



**The
Heart
of
the
Mountain**

Brenda Adcock

The Heart of the Mountain

by

Brenda Adcock

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Acknowledgments

I spent my youth listening to my only grandmother telling me stories about Appalachia and our family, including the time my great-uncles spent working in the small coal mines of eastern Kentucky near where I was born. She gave me an appreciation for the people and culture of Appalachia, as well as my own family history. As a child, I didn't realize what a gift she was giving me, but the memory of her stories has now been passed on to my own children who will hopefully one day understand their value.

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Dedication

To my grandmother, Cassie Hendren Robbins, who never stopped telling me stories.

Chapter One

LU CALDER BACKED her black and silver Harley soft tail into a parking spot in the dusty, gravel-covered lot. The building was run-down and a blinking neon sign in the window announced it as Dirty Gertie's. It was a typical roadside tavern deep in the mining country of eastern Kentucky. She sat back on the leather seat of the motorcycle and unfastened her helmet. She figured she was probably the only person in Landon County, Kentucky who wore a helmet. Although she was willing to take risks, bouncing her skull along the pavement of some highway wasn't one of them.

She pulled her helmet off and untied the faded blue bandanna that covered her short, dark blonde hair. She rubbed a hand through her hair, separating the strands and returning it to its usual spiked appearance. She'd been riding most of the day on the final leg of her trip from Colorado to just outside Hawthorne, Kentucky. She'd been fortunate enough to skirt around a couple of early fall storm fronts and pulled off the road into a cluster of trees to spend the last two nights under the stars. This night she would sleep indoors, but could only hazard a guess as to the condition of the little cabin a distant part of her mother's family had once called home. As far as anyone knew, the old place had been sitting vacant for over thirty years.

She inhaled a deep breath, taking in the cool air of a cloudless late September night, pushed the kick stand down with the heel of her boot, and swung a long, jean-clad leg over the seat. She propped her helmet on the backrest before she unzipped her brown, distressed leather bomber jacket and stretched. All she wanted at that moment was anything that wasn't dehydrated or from a can. She stomped her feet on the gravel to quiet the vibrating sensation in her legs and strode up the four swayback wooden steps of the bar. When she tried to push through the front door of the establishment, the door stuck a little and forced her to lower her shoulder to coax it open.

The interior was pretty much what she'd expected in a honky-tonk that catered mostly to miners and loggers. The scuffed hardwood floor, desperately in need of a new coat of varnish, creaked as she strolled across it. Neon beer signs, some of which flickered, giving them a strobe-like effect, were hung generously, and obviously without much thought to interior decorating, on every wall. Three men in their thirties or forties were engaged in a spirited game of pool on the coin-operated table. She smiled to herself as she remembered the pick-up games she'd played in college to make a little extra cash. It wasn't that she was a great pool player, she just usually had been more sober than her opponents.

"What can I getcha?" a smoky-sounding voice asked from behind the bar.

Lu turned to see a Rubenesque red-head leaning on her elbows at the bar, displaying ample cleavage that was one good cough away from spilling out of the woman's too small top. Long gray ash hung precariously from the end of a cigarette wedged in the corner of ruby red lips that clashed with her red hair. Lu slid a nearby ashtray toward the woman. "You got food here?" she asked.

"Nothin' fancy. Frozen burgers, frozen hot dogs, frozen pizza and the like."

"Fries?"

“Pretty sure there’s some in the freezer.”

“Then I’ll take a cheeseburger and fries.”

“Wanna beer with that?”

“Cumberland Ale. One now and another when my food’s ready.”

“Glass?”

“Bottle’s good.”

“Ten even.”

Lu dropped a ten on the bar, picked up the amber bottle the woman slid to her, and looked around for a place to sit. She preferred a table rather than a booth because they were easier to get out of in a pinch, if need be. She lifted the bottle to her lips and let a long swallow flow down her dry throat. She shivered slightly as the cold liquid made its way down to her stomach and cooled her body from the inside out. She spotted a small table with a single chair near the front window, not far from the pool table. She sat down and stretched out her long legs, slouching slightly in the seat as she downed most of the remaining ale with a second, long swallow. Her mother, who was all of five foot nothing, always bitched at her for blocking the walkway with her legs, calling it an unlady-like position.

Lu’s father died when she was ten, but she apparently inherited his height. He was well over six feet tall and Lu was only slightly shorter at six feet even. She wondered if her mother had gotten the work at the old cabin completed. Lu didn’t mind roughing it, but appreciated some creature comforts, like light bulbs, running water, and indoor plumbing. She’d spent two nights reading by lantern and ducking behind bushes when nature called. If everything went according to plan, an old truck would be waiting for her, along with a few appliances. She should have asked her mother or stepfather to include a six-pack of beer as a bonus. Her stepfather, Charlie, was more of a whiskey sipper and she wouldn’t mind a couple of shots of that either before she settled down for a good night’s sleep.

A red plastic basket lined with a brown paper towel, filled with fries and topped by a large cheeseburger with the works, hit the table in front of her. Lu sat up and said, “Thanks.”

“You ready for that second beer, honey?”

Lu finished the drink in her hand and set the bottle heavily on the table. “Yeah.” She watched the plump bartender-slash-waitress waddle back to the bar and retrieve a second sweaty bottle.

She was hungry, but tried not to gobble down the greasy food in front of her. She chewed slowly and savored the surprisingly good burger, occasionally observing the trio shooting pool. They obviously noticed her, too, and were spending time strutting around the table between shots, puffing their chests out, and sucking in the guts created by too many cheap, happy hour beers. They reminded her of banty roosters, preening in an attempt to impress the hens. Lu shook her head and smiled at the thought. Unless they suddenly sprouted soft breasts and firm heart-shaped asses that filled out a pair of tight jeans like nobody’s business, there wasn’t anything they could do to interest her. Either way, she was in eastern Kentucky’s coal country on business and wasn’t looking for company.

ERNESTINE KINLAW BRAKED and let her old station wagon slide to a stop in front of Dirty Gertie’s.

“Damn long day,” she muttered, brushing a few stray strands of graying hair off her face. “One or two beers and we can get on home.” She opened the driver’s door and looked over her shoulder at the man seated next to her. “Gardner, I’ll go on in and claim a booth.”

“Okay, Mama,” the thirty-five-year-old with dark brown, shaggy hair protruding from around the edges of a dirty Kentucky Wildcats baseball cap said as he stepped out of the wagon and opened the back door.

“I wish she wouldn’t stop here,” the woman in the back seat said as she leaned forward out of the shadows to grasp the front seat.

“You always say that, Reg,” Gardner Kinlaw said matter-of-factly.

“I know, Gardner,” Regina “Reggie” Kinlaw said as she pushed the back door open. “But I need to pick Hallie up from Mrs. Farmer’s. Didn’t Calvin say my van would be ready tomorrow?”

“He said he’d bring it to the mine b’fore you got off work,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks.”

Within a matter of minutes Gardner placed his hand on his sister’s elbow and guided her up the wide steps of the bar. He opened the door and held it while she made her way inside. Reggie blinked several times to adjust her eyes to the smoky, blue haze that hovered over the interior of the bar. She finally spotted her mother, who was already well into her first beer, seated in a booth against the side wall. Ernie pulled a cigarette from a pack inside her coat pocket and ignited a match with her thumbnail before taking another long drink. She inhaled smoke from her cigarette deeply into her lungs, holding it a while before exhaling slowly through her nose.

Reggie looked around and noticed a stranger filling her mouth with one of Gertie’s cholesterol and grease-laden burgers. The woman’s features were angular and chiseled even though the curves of her body were distinctly feminine. Her dark blonde hair was short and stood up, capping her head in a casual way that highlighted her striking features. The stranger looked around and noticed Reggie staring at her. She allowed her eyes to scan Reggie’s body appreciatively for a moment before returning to her food.

LU TOOK ANOTHER big bite of her food and chewed contently. The young woman was stunningly attractive. Her dark, wavy hair was a manageable length that fell to just below her shoulders, and shone when the light bounced off it. Waves of natural curls framed the woman’s face in a casual way. The strutting pool shooters temporarily stopped their game to stroll over and shake the hand of the man accompanying her and give the brunette a friendly hug. Lu caught the woman’s eye for a moment and flashed her a cocky grin. The woman averted her eyes and moved toward the booth where an older woman waited.

The woman said something to one of the men, laughing as she raised her bottle to her full lips. One of the men stared at Lu as she leaned back and took a drink from her bottle. Lu watched as he swaggered toward her table. He stopped in front of her and hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. His hips jutted forward as if showing her proof of his manhood.

“Somethin’ you need?” she smirked.

His grin seemed more like a leer as he placed his hands flat on her table and leaned forward into her personal space. “Just wonderin’ if you’d like to shoot a round with me and my friends? We could use another to make a foursome,” he said, attempting to make his voice sound sexy.

“No, thanks,” she answered. “Gotta get goin’.”

“Where you headin’?”

“Home. It’s been a long day.”

“Mabbe I should go with you to make sure you don’t get lost. I ain’t seen you ‘round here b’fore.” He waggled his eyebrows at her as his eyes cruised down her body. “And I’d remember a fine lookin’ filly such as yourself.”

“Pass.”

“Oh, come on now, baby,” he said as he leaned closer.

“Don’t push your luck, Bubba,” Lu said through gritted teeth.

Lu heard a noise behind her and looked over her shoulder. The man accompanying the two women got out of the booth to stand next to his table. “Leave her be, Collie,” he said. “She ain’t interested. I’ll shoot for a while.”

“If I’d wanted you to join us, I’d’ve asked you, Gardner.”

“Don’t get mixed up in somethin’ that ain’t your business, son,” the older woman said, grabbing his wrist. “We’re leavin’ in a few minutes anyway.”

“So how’s about it, sweet thing?” the man named Collie asked, his hand reaching out to touch Lu.

She grabbed his arm and twisted it before slamming it onto the top of the table. The action got the attention of his companions who laid their pool cues down and started toward their friend. “Tell your buddies to back off or I’ll break your fuckin’ wrist,” Lu said calmly.

Collie held up his other arm toward his friends and said, “S’okay. I got it under control.” He looked back at Lu. “Just a slight disagreement.”

Lu smiled at the man now partially lying on her table. “I’m gonna let you go. You’re gonna rejoin your friends. Then I’m goin’ out that door...alone.” She gave his wrist a small twist for emphasis. “That okay with you?”

“Sounds like a plan,” he managed through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Lu said and flung his hand away as she stood and backed toward the exit.

She kept a close eye on the door as she walked casually to her bike and pulled her helmet over her head. She threw her leg over the seat and hit the kickstand with her boot heel. She started the big machine and fastened the chin strap on her helmet. She heard the door of the bar slam shut and looked up. The man called Gardner escorted the women down the steps. Lu revved her engine before pulling away from the gravel lot toward her temporary new home. She didn’t have time for distractions, no matter how attractive they were.

LU WAS GIDDY with excitement that the electrical system and new toilet in the old cabin both worked. After spending a few minutes appreciating the new modern conveniences, she opened the door to an old faded, beat up Chevy short-bed parked alongside the cabin. She pulled out a suitcase and a duffel bag that contained the clothes she’d be wearing for the next few months. She put everything away and sat on the already made double bed, bouncing on it gently. Not bad, she thought. At least she’d be able to sleep in relative comfort.

The valley where the cabin was located had been safe enough to leave it unlocked fifty years ago, but Lu doubted it was now. Teenagers, bored from the lack of things to do, were always looking for some out-of-the-way place to smoke a joint or fuck their girlfriend. The cabin wasn’t visible from the road that meandered through the valley and made a perfect place for those

wanting to raise a little hell in private. Lu opened the cabinets in the kitchen to see what her mother thought she should be eating. She grinned when she saw her stepfather's Jim Beam contribution to her nutritional needs. When she looked in the refrigerator she was thrilled to see the six-pack she hoped would be there. On the bottom shelf, a case of water was cooling. She knew water would be her best friend in the mine, but tonight she would rather spend time with Jim or a member of the Coors family.

She grabbed a cold bottle and carried it onto the front porch of the cabin. She sat down on the top step and checked to make sure her old rifle was loaded. She rested it against her leg and pushed her hand into her jean pocket for her cell phone. She punched a single number and waited as the phone at the other end rang. On the ridge across the road from the cabin, a light at the top of a cell tower blinked repetitively.

"Hello," Augusta Bowers answered.

"Hey, Ma!" Lu replied. Alone at last, she dropped the accent she adopted to fit in better. It took her years to lose it completely after she left Kentucky as a child. She quickly grew tired of having others make fun of the way she talked. But she fell back into her old manner of speaking relatively easily.

"Lu! You at the cabin?" her mother asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for the beer. It's like a taste of home," Lu said as she pulled a cigarette from the pack in her bomber jacket and lit it. "Everything works great. You should consider renting it out after I leave."

"I was thinkin' about usin' it as a vacation cabin."

"You could do that, too." Lu could picture her mother as the small child who had grown up in a similar cabin. Augusta Calder Bowers, better known to her family and friends as Gussie, never forgot or abandoned her roots in the coal country of Appalachia. She was the daughter of a coal miner and the wife of two others. Cleveon Calder was the love of Gussie's life, until he was killed in a mining accident at the small mine where he was the superintendent. It was a freak accident, but Lu still remembered the anguish she had seen on Gussie's face when the news came. Cleveon died in a secondary collapse while trying to reach a trapped miner. Her father's death and the results of the investigation afterward had determined Lu's future. She graduated at the top of her class from the Colorado School of Mines as a mining engineer with a minor in geology. She began working for Bowers Mining after her graduation. It helped that Charles Bowers was her stepfather. Lu and Charlie's daughter, Melissa, were about the same age and the two girls became close friends until Melissa married a homophobic bigot named Carl Chapman. Now the two women rarely saw one another unless it was at corporate headquarters in Boulder, Colorado.

"You be careful out there, you hear me, Lucinda?"

"I promise, but you know shit happens."

"Watch your friggin' mouth, girl," Gussie ranted. "You sound like a damn miner."

"What a coincidence. I am a damn miner!" Lu laughed. "Let me talk to Charlie. Love you, Ma."

"Love you, too, you scamp. Here's Charlie."

"Gettin' settled in?" Charlie Bowers' gruff voice rasped a moment later.

"Yeah. The place looks great. Thanks. I report first thing tomorrow morning."

"Your letter of recommendation from Harvey at the Gilsonite mine in Utah was faxed to Hopewell about a week ago. Makes you sound like a freakin' genius," Charlie chuckled.

"What exactly am I looking for, Charlie?"

“I been hearin’ some rumors about a few possible problems. The last inspector I sent out there about six months ago spotted some cracks in the ceiling between the support pillars. Measure the fissures, if you can, and figure out the rate of separation. I’ll close that whole damn mine down if I have to, Lu. Accountin’ has also noticed a periodic drop in tonnage over the last year as well. If Hopewell’s stealin’ from me and doctorin’ the books, I want to know about it.”

“I gotcha covered, Charlie. And hey, thanks for the beer.”

“That was from your mama. The Beam was mine.”

“Figured that. I don’t know what time it is, but my body feels like it’s late, so I better get some sleep. Five will get here early.”

“Watch your back, Lu. Hopewell may have friends who wouldn’t be happy about anyone snoopin’ around.”

“Good night, Charlie. Give Ma a kiss for me.”

“I was hopin’ you’d say that. Come’re woman,” Charlie said as he disconnected.

THE OLD STATION wagon barely had time to come to a full stop before the door to the Farmer’s house flew open and a young girl ran out. Reggie opened the back door and knelt down to greet her daughter, holding her arms open, a wide smile across her face. The child slowed slightly before she was swept into her mother’s arm and smothered with laughing kisses

“You’re late,” the girl said with a slight frown.

“I’m sorry, Hallie, but Grandma had to stop someplace first. We’ll have our van back tomorrow,” Reggie said. “You got everything?” she asked as she smoothed the ten-year-old’s dark hair back from her cherubic face and lifted her into the back seat.

“Yep,” Hallie answered while buckling her seat belt. “Hey Gramma. Hey Uncle Gardner.”

Gardner turned and slung his arm into the seat back. “I found this at the mine today and thought you might want it for your collection,” he said with a smile. His hand was closed into a fist.

“What is it?” Hallie asked as Ernie began backing down the drive.

“Well, you gotta dig it out like I did,” he teased.

Hallie leaned forward to grab his hand and forced each of her uncle’s tightly clenched fingers open. “It must’ve been really deep,” she laughed as she struggled to open his thick fingers.

“It was hidin’ pretty good for sure,” he chuckled as her little fingers gradually worked their way between his.

“Just give her the damn thing, Gardner,” Ernie snapped. “We’ll be to their house in a minute.”

Gardner loosened his fingers slightly, still smiling. Hallie looked amazingly like Reggie. She had the same blue eyes only slightly darker and the same chestnut hair. She was a curious child with a deep interest in the things nature presented her. She asked questions about everything, which irritated Ernie no end.

“It’s a fossil,” Gardner said.

Hallie gingerly lifted it from her uncle’s calloused hand to examine it closely. “It sparkles,” she breathed. “How come, Uncle Gardner?”

He whispered conspiratorially. “Because it’s full of baby diamonds.”

Hallie’s eyes filled with wonder. Ernie snorted. “Why you gotta fill the girl’s head with that BS?”

“There’s nothin’ wrong with lettin’ her dream,” Reggie said, stroking her daughter’s hair.

“Right. Look where dreamin’ got you,” Ernie groused.

“Shut up, Mama,” Reggie said. “Thank Uncle Gardner and gather your stuff, Hallie,” she added as Ernie swung her vehicle into the overgrown drive to Reggie’s house. As soon as the car stopped, Hallie released her seat belt and scooted forward to wrap her arms around Gardner’s neck for a moment before moving over to give her grandmother a quick hug as well. “Thank you for the ride, Gramma,” she said softly. “Love you both.”

Ernie only grunted as she shifted into reverse to leave. Gardner quickly rolled his window down and yelled, “We’ll pick you up ‘bout seven in the mornin’, Reggie!”

Chapter Two

LU STEPPED ONTO the back porch before sunrise the next morning, set her mug of black coffee on the railing, and lit a cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into her lungs. She exhaled a long white stream as she looked at the thick fog, created by damp, rotting debris on the forest floor, hovering along the ground and shrouding the forested ridge above the cabin. The damp boards felt good beneath her bare feet. It reminded her of her home in the Colorado mountains, high above Boulder, in early fall.

“I won’t be here when you get back,” Rita said as Lu dressed to leave a few days earlier.

“Whatever makes you happy,” Lu replied as she finished tying her boots and stood. “Leave your key on the kitchen counter.”

“That’s all you have to say? Don’t you even want to know why I’m leaving?”

“Does it matter?” Lu answered with a shrug.

Rita Conners was a beautiful woman and lived with Lu a little over a year. Lu knew their relationship was over six months before Rita figured it out. Rita’s dramatic announcement neither shocked nor surprised Lu. She should have kicked the woman out a long time ago, when the sex became a chore rather than uncontrollable lust. Rita would be all right alone. But Lu thought it would only be a temporary situation for the attractive brunette. She’d lasted longer than any of the other women Lu had hooked up with in the past. Lu was a solitary person most of her adult life and wasn’t looking for more than a temporary liaison to keep her libido in check.

Lu pulled an old pocket watch out of her jeans and pushed the button to flip the cover open while she sipped her coffee. Her mother gave it to her when she graduated from college. She ran a finger over the engraving inside the cover. The watch once belonged to her father, an anniversary gift from Gussie to Clewon. She snapped the watch closed before turning and jerking the wooden screen into the kitchen open. She picked up the remainder of her toast and washed it down with coffee before returning to the bedroom to change into her work clothes.

She knew there was a trailer at the mine where the miners showered after their shift, but since, as far as she knew, she would be the only female miner at Brushy #3, she would only use the trailer long enough to pick up a set of coveralls and a self-rescuer.

She pulled her t-shirt over her head and sat on the side of the bed to remove her jeans. She replaced them with a set of snug thermal underwear, thick socks, flannel-lined jeans, and a flannel shirt. She tightened the laces on her well-worn leather steel-toed work boots and walked back to the kitchen. She filled a lunch box with bottled water and protein bars, as well as a sandwich. She picked up the carafe of the coffeemaker and poured the remaining coffee into a thermos before snapping it into the lid. It was always chilly in the mines and she hoped the coffee would stay warm most of her shift.

She started the old green Chevy shortbed before the sun penetrated the thick trees that surrounded the cabin. She looked at the dew-laden grass and undergrowth as she eased down the gravel drive to the two-lane paved road that ran the length of the valley. She flipped on her headlights, hoping they would cut through most of the morning haze that hovered over the road.

Brushy #3 was on the far side of the ridge from the cabin, but it would take her about thirty minutes on the curvy, switch-back roads cut into the sides of Walnut Ridge, to reach the mine's main entrance.

The bumpy asphalt road ended where the mine property began. She pulled into a parking space in front of a metal pre-fab building marked "Office". She slid from the truck about ninety minutes before the first shift would descend into the mine and looked around. On the outside Brushy #3 looked like every other mine she'd been in over the last fifteen years. Below ground was a different matter. Beams from bright halogen lights cut through the pre-dawn gloom and illuminated the entire area. Early in the morning, the area around Brushy #3 reminded Lu of the glens in Scotland. Sort of a loamin' in the gloamin' look in Kentucky. In another hour or so, sunlight would begin coaxing moisture from the surrounding hills, drawing vapor clouds from decomposing forest detritus into the blue sky overhead.

When she first began working for Charlie Bowers after college, she spent nearly six years working as a miner in his various holdings around the country to learn how the process differed for each mineral they were bringing out of the darkness. Many of the Bowers mines were coal producers and Lu became familiar with each one. Depending on the geological area in which a mine was located, the approach to it varied. Some were more dangerous than others, with unstable substrata. Brushy #3 had a decent safety record and Charlie was proud of the fact that no miners had been lost in any of his mines over the past ten years. That record made his miners and their families feel safe. They knew Bowers Mining did everything within its power to make working conditions as safe as possible, but there were always risks involved in convincing the mountain to peacefully surrender its precious minerals.

LU SHOVED HER leather work gloves into the rear pocket of her jeans and took the steps into the office two at a time. It shouldn't take her more than an hour to fill out personnel and payroll paperwork. She would still have time before her shift began. She was hired as a general miner and maintenance mechanic. Her job was to make sure every piece of equipment ran smoothly and never went off line for more than thirty minutes. It was tedious work, but would allow her access to every part of the mine, from the man trip that took workers through the underground tunnels to the giant continuous miner whose claws ripped into the earth twenty-four seven.

Although it wasn't listed as part of her job, Lu would also monitor the methane and carbon dioxide levels throughout the mine, making sure the intake/ouptake fans worked efficiently. If she believed the reading was too high she would report it to the shift safety officer immediately. The protocol for Bowers Mining was to evacuate the tunnels until the excess gases were sucked out by exhaust fans and lowered to a safe level. She helped write the safety protocols and knew the procedures better than anyone. They'd come a long way since the days of sacrificing canaries to determine unsafe gas emission levels.

The overhead lighting inside the main office cast a yellowish pall over everything and everyone. An older woman with gray hair and thick glasses that seemed to magnify her watery brown eyes sat behind the front desk, shuffling through a stack of papers. She wore a light pink sweater over her dark pink dress top. "He'p you?" she asked when Lu stopped in front of her desk.

“Transfer from Bowers’ Long Ridge in Utah checkin’ in. Miner and mechanic,” Lu answered succinctly.

“Reggie!” the woman called over her shoulder. “You got a customer!”

“Send ‘em back,” another voice responded.

Without looking up from her paper shuffling again, the older woman said blandly, “Down this hall, second door on your left.”

Lu’s heavy, steel-toed work boots made a clumping sound on the wooden floor of the prefab as she walked down the hallway into a maze of offices. She stopped in front of the office she’d been directed to and knocked on the door frame.

“It’s obviously open,” the woman behind the desk snorted sarcastically. Lu paused for a moment before stepping inside. She recognized the woman as the one she’d seen at the bar the night before. She glanced at the nameplate on the front of the desk which read ‘Regina Kinlaw’. “What can I...” Reggie started before she looked up and saw Lu. Reggie cleared her throat and tried again. “What can I do for you?”

“I was told to report here b’fore my shift,” Lu replied. She hadn’t been close enough to notice the night before, but Regina Kinlaw’s eyes were the lightest blue she’d ever seen. Almost the color of blue ice on a high mountain glacier. But something warm simmered just beneath their cool surface.

“Got your card and social?”

Lu reached into her back pocket and pulled out her wallet. She withdrew her United Mine Workers identification card and Social Security card and handed them to Reggie. Reggie pushed her rolling chair back and opened a drawer in the file cabinet behind her, pulling out a manila folder. She dug through a stack of folders on her desk and removed one. She held up the two folders. “Check the information in this one and make sure everything’s been typed in correctly,” she instructed as she handed the folder to Lu. “And fill this one out to be sent to payroll,” she added as she gave Lu the second folder. “While you’re doin’ that I’ll make a copy of your cards for our files.”

Lu took a seat in front of the desk and tried not to be obvious about observing Reggie’s wavy chestnut hair while she began filling out the forms in front of her. She leaned forward slightly and smiled when she watched Reggie make her way toward the front of the building, appreciating the way her body moved as she walked. Reggie Kinlaw appeared to be about five-seven or eight. She was slender and Lu estimated perhaps one-twenty, maybe less. She was definitely a head turner. Lu noticed she wore virtually no make-up to enhance her natural good looks. Only a dash of lip gloss and a little liner to highlight her stunning eyes. Lu looked up from her paperwork to see light blue eyes staring down at her.

“Somethin’ wrong?” Lu asked, ignoring the look and closing the folders.

Reggie shook her head and returned to her office chair, settling into a comfortable position. As Lu leaned back and rested her right ankle on her left knee, she glanced around the small office. A carved squirrel perched on the desk next to Reggie’s nameplate caught Lu’s attention. She picked it up and turned it over in her hands while Reggie checked Lu’s paperwork. On the bottom the initials RK were cut into the wood.

“You carve this?” Lu asked casually.

“Yeah,” Reggie answered.

“It’s real good. Looks almost alive.”

“Just a hobby. Nothin’ special,” Reggie said as she ran a finger down the final page Lu had filled out. She picked up the papers and tapped them on her desk to straighten the pages, then stapled them together, and slid them into a folder.

“You were at Gertie’s last night, weren’t you?” Reggie asked as she handed Lu’s cards back to her.

“Yeah. Just arrived and was hungry. Pretty decent burger.”

Reggie smiled as she glanced at Lu. “Well, today should be interestin’ for you. The maintenance foreman is Kenneth Leifester. Collie, the guy you had a...moment with last night, is his baby brother. Kenneth was the one with the beard.”

“I didn’t have no quarrel with them,” Lu said with a shrug. “Just weren’t my type.”

Reggie rested her forearms along the edge of her desk. “And what type would that be?” she asked.

The left side of Lu’s mouth curled up into a half-smile. “Male,” she answered with a wink.

“Uh-huh. Well, don’t hesitate to let someone know if either of them give you a rash of shit. They’re both on first shift with you today.”

Lu shrugged. “At least I’ll know somebody goin’ in.” She set the squirrel down carefully and stood up, rearranging her jeans. “That it?”

“You’re good to go,” Reggie said, extending her hand. “Have a safe shift, Lucinda Calder. You can change into your gear in the trailer near the mine entrance.”

Lu took the warm hand and smiled. “It’s just Lu,” she said as she left the office.

OF COURSE IT is. As soon as Lu left, Reggie thumbed through her personnel file again. She was surprised at the woman’s age. She looked younger than the thirty-six she had listed as her age even though her file also listed a series of mining jobs over the past fifteen years. She hadn’t stayed at any of her previous jobs longer than two or three years before moving on for some reason. In Reggie’s experience, miners tended to stay with a company most of their lives, choosing not to wander from place to place. But then again, most miners she knew were men and supported a family. Lu Calder hadn’t listed any family members. She was a ruggedly handsome woman and, if the night before was any indication, deceptively strong. She listed her height at six feet even and her weight at one-forty-five. Reggie knew most women lied about their weight, but doubted Lu had. She was well proportioned with slender hips and a gait that Reggie could only describe as...eye-catching. Lu Calder might be an interesting woman to have as a friend, if she stayed around long enough.

WHEN LU STEPPED out of Reggie’s office, she was stopped by a hand gripping her arm.

“You the new miner?” a man wearing a stark white shirt and a striped necktie asked.

“Lu Calder,” she said with a nod.

“Terrance Hopewell, mine superintendent,” he said. “Come to my office.” It wasn’t a request. He wheeled around and left Lu to follow him. He unlocked a door to an office at the end of the narrow hallway and strode in ahead of Lu.

“There a problem?” Lu asked.

“Hopefully not,” Hopewell said. “You’re the only female miner at Brushy #3. Bowers Minin’ is an equal opportunity employer, so do your job and keep up and you should be all right. If you make it, I’ll probably have a slew of damn women applyin’ to work here and screamin’ about women’s rights or some other crap. Until then we provide a shower room for the miners to use after their shifts. However, it’s a communal shower and you might feel a mite uncomfortable sharin’ it with seventeen naked men.”

“Or they might be uncomfortable sharin’ it with one naked woman,” she replied with a grin. “What’s your point?”

“I suggest you arrive early to dress for your shift and wait until the men leave before takin’ your shower. Bowers is not prepared to make any other special allowances for a female miner. Maybe if we had several, the policy might change, but not at the moment.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Lu said. “I have most of my own gear except for coveralls and a self-rescuer. And I can wait to shower ‘til I get home. Any other problems?”

Hopewell picked up a pen and signed a sheet of paper in front of him before tossing it in a basket. “Nope. Just needed to make you aware. We don’t want any discrimination problems associated with your employment with us.”

“As long as I do my job, I don’t expect any problems. Is that all? My shift starts in a few minutes.”

“Have a safe shift, Calder. Close the door on your way out.”

ONCE HE WAS certain Lu was gone, Hopewell picked up his office phone and punched in a series of numbers and waited.

“Hello,” a man’s deep voice answered after three rings.

“She’s here,” Hopewell said. “Looks harmless enough.”

“Don’t be fooled by her looks, Hopewell. Make sure your books are someplace safe. Without them she can’t prove jack shit or report anything damaging to the old man.”

“I got it covered.”

“See that you do or we’ll both go down...hard.”

“Don’t threaten me, Carl. I know what’s at stake.”

In the background Hopewell heard a woman’s voice asking who was on the phone.

“Nobody, baby,” Carl said. Into the receiver he lowered his voice. “Gotta go. Keep me in the loop.”

Hopewell stared at the receiver before placing it back in its cradle.

LU OPENED HER truck door and pulled out her insulated lunch bucket, checking the contents. Four bottles of water, a sandwich, chips, and a couple of protein bars for late in her shift when she knew her energy would begin taking a nose-dive. A small bottle of instant energy lay beneath everything else. She picked up her white hard hat, covered with decals from other mines she’d worked, and secured her work goggles over it. She pulled her personal dust protector over her head, allowing it to drape around her neck before pressing the hardhat onto her head. She grabbed her earplugs and dropped them into her shirt pocket. She locked the truck and shoved her keys into her jeans pocket before striding off toward a trailer near the mine entrance

that served as a washroom. She jerked the door open and located an empty locker for her coat. She grabbed a set of blue water-resistant coveralls a size bigger than she normally wore, but big enough to fit easily over the clothes she would wear beneath it. She found a pair of rubberized knee pads on a shelf and slid them up her legs. She removed a headlamp from its charger and snapped a self-rescuer on her belt before leaving the trailer with her decal-laden helmet tucked under her arm.

She lit a cigarette and made her way slowly toward the hoist house where a group of men clustered nearby, waiting to enter the cage that would lower them into the belly of the mountain. She sucked in deep breaths of fresh air, as well as cigarette smoke. The hint of coal mingled with the dampness around her.

She saw the men who were at Dirty Gertie's the night before and steeled herself for a possible confrontation. She singled out the bearded man whose red coveralls identified him as the fire boss for her shift's team and angled her way toward him. His eyes widened when she stopped in front of him and held out her hand. "Lu Calder," she said. "Miner and mechanic."

An insincere smile revealed white teeth in the middle of his bearded face. "Kenneth Leifester, first shift fire boss today." He was only about an inch taller than Lu. He motioned with his head to his right, where a slightly shorter man stood. He gripped Lu's hand firmly. "You remember my brother, Collie."

Lu returned Leifester's firm grip ounce-for-ounce and nodded. She looked at Collie and nodded. "How's the wrist?" she asked with a grin.

"Fine," he said, attempting unsuccessfully to draw his body up to match Lu's height.

Even though the bones in her hand were beginning to feel the discomfort of Kenneth's tight grip, Lu refused to show it. "Glad to hear it." She moved her eyes to meet Kenneth's. "Where you want me today, boss?"

Kenneth finally gave up his silent pissing match and released Lu's hand. He wiped his palm on the leg of his coveralls. "When we get off the cage, we'll go down to level three. Our team will take the right tunnel. Check out where everything's located. There's some storage areas that should have all the tools and parts you might need. I suggest you keep an inventory list of where everthin' is. If somethin' breaks down you won't have time to spend all damn day fartin' 'round for the part you need. Time is money." He laughed humorlessly. "Company motto." He let his gray eyes scan her for a moment before adding, "There's a maintenance schedule posted inside all maintenance lockers. Memorize it."

"Communications?" she asked, resisting the urge to flex her fingers as she took another drag from the cigarette perched at the corner of her mouth.

"You'll get a set of headphones once we're inside," Kenneth said. "There's a call box in each tunnel section so the supervisors can reach you."

Lu already knew about the communication system which had been installed in every Bowers mine. She designed it herself and it was now common equipment. Its back-up system presumably could be used by trapped miners in case of a ceiling or wall collapse, but so far that part had never been tested since there had been no collapses since its installation. Lu hoped it would never be tested under real circumstances.

Five minutes before the official beginning of her shift, she and seventeen other miners filed onto the thick plank flooring of the elevator, also known as the cage, that would lower them gradually into the heart of the mountain. Light bulbs mounted on the corners of the heavy gauge wire enclosure illuminated the shaft walls. By looking at the various substrata as they passed by, Lu could only estimate the millions of years and the violence of continental plates crashing

together it took to create this particular mountain. She could feel the change in temperature around her and shivered involuntarily with excitement at entering a new mine. Lu stepped out of the cage, the cap lamp on her helmet already on.

The other miners in her shift found a place to lean against the mine wall or sit on the dirt floor while they waited for the man trip to arrive. Shafts of light from their helmets shot through the darkness surrounding them, casting eerie shadows along the walls. She adjusted her hardhat and shifted her weight from one foot to another.

A few moments later she heard the low whine of the battery powered man trip as it slowly approached. The driver swung the conveyance in a half circle and stopped, allowing the night shift's miners to make their way toward the cage for the journey to the surface to inhale fresh air and stand beneath a warm shower after their eight-hours in the cool, semi-dark anthracite-producing mine. Some of the men paused to speak for a minute to a friend before throwing a hand up in a wave. Lu saw Leifester jotting down notes from the night shift fire boss, letting him know of any problems and where their work had stopped.

She loved the descent into a mine, her skin adjusting to the change in temperature and pressure as they disappeared beneath tons of earth and rock. No matter the season or surface temperature, she knew she could look forward to working the next several hours in a constant fifty degrees.

"Have a good'un," she heard a man say to no one in particular. Lu felt her lips curl up slightly into a contented smile as she dropped into a seat on the low-slung man trip that would take the miners on her shift deeper into the tunnels. She flipped her lamp off to conserve the battery and placed a noise-reducing earplug into each ear. As she adjusted her body into the seat, preparing for the twenty-minute ride to the area of the coal seam where she'd be working, a hand tapped soundly on the top of her helmet. She opened her eyes and gazed up at a man with a craggy face.

"What?" she asked.

"Get outta my seat," he said, his voice rumbling from deep in his chest.

She sat up and turned to look over her shoulder. "Don't see your name on it," she observed before lying back into the seat and closing her eyes again.

"What's the hold up, Ronnie?" Kenneth called out.

"Somethin's on my seat, boss," the miner called back.

"Then remove it and let's go," Kenneth chuckled as he swung into his seat.

"Sure thing, boss," Ronnie answered, reaching down and grabbing the front of Lu's coveralls, dragging her from the seat, and depositing her unceremoniously on the mine floor. To a wave of laughter, he stepped over her and plopped into the now vacant seat. "Ready, boss."

The urge to punch the older man in the face crossed her mind, but it was obvious that this was the first in what could become a series of minor hazing incidents and practical jokes aimed at all new or rookie miners. As long as it didn't get any worse than a little bruised pride, she would tolerate it. She had done the same kind of thing herself in other mines. She pushed her body up and dropped into the seat behind him as the man trip jerked forward to begin its trip deeper into the tunnels. Ronnie coughed and chortled to himself.

The headlight of the man trip pierced the darkness as it lurched forward. It squealed and bounced on a track laid down the middle of the twenty-foot wide corridor. She rode through a tunnel that looked like it was covered by dirty flour. The headlight reflected off the rock dust. Powdered limestone was regularly sprayed along the coal seam to lessen the combustibility of

the coal dust from the sinuous, shiny stripes of anthracite coal lying beneath the surface of the wooded hills and valleys of Landon County, Kentucky.

Lu leaned her head back and took a deep breath. She had worked in many different types of mines, but was becoming addicted to coal mines. It was a way of life that drew her as deeply into it as the tunnel that was passing a few feet above her now. Even though it was her first day at Brushy #3, she had been in several other coal mines for Charlie Bowers. The weather inside the mine never changed, the work was physical, but satisfying. She had many friends who were miners and her knowledge was always valued by those working beside her.

As a geologist she was attracted by seeing things that hadn't seen the light of day for two-hundred-and-eighty million years. Brushy #3 was approximately eight-and-a-half miles long from one end to the other. A four-story shaft had been punched roughly in the center of the mine to position the cage, which lowered miners into the mine proper. An adjacent tunnel carried coal to the surface via a conveyor belt. By the time Lu reached her work station today, she would be nearly twenty-five stories beneath the earth's surface. The ride would take about twenty minutes and there were times when she closed her eyes and dozed. Because the man trip was built as low to the ground as possible, she was practically lying down during the trip.

Her first day assignment would be working with another miner as a roof bolter. The mine itself was made up of a series of rooms held in place by columns of coal. Roof bolters followed the continuous miner and stabilized the ceiling by drilling nine feet into the rock overhead. Then they would tamp in canisters of glue followed by steel bolts that would draw the various rock strata together to strengthen the ceiling. Eventually, the pillars of coal would be removed one row at a time, allowing the ceiling to collapse in a controlled manner as miners gradually moved back toward the entrance, a process known as retreat mining.

She twisted her head and smiled when she saw another safety innovation recently put into place. She hoped no one would need it, but in an emergency it was easy to become disoriented and lost in the dark. Green fluorescent strips clung to the walls at regular intervals to show miners which tunnel was a primary escape route. Blue markers in an adjacent tunnel indicated a secondary route.

The man trip stopped at the third level and a group of nine miners, including Lu, stepped out to move to their assigned jobs. Lu followed Kenneth and checked out her headphones to make sure she could both send and receive. Kenneth handed her a map of the mine and she set off to see the machinery she would be responsible for maintaining for her team.

"Take the right tunnel," Leifester instructed. "Run a maintenance check on the continuous miner while Harpo starts boltin'. Goober's been bitchin' about it all damn week."

Lu nodded and stored her lunch bucket before making her way through the tunnel.

She stopped to introduce herself to Harpo, an older man, before going to the continuous miner. There were two teams of roof bolters, a scoop driver who carried loads of coal from the continuous miner to the conveyor belt, a continuous miner operator, and two car drivers who picked up debris. She was briefly introduced to the men before they entered the cage and endured distrusting looks from the male miners who were unaccustomed to females working underground. She checked the sounds of various pieces of machinery and mentally logged how each sounded when running normally. Near all of the work sites a wide conveyor belt rumbled as it carried coal to the surface. She could hear the sound of the continuous miner as its claws relentlessly chewed large chunks of coal from the vein that ran through the center of the mountain as she made her way toward it. She stopped when a horn sounded and a flashing red light sent strobes along the wall of the tunnel. Lu depressed the mike button on her headphones.

“What’s wrong?” she asked loudly to be heard over the roaring of the equipment around her. “Conveyer’s stopped,” a voice replied. “Near the claw.”

“I’m there now. I’ll check it out,” she said as she turned and made her way toward the machine.

“What happened?” she asked the man operating the continuous miner when she arrived at the stalled conveyer.

A scruffy-looking man with a closely clipped beard glanced at her and spit a stream of tobacco juice that landed near Lu’s feet. “Quit workin’,” he said with a shrug.

Lu flipped on the high-beam light on her helmet and knelt next to the belt, shining the beam underneath the essential piece of equipment. It didn’t take long to discover the problem. She made sure the conveyer in that section was shut down before she flipped onto her back and used her legs to maneuver her body into a small work entry beneath the belt. A large chunk of coal was lodged in the gears and jamming them. The small access hole made working difficult because she had to reach over her head and tilt the light on her hard hat backward, practically working upside down.

“Pry bar,” she called out.

Almost immediately, a heavy metal bar slid through the access hole along the side of her body. She winced as the metal struck her ribs and pushed the bar away. She positioned the curved end close to the gears and worked it into the gear cams, careful not to dislodge them from meshing. She grabbed the end of the bar and braced her feet against either side of the access hole. Two sharp jerks against the obstruction barely moved it, but after taking a deep breath, her third attempt popped the heavy stone loose and it fell to the ground next to her head. She felt like an inchworm as she slowly scooted out, forcing the stone to accompany her. She pulled her legs up toward her abdomen and moved the stone down enough to shove it out with her feet. Then she reached back and grasped the pry bar. In all, it had taken her about ten minutes to find the problem and clear it. When her gloved hands were close enough to grab the sides of the access hole, she pulled the rest of her body from beneath the machine. She pushed the chunk of coal, which weighed at least fifty pounds into a pile of coal waiting to be picked up by the scoop car and taken to the conveyor. She handed the pry bar back to the continuous miner operator.

“You can turn it back on now,” she said, brushing dirt and coal dust mixed with limestone dust from her coveralls.

“Took you long enough,” the man grumbled.

“That happen often?” she asked.

He looked at her and the side of his mouth lifted in a half grin. “Never happened b’fore. Musta been a fluke.”

“Right,” Lu said. “Any other problems?” she called out as the conveyer rumbled to life.

The operator resumed his place atop a pile of slag and picked up the remote control running the continuous miner. It was another prank and she and the machine operator both knew it. Leifester might have called down and told the operator to create a basically harmless problem to test her. Was she strong enough, gutsy enough, to do a job they thought should have gone to a male miner? She decided not to say anything about the incident unless the hazing went too far and became either dangerous or interfered with the normal operation of the mine.

She moved to her left through two access tunnels and reintroduced herself to the roof bolter she would be working with, the older man called Harpo.

“Bout time you showed up, girl,” he said gruffly.

“Conveyor problem.”

She looked around for a moment until she spotted the safety jacks she needed to support the mine roof in the area where she would be working. Satisfied they were stable, she found the drill she'd need to cut into the strata above her. She drilled the nine-foot holes for the ceiling bolts, removed the drill bit, inserted a bolt into the bolting machine, then forced a tube of glue and the bolt into the hole. Next, she and Harpo rotated the drill chuck to open the bolt's expansion head, anchoring the bolt safely in the rock above them. Lu picked up a turnbuckle and began tightening the end of the bolt while Harpo followed her with a torque wrench to test each bolt for the correct amount of tension. After setting a few truss bolts, which had to be installed across the entire roof span of the mine, she and Harpo worked together as a team the next four hours. The rhythm of their work curtailed much discussion between them. While Lu was tightening the last group of bolts she'd set, Harpo lightly punched her on the shoulder.

"Lunch break," he said loudly. "I'll join you after I check the tension on these."

She nodded and, after tightening the last bolt in her section, she leaned back on her heels to give her back a rest. While she waited as Harpo completed the final step, she shook her arms out, grateful to give her muscles a break. She was certain they would be sore the next day. Harpo slapped her on the back before they went to find their lunch buckets and relax before the second half of their shift began.

Harpo found a spot and sat down heavily not far from where they'd been working. He drank half a bottle of water, then began devouring his sandwich. "You done good," he said between bites. "I think we mighta broke a record today. I was a little worried, what with you bein' a girl and all, but you done real good."

"So did you," Lu said with a smile. "I was a little worried too, you bein' an old guy and all."

Harpo barked out a laugh. "You have any problems with anyone yet?"

Lu shook her head. "Nothin' to write home about. Only other guy I met was the one on the continuous miner."

"Goober. He's pretty quiet until you get to know him, but a helluva nice guy. Where you from?"

"My family's from around here originally, but I've been minin' out west for the last few years."

"Didja like it?"

"It was okay, but it was time to move on. Reckon I'm still lookin' for the right place to settle," Lu said before shoving the last bite of her sandwich into her mouth. Once she swallowed it, she asked, "Where we at next?"

"Scoopin'. A little borin', but we get to sit," Harpo chuckled.

"If you don't mind, I'm gonna look around so I know where everthin' is." She grunted as she pushed her body up and stretched. It would give her a chance to check out a few things without drawing unnecessary attention to herself.

Every couple of hours the continuous miner operator moved his big machine to allow the scoop drivers to load and haul coal away. The continuous miner was operated by remote control, letting the eleven-and-a-half-foot wide cylinder's one hundred diamond teeth grind into the seam and chew the coal out. Occasionally, an oversized chunk of coal needed to be broken up with a pick before being loaded onto the conveyor belt to prevent a jam. It made Lu grateful that swinging a pick wasn't needed to dig the coal out any more.

Lu made her way down the main tunnel of the mine, stopping periodically to check the bolts she and Harpo had set. Then she checked the ceiling sections in the access tunnels, trying to estimate the widths of an occasional fissure above her head.

The remainder of Lu's first shift at Brushy #3 was relatively calm. She walked from access tunnel to access tunnel, inventorying both the tools and replacement part locations in each maintenance locker. She spoke to several miners about the reliability of their equipment. From everything she saw and heard, the miners seemed to be satisfied with their working conditions and offered no serious complaints. Some miners who'd been with the company for years talked about improvements they thought could be made in their particular areas of expertise. Since no one knew the work in each area better than the men who performed it, Lu took their suggestions as valid.

In the final hour of her shift Lu found a place to sit in a maintenance area to re-organize her notes. When the final horn announcing the end of her shift sounded, she packed up her lunch bucket and logged in her communication equipment. Finally, she waited until the other miners climbed onto the small train that would return them to the cage and took her seat last. The slow, rhythmic rocking motion of the man trip lulled her into a short nap that ended with an abrupt jerking stop when they reached the cage area. Leifester made a head count to make sure everyone was on board before punching the button that would hoist the cage to the surface again,

As Lu stepped from the cage into the fresh air, she was patting her pockets to locate her cigarettes when Leifester grabbed her by the arm.

"Got a minute, Calder?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, lighting a cigarette after he released her arm.

"Someone wants a word with you," he said, taking long steps away from the mine entrance to make way for the on-coming shift. She followed him across the parking lot. She recognized the man leaning against a rusty, old Dodge truck not far from the main office. He turned to face them.

"Calder, this here is Gardner Kinlaw. He's usually the first shift Fire Boss, but had a meetin' with the superintendent today," Leifester said as he leaned against the car parked next to Kinlaw's truck.

"Kenneth says you done pretty good today," Gardner said as he shook Lu's hand, ignoring the black coal smears.

"No problems today," Lu said. "But ever day's different."

"The guys didn't give you any shit, did they?"

Out of the corner of her eye Lu saw Leifester shift his weight from one foot to the other. "Nope. As I said, no problems. It's a pretty clean mine and seems to be producin' well enough."

"I read your personnel records, Calder. How come you move around so much? Odd for a miner."

Lu shifted her feet and moved her lunch bucket from one hand to the other. She stuck her cigarette in the corner of her mouth and squinted at Gardner. "I figure to be a good miner I should work in a bunch of different mines, bringin' up different minerals. That way I can decide what kind I'd rather work with. My daddy was a coal miner and I've pretty much decided I like workin' coal better than the others I've tried so far."

Gardner looked around and readjusted the waist of his jeans. "Makes sense, I guess. I'll look over Kenneth's eval tonight and be back on shift in the mornin'. Get a good night's sleep and I'll see you then."

Lu nodded and strode down the parking area toward her truck.

Chapter Three

LU FOLLOWED THE winding road from the mine property to the main road. It was only a two-lane road, mostly paved, but frequently repaired by a road crew known locally as “daubers”. The joke in the area was that the crew truck drove along the old road and patched it by daubing asphalt into the new cracks and holes. Of course, the repairs never lasted more than a few weeks.

It wasn't fully dark yet, but the thick canopy of trees branches hanging over the road successfully blocked the late afternoon sun, creating a winding tunnel that covered the road in deep shadows. Lu lit another cigarette and inhaled a puff as she rested her elbow on the edge of the open truck window. She flipped on her headlights as she piloted her truck around a sweeping curve and saw a vehicle parked off the side off the road. She slowed and noticed it was an older model cargo van. The side door was open and the hood was up. Lu pulled behind the vehicle and parked. The driver's side door of her truck popped as it opened and she stepped out. She pulled her baseball cap down a little snugger on her head as she approached the vehicle. She didn't see anyone around and thought perhaps the owner decided to walk for help. She placed her hands on either side of the open side cargo door and leaned in. A low, menacing growl pierced the darkness and she found herself face-to-face with the largest set of canines she had ever seen. Drool from the black-and-tan coonhound's mouth hung from its jowls and Lu backed away slowly as the dog's tongue lapped up its saliva.

“Chester!” a voice said sharply. “Back off!”

The dog's eyes shifted in the direction of the voice as it began slinking back into the dark interior of the van, the low growl still rumbling deep within its throat as its eyes darted back to Lu.

“Just ignore him. He only sounds mean,” the voice said. Lu looked to her left and saw someone moving from in front of the van. A moment later Reggie Kinlaw came into sight.

“Interestin' guard dog,” Lu commented with a grin. The shadow from the brim of her cap hid her eyes, letting them drift appreciatively down the length of Reggie's slender body.

“Chester's always been protective, but looks meaner than he is. Don't pay him any mind.”

“What seems to be the problem?” Lu asked, nodding toward the van.

“If I knew that, I'd fix the damn thing,” Reggie said testily. “I just got it back from my genius cousin today. He said it was fixed. Bad battery posts or some such shit.”

“Let me take a look. Might just need a jump,” Lu said. She walked around Reggie, catching a brief whiff of a musky but pleasant cologne, and peered into the engine compartment. She rubbed a finger over the battery cells and wiped her hand on the side of her jeans. She checked the oil and even though it looked like it could stand a change, the level was acceptable. She checked the spark plug connections and a few other minor things. She walked to the toolbox in her truck and used a cylindrical wire brush to clean the battery posts. She leaned around the corner of the van and said, “Try it now.” She watched as Reggie stepped onto the running board and pivoted to sit behind the steering wheel.

“Got any WD-40 or anything I can spray into the carburetor?”

“How the hell would I know,” Reggie snapped. “I’m not a damn mechanic.”

Lu backed up a step and raised her hands slightly in surrender. “Let me check my toolbox.” She returned a few minutes later to find Reggie tapping her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel.

“I’ll move my truck and give her a jump. Did it start okay when you left work?”

“Yeah, but it took a couple of tries before it turned over.”

“It should have charged while you were drivin’.”

“I braked comin’ around the curve back yonder and it died.”

Lu nodded and walked back to her truck. Within a few minutes she edged it close to the front of the van. Balancing a foot on the bumper of each vehicle, she attached one end of her jumper cables to her truck battery, then tapped the free ends together, creating a spark before clamping them to the van’s battery posts. “Try it now!” she called out when she was ready.

Two tries later the engine of the van came to life. Lu let it idle for a minute before she disconnected the cables. She backed her truck away to allow room for the van to turn onto the road and left it running while she walked to the driver’s window of the van.

“Thanks,” Reggie said without looking at her. “Sorry I kept you from gettin’ home. Looks like you could use a bath.”

Lu rubbed her fingertips across her forehead and looked at the coal residue on her hand. “Guess I am kinda dirty. Occupational hazard,” she said with a grin. “I’ll follow you home to make sure it don’t crap out on you again.”

“That’s not necessary. I’ll be fine from here.”

“I wasn’t askin’ for your permission,” Lu said, yanking the side door of the van closed.

Reggie pulled onto the road before Lu returned to her truck, but a fast U-turn allowed her to catch up quickly. Lu had no idea where Reggie lived, but lit a cigarette as she kept the van in sight. When Reggie signaled a right-hand turn a few miles later, Lu followed her. A steep drive led up a hill to a two-story log home with a screen-enclosed front porch. An open garage constructed of whitewashed cinder block was attached to the porch by a ramp with a metal roof. As soon as Lu saw the van’s taillights flash on, she pulled her truck into a place behind it and jumped out.

As she walked toward the van, she saw an older woman step onto the porch. The woman’s hand rested lightly on a girl’s shoulder. Assorted pieces of rusted farm equipment cluttered the yard along the front and side of the house. Wisps of light gray smoke came from the chimney. An old porch swing and a couple of rocking chairs took up space on the porch. When Reggie stepped around the van, the woman leaned down and said something to the child. The girl skipped down the ramp and Reggie scooped her into her arms and swung her in a circle, eliciting giggles, before setting her down again.

“Get in the van,” Reggie said. “Chester’s waitin’ for you and we gotta get on home to feed the chickens.”

“Who’s that?” the girl asked, glancing toward Lu.

“Just a friend from the mine,” Reggie answered.

“Why’s she here?” the child continued.

“Because the van broke down and needed a jump. She’s following me to make sure we get home without a problem. Any more questions or can we get on home now?” Reggie asked as she looked at Lu who was standing with her hands shoved in the back pockets of her jeans.

“No more questions.” The girl grinned. “But I might think of some by the time we get home.”

Reggie rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you will."

While Reggie got the girl situated in the van's front seat, Lu climbed into her truck and backed up to give Reggie space to turn the van around. Lu lit a cigarette and watched the van rumble down the drive. Reggie hadn't introduced her to the girl, but Lu was sure they were related. Everything about the child reminded her of Reggie, except the constant questions. Apparently, Reggie wasn't interested enough to ask questions. That suited Lu. Her stay at Brushy #3 would be fairly short and she didn't have time to get involved in anyone's life. But Reggie Kinlaw would be an extremely tempting diversion.

LU BROUGHT HER truck to a stop behind Reggie's van and looked around. The front yard of the little house appeared to be recently mowed and trimmed. A light over the front door flickered slightly. Before Lu could open her door, she was startled when the young girl jumped onto the running board and thrust her hand into the cab.

"I'm Hallie. Who are you? Mommy says you're a miner. Are you new? Do you like gettin' dirty? You ain't from 'round here, are you?" the girl babbled on.

Lu lit a cigarette and smiled at the girl's wide eyes. "You ask a lot of questions," she said as she exhaled a thin stream of smoke.

Hallie shrugged. "Can't learn nothin' without askin' questions," she said.

Lu gripped Hallie's hand and gave it a single shake. "Lu. I am new here and love gettin' dirty. I'm here from out west."

"Where out west? Wyomin'? Idaho? Montana? Arizona?"

"Colorado," Lu said to stop the listing of western states.

"Is it pretty there? Does it snow a bunch? Can you ski?" Hallie persisted.

"Yep, yep, and sometimes," Lu said with a laugh. "Can I get out of my truck now?"

Hallie jumped backwards away from the truck and landed on the ground. When Lu stepped out, Hallie's blue eyes got even wider as she tilted her head back to look up at Lu. "Wow! You're tall! How t—" she started.

"Six foot even," Lu said, interrupting Hallie's question. "How 'bout you?"

Hallie shrugged. "Don't know."

"Hang on and we'll find out," Lu said. She walked to the bed of her truck and opened a large tool box. She pulled out a measuring tape and pushed a button on the side. The tape dropped to the ground. "Step on the end," Lu said. Satisfied that Hallie had the tape anchored, Lu pulled the tape up and closed one eye to check Hallie's height. "Looks like about four feet and two inches to me, short stuff."

"That good?"

"Beats me, kid. I don't remember bein' as young as you. It was a long time ago."

"How old are you? I'm nine, but will be ten next January."

"Well, don't tell anybody, but I'm thirty-six," Lu said, lowering her voice.

"Boy howdy! You're old," Hallie breathed.

"And gettin' older by the minute," Lu muttered to herself under her breath.

The door to the plain little house opened and Reggie stepped outside. She had changed into a worn pair of jeans and a Kentucky Wildcat t-shirt that clung to her body in all the right places. Lu swallowed hard and felt her stomach clinch at the sight, but wasn't able to tear her eyes away. The evening breeze was chilly and Reggie wrapped her arms around her body, which only

emphasized her full breasts. A moron would have noticed how the cool air caused her nipples to stand out against her shirt. And Lu was no moron. She stood there, mesmerized for several moments as her mouth went dry.

“Hallie!” Reggie called out. “Chickens! Now! Supper will be ready soon!”

Hallie looked up at Lu. “You stayin’ for supper?”

“Nah, I need to be gettin’ on home. You better get to them chickens b’fore your mama gets mad at you.”

Hallie finally scampered away with Chester loping next to her. Lu opened the truck door and stepped onto the running board. She glanced up in time to see Reggie walking toward her, backlit by the porch light. Trying desperately not to be obvious, Lu appreciated the way her slender hips flared slightly as they swayed while she walked. She could see the smooth movement of the muscles in Reggie’s thighs as they slid beneath the worn fabric of her faded jeans.

“Your ears fallen off yet from all her questions?” Reggie asked as she approached Lu.

“I was the same way when I was a kid,” Lu chuckled. “Payback, I guess.”

“Well, you might as well come on in and get cleaned up. I made some cornbread and supper will be ready by the time Hallie is done feedin’ the chickens.”

“I should be gettin’ on home, but I appreciate the offer.”

“I already set a place for you and Hallie will be disappointed if she loses another sucker.”

Reggie laughed and the sound of it flowed over Lu’s ears like soothing water. Her brain screamed for her to get away as soon as possible, but she ignored its warning, as usual.

“I’d be glad to check out your van in return,” Lu offered.

“It’ll be okay,” Reggie said as she turned back toward the house.

“Okay,” Lu said with a shrug. “Show me where I can clean up.”

Lu followed Reggie to the house and held the door open for her. Reggie took the lid off a pot on the stove and stirred the contents. “You can wash up in the kitchen sink,” she said. “The cornbread will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Smells great,” Lu said as she rolled her shirt sleeves up. She scrubbed her arms and face, then dried them with a kitchen towel.

While Reggie filled three bowls with fragrant stew, Lu took the corn bread from the oven and cut it into eight slices. She transferred it onto a plate and set it on the table. Hallie ran into the kitchen and washed her hands, drying them on her shirt before taking a seat. Lu pulled a chair out for Reggie, then sat between them and began slathering a piece of cornbread with margarine.

“You get the chickens fed?” Reggie asked.

“Yes, ma’am. They might get some corn bread after dinner, if Lu leaves any,” Hallie snickered.

“I like homemade cornbread and this is great. Haven’t had any in a while,” Lu said. “Thanks for invitin’ me to share a meal with you.”

“How’s the stew?” Reggie asked.

Lu crumbled cornbread into her bowl, took a big bite, and nodded her head. “Squirrel, right?” she asked after swallowing. “Good flavor.” She looked at Hallie. “You shoot ‘em?”

“A couple. Me and Uncle Gardner went huntin’ last weekend.”

“There’s a bunch of squirrels at my place. Maybe you can help me thin ‘em out one day,” Lu said with a smile.

“You don’t have to do that,” Reggie said.

Lu shrugged. “Don’t think you’ll get out of helpin’. I like squirrel stew and after me and short stuff clean ‘em, you can show me your recipe. How ‘bout that?”

Reggie smiled.

After dinner, Lu stacked and rinsed their bowls. Reggie prepared water to wash their dishes, while Hallie took the remaining corn bread to their chickens with Chester following her, hoping for a handout. Lu found a dish towel and began drying their dishes after Reggie dipped them in hot water to rinse them.

“You don’t have to do that,” Reggie said.

“I don’t mind and there ain’t much,” Lu said with a shrug. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Well, thanks and thank you for puttin’ up with Hallie’s questions.”

“She’s a good kid, just curious ‘bout stuff. Nothin’ wrong with that.” Lu smiled as she dried the last bowl and folded the dish towel.

Reggie dried her hands, then squirted lotion onto them before rubbing it in. She followed Lu outside. “Appreciate the help tonight,” Reggie said as Hallie and Chester trotted onto the front porch and watched Lu stroll to her truck.

Lu sat back in the cab of her truck and lit a cigarette. She took a long drag, letting the later September air blow in through the truck’s open windows. Her belly full of stew and cornbread, she revved her truck and coasted down the drive to the valley road. Reggie hadn’t spoken much over dinner, but spent most of her time watching Lu and Hallie interact. It was nothing like the evenings she’d spent with anyone else. What was it Rita had called her? Socially stunted? Lu never felt as relaxed and comfortable with anyone before, like she did with Reggie. When they talked, it was natural and easy.

Lu enjoyed her time with Reggie and Hallie, but she had a job to do at Brushy #3 so she could get back to Colorado.

KENNETH LEIFESTER LEANED his arms on the front counter of the main office the next morning and grinned at the woman behind the counter.

“Whatcha need, Kenneth?” she asked, smiling back at him.

“Dunno. Hopewell wants to see me about somethin’,”

“Mabbe you’re gettin’ a raise.”

“I wouldn’t turn one down, but I ain’t holdin’ my breath,” he laughed.

“Go on back. You know where his office is.”

Leifester slapped his hand on the counter. “Indeed I do. Thanks, Edith.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you, sweetie.”

Leifester sauntered down the hallway to the superintendent’s office. He paused for a moment to look into Reggie’s office.

“Hey, beautiful, how’s your day goin’?” he asked.

“No complaints so far, Kenny. How ‘bout you?” Reggie answered with a smile.

“They don’t pay me extra to complain,” he chuckled. “If they did, I’d be a rich man by now. Talk to you later.”

“Have a good one,” Reggie said as he walked away before returning to her paperwork.

Leifester continued to the superintendent’s office, stopping at Hopewell’s secretary’s desk. “Mornin’ Thelma. He wanted to see me before my shift today,” he said, motioning toward Hopewell’s office with his head.

“Go on in,” Thelma answered without looking away from her work.

Leifester opened the door and stepped inside. “You wanted to see me, Mr. Hopewell?” he asked.

“Yeah. I was just lookin’ over your report from yesterday about some maintenance on the conveyer,” Hopewell said. He leaned back in his leather office chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “You really think it’s necessary? It would take the belt off-line for half a shift.”

“Probably, but it would have to be done eventually anyway.” Leifester shrugged. “Our new maintenance mechanic recommended it as a precaution. We can do it now or wait until it breaks down. Either way, it’ll cost us some downtime sooner or later.”

“When did we change out the conveyer belts last?”

“Bout a year ago, I think.”

“When are the bits on the continuous miner scheduled to be replaced?”

“Maybe a week or so,” Leifester answered, lifting one shoulder in half a shrug.

“How about we wait and do both at the same time? There’d be a slight drop in production, but the miner wouldn’t get too far ahead of the belt and the other workers on the shift should still have plenty to do. Set it up and let Gardner know.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You trust this new mechanic?”

“Seems to do her job okay. Fast bolter.”

Hopewell nodded and glanced up at Leifester. “I heard a rumor that corporate might be sendin’ in someone to snoop around. You know, to make sure we’re not slackin’ off. Kind of a coincidence that this Calder showed up right after I heard that.”

“Think I should keep an eye on her?”

“Up to you, but I looked over her record with Bowers and she sure moves around pretty often. More than usual, if you catch my drift. Be a real shame if she got hurt on the job because she’s not familiar with how we do things ‘round here.”

Leifester smiled. “Sure would. That all you needed?”

“Yep. Schedule the shut down.”

DURING HER BREAKS Lu began checking the tunnel supports and noted the fissures in the ceiling between the pillars. When no one was paying attention, she took measurements of their depth and width. On her cell she left herself a reminder to re-measure the roof fissures and their widths and depths weekly to determine the rate of expansion. On her final day before a day off, Leifester stopped her before she could drop into the man trip for the twenty-minute ride into the mine.

“We got the go-ahead to shut down the conveyer and the CM this morning,” he said. “We got four hours. Gardner and Collie are gonna work with us. Goober and Harpo will change the claw’s bits at the same time. Which section you want?” he asked as he handed her a headphone and mike.

“Don’t matter,” she answered.

“Take the claw level. They should finish b’fore we do and can start diggin’ again. Then you can help Goober load the coal into the scooper until the belt gets caught up.”

Lu nodded and settled into an egg-shaped cubicle. She closed her eyes when she felt the slight jerk as the battery-operated train began its descent. A few minutes after she left the train, she heard Leifester’s voice announcing he was shutting down the conveyer and claw for

maintenance. She heard the buzzing sound of the system shutting down and attached an extra lamp to her hard hat.

“How long’s this gonna take?” Goober yelled as the claw stopped.

“‘Bout four hours,” she answered, holding up four fingers.

She shined her beam under the conveyer assembly and counted the number of replacement belts she’d need, then made her way as quickly as she could to the closest maintenance shed. Twelve belts would handle the section she’d be working on. She grabbed a set of pullers, a trimming knife to remove excess rubber, and a stretcher to pull the new steel-reinforced bands tight against the gear wheels. She adjusted her goggles and shimmied into the access opening on her back.

Periodically Leifester or Gardner asked for a progress report from the mechanics. So far Lu was satisfied with her progress. Thankfully, most of the belts that needed to be removed were already stretched from use and came off easily. However, the new belts were unforgivingly tight. Forced to rely primarily on the muscles in her hands and forearms because of the limited work space was fatiguing. She used the stretcher as a ratchet to move the new belts in the right position before seating them into place. If the belt wasn’t seated correctly between the metal ridges of the gears, it could fly off and injure anyone nearby. She removed her work gloves to check the seat for each belt. It made her work a little slower, but was worth it for safety.

She paused and took a deep breath before she removed the final belt. She slipped the new one in place and attached the stretcher. She knew this had been her bright idea, and in the long run would prevent future shutdowns, but her arms were wearing out. Maybe thirty more minutes, she thought, to seat the new belt and haul herself and her tools back to the access opening. She heard the claw start up again, the new bits chewing easily into the coal seam.

“Restart in fifteen,” Leifester’s voice came over her headphones.

“Negative,” she said. “Make it thirty.”

“What’s the hold up?”

“Lack of muscle power.”

“Then you better start liftin’ weights or somethin’, woman,” Leifester said with a laugh. “Let me know when you’re clear.”

“Will do,” she said as she grabbed the handle of the stretcher and pumped it as fast as she could. She felt the final belt slide into place. She checked the edges to make sure it was seated between the metal edges of the gear wheel. She rolled over and low-crawled toward the access opening with her tools between her arms and chest. When she reached the opening, she tossed the tools out first and prepared to crawl out.

Suddenly she heard over her headphones, “Conveyer restart.”

She pushed the button on her mic and yelled, “No! Goddamnit!” The system would come on in sections and she scrambled to exit the conveyer. The pant leg of her coveralls snagged on something preventing her from continuing her forward movement. She glanced down and tried to reach whatever her leg was stuck on. She needed to remain calm, but knew her heart was beating faster as she tried to jerk the material free. If it was caught between two of the gears, it could rip her leg off. She struggled to pull her knife from its case on her belt. She finally freed the knife and flicked open the sharp lock-back blade. She curled her body closer to her leg and stretched her arm to cut the material away, barely nicking the part nearest the gear. Dirt and coal grit fell through the now-vibrating conveyer belt as the section in front of her began moving.

Unexpectedly, she felt a hand grab the collar of her coveralls and yank her forcefully toward the access opening. She heard material ripping and then felt her body being dragged over coal

and dirt. When she cleared the opening, she quickly drew her legs up to her chest and away from the machinery as the rows of gears began engaging. Breathing heavily, she looked up and saw Goober looking down at her. She pushed her body up on shaky legs and tried to gather herself. She slapped Goober on the arm with a trembling hand and managed to say, "Thanks, man."

Chapter Four

LU TOSSED HER tools into the maintenance shed and moved determinedly up the primary tunnel. When she reached the maintenance section on level two, she saw Leifester and his brother standing over a work able in the main area, laughing. Anger exploded inside her and she charged toward the two men. She launched her shoulder into Kenneth's abdomen and took him to the floor. Straddling him, she landed a solid punch against the side of his face. Collie grabbed her from behind and pulled her off his brother, but a sharp blow from her elbow into his abdomen knocked the breath out of him. She reached over her shoulder and grabbed Collie by the collar of his coveralls, flipping him onto the dirt floor.

She turned her attention back to Kenneth, ready for him to strike back. He swung widely at her and she ducked, bringing her fist up to catch him on the jaw forcefully enough to stagger him. Blood from a cut next to his left eye ran down the side of his face. Something struck Lu across the back and knocked her to the ground. Kenneth's boot glanced across her jaw and she rolled away, getting her feet under her.

"Break it up!" a loud voice bellowed as Collie prepared to swing a section of two-by-four at her. "What the hell's goin' on?" Gardner Kinlaw demanded.

"We was just standin' here and she attacked us," Collie panted.

Lu pointed her finger at Kenneth, "You damn near killed me, you sonuvabitch," Lu accused loudly. "I told you I wasn't out yet, but you started the fuckin' conveyer anyway."

Gardner stepped in front of Kenneth. "That true, Kenny?"

"We needed to get back on-line. Goober said she was on the way out," Kenneth said defensively.

"I got hung up. If Goober hadn't pulled me out, I'd've lost my damn leg," Lu said forcefully, taking a step toward Kenneth, stopped only by Gardner's hand on her chest.

"You should've waited until you got the all clear from Calder," Gardner said to Kenneth. "You know better'n that."

"The claw started up again. I couldn't hear what she said."

Lu was taking deep breaths to calm down and began to relax. She rested her hands on her knees. She saw movement to her right, but before she could see what it was, Collie swung the two-by-four and caught her along the side of the head, knocking her hard hat off. She fell to her knees heavily and felt something running down the side of her face before she collapsed.

LU'S EYES SNAPPED open at the feel of a cold cloth across her forehead. She sat up quickly and immediately grabbed her throbbing head. She swung her feet off whatever she was lying on, but was dizzy and stumbled back against a wall. She reached out to steady herself and hit a tray, sending metallic objects skittering across the floor. She didn't know where she was and, even though it made her headache worse, she shook her head and rubbed her eyes.

She squinted as the room began to fill with people, most of whom she didn't recognize. An older man wearing dress pants, a white shirt, and a striped tie took her by the arm and guided her to a raised table.

"Reckon she's awake," he said.

"Where?" Lu asked.

"Infirmary," a familiar voice answered.

Lu blinked several times to clear her eyes as Reggie pushed her way into the already crowded room. For some reason, seeing the younger woman made Lu feel better.

"What happened?" Lu asked.

"Collie clocked you with a two-by-four," Reggie said. "Payback's a bitch, accordin' to him."

"Well, now he's unemployed. You wanna press charges?" the man in the shirt and tie asked.

"No. I hit them first."

"Goober and another miner told me what happened," Gardner said.

"I could have confronted them without usin' my fists," Lu objected.

"Go home, Calder. Give yourself a couple of days to recoup," Gardner said.

"Should she be drivin'?" Reggie asked.

"I've taken harder knocks. It'll be okay."

"Doc?" Reggie said to the man with the tie.

"I reckon she's got a hard head like all miners," he said with a smile. "I can take the stitches out by the end of next week." He looked at Gardner. "I don't recommend real heavy liftin' for two or three days."

"I can do my fuckin' job," Lu protested. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Then you're suspended for three days," Gardner said firmly. "For startin' a fight."

Lu opened her mouth to argue, but flinched at a pinch on the outside of her thigh. She winced and looked at Reggie, who was shaking her head.

Half an hour later, Lu walked to her truck and climbed in. Her vision was better and as long as she drove slowly, she was sure she wouldn't have a problem getting home. Working at Brushy #3 should have been cut and dried. So far she hadn't had a chance to get into Hopewell's office to look through his files. She would remain at Brushy #3 until the new year and still had plenty of time. For now, she needed to wait until everything calmed down and returned to its normal routine. Maybe once she left, she would recommend that Collie Leifester get his job back.

She pulled into the drive of the cabin, parked, and locked the truck. Once she entered the cabin, she stretched out on the couch and gulped down a bottle of water. Shit! She'd left her lunch bucket in the mine. Hopefully, no one would take it. She forced her body up and took her rifle from the front closet, checking to make sure it was loaded. She wasn't expecting any visitors, announced or otherwise, but if her rebuff at Gertie's had led to Collie's actions, she didn't want to think what kind of retribution losing his job might create. She locked the doors and windows and closed the curtains before throwing a dinner into the microwave. Exhaustion overwhelmed her when she removed her boots and curled up on the couch again.

SLOWLY, POUNDING SEEPED into Lu's consciousness and she rolled over on the couch to make it go away. She rubbed her face into the small pillow beneath her head and pain shot through it. She fingered the row of stitches above her right ear gingerly while resting her elbows on her knees. Then the pounding resumed. It took her a moment to realize it came from someone

banging on the side door of the cabin. She reached down, grabbed her rifle, and stood up carefully. Still semi-wobbly she made her way to the door. She opened the door a sliver, her rifle at the ready, and peeked outside.

“You left your bucket,” Reggie said. She was standing at the bottom of the two side steps. Lu had stripped down to her jeans, which were unbuttoned at the waist, and a clean white t-shirt covered her braless chest. She felt the cool wooden floor beneath her bare feet as she swung the side door open.

“I woulda got it when I returned,” Lu muttered. “You didn’t have to bring it out here.”

“You’re welcome,” Reggie said, frowning as she pivoted back toward her van.

Lu pushed the screen open and stepped out to pick up her lunch bucket, shiverin slightly. “It’s chilly out here. Would you like a cup of coffee or somethin’?” she asked. “Sorry. I fell asleep. How’d you know where I lived?” Lu asked as she held the screen open and waited for Reggie to make a decision.

“Personnel records, remember.” Reggie walked back to the cabin and stepped onto the bottom step. Lu propped her rifle behind the door and stepped outside. She offered Reggie her hand to enter the cabin.

“That isn’t necessary,” Reggie snapped.

“Sorry, but my feet was gettin’ cold,” Lu said as she closed and re-locked the door. She picked up her rifle and pulled a chair away from a small dinette before walking to the counter. “Take a load off,” she said. “Coffee’ll be ready in a few minutes,” she added as she filled the carafe of the coffeemaker with water from the pump next to the sink.

“Expectin’ trouble?” Reggie asked when she saw the rifle.

“I always expect trouble,” Lu mumbled.

“I didn’t know anyone was actually livin’ here again,” Reggie commented as she dropped onto the chair.

“I lucked out. It’s better than some of the places I’ve lived and the price was right,” Lu said. “Don’t need much.”

“Well, the décor leaves a little to be desired,” Reggie observed with a smile. Other than the couch in the main living area and the dinette in the kitchen, there was no other furniture.

“A snap to clean though,” Lu quipped. “I’m plannin’ to build a few things, but basically I only eat and sleep here.”

“How’s the head?”

“Been better,” Lu said as she dumped coffee into the coffee-maker.

“I’m sorry Collie hurt you. I should have warned you about his temper.”

“I should’ve handled it better.”

“He’ll recover and probably get his job back in a couple of weeks anyway,” Reggie said with a shrug. “But you’ll have to keep an eye on him. You’ve insulted his manhood twice and he’s not likely to forget that real soon.” Reggie said.

“Great,” Lu mumbled. The one thing she hadn’t wanted to do was make waves or draw undue attention to herself while she conducted her investigation.

“It’s pretty rare to have a female miner at Brushy #3,” Reggie said.

“My father was a miner. I’ve been working out west for a while, but decided to move back to the area my parents called home.”

“They still live around here?”

Lu shook her head. “My father died in a collapse when I was a kid and my mother remarried and relocated.”

“You got any brothers or sisters?”

“A half-sister, but don’t see her very often. Did you catch that question habit from the kid?”
Lu asked with a smile.

“Must have. Sorry. We don’t get many new people around here. Most don’t stick around too long.”

“It’s quiet and life is simple enough. Just like everywhere else, I guess. Go to work, go home, and then go back to work. Uncomplicated.”

“You don’t like complications, I gather?” Reggie asked.

“Not much.”

Lu set a cup and sugar bowl in front of Reggie then took a small carton of milk from the refrigerator. When the coffeemaker belched the last of the coffee into the carafe, she carried it to the table and poured two cups. Reggie observed Lu as she moved methodically and stoically around the small kitchen before sitting down. Reggie poured milk into her cup, followed by a spoonful of sugar before sliding them toward Lu, who shook her head and blew into her cup before taking a sip.

“Does it hurt?” Reggie asked.

“Some,” Lu answered.

“Not much of a talker, are you?”

“Usually no reason.”

“Do you ever smile?” Reggie asked.

“When I have a reason to,” Lu answered, taking another sip from her cup.

“So what do you do besides eat, sleep, and work?”

“Sometimes I hike or run along the ridge when I have time.”

“Sounds like a boring life.”

“I’ve been told I’m not a very excitin’ person.”

“Is that what the ladies say too?”

Lu looked into Reggie’s eyes and frowned. “Mostly after the new wears off. Why do you ask?”

Reggie shrugged and sipped her coffee. “No reason, but you never learn anythin’ unless you ask.”

They sat companionably silent for several moments before Lu finally spoke. “Where’s your kid’s daddy?” she asked, shifting her eyes to Reggie’s face.

“I have no idea,” Reggie answered.

“Sorry.”

Reggie smiled. “I can support my daughter and myself.”

“You live with your mama?”

“I did for a while,” Reggie sighed. “But Hallie and I are better off livin’ in our own place. Not the big future I had in mind, but it’s worked out for us.”

The silence between them began to grow uncomfortable.

“You play?” Reggie asked, indicating the guitar, nestled against an old quilt beside the fireplace.

Lu followed Reggie’s eyes and nodded. “Some, when I have time. It helps me relax.”

“Can I see it?”

Lu pushed away from the table and moved toward her guitar. She picked it up, stroking it with her hand. She extended it toward Reggie as she sat again. She could see the gleam in

Reggie's eyes as she rested the old guitar on her lap. She carefully examined the well-polished wood, the ivory frets.

"How old is it? I've never seen a Martin like this one," Reggie asked as she caressed the instrument.

Lu shrugged. "Don't know exactly. Belonged to my father. I remember him playin' it at night when I was little. My mother told me he got it from his father, so I guess it's pretty old."

"It's beautiful craftsmanship." Reggie strummed it softly. "It's got amazin' tonal quality." She hummed as she picked out a melancholy tune.

REGGIE CLOSED HER eyes and continued to strum the instrument with more complexity. She finished, allowing the final chord to linger in the quiet room. It reminded her of the times she played for Jac when they were at home alone. Jac loved to hear her play. Reggie frowned and abruptly stopped.

"Who taught you to play?" Lu asked.

Reggie cleared her throat before answering. "My daddy before he passed away. He was really good and very fond of bluegrass. He played in a little band sometimes." She looked at Lu with a grin. "I prefer somethin' a little slower personally."

"You have a guitar?" Lu asked.

Reggie nodded as she stroked the instrument. "And a mandolin, neither as top-drawer as this one though. I've been teachin' Hallie a couple of simple tunes, when I can get her to sit still for a few minutes." She handed the guitar back to Lu, who began fingering the strings, plucking out a catchy tune as she leaned over to look at the frets.

"Maybe you can both come over sometime and we can pick out a few tunes," Lu said. "I haven't played in a while now. Get-tin' a little rusty."

"We'd like that," Reggie said, staring at Lu. There was something intriguing about Lu's dark hazel eyes. She pushed her cup away. "Well, I better be gettin' home. Hallie will be wonderin' where I am."

Lu stood up and returned the guitar to its resting place before opening the side door. She stepped outside and extended her hand to assist Reggie down to level ground.

"Thanks for droppin' my bucket off," Lu said.

"No problem," Reggie said. Lu's hand was rough and calloused, yet warm and gentle. There was something safe and reassuring about her hand in Lu's.

"Van runnin' all right now?"

"Just a loose wire somewhere. I enjoyed our talk. There're not many women for me to talk to 'cept Mama and I already know her opinion on just about everything better than I want to," Reggie said, rolling her eyes. "It's nice to talk to someone new for a change."

"I suppose," Lu said with a shrug.

"Guess I'll see you back at work in a few days."

Chapter Five

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Lu was up before dawn, and squatted near the top of the ridge above the cabin and gazed down at Brushy #3. Directly below her was the pre-fab building that contained the administrative offices. Terrance Hopewell's private office was in the rear of the building. Lu brought a pair of binoculars up from her neck and checked the building closely. She could see clearly into Hopewell's office. She smiled to herself when she looked into the other windows along the back and side and saw Reggie's office. She didn't want to involve innocent people in her investigation, but Reggie's office butted against a short drop-off and was a perfect access point to enter the building surreptitiously.

Near the bottom of the ridge she saw two fences through the ground fog. Three loosely stretched strands of rusty barbed wire wrapped around thin, precariously leaning poles, and must have marked the original property line for the cabin. A higher, more professionally installed metal fence a few yards farther down the ridge marked the boundary of the mine property. She located a large rock and kicked it down the hill. When it struck the fence, nothing happened. She couldn't remember whether it was electrified, but would return later and get closer under cover of darkness.

Aside from her headache, maybe the fight had been a blessing in disguise, giving her time to plan. She backed away and began slowly making her way down the hill to the cabin. The forested area was thick and she grabbed saplings that were growing everywhere to keep from slipping and falling. She altered her path to avoid a large stand of wild blackberry canes. Too bad she wouldn't be around in the spring and summer when the canes would be loaded with ripe fruit.

THREE DAYS LATER, Lu slammed her truck door and made her way across the parking lot to begin her shift. Her constant headache was finally gone and she nodded at a few of the miners on her shift as she stepped into the washroom to grab the last of her gear. Gardner gave her an assignment as she climbed into the man trip to start her day.

Lu adjusted the sweatband she'd placed over the stitches on her head to keep her hard hat from rubbing and irritating the stiff sutures. If they became more uncomfortable she'd take them out herself and replace them with butterfly bandages. Either way, she would probably have a scar as a souvenir of her brief visit to Brushy #3.

During the first of her two fifteen minute breaks, she drank a bottle of water and cast the beam of her flashlight along the ceiling of the mine. She measured the fissures she was most concerned about and jotted down their width and depth. She didn't see any moisture dripping from them. It was possible the cracks were letting the stone inside the mountain relieve pressure and breathe as it adjusted to differences caused by the fluctuating outside temperature. She measured the length of the cracks and noticed that some of them ran beneath the support beams.

Not necessarily a bad sign, but she would keep an eye on them to determine their rate of expansion.

On her second break, she sneaked a peek at the daily logs to determine when the last evacuation drill was performed. She was shocked to discover that it had been more than a year since the last drill. Normal safety guidelines established by Bowers Mining required the drills quarterly. She remembered that her employee packet contained a one-page instruction sheet of what she should do in the event of an emergency. However, without actually practicing the evac procedures, the sheet might as well have told her to stick her head between her legs and kiss her ass goodbye before several tons of the mountain buried her.

Only four years earlier Lu and a small group of miners were trapped by a partial ceiling collapse in a Wyoming uranium mine. Along with her were two young, newly hired miners and their panic almost cost them all their lives. It took nearly two days to rescue them and the two newest miners quit as soon as they hit fresh air. If they had gone through a couple of drills, they would have known what to do and hopefully remained calm. Panic was the biggest enemy and Lu was forced to physically restrain one of them before he killed them all. She rubbed absently at her leg where a scar reminded her daily of the hazards of her chosen work.

“Hey, Calder,” Gardner called out.

“Yeah.”

“You know much about electrical systems?”

“Depends on which system you’re talkin’ about.”

“Goober called up about the claw. Says it sounds different and he’s seein’ sporadic arcin’ in the main housin’.”

“It still runnin’?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t sure about shuttin’ it down.”

Lu pulled her work gloves on and nodded. “Might be a wire comin’ loose and makin’ contact with the housin’. I’ll check it out. If I don’t think I can handle it, you might want to have an electrician on standby.”

“Will do,” he said as she started off for the tunnel being worked by a second team. She hoped she wasn’t walking into another hazing ‘accident’. As soon as she arrived, she chatted with Goober as she watched the electrical housing unit until she finally observed the arcing he had described.

“How long b’fore you move it?” she asked.

“A few minutes. Tripp’s gonna scoop the coal up while I move over to two.”

“Okay. Back it out and I’ll shut it down.”

Goober used the remote and backed the continuous miner several feet away from the face he’d been cutting and stopped it in a crosscut tunnel to make room for the scooper while Lu worked on the big machine. She shut it down and unscrewed the bolts holding the assembly together.

“Whadda you think?” Goober hollered, even though the noise level was minimal without the giant claws chewing into the seam of coal.

“Hopin’ it’s just a screw that’s vibrated loose and lettin’ a wire hit the assembly wall,” she answered. “Take a break while I check it out.”

“Think it’ll be down long?”

“A few minutes maybe.”

Goober squatted on a nearby stack of slag while Lu worked.

“Been meanin’ to tell you that you’re doin’ an okay job,” Goober said.

She looked at him and nodded. "Thanks."

"Actually I didn't think no woman could do your job, but I been wrong b'fore. I heard Collie smacked you with a board. You okay?"

"Yeah. Got a hard head."

"If I'd been there I'da beat his ass down. No call for that shit. This work is hard enough without some damn fool with a wounded ego makin' it harder. Ain't the first time he's done somethin' stupid like that. Reckon he wasn't expectin' some gal to kick his ass twice." Goober chuckled and then coughed.

"I'll recover."

"You like molasses?" he asked.

"I can take it or leave it," Lu said as she connected her voltage meter and took a few readings. She reached inside the assembly box with a pair of needle-nose pliers and tugged lightly on each wire until one finally pulled away from the screw holding it down.

"Well, if you've a mind to, we're puttin' up a batch next weekend over at my place."

Lu pulled the screw out and dropped a small rubber washer onto it, then screwed it back in place and wrapped the loose wire under the screw head and finished tightening it down. She tugged at it once more to make sure it would hold before closing the assembly. She flipped the switch and watched as the metal claws resumed their never-ending work. Goober patted Lu solidly on the back as he grabbed the remote controller and drove the miner to its next position. She nodded at him and said, "Reckon I'll see you next weekend then."

She called in a brief report to Gardner that everything was back on line and running normally. She was returning to the maintenance area, taking methane readings along the way, when Gardner's voice came over her headphones again.

"Hey, Calder. You there?"

"Yeah."

"They want you at the main office to fill out an incident report for corporate about the other day. Relieve Tripp on the scooper so he can take his lunch break now. Then go on up."

"On my way," she responded. She tapped Tripp on the shoulder and repeated what Gardner told her. About an hour later, she grabbed her cooler and took the man trip to the cage.

"YEAH, SHE'S ON her way to fill out a report right now," Terrance Hopewell said into the handset of his cordless phone as he watched Lu Calder walk into the daylight outside the mine entrance and fish sunglasses from her coverall pocket before lighting a cigarette while walking toward the main office.

"Don't underestimate her again," the voice on the other end of the line warned. "She knows what she's doin'."

"As far as I can tell she's only been in this office once b'fore now."

"Just remember, Hopewell, it's to both our advantage that she disappear."

"I'll take care of it. You just cover my ass at corporate. She'd be gone already if Leifester'd done his job right last week."

"There's gonna be an unannounced inspection from corporate within the next month. I'll let you know when as soon as I know."

The caller disconnected before Hopewell could say more or ask any further questions. He placed the phone back on its cradle and returned to the reports in front of him.

LU OPENED THE metal door into the main office and stomped her feet on the mat to dislodge dirt and coal dust from her work boots and coveralls before entering.

“I’m s’posed to fill out an incident report,” she said when the woman at the front desk looked up at her. Without a word, the woman slapped a form in front of Lu, along with a pen, and pointed to a desk at the back of the room.

Lu removed her hard hat and laid it on the desk as she looked at the form and thumbed through the lengthy document. She was relieved to see that parts of the form were to be completed by the doctor, her supervisor, and witnesses. That reduced her part to only a couple of pages. As she began writing, a tall, slender man in a light blue shirt and dark blue tie swaggered through the main door and smiled at the older woman behind the desk. He walked past Lu and into the second door on the left. Reggie Kinlaw’s office. With a glance back into the hallway, he shut the door behind him and Lu heard the distinctive snicking sound of the door being locked.

“WHAT CAN I do for you, Lawrence?” Reggie asked when Lawrence Treadway, the assistant superintendent of Brushy #3 stepped into her office and closed the door.

“I thought we might have lunch together today,” he answered as he walked to the window of Reggie’s office and looked outside.

“Thanks, but I brought my lunch.”

“Bring it to my office and we can...talk,” he said, turning around and lowering his lips near her ear. He rested his hands on her shoulders and squeezed lightly before kissing the back of her neck. “Or maybe make time for a little afternoon de-light,” he whispered while he nibbled her ear and slid his hands down to enclose her breasts.

“Get away from me, Lawrence.” Reggie stopped what she was doing and rolled her chair back to force him away.

“Why, baby? You know I can make you all hot and sweaty,” he persisted.

She leaned back in her chair and glared up at him. “We’re at work, for God’s sake!”

Lawrence’s voice hardened and he swung her chair around to face him. “You’re mine, Reggie.”

Reggie laughed. “In your and my mama’s dreams. Now get out of my office before I file a harassment complaint with Hopewell.”

Lawrence leaned closer causing her to press against the back of her chair. “You didn’t use to be this unfriendly, especially after a couple of drinks,” he said with a grin. Dropping to his knees, his hands wandered up her thighs toward her crotch. His thumbs pressed roughly against her. “You’re so hot, baby. I can feel it. I bet you’re wet, too.”

“Stop it, Lawrence! We were in high school then,” she said angrily, pushing him away to relieve the unpleasant pressure against her crotch. “Grow up!”

Lawrence grabbed her wrist and pinned it against the arm of her chair. Then he pressed his mouth to hers in a bruising kiss, driving his tongue into her mouth.

A knock at the door interrupted Lawrence’s unwanted advances. He jumped up and glared at Reggie. “Say anythin’ and you’ll regret it,” he hissed threateningly as he unlocked the door, and jerked it open. “What?” he snapped.

Lu looked at the papers in her hand. “I...um...I have a question about this form I’m supposed to fill out. Thought maybe Miz Kinlaw could answer it for me,” she mumbled.

Lawrence looked over his shoulder at Reggie, his face red with anger when he saw her wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. “We’ll settle this later,” he said with a smile. Then he shoved his way past Lu. Reggie cleared her throat.

“How can I help you, Ms. Calder?” Reggie asked.

“Just Lu.”

“How can I help you, Just Lu?” Reggie asked, expelling a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. She had to do something about Lawrence and his persistent unwelcome advances. She had spent an evening making out with him once in high school after a few drinks and now he believed he owned her. He was a nice enough guy until he became interested in her again when she was hired at Brushy #3. Then he simply refused to take the hint she wasn’t.

“Oh, nothin’. I think I figured it out,” Lu said as she turned away, leaving Reggie wondering how much she had heard of her brief encounter with Lawrence.

LU LEANED HER back against a mound of debris in the shade and slowly chewed her sandwich and chips, washing them down with a bottle of water. In her mind she was putting together a plan to get the information she needed to complete her investigation into irregularities at Brushy #3. As far as she had been able to determine, with very few exceptions, there weren’t many problems involving the miners. They worked together well for the most part and trusted one another. They spent more time with each other than they did with their wives and kids. All the safety precautions Bowers Mining put into place, except the evacuation drills, appeared to be working. Other than the scuffle with the Leifester brothers, Lu was accepted as another miner. Some concerns, such as the ceiling fissures, were controllable, but would require additional bolt supports. The volume of air being forced into the deep tunnels was sufficient to flush methane and carbon dioxide out and maintain an even volume.

As a retreat mining operation, Brushy #3 used a continuous miner to bring out the fossil fuel. The room-and-pillar system would reach the end of the coal seam within twenty years and then the mine would be shut down and abandoned as one room after another was closed in a series of controlled collapses. According to the Bowers environmental specialists, the damage to the region from the collapses should be minimal. Hopefully in less than a generation, the forest would reclaim the entire area. Originally, Charlie considered strip mining the area, but Lu and Melissa convinced him to use a deep mining process instead due to Lu’s estimate of the depth of the coal seam based on several core samples. The sight of mountaintops flattened or enormous scars left circling the ridges broke the two women’s hearts. It would take two or three times longer to recoup from the extraction of the minerals than the less intrusive underground operations. Despite the additional costs and hazards, Charlie finally agreed. Now Lu felt as if Brushy #3 was at least partially her baby and she would care for it. That was part of the reason she’d accepted the assignment to check out the ten-year-old mine.

“You Just Lu?” a voice asked.

Lu squinted up into the sunlight that was obscuring the person speaking. “Yeah.”

“Someone over at the mess hall wants you,” the owner of the voice said before walking away.

Lu pushed the remainder of her sandwich into her mouth and picked up the rest of her things. She stood and dusted off the back of her coveralls. She took the steps into the mess hall two at a time and pushed the screen open, letting it slap closed behind her. Across the room she saw Reggie Kinlaw sitting at a table with a woman Lu now knew was her mother, Ernie Kinlaw. Lu looked around and didn't see anyone else she knew and strode toward the table, stopping next to it.

"Someone wanted to see me?" Lu asked.

Ernie took a drag of her cigarette and squinted as the smoke rose to her eyes. "I did," Ernie grunted. "You goin' back down?"

Gussie had spent untold hours drilling manners into Lu's head, but this wasn't one of those conversations that required politeness. "Yeah."

Ernie reached for a bag on the table and shoved it toward Lu. "Take this down and give it to Gardner." It wasn't a request or a question. No please or thank you.

"Okay," Lu said as she picked up the bag and turned to leave the mess hall. "But I need to pick up somethin' in the office first."

"Thanks, Lu," Reggie said.

ERNIE SHOOK HER head as she crushed out her cigarette in a rusted metal ashtray on the table. "That's one damn peculiar woman." She shook out a fresh cigarette and puffed as she lit it. "Didja talk to Lawrence today?" she asked between puffs.

"He stopped by my office for a minute to grope me, if that's what you mean," Reggie snorted. She readjusted her body in the chair. "It wasn't what I'd call a talk."

"He wants to marry you."

"He wants to fuck me," Reggie said as she took another bite of her lunch.

"I ain't gonna be around forever and Gardner'll be leavin' home soon to get married hisself. Somebody's gotta take care of you and that kid."

"Well, it won't be Lawrence Treadway," Reggie huffed. "We're doin' okay."

"He's got a good job and a chance to be superintendent one of these days."

"He makes my skin crawl. All he wants is to get between my legs."

Ernie shrugged. "He's a man, Reggie. It's what they all want."

"Well, he's not gonna get it from me."

"I don't see nobody else beatin' down your door." Ernie took a drag on her cigarette and flicked the ashes into the metal ashtray. "Besides, you didn't make such a good choice with that rich boy, Jack. You're damn lucky there's a man around here willin' to overlook your past mistakes, even if she's walkin' around here ever day as a reminder."

Reggie glared at her mother and stacked her dishes. "I gotta get back to work," she said.

Reggie wasn't prepared to listen to anything her mother was always more than ready to carry on about again. She'd heard it all before. The only thing that made any of it tolerable was knowing Ernie still thought Jac was a man and not the handsome, intelligent woman Reggie remembered so very well. Her skin tingled at the thought of Jac's touch.

She would always miss Jac. She hadn't seen her since Hallie was a baby. But as Hallie grew, it became more difficult to explain to the child why they visited the unresponsive woman wasting away on a hospital bed in Virginia. Reggie tried to imagine the look on Jac's face when Hallie was born, the kind of parent she would have been, the birthday parties they would have

shared. Everything that would have made them the family Jac dreamed of. To protect that dream, as well as Hallie, no one knew who Jac really was and Reggie would never tell them. She was willing to be regarded as a woman who'd made a mistake, but not as a woman who loved another woman. Jac would be seen as someone who got what she deserved for perverting a young woman like Reggie, not the tender, loving woman she was. Reggie hated it, but could live with it.

Engrossed in her thoughts, Reggie tripped on a loose board on the ramp and reached out to grab the ramp's railing to prevent herself from falling, and was surprised when her hand clamped around a hard, muscular forearm instead. When she looked up, her face was impossibly close to Lu's. Reggie was breathing heavily as Lu settled her hands on Reggie's waist until she could stand and stabilize herself.

"What?" Reggie said defensively. "Never seen a stumblin' woman b'fore?"

"Not one as pretty as you," Lu answered softly. She stepped back and reluctantly released Reggie's body. "You okay?"

Reggie cleared her throat and blushed. "Yeah, well...thanks. I was late gettin' back to work and tripped, that's all. Too early in the day to claim I was drunk." She closed her eyes to enjoy the feel of gentle hands and strong arms steadying her, just like Jac's.

Lawrence Treadway ran up the steps to the main office. He glanced at Lu's hands resting on Reggie's waist and frowned. "You can take your hands off my girl now, Calder."

Reggie glared up at him. "How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not your girl," she seethed. "So stop sayin' it, Lawrence."

Lu opened the door into the office again, holding it while Reggie went inside. "My pleasure, Miz Kinlaw," she muttered.

Chapter Six

JUST BEFORE DAWN Lu turned into the drive of a century old, two-story farmhouse that sat atop a rise. She drove across a gravel-covered culvert toward a field off to the side, where half a dozen other vehicles were parked. She hadn't had much of an opportunity to mingle with the other miners and their families and accepted Goober's invitation to help make molasses over the weekend. She'd never done it, but was willing to give it a try.

It was the right time of year, with just a hint of a nip in the early morning air. She slid from the truck seat and looked around. Goober told her the house was built by his ancestors, cutting down trees on their property and towing them to a sawmill a few miles away. Smoke poured from twin chimneys located at each end of the house. A wide porch surrounded three-quarters of both stories.

Goober walked out of the house, pulling the straps of his overalls over his broad shoulders. "Have any trouble findin' the place?" he asked.

"Nope," Lu answered as she lit a cigarette. "Just tell me what to do."

Goober handed her a steaming cup of coffee. "Me and the boys are choppin' cane across the road. Did you eat breakfast?"

"Yeah." She tested the strong coffee before taking a deeper swallow.

In a field on the other side of the road from the main property, Lu spotted five or six men standing in a group.

"Half of us will chop the cane. The other half will cut off the seed pods and stack it. Pair up and pick a row," Goober directed. He picked up a homemade implement that looked like a cross between a scythe and an overgrown machete and handed it to Lu. "Chop or stack?" he asked.

"Chop," she answered with a grin as she finished her coffee and handed the mug back to Goober before bending over to grab the first stalk. An hour later, Lu stood to rearrange her baseball cap.

"I'm gonna get the sled to haul this cane over to the grinder. You be okay 'til I get back?" Goober asked.

"Sure," Lu said. She put her hands on her hips and leaned back to stretch out her back muscles.

"Take a break while I'm gone. There's water in the cooler."

"Thanks," Lu said as she shook a cigarette from a pocket of her jacket and lit it. She pulled her jacket off and flipped the lid of the cooler open before plopping down on the closest stack of cane. The sun glinted through the trees bordering the cane field and although it wasn't hot outside, the temperature was comfortable. She looked across the road and saw a few more vehicles had arrived. Groups of men and women were busy chopping wood and stoking small fires.

By the time Lu field-stripped her cigarette and stood to stuff the filter into her jean pocket, Goober, leading a team of Belgian draft horses pulling a wooden sled, was entering the field. When he drew them to a stop, Lu looked up at the huge animals and grinned. "Couldn't find any bigger horses?" she asked.

“They’ll do,” Goober answered as he picked up a stack of cane and placed it on the sled while the horses stood peacefully and nibbled at a cane stalk. Half an hour later, they were stacking sugar cane stalks next to an old stone grinder. It was being turned by a familiar girl astride a bored-looking mule that walked in an endless circle as others fed stalks into a funnel. A steady stream of thin, greenish juice flowed from a spigot protruding from the grinder to slowly fill a bucket beneath covered with tightly stretched material.

About ten feet apart, the men had constructed metal troughs that appeared to be two to three feet wide by twelve feet in length. The buckets of sugar cane juice were poured a half a foot deep into the troughs. Fires beneath the troughs had burned down into thick red embers. At the end of each trough a man or woman used a homemade skimmer to remove green slime as the juice cooked down into a thick dark molasses.

Periodically the troughs were drained into a pail and carried into the house where women sealed the molasses in jars. Goober grabbed Lu and placed a skimmer in her hands before he carried a bucket into the house. No matter where she stood, smoke from the smoldering wood embers of the trench fire blew into her face. It didn’t take long before she was forced to shed her jacket again as she felt sweat rolling down her spine. It was tedious work, but something everyone in the little community would benefit from.

Goober slapped her on the back when he returned with the now empty bucket.

“Will there be others comin’ later?” Lu asked.

“Tired already?” he asked with a laugh. It surprised her because she’d never heard him laugh at work.

“I’m liable to pass out from smoke inhalation,” Lu said as she waved her hand to disperse the smoke. Her eyes watered and she wiped at them with a rag from her back pocket. She heard loud laughter from near the back of the house and sniffed as she saw Ernie Kinlaw step out the back door and glance around

“We only invited a few families,” Goober said. “Only the ones we thought would do any work.”

“Thanks, I guess,” she said, running the skimmer down the trough. Someone pulled the rag from her back pocket. She looked over her shoulder and saw a hazy figure behind her through bleary eyes. Just as quickly the rag was in her hand, dripping cool water.

“Wipe your face and eyes, then tie it over your nose b’fore you choke to death,” a soothing voice said,

Lu did as told, sighing at the feel of the cool rag against her eyes. “Thanks,” she said, shaking her head.

“The smoke sure loves you today,” the voice said, a slight lilt accompanying it.

“Seems to,” Lu answered, running the wet rag over her stinging eyes again. “Shit! This is worse than inhalin’ goddamn coal dust.” She blushed when she pulled the rag away and blinked rapidly to clear her eyes. Reggie stood quietly grinning at her, a bucket of water resting against her hip.

“Scuse my language,” Lu said, smiling back.

“Hey, you actually smiled,” Reggie noted.

Lu grinned, looking into Reggie’s cool blue eyes. “Usually do when I’m ‘round a good lookin’ woman.”

“First time makin’ molasses?” Reggie asked, glancing away.

“How can you tell?” Lu replied snidely.

“Oooh, and a smart ass too, huh?” Reggie said with a laugh. “Let me guess. Goober gave you this trough, right?”

“Yeah.”

Reggie shook her head. “He does this ever year. Puts some-thin’ in the fire that puts off extra smoke that seems to follow some poor fool around. Step away from it for a while. It’ll burn off in a bit. Won’t kill you, but is guaranteed to clean out your sinuses.”

“How long does this stuff have to cook?”

“Usually about an hour to burn off all the green,” Reggie said with a grin as she stared back at Lu. “It’ll be worth the work once you drop some on a hot, buttered biscuit though. Have a drink,” Reggie said, holding up a paper cup of water.

“This isn’t another trick is it?” Lu asked. “I mean, my mouth won’t turn blue or nothin’, will it.”

“I’m not into that juvenile crap,” Reggie answered with a laugh that seemed to ring in Lu’s ears.

“Regina!” Gardner yelled. “There’s thirsty people down here too, girl.”

“Better get back to skimmin’ or you’ll have burnt molasses,” Reggie said over her shoulder as she moved away. Lu rinsed her mouth and spat it out, watching Reggie move carefully across the uneven ground, stopping to chat amicably with other workers. From time to time, Reggie seemed to look back at Lu and smile. Or maybe Lu only imagined it.

“You know, I love molasses, but can’t say as how I’m too crazy about makin’ it,” a man next to Lu commented. “It’s my cane so I should be gettin’ it for free anyways.”

“A community project, I guess,” Lu said. “‘Cept for fightin’ the smoke, it’s not hard work,” she coughed.

“Lunch will be worth it,” the man said.

Lu looked at him. “They feed us for workin’?”

“Oh, hell yeah. No one makes fried chicken like Goober’s woman. That makes it all worth the effort,” he said.

A light breeze blew the smoke away a few minutes later. Lu pulled the still cool damp rag from her pocket and wiped her face again. “Mama says you play a guitar,” a child’s voice said. “That true?”

Lu looked down at Hallie and nodded. “Sometimes. Do you?”

“A little, but not real good. Not like Mama. She sings good too.”

“I bet. What do you like to do for fun, Hallie?”

“I collect weird rocks and go squirrel huntin’ with Uncle Gardner sometimes,” Hallie said with a shrug.

Lu smiled. “I did too when I was a kid. Now it’s easier to go to the grocery store.”

Hallie reached out and fingered the knife on Lu’s waist. “You play mumble-peg?”

Lu nodded. “You?”

“Sometimes.”

“You any good?”

Hallie shook her head. “Mama don’t like me to play with knives.”

“Well, maybe later she’ll let us play a game together, since I’m a grown-up and all.”

Hallie’s eyes lit with excitement as she looked up at Lu. “Will you ask her?”

“Sure, kid.”

“You won’t forget?”

Lu drew an X over her heart with her index finger. “Promise,” she said. “But then you gotta do somethin’ for me.”

The smile dropped from Hallie’s face. “What?”

“How ‘bout gettin’ me another drink of water?”

Hallie skipped away, returning a few minutes later carrying a small cup of water, concentrating hard on not spilling too much as she walked.

It was almost noon when Goober poured the latest batch from Lu’s trough into a large metal pail and banked the embers beneath it. “Come on, Calder. Help me set up the tables for lunch.”

Lu glanced at the man next to her and winked. “Don’t you steal none now, girl,” he warned her.

“Don’t worry none, Clyde,” Goober said with a laugh. “There’s plenty.”

Lu followed Goober into the back door of the house and handed him jars from a water bath, waiting until he sealed the last of the molasses. When she handed him the final jar, she noticed Reggie rinsing out the water bucket she had been using to keep everyone from being thirsty. Reggie looked tired, but happy as she chatted with Goober’s wife and daughters. Lu smiled when Reggie lifted the youngest girl onto her arms and spun her around as the girl giggled. Afterward Reggie hugged the little girl and held her on her hip as she rested her head on Reggie’s shoulder. Reggie patted her on the back as the girl’s eyes began to droop.

“Let’s go,” Goober said, slapping Lu on the back again.

Lu followed him outside and the two of them set out saw horses, topping them with long sheets of thick plywood. Two of Goober’s older daughters and Hallie joined them and covered the makeshift tables with sheets of cloth that would serve as table covers. Gradually the tables were filled up with platters of golden fried chicken, potato salad, coleslaw, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn on the cob, and a huge assortment of relish platters, bowls of chips, bread and pastries. Lu’s mouth watered as the smell of home-cooked food filled the air. Finally, Goober’s wife stepped outside and rang a large bell mounted on a pole near the back door, signaling everyone it was time to eat. Lines quickly formed with people grabbing a plate and eating utensils, slowly making their way past the mounds of food. The final stop was a table filled with glasses of iced tea.

Lu didn’t see Reggie when she looked around. She excused herself and returned to the house. She heard what sounded like soft humming from a room off the living area of the old house. Eventually she located Reggie. The three-year-old she’d been holding earlier was lying on a twin bed and Reggie was humming, gently rubbing the child’s back as she drifted off to sleep. Lu tiptoed into the room and Reggie smiled when she saw her, continuing to hum and rub the girl’s back. Lu mouthed the words lunch is ready. Reggie nodded and let her humming drift away. Confident the child was sleeping, she turned to leave and was greeted by Lu holding a hand out.

“I hope she’ll sleep. I promised her mama would put together a plate for her,” Reggie said quietly. “She reminds me of Hallie a few years ago. They grow up so damn fast.”

“If someone would hum a beautiful tune and rub my back like that, I’d never want to wake up,” Lu said, leaning down to whisper in Reggie’s ear. “It’s a valuable service.”

Reggie leaned her head back and smiled up at Lu. “You think so? Maybe I could charge by the hour.”

“I’d be willin’ to pay a pretty penny for it, but I’ve always been a sucker for a good back rub,” Lu said with a wink.

When they reached the back door, everyone was seated and had a plate loaded with food in front of them. When Goober saw Reggie and Lu at the back screen door he jumped up and held it open while Reggie came down the steps.

“Why thank you, Vernon,” Reggie said.

“Vernon?” Lu grinned at her friend, whose face had flushed red.

“It’s a family name,” Goober said with a shrug.

“Wasn’t that the name of your daddy’s old mule?” Reggie asked with a laugh.

“He was my daddy’s favorite mule,” Goober said. “Grab a plate while there’s still food.” He looked at Reggie. “Did Sarah fall asleep okay, Reg?”

“She’ll be fine. I had to promise to save her a couple of legs, a bunch of mashed potatoes smothered in gravy, and a half dozen deviled eggs though,” Reggie said. “Where’s Hallie?”

Goober looked around and pointed to a table. “Over there between Gardner and Darlene.”

Reggie looked up at Lu. “Get your food, Lu. I’m goin’ to check on Hallie.”

“Okay. If you tell me what you want, I’ll load a plate for you,” she said. Before Reggie could say anything, she added, “I figure you might be hungry and it would be quicker.”

“What about you?”

“After I get you settled, I’ll go back for mine.”

A few minutes later Lu accompanied Reggie to a space at the last table. She set a plate in front of Reggie before returning for her own. When she returned, she swung a leg over a long wooden bench and sat down next to Reggie. “You mind?” she asked.

“Of course not,” Reggie answered as she cut a piece from a deviled egg and placed it in her mouth.

“It’s nice of Goober and his wife to feed everyone,” Lu noted in an attempt to make conversation.

“It’s an annual event,” Reggie said. “They’ve been doin’ it for years. It gets friends together for a pleasant day and gets work done at the same time.”

“Well, it’s a great idea,” Lu enthused as she took a big bite of chicken. “This is really good. I should ask for her recipe. My mother would go crazy for this.”

“Where does your mother live?” Reggie asked.

“Um...out west. I don’t see her very often, but she loves cookin’ for the family.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t see her often.” Reggie looked at her mother sitting at the table in front of her and laughed. She leaned closer to Lu. “There is such a thing as bein’ too close.”

“Really?”

“Take my mother, for example. She spends all of her time worryin’ about what would happen to me if she wasn’t around.”

“Why? You’re capable of takin’ care of yourself and Hallie.”

“She’s under the impression I need to find a man to take care of me.” Reggie stared at her plate and pushed the food around with a fork.

“Is that what you want?” Lu asked softly.

Reggie shrugged and looked at Lu. “Mama wants me to marry Lawrence Treadway.”

“From the mine?”

“Yeah, she says he’s a good catch and I can’t afford to be too choosy.”

“He the guy I met when I stopped you from fallin’ the other day?” Lu asked.

“Yeah. I just finished arguin’ with Mama about him and viola, there he was.”

“Seemed like he already thinks you’re his.”

“Well, I’m not,” Reggie said firmly. “I don’t like the idea of belongin’ to anyone.”

“Seems like a guy with a good job who cares about you.”

There was rage in Reggie’s eyes when she whipped her head toward Lu. “All he cares about is—” She stopped abruptly and took a deep breath. “I know what love is, and what he wants isn’t it.”

“Sorry,” Lu responded quietly.

Suddenly, a small body slammed against Lu’s back and thin arms draped around her shoulders and neck. She looked back to see Hallie, accompanied by Gardner and his girlfriend. Lu reached back and pulled the girl onto her lap, tickling her, and causing a fit of laughter in the process.

“Ma’s ready to go, Reg,” Gardner said. “She got here early and is tired.” He was holding the hand of a pleasant-looking young woman who looked at Gardner affectionately.

“Can you and Darlene take her on home, Gardner?” Reggie asked. “I’m still eatin’ and told Margo I’d stay to help her clean up. I’ll get a ride home from someone.”

“Okay.”

“Tell her not to worry about me, okay, Gardner,” Reggie said.

“I can take your sister and niece home when they’re ready,” Lu offered as she wrestled with Hallie. “It’s on my way anyhow. Plus, I promised the monkey here a round of mumble-peg later.”

“Thanks, Calder.”

“No problem. I’ll see you at work.” Lu turned back to her plate in time to see Hallie snatch a deviled egg and stuff it into her mouth.

“We don’t live anywhere near you,” Reggie said as Gardner and Darlene walked away.

Lu shrugged. “Figured I owed you for bringin’ my lunch bucket to me. Don’t worry. I’m a safe driver.” She washed her food down and moved Hallie next to her mother before standing. “Watch my plate, will you?” she said, ruffling the girl’s hair. “I’m gonna get a refill. You want one?”

“No, thanks. I still have plenty.”

REGGIE WATCHED AS Lu walked away, stopping periodically to speak to someone. Goober joined Lu to refill his glass. She sipped tea as they talked. Lu laughed at something Goober said and Reggie was surprised at how much her smile lit up her face. Lu Calder was an unusual woman. She chose a profession which was predominantly male, yet seemed to like the work. She obviously had a temper and seldom smiled. She would never be someone who spent time after work downing a few beers at Gertie’s or getting drunk with the guys or attending potlucks with the women. She was a loner, but there was something about her that Reggie liked, even though she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. Perhaps it was the way she asked questions others avoided because they were too personal. Perhaps it was the non-judgmental way she seemed to accept others. Perhaps it was her willingness to spend time with Hallie. Had she been judged by how she chose to live her life? Maybe she hadn’t been around long enough to hear the whispers others made behind her back. Reggie shifted in her chair. She already knew what the people around her whispered about her. She wasn’t ashamed of the choices she’d made.

There were only two people who knew what happened ten years ago that left Reggie's body and psyche scarred and one of them wasn't talking.

By late afternoon the molasses had been distributed, the kitchen cleaned and everything was back in its place. Lu and a neighbor helped Goober take the tables down and store the plywood back in the barn. Hallie joined Goober's daughters to gather eggs from the chicken coops.

Finally, they all settled down around a backyard fire pit to enjoy a little time together chatting. Reggie was having a good time talking with Goober's wife, Margo, while Hallie and the two older girls began a game of Frisbee. Eventually, Lu joined them. Reggie watched the way Lu interacted with the girls, making them laugh as they taught her how to throw the plastic disc correctly, something Reggie was sure she already knew. Lu seemed relaxed and comfortable in the company of the children.

Margo left for a moment to go into the house, returning a few minutes later carrying a radio. She plugged it into an outdoor socket and turned the dial until she located a station she liked. The girls halted their game when a faster tune began. Goober's eldest girl, Patricia, tugged on Lu's arm and held her arms out.

"Lu's in trouble now," Goober laughed.

"Why?" Reggie asked as Lu swung Patricia around the field in a lively dance, laughing.

"Because the girls love to dance and they've found a sucker," Goober said with a grin.

By the end of the song, Lu was breathing heavily, but the next song was slower paced and she offered a hand to the second girl, Naomi. Naomi shook her head, but her sister encouraged her to dance. Lu leaned down and whispered something to the girl, who broke into a smile. She stepped onto Lu's boots, placing one hand in Lu's and the other on her waist. Lu placed a hand on the girl's back and began counting the steps slowly while Naomi stared down at her feet, her face heavy with concentration. Patricia found another partner and motioned to her parents to join the mini dance-fest. Goober refused, but Margo's fake pout eventually forced him to his feet.

Reggie held Sarah in her lap, tapping her feet and bouncing the child on her knees in time with the music. Sarah's squeals of delight made Reggie laugh until the music came to an end. Sarah slid from Reggie's lap and took her father's hand in an attempt to make him dance with her. The moment he stood, she jumped onto his feet and held both his hands to balance herself. Reggie clapped and laughed as Goober shuffled around the field. The dance finally ended and Naomi tapped her father for the next round.

Margo leaned over to Reggie, who seemed intent on watching Lu dance with Hallie.

"Lu's a pretty good dancer," Margo whispered. "I know you used to love it too. Why don't you ask her?"

Reggie felt her face flush. "I don't want her to get the wrong idea. We're just friends."

"I know, but you might have fun. I haven't seen you have just plain ole fun in a long while. You used to love dancin' when we were younger."

WHILE THEY WERE talking, Reggie didn't see Lu sit down beside her and take a deep breath. Lu glanced at Margo and swallowed a gulp of tea. She stood again and held her hand out to Reggie. Reggie stared at it, then up at Lu.

"Your choice," Lu said with a shrug. "Unless you want to wait for Goober, looks like you're stuck with me. I'll try not to step on your feet...too much," she added with a smile.

Lu still held her hand out and Reggie took it reluctantly. Lu pressed her hand in the center of Reggie's back before stepping into a slow dance step.

"Try to relax," Lu said. She could feel the warmth of Reggie's body against hers and took a deep breath to calm the quivering in her abdomen and the thudding in her chest. When Reggie loosened her grip on Lu's shoulders and slid a hand across her back and up to her neck, Lu had to stifle an unexpected groan.

"Thank you," Reggie breathed into Lu's ear.

Lu shivered slightly as the warm breath flowed over her skin. "My pleasure. It's been a while since I danced," Lu whispered back.

"No. I meant thank you for bein' so nice to Hallie and spendin' time with her."

"Not a problem. I still owe her a round of mumble-peg."

"When this song ends, we should leave," Reggie said. "Hallie needs a bath before goin' to bed. It's been a long day and I'm sure you're tired as well."

Lu's eyes met Reggie's and she felt herself being drawn into their deep blue coolness. She hoped the song never ended "Not at all," she said.

Goober held the back screen open twenty minutes later as Reggie held Hallie's hand and Lu escorted them down the steps. Lu lifted Hallie into the cab of her truck before Reggie easily slid into the truck's passenger seat.

"Appreciate the help, Lu. Hope you enjoy the molasses," Goober said as he closed the truck door and leaned against the window opening.

Lu handed the jar of still warm molasses to Hallie as she settled behind the steering wheel. "Anytime, man, and thank Margo for the feast. I won't need to eat again for a week."

Lu checked to make sure Hallie and Reggie were buckled in securely and snapped her own seat belt in place before shifting into reverse to swing the truck around. She glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "It's still early. If you want, we can go to my place for a little bit for that game I promised. I cut out the pieces for a coffee table, a couple of end tables, and a rocker and was plannin' to put them together this weekend." Lu saw the look on Hallie's face and added, "I just work better when someone's watchin' and keepin' me company. Mabbe your mama can strum a few tunes while I work."

"Can I help?" Hallie asked.

"Of course. I have the perfect job for you," Lu said.

Lu glanced at Reggie's profile as she gazed out the front window and let a smile creep across her face. She was comfortable with Reggie and enjoyed spending time with her, even if it would all end in a few months.

AFTER HELPING REGGIE and Hallie into the cabin, Lu began filling her coffee pot with water. A bump against her shoulder stopped her.

"I don't know shit about makin' furniture, but I can make coffee. Let me do this while you gather whatever you need to put your furniture together."

Lu nodded and stepped away, sticking her hands into her pockets, still feeling the warmth from Reggie's body near hers. She wasn't sure when it happened, but a slow, burning need to touch Reggie had taken root in her stomach. She turned away quickly and went out the side door, followed by the excited nineyear-old.

They returned a few minutes later and Reggie laughed at the sight as Hallie made her way inside, her little arms filled by two wide, thick rough-hewn planks and a leather tool belt wrapped twice around her thin waist. Lu followed, carrying a much larger stack of wood and a tool belt strapped loosely above her hips. She stacked the planks on the floor and dug a fistful of wooden pegs from a pocket of her tool belt. She handed Hallie a mallet and pulled a hand drill from the belt and added them to the stacks of wood.

“Coffee’s ‘bout ready,” Reggie announced.

“I’ll get a fire goin’ and then we should be ready in here, too. If you heat up some milk, I think there’s some mix for hot chocolate up in the cabinet if Hallie wants some.”

Reggie dug through the kitchen cabinets and set three cups on the table as she watched Lu and Hallie put together a small cone of kindling and light it, creating a tight, small blaze before adding slightly thicker pieces of wood that smoked before catching fire. Hallie smiled and laughed as Lu patiently let her help. Soon heat filled the front room to a cozy level.

Reggie sat at the small kitchen table, grabbed the sides of her blue Kentucky sweatshirt, and began pulling it over her head. She saw the look on Lu’s face and laughed.

“You don’t mind if I get comfortable, do you?” she asked as she pulled down a white Wildcat t-shirt that was curled under her sweatshirt, giving Lu a tantalizing glimpse of the smooth skin along her abdomen for a moment before covering it again.

God, Reggie was so beautiful, Lu thought, then mentally slapped herself to chase her thoughts away.

“What do we do first?” Hallie asked, running a hand through her short chestnut hair.

“Uh, holes, I guess. I mean, drillin’ holes for the pegs,” Lu said.

Hallie’s eyes darkened and she frowned. “Why can’t I hit the nails?”

“The old-fashioned way is better, more sturdy,” Lu said. “It’s how they made furniture back in the day, before nails. Your job is to drive the pegs in the holes after I drill ‘em.”

Reggie poured coffee and prepared hot chocolate for Hallie. “Then get busy drillin’, woman,” she said, picking up the mallet. “I been needin’ to smack somethin’.”

Lu sat on the floor and gripped a thick slab of wood between her knees, holding it tightly as she began turning the drill handle. She steadily drilled the holes she needed in the planks before drilling more holes in smaller pieces of wood that would join the pieces together. Finally, she slid the pieces to Hallie and lined up two holes where she needed a peg inserted. “Insert the smaller end and then pound the rest in with the mallet.”

Hallie settled on the floor and grabbed the mallet with both hands. Lu handed her a peg. “Put the first one here,” Lu said, matching two holes together. The girl was the picture of concentration as she tapped the peg into the holes, her tongue protruding slightly from the corner of her mouth as she worked.

Once the first peg was in, Hallie leaned back against the couch and smiled up at Reggie. “I did it, Mama!”

“Yes, you did,” Reggie said, rubbing her daughter’s back. “It looked like fun. Can I do the next one, sweetie?”

Hallie nodded and handed her mother the mallet after she joined them on the cabin floor. “Be careful so you don’t hit your fingers,” the child warned.

They took turns putting in the pegs until the pieces of furniture were finally assembled to everyone’s satisfaction. Reggie finished her coffee and leaned back with an arm draped around Hallie’s shoulders. “They’ll look great in here, Lu. Very rustic.”

Hallie tugged on her mother's hand. "Maybe we can make one of those really big round rugs like we have. We might have enough scraps at home."

"You don't have to do that," Lu said.

"Consider it a housewarmin' gift," Reggie replied with a smile. "It'll give us somethin' to do in the evenin'." She glanced at her cell phone. "Shit! It's almost ten! We were havin' so much fun I didn't even think about the time."

"I'm sorry," Lu said. "I should've thought about that sooner."

Reggie leaned over and placed a hand on Lu's arm with a smile. "Don't worry about it, Lu. We had a good time and that was worth it. Thank you for that, okay?"

"If you come back the next weekend I'm off, I'll fix you dinner. In the meantime, I'll varnish these tables and you can see the finished product."

"Sounds like a plan," Reggie said as she took Lu's hand and hauled herself up.

LU PULLED HER truck as close as possible to the covered ramp leading to the porch of Reggie's home. She looked around and noticed another truck parked off the side of the drive.

"Shit," Reggie breathed from the passenger seat. Hallie had fallen asleep, her head resting against Reggie's side.

"Looks like you got company," Lu observed quietly.

"Lawrence is here."

Lu slid from her seat and jogged around to assist Reggie out of the truck. A shadowed body rose from a chair on the porch and Lawrence Treadway stepped into the light as Lu lifted Hallie into her arms. Lawrence sauntered down the walkway and leaned over to kiss Reggie. Before their lips could touch, she dodged him and asked, "What're you doin' here, Lawrence?"

Lawrence managed to find her lips anyway. "Just wanted to spend a little time with my girl is all." He swiped his tongue over his lips. "You taste real good, honey."

Lu could almost feel Reggie seething with anger. "How many times do I have to tell you I'm not your girl?" Reggie hissed. Hallie stirred slightly in Lu's arms. She shushed the girl, but Reggie pulled her daughter into her own arms and made her way resolutely up the wooden walkway toward her house. "I need to get Hallie ready for bed. Go home, Lawrence," she said pointedly.

Lawrence spun around and shoved his face close to Lu's. "Thought I told you to stay away from Reggie," he hissed. "You deaf or somethin'?"

Stopping herself from saying something she was sure to regret, Lu turned away quickly. She threw open the truck door and hopped inside. Suddenly she felt anger burn deep inside her body as she slammed the truck into reverse to leave. Why should she care? She was there to do a job, not get involved with anyone. Regina Kinlaw and her daughter weren't her problem. She wasn't there to make friends.

LAWRENCE TREADWAY WATCHED as Lu drove away before striding purposely up the walkway. He hesitated for a moment, then raised his fist to pound on Reggie's front door. He continued, knowing she would eventually be forced to open the door. He smiled when he heard

the lock on the door click. As soon as the door cracked open, he put his palm on it and pushed against it, stepping inside.

“I know I told you to leave, Lawrence,” Reggie said, keeping her voice low. “Hallie’s—”

“Hallie’s sound asleep,” he said, reaching for her.

Reggie tried to jerk her arm away, but Lawrence tightened his grip and pulled her against his body. “I’m gettin’ tired of you playin’ coy with me, Reg,” he said as he began kissing her neck. “I love the way you feel, baby.” He buried his hands in her hair and tilted her head up until his lips covered hers, forcing them apart with an insistent tongue.

Reggie could feel his arousal pressing against her and waited for the kiss to end. When it did, he began unbuttoning her blouse until she pushed him away. She could taste the liquor in his mouth. “You’re drunk. Leave me alone,” she said forcefully as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

“That’s not what you said the last time,” he said with a cocky grin.

“I was drunk when I slept with you. It was a mistake, but it will never happen again.”

“You’re nothin’ but a fuckin’ tease, Reggie,” he said angrily.

“I could take you right now if I wanted. Don’t forget that.”

LU ARRIVED AT work earlier than usual Monday morning. She didn’t want to run into Reggie. She already knew her private interest in the younger woman was nothing more than an impossible fantasy. Reggie was straight, and despite her protests, she would one day probably be convinced to wed Lawrence Treadway and lead a reasonably happy life as his wife. It was what was expected of her. Lu had nothing of substance to offer anyone and was happy enough with her life, even if she was alone. Alone didn’t mean lonely. It just meant alone. She had work to do and couldn’t let anything interfere with that.

“Hey, Calder!” a man’s voice called out, interrupting her thoughts. She turned around and saw Lawrence Treadway striding toward her. She shook a cigarette from a pack in her jacket pocket and lit it.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

He stopped in front of her and jabbed her in the chest with his index finger. “You can stay away from Reg. She’s mine, so back off. Understand?”

“She’s just a friend,” Lu started.

“Not of yours. You think I don’t see the way you look at her. She’s not interested in your kind, Calder.”

“What kind is that?”

“The queer kind. It’s not a popular choice ‘round here.”

“Do you have a complaint about my work?”

Lawrence smiled at her and brought his hands up. He brushed them over her shirt, smoothing away imaginary wrinkles from the fabric before patting her shoulders lightly. “Just wanted to make sure you knew how things are ‘round here. I’ll protect what’s mine. We all will. You might want to remember that in the future.”

“I will and you might want to remember that I have rights now about who I choose to associate with.”

“I heard that, but no matter what those queer lovers back east say, your kind will never be welcome here.”

“You got up real early to tell me somethin’ I already know, Treadway. Leave me alone and let me do my job.”

“Watch your back, Calder!” Lawrence called out as she walked away. “There might not be anybody there to cover it.”

She entered the mine and waited for her shift to begin. Gradually the men drifted in, but Treadway stopped several and spoke to them briefly, glancing her way as he did. She might have to move her schedule up and get out of Brushy #3 sooner than expected.

Chapter Seven

REGGIE PULLED THE van to a stop behind Lu's truck and smiled as Lu sauntered toward her. She'd enjoyed the short time she'd spent with Lu, but wasn't sure what they would find to do all day. Lu patted her hand on the door's open window.

"Sorry we're a little late," Reggie said. She glanced at Hallie. "Someone had a hard time findin' her hikin' boots."

"You're right on time. Can I help you with anythin'?"

"Nope," Reggie said. "Hallie, can you get the guitar case and the basket in the back, please?"

"Okay, Mama." Hallie picked up a woven basket and the old guitar case.

When the side door on the van slid open, Chester slinked back into the cargo area with a deep growl and stared at Lu. She took the basket from Hallie and lifted the girl out, setting her and the guitar case down. "Somethin' smells good," she said with a smile.

"You've probably already had breakfast, but I made some apple-cinnamon muffins while Hallie was gettin' dressed," Reggie said.

"Then I reckon it's a good thing the coffee's ready." Lu patted the side of her thigh and whistled. "Come on, Chester!" she ordered in a firm voice. The leery hound crept forward, smelling everything near him, before jumping out the side door. Lu slid the door closed and waited for Chester to run his nose over her feet and legs before moving away to help Reggie out of the van.

Reggie smiled and slid to the ground. "Sounds like a winner," she said. "So what is this project you have that needs our help?"

"Well, now that the furniture is finished, I need some help makin' somethin' special. Kinda a poor man's home décor item, I reckon."

Lu followed Reggie and Hallie up the short cement walkway to the side door.

Reggie glanced over her shoulder. "You lookin' at my ass, Just Lu?" she asked with a grin.

"Uh, no. Of course not," Lu answered with a blush. "Just makin' sure you don't trip on anythin'."

As soon as Reggie was settled inside on the couch, Lu set the basket on the kitchen table. Hallie placed the guitar case on her mother's lap.

"Want a muffin and coffee now?" Lu offered.

"Just coffee for me," Reggie said.

"That where you went?" Lu asked, nodding at Reggie's t-shirt when she returned with two steaming cups of coffee, a glass of milk for Hallie, and two large muffins.

"Of course," Reggie answered with a smile. "Bone-deep Wildcat through and through."

"That where you wanna go someday too, Hallie?" Lu asked before taking a big bite of her muffin and humming her pleasure.

The girl nodded vigorously, muffin filling her cheeks. She reminded Lu of the chipmunks she'd seen in the forest around her home in Colorado.

Reggie nibbled at a pinch she'd stolen from the edge of Hallie's muffin and stared at her daughter. "You'd think I never feed you, girl," she said with a grin.

Chester sat attentively nearby, only his eyes moving between Hallie and Lu as they bit into their muffins. His tongue darted out to lap up small drool that threatened to fall to the floor.

"What did you study?" Lu asked, tossing a chunk of muffin in Chester's direction. He snatched it out of the air and planted his nose to the floor under him in case he missed a crumb.

"You'll regret that later," Reggie said. "I majored in Music Education. I'd never get rich, but thought helpin' the kids around here get away from the mines would be worthwhile. In the end, it turned out I wasn't one of the ones who'd make it out of here either."

Lu frowned at the unhappiness she heard in Reggie's voice and the sadness she saw in her usually sparkling light blue eyes. "You could still do it, you know," she said, shoving the last of her muffin into her mouth.

"Too much time has passed now," Reggie said. She looked up and gave a smile her best effort. "Besides, I've got a decent job at Brushy #3 with real good benefits for me and Hallie."

"Well, we're goin' on a picnic for lunch and we can work on my special project while we're at it," Lu said, changing the subject away from something that obviously made Reggie unhappy.

For the next hour they sat on the couch, sipping coffee and plucking out tunes on their guitars while Chester stretched out near the fireplace for a nap. Reggie couldn't resist smiling when Lu picked Hallie up and placed the girl on her lap to teach her the chords of a simple tune.

Eventually, Lu stood and returned her guitar to its quilt-covered stand. "Does anyone need the bathroom, or anythin' b'fore we take off on our quest?"

"Hallie, carry this stuff to the kitchen while I use the restroom, please. Then you can go," Reggie said. She looked at Lu. "I suck at squattin' behind a tree," she laughed.

"Bathroom's to the left in the hall," Lu said. "Holler if you need anything. Want to take some coffee in case we get chilly?"

"Sure," Reggie said as she started toward the bathroom.

While Reggie was gone Lu and Hallie packed sandwiches, chips, and a couple of bottles of water into a picnic basket Lu purchased the night before. She poured coffee into a thermos and tossed packets of cream and sugar along with two plastic mugs and a spoon into the basket.

Hallie scampered down the hallway with Reggie following behind her. Reggie laughed. "I swear, that girl has a bladder the size of a thimble."

"Don't all kids?" Lu asked with a smile.

Once they gathered everything and left the cabin, Reggie and Hallie waited as Lu jogged to the back of the cabin. They heard an engine start and a moment later Lu backed a quad around the corner of the cabin and hopped off.

"Your carriage awaits!" Lu announced.

"I used to have one of these when I was a teenager," Reggie said with a smile as her eyes took in the custom painted four-wheeler.

"Then you already know how to handle one," Lu beamed. "Great!"

"Hallie's never ridden one and it's been years since I have." Reggie shook her head.

"We'll go real slow." Lu promised.

"Why are you doin' this, Lu?" Reggie asked.

Lu shrugged. "It's the easiest way up the ridge and I thought it would be more fun than walkin', I guess. If you really hate it, we'll figure somethin' else out."

"Can we ride 'em, Mama? Please?" Hallie begged as she jumped up and down excitedly next to her mother.

“Not fast?” Reggie asked as she glared at Lu.

“You’re in control of the accelerator.” She looked at a frowning Reggie. “Or Hallie can ride with me if you think you can’t handle it.”

“Now you’re bein’ insultin’.”

“I promise neither of you will get hurt.”

Reggie continued to frown, but moved closer, reaching out to touch the four-wheeler. “My daddy always said four-wheelers were for pansies,” she said. She looked up at Lu and smiled. “But they’ve always been my favorite flower.”

Lu reached out to help her, but Reggie swatted her away. “I can do it,” she said firmly, throwing a leg over the seat to straddle the machine. Once she was settled, Lu lifted Hallie and placed her in front of Reggie.

“You were pretty sure I’d get on this thing, weren’t you?” Reggie asked.

“You seem like a woman who enjoys a challenge.”

“Damn straight,” Reggie muttered. She adjusted her body on the padded seat and Hallie placed her hands on the handle bars to balance herself. Reggie turned the ignition key, smiling as the engine began idling smoothly. Lu handed them each a helmet and left to get a second quad. Gradually, Reggie turned the accelerator on the handlebar and they crept into the small, flat back yard. Reggie was the picture of concentration as she practiced controlling the vehicle.

“Don’t get too far ahead of me,” she told Lu.

“Not a chance. I’m followin’ so I can tell you where to turn. There’s a little stream about half way up this ridge. We can stop in a field near there for lunch and then finish our hunt.”

“What are we huntin’ for?”

“When I was a kid I had a terrarium that my mom filled with wildflowers and plants of all kinds. I thought you might help me find some. There’s some really fine moss near the creek to line the bottom with.”

Hallie’s eyes lit up. “Can we get enough for two?”

“That’s the plan.”

Reggie laughed, raised her right arm, and slung it forward. “Then wagons ho!” she called out loudly. Chester ran ahead of them, stopping occasionally to investigate an interesting new scent.

THE TERRAIN WAS slightly uneven and bumpy, but Reggie never paused as they climbed the side of the ridge. Lu increased the speed of her quad and brought it alongside Reggie’s.

“Over the next rise we can take a break.”

Reggie’s face was flushed from the brisk October air. “Cold?” Lu asked.

“No. I love this time of year and the way the cool air seeps into my body. Do you mind waitin’ a while longer to eat lunch?”

“Nope. You doin’ okay, kiddo?” Lu asked Hallie.

The girl nodded furiously. “This is great!” she enthused. “Can we go faster?”

“Maybe next time when your mama ain’t around,” Lu half-whispered conspiratorially. She looked at Reggie and grinned. “You’ll see the creek in a little bit. Bear left to where it flattens out some. We’ll get the moss first.”

Reggie nodded and increased her speed a little to get over the rise. She rolled to the left and stopped in a flat depression about thirty feet down the bank of the lazy little creek. Lu stopped next to her and swung a leg over the seat. She picked a handful of plastic grocery bags from a

large box attached to the rear of her vehicle and stuffed them in her coat pockets before moving to stand next to Reggie, who hadn't moved an inch after Hallie jumped off. Lu watched the slender brunette close her eyes and take a deep breath.

Lu touched her on the shoulder. "You okay?"

Reggie leaned her head back and nodded. "This is the first time I've been on the ridge since Hallie was born. Listen! Do you hear that woodpecker off in the distance?"

"Busy fella," Lu answered at the rapid staccato sound. "Need help?"

Reggie opened her eyes and turned her head toward Lu. Reggie stood, still straddling the seat of the ATV, and looked around. The sight of her, hair fluttering in the light breeze, her cheeks rosy in the cool air, caused Lu's stomach to tighten and begin a slow flip, forcing her to look away to catch her breath.

"That's a nice section of fern moss right over there," Reggie said, pointing down the ridge as she balanced herself on the uneven ground.

"Grab the blanket, will you? No sense gettin' dirty as a pig while we're doin' this," Lu said.

"People pay good money to have someone smear mud all over them at beauty spas."

"It's never helped me," Lu said. She took two corners of an old blanket while Reggie grabbed the other two to spread it on the ground.

"There's a nice little trillium," Reggie said. "Did you bring something to dig with?" Lu strode to the back of her vehicle, returning with a small garden spade. She handed it to Reggie and said, "Good eye. I didn't see that one."

Reggie looked around and squinted into the beams of sunlight that made their way through the dense tree limbs overhead. She pointed to a beam not far away. "There's a Preacher's Pulpit over there. See it?"

"I'll get it after I bag this moss," Lu said.

"I'll get it. Just get the moss and be careful not to damage it," Reggie said.

Several minutes later, Lu was kneeling beside the moss and preparing to slip a large chunk into a plastic bag. She looked over her shoulder and smiled when she saw Reggie depositing three or four bags containing plants surrounded by generous amounts of dirt next to the blanket. Reggie moved closer to the creek and sat on a large stone. She pulled her jeans legs up and removed her socks and shoes. Finally, she lowered her bare feet into the cold water and sighed as it floated over them. Reggie leaned her head back and rested on her elbows. She was soon joined by Hallie, who assumed the same pose. Chester waded into the creek and stopped to lap up some water, letting the excess drip from his mouth. Reggie squinted and gazed at her daughter, her eyes filled with deep affection as she brought a hand up to stroke the girl's hair.

"Feel good?" Lu asked as she squatted and set her plastic bags next to the others that had been collected.

"It feels great," Reggie said with a smile. "Join us."

"Aren't your feet freezin'?"

"Not yet. Before the electric company ran lines to it, Mama kept milk and butter in a creek like this behind our house. When I was little I used to love runnin' out there to get somethin', especially in the summer."

Lu lowered her butt to the ground next to Reggie and wrapped her arms around her knees. The three sat in companionable silence until Reggie's stomach grumbled.

"Must be time to eat," Lu said with a laugh.

Reggie placed her hand on Lu's arm as she started to stand up. "Thanks, Lu. We're havin' a wonderful time for the first time in a long while."

Lu swallowed hard and patted Reggie's hand. "Me too. I'll get somethin' to dry your feet." Lu stood and walked to the four-wheelers. She rubbed her arm where Reggie had touched it and could still feel the warmth from the younger woman's hand. It was nothing more than a friendly gesture, she told herself as she dug through the box attached to the rear of her four-wheeler. When she gathered herself, she carried a towel back to the stream and knelt down next to Reggie.

Reggie let Lu dry her feet without an argument as she closed her eyes, leaned her head back, and took a deep breath. Lu rubbed her feet briskly to warm them up. "You have gentle hands," Reggie said softly.

"I don't want to rub your skin off," Lu answered with a shrug. She drew socks over Reggie's feet and pulled each one nearly to her knees. Lu allowed her hands to drift the length of Reggie's legs as she pulled the legs of her jeans down and slipped her shoes on before turning her attention to Hallie.

They ate a leisurely lunch on the bank of the little creek, tossing a few bites to Chester and washing it down with warm coffee. Lu brought her legs up to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees. She inhaled a deep breath. An unexpected hand running lightly up and down her back startled her and she flinched.

"You're tense," Reggie said softly. "You're supposed to be relaxin'."

"Sorry. You surprised me," Lu said.

Reggie began massaging Lu's shoulders. Finally, her fingers kneaded up the back of her neck and into her hair. Lu groaned, enjoying the intimate touch.

"That feel good?" Reggie asked.

"You have no idea," Lu said. She felt an immediate loss when Reggie removed her hands.

Reggie began packing their things back into the picnic basket. She looked up and smiled as Lu stood.

"Can we do one other thing while we're on the ridge?" Reggie asked.

"Anythin' you want to," Lu answered as she gazed down at Reggie.

"Do you have a hatchet or a saw or somethin'?"

"I think so. What do you have in mind?"

"I noticed earlier that there are quite a few saplings near this creek that have vines growing around them." Reggie held her hand out. "Pull me up," she said.

Once on her feet, Reggie made her way to a sapling that was two or three inches in diameter. A thick vine wrapped around it, creating a spiral that bit deeply into the bark as the young tree grew. Reggie ran her hand over it. "I'd like to find four or five like this. Then I could carve them into walkin' sticks or somethin'. What do you think?"

"Only if you carve one for me, too."

"Of course."

"Then pick the ones you want and I'll check to see what I have to cut them down," Lu said as she walked toward her ATV.

It was late afternoon before they began the trip back to Lu's cabin. When everything was unloaded, Lu followed Reggie and Hallie inside and led them into the living area. They both collapsed onto the couch, Hallie resting her head on Reggie's lap. Lu retreated to the kitchen to begin making preparations for dinner.

She walked quietly back into the living room nearly an hour later and found Reggie sound asleep with her arm draped across Hallie's shoulder. Lu gently lowered Reggie onto a pillow and lifted her legs onto the couch, removing her shoes and covering them both with a quilt. Reggie

looked peaceful and Lu couldn't resist letting her fingers travel lightly over the edges of her soft hair.

THE SLAMMING OF a door snapped Reggie awake. She rubbed her eyes and stretched her arms lazily over her head. She was jarred from a wonderful dream in which an unseen person comforted her by running a hand through her hair. She pulled herself up and looked over the back of the couch to see Lu taking dishes from a cabinet over the sink. She ran a hand up and down Hallie's arm and gently kissed her awake. She found her sneakers on the floor next to the couch and slipped them on, but didn't remember removing them. She leaned over to tie them and Hallie fell over behind her on the couch and snuggled under the quilt. Once upon a time, her life had been so peaceful, she thought. She hated feeling like a pathetic loser, she hated losing everything that was once important to her. But it had been her fault. She should have died the night of the accident. Then her problems would have been over, but she wouldn't have Hallie. She felt something drop onto her cheek and realized it was a tear. She wiped it away on the shoulder of her sweatshirt.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" she asked as she made her way to the kitchen.

"You was sleepin'." Lu answered. "I figured you and Hallie needed it after all that fresh air. Hungry?"

"Starvin'. That sandwich didn't last long. What can I do?"

"I'm just waitin' on the potatoes, but you can get the salads and dressin' out of the fridge. I didn't know what kind you liked so the selection may be limited," Lu said with a smile.

"You have a nice smile, Lu. Should use it more often."

"I do when I have a reason."

Reggie opened the refrigerator and carried everything to the kitchen table. Lu put on an oven mitt and removed three medium potatoes from the oven, squeezing them lightly to make sure they were done. She placed one on each plate and followed them with steaks while Reggie got Hallie up. Finally, they sat down and Lu took a deep breath.

"Everthin' looks and smells delicious," Reggie said as she put dressing on her salad and mixed it.

They chatted comfortably through most of their meal until they could eat no more and shoved their plates away. Chester's tongue ran over his mouth hopefully and he shifted from foot to foot next to Hallie.

"Can I play your guitar?" Hallie asked.

"Sure," Lu said as she took a cigarette from her pocket and brought it to her mouth. She glanced at Reggie before she lit it. "Does the smoke bother you or Hallie?" she asked.

"No. My uncle grew tobacco on his farm. When I was little he would hitch up his team of draft horses to a sled and take me with him to water his plants. I thought it was such an adventure 'til the day he asked me to check for tobacco worms." Reggie screwed her face up in disgust and shook her head. "Like poppin' a sack of tobacco juice. Ugh! I swore then and there that I'd never use tobacco."

"Good idea. Not a healthy habit, but probably not much worse than suckin' in coal dust all day," Lu chuckled as she lit the cigarette. She rested her elbows on the table. "Fact is, I almost died when I was a teenager, but not from cigarettes. I was too stupid to wear a mask and sanded about twelve different kinds of wood for somethin' I was makin'." She shook her head as she

inhaled a lungful of smoke. “Anyway, I sucked in a ton of different kinds of wood dust and damn near clogged up my lungs. Had the doc puzzled ‘til I confessed what I was doin’. Now I always have a mask of some kind with me.”

“I guess we all do stupid things when we’re young. It’s a wonder we survive to adulthood,” Reggie said. She looked toward Hallie. “Be careful with that, Hallie.”

“It’s just a thing,” Lu said.

“It belonged to your grandfather, so it means somethin’,” Reggie said.

“Things can always be replaced and the memories will always be there even when the things are gone.” Lu smiled. She exhaled a stream of smoke, leaned forward, and stood up.

“What is it?” Reggie asked.

“Nothin’, I guess. Just a car turnin’ ‘round in my drive,” Lu said.

“I didn’t hear anythin’,” Reggie said, turning her head toward the front window. “Expectin’ company?”

“Nope,” Lu answered before she began clearing the table and wiping everything down.

“I’ll wash the dishes in a minute,” Reggie said. “You cooked. I’ll wash.”

“I got it,” Lu said.

Reggie remained silent as she finished off the cup of reheated coffee she’d had with dinner. “I didn’t know anyone was livin’ here. Not since the Carpenters passed on years ago.”

“When I decided to move back closer to home I checked this place out,” Lu said. “The Carpenters were distant relatives on my mother’s side.”

“I thought you said you were rentin’ this place,” Reggie said.

“I am. It’s kind of a long story,” Lu said with a shrug.

Reggie set her fork down. “I’m free all night.” She leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest.

Lu took a deep breath. “When I decided to move back home, I contacted a realtor and had him convince the owner of the property that he had someone interested in rentin’ the place if they’d be willin’ to provide the appliances and get the electricity and water workin’. He acted as the leasin’ agent and here I am, so to speak.”

“And your folks haven’t questioned where you’re livin’?”

“I’m too damn old to be explainin’ myself to my mama,” Lu answered, her tone sharper than she’d intended. When she saw the look in Reggie’s eyes, she added, “Sorry.”

“No, you’re right. It’s none of my business.”

“I’m not used to explainin’ myself to anyone else. I make my own decisions and live with the consequences when I’m wrong.”

“I think it’s time for us to get on home. It’s past Hallie’s bedtime, but I appreciated the dinner, Lu.”

“Any time,” Lu said. She stood, went to the front closet, and took out Reggie’s jacket. Reggie refused to look at her as she slipped her jacket on.

“Don’t forget your guitar,” Lu said.

“Can I leave it here for now?” Reggie asked as she shrugged her jacket on.

“Sure. We’ll play again next time.”

“Will there be a next time?” Reggie asked.

“Count on it,” Lu managed, her voice soft.

Reggie stepped onto the porch while Lu held the screen open. She zipped up Hallie’s jacket and took her hand before leading her down the drive to their van. Reggie watched Lu walk into the cabin and close the door. It had been a perfect day.

Chapter Eight

REGGIE FLIPPED ON the old van's headlights and settled into the front seat for the drive home. She'd had a good day, but near the end Lu's demeanor changed. Reggie tried to remember anything she'd said that might have upset Lu, but nothing came to mind. Maybe they'd both been tired after an afternoon crawling around the ridge looking for plants. Reggie yawned. Even after her nap, the meal she'd eaten made her sleepy. Hallie had fallen asleep as soon as she settled into her seat in the van. Reggie smiled. Hallie could fall sound asleep almost anywhere. Reggie would call Lu the next day to find out what she was upset about.

Bright lights suddenly filled her rearview mirror, temporarily blinding her. She flipped the switch on the mirror to deflect the lights and slowed down. "Pass me, asshole," she muttered. Then suddenly, the vehicle behind her swung around the van, but didn't pull away. Instead, the driver slammed on his brakes, forcing Reggie to swerve off the road to avoid a collision. Her van bounced over the unpaved areas next to the road for several yards before she regained control and brought the van to a complete halt. She was shaking and placed her head against her hands, which were still gripping the steering wheel tightly. She sucked in a deep breath in an effort to calm her nerves, but horrible memories flooded her mind. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the vehicle speed away, its taillights disappearing into the night. Her hands were shaking as she put the van into gear and turned back onto the main road. She sent up a silent prayer because Hallie remained asleep and unharmed.

IT WAS A little before eleven when Reggie turned into the drive of her home. She managed to calm down as she parked the van in its usual spot. She walked to the passenger side, leaned in to unfasten Hallie's seat belt, and lifted her into her arms, holding the girl snugly against her body as she walked up the walkway to her house. She stopped abruptly when she saw a figure standing on her porch. The figure moved toward her and she tightened her grip on Hallie. When moonlight revealed the identity of the figure, Reggie released the breath she'd kept trapped in her chest.

"L...Lawrence?" she gasped.

"Put the girl to bed, Reggie," he said in a low, tight voice.

"We need to talk."

"Now?" she asked. "Can't it wait until—"

"Now," he whispered forcefully, taking a step toward her. "Don't make me hurt you," he threatened.

"Just...just promise you won't hurt my daughter. I don't care what you do to me, but leave her alone, Lawrence," she said, fighting to remain in control as Hallie stirred in her arms.

"Put the girl to bed," he repeated softly, stepping aside to let Reggie pass.

She carried Hallie into her room and placed her on her bed, carefully removing her shoes and jeans. She drew a blanket over the girl's body and kissed her forehead before backing out of the room and quietly closing the door.

A hand grabbed the back of her neck roughly, shoving her head forcefully against the hallway wall, stunning her. "How long do you think I'll wait for you, Reggie?" he snarled. "You gave it away before and now you're humiliatin' me with that fuckin' dyke!"

"I...I didn't," she said.

"Don't! Lie! To! Me!" he screamed, striking her head against the wall after each word. As she was struggling to remain standing, tears running down her face, he grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. His hand struck her cheek and she fell heavily to the floor at his feet, trails of blood mixed with the tears running down her face. She whimpered pitifully as he kicked her viciously in the abdomen. She gasped for breath when he squatted next to her. "If you tell anyone about this, I'll take care of you, the kid, and that dyke. Understand?" he snapped before he walked away.

AS SOON AS Reggie heard Lawrence's truck leaving, she pushed herself up and checked to make sure Hallie was still asleep before making her way into the bathroom to clean up. She ran water into the sink and gingerly cleaned the skin around the bruised, split cut on her forehead. She pressed a cool washcloth against her throbbing head and sucked in a deep breath to calm herself as she covered her torn skin with a bandage. She was bruised and sore and all she wanted was a hot bath and her soft bed where she could curl up and fall asleep.

The sun was coming up when she finally crawled stiffly beneath the covers and drifted off. She didn't know how long she'd been sleeping when the sound of distant knocking woke her up again. She groaned and rolled over, hoping the unwelcome noise would go away. She threw the bedcovers from her body and sat up, then pulled her terry cloth robe over her shoulders and stumbled barefooted to the front door. When she opened it Lawrence was grinning down at her. Before she could slam the door in his face he slid his shoe far enough in to prevent it from closing. She flinched when Lawrence pushed his way into her house.

"We gotta talk, Reggie," he said.

"What do you want, Lawrence? I won't tell the sheriff you attacked me. So get out of here before I change my mind. I'm tired."

"Not until we talk," he said, keeping his voice low.

"About what?" Reggie snapped. "I have a splittin' headache from you smackin' my head against the wall and this ain't helpin' it!"

"You know I want you, Reg. I have since we were in high school." He stepped closer and slipped a hand into her crotch and pressed it firmly against her. "You're guardin' this like it's a national treasure or somethin'," he said with a frown. "You're mine and so is this," he breathed, pressing harder against her.

Reggie's eyes watered slightly. "You're hurtin' me, Lawrence!" she hissed. "Stop it!" She tried to push his hand away to relieve the unpleasant pressure.

"I've loved you since high school, but now—"

"You got a damn strange way of showin' it," she snapped.

"I still want you, Reg," he breathed heavily into her ear. "You'll always be my girl."

“I don’t love you, Lawrence, and I was never your girl,” she said flatly. “I was seventeen and drunk the one night we were together. I barely remember it. After last night, I’m not sure I even like you. Now get the hell out of my house.”

Lawrence stepped back and clinched his hand into a fist.

“You gonna hit me again?” she asked, glancing at his hands. “Just to show me how much you love me.”

“What happened to you after you left here for college? That’s where you met that Jack guy, isn’t it?” he hissed, anger flashing in his eyes.

Reggie opened her mouth to speak, but hearing Jac’s name again after nearly ten years froze her brain for an instant and she couldn’t stop tears from shimmering in her eyes. After what seemed like an eternity, Reggie walked to the front door and opened it. “Please leave,” she muttered. “Just leave us alone.”

“I’ll never let anyone keep us apart, Reg, he said before stomping out the door. “Remember that!”

REGGIE SAT ON the couch in her living room and sipped from a hot mug of coffee to calm down after Lawrence left. She gazed around the room, running her thumb back and forth over the worn design embossed on the old, ceramic mug. She should have discarded it years ago, but couldn’t bring herself to part with it. It was all she had left of Jac. It had been her favorite coffee mug and she would drink from it all week without stopping to wash it daily. Reggie’s vision blurred and she sniffed. How could it still hurt so much? Would her feelings of loss ever leave her? “I miss you so much, baby,” she murmured softly.

She smiled and closed her eyes, letting every vestige of her memory run freely through her mind, from the first time she saw Jacqueline Frazier to the moment she saw the rise of her lips as they curved into her final smile.

Reggie hurried around a corner in the building at the University of Kentucky that housed the Mathematics Department, in danger of being late for her college algebra class...again. She hated the class, but it was required for all freshman students. It was supposed to make them more well-rounded, but the instructor was both bored and boring. Stuck with the job of making numbers and symbols exciting, which they weren’t to anyone other than possibly goofy engineering students.

With her books pressed against her chest, Reggie barreled around the corner that led to her assigned classroom and ran into a solid body. Hands reached out to stop her fall, but she ended up dropping her books and sitting ungracefully on the floor at the feet of a tall, darkly handsome woman, who was staring down at her with an amused grin. The woman knelt down to gather Reggie’s books and offered her a hand as she stood. “Sorry,” she said as Reggie accepted the hand. “I didn’t see you coming.”

Reggie shook her head. “No, it was my fault,” she said. “I’m late for class and should have been more careful.”

“Well, however it happened, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” the woman said, her voice soft and musical. “Are you hurt?”

“No, just embarrassed,” Reggie answered, straightening her clothes. When she finally looked up to take her books from the stranger, she was greeted by a pleasant smile, and dark, lively, curious eyes. Her hair was a slightly mussed cap of warm, feathered burnt umber. The stranger

was wearing camel, thin-wale corduroy slacks and a tan long-sleeved, button down shirt topped by a forest green knit vest.

“Which room is your class in?” the stranger asked.

“One-twelve,” Reggie replied. Something about the young woman’s eyes were mesmerizing.

“Let me escort you. I’ll let your TA know why you’re late,” the woman said as she continued to hold Reggie’s books and turned around.

Reggie laughed. “He already thinks I’m an idiot. Now he’ll think I’m a klutz as well.”

“Who’s your TA?”

“Mr. Stanley,” Reggie said with a grimace.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, shaking her head. She stopped for a moment and looked at Reggie. Then she said, “Look, I’m a TA in the math department, too. Math is a beautiful thing, but Carl Stanley can make it seem as dull as dirt. Let me know if you’re having a problem and maybe I can help you out.”

“I definitely need help, but can’t afford a tutor.”

“For free. I love math. I guess you could call me a nerd, but it’s my thing,” she said with a shrug. She reached into the back pocket of her slacks and withdrew her wallet. She removed a card and handed it to Reggie. “They gave me these and I’ve never used one before, but if you need help give me a call.”

“Jacqueline Frazier, Teaching Assistant, Department of Mathematics. Sounds very official,” Reggie read aloud, smiling.

“My friends call me Jac,” the woman said, offering a hand again.

“Regina Kinlaw,” Reggie said as she took Jac’s hand briefly. “But my friends call me Reggie.”

That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship that quickly developed into a beautiful love affair. Reggie never felt more loved, more cherished, even though she struggled to accept what she was feeling for another woman. She loved Jac with everything she was, but could never bring herself to reveal her feelings to her family. They would never understand and she would lose the foundation she relied on to support her until she reached adulthood. By the time Reggie reached her twentieth birthday, she and Jac had begun planning a life together. Jac would be completing her doctorate in mathematics and Reggie would be graduating with a degree in education at the end of the year.

Reggie fluttered her eyes open, furiously blinking her tears away, remembering a night together not long before everything ended.

Jac called her earlier in the day and said she had exciting news. Reggie left her dorm and took the bus, getting off two blocks from Jac’s apartment as usual. When Jac opened the door, she wrapped her arms around Reggie and spun her around before carrying her into the apartment and lowering her to the floor. She brought her hands up to caress Reggie’s face. “I’ve been offered a job,” she said, her smile brilliant.

Reggie threw her arms around Jac’s neck and pulled her into a kiss. Jac was vibrating with barely controlled excitement and deepened the kiss. Finally, Reggie broke their connection to take a breath. “Where, baby?” she managed.

“At a small, private college...in Massachusetts,” Jac grinned as she rested her forehead against Reggie’s. “It’s perfect and we won’t have to sneak around anymore. We can have the home we’ve always wanted, free to be ourselves at last. I have to fly up for the face-to-face interview over spring break, but it’s only a formality since they’ve already made the offer.”

“We should celebrate,” Reggie said.

“Oh, we will, baby.” Jac released her and stepped away. “Wait here. I’ll be right back,” she said. She hurried into the bedroom and returned a minute later. She took Reggie’s hand and led her to the sofa. When Reggie sat down, Jac held her hand and took a deep breath.

“What’s wrong, Jac?”

“Nothing. Just a little nervous. I’ve never done this before and don’t want to screw it up.”

“Screw what up?”

“I love you so much, Reg, and never thought anyone could make me so happy.” She took something from her pocket and dropped to her knees, holding out a small diamond ring. “Please marry me, Reggie, and make me the happiest woman alive. It’s legal in Massachusetts and we can have the life, the family, everything we’ve ever dreamed of.” Jac held her breath, her eyes searching Reggie’s face.

Finally, Reggie said, “Are you sure that’s what you really, truly want?”

“Since the day you ran me down in that damn hallway, I knew you were the one,” Jac said softly, taking Reggie’s hand and bringing it to her lips to kiss her palm. “I want to prove that to you every day for as long as we live.”

“Convince me, baby,” Reggie purred seductively as she leaned closer and whispered against Jac’s lips. “Make me yours like you did the first time.”

Jac groaned as Reggie ran the tip of her tongue over Jac’s lips before slipping it slowly between them and into the warmth of her mouth. Jac slid her hands beneath Reggie’s shirt and caressed the soft skin of her abdomen before pushing the fabric up to reveal her full, firm breasts and running her thumbs over their sensitive nipples. She moved her hands to Reggie’s back and pulled her closer. “I want you too much, Reg,” she said.

“It can never be too much, baby,” Reggie moaned as she felt the heat of Jac’s mouth encircle a nipple and suck it steadily, tenderly in and out of her mouth. “Take me to bed, Jac. I need to feel you against me. I need to feel you...everywhere.”

Jac pulled her up, leaving a trail of clothes as they made their way slowly toward the bedroom, pausing to appreciate each newly revealed portion of one another’s body along the way.

Reggie couldn’t stop a smile while remembering each touch or how Jac begged for release when Reggie took her to the edge over and over without giving her that final push into mindless ecstasy. She gasped as her stomach clinched at the memory that seemed so real invaded her body. She sat up and doubled over as the feeling consumed her.

“Mama?” a voice filled with young concern said. “Are you sick?”

Reggie ran a hand over her face as she sat up again. She glanced into Hallie’s worried face. It was the face that would always remind her that unimaginable happiness was possible. “No, baby. It was just a dream,” she said, forcing a smile. “I could use some breakfast. How ‘bout you?”

Chapter Nine

A LITTLE AFTER noon on Sunday Reggie drove to her mother's house. She smiled as Hallie wiggled in the passenger seat, obviously uncomfortable wearing a dress her grandmother had gotten for her.

"Why I gotta wear this stupid dress, Mama. It's ugly," Hallie whined.

"Because your gramma bought it for you and wants to see you in it. It will make her happy, okay, so suck it up, buttercup. I promise we won't stay long."

Hallie chuckled. "You two will be fightin' like cats in less than an hour."

"Probably right," Reggie mumbled to herself as she turned into her mother's drive.

"Well, ain't that a pretty dress," Ernie beamed from the porch as Hallie skipped toward the house. Turning her attention to Reggie, she asked, "You talk to Lawrence yet? And what the hell did you do to your head?"

"I tripped and fell," Reggie lied. "And no, I haven't talked to Lawrence."

"He was here first thing this mornin'. Wants to marry you. Congratulations!" Ernie leaned closer to hug her daughter, but Reggie backed away. "What the hell's crawled up your ass, girl?" Ernie asked.

"First, I am not a girl and haven't been since I lost my virginity years ago. And second, I don't love Lawrence Treadway, I've never loved Lawrence Treadway, and I will never love Lawrence Treadway! What part of that can't you understand?"

"You claimed to be in love with that Jack fella and look where that gotcha! Knocked up and raisin' a kid alone," Ernie fumed. "You finally found a man willin' to put that issue to rest. You don't have to love him. Lawrence wants to be with you. You could do worse!"

"What's virginty?" Hallie asked.

"Go on inside, Hallie, and say hello to your uncle Gardner," Ernie said.

"Why don't you just auction my services off to the highest bidder like you would some prize bitch!" Reggie seethed after Hallie went inside.

The sting of Ernie's hand across her cheek stunned Reggie and she stood there with her mouth partially open, rubbing her cheek for a minute. There were tears hovering along her bottom eyelid. She fought them off as she struggled to compose herself.

"Do you think I liked hearin' others talk about you like a common whore when you come home pregnant?"

"That was almost ten years ago, Mama. Why can't you get over it?" Reggie snapped.

"Because I have to look at the proof of it almost ever day when I see that girl," Ernie snapped back.

"It's not Hallie's fault!"

"And now you're hangin' 'round with that pervert. It makes me sick! If you keep doin' what you're doin' no man will consider a woman who acts like a trollop and is friends with a queer like that Calder woman."

“No one would know about Jac if you hadn’t told them, hopin’ they’d feel sorry for you, saddled with a daughter too stupid to say no,” Reggie said. “Lu treats me like I’m somethin’ besides a fuckin’ burden.”

“She’s a queer! She ain’t normal!” Ernie covered her mouth, a look of horror and disgust crossing her face. “My God! You ain’t let that woman touch you, have you?”

“Of course not! She wouldn’t do that,” Reggie spat, defending her new and only friend. She took a long shaky breath and slowly exhaled, silently wondering what it might feel like if Lu did touch her. She opened the front door. “Hallie! We’re leavin’!” she called out. While she waited for her daughter, she said, “Stop tryin’ to push Lawrence on me, Mama. It won’t happen.”

Hallie ran to the van and jumped in, waving at her grandmother as Reggie started the old van and backed up. “We wasn’t at Gramma’s anywhere near an hour,” she said with a smile.

“We got things to do at home,” Reggie replied. When they reached the end of the drive, she looked at her daughter. “Some days your gramma gets on my nerves quicker than others. Today was one of those days, I guess.”

“Can we go to Lu’s? Maybe we can help with the terrariums,” Hallie asked.

“We were just there yesterday, sweetie. She might like a day for herself. Maybe another day, okay?”

“I guess,” Hallie pouted and looked out the side window.

Ten minutes later, Reggie turned into her drive. She was surprised to see Lu’s truck parked off to the side of the drive.

“Lu’s here!” Hallie yelled and bounced in her seat until Reggie shifted the van into park. Hallie then launched herself out of the vehicle. Lu sat on the porch, smoking a cigarette, and scratching Chester’s chest. Hallie ran up the porch steps, tucking her dress under her butt before sitting next to Lu.

“Pretty dress,” Lu said with a grin.

“Liar,” Hallie muttered. “Mama made me wear it so Gramma could see me in it. Why you here?”

“Thought you might want that,” Lu said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder.

Hallie’s eyes widened and she jumped up, rushing to the terrarium resting on a porch chair. She picked it up and turned it between her hands to examine it as she smiled broadly. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Did you stay up all night to make that?” Reggie asked as she approached the porch.

“Nope.”

“Well it’s very nice. Thank you,” Reggie said as she started up the steps. She glanced down at Lu. “If you can tear yourself away from my dog, feel free to come inside and I’ll make some coffee.”

“What happened to your head?” Lu asked.

Reggie reached up and touched the bandage on her forehead. “Nothin’ important,” she said as she unlocked the front door. “Where you plannin’ to put your terrarium?” she asked Hallie while holding the door open.

“Under the window in my bedroom.”

“You might set it under a window in the livin’ room so we can both enjoy it,” Reggie suggested.

“The sun could hit it ever mornin’ there,” Hallie said with a smile, stepping past her mother, carefully cradling the terrarium in her arms. “Come on, Lu,” she said.

Lu stood and stretched before stomping dirt from her feet. “Thanks,” she said. Chester darted around Lu and found a place to lie down as Reggie closed the front door. Reggie walked into the kitchen and began filling the coffeemaker. Lu leaned against the counter and stared at her.

“What happened to your head?” Lu asked again. “It was fine when you left last night.”

“I told you it was nothin’,” Reggie snapped. “Leave it alone, Lu.”

“I don’t believe you. Let me see it.” When Reggie didn’t move, Lu reached out to pull the bandage off.

Reggie slapped her hand away and stepped back. “I told you to drop it, Lu. Please.”

“Did someone hurt you, Reggie? Tell me who and I’ll mess ‘em up,” Lu said, anger flashing in her eyes.

“L...Lawrence,” a small voice said from the kitchen door.

“You were asleep,” Reggie said.

“I heard you arguin’. It woke me up.” Tears rolled down Hallie’s cheeks. “I...I was afraid, Mama,” she hiccupped.

Reggie went to her daughter and hugged her. “I’m so sorry you heard any of that, baby, but I’m okay. It’ll go away in a few days.”

“You should press charges and have his ass arrested,” Lu seethed.

“And make things worse than they are? What would that accomplish?”

Lu took a deep breath and exhaled slowly in an effort to calm down. She smiled at Hallie.

“Hey, kiddo. You still owe me a round of mumbley-peg. Bet you thought I forgot, didn’t you?”

Hallie nodded and wiped her eyes. “I never forget a promise,” Lu said, patting the girl’s back as she left the kitchen without looking at Reggie again. “I’ll meet you out front after you get out of that fancy dress.”

Lu stepped onto the front porch and stuck a cigarette between her lips. She leaned against the porch railing before pulling her lighter out of her jean pocket and flipping it shut with a jerk of her wrist after lighting the cigarette. She exhaled a light gray stream of smoke as she stared off into the treeline not far from the house.

Reggie came outside and leaned against the railing opposite Lu, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked out at her front yard.

“Do Gardner or Ernie know Lawrence hurt you?” Lu asked, still refusing to look at Reggie.

“No,” Reggie answered softly. “I didn’t know Hallie knew until a few minutes ago. I’ll talk to her about what happened later. Soon as I can figure it out myself.”

“Will you tell me if he hurts you again?”

Reggie shrugged. “I can handle it.”

Hallie rushed onto the porch still fastening her overalls. Lu took a pocketknife from her pocket and handed it to the girl. “I found this old knife in my stuff. Thought you might like it to practice with, if your mama don’t mind. Decent balance.”

Hallie took the knife and looked at Reggie, who nodded. Hallie opened the lockback knife carefully to examine it. Lu flipped another knife open and started down the porch steps. “You first,” she said with a smile.

After several practice throws, the game began. Nearly an hour later, Lu conceded, giving Hallie the win with a promise of a re-match in the future. Reggie was relatively certain Lu had allowed Hallie to win, but didn’t press the issue. The only thing she was sure of was the change in Lu’s demeanor.

Chapter Ten

EARLY MONDAY MORNING, Lu backed out of the driveway to her cabin and shifted into first to begin her daily drive to the mine. She lit a cigarette and gazed out the side window of the truck at the low-lying haze covering the fields along the road. Within a few hours the haze would dissipate, leaving heavy drops of dew clinging to stalks of grass and fall crops waiting for harvest. She smiled, remembering early morning walks while squirrel hunting with her father or grandfather, learning to detect the secrets hidden in the wet fields. It had seemed miraculous to her then. Now it seemed almost ordinary and she missed those earlier times. The sun began making its appearance over the edge of the ridge, forcing her to reach up to lower the sun visor to block the sun's rays. She pulled her cap down over her forehead and slipped sunglasses on. She leaned over to stabilize her cooler before entering a sweeping curve that would take her up the ridge.

In an instant the windshield exploded, shooting shards of glass over her body. She sat up trying to keep control of her vehicle. The cold morning air blew into the cab through the missing windshield, Lu's eyes widened when she saw a truck coming toward her. She turned the steering wheel to avoid hitting the oncoming vehicle. Her front tires ran onto the gravel edge of the narrow road, taking her truck down the slope of the ridge, and into a heavily forested area. She pumped the brakes, but the truck's tires failed to grip the damp, slick soil beneath her.

"Fuck!" she shouted even though no one could hear her. She needed to slow the vehicle down, if possible. The truck bounced over a rise and ahead of her she saw a pair of thick tree trunks standing a few feet apart and twisted the steering wheel toward them. The cessation of movement was so sudden that her body lurched forward and struck the steering wheel, forcing the breath from her lungs. Everything in the front seat either fell to the floorboard or flew through the open windshield.

Lu groaned and shook her head, trying to gather her thoughts. What the hell happened, she thought. She leaned back in the truck seat and felt slightly nauseous. Steam from the radiator billowed from the front of the old vehicle. Turning her head to look out the side window, she saw blood smeared across the glass. She brought her hand up and gingerly felt her face and forehead. When she lowered her hand there was blood on her fingertips. She pulled the door handle, but her truck was wedged firmly between the two trees. She felt around for the seat belt release and pushed the button. Nothing happened. She felt along the belt of her jeans and was able to flip her knife open to cut through the seat belt. Although a portion of the dash had buckled, creating a tight fit, she managed to draw her legs onto the seat. She located a wrench on the front floorboard and ran it around the edges of the windshield opening to crawl out of the truck on her belly. When she slid to the ground her knees collapsed and she sat heavily on the damp ground. Her head and chest hurt from hitting the side window and impacting the steering wheel. Fortunately, the seat belt prevented her body from flying out the windshield, but would definitely leave an ugly bruise.

She heard leaves crushing on the hill above her. Someone was coming toward her. She scrambled to her feet, still gripping the wrench in her fist. A man in his fifties, following a large red dog, spotted her.

“You alright?” he hollered.

She waved to let him know she was okay. The dog reached her first and got busy sniffing every part of her body he could reach without actually standing on her. The man wrapped an arm around a nearby tree to slow his momentum.

He bent over to catch his breath. “What happened? You damn near hit me up there,” he panted.

“Dunno,” she answered. “When I came ‘round the curve somethin’ took out my windshield.”

“You hurt?”

“Don’t think so.”

“You’re bleedin’ some.”

“Hit my head on the side window when I made a kinda sudden stop.”

“Sheriff’ll be here soon. I’ll stick around ‘til she gets here.”

“Thanks.”

Lu climbed onto the hood and reached back into the truck cab in an attempt to locate her cell phone. She finally had to climb inside again to search beneath the seat. She had to notify the mine that she would be late for work. She located her cell a few minutes later and pulled her gloves from her back pocket to brush the shattered tempered glass off the seat to sit. While she waited for someone to answer the emergency number, she glanced around the cab’s interior. There were a few pieces of glass on the driver’s seat. It must have gotten there when I leaned over to stop my stuff from sliding off the seat, she thought. Then she noticed a hole in the vinyl seat cover. She stuck a finger in the round hole and felt around. Before she could investigate further she heard the sound of others outside the vehicle.

TWO HOURS LATER, Lu arrived at Brushy #3 on her Harley and hurried across the parking lot toward the cage. She paused long enough to ask the outside man to send a message to Gardner that she was on her way down. She stood in the cage and rubbed a hand over her chest. A county deputy had given her a ride home after she made arrangements to have the truck towed to the cabin.

She cleaned the blood from her face and checked the bruises on her chest and abdomen. She was sure every part of her body would be stiff and sore by the next day. She was equally sure someone had tried to kill her. There were a few suspects, but no evidence pointing to anyone specifically. If she hadn’t leaned over while making that turn, she could have died.

She knew she’d made a few enemies, but none bad enough to attempt murder. She decided to lay low until she could complete her investigation. By then she would be more than ready to return to Colorado and resume her normal, uncomplicated life, leaving Landon County, Kentucky far behind.

She rode a golf cart to the level her team was working and got her assignment. She briefly explained that she’d lost control of her truck when she swerved to avoid an animal on the road and endured the laughter of a few miners. A couple offered to help her get the old truck running again, but she turned them down, claiming it would give her something to do in her spare time.

Gardner assigned her to a team of roof bolters since she'd proven herself to be one of the quickest and most reliable bolters on first shift.

She was leaning against a pillar, trying to catch her breath while she scarfed down a sandwich and tried to think of any logical explanation for her accident early that morning. She closed her eyes in an attempt to re-envision what happened.

"You awake, Calder?" Gardner's gruff voice asked.

"Yep," she answered without opening her eyes. "Just thinkin'."

"Don't come in tomorrow mornin'."

She opened her eyes. "You firin' me?"

"Nope, but I'm movin' you to third shift startin' tomorrow. Their roof bolters need to work together faster like you and Harpo. Once they learn that, I can move you back to this shift. So sleep in tomorrow."

"It'll give me a little extra time to work on my truck, so thanks, boss," Lu said.

By the time the horn announcing the end of her shift sounded, Lu was dripping with sweat from working faster than usual to keep her muscles loose. She couldn't wait to get home and stand under a hot shower. Then she should still have enough time to look over the damage to her truck. She loved her Harley, but it wouldn't provide much protection once colder weather set in. She didn't stick around when her shift ended, but hopped on the Harley and gunned it as soon as she left the parking lot. However, she noticed that Reggie's van wasn't in its usual spot in the parking area.

She stripped as soon as she entered the cabin, carried her clothes to the washing machine, and stepped into the shower, sighing as the water pelted her head and body. She washed her hair and gingerly scrubbed the oily coal residue from her body, taking time to check the extent of the bruises blossoming over her body. She figured they would turn an ugly shade of purple overnight, but they wouldn't keep her from working. The broken skin on her cheekbone stung, but the pain was manageable. She patted her body dry and dressed, anxious to look at the truck while there was still daylight. As far as she had been able to determine, the damage was mostly to the body. She could get the parts she needed at a junkyard. It wouldn't be a thing of beauty, but it would run.

She grabbed a few tools and made her way to the old truck now sitting broken looking on the gravel drive. The front tires were flat, but otherwise she would only need a windshield, new doors, rearview mirrors, a couple of door handles, and new engine mounts. Maybe a new radiator. Everything else was scrapes and minor bodywork. Maybe a couple of weekends.

She climbed onto the hood and wiggled into the cab. She stuck her finger into the hole in the driver's seat and felt around. She was sure there was a bullet in there somewhere, but might have to remove the whole seat to locate the damn thing. She settled on the driver's seat and pushed her legs against the floorboard to fish the truck key from her jean pocket. This would be the ultimate test. Inserting the key into the ignition, she turned it and smiled as the old Chevy engine caught and turned over. It sounded a little rough and she needed to check the whole thing over to tighten a few things.

She was under the hood, checking the truck's spark plugs for cracks when she heard tires on the gravel drive. She climbed out of the engine compartment and pulled a greasy rag from her back pocket to wipe oil and grime from her hands before sauntering toward the faded blue van in time to see Reggie step to the ground.

"What're you doin' here?" Lu asked as she wiped her hands.

"Heard you was in an accident. Just wanted to see if you were alright," Reggie answered.

“I’m good. Truck needs a little work though. Engine’s runnin’ a little rough.”

“Your cheek looks a little swollen,” Reggie observed and raised her hand to touch it.

Lu shook her head and leaned away. “I cleaned it out good. It’s fine. Probably bruise some is all.”

“You should cover it at work so no coal dust gets in.”

“I’ll put a Band-Aid over it tomorrow.”

“Do you know what caused your accident?”

“Somethin’ busted out my windshield and I went off the road.”

“Then I guess you’re all right. You got any plans for Thanksgiving?” Reggie asked.

“I volunteered to work that day. You know, no family, no kids.” Lu grinned. “Seemed like the right thing to do and now I can use the extra money to get the truck runnin’ again.” She hesitated, looking around at nothing in particular, twisting the rag in her hands.

Still staring off into nothing, she cleared her throat and managed to say, “I was worried about you. Didn’t mean to upset you when I stopped by Sunday.” Lu hadn’t felt so unsure and awkward since she was a teenager and still trying to find her way. Not since she first faced the truth about herself and asked a young woman to dance with her at a club when she was an undergrad at Colorado School of Mines. That one dance was all she’d needed to confirm what she’d known for years, but never acted on. “Look, I, uh, need to get back to work while there’s still some daylight,” she said.

“Of course. Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow,” Reggie said softly as she turned back to her van.

“Take care,” Lu mumbled under her breath to Reggie’s retreating back.

THE NEXT EVENING Lu arrived at the mine an hour before the start of her shift. She untied a small aquarium from the back of her motorcycle and carried it into the main office. She walked down the hallway and entered Reggie’s office. She set the aquarium on a two-drawer file cabinet beneath the office window and left as quickly and quietly as she’d arrived. After retrieving her cooler from the cycle she shoved her hard hat on and checked to make sure she had everything.

With some time to kill before going back to the mine, she walked to the mess hall and bought a large cup of coffee, hoping it would keep her warm until the miners made their way to the cage that would bring out the second shift and take the third shift down. She found a mound of debris off to one side of the shaft entrance and sat down.

Halfway through her cup, she saw the main doors to the mess hall open and watched Ernestine Kinlaw, Reggie’s mother, step outside for a cigarette. Even in the dark, she reminded Lu of Marjorie Main from the Ma and Pa Kettle movies of the nineteen forties and fifties. In all likelihood Ernie Kinlaw wasn’t nearly as humorous as Marjorie Main. She could almost feel Ernie staring at her across the dark, dusty parking lot.

She watched the woman make her way down the steps and across the parking area, carrying a Styrofoam cup of coffee. When she reached the knot of waiting miners, she said something Lu couldn’t hear as she drank her coffee and glanced in Lu’s direction.

The metallic rumble of the arriving cage announced it was time for the miners to make the descent to start their shift. Lu stood and paused to let Ernie pass by before she moved toward the cage to begin another day. She rested against the wall of the cage and closed her eyes. She never saw Collie Leifester approach. He poked her sharply in the center of her chest, aggravating the

bruised area. She couldn't stop herself from bowing up to him defensively, but managed to restrain herself from overreacting.

"Did you get the message, Calder?" he asked in a low, rumbling voice. "Stay away from Reggie Kinlaw."

Lu turned her head to look at him. "Or what, Leifester. There's always an 'or what'."

"Just do your fuckin' job and stay away from her. Next time you might not be so lucky."

"That message from her or Treadway?"

"Don't matter. Just do it."

"Didn't know you got hired back on," Lu responded, looking at the ceiling of the slowly descending cage and closing her eyes again.

"I got friends with short memories," he laughed. This assignment was becoming too complicated, Lu thought. She needed to get the information she'd come for and move on. She'd already volunteered to work Thanksgiving since she had no family and the next two weeks wouldn't pass fast enough. The cage jerked as it ended its descent.

Chapter Eleven

WHEN REGGIE PULLED into the parking area the next morning, she saw Lawrence leaning against the tailgate of his truck and frowned. He stared at the dirt beneath his feet, sweeping the toe of his shoe in a large arc as he waited for Reggie to pull into a nearby parking space. He looked up when she swung her van into a space near the main office and opened the driver's door.

"Mornin', Reggie," he said.

"Lawrence," she said.

"Got anythin' to carry in?"

"Just my lunch." She lowered her head, resting her chin against the heavy jacket she was wearing. She really didn't want to talk to Lawrence right then. Maybe never again.

"How you feelin' this mornin'?" he asked.

"Just peachy," she answered, refusing to look at him.

"You give any more thought to us gettin' married?"

"Can't say I have," she said, gritting her teeth.

"I'd be real good to you."

Her eyes flashed up to his, "Like you were the other night?" She pushed him back a step. "Get away from me and leave me alone or I'll tell everyone what you did," she threatened.

He grabbed her arm and jerked her closer "You made me do that, Reggie," he seethed.

"I gotta clock in," she said as she pulled her arm away.

The door to the main office opened and Reggie saw Terrance Hopewell looking in their direction. "Mornin', Mr. Hopewell!" she called out. Looking up at Lawrence, she pushed past him and went quickly up the stairs to the main offices. She pushed her office door open and flipped on the light switch. She smiled when she saw the terrarium behind her desk and moved closer to examine it. Small slits of sunlight created a light haze across the bottom layer of the delicate moss. The heat from the plants was forming condensation on the glass sides which would keep the plants moist similar to their natural environment. Mixed in with the plants, Lu had placed a couple of miniature resin toadstools. The back was slightly higher than the front, creating an interesting landscape. Reggie opened the blinds and watched the sunlight glitter on the moisture accumulating inside the terrarium.

Looking at the completed terrarium reminded Reggie of the day she'd spent with Lu gathering the plants inside the glass.

Every moment she spent with Lu was easy, comfortable. Just as it had been with Jac. Lu treated her with kindness and as an equal, but she wasn't Jac. Jac always smiled and had trouble containing her youthful exuberance at times. Making love was playful, filled with laughter as well as passion and the desire to please one another. Reggie squinted against the sunlight that streamed through her office window and seemed to attack her eyes with its brightness, creating flashes of white light that danced across her vision, forcing her to close her eyes momentarily. That was all the time it took for the memory of Jac's face, her eyes filled with hazy, liquid desire,

to make its way out of the darkness in Reggie's mind. It was Jac's face looking down at her the last time they'd made love. Three hours later, Jac was gone forever, taking the dreams of their future together with her.

Reggie frowned when she thought of the night of the accident. Ernie and Gardner thought she was asleep, but she'd heard them whispering. Talking about how long it would take Reggie to recover. All it took was an instant and one drunken idiot, to kill every dream she'd ever had. Jac promised to take care of her...until that moment took it all away.

Ernie could be cruel and judgmental. When Reggie's doctor told her she was pregnant, she was overjoyed until she had to try to explain that to her mother. She took the easy way out and lied, unwilling to admit Jac was another woman. Wasn't it better that Ernie and Gardner believed she'd had an affair with an unknown man than be labeled as a pervert? By choosing the coward's way out Reggie had betrayed Jac's memory, but perhaps they would be more willing to accept Hallie. She remembered her mother's words when they'd argued only days earlier. Now the words still echoed in her mind. Trollop. Whore. There had been words for Lu as well. Queer. Disgusting. Abnormal. Reggie could shoulder whatever anyone called her in whispers, but she would do anything to protect her daughter. She covered her eyes with her hand and bit back a sob. "I'm sorry, baby," she mumbled softly. "I miss you so much."

Hopewell's secretary dropped a stack of files on Reggie's desk that pulled her away from her dark thoughts. The horn announcing the end of third shift sounded. From her window Reggie could see the miners wandering toward the showers and was surprised when Lu stepped into the early morning sunlight. Coal dust coated her face and clothes. Goober paused and spoke to Lu a few minutes, shaking his head as he walked into the mine. Lu went to her motorcycle and climbed on, backed out without hesitation and left the lot.

FRIDAY, NOT LONG after the beginning of the first shift, a black Suburban pulled into the parking area in front of the Bowers Mining Corporation office at Brushy #3. The driver jumped out, but the passenger in the rear seat opened the door before he could reach it. Melissa Chapman, a slender woman with long, blonde hair, stepped out and strode toward the front steps of the office like a woman on a mission.

"Grab some coffee, Denton," she said over her shoulder. "And get one for me while you're at it. I'll be with the superintendent."

Denton Freeman was an older man and had worked with Melissa Chapman for three years. Injured in a mining accident five years earlier, her dad, Charlie had seen to it that he always had a job with Bowers Mining. Currently, he was assigned as Melissa's driver for this impromptu mine inspection at Brushy #3. They'd rented the Suburban at the Lexington airport and driven directly to the mine that morning.

Melissa stepped into the office and stopped briefly at the front desk. "Is Terrance Hopewell available?" she asked as she unzipped her parka and removed her gloves. She smiled at the receptionist and raised her sunglasses to rest slightly above her hairline. She was an attractive, statuesque woman with piercing hazel-green eyes.

The receptionist raised an eyebrow as she looked at the woman in front of her. "And you are?"

"Melissa Chapman from Bowers' corporate. I'm here to conduct an inspection of the mine."

“Just a moment,” the woman said as she stood and walked quickly down the hallway toward the back of the building as Melissa gazed around the front office.

The receptionist knocked on the door of the superintendent’s office and stuck her head inside. Melissa heard a very grumpy man say, “What, Edith?”

“Sorry to interrupt your call, Mr. Hopewell, but there’s a woman at the front desk who says she’s here from headquarters to inspect the mine.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

A few minutes later, a smarmy-looking man who was in the process of pulling on the jacket to his suit walked briskly down the hall. He smiled when he saw Melissa. He extended a hand. “Terrance Hopewell, mine superintendent. We weren’t expecting you, Ms. Chapman.”

“That’s why it’s called a surprise inspection,” she said with a disarming smile. “And it’s Mrs. Chapman.”

“Of course,” Hopewell said. “Is there anything you’d like to see here in the office?”

“Perhaps later. Show me where I can find coveralls and protective gear.”

Denton walked in the office door and handed Melissa a Styrofoam cup. She took a quick sip as she followed Hopewell outside. “Thanks, Denton. We’ll probably be a couple of hours. If you’d take soil samples around the property, it would save some time. Oh, and please check the grading process.”

“Consider it done, Mel.”

Melissa walked a few feet behind Hopewell. She was casually dressed in a flannel shirt and flannel-lined jeans and only needed to slip into a set of coveralls, take a hard hat, and strap on knee pads and a self-rescuer to begin her inspection. Inside the washroom, she briefly checked the showers and equipment before checking them off on a clipboard she carried. She left the building and wandered to the air intake and outtake units to read the gauges to insure the good air entering the mine was replacing an equivalent amount of methane and carbon dioxide gases. Satisfied, she joined Hopewell at the cage for the trip into the deep mine, twisting her long hair up beneath the hard hat. The man trip waited as she stepped off the elevator for the journey farther into the eight-thousand-foot mine.

Once in the mine, she walked through the semi-darkened tunnels, stopping periodically to ask the miners questions about their jobs although she already knew what they each did. She examined charts that showed the tonnage produced by each shift. If a particular shift sent out an obviously small tonnage she questioned it. Usually a reduction in tonnage was the result of downtime for equipment repair.

After nearly an hour, Melissa stopped to watch a team of roof bolters as they drilled holes into the ceiling and set glue and steel bolts. The pair prepared to move farther down the face for the next bolts to be placed.

“About how long does it take to set the bolts?” Melissa asked.

“We’re pretty consistent at twenty or thirty minutes,” one of the bolters answered.

“Does that allow ample time to perform the job correctly?”

“We used to do it faster, but my co-worker got moved to third shift,” the bolter said with a shrug as he turned away.

“Why is that, Mr. Hopewell?” she asked.

“Our roof bolters on third shift are less experienced and Calder is one of our best bolters. I thought it would bring them up to speed more quickly,” he answered.

Melissa looked at the ceiling. “What about those fissures?”

“We’ve kept an eye on them, and so far, they haven’t spread significantly. They should last until we’re ready to back out of here and drop these pillars.”

“Have the methane and carbon dioxide levels spiked due to the fissures?”

“Slightly. Probably the seam belchin’ or somethin’.”

“Has that rise, even though slight, affected the in-take and out-take?”

“The air flows automatically adjust if there’s a noticeable rise in gas levels. No discomfort has been reported and the blowers are checked daily.”

Two hours later, Melissa and Hopewell exited the cage and walked out of the mine. She stripped off her coveralls and replaced her hard hat and self-rescuer. When she left the washroom she smiled at Hopewell. “Now I’d like an office where I can examine your books,” she said.

Hopewell led Melissa back into the administration building and offered her the office next to his. He paused at an office and stuck his head inside. “This is Regina Kinlaw. She handles all personnel records and makes sure every miner has current documentation.”

“I heard you have a female miner,” Melissa said. “How long has she been here?”

“Lu’s been here a couple of months,” Reggie answered without hesitation.

“Any problems?” Melissa asked.

“Nothing serious. She seems to be an above average miner,” Hopewell said as he waved his hand down the hall. “Shall we?”

Chapter Twelve

MELISSA WHEELED THE Suburban into the parking lot of a restaurant not far from where she and Denton were staying in Hawthorne, mid-morning Saturday. She opened the driver's door and gathered a few things before stepping out. When she entered the restaurant, Lu stood to greet her. She wrapped her arms around Melissa's waist and lifted her slightly, spinning her around. She hugged her tightly and dropped a kiss on her cheek before they were escorted to a table next to the front window.

"I've been waitin' to do that since I heard you were here," Lu said. "Where's Denton?"

"Sleeping off a long night drinkin' with a bunch of miners," Melissa answered as she set the paperwork in her arms onto the table. "You look great, Lu. How are you doing?"

"I've had it worse," Lu shrugged. "You're lookin' pretty uptown yourself. Nice dress, but a little classy for little ole Hawthorne, Kentucky."

"I wore it just for you," Melissa said with a smile.

"I'm honored. Don't tell Carl though or he'll accuse me of tryin' to seduce you or somethin'."

"I noticed you didn't have any trouble picking up the accent again. You haven't talked like that since I first met you. Jesus! You were such a hick back then," Melissa said with a laugh.

"It's like ridin' a bike, easy to pick up again," Lu laughed.

"You need to come home and work out of the main offices. We have others we can send in to check out the mines."

"Maybe one day. How's Carl?"

"We both know you don't give a shit about my husband, Lu. You don't have to pretend you care."

"I care whether or not he makes you happy, Mel. If I came back now, we'd just fight every time that bigot opened his mouth. Eventually, I'd hit him and the shit would really hit the fan."

"So, tell me Lu, you met anyone interesting around here?" Melissa asked.

"I'm not here to make friends," Lu said.

"I don't mean friends. I mean anyone you might be interested in...socially."

"I just got rid of my last social experiment. Not ready to start up somethin' new. Besides, I'll be leavin' here b'fore the first of the year."

"Wouldn't be the first time you dragged someone home with you. Remember that hot little chica you brought back from New Mexico?"

"Consuela? Yeah, she was one hot tamale all right. Damn near clawed my eyes out when I handed her that one-way bus ticket back home," Lu said with a laugh.

"Once she figured out you had more than a few pesos to rub together, she wasn't too happy." Melissa leaned forward and lowered her voice. "I think that little bitch even tried to seduce Carl."

Lu shook her head. "She wasn't that desperate!" Then she looked up at Melissa. "I'm sorry, Mel. I let my big mouth open before thinkin' again."

“No, you’re right.” Melissa took a deep breath and let it out. She rested the side of her face on her hand. “You know what’s really pathetic? The man knows how to yank my string. He’d make an excellent gigolo or something, but he’s about as faithful as a hound in heat.”

“And you still want to be with him?”

“Sex-wise, yeah. For the long haul, not so much anymore. I’m tired of pretending I don’t smell someone else’s perfume on his clothes when he comes home. It’s definitely an unhealthy relationship. He knows I don’t trust him, but doesn’t seem to give a shit. If I divorce him or vice-versa it could cost me a fortune. So I have to decide if it’s better to keep him around for an occasional fuck or just bite the bullet and kick him to the curb.”

“Didn’t Charlie insist he sign a pre-nup?”

Melisa shrugged. “He did, but there’s always a blood-sucking lawyer somewhere who might find a way around it, for fifty or sixty percent.”

Lu reached across the table and took Melissa’s hand. “I don’t like seein’ you so unhappy, Mel. If I ever catch him, you won’t have to worry about it because I will personally kick his ass.”

Melissa snorted. “That will certainly make him like you more.”

“He already considers me an unnatural lifeform, so there’s not much he can do to me. You’re the one I’m concerned about, sweetie. I learned a long time ago how to take care of myself.”

“Well, be careful. I think Hopewell knew I would be here today,” Melissa said. “He was way too calm about everything.”

“Maybe he had insider information.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it and unfortunately I had to tell Daddy last night that it could be Carl. I hope I’m wrong, but can’t think of anyone else who knew my last minute plans besides Daddy and Gussie and they wouldn’t tell anyone,” Melissa said with a smile. Then she frowned. “I’ll know when I get back from this trip, but I think Carl’s getting a little action on the side when I’m out of town.”

“I’m sorry, honey.”

“I shouldn’t have married his ass, but he wasn’t as obvious about it until after the wedding.”

“I know. And I know you can do better.”

Melissa laughed. “Maybe I should join your team.”

“Women cheat too.”

“Gussie told me about Rita leaving. I’m sorry.”

“It was good when we were both interested. She hated my job and I couldn’t stand her bitchin’ anymore.”

Melissa ran her hands through her hair. “Got anything for me?”

“Nothin’ solid until Thanksgivin’. I’ve arranged to work the night before the holiday. There won’t be anyone in the main office then, so I should be able to get into Hopewell’s office.”

“Well, be careful. He’s slicker’n Jimmy Swaggart.”

“You hungry? Food’s not bad here.”

“Sure. Breakfast is better than another quickie burger.”

Ninety minutes later, Lu held the restaurant door open for Melissa and slid an arm around her slender waist as she walked her to her car. Lu leaned around her to open the Suburban’s door. Melissa wrapped her arms around Lu’s shoulders and pulled her close. “I’ve missed having you around, Lu.”

Lu leaned back and laughed. “You just miss my scintillatin’ company.”

Melissa laughed back. “I bet that’s the biggest word you’ve used since you got here.”

“Probably right.”

“Any messages for Gussie or Dad?”

“Tell Mama I’ll be home soon and tell Charlie to expect my report after Thanksgivin’,”

Melissa stepped into her car and Lu leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. “Good to see you again, Sis,” she said. Lu closed the door and stood back as Melissa pulled away.

REGGIE HADN’T HAD a chance to speak to Lu much since the weekend they’d picnicked on the ridge, but it seemed like forever. She didn’t have a particular reason for being in town on a Saturday morning, but she’d been restless. Hallie skipped into the house and draped her body over Reggie’s shoulder as she tried to occupy her mind by reading a new book. However, she’d read the same paragraph three times, unable to concentrate.

“Mama, can we go to town today?” the girl asked.

“Got any money?” Reggie asked with a smile.

“No, but we can just look. Maybe there’s a sale at Miz Clara’s.” Hallie shrugged. “You said you was gonna make a rug for Lu. It could be a Christmas present from me and you,” Hallie’s eyes sparkled with childish excitement.

“Get cleaned up and we’ll go look,” Reggie agreed.

“I am cleaned up,” Hallie said.

“You’ve been playin’ with Chester, so go wash your face and hands. You look like a little piglet.”

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Now she walked with Hallie to their van in the parking lot between the Hawthorne Restaurant and Miss Clara’s Fabrics and Notions, trying to comprehend what she was seeing and attempting to understand why seeing Lu with the woman who’d inspected Brushy #3 the previous day upset her so much. What Lu did on her own time was none of Reggie’s business.

For reasons Reggie couldn’t fathom, jealousy reared its ugly head at the thought of Lu with the attractive blonde. When the woman talked, she tossed her thick hair aside and smiled at Lu. Finally, she hugged Lu and Lu kissed her. Reggie felt a niggling sense of loss, but didn’t know why as she took the bundles of remnants Hallie found to make the rug for Lu’s living room and stored them in the cargo area of the van. The earthy colors, dark green, rust, and tan, would mix well with a strip of navy blue intermingled throughout. After making sure Hallie was buckled into her seat, Reggie shifted the van into reverse and slowly backed out of the parking space as Lu walked to her motorcycle. Why should I care what Lu does privately, Reggie thought.

Chapter Thirteen

THE DAYS UNTIL Thanksgiving crept by for Lu. She hadn't seen or spoken to Reggie since she'd been reassigned to third shift. She still had over a month left before her assignment ended. She went home, showered, and fell into bed almost every morning when her shift was over.

She agreed to go to Gertie's a couple of times with the other miners and managed to pretend to get drunk both times. But she listened to them complain about their wives, their children, and the mine. In her reports to Charlie she listed everything she heard that involved the mine or its operation. Her measurements of the ceiling fissures indicated they had begun to widen significantly and she concluded there could be a collapse within the next year or two unless additional supports were put in place immediately.

So far the methane levels remained constant. But if there was a collapse anywhere along the eight miles of tunnels, dangerous levels of methane and carbon dioxide could be expected from newly exposed sections of the coal seam. Her final analysis was that Brushy #3 was a potential disaster waiting for the right set of circumstances to converge. To make Charlie feel better, she also concluded it was probable that every coal mine in the region was suffering from the same problems because of the make-up of the substrata.

She sent a recommendation to Charlie that he give all miners Thanksgiving off as a paid holiday. The third shift would work Thanksgiving Eve, but get a well-deserved day off to be with their families. The administrative staff was already scheduled to be off and the miners would appreciate the same consideration. When Lu arrived for her shift the night before Thanksgiving she was handed a flyer announcing her recommendation had been accepted. She and her fellow miners all seemed grateful and the shift went by quickly.

Lu left the mine as soon as possible after her shift Thanksgiving morning. She drove straight home, took a shower, and gobbled down a sandwich before stretching out for a long nap. She thought it was appropriate to have a turkey and cheese sandwich, accompanied by half of a can of jellied cranberries. She imagined her mother and Charlie, along with Melissa and her asshole husband, snoozing away after downing as much of the huge turkey Gussie always prepared, with all the trimmings. Sedated by the over-abundance of tryptophan in their digestive systems, she imagined them all in the midst of a nap. She turned over the resealable package her turkey came in and read the list of ingredients. Minimal tryptophan.

As she chewed the last bite of her sandwich she changed her clothing for something more apropos, considering her mission. Black jeans, black sweater over black biker boots topped off with a black leather jacket. The area around the mine should be relatively devoid of people since Hopewell had allowed everyone the entire day off. The only possible complication might be a security guard keeping an eye on the property. She pulled a black wool cap onto her head and left the cabin through the kitchen door. She checked her pockets for her digital camera. The light from a nearly full moon and a clear sky made navigation up the ridge a fairly easy task. She stopped to rub her face with her leather gloves. The cold air against her face had begun to sting.

She hated all the cloak-and-dagger shit Charlie had her doing. It would have been so much simpler to just drop in one day and take over Hopewell's office. Of course, if they didn't find anything, they would all look like top-drawer morons and there would be no reason to have Hopewell arrested for skimming money into his own pocket while endangering the lives of the miners. Charlie insisted he had to have the evidence in-hand before making a move against the mine superintendent. Charlie also suspected Hopewell had someone in the corporate offices who warned him of an impending invasion of his domain. Charlie was a crusty old guy, but Lu liked him, not that she'd had much of a choice after he married her mother. Even though Lu never stepped foot in corporate, Charlie trusted her as much as his own daughter.

When she crested the ridge she followed an old dog run path until she could look down at the huge open space below that made up the Brushy #3 complex. Although she'd scouted the ridge behind the mine several times, it was different at night. Halfway down the side of the ridge a tall barbed wire fence separated the mine's property from the land open to hunters and dog runners.

Hunters training their dogs often brought them onto the ridges at night to chase and tree game. Most of the time the dogs returned to their owners when they heard them blow a whistle. Nevertheless, a couple of weeks earlier she'd found a coonhound curled up in a tipped over rain barrel in her back yard, its feet raw and bloody from running. She'd picked him up and taken him to the local vet who recognized the dog and called his owner. She didn't think any of the hounds would attack her, but didn't want to be mistaken for the object of a hunt. Hopefully, she thought, everyone would be digging into left-overs and the dogs would be enjoying a night off.

She eased down the bank of the ridge, but didn't see the cluster of blackberry canes until she hit them and cursed under her breath as she worked them from her clothing. The thorns drew blood on her left cheek and on her hand. Her leather gloves were warm, but not thick enough to deflect a couple of thorns. When she reached the first fence, halfway down the slope of the ridge, she clipped the bottom two strands of barbed wire. She crawled through and pulled the wire back together temporarily. She loped sideways down the ridge, remaining in the deep shadows of the forest overlooking the mine until she caught her breath. If everything went right she would be scampering back up the ridge in less than an hour and no one would be the wiser.

She'd hated to use Reggie, but made up a reason to see her briefly after work the day before Thanksgiving, ostensibly to make a change in her W-4 form. While Reggie went to a file cabinet in another room to get the form, Lu unlocked the window into her office. Now she hoped Reggie wasn't in the habit of checking the window before leaving each day. As far as Lu knew, no one in the main office ever opened their windows. Too much dirt and coal dust floating around and getting on their paperwork.

A four-foot bank was cut into the ridge near the back of the office. She paused for a moment before climbing over the metal fence that separated the mine property from public property. Once past the fence, she sat down and scooted closer to the edge of the drop off and let her body drop silently to the ground behind the pre-fab building. Mentally she pictured where Reggie's office was located and pressed her body close to the building. When she reached the corner, she dropped quickly to her stomach and low-crawled beneath the building until she reached the edge closest to Reggie's office. She scanned the parking area and everything looked quiet.

She started to crawl out when she heard voices not too far away and crawfished into the shadows underneath the building. She watched as booted shoes walked along the side of the building and turned the corner to move along the back side. She would have to check for the watchman when she left. Just her luck that Hopewell had hired an eager beaver to work security. She waited a significant amount of time before moving again and silently yawned. Maybe there

had been tryptophan in her packaged turkey after all. Finally, she crawled from under the building and went to the window that should have been Reggie's office. She pushed up on the glass and it made a cracking sound as it released from the bottom of the window sill. As fast as she could, Lu hoisted her body into the window and closed it again.

It was darker inside than it had been outside and she paused to let her eyes adjust. She went to the office door and opened it a crack. There were no lights on in the outer offices other than the theater lights that ran along the baseboards. She stepped into the hallway and headed for Hopewell's office at the rear of the building. Charlie had sent her a set of master keys and she tried several before the door to Hopewell's office opened. She closed the door behind her and began looking in the file cabinets along the far wall. She didn't think he'd be stupid enough to hide anything in plain sight, but you never knew. She took a small flashlight from her coat pocket and turned it on, holding it between her teeth while she looked through one drawer after another. So far everything looked in order.

She pulled out the safety reports and took pictures of them, showing the safety drills the miners supposedly had every two or three months for the past year. The schedule showed the dates and two of them were supposed to have occurred since her date of employment, but hadn't. She sat down at Hopewell's desk and went through all the drawers until she came to the bottom one. It was locked. None of the master keys fit and she resorted to picking the lock. She took a small set of tools from an inside pocket in her jacket and worked at it until the drawer gave up. She shook her head. She definitely needed more practice picking locks.

She went through every file in the drawer, but there was nothing that caught her attention. As she looked around and pushed the drawer shut, the runner caught on something and she reached into the drawer to remove the obstacle. A manila folder was sticking up and catching the roller. She pulled everything in the drawer forward and reached for the folder. Then she noticed that the corner of the folder had fallen into a seam that ran along the back and length of the drawer. She removed everything and stacked it on the desk. She placed her index finger on the bottom of the drawer and ran it forward. She saw where the top of the drawer hit her arm. She took her arm out and placed it at the outside bottom of the drawer which was flush with the drawer face. There was at least a four- or five-inch difference.

She pushed against the bottom of the drawer, inside and out, but the drawer remained the same. She sat in the desk chair and ran her hands under the desk and along the sides. She felt a slight depression on the right inside part of the desk and shined her flashlight over the area. Inside the depression was a button, almost flush with the veneer of the desk. She pushed it and the bottom of the desk drawer dropped down. Inside was a set of ledgers, identical to the regular accounting books. She took them out and flipped open the first page. Bingo! It would take her the rest of the night to take pictures of both the official books and the doctored set. She decided to only take pictures of the last month or two. There were probably enough irregularities to warrant action.

Forty-five minutes later she replaced everything where she'd found it. She went quickly to Reggie's office and locked the window before returning to Hopewell's office. She closed and locked the door. Then she slid her hand between the slats of the blinds and unlocked his window.

She looked outside carefully before opening the window and lowering her body to the ground. She reached up and closed it. Half bent over, she ran to a low area in the bank behind the building and used her arms to pull her body onto the ragged edge. With one last glance, she began running toward the fence line.

A shot rang out and a sharp pain struck her left arm, causing her to stumble. Her body spun around, but didn't fall. She grabbed her arm and ran like the devil was after her. Getting shot was not part of the plan, she thought as she forced her body up the ridge and under the metal fence.

She dug deep and continued up the hill, zigzagging at an angle away from the mine property. Her arm felt like it was on fire, but it couldn't have been a very bad wound or she wouldn't still be running, right? She heard panting behind her. The person pursuing her must have found the grade a little steeper than it looked. She managed a smile and darted off to her right. She remembered a place along this side of the ridge from one of her earlier reconnoiters of the ridgeline. Ahead of her she saw the silhouette of an old tree that had once been struck by lightning. As long as nothing was hibernating inside, she would be fine.

Chapter Fourteen

LU HEARD A cracking sound before the earth beneath her feet suddenly dropped away. She fell awkwardly, landing on her back, and submerging in a pool of freezing water that tore her breath away. She struggled for a moment ignoring the pain in her arm as her head popped above the water and she gasped for air. She heard the sound of something scurrying inside the hole, then the rustling of leaves as someone ran nearby. She breathed through her nose with deep breaths to calm her body down. She felt a current pushing against her body as she began to drift. She treaded against the current and managed to locate a glow stick attached to her belt. She prayed it would still work after being submerged. She needed to get out of the water. Her arm hurt and she was tiring from fighting against the current. She snapped the glow stick and an eerie green glow filled the hole she'd fallen into.

She couldn't believe the size of the underground cavern. Her eyes opened widely when she saw the water running into a smaller opening, seemingly pouring into the blackness. God only knew how long the underground stream had been slowly washing the soil away leaving nothing more than a scab of dirt and moss. She'd been the lucky one to step on it and break through. She spotted a ledge along the underground river and tossed the glow stick onto it to free both hands. As she got closer to the edge of the water, she felt around for something — anything to grab. She was an experienced climber, but had never had to fight a river at the same time. A rock protruded from the ledge and she reached for it. She forced her arms through the numbing water as she gradually moved closer. The water current continued to push her closer to the menacing-looking hole.

She used what little strength she had left to reach for the rock resting inches above the water. It took every ounce of strength her arms could muster to drag her body out of the water and onto the narrow ledge along the edge of the subterranean stream. She took a minute to gather herself and get her breathing under control before checking the bullet graze to her right arm which was beginning to make its presence felt. She grabbed the glow stick and raised it over her head to examine the hole she'd dropped into. She estimated she'd fallen at least twenty feet. Even though she was shivering almost uncontrollably, landing in the water broke her fall and left her relatively unscathed.

She spotted a thick root protruding from the cavern wall not far from the opening, which had given way beneath her weight. If she could pull herself up on the root, she might be able to reach across to a second, smaller root and climb out. She looked at the roots poking from the walls of the sinkhole to find one or two she thought would hold her weight and let her get closer to the larger root.

Lu shivered against the cold and her teeth chattered. She worked her wet gloves from her hands and shoved them into her jacket pocket. She placed a foot on a root and bounced slightly to test whether it would hold her weight before reaching to her right to grab a second root. Her hand felt something soft and fuzzy moving over her fingers. That was all the encouragement she needed to jerk her hand away quickly. She hoped what she felt was only moss, but in her experience moss never moved. She held the glow stick out to look at the second root and

discovered a huge nest of Daddy Longlegs crawling over one another to resetttle. She knew the small-bodied spiders couldn't harm her, but she wasn't fond of any variety of spider. She shook her hand and slapped at her clothing as she changed her course to avoid their nest.

She didn't know how much time had passed until her hand reached the upper edge of the sinkhole and she felt around for something solid to grab. Slowly she managed to gain purchase with her feet and push her body more than halfway over the ragged lip of the hole. She was finally able to drag her legs onto solid ground again and flopped onto her back. Lu tried to catch her breath and shivered violently. In the moonlight she managed to locate the wires she'd cut to enter the mine property and crawled through and away from the area. Although she didn't know where the person hunting her was, she took off. She was forced to move slowly until she reached the top of the ridge. From there she saw an increase in activity at the mine and lights in the administrative offices flashing on. She made it down the ridge using trees for support.

The minute she reached the back deck of the cabin, she knew she wasn't alone, but was so cold she didn't care. She opened the back door and stumbled into the kitchen, peeling off her cold, wet clothes, which were plastered to her skin. Shaking uncontrollably, she walked naked through the cabin, her skin a light blue pallor, and huddled in front of the dying fire in her fireplace, poking the embers and stacking more wood on top.

"What the hell happened to you?" Reggie asked, grabbing a blanket from the back of the couch and wrapping it around Lu's shivering, naked body. Hallie stood in the doorway, gaping at Lu through wide eyes.

"F-f-fell into a-a-a s-s-sinkhole." Lu managed to rasp out. "Cc-cold."

"Hallie, heat up some water," Reggie instructed calmly. "I'll find her some dry clothes."

Gradually Lu began to feel warmer. She pulled the blanket down to examine the wound on her left arm. As far as she could tell, it wasn't much more than a graze and even though it would hurt like a sonuvabitch for a day or so, it wouldn't stop her from going to work the next evening. Chester moved closer and stretched out toward her, growling when he caught the scent of blood.

"You're bleedin'," Reggie said, pushing the hound away when she returned with a sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants.

"R-ran into a b-blackberry c-cane," Lu said.

"First aid kit's in the bathroom, right?"

Lu nodded and waited for Reggie to return. "Y-you should leave. I c-c-can take care of this," Lu said.

"You were at the mine tonight, weren't you?" Reggie asked as she used a damp washcloth to wipe the oozing blood from Lu's hand, face, and arm. She looked closely at Lu's arm. "This was caused by a bullet. You're the burglar the guard shot at."

Lu simply stared at Reggie for a moment. "C-can I trust you?" she finally asked as another shiver caused her whole body to shake.

Reggie nodded as she concentrated on cleaning and bandaging Lu's injuries.

"I did break into the mine offices, but, even though I can't tell you why, I had a good reason." She blinked hard, trying to control the shivering. "Y-you have to t-trust me."

Reggie washed the area around the gunshot wound and located a wet/dry bandage to cover it after she slathered it with an antibiotic ointment. She wrapped a plastic grocery bag around the wound and taped it down. "Keep this arm as dry as possible, but take a hot shower and wash your hair. I'll take care of things out here and make some coffee. Holler if you need me, okay?"

WHEN SHE HEARD water running in the bathroom, Reggie quickly removed everything from the pockets of Lu's clothing. She stuffed it all into a garbage bag, including Lu's leather jacket with the bullet hole in the left arm, and dropped it into a burn barrel for trash. She doused it with lighter fluid, then lit a match and watched everything go up in flames as she sat on the back stoop of the cabin and took a deep breath to calm her nerves. Hal-lie sat beside her mother on the stoop and leaned her head against Reggie's shoulder.

"Is Lu in trouble?" Hallie asked.

Reggie wrapped her arm around her daughter and stroked her back. "No. She just had an accident."

"But why are we burnin' her clothes?"

"They're ruined from the accident," Reggie lied. "She told me she didn't want to keep them anymore."

"But—"

"Why don't you go lay down on the couch, sweetie? You look tired and we'll be goin' home in a little bit."

THIS WAS HER last assignment for Charlie, Lu thought. She was getting too damn old for this double-oh-seven shit. She needed to settle down and go to work like everyone else. After all, she was a skilled mining engineer and there was a lot she could teach others about mining and minerals.

She'd been too cold to think about it earlier, but why the hell was Reggie there? Not long after Reggie's last visit to the cabin, someone shot at Lu. She didn't need to invite more trouble than she already had. Lu stepped onto the back porch and said, "What are you and Hallie doin' here?"

Reggie stopped and looked at her. "Just thought I'd visit a friend and stumbled into a lot more than I wanted to." Reggie said with a shrug.

"What's burnin'?"

"The clothes you was wearin' when you came home. Figured you wouldn't want to keep 'em 'round anymore."

"Good figurin'," Lu said. "Coffee's ready, if you want to join me for a cup."

"You should put some antibiotic cream on your face b'fore you go to bed or it's liable to get infected."

"I will. Now come back inside. Please?"

"Hallie's takin' a nap. Sure we won't be in the way?"

"Positive."

Once Reggie was settled on the couch with Hallie's head on her lap, Lu handed her a steaming mug of coffee. She sat carefully in the rocker, propping her feet on the coffee table.

"Did you have a good Thanksgivin'?" Lu asked.

"Better'n yours, apparently," Reggie said. "Sorry. It was okay. Mama insisted on invitin' Lawrence and his folks over. That was a little uncomfortable. Fortunately, he got called to the

mine due to the break-in. I really only stopped by to thank you for the terrarium in my office. It's beautiful. I love it."

"I'm glad," Lu said as she swallowed another sip of her coffee and could finally feel her insides beginning to warm.

Reggie smiled. "It reminds me of when I was a kid and ever-thin' was simpler and uncomplicated."

They sat quietly finishing their coffee until Reggie finally stood to take their cups into the kitchen. When she returned she gazed down at Lu. "Let me check your arm again b'fore I leave. Then you should get some rest. You really shouldn't go in tomorrow, you know."

Lu pushed the sleeve on her shirt up and leaned forward. "Have to. Too suspicious if I don't," she said.

Reggie peeled the bandage back and frowned. "I'll put more antiseptic ointment on it, but if it's still red like this tomorrow, stop by the mine infirmary and get the doc to give you a prescription for a stronger oral antibiotic. You can claim it's for the thorn scratches on your hand and face." As she applied the ointment to the wound, Reggie's hair fell down to cover the side of her face. She brushed it behind her ear, but it fell again a moment later. "Damn hair," she mumbled.

Lu reached up to push the hair back and rubbed it between her thumb and index finger. She could smell its fresh scent. "I like your hair," she breathed. "It's pretty."

Reggie turned slightly to look at Lu.

Lu leaned closer, drawn by the deep coolness of the light blue eyes staring into hers. With their lips millimeters away, she ran her fingers into Reggie's hair, and stroked her cheek with her thumb. "You're beautiful," she muttered huskily. "So beauti—" she started an instant before her lips would have touched Reggie's.

Reggie stood up quickly and looked around. "I...uh...I should go," she stammered. "Don't forget to see the doc tomorrow, okay." She coaxed Hallie awake, grabbed her jacket, and hurried out the side door without looking back.

LU ROLLED OVER in bed Friday morning and didn't want to get up. But she had to so no one would suspect anything because of her absence. The night before had been exhausting, especially after the adrenaline rush left her body. Then she had done an incredibly stupid thing by almost kissing Reggie. But she smelled so good. And her eyes were so alluring that she couldn't stop herself. Thank God one of them had the brains to stop anything else from happening. This was how Lu always found herself in trouble by becoming attracted to the wrong woman.

It would be a long shift, but she would be off over the weekend. She walked into the kitchen and prepared a carafe of coffee before making her way into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet lid and wrapped her arm in a fresh sterile bandage and taped the edges down. She carefully pulled an insulated top over her arm and rotated it to make sure the graze on her upper arm wouldn't bleed through. She felt like hell and could still feel the watery chill working its way out of her bones, but after swallowing a couple of aspirin, followed by a large bowl of hot oatmeal, she was reasonably confident she would make it through the next night of her new shift.

When Lu arrived at the mine to await the start of her shift, she saw a patrol car from the county sheriff's department still parked in front of the administrative offices. She did the best she

could to avoid the area. Occasionally, she could still feel the cold from the underground river as it swallowed her body and pushed her toward the black hole of the subterranean cavern. She shivered involuntarily at the thought of where all that water eventually came out, if it did. The roar of water falling made her wonder how deep into the earth the water flowed. She frowned and rubbed absently at the cut on her cheek. Her cheek and arm ached and she hoped neither would become infected. After her shift she would stop by to see the mine physician for an oral antibiotic as Reggie suggested. The evening seemed to drag by in slow motion and she couldn't wait for her shift to end. By the time she walked out of the mine a light dusting of snow covered everything and the dark clouds hanging low over the ridge threatened to dump another inch or two. Lu was exhausted and looking forward to a couple of days off in front of her fireplace.

A slap on Lu's injured arm caused her to wince. "How was your Thanksgivin'?" Goober boomed.

Lu rubbed her aching arm. "Best TV dinner I ever had," she said. "But cleanup was a cinch."

"Figured it'd be somethin' like that. Margo sent you a plate full of food for sort of an after-Thanksgivin' feast. I stored it in the mess hall fridge, so don't forget to pick it up before you head on home. Can't believe Gardner moved you to three, but they needed a good bolter to take Steve's spot."

"Thanks, Goober. And thank Margo for me."

Lu shuffled to the mess hall. A fresh cup of coffee sounded good for her drive home. The line wasn't very long yet and it should only take a few minutes to grab a coffee and pick up the food Goober left for her.

"How're you feelin' this mornin'?" a quiet voice asked from behind her. Lu turned and saw Reggie.

"Good. I'm good," Lu answered. "How 'bout yourself?"

"Actually, I'm confused. I don't know what happened last night."

"Nothin' happened last night." Lu moved forward in the line to get her coffee.

When the line paused again, Reggie whispered, "We need to discuss the nothin' that almost happened last night."

Lu turned and said, "Maybe you should drop by to pick up your guitar some day after work then."

"Yeah, I will. Maybe over the weekend when I have a little time."

Lawrence Treadway stepped behind Reggie and ran his hand down her back, letting it come to rest on her hip. "Hopewell needs you back in the office, Reg," he said as he glared at Lu.

Lu saw Reggie roll her eyes as she snapped, "I'll be back soon as I get my coffee."

"Hey, Ernie," Lawrence called out. "Two large cups of coffee and another one for Hopewell. We're kinda in a hurry here."

Ernie smiled and poured three large cups of coffee and handed them to Lawrence over the counter, ignoring Lu.

"You had a customer before us, Mama," Reggie scolded.

Ernie waved her hand dismissively. "She don't mind lettin' you and Lawrence get yours first so you can get on back to work."

"She just finished her shift and probably wants to get home. Her job is a lot harder than ours."

"It's okay. I'm sure mine will be next," Lu said, glancing at Ernie. "Right, Miz Kinlaw?"

Ernie picked up a carafe of coffee from the heating unit and poured a quick cup, slapped a lid on top and slid it to Lu. "There you go, Calder. On the house."

“Goober said he left a plate of food for me in your fridge,” Lu said.

A look of faux shock ran across Ernie’s face and she placed a hand on her ample chest. “That yours?”

Lu nodded, knowing she would never see whatever Goober left for her. “Yeah.”

“It wasn’t labeled and we was afraid it was bad so we tossed it,” Ernie said, vaguely concealing a smirk. Then she added, “Looked like it would’ve tasted real good, but I couldn’t take a chance on food poisonin’.”

“Appreciate that,” Lu said through gritted teeth before turning away and walking out of the mess hall. She slammed the door, but it popped open again, allowing the cold wind to enter the large room. She continued walking away as she heard Ernie’s voice hollering at her to return and close the damn door. Fuck that, shit!

“THAT WAS RUDE, Mama,” Reggie said.

“She’s a pervert. ‘Bout time everbody knew it,” Ernie snorted.

“She’s never done a damn thing to you. All she wants is a chance to show she’s as good a miner as anyone else. At least none of the miners’ wives have to worry about their husbands screwin’ ‘round.”

Lawrence began to back up, pulling Reggie away. Reggie jerked her arm away, refusing to leave the confrontation with her mother. “There’s others waitin’ to get their coffee, Reggie, honey,” he said in a low voice. “This ain’t the place to be arguin’ with your mama.”

Reggie looked up at him and knew he was right, but she felt the need to defend Lu for some reason she couldn’t articulate.

A brisk wind rolled across the mine parking lot, ruffling Lu’s hair slightly as she leaned against her truck and sipped the bitter coffee Ernie Kinlaw had given her. She watched Lawrence escort Reggie down the ramp toward the main offices. Lu dumped the coffee on the ground at her feet, opened the door of her truck, and backed out quickly, letting the tires spew up a cloud of dirt as she shifted into drive and sped away.

She suddenly missed her home in Colorado. In a few weeks, by Christmas, it would be almost completely snowed in. Charlie promised to look after it and drain the pipes. When she returned she could regain the solitude she craved. What was so great about having someone else around? Last winter she’d had Rita to cuddle against on cold nights, but no one had ever warmed her soul. She shook her head to dislodge her thoughts. It was stupid to dwell on things that couldn’t or wouldn’t change. As she gazed up to see the outline of the pines along the ridge, she wondered if her mood was only due to the melancholy nature of the area. It looked like she felt, cold, dark, and alone.

Chapter Fifteen

STILL ANGRY, LU drove carelessly along the curvy road. Other than the fact that Ernie Kinlaw was a total bitch, she didn't do anything Lu hadn't expected. She wasn't even mad about the loss of the food. Yeah, it would have tasted good, even reheated, but she had food at the cabin. It was indefinable, but Lu was just plain old mad.

She turned off the narrow road to her cabin and onto a slightly wider paved road that would take her closer to town. She crossed a wooden trestle over a stream and an arched bridge over the train tracks. She didn't have a destination in mind, but needed to drive until the anger left her. Ahead she saw the gravel parking area for Gertie's. For eight in the morning, there were a surprising number of trucks and motorcycles there, but she didn't recognize them. She pulled into a spot away from the entrance and jumped out, shoving her keys into her pocket. She needed a bath to scrub off the remaining coal dust and dirt, but it would have to wait. She pushed the front door open and dodged a couple of men as she strode purposefully to the bar. The same redhead, Gertie as it turned out, was standing behind the bar, chatting up a haggard looking man who looked as if he'd reached his limit an hour earlier.

Lu slapped her hand on the bar. "Hey! You got a payin' customer down here!" she said loudly.

Gertie eventually waddled toward Lu. "What'll it be, sunshine?"

"Whiskey. A double," Lu answered, throwing a ten on the bar. As soon as her drink appeared she picked it up and tossed it down her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited as the drink burned its way to her stomach. She sat the shot glass down forcefully and shoved it at Gertie. "Again," she said.

By the fourth shot Lu was beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol in her system. A young man walked up to her and dropped his arm over her shoulder. "Buy you another one, sweet thing?" he asked, his breath close to her ear.

"No, thanks. Hit the road, bubba," she muttered.

"No one should drink alone, baby." His hand dangled over her shoulder and his fingers extended toward her breast.

Lu turned and stared daggers at the clueless man. "You fuckin' deaf? Leave. Me. Alone."

"Or what, sugar? You gonna slap my face?"

Lu balled her right hand into a fist. "Nope," she said as she punched him in the face, causing blood to run from his nose.

The man grabbed his nose as a second man, apparently his friend, grabbed Lu by the shoulder and spun her around. Unfortunately, he wasn't expecting to be greeted by a fist that found his crotch, doubling him over in pain. The grin on Lu's face as he fell to his knees disappeared as a fist slammed into her jaw, sending her sprawling onto the floor. She shook her head and spat out a wad of blood. She brought her hands up, grinned, and prepared herself for the fight she was looking for. The fight she needed to burn off the rage simmering in her blood.

Before she could take a step forward, her arms were grabbed by another man who reeked of alcohol. "Hold on there, gal, b'fore you get into trouble," the man slurred.

"Thanks, mister," the man with the bloody nose said as he swung his fist and drove it into Lu's abdomen. She coughed and the man released her, but it was too late. The man whose balls she'd hit, joined in the fray, landing a blow that knocked her unconscious.

NEAR THE END of the day, Reggie picked up a stack of file folders from her desk and carried them into the front office. She laid them on top of a row of file cabinets, preparing to re-file them. The day had passed quickly and a quick glance at the clock told her another day was almost over. Nothing much ever changed at the mine, she thought as she pulled the first drawer open.

"Lookin' forward to the weekend?" Edith asked.

"I'm lookin' forward to a couple of days off," Reggie answered. "Got a few things I need to get done before winter really sets in. How 'bout you? Your kids comin' home?"

"Lord yeah. Hope we got room for 'em all," the older woman said. "Seems like someone's havin' another grandbaby ever year."

"You know you love fussin' over them babies, Edith," Reggie said with a laugh.

"That's a fact, but when they get older we might have to add more bedrooms to the house."

The main door into the building opened and a man bundled in a heavy coat and fur cap stepped inside, accompanied by a stiff, cold breeze.

"Shut that door," Edith ordered. She placed her hands on the counter to stop papers from blowing as the breeze threatened to send them flying. "If I have to re-stack these papers, I won't be happy."

The man grabbed the door and pulled it shut quickly before turning into the office.

"Ralph!" Edith said. "You was just here a couple of hours ago."

"I know, Edith, and believe me, I wouldn't be back now except the weather's supposed to get worse later. I found this letter for Reggie after I left earlier, stuck in the bottom of my bag," he said. "She has to sign for it. Came certified so I reckon it's important."

Reggie closed the file drawer she was working in and stepped to the counter. Ralph slid a clipboard over the countertop to her and fumbled in his coat pocket for a pen. She scribbled her name and took the envelope. She glanced at it and recognized the Virginia return address immediately. She pressed the envelope to her chest and took a deep breath before running her finger under the flap to open it. She unfolded and read the document as tears began forming in her eyes.

"Who's Jacqueline Frazier?" Edith asked, reading over Reggie's shoulder.

"An old friend," Reggie sniffed. "She's been sick a long time."

"I'm so sorry, honey," Edith said, rubbing a hand down Reggie's back.

"Thanks, Edith." Reggie folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope. "After I file the rest of these folders, do you mind if I go on home a little early? I should call her family with my condolences."

"Of course not," Edith said. "Nothin' much goin' on 'round here anyways."

Half an hour later, Reggie lowered her head against the cold wind and made her way to her van. She allowed it to idle long enough for the heater to start putting out tepid warmth before backing up and leaving the employee parking area. A mile or so from the mine, she pulled to the

side of the road and let the tears she'd been holding back flow freely. She rested her head on the steering wheel and sobbed. Jac was gone. Her only consolations were her memories and the knowledge that Jac was finally at peace.

Reggie wiped her tears away with her hands before shifting the van back into drive and pulling back onto the road and driving home to mourn her loss alone. Hallie would never know her other mother. She would never be totally accepted by Reggie's mother or know her other grandparents.

When she brought the van to a stop in the open shelter next to her house, Reggie slowly slid from behind the steering wheel. Unexpectedly, her knees buckled slightly and it took her a moment to regain her equilibrium. She unlocked the front door and wandered through the empty home gathering her thoughts. She still had a couple of hours before Hallie arrived home from school. She made her way into her bedroom and changed into a more comfortable pair of faded old light blue jeans. She pulled a dark blue University of Kentucky sweatshirt over her head and slipped into pair of warm house shoes. She knelt next to her bed and reached under it to pull out a locked, fireproof box that held her most important papers.

She sat on the bed and crossed her legs beneath her, then unlocked the metal box and flipped the lid up. The last paperwork she'd secured in the box lay on top. She removed it and unfolded it. She smiled as she gazed at Hallie's birth certificate. Despite her mother's disapproval, Reggie had fallen in love with the infant the instant she'd seen her. She belonged to her and Jac. She would never give her up. A small stack of pictures of her holding Hallie, mostly taken by nurses or Gardner, lay under the birth certificate. Even though it wasn't genetically possible, there were many things about Hallie that reminded Reggie of Jac. She was the child Jac wanted more than anything. Jac would have loved the girl's seemingly insatiable curiosity. She wished Jac could have met their daughter, their miracle child.

Reggie picked up the next folded piece of paper and took a deep breath. She reclined against a pillow and pressed the paper against her lips, kissing it tenderly as she opened her mind to allow her memories to take over her thoughts.

She and Jac flew to Boston over their spring break in early April 2006 for Jac's face-to-face interview. They spent most of the day touring the small campus. The next day they rented a vehicle and looked at a few small houses for rent within walking or bicycle distance of the campus. By the fourth day, they were married. In two months they would be settling down into the life they'd been planning for the last two years. It should have been a dream come true.

A smile curled Reggie's lips when she picked up the marriage certificate and ran her fingers over the ornate letters that curved over the top of the paper as she remembered their first night together as a married couple. Jac had been unusually nervous as they prepared for bed. It was so unlike her.

"Already having second thoughts?" Reggie asked as she snuggled against Jac's side.

"Never," Jac answered, kissing Reggie's forehead.

"Then what's wrong, sweetheart?" Reggie pressed.

"You want a family, don't you?"

Reggie turned to rest on her elbows and looked at Jac. "We've already talked about that, Jac. You know I do. I want lots of babies that are yours and mine. Little Fraziers crawling everywhere that you can teach about the beauty of math and I can sing to sleep every night."

"I love you, Reg," Jac whispered. "I want to give you those babies, but I'll need a little help."

"We'll find a way, honey."

Jac threw the bedcovers back and got up. She went to the small refrigerator in their room and took something out. "I asked around and might have found our answer, if you're willing to try it," she said as she returned to bed, holding a clear plastic syringe.

"What the hell is that?" Reggie asked.

"It's one of those things you use to give babies medication. I read up on it before we left to come up here."

"I don't need any medication, Jac," Reggie said with a frown.

"I know, but I had a friend jack off so I could fill this syringe and inject it into you. He's a really nice guy."

"What guy!?" Reggie said loudly.

"Calm down, baby," Jac shushed. "He's safe and I trust him. We might have to try a few times, but the theory is good."

"Can't I just go to a doctor or something?"

"Not until we're back here. Nobody back in Kentucky would consider it. And we can't afford a doctor right now."

LU OPENED HER eyes and gazed up at what seemed to be stars falling from a dark gray sky and landing on her face. Her body was curled into a tight ball, apparently in an attempt to stay warm. It wasn't working. She grunted and forced her body to uncurl, finally managing to stand on wobbly legs. How long had she been there? She looked around and noticed that hers was the only vehicle remaining in the parking lot. She shivered even though she was still wearing her lined coat. Those assholes! They'd dumped her in the parking lot and left her there! She gingerly brought her cold hand up and touched her face. Nothing felt broken, but she was positive there would be bruises by morning. Her ribs were sore as she made her way to her truck and opened the driver's door after two or three tries. She reached into her coat pocket and withdrew a bent cigarette. She stuck it between her lips and lit it with a shaking hand. She turned the key in the ignition and took a long drag while she waited for the truck to warm a little.

She looked at the clock on her dash. It was that dark, gloomy time of day when you couldn't tell whether it was morning or evening. Her head felt a little fuzzy from the shots she'd had, but most of it had worn off while she was unconscious. Her stomach had a sour feeling and, although she'd never eaten any, her mouth tasted like what she imagined road kill might taste like.

She turned into the drive to her cabin and just made the turn into the final curve when she stopped. A familiar blue van blocked her way. She opened the door with a pop and slid out until her feet landed on the gravel drive. She reached back inside and grabbed her lunch bucket before slowly making her way along the passenger side of the van. She peered into the window, but didn't see anyone. She turned in a circle. Then she saw what looked like footprints in the snow along the walk leading to the back of the cabin.

"Reggie?" Lu called out. It was freezing and snow had begun falling in earnest from the gray-black clouds overhead. Surely Reggie hadn't been foolish enough to wait out in the cold for Lu to arrive home. Lu cursed herself for stopping at Gertie's when Reggie was possibly freezing to death somewhere nearby. "Reggie!" she tried again as she ran around the side of the cabin and onto the back deck. Reggie was lying face down on the deck, partially covered with snow. Lu dropped to her knees beside her and rolled her onto her back. "No, no, no, no," Lu muttered. She hurriedly unlocked the back door and flipped on a light before returning to Reggie. She saw a

bluish lump on Reggie's forehead as she lifted her into her arms and carried her inside. Lu placed her on the couch and pushed it closer to the fireplace before quickly starting a fire.

Lu unbuttoned her heavy coat and pulled it off. She removed her gloves and let her warm hands touch Reggie's cold cheeks. She pulled Reggie up and removed her parka. She grabbed a quilt from the back of the couch and held it up in front of the now-blazing fire to warm it. She ran a hand over the material, satisfied that the quilt would help warm Reggie's chilled body. She placed it carefully over the unconscious woman and tucked it close to her body.

Lu prepared coffee and heated water for tea. She heard a groan from the living room and rushed to the couch. Reggie brought a hand up and felt the knot on her head. "Ow," she breathed.

Lu pulled her up and wrapped her arms around her. "Thank, God, you're all right, baby."
"I slipped."

"What are you doin' here? You should be home under a warm blanket."

Reggie blinked away tears. "Why weren't you here?"

"Rough shift and I...uh...I had something I needed to do on the way home," Lu lied.

"Well, it took you damn long enough," Reggie grouched.

"I would've been here if I'd known you were comin' over," Lu said as she swept Reggie's hair away from her face and examined the bluish knot on her forehead.

"I came for my guitar," Reggie said. "You told me to come after work."

"I would've brought it to you."

"Ow," Reggie said again as a frown formed on her forehead. "Is it bad?"

Lu shook her head and offered a smile. "Just a goose egg."

"Lovely. Help me up and I'll head on home."

"It's gettin' late. Wait until you're warmed up. You still look a little shaky. Where's Hallie?"

"Spendin' the night with Goober's girls," she said with a grunt.

Lu heard the kettle beginning to whistle. "Coffee or tea?"

"Whatever, as long as it's hot," Reggie said, pulling the quilt closer around her body.

"I'll throw another log on the fire then get your tea. It should help you sleep."

"Sorry if I scared you, Lu."

"Sorry I wasn't here when you needed me." She raised her hand, but stopped before touching Reggie's cheek. "I'll be right back," she said as she quickly stood and fisted her hand. "I'm never there when someone who matters needs me."

She returned a few minutes later and set a cup of tea on a table near Reggie before sitting in the rocker she'd put together. They sipped their drinks silently for several minutes.

"What happened to your face this time?" Reggie asked.

Lu shrugged. "Nothin' serious. Ran into somethin'."

"Whose fist was it?" Reggie smiled as she looked at Lu over the rim of her cup.

"What makes you think that?" Lu asked defensively.

"Because I've seen my fair share of fist fights. Does it hurt?"

"Not any more than that bump on your head, probably."

"I'll leave in a few minutes, soon as I warm up," Reggie said with a shiver. "Why don't you shower to get the coal dust off you?"

"Why did you really come over, Reggie?"

Reggie shrugged. "Just been a rough day and I needed someone friendly to talk to, I guess." She smiled at Lu. "Go on and get cleaned up."

Lu nodded and pushed her body up. She glanced back into the living room as she carried fresh clothes into the bathroom. Standing under the hot water, she examined a few places on her

body that might turn into nice bruises in a day or two and scrubbed the coal dust from her face. It burned a little around a couple of cuts, but was tolerable.

By the time she dressed and left the bathroom, Reggie was dozing peacefully, still wrapped in the quilt from the couch. Lu smiled at the relaxed look on her face. The lump on her forehead looked smaller and Lu was sure it would leave nothing worse than a small bruise. She could get used to coming home each evening and finding Reggie there. Back home, in Colorado, she might hook up the horses and bundle Reggie up for a sleigh ride through the falling snow. But this wasn't Colorado, she frowned. This was just another temporary assignment.

Lu carried her cup into the kitchen, along with Reggie's. She rinsed them out and grasped the edge of the counter tightly in an attempt to distract her straying mind.

A voice behind her asked, "Are you all right?" A warm hand touched her back and felt like a brand burning into her skin through her shirt.

Lu nodded and took a deep breath to compose herself before she turned. She didn't expect Reggie to be standing quite so close. Her impossibly light blue eyes seemed to look into Lu's soul. Lu brushed a strand of silken hair, the color of golden chestnuts, away from Reggie's face and saw those perfect, full lips so close. Too close. Lu's eyes begged for acceptance as she leaned down but, diverted the direction of her lips at the last moment, pressing them softly against Reggie's forehead.

"Thought you were sleepin'," she said.

Staring at Lu, Reggie shook her head and smiled. "I was feelin' warm and safe and just thinkin'," she said. "I felt you lookin' at me." When Lu opened her mouth to deny it, Reggie added, "I liked it." Her eyes shifted away shyly. "I liked it...alot. I'm sorry. I should get goin'."

Lu reached out and grabbed her arm. "Stay. Please," she managed around the lump growing in her throat, threatening to choke her. She raised her hand and caressed the side of Reggie's face, her thumb stroking her cheek. "Don't leave," she pleaded as she lowered her lips to tentatively kiss Reggie.

A low moan escaped Reggie's throat as she pressed against Lu to deepen the kiss. A feeling of softness and desire swept through Lu's body as her tongue fought with Reggie's to explore the warmth of her mouth. Lu's hand cradled the back of Reggie's head and she couldn't seem to get enough of her.

When Reggie finally pulled away, Lu could see tears shimmering in her eyes. But there was something else in Reggie's light blue eyes Lu couldn't identify. "I need you more than you know," Reggie said huskily.

Their lips came together again in an all-encompassing kiss as Lu slipped her hands beneath Reggie's sweatshirt and slid them up her abdomen to knead the soft, pliant breasts beneath her silky bra. Reggie's fingers found their way into Lu's hair and she tilted her head, offering her neck to Lu's searching mouth.

"Oh, yes," Reggie breathed. "Feels so good."

When Lu felt Reggie's pulse beating under her lips, she quickly lifted Reggie into her arms and carried her toward the bedroom. "Tell me what you need," she whispered as she gently placed Reggie's body on the bed.

"I need to be held and touched. Please touch me," Reggie said as she pulled Lu down beside her and rolled into her arms. "Let me hold and touch you, too," she said, snuggling closer, dropping light kisses over Lu's neck and shoulder as she stroked a hand down her arm and over her waist.

Lu shifted her hips to face Reggie. She ran her fingers down Reggie's face and followed them with soft kisses, watching a smile work its way across her lips. They parted slightly as Lu kissed along the edge of Reggie's mouth. "I want you so much, Reg," she whispered.

"I'm right here, baby," Reggie said.

"Bein' close to you like this is drivin' me crazy."

Lu's hand drifted down Reggie's body and pushed her sweatshirt up to reveal her abdomen. She kissed the exposed skin softly as her hand slid over Reggie's waist to embrace her. Then she lowered her head to pillow it on the softness beneath her and took a deep breath, inhaling Reggie's scent. "You smell so good," she said as her thumb lightly stroked over the warm flesh along Reggie's waist.

Reggie brought a hand up and ran her fingers through Lu's hair. Lu sighed at the touch. She couldn't remember ever feeling so contented and closed her eyes.

"What are you thinkin'?" Reggie asked.

Lu raised her head to look at Reggie and smiled. "How good I feel when I'm with you," she said.

"C'mere," Reggie said, inviting Lu into her arms.

Lu pushed herself up to nestle against Reggie's shoulder. Reggie kissed the top of Lu's head before cupping her chin and tilting Lu's head up to look at her. She leaned down and covered Lu's lips in a tender kiss, her tongue exploring freely. Lu responded by drawing Reggie into a deeper kiss that seemed to go on forever before Reggie pulled away slightly.

"Please, don't stop, baby," Lu said as Reggie gazed down at her.

Reggie sat up and rolled Lu onto her back, straddling her hips, and releasing the top button on her shirt, stopping to lean down and kiss the newly exposed skin before opening the next button. When she undid the last button, she pushed the material away to reveal the small breasts beneath. "Beautiful," she breathed. Then she encircled Lu's head with her arms to kiss her hungrily, eliciting a groan when she broke the kiss and palmed the small breasts as she kissed down Lu's throat toward her chest. Lu's body twitched as the heat of Reggie's mouth covered her breast and teased its tightened nipple for a moment before moving to greet its twin.

Suddenly, Reggie became a woman possessed as she claimed Lu's body and touched it everywhere. She pulled off her sweatshirt and shook her head, sending her hair cascading over her shoulders, creating a wild look that stoked the fire of desire in Lu's belly. She forced her body up and took Reggie in her arms to unclasp the bra covering her breasts and dragged it down her arms and away from her body. She buried her face between Reggie's breasts as her hands ran up the smooth skin of her back.

Reggie pushed Lu back down and leaned forward, resting her weight on her arms. Her breasts hung above Lu, teasing her with the need to taste them, to fill her mouth with them. She pressed her hands against Reggie's back and brought the tantalizing sight closer. When her tongue flicked across a nipple, Reggie groaned, "Oh God, yes." When Lu drew the softness into her mouth and caressed it with her lips and tongue, Reggie's hips began a slow undulation against Lu's crotch.

Lu flipped Reggie over and pressed her thigh between Reggie's legs. She struggled to control herself and please Reggie, but she wanted her so much the pulsing in her clitoris was painful. She could smell the pungent aroma of Reggie's arousal, could feel her beginning to let go as her fingers dug into Lu's back, clinging to her as she rode against Lu's thigh.

"I need...I need to feel you, baby," Reggie gasped. "Oh God, please let me feel you."

Lu sat back on her heels and quickly unfastened her jeans and pushed them down. She was distracted as Reggie reached up to stroke her hands down Lu's body while she fought to free herself from the denim that clung to her sweaty body. She finally kicked them off and unzipped Reggie's pants. She pushed them over her hips and down Reggie's legs until they both lay naked. Lu bent over to inhale the heady essence of Reggie's arousal. She glanced up to see Reggie's hazy, hooded blue eyes before dipping her tongue into the glistening wetness between Reggie's legs. She hummed with satisfaction as she slowly dragged the flat of her tongue over the length of Reggie's sex. Reggie's response was immediate as she moved her hips against Lu's mouth, seeking closer contact as her pleasure grew.

"Make me feel alive again," Reggie moaned. "It's been so long, baby."

When Lu entered her, Reggie grasped the bedcovers in her fists and threw her head back. Lu could feel Reggie's muscle walls relax and open to allow her to penetrate as fully as possible before they clenched again to squeeze around her fingers tightly. Reggie's muscles clasped and released with each stroke of Lu's hand and she panted to stave off the inevitable. Finally, her body stiffened and collapsed against the bed, fumbling to push Lu's hand away. "Enough," she mumbled. "Tired, but so good."

Lu crawled up next to Reggie and kissed her before pulling her into her arms.

Lu fell into a dreamless sleep holding Reggie in her arms. She didn't know what time it was when she was awakened by a moist, tingling sensation on her breast. She raised her hand and buried it in soft silky hair hovering over her. "God, you're so beautiful," she groaned. A hand ran down her thigh and fingers probed into her center, causing her hips to rise. "Damn, baby," she muttered, feeling her body react to the teasing touches.

"You like that?" Reggie asked as she stroked the length of Lu's twitching clit.

"Oh, yeah," Lu managed as she dug her heels into the mattress.

"Try not to come."

Lu barked out a laugh. "I'm ready to explode right now."

"Wimp," Reggie teased, her fingers brushing over the engorged nerve bundle again.

"That's so not fair," Lu groaned again as her body jumped.

"It's what separates real women from the girls. I have to know if you have stayin' power. I don't want a lightweight."

"You didn't last very long earlier," Lu said.

"That's because you were so good and I wanted it so much. I like a gentle lover... sometimes," Reggie said with a seductive grin.

"You didn't give me a chance to...," Lu started when Reggie squeezed her clit between her fingers. "Oh, shit. I'm right there, baby. So damn close. Please!" Her hips bucked and she was clearly losing the fight.

"Oh, all right," Reggie huffed. She plunged her head between Lu's legs and began sucking and licking as Lu thrashed against her mouth.

"Harder, baby!" Lu cried out, twisting to get away. But Reggie held her tightly in place as her tongue alternated between thrusting into Lu's center and swiping over her clit.

At last Lu's body stiffened and she hollered as release tore through her body. Reggie gently kissed Lu's sex creating a half dozen spasms that left her limp and sweaty. Reggie's mouth sliding over her breast and nipple made her want to beg for mercy. She pulled Reggie up and kissed her breathlessly. Reggie curled against Lu and sighed.

"God, baby. Damn," Lu said breathlessly as she caressed Reggie's head to drop a kiss on her temple. "I'm not sure I can move. No one's ever made me come like that b'fore."

“My pleasure,” Reggie mumbled against Lu’s shoulder.

Gradually, Lu shifted her body to hover over Reggie, holding herself up on her forearms. She lowered her mouth to cover Reggie’s and kissed her slowly. Then she moved her mouth to Reggie’s neck, nipping at the tender skin. Reggie responded and raked her nails down Lu’s sides.

“What are you doin’?” Reggie asked.

“Showin’ you I’m not a lightweight,” Lu responded between nips.

Reggie’s laugh was stopped as Lu kissed her and began exploring her body again.

Lu rested her forehead on Reggie’s mound and inhaled deeply. “You smell so damn good, Reg,” she murmured. She stroked Reggie lightly with her tongue, eliciting a moan. “And you taste even better.” Lu wanted her so much and fought to restrain herself from continuing too quickly. She wanted to slowly give Reggie the pleasure she needed.

LU SLAPPED AT the alarm that awakened her and stretched. She rubbed her face and turned her head, smiling at the sight of tousled chestnut hair covering the pillow next to her. Memories of the night before crept into her mind. She smiled and leaned over to gently kiss the soft, white shoulder peeking from beneath the bedcover. Reggie mumbled and repositioned her head.

Lu carefully brushed hair away from Reggie’s face. She was even more beautiful than she had been the night before. She remembered the look of wild abandon on Reggie’s face as she succumbed to Lu’s touches and the passion they’d awakened. Quietly, Lu slipped out of bed and dressed in the dimly lit room. The snow stopped during the night and now an undisturbed white blanket covered everything. She pulled the bedroom door closed behind her and prepared a fresh pot of coffee before taking bacon and eggs from the refrigerator. Her shift wouldn’t begin until three, but she would need to awaken Reggie soon.

“Lu!” she heard Reggie call out. She turned the eye on the stove off and pushed the door leading to her bedroom open. Reggie was propped up on her elbows with the bedcovers pulled almost to her neck. She didn’t move away when Lu crossed the room, sat on the edge of the bed, and leaned down to kiss her softly.

“Sweet Jesus. You’re beautiful,” Lu whispered.

Reggie cleared her throat. She looked up and said, “Thank you, but it won’t be pretty if I don’t get to the bathroom soon. Do you have a shirt I can borrow?”

“Oh, yeah,” Lu said. “Of course.” She went to the little dresser and pulled out a white t-shirt. Reggie took it and quickly pulled it over her head and down her naked body. While Reggie relieved her bladder with a contented sigh, Lu took a new toothbrush from the medicine cabinet and placed it on the side of the sink. “Breakfast will be ready in a little bit,” she said. “Yell if you need anythin’ else.”

“Can I use your hairbrush?”

“Sure, but I kinda like that wild woman look on you.” Lu laughed as she left Reggie alone.

Fifteen minutes later, Reggie opened the bathroom door and came out, followed by the steam from the shower.

Reggie stood behind Lu and wrapped her arms around her waist. “Thank you,” she muttered.

“For what?”

“For makin’ me feel alive again for the first time in a while. I needed that.”

Lu placed eggs and bacon on a plate and added two slices of toast. She prepared a second plate and carried everything to the table before sitting down. After she chewed and swallowed the first bite, she looked at Reggie, who suddenly looked uncomfortable and unsure. "We all have control over some things in our lives Reggie. And others we don't. All we can really do is what we think is best for us at the time and live with it if it doesn't work out. About last night..." Lu stopped and shrugged. "I wanted to make love to you. I don't have any regrets and hope you don't either."

"I don't," Reggie said, staring down at her plate.

"Good." Lu said. She was unsure what to say. Reggie had been gentle and funny when she touched Lu. She was infectiously playful, yet giving.

Reggie rested her chin on her hand. "For my own reasons, I haven't allowed anyone to touch me, or touched anyone else, in ten years."

The memory of Reggie arching into her, seeking her touch, was something Lu would never forget. Reggie's body reacted to a patient and gentle touch. If Lu had given her that, she was glad. "We all have secrets," Lu said, reaching across the table to take Reggie's warm hand. "Maybe I'll tell you mine one of these days."

"We need to talk," Reggie said in a subdued voice as she squeezed Lu's hand, stood, and turned toward the living room. Lu waited for Reggie to get comfortable before sitting next to her. Reggie took her hand once again and squeezed it lightly.

"There's things you don't know about me, Lu. Things no one knows." She glanced at Lu and took a deep breath, shifting slightly to face Lu.

"You don't need to tell me anythin', Reggie," Lu said softly. "I don't care."

There were tears in Reggie's eyes when she looked at Lu, frowning as she tried to gather her thoughts. Her shoulder purse was on the end table next to the couch. She opened it and stuck her hand inside to draw out a folded sheet of paper. She ran her fingers over the paper before handing it to Lu. "I got this yesterday," she said softly. "I...I came here last night because I was upset."

Lu opened the sheet and glanced over it. "Who's Jacqueline Frazier?"

When Reggie looked up, tears fell to her cheeks. "My wife," she answered.

"No one else knows?"

"Only Jac's parents, but they wouldn't accept it. I see her every year, but stopped taking Hallie when she was two. thought it was better Hallie didn't see her again after that."

Lu took a deep breath and blew it out. She handed the paper back to Reggie. "Canada?" she asked.

Reggie shook her head and wiped her eyes with her hands. "Massachusetts. Ten years ago. I miss her so much. When I found out she was gone, I needed someone I could talk to." She rubbed her fingers against her forehead until she collected herself. "You remind me of her. You don't look like her or anythin', but you're just as confident and sure of who you are as she was. I needed that again."

Lu frowned and felt a bubble of anger and disappointment rise inside. Reggie had used her as a substitute for another woman. "So when you made love to me last night you were just pretendin' I was her?"

"No!" Reggie flared.

"Then why?"

"Because I was so damn tired of bein' alone," Reggie muttered. "I needed to feel close to someone again."

Lu readjusted her body slightly and drew the brunette beauty into her arms. She inhaled the scent of Reggie's skin. She let her fingers slip down to Reggie's neck to feel the rapid fluttering of her pulse against the pads of her fingers and dropped small kisses around her throat. The pulse beneath her fingers quickened. Lu fought every urge her body was demanding. She should be mad as hell for allowing herself to be used. Was this how the women she'd made love to felt when she distanced herself from them? She lifted her head and the sight only inches away sapped her resolve. She wanted Reggie, just as she had from the first time she'd seen her. She kissed the sides of Reggie's mouth and saw her lips part slightly. She pressed their lips together for a moment, asking permission to enter. Reggie ran a hand through Lu's hair as her lips separated to allow Lu inside. Slowly, Lu's tongue stroked the sides of Reggie's and tenderly explored her mouth. Her arms tightened around Reggie and she lowered her hand to Reggie's ribcage as her anger melted away. She deepened the contact between them, struggling to temper her desires. Reggie broke the kiss and moved her mouth to Lu's neck, pressing her searching mouth firmly against Lu's flesh. "Oh God, Lu," she sniffed. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Tell me about her," Lu said quietly.

Reggie leaned back on the couch and brushed her hair back with her hands. "I barely know where to start," she said. "We met when I was a freshman at UK and she was a graduate student. We fell in love and got married near the end of my senior year when we flew to Massachusetts for an interview she had at a small college there. The day we flew back to Lexington, we were drivin' home when we were hit by another car whose driver fell asleep and drove into our lane. I was hurt pretty bad, but Jac only hit her head on the side window. I don't remember too much, but was told she collapsed at the hospital." Reggie shook her head. "She never woke up again. Her parents drove down from Virginia and had her transferred to a place there. After I got out of the hospital, I tried to see her, but they left orders with the staff at the care center that I wasn't to be allowed in."

"Did they know you were married?" Lu asked as she massaged Reggie's neck.

"They knew, but Virginia wouldn't recognize the marriage back then. A month or two later, I found out I was pregnant. Honestly, it was a miracle and I had to let Jac know, thinkin' she'd eventually come out of her coma. So I drove to Virginia, showed them our marriage license, but was turned away. Finally, a nurse who worked the night shift told me to come back late at night and she'd sneak me in." As Reggie told the story, it was clear how very much she'd loved Jac. It was a kind of love Lu had never known.

"When I walked into Jac's room, she looked like she always did when she was sleepin'. She didn't look hurt at all. I kissed her, but there was no reaction. I stayed the rest of the night, holdin' her hand, and told her about our baby. We were gonna be the family she wanted. I begged her to wake up. I took her hand and put it on my belly, promisin' her I would take care of our baby until she could walk out of there and be with us again. But she never would." Reggie sniffed and Lu handed her a tissue.

"I took Hallie with me after she was born and the next couple of years. I told her who Jac was and why we were there, but I know she didn't understand any of it. I've visited alone every year after that."

"Where does your family think you go every year?"

"To visit a friend from college," Reggie answered with a shrug. "I found a daycare near the center where Jac was that stayed open all night for Hallie and was back before she woke up."

"You were afraid."

Reggie frowned. "I was and maybe I still am. I couldn't do it alone. What would you do if your family rejected you?"

"I didn't think much about it. They would either accept me or not, but I knew I couldn't live a lie, afraid all the time. It was no way to live."

"I wish I could have been as brave as you."

"You had a child to protect, so don't beat yourself up about it."

"I'm so tired now," Reggie said as she scooted down to rest her head on Lu's lap.

Chapter Sixteen

ERNIE SLAPPED HER son's arm to wake him up. "Get up, boy," she snapped. "Lawrence is here lookin' for Reggie."

"It's Saturday. She's probably runnin' errands or somethin'," he mumbled as he attempted to burrow beneath his blankets again.

Ernie shuffled down the wooden floors to the kitchen. She poured coffee into an old mug with a crack in it and carried it into the front room. Lawrence stood staring out the front window and she handed him the mug. "I'll be fixin' breakfast soon as Gardner gets up," she said. "You stayin', Lawrence."

"Not until I find Reggie. She ain't at her place and I thought she might be over here."

"She took Hallie to spend the night with Goober's girls last night," Gardner said as he came into the room, rubbing his face to wake up. "Maybe she's there pickin' her up."

Ernie grabbed the phone and dialed Goober's number. She spoke to someone quietly before hanging up. "They ain't seen her today, but she told them she was going to visit that Calder woman after she dropped the girl off."

Lawrence rubbed his face and the muscle along his jaw bunched up. He finished his coffee and thanked Ernie before leaving and walking quickly to his truck. As he peeled out of the drive, gravel spewed from beneath his tires.

Ernie watched Lawrence leave and muttered to herself, "Maybe he'll take care of that Calder woman once and for all."

LAWRENCE LET THE truck glide down the far side of the ridge, gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white, and took a fork in the road that led into the next valley. Reggie had been humiliating him since that Calder woman arrived, but no more. Reggie was his!

Taylor Valley was on the other side of the ridge from Brushy #3, the road was reasonably clear. He had only been to Calder's place once, but it had been dark then. He was beginning to think Ernie was wrong and Reggie hadn't come this way when he spotted her van. He had already passed the drive and braked. He didn't see anything coming up behind him and backed up. He swung the truck into the drive and stopped behind Lu's truck.

There was a thin line of white and gray smoke coming from the chimney as he stepped out and pushed the door closed.

He followed the gravel path and walked quietly up the front steps. Before knocking he looked into a front window. Calder was on the couch and looked like she was sleeping. And there was Reggie, her head lying in Calder's lap, her back to the window, and her arm snuggled around Calder's waist. Anger rolled through him and he stepped back, bringing his foot up, and slamming it into the door.

REGGIE NEARLY FELL off the couch, the loud noise jarring her awake. She was barely able to move out of the way before Lawrence grabbed Lu by the front of her sweatshirt and jerked her off the couch.

“Get your filthy, fuckin’ hands off her!” Lawrence raged. He slammed her against the wall. She grabbed the back of her head and pushed away from the wall, preparing to meet his attack. She managed to deliver a solid blow to his jaw that staggered him before Reggie stepped between them.

“Lawrence!” Reggie screamed. “Stop it! Stop!”

“Get out of here,” Lawrence ordered. “Now!”

He reached around Reggie and jabbed Lu in the chest. “I’ll kill you if you touch Reggie again!”

Lu slapped his hand away. Despite Reggie’s attempts to push Lawrence back, he was able to land another blow that snapped Lu’s head back, splitting her lip. He smiled at the sight of blood on Lu’s face and breathed heavily through his mouth, ready to deliver another hit, but Reggie grabbed his arm.

“Get your shit, Reg, and go get your kid,” he said calmly as if nothing unusual had just occurred.

Reggie turned and saw Lu staring at Lawrence and wiping the blood running down her chin with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. Reggie had lived in fear that someone would discover her secret for so long. She was a spineless coward and felt ashamed for that. Humiliated and unable to think, all she could do was what Lawrence told her, get Hallie home, and hope Lu would be all right.

IT WASN’T BAD enough that her body was protesting every move she made and her head was thudding with the worst headache she’d ever had in her life, but she’d been forced to watch Reggie leave. Gathering her strength, Lu managed to put one leg in front of the other and collapse on the couch. It was snowing again and a small drift had blown into the entrance to the cabin. She examined the door and was finally able to get it closed, but the door frame had been damaged. She pulled a chair from the kitchen and propped it under the door knob. She trudged to the fireplace and was glad to see that the embers were still glowing. She picked up a couple of small logs and settled them on the remaining embers. She leaned against the mantle until the logs finally began to flicker. She rubbed her cold hands together and pulled her shirt away from her body to trap the rising heat beneath it.

She made her way into the bathroom and looked in the mirror over the sink. Her bottom lip was split and blood had trickled down her chin. It was accompanied by blood from a cut along her right eye. There would be more bruising, of that she was sure. She ran the cold water until it gradually began to warm and brought hands full to her face. Her back ached from hitting the wall and she gingerly touched a tender place on the back of her head. It had certainly been a night to remember, in more ways than one, she thought as she returned to the living room and dialed Reggie’s number to make sure she was all right.

LAWRENCE WALKED INTO Reggie's house. A few minutes later the front door opened and Reggie stomped into the front room. She glowered at him, the streaks from tears marring her cheeks.

"Do you feel like more of a man now?" she snarled.

"You bet your sweet ass!" Lawrence barked. He launched his body toward her before stopping, glaring down at her. "What the fuck's wrong with you, Reggie?"

"Nothin's wrong with me," she answered. "You and my mama are so damn anxious to marry me off, it's drivin' me crazy!"

"Spendin' the night with Calder? That's crazy!"

"You want to check to see if I've been tainted more than I already was?"

"Man's got a right to worry about the reputation of the woman he's marryin'," Lawrence sneered. "No man wants a loose woman for a wife!"

"At least you didn't call me a tramp like my own mother," Reggie snapped.

Lawrence couldn't stop his hand before it slapped Reggie's face, snapping her head back. Reggie's hand flew to her stinging cheek. "That's twice you've hit me," Reggie sniffed as she fought off more tears. She didn't think she had any left.

"I'll smack you a hundred more times if that's what it takes to get your mind right," Lawrence said as he stood tall and folded his arms over his chest.

"I spent the night at Lu's because it started snowin' and she didn't think it was safe for me to drive home," Reggie said, trying to make the best of a bad situation.

"You been drivin' in this weather all your life, Reg," Lawrence said.

Reggie looked at Lawrence. "I was tired and had a few drinks to relax."

"What happened to your head?" he asked, reaching out to finger the bruise on her forehead.

"I told you I had a couple drinks. I slipped and hit it when I fell. It's nothin'," she answered, slapping his hand away.

"Did Calder touch you?" he asked tensely.

"No, She's not like—" she started before catching herself. She blinked hard several times. "I have to go get Hallie," she said dully. "Go home, Lawrence."

"This is a long way from bein' over," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'll do whatever I have to to get Calder out of your life," Lawrence snapped as he threw the front door open and left.

WHILE REGGIE WASHED her face in her bathroom, her phone in the living room began to ring. "Shit! Now what?" she muttered as she dried her face. Hesitantly she lifted the receiver.

"Hello," she said softly.

"Reggie? You okay?" Lu asked, with a waver in her voice.

"I'm fine, but I know you're hurt. I should've—" Reggie started.

"No, you were right to leave," Lu interrupted.

Reggie began crying again. "I was so scared," she sniffed. "I'm sorry, Lu."

"What did Lawrence say?"

“That it wasn’t over yet. I’m afraid for Hallie, Lu. He’s so mad, I don’t know what he’ll do. I could lose my job...or worse.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you or Hallie. Just trust me a little bit longer. Please, Reg.”

TERRANCE HOPEWELL PACED behind his desk Saturday morning. When the phone rang he grabbed it before the ring died away. “Hopewell.”

“You’ve really fucked up this time, Hopewell,” the voice at the other end of the line snapped.

“What’re you talkin’ about? Everything’s calm at this end. We passed the inspection, but you cut that warnin’ too damn close. My ass is the one hangin’ out to dry. What do you want now?”

“I thought I’d let you know that Calder has been in your office. The faxes were flyin’ into the office a couple of days after the holiday, Terrance. I grabbed ‘em before the old man could see ‘em.”

“That’s not possible,” Hopewell said as he sat down heavily in his chair.

“It’s more than possible, you idiot! I told you not to keep those damn books at the mine. Calder’s not stupid. Did you think she was just another dumb miner? She knows twice as much about minin’ as you do.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get rid of her soon and make it look like an accident. Pin it on someone else then lay low until I can get you transferred out of there before anyone can track it back to me.”

“Give me a minute to think, will you?” Hopewell scribbled on a pad on his desk and slowly a grin came to his lips. “I can pin it on Lawrence. Don’t worry about it. Collapses happen all the time in these old mines.”

The voice on the other end of the line was laughing as he hung up.

Hopewell walked to his office door and leaned out, smiling. “Thelma. Is Collie Leifester workin’ today?”

Thelma thumbed through a stack of papers on her desk and pulled out a sheet. “Third shift. Should be in in a few hours. You wanna see him when he gets here?”

“It’s nothin’ urgent,” Hopewell said. “Never mind.” He returned to his desk and took his cell phone from his shirt pocket. He punched in a number and waited. When Collie answered, Hopewell said, “Drop by my office before your shift tonight.” Then he disconnected.

LU WASN’T THRILLED when she arrived to start her shift Saturday evening. Her back ached and even though she’d done the best she could, her face was still cut and bruised. She could blame her injuries on the altercation at Gertie’s and not mention the attack by Lawrence. She didn’t know many of the other miners on her shift well, but they seemed competent and most were veterans of years underground, except Collie Leifester. There wasn’t much talking among them as they went about their tasks and worked efficiently. Aside from her bruises, she was still adjusting to a new sleep schedule and grew tired much easier.

First shift had broken through a large portion of the coal face using compressed air canisters. It was a change in protocol, but the continuous miner was down undergoing an unscheduled maintenance check. Mounds of coal awaited the scoopers that would haul the coal to the conveyor belt which would carry it to the surface. Unfortunately, many of the larger chunks had

to be broken up using hand picks or pneumatic drills. There were nine miners working the area Lu was assigned to. The work was backbreaking and they had agreed to rotate jobs to give each miner about an hour break. Around two in the morning Lu would stop drilling and trade out with another miner who had been setting bolts across the ceiling to stabilize the rock overhead.

While she waited for the man trip to make the journey into the mine, she noticed the lights still on in the main office. Gardner's truck was parked in front, along with two others, including Reggie's van. Everyone else had gone home for the night. She hadn't spoken to Reggie since Lawrence attempted to kick her ass. All she could do, without compromising her mission, was wait for a day off and contact Reggie then. She hoped she was alright. It was possible their night together had been a one-time thing, but Lu hoped not. She needed more time to examine her feelings for Reggie and explore the possibilities of a more permanent relationship.

The miners on the second shift warned the third shift there would be an unannounced emergency evacuation drill. Everyone knew where they were supposed to go and mentally Lu plotted the fastest route out of the mine. Ideally, they would have enough time to ride the man trip out. The Fire Boss for her shift stopped her before she moved to her assigned area.

"Gonna be a drill some time tonight, Calder," his deep voice rumbled. "I need you to make sure everyone in access tunnels two and three are out before you leave."

Lu frowned, knowing what he asked was not a part of an evacuation drill. Seeing the look on her face, he added, "We got a couple of newer miners. They've never been through a drill. If we fuck it up there'll be hell to pay. Probably a drill ever damn shift for a month. Can you handle it or not?"

"Of course," she finally agreed. "How long will I need to wait?"

"A couple minutes. We'll leave a motorized cart you can drive to the cage."

Lu nodded. There was nothing she could say without letting the man know she had been sent by corporate.

"Hopewell is supposed to come down to check it all out once you're clear, but he's probably already gone home." He shrugged. "I reckon somebody else will come down though."

"Where do you want me tonight?" she asked as she pulled her gloves on.

"I want you to break up some of the large pieces and then switch over to roof bolter after your break."

Around two in the morning Lu stopped drilling and traded out with another miner who had been setting bolts across the ceiling to stabilize the rock overhead. She was tightening down the next to the last bolt when lights down the tunnel began flashing and a claxon sounded, echoing through the tunnels. Even though she was expecting it, when the warning horns sounded, she jumped a little. She jogged up the corridor of coal pillars, cutting across to the access tunnels before returning to the motorized cart.

She stopped abruptly when she saw Lawrence Treadway and Collie Leifester in the corridor, blocking her exit route.

"You're supposed to be out of here by now," she said, pointing at Collie.

"You were warned, Calder," Lawrence said.

"About what?"

Lawrence stepped forward and shoved Lu. "To leave Reggie alone."

"You already told me that," Lu said through gritted teeth.

Lawrence shoved her harder. "Why'd she spend the night at your place?"

"What ar..." she started before Lawrence's fist caught her on the jaw and knocked her against the rock wall.

Just as she began pushing away from the wall, Collie landed a solid blow to her abdomen. “I ain’t never hit a woman b’fore,” he said with a wicked grin. “But I’ll make an exception in your case.”

Lawrence drew his arm back and said, “You wanna act like a man, then take it like a man.” Lu ducked and grabbed his arm, slinging him against the wall. She turned away, but not fast enough to avoid being struck in the mid-section again by Collie, followed by a strong upper cut that knocked her onto her back. As she tried to stand, Lawrence grabbed her by the front of her coveralls and ran her into the rock face. She curled into a ball to protect her head, and a kick to her lower back that shot a sharp pain through her body. She pulled her body halfway up and held her hand out as she scooted toward the pillar closest to her. “St...Stop,” she panted, trying to catch her breath.

Lawrence squatted down next to her. “You don’t look so tough now, bitch. This is your last shift. You’re fired.”

Before she could answer, Lawrence slammed his fist into the side of her face again. While he stood over her, she coughed as she inhaled the rock dust on the floor and spit blood out of her mouth. She tried to push her body up, but fell onto her back, staring at the ceiling.

Lawrence threw a work cloth at her. “Get cleaned up and get your ass outta my mine. No one wants your kind around.”

Lu felt for the cloth, but twisted her head around and tracked something that shouldn’t have been there near the top of the last pillar. She pushed up against the tunnel wall and touched a black wire that was barely visible running along the coal seam. Her left eye was beginning to swell shut and her lip felt numb. She blinked to clear her eyes as she followed the wire. She froze for a moment when she saw a series of blinking red lights. She released the wire and stumbled toward the communications box on the far wall. “Get out!” she said as loudly as she could. “Get out now!” She pressed the button on the communications device and yelled, “Evacuate! Evacuate! This is not a drill. Get the hell outta here!” Before she could say anything further, the wall behind her exploded.

She fell to the floor and covered her head as chunks of coal became missiles flying through the access area. She low-crawled as fast as she could behind the safety of an adjacent pillar. A rumbling sound followed a moment later and she peeked around the edge of the pillar. She didn’t see Lawrence or Collie. Hopefully they’d hauled ass toward the main access.

Just as she stood to make a run for it, streams of water began shooting out of cracks made in the rockface by the explosion. “Shit!” She limped back to the communications box. “Water enterin’ the main access tunnel!” she yelled. She glanced at the wall behind her and cut to her left into a parallel tunnel. She had to get to a higher tunnel before the wall gave way.

She heard the rush of water as cold brackish water began shooting from the strained cracks. Water quickly swirled around her feet and climbed up her legs. It rapidly created a current swift enough to knock her off her feet. She had to get higher or she’d drown. The force of the water was strong enough to push everything in its path, including machinery, swiftly down the tunnels. She looked around at the sea of water surrounding her.

The conveyer!

If she could reach it she might be able to stay above the rising water. She tried to determine how fast the water was pouring into the mine before entering a main tunnel. Something heavy slammed into her leg and she felt the bone below her knee snap.

She lunged for the edge of the conveyer and barely managed to grip it as the water pushed her lower body away. Using only the strength in her arms and her desperation to get out of the

water, she finally pulled her upper body onto the conveyer. Gradually she was able to drag the rest of her body out of the swirling water and onto the belt.

Chunks of coal poked into her back while she tried to catch her breath. Blood from her injured leg soaked through her coveralls. Breathing became more difficult and the air around her smelled dank and musty. Black damp, she thought. Low oxygen air that would eventually turn lethal. Air outtake fans could handle gases, such as methane, but as long as the tainted water flooding the mine remained in such volume, the fans would never flush the black damp out. Fresh air wouldn't be able to reach her. The smell of the air was giving her a headache and she grew nauseous. She rolled over and forced herself onto her hands and knees. For the moment, the best she could do was drag her broken leg along the conveyer and hope to reach a higher area above the water.

Chapter Seventeen

HOPEWELL AND GARDNER heard the explosion and ran out of the administration building. Miners began stumbling out of the dust cloud belching from the mine entrance, gasping for breaths of clean air. Gardner raced to the fire boss and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“What the hell happened?” he yelled.

“We were evacuating for the drill when someone came on the com system and yelled it wasn’t a drill. To get out. Then we heard an explosion. Dust and crap shot up the cage shaft. B’fore we were halfway up someone yelled there was water fillin’ the tunnels,” the man coughed.

“Is everone out?”

“I’d have to do a headcount, but I don’t think so. Calder was makin’ a final sweep in the access tunnels. She was supposed to take a cart to the cage, but I don’t see her.”

“Send the cage back down in case she’s waitin’ on it,” Gardner ordered.

“Where’s Treadway?” Hopewell asked. “He went down to make sure the drill went okay.”

“You need to call the old man,” Gardner said. “I’ll start callin’ some rescue teams in. We have to do everthing we can to give ‘em a chance.”

When Gardner rushed off to get the rescue effort started, Hopewell smiled as he walked to his office. “There won’t be no rescue. More of a body recovery,” he chuckled to himself, looking back at the mine. A golf cart suddenly appeared, exiting through the conveyer tunnel. Hopewell ran toward it and saw Collie Leifester, struggling to breathe in the cloud of dust surrounding him. He helped him walk into cleaner, fresher air. “You okay, Collie?” he asked. “Anyone behind you?”

Collie shook his head, bending over to catch his breath and attempt to stop coughing. “No... no one could have survived that,” he said between coughs. “Barely got out myself.”

CHARLIE BOWERS FELT around on his nightstand, searching for the source of the ringing that had awakened him from a sound sleep.

“Bowers,” he said gruffly. He sat up in bed and listened to the panicked voice coming over the line. He glanced at the clock next to the phone beside him. “I’ll contact the state police to escort us from the airport. We should land about six your time. Keep this line open. I’ll call from the plane.” He disconnected and rubbed his face. He reached across the bed and shook his wife’s shoulder. “Get up, Gussie. There’s been a collapse.”

“Where?” she mumbled.

“Brushy #3,” he said calmly.

“Lu?”

“She’s missin’, honey.” He ran a hand down her arm. “We’ll get her out. I promise.”

Gussie tossed her bedcovers off and went to her closet to begin dressing for travel while Charlie dialed a number on the phone to contact Melissa. Within half an hour Charlie and Gussie picked up Melissa and her husband, Carl, and headed for the Denver airport.

“Denton and the pilots will meet us at the airport and have the plane ready to take off as soon as we get there,” Melissa said. “Anything new about what caused the collapse?”

“Hopewell said compressed air canisters were used earlier in the day because the CM was down for maintenance, but that shouldn’t have caused anything more than a controlled collapse. They aren’t that powerful.”

“The substrata would have to be much weaker than we suspected to cause a substantial collapse. You said something about water getting into the mine. Where’s that coming from?” Melissa asked.

“No idea,” Charlie said.

DURING THE TWO-hour flight from Denver to Kentucky, Charlie stayed on the phone constantly, contacting drilling companies in the middle of the night and getting their asses moving. He remained in contact with his people at the mine for updates from the scene. He made arrangements to have vehicles waiting at the airport and troopers to escort them to the mine. Lastly, he called Fred O’Brien, an old friend and retired miner, who still lived about twenty miles from Brushy #3 and owned a small, independent drilling company. Even though it was the middle of the night, Fred sounded wide-awake when he answered the phone.

“Fred?” Bowers started. “Charlie.”

“Figured you be callin’ sooner or later, Charlie. Heard you had a problem over at Brushy,” Fred said.

“A collapse initially, but now there’s water gettin’ into the tunnels,” Charlie explained.

“Anybody inside?”

“One miner. Possibly a second person. The miner’s Gussie’s girl.”

“Well, if anyone is alive, they’d know they had to get to the highest possible point to stay above any water to have a prayer,” Fred said, although he didn’t sound hopeful.

“What do you recommend, Fred?”

“I think you need to start by pumpin’ as much water out as you can, quick as you can and get some fresh air down there.”

“Do it,” Charlie ordered. “We should be there in about ninety minutes.”

“I know two or three small drillers not too far away who might be able to start drillin’ to pump water out. Want me to call ‘em in?”

“Call anyone we might need. Cost don’t matter. And thanks, Fred. See you soon,” Charlie disconnected and sat staring at his phone, rubbing his forehead, trying to think of anyone else he should contact.

A hand slid across his shoulders and he looked up to see Gussie gazing down at him. She handed him a cup of coffee. “Take a break, honey,” she said.

He sipped the coffee. “I’m sorry, Gus. I shouldn’t have sent her to Brushy,” he said, shaking his head.

“She coulda said no, but she didn’t. It’s not your fault, Charlie.” She leaned down to kiss the top of his head.

“I’ll get her out, honey. I swear I will.”

“I know you will, sweetie. Drink your coffee and try to get in a short nap before we land, okay? It might be a long day.”

“I need to call to arrange for a GPS scan to pinpoint her most likely position,” Charlie said. “Then I’ll take a break.”

Gussie took his cell. “Melissa can do that,” she said.

CARL SMILED WHEN he saw the flurry of activity around the Brushy site as their vehicle followed a highway patrol vehicle using lights and siren onto the mine property. He stepped out of the vehicle and stretched as he looked around. Aside from the men and equipment attempting to enter the mine via the main and secondary entrances, three groups near the top of the ridge were setting up and preparing to drill. No one could have survived this, he thought.

“Carl, go in and check with Hopewell. Find out what the hell happened,” Charlie directed as he helped Gussie out of the car.

“On it, Charlie,” Carl said. He ran up the front steps of the main office of Brushy #3 and stepped inside. He strode to the back of the pre-fab building and opened the door to an office. Terrance Hopewell stood up and came around the desk.

“Fast trip, Carl,” Hopewell said.

“The old man broke a record getting here, but from the looks of everything outside, it won’t help,” Carl Chapman said with a smile. “Good work, Terry.”

“Piece of cake. I told you I’d take care of it. Lawrence Tread-way was killed in the explosion. ↓←

↑Perfect. Why was he down there? ↓←

↑Seems Calder was payin→a little too much attention to Lawrence→s fiancé. Apparently she was tryin→to steal his girlfriend and he was lookin→for revenge. ↓←

↑Good story, ↓← Carl nodded. “Lu’s always been a fucking pervert. So good riddance.” He clapped Hopewell on the shoulder.

“Lawrence didn’t go down alone though. He took another miner down with him. He escaped, but saw the wires I placed,” Hopewell admitted.

“Who went down with Treadway?”

“Collie Leifester. There was bad blood between Collie and the Calder woman already. She got him fired a couple months ago so I don’t think he’ll say anything.”

“Minor problem then,” Carl said with a grin.

CHARLIE GRABBED AN ATV to join the drillers while Melissa ran into the main office. She walked to the room where maps of the entire area were stored. She examined several maps, tossing them quickly aside before she found what she was looking for.

“Shit,” she muttered as she ran her fingers over the map. “Someone hand me a walkie!” she yelled. “Right now!”

Edith grabbed a walkie-talkie and handed it to Melissa. She jerked it out of Edith’s hand and depressed the switch on its side. “Dad! Come back!” she said while pushing her hair back over her head.

“I’m here, Melissa,” Charlie’s voice crackled over the walkie.

“I found the probable source of the water. There’s an old, abandoned mine that backs up pretty close to our main tunnel. An explosion in the Brushy tunnel could have caused a crack. Depending on the size and length of the old mine, there could have been water accumulating inside for decades,” Melissa said.

“How much?” Charlie asked.

“Best guess, could be between one and two million gallons, Dad.”

“Fred said another driller is on his way.”

“How long until they break through?”

“‘Bout half an hour.”

“Don’t be too close when they do. There could be an accumulation of black damp from that old mine.”

Melissa set the walkie-talkie down and pulled her cell from her coat pocket. She thumbed through her contact list and punched a number to connect with the geology department at UK. She explained the situation and was referred to a professor at home.

“I don’t know much about mines in that region,” he said as he tried to wake up.

“But you know about caves. This is the same damn thing only man-made. Water gets in caves too, doesn’t it?”

“Usually, but water creates the cave after millions of years of erosion. You could try forcing compressed air through the bore holes to press against the water and prevent it from rising to create an air pocket like the ones sometimes found in flooded caves. It’s really only a theory, but it might work, at least temporarily. Of course, you’d have to determine how many pounds per square inch of pressure you’d need to keep water out of the area where it was probable any trapped miners might be.”

“So how many pounds of pressure would do the trick, theoretically?” Melissa asked testily.

“I don’t know. It depends on how much water, the dimensions of the tunnel, and a few other variables,” he said.

“It’s over a million gallons of water,” she said before giving him the length, width and height of the average tunnel. “That’s the best I can do. My sister’s life depends on finding an answer,” Melissa pled.

“How many holes are you drilling to pump out the water?”

“There are two being drilled now, plus another one to pump fresh air in when we break through.”

“Best guess, you’ll need at least three or four times that many to make a difference. Over a million gallons is a shitload of water.”

“We’re doing the best we can as fast as we can for now,” she said before disconnecting.

When Melissa stepped outside again, the sky was overcast, but beginning to lighten up. She spotted Gussie sitting on the office steps watching the activity around the mine. She sat next to her and wrapped an arm around the older woman’s shoulders. “They’ll get her out, Gussie,” she said, but there wasn’t much conviction in her voice. “Lu’s smart. She’ll find a safe place until they can get to her.”

“I know,” Gussie mumbled. “Charlie promised and he’s never broken a promise yet.” She turned toward Melissa and attempted a smile.

“Hey, Denton!” Melissa called to the older man leaning against the car that had driven them to the mine earlier. “Think you can rustle up a couple of cups of coffee for us?”

Denton nodded and headed quickly toward the mess hall. “And see if you can get a couple of thermoses for the drillers too,” she yelled. Denton waved an acknowledgment over his head.

“I saw a pretty decent chair in the office, Gus. Let me bring it out for you.”

I’m fine, Mel,” Gussie said.

“No arguing. These steps are freaking cold.” She looked up at the sky. “Looks like it might snow again later, too. Lovely.”

LU STRUGGLED AGAINST the current of the water rushing past her and shook water from her face. She fought against it to pull her body onto the conveyor belt. The weight of her cold clothes made everything more difficult. If she could crawl along the mesh of the belt she might be able to reach a higher area close to the back of the mine and work her way to the farthest access tunnel. Her hands slipped on the conveyor, cut by the shards of coal it had been carrying, leaving them bloody. Her broken left leg still throbbed, but the cold water slowed the bleeding. If she wanted to stay alive, she had to force herself to continue. The water was roofing out behind her. She tried to think, but her mind was sluggish from the cold.

The highest part of the mine was three rooms to her right and another three or four rooms toward the rear of the mine. The room farthest back had only been cut out within the last month and serious work had yet to begin. She couldn’t continue to crawl along the punishing conveyor much longer. She strapped her hard hat down securely and lowered her legs into the cold water rushing down the access walkways. She gripped part of the belt system until her foot felt stable against the current. The rising water inched past her hips and began its journey toward her chest. She leaned forward against the water and made her left leg swing forward.

It would be a slow, exhausting trip to safety, but she had to try. Over an hour later, with the water level touching the bottom of her chin, forcing her to tilt her head back to keep her face above the rising water, she used the remaining strength in her arms to pull her body around the edge of the final pillar.

Lu nearly yelled out her excitement. She would have jumped for joy if the water wouldn’t have knocked her legs out from under her, when she spotted the scoop car near the wall of the pillar. It was sitting with its scoop elevated nearly to the ceiling of the tunnel. She scrambled closer to the machine, grabbing the bar near the operator’s low seat and lifting herself out of the water. She crawled along the flat roof of the big yellow machine until she fell into the coal that filled the scoop. She rolled onto her back and took several deep breaths to calm her now-shivering body. The temperature of the water combined with the cool temperature of the mine, not to mention the heavy layers of soaking wet clothing she wore weren’t making her attempt to reach safety any easier.

Once her breathing had calmed down, Lu sat up and surveyed the scene around her. She hadn’t heard any sounds of drilling and wondered what was going on at the surface. Did anyone know she was trapped inside the mine, sitting ass-deep in a lake of undrinkable water.

She was convinced there was enough breathable air trapped along with her. After all, she was just one person. How much air could she suck in? But who knew how long she might be stuck twenty-five stories below ground. How long could she stay high and dry? How long would the battery pack in her helmet last before plunging her into total darkness? How much more water would rush into the rooms before she would be forced to move again? She should have paid more attention to the number of abandoned mines that had made Swiss cheese out of the mountain over the years. She closed her eyes and laughed to herself.

She should have chosen a less potentially dangerous profession, goddammit! She could practically hear Gussie scolding her for letting even a smidgen of self-pity creep into her thoughts.

GUSSIE BOWERS LEANED back in the office chair Melissa had dragged outside and accepted another cup of coffee from one of the mess hall workers. The sun was now shining brightly, but wasn't warming up the temperature around the mine much. She saw Charlie and Melissa going over the topographical maps on the table in front of them and pointing to various places along the ridge over the mine. The sound of a vehicle slowly approaching distracted her and she watched as an old blue van double-parked behind another vehicle. A moment later a young woman slid to the ground, her eyes gazing steadily at the flurry of activity near the mine portal. A young girl jumped from the passenger side and skipped around the front of the van to take the woman's hand.

Gussie watched the woman walk slowly toward the main office. When she was closer, the woman said, "I heard there was an accident at the mine. Is everyone okay?"

Gussie closed one eye and looked at Reggie, then offered her hand. "I'm Gussie Bowers. There was an explosion in the mine last night. We don't know the details yet."

"Regina Kinlaw. I have a friend workin' the night shift. Lu Calder. I wanted to see if she's okay," Reggie said.

"She's trapped down there. I'm hopin' she's still alive," Gussie answered softly, her voice thick with emotion. "Of course, dependin' on how bad things are down there, it might be better if..."

"Don't say that!" Reggie said. "Was anyone else trapped?"

"Only Lu, but they said someone was killed in the explosion."

"Brushy #3 doesn't use explosives," Reggie said.

"We know."

"Then how..." Reggie started.

"Don't know yet." The look in Gussie's eyes turned hard as she spoke. She swirled the remaining coffee in her cup and stared into it for a moment. "I'm sorry if I sound upset, but I've been through this before. My husband owns this mine and Lu...Lu is my daughter." Gussie took a deep breath to collect herself before looking at Reggie again and smiling at the child holding her hand. "Lu loves mining, but this is the third collapse I've been through. I lost her father in a rescue attempt after a collapse and it's only been a couple of years since Lu was trapped the first time. Wish she'd take up needlepoint or something," Gussie chuckled to herself.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bowers," Reggie said. She extended her hand. "I work in the office, in personnel. This is my daughter, Hallie."

"You care about her, too, don't you?" Gussie asked, taking Reggie's hand and smiling at Hallie.

"Yes." Tears formed in Reggie's eyes and she wiped them away. "But I'm...I..." Reggie stuttered.

"You're not like that, is that what you're tryin' to say? I lived here most of my early life. I know how people here are. The way Lu lives her life doesn't fit in. Reckon, if you cared for her that way, you wouldn't fit in neither. You can choose to fit in or try a different path. Only you know what's in here," Gussie said, patting her coat over her heart. She swallowed the last of her

coffee and pushed out of her chair. “Think I’ll get another refill. Can I get somethin’ for either of you?”

Chapter Eighteen

LU DOZED ON top of the load of coal in the scooper. She coughed and looked over the side of the machine. The water level had risen, but not as swiftly as the initial rush. The main tunnel was a little over six feet from floor to ceiling. Now Lu could reach up and touch the ceiling with the flat of her hand. She estimated she was about eighteen inches from the roof of the tunnel. The water had risen high enough to cover the scooper itself and only the raised coal scoop was keeping her above water. She would need to seek a higher area soon. She felt stiff and cold from the dampness surrounding her and her leg ached. Periodically, she turned the headlamp on her hard hat off to preserve the battery as long as possible. Even though she was surrounded by water, none of it was drinkable and she was incredibly thirsty. Lying in the pitch black of the access walkway, she closed her eyes.

A distant, familiar sound penetrated her mind and she sat up quickly, her hard hat firmly colliding with the rock above her in the darkness. Had it only been her imagination or had she heard the sound of drilling? She flipped her helmet light on and concentrated on where the sound was coming from. She dragged her body from the scoop and back into the cold water, forcing her legs to move forward into a cross tunnel. The sound grew louder and she tried to move toward it.

Suddenly a drill broke through the tunnel ceiling ahead of her. A few minutes later, a pipe dropped down. Heated, compressed air roared through the pipe, forcing much needed clean oxygen into the flooded tunnel. The roar of the air hurt her ears, but the pipe meant they must know where she was. She had to let them know she was alive as the foul smelling water continued to rise around her. The pipe acted as a relief valve and sucked the water and bad air up, covering the small air shaft.

Lu moved to the highest area she could find about three hundred feet from the air shaft to await what she now believed would be the inevitable. Judging the rate of the water's level, she figured she'd be dead in about an hour...maybe less. The area she made it to was a rectangle of damp earth near the back of the mine, no more than about eighteen by thirty feet, leaving her temporarily out of the water.

Lu was exhausted and shivering from being submerged in cold water for hours. She leaned her head back and dozed, finally awakened when a strong tremor ran through her body. She didn't know how long she'd slept, but it surely was over an hour. Yet the water wasn't any closer to her. From the water line on the floor, it seemed to be receding slightly. But that was impossible!

MELISSA KNELT IN the mud and slushy brown snow guiding a length of pipe into the hole being drilled through the rocks and coal that blocked the lowest level of Brushy #3. She'd estimated the distance between the clear upper level and the main lower area of the mine. Charlie stood behind her. "How much farther?" he asked.

“Hard to tell,” she said. “I’m worried about the water inside the rooms. That old mine has taken in millions of gallons of water over the years. I’ve got some bulldozers digging out some areas to catch the water as we pump it out. Water seeks its own level so we can only hope the access areas in the mine are big enough to handle it all without roofing in all the rooms.” She stood up and moved away to allow the drilling team to push their high-speed drill bit through the pipe and continue pushing through the blocked area. “How long before the next section goes in?” she asked loudly after tapping one of the miners on the shoulder.

“An hour. Maybe less,” he yelled back.

“I’ll be back,” she said to Charlie. “You should take a break too, Dad.”

He shook his head. “Not until we get Lu outta there.”

Melissa placed her hands on her father’s shoulders. “Lu is the best miner I know. She knows the rocks. If there’s a place she can get to so she can survive, she will. It’s not your fault, Dad.”

“I sent her here.”

“She knew the risks.”

“This wasn’t a fuckin’ accident, Mel.”

“Let’s concentrate on getting Lu out before we worry about anything else. You should check on Gussie. I have to talk to Carl and will be right back. I’ll bring you a cup of coffee, okay?”

Charlie wrapped his arms around his daughter and hugged her tightly. “Hurry back,” he whispered.

REGGIE STIFFENED WHEN she saw Melissa Chapman striding across the parking area, removing her work gloves and running a hand through her silky blonde hair. She stopped in front of Gussie and leaned down to hug her.

“Any news?” Gussie asked.

“Not much, Gus. We broke through and started flushing out the bad air, replacing it with clean air. We should begin pumping water out in about an hour. That will help a little. We have to pump it out before the team near the entrance can go in.”

“Think Lu can hear you drillin’?”

“Maybe. You should lie down someplace and get some rest.”

“Not until I see Lu.”

“Yeah. That’s what Daddy says too.”

“Reggie, dear, have you met Lu’s sister, Melissa?”

Melissa held her hand out. “I saw you briefly when I performed the inspection last month, but we didn’t get a chance to talk. Melissa Chapman.”

“Reggie Kinlaw. I didn’t know you and Lu were related.”

“We’re not blood-related, but might as well be. We grew pretty close after my daddy married Lu’s mama.” She looked back at Gussie. “Have you seen Carl? That prick was supposed to bring us coffee two hours ago.” She smiled at Reggie. “My cocker spaniel has a longer attention span.”

“That’s no way to be talkin’ about your husband, girl,” Gussie said.

“He’s just another man, Gus. Probably in the office,” Melissa said as she started up the steps of the pre-fab.

“I’ll get some coffee ready for you and Charlie while you’re gone,” Gussie said.

A FEW MINUTES later Gussie returned with two thermoses and sat back down.

“How long have you and Mr. Bowers been married?” Reggie asked.

“Close to twenty-five years now. Since the girls were beginnin’ junior high. They’ve been a handful over the years, but I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“Lu will be all right,” Reggie said. “She has to be.”

Gussie took a deep breath and squinted. “Hope so.” She rubbed her eyes. “Seems like they just keep goin’ in even though they know the risks. I swear I just don’t understand it.”

“Lu loves being a miner,” Reggie said. She looked over at Gussie and shrugged. “She told me once that the mountain speaks to her, whatever that means.”

“I hope the mountain is watchin’ out for her now,” Gussie sighed. “After this, she needs to come on home, settle down, and let someone else take the risks for a change.”

MELISSA STOMPED THROUGH the main offices looking for her husband. She was covered in mud and her clothes were wet and cold. She walked past Hopewell’s secretary and into his office, leaving the door open. Carl and Hopewell were sharing drinks and staring down at a ledger lying open on Hopewell’s desk. Melissa frowned as she stared at the two smiling men.

“Hey, babe. Any luck?” Carl asked, walking toward her. She noticed Hopewell close the ledger and lean back in his chair.

“Not yet,” Melissa said. She took the glass from him and drank the contents quickly.

“Smooth bourbon,” she said. “Celebrating something, Carl?”

“It was just to relieve the stress, sugar,” he said with a shrug.

Melissa took a step closer to Carl and ran a finger along his jaw line. “Where’s that coffee you were going to bring me...two hours ago?”

“I’m sorry, baby. We started going over the books and lost track of the time. You know how business is,” he smiled.

“Indeed, I do.” She stepped around him and moved closer to the desk.

Hopewell looked at her and his hand twitched as he started to raise it.

“Don’t,” she snapped. “I examined your books less than a month ago,” she said. “But I’m willing to bet these aren’t the same ones I saw then, are they?” She flipped the ledger cover open and waited for an answer.

“Melissa—” Carl started.

“Shut up, Carl!” she said, her voice hard as flint. “Thelma,” she called out loudly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hopewell’s secretary said as she stuck her head into the open doorway,

“Please call the sheriff’s office and tell them we have a situation here. Ask them to drop by at their earliest convenience.”

After Thelma left, Melissa picked up the ledger. “I’ll leave this with one of the deputies outside so it doesn’t mysteriously disappear. Don’t you boys go anywhere. I’m sure they’ll want to speak to you soon.” She walked around Carl on her way out, but stopped to look back at him, smiling faintly. “And by the way, darling, even though you are a decent fuck, I want a divorce.” When she left, she slammed the door hard enough to send a shudder through the entire building.

BY THE TIME Melissa changed into dry clothing and returned to the drilling site, the super drill Charlie had located was being assembled to create an escape chute through the two hundred and forty feet of rock above the flooded mine, but there were potential problems. If the super drill punched thru the roof too suddenly, the air in the mine shaft would rush upward, potentially allowing water to rush in and fill the air pocket created by the compressed air. If Lu was still alive, she could drown. If not, there was the chance that suddenly releasing the air pressure could result in “the bends”, which could cause bubbles to form in her bloodstream and kill her.

Charlie contacted diving experts in Virginia and arranged to have a portable hyperbaric chamber airlifted to the mine immediately in case Lu had to be treated for decompression immediately after she was brought up. To help alleviate the drop in pressure, an engineer from a nearby university devised a plan to create an airlock to be placed on top of the escape tunnel. Eventually a forty by three-foot diameter tube with a sliding bottom door to go on top of the escape shaft and keep pressurized air from leaking as the escape capsule was lowered.

The huge drill bit chewed slowly and easily through the first one hundred feet of soil and substrata, but a few feet later the bit on the super drill broke. The group running the drill estimated that removal of the broken bit could take as long as a week. In the meantime, a second crew would begin drilling another rescue chute about 75 feet from the stalled one. When the second bit also broke, Charlie found a small company of fabricators and faxed them the specifications for what he needed to remove the first broken bit.

EARLY THE FOLLOWING morning, Charlie was called to Brushy #3’s main office to take a phone call. Already aggravated because drilling had been halted due to the broken bits, he wasn’t in a very good mood as he snatched the receiver from the receptionist.

“Bowers,” he snapped.

“Mr. Bowers, this is Chuck Woolridge at Wildcat Fabrication in Lexington,” a man’s voice responded. “I’m looking at the specs you faxed us last night and have a couple of questions.”

“We don’t have much time, but all right.”

“How deep was the bit when it separated from the shaft, Mr. Bowers?”

“A little over a hundred feet.”

“Do you know the composition of the substrata the bit was attempting to penetrate when it broke?”

“I’m a miner, son, not a goddamn geologist,” Charlie barked. “What fuckin’ damn difference does it make? I just need to get the damn thing out to replace it.”

“I understand, sir, but our people wanted to know. It’s probably not a big deal.”

“When can the hook be ready?” Charlie asked, taking a deep breath to calm down.

“We have a few other projects ahead of this one, but we can probably have it ready in about a week or so.”

“A week!” Charlie stormed. “I needed it yesterday! A week is absolutely unacceptable! Am I makin’ myself fuckin’ clear?”

“Let me contact my supervisor and get back to you,” the man said.

“Don’t you hang up on me you goddamn asshole or I’ll fly up there and snap your neck like a fuckin’ chicken. A life depends on gettin’ that bit out!”

“Hello!” Charlie bellowed into the receiver when there was no reply.

Finally, another voice said, “Hello.”

“Who the hell is this?”

“Dave Prentiss, the owner. And you are?”

“Didn’t that other idiot tell you?”

“Mr. Bowers. What can I do for you?”

“I sent in specs last night and need a piece fabricated to pull a broken bit out of the ground, today. The other guy told me I couldn’t get it for a week and that wasn’t acceptable. You own the damn place so how fast can I get it?”

“All I can promise is that we’ll work as fast as we can. It’s the best we can do, Mr. Bowers.”

“I’m sendin’ a helicopter up there to sit on your goddamn lawn until what we need is ready.”

Charlie hung up and turned around to find Melissa. Instead he saw Gussie frowning at him.

“That was very rude, Charlie,” she admonished.

He shrugged. “I’m a rude guy, Gussie, but hopefully it worked.” He wrapped his arms around his wife. “Hope Lu can hang on a just little bit longer, sweetie.”

Gussie patted him on the back. “She knows you’ll come for her, Charlie. You haven’t eaten since we got here, so let’s go to the mess hall until the part arrives. Pacin’ around never makes the time go any faster.”

Charlie nodded. “Let me talk to Melissa for a minute first. I am gettin’ a mite hungry.”

Charlie asked Melissa to send a chopper to Lexington and let him know when it returned. Gussie stopped to invite Reggie and her daughter to join them. Hallie was quiet and Reggie explained it was because she was worried about Lu. Gussie went out of her way to reassure the girl. Even Charlie helped by challenging Hallie to a round of mumble-peg after Hallie showed them the knife Lu had given her.

THREE HOURS LATER the fabricated hook was flown to the drill site. Fourteen hours after the first bit broke, they were back in business. Proceeding carefully, the new drill bit broke through at ten-fifteen Monday night. Lu was cold, hungry, and thirsty, her leg throbbed, but she fought to remain awake. She thought if she fell asleep, she’d never wake up again. She thought she heard a voice, but it was far away and it could be a delusion.

Then the voice grew louder and she saw a bright green glow stick protruding from the bottom of the air hole in the roof about 250 feet from where she was leaning against a wall. The light on her hard hat was dim, but she managed to move slowly toward the green light, dragging her injured leg behind her, and over the rough passageway.

Several minutes later she heard a voice ask, “Are you there?” She realized there was a small microphone dangling from the hole. She opened her dry mouth to speak, but no sound left her lips. She closed her eyes and concentrated, focusing all her energy to her vocal chords.

“I’m...I’m...here,” she said weakly. “G...get me...outta here,” she pled as warm tears ran down her cheeks. She covered her eyes as if ashamed, embarrassed by the flood of emotion that filled her body.

“We’re sending a cage down. Can you get to it?”

“Th...think s...so,” she stuttered through trembling lips. She looked around and saw a larger hole in the roof not far from where she sat in a puddle of cold stagnant water. A few minutes later she saw the bottom of a heavy wire capsule. The bottom slid open and she used the last of her strength to pull her body to it. She grabbed the wire to pull herself into the cage and stood on one leg while she waited for the bottom to close before relaxing.

As the cage began its slow ascent out of the darkness that could have been her tomb, Lu began to shake. Unable to stand on both legs, she worried she would crumple to the floor of the capsule. Halfway up she passed through an aquifer and freezing groundwater poured down over her already cold body so heavily she had trouble taking a breath. The mountain was fighting back and wasn't ready to release her without a struggle.

Fifteen long minutes later, Lu glanced at the lights near top of the narrow shaft bringing her out of what could have been her tomb and heard cheers welcoming her back to the living. She grabbed the wire in the capsule to hold herself up and blinked after three days alone in the virtual darkness. She heard Gussie calling her name and forced her eyes to search for her mother's face. The top of the capsule slid open and she cried out from the pain in her leg as she was lifted from the capsule and placed on a stretcher.

“Ma,” Lu croaked.

“I'm here, baby,” Gussie said, reaching through the men surrounding Lu to grasp her hand.

Lu took Gussie's hand and held it tightly while Gussie and Charlie made their way closer.

She blinked up at them from a face black with oily coal dust. Gussie ran a hand over her daughter's slick hair. Lu couldn't stop the tears that suddenly erupted from her eyes.

“I'm a mess, Ma,” she said. “I...I was scared I wasn't gonna see you again.”

“You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,” Gussie sniffed as she walked next to the stretcher toward a waiting ambulance. She stood back as a paramedic took Lu's vital signs while another cut through her clothes to examine her badly swollen leg. Working quickly, they used a special detergent in warm water to wash away the oily, flammable coal residue from her body, even in her ear canals. Then an air cast stabilized her leg for transport and an IV was started to get liquid into her dehydrated body. An EKG and blood oxygen level were taken, while another test was performed to check for any sign of the bends.

She was shivering almost uncontrollably, even though wrapped in warm, dry blankets. Her body temperature had dropped dangerously low, to 92.5. Her feet and legs were purple and mottled from the long immersion in icy water. When she was stabilized, the ambulance drove to a nearby field where a helicopter waited to fly Lu, accompanied by Gussie, to the closest trauma center. At the hospital thirty minutes later, dry warm blankets were put against Lu's back and a bearhugger wrap covered the front of her body to envelop her in heat. A second IV was started to push warm fluids into her system.

WHEN LU FINALLY awakened, she was lying in a Lexington hospital. Gussie and Charlie were napping in uncomfortable-looking chairs against the far wall. She glanced down and saw a dark, chestnut head of hair lying on the mattress beside her. A warm hand rested on her forearm. The sunshine streaming through the window of her hospital room made her think this was what Heaven must look like. She managed to lift her right hand enough to touch Reggie's hair while trying to mentally assess her various aches and pains. Her leg hurt like hell and her hands throbbled beneath the gauze that encased them. She felt like shit, but she was alive. When she

was trapped in the mine and struggling to survive, she remembered snippets of the one night she'd spent with Reggie. The tenderness between them. She frowned knowing Reggie had really been making love to Jac one final time, not to her.

There was a tap at her door, followed by a cafeteria worker carrying a food tray. She placed it on a rolling table and moved it in front of Lu.

Reggie woke up and brushed her hair back, blinking to clear her eyes. She smiled at Lu as she uncovered the tray, which turned out to be mostly soft food, like oatmeal, pudding, and applesauce. "They want you on soft food for a couple of days," Reggie explained. "But there is coffee."

Charlie and Gussie woke up and stretched, then announced they were going to the cafeteria to find coffee and breakfast. Lu only nodded in acknowledgment, not taking her eyes off Reggie. She had to let Reggie go. "Where's Hallie?" she croaked.

"Gooper took her to his place, but she's worried sick 'bout you. You're goin' home and stay with your folks until you're able to be up and around on your own. You hurt your leg pretty bad and will need some rehab. Your minin' days are probably over, but Charlie says he's got an office ready for you in Boulder," Reggie explained as she fed Lu.

"I can't work there. Carl —"

"Carl, along with Hopewell, is in jail for embezzlin' and conspiracy to commit murder. And I heard Melissa's gonna divorce his sorry ass."

"Who'd he try to murder?"

"You," Reggie frowned.

"C'mere," Lu said after she swallowed the last bite.

"You need somethin'?" Reggie asked.

"Yeah. I need to tell you somethin'."

"What?" Reggie asked suspiciously.

Lu pulled her closer and drew her down to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "I'm glad to see you, but I'm no good for you, you know," she said softly. "I'm not really the forever kind. I know it's what you want, but I can't promise you that. I can't be the one you want. I'm sorry, Reggie."

Reggie stared at Lu for a moment, then cleared her throat. "You don't know what I want," she finally said through clenched teeth.

"I'm not Jac," Lu muttered. She looked up to see tears fill Reggie's eyes.

"Is that what you think? That I used you as a substitute for Jac?" she spat.

"Well, didn't you?" Lu asked. "I won't be used."

"I'm sorry if your fragile ego was damaged, but that isn't my problem. It's yours. I need to get back to Hallie and make sure she's okay," Reggie said coldly. "I'm glad you survived," she said over her shoulder as she shoved the door open and stomped out of the room.

REGGIE WAS GONE when Gussie returned to Lu's room. She looked at her daughter with confusion in her eyes, but didn't say anything.

"What's Melissa gonna do now that she's unloadin' Carl?" Lu asked between bites.

"She's stayin' at Brushy #3 to direct the clean up, but only until it reopens again. And she convinced Charlie to keep almost everyone on the payroll. It's still a worthwhile mine."

"The substrata should be shored up to stabilize it now."

“She knows and is plannin’ to check out any other old mines near Brushy and seal them off after pumpin’ out any water.”

“There’re some sinkholes on the property behind the cabin too that could be a problem. I fell into one that had a river runnin’ through it. I don’t know where the water went, but it could be an accident waitin’ to happen.”

“You can tell her that yourself. I’m sure she’ll be here sometime today. She’ll want all your notes, I’m sure.”

“They’re at the cabin so she better get them out of there quick before they disappear. I sent a copy of everything to Reggie’s computer though.”

“What’s goin’ on between you and Reggie anyway?”

“Nothin’.”

“She seems like a nice girl. I know she was worried sick about you. Been stickin’ next to you tighter’n a tick since we got you outta there.”

“We’re friends, Ma. That’s all.” Lu couldn’t look at her mother.

“I taught you never to lie, Lu. Don’t start now,” Gussie huffed. “You know I can always tell when you’re lyin’.”

“We both know I suck at relationships. I care about her, but even if there was anything goin’ on between us, it wouldn’t take her long to figure out how I am. Then she’d be gone like all the others. Besides, she’s in love with somebody else.”

Chapter Nineteen

Six Months Later

LU LEANED AGAINST the back seat of the company Suburban, periodically glancing out the side windows as the vehicle passed old, run-down homes secreted in the thick forest and desperately in need of a new coat or two of whitewash. The sky was sunny with a periodic cloud drifting overhead. It hadn't changed much since she'd last been there nearly six months before. The sameness of the area amazed her and reminded her of a place that time and modern society had forgotten, or perhaps never realized existed. As the vehicle cruised by an old two-story home, she remembered a pleasant day she spent there. That day had given her a sense of community she'd never experienced before. She shifted her eyes to her mother and stepfather chatting on the bench seat in front of her.

Lu felt oddly uncomfortable. She rarely wore a business suit, but today was a special day. The day Brushy #3 would re-open and miners would resume coaxing coal from the bowels of the mountain that rose to her right. The mountain that was intended to be her tomb. If the company's environmental impact plan went as anticipated, no one would ever know the dangerous work that had gone on there.

A warm hand reached out and rested easily on her thigh. "You look incredibly uncomfortable, Lu," Melissa said softly. "Afraid no one will recognize you in that spiffy suit?"

Lu smiled at her step-sister. "I don't even recognize me."

"How's the leg?"

"Still aches some."

"Well, now that you'll be workin' out of headquarters in Boulder, it shouldn't bother you at all," Charlie said.

Lu adjusted her sunglasses. "I suppose."

Several minutes later their driver, Denton, announced they'd reached the entrance to the mine property. They drove under a long banner announcing the re-opening of Brushy #3. A sizable group, mostly miners and their families, along with a few local officials, were gathered and Lu heard a cheer rise as the vehicle approached. Lu scanned the faces in the crowd and saw many she recognized. Some would be glad to see her and others would be hiding their guilt for wishing she hadn't survived.

She blinked against the bright sunlight that flooded the vehicle when Charlie opened the door and stepped out, followed by Gussie. She didn't hear much of what he said to the gathered crowd. Her breath stopped when she saw Reggie working closer to the front of the crowd. Her hand rested on Hallie's shoulder as she leaned down to speak to the girl, her warm chestnut hair draping along the side of her face. Reggie looked as simple, yet as beautiful as the first time Lu

had seen her. She wanted to leave the car and take Reggie in her arms to inhale the rich scent of her hair.

Since the day Reggie had stomped out of her hospital room, Lu hadn't seen or spoken to her. She could have sent an email to let her know she was okay, but hadn't. Her confession to her mother in the Lexington hospital that she cared about Reggie was the last time she had spoken about it, refusing to discuss it, even when Gussie tried to bring it up again.

The door next to her popped open and she stepped into the sunlight as Charlie introduced her as the Chief Engineer of Bowers Mining. Leaning on her cane to stabilize herself, she joined the others lined up near the front of the stage platform. Gardner, the new superintendent shook her hand firmly, and Goober, the new assistant superintendent, wrestled her into a tight bear hug as he welcomed her back. She looked down and smiled at Hallie, who was excitedly jumping up and down, as usual. Ernie Kinlaw frowned and turned away to make her way out of the crowd. Some things would never change.

When the official re-opening of Brushy #3 ended, everyone retired to the mess hall for cake, punch, and conversation. Lu looked for Reggie, but only caught a glimpse of her before she and Hallie disappeared.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, Lu turned into the drive of Reggie's home. She wasn't sure what she would say to Reggie, or whether it would even make a difference. She parked her vehicle and slid from beneath the steering wheel, planting her cane in the gravel before pushing her body up. Before she could take more than two steps, Hallie, accompanied by Chester, came flying down the porch steps toward her. Lu braced for the impact of the girl's body and laughed as small arms wrapped around her hips. She lowered onto her good knee to embrace Hallie.

"Where did you go? We missed you so much, Lu. Did you miss us? Are you hurt? What's with the cane?" Hallie jabbered.

"Back to Colorado. I missed you like crazy too. I had a little surgery to fix my leg. Nothin' serious," Lu answered as she ruffled Chester's fur and accepted his drooly kisses.

"Got your knife?"

"I do and think I owe you a game, don't I?"

"And you never forget a promise," Hallie said with a freckled grin.

"That's right," Lu said, smiling as she tickled Hallie's sides.

The girl wiggled away and ran toward the house. "I'll be right back," she said. "Don't go away, okay?"

"I won't."

As Lu made her way back to her feet, Reggie stepped onto the porch, her arms crossed loosely over her chest.

"Reggie," Lu said.

"Lu," Reggie acknowledged.

"You left today before we had a chance to talk."

"Wasn't really anything to say," Reggie said, shrugging.

Before Lu could respond, Hallie was back, ready to start the game. A little over an hour later Lu followed Hallie into the small living room.

"I won again, Mom," Hallie called out.

Reggie came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands. "I made lemonade if you want some," she said to her daughter.

"You want a glass, too, Lu?" Hallie asked.

"That sounds good, kiddo. Thanks."

"Almost time to feed the chickens, Hallie," Reggie reminded the girl.

"Okay," Hallie called back. "Soon as I get Lu her lemonade."

There weren't many places to sit, so Lu pointed to the couch where Reggie sat with her legs folded under her.

"That's fine. I don't bite. How's the leg?"

"Good, but it'll never be the same. I had minor surgery on it again last week, but it should be okay once it heals up."

"Glad to hear that."

"Pretty chilly in here for June, isn't it?" Lu said.

Reggie looked at her. "What would you like me to say, Lu?"

"I was hopin' you'd get mad and smack me, or throw some-thin'."

"And what good would that do?"

"You left the hospital without sayin' a damn word," Lu said. "Not even goodbye."

Reggie glared at her. "I seem to recall you sayin' plenty. I couldn't think of anythin' brilliant to say after that."

"I—" Lu started.

"I cried all the way home. I gave you the most important part of me and you had the nerve to tell me you weren't the 'forever kind'," Reggie said, raising her fingers to make quote marks in the air.

"I'm not, but—" Lu tried again.

"We haven't heard one damn word from you for six freakin' months!" Reggie shouted and jumped up. "I was the one who had to try and explain to Hallie why you never came back to see her or even bothered to call."

Lu stood up as well. "If you'd just let me finish," she said just as loudly. She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down.

"You made me feel cheap and used, like a piece of trash you could throw away when you were done with it."

Lu clinched her hands into angry fists. Her voice was strained when she finally spoke. "I'm...I'm sorry I made you feel that way, Reggie, but I was angry because you used me to spend one last time with Jac. I should go before I say somethin' I'll regret. I won't bother you again."

When Lu turned away Reggie grabbed her by the arm. "Not until you say goodbye to Hallie," she said. "I won't be the one to break her heart again." She let her hand slip from Lu's arm as she turned back toward the kitchen, but Lu could see the tears shimmering in her eyes.

LU DROVE AWAY from what she had hoped could be her future and signaled to turn onto the valley road that would lead her toward uncertainty instead. At the end of the drive, she glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Hallie running down the drive, still waving goodbye, with Chester loping behind her. Lu had spoken to the child briefly, but had no answer to when she might return to see her again. She wasn't certain about her own feelings yet. She missed the

girl, but an unidentifiable anger simmered somewhere deep in her soul. She was angry at herself and angry at Reggie. She turned onto the narrow, two-lane road that would take her over the ridge and back to.... Back to what? The loneliness and solitude she'd always known? Short-lived liaisons with women who thought they could change her?

She saw the graveled parking area of Gertie's and slowed before deciding to turn in. Maybe a couple of drinks would calm her down and give her a chance to think. It was late in the afternoon and there were already several trucks and motorcycles parked in front of the run-down tavern.

Lu pushed her way into the perpetually stuck front door and glanced around. She was still wearing her suit from the celebration and looked out of place now among the miners and leather-clad bikers who frequented Gertie's. She endured a few stares as she made her way to the bar. As usual, Gertie stood behind the bar, chatting with a couple of patrons and wiping down the bar top. She looked at Lu for a moment before moving in her direction.

"Well, you're lookin' mighty spiffy today, champ," Gertie said. "Get hitched or somethin'?"

"Just passin' through and needed a drink," Lu answered.

"Plannin' to get lickered up and start another fight?" Gertie chuckled.

"Too soon to tell." Lu smiled as she pulled a twenty from her wallet and slapped it on the bar. "Cumberland Ale and keep 'em comin' 'til this runs out." She swiveled on the bar stool when a couple of loud, rowdy patrons stomped in. She blinked when the memory of the first time she's seen Reggie flashed through her mind. Everything in her life had changed at that moment. She turned back to the bar and swallowed half her ale in one long draw.

"You'd forget faster with somethin' a little stouter," Gertie said.

"What makes you think I'm tryin' to forget somethin'," Lu growled as she finished off her first drink.

Gertie shrugged as she set a second bottle in front of Lu. "Just a hunch," she said. "I only get two kinds of customers in here. The ones tryin' to forget or the ones searchin' for a memory. Which one are you?"

"That ain't none of your business, now is it?" Lu said.

"Probably not, but I'm a curious bitch," Gertie chuckled. She moved back a step and folded her arms over her ample chest. "Been a while since I seen you in here."

"Been gone 'bout six months or so recuperatin' from an accident."

"So who'd you leave behind? Someone special, I bet."

"Not accordin' to her."

Gertie raised her eyebrows and only nodded.

"Her, huh?"

"Yeah."

"She dump you?"

"Yeah."

"There's gotta be a reason, sugar. Women give their hearts away and cling like starvin' leeches once they've latched on to what they want."

"She's mad because I didn't contact her while I was gone."

Gertie laughed. "Not your best move, stud. A woman has to have a little sweet talk from time to time to know you're still interested. Did you think she was a fuckin' mind reader or somethin'?"

"I loved her, but it turned out I was nothin' more than a substitute for someone else."

"Did she say that?"

"No, but I saw it in her eyes."

“So your fragile ego got bruised some. Grow up and get over yourself.”

“I thought ‘bout her the whole time I was gone. Couldn’t stop myself.”

“But couldn’t find a fuckin’ phone to call her? Humpf! That’s lame.”

“I tried to apologize to her earlier today, but she wouldn’t listen. I tried, okay.”

“But she didn’t throw herself back into your arms, did she?”

“No.”

“So you give up and decided to come here to get drunk?” Gertie asked as she set a shot glass in front of Lu and filled it. “Think it’ll help?”

“Can’t hurt.” Lu tossed the drink down and hissed as she tapped the glass on the bar for a refill. “What the hell do you expect me to do?”

“Beg. Grovel. Kiss her ass. Whatever works,” Gertie huffed, pouring a second shot.

“Through talkin’. I got other customers needin’ refills. Can’t spend all day holdin’ your hand and listenin’ to you snivel. You owe ten for the shots. I give you the good stuff.”

Lu slapped a ten on the bar and frowned as the red-head picked it up, stuffed it between her breasts, and waddled away to chat with a group of men farther down the bar.

Lu picked up the beer in front of her and took a sip. Her mind began to feel fuzzy, periodically allowing thoughts of Reggie to seep out. She’d tried for the last six months to forget Reggie, but nothing had worked. Every time she thought she’d driven her from her mind, something brought her back again and Lu ached inside. None of the other women she’d been with caused the same reaction. The same need. She loved Reggie and the thought of never being with her again hurt. She had to make Reggie listen. Make her understand how desperately Lu needed her.

THE NEXT MORNING, sober and rested, Lu returned to Reggie’s home. When she turned into the drive, she didn’t see the old blue van. But there was a familiar truck parked next to the house. Lu parked near the porch and worked her way out of her car. Before she could shut the car door, she heard Chester baying as he loped toward her. He jumped up excitedly, resting his front paws on her chest. She patted him solidly on the back and began scratching his ears. She heard the front screen slam against its frame on the porch and looked toward it, expecting to see Reggie staring down at her. Instead she saw Gardner Kinlaw leaning against a porch post. His fiancé, Darlene, stood beside him, holding his hand in hers.

↑Mornin’→↓← Lu said with a smile.

↑Mornin’→ Calder. Darlene just put on a pot of coffee. Want a cup?↓← Gardner asked.

↑Sure, thanks. Reggie ←round?↓←

↑Nope. Called last night and said she was goin’ out of town for a coupla days. Asked me to stop by and feed Chester,” Gardner said, turning to re-enter the house. His arm rested easily around Darlene’s waist as he leaned around her to open the screen again.

Lu made her way up the porch steps and followed them inside. “Say where she was goin’?” she asked.

“Virginia, I reckon. She goes ever year to visit a friend,” Gardner answered with a shrug as Darlene poured three mugs of coffee and handed one to Lu. “Left a couple of hours ago. Long drive.”

“Take Hallie with her?”

“Had to. Nobody here to watch her and Reggie don’t like to leave her anywhere more’n a day. I told her me and Darlene would stay here with Hallie, but Reggie didn’t want to leave her.”

“What about your mama?”

“Reg would never ask her.” Gardner pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down heavily. “Our mama’s not the forgivin’ kind,” he chuckled. “She ain’t never got over Reggie comin’ home pregnant. Didn’t help that Reggie refused to talk ‘bout it or put Hallie up for adoption after she was born.”

“That’s a shame,” Lu said.

“Hallie’s a sweet kid. Just don’t understand why her grandma isn’t nicer to her.”

“Gardner spends as much time with her as he can,” Darlene said. It was the first time Lu had ever heard the young woman speak and her soft, smooth voice surprised her.

“She’s my kin, honey, a part of my family. It’s the right thing to do,” Gardner said, taking a sip of his coffee.

Darlene rubbed her hand over his broad shoulders. From the way she looked at Gardner, Lu could tell that her affection for him was real and deeply felt.

“How’s everthing goin’ at the mine now?” Lu asked, changing the subject to something more comfortable.

“Good. Real good,” Gardner nodded. “We all learned a bunch from Melissa. She, Charlie, and Gussie are good people.”

“Yeah, they are,” Lu agreed.

“Miz Gussie spoiled Hallie somethin’ fierce while she was here. She missed them when they left.” Gardner sipped his coffee and took a deep breath before speaking again. “Hallie missed you too, but Miz Gussie told her you was still gettin’ over bein’ hurt.”

“I...I should have contacted her, but—” Lu started.

“You shoulda. You shoulda called Reggie too. It ain’t none of my business, but I know she liked you. I kinda had the feelin’ you liked her too.”

“I did. I do.”

“Then why didn’t you keep in touch?”

“Scared, I guess. Scared of how she made me feel,” Lu answered with a shrug, unable to look at Gardner. “Still am.” She finished her coffee and stood up.

“You goin’ after her?” Gardner asked.

Lu turned to look at him. “I have to,” she said with a sigh, prepared for a fight. “I love her.”

Gardner stood and stared at Lu, but she couldn’t read what she saw in his eyes. “If you take Highway 95 east, it’ll take you to the Interstate. Save you ‘bout an hour,” he said with a grin. He stuck his hand out and added, “Good luck, Calder.”

“WHERE WE GOIN’, Mama? I’m tired,” Hallie whined.

Reggie signaled and slowly turned her van through the tall wrought-iron arch of Holy Trinity Cemetery on the outskirts of Charlottesville, Virginia. Her hands tightened slightly around the steering wheel as she drove slowly along the narrow asphalt path of an immaculate section.

“Why’re we at a graveyard?” Hallie asked.

“A very close friend of mine passed away a while back. I want to pay my respects and say goodbye,” Reggie answered softly. She smiled at her daughter and reached out to stroke a hand over the girl’s hair. “You met her a couple of times when you were real little.”

“I did?”

Reggie nodded. “She loved you just as much as I do.”

Hallie looked around at the rows of stones. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been here, but she told me once her family had a special place,” Reggie answered as she looked around. She pointed to a fenced area near the top of a rise. The spreading branches of a large oak shaded most of the area. “Let’s try up there,” she said.

A path ended near the bottom of the rise. Reggie stepped out of the vehicle and walked around it to open the passenger door.

She leaned inside and took Hallie’s hand. “This is it,” Reggie said. “I can feel it.” Hallie reached behind her seat and picked up a bouquet of daisies before she got out of the van. She held Reggie’s hand as they started up the manicured rise.

Reggie opened the gate which was topped by an ornate letter F and held it for Hallie. They wandered around the enclosed area until Reggie stopped. Her hand went to her mouth and covered it as she stared at a large stone clearly engraved “Frazier”. Birth dates, but no death dates filled two gray granite rectangles on the black granite marker. One was engraved “Phyllis”, the other “David”.

“This is it. Those are her parents’ names,” Reggie said.

To the right side of the large double stone stood a smaller single grave marker with “Jacqueline” deeply etched into it. Above the name a picture of a smiling young woman with sparkling eyes, adorned the stone. Below the name a single line was engraved. Resting in peace at last.

Finally seeing the evidence that her wife and lover was gone affected Reggie’s emotions more than she thought as tears began building in her eyes and she swallowed around the lump forming in her throat.

Hallie asked, “What’s wrong, Mama?”

“Nothin’, baby.” Reggie said, her voice soft. She managed a smile. “I’m just a little sad to know my friend is gone is all.”

Hallie stepped closer and knelt down to examine the picture on the stone more carefully. She touched it tentatively and looked up at Reggie. “She was real pretty,” Hallie said.

Reggie struggled to speak. She cleared her throat and said, “Yes, she was, sweetie. I wish you could have known her.”

Hallie laid the bouquet of daisies against the headstone and stood, backing up slightly to take her mother’s hand. “Tell me ‘bout her, Mama,” she said.

Reggie lowered her body to the ground and pulled Hallie into her lap. “She was curious, like you. Her smile could light up a whole room.” She leaned her head against her daughter’s and said, “Just like you, baby.”

“Was she smart?”

Reggie laughed. “Very smart. She loved learnin’ new things. She was kind and gentle and I loved her very much.”

“As much as you love me?”

“That’s a tough one, but I might love you a little more,” Reggie said.

Hallie snuggled closer against Reggie and Reggie hugged her daughter tightly.

“Did she like daisies?” Hallie asked.

“They were her favorite flowers,” Reggie answered. “Now can you wait for me near the van so I can say my last goodbye? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Okay,” Hallie said, standing again.

When her daughter skipped away, Reggie ran her fingers over the photograph embedded in the stone. Then she stood, placed a hand on the headstone, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, smiling as she silently remembered Jac.

“I loved you, baby, and miss you every day. You gave me Hallie, but never got to know her. She’s so beautiful and looks like you. I wish you could have known her. I brought her to see you a couple of times, but...but it became too hard. I like to think you’re watchin’ over her now. When she’s older, I’ll make sure she knows about you and never forgets who you were to me. You will always be in my heart, but I need to get on with my life. I hope you understand.”

Reggie bent down and placed a kiss on top of the headstone and let her fingers slip over the edge of the stone as she stepped away and turned to rejoin Hallie.

As Hallie wandered around the headstones not far from the van, a dark blue mid-size sedan drove by slowly and stopped not far away. Reggie closed the gate of the Frazier enclosure, still absorbed in her private thoughts as she made her way back to the van, not paying attention to the vehicle that parked nearby.

“Hallie!” Reggie called out. “Let’s go, baby. It’s a long drive home.”

The door of the sedan opened and Lu stepped out. She closed the car door, taking a step forward before Reggie glanced in her direction. “Lu? What are you doin’ here?”

“I...uh...have to talk to you, Reggie. Please,” Lu said.

“We already talked,” Reggie said with a frown. “Now leave us alone.”

“You have every reason to be mad at me, but I can’t just go away again.”

“Of course you can. You’ve already done it once so it should be easier the second time ‘round. You can’t just keep on waltzin’ in and out of Hallie’s life...my life.”

“I know I deserve that. I love you and Hallie, Reg. I thought I could walk away like I always have, but I can’t,” Lu said. “I need you to forgive me. I need you and Hallie.”

Reggie turned away. “Hallie! Let’s go! Right now, girl!” she yelled.

Lu reached out and took Reggie’s shoulder, turning her to face her again. Her voice quivered slightly when she spoke. “I never stopped thinkin’ about you the whole time I was gone.

Thinkin’ how it hurt to not see you every day and how I’d hurt you. I couldn’t forget how you made me feel when you looked at me, how soft your lips felt when I kissed you, how you made me feel alive for the first time. I couldn’t forget how devoted you were to Jac all those years or what a wonderful mother you are to Hallie. You’re a good woman and I didn’t deserve you because I’ve never loved anyone as much as you loved Jac and that scared the crap out of me. I’ve never given myself to anyone like I did you. I couldn’t imagine havin’ that feelin’ forever, but I want it. I want you to love me as much as you loved her. I want to marry you and adopt Hallie so we can be the family you’ve always wanted.”

Reggie cleared her throat. “I need time to think about it.”

“Chester too?” Hallie asked as she stepped around the side of the van.

“Chester too,” Lu said with a smile. “Every family needs a Chester.”

She moved closer to Reggie and leaned down to kiss her tentatively. When Reggie responded by deepening the kiss, the passion Lu felt took her breath away. It was her answer, the only one she needed. When the kiss ended, Lu pressed her forehead against Reggie’s, losing herself in those amazing light blue eyes that told her she’d finally found home. She took Reggie’s hand and squeezed it lightly, holding her other hand out to Hallie. “I’d be honored if you’d introduce me to Jac now,” she said.

About the Author

Originally from the Appalachian region of Eastern Tennessee, Brenda now lives in Central Texas, near Austin. She began writing in junior high school where she wrote an admittedly hokey western serial to entertain her friends. Completing her graduate studies in Eastern European history in 1971, she worked as a graphic artist, a public relations specialist for the military and a display advertising specialist until she finally had to admit that her mother might have been right and earned her teaching certification. Amazingly, she retired from teaching world history and political science in December of 2013 after thirty years. Brenda and her partner of nineteen years, Cheryl, are the parents of four occasionally grown children, as well as five grandchildren, soon to be six. Rounding out their home is a laid back blonde cat named Tudie and a three-year old Puggle named Peanut, who snores like a freight train. She may be contacted at adcockb10@yahoo.com and welcomes all comments.

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Untouchable

Dr. Emma Rothenberg is the most feared professor at Overland University because of her failure rate. Laramie “Ramie” Sunderlund is a senior art major, desperate to earn three lousy English credits to graduate.

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In the Midnight Hour

What happens when you wake up to find the woman of your dreams in your bed? All-night radio hostess Desdemona, Queen of the Night draws her listening audience with her sultry, seductive voice, the only thing of value she possesses. During the day she becomes an insecure, unattractive woman named Marsha Barrett, living in a world with too many mirrors. She is comfortable with her obscurity until she meets Colleen Walters, a tall, attractive woman hired to expand her listening audience by selling Desdemona to new markets. When she wakes up in bed with Colleen after a night at a club, Marsha is terrified. A woman like Colleen would never go to bed with a woman like Marsha. She might dream about such a thing, but in the harsh reality of

daylight, it would never happen. Beauty is only drawn to beauty and Marsha refuses to believe beauty could ever be drawn to anyone who looks like her. Just as she begins to believe happiness may be possible, the past returns determined to destroy them.

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The Cameleon

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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The Game of Denial

Joan Carmichael, a successful New York businesswoman, lost the love of her life ten years earlier. Alone, she raised their four children, always cherishing her deep love for her wife. Her memories of their life together come back even stronger as one of their daughters prepares to

marry. Joan and her four adult kids fly to Virginia to meet the groom's family and attend the ceremony at the small horse farm owned by the mother of the fiancé.

Evelyn ↑Evey↓← Chase, also a widow, has secrets in her past, and her memories of her dead husband aren't pleasant. She's concerned about meeting her future daughter-in-law's family, certain that she and her three kids will have little in common with the wealthy New Yorkers. Besides, the thought of two women in a relationship bringing up a family together makes her uncomfortable, even though her daughter-in-law assures her that lesbianism is not hereditary or catching.

When the two women meet they are drawn to one another in a way neither anticipated, and the game of denial begins. Evey fights her attraction and doesn't realize the effect she has on Joan. Joan tries to shake off her feelings, seeing them as a betrayal to the memory of her wife. Besides, isn't Evey Chase straight? After Evey and Joan share an intimate moment at the wedding reception, they are both emotionally terrified and Joan flees. Will Joan overcome the feeling of betraying her former mate and stop denying her desire to be happy again? Can Evey finally face her past in order to accept the love of another woman and the desire to live the life she had once dreamed of?

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The Sea Hawk

Dr. Julia Blanchard, a marine archaeologist, and her team of divers have spent almost eighteen months excavating the remains of a ship found a few miles off the coast of Georgia. Although they learn quite a bit about the nineteenth century sailing vessel, they have found nothing that would reveal the identity of the ship they have nicknamed "The Georgia Peach."

Her rescue at sea leads her on an unexpected journey into the true identity of the Peach and the captain and crew who called it their home. Her travels take her to the island of Martinique, the eastern Caribbean islands, the Louisiana German Coast and New Orleans at the close of the War of 1812.

How had the Peach come to rest in the waters off the Georgia coast? What had become of her alluring and enigmatic captain, Simone Moreau? Can love conquer everything, even time?

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Pipeline

What do you do when the mistakes you made in the past come back to slap you in the face with a vengeance? Joanna Carlisle, a fifty-seven year old photojournalist, has only begun to adjust to retirement on her small ranch outside Kerrville, Texas, when she finds herself unwillingly sucked into an investigation of illegal aliens being smuggled into the United States to fill the ranks of cheap labor needed to increase corporate profits.

An unexpected visit by her former lover, Cate Hammond, and the attempted murder of their son, forces Jo to finally face what she had given up. Although she hasn't seen Cate or their son for fifteen years, she finds that the feelings she had for Cate had only been dormant, but had never died. No matter how much she fights her attraction to Cate, Jo cannot help but wonder whether she had made the right decision when she chose career and independence over love.

ISBN 978-1-932300-64-2

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Reiko's Garden

Hatred...like love...knows no boundaries.

How much impact can one person have on a life?

When sixty-five-year old Callie Owen returns to her rural childhood home in Eastern Tennessee to attend the funeral of a woman she hasn't seen in twenty years, she's forced to face the fears, heartache, and turbulent events that scarred both her body and her mind. Drawing strength from Jean, her partner of thirty years, and from their two grown children, Callie stays in the valley longer than she had anticipated and relives the years that changed her life forever.

In 1949, Japanese war bride Reiko Sanders came to Frost Valley, Tennessee with her soldier husband and infant son. Callie Owen was an inquisitive ten-year-old whose curiosity about the stranger drove her to disobey her father for just one peek at the woman who had become the subject of so much speculation. Despite Callie's fears, she soon finds that the exotic-looking woman is kind and caring, and the two forge a tentative, but secret friendship.

When Callie and her five brothers and sisters were left orphaned, Reiko provided emotional support to Callie. The bond between them continued to grow stronger until Callie left Frost Valley as a teenager, emotionally and physically scarred, vowing never to return and never to forgive.

It's not until Callie goes "home" that she allows herself to remember how Reiko influenced her life. Once and for all, can she face the terrible events of her past? Or will they come back to destroy all that she loves?

ISBN 978-1-932300-77-2

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Redress of Greivances

Harriett Markham is a defense attorney in Austin, Texas, who lost everything eleven years earlier. She had been an associate with a Dallas firm and involved in an affair with a senior partner, Alexis Dunne. Harriett represented a rape/murder client named Jared Wilkes and got the charges dismissed on a technicality. When Wilkes committed a rape and murder after his release, Harriett was devastated. She resigned and moved to Austin, leaving everything behind, including her lover.

Despite lingering feelings for Alexis, Harriet becomes involved with a sex-offense investigator, Jessie Rains, a woman struggling with secrets of her own. Harriet thinks she might finally be happy, but then Alexis re-enters her life. She refers a case of multiple homicide allegedly committed by Sharon Taggart, a woman with no motive for the crimes. Harriett is creeped out by the brutal murders, but reluctantly agrees to handle the defense.

As Harriett's team prepares for trial, disturbing information comes to light. Sharon denies any involvement in the crimes, but the evidence against her seems overwhelming. Harriett is plunged into a case rife with twisty psychological motives, questionable sanity, and a client with a complex and disturbing life. Is she guilty or not? And will Harriet's legal defense bring about justice—or another Wilkes case?

Recipient of a 2008 award from the Golden Crown Literary Society, the premiere organization for the support and nourishment of quality lesbian literature. Redress of Grievances won in the category of Lesbian Mystery.

ISBN 978-1-932300-86-4

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Tunnel Vision

Royce Brodie, a 50-year-old homicide detective in the quiet town of Cedar Springs, a bedroom community 30 miles from Austin, Texas, has spent the last seven years coming to grips with the incident that took the life of her partner and narrowly missed taking her own. The peace and quiet she had been enjoying is shattered by two seemingly unrelated murders in the same week: the first, a John Doe, and the second, a janitor at the local university.

As Brodie and her partner, Curtis Nicholls, begin their investigation, the assignment of a new trainee disrupts Brodie's life. Not only is Maggie Weston Brodie's former lover, but her father had been Brodie's commander at the Austin Police Department and nearly destroyed her career.

As the three detectives try to piece together the scattered evidence to solve the two murders, they become convinced the two murders are related. The discovery of a similar murder committed five years earlier at a small university in upstate New York creates a sense of urgency as they realize they are chasing a serial killer.

The already difficult case becomes even more so when a third victim is found. But the case becomes personal for Brodie when Maggie becomes the killer's next target. Unless Brodie finds a way to save Maggie, she could face losing everything a second time.

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Soiled Dove

In 1872, sixteen-year-old Loretta Digby fled her home in Indiana to escape an abusive step-father. Rescued from the streets of St. Joseph, Missouri by brothel owner Jack Coulter, she turns to the only work available. By twenty she became a much sought after prostitute catering to St. Jo's most influential men and dreaming of the day she can leave her past behind and start her life anew. Working with teacher, Hettie Tobias, who is traveling west for a teaching position in Trinidad, Colorado, Loretta and Amelia leave their former lives behind.

In the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains outside Trinidad, Clare McIlhenney has been struggling for years to make her father's dream of owning a cattle ranch in the west come true. Working with a few ranch hands and her foreman, Ino Valdez, Clare has slowly built the ranch over the last twenty years while overcoming everything that should have stopped her.

In the spring of 1876 Loretta and her friends arrive in the dusty Colorado town. Her first meeting with Clare McIlhenney is less than inspiring. When Clare is injured, over her strenuous objections, Ino hires Loretta as a temporary cook and housekeeper for the ranch. Over the next few months, Clare struggles with her unwanted attraction to the much younger woman, unable to forget the events of her past that led to the deaths of everyone she had been close to. Determined to never lose anyone else, Clare closed off her emotions and became a distant and disliked stranger to everyone around her.

Will Loretta be able to keep her past a secret and find a new life? Will Clare open herself up to loss yet again and put her own prejudices behind her? In a story of the struggles in a harsh and unforgiving time will the two women find peace at last?

Recipient of a 2011 award from the Golden Crown Literary Society, the premiere organization for the support and nourishment of quality lesbian literature. Soiled Dove won in the category of Historical Romance.

ISBN 978-1-935053-35-4

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The Other Mrs. Champion

Sarah Champion, 55, of Massachusetts, was leading the perfect life with Kelley, her partner and wife of twenty-five years. That is, until Kelley was struck down by an unexpected stroke away from home. But Sarah discovers she hadn't known her partner and lover as well as she thought.

Accompanied by Kelley's long-time friend and attorney, Sarah and her children rush to Vancouver, British Columbia to say their goodbyes, only to discover another woman, Pauline, keeping a vigil over Kelley in the hospital. Confronted by the fact that her wife also has a Canadian wife, Sarah struggles to find answers to resolve her emotional and personal turmoil.

Alone and lonely, Sarah turns to the only other person who knew Kelley as well as she did—Pauline Champion. Will the two women be able to forge a friendship despite their simmering animosity? Will their growing attraction eventually become Kelley's final gift to the women she loved?

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Picking Up the Pieces

Athon Dailey hasn't had many breaks in her life other than the ones she made for herself by living up to her reputation as a tough girl until she meets Lauren Shelton, a new girl at school in Duvalle, Texas. Tamed by Lauren's affection, Athon begins to believe there could be a brighter future. When Lauren's parents discover the growing relationship they send her away, making sure the two girls never have contact, leaving Athon alone and abandoned.

Twenty years later the two women meet again. Athon has established a successful military career as a helicopter pilot while Lauren has returned to Duvalle to teach. It doesn't take long for them to rekindle their feelings for one another and they finally get the chance to rebuild their teenage dreams. Permanent happiness is within their grasp when Athon's unit is deployed.

Athon comes home in a coma, diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury. She awakens to find Lauren by her side to welcome her home. When Athon chooses to retire and return to Texas, neither realizes the twists and turns the journey home will take. The Athon Dailey who returned to Lauren is not the woman she remembers. In order for their relationship to survive, Lauren begins her search for the woman she loves. Will Athon finally find her way back to Lauren and the dream they both once had? Does Lauren have the courage to live with a woman who is now a stranger?

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