakota asked.

“I grew up around it.” Tish puffed along on her crutches. The store was a few blocks away from the downtown area, and there were no taxis in Leavenworth. “The gaydar, that is, not the pot. I figured that out on my own. My parents hated that Aunt Bea and Aunt Leigh were lesbians.”

Dakota laughed. “Bea and Leigh? Were they twins?”

“No, Aunt Bea is my dad’s sister, and Aunt Leigh was her partner,” Tish said. “Her wife, I mean. They got married right before Aunt Leigh died. That was a few years ago. Anyway, my parents talked about them all the time, and not in a good way. They would point out lesbians as bad examples for me, so I was pretty much able to spot them by the time I was twelve. Which is about when I came out.”

“How did your parents take it?”

“They were pissed,” Tish said. “They blamed Aunt Bea. They took me to church, sent me to therapy, hated me. You know, the usual.”

Dakota gnawed her lip. She was twenty-one years old and a college graduate now, so her parents couldn’t force her to go to church or to therapy, but they could still hate her.

“That’s not usual,” Jess said.

“So you’re an expert in all things, not just love?” Tish asked.

“I’m not an expert,” Jess said, “but it’s not usual for parents to hate their kids just because they’re gay. I’m not saying it doesn’t happen. It’s just not usual and it’s not okay.”

“What did your parents do when you came out?” Dakota asked.

“Nothing much,” Jess said. “They saw it coming. It was a much bigger deal to me than it was to them.”

Dakota’s parents didn’t see it coming, she was sure about that.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Dakota asked.

“No,” Jess said. “Not for a while. The last time I had a girlfriend, I could see her.”

“How long ago was that?” Tish asked.

“Three years,” Jess said.

“She left you because you went blind?” Dakota asked.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Jess said.

They reached the store, The Canna-Beans, a pot store that promised someday to produce marijuana infused coffee.

“I’m tired,” Tish said. “I’m going to rest out here a minute. You guys go ahead and I’ll keep watch.”

“Keep watch for what?” Jess asked. “This is legal, remember?”

“That doesn’t mean I have to go in,” Tish said. “You don’t need me along to buy pot.”

“Yes I do,” Dakota said. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“You’ve never smoked pot before?”

“I’ve smoked it, but I never bought it. I don’t know how.”

“Come on, Tish,” Jess said. “Let’s help the kid out.”

In the end, the store was disappointing. It was clean and bright and well-staffed, much like a regular store, and Dakota’s vague idea of a dramatic and romantic and barely legal experience evaporated. It was a transaction, like any other, and just like any other, she didn’t have enough money to buy what she really wanted. Dakota and Tish pooled their money and bought two grams of the least expensive sativa in stock, while Jess bought a sugar-free brownie with walnuts for ten dollars. They exited the store with their purchases in plain brown paper sacks, though the proprietor thoughtfully drew a yellow smiley face on each one.

A BLIND GIRL and a lovesick teen were not the best of chaperones, but Beatrice really had no choice. Carmen needed a chaperone right then more than Tish did. There was only one reason Beatrice could think of for Carmen to suddenly be interested in hats, and that was so she could go off with Veronica to grill her about Paula. The poor girl didn’t deserve that. It looked like she’d already had a tough time that morning.

Fortunately the road to the hat shop was lined with distractions that kept Carmen from pestering Veronica. The shop windows were old-fashioned and wide paned and filled with interesting objects.

“I want a beer stein,” Carmen said. “They should sell them at the beer garden, filled with beer. I’d buy one.”

“I’m sure you can buy one without the beer,” Beatrice said.

“Oh, look at those cuckoo clocks,” Veronica said. “They look like little doll houses. I love them.”

“Seven hundred dollars?” Beatrice asked. “Really?”

“Hey look.” Carmen stopped in front of a shop filled with musical instruments. “It’s one of those horns. What are they called?”

“I think they’re called horns,” Beatrice said.

“Alpine horn,” Veronica said, reading from a card taped to the window. “Also called an alphorn or a labrophone.”

“It must be ten feet long,” Carmen said.

“More like eight. Let’s stay focused, shall we?” Beatrice asked. “We’re going to the hat shop first. We can stop here on our way back if we have time.”

The hat shop was long and narrow with rows of shelves built against the walls on both sides and down the center, all of them filled with hats. The aisles were crowded with tourists trying on hats, everyone jostling for a look in one of the few small mirrors scattered about. Veronica vanished into the crowd. Carmen started to follow, but Beatrice stopped her.

“This hat would look great on you,” Beatrice said, randomly grabbing a hat. It was a beanie with a propeller on the top, but it was enough to halt Carmen’s pursuit.

“Very funny,” Carmen said.

“Okay, just kidding,” Beatrice said, “but did you ever have one of these when you were a kid? I did.”

“No. I only saw them on cartoon kids. I like this one better.” Carmen put on a black silk top hat. “I feel like the Artful Dodger.”

Beatrice found a deerstalker hat and pulled it on. “I’m Sherlock Holmes. I’ll catch you, you little thief.”

“Here, try this one.” Carmen handed Beatrice a gray beret.

Beatrice plopped it on her head and found a mirror. It looked terrible on her. She never could wear hats. It would have looked great on Leigh, though. Leigh loved hats. Why wouldn’t she? They all looked good on her. Berets were her favorite, though, and this one would have matched her eyes. At the thought of Leigh’s light gray eyes with their long dark lashes, Beatrice felt her own eyes suddenly fill with tears. It hit her that way sometimes, out of the blue. She blinked the tears away, pulled the hat off, and tossed it onto the shelf. She looked around and found herself surrounded by strangers. Carmen had slipped away.

Damn it. Beatrice pushed further into the shop, trying to avoid elbows and knees, and found Carmen and Veronica near the back. Veronica had donned a yellow cowboy hat nearly the same shade as the little flowers on her high-neck sleeveless blouse. She gazed at herself in the mirror, tilting her head to see the hat from all angles, and did not look at Carmen.

Carmen, on the other hand, stared only at Veronica as she spoke earnestly to her. “She’s old enough to be your mother,” Beatrice heard her say.

“Carmen,” Beatrice said sharply.

A flash of guilt crossed Carmen’s face, but it was immediately replaced by a mulish expression. She refused to meet Beatrice’s eyes and continued speaking to Veronica. “I just want to know if you’re serious. If you’re not, don’t toy with her. She’s been hurt enough.”

Beatrice put a hand on Carmen’s arm. “This is not your business, Carmen.”

Carmen shrugged her off. "It is my business, Bea," Carmen said, "but it's not yours."

Beatrice pulled her hand back, surprised. It was not like Carmen to be snappish. Beatrice was usually the snappish one.

"Do you think I should get this hat?" Veronica asked, and Beatrice couldn't tell if she was being clueless or classy.

"She asked me to marry her once, did she tell you that?" Carmen said. "I bet she didn't. I bet she never told you about Noreen, either. Her girlfriend who died? Did she?"

Veronica pulled her dark brown hair in front of her shoulders and caressed it. She examined the effect in the mirror and licked her lips.

"She still loves me," Carmen said. "She wouldn't have come up here at all if she didn't. She knew I might be here."

"Carmen, please," Beatrice said, "this is embarrassing."

Veronica removed the hat, sighed, and returned it to its shelf with a look of longing. "I don't have anything to wear it with except this," she said, "and I don't think I'll ever want to wear this outfit again." She turned to Carmen, the light suddenly gone from her face, and said, "Honey, I don't want her. If you want her, go for it."

Carmen blinked. "Really?"

"Oh, don't tell her that," Beatrice said. "She's obsessed enough as it is, and Paula's just not interested."

"She is," Carmen said. "And who made you my babysitter, anyway?"

Beatrice winced. "Fine." She turned away. "It's your funeral." But the words hurt. In one of the few chronic arguments she and Leigh had, Leigh accused Beatrice of trying to be "the world's babysitter." A busybody, she'd called Beatrice once, and it was true that Beatrice often advised people of the pitfalls around them. It was just that Beatrice could see the pitfalls so clearly, where those involved seemed not to see them at all. How could she let the people she cared about continue headlong into trouble when she could prevent it with a simple warning? But people rarely appreciated Beatrice's help. Most resented it, even after Beatrice was proven right, which she usually was. You'd think she would have learned by now to mind her own business, but here she was at the ripe old age of sixty still trying to guide her best friend's love life, and volunteering to take on Tish's supervision, too. Maybe Carmen was right, and Leigh too. She was trying to be the world's babysitter.

"I don't want a hat," Beatrice said, her mood ruined. She pushed out of the store, and Veronica and Carmen followed, all of them hatless and more subdued than when they entered.

It started to rain on their journey to King Ludwig's, so they made good on their promise to stop in at the other shops. By the time they arrived at the restaurant they were damp but loaded down with packages, smiling again. Their good mood paled, however, in comparison to that of the three women waiting for them.

Tish, Jess, and Dakota were already seated in King Ludwig's at a large round table, bobbing their heads in time to the accordion music being played at their table by a small ancient man in lederhosen. Tish spotted Beatrice and called out, "We're over here. Look, we found a gnome!"

Beatrice slipped the accordionist a five-dollar bill, and he skipped to another table.

"Look." Dakota held up a white paper bag smudged with brown fingerprints. "They have a Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory here." She dug a truffle from the bag and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes were red.

Beatrice looked at Tish. Her eyes were red too. There was no telling about Jess, of course, with her dark glasses, but she wore an open-mouthed smile that looked suspicious. Beatrice took

the seat beside Tish, while Carmen and Veronica sat in the remaining two seats. A waitress brought two large platters to the table, one filled with fat noodles and the other with rye toast.

“Oh yeah, we ordered spätzle,” Tish said, rubbing her hands together.

Tish spooned a helping of spätzle onto an appetizer plate and placed it in front of Jess, prepared one for herself, and gave them each a piece of toast. Dakota grabbed a finger of toast, dipped it in sauce, and took a bite before she’d even finished swallowing her chocolate.

“These are just appetizers,” Tish said with her mouth full of noodles. “I’m going to order goulash for lunch.”

“I’m ordering wiener schnitzel,” Jess said.

“I’m having King Ludwig’s Hot Sausage,” Dakota said, and all three girls collapsed in laughter.

Carmen joined in their laughter. “So where’d you find the wacky weed?”

“Have you?” Beatrice asked sternly.

“Don’t worry, it’s legal now,” Dakota said, wiping her eyes.

“That doesn’t make it smart,” Beatrice said.

“Oh come on,” Carmen said. “It’s only pot.”

“Shame on you, Carmen. You of all people—” Beatrice bit off the rest of her words. She tried to give a warning look to Tish, but Tish wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Room at the table for me?” Holly asked, appearing behind them.

“Sure.” Dakota and Veronica shifted their chairs so Holly could wedge a chair between them.

“Have you ordered yet?”

“No,” Dakota said. “I was just about to order King Ludwig’s Hot Sausage.” The girls erupted into laughter again.

The sky darkened further while they ate, and the rain grew in intensity. When they were finished, Holly dashed through the downpour to the van and brought it to the restaurant’s door. They still had to run to avoid a drenching. Tish and Jess couldn’t run, of course, so they got soaked.

Holly peered through the wipers that slapped at their fastest speed. “This is ridiculous,” she said. “We never get rain like this at this time of year. Where the hell did this come from?”

THE WOMEN SCATTERED when they returned to the Inn. Tish headed to her room to change her damp clothes. She didn’t have many choices. She couldn’t wear pants over her cast without ruining them, which she wasn’t about to do, so she hadn’t even brought any with her. She had two skirts, both denim and both short. She exchanged the damp skirt for the dry and changed into a clean T-shirt. Her hair was half dry already, but tangled, so she sat at the window tackling it with a comb. She’d only been there a moment when she saw Dakota dart from the patio to the hot tub. Tish wondered why she bothered to dart, since the hot tub wasn’t covered and she was going to get wet anyway. But Dakota only paused at the hot tub. She put a hand to her pocket, gave a furtive look around, and darted past the hot tub into the trees behind it.

What the hell? She looked like someone sneaking off to smoke some dope, but why would she do that? It was no secret to anyone they’d just gotten high. The trees were too thick beyond the hot tub to see through from above, so Tish couldn’t tell where Dakota went from there. After several minutes, Dakota returned to the hot tub. She stripped off her sopping wet clothes. She

spread her arms and tilted her head back, letting the rain fall on her face, her bare chest, her belly and thighs.

Ignoring the step stool, she flung her long leg over the side of the tub and slid into the water. She bobbed up and down, flashing her dolphin skin, and Tish put her fingers to work inside her panties.

The pot enhanced her arousal, and she was completely absorbed in her business, so she wasn't sure how long the sound of someone talking had been coming from Aunt Bea's room when she finally noticed it. Tish wiped her fingers on her damp shirt, which she'd tossed on the floor, and moved to the connecting door. There were murmurs, and she recognized Aunt Bea's angry voice. Now and then she made out words: "so miserable" and "head against the wall."

As soon as Tish knocked, she wished she hadn't. If she'd kept listening, maybe she'd have heard something more interesting, but she couldn't take it back. The door opened, and Aunt Bea stood there, her eyes blazing. "What is it?" she barked.

Tish peered past Aunt Bea into her room. It was empty. "Who were you talking to?"
"Nobody."

"But Aunt Bea, I heard you. You said something about miserable and head against the wall."

"Well, I was probably talking about you, then," Aunt Bea said. "What the hell were you thinking? That pot's going to show up in your urinalysis, you know. It's not like alcohol that you can piss out the next morning."

"There's not going to be a urinalysis," Tish said. "I keep telling you, I'm innocent."

"Right. Do you have any idea how many innocent people go to jail every day? It's stupid to think you can outsmart the system."

"Right, I'm stupid. I'm fucked up. I should have finished college, like you. I should have become a lawyer like you so I could be smart enough to know if I'm innocent or not."

"I didn't say that," Aunt Bea said, "and even if you didn't stalk that girl, you're still not innocent. Why do you have to keep chasing girls who don't want you?"

"What's so bad about chasing girls? If I was straight, I'd chase men and I'd have five babies by now and be on welfare, but I'm not. I don't fuck men, I fuck women. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that those girls don't want you, Tish," Aunt Bea said bluntly. Her face was red and her eyes still glittered with emotion. "They just want you to leave them alone, and you won't. Don't you get it? It's scary to be stalked. They're afraid of you." Beatrice threw up her hands. "What is wrong with everybody? Doesn't anyone have any self-respect anymore? Dakota chasing Amy, Carmen chasing Paula, you stalking those two girls last week. If somebody doesn't want you, let her go, for Christ's sake. Why is that so hard to understand?"

"Don't judge us, Aunt Bea," Tish said. "You're the lucky one, remember? You already found your true love and got to live happily ever after for thirty years. We all just want what you had."

Aunt Bea's face went from red to white in an instant, and Tish immediately felt bad. Tish didn't know what it was like to lose someone she'd loved that long, but she knew that Aunt Bea had never recovered from Aunt Leigh's death.

Before she could apologize, though, they were interrupted by a piercing scream.

Chapter Three

Make That Eight

LILA KNELT BESIDE the body, her knees landing in a clear puddle of water. The stone path was slanted, and the blood streamed in the opposite direction to pool in a miniature gully where the stones met the back lawn. Even there the water was only slightly pink, it was so diluted by the rain.

Lila had never actually seen a dead body, despite her past associations with death, but she had no doubt the woman was dead. Her head was flat on one side where it should have been round, and bits of brains and skull had splashed out. She put her fingers to the woman's throat anyway, more because she had seen it done on TV than for any other reason.

The side door between the lounge and the workout room opened, and Jess emerged. She stayed under the eaves out of the rain and asked, "What happened?" Before Lila answered, Dakota ran around the back corner of the Inn, barefoot and naked except for a sopping wet towel she held in front of her, too small to be of any real use. She was drenched, of course, from the hot tub or the rain or both. She skidded to a halt, but not before her toes landed in the pink puddle.

"Jesus H!" Dakota leaped backward and rubbed her feet on the grass to clean them as if she'd stepped in dog poop. Lila wondered if her shock was from the sight of the body lying in front of her or the bloody water on her toes.

"I'm calling nine-one-one," Holly called from behind Lila, and she was gone before Lila even realized she'd been there.

Beatrice arrived next, coming from the same direction as Dakota. Lila met her eyes and looked away. There was no recognition in those eyes, thank heaven, and there wouldn't be if Lila could help it. Beatrice made a wide circle around the body and moved to Carmen, who stood behind Lila, where she had been standing since before Lila arrived, and who had been wailing the entire time. It was she who had screamed of course.

The side door opened again and this time Veronica stepped out. Her eyes widened at the sight of the body. Carmen cut off her wailing long enough to choke out, "You. You did this."

"Don't, Carmen," Beatrice said.

"She killed her," Carmen sobbed. "She killed Paula."

Lila pulled her shirt off and held it over Paula's smashed head. Her intent was to preserve any evidence that might not have already been washed away by the rain, but it must have looked like an attempt to show respect. Beatrice removed her sweatshirt, knelt beside Lila, and held it over Paula's midsection.

"Don't be silly," Beatrice said, her voice so close that Lila felt the vibration of it.

Tish arrived last, rounding the back corner panting and sweaty and moving too quickly on the wet stones. "What happened?" she asked, but then she saw the body. She faltered, a crutch slipped, and she fell backward.

Dakota was closest. She dropped her towel and reached for Tish, catching her under her arms from behind as if they were playing a trust-building game. She propped Tish back up and left the towel on the ground, all pretense of covering herself gone.

“Thanks,” Tish said. Her attention seemed equally divided between the dead body and the nude one.

Holly returned to the scene. “They wanted me to stay on the line,” she said, “like that makes any difference. They know where we are. Does anyone know what happened?” She leaned over, grabbed Dakota’s discarded towel, and knelt beside Beatrice to hold it over Paula’s legs. Lila almost laughed at the picture they must make, crouched in a row in the pelting rain trying futilely to keep a dead woman dry.

“She killed her,” Carmen said again, apparently fixated on Veronica.

“I didn’t,” Veronica said.

“Maybe she jumped,” Holly said, and Carmen moaned.

“She might have slipped,” Beatrice said. She looked up, and Lila followed her gaze, as did the rest of the group except for Jess. A fragment of black wrought iron fence, barely visible through the downpour, dangled uselessly over the side of the tower.

“She wouldn’t have,” Carmen said. “She wouldn’t have jumped, and she wouldn’t have slipped. She was very sure on her feet.”

Lila glanced at Paula’s feet. Rubber soled athletic shoes, of course.

THE CORONER ARRIVED and declared that Paula’s death was caused by falling from the top of the three-story tower and landing on her head.

“Whether it was accident or intentional, I don’t know,” the coroner told the responding deputy of the Wenatchee County Sheriff’s Office. “That’s your job.”

“I’d better get some pictures before it gets too dark,” the deputy said. He hugged the cane of a black umbrella under one arm and tried to balance his camera and shoot with the other. “Don’t know what good they’ll do in this damn rain.”

“I’m not sure it matters,” the coroner said. “Cause of death is pretty obvious. She fell from up there.”

“Don’t you have lights?” asked Beatrice, the only woman from the Inn still standing out in the rain.

“Sure,” the deputy said. “I got three lights. Two of them are on the front of my car over there. The other one’s right here.” He used his elbow to nudge the flashlight that hung from his belt. “This ain’t CSI, you know.”

“I’m not sure it matters,” the coroner said again. “The answer to what happened isn’t down here.” He looked up. “Maybe up there.”

Beatrice wondered if he meant heaven or the roof of the tower.

The body had already been taken away in an ambulance and the camera and flashlight both put away by the time the Wenatchee County detective arrived and introduced himself. “Wayne Rainwater,” he said. “Go ahead, say it three times fast. We’ll get that out of the way first.”

“Wayne Rainwater,” Dakota said and blushed when no one else joined in.

They were all in the lounge, even Carmen. She carried a box of tissues with her. Lila produced bread, lunch meat, and condiments, and those who were hungry created their own

sandwiches for a late dinner. Beatrice munched on barbecue potato chips and water and called it a meal, something she never would have gotten away with when Leigh was alive.

Detective Rainwater sat on the couch between Beatrice and Carmen and helped himself to some of Beatrice's potato chips. He was a large man with dark skin and a hooked nose. He reminded Beatrice of a chubby Chief Joseph, except his eyes were green.

"Don't look so worried, ladies. We do a little investigation like this any time somebody dies in an unexpected way," Rainwater said. "If they weren't sick and they weren't in a car accident, we have to make sure there was no foul play. So what I want to know from all of you is, anybody see anything?" He stuffed a cluster of potato chips in his mouth and looked around the room. No one answered, though several shook their heads no.

Beatrice nearly spoke up, though not to answer his question. It was hardly protocol to question everyone as a group. If he didn't want the women coloring each other's memories, he should separate them and take individual statements. He appeared to be conducting the investigation all by himself, though, and there were several of them. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to gather his preliminary information informally.

"Anybody hear anything?" Rainwater asked. More shaking heads. "Anybody know any reason why this woman ended up at the bottom of a forty-foot drop?"

Glances turned to Carmen, so Rainwater looked at her, too. "What's your name?"

"Carmen Chang," she said, her voice clogged from crying.

"What do you know about this, Ms. Chang?"

"All I know," Carmen said, and the tears fell again, "is that she wouldn't have jumped and she wouldn't have slipped, so what does that leave? Somebody pushed her." She glared at Veronica.

Rainwater's brows rose and he traced Carmen's gaze to Veronica. "And you are?"

Veronica cleared her throat. "Veronica Pilot. I was Paula's guest." Her voice was soft, and Rainwater leaned forward as if to hear. "I didn't know her well."

"Paula didn't love her," Carmen said. She grabbed tissues from her box and covered her face.

Veronica nodded. "That's true."

"Look, I'm not worried about your relationships," Rainwater said. "I know this is Women's Weekend or something like that, and I know what that means. My people have honored two-spirits since before your people ever saw a boat, so don't worry about that. All I need to know is who you are, how you knew Paula Brown, when you last saw her, and if you know anything about her jumping or falling or being pushed off the building. Okay?"

Beatrice decided he had floundered enough. "I'll go first," she said. "My name is Beatrice Scott. Judge Beatrice Scott. I preside over the Cascade County Superior Court. I met Paula about four years ago when she started dating Carmen, who has been my friend since we were children. Carmen and Paula dated for about two years, and then Paula broke it off. Carmen has had a hard time of it, as you can see. She wasn't happy to see Paula here with another woman, but she and Veronica worked through that today in Leavenworth. I last saw Paula at breakfast. She didn't go into Leavenworth with us because she doesn't enjoy shopping, but all these other ladies did, except for Lila. I assume Paula fell while we were gone."

Rainwater nodded while she spoke, but he took no notes. "That true?" He looked around the room. "Nobody saw her since breakfast?"

"Well, I did," Lila said. She stood in the doorway between the lounge and the dining room with a towel in her hand as if to symbolize her role, though she had done nothing but stand there

since Detective Rainwater entered the room. “She came into the kitchen around noon looking for lunch.”

“Why didn’t you go to Leavenworth with the rest of the women?” Rainwater asked.

“I had work to do. Food prep, laundry, bathrooms.”

“You give her something to eat?”

“I showed her where it was,” Lila said. “Bread, meat, chips. The same stuff we have here. Beer.”

“How much beer?”

Lila shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t count.”

“You have an idea?” Rainwater asked. “Two beers? More than two? More than six? Less than ten?”

“I didn’t watch her. I showed her where it was and left. I had things to do.”

“Is that normal? You always let your guests drink free beer? As much as they want?”

Beatrice felt growing respect for Rainwater. He was asking questions like a cross-examiner, better than many attorneys she had heard. There was something familiar about Lila as she answered the questions. She appeared relaxed, her body pliant as she leaned against the door jam. It would have fooled most juries, but Beatrice had seen too many defendants testify in too many trials to be fooled. Lila was wound tight.

“We have complimentary beer and wine in the evenings,” Lila said. “I didn’t think it would hurt to let her have beer at lunch too. It was only one person. I felt sorry for her.”

“Why were you sorry for her? Was she sad?”

“Not particularly,” Lila said. “She was just alone, that’s all.”

“Hmm.” Rainwater glanced at the windows. The night was black, and rain slammed against the glass. “So who found her?”

“I did,” Carmen said, “after we got back from Leavenworth.”

“And when was that?”

“We got back at four o’clock,” Beatrice said.

“And nobody saw her after you got back?” Rainwater looked at Veronica again. “You share a room with her?”

“Yes,” Veronica said, “but she wasn’t there when we got back. I never saw her again. Alive, I mean.”

“Well.” Rainwater reached for more potato chips, but the bowl was empty. He slapped his hands on his knees instead. “We’ll run some tests, see how much alcohol she had in her system, or anything else.” He looked again at the windows. “I’ve got to get out of here while I still can. I guess I don’t have to tell you ladies to stay put tonight. It’s just a formality, but I’ll probably think of some more questions overnight. I’ll talk to you again tomorrow.”

DETECTIVE RAINWATER CALLED the Inn the next morning and asked to speak with Beatrice. She took the call at the desk in the lobby.

“This is Judge Scott,” she said automatically, half sensing it was business. She corrected herself. “Beatrice Scott, that is.”

“Wayne Rainwater here, Judge. That was some rainstorm last night, huh?”

“Yes, it was,” Beatrice said. “I hope your drive home was uneventful.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t pretty, but at least the road was still there,” Rainwater said.

Beatrice gave a polite laugh. "That's good to hear."

"You hear about all the fires we had out here this summer?"

"I did," Beatrice said, wondering how long she would have to indulge in small talk before he got to his point. "We smelled the smoke all the way over on our side of the mountains."

"Worst fires we've had in the memories of me and my grandma put together," he said. "It burned everything up. Now this rain comes in, and it's the worst we can remember too. There's nothing left to hold the soil in place when it gets this wet. There's mudslides happening all over the place."

"Really?" Beatrice thought she divined the purpose of his call. He was delayed by other emergencies. It was really too bad. He'd barely initiated an investigation yesterday, and he had nothing that would stand up in court. "That's too bad. I'll bet that's keeping you busy."

"That's an understatement," Rainwater said. "There's even a huge mudslide over Highway 2, so you can imagine what a mess that makes. That's an emergency route for this whole region, so they're sending all sorts of resources to clear that one. It's going to be a while before they get to yours."

"Ours? What do you mean?"

"Yep," he said cheerfully. "You got one too. It's at the base of the Piney Road just before it meets up with Walker. There's a mountain of mud where the road used to be."

"Oh no," Beatrice said. She tried to envision the route in her mind. "That's terrible. Is there some sort of detour that can be used to get in and out?"

"Nope," Rainwater said. "They're working on one for Highway 2, but like I said, that's their number one priority right now."

"Well, how long will that take them? I have to get home tomorrow. I work Tuesday."

"Oh, it'll be a day or two. Remember that bridge that collapsed over the Skagit River last year? They brought in those portable bridges to make do while they fixed it up. It's amazing what these engineers can do in an emergency. Of course, it took them a month or so to get that done, and like I said, your road isn't a priority."

"It's not my road," Beatrice snapped, suddenly in no mood for any more chitchat. "What are you going to do about your investigation?"

"Yeah, I got a problem with that," he said. "I would have finished those interviews last night if I'd known this was going to happen, but I thought I could finish them this morning. And that rain was sure coming down. Who knows, I could have been on the road when that mudslide hit. It's a good thing I left when I did."

"Of course," Beatrice said.

"Yeah, you're right. I listened to my gut. I always listen to my gut, and it works for me, usually, but now I have a problem. I thought, since you're an officer of the court and all, you could help me out."

"Detective, I'm an officer of the court in Cascade County. Here I'm just Beatrice Scott."

"I get that. I'm not asking you to do anything official. It's just that I can't let those interviews wait any longer. I'm going to have to interview you folks over the phone, and I don't like that. There's a whole lot more to interviewing than just asking questions, you know that. I watch people, even when they think I'm not. I can tell sometimes if someone's holding something back or lying. It's a gut thing. You know what I mean. You do it too."

"I put people under oath and they swear to tell the truth, but they don't always do it," Beatrice said.

“But you can tell when they’re lying, can’t you? All I want you to do is watch them when I interview them, take notes, let me know if anything tugs at your gut.”

“You think people will be honest with you if I’m in the room?”

“Maybe not, but I think you’ll spot ‘em. If anything strikes you hinky, let me know and I’ll follow up when I can get up there or you can get down here. Maybe you could even write up your notes and sign them. An affidavit from you would go a long way if this thing was to end up in court.”

“Do you really think that’s likely? Paula’s death is almost certainly an accident or suicide.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Rainwater said, “but that broken fence bothers me, if you want to know the truth. I never heard of a suicide taking a fence down with them. They usually climb over before they jump. An accident maybe, but how? Somebody knows something, I bet, even if they don’t realize it. So are you going to help me?”

She couldn’t exactly refuse. “All right. What about me? Who’s going to tell you if I’m lying?”

“I guess I’m on my own there. Are you ready now? I have a recorder ready to go.”

“Sure.”

He asked her some preliminary questions and went over what she’d told him last night before getting to the more pertinent details of the day.

“Carmen and Veronica were closest to her,” Beatrice said, “but they both spent the day in Leavenworth. I was with them the whole time. We didn’t get back to the Inn until four o’clock, and I went immediately to my room. I was still there when Carmen found Paula, which was around four-fifty.”

“Who all went into Leavenworth with you?”

“Carmen, Veronica, Tish, Dakota, and Jess. And Holly, of course. She drove.”

“So unless Paula fell between four and four-fifty, the only person there who might have seen something is Lila.”

“Unless someone came up here during the day,” Beatrice said.

“Good point,” Rainwater said. “It’s nearly nine now. Can you have the first interviewee ready at nine fifteen?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“WHAT DID HE want?” Tish asked when Aunt Bea returned to the breakfast room.

Aunt Bea waited until she’d poured her bowl of soggy Cheerios into the trash and popped a slice of bread into the toaster before answering. “To tell me he won’t be coming back today,” she said. “Piney Road’s washed out. There have been mudslides, apparently, all over the place.”

“What do you mean?” Tish asked. “You mean we’re stuck here?”

“I’m afraid so. He thinks it’ll be a couple of days before it’s open again.”

“Really?” Holly asked. “That’s never happened before.”

“I can’t stay here two more days,” Dakota said, distress elevating her voice. “I have to find Amy. She won’t answer my calls.”

“That means no paddle-board lessons again today,” Holly said.

“I doubt anyone feels like paddle-board lessons anyway,” Beatrice said. “Not after what happened to Paula.”

Tish nibbled her muffin, unconcerned. She wouldn't have been able to paddle-board anyway, and she was fired from her job when she got arrested. She had nothing to hurry back to, and she was already under house arrest. It might as well be at the Inn as at Aunt Bea's dreary over-fifty active-living community.

"Detective Rainwater wants to interview everyone today by telephone," Beatrice said. "He asked me to set it up and take notes. The first one's at nine fifteen. Any volunteers?"

Holly paused in the act of removing the empty coffee pot. "Why? We already told him everything."

"He wants to do individual interviews," Beatrice said. "He rushed through his questions last night because of the weather."

"What does he think happened?" Tish asked.

"Nothing in particular," Beatrice said. "He just wants to pinpoint exactly when Paula fell. Someone might have seen or heard something and not realized what it meant at the time."

"I was in the hot tub," Dakota said.

"When?" Beatrice asked.

"When she fell."

"How do you know when she fell?"

"Well, I mean when Carmen screamed. I went to the hot tub when we got back from Leavenworth and was still there when she screamed."

Except for her little foray into the woods, of course, but Tish could hardly bring that up without revealing that she'd been spying on Dakota in the hot tub. Wouldn't Aunt Bea have a field day with that? Anyway, Dakota had gone in the opposite direction from the Inn, so whatever she was up to couldn't have had anything to do with what happened to Paula.

"I can't even remember what all I did after we got back," Holly said. "I brought the groceries in. I balanced the checkbook. Let's see...I got the dining room ready for dinner, though we didn't end up eating there."

Aunt Bea's toast popped up. She put it on a plate and spread butter on it.

"I'll do the first interview if you like," Holly said. "I'll meet you in the lobby at nine fifteen." She returned to the kitchen.

Dakota rushed to the lobby. "Wait, I need to use the computer before you start interviewing in there."

"That's not a bad idea," Aunt Bea said. "I need to let the court clerk know I may not be in."

Tish finished her breakfast in solitude. She had no one to notify of her absence. The weather was still drizzly outside so she exited the breakfast room into the lounge. It was dark, and at first it seemed silent, but then she heard the distant clang of a barbell being dropped too soon.

Tish knew there was a workout room at the Inn, but she hadn't paid much attention to where it was. She wasn't one for working out even when she was whole. Now, with the cast on her leg, just a trip across the room was workout enough. She followed the sound to the back of the lounge where she found a door to the outside that she'd not noticed before. She opened it, peeked out, and saw the pavement where Paula had landed. There was no sign left of what had happened. She closed the door and continued on a curving hallway leading to the ground floor tower room.

The door of the room opened just as Tish reached it, and Veronica stood there. She wore knee length sweatpants and a Supergirl tank top, and her eyes were filled with tears. She said nothing but brushed by Tish and was gone.

Tish caught the door before it closed. She slipped inside. Veronica wasn't the only one working out. Jess stood before a wall made entirely of mirrors. Tish saw herself in the reflection and nearly backed out, thinking for a moment that Jess would see her. She realized her mistake, smiled, and eased farther into the room so she could watch.

Jess wore a loose tank top and a pair of long shorts that hugged muscular legs. She held twenty-pound weights in each hand and alternated lifting them. The veins in her arms popped and muscles rippled. She took a deep breath, lifted a weight with a grunt, expelled the breath, and did it again with the other arm. She did not wear her glasses. She stared into the distance, and sweat dripped down the sides of her face. Her hair was already wet with it, as was the top half of the tank top. There was something exciting about watching a woman work out right in front of her, completely unaware she was being watched. It was almost better than watching Dakota in the hot tub, since Jess was barely ten feet away. Tish leaned against the door jam and settled in. Maybe Jess would lift the bottom of the tank top to wipe off her face and show off her stomach. Maybe she'd get hot and take the tank top off completely.

After ten more reps with each arm, Jess replaced the weights on the rack. She used her shoulder to wipe her forehead and retrieved her glasses from the top of the water cooler. She put them on and faced Tish. "Hey there," she said.

Tish straightened and gripped the crutches. "Hi."

"How long were you going to stand there watching?"

"I, uh, I just got here." Did the woman have superpower hearing? "I didn't want to startle you."

"Right." Jess pulled a white towel from the small stack on a shelf and wiped her face and neck.

"Why was Veronica crying?" Tish asked.

"Was she crying?"

"Yeah. What happened?"

"Nothing," Jess said. "Maybe she was thinking about Paula."

Not likely, Tish thought. Everyone could tell Veronica never gave a rat's ass about Paula. "How do you know where everything is?" she asked.

"I worked out in here yesterday," Jess said.

"Do you work out every day?"

"Yes."

"It shows," Tish said. "You might not know it, but you've got great muscle definition."

Jess's face twitched, but it was more of a wince than a smile. "Thanks."

"No, really," Tish said. "I mean, you have a pretty hot body."

"Well, thanks," Jess said. "But that's hardly fair."

"What do you mean? Of course it's fair. You work out every frickin' day."

"I mean it's not fair that you know what I look like, but I don't know what you look like."

"I have a hot body too," Tish said and laughed.

"I'm sure you do," Jess said. "You should let me feel it."

"Excuse me?"

"If my eyes worked, I'd already know what you look like." Jess held up her hands. "These are my eyes. The only way I can see is with my hands. It's only fair."

Tish thought about it, and she let her eyes roam Jess's body while she did. Her ass was tight and her legs were all muscle. Her shoulders and arms rippled when she moved them. There didn't seem to be an ounce of fat on her, and Tish wished again that she would lift the tank top to

let her abs show. Jess was right. It wasn't fair. Here she was getting all turned on from clear across the room just from looking, and Jess didn't have a clue what Tish looked like.

"All right." She stepped further into the room. "But be careful of the crutches."

Jess walked directly toward her without the cane and stopped in front of her. Tish braced herself.

Jess brought her fingers first to Tish's hair where they lightly stroked from the top of her head to the ends. The fingers dipped in and lifted, like the hairdresser did when she washed Tish's hair, then they slipped underneath and stroked the back of Tish's neck. Tish closed her eyes. The touch came forward to her chin, her cheeks, her mouth. Tish gasped when a thumb crossed her lips, but the fingers had moved on to her nose, her eyes, her brow. She was stunned by the intimacy of the touch and almost protested, but she reminded herself that Jess wasn't touching anything that others couldn't see anytime they liked.

Jess's hands moved to her collarbone and her shoulders. The fingers slid gently underneath Tish's arms where she was sore from bracing herself on the crutches. Tish shivered. Jess's touch moved down to her elbow, to her wrist and her hands. She took the time to lift one hand completely off the grip of the crutch to touch each finger, the thumb, and the palm, as gentle as a kiss. Deliberately, her expression solemn and intent, Jess placed a hand on the center of Tish's chest, on the breastbone, and Tish took a deep breath. Slowly Jess moved the hand left and placed her other hand on the right. She stroked her hands over Tish's breasts, under, around, and across the front, where by now the nipples stuck out, aroused and sensitive. Tish bit her lip to prevent herself from making noise as Jess dropped her hands lower. She ran her palms across Tish's abdomen, around her back, down the outside of her hips until she reached the hard plaster on the right thigh. Tish thought she would stop there, but she did not. Jess brought her finger up under Tish's skirt and traced the flesh at the top of the plaster all the way around to the inside of her thigh.

"God," Tish whispered, abandoning her attempt to be silent.

Jess's knuckles brushed the center of Tish's panties. She had to have felt the wetness there, but she gave no sign of it. She dropped to a knee. She stroked her hand around Tish's other thigh, running it down Tish's left leg until she reached the knee, the ankle, the arch, the toes. She ran her finger across the toenails with their chipped paint and said, "Pretty." She rose to her feet. She stood very close. She smelled like sweat. Her breathing was not completely natural either.

"Thank you," Jess said. "I can see you now."

Tish opened her eyes. "Hey, fair is fair." She adjusted her grip on the crutches and turned to leave.

Jess moved away and returned to the weight rack. "You're right, by the way," she said.

Tish paused. "About what?"

"Your body is hot."

BEATRICE SWIVELED THE chair away from the computer and sat, a notebook in her lap and a pen in her hand, like a good secretary. She wrote Holly's name, the date, and the time on the top of the page. Holly stood behind the reception desk, where she had placed the phone. They waited for it to ring. It was nine nineteen.

"He said things were busy," Beatrice said, "because of all the mudslides. He may be running late."

“Yeah.” Holly absently lifted the receiver and her eyes widened. “It’s dead.”

Chapter Four

Cut Off

“WHAT?” BEATRICE ASKED.

“It’s dead,” Holly said again. She held the receiver out to Beatrice while tapping her finger on the button in the cradle, as if that could make a difference. “Listen.”

Beatrice took the receiver, listened, and heard nothing but Holly’s tapping. The line was dead, all right. She cradled the receiver. “Great. So now we have no road and no phone?”

“The phone does go out sometimes in bad weather,” Holly said. “Most of the lines out here are still overhead. One downed tree can cut off the whole mountain.”

“How long does it take to get service back?”

“Depends on where the break is. If it’s on this side of the mudslide, it won’t be fixed until the road is clear.”

Beatrice frowned and tapped the notebook with her pen. That would delay the interviews a day at least, maybe two or even more. It was too long. The best evidence came from recent memories. If the interviews were put off, memories would fail or they would be colored by what people heard later. Even signed declarations lost credibility when they were written too long after the fact.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” Beatrice asked.

Holly’s brows rose.

“I just think it would be best to go over things while they’re still fresh in everybody’s minds,” Beatrice said. “I can make notes for Detective Rainwater.”

Holly shrugged. “I don’t mind, but you should probably check with Lila before you start questioning the guests.”

“Good idea,” Beatrice said, though of course Lila’s opinion didn’t matter. Beatrice had the right to talk to anyone she liked. “What did you do after we came back from Leavenworth?”

“I already told you,” Holly said. “Brought in groceries, balanced the checkbook, and set the table.”

“I know, but I want you to go over it in more detail. You dropped us all off at the front door. Where did you bring in the groceries?”

“The kitchen, of course,” Holly said.

“So you drove the car around to the east side?” Beatrice pointed. “Is there a door back there?”

“Yes, of course there is.” Holly’s face was still pleasant, but her tone already was growing impatient.

It took skilled interview techniques to get all the details from witnesses without annoying them. Columbo was the best at it. He played dumb and made people think he really didn’t understand, and they fell all over themselves trying to help him. Beatrice had tried that technique, but it didn’t fit her personality. Playing dumb didn’t come easily to her. In a legal

setting, it didn't really matter, since the people being questioned were usually under oath and had no choice but to answer, no matter how irritated they were.

This time, it mattered. Nobody had to answer her questions. If she irritated them too much, they wouldn't.

Beatrice shrugged and smiled. "Sorry. I haven't been back there. Is there a parking spot by the back door?"

"Not officially. I just pulled up there to unload the groceries."

"Oh. It's covered back there?"

"No, it's just close. I always unload things there. Why carry things farther than I have to?"

"I just wondered because it was still raining," Beatrice said. "Didn't the groceries get wet?"

"Yes, they did." Holly smiled. "And so did I."

"How long did it take you to put the groceries away?"

"Oh, gosh, I don't know. Fifteen minutes maybe? Twenty?"

"Did anyone help you?"

"No. Lila does sometimes, but she wasn't in the kitchen when we got back."

"Where was she?"

"I don't know. She's always busy. She was probably cleaning somewhere."

Beatrice made a few notes. "What did you do after you put the groceries away?"

"Let's see, I came out here," Holly said. "This is my desk." She reached underneath the counter, pulled items from shelves, and put them on top. "Check register, calculator, receipt file. I always balance the checkbook as soon as I come back from shopping. If I wait, it becomes too big of a job, and I hate that. Then I went into the dining room and set up the buffet and the table. I was getting clean napkins from the laundry when I heard Carmen scream."

"Where's the laundry?"

"Right off the kitchen."

"And how long did it take you to balance the checkbook?"

"Oh, geez, I don't know. Does it matter?"

"I'm just trying to figure out exactly when you were in the lobby," Beatrice said. "If someone came down the elevator when you were here, you would have seen them."

"Well, I didn't see anyone."

"Did you see anyone while you were in the kitchen or the dining room or the laundry?"

"I saw Carmen. She came into the dining room when I was setting the table. She was looking for Paula."

"Any idea what time that was?"

Holly shook her head. "It was just a few minutes before she screamed. She went out the French doors to the patio."

"Okay, there's no way to ask this except straight out. Did you go to the bathroom at all during this time?"

Holly laughed. "I'm sure I did. At least once."

"When was that?"

Holly frowned. "I don't know. It's not something I really think about. That's sort of an autopilot thing, you know?"

"Which bathroom would you have used?"

"Depends. I use both, whichever one's closest." She knocked on a door right behind the registration desk. "This one if I'm working in here. If I'm in the dining room I use the lobby bathroom. If I'm in the kitchen I use Lila's."

“Lila’s?”

“Yes, this one.” Holly knocked again on the door behind her. “It’s the same one. Her rooms are back here. The bathroom has two doors. Her bedroom’s on the other side. She has a little living room next to that, and it leads to the kitchen. I probably used hers, now that I think about it, because I usually have to go as soon as I get back from Leavenworth. It would have been closest.”

Beatrice wrote it all down and wondered what else she ought to ask. In the old days, when she was a prosecutor, she always had her questions prepared ahead of time. “Did you have any problems with Paula?”

“Me? No.”

“And you don’t know any reason why she might have wanted to kill herself?”

“None at all,” Holly said. “My guess is she fell. It was wet up there, and she’d been drinking. She probably lost her balance, slipped, and tumbled over.”

Beatrice nodded. It was the most likely scenario. But those rubber soled athletic shoes looked new.

THE KITCHEN WAS more family style than commercial. The stainless steel refrigerator was industrial size, but there was only one of them, and the convection oven was no fancier than the one Beatrice had at home. The counter space was filled with projects. Carrots, green peppers, and mushrooms were piled beside a cutting board, a muffin tin had cups lined with uncooked pastry, and a pot of something was simmering on the stove. An open door on the west wall revealed pantry shelves filled with boxes and jars and the edge of a chest-high freezer.

Lila stood before a KitchenAid mixer, her back to the door, scraping the sides of a bowl as it spun. Beatrice let the door snap shut behind her, and Lila whipped around, spoon in her hand. Straight bangs hung in her eyes and she blinked, her expression startled and guarded at the same time. She wore a plain white T-shirt and jeans, both of them dirty with food spatters.

“What do you need?” she asked, but the tone of her voice was more, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Did you hear about the road?” Beatrice asked.

“Yes, Holly told me.”

“Did she also tell you Detective Rainwater wanted to interview everyone by phone?”

“Yes. He can if they want to, but I’m not going to force my guests to do anything.”

“He can’t,” Beatrice said. “The phone went out.”

“What? What happened to the phone?”

“Holly thinks a tree fell on a line.”

Lila’s fingers curled around the spoon like she wanted to strangle it. “Great. Just what I need.” She turned back to the bowl and banged the spoon hard against the rim twice.

Lila was not a happy cook, Beatrice guessed. She reminded Beatrice of her mother on Thanksgiving Day. She hated cooking but felt duty bound to prepare an elaborate meal for dozens of relatives. She spent the holiday stressed and resentful, much like Lila appeared at that moment. When Beatrice was a kid, she learned not to go into the kitchen on those days. Complaining of hunger at lunch time made her mom’s fingers curl just like Lila’s, and by the time she was six she’d learned not to do it. But Beatrice wasn’t a kid anymore, and Lila was

probably ten years younger than she was. She leaned against the door of the fridge and crossed her arms.

“You seem kind of stressed.”

“You could say that,” Lila said. She ran the beaters slowly and raised them out of the batter, letting them spin batter back into the bowl. “Somehow I have to make all this food feed eight people for God only knows how many days.”

“Rainwater said it would only be a couple of days.”

“Rainwater’s full of shit.” Lila glanced up and said, “Sorry,” like she’d just remembered Beatrice was a guest. “There’s no way they’ll get that road fixed in two days. We’ll be lucky if it opens in a week.”

“A week!” Beatrice straightened. “I can’t be stuck here a week.”

Lila shot her a tiny grin, the first real smile Beatrice had seen from her. “Yeah, me neither.”

“You really think it’ll take that long?”

“Maybe.” Lila poured the batter into a greased cake pan. “It’s never happened before. I just don’t think it’ll only take two days to clear a mudslide big enough to close the road. And we usually restock every two or three days.”

“I’m going to have to send another e-mail,” Beatrice said. “Somebody’s going to have to cover my docket.”

Lila shrugged, slid the cake into the oven, and turned to the vegetables, the resemblance to Beatrice’s mom more pronounced than ever. She didn’t give a shit about Beatrice’s docket.

Holly entered. “Did Beatrice tell you about the phone?”

“Yeah,” Lila said.

“Mind if I check yours?” Holly asked. “In case it’s just that one.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Holly opened a door at the far end of the kitchen and walked through. Beatrice saw a corner of a couch and a desk.

“I realize you won’t force your guests to be interviewed, but do you mind if I ask them a few questions?” Beatrice asked.

“You?”

“I think someone needs to take down everyone’s statements while they’re still fresh,” Beatrice said. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but I’m a Superior Court judge.”

“Yeah, I heard that.”

“I used to be a prosecuting attorney. So I know a little bit about taking statements.”

Holly returned to the kitchen. “Nope,” she said. “It’s both phones.”

“People forget things,” Beatrice said. “I just plan to write down what they remember in my notebook and give it to Detective Rainwater when the road opens.” She held up her notebook for Lila to see, but Lila was slicing mushrooms and didn’t look up.

“I don’t think being a judge gives you authority to interrogate my guests,” Lila said.

“Of course it doesn’t,” Beatrice said. “I can’t make anyone talk to me. But if they’re willing, I think it would be helpful.”

“She already interviewed me,” Holly said.

Lila shrugged. “Whatever. I just don’t want them upset. They’re already likely to be underfed by tomorrow night.”

“Thanks,” Beatrice said. She opened her notebook to a new page, and wrote Lila’s name at the top. “Did you see Paula at all yesterday after lunch? Or hear anything unusual?”

Lila gave a half smile. "No time like the present, eh? No, I didn't see Paula after lunch and I didn't hear anything. I was busy."

"Did anybody come by?"

"Not yesterday."

"How would you know?" Beatrice asked. "If you were working in the kitchen, couldn't someone have come to the front without you knowing about it?"

"Tires on the driveway make a lot of noise," Lila said. "It's gravel. Unless they walked up or rode a bicycle, which is practically impossible, I would have heard."

"Could you have been vacuuming or running the dishwasher or something noisy like that?"

"Not yesterday. I dusted a little and did some paperwork," Lila said. "What are you thinking, some stranger came in, took Paula up to the roof, and pushed her off?"

"I'm just ruling it out."

"She jumped," Lila said. "It's pretty obvious, don't you think? She was having girlfriend problems with more than one girl, it sounds like."

"If she jumped, why was the fence broken? Wouldn't she have climbed over it?"

"Maybe she did," Lila said. "Maybe that's why it broke. That fence wasn't designed for people to climb on it. She was solid. She must have weighed close to two hundred pounds."

"Maybe she was drunk and fell against it and it broke," Beatrice said.

The crease between Lila's dark brows deepened. "She didn't drink that much."

Lila was worried about liability, Beatrice guessed. "How do you know? You told Detective Rainwater you don't know how much she drank."

Lila tossed the knife onto the cutting board, crossed the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator door. "Look." The bottom shelf was filled with beer. "This is where I keep the cold beer. I don't count it. I just put it on the shelf. I have more in the pantry. When it gets used up, I put more in. I showed her where it was, and she drank some, but not many. I would have noticed if half a case was missing, all right?"

"What about empties?"

Holly had been watching in silence like a child hoping to avoid notice while eavesdropping on the adults. At Beatrice's question, she toed the trigger on a stainless steel trash can. It opened and she tilted it so Beatrice could see it was filled with cans and bottles. "We recycle."

"That's from the whole week," Lila said. "I don't have any idea how many of these bottles were hers. Do you?"

Beatrice shook her head. It didn't matter anyway. The toxicology tests would show if Paula had been intoxicated when she died.

"Now if there's nothing else, Detective, I have work to do."

LILA MIGHT RIDICULE, but Beatrice was serious. People would forget the details if they were cut off for a week. She might not have authority, but somebody had to make some sort of official record before the passing days clouded everyone's memories. She returned to the dining room, which had already been cleared of the breakfast mess, and sat at the table with her notebook. She added a few more notes to Lila's page, then added pages for Veronica, Jess, Dakota, and Carmen. She tapped the pen against her tooth and added a page for Tish. On Dakota's page she noted that she had been in the hot tub when Carmen screamed, not that she

needed the reminder. Even Beatrice wasn't immune to the sight of the glorious girl standing there wet and naked.

Carmen, Jess, and Veronica were the only women she hadn't spoken to at all yet. Carmen still slept, and Beatrice was reluctant to wake her. When Beatrice left her it was already after midnight, and Carmen was still far too upset to sleep. Beatrice felt a bit guilty about leaving her then, but she was exhausted and also a bit unsympathetic. Carmen was truly upset, she knew, but she'd only dated Paula a couple of years, and they'd broken up nearly a year ago. It couldn't compare to losing Leigh after thirty years together, and Beatrice had never sobbed in people's arms like Carmen did last night. People grieve in different ways, of course. Beatrice held her grief inside where it was private and safe.

She wondered where Jess and Veronica were. As though she'd been conjured, Jess entered the dining room from the lounge. Beatrice flipped her notebook over to conceal her writing before realizing how absurd that was. Jess was sweating and wearing exercise clothes, and Beatrice remembered there was a small workout room behind the lounge.

"Hello Jess," Beatrice said quickly to let Jess know she was there.

"Hello, Beatrice."

"You're good at recognizing voices."

"Yeah." Jess stood a moment as if trying to decide whether to stay or not.

"Have you heard about the road closure?" Beatrice asked.

"No," Jess said. "What happened?"

"A mudslide. We're going to be stuck here an extra day or two. Apparently they're happening all over. Something about the fires this summer combined with all this rain. Would you like a cup of coffee? I'd like to talk to you about something else, if you have a minute."

"Sure."

Beatrice rose. "Have a seat. I'll get you one. Cream and sugar?"

"No, just black, thanks."

Beatrice poured a cup from the urn on the sideboard and placed it in front of Jess, letting it strike the table slightly so she would hear where it was. Jess was still sweating. She pulled her glasses off, rubbed the towel across her face and over her head, and put the glasses back on. It was too bad she had to wear them. Her eyes were light brown with a darker rim, the lashes thick and long. Her hair at the ends was wet with sweat, and it curled slightly toward her cheeks. Her lips were wide and red, her skin glowed from her exercise, and the bone structure of her face was striking and beautiful.

Jess lifted the cup to her lips and sipped.

"The road isn't the only problem," Beatrice said.

"Oh?"

"No. The phones are out too."

"Wow," Jess said, but her expression didn't change, at least as far as Beatrice could tell.

"I did speak with Detective Rainwater before the phone died. He said he didn't finish interviewing people last night, so he wanted to do it today over the phone. He wanted to get everyone's memories of yesterday while they're still fresh. Of course now he can't. So I thought I'd talk to everyone and make a few notes for Detective Rainwater before everyone forgets."

"I don't think any of us will forget yesterday," Jess said.

"Oh, I know we won't forget what happened to Paula, but we might forget the details. Things like where we all were after we got back from Leavenworth. Do you remember?"

"I worked out," Jess said.

People generally shift their eyes to the right when they're trying to remember something they did or saw, and they look to the left when they're lying. There were other indicators, too, when someone lied, facial expressions that didn't keep up with emotions, crossed arms, touching the mouth frequently. Spotting lies often came down to a feeling in the gut, like Rainwater said. After watching dozens, hundreds even, of witnesses caught in lies on the stand, Beatrice had a good sense when someone was telling the truth. But they usually weren't blind. Beatrice wondered if Rainwater had any special tips for reading people wearing dark glasses.

Beatrice felt her own eyes move to the right as she tried to picture what Jess was wearing yesterday afternoon. She saw Jess standing under the eaves out of the rain wearing cropped black leggings and a baggy blue sweatshirt.

Jess sat still and apparently calm with one hand on the towel draped over her shoulder and the other on her coffee cup. She didn't lift it, but kept her finger on the handle as if making sure she'd be able to find it again easily when she wanted it. No doubt Jess had a lot of mannerisms driven by her lack of sight that could render the usual cues of truthfulness or deceit useless.

"Did you go straight to the workout room when we got back?" Beatrice asked.

"As soon as I changed. I was there within ten minutes, I would guess."

"Did you go down the elevator or the stairs?"

"The elevator."

"So you would have to go through the lobby and the dining room and the lounge to get to the exercise room. Did you see anyone? I mean, not see, but..."

Jess's lips twitched in the tiniest of smiles. "I know what you mean, and no, I didn't."

Holly would still have been in the kitchen unloading groceries, of course. "How long did you work out?" Beatrice asked.

"Probably about forty minutes. I usually do an hour, and I was more than halfway through when I heard Carmen scream. The side door opens right out to where Paula landed. Lila was already there, so I thought it would be best if I just stayed out of the way."

It was a sensible reaction. What else was a blind girl supposed to do when faced with a dead woman lying in the rain?

"Did you know Paula very well?"

"I never got much of a chance to know her at all," Jess said.

"So you didn't have any problems with her? You don't know any reason why someone might have wanted to hurt her, or if she might want to hurt herself?"

"No," Jess said. "But based on the little I did know of her, I think she'd be the last person here who'd want to kill herself. And, forgive me if she's a friend of yours, but she might have been the last person people would mind seeing dead."

"She was no friend of mine," Beatrice said quickly, then shook her head in immediate remorse. Paula was someone Beatrice would never have befriended on her own, but the woman was dead, and she hadn't been that bad. It was Carmen who had brought her around, of course, and Leigh thought she was funny. It was strange to think that Paula might even now be in the same place as Leigh. Were they talking together? Laughing? Leigh always could get along with anyone.

Beatrice shook her head again. Jess was very insightful for someone who couldn't see. "Why did you come here?" Beatrice asked. "I mean to the Inn, all by yourself?"

Jess hesitated before answering and for the first time fidgeted just a bit. Her feet shuffled, and she ran her finger up and down the handle of her coffee cup. "I wasn't born blind, you know," she said finally. "It happened pretty suddenly three years ago. It changed my world."

“I imagine so.”

“I’ve spent most of my time ever since re-learning things. I had to learn how to walk with a cane and how to ride a bus and use a cell phone. Even how to dress and how to eat properly. It’s not as bad as I thought it was going to be. But I’ve always been very independent. More than anything else, I missed going places alone. So for my vacation this year, I decided to go off by myself somewhere. I picked this place because it’s small and isolated and quiet. And lesbian-friendly, of course.”

“Is this your first time going anywhere alone?” Beatrice asked.

“First time to somewhere not on the city bus system.”

Beatrice’s admiration for Jess grew. On top of everything else, she was courageous and smart. For a fleeting moment Beatrice wished she was thirty years younger. An awful pang of guilt and remorse shot through her as she thought of Leigh, waiting for her upstairs.

“How’s it going for you?” Beatrice asked. “Being here alone?”

For the first time, Jess smiled, though she tried to hide it, and a faint blush crossed her cheeks. “It’s been great,” she said. “I mean, aside from what happened to Paula, of course, and the road being closed and no phone connection. Aside from all that, it’s been great.”

BEATRICE FOUND VERONICA in her room.

“Just a minute,” she called when Beatrice knocked.

Beatrice could hear movement in the room, but she couldn’t discern its cause. The door opened. Veronica stood there, flushed and slightly breathless, barefoot and wearing a short blue robe belted at the waist.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was dressing.”

Her eyes were bright, but not with tears. She looked remarkably happy for a woman whose date had died the day before.

“I wonder if you have a minute to talk,” Beatrice said. “I don’t know if you’ve heard about the road?”

“No.” Veronica backed into the room so Beatrice could enter. “What about it?”

Beatrice looked around the room. It was much larger than hers, and two of the walls were rounded like the inside of the tower. Several sets of clothes were piled on the bed, all Veronica’s by the look of them. Beatrice wondered where Paula’s clothes were. She removed a skirt from the rocking chair, tossed it onto the bed, and sat down. “The rain caused a mudslide,” she said. “The road’s out of commission for a while.”

Veronica caught her breath and her eyes widened. “Is there another way out?”

“I’m afraid not. Our vacation might be extended for a day or two.”

Veronica’s brows twitched and her cheeks tensed. She tucked a thin strand of hair into her mouth and began chewing it. Her face was mobile and expressive. There was no mistaking her feelings. The girl was nervous.

“It’s worse than that,” Beatrice said. “The phones are out too.”

Veronica sat on the edge of the bed. “Oh no.” Her voice was nearly a whimper.

“Is there something wrong?” Beatrice asked, suddenly concerned. “Is there some particular reason you need to get back? A medical reason or something?”

Veronica shook her head. “No, nothing like that. I just...it’s just work, that’s all.”

“You can still send an e-mail,” Beatrice said. “That’s what I did.”

Veronica nodded, but the distress on her face didn't change. Sending an e-mail, Beatrice guessed, would not solve her problem.

"If you don't mind," Beatrice said, making her voice gentle, "I'd like to ask you a few questions. Detective Rainwater meant to come back today, but since he can't, I thought it would be a good idea for all of us to go over what we remember about yesterday before we forget."

Veronica stopped chewing her hair and gave Beatrice a wary eye. With the strand of hair still attached to her lip like a bridle, she reminded Beatrice of a skittish horse. "What kind of questions?"

"Just what you did when you got back from Leavenworth, and if you saw or heard anything," Beatrice said. She indicated her notebook. "I'm making a list for Detective Rainwater."

"I came back here," Veronica said. "I showered and changed."

Beatrice thought back. It was true that when Veronica showed up at the side of the house yesterday, she wore different clothes than she'd worn to Leavenworth, and her hair was fresh and clean. "Did you hear anything?"

"Not until the scream," Veronica said.

"Did you see anyone?"

"No. Yes. Carmen stopped by. She was looking for Paula. But I hadn't seen her."

"She wasn't here when you got back?" Beatrice asked. "Paula, I mean?"

"No," Veronica said. "I told the detective that last night."

"What time was it that Carmen came by?"

Veronica's eyes shifted right. Unless she was a skilled liar or a psychopath, she was trying to remember. "After my shower I think. No, before. No, wait, it was after I think." She shook her head. "I don't really remember."

"How did Carmen seem? Was she upset?"

"No. She wasn't mad at me then," Veronica said. "She seemed kind of excited, like she had a chance of getting back together with Paula once I told her I wasn't interested. Like it didn't even matter what Paula wanted."

"Did Paula tell you what she wanted?" Beatrice said.

Veronica looked down at her fingers, which played with the belt of her robe, and shook her head.

Beatrice tapped her pen on her notebook and said, "Forgive me, but why did you come here with her, anyway, if you weren't interested in her. You're so much younger and so pretty."

Veronica rolled her eyes. "And so naïve. I had no idea she thought of this trip as a date. We're members of the same book group. She told all of us about Women's Only Weekend a couple months ago and asked if anyone wanted to go. I did. A few other people were interested too, but they ended up backing out. Paula probably told them to. I didn't know until we got here that she booked us in a room together."

"I didn't think Paula was much of a reader," Beatrice said.

"She's not," Veronica said. "She never reads the book. I already knew she only joined the group in order to meet women, we all knew that, but it never even crossed my mind that she thought of me that way. She really is older than my mother." She gave her head a small shake. "Was."

"You were upset yesterday morning," Beatrice said. "Did you and Paula argue?"

"No, I wouldn't call it an argument."

"What was it about?"

Veronica looked up, and for the first time there was a bit of a challenge in her expression. "It's kind of personal."

Beatrice nodded. "I'll just make a note for Detective Rainwater," she said. "He may want to follow up."

Veronica turned pink. "No, don't. It's not that big a deal, really. If you must know, she wanted to have sex and I didn't want to. That's all it was." She nibbled on her hair again.

Beatrice thought back to some of the lewd stories Paula had told in the past about her conquests and thought Veronica's refusal would not have gone over very well. She made a show of capping her pen and closing the notebook before asking softly, "Who won?"

The color on Veronica's cheeks turned darker and her eyes turned hard. "Nobody won. I told you, it wasn't an argument. She wanted sex and I said no."

Beatrice nodded like she believed her.

Veronica rose. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get dressed."

VERONICA CLOSED THE door behind Beatrice, her mood deflated. She had been feeling buoyant before the interruption, happy in her privacy, letting herself forget for the moment the reason for it, dancing around in nothing but her panties and enjoying her image in the mirrors as she flashed by. Her interview with Beatrice had destroyed all that. Paula was still dead. The questions were closing in, and Veronica couldn't even leave the Inn. The odds of getting through this thing unscathed were growing slim.

She sat on the bed for several minutes, thoughtfully stroking the smooth skin of her forearm. Then she moved to the bathroom and reached for her razor.

BEATRICE DECIDED TO wait no longer for Carmen to wake up. It was eleven o'clock already. She knocked softly on Carmen's door, to wake her gently, and was surprised when it immediately opened. Carmen stood in the doorway with a pair of shorts in one hand and sandals in the other, but she was fully dressed. Behind her on the bed was an open suitcase half filled.

"I'm glad you finally showed up," Carmen said. "When are we leaving? I'm nearly ready."

"We're not leaving," Beatrice said. "Not today."

"Then I'm leaving without you. Why do you want to stay? They'll give us our money back for tonight. They have to. Somebody died here." Carmen's voice cracked.

"It's not that. We can't leave today. The road washed out last night. There was a mudslide. We're cut off."

"Oh Christ." Carmen tossed the sandals at the suitcase and threw herself on the bed. "Don't tell me that. I can't take another fucking thing."

"I'm sorry," Beatrice said. "They say it'll be a couple of days before it's fixed."

"Isn't there another road? There can't be only one goddamned road to this place."

"You know there's only one road, Carmen. You're the one who told me that."

Carmen sat up. "Bea, Paula's dead." Her eyes were wide and her face slack, as if realizing it for the first time, though she had said the same thing at least a dozen times the night before.

"I know." Beatrice sat on the bed and looped her arm through Carmen's. "I know. It's hard."

Carmen sighed and rested her head on Beatrice's shoulder. She wasn't crying anymore, at least.

"How did you end up finding Paula yesterday?" Beatrice asked.

"I looked everywhere for her," Carmen said. "I just wanted to tell her what Veronica said. I mean, if she was pushing me away because she thought she had a chance with Veronica, she needed to know what Veronica said, don't you think?"

Beatrice felt a moment of relief that Paula was dead. There was no point any longer of trying to cure Carmen of her delusions.

"Where did you look?"

"Everywhere," Carmen said. "I went to her room first, but Miss Priss wouldn't let me in. She just said she wasn't there and she hadn't seen her. She didn't even seem to care."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. Right after we got back. When was that?"

"About four. Was Veronica's hair wet?"

"Y-yes," Carmen said. "Wasn't everyone's? We got rained on."

"That was way back in Leavenworth," Beatrice said. "Holly dropped us right at the front door when we got back. I mean was it really wet, like she just got out of the shower?"

Carmen shrugged. "I guess."

"So you couldn't have gone straight to her room, could you? Not if she got there first and had time to take a shower."

"She has longer legs."

Beatrice gave Carmen a nudge. "Come on, Carmen."

"I guess I stopped at my room to wee, all right? I combed my hair. What difference does it make?"

"None, probably." She'd stopped at her room to primp, Beatrice realized, because she was going to make another play for Paula. "Where did you look next?"

"Downstairs. The lobby, the dining room, the lounge. Did you know there's a little gym behind the lounge?"

"Yes. Was anyone in it?"

"The blind girl was. Jessica."

"Jess," Beatrice said. "Did you see anyone else down there?"

"I don't think so," Carmen said. "Wait, I saw Holly. She hadn't seen Paula either."

"Where did you see Holly?"

"The lobby, I think. Or maybe the dining room?"

"Did you look in the kitchen?"

"I poked my head in, but no one was there. So I went outside and checked the hot tub and the gazebo, but nobody was around. It was raining."

"No one was in the hot tub?"

"Nope. So I walked around the corner, and there she was." Carmen's voice shook. "She was just lying there on the ground all wet, her poor head smashed in."

Beatrice itched to make a note that Dakota wasn't in the hot tub, but she didn't want to pull out her notebook while Carmen was still upset. "Did you ever check the tower roof?"

"No," Carmen said, and the tears started flowing. "I didn't think about it. I forgot all about those damn stairs. What the hell was Paula doing up there, anyway?"

BEATRICE STOPPED IN her room to make some notes and grab a sweatshirt. She glanced at the box on the window seat and gave an indulgent smile.

“Is Paula with you, love? Are you two having a good laugh, wherever you are? Ask her what she was doing up on that tower roof, will you?”

Beatrice sat, placed Leigh’s box on her lap, and wondered why she was putting forth so much effort to solve the mystery of Paula’s death when in the end it made no difference. Everyone died. Did it really matter how, or by whose hand? Whether it occurred early or late in life? If she weren’t such a coward, Beatrice would end her own time here on earth and go be with Leigh. But, of course, that might not be what happened when Beatrice died. Maybe she wouldn’t get to be with Leigh at all. The thought terrified her.

For decades, ever since she gave up Catholicism in her twenties, Beatrice had cheerfully considered herself agnostic. When it came to God or the gods or goddesses, to life after to death, to the eternity of souls, she simply did not know. No one had yet returned to tell the story. Nobody knew what happened after death and nobody could know, and Beatrice was not bothered by that fact. She was comforted by the belief that upon her death she would either end and know no difference, or she would move on to some more interesting development in the journey of her being, some higher level or, at the very least, another life somewhere. Only recently had the thought intruded that perhaps, upon death, the journey doesn’t end and it doesn’t get better. Perhaps the journey only got worse.

A terrible afterlife made an awful kind of sense. Why would people cling so tightly to life if what waited for them on the other side was better? Not just people, but animals and plants too, every living thing spent every bit of energy and effort it possessed for one purpose, and that was to live. Why the desperate urgency unless, on some level, they knew, all life knew, right down to the smallest protozoa, that at the end of it all they would face something so horrible that their conscious minds simply could not acknowledge it? What if, even now, Leigh was suffering in a world worse than this one?

“Is this a one-person pity party, or can anyone join in?” Leigh asked.

Beatrice smiled. Leigh always did know how to tease her out of her gloomy moods. “I know it’s not a big deal from your perspective,” Beatrice said, “but over on this side, it’s a little scary when somebody dies under mysterious circumstances.”

“It’s a little scary over here too,” Leigh said. “You wouldn’t believe how many ghosts I see floating around.”

“Really?” Beatrice asked.

Leigh didn’t answer, and Beatrice gave a soft laugh.

THE DOOR TO the stairs was between the elevator and the door to Paula and Veronica’s room. The staircase was wide and well lit, but the stairs themselves were concrete, narrow on one end and wide on the other as they curved around the tower wall. To Dakota and Amy, they were probably charming, but Beatrice found them disorienting, and she couldn’t even imagine hauling her luggage up them.

She climbed up to the third floor where there was a landing and knocked on Dakota's door. She waited, but there was no answer. At the end of the landing the stairs continued to scroll up the tower. Beatrice went up.

The door to the roof was not locked. Beatrice stepped onto the round roof and realized she didn't need the sweatshirt after all. Clouds still skidded across the sky, but blue swaths appeared too, the sun shone through in spots, and the temperature on the roof was comfortably warm. An attempt had been made to make the rooftop a nice place to visit. Green outdoor carpet simulated grass along the sides and a tile walkway sliced through the center. A wrought iron bench was placed against the wall beside the door flanked by large ceramic pots of red and white geraniums. The flowers were alive, but barely. Most of the leaves were shriveled, and there were more soggy black petals than red or white. Cigarette butts stuck up in the dirt of the plant on the right. Most of the butts were limp and wet, but one of them protruded straight up, firm and dry. Interesting. The butt had to have been placed there that day, probably in the last hour. Beatrice hadn't realized any of their party smoked.

The fence circled the edge of the tower. Beatrice moved to an unbroken spot. The fence was constructed in six-foot sections, each connected with hinges and bolted to the ground. She reached out, grabbed the top of the fence, and gave it a shake. It wobbled. Not much, but it was enough to make Beatrice step back. It wasn't a fence she would lean against. Had Paula made that mistake?

Beatrice heard a sound behind her. She turned and saw the door from the stairs open. Dakota stepped out.

"I thought I heard someone come up here," Dakota said. "Did you knock on my door?"

"Yes. No one answered."

"Sorry. I was in the bathroom." Her face looked freshly scrubbed. "Did you need something?"

Beatrice held up her notebook. "I thought I'd make some notes for Detective Rainwater, since he can't do his interviews. Do you mind?"

Dakota shrugged and sat on the bench. "Whatever. I already told you I was in the hot tub."

"When did you go there?"

"After we got back from Leavenworth."

Beatrice opened her notebook to Dakota's page. "Did you go to your room first?"

"Well, yeah," Dakota said. "I changed and grabbed a towel. Not that it made any difference."

"So how much time passed, do you think, from the time we got back and you went to the hot tub?"

"Hardly any. Ten minutes, maybe. That's all."

"Did you see anyone, either when you were going down to the hot tub or while you were there?"

Dakota's eyes veered to the left. "No."

"Not even Holly in the lobby?"

"She wasn't there when I came down."

"And then you must have walked through the dining room to the patio. Did you see anyone there?"

"I didn't see anyone anywhere," Dakota said.

Beatrice flipped back through her notebook like she was looking for something. She paused at one page. "Not even Carmen?"

Dakota's eyes turned wary. "Why Carmen?"

“Well, she says she was looking for Paula, and she looked at the hot tub. Nobody was there.”

“I was there,” Dakota said. “She just didn’t see me. She probably doesn’t remember. She was too focused on finding Paula. Besides, it was getting dark already by then. I duck down in the water sometimes too.” Her eyes were shifting to the left like mad, and she’d given three reasons why Carmen wouldn’t have seen her in the hot tub when one would do.

“Have you come up here before?” Beatrice asked.

“Yes. Amy and I came up here that first night. Before she took off, obviously.”

“I don’t suppose the fence was broken then?”

“No.” Dakota’s eyes shifted to the left again. For the first time since Dakota arrived, Beatrice looked back over her left shoulder. The broken fence was behind her just to the left. Perhaps Dakota wasn’t lying after all. Maybe she just couldn’t take her eyes off the broken fence.

Dakota rose from the bench and walked up to the section of fence that still stood right next to the gap caused by Paula’s fall. She grabbed the top and shook it like Beatrice had done. This section wobbled more, and the piece that dangled, which was connected only by one hinge, banged against the side of the building. “This hinge is broken, but the other one’s okay. Want to look?”

“No, I’m afraid of heights,” Beatrice said, and she felt her own eyes shift at the lie. She wasn’t afraid of heights. Except when lured to the edge by someone who was lying about where she’d been when Paula was killed.

JESS SAT ON the edge of her bed and cradled her guitar in her lap. She strummed a few chords of an original composition and sang along with it lightly. Very lightly. She didn’t want anyone to hear her. She knew the song by heart, and her fingers unerringly found the correct strings. Her timing was right, and her voice was pitch perfect. Still, something wasn’t right.

She had envisioned, when making her reservation for the remote mountain Inn, that she would spend some time in the evening playing songs around a campfire for a receptive crowd who sang along and asked for encores. Just like it used to be. People used to beg her to bring out her guitar. Play for us, they’d say, and sing us a song. Sometimes she would and sometimes she wouldn’t, it would depend on her mood, but she never doubted that she was wanted.

The weekend was not turning out like she’d expected. Of course, Paula’s death changed everything, but even before that she had realized that her campfire vision was just a fantasy. Every woman there seemed wrapped up in a fantasy of her own. Nobody had attention to spare for someone else’s dream. Maybe that’s the way it had always been, maybe even the way it always would be. Everyone just floated around in her own little bubble. Sometimes bubbles bumped into each other, and they’d pop and have to start over. Once in a while, they merged and created a bigger bubble they could share.

It seemed when she was younger that it was easy to find others like her, women who would share her bubble for a while. That was what young people did. Little kids would play with anyone. When they got older they fooled around with anyone who looked good to them and was interested in the same goal, which was usually sex. Look at Dakota and Amy. Those two had nothing in common but sex and looks, at least according to Tish. When you’re twenty-one, sex and looks may be enough, but Jess hadn’t been twenty-one for a long time.

She was a fool to have expected to show up at an inn full of strange lesbians and have a big bonding experience around the campfire like Girl Scouts. Everyone there already knew someone. Only Jess had come to the Inn alone knowing not a soul.

She did feel a bit bonded to Tish though. There was something about running her hands all over Tish's body that made her feel connected. Proprietary even. Jess had never felt anything like Tish's body. She was small and curvy and soft. Jess wished she could think up an excuse to touch it again. Or why did she need an excuse? She should just go right ahead and do it. Tish had liked it, that much was obvious.

Jess couldn't get over Tish's confidence. She'd just stood there and let Jess touch every bit of her like she had nothing to be ashamed of. Jess had that kind of confidence once, not with her body, but with her guitar. She didn't have it anymore. That's what was missing.

Jess tried to imagine letting someone touch her all over. No, not someone. Tish. She imagined Tish's hands on her breasts, running down her sides, across her belly, over her hips, between her legs.

Sweet Jesus.

Jess played her fingers over the strings and let her feelings pour out of her voice, and it was good. She knew she was. If she thought she could play like that for the women downstairs, she'd haul her guitar down there right this minute. She couldn't do it. She put the guitar away. She put thoughts of Tish away too, and forced herself to think of something else.

She needed to talk to Veronica about what happened in the workout room. No one else knew about it, she was fairly certain of that. No one living, that is. Paula may have known, but she wouldn't be telling anyone now.

THE ADELHEID INN was really nothing more than a bed and breakfast. It was not designed to be an entertainment venue. Guests slept at the Inn and they ate there, and on Women Only Weekends they might drink and party there in the evenings, but generally guests left during the day to be entertained in Leavenworth or with local outdoor activities. The mountains were filled with opportunities for hiking, climbing, biking, rafting, or golfing in the summer, and skiing, ice climbing, sleigh riding, and even dog sledding in the winter. For guests unexpectedly stranded at the Inn, though, there was little to do on a blustery Sunday afternoon.

Holly opened a cabinet filled with board games, which the women largely ignored, and knelt at the fireplace to nurse a small fire. Dakota curled in a chair beside the fire, headphones in her ears, and stared into the flames, head wagging to a tune only she could hear. Veronica propped one foot on the coffee table, which she had strewn with fingernail polish, remover, cotton balls, and assorted tools. She hunched over her toes with a brush.

Opposite Veronica, Tish lay sideways on the couch with her legs resting on the cushions. She stared at her toes and wondered what Jess meant when she touched them and said, "Pretty." She leaned forward, closed her eyes, and ran her fingers across her big toenail. She could feel where the polish had chipped. It didn't feel pretty. Did Jess mean Tish's toes were pretty, or all of her? How did a blind person see pretty anyway? Keeping her eyes closed, she imagined a scenario where she got to run her hands all over Jess like Jess had done to her. What excuse could she give? The one Jess had given didn't apply.

"Would you like me to do your toes?" Veronica asked.

Tish opened her eyes. Veronica's toenails were painted pink and now dried, separated from each other by a green foam toe separator. "Cool. Yeah, that would be great."

"What color would you like? I have Peach Schnapps, Orchid Luster, Bubblicious, Tangerine, and Leopard."

"You brought all those colors for one weekend?"

Veronica shrugged. "I didn't know what mood I'd be in."

"Let me see them." Tish examined the bottles and picked Tangerine. She dropped her left leg to the floor and prepared to swivel her cast onto the coffee table.

"No, don't move that leg," Veronica said. "I can sit here, if it won't bother you." She perched on the edge of the couch between Tish's spread legs. "It's easier to reach both feet this way."

"Uh, all right." Tish tucked her skirt between her legs to hide her panties, but Veronica didn't seem interested. She doused a cotton ball in fingernail polish remover and went to work removing the chipped paint from Tish's right toes.

Dakota rose and wandered over. She tugged the cords out of her ears. "Can we sign your cast?"

"Sure."

Holly rose from the hearth and said, "We have markers." She rummaged through the pile of games and came up with a rainbow pack of markers. She removed a black one from the pack, pulled the cap off, and sniffed. "Mm, licorice."

"Is there tangerine?" Tish asked. "It would match my toes."

"There's orange."

"Close enough."

Holly reached in behind Veronica and scrawled her name with the orange marker along Tish's calf. She was finished in seconds. Dakota, though, attacked the project with an artist's eye. She grabbed a handful of markers, leaned over the couch, and started working at Tish's ankle. Tish crossed her hands behind her head and smiled. She had Veronica tucked between her legs, though she had her back to Tish, and Dakota leaning over her with the mounds of her tiny breasts practically popping out over the top of a skimpy tank top, her tongue swirling a cinnamon candy that made her lips vibrantly red. Holly had returned to the fire, but that didn't stop Tish from imagining her hovering over her as well. There was little more a girl could ask for. Then she heard the scrape of a cane and the slow measured tread of Jess's step entering the lounge.

"Hi Jess," Dakota said. "We're signing Tish's cast. Want to?"

"Sure," Jess said. "Just give me a minute. I'll be right back."

"I'll save you a spot," Dakota said.

Tish thought Dakota was kidding, but the letters she created were large, fat, and three dimensional, squished together like graffiti. By the time Jess returned several minutes later, Dakota's name had nearly reached Tish's knee, and she was only on the 't'.

"What's that?" Tish asked, seeing a small metal object in Jess's hand.

"It's a stylus," Jess said.

Veronica rose. "Here, Jess, sit here. I only have the left foot to do. I can reach it better from here anyway." She returned to the chair across from the couch and raised Tish's left foot to her lap, spreading Tish's legs like a wishbone.

Jess took Veronica's place, and it didn't take her long to figure out where she was. She placed a hand on Tish's left thigh, felt skin, and placed her other hand on the cast. Her brows twitched. Unlike Veronica, who had worked with her back to Tish, Jess faced her, one leg curled up beneath her.

“I’ve decorated up to here,” Dakota said.

Jess located a space between Dakota’s hand and the top of the cast, brushed Tish’s skirt up and out of the way, and leaned forward. She poked the stylus into the hard plaster, worked it around to make a small hole, and blew the plaster dust away. Given the area staked out by Dakota and the position in which Tish sat, it was really the only spot available, but it was on the inside of Tish’s thigh. Jess fingered the dot she had made, arranged her stylus, and started on another. With every jiggle of the stylus, Tish’s crotch trembled, and with every puff of Jess’s breath, it clenched. She tried to control her breathing so no one would notice the effect Jess’s movements had on her.

“What are you—” Tish had clear her throat. “What are you writing?”

“My name,” Jess said. She blew again. “In braille.”

How many dots would that take, Tish wondered. If it went on for long, she was going to start moaning in front of everyone. “Are you writing Jess?” she asked, “or Jessica?”

A smile curved Jess’s lips. “Which would you prefer?”

“Don’t curl your toes like that,” Veronica said. “The polish isn’t dry.”

“Oh,” Tish said. “Sorry.”

Aunt Bea entered the lounge from the dining room. “Have you girls got a few minutes? Well, I can see that you do.”

“We’re decorating Tish,” Dakota said.

“Lucky girl,” Aunt Bea said, and Tish wondered if she meant Dakota or Tish. “I know I’ve spoken with all of you already, but I’m still trying to get some things straight for Detective Rainwater. I’m trying to figure out who was first to come outside and find Paula yesterday, after Carmen, that is.”

“It was either me or Lila,” Jess said. “The door from the gym leads right to that side of the building. It only took me a minute to get out there when I heard Carmen screaming.”

“I was next,” Dakota said. “When I got there, Jess and Lila were already there.”

“I got there the same time as Dakota,” Holly said, “but from the front of the building. I didn’t stay, though. I ran back to call 9-1-1. It was pretty obvious there was nothing I could do for her.”

“Everyone else was already there when I came out,” Veronica said, “except for Tish.”

Aunt Bea nodded again and jotted something in her notebook.

“Why does it matter?” Dakota asked.

“It might not,” Aunt Bea said. “But you never know what will be important in an investigation.”

“But why are you investigating at all?” Tish asked. “What’s the big deal? Paula jumped.”

“Maybe.” Aunt Bea smiled, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. She wandered out of the room.

Silence fell over the four women when she left, a silence broken finally by Dakota who said, “I know she’s your aunt, Tish, but she’s kind of weird.”

Self-conscious laughs from the other women showed they felt the same. “Don’t worry about it,” Tish said. “I know she’s weird. She used to be the cool aunt, believe it or not. Seriously, Aunt Bea was lesbian when lesbian wasn’t cool. But that was before Aunt Leigh died. That was three or four years ago, and I think she took part of Aunt Bea with her. She’s never happy anymore.”

“Do you think she was trying to get at something?” Veronica asked.

“She was pretty specific with her questions,” Holly said.

“It’s kind of freaky,” Dakota said. “Like she knows something we don’t know.”

Jess leaned over Tish's thigh again and blew at some non-existent dust. Tish tingled, and it was only partly because of Jess's breath.

BEATRICE'S HEAD POUNDED. She didn't want to open her eyes. It felt like she'd been hit with a brick. She tried to remember what she'd been doing to cause such agony. It couldn't be drinking. Even in the wild days of her youth, which frankly hadn't been very wild, she'd never woken to a headache like this. Had she been in a car accident? Had anyone called Leigh?

Something wet touched her face. Her eyes flew open. A dripping yellow sponge hovered over her. A drop fell from it to land on her face, and she blinked. The sponge vanished.

"Oh good, you're awake."

Beatrice turned her head. It hurt, but it was easier than trying to move her eyes. Lila sat beside her with the sponge in her hand and an anxious look on her face.

"We can't exactly call 9-1-1," Lila said. "I hope you're not too badly hurt."

"9-1-1? Why?" Beatrice asked. "What happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that," Lila said. "Holly heard a crash and found you sacked out on the floor in the dining room. You have a big bump on the side of your head."

Beatrice raised a heavy hand to feel for herself. She did, indeed, have a large tender bump on her head. "How did I get here?"

"You walked. Holly and I helped you. You don't remember?"

"No," Beatrice said, but her memory was returning. There had been no car accident. Leigh was dead. The last thing she remembered was talking to the girls in the lounge. She'd wanted to tell Tish to close her legs, for God's sake, she was wearing a skirt, but she'd bit her lip. "From the dining room?"

"Well, between the dining room and the lobby. The big vase from the buffet was smashed on the floor right by you."

"Were the girls with Holly?"

"No," Lila said. "Nobody was there except you."

"They were in the lounge together," Beatrice said. "By the fire. Tish and Jess and Veronica and Holly."

"There's no fire in the lounge," Lila said. "I think Holly had one going earlier today."

"What time is it?" Beatrice asked, but a more urgent question struck her before Lila could answer. "My notebook. Where's my notebook?" She ran her hands down her sides, but felt nothing.

"I didn't see it," Lila said.

"I know I had it," Beatrice said. She was remembering now. Of course the girls weren't still in the lounge, that was hours ago, but she remembered heading downstairs with her notebook. She'd had some purpose, some more questions to ask, but she couldn't remember what they were. She struggled to sit up, and a cloud of pain squeezed her head. She lay back down.

"You'd better lie still," Lila said. "If we could get to a hospital, I'd take you there. Blacking out plus amnesia sounds like a concussion to me."

"I don't have amnesia. I need my notebook. It has my notes, my investigation." She tried to rise again.

"Stop it. I'll go find your notebook. Just don't move, okay?"

Lila left, and Beatrice tried to relax. She'd figured something out from her notes, she remembered, and it was important, but she couldn't recall now what it was. A review of the notes would probably bring it back to her. It was disconcerting to have a portion of her memory gone. How could she have got up and walked to Lila's room and then forgotten all about it?

She looked around. She had no doubt she was in Lila's room. The couch on which she lay and the desk nearby matched the bit she'd seen when Holly had opened the door from the kitchen earlier. The desk was piled high with papers, notebooks, and manila folders beside a computer much newer than the vintage specimen in the lobby. A shelf beside it was filled with books and manuals and more books. Some of them were familiar. After puzzling for a moment, she was able to make out a *Black's Law Dictionary*, a spiral *Blue Book* of legal citation, manuals on appellate briefs, and *2014 Court Rules* for the state and federal courts in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. All the books were well used, with post-it notes sticking out the sides and tops marking necessary spots.

A memory she didn't know she had, a memory from long ago, popped in her head and she knew why Lila had seemed so familiar.

Lila entered the room, her hands empty. "I'm sorry," she said. "We couldn't find the notebook."

Beatrice stared, the notebook forgotten for the moment.

Lila frowned. "Are you all right? Did you forget again?"

"You cut your hair," Beatrice said.

Lila froze.

"Well, why shouldn't you?" Beatrice asked. "It's been a long time. Twenty years almost, right? People do cut their hair."

Muscles moved in Lila's face, but barely. She was trying to decide whether to lie, Beatrice suspected. She'd been called Del back then, not Lila.

"Delilah?" Beatrice asked. "Is that your name?"

Lila must have realized denial was futile. She gave a stiff nod. "I don't think we ever met," she said.

"We didn't," Beatrice said. "I worked in Jefferson County back then. But it was in the news, of course. We all followed the story."

Lila's chin rose. "I did my time."

"I know," Beatrice said. First degree manslaughter was what she had been charged with, a Class A Felony, and that's what she was convicted of, too. She must have spent six years or more in prison, even with good time credits. "You wouldn't accept a plea."

Lila looked away. "I couldn't accept a plea. Not for that. I was guilty."

"You know better than that," Beatrice said. "Pleas are standard."

"Not for me."

It was true that Lila was a special case. After all, she'd been a prosecutor in Pierce County when it happened. She'd specialized in domestic violence and child abuse cases, and she had a reputation for being harder than most on defendants. Her plea deals were legendary for their stinginess, and it was said they were withdrawn if she didn't like the way a man looked at her. Defense attorneys hated her. Some of the prosecutors did too.

So when the child died, they really had no choice but to throw the book at her. Nobody was going to let her get away with a sentence lighter than what she'd handed out to others. Baby Killer, they'd called her. Beatrice had called her that herself. Lila must have heard it a lot in

prison. It must have been rough. Prisoners don't go easy on baby killers. They don't go easy on prosecutors either.

"Still," Beatrice said, "they offered you Manslaughter 2, I heard. Two years."

Lila shook her head. "Two years wasn't enough." She remained unmoving still, her head hanging, staring at the floor, the picture of self-immolation. Beatrice had seen it before, though it was rare, when a person convicted of a crime imposed a harsher sentence on him or herself than was imposed by the law.

"Penance, you mean?"

Lila nodded.

"Was seven years enough?" Beatrice asked.

Lila raised her head and blinked.

"Would anything ever be penance enough?" Beatrice asked.

Lila's jaw clenched. "No."

"Nobody ever thought you did it on purpose."

"I did it," Lila said. "The rest doesn't matter. He would be twenty-one years old now."

Beatrice sighed, overwhelmed at the sadness she felt coming from Lila. She'd seen some horrible cases over the years, both as a prosecutor and a judge, but child cases were the worst. She glanced again at the law books. "You're still practicing?"

Lila shook her head. "I just do research, some writing, on a contract basis. Now how are you feeling? Can you walk?"

"Can I get the hell out of here, you mean, and leave you alone?" Beatrice asked. She expected at least a smile, but Lila's face was stone. Beatrice pulled herself up to a sitting position and then stood. Her head pounded, but she wasn't dizzy or faint.

"They say not to let someone sleep after a concussion," Lila said.

"I think that's just so the doctor knows whether to open your skull or not to relieve the pressure," Beatrice said. "I don't see the point out here, since no one's going to be opening my head, I hope. But I'm not sleepy anyway."

"That's good."

"I can't sleep. I need to find my notebook."

DINNER WAS SIMPLE comfort food, self-serve from the sideboard as usual. Miniature chicken potpies, a bowl of steamed green beans, and a chocolate sheet cake. Tish sat at the end of the table again, her cast sticking out to the side, and directed Holly to fill her plate with two chicken potpies, no green beans, and a large center square of chocolate cake.

"You never know, right?" Tish said. "The world could end any minute, and I'm not missing out on cake."

The group was subdued and seemed smaller than normal, though both Carmen and Lila joined them at the table. Aunt Bea entered after everyone else was seated. She looked terrible. Her face was pale and she had gray smudges underneath her eyes. She stopped in front of the sideboard and scanned the selections. "Is there vegetarian?"

"Sorry, I forgot." Lila rose from her chair. "I can fix you a veggie burger or a salad."

"No, don't bother," Aunt Bea said. She scooped a mound of green beans onto a plate and sat beside Tish. "I'm not really hungry."

“Why don’t you just pick the chicken pieces out?” Dakota asked. “They’re pretty big chunks.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Aunt Bea said. She put her elbow on the table, cradled her chin in her hand, and picked up her fork, but she didn’t eat.

Aunt Bea never put her elbow on the table.

“Are you all right, Aunt Bea?” Tish asked.

“Not really. I have a headache. What time did you girls leave the lounge this afternoon?”

Tish shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe around two-thirty?”

“No, it was closer to three,” Veronica said.

“Why?” Tish asked.

Instead of answering, Aunt Bea addressed the whole table. “Has anyone seen my notebook?” They all shook their heads.

“I looked all over the dining room and the lobby,” Holly said. “I couldn’t find it.”

“Your aunt took a tumble this afternoon,” Lila said. She took a pitcher of ice water from the sideboard and rounded the table, filling water glasses as she went. “She hit her head and lost consciousness for a bit.”

“You fell?” Tish asked. “Oh my God, that’s why you look so awful.”

Aunt Bea frowned at her and said, “I didn’t just fall.”

Lila paused in the act of pouring, Veronica’s glass half filled. “What do you mean?”

“Somebody hit me,” Aunt Bea said.

“What?” Tish asked.

“Nobody hit you,” Lila said.

“You mean literally?” Tish asked. “Like, you think somebody actually hit you? On purpose?”

“Who?” Dakota asked.

“I didn’t see who did it,” Aunt Bea said. “It knocked me out.”

“You fell,” Lila said. She still stood with the pitcher half-cocked over Veronica’s glass.

“People don’t just fall, usually,” Aunt Bea said. She looked at Lila and held her gaze for a long moment. Finally Lila compressed her lips, looked away, and resumed pouring.

What the hell? When did Aunt Bea get to know Lila well enough to piss her off already?

“Maybe you tripped,” Veronica said. “Maybe your foot got caught in the rug.”

“Yeah,” Dakota said, “in that spot where the loop sticks up.”

“And hit my head so hard I blacked out?” Aunt Bea asked. “Besides, the big vase from the sideboard was smashed. How did that happen if someone didn’t hit me with it?”

“I assumed you knocked it off when you fell,” Holly said.

“Then what happened to my notebook? I know I had it with me.”

“But why would somebody hit you on the head?” Carmen asked.

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?” Aunt Bea asked. “It was after you girls left the lounge around three, and Lila and Holly found me lying in here at three-thirty.”

“I was in the bathroom when I heard the crash,” Holly said. “When I got here you were out cold, but I didn’t see anyone around. I just thought you fell.”

“And you didn’t see my notebook?”

Holly shook her head.

“But that’s crazy,” Tish said. “Who would do that?”

“Someone who wanted the notebook, obviously,” Aunt Bea said. “Somebody here doesn’t want me to figure out what happened to Paula.”

A mattress of silence fell on the table.

“You think one of us did it?” Jess asked. Her voice was soft and even, like what Aunt Bea had said wasn’t incredible.

“Aunt Bea, nobody here cared about your silly notebook,” Tish said.

“Then where is it?” Aunt Bea asked.

“Maybe it wasn’t just about the notebook,” Jess said. “Maybe somebody wanted to stop her from investigating.”

“From investigating what?” Carmen asked. “You mean Paula?”

Eyes shifted as everyone realized the implication.

Carmen’s fist hit the table. “I knew it! I knew she didn’t just fall, and she wouldn’t have jumped. Somebody pushed her.”

“So,” Dakota said, her blue eyes as round as corks, “you think whoever hit you and took your notebook also killed Paula?”

Aunt Bea’s face relaxed like she was relieved someone else had said it. She started to nod, winced, and simply said, “Yes.”

“Wait a minute. Isn’t that kind of a leap?” Tish asked. “There could be lots of other explanations.”

“Like what?” Aunt Bea asked.

“Maybe someone came in from outside,” Veronica said. “Not one of us.”

“I don’t know how someone could have done that,” Lila said. “We’re the only place on this road. There’s nothing up here but trees.”

“Which one of us do you think did it?” Carmen asked. Her eyes shifted to Veronica.

“I was in the hot tub,” Dakota said quickly.

“You keep saying that,” Tish said.

“You mean when I was hit?” Aunt Bea asked.

“No, when Paula fell,” Dakota said.

“How do you know when Paula fell?” Veronica asked.

“Stop saying she fell,” Carmen said. “She was pushed.”

“I do think we have to assume at this point that she was pushed,” Aunt Bea said.

“But...” A panicked look crossed Dakota’s face and she rose from her chair. “Amy! What if... If Paula was pushed, what if something happened to Amy? Maybe Amy never left here at all!”

“Oh come on,” Tish said. “Why are you all assuming the worst and craziest possibilities? Amy’s car was gone, right? And didn’t you say she took her things?”

“Whoever killed Paula could have done that,” Dakota said, but she sat back down. “I’m a very sound sleeper. They could have sneaked in and packed up her things and then hidden the car somewhere. Beatrice, you have to add this to your investigation. Find out where everyone was Friday night.”

Aunt Bea glanced around the table, her chin still in her hand. “Did anyone see or hear anything strange Friday night?” They all shook their heads. “Does anyone know of any reason someone would have done something to Amy?” Again, the heads shook no. “Sorry, Dakota. I’m sure Amy just left on her own.”

Tears pooled in Dakota’s eyes. “But why? No wonder she hasn’t answered my e-mails. She’s probably dead.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Aunt Bea said, dismissing Dakota’s fears without a care. “They say there are three threads to follow when solving a crime: means, motive, and opportunity. The means is obvious here. Paula was pushed. Everyone has already denied knowing a motive. So

I'm focusing on opportunity. That's why I've been trying to figure out where everyone was at the times when Paula may have been pushed. If she was pushed after our return from Leavenworth, anyone could have done it, except for Tish."

"Me?" Tish asked.

Aunt Bea continued as if Tish hadn't spoken. "If she was pushed before our return, it must have been Lila."

Lila sucked in her breath, a sharp inhale that sounded almost like a whimper.

"Why not Tish?" Holly asked. "She gets around pretty well on those crutches. She could have climbed to the top of the tower."

"Yes," Beatrice said, "but it rained all day long. When Tish came outside after Carmen screamed, she was completely dry. She couldn't have done it unless she made her way up those stairs on her crutches and managed to push Paula off the roof, all while staying completely dry. I just don't see how she could have done it. Carmen, you were the first person to find Paula. Was she wet already when you found her?"

"Yes," Carmen said. "Soaked through."

"And—sorry to ask this while we're eating—was the blood still running?"

Tish's fork had long since been placed on the table, even the cake untouched. Looking around, she saw no one else was eating either.

"It was pretty much washed away," Carmen said.

"And what about you?" Beatrice said. "Were you wet?"

"Of course I was. I'd been walking all around the building by then, out to the gazebo and the hot tub and everywhere."

Tish shot a glance at Dakota and saw her eyes fall to the table. Dakota had to know she was busted now.

"And Lila arrived next," Beatrice said. "Was she wet or dry?"

"I don't remember," Carmen said. "I was upset. Everyone was just there all of the sudden, and everybody was wet."

"I was dry when I left the dining room," Lila said, "but I was soaking wet a minute later. It was really coming down."

"That's what I mean," Beatrice said. "Nobody could stay dry if they were outside for even a minute. So Jess arrived next. Was she wet or dry?"

"I remember her being pretty wet," Lila said. "Her hair was stuck to her head, and her shirt was dark in spots."

"I was working out," Jess said. "I sweat a lot when I work out."

"She does," Tish added. "I've seen her. She sweats buckets."

"Well that doesn't eliminate her as a suspect," Beatrice said.

"Oh, come on," Tish said. In the privacy under the table she fingered the dots on her inner thigh like she had done a dozen times already that afternoon. "She's blind. Do you really think she climbed to the top of that tower and pushed Paula off the edge when she can't even see?"

"I'm only saying it's possible," Beatrice said. "She gets around nicely with that cane. Maybe she argued with Paula and pushed her without realizing how close she was to the edge."

"I didn't," Jess said.

"We know you didn't," Tish said. "Aunt Bea's crazy."

"No, she's being rational," Jess said. She made her tiny smile. "I'm flattered, actually, that she thinks I could have managed that."

"Then Dakota showed up," Aunt Bea said, "wet, of course."

“And naked,” Tish added.

“She was naked?” Jess asked.

“I was in the hot tub,” Dakota repeated.

“And then Holly,” Aunt Bea said. “Was she wet or dry?”

“I didn’t notice, to tell the truth,” Lila said. “She showed up and left right away to call for help. I was kind of focused on Paula at the time.”

“I didn’t even see Holly,” Dakota said. “I heard her say she was calling 9-1-1 and then she was gone.”

“Carmen, did you notice?”

“No. Why are you bothering with all this? Veronica did it.”

“I was dry too,” Veronica said.

“Yes,” Beatrice said, “but you’d changed your clothes. There was time after our return for you to push Paula off the roof, change clothes, and dry your hair.”

“Time enough for me, but not for Tish?” Veronica asked.

“Yes, actually,” Aunt Bea said. “Tish’s hair obviously hadn’t been dried. It was dry, but still in the mess it got into in Leavenworth.”

“Gee, thanks,” Tish said.

“Veronica’s hair was wet,” Carmen said. “When I went there looking for Paula. She had a towel on it!”

“I was just out of the shower,” Veronica said. “And you were wet too.”

Aunt Bea raised her head. “She was?”

“I told you, I was all around outside looking for Paula,” Carmen said.

“Outside, then inside, then outside again?” Aunt Bea asked.

“Yes,” Carmen said. “I don’t know. I was all over the place. I don’t remember what order exactly.”

Aunt Bea’s fingers twitched like she wished she could write notes in her missing notebook. “Well, anyway,” she said, “all that means is neither of you are eliminated. I was the next one out and Tish was last. Neither of us had changed or showered, and we were both dry, at least until we stood in the rain a bit.”

“So you say,” Lila said. “I don’t really remember you being dry.”

They exchanged another one of those looks. Tish thought back and recreated the scene in her mind. By the time she’d arrived at the side of the house, everyone was sopping wet, including Aunt Bea.

“Fair enough,” Aunt Bea said. “I’m not eliminated either. So the only person who really couldn’t have done it is Tish.”

It was no surprise to Tish—she already knew she didn’t do it—but everyone at the table looked at her as if a secret had been revealed. Even Jess turned her head in Tish’s direction.

“Now if we assume the same person who pushed Paula also hit me,” Aunt Bea said, “We need to figure out who could have done that. So where was everyone between three and three-thirty?”

“I was in my room,” Dakota said.

“Me too,” Veronica said.

“I was in the bathroom,” Holly said, “like I said.”

“I’m the one who was in the hot tub this time,” Jess said. “Not naked.”

“Carmen?” Aunt Bea asked.

“You think I would have killed Paula?” Carmen asked. Her eyes filled with tears. “I loved her.”

“I know,” Aunt Bea said, “but where were you from three to three-thirty?”

“I was in my room, like everyone else.”

“I was in the kitchen,” Lila said.

Aunt Bea sighed. “So it could have been anyone.”

Tish looked at her plate. The potpie was cold and congealed. She lifted her fork and sliced a bit of cake from the slab. Thank goodness cake didn't have to be warm. Thank goodness she'd thought to put a slice on her plate from the start. Thank goodness no one thought to ask where she had been between three and three-thirty.

Aunt Bea pushed back her chair, her beans still untouched. “I'm going to e-mail Detective Rainwater. At least we still have Internet. I need to update him on what's happened.”

Dakota stood as well. “And I'm going to e-mail Amy again. If I tell her there's a killer among us, she'll have to answer me. If she's still alive, that is.”

They left, but moments later Aunt Bea was back. “There's no Internet connection. Who's the IT person around here?”

Holly rose from the table with a heavy sigh. “That would be me, but I'm no expert. I usually try to rope in some tech savvy young guest to help when things go wrong.”

“Well, Dakota's playing with it,” Beatrice said. “She already reset the modem, but that didn't work. This is where I usually call tech support, but with no phone...” She and Holly left the room.

“So there's no road, no phone, and no Internet?” Veronica asked.

“Why would someone want to kill Paula?” Carmen asked.

Tish's cake was gone, so she nibbled on a cold green bean. “Good question. Aunt Bea's so focused on who had the opportunity. I'm more interested in the motive. What reason could there have been to kill Paula?”

“And maybe Amy,” Jess added.

“Really?” Tish was surprised. “You think something happened to her too?”

“It's possible,” Jess said. “I wouldn't say that in front of Dakota, though.”

“I had no reason to kill Paula.” Veronica addressed Carmen. “I know you think I did it, but I didn't.”

Carmen scowled at her plate. “Who else could have done it?”

Silence answered her.

Lila broke it. “Holly planned s'mores over the fire pit for tonight. Anyone still up for it?”

“Yum,” Tish said.

“A campfire?” Jess raised her head.

“Jess, you should bring your guitar down,” Tish said. “We can sing around the campfire.”

“Uh, sure,” Jess said. “If you want me to.”

“I'll go change,” Veronica said.

“You have to change to make s'mores?” Tish asked.

“I'm not going to let these clothes get all smoky.”

“The sparks do fly,” Lila said. “It's not a bad idea to wear clothes you don't mind getting scorched.”

TISH PULLED A sweatshirt over her head but didn't see any options otherwise. She could wear denim skirt number one or denim skirt number two. Both were already dirty. She kept on denim skirt number one.

She stepped out into the hall and hesitated, wondering if Jess had gone down yet. As she thought it, Jess's door opened and the tip of her cane peeked out. Tish shrunk back against her door, held her breath, and watched Jess walk by. She wore a gray hoodie with a wide-eyed owl on the back and the same jeans and sneakers she'd worn earlier, and she carried her guitar. The jeans fit her nicely, and Tish ogled openly, knowing there was no chance of getting caught. She planned to join Jess when she called for the elevator, but Jess didn't stop there. She walked past the elevator, her hand sliding along the wall, until she reached the door to Veronica's room. She knocked, and Veronica let her in.

What the hell?

Tish crept up to the door. She heard their voices but couldn't make out what they said. She'd never noticed any sparks between the two of them. Tish thought she was the only one who had noticed Jess's charms, and Veronica gave off no vibes at all. There was a brief silence. Were they kissing? Then a tap at the door suggested Jess's cane on the other side. Tish darted as best she could to the nearest door, which happened to lead to the stairs. She got the door closed just as Veronica's door opened.

Tish examined her surroundings. She was on a flat landing. To the left of her, the stairs curved downward. To her right they curved upward, presumably to Dakota's room and then on up to the roof of the tower. Those were the stairs the killer took to push Paula off the roof. The stairs Aunt Bea thought Tish couldn't have taken in her crutches. Tish wondered if she could. She decided to give it a try, but going down instead of up. She was going that way anyway.

Tish had never paid much attention to stairs before she broke her leg. Before then, taking stairs was not much different than walking except it was slower. She usually took stairs two at a time, too impatient to waste time on every stair. Now, though, they were a challenge.

The staircase was well lit, but the stairs themselves were bare concrete. They curved around the inside of the tower, so one end was wider than the other. There was no railing, but Tish couldn't have used one anyway. She put the tips of her crutches on the first step and let them bear her weight as she swung her right leg through and lowered her left. It was harder than she thought it would be, but it wasn't impossible. She went down another step, three, four. She wobbled a bit on step five. Her heart jumped, but she regained her balance. It was probably foolish of her to have tackled the steps by herself, at least for the first time. If she tipped forward at all, she would have no real way to break her fall. She was far enough down, though, that it didn't seem worth it to turn around and go back up. She continued on, her pace agonizingly slow. Each step felt like an accomplishment, and she congratulated herself when she passed the half-way mark.

That's when the lights went out.

Chapter Five

In the Dark

TISH FROZE. THE sudden blackness was disorienting. She felt as if she were tipping and instinctively reached a hand out to the nearest wall. Her crutches slipped from her grip, first the left and then the right, clattering as they skittered down the concrete steps. Tish imagined herself following after them and leaned hard against the wall, hugging it with both hands, terrified to move. She lowered herself down until her ass touched a stair and sagged in relief.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Who turned out the lights?” There was no answer, and Tish remembered that there was a good chance that one person among them was a killer. Her heart pounded. “Is anybody there?” No sound at first, but then the door above her opened and she heard a scrape and a soft footstep. “Who are you?” Tish asked, her heart in her throat. If she had to run, she’d be doing it on her ass, bouncing from step to step.

After another scrape, a low voice said, “Tish? Is that you?”

It was Jess. Tish relaxed. Jess was the one person Tish knew for certain could not have bonked poor Aunt Bea on the head between three and three-thirty. “Yes, I’m here.”

“What are you doing there? Are you all right?” Jess asked.

“I dropped my crutches,” Tish said. “Somebody turned out the lights. Can you turn them on?”

“I can’t. There’s no power,” Jess said. “The elevator isn’t working either. Stay there.”

Tish heard Jess’s step on the stair. “Be careful. The steps aren’t even. It curves.”

“I’m always careful on stairs,” Jess said. “You’re the one who should be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Tish said.

“Why not?” Jess’s voice was closer. “I could be the killer.”

“So could I,” Tish said.

“Your Aunt Bea says no.”

Her cane tapped Tish’s thigh.

“That’s me,” Tish said. “I’m sitting down.”

Jess reached the step Tish sat on and lowered herself beside her. It was as dark as a coal mine, but if Jess hadn’t said a word, Tish still would have known who she was. Tish didn’t realize Jess had a distinctive smell until that moment, but she recognized it immediately, just a little bit sweat and a little bit sweet.

“Aunt Bea’s biased,” Tish said. “I think I could have done it. I’m taking the stairs now, and I could have worn a raincoat to stay dry.”

“Do you have a raincoat?”

“No, but I bet I could find one around here.”

“Mm,” Jess said, but not like she was concerned. Their arms and hips were touching. “Why aren’t you afraid of me? Don’t you think I could be the killer? Because I’m blind?”

“No,” Tish said. “You handle stairs pretty well.”

Jess nudged her hip against Tish’s. “Why then?”

There was a charge in the air so thick Tish could almost touch it. Was it the darkness that made her so aware of the invisible feelings swirling around them? Whatever it was, it was real, and it gave her the courage to tell the truth. "I know you were in the hot tub when Aunt Bea was hit."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw you."

"Did you follow me?"

Tish didn't answer.

"You were stalking me?" Jess asked.

"No. I just wanted to see if..."

"What? If I got naked?"

"Some people do."

"You must have been disappointed," Jess said.

"I haven't given up hope."

Jess gave a breathy laugh. "It's low to stalk a blind girl."

"Oh come on," Tish said. "You're the one who practically gave me a blow job when you were signing my cast."

That startled a real laugh out of Jess. "I did not."

"You did too, right in front of everyone. Every time you blew the dust away, you blew on my hoo-haw. You can't blame me for wanting to see you naked after that."

"It's always the stalkee's fault in your little world, isn't it?"

Tish shrugged. "I like women's bodies."

"Have you ever made love to a woman without seeing her body first?"

Tish turned her head toward Jess and, though she couldn't see her, she knew Jess had turned her head as well. It was like the air around them moved, and she wasn't surprised to feel Jess's lips touch hers.

What surprised her was her reaction. Her heart thumped twice as hard as it had when the lights went out, and her lips trembled. Jess's hand came up to rest on the back of Tish's neck, and the kiss deepened. Their breathing quickened, and the thumping of Tish's blood dropped lower to pulse between her legs.

Jess raised her head. "Do you like that?" she whispered.

"I like it a lot."

"Even though you can't see?"

"Well, it's just kissing."

Jess accepted the challenge. She kissed Tish again, and this time her hands roamed as well. She slid them under Tish's shirt and up her skirt, and just when Tish was about to groan out loud, she raised her head again.

"You really should try making love in the dark," Jess said, "to a woman you've never seen naked. It's more erotic than you can even imagine."

"I'm willing to try anything once," Tish said. "Now?"

"Well, it's better in a bed," Jess said. "Wait here." It took years for Jess to go down to the landing, retrieve the crutches, and bring them up to Tish. "I'll help you. Careful."

Tish turned to head up the stairs. Jess kept her hands on Tish's back, offering support and a promise. Tish still throbbled and she had to force herself not to rush.

The door below them opened and a glow lit up the stairs. "Tish, is that you? Oh good, you're with Jess," Aunt Bea said. "I was just about to come find you."

The door above opened immediately after. A tiny blue light darted over them, and Veronica said, "Hello? The power's out."

"Yes, we know. Come on out to the fire, all of you," Aunt Bea said. "We need to have a powwow."

Fuck.

BEATRICE WAS MORE worried than she'd let on, even to herself, if the relief she felt at seeing Tish in the stairwell was any indication. The girl was thirty years old, but Beatrice didn't want to let her out of her sight. It was time to share her concerns with the rest.

She led the way with her flashlight. The fire pit was remote from the Inn, about the same distance as the hot tub, but east of it. The path was dirt and led to a clearing in the trees. The fire pit itself was simply a depression in the dirt circled by a ring of basalt rocks. Four wooden benches hewn from thick tree trunks made a rough square around it. Carmen, Holly, and Dakota were already there. Holly knelt in the dirt splitting kindling with a small hatchet. Graham crackers and Hershey bars were piled on the bench beside her next to a bag of large marshmallows and a flashlight identical to the one Lila had given Beatrice. Carmen sat on the bench opposite Holly's, and Dakota stood poking a long stick at a teepee of burning logs.

"Not too much," Holly cautioned. "If you knock them down completely, it'll go out. Fire needs oxygen."

Veronica sat on a third log bench, and Jess and Tish sat on the fourth with Jess's guitar. Beatrice sat beside Carmen. "Where's Lila?" she asked.

"She's checking the generator," Holly said. "It should have kicked on automatically when the power went off."

Just then a circle of light emerged from the darkness and Lila joined them, an old-fashioned oil lantern dangling from her fingers. "It's nothing obvious." She sat beside Veronica. "I'll have to wait until morning when I can see better. Do any of you happen to have flashlights with you? Holly and Beatrice have mine. I have lots of candles."

"I have one," Carmen said. "I keep one in my travel bag."

"I have my keychain light," Veronica said, "but it hardly gives off any light at all. I'd prefer candles in my room."

"Me too," Dakota said. "I want to carry a candle up the tower stairs to my room. Can you imagine?"

"You want to borrow a flowing white nightdress?" Veronica asked.

"Yes. Cool!" Dakota said. "You can take my picture with my phone. No one would believe it."

"I want a candle too," Tish said, "but I can't carry one around."

"I think I have a headlamp you can use," Lila said. "I'll get it for you before we head upstairs."

"I don't need anything," Jess said.

Holly handed out campfire forks and passed the bag of marshmallows around.

Beatrice was not in the mood for s'mores. She passed the bag along and waited until everyone had their marshmallows toasting before she spoke. "I'd like to make a suggestion, for everyone's safety." Faces turned toward her. The roasting marshmallows, the flicker of flames, and the crackling wood of the campfire made the scene seem cozy and normal. Everyone

appeared to have forgotten the danger that loomed around them, but Beatrice, with her still throbbing head, could not forget. "From now on, I think we should all buddy up. Twos and threes, or maybe even threes and fours."

Varying expressions of bewilderment and resistance crossed the women's faces.

"You mean at night?" Veronica asked. "I'm not buddying up with anyone."

"Me either," Lila said.

"Isn't that kind of overkill?" Dakota asked. Her marshmallow caught on fire. She waved the fork to blow the flames out, but the marshmallow dripped off and landed, black and sizzling, in the fire. "Damn it." She took another from the bag and started over.

"I still can't believe one of us killed Paula," Tish said. "Just because someone hit you and took your notebook doesn't mean that person was a murderer. It might not have anything to do with Paula."

"Or Amy," Dakota said.

"Paula did not jump," Carmen said.

Beatrice's head pounded. Her nerves were flashing caution, and her nerves were usually reliable, but she wasn't at the top of her game right then. Maybe she had it all wrong. Maybe Tish was right and she was making what happened bigger than it was. "The problem is we don't know why any of this is happening," she said. "Even if the person who hit me isn't a killer, someone still hit me." But from the looks on the women's faces, Beatrice realized they didn't believe her. "Okay, fine. At the very least, make sure you lock your doors tonight. Don't go out and don't let anyone in 'til morning. In the morning it'll be safer."

"Paula was killed in the daylight," Carmen said.

"Anyway, we're safe now," Tish said. "And Jess is going to play her guitar."

"Cool," Dakota said.

"And you know what goes well with music and s'mores?" Holly asked. "Wine." She reached behind her bench and pulled up three bottles.

"Holly?" Lila asked.

Holly handed bottles to Veronica and Tish, kept one for herself, and avoided looking at Lila.

"Do you think that's wise?" Beatrice asked, but she was ignored. Plastic cups were passed around and filled with red or white wine. Jess pulled her guitar from her case and propped it on her knee. It seemed the group was settling in for a party. Beatrice rose. Despite her warnings to stick together, she wanted no part of this. Her head hurt, she was exhausted, and she just wanted to lay her head on her pillow. "Remember to blow out your candles," she said, wondering at the wisdom of giving candles to drunken women. There was no point mentioning it, though. They were determined to ignore her.

She did feel a bit like the heroine of a gothic novel when she took her flashlight up the curving stairs to her room, but Beatrice wasn't worried for herself. Whoever had hit her, and most likely killed Paula, was still sitting down at that campfire getting drunk. She could lock her door against them all and be safe, but the same didn't go for Tish. Already she was regretting leaving her down there. Her head hurt so badly, though. She just needed to lie down for a minute.

ARE YOU AWARE that you seem to be far away?

Come sit down here beside me.

Or are you scared of the past you dared?

Life is sweet.

Please try and understand.

**See I used to have warm feelings inside me.
A touch, a smile, it felt just like home.
What happened to the trust and understanding?
Is this just another season of hope?**

Tish watched Jess's fingers on the strings of the guitar and felt a pull inside her. She sat so close to Jess that their thighs brushed, and she felt the thrum of Jess's voice vibrate through her. For the first time, she realized that sight really wasn't the most important sense. She closed her eyes and listened and felt.

**The wall that's there, why'd you put it where
I can't reach?
I wonder where you are.
Buried deep inside while your knight in shining armor
Rides right by.**

**I used to have warm feelings inside me.
A touch, a smile, it felt just like home.
What happened to the trust and understanding?
Is this just another season of hope?**

**Why don't you dare to be yourself with me?
Why do you choose to run away?
What happened to the love and understanding?
Is this just another season of hope?**

That was exactly how Tish felt, buried deep inside herself. She wanted so desperately to find her knight in shining armor, but how could she expect to if she kept herself hidden? Jess was singing to her and about her, and about herself as well. And about some other woman. Of course she'd written the song long before she met Tish.

**The future's dim.
Where do I begin?
I had you in my arms, now you're not here.
I feel deep within, I'm gonna win.
This time this one's too near.**

**I want those warm feelings inside me.
Your touch, your smile, it felt just like home.
What happened to the trust and understanding?
Is this just another season of hope?
Well, it's just another season of hope.
Well, it's just another season of hope.**

The guitar settled into silence. Tish opened her eyes. The campfire reflected in the faces of the women, who all wore expressions of deep feeling, of remembrance or melancholy. Tears streamed down Dakota's cheeks.

Tish looked at Jess, saw the dark glasses, and realized Jess couldn't see the effect she had on her audience. "That was beautiful, Jess," she said.

A tiny smile crossed Jess's lips. "Would you like another?"

"Yes, of course."

Jess played again, a livelier song that had the women smiling, and then some traditional campfire songs that got everyone singing along. The more she played, though, the more Tish wished she would stop. They'd started something on the stairs, and Jess's singing was driving her wild. If they didn't get to bed pretty soon, Tish was going to start humping Jess's leg. She leaned heavily against Jess's side, trying to send a message, and Jess got it.

"I'm going to have to stop," Jess said. "My fingers are getting sore, and I'm getting sleepy."

"Me too," Tish said.

"Do you mind if I try?" Dakota asked.

"You play?" Jess asked.

"Yes, I learned at camp."

"This is a twelve string, though," Jess said. "It's a little more complicated."

Tish leaned against Jess again to remind her of the urgency.

"All right," Jess said. "Just bring it inside when you come in, okay?"

"Don't worry," Dakota said. "I'll take care of it."

Tish's headlamp barely lit the path back to the Inn and up the stairs. She carried an unlit candle in her pocket to use in her room. When they reached her door, Tish said, "Give me a few minutes alone. I want to make sure Aunt Bea's asleep."

"Sure," Jess said. She walked down the black hall to her door, not slowed at all by the darkness.

Tish entered her own room, set the candle on the bureau, and lit it. She removed the headlamp and turned it off. The glow of the candle gave off just the right amount of romantic light. She moved to the door between her room and Aunt Bea's. She listened but could hear nothing. She knocked softly, and no one answered. Good. Aunt Bea was asleep. Tish made sure the door was locked from her side, just in case. The last thing she needed was Aunt Bea barging in on them in the middle of everything.

Tish pulled her camisole and matching panties from her backpack and put them on. She hardly had any clothes with her, but she always carried the camisole and panties. You never knew, after all. She pulled them on and examined herself in the mirror. The light was faint, but she could see that her stance on the crutches pulled the camisole tight against her breasts, making her look practically naked. It was a great look. Too bad Jess would never see it.

There was a light rap at the door. Tish opened it and Jess stood there.

"You're supposed to ask who's there," Jess said.

"I didn't need to." Tish backed up.

Jess followed and closed the door behind her. "You don't need a candle, Tish."

"How do you know I have a candle?"

"I know. Blow it out."

Tish blew out the candle. The room turned black and Tish trembled, though she wasn't sure why. It was dark, that was all. She'd made love in the dark before. Never with someone she

hadn't seen before, though, naked anyway. Never with someone who hadn't seen her. Never with Jess.

"I only have twin beds," Tish said.

She heard the scrape of Jess's cane, and then Jess was in front of her. Fingers touched her lips, her neck, her shoulders, slid to her front and stroked the silky camisole.

Tish sucked in a breath. "We have to be quiet," she said, though Jess had not made a sound. "Aunt Bea's right next door."

"I'm usually quiet," Jess said. Her lips touched Tish's neck. She put an arm around Tish, removed her crutches, and set them aside. "You don't need these." She swept an arm under Tish's legs, both casted and bare, and tipped her back onto one of the beds, turning her so she lay flat. She ran her hand swiftly and firmly from Tish's crotch to her chin, rumpling the camisole up above Tish's breasts. "I like your outfit," she said.

Tish lay gasping and bare, feeling more exposed than she ever had, though she knew Jess could not see her. The anticipation of what Jess might do to her next had her giddy.

"This is not about you, though," Jess said and rose. "Tonight, you're going to make love to me."

Tish sat up. "Can't we do both?"

"We will," Jess said, "but you're going to make love to me first." Tish heard clothing being removed. "Tonight you're going to learn to see with your hands."

The bed beside Tish sank. She reached out, felt bare skin, and let the lesson begin. She meant to try to create a picture in her mind of Jess's body. She anticipated flat abs, firm breasts, and muscular thighs, but she found herself distracted by heat and scent, the sound of breaths soft and urgent, the clenching of muscles, and the beating of hearts.

Jess's skin was softer than Tish thought it would be. She pressed Jess back against the pillow and ran her hands from Jess's neck to her shoulders and under her arms. She raised Jess's arms over her head and nipped the skin between her armpit and her breast. Jess gasped. Tish smiled and did it again before moving her mouth to the breasts themselves.

Moving over Jess's body was awkward with the cast, but Jess made it easier for her by moving her own body so that Tish had easier access. She spread her legs and guided Tish to her hips. Tish probed with her fingers and her tongue. The tastes and smells were sharp and arousing in unfamiliar ways, and when Jess finally came, Tish stuck one hand between her own legs and came right along with her. It was almost like she could feel what Jess felt. After a brief rest, Jess rolled onto Tish and used her body and her hands and her mouth to remind Tish once again that sight was overrated. Tish had to scream into her pillow at one point, so she wouldn't wake Aunt Bea.

"Holy shit," Tish said finally, her head lying on Jess's shoulder. "I've never come so hard in my life."

"It takes seeing with your hands to whole new level, doesn't it?" Jess asked.

"You mean seeing with my mouth, don't you? And my vagina?"

Jess laughed. "Only the lucky ones get to see with their vaginas."

"Who did you write that song for?" Tish asked.

"Which one?"

"The one about being buried deep within and the knight in shining armor."

"Season of Hope," Jess said. "My ex."

Tish felt the burn of jealousy. "The one who dumped you when you went blind?"

"No, that's not how it happened."

“But she dumped you, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, fine, don’t tell me,” Tish said. It was unreasonable to be jealous of someone who’d been in Jess’s life before Tish even knew her, but Tish never could count on her feelings to be reasonable. “Why did you go to Veronica’s room yesterday?”

“How do you know that?” Jess asked. “Were you spying on me again?”

“No. I just happened to see you,” Tish said.

“Right. Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you,” Jess said. She squeezed Tish with her arm. “But I’m not interested in her, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Oh, I don’t care about that,” Tish said, but she snuggled happily into Jess’s embrace. “I wish you’d write a song for me.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

It was after midnight when Jess finally returned to her own room, at Tish’s insistence. “I don’t want Aunt Bea to find you here.”

“Why?” Jess asked. “Does she think you’re a virgin or something?”

“She thinks I ought to be,” Tish said. “It’s complicated.”

“Which means you’re not going to tell me.”

“Not right now,” Tish said, and ushered Jess out the door.

She abandoned the camisole—it had served its purpose—and donned a T-shirt. She was sated and happy and peeked out the window more out of habit than any real idea of seeing a nude hot-tubber. Besides, who hot tubs when there’s no power?

Someone was. At least, there was a candle burning beside the hot tub, so there had to be someone nearby. Tish peered past the candle itself to the faint circle of light it created. There was someone in there, all right, a woman, and she was indeed nude. She didn’t move, but floated with her head back and her arms extended, almost like she was sleeping. Almost like she was dead. Tish’s heart pounded before she even realized she was frightened. The woman floated unmoving for far too long.

“Hot tub!” she screamed. “Hot tub!” She hurried to the door, running as fast as she could on her crutches, and flung it open. “Somebody help! Wake up! There’s someone in the hot tub!” She banged her crutch against Aunt Bea’s door, crossed the hall, and banged it on Veronica’s as well.

Jess, still awake, opened her door first. “Tish? What’s wrong?”

More doors opened. Aunt Bea, Holly, and Veronica all emerged. Aunt Bea and Holly had their flashlights and Veronica had her little key chain light.

“Someone’s in the hot tub,” Tish yelled. “I think she’s dying. I think she’s dead. Hurry!”

The women ran for the stairs. Tish tried to follow but Jess called from behind her. “Slow down. Wait for me.”

“It’s Dakota, Jess,” Tish said. She was surprised to find herself crying. “I think she’s dead.”

“One step at a time,” Jess said. “You won’t help anything by falling down the stairs.”

Someone had propped open the doors at the top and bottom of the stairs, but the other women had already vanished and Tish had forgotten to grab her headlamp. Their descent was as dark and creeping as it had been the day before. They finally reached the lobby and followed the voices and lights to the gazebo.

Dakota lay wet and sprawled on the ground beside the hot tub. Lila crouched over her like a lover, breathing life into her lungs.

Veronica knelt on Dakota's other side, her fingers on her wrist. "She has a pulse," Veronica said, tears running down her cheeks. "But she's not breathing."

Holly rushed up with her arms filled with towels. She spread them over Dakota as far as she could without getting in Lila's way.

"Dakota," Aunt Bea said sternly. "Breathe."

At the command, Dakota's body lurched. Lila pulled away, but not fast enough, and a spew of vomit hit her in the face and hair. Lila didn't seem to care. She spit the vomit from her mouth and turned Dakota on her side. Dakota took in a gasping breath and heaved again. She coughed, vomited a third time, and started crying.

Tish leaned back against Jess and burst into tears.

They adjourned to the lounge. Lila and Veronica supported Dakota to the couch. She lay pale and still, but she was breathing. Holly piled blankets on top of her and turned to start a fire. Tish and Veronica sat in chairs, but Jess remained standing, as did Aunt Bea, who wandered restlessly around the room. Lila slipped out of the room, to gargle with mouthwash, Tish assumed.

"I hope now you all realize how important it is to stick together," Beatrice said. "In twos or threes or fours."

"You think somebody did this to her?" Veronica asked.

"Of course they did," Aunt Bea said. "It's too much to be coincidence. With everything that's happened, we have to assume the worst."

"I'm sorry to say it," Holly said, "but Dakota drank almost a whole bottle of wine all by herself."

"But why was she in there?" Aunt Bea asked. "The hot tub wasn't even on."

"The water was still hot," Veronica said.

"And she was naked again," Tish said. "She must have gone in there willingly."

"There's nothing sinister about a drunk girl passing out in a hot tub," Holly said. "It happens every day."

"Besides," Tish asked, "why would someone want to kill Dakota?"

Aunt Bea stood at the back of the couch and looked down at Dakota. Tish did, too. Dakota looked about six years old. Her hair, which had appeared straight and dark when it was wet, lightened as it dried and ringlets formed around her little white face. Her eyes fluttered but didn't open, emphasizing the long dark lashes on her cheeks. She didn't look like someone who'd nearly died a half hour ago.

"I don't know," Aunt Bea said. "We don't know why any of this is happening. We can't assume the killer is rational. We should stick together to be on the safe side. At the very least, someone needs to stay with Dakota tonight, in case someone is trying to kill her."

"She can sleep here," Holly said. "I'll stay with her."

"Me too," Lila said, entering the room. She had changed her shirt and her hair was wet. "We'll put a couple of mattresses on the floor."

"Good," Aunt Bea said. "And I'll sleep in Tish's room. Jess and Veronica, perhaps the two of you—"

"No," they said simultaneously.

"We'll be safe enough, I think," Jess added, "as long as we keep our doors locked."

"All right," Aunt Bea said. "Well, at least we can walk each other to our doors."

Tish tried to convince Aunt Bea to sleep in her own room, or at the very least allow Tish to join her there rather than having Aunt Bea in Tish's room, but for some reason Aunt Bea insisted

on sleeping in Tish's room, which smelled like sex. Aunt Bea didn't seem to notice, thank God. She fell asleep as soon as she pulled the covers up to her chin. She snored, of course.

Tish was exhausted as well, but she couldn't sleep. It was difficult enough to sleep with the damn cast on her leg, but it was worse with Aunt Bea's snoring, and her romp with Jess had taken a toll on her too.

She hadn't noticed any pain at the time—far from it—but now her leg throbbed.

She sat up, put on the headlamp, and grabbed her crutches. The light from the headlamp was not bright, but it showed her the way to the bathroom clearly enough. She closed the door so she wouldn't wake Aunt Bea and reached for her cosmetic bag.

She hadn't taken any of her Hydrocodone since arriving at the Inn. She had a high tolerance for pain, preferred alcohol, and was too smart to mix the two, but now she needed something. She rustled through the cosmetic bag for the pills, but couldn't find them. She had put them there, hadn't she? Maybe she'd put them on the counter or on the shelf above the toilet. She aimed her headlamp like a spotlight around the bathroom, but found no pills. Maybe they were in her backpack, which was in the bedroom.

It wasn't worth waking Aunt Bea for. She'd look further in the morning. Meanwhile she had some aspirin. She swallowed two and made her way back to bed.

She woke the next morning when Aunt Bea opened the door of the bathroom, the odor of body wash and shampoo carrying into the bedroom.

"Can't you even shower in your own room?" Tish asked from the bed.

"Still grumpy in the morning, I see," Aunt Bea said.

Tish sat up, swung her legs out, and reached for her crutches. Her leg didn't throb anymore, but it still had a deep ache. She stopped on her way to the bathroom to throw her backpack over her shoulder.

"Cold showers this morning," Aunt Bea said. "I'll wait for you."

"No need," Tish said. "You can go on down."

"Sorry, sweet pea," Aunt Bea said. "We still need to stay in pairs, I think. It was the middle of the day when I was hit and when Paula was pushed. Of everyone here, we're the only two people who couldn't have pushed Paula."

"Actually, I don't know that about you," Tish said.

"Tish."

"Sorry, just kidding." Tish paused in the bathroom doorway. "I just don't think anyone's going to come murder me in the shower. It's too *Psycho*."

"Fine. Don't come crying to me if someone tries to kill you."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Aunt Bea just smiled. "I'll be waiting here when you get out." She started making the beds.

Tish closed the bathroom door, turned on the water, and searched again for her pills. It was much easier to see with the sunlight pouring through the bathroom window, but it didn't make any difference. There were no pills anywhere in the bathroom or in her backpack.

Someone had taken her pills.

She did a roll call in her mind. Holly and Lila had keys to her room. Jess had been alone in Tish's bathroom that night, and so had Aunt Bea. Carmen could have taken them in the middle of the night when everyone was downstairs with Dakota. Tish had left her door wide open. She didn't see how Veronica could have taken them, or Dakota, but that didn't mean they hadn't done it. Maybe that was the real reason Dakota passed out in the hot tub. It might not have been just the wine at all.

Anyone could have taken those pills. Most likely the killer.

BY THE TIME Beatrice and Tish made their way downstairs, everyone but Carmen was already in the dining room, all reassuringly alive. Lila hadn't even tried to cook. Boxes of various cold cereals were placed on the table, family style, next to a stack of bowls and a plastic gallon of milk.

"Oh boy, Lucky Charms," Tish said and dropped into a chair beside Jess. "Maybe I'll get lucky."

"The milk isn't very cold," Holly warned, "but it's still good. Lila put it in a cooler last night."

"Smart," Beatrice said.

Lila sat at one end of the table with a thick book open in front of her. "We need to get Dakota to a doctor as soon as possible," she said without looking up.

Beatrice glanced at Dakota. She had a bowl of cereal in front of her, but she wasn't eating. She was still pale with dark circles under her eyes, but she seemed all right otherwise.

"Listen to this," Lila said. "Near Drowning. After administering CPR, seek medical attention immediately. Even if a person appears fine, water in the lungs can lead to serious and life-threatening complications." She looked up and met Beatrice's eyes. "She coughed half the night."

"I'm sorry," Dakota said. Her voice rasped and her eyes looked weepy. She seemed embarrassed, as well she should be if she really did just drink too much before hopping into the hot tub. But she was only twenty-one years old, and a Mormon at that. What did she know about drinking?

"Have you checked the generator?" Beatrice asked. "If we have power, we can send an e-mail. They can send a helicopter if it's an emergency."

"It's not an emergency," Dakota said. "I feel fine. Really."

But Lila was already shaking her head. "The generator's no good. It's out of gas."

"Out of gas?" Beatrice asked. "What's the point of having a generator for emergencies if you don't keep it filled with gas?"

"It was filled with gas," Lila said. "Somebody drained it."

Beatrice felt lightheaded. She pulled out the chair beside Lila and sat. She'd been warning everyone all along that one of them was a killer, but this was the first confirmation they'd had that she was right. Paula's fall, the blow to Beatrice's head, Dakota's near-drowning, any of them could arguably have been an accident, but this was deliberate.

"Somebody's trying to stop us from getting help," Beatrice said.

"Wait, hold on a minute," Lila said. "We don't know when the gas was drained. I filled the generator in the spring, but we haven't had to use it. Somebody could have siphoned that gas any time since June."

"Do you have any more gas?" Veronica asked.

Lila shook her head. "I had an extra five gallon can. It's empty too."

Beatrice looked around the room at the women and their various responses to the news. Dakota looked confused, Veronica worried, Jess thoughtful, Holly concerned, and Lila very much afraid. Tish stared at her cereal bowl and shoveled in Lucky Charms. She didn't look up at

all, but she was too smart a kid not to understand the implications. She was hiding something, but she wasn't the killer. And one woman was missing.

"Has anyone seen Carmen this morning?"

No one had.

"We need to check on her," Beatrice said. "Will someone come with me? I don't think anyone should go anywhere by herself today."

"I will," Holly said.

Beatrice felt some urgency while climbing the stairs. Carmen hadn't been acting like herself. She was mourning Paula, of course, and Beatrice knew how much that could change a person, but it was strange how quiet Carmen had been. Aside from that first night, when she cried half the night in Beatrice's room, Carmen had kept to herself, and she was not generally a quiet person.

Beatrice knocked on Carmen's door. There was no answer. She knocked again. "Carmen, wake up." She turned the knob, but it was locked, of course. She pounded on the door. "Carmen! Let me in." Even if she was in the bathroom, she would have heard that, but still there was no answer. "Holly, do you have your keys?" Holly already had them in hand. She unlocked the door and they entered the room.

Carmen lay on her back, the covers pulled up to her neck. It was immediately apparent that there was no need for CPR. She had been dead for several hours, based on the rigor mortis grin on her face.

Chapter Six

Seven Are Left

BEATRICE AND CARMEN had known each other since they were freshmen in high school, but they had drifted apart over the years. For nearly fifteen years in their thirties and forties they hadn't spoken at all. They hadn't fought, but they were both busy with their own lives, which were worlds apart. While Beatrice enjoyed a successful career and settled into her comfortable suburban home with Leigh and an amusing group of intelligent friends, Carmen careened from giddy happiness to the depths of despair. She'd lived in a commune, been homeless, made a bundle of money selling real estate and wasted it all on drugs, she'd married a man once and had a baby, though not her husband's, declared herself at various times Buddhist and atheist and Jewish, and had been in love more times than Beatrice could count. She showed up in Beatrice's life at inconvenient times, sometimes to share her happiness, sometimes to drown her sorrows, but the last time she'd shown up was when Leigh died, and it was to do nothing but provide a shoulder to cry on. Beatrice had needed it desperately.

Carmen was difficult and annoying and sometimes embarrassing, but she had been in Beatrice's life longer than anyone she knew except her brother, who was an asshole. To see her lying there with no life was more than Beatrice could bear. She gave up on her plan of staying in pairs, abandoned Holly alone with Carmen's body, and fled down the hall to her room. She closed the door behind her, crossed the room to the window seat, and dropped to her knees before the box that held Leigh's ashes.

"She's dead, Leigh. Oh my God, it's Carmen. Somebody killed her!" Beatrice wrapped her arm around the box and dropped her forehead to it.

Leigh let her cry for a while, but moments later her voice intruded into Beatrice's thoughts. "Carmen was a pain in the ass, Bea. Why are you so torn up about her now?"

Beatrice raised her head and wiped her eyes. "I know she was a pain in the ass, but it wasn't her fault. She had a hard life. And she's the only one who stuck around after you... Most of our friends avoided me, you know."

"You pushed them away."

"Maybe," Beatrice said, though of course she had. "But Carmen wouldn't let me push her away. I love—loved her for that. And now somebody's killed her."

"You need to keep yourself safe, love."

"Oh Leigh, what's the point of it all? I hardly even care if I go next."

"It's not time for you yet."

"How the hell would you know that?" Beatrice snapped. "You're not even real."

Silence. An agony of silence.

Beatrice's tears dried up. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Then, a bit louder, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that. Don't go, please. Come back. I still need you!" Beatrice's heart pounded. Leigh couldn't leave her now, she wasn't ready to be alone, but what if Beatrice's words had pushed her away? She'd never said them out loud before, hardly even let herself think

them. Leigh was as real to her as any living breathing person, even though Beatrice was the only one who could hear her voice. Too much time passed. "Please?" Her voice was small. "Talk to me."

"What about Tish?" Leigh finally said.

Waves of relief washed over Beatrice. She sat back on her heels, happy just to be talking again. "Tish doesn't need me. She's thirty years old, for God's sake."

"Chronologically, maybe, but inside she's still that hurting little girl."

"All she ever thinks about is sex."

"Oh dear," Leigh said. "You mean like we did when we first met? How old were we again? Nearly thirty, weren't we?"

This time Beatrice was the one who didn't answer.

"Are you just going to leave her to your brother?" Leigh asked. "Or even worse, his wife?"

"That shallow little bitch?"

"I didn't think so. We let Tish down once, Bea. Don't do it again."

TISH STOOD OUTSIDE Aunt Bea's room, her hand poised to knock, but she didn't do it. Holly had come downstairs and told them about Carmen, and about Aunt Bea's reaction. She'd suggested Tish talk to her. Jess and Veronica stood by the door to the stairs, staying in sight but a respectful distance away.

Tish was worried about Aunt Bea. She and Carmen had been friends forever. It was shocking to everyone that another woman had died, but it had to be particularly rough on Aunt Bea. But when she reached the door, she heard Aunt Bea talking.

Holly had stayed downstairs with Dakota and Lila, and Tish knew for a fact that no one else was in the Inn. Aunt Bea was talking to herself. Mom had always said there was something not quite right about Aunt Bea, more than just the fact that she was a lesbian, though that was bad enough for Mom. Dad said Aunt Bea was just too smart for ordinary people to understand her, implying not too subtly that Mom was one of those ordinary people.

Tish didn't care if Aunt Bea talked to herself. She was upset, and didn't everyone do it once in a while? But Tish didn't want to embarrass her, so she waited until she heard a pause long enough for Aunt Bea to think she hadn't been overheard. Meanwhile, snippets of Aunt Bea's conversation with herself could be heard through the door.

"I'm so sorry. Don't go. Come back. I still need you."

Dear God, was Aunt Bea talking about Carmen?

"Tish doesn't need me. She's thirty years old, for God's sake. All she ever thinks about is sex."

Tish dropped her hand.

"That shallow little bitch?"

Tish stepped back, forgot to move the crutch first, and nearly fell backward. She felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. Is that how Aunt Bea thought of her? Sure Aunt Bea had been a pain lately. Well, ever since Aunt Leigh died, really, and especially since Tish was arrested, but it never occurred to her that Aunt Bea didn't still love her. The words hurt like stab wounds, and Tish thought she might be sick.

She left the door and joined Jess and Veronica at the stairs. "Leave her alone," she said. "She's fine."

“I HOPE NOW you all see how important it is that we stick together,” Beatrice said. All seven women congregated in the lounge, but only Beatrice had swollen eyes. “Someone is picking us off, one by one. We don’t know why, and we don’t know who might be next. If we all stick together until the road opens, we’ll be safe.”

“We can’t wait that long,” Lila said. She sat beside the couch, one hand on Dakota’s shoulder. “Timing is critical in drowning cases. The lungs become damaged. Even when the person seems all right at first, pneumonia can set in quickly. If it’s not treated soon...”

Dakota opened her eyes. “I’m feeling much better,” she said, but her face was ashen and her voice hoarse from coughing.

“What else can we do?” Beatrice asked.

“Does anyone know how to syphon gas from a car?” Jess asked.

“Too bad we can’t Google it,” Tish said when no one answered.

“We can walk out,” Holly said.

Beatrice glanced at Tish. She couldn’t walk out.

“Not all of us,” Lila said, still looking at Dakota.

“Sometimes you can get a cell signal from the top of Sparkle Mountain,” Holly said. “I can call for a helicopter. I’ll go now.”

“You can’t go alone,” Beatrice said.

“Why not?” Holly asked. “Seems to me being alone out there might be the safest place there is.”

“Not for the rest of us,” Beatrice said.

Holly looked confused for a moment and then shocked.

“You think I’m the killer?”

“I don’t know,” Beatrice said. “That’s the whole point. We don’t know who it is. If it’s you, and nobody goes with you, what’s to stop you from coming back and killing us all?”

Holly turned gray.

“Jesus, Aunt Bea,” Tish said.

Beatrice turned to Tish, irritated. The girl didn’t seem to understand that their lives were in peril. “I’m not trying to make friends here. If I can get us all off this mountain alive, I’ll be satisfied.”

“It’s never safe to hike alone up there,” Lila said. “It’s a rough climb. It’ll take at least two hours to get to the top, maybe more. I can’t leave Dakota. I know first aid. If anything happens to her...”

Beatrice knew she should volunteer. She was healthy and strong, she had two good legs, and she could see. Hiking was one of the few activities she hadn’t given up when Leigh died. But she was reluctant to leave Tish.

Tish apparently didn’t have the same reluctance to be parted. “Aunt Bea can go.”

“No,” Beatrice said. “I won’t leave you here.”

Tish sat up sharply. “Why not? I can take care of myself.”

“Not really,” Beatrice said. “Not on crutches. You can’t move quickly if something happens.”

“And what are you going to do about it, carry me?” Tish asked. “I’m not a baby. I’m not an invalid.”

“No, but you can’t climb a mountain either.”

Finally, to Beatrice’s relief, Veronica spoke. “I’ll go. It makes the most sense.”

“We have some hiking boots,” Lila said. “What size are you?”

Veronica crunched her nose. “Eleven. I have big feet.”

“No worries. We have men’s boots too.”

They were outfitted with backpacks filled with lunches and water, and Holly took a compass and a can of bear spray as well. A dismayed look crossed Veronica’s face. “It’s just in case,” Holly said.

They left, and five remained.

“Is anyone hungry?” Lila asked. “I can fix us some sandwiches.”

“If you go to the kitchen, we should all go,” Beatrice said.

“No, don’t make Dakota get up,” Lila said.

“I don’t mind,” Dakota said. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“This is stupid,” Tish said. “What are we supposed to do if we have to go to the bathroom?”

“We could wait outside the door, I suppose,” Beatrice said.

“No way.” Tish pulled herself up and tucked her crutches under her arms. “I can’t believe we’re all sitting here like scared ducks. I’m going to go figure out how to syphon gas. It can’t be that hard. You suck but don’t swallow. It’s not like I haven’t done that before.”

“No, Tish,” Beatrice said. “You can’t wander around alone. You’re too vulnerable. How would you defend yourself if something happened?”

“Fine. I’ll take Jess with me,” Tish said.

Jess was already on her feet.

“She’s as vulnerable as you,” Beatrice said. “I’ll come with you.”

“I don’t want you, Aunt Bea,” Tish said bluntly. “I want Jess. I’ll be her eyes and she can be my legs. We’re invincible together.”

Fear mixed with anger, but the anger won out. “Don’t be stupid, Tish.”

“It may come as a shock to you, Aunt Bea,” Tish said, “but I’m not stupid. Let’s go Jess.”

TISH LED THE way through the dining room to the lobby and paused when they were out of earshot of the lounge.

“What was that all about?” Jess asked.

“Aunt Bea’s a bitch, that’s all,” Tish said. “I just didn’t want to be in the same room with her anymore. I mean, just because we can’t climb a mountain doesn’t mean we’re useless.”

“She didn’t say we were,” Jess said. “Aren’t you being kind of hard on her?”

“It just seems to me we’ve been a bit too trusting around here,” Tish said. “I mean, how do we even know the road is closed?”

“Detective Rainwater said it was.”

“No, Aunt Bea told us that’s what he said.”

“You think she lied?” Jess asked.

“Maybe. Somebody drained the generator, right? How do we know the same person didn’t cut the power lines and the phone lines?”

Jess moved to the telephone on the desk, lifted the receiver, and listened. “It’s definitely dead.”

“Yeah, but was it by accident or sabotage?” Tish asked.

Jess turned toward the front door. "There must be phone lines coming into the house. We can check and see if they've been cut."

They went outside. The air was cool and damp and windy, but the sun shone, except for the occasional white and gray cloud that scudded across the sky temporarily turning the day cold and dark. Tish led the way around the west side of the house, not because she had any idea where the telephone lines were but because she instinctively avoided the site where Paula had fallen. A rocky path circled the Inn. It was constructed with rounded stones in various hues of gray, including some with tints of pink or green. It was beautiful, but treacherous for people on crutches or those who were blind.

"Watch your step," Jess said.

"You too," Tish said.

"Wait." Jess paused and swung her cane around until it tapped the side of the house. "Let's walk here." She stepped off the rocks into the grass that grew between the walkway and the house. Tish joined her, and they continued their slow progress around the house. The grass was tall and damp, and her shoe grew wet, but Jess was right. It was easier than trying to navigate the rocks.

They made their way, eventually, to a plastic box on the side of the house near the back. "Here it is," Tish said. A tube bolted to the wall encased the wires that led to it, and a hole in the cover allowed the insertion of a padlock to keep the wires unmolested. There was no padlock in sight, but the cover was screwed shut. "I don't suppose you have a screwdriver on you," Tish said.

Jess put her hand in the front pocket of her jeans and pulled out a tiny blue pocketknife. She flipped out the screwdriver attachment.

Tish took the knife. "You're such a dyke."

"I only carry it for the scissors," Jess said.

"Right." Tish leaned a crutch against the side of the house. "Don't let me fall."

Jess moved behind and slipped an arm around Tish's waist. Tish let Jess support her as she tackled the screw. It turned easily and moments later released from the nut. Tish opened the door. Clusters of tiny wires of blue and white and orange and green wound tightly around like a snake inside the compartment.

"Well?" Jess asked.

"They look okay to me," Tish said. "But that doesn't mean anything. Aunt Bea probably knows another way to do it. She knows tons of things. She's too smart for her own good, Dad says. She learns about crimes and things in court and about how people get caught. She says criminals get caught because they're stupid, but smart people can get away with murder."

"Where is this coming from?" Jess asked. "Why are you suddenly suspecting your aunt?"

Tish turned in Jess's arms so that she faced her, though she didn't know what difference it made. Jess couldn't see her anyway. "Somebody stole my pills," she said.

"What pills?"

"My pain pills. My Hydrocodone."

"How many did you have?"

"Lots," Tish said. "Enough to kill someone."

Jess sucked in a breath. "Someone like Carmen?"

"Yes, or someone like Dakota," Tish said.

"You think your aunt took them?"

"She was in my bathroom last night."

“So was I,” Jess said.

“I know,” Tish said. “I thought about that. But how would you even know what they were? You couldn’t read the label.”

“When’s the last time you saw them?”

“I can’t even remember. Friday night? I haven’t taken any all weekend.”

“Couldn’t Holly or Lila have taken them? They must have keys to the rooms.”

“I know,” Tish said. “Carmen could have taken them too. I left my door open last night when we all ran downstairs to Dakota. Carmen didn’t come downstairs.”

“Then why are you suspecting Beatrice?”

Tish leaned into Jess, pressing her with a full-body hug. She tucked her face into Jess’s neck and whispered, “My mom always said there was something fishy about Leigh’s death.”

“Leigh? Her wife?”

Tish raised her head. “Aunt Leigh got cancer. Aunt Bea was taking care of her at home, and somehow Leigh overdosed on morphine. They said she was too weak to do it herself. Someone had to have given it to her, and Aunt Bea was the only one there. She was never prosecuted. Mom says they never even tried because she’s a judge. No prosecutor wants to go in front of a judge they’ve accused of murder.”

“So what if she did give Leigh the morphine? What’s so bad about that? If Leigh was really that sick, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t care if that’s what she did. I’m not against mercy killing, but it’s still murder in Washington. There’s no statute of limitations, and if she were convicted of it she would go to prison. I just can’t help but wonder.” Tish hesitated, but the fact that Jess couldn’t see her made it easier somehow. “I can’t help but wonder, if you’ve killed someone once, maybe it’s easier to do it again.”

“But why would she?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone knew what she did. Maybe Paula did. Paula and Carmen were still dating back then, when Leigh was so sick. Paula could have threatened to tell, so Aunt Bea pushed her off the roof. Then Carmen figured it out, so Aunt Bea had to kill her too.”

“And Dakota?”

“I don’t know about Dakota,” Tish said. “Maybe she really did just get drunk.”

Tish searched Jess’s face for a clue about what she thought. She expected Jess to tell her she was crazy, that Aunt Bea couldn’t possibly be the killer, and here’s why.

Instead, Jess said, “Maybe we should go check out the road and see if it really washed away.”

“NOBODY DIES ON my watch,” Lila said. She sat in a straight-backed chair beside the couch. Dakota slept deeply. Her cheeks were two rosy blooms, and her skin was hot.

“Not again, you mean,” Beatrice said.

Lila winced, and Beatrice felt mean.

“Right,” Lila said. “Never again.”

Beatrice knew it was foolish to decide, for no logical reason, that she was safe with Lila. She’d just insulted Tish for doing the exact same thing with Jess, and Jess had never killed anyone. As far as Beatrice knew, anyway. But Lila was too worried about Dakota, and she’d been so hard on herself about the child.

“How did it happen?” Beatrice asked.

Lila looked up, a question in her eyes, but her face closed up quickly when she figured out what Beatrice meant. "I left him in the car. You know that."

"I know, but how?" It was what everyone wondered, every time they heard stories like it in the news. How could such a thing happen? And, more important, could it ever happen to me?

Lila wrung out a fresh cloth in the bowl of cool water beside her and swapped it for the warm one on Dakota's forehead. "I'd had a two-week trial," Lila said. Her voice was low, but there were no other sounds to distract from it, no hum from a furnace or air conditioner, and no other people in the room. "Child molester, a bad one. I wasn't about to let him get away. The trial was finished. We were just waiting for the jury's verdict, and I knew it would come in that morning. I only watched Georgie on Friday afternoons, and only on the days I was able to get off early. On the days I couldn't, my sister would take the afternoon off and pick him up herself. But that Friday was free. The verdict would be read before noon, and I could pick Georgie up from his babysitter and take him home until Frannie came to get him."

Lila's words came smooth and easily, and she didn't take her eyes off Dakota as she spoke. Beatrice had the sense that she'd forgotten Beatrice was in the room, that she was reciting a story she'd told many times, at least to herself.

"I was right about the verdict," Lila went on. "The jury came in at eleven with a guilty verdict. I was happy, of course, but exhausted. You've been a lawyer, you know how it is."

So she knew Beatrice was in the room after all.

"You get so busy with a case, when it's a big one, you go on autopilot. I did anyway. I just did the next thing, I couldn't think any farther than that. My legal assistant put what I needed to do on my calendar, and when I finished one thing I crossed it off and moved on to the next. 'Closing statements, jury instructions, reading of the verdict, go pick up Georgie.' Like that. He was the next thing on my list, so after the verdict came in, I went and picked up Georgie. I got home and I was so tired. It was a hot day. I parked in front of the condo, dropped my bags in a chair, cranked up the air conditioning, and fixed myself a drink. I hardly ever drank, even then, but it was a horrible case. I fixed the drink, kicked off my shoes, and lay down on the couch. I was asleep before I'd even finished half of it. When I woke up the ice in the glass had melted even though the house was cool. I looked from the glass to the clock to see how long I'd slept and my eyes fell on the chair with my bags. There was my briefcase and my purse and a bag made of cloth, blue and brown, with little smiling monkeys all over it."

Lila looked up, and the bleak misery in her eyes made Beatrice catch her breath. "It wasn't on my calendar. It never said 'bring Georgie in the house,' and I forgot him." Her voice was thin as if she was still bewildered. "My blood froze. I know it sounds crazy. It's a stupid expression from pulp fiction, but it was true. It just froze in my veins for I don't know how long. I couldn't breathe, and my heart didn't pump. I was trying to die, I guess, but then I started screaming. It was too late, of course. I'd left my little baby nephew in the car and cooked him until he died."

Lila returned her gaze to Dakota, and Beatrice took a shaky breath of relief at not seeing her eyes any longer. It was horrible, seeing what Lila felt.

"Your sister?" Beatrice asked after a long moment.

"She never spoke to me again." Lila wrung out another cloth and replaced the one on Dakota's forehead. "I will never let another person die because of me. I live up here in the mountains because it's isolated and I never have to see children. They're so fragile. People don't understand. I learned first aid and CPR. I try to keep everyone safe. I donate blood every eight weeks. I'm on the National Kidney Donation Registry and the Bone Marrow Donation Registry. I give money to the Red Cross and St. Jude's Children's Hospital and UNICEF." She looked up

and met Beatrice's eyes again. "If I could do more, I would. If there's anything I can ever do to save a life, I will do it. I know you're trying to find out who killed Carmen and Paula. I want you to find out too. I hate like hell that they died on my watch. But cross my heart and hope to die, I didn't do it. Hope to die."

Beatrice believed her. It was impossible not to. She was about to say so when they were startled by a horrendous bang.

GETTING THE KEY to Aunt Bea's car was the easy part. The door between the rooms was still open, and Tish knew Aunt Bea was down in the lounge with Dakota and Lila. It was eerie being upstairs knowing that no one was about except Carmen, lying dead in her bed at the end of the hall. Tish was grateful Jess was with her. She entered Aunt Bea's room, scanned it for her purse, and saw it on the window seat next to a wooden box the size of a half-case of beer. She sat beside the box and put the purse in her lap.

The last time Tish opened Aunt Bea's purse she'd been nine years old and she was looking for money. She'd found some and had already gorged herself on the candy she'd bought with it when Aunt Bea tracked her down and forced her to confess. It had taken a while. Tish had been confident that Aunt Bea didn't know for sure that Tish was the guilty party. After all, someone else could have snuck into the house and taken all the coins, leaving the bills unmolested. Aunt Bea seemed positive it was Tish, though, and she was prepared to wait it out. It's certainly not due process, or whatever, to force someone to sit in a corner until they confess, but that's what Aunt Bea did. It probably took less than thirty minutes for Tish to break, but it felt like days.

So when Tish opened Aunt Bea's purse and felt for the keys, it wasn't without a feeling of shame and remorse. But somebody had to find out if the road really was closed, and neither Tish nor Jess had a car. Aunt Bea's purse was as tidy as her car, but that didn't make the keys easy to find. There was a place for everything, and everything was in its place, but Tish didn't know where that place was. She had thrust her fingers into half a dozen pockets when she happened to glance at the box beside her. What she saw made her leap to her only good foot. Aunt Bea's purse fell and the contents spilled out onto the floor.

"Fuck!"

Jess appeared in the doorway between the rooms. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Tish grabbed her crutches to keep herself from falling. "I dropped the purse."

She didn't mention that there were two dead women upstairs at the Inn: Carmen lying in her bed at the end of the hall, and the cremated remains of Aunt Leigh in the box Tish had just been sharing a seat with.

Leigh Scott

Beloved Wife

November 12, 1954 — January 11, 2011

Wait for Me

Aunt Bea had brought Aunt Leigh's ashes with her. That must have been who she was talking to when Tish stood at her door earlier. Aunt Bea was nuttier than Tish had thought.

The keys had landed on the floor. Tish leaned down and scooped them up. She left everything else where it had fallen. She'd never be able to put things back in their proper places. Let Aunt Bea think the purse just fell. Maybe she'd think Aunt Leigh did it.

"I got 'em," Tish said. "Let's go." They went outside to the parking lot. "How are we going to do this?"

"I'll sit in the driver's seat," Jess said, "and you sit on my lap and steer."

"On your lap?"

"How else? You can't push the pedals, and I can't steer."

It wasn't easy getting Tish situated on Jess's lap. The long cast made it nearly impossible for Tish to get into the front seat in the first place. "You get in first," Tish said, "and I'll slide in from the other side."

Jess sat in the driver's seat. She was taller than Aunt Bea, so she had to move the seat back, which left plenty of room for Tish. Tish opened the front passenger door and lowered her butt to the seat. Her leg stuck outside. She tossed her crutches into the back seat and scooted herself backward. Jess put her hands on Tish's hips and pulled.

"Wait, the gear shift," Tish said.

"Can you lift up?" Jess asked. "I can't—" A pause. "Hey, you're not wearing underwear."

"I only brought three pair," Tish said. "I can't wear dirty underwear. Um, Jess? Your hand right there isn't helping."

"Oh, sorry. Lift up just a little."

"Okay. It's not easy. Ouch! Oh, fuck. I think I just lost my virginity."

"Nice try. I was there last night, remember? You okay?"

"I'll live." Tish landed on Jess's lap. Her left foot was on the floor and her right leg stretched out on the passenger seat. She twisted her torso so that she could hold the steering wheel. "Okay. But how do I close the door?"

"Do we have to? How close are we to another car?"

"Not too close. Okay, I'm turning it on." Tish turned the key. A high chime rang out, notifying them that their door was open and their seatbelts were unbuckled. "This is crazy. Okay, we need to back out. Hold on." She couldn't shift to reverse without lifting her cast. She rocked back on her butt so she could lift the heavy leg.

"Ouch," Jess said. "Your butt doesn't look that bony."

"Sorry." Tish moved the gearshift to reverse. "Okay, touch the gas, nice and easy. There's nothing behind you."

The car crept backward at the pace of a snail. Tish turned the wheel so that the car aimed at the driveway that curved in front of the Inn. "Stop."

Tish rocked back again, lifted her leg, and shifted to drive. There was no longer room enough for the cast to fit behind or in front of the gear shift, so Tish balanced it awkwardly on the shift knob, her toes nearly pointing out the window. "Okay, a little gas." Tish's cast slipped off the gear knob and fell forward, pulling her off balance. Her chest hit the steering wheel. "Stop! Wait, this isn't working." She raised herself up onto her left leg, shifted to park, and pulled herself forward to drop into the passenger seat. She leaned down and found the control to move the seat back. When it was back as far as it could go, she was able to swing the cast inside the car and rest it on the floor. She closed the door. "Whew. I'm exhausted already."

"Can you reach the steering wheel?" Jess asked.

"Sure." Tish leaned forward and gripped the wheel with her left hand. "We should have tried this first."

“But then I wouldn’t have found out you’re not wearing underwear.”

“There are other ways.” Tish shifted to drive. “Okay, we’re going straight.”

“I can’t. I was born this way.”

“Ha ha. Gaily forward then.” The driveway curved in front of the Inn before straightening out to become the road. The electric engine was nearly silent, but the seat belt warning still rang and the gravel made loud popping noises underneath the tires. Tish worried Aunt Bea might hear and come out and stop them. At the pace they were moving, she’d have time to climb in the back seat and join them. It had been two full minutes already, and they hadn’t even passed the front door yet. “Maybe a little more gas,” Tish suggested.

The car lurched forward.

“Stop!” Tish cried and cranked the wheel, but it was too late. The car struck the rock pillar by the front steps. Something slapped Tish hard in the face, a tremendous bang sounded, and a metallic stench filled the car.

They sat for moment, too stunned to speak, until Tish said, “Oh shit.”

“You all right?” Jess asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yes. What happened?”

“You crashed into the Inn.”

“Me?”

Then Aunt Bea was there, hopping down both steps in one leap. She wrenched open the driver’s side door and peered past Jess to glare at Tish. “You let a blind girl drive my car?”

“It was her idea,” Tish said.

“I only did the pedals,” Jess said. “Tish steered.”

“Not very well, she didn’t,” Aunt Bea said.

“Are they all right?” Lila called from the doorway.

Tish opened the door. “We’re okay,” she called. “Thanks for asking.”

“Can we take this up inside then?” Lila asked. “I need to get back to Dakota.”

“WHAT IN GOD’S name were you thinking?” Beatrice asked.

They sat in the lounge, the four of them and Dakota, who still lay sleeping. Sandwiches were piled on a tray on the coffee table beside a box of warm water bottles. Beatrice wasn’t hungry. She hadn’t stopped shaking since seeing Tish in the crumpled car. She had suffered no damage, though, aside from a bruised face from the airbag, so Beatrice didn’t spare her. “Why the hell did you think you could drive a car that way? And where did you think you were going?”

“I’m taking the fifth,” Tish said. She slumped her chair like a sulky girl. “I wish it was vodka.”

“And you.” Beatrice turned on Jess. “I expected more from you, at least.”

“Nice, Aunt Bea,” Tish said. “Thanks a lot.”

“We wanted to check the road,” Jess said. Even she was a little pale. “We wanted to make sure it was really washed out.”

“Of course it’s washed out,” Beatrice said. “Detective Rainwater told us it was. Why would he lie about that?”

“We only have your word he said that,” Tish said.

“What?” Beatrice frowned at Tish and was met with a glare. It was a familiar look, both angry and hurt. It was the same betrayed expression Tish had worn the day she’d shown up at Beatrice’s and Leigh’s doorstep, eighteen years old and mad as hell at her parents, who’d finally kicked their deviant daughter out of the house. What on earth had happened to make Tish that angry with Beatrice?

Lila caught Tish’s implication before Beatrice could recover from Tish’s challenging glare. “You think Beatrice lied about the road?”

“Me?” Beatrice blinked. She’d been accused of many things in her life, but lying was not one of them. “Why would I lie about that? Besides, if the road wasn’t washed out, wouldn’t Rainwater have been here by now?”

“Maybe you lied about that too.” Tish’s voice had the waspish tone of a sullen teenager. “He never actually said he was coming back up here. He just said he’d talk to us some more.”

Beatrice was bewildered. “Tish, where is this coming from? I’ve never lied to you. Why do you think I am now?”

Tish glanced away. For a brief moment, the hurt was more evident in her face than anger. “Somebody took my pills,” she said.

“Your pills?” Beatrice asked. “Your pain pills? When?”

Tish shrugged. “Sometime between Friday night and this morning.”

“Where were they?” Lila asked. “How many did you have?”

“They were in my bathroom, and there was a whole bottle of them.”

Beatrice dropped to a chair, her legs suddenly weak. “Carmen.”

“Oh my God,” Lila said. She brushed the hair from Dakota’s forehead. “Maybe Dakota was drugged too.”

“Who could have taken them?” Beatrice asked.

“You could have,” Tish said, the challenge momentarily back in her eyes as she met Beatrice’s. She looked at Lila. “You or Holly could have. Or Carmen. Or Jess.”

“Just about anyone, then,” Lila said.

“Any of us could have,” Jess said, “but why would we?”

A noise from the dining room made everyone freeze. Uneven steps crossed the floor. Beatrice stood, prepared for what, she didn’t know.

Veronica appeared in the doorway. She was covered in dirt and mud. Dried blood smeared the left side of her face, her lip was fat and oozed blood, and she cradled one arm.

“Veronica!” Beatrice rushed to her, put an arm around Veronica’s back, and felt her trembling.

“Holly pushed me off a cliff,” Veronica said, her voice coming in jerks.

Jess rose. “Are you all right?”

“No, not Holly,” Lila said.

“We were half-way to the top,” Veronica said. “She freaked out and knocked me off the ridge.”

“Sit down. Here.” Beatrice opened a bottle of water and handed it to Veronica.

Veronica sank into the chair vacated by Beatrice and spoke rapidly. “She didn’t know I had other people’s phones with me. I pulled Tish’s and Beatrice’s phones out of my pocket to see if I could get a signal, and she was like, ‘What are you doing?’ And I said I was trying for signals, because even if my phone won’t work, somebody else’s might. And the next thing I knew, she tackled me and knocked me off the cliff.”

“Oh my God,” Lila whispered.

“How did you get here?” Tish asked.

“It wasn’t a very high cliff, I guess, or it wasn’t as steep as she thought it was.” Veronica took a long drink. “I landed on a ledge and grabbed a bush.” She held out a hand to show it streaked with scratches filled with blood and dirt. “It pulled my shoulder—I think I dislocated it—but I didn’t fall. Holly called down over the edge. She said it was an accident, but I didn’t believe her. She couldn’t see me where I was, so I just lay still and didn’t say anything. She said she was going on up the mountain to get help. I waited until I knew she was gone, and then I pulled myself back up and came here.”

“Holly did that?” Lila asked. “I can’t believe it.”

Veronica looked at her hands. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“We’re not letting anyone go off alone,” Beatrice said.

Tish pulled herself to her feet. “I’ll go with you.”

Beatrice didn’t want Tish to be alone with Veronica, or anyone else for that matter, but before she could voice her protest, which Tish would almost certainly have ignored, Jess said, “I’ll go too.”

“Here, take the lantern,” Lila said. “There are no windows in the downstairs bathrooms.”

The three women left the room, one cradling her arm, one hobbling on crutches, and the third guiding her way with a cane. Jess, ironically, carried the lantern.

“There’s something off about Veronica’s story,” Beatrice said.

“I hope she’s lying.” Lila’s face pinched like she was trying not to cry. “I couldn’t stand for it to be Holly. It would be my fault.”

“How could it be your fault? If Holly is the person behind all this, it’s Holly’s fault.”

They sat a moment in silence. Dakota wheezed in her sleep as if she had asthma.

“I think,” Beatrice said, “when the girls get back, we need to talk.”

VERONICA STARED AT herself in the mirror, something she did far too often, but this time she had a legitimate reason. Even in the lantern light, she could see that the gash above her left eye was likely to cause a scar. It had bled profusely, though it seemed to have stopped for now. She wondered if Lila knew how to make a butterfly bandage. Her lip had bled too, but only on the inside. Once the swelling went down, no one would be able to tell. She soaked a washcloth in cold water, the only kind the Adelheid Inn had, and gently wiped away the blood and dirt as best she could, trying not to let the bleeding start up again.

Her insides felt like jelly. The last two hours had been grueling, an experience she never wanted to repeat. She still didn’t know if she’d cut her lip on the cliff or if she’d done it herself, biting it as she forced strength into her arms she didn’t know she had. She flexed her uninjured shoulder. She was proud of the strength she still possessed. It had been a long time since she’d asked those muscles to perform like that.

She scrubbed her face and hands, running her fingers along her smooth and hairless forearms with affection. When she was as clean as she could get, she turned away from the mirror. She pulled down her pants, sat on the toilet, and tucked her penis down into the bowl. She would be glad when she didn’t have to hide *that* anymore.

“WE ALL HAVE secrets.” Beatrice’s voice was hushed, as if she was telling a ghost story around a campfire. Which, in a way, she was.

Lila had built a fire in the fireplace. It was getting late, and candles and flashlights would not be enough to ward off their fears this night. When Veronica returned from the bathroom with Tish and Jess, they all gathered in a half-circle around the hearth, Dakota’s couch just behind Lila’s chair. Lila had produced a long-handled fireplace popcorn popper, and she and Beatrice took turns shaking it over the flames until they had two large bowls of salted popcorn, one with butter and one without.

“There are things we hide because we regret them or they embarrass us,” Beatrice went on. “Sometimes we’re afraid of the consequences if someone found out. Like in Idaho and down South, people hide the fact that they’re gay because they could still be fired from their jobs.”

The bowl of unbuttered popcorn sat nearly untouched, while the buttered popcorn was almost gone. Lila put more butter in the hot pan. The women stared into the flames or watched the cube of butter slide around the pan, growing small. At Beatrice’s next words, their eyes turned to her.

“I think someone here has a secret so frightening to her that she’ll do anything she can to keep it hidden from the rest of us.”

Each woman, except Dakota, made a movement of some sort. Jess touched her mouth, Tish shifted in her seat, Lila clanged the pan of butter against the edge of the hearth, and Veronica wrapped her arms around her stomach and curled into herself.

“You may feel safer with your secrets hidden,” Beatrice said, “but I think we’ve reached the point where that’s not possible any longer. Our lives are in danger. The reason why might be somebody’s secret. It’s time to come clean.”

“But if the killer’s one of us,” Jess said, “and she’s killing people in order to keep her secret hidden, why would she tell now?”

“She might not,” Beatrice said, “but I’ll know it if she doesn’t.”

“Don’t think much of yourself, do you, Aunt Bea?” Tish asked.

“I have plenty of faults,” Beatrice said, “but I’m good at knowing when people lie. It’s what I do. Don’t worry, whatever you have to tell me, I’m sure I’ve heard worse. I’ll go first.” She looked at Tish. “Your Aunt Leigh died nearly four years ago. She knew she was going to die. She asked me to spread her ashes in the mountains, and I promised that I would, but I haven’t done it. I keep her with me. She’s in a box. She’s upstairs. I talk to her every day.”

“Aunt Bea.” A warning sounded in Tish’s voice.

“Don’t worry, I’m not crazy,” Beatrice said. “It may seem so to you girls, but you don’t know what it’s like. We were together thirty years. Imagine it, Tish, thirty years. The only person you’ve known for thirty years is me. And your parents, but they don’t count.”

“No,” Tish agreed. “They don’t.”

“I’m sorry Tish. We tried, Leigh and I. When you were little, they were good with you. You were a cute and funny kid. But when you got to be eleven or twelve, old enough to have ideas of your own, old enough to talk back, they got so harsh with you. Not with your sister or your brother, just you. You were a smart aleck, of course, but you were just a little kid. And you liked girls. They hated that. They tried so many ways to change you but, well, we all know how well that sort of thing works. They were never bad enough that we could report it to anyone, just bad enough to make you miserable. We tried to help. We invited you to come stay with us, but they wouldn’t let you. We were the evil lesbians. They thought all gay people were pedophiles out to molest you and recruit you. It sounds crazy now, but it’s what a lot of people thought back then. We couldn’t risk that sort of accusation. I didn’t want them saying you were lesbian because of

me. So we backed off. Until you were old enough to come to us on your own. By then it was too late.”

“No it wasn’t,” Tish said. “I wasn’t exactly ruined, you know. I really have turned out okay.”

“All right, you weren’t ruined,” Beatrice said. “But you were angry. I think you still are.” She thought Tish blushed, but it was difficult to tell in the firelight. “We did everything we could think of to break through your shell, and we just couldn’t do it. Then you went off to college, and you never really came back. Except for the odd Christmas and Leigh’s funeral, I never even saw you. Until you got arrested.”

Tish’s eyes narrowed. “Hey, did you *ask* them to throw me in jail?”

“Wait a minute,” Lila said. “You were in jail?”

“You never told me you got arrested,” Jess said.

Everyone looked at Tish. “I think it’s your turn,” Beatrice said.

“Are you sure you’ve told us everything, Aunt Bea?” Tish asked, but she was only stalling, of course.

“That’s all,” Beatrice said.

Tish sighed heavily and reached for the freshly buttered bowl of popcorn. “I violated a restraining order,” she said and popped a kernel in her mouth. “No big deal.”

“How long were you in jail?” Lila asked.

“A week,” Tish said.

Lila’s brows rose. “That must have been some restraining order.”

Tish rapped on her cast. “This is what delayed my arraignment. Most of that time I was in the infirmary. That’s why I have such an ugly cast, or I did have until you guys decorated it for me. The jail doesn’t go for frills.”

A thin voice came from behind Lila. “I thought you fell out of a tree.”

Lila spun around. “Dakota! You’re awake.”

“Yes. I’ve been listening.”

“How do you feel?”

“Okay. Real tired. My chest hurts.”

Lila gave her some water and aspirin, which Dakota swallowed.

“Didn’t you say you fell out of a tree, Tish?” Dakota asked.

“Yes,” Tish said, “but it wasn’t my fault. See, I had this thing for my ex for a while after we broke up, so yes, I stalked her a little bit. She got a restraining order against me and I stopped, I swear. Then I started dating this other girl who was hot but really shallow, you know? I knew she was cheating on me, so one night I climbed the tree outside her bedroom to where I could see in, and sure enough, I caught her in there making love to another woman. Who just happened to be my ex, the one who had the restraining order against me. That’s when I fell out of the tree.”

“And you were arrested,” Beatrice said.

“Yes, I was arrested,” Tish said, “and somehow my sneaky and crazy Aunt Bea got them to release me into her custody, which is why she’s been riding my ass all weekend to try to make me be good. She’d be so embarrassed if I violated probation while under her watch.”

“I might be a little sad too,” Beatrice said, “if you got hurt or sick or died.”

“Thanks,” Tish said. “So there you have all my secrets.”

“I think there’s one more?” Beatrice asked.

“Oh yeah. Jess and I made love.”

“Hey,” Jess said. “That wasn’t just your secret.”

“And it was no secret,” Dakota said.

Beatrice held back a laugh. “Thanks for sharing, but that’s not what I meant. Haven’t you started smoking again?”

“No!” Tish looked at her like she was crazy. “I haven’t smoked in years. Why would you think that?”

“Well, somebody here smokes,” Beatrice said. “I found cigarette butts on the tower roof. Dry cigarette butts, even after it rained.”

They all looked at each other, wide-eyed innocence on their faces, until a tiny voice came from behind Lila.

“I’m sorry,” Dakota said. “It was me.”

Lila’s jaw dropped. “You smoke?”

“So that’s why you were sneaking away from the hot tub that time,” Tish said.

“And why your breath always smells like cinnamon,” Jess added.

“Sneaking away from the hot tub?” Beatrice asked. “When?”

“It was right before Carmen found Paula,” Tish said.

“That would explain why Carmen didn’t see anyone in the hot tub,” Beatrice said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It couldn’t matter,” Tish said. “She was going in the wrong direction, away from the Inn. Besides, I—”

“You what?” Beatrice asked.

“I didn’t want you to know I could see the hot tub from my window.”

“You can?” Dakota asked.

“Why would I care about that?” Beatrice asked, but then she remembered seeing Dakota and Amy in the hot tub that first day. “Oh.”

“I think I’m going to die,” Dakota said.

“Don’t say that,” Lila said sharply.

“Why did you hide the fact that you smoke?” Jess asked.

“Because it’s so dumb,” Dakota said. “I know better. Everybody does. I can’t believe I ever started. It’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Tish said. “We’ve all smoked. The important thing is to quit.”

“Is there anything else you didn’t tell me,” Beatrice asked Tish, “because you thought it didn’t matter?”

Tish shook her head.

“Any other dark secrets from you, Dakota?”

“No.”

Lila cleared her throat, and the attention shifted to her. “Beatrice already knows my secret,” she said, “but I’ll tell the rest of you. It’s not a pretty story. I was arrested once too, and I spent seven years in prison.”

Beatrice heard intakes of breath from Tish and Jess, and even Veronica looked up from the examination of her shoes.

“You’ve all heard stories about people who leave babies in cars on hot days.” Lila’s voice was expressionless. “I did that. My nephew died. He was two years old. I was convicted of first degree manslaughter.”

The room was still for a long while until Beatrice finally spoke. “It wasn’t quite that black and white.”

“It’s my secret to tell,” Lila said. “That’s what happened.”

The room returned to silence. No one even moved except for Lila, who poked the fire.

"I'm so sorry," Dakota finally said.

Lila turned and gave her a tender smile. "It puts cigarette smoking in perspective, doesn't it?"

"Does Holly know?" Tish asked.

"Oh yes," Lila said. "Holly knows."

"Veronica?" Beatrice asked. "We haven't heard from you yet."

Veronica dipped her head and shook it.

"Nothing?"

Veronica shook her head again.

"I'll help you out," Beatrice said softly. "How far in transition are you?"

Veronica raised her head, her eyes wide.

"I had a trial once with a trans-woman," Beatrice said. "It was an arson case, but the witnesses all insisted it was a man who had done it. The prosecution's theory was that the woman transitioned in order to create a disguise for herself. The defense called in an expert witness who testified that the hormones couldn't work that quickly. The jury found her not guilty. I learned a lot about male-to-female transitions during that trial."

Veronica's chest rose and fell quickly. She stared at Beatrice and said nothing.

"Wait a minute," Tish said. "You mean Veronica's a man?"

"No, she's a woman," Jess said. "She was just born in a male body."

Tish turned to Jess. "Did you know about this?"

"I found out yesterday," Jess said. "We were working out together, and—"

"I grunted," Veronica said. Her voice was tiny and her face red.

"That's why you went to Veronica's room," Tish said.

"A man's voice coming from a woman would be a dead giveaway," Beatrice said. "Men can train themselves to sound like women, but it doesn't work the other way around. But it was the Adam's apple I noticed."

Veronica put her fingers to her throat.

"Oh, you hide it very well," Beatrice said. "You've probably trained yourself to swallow it so it doesn't show, but that's difficult to do all the time."

Veronica swallowed.

"But you're so feminine," Tish said. "More than any of us. I let you paint my toes because the polish looks so good on you."

Tears welled in Veronica's eyes. Her face was small and pale in the firelight. For once she wore no make-up, and her puffy lip and bruised eye contrasted sharply with her white skin. "I didn't kill anyone," she said with trembling voice and trembling lips. She looked like a little girl.

"Why were you with Paula?" Tish asked. "She's twice your age, and you didn't even seem to like her."

"I didn't know it was a date," Veronica said, and the tears fell in earnest. "We met through our book group. I never dreamed she thought of me like that, not 'til we got here. I thought it was just something to do, and it sounded fun. A whole weekend with just women. It would be a chance to—"

"A chance to what?" Beatrice asked.

Veronica put her hands to her breasts and pushed them upward. It was a loving gesture. "My boobs are real," she said, "but the rest of me..." She dropped her hands and wrapped her arms around her stomach again. "I haven't had surgery. You wouldn't believe how much it costs. But lately my dad's become more receptive. He's starting to realize I'm not going to change my mind. He told me if I could really pass as a woman full-time, with people who didn't know me

before, he'd pay for the surgery. This weekend seemed like a great chance to prove to him that I could do it. But I couldn't." She curled over herself once more. "I couldn't do it. You guessed."

"So don't tell him," Tish said. "Besides, Aunt Bea and Jess aren't normal. You sure had me fooled."

"Did Paula know?" Lila asked.

Veronica shook her head. "She thought I was a normal woman. A normal lesbian."

"But she tried something with you," Beatrice said. "Paula would."

Veronica nodded. "That first night. She kissed me. I let her, at first. I was kind of shocked. I don't know if it was because she was so old or because she was a woman. I'm so naïve sometimes. I don't even know if I'm a lesbian, to tell the truth. I've never actually had sex, except a couple of times when I was a teenage boy, when I thought I had to. So I let her go ahead and kiss me, but when she started putting her hands inside my clothes, I had to stop her."

"How did she take it?" Beatrice asked.

Only then did Veronica seem to understand the direction of Beatrice's questions. She looked up, met Beatrice's eyes, and said, "She was angry. She said I was a tease. I ended up sleeping on the couch. I could tell it was going to be a long weekend, but I didn't kill her over it."

A thoughtful silence followed her words. It was interrupted only when the lights flickered and turned on. The women looked up, gasped, and a few clapped their hands.

"Does this mean the road's open?" Veronica asked.

"It probably just means the line break was on the other side," Lila said. "I think someone would have come up here if the road was open long enough to repair the power lines."

Beatrice stood up. "The computer! I can send an e-mail now." But before she'd taken a single step, the lights went out again. "Oh damn." She sat back down.

"It's a good sign, though," Lila said. "At least they're working on it." After the brief moment of light, the room seemed darker than ever. The windows had grown black, and the firelight provided shadows more than anything else. The women stared at the fire, and the silence grew again.

TISH WAS NOT thinking about the lights. Was she the only one who'd noticed how Jess looked up, just like everyone else, when the lights flicked on? She felt like she'd been splashed with an ice-cold water balloon. How did they know Jess was blind, after all? Only because she'd told them she was, just like Aunt Bea had told them the road was blocked and Veronica told them she was a woman. Or had Veronica ever actually said that? It didn't matter. The fact was, Jess could see. She'd lied, just like everyone else.

Jess couldn't be the killer, though. Tish knew for a fact that she'd been in the hot tub when Aunt Bea was hit on the head. If Aunt Bea was hit on the head, that is. Aunt Bea might not be as reliable as Tish had previously thought, and if that was the case, it put a new spin on everything.

Tish thought back to Jess running the car into the front pillar. Could she have done that on purpose? True, they were hardly moving at all, but it was enough to set the airbags off, and people had been killed by airbags. If Tish had still been on Jess's lap, like Jess had wanted, her head would have probably been knocked clean off.

It was almost anti-climactic when she heard a door open, the sound of steps trudging toward the lounge, and Holly appeared in the doorway.

"I couldn't get a signal," she said. "And I have some bad news."

Veronica, who had been sitting in the shadows, stood and faced the door.

Holly gasped and, just a second too late, smiled. "Veronica, you're alive!"

"No thanks to you," Veronica said.

Holly's smile faltered. "What do you mean? You went over the cliff. I looked for you. I shouted, but you didn't answer. I thought you were dead."

"You mean you wished I was," Veronica said.

Holly frowned. "What are you talking about?" She turned to the rest of the women. "She fell. She pulled all these phones out of her pocket, three or four of them. She couldn't hold them all and she started dropping them. One fell over the cliff, and another started to go. We both grabbed for it, but she leaned over too far. I tried to catch you, but it happened too fast."

"You pushed me," Veronica said.

"No." Holly's face crumpled like a tired child's and tears pooled in her eyes. "I didn't Veronica. I didn't. I was trying to catch you." She squatted, dropping her head on arms crossed over her knees, as if exhausted. "Why do these things keep happening? Why?"

She sure didn't act like a killer. Tish glanced at Aunt Bea, her barometer, and saw that she looked uncertain too. They all did, even Veronica, though she still glared.

"Well, come in and join us," Aunt Bea said. "We're all sticking together until the road opens. Turns out none of us can be trusted."

Holly raised her head from her squatting position. "I need to use the bathroom."

"The lights flicked on a few minutes ago," Aunt Bea said. "For a split second anyway. The power's likely to come back on any time. Can't you wait?"

"Not really," Holly said. "I hurried back to tell you. I didn't want to stop."

Tish grabbed her crutches. "Jess and I will take her." They'd done it with Veronica, so no one questioned it, not even Jess.

Holly carried the lantern this time. Tish and Jess followed. Holly didn't turn toward the hall bathroom like Veronica had, but instead headed straight to the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Tish asked.

"To the bathroom," she said. "Lila's is closest."

Tish had never been in Lila's room before. The bathroom was at the far end of a living space crowded with furniture, part office and part living room. A bed could be seen through another door. Holly took the lantern into the bathroom. Tish and Jess waited in the near darkness, the only light coming from Tish's headlamp and the thin band underneath the bathroom door.

"You told me you were blind," Tish said.

"I am," Jess said.

"You looked up when the lights came on."

"Oh. Well, I never said I was totally blind," Jess said. "Most blind people aren't."

"What can you see, then?"

"I can see light. I can see the shape of people if they stand in front of a light. If they move, I might be able to recognize them."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"When did that conversation come up?" Jess asked. She sounded irritated. "What was I supposed to say? I bench press one-forty, I speak French, and oh by the way, I have limited light perception?"

"Could you see when you were driving?"

"I could see that it was light out."

“So you must have seen that big black shape of the building in front of you,” Tish said. “Why didn’t you stop?”

“I didn’t see it,” Jess said. “Besides, you were steering, not me.”

That was true, but still. “Why did you want me on your lap? If those airbags went off when I was sitting in your lap, it would have killed me.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jess said. “My head would have exploded like a watermelon. Tish, come on. Do you really think I crashed the car to try to kill you? If I wanted to kill you, love, I could have done it a hundred different ways last night.”

Tish quivered at the endearment, but was distracted by another thought. “If we’d left the candle lit last night, could you have seen my body?”

“Maybe.”

“You cheated,” Tish said.

“How did I cheat?”

“You knew I wanted to see you naked. You made me think it wouldn’t be fair because you couldn’t see. But you can. What else have you lied about, Jess?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You did too,” Tish said. “It’s a lie of omission, just like Veronica didn’t tell us she’s a man.”

“She’s not a man, and keeping something private is not the same as lying.”

“Like what, Jess? What else are you keeping private?” The question was asked in a fit of petulance. Tish didn’t really expect an answer, and she didn’t get one at first. But Jess sucked in a breath and a guilty expression crossed her face. “Jess? What are you hiding? I know for a fact you’re not a man. I didn’t need eyes last night to see that.”

“I’m not a man,” Jess said, “but that doesn’t mean I wanted you to see me naked.”

“Why? You have a great body.”

“Yeah, right.”

“What do you mean?” Tish had a sense of foreboding. Had Jess been injured in a horrible accident and had unsightly scars all over her body? Maybe that’s how she lost her sight.

“I have diabetes,” Jess said. “Type 2.”

Tish frowned. “So? I know lots of people who do.”

“I didn’t know it for a long time. I was overweight. No, that’s not true. I was obese, morbidly obese.”

“You?”

“I was over three hundred pounds. I don’t know how much over. That’s when I stopped weighing myself.”

“Three hundred pounds?” Tish tried to picture it, but she didn’t really know what three hundred pounds looked like. “Is that why your girlfriend dumped you?”

“No,” Jess said. “She was just as big as me. We were the stereotypical obese lesbian couple. We had to buy SUV’s to get around because we couldn’t fit in regular cars anymore. I started having problems with my vision, but I ignored them. I didn’t want to go to the doctor. I was afraid of what they might tell me—you know, exercise, eat right, blah blah blah. I didn’t want to hear it. I was in so much denial. But one day I woke up and I couldn’t see well enough to drive to work. It was like somebody rubbed Vaseline on my eyes, and I couldn’t rub it out. I had to have my girlfriend give me a ride to the doctor. That’s when I found out I had diabetes. Sometimes they can correct vision loss caused by diabetes, but I waited too long.”

“There was nothing they could do?”

“They looked into surgery, lasers and things like that, but it was too late. It wasn’t too late for other things, though. I started exercising that same day. Just a little walk, but it was a start. I cut out the sugar cold turkey. Learning how to eat right was hard, since I couldn’t even read a damn book about it, but I started. I still have diabetes, but it’s under control now.”

“You’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“Yeah. I’ve probably lost more than you weigh,” Jess said. “And that’s when my girlfriend dumped me. I changed, and she didn’t want to. It’s hard on relationships when one person changes and the other doesn’t.”

“But what’s that got to do with not letting me see you naked?” Tish asked. “You’re thin now.”

“I guess,” Jess said. “But part of me doesn’t really believe it. I’ve never seen myself thin. The last time I saw myself, I was too big to fit in the mirror. In my mind, that’s what I still look like, and I know I must have stretch marks. Lots of them. You seem to care so much about how people look. I was afraid.”

Tish felt a prickle of shame. “You were afraid of what I would think?”

“That shouldn’t surprise you,” Jess said. “Hey, hasn’t Holly been in there a long time?”

Tish looked down. The line of light that had shone from underneath the door was no longer there. She knocked. “Holly?” No answer. “Hey, are you all right in there?” Tish tried the door, but it was locked. “Oh shit.”

“Oh oh,” Jess said. “We better get some help.”

“Wait. It might be a trick to get us to leave.” Tish directed her feeble headlamp around Lila’s room. “There’s a hardback chair over there, to your left.”

Jess found the chair and brought it back. They secured it under the doorknob so the door could not be opened from the other side and scurried back to the lounge as quickly as a blind woman and a woman on crutches can scurry in the dark.

“Something’s happened to Holly,” Tish announced.

“What? How?”

“I don’t know,” Tish said. “The door’s locked. She took the lantern in with her, but the next thing we knew the light was out and she’s not answering.”

Lila stood up. “Which bathroom did you take her to?”

“Yours. She told us to.”

“There are two doors to that bathroom.” Lila grabbed a flashlight and headed for the door, saying over her shoulder, “Beatrice, watch Dakota.”

“Tish, go with her,” Beatrice said. “You too Jess.”

Lila moved much more quickly than Tish or Jess could. By the time they reached the dining room, Lila was gone. Tish saw a faint glow from the lobby. “This way,” she said. When they made it to the lobby, Lila was no longer there, but a moving light showed through an open door behind the registration desk. The door was only three feet away on Tish’s left, but it was blocked by the registration desk, which was as long as Tish was tall. She made her way around it, followed by Jess, and reached the bathroom doorway.

Lila stood still in the bathroom, her flashlight fixed at a bare spot on the floor. “She’s gone.” Her voice sounded choked, but Tish couldn’t see her face.

“Maybe she just went to her room or something,” Tish said.

“Yeah,” Lila said, but it didn’t sound as if she meant it. She abruptly left the bathroom, taking most of the light with her.

Tish started to follow, but paused to swing her headlamp around the bathroom, just in case Lila had missed something. From the faint illumination of her headlamp, she could see that the bathroom was large and, unless someone was hiding behind the shower curtain, empty. Hearing the dangerous crescendo of *Psycho* violins screeching in her ears, Tish raised one crutch, caught the edge of the curtain, and swept it back to reveal nothing but an empty tub. Lila was right, there was no one in the bathroom. Tish turned to follow Lila and Jess to the lounge, but once again she'd been too slow. Lila and her flashlight were nowhere to be seen. Neither was Jess.

What happened to everybody sticking together? She was only a minute or two behind them. Hadn't they even noticed she wasn't with them? She hurried to catch up and made it as far as the end of the lobby desk when her headlamp finally quit. She was plunged into darkness. Shit.

"Jess?"

No answer. Tish's heart pounded and she was afraid to move. It was the black staircase all over again. She was afraid to take a step. How could she possibly navigate her way from the lobby, through the crowded dining room, and back to the lounge without any light?

Something she'd seen in the bathroom came back to her. There'd been a glint of light above the toilet tank. It hadn't registered at the time, except to strike her as slightly odd, but she thought of it now with relief. The lantern. Holly had doused it and left it in the bathroom. Probably she didn't want any light with her, since she was sneaking about the Inn, and she certainly knew her way around well enough not to need it. Tish turned and made her way back to the bathroom, a clear straight shot of no more than six feet, easily navigable even in the dark. Once there, she propped a crutch against the door and used her other hand to search. There had to be matches somewhere. Every bathroom had matches, right? She found them on the bottom shelf of the medicine cabinet, and she only knocked over a half dozen bottles in her search. She scratched a match, lit the lantern, and tucked the glass shade back over the flame with a satisfied sigh. She had light.

The next problem was how to carry it. She couldn't very well loop a burning oil lamp through her fingers while using the crutches. Maybe she could do it in stages. The lobby desk was only three feet away from the bathroom door. Tish balanced herself with one crutch, grabbed the lantern with her other hand, took two awkward lurching steps to the door to the lobby, made two more steps, and reached the registration desk. She set the lantern on the desk, hobbled back to the bathroom to retrieve her other crutch, and returned to the lobby. She leaned one crutch against the desk and used her free hand to slide the lamp to the end of the desk.

There was a sound behind her. Something touched her back. She jerked, yelped, and spun around all at once, her heart in her throat. It was the crutch. It had slid from its spot and hit her from behind. That's all it was, but before she could still her thumping heart, she heard a crash behind her and spun again, finally losing her balance and tipping backward onto her butt. Her spastic movement on being touched by the crutch had toppled the lantern off the desk. It shattered. Kerosene splashed, and flames licked at the carpet.

"Fuck." She scooted backward on her butt, dragging one crutch with her. The other had fallen in the opposite direction on the far side of the fire. There was nowhere to go but back, since the chest-high desk was as effective as a wall in blocking her in.

She wasn't frightened, not then. It was just a little fire, and she had water right behind her. She managed to get to her feet and returned to the bathroom. The only light she had now was from the little flames behind her, but it was enough to show her the decorative pitcher on the side of the tub. She filled it with water, moved to the doorway, and threw the water on the flames.

Whoosh!

Flames, much larger than before, leaped and seemed to fly. She remembered the rule, too late, never throw water on a gas fire. Flames landed on the desk, the wall, and the carpet at Tish's feet. Fuck again!

This was more than she could handle. "Fire!" she screamed. "Fire!" She hurried on her single crutch back to the bathroom, found the other door, turned the knob, and pushed. It wouldn't budge. Of course it wouldn't. She and Jess had blocked it with the chair. She was stuck.

"HOLLY'S GONE," LILA announced upon her return to the lounge. Shadows moved in the background, and Beatrice saw light glint off Jess's cane.

"I told you so," Veronica said.

"She probably went to her room to change," Beatrice said.

"No," Lila said. "She wouldn't have just left the girls out there like that. Oh my God, this is all my fault." Her voice was tragic.

"Don't be silly," Beatrice said. "How could it be your fault? Even if she's the killer, you couldn't have known it."

Lila sat on the hearth and dropped her head into her hands. "Yes I could. I did know it. I did. She's killed before, just like me."

"What?" They all said it once, even Dakota, who struggled to sit up.

"I told you I was in prison," Lila said. "What I didn't tell you is that's where I met Holly. I didn't want to tell you her secret. I wanted her to do it, but now... She was in on a manslaughter charge, like me. Hers was for drunk driving, and her passenger was killed. We were alike that way. That's why we became friends in prison. She was the only friend I had. Years later she came to me. She wanted a job. I had no reason not to trust her. She doesn't drink at all anymore, and it's hard for felons to find jobs. I thought I was doing the right thing in hiring her." Lila's voice trembled. She shivered before the fire, though it wasn't cold in the room. "She's been a good employee."

"Paula had a girlfriend who was killed by a drunk driver," Beatrice said. "Carmen was talking about it just the other day. Her name was Noreen, I think. She and Paula had a fight, and Noreen went out with some other woman that night. They got drunk. The other woman crashed her car and Noreen died."

"The woman Holly killed was named Noreen," Lila whispered.

Beatrice felt the penny drop. Noreen was not a common name. "Paula must have recognized Holly," Beatrice said. "Maybe she confronted Holly about it, and Holly asked her to go up to the roof with her where they could speak in private. Holly could have come back here after she dropped us all off in Leavenworth. Why didn't I think of that? She would have known to park away from the Inn so Lila wouldn't hear the van on the gravel. And then Holly pushed Paula off the roof."

"But what about Carmen?" Veronica asked. "And Dakota? And why would she try to push me off the cliff?"

"I didn't." At the sound of Holly's voice, everyone froze. It was too dark to see her, but the voice came from the doorway between the lounge and the breakfast room.

"I keep telling you," Holly said, "I was trying to catch you." Her voice was clogged with tears.

"Bullshit," Veronica said. "Were you trying to catch Paula too?"

“Paula fell,” Holly said. “I didn’t push her, I swear. We were up on the roof arguing, you got that much right. She figured out I was the same Holly who’d killed her girlfriend in that car accident. She was furious all over again. I was standing by the fence on top of the tower, and she charged at me. I didn’t push her, I just moved away so she couldn’t hit me, and she went over the edge.” She snapped her fingers. “Like that. All I did was move away. But I knew nobody would believe me. Nobody ever believes me.”

“Why did you sneak out of the bathroom like that?” Jess asked.

“I went upstairs for this,” Holly said. She waved something. It was too dark to see what it was, but the sound of it flapping was familiar.

“My notebook?” Beatrice asked.

“I didn’t hit you, Beatrice,” Holly said. “I heard the crash when you fell, like I said. I came running and found you out cold. Nobody was around. You just fell. I borrowed the notebook. I saw it there, and I couldn’t resist. I had to find out if you knew about me and Noreen. I was going to give it back to you, but you said someone had hit you. I knew you’d think I did it, and I didn’t!”

“What about Amy?” Dakota asked. “What did you do to Amy?”

“I didn’t do anything to Amy. She ran away. Anyone could see she was scared shitless about being with a bunch of lesbians.”

“She sure was,” Veronica said.

“And Dakota?” Beatrice asked.

“Dakota got drunk,” Holly said. She glanced toward the lobby as if she’d heard a sound.

“That’s true,” Dakota said. “I did.”

“What about Tish’s pills?” Beatrice asked.

“Tish’s pills?” Holly seemed genuinely puzzled. “What pills?” She looked again in the direction of the lobby and stepped backward to get a better look. As she did so, a faint yell could be heard coming from the direction of the lobby. Light flickered, and for the first time Beatrice could see Holly’s face. Her expression changed from puzzled to alarmed. “Fire!” She darted away. Dancing light from the lobby suddenly filled the breakfast room.

“Tish?” Jess asked. She swung her cane around her. “Tish, where are you?”

In the new light, Beatrice could see Jess. The space beside her was empty. “Tish!” she screamed. “Tish, answer me!”

“She was right behind me,” Jess said.

A chorus of battery-powered smoke alarms blared. Beatrice ran for the breakfast room, but Lila beat her to the door and pushed her back. “Get Dakota out of here,” Lila said. “Go out the west door. I’ll find Tish.” She ran toward the fire as Holly emerged from the kitchen with a fire extinguisher in her hands.

Beatrice started to follow, but Veronica called from behind, “Beatrice, wait, I need help!” Beatrice looked over her shoulder. With her one good arm, Veronica tried to help Dakota rise from the couch. Jess moved quickly to help, but she bumped into the table and dropped her cane. She fell to her knees and groped at the floor. Beatrice looked back at the fire. The flames licked the floor and walls heading into the lobby creating a ring of fire and smoke. Lila darted through it. She turned and flashed a strangely triumphant grin at Beatrice. “Go back! I’ll save her!” She disappeared into the smoke.

“Tish, get your ass out here!” Beatrice screamed, but she could do no more. She had to help with Dakota. She returned to the lounge and hurried to Dakota’s side. Jess found her cane and

they all escaped out the side door by the gym to the west pavement where two days earlier Paula had fallen to her death.

LILA RUSHED TO the lobby. It was in flames.

Holly aimed the little extinguisher at the fire. It was about as effective as spitting, but it spoke volumes to Lila. Holly wasn't letting the Inn go down without a fight. Her actions weren't those of a killer.

Lila grabbed her arm. "Tish is missing!" she yelled. "Help me find her!"

Holly's eyes widened. She instantly grasped the situation. "I'll check upstairs." She ran forward with the fire extinguisher.

Lila had last seen Tish in the downstairs bathroom. She assumed the girl had followed her to the lounge, but she didn't actually remember seeing her do it. She'd been too upset about Holly. The girl was on crutches, though. She couldn't get far. The bathroom was the logical place to start looking.

Lila wasn't afraid of getting burned, but she was terrified that she wouldn't find Tish in time. She had done so much that was wrong in this life, so much harm, though she'd never meant any of it. Now, because of her, because she'd brought Holly to the Inn, two women were dead, one was missing, and another might die if Lila couldn't get to her in time. Too many people had died because of her.

She put her arm over her nose and mouth and dived into the lobby. "Tish!" she screamed. The flames were surprisingly loud, and she wasn't sure she could hear Tish if she answered. She moved past the lobby desk and kicked something metal. She kicked at it again, and it moved. Tish's crutch. Flames blocked the path to the bathroom door but Lila ignored them. She ran through them as though they weren't there and opened the door.

Tish crouched on the edge of the tub with her face near the seam of the opposite door and her cast sticking straight out in front of her. She looked up. Tears streamed from her eyes.

"Help me," Tish said.

Lila slammed the door behind her to prevent more smoke from entering and grabbed the knob of the other door, uncertain why Tish hadn't done the same. The door wouldn't budge.

"We put a chair—" A cough cut Tish's sentence short, but Lila understood immediately. There was no way she could get the girl back through the flames without setting them both on fire.

"Wait here," Lila said. She opened the lobby door, slammed it behind her again, and ran back through the flames. They had spread. The entire lobby was burning, even the ceiling. Flames dropped like slush around her. She felt pain sear her lungs, but she paid it no attention. Nothing mattered but getting Tish out of that bathroom, and soon.

The smoke had spread to the breakfast room, but it wasn't heavy there, not yet, and the kitchen appeared nearly normal except for a haze near the ceiling and the scream of the alarm. Despite the reduced smoke, Lila found it difficult to breathe. She grew dizzy, but she had to make it to the bathroom.

Her living quarters seemed serene and remote from the fire until she reached the bathroom door. A chair was wedged beneath the knob, and smoke trickled from under the door. She pulled the chair away and opened the door. No flames, but smoke poured out. Tish was sprawled on the floor, a wet rag over her mouth and nose. She gasped like a fish at the fresh air.

“Hurry,” Lila said. There was little force behind the word. It sounded like a whisper. She grabbed Tish’s arm, thrust her crutch beneath it, and hauled Tish to her feet. “Go. Now. Out the back.”

“What about you?” Tish asked.

“I’m going to find Holly. Don’t wait for me. Go.”

Tish hobbled off. She only had one crutch, and to Lila her pace seemed agonizingly slow. But she only had to make it to the patio doors in the breakfast room. She would be all right, and Lila had one more person to try to save.

EVERY CELL INSIDE Beatrice screamed for speed. She wanted to rush everyone away from the burning building to safety and run back inside to find Tish. But hurrying was impossible, despite the smoke and heat at their backs. Beatrice was the oldest of the four women, but she was the only one of them able to run, and they needed her. Dakota was flaccid in her arms, barely conscious. Veronica was on Dakota’s other side, helping as best she could, but she only had one good arm. Dakota was thin, but she was taller than both of them, and hauling her between them wasn’t easy. Jess was in great physical shape, but of course she couldn’t see.

“Hurry,” Beatrice said, and they crept forward as quickly as they could in the dark.

“She was right behind me,” Jess said for perhaps the fifth time. “Why didn’t I notice she was gone? I always know where Tish is. I hear her. I smell her.”

“Hurry,” Beatrice panted. They had still only reached the corner of the building. They needed to get farther away. “Maybe I should go get a car. It’ll be faster.”

“What about keys?” Veronica asked. “Besides, you can’t leave us here. I can’t move Dakota by myself.”

“I can walk,” Dakota murmured, but it was obvious she couldn’t.

“Not yet,” Veronica said. “Let’s get farther away first.”

So they struggled a few more steps. They could hear the crackle of the fire now.

“It sounds like water,” Jess said.

It did for a moment, until the simple rippling sound was overpowered by a roar. Light flared and lit the path ahead of them. Beatrice looked back. She could see flames through the front windows, and a black smudge darker than the night plumed from cracks in the building. As she watched, a window shattered. The flames leapt up, the roar grew louder, and the smoke billowed.

“No.” She turned further around, nearly dropping Dakota.

“We’re still too close,” Veronica cried. “Help me.”

Veronica was right. They had barely reached the gravel in front of the building, and there was no doubt the whole building was going to go up in flames. No fire trucks would careen up the road, sirens blaring, to put it out, and Holly’s little fire extinguisher was no match for this fire. Beatrice strengthened her grip on Dakota and hauled her forward. The worst of the fire was on the east side of the Inn, so they veered west, off the gravel and into the trees.

Jess stopped. “Nobody can see in a fire,” she said, and Beatrice could tell from her voice that she was crying. “I can save her as well as anyone.”

“Don’t,” Veronica said, and she was crying too. “It’s too late.”

Jess ignored her. She turned and rushed back to the Inn, but she was in too big a hurry to use her cane properly. She tripped and sprawled on the ground.

“You’ll just be one more person to save,” Beatrice cried. “Lila will get her out.”

“Wait.” Veronica pointed. “There she is.”

And there she was. Tish hobbled from the back of the building like an injured bug, using a single crutch for balance as she hopped on her left foot and swung her cast forward. Beatrice dropped Dakota into Veronica’s arms and ran to her while Jess scrambled to her feet.

“Tish, thank God!” Beatrice wrapped an arm around Tish’s waist and practically lifted her off the ground carrying her forward.

“Aunt Bea,” Tish said, her voice trembling as well as her limbs, “Lila saved me. She went back for Holly, but I think...I think the flames blew up when I opened the door.”

“She’ll be all right,” Beatrice said without any idea if it was true. “She knows what she’s doing.” But as she spoke, the fire roared louder. “Can you go any faster, kiddo?”

Jess reached them. She put a shoulder under Tish’s other arm and they lifted her off the ground and carried her to the trees where the others waited. Beatrice lowered her to the ground. Jess dropped along with her, as if they were fused.

Flames blew out more windows. The light grew brighter, ash fell on them like snow, and a moment later a burning ember landed on the ground beside them.

“We’re still too close,” Beatrice said. She and Veronica bent to Dakota, who slumped on the ground, and lifted her again. Jess helped Tish, and the five women continued their frantic creep away from the burning building. They reached a point far enough removed to feel safe. The heat was intense, but not scorching, and embers no longer fell around them. They put Dakota on the ground and turned to face the building. It was fully ablaze, flames erupting from every window, the frame of the house showing black like bones on an x-ray.

“Where did you go, Tish?” Jess asked. “I thought you were behind me.”

“I was,” Tish said. “I just wanted to check the bathroom real quick, in case Lila was lying. But she wasn’t. She saved me.”

“Saved you how?” Beatrice asked. “What happened?”

“My light went out,” Tish said. “I couldn’t see, so I lit the oil lamp. But I couldn’t carry it very well. I knocked it on the ground and it broke. The fire started and I got trapped in the bathroom.”

“*You* started the fire?” Beatrice asked.

“Yeah. I tried to put it out, but...sorry.”

“I thought it was Holly,” Veronica said.

The reorganization of facts in Beatrice’s mind continued. It had started with Holly’s genuine despair at the accusations made against her. She could still have been skillfully lying, of course, but that didn’t mesh with her reaction at seeing the fire. Beatrice’s next thought was that if Holly wasn’t lying, Veronica must be. But was it possible that no one was lying? Could she have just been mistaken?

She kept expecting to see Lila and Holly come running from the back of the burning building like Tish had, but with each moment that passed, the hope faded.

“I don’t think they’ll make it,” Veronica said, echoing Beatrice’s thoughts.

“Wait, look!” Tish shouted.

Beatrice followed the direction of Tish’s finger with her eyes. She’d been looking at the wrong place. On the top of the tower, the only part of the building still relatively intact, stood a figure waving her arms. Holly.

“Stay here,” Beatrice ordered, though no one could have followed her anyway. She ran toward the building.

Tish called from behind her. “Come back Aunt Bea!”

Beatrice ignored her. She had to try. But before she even made it half-way to the building, she felt a wall of heat so intense it had a force of its own, pushing her back. She put up an arm and tried to push forward, but the heat burned her eyes, her skin, even her lungs.

“Holly!” she screamed. “Jump!” Jumping might kill her, but it might not, and remaining on top of that burning building certainly would.

Holly turned and disappeared. Beatrice wondered if she was backing up to give herself a running start to leap off the building, which seemed the wrong way to go about it, but a moment later she returned to the edge of the tower, and she wasn’t alone. Lila was with her. Both of them stood at the edge of the tower, their figures silhouetted by the glow of flames, in the same spot where Paula had plunged to her death.

A roar and a crash from the far side of the building caught the attention of all three of them, and behind her Beatrice heard screams. The entire eastern side of the building had just collapsed. The flames behind Holly and Lila grew.

“Jump!” Beatrice called again. “It’s your only chance.”

Unbelievably, the two women seemed to be having a conversation, their postures relaxed as if there were no urgency. Lila spoke. Holly looked out, seemed to meet Beatrice’s eyes, though that was impossible, and waved her forward. Beatrice shook her head. It was too hot, and what could she do?

Their conversation ceased. Holly lunged at Lila, grabbed her arms, and yanked her toward the edge of the tower. Lila struggled, but weakly. Holly, in contrast, was strong. She dropped to her knees, still holding Lila’s arms, and swung Lila over the edge, letting herself lie flat.

Beatrice understood. She ran forward, heedless of the heat, barely even noticing it. It was an impossible plan, but she couldn’t stand by doing nothing to help. Holly loosened her grip on Lila’s arms so that her hands slid to Lila’s wrists, dropping her further over the side of the tower. Lila dangled. Beatrice ran as fast as she could to the outer wall. She tried to be ready, but when it happened, it was amazingly quick. Lila plummeted to the ground. Beatrice lunged forward, arms outstretched.

She missed. She felt Lila’s body scrape her arms, her chest. Maybe Beatrice slowed her fall a bit, but that was all. She heard a crunch as Lila landed, and then her scream.

But she was alive. She was crumpled, but she was alive. The heat and smoke were suffocating, and embers and ash still fell around them.

Beatrice put her hands underneath Lila’s arms, braced herself, and dragged the injured woman away from the wall. Lila screamed again.

“I’m sorry,” Beatrice gasped. “I’m sorry.” But she didn’t stop. She looked up and saw Holly standing at the top. She wasn’t trying to drop over the side. She wasn’t moving at all.

“Holly, jump!” she screamed. Holly shook her head, raised a hand as if saying goodbye, and dropped to her knees. A moment later, she slumped to the ground and disappeared.

Beatrice fell to her knees, crouched over the moaning Lila, and sobbed. She heard something thump the ground close by and looked up. Stones were falling from the top of the tower. They were too close. One could hit her or Lila, but she didn’t have the energy to move.

Lila grabbed Beatrice’s arm. “Tish,” she said, her voice a whisper. “Did Tish get out?”

“Yes,” Beatrice said. “Tish is safe.”

“Thank God,” Lila said. She closed her eyes. A moment later she opened them again, and they were filled with tears. “Why didn’t she let me burn? She should have let me burn.” She shook her head and answered her own question. “No, that would be too easy. I haven’t suffered enough.” She closed her eyes again, released a sigh, and relaxed into unconsciousness.

An ember landed on Beatrice's hand. She shook it off and watched it burn in the dirt. It reminded her of Leigh's ashes. Ash can't burn twice, they say, but Leigh's ashes were doing it now. She never did like following the rules.

"Okay, okay, I get the message," Beatrice said. "You don't have to burn me, my love." She stood, gripped Lila again under her arms, and dragged her away from the flames.

Chapter Seven

Smoke

THE FIRE WAS dying when the first helicopter arrived. The women lay in a huddle on the ground at the southern edge of the parking lot, farthest from the Inn. Beatrice no longer thought of retrieving a car. The garage had caught fire and they had heard the cars' gas tanks explode one by one. The only sound in the night now, before the thwump thwump of the helicopter, was the quiet crackle of giant embers shifting for position closer to the ground, a thump now and then when a stone loosened from the tower and fell to the ground, the rattle of Dakota's breathing, and Lila's coughs and groans.

Beatrice had already made plans to hike out at dawn to find help. No doubt the road was still blocked, but perhaps she could climb over the mudslide. If not, there must be someone working nearby, someone who could hear her yell for help. The arrival of the helicopter, though, made such a trek unnecessary. She nearly wept from the relief of it.

It was a police helicopter, designed for multiple purposes, including an air ambulance, but it was not large enough to take all six women. Lila and Dakota had to go, of course, and Veronica.

"We've got another copter coming," the pilot said. "Hang tight. It'll be an hour maybe."

Beatrice, Tish, and Jess remained. They sat on the ground shoulder to shoulder, with Tish in the middle, and waited, each lost in her thoughts. Beatrice stared into the smoking ruins and thought about the two bodies lying burned in the rubble. Three, if you counted Leigh.

"I hope Lila will be all right," Tish said. "She saved my life."

Beatrice thought of Lila's grin as she ran into the fire to save Tish. She knew she might die saving her, but she was happy doing it. It might be the only thing that ever could make Lila happy. Beatrice didn't think Lila would ever be all right, even if her body healed.

"I wonder why Holly didn't jump," Jess said. "She'd at least have had a chance."

"She probably knew she was going to end up in the electric chair," Tish said. "She did try to kill us, you know."

"I'm not sure Holly did try to kill us," Beatrice said. "I'm not sure anyone did."

"Three people are dead, Aunt Bea," Tish said. "Maybe four, if Amy's dead, five if Dakota doesn't make it, and six if Lila dies too."

"They'll make it," Beatrice said. "I think Amy just ran off. And Holly didn't try to kill Lila. She saved her, and she died because of it."

"What about Paula and Carmen?" Tish asked.

"Well, you heard what she said about Paula," Beatrice said.

"Tish wasn't there," Jess said.

"Oh that's right," Beatrice said. "When Holly told us about Paula, you were busy starting fires."

"Ha ha."

"Just kidding." Beatrice gave Tish a nudge with her shoulder. "Well, Paula figured out that Holly was the one who drove the car the night her girlfriend, Noreen, was killed, and she

confronted her on the roof. Paula got mad and charged at her, and Holly just moved out of her way and Paula went off the roof.”

“Do you believe her?” Tish asked.

“It’s the sort of thing Paula would do. She had a short fuse. Besides, people don’t necessarily die falling from a three-story building. Lila didn’t. It may have been an accident that Paula died, really. Holly got scared and didn’t tell anybody. That may be the worst thing she did.”

“What about Carmen? Somebody gave her my pills.”

“That may have been Carmen’s own doing. She’s had problems with drugs in the past, you know. She’s been clean for a couple of years, but she was really upset about Paula. It may have triggered a relapse. She knew you had the drugs, and she saw your door open. It would have seemed a perfect opportunity.”

“You think she committed suicide?” Tish asked.

“Maybe, or it may have been accidental. She wouldn’t have the same tolerance now as she did back when she was using. Maybe she didn’t think about that and just took too much.”

“But what about Dakota?”

“Well, Dakota did drink a whole bottle of wine last night. Anybody could pass out in a hot tub after that, and she’s not used to alcohol.”

“But you?” Tish asked. “Somebody hit you on the head.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Beatrice said. “I’m not sure anymore. It’s not like I remember getting hit. I assumed I was hit because my notebook was missing, but Holly admitted she had that all along. I’m starting to think this whole thing might have been my fault. I may have let my imagination run away with me. You all kept telling me there were reasonable explanations for everything that happened. I was the one who kept insisting we were in danger. Veronica assumed Holly tried to kill her because I had her convinced there was a killer among us. We all thought Holly must have started the fire, and it turns out you did. I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I think I got so wrapped up in investigating, I may have created a mystery where there wasn’t one.”

When it really came down to it, Beatrice realized, the fire was her fault, and Holly’s death too. If Beatrice hadn’t frightened everyone into not going off alone, Tish would never have gone to the bathroom to try to track down Holly. She wouldn’t have tried to carry the lantern by herself and dropped it. Beatrice wasn’t just embarrassed, she was deeply ashamed. Her ego convinced her to act like Columbo and try to solve the mystery of Paula’s death, and when there was no mystery, she invented one.

“Are you sure?” Tish asked.

Beatrice sighed and shook her head. “No, I’m not sure at all. We may never know for sure. Holly’s the only one who could tell us, and she’s dead.”

They sat in silence a while longer watching the embers burn and half dozing. They were too far away to feel the heat from the fire now, and the ground was wet. It was cold, and Beatrice was about to suggest moving closer to what remained of the fire when Jess spoke.

“I wish I could have saved my guitar.”

“I’m sure Lila has insurance,” Beatrice said.

“It’s not the same,” Jess said. “I loved that guitar.”

“Where was it?” Tish asked.

“Wherever Dakota put it when she brought it in from the fire pit,” Jess said.

“Are you sure she brought it in?” Tish asked. “She did drink a whole bottle of wine, remember.”

Jess raised her head like she'd caught a scent. "Do you think maybe she didn't?"

"I think we should go check." Tish raised her arms. "Help me up."

Jess stood and helped Tish to her feet.

"What are you doing?" Beatrice asked. "You can't go back there."

"Why not?" Tish asked. "The fire's practically out, and we'll circle around it." Jess handed her the crutch.

Beatrice dragged herself up. She was exhausted, but she wasn't about to let them be separated now. She followed the girls as they circled the Inn, Tish gliding along easily with a crutch under one arm and Jess's shoulder under the other. The system worked well. Tish was Jess's eyes, and Jess was her legs, just like Tish had said.

"Look," Tish said when they reached the back. "The gazebo's still standing."

Beatrice looked, saw the outline of the gazebo, and realized the sky had turned gray. Sunrise was not far away. They continued on past the hot tub, which was intact, to the fire pit. It was darker there, where the cluster of trees shadowed it from the glow of the Inn, and they had to feel their way. The benches were still there. Beatrice sat on one. It was far more comfortable than sitting on the damp ground.

"Anybody hungry?" Jess asked. "I found a bag of marshmallows."

"Yum," Tish said. "Are there any graham crackers?"

"Yep, right here."

"Maybe we should start a fire," Beatrice said. She gave a little laugh. "I mean a campfire. I know where I can get a light." It wasn't a bad idea. It would give them heat and light until the helicopter arrived. "I'll be right back." She followed the path back to the Inn. The fire was low enough now that she could walk right up to it without getting scorched. She located a twig, held the end of it to an ember until it caught fire, and returned with it to the fire pit. Before she reached it, she heard the sound of soft guitar strumming.

"You found your guitar," she said.

"Yes." Jess grinned. "Dakota even put it back in its case. And it's still in tune."

Beatrice handed the branch to Tish to hold while she tackled the fire. Someone had tossed dirt over the last fire to put it out, but underneath the dirt were logs that were only half burned. Beatrice brushed the dirt off and moved the wood.

"Ouch. It's still hot under here," she said.

"That's weird," Tish said. "It's been more than a day since we had the campfire."

"They say embers can burn for days after a forest fire," Beatrice said. "That's why it's so important to make sure a fire's out before you leave it. It'll make it easier to build a fire now, anyway." She pulled some kindling from a pile nearby and arranged it beneath the logs. It caught easily, and they soon had a merry fire.

Beatrice settled onto her bench. "So," she said, "you two slept together?" It was light enough now that Beatrice could see an expression of guilt cross Tish's face, but Jess just smiled. "I think you're a good match."

Tish's brows rose. "You do?"

"Yes. Now don't go breaking up just because I said that, okay?"

"Come on, Aunt Bea, I'm not eighteen anymore."

"I know," Beatrice said, "but you haven't shown great judgment in the past when it comes to women."

"Who has?" Jess asked.

"Yeah, Aunt Bea. You're the lucky one, remember?"

“I know.” Beatrice stared into the little fire. How could it seem so cheerful and cozy, when its deadly cousin still burned only a few yards away?

THE SUN HAD crested over the North Cascades, and the sky was pink. The light grew to the point where Tish could see the fine ash that lay over everything. She used her finger to write “I ♥ Jess” on the bench beside her. She quickly brushed it away before Jess or Aunt Bea could read it. Well, Aunt Bea, anyway. Jess was immersed in her song, and she couldn't see anyway.

It occurred to Tish that Carmen and Holly had burned up in the Inn, and they might be part of the black ash that she had just touched. Aunt Leigh too. Creepy. She rubbed her finger on her skirt. It could hardly get more filthy.

Aunt Bea was half asleep on the bench across from her. She'd sure made a fool of herself making them all think they had a killer in their midst. It turned out Aunt Bea wasn't so perfect after all. It was refreshing to know she could get caught up in drama too. In fact, if she had to put it on a scale, Tish thought what Aunt Bea did was probably worse than climbing a tree to spy on her ex making love. She felt pretty smug as she stared into the fire and listened to Jess play her guitar. But when her eyes fell on the pile of kindling, clearly visible in the dawn, a tingle crept up her spine.

“Aunt Bea,” she said softly. “Do you see anything strange about that pile of kindling?”

Aunt Bea opened her eyes, sat up straight, and looked at the kindling. It took her a moment, but she saw it too. She looked at Tish, awareness in her eyes. “I took a couple of pieces to start the fire,” she said, “but not enough to...”

The pile of kindling had at least twenty sticks in it, freshly cut pine, and the wood was starkly bright in the morning light. No ash covered it. A thin blanket of ash covered everything around it, but the pile of kindling was fresh and clean. Even the splinters caused by the chopping curled neatly on top of the ash, not beneath it.

The guitar stopped. “What is it?” Jess asked.

“There's somebody here,” Tish answered, her voice barely above a whisper. “Somebody put that kindling there after the fire died down. The big fire, I mean.”

Their heads swiveled, even Jess's, as they looked around at the surrounding trees. The campfire crackled, and birds chirped. Aunt Bea rose silently to her feet. Tish grabbed her crutch and held it ready so she could do the same if the need arose.

“How could there be anyone here?” Jess asked softly. “We're the only ones left.”

“I don't know,” Aunt Bea said. “But somebody put that kindling—”

“Hello?”

Tish jumped and nearly lost her grip on the crutch. The voice came from the path between the Inn and the campfire.

“Hello,” the voice said again. It was closer this time. “Who's there?”

“It's Holly,” Jess whispered.

“Holly,” Aunt Bea called. “We're here, by the campfire.”

Holly rounded a curve in the dirt path. She was covered in soot, and she was limping badly. “Oh, thank God.” She hobbled forward, still putting weight on her left foot, but barely. “I thought you guys were in that helicopter. I thought you left me behind.” She dropped onto the nearest bench, across from Jess and between the benches occupied by Tish and Aunt Bea.

“Holy shit,” Tish said. “You're alive.”

“The helicopter couldn’t carry all of us,” Aunt Bea said. “How did you get out of the Inn?”

“We thought you were caught in the fire,” Jess said.

“I almost was,” Holly said. “But I managed to make my way down to the second floor where I could climb out a window.”

Ash covered Holly’s hair and clothes, and soot smudged her face and hands. Tish was surprised there were no tear tracks down her cheeks. Everyone else that night had cried.

“Why didn’t you take Lila out that way?” Aunt Bea asked. “She might have saved her legs.”

“I’m sorry. If I’d known I was going to find an easier way out, I would have,” Holly said.

“But when did you get out?” Tish asked. “It had to have been before the helicopter even got here. Why didn’t you come out front with us?”

Holly shook her head. “I wish I had,” she said. “I was kind of confused, though. I got turned around and ended up here at the campfire. And my foot hurt, so I decided I might as well stay here and build a fire and wait for morning. When I heard the helicopter, I tried to get out front to catch it, but I was too slow. So I came back here. I thought I was all alone, so when I heard voices coming, it scared me. I didn’t know it was you guys. I put the fire out and slipped away through the trees.”

“Why did you come back?” Aunt Bea asked.

“I heard Jess’s guitar,” Holly said. “I knew it had to be her, so I came back.”

It all made sense, if allowance was made for confusion and fear, which there was plenty of that night. Aunt Bea had already explained that she was the root of the mystery that had gripped them the last couple of days. There was no killer.

But Tish was still uneasy. It was strange that it took Holly so long to come back to the fire pit. Jess had been playing for ten minutes or more. Tish glanced again at the kindling. “Where’s the hatchet?” she asked.

“The hatchet?” Holly asked.

Tish indicated the kindling. “You obviously just split that. There’s no ash on it. You must have used the hatchet.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” Holly gave a self-conscious smile, reached behind her, and pulled the hatchet from the back of her pants. She cradled it in her lap. It was a small hatchet. The handle was no more than eight inches long, the blade only four. “I told you I was scared when I heard voices. So I took it with me.” She rubbed the side of the blade with her thumb.

“Well, you don’t need it now,” Aunt Bea said softly. She held a hand, palm up, toward Holly. She stared intently at her. “Give me the hatchet, Holly.”

Holly gave a little laugh and shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. There might still be a killer around here, remember? How do I know it’s not you?”

“Well, you know it’s not me,” Tish said. She held out her hand. “Give me the hatchet.”

“Or me,” Jess said. She stood up. “Give me the hatchet.”

Holly rose. She held the hatchet in one hand and stepped around the bench so that it was between her and the other women. “No,” she said. “You could all be lying.”

“We’re not,” Tish said, “but you are. You forgot to limp.”

Holly glared at Tish, and her demeanor changed. Her lip raised and her nostrils flared exactly like a snarling dog. “God damn you,” she said. Her hand massaged the handle of the hatchet like she was itching to use it.

Aunt Bea stood up. “Put the hatchet down, Holly. You don’t have to lie to us. We know you didn’t kill anyone. Nobody did. I let my imagination get away from me, that’s all.”

“Yeah, right,” Holly said. “You must think I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, Holly,” Jess said. “We all bought into Beatrice’s stories until she explained it to us. Paula fell. Carmen committed suicide. Dakota drank too much. The only reason Veronica thought you pushed her was because Beatrice had us all convinced there was a killer among us, but she was wrong.”

Holly shook her head. “Nobody would believe all that, especially not with my record. I really didn’t kill Paula. I had no reason to. She was just pissed off because she finally figured out I was the one who killed Noreen, and I already did my time for that. It happened just like I said. She charged at me, I moved aside, and she fell over the edge. But I couldn’t tell. Who would believe me, with my record? And then...” She shook her head and, for the first time, tears streaked down Holly’s cheeks, channeling the soot. “You guys went upstairs and left us down here all alone at the campfire. Even Lila and Veronica went to bed, and it was just the three of us, me and Carmen and Dakota. We were drinking. I shouldn’t drink. It’s been so long, but I was uptight ever since Paula fell. I only drank a couple of glasses, but I guess I let something slip about prison, and all of the sudden Carmen figured out who I was. She was going to tell, too. I didn’t want anyone making the connection, or they’d think for sure I killed Paula. I already had Tish’s pills. I took them that first day when I knew you weren’t going to use them. I slipped them into the open bottle of wine.”

So Aunt Bea was right all along. Holly really was a killer.

“You mean you killed Carmen and you almost killed Dakota just so no one would suspect you of killing Paula?” Aunt Bea asked. “Who you didn’t kill?”

“No,” Holly wailed, like Aunt Bea was being unfair. “I didn’t mean to drug Dakota. I didn’t know she was drinking from that bottle. She’s a sweet kid.”

“You hit Aunt Bea in the dining room, didn’t you?” Tish asked.

“I only wanted the notebook.” Holly raised the hand that didn’t hold the hatchet and wiped the back of it across her face. Snot and tears smeared the soot up her cheek, giving the impression of a lopsided grin. “I just wanted to see if you’d figured out who I was. I didn’t mean to hit you that hard.” She scowled at Aunt Bea like it was her fault for having a soft head. “And I didn’t push Veronica. I barely nudged her. I didn’t mean for her to go over the cliff, only the phones. I knew my phone wouldn’t get a signal, but I didn’t know about all those others. I didn’t want anyone calling for help, not yet. I just needed a little more time to figure out how I was going to get out of this jam without someone putting everything together. I didn’t think of a fire. I owe you one for that, Tish. I figured it would be easy to fake my death in the fire and get clean away. I can start over somewhere else.”

“But you know you can’t get away now, right?” Aunt Bea said.

Tish tightened her grip on her crutch. It wasn’t smart to rile Holly.

“Sure,” Holly said, but she still held the hatchet. “I almost did, though, didn’t I?” She sniffed, and her eyes shifted from Aunt Bea to Jess to Tish and back like she was trying to find the weakest link. Her gaze rested on Tish. She’d found her weak link. “If you just hadn’t noticed the damn kindling. Of course, that won’t mean anything if you’re not around to tell about it.”

She lunged at Tish, the blade of the hatchet flashing in the air. Tish raised her crutch, but was only able to strike a glancing blow on Holly’s hip. It was not enough to slow her down.

Jess’s guitar was, though, when it shattered on Holly’s head. The sun was bright enough, or Holly’s movement so apparent, that Jess saw her coming, or perhaps she just had a sixth sense, but her timing was perfect. She swung it like a baseball bat, and the body of the guitar smashed right into Holly’s face.

The strings screeched, and so did Aunt Bea, who flew across the fire pit and tackled Holly to ground. Holly still held the hatchet, and she swung it wildly, making contact with Aunt Bea's shoulder. Tish jammed the tip of her crutch into Holly's neck and pinned her to the ground long enough for Aunt Bea to roll off Holly and Jess to replace her. Aunt Bea clamped a hand to her shoulder, and blood dripped through her fingers.

"Aunt Bea, are you all right?" Tish asked.

"I think so." Aunt Bea scooted away and leaned against a bench. Blood dripped through the fingers of her right hand, but she moved her lower arm and flexed the fingers of her left hand. "It hurts, but everything still works, I think."

"Tish, I got her," Jess said. "Move your crutch. She can't breathe."

Tish lifted the crutch. Holly took a gasping breath, blood trickling from her nose, but she could not move. Jess sat on her midsection and pressed her hands into the dirt above her head.

Holly bucked. "Get off me, you bitch. You're too heavy. You must weigh a hundred and fifty pounds." Jess laughed.

THE SECOND HELICOPTER finally arrived. It stopped at the hospital first, where it dropped off Beatrice, Tish, and Jess, and then continued on to the jail with Holly. At the hospital they found Veronica in the emergency waiting room. Her arm was in a sling.

"They admitted Dakota and Lila," Veronica said. "Lila broke both her legs and had some smoke inhalation, but she's going to be all right. They put Dakota in intensive care. She could hardly breathe when we got here. What happened to your arm?"

Beatrice let Tish and Jess explain about Holly. She gave her information at the desk and sat back in the plastic waiting room chair, trying to ignore the throbbing in her shoulder, and listened for her name to be called. It was a busy night at Central Wenatchee Hospital.

"My dad's coming to get me," Veronica said. "He's so worried, especially since I had to give my insurance card with my male name on it. He doesn't think that's safe, so he told me not to worry about my reassignment surgery. He's going to help me pay for it."

"That's wonderful," Jess said.

"And guess who else is on her way?" Veronica asked, but she couldn't wait for guesses. "Amy."

"Really?" Tish asked. She didn't sound happy.

"We called her from Dakota's cell phone," Veronica said. "It was Lila's idea. In case Dakota—you know."

"Oh, yeah," Tish said. "I guess."

"Dakota will be fine," Beatrice said firmly, ignoring her fatigue and her pain. "You girls should get a hotel room, all three of you. The Red Cross will help. Call them."

The younger women's faces relaxed. They liked it when older people took charge, no matter what they said.

"Okay, Aunt Bea," Tish said.

But when Beatrice returned to the waiting room two and half hours later, wearing her own sling and dozens of stitches, she found Tish slumped in a chair sound asleep. Beatrice sat beside her and nudged her with her good arm.

"Hey, kiddo," she said softly. "Wake up."

Tish opened her eyes and sat up. "Aunt Bea, how are you?"

“I’ll live. They’re filling a prescription for me. What are you doing here? I thought I told you to get a hotel room.”

“Jess and Veronica did.” Tish gave a huge yawn. “It’s right across the street. They brought me a key. We can go there when you’re ready.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“You needed somebody,” Tish said.

“Oh.” Beatrice was surprised at how moved she was by the simple words. “Thank you.”

“Everybody needs somebody,” Tish said. “Remember how it was on nine eleven, how everyone cried that day? I was a junior in high school. Even the teachers cried. When the towers collapsed, they let everyone use the phone to call home or anyone they wanted, but I couldn’t think of anyone to call. I was the only one in my class who didn’t use the phone.”

“Oh, Tish,” Beatrice said.

“It never even occurred to me to call Mom or Dad. We didn’t have that kind of relationship, and I didn’t have any close friends. When I got home Mom and Dad were all upset because Gerald said he was going to quit school and join the marines, and Stacy was all hysterical. I just went to my room. Nobody even asked how I was.”

“Your parents are assholes,” Beatrice said. “You could have called me.”

“Right. Wouldn’t you have been shocked to hear from me? Who did you call that day? Aunt Leigh? Of course you did. That’s all I want, someone I’m as important to as Aunt Leigh was to you. I keep chasing it, but I don’t know if I’ll ever find it. I’m too damaged for love, I think.”

“You’re not. Your parents are damaged way more than you are,” Beatrice said. “They never knew how to love you right, and they were too proud to admit it. If only they would have given you to us.”

“Given me to you?”

“Yes. We tried, Leigh and I. We wanted to raise you.”

“Me?” Tish’s face was stunned.

Beatrice smiled at her expression. “Yes, you. We offered more than once. We knew they weren’t treating you right.”

Tish looked skeptical. “Come on, Aunt Bea. I heard what you said about me.” She hung her head. “To Aunt Leigh, or her ghost or whatever.”

“What I said about you? What are you talking about?”

“After Carmen died,” Tish said. “I went to see if you were all right. I was standing outside your door. I heard you talking about me. You said all I ever think about is sex, and I’m a shallow bitch.”

Beatrice shook her head, bewildered. “Tish, I never would have said that about you.”

“I heard you, Aunt Bea.” Her face wore that hurt little girl expression again, and suddenly Beatrice remembered.

“Oh, that. Tish, no! That wasn’t about you. I—I was talking to Leigh, and she, well, she answers me sometimes.” It was an embarrassing thing to admit, but Beatrice had to remove that look from Tish’s face. “I was upset about Carmen, and sometimes I miss Leigh so badly. I said something about wishing I could die. I said you didn’t need me anymore, and she asked me if I really wanted to leave you all alone with your mother, and I said no. That’s when I said shallow bitch. It was about your mother.”

Tish’s face crumpled, which made Beatrice’s eyes sting too. She put her good arm around Tish’s shoulder, and pulled her against her chest. “They weren’t bad parents to your brother and sister, but for some reason they couldn’t be fair to you. It was hard to watch. You wanted their

love so badly, and they never gave it to you, or not enough anyway. The last time we offered to take you, you were fourteen, and even they couldn't ignore the fact that you were growing up to be a lesbian. But they said no again. They said if we brought the subject up again they wouldn't let us see you at all."

A sob rocked Tish's body, and she buried her face in Beatrice's chest.

"We couldn't risk getting cut out of your life altogether," Beatrice said, "so we stopped asking if we could take you."

"I wish you could have," Tish said, her voice muffled in Beatrice's shirt. "I do need you, Aunt Bea."

"I know, kiddo." Beatrice kissed the top of her head. "Me too."

Tish gave a wet laugh. "That's what Aunt Leigh used to call me. Kiddo."

"Well, Aunt Leigh's gone—" There was a hitch in Beatrice's voice. She took a breath and looked up. She tried again. "Aunt Leigh's gone, so I have to love you for both of us now."

Tish looked up. She wiped both hands on her wet cheeks and said, "So now that Aunt Leigh's gone, are you going to stop talking to her?"

"I'll never stop talking to her," Beatrice said. "It just means I miss her. It doesn't mean I'm crazy."

"Well, it doesn't mean you're not," Tish said, and they laughed.

THE END

About the Author

Kate McLachlan is the author of several award-winning lesbian novels. Kate lives in Eastern Washington with her wife, Tonie, who is also a Regal Crest author, and their two dogs and two cats.

Kate welcomes visits to her website at www.katemclachlan.com and e-mails from readers: kate@katemclachlan.com

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Jo Erin, Susan's childhood friend, is the cross-dressing Pinker-ton agent sent to track Susan down. Before she can complete the job, a mining war breaks out and interferes with Jo Erin's plans. Complicating matters even further are the feelings that resurface between Susan and Jo Erin, as events from their past come back to haunt them.

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SleepSafe Youth is Darcy Gabriel's baby, her way of paying back the help she received as a homeless teen. The charity she established gives homeless kids a safe place to sleep, and SleepSafe's annual Christmas tree sale is the organization's biggest fund-raising event of the year.

When Jasmine learns that SleepSafe's Christmas tree lot is only a block away from her own, she turns her dismay and anger into determination and vows to give SleepSafe a run for its money. Sparks fly between Jasmine and Darcy as they compete for the Christmas tree business.

Before long, sparks of a different sort fly, and they find themselves experiencing a Christmas they'll never forget.

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Carson is an awe-inspiring woman by anyone's standards. Possessing genius-level intelligence that has allowed her to become a self-made millionaire of a computer software company, Carson still has a dark secret that could be her undoing.

When the two are thrust together to escape a deadly killer in a high-rise office building while a blizzard rages outside, they have no one to count on but each other. So begins an unexpected yet tender romance. However, unchecked love and desire isn't in their future. The murderer is still out there and he's coming for them. Will Carson's street-wise skills protect them both as Erin attempts to discover the killer's identity just as relentlessly as he is seeking their demise?

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by Brenda Adcock

Six years ago Detective Christine Shaw left her happy life and a good job in Texas to follow her libido to New York City. She's still a cop, but her stewardess girlfriend has flown the coop and Chris hasn't been able to fill the void. Everything in her life begins to change when she and her partner are assigned to a high profile case.

The murder of Broadway star Elaine Barrie propels Chris into a whole new world. A fan of the murdered actress since she was a teenager, Chris isn't prepared for the secrets she uncovers during their investigation, including her attraction to the daughter of her number one suspect.

Was the victim any of the personalities witnesses describe, or was the real person a chameleon, satisfying the expectations of each person she met?

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by Andi Marquette

When a man is shot to death in his house near Albuquerque's Old Town, homicide detective Chris Gutierrez is called to the scene with fellow detective Dale Harper to investigate. They soon discover that the murder victim may have been involved in human trafficking over the Mexican border, and that he may have attracted enemies in an underground network with its own code of honor. Did someone in that network kill him? Or did his past finally catch up with him? As Chris works to find answers, she also draws the attention of a local anti-immigrant blogger who will go to any length to post damaging and personal information about Albuquerque law enforcement officers, and she knows that her partner, prosecutor Dayna Carson, will be part of that campaign if the blogger discovers their relationship. She has to find a way to watch her back and keep Dayna and her friends and family safe from the blogger's large audience and prying eyes, even as he dogs her every move.

From Albuquerque to El Paso, Chris is on the trail of a killer who seems to be able to disappear into the cultures on either side of the border, like a ghost or desert wind. Those along the border protect their own, Chris knows, but she has a job to do, even as she draws closer and realizes that sometimes, things aren't what they seem.

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