

Chasing Chips, Finding Love

Copyright © 2019 B. B. Montgomery
A High Pines Press Publication
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the author.

* * * * *

This book is a work of fiction. Places, events, and situations in this book are purely fictional and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental

* * * * *

Formatting and cover design by Debora Lewis
deboraklewis@yahoo.com

Cover photo courtesy of Shutterstock

* * * * *

Chasing Chips, Finding Love

B. B. MONTGOMERY

Acknowledgments

This has been a fun book to write. Turning fact into fiction is becoming my favorite thing to do. The Desperation Depot is real but not in Jerome, AZ. It's outside of a wonderful little town in Franklin, Indiana. I have a great team that helps tremendously. Tenita is the editor of editors. She keeps me on the straight and narrow. Deb's creativity turns my words into a beautiful picture on the cover. Without my honey's help, I would never get out of the corners I sometimes paint myself into. Bob's support, love, and encouragement keep me going.

Prologue

“I can’t believe he turned me down! I’ve worked so hard to finally get this opportunity!” Ellie paced the floor as she ranted to no one in particular. The confines of her little cubicle suddenly started to close in on her.

The ringing of the phone on her desk grabbed her attention. “Hello!” Her harsh, unofficial greeting was not wasted on the caller.

In response to the shock at the informal greeting on the other end of the line, the female voice asked, “Ellie? Are you alright?”

“Aubrie!” Ellie took a moment to gather her composure. “I’m so sorry! I was just upset.”

“Obviously! What in the world is going on?” Her friend prodded Ellie for an answer. “I was calling to invite you to lunch, but I’m not sure that was such a good idea now. I’m in town and we haven’t seen each other in months! On second thought, please just meet me and let’s talk about whatever is upsetting you.”

“Alright, Aubrie. Let’s meet at The Palace in an hour.” Ellie replied.

“Don’t do anything rash.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I know you, Ellie. Please keep your head on your shoulders until we talk, okay” Her friend pleaded.

A short time later, as Ellie made her way down the street to the restaurant, she tried to take deep breaths of the summer air. Prescott was the right move for great weather, she mused, but so far it wasn't exactly the smartest decision for her career. The county courthouse square was always full of activity especially this time of the year. It was the height of tourist season and vendors were busily setting up their booths for the event this weekend. She waved as she passed familiar people and headed straight towards The Palace Restaurant and Saloon.

Pushing her way through the swinging doors, Ellie adjusted her eyes to the dimly lit interior. She saw her friend and quickly moved to the table in the back.

Aubrie stood and gave Ellie a big hug. "Wow! Look at you! When did you do this to your hair?" Aubrie touched Ellie's long strands. "Didn't you like being a blond?" She teased her good friend. Aubrie's own natural red hair was long and loose and Ellie envied her friend.

"Unfortunately, that blond shade was from a bottle. My own natural color is a dark brown. As that started to fade, I decided that getting gray before my time was not something I wanted to do, so I added highlights, lowlights, and whatever lights I could get." Ellie laughed. "That way no one will ever know about my natural gray!"

"I love it! It suits you." They sat back down and quickly gave their order to the server.

"So tell me. What in the world has you so upset?"

"Aubrie, I have worked so hard to get my degree in Criminology; Uncle and I moved back here last year

so I could pursue my dream of becoming a detective. I know that I can't start out at the top, but come on! I have more qualifications than the man they hired!" She stopped long enough to take a drink of her soda. "I'm sure that Tuck told you I had applied for the position."

"Yes, I know, Ellie. You've worked very hard. I was so glad that you were the one with me last year when we had to deal with that car in my lake. I couldn't have asked for anyone better when we dealt with that crazed deputy. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there." Aubrie shuddered with her memories.

"That was awful, wasn't it?" Ellie agreed.

"It was the scariest thing I've ever had to go through. I was sure that that deputy was going to kill us. Thanks to your quick thinking, we got away."

"Does Tuck talk about it? Did he say they were coming closer to solving his dad's death?" Ellie referred to Aubrie's husband who is a detective for the sheriff's department.

"Not really, he keeps things close to him. I know he works on solving it every day but he has so many other current cases that require his attention. That's why they're expanding the force of detectives." She saw the look of consternation appear on her friend's face, and amended, "Ellie your time will come. You'll see."

"Arghhh! I just get so frustrated!" She took a bite of her sandwich before continuing. "They may be right, though. I have the book smarts, but I do lack the practical field experience."

“Wow! Ellie Parker admitting she has faults!” Her friend teased.

“Of course I have my faults. Don’t most of us?”

“Yes we all do.” Both ladies ate on their lunch for a bit.

“So, how are things with you and your wonderful husband?” Ellie prompted.

“We’re good. He works lots of hours, but that gives me time to take care of our home and the guests at our B & B. I love living out by the lake.”

“I envy you two.”

“What’d you mean? I thought you and John were doing fine.” Aubrie replied.

Ellie sighed, “We were before I started working for the sheriff’s office. After I got the job in records, he started coming up with excuses not to get together. It’s like he’s more concerned with what others think than what he feels about me.”

“I’m sure that’s not it, Ellie. He’s a very busy man. You know he has to take care of the entire county.”

“Oh, I don’t know what to think. I just know that I have it bad for a certain sheriff and my career’s going nowhere.” Ellie slumped in her chair.

“I think you need to get some help.” When Aubrie saw her friend’s objection, she continued, “I don’t mean help like counseling or that. I think you should get a mentor. You know, someone that can help you get that field experience that you need.”

Ellie’s eyes brightened up. “You know, I think that’s a great idea! I wonder who I can get to help me?”

“Now you’re using your brain.”

Aubrie laughed and Ellie joined in, but their laughter faded as a tall, dark man crossed the floor to come and stand by their table. Aubrie was the first to respond. "John, how nice to see you!" She smiled up at the sheriff. She could see Ellie squirm in her seat and chuckled.

"Ladies. Nice to see you both. May I join you?" He was already in the motion of sitting in the vacant chair, not waiting for a reply from either of them.

"Have a seat, Sheriff." Ellie's sarcasm was wasted as John didn't acknowledge her sharp comment. He smiled at Aubrie before asking, "How are you doing Aubrie? I'm keeping Tuck so busy I don't often get a chance to ask about you."

"John, I'm doing great, Ellie and I both are." As she tried to include Ellie in the conversation. With that the sheriff finally turned to the other woman at the table.

"El, how are you?"

"You damn well know how I am!" was her sharp reply.

Aubrie had to turn her head to keep them both from seeing the grin that crossed her face. This was not going to be pleasant, she thought with humor.

"And don't call me El!" Ellie added with emphasis.

Aubrie started to get up, "I can see you two have some things to talk over. I need to get back to the lake anyway."

"Aubrie, you don't have to go. Please stay." Her friend pleaded.

"Nonsense, I have guests coming tomorrow and there are things to be done." She grabbed her purse,

but before leaving the table, she reminded Ellie. "Remember that thing we were talking about earlier?" Seeing the confused look on the other lady's face, she elaborated, "You know the help you need?" She nodded her head towards the sheriff.

"Oh, no! That's not going to happen. That's a very bad idea." Ellie shook her head.

Aubrie started to walk away. "See you two! Have a great day." She giggled as she made her way to the front door.

The silence was broken by the sheriff. "Look, El... Ellie, I came looking for you. I knew you'd be upset over not being chosen for detective. I wanted to talk to you." He was visibly nervous.

"Well, start talking Sheriff. You know I have better qualifications than the man you hired! I've been doing my best to do everything I could, but I just can't seem to pass your muster!"

"Ellie, you must know that the decision wasn't mine to make."

"Maybe you didn't have the final say so, but I know that you were involved at least in the discussion about who was hired." She was not going to be put off.

"Ellie..." He seemed at a loss for words. "What can I do? It was the Captain's call, not mine. How can I make you understand? How can I help?"

For a moment, she didn't speak, and then Ellie put a sarcastic smile on her face. Aubrie was right. She needed a mentor. She needed field experience. "John, you want to help?"

“Of course. I want to see you happy.” The sheriff replied, hopeful that he was getting somewhere with her.

“Then, you, Sheriff Clarke, are going to become my mentor! You’re going to help me get the field experience I need!”

One

Ellie answered the ringing phone on her desk only to be completely surprised by the male voice on the other end. "Be at the lake tomorrow morning at 8:00! You want field experience, lady, you're going to get it!"

"John?" She questioned tentatively.

"Of course! We're going to investigate a crime near and dear to your heart!" His voice was firm and brooked no arguments.

"Do you mean the missing deputy?" She questioned.

"Good question, but save all that for tomorrow. I'll see you at the Hassayampa." He hung up the phone before she could protest.

"Thanks, I think." Ellie said as she put the phone back on her desk. Thoughts of the tall, dark haired man that belonged to that sexy voice popped into her mind. She could see him with his jeans, and uniform shirt on along with that familiar Stetson cowboy hat. A little part of her was nervous but most of her was excited. This could be the training I need! She went about her day but her mind was definitely occupied by her impending work with the sheriff. As she left her cubicle for the day, she hurried to her car and home.

“Uncle, I’m home.” She announced to an empty room. The older home she and her uncle had purchased was in a more established section of town. He had his own separate bedroom and living area in a detached building, but they shared the kitchen in the main house. She found a note stuck to the refrigerator stating that her uncle was visiting his friends down the street and wouldn’t be there until later. She chuckled as she read the scribbled note.

Shotgun Willie, as he was known by his closest friends, was her uncle and only relative. Since coming to Prescott from Las Vegas, he had made a very busy life for himself with the neighbors. The Girls, as he called them, lived down the street and the three of them often played cards and shared meals. Because of his need for assistance to get around, they bought him a little golf cart and he never stopped putting the miles on it. He could use his cane and the cart and she smiled as she realized that helped him maintain some independence.

“At least he has a social life.” She stated sarcastically to the empty room. Ellie kicked off her shoes and went to her bedroom to change into her comfortable clothes. Upon finishing that, she went to the refrigerator and grabbed the partial bottle of wine and poured a rather large glass for herself.

After sitting down on the sofa, Ellie dialed her phone. Her friend answered almost immediately.

“Ellie, how did things go with John after I left you yesterday?” Aubrie’s teasing note didn’t go unnoticed.

“Thanks for abandoning me, friend!”

“Oh, I’m quite sure you handled it just fine without me there. So, what happened?”

“Nothing really, he tried to apologize about me not getting the position, but I didn’t let him get away with it.” Ellie responded glibly.

“Maybe you two can get things straightened out.”

“I don’t think so. I just want to get on with my career and he’s too busy being the high and mighty sheriff.” Ellie took a swig of her wine. “One thing good came out of his visit, though.”

“What’s that?”

“He called me just before I left work and we’re going to meet at your lake in the morning. He’s agreed to help me learn how to conduct a proper investigation.”

“Really?” Aubrie sounded surprised.

“Yes, I badgered him into agreeing to become my mentor. We start tomorrow morning.”

“What are you going to investigate?” Aubrie’s curiosity was piqued.

Ellie hesitated before answering. She realized that her friend was a little more vulnerable than herself and she didn’t want to bring back some unpleasant memories.

“Ellie? What’s he got for you to do?” She pressed for more.

“He said we’re going to look for the infamous missing Deputy Chuck! He wants to renew the search for him and hopefully get some answers for when he... well you know.” Ellie left the rest unsaid.

“You mean he wants to uncover more information about that rat and how he kidnapped us! Ellie, you

don't need to sugarcoat it for me. I'm fine now. With Tuck here I feel very safe and I have a wonderful life."

"Aubrie, I know that you're not used to law enforcement and all that goes with it. I just wanted to protect you from some of the harsh realities of my world."

"Ellie, you're a good friend, but you don't need to protect me. I've gotten more educated by being married to a detective. Tuck's wonderful and I love him with all my heart, but I realize there's a side to him that I don't get to see. It only comes out when he's on the job. So, I've tried to learn a little more about his world. That way I can be a supportive wife."

"You're so good! I envy you two." Ellie took another big sip of her wine.

"Maybe this will be the start of you and John getting back together."

"I doubt it, that's why I left and moved to Las Vegas the first time. It's not much different now. He's more concerned with the job than with us." She started again, "Don't worry about me, Aubrie. I'm going to be just fine."

"I never worry about you, my friend. Have fun tomorrow. Maybe you two can stop by and have some lunch."

"We'll see. Luv you." She ended the call.

Ellie got busy and started her old faithful laptop. She wanted to do some research before meeting the sheriff. She hoped to appear more informed about the case. If only I had access to those types of records at work, she mused. Oh, well. After several hours of internet work, Ellie finally made her way to bed.

Bright and early the next morning she made her way to the Hassayampa Lake. The lake and 500 acres was privately owned by Tuck and Aubrie. Upon inheriting the beautiful old two story house, the young couple had worked hard restoring it to its former grandeur. The tall stately pines swayed to the warm summer breeze and she admired the pristine view from her car. They had a successful bed and breakfast lodge and used the lake for their guests. As she drove down the lane passed the home her friends lived in, Ellie was not surprised to see that the sheriff was already there waiting for her at the lake's edge. A case of nerves suddenly settled in her stomach. She pulled her SUV right up behind his truck.

"John," She addressed the sheriff solemnly.

His snicker wasn't wasted on her. "Ellie." He returned her unemotional greeting. "Ready?"

"Absolutely. What do you have in mind? Where do we start?" She pressed further.

"Did you eat? Want to go to Aubrie's for breakfast?" He stalled.

She looked at the handsome man and for a moment wanted to give in to a more social situation, but suddenly remembered that she wanted to be a detective and nothing or no one should get in the way of that goal. "No! I don't want to have breakfast. I've already eaten." Ellie paused, "Sorry, I didn't mean to sound so grumpy. I would rather you share with me and then let's get onto some serious investigating."

Ellie grabbed her notebook, shoved her phone in the pocket of her jeans and came over to the back of John's pickup truck. He was leaning against the

tailgate of his personal vehicle reading some sort of document and she took a moment to look over the tall, dark man. He was dressed casually just as she was in jeans and a chambray shirt. He had rolled the sleeves up and his muscular forearms were as tanned as his face. Spending a lot of time in the Arizona sun had added to his roughened look. He had on a baseball cap rather than the usual Stetson cowboy hat he wore with his uniform. His dark hair appeared to be slightly damp as though just out of the shower.

Ellie had to shake her head and dismiss those thoughts from her mind. "What's that?" She leaned up against the back of the truck as she referred to the paper in John's hand.

"I was just refreshing myself with the details as we knew it over a year ago." He put the entire pack of papers down as he looked directly at her. "It's hard to realize that it's been that long since you were in harm's way."

She turned her head to avoid locking gazes with him. This was going to be harder than she first thought. She wanted and needed experience in solving a crime, but she didn't need nor wanted to be reminded of her emotional ties to this tall sheriff from her past. For a few seconds, they each were in their own private thoughts and nothing was heard except the wind whistling through the tall trees surrounding the small lake.

"Ellie, let's start with your memories. I chose this place because that's where you first met Deputy Chuck. Right over there, right?" He pointed to an area further down the path.

She nodded her head. Until that exact moment, Ellie had thought she had successfully dealt with the emotions of being kidnapped. She shuddered in remembrance.

“If this is too painful, we can quit right here. You don’t have to go through with this.” John was at her side, but not touching her. His voice didn’t show emotion but Ellie somehow knew he was testing her.

She turned to face him. “I’m fine. Let’s do this.” She stalked away putting some distance between them. Her footsteps were firm and she was determined to gain control of her emotions. A good detective doesn’t allow feelings to interfere with the facts, she thought to herself. Soon, she stopped and turned to see if he had followed. John was right there behind her. His face was blank and he waited for her to speak.

“This seems to be the exact spot. Although with the lake full now, it’s hard to tell for sure.” She hoped her voice was steady and full of confidence.

“I want you to close your eyes and tell me what happened the very moment you met the deputy. Don’t worry about the order in which you say things, just start describing everything you can remember.” John pulled a small notebook from the pocket of his shirt and waited for her to comply.

“But it’s been over a year!” She protested.

“Ellie, you’d be amazed at what the mind can retain. Very often, it takes time for small memories to surface. Trust me. Give it a try.”

Ellie reluctantly closed her eyes and allowed the memories to come to her. Her voice was quiet and

John strained to hear. "I remember thinking as we got closer and saw him standing beside his old pickup that something was out of place. I could feel that something wasn't quite right." She stopped and opened her eyes to face the sheriff. "I suppose you think that's silly."

"Ellie, I'm not making any judgements here. I want all the information that you have. That file has plenty of facts in it, but in order to find my missing deputy I need more. You have important material in your head that will help us do that. A good investigator realizes that very often a case is solved by 'feelings'."

Satisfied that he was sincere, Ellie once again closed her eyes and continued her trip down memory lane. "I tried to get Aubrie to turn around and go back to the house, but it was too late. Deputy Chuck was waving at us to come on over."

"I remember him being extremely surprised that Aubrie had brought company. He wasn't at all happy about that. When Aubrie asked him what the emergency was, he became even more agitated." She hesitated but then pushed on, "When we started to back up toward our vehicle, he grabbed me and pulled out his gun. As soon as I saw that, I knew we shouldn't have come without you or Tuck with us." She took a deep breath and stopped.

"What did you smell? What did you hear?" John kept pushing her.

She opened her eyes. Was he playing with her? Was he serious about this type of questioning? She looked at him squarely and realized he was intent on her answering his questions.

“When he grabbed me and pulled me close to him, I could smell smoke.”

“Smoke? Like cigarette smoke?”

“No, more like a campfire.”

“That’s probably because he’d just set that old chicken coop on fire.” John kept writing down notes in his small book.

“That’s another thing. He kept reaching for a notebook such as yours. He was writing in it just like you’re doing.” She was proud of remembering such a small detail.

“It’s a tool I train the deputies to use. None of us have full recall but when we write it down, it helps jog our brains.” He used his pen to complete his notes.

“That’s one thing different, though. The deputy didn’t use an ink pen, he used a pencil. You know those little, short pencils that you get at a golf course? It was one of those. It didn’t have an eraser.”

“Great information. Those are the types of tidbits that very often are the key needed to solve a case.”

His praise made her grin. She could get used to enjoying him being supportive. This was not something she expected from John.

“What next, Ellie? What happened after he grabbed you?” John waited for her to answer.

“John, I gave my official statement over a year ago when all this happened. Is it really necessary to go over it again?”

It made her nervous as she had strived to put all this behind her.

“I know what the official report says, Ellie, but what I want now is your feelings, unofficial observations, your opinions.”

“You mean unlike Sergeant Joe Friday, you don’t want just the facts?” She challenged him.

His laughter was music to her ears. It seemed to break the tension between them. She was grateful for the humor they shared.

“El, you’ll find that ‘just the facts’ is good, but very often allowing people to relate their own impressions can bring to light new information.”

She allowed the use of his pet name. Ellie didn’t want to break the spell of comradery that was suddenly there between them.

She took a deep breath before continuing. “He demanded the stolen Las Vegas poker chips. We were both stunned into silence for a few seconds. Aubrie denied knowing what he was talking about and I tried to appeal to his sense of duty. I tried to get him to see that what he was doing would forever ruin his law enforcement career.” There she stopped, not sure she wanted to share the negative comments the deputy had made about the sheriff.

“Go on.”

“He exploded with my suggestion and blasted you for assigning him to guard an empty lake.” She watched John for any reaction that would shed some light on how he felt about his role in the deputy’s actions. He showed nothing as he probed for more.

“When Aubrie said she would tell him where the chips were hidden, I told her not to give him that information. That’s when he struck me with his gun.”

Unconsciously, Ellie reached up to stroke her hand across the barely visible scar on the side of her head. It was just on the side of her face almost hidden by her hairline.

It was then she finally saw John flinch. Maybe the sheriff wasn't as unemotional as he tried to portray, she thought.

She wanted to stop those erratic thoughts and proceeded to fill in the details. "Aubrie bent down to help me. She told Chuck that she would tell him where the chips were hidden, but he was immediately in a hurry to get us out of there. He ordered us to his truck before Tuck and Phil could get back."

Now that she was on a roll with her thoughts, Ellie continued, "He kept that gun poked into my ribs and as Aubrie drove I was trying to keep my wits about me. My head was spinning and it was all I could do to stay alert and conscious."

"But you did a good job, Ellie. Your awareness and quick thinking saved you both." John turned and started towards his truck. "Let's go to Aubrie's and get some lunch. I ordered one of her special picnic baskets."

As Ellie followed him, she looked to the skies. It was closer to noon now and the sun was shining with scattered light clouds. She loved the summers in Prescott. Even though it was warm, there was still a breeze and with the higher altitude, the day was completely enjoyable. Living in Las Vegas during the summers was unbearable. The temperatures could reach as high as 120 degrees, this was a wonderful change.

“Shall we take my truck? We can come back when we’re done and get you to your vehicle.”

“Sure. It doesn’t make much sense to take two cars.” She tried to justify it more to herself than him. When they got to the truck, she hurriedly opened the passenger door for herself. This motion wasn’t wasted on the sheriff. He laughed out loud but gave her the space she seemed to need.

He drove the short distance to the house and waited for Ellie to step out of the truck. Aubrie had heard them pull up and was on the front porch, smiling and waving.

“Hey, you two! Come on in.” She pulled open the front door of her aging home. The old, Victorian style house was in wonderful condition thanks to Aubrie’s efforts. When her aunt had left the home, the lake and 500 acres to her, Aubrie had worked non-stop to renovate and update the structure. It was now a very successful destination bed and breakfast in the Prescott area. People came from near and far to relax and take in the mountain air and views.

She ushered them through the front room, the parlor and eventually into the kitchen. It was large enough for people to sit and enjoy the cozy atmosphere while dining at the small table. “Sit, sit. Are you ready for coffee? Or something stronger?”

Ellie sat down and looked to John for an answer. “I think coffee will do just fine, Aubrie. At least for now.”

“Great!” Aubrie moved around the room gathering cups and quickly set the table with a plate of cookies.

She seemed nervous and it suddenly made Ellie chuckle.

“What? What’s so funny?” Aubrie asked of her friend.

“Will you settle down? What’s going on with you? I’ve never seen you so jumpy.” Ellie waited for an answer.

Suddenly, Aubrie stopped in the middle of the kitchen. “Can you two keep a secret? At least for a little while?”

John seemed taken aback. “Aubrie, I’m not good at secrets. It’s a hazard of the job, I’m afraid.”

Ellie encouraged her friend. “Tell us. We’ll do our best to keep your secret.” She spoke for both of them, giving John a hard look.

“I’m pregnant!” The words came bursting from Aubrie.

“Wow! Congratulations.” Ellie got up and gave her friend a big hug. John also came over and hugged both ladies.

“I haven’t had time to tell Tuck yet.” As she saw the look on John’s face, she amended. “I’m going to tell him as soon as he gets back from helping Phil with the well. I just couldn’t wait to tell someone and well, you guys were there when he proposed, when we got married and it just seemed fitting that you were here to share this moment!”

“How far along are you?” Ellie asked.

“Just a few weeks. I haven’t confirmed it with the doctor, but I’m positive. I can’t wait to tell Tuck.” She was overcome with joy.

John sat back down at the table and took a sip of the coffee that Aubrie had placed in front of them both. "Did you make that picnic lunch for us?"

Ellie could sense that John was uncomfortable with the very personal news her friend had just shared. He seemed nervous about hearing the news before his friend, Tuck.

"Are you ready for it?"

"Yes, I think we'd better get going. We have more territory to cover before the day runs out on us." He stood and gave Ellie a look.

She got the message and was on her feet beside John. "Aubrie, congratulations. We'll talk more later." They gathered the lunch basket and soon headed out the door. At the porch, John turned to Aubrie.

"Did Tuck leave us a vehicle? I had asked him for the loan of one of his all-terrain bikes."

"Oh, yes, he did. It's parked just around the side of the house. The key should be in it. See you guys later." Aubrie smiled and waved as they disappeared around the porch.

"We're not taking your truck?" Ellie didn't much like the idea of sitting so close behind John.

"No, this will get us closer. I want to spend as much daylight time as we can at the site." He had already mounted the vehicle and indicated that Ellie should join him.

She didn't want him to think that this was any big deal, so she quickly got on behind him. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can gain back my own space, she reasoned internally.

John revved the bike and with a lurch they took off from the house. The noise prevented them from conversation for which she was grateful. Ellie took this time to gather her emotions and get her feelings for John under control.

The rough, dirt road took them through the small settlement of Potato Patch. It was not really anything more than a few dozen cabins and a small community park. Most of the people only stayed at their homes for the summer months. Although a few hearty residents lived there all year long. She waved to a few children playing on the monkey bars in the park; as they headed up past the center of the community, the cabins were fewer and farther between. The road gave way to just a rugged path barely big enough for their OHV. She finally had to wrap her arms around his waist to keep her balance.

She could see dozens of trees bent and leaning. Several had made a natural bridge across their path. Ellie and John had to duck their heads a few times to avoid getting hit by the low-hanging branches. Their OHV jostled violently over the rocks and downed tree branches causing their bodies to rub against each other.

Suddenly the path ended due to huge blockages caused by massive fallen trees. John stopped the OHV and shut the engine down. "We'll have to walk from here." He waited for her to dismount from behind him. John held out his hand to offer her assistance. She put her smaller one into his big grasp.

“I don’t recall it being so congested. We didn’t have to walk so far. I would have remembered that.” She reflected.

“That ice storm we had this last winter did a lot of damage. That’s why all the downed trees, plus the forest service is trying to discourage people from coming up here. These old mines can be very dangerous.”

A few minutes later, they had arrived at their destination. The Mormon Girl mine was directly in front of her. She slowly turned and stood staring at the entrance. The area was overgrown with pines, oak trees, and scrub brush. The sky was barely discernible overhead with so much foliage. The sheriff came up next to her, not speaking but giving her much needed time to get her bearings.

“Do you know this wasn’t your usual gold mine? So many people think that the only mines in this area were all for gold.” She still stood there, not moving an inch.

He was silent. She seemed to know what he was doing and she turned to give him a weak smile. “Thanks, John.”

“I figured this would be hard. You haven’t been back here since that day, huh?”

“No, I never saw a need for a return visit. One look up here was quite enough for anyone.” Her sarcasm made him smile.

“I wonder what they mined out of this hole.” He turned the topic to a safer one.

“Lead and zinc. The information is extremely sketchy about this mine. I couldn’t even find out who

owns it or when it was active.” She related her research details.

“I’m impressed. You’ve done your homework.” John started to move towards the opening. As soon as he saw she hadn’t taken a step, the sheriff stopped and faced her.

“Ellie?”

“I’m not sure I can do this. I’m not sure I want to face that devil again.”

Two

“Are you going to let him win?” John challenged her.

“Damn you, Sheriff!” She turned to go, but suddenly stopped, her anger getting the best of her. “How dare you! You have no idea what we went through and how can you possibly judge me now?”

“Ellie, I’m not judging. It’s part of the job. A good detective has to be able to push through, to do the hard things. They need to see past the emotions of their victims, their suspects and anyone else in between.” He was tough and his voice showed it.

Tears started to form in her eyes. She avoided looking directly at him, not wanting him to see her vulnerability.

“Ellie, let’s go. This is too much for you.” He started to walk back towards their transportation.

“Stop right there, mister! I’m not giving up just yet. You get that lock undone and we’ll investigate!” She ordered him stood there with both hands on her hips as she barked her order. The wind whipped around causing her hair to flow with the breeze. She made a formidable sight and his heart constricted. His intentions had been to help, but he could see that this might be harmful to her state of mind. John had watched her over the last year, looking for signs of

dealing with the horror of her captivity. He was concerned that she hadn't completely resolved her feelings about it and this moment between them proved his theory.

"Ellie, I know you only cry when you're angry! You're not a typical female that cries at the drop of a hat. Maybe we should postpone this part of our investigation. There are other things we can check out first." He threw her a bone and hoped she would take it.

"Not on your life, Sheriff! I'm not going to give in." She finally moved closer to the iron gate covering the entrance to the mine.

"You only call me sheriff when you're mad at me. Ellie, we can wait for this. We have other things to look into." He waited not so patiently.

"Let's do this. What exactly are we looking for? I'm sure that your team has gone over this site as well as the lake for any evidence." Her sarcasm was in full force.

Ignoring her outburst, Sheriff John pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and searched for the proper key. As soon as he located it, he quickly opened the padlock. The gate screeched an eerie sound as he swung it open. He missed the look of fear cross Ellie's face as he had his back to her. She quickly put her game face back on before he turned around to face her.

"Tell me what you felt when you saw what he had in mind."

"I was mainly concerned for Aubrie. She is more delicate than most and I was afraid for her. She

doesn't have the same law enforcement training that we all have."

"Not for yourself?" John questioned.

"Of course, but I'm... I'm not as innocent as she is and I felt I could handle whatever he thought he was going to do to us."

"Is that because of your childhood?" He probed.

She stopped moving towards the now open gate and faced him. "Yes, John, I didn't exactly have the ideal childhood. With my parents gone, I was in foster home after foster home until my uncle finally got put in charge of me. I wasn't mistreated, I just learned how to take care of myself. You learn a few things along that path." She simply stated the facts, with no sarcasm tinging her words.

He let that bit of information go for now. "So, what did you feel?"

"I was afraid. I was looking at my surroundings to see if I could see a way out of that mess."

"That's good." He slowly stepped aside and indicated for her to move in front of him. John could see the conflict cross over the fine features on her face but he also saw determination as she slowly stepped into the entrance of the abandoned mine. The first thing that came to her senses was the acrid smell of dampness. She rubbed at her nose but took a small step further into the gaping hole in the side of the mountain. Her steps were measured and she looked down to see where her foot was before moving forward.

"Here, use this." John handed her a flashlight. As she turned it on, she released a calming breath. The

LED lights brightened the interior of the huge area as bright as the day outside. "Wow, I wish we'd had one of these the last time I was in here." It helped her nerves to make jokes.

Even in the heat of summer, this dark space had a small trickle of water coming from way back in the cave. There were old boards and broken pallets covering the ground. To the side of those things, she could see the railway tracks that once held the ore carts. "What happened to the cart we used to bust out of this place?"

"Until we could get this locked up, people had vandalized the site. It took a few months, but the county and the Forest Service got control of the area." He pointed to the signs posted at the entrance warning people that it was government property and no trespassing was allowed.

"I thought those were new. I didn't remember them. This mine and the entire surrounding area seem to be more dilapidated. I guess people will take just about anything as a souvenir." She expressed her sadness at the lack of concern on other people's part about respecting historic sites.

"Do you remember how far back you had to go to find the ore cart?" John once again encouraged her memories to surface.

"I'm not sure. Believe it or not, Aubrie was the first to venture back there. I couldn't let her go it alone, so I joined her in the search."

"Search?"

"Yes, we were trying to find anything that would help us get out of here before the deputy came back."

She slowly inched her way to the back part of the abandoned mine. The ground was getting wetter and the smell was almost her undoing. "Wow, I don't remember it smelling this bad. What do you suppose is creating that?" She suddenly stopped. "It couldn't be..." Her voice faded.

"What, Ellie? What are you thinking?" John was looking around to see what could be in their path.

She shuddered. "Could it be a body?"

He stopped and turned to her. "Do you think it's our buddy, Chuck?"

"Well, no one has seen nor heard from him since then, right?"

"Yes, but I always thought he just left town. I didn't think he could be dead." John was amazed at her train of thought.

Ellie flashed the light further back and all around the side of the interior of the mine. She was diligently looking for the source of the rancid smell. Her flashlight caught a pile of what looked like fur in a far corner. The mine wasn't entirely straight back and whatever this was, it was lodged in a bend in the wall. "John, look!"

Before approaching John pulled a revolver from the back of his jeans. Somehow, Ellie wasn't surprised that he was prepared for anything. "Shine that light directly at that pile of stuff." He ordered her. "Stay behind me." His voice brooked no argument.

For reasons unknown even to her, Ellie complied. This was a scary place and having John take the lead was a comfort. She was remembering the fear she felt

when Aubrie and her were captive in this horrible place.

As they cautiously approached the suspicious bundle, she found herself holding onto John's back. She could feel his heart beating hard, or was it her own? The smell was even more prevalent and she was convinced that whatever it was, life no longer existed in it.

John suddenly stopped and turned to face her. He let out a strong breath. "Ellie, it's a dead raccoon. Look." He pointed to the striped tail in the bundle of fur. Both of them breathed a sigh of relief.

"I guess my nerves were on alert. Sorry." She apologized.

"No worry, I was on the same wave length it seems." He took the flashlight from her shaking hand and used it to light the entire area around the cave. "I don't see any use at continuing this search. There seems to be no new evidence here."

She was grateful that their journey into the abandoned mine was at an end. She turned and quickly headed back to the entrance and the daylight. As they got closer to the exterior, Ellie was thankful that the smell was not as strong as before. Just as she was exiting, she looked at her feet to make sure that she was on solid ground. John passed her and was already outside when she spied the item on the floor of the mine.

She reached down and grabbed at the small object embedded into the wet mucky dirt. John had his back to her and she quickly dug the small item out of the dirt and hurriedly put it into the pocket of her jeans.

For reasons she couldn't explain, Ellie had no desire to share this find with him. She felt a rush of adrenaline and tried to calm her beating heart.

She looked around at the abandoned shack to the right further up the trail. It was barely standing and surrounded by all kinds of junk. She noted a small freezer, a rusty bed frame and piles of useless boards. Most of the junk had been sitting in the weather and was covered with pine needles and leaves. She was about to turn when she noticed an old car smashed up against a towering ponderosa.

"I never noticed that car before." She commented as she walked closer. She had to step over downed trees and boards and when she almost stumbled, she felt the sheriff's hand on her elbow.

"Thanks." His touch definitely disturbed her but she tried not to shake out of his grasp for fear he would know his effect on her.

"How do you think this car got here?" She walked around the older vehicle. It was rusted and stripped of anything valuable. The roof was nearly caved in as well as the hood was completely beat up. She peered inside to see that it still had an engine.

"It's an older one, probably a Plymouth. I would say around 1950 or so." The sheriff was looking for any vehicle identification numbers or anything that would indicate the year or model. "They've obviously used it for target practice." He stated the obvious as the blue car was full of bullet holes.

"Why would someone just leave it here?" She was puzzled.

“I think that at one time, the trail we came up was a more usable road. They had to have some way to bring in mining equipment and supplies. When they abandoned this mine, they just packed up their belongings and left, leaving everything behind.”

She suddenly felt the urge to get out of this area. A strange sense of danger and the unknown swept over her. “John, I think I’m ready for something to eat, if you are.” They trekked back over the rough terrain, watching their steps carefully. She tried to divert his attention from their adventure into the mine.

“Okay, I’m hungry too.” John locked up the mine and moved toward their quad. He waited for her to get on behind before speeding away from the site. She was glad to leave that place behind and took a deep, cleansing breath.

As they headed back into Potato Patch, she noticed that instead of heading straight to the lake, he turned left and headed up the mountain. There were still many cabins and she felt a sense of freedom on the vehicle with the air rushing past them. He kept pushing the quad up the rough road and she finally asked. “Where are we headed?”

“I have a place up on the top of the hill.” Conversation wasn’t easy with the noise of the quad and she allowed their talk to cease. The track was rough but passable and soon they were on Carlisle Road and continued past several more cabins. Near the top of the ridge, John slowed the quad down and they turned into a little overgrown path that led to a spot on the side of the mountain. He shut the bike off and

as they dismounted, she noticed a wooden deck built on the side of the hill.

“This is it?” She questioned.

“Yeah,” He seemed a bit embarrassed. “I only got this deck built. I never found the time to complete the cabin or anything else.”

She followed him up the few steps and soon they were standing on the wooden deck. The view was spectacular. The surface faced northward toward the city of Prescott. They could see nothing but wonderful forest and mountains ahead. She turned to talk to John when she noticed he had sat some lawn chairs on the deck and a small table between them. He had gone back to the quad and retrieved the basket and was setting out some of the lunch items.

“John, this vista is absolutely beautiful! You must have the best view on the mountain.” She went over and sat on the chair and reached for some of the cheese and crackers he had sat out. “Aubrie puts together a wonderful lunch basket, doesn’t she?”

“She sure does.” John sat down and reached back into the thermal picnic basket and brought out some beverage. He offered Ellie her choice. She took the bottle of beer he held up as John helped himself to another one.

“Why were you so nervous when Aubrie told us about being pregnant?” Ellie finally questioned his behavior.

He squirmed in his chair and it seemed as though he wasn’t going to answer. Finally, he spoke. “I think she should have told Tuck first. I’m not comfortable

with her sharing that sort of husband/wife information with another person.”

Ellie smiled and saw a new insight into the man sitting next to her. “I’m sure she was just so excited that she had to share her news with someone and we happened at the right time.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m sure that Tuck will be thrilled. I know I would be.” He suddenly looked as though he had revealed too much to Ellie.

“John, this was a wonderful idea, a picnic on your deck. I love it.” She changed the subject and saw that he was immediately grateful. They ate from the fare offered by Aubrie’s generosity and were just enjoying the silence. Words seemed out of place as they listened to the wind softly blow through the ponderosa pines. Ellie took another drink of the cold brew when John spoke.

“Why did you think you’d find a body in that mine?”

Ellie laughed a bit. “I think you’ll decide that I’m crazy.”

“Too late for that.” He chuckled back at her.

She reached out and hit him on the shoulder. “Thanks! It’s nice to know that you are thinking good things about me.”

“Oh, I do that too, but it’s easier for our relationship to think that you’re crazy.”

She paused for a moment and took a hard, long look at her companion. He had taken his hat off to eat and the breeze was ruffling that silky, black hair of his. His face lit up with his laughter and she found her heart in danger.

“When I was a child, one of the families I lived with used to take picnics in the desert. I had a very active imagination and I always thought that I would find some buried treasure or at the very least a body out in the desert. You know, it was a way to escape. I would find the treasure or the body and then the news people would want to talk to me and I would be popular.”

He didn’t respond but instead tried to imagine the little girl she must have been.

“Oh, don’t feel sorry for me. Each of the families was great and I wasn’t abused. I just didn’t belong. I felt it was easier to blend in and maybe then I’d be a part of their family. These wild scenarios I’d create were just a way of brightening up my world. Stupid, huh?”

“Then your vivid imagination created a body in the mine?” He steered the conversation back to his original question.

“Well, I suppose so, but there’s always been a part of me that found it amazing that there’s been no sighting of the deputy since he left us in that mine. Don’t you think that’s weird?” She munched on her sandwich.

John hesitated before speaking. “We searched his apartment and found his pickup truck gone, along with clothes and personal things. We put out notices and waited for news of his sighting, but as time went on and the trail grew cold, we assumed he simply left the area.”

“Speaking of trucks, why didn’t you guys see it in the woods? He made us hide it, but I would’ve

thought you or your team would have eventually found it.”

He grinned sheepishly. “That’s one of the classic mistakes I was telling you about earlier. I’m afraid I let my emotions get in the way of my usual investigative tendencies. I was so concerned about you that I just wanted to find you and I missed some very important details in the process.” His look turned to one of humiliation. “I’m sorry. I let you and Aubrie down back then.”

She didn’t know how to respond and quickly changed the subject. “What about the quad he rode away on? Did you ever find it? What about our phones? He took them from us and I assumed you would use the GPS on them to track them or him down.”

“Ellie, we never found any of those things. I’m afraid it’s like he disappeared from the face of the earth without a trace.”

She tried to control the emotions suddenly flooding her being, but failed. She stood abruptly. “So, you and your team failed! You did nothing right to find the man that kidnapped us and he got away clean!” She paced to the edge of the deck and stood at the railing.

He came up to stand beside her. For a few long moments nothing was said between them. “Ellie, I let you down and I’m sorry for that.”

With a deep sigh, Ellie turned to face him. He expected a grim expression but was totally surprised to see a grin on her face.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, but if you think that I'll feel sorry for you and we'll just forget this whole thing, then you're wrong. I want you to teach me!" Her voice showed her emotional involvement. "Well, Sheriff... John, if you think I'll give up on learning as much as I can about investigative procedures, you are sadly mistaken!" She poked his chest for emphasis with her finger. "You are going to continue teaching me and I will not accept anything less than your best!" She stomped back to her chair and plopped down.

"Ellie! I'm not trying to discourage you in any way, shape or form!" He followed her. "I'm trying to apologize, explain."

"Save your breath!"

"Listen, I'm trying to explain how it was coming down. The feds told us to back off and as the local authority in these parts, I had to comply. I did some research on my own, but those guys were watching my every move."

"So why now? Why help me investigate this whole mess?" She didn't want to give in to his emotional appeal. If she could hold onto her anger, maybe she could hold onto her heart.

Suddenly another thought occurred to her. "You're just using me. You're just using this to further your own exploration."

The look on his face confirmed her thoughts. He didn't even try to deny her claims.

"You sneak!" She accused him. "If they think you're just training me, they won't bother you." John

still remained silent and let her wrestle with her own thoughts.

Ellie took one last swig of her beer. She looked to the distant mountains as for insight into her situation. When she was finally settled, she turned to her companion. "John, we'll continue this training because more than anything else, I want to become a detective and you, sir, are one of the best." When she saw the grin evolve on his face, she quickly put him down. "Don't let that go to your head! I could just have easily asked Tuck!"

"I'll take that! So, what's our next steps?" He put the ball into her court.

"First, you're going to take me back to Aubrie's. I need to use the little girl's room." She stood at her announcement.

"No, need. Let me show you to the best outhouse on the mountain!" He got up and motioned for her to follow him around the side of the deck. Next to a small shed she saw another small room with a painted door. He proudly opened it and laughed at the look on her face.

"John, you're too much!" She gazed at the small room. Everything was pristine. The floor was covered with real ceramic tile, the commode was a regular version and there was even a small vase of dried wild flowers on the little shelf below the oval mirror.

"My neighbors on the hill tease me. They can't wait to see me build a real cabin next to my deck and my bathroom." He allowed her the privacy she needed and soon she was walking back to their chairs on the wooden surface.

“I found some delicious looking brownies. Want one?” He held up the plastic wrapped bundle.

“Of course! I never turn down chocolate and especially Aubrie’s brownies. She sure has mastered that wood-burning stove! You’d thought she would have replaced it by now.”

“She says never! Guests at their bed and breakfast love it. They love sitting in that great kitchen and tasting all her homemade cooking.” John spoke proudly of their mutual friend’s accomplishments.

“As much as I hate to, I’m afraid we should go. It’s been an interesting day but I still have some paperwork at the office.” John rose and started gathering up the remains of their lunch. Ellie got up and helped put the chairs away and soon they were on the quad heading back down the mountain towards the lake.

As they drove passed the house on the lake, both turned to look. Ellie saw Tuck come dashing out on the front porch and wave them down. She tapped John on the shoulder in case he hadn’t seen.

He turned their quad around and drove straight up to the porch. “Hey, Tuck! What’s up?”

“We need to celebrate! I know Aubrie shared her news with you two and I need to share a drink with my friends! Come on up here and I’ll have my little woman bring out some refreshments.”

It was apparent that Tuck wasn’t going to take no for an answer, so John shut the OHV down and they both climbed off. As they stepped up to the beautiful wrap around porch, Tuck and Aubrie came out with a tray of drinks. Grins were the attire for the day as they all sat down on the wicker furniture.

“Here’s to me and my bride! We’re going to start our family!” Tuck held up his beer and offered John and Ellie their choice of beverages. Aubrie took her glass of cool lemonade and as they all clinked their glasses together, she giggled.

“Thanks, guys. I’m so glad you’re here to help us celebrate this wonderful occasion in our life!” Aubrie smiled broadly.

“I can’t think of anyone else that we would want here at this moment. Phil and Betsy are on their way. It just seems right, doesn’t it?” Tuck beamed proudly and gathered his wife in a big bear hug.

About that time, they all heard the sound of another vehicle pull up and shortly, Phil and Betsy mounted the steps to join the party. Betsy’s illness was taking its toll, but she still walked proudly and firmly. In her gruff voice, she spoke, “What are we toasting, as if I didn’t know?” She had a twinkle in her eye. The cancer in Betsy’s throat had exacted its damages on her vocal chords, but all that loved her didn’t pay any attention.

Tuck quickly gathered more chairs and helped the caretakers of their property settle in and join the happy group. Phil was the one to take lemonade for his wife and himself. He pulled a small lap quilt over her legs for extra comfort. Betsy patted his arthritic hand with her own.

Once everyone had a drink, Tuck stood and made his official announcement. “My lovely wife has informed me that we are expecting the first of many to our wonderful home. Raise your glasses, friends, and welcome our new addition.”

All gathered raised their glasses and toasted the happy couple. Cheers were said and glasses were knocked together to signify their happiness.

Phil turned to the sheriff and spoke, "What are you two doing today?" His question was innocent enough, but it seemed to put John and Ellie on the spot. She looked to John for the answer.

"Oh, I just wanted to show Ellie my deck." He knew that would bring a laugh to the crowd.

To Ellie, Tuck addressed his next question, "Well, Ellie, what did you think of the sheriff's construction abilities?"

As the laughter died, she finally answered. "I think John builds a wonderful deck. But, the bathroom, excuse me, the outhouse is the best I've ever seen!" They all laughed and even John seemed to enjoy the comradery.

"Did you like the bouquet of dried flowers?" Aubrie asked.

"Oh, that was the finishing touch. You know that any girl worth her weight in salt loves a bunch of flowers." Ellie added with a touch of sarcasm.

John mocked hurt and responded, "I picked and dried those wild flowers myself."

"Oh, what hidden talents! I had no idea." Ellie joked back.

Eager to change the subject, John asked Aubrie, "Any new, interesting guests coming to the B&B?"

"I guess you two don't get to see much of each other at work, otherwise Tuck would have told you about Carson."

"Carson?"

Tuck responded to John's question. "Yes, Carson Layne was one of my mentors when I worked for the government in Vegas. He worked under my step dad and then when I got on board, he took me under his wing." Tuck filled in the blanks about their guest.

"So, just a visit?" John's natural curiosity guided his questions.

"I'm not sure. He's retired now and I think he's just trying to figure out where he goes next in life. He booked for a few weeks." Tuck stood and offered re-fills on their drinks.

Ellie watched the looks pass between the two men. Her own curiosity became alert. Last year when Aubrie and she were kidnapped, Tuck was still working for the government. He was not officially working a case, but he was posing as a handyman and looking for his missing stepfather. Her thoughts were interrupted as John turned to her.

"Ready to go? I still have reports to finish at the office." She agreed as she was eager to review where they were in their own investigation. They said their goodbyes and soon were back at the lake.

Before she got out of his truck, John stopped her. "Let's review the facts of the case before we part." He paused and waited for her to speak.

"Just before Aubrie inherited this house and the lake, they had to drain the lake and found the car with a skeleton in it. Once Aubrie was here, she found a bag of old poker chips from Las Vegas in the attic. Tuck was already here posing as the local handyman. You assigned Deputy Chuck to guard the lake and the crime scene, little knowing that he was being paid by

an unknown person to get the chips. Kidnapping Aubrie and myself was not part of the plan, but then, we both know now that the deputy was not particularly bright.”

There were a few moments of silence between them before she continued. “You knew that something wasn’t quite right about Tuck and soon he revealed his true identity and purpose for being here. When you two rescued us from the kidnapper, Deputy Chuck had already disappeared and the skeleton in the car was identified as Harold Jenkins, Tuck’s stepfather. The information was leaked out of Vegas by someone inside the agency and a year later, we are no closer to solving this than we were back then.”

Ellie opened her truck door and jumped in, starting the engine. Just as she was starting to back away, rolled down her window and leaned out towards John.

“You and Tuck are suspicious of this Carson Layne and his mysterious visit here at the lake.”

Three

John's rich laughter was music to her ears. "Ellie, I've missed you. Nothing gets passed you, does it?"

"Not if I'm going to be a great detective! Now, tell me about that look that you two gave each other." She leaned out her open window, with her arms on the frame. She waited impatiently for John to answer but the look on his face told volumes. "You're not going to share with me, are you?"

"Ellie, I will, just not yet. Let me talk with Tuck privately and then we'll know what it means." He pleaded.

Just then she remembered the object she picked up at the mine and felt just a bit guilty. She, too, was keeping secrets for now. She smiled a tiny grin and agreed. "Okay, John, what's next?"

The gaze he gave her told Ellie that he wasn't convinced that she gave up so easily, but he moved on with their plan. "How about we meet tomorrow? We could go to dinner and formulate our next moves."

"Sorry, I always do Sunday dinner with my uncle and," She stopped suddenly. "Why don't you come for dinner? You haven't visited my uncle in quite a while. He would enjoy seeing you."

“Sure, what time? Can I bring something?” John was surprised at the invitation but eagerly agreed.

“Nothing. I have everything already planned. See you around six?”

“That sounds great. Until then.” He started his truck.

She quickly rolled up her window and thought, the sooner she was out of here the better. Ellie was struggling with her feelings for John and she knew she needed to put some space between her and the handsome sheriff. During the drive to her house, thoughts of the case and John filled her head and before she knew it, Ellie drove down the lane and to the safety of her own home. Her uncle was in the kitchen when she arrived.

“Hey, girl. What you been up to?” He popped the top on a can of beer. She often helped him as the arthritis in his hands sometimes made such movements difficult, but she could see he was already sipping the cold brew.

“Oh, not much. I went out to the lake and met John.” She tried to make her voice sound casual even though her heart was still in turmoil. She went to the cupboard and grabbed a plastic lunch bag. Carefully, she used the plastic to pull the pencil out of her jeans and securely locked the tab shut.

“What’s that?” Nothing escaped her wily uncle.

“Oh, I just need to keep this secure.” She tried to avoid his gaze.

“Okay, girlie, spill it. What’s the big secret you’re trying to keep from your old uncle?” He used his cane and slowly came to stand beside her at the counter.

“You know that I could always tell when you were trying to hide things.”

“Uncle, you have always taken the greatest of care for me. I will be eternally grateful for the day I came to your home.” She started and then finished, “I am trying to become a detective with the sheriff’s office.”

“And...” He encouraged her.

“And, John, the sheriff has agreed to help me.” She couldn’t seem to look at him.

“And, girl, what’s your problem with that?” His gruff voice penetrated her thoughts.

“Uncle, you know when I came to Prescott to spread my wings and get my degree?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I fell for a certain sheriff and it didn’t end well.” Her voice was small. She finally faced him. He patted her on the arm with his gnarled hand.

“You know I’ve come to realize that life doesn’t have to be that difficult. Sometimes it just comes down to timing. If we let go and allow the universe to do its thing, very often things turn out alright.”

“Wow. That’s awfully deep, Uncle.” She teased him. “I do have a tendency to want to control everything.”

“Really!” His sarcasm was followed by his gruff laughter.

She playfully punched him on his arm and turned back to look at the pencil lying on the counter. She read the name on the side. “Uncle, do you know where the Agua Fria River Course is located?”

“Sure, you going golfing?” He teased.

"More like fishing," was her answer. "It's still daylight. I'll be back shortly." She grabbed her purse.

"How about some company?" He didn't seem to want her to go by herself.

"Sure."

"Then you can tell me what we're fishing for on the way." At the front door, he removed his worn black Stetson from the hat rack on the wall and placed it on his thinning white hair. She grinned at the familiar routine. Her uncle never went out without his hat tucked firmly on his head.

As they drove across town, he waited patiently for Ellie to explain the pencil in the plastic bag.

"John and I are investigating the disappearance of the deputy. I found this outside of the Mormon Girl Mine and feel that it could be a clue." She indicated the bag lying beside her on the seat.

"I thought the feds were handling that one."

"Not very well! They've done absolutely nothing to solve any part of that crime." Her anger was evident.

"Won't they object to your nosing around?"

"How can they? I'm just going to a golf course." She was smiling innocently.

"You don't fool me, girl. What has this pencil to do with the missing deputy?" On the way to the Agua Fria River Course, Ellie filled her uncle in on the way the deputy kept notes.

"This has to have belonged to him."

"You know you shouldn't have touched it, don't ya?" Her uncle stated the obvious.

"I tried to barely touch it, but I had to pick it up before John saw me." A guilty blush crept up her face.

“And why would you be keeping information from the good sheriff?”

“I’m not really sure.” Her answer was honest. “I guess I want to do some investigating on my own.”

“That way you can prove to him that you deserve a promotion.” It was a knowledgeable statement. His perceptiveness was uncanny. It always had been when it came to his niece. He loved her and took great care of her when she was growing up and that didn’t stop as she matured into the woman that sat beside him. She smiled at his tenderness.

They pulled down the lane between the mobile homes. This particular golf course was nestled at the back of a retirement community. The mature trees lined the street and she saw activity at the recreation center as well as in the various yards. The residents lived a very social life and the population soared in the summer months as people sought to escape the heat of the valley.

She parked and they both went into the small clubhouse. It was later in the day and most of the folks were done with their rounds of golf. It was time to have a drink and celebrate their efforts. She went to the bar and pulled out a stool for herself and her uncle. She heard the strains of a local band from the patio outside and people were coming back and forth from the bar to the deck.

“I could get used to this.” Her uncle stated as he smiled at the people around the room.

“What’ll you have?” An older woman with too much make up on approached them, placing napkins on the wooden surface of the aged bar top.

"I'll have a beer. Uncle?" Ellie turned to her companion.

"Make mine the same, honey." He gave his best grin to the woman and she beamed back at him, obviously enjoying his attention. Ellie could hardly hold back her laughter. Her uncle was never one to turn down an opportunity to flirt with the ladies.

"My name's Belle."

"My name's Willie, but my friends call me Shotgun."

"Does that mean you're locked and loaded?" The older woman flirted shamelessly and Ellie had to turn her head not to laugh openly.

Willie didn't answer but just gave a big grin in response.

"You guys golfing today?" The bartender asked.

"Nah," Willie answered. "My niece was thinking about taking a few lessons and a friend of ours recommended this course. Maybe you know him?"

The woman leaned closer to Willie and smiled another big grin. "Maybe I do. What's his name?"

Ellie just sat there watching her uncle work his magic with the older woman. She had wondered how they were going to gain the information they wanted, but soon saw that Willie had it all in hand.

"Chuck, Chuck Paulson. He is a deputy with the sheriff's office." Willie casually took a sip from his bottle of beer.

The bartender immediately stood up and became a bit abrupt. "You need to talk with Sherry. He was a bit too young for me and she's not too happy with him!"

She turned and hollered across the room. "Sherry, these folks want to talk with you."

A younger version of the bartender came over and greeted them. "Can I help you?" Her hair was pulled back into a tight pony tail that hung down her back. Her jeans were tight and the blouse she had on showed ample cleavage.

Ellie took over the conversation. "I was recommended by a friend to come here and take some golf lessons. Perhaps you know him?"

"Oh, I know a lot of people. It wouldn't surprise me if I know your friend." She smiled.

"His name is Chuck, Chuck Paulson." Ellie waited for a response.

It wasn't long in coming. A dark scowl crossed the young girl's face and she took a visible deep breath before answering.

"If he's a friend of yours, I feel sorry for you."

"Well, maybe I misspoke. He's not really a friend, I just work at the sheriff's office in bookkeeping and he sometimes comes by my desk." Ellie tried to smooth over the obvious tension and hoped her little white lie wouldn't come back to haunt her.

"Then, if I were you, I'd stay away from that guy. He's nothing but trouble." The waitress leaned up against the bar and faced the two. "I thought we were going to be married. He came in here regular like and talked about big dreams. He took me on picnics and dates and even to Vegas!"

"I'm sorry, Sherry. What happened?" Ellie wanted to keep her talking.

"Then, nothing! All of a sudden, about a year ago, I never heard from him again!" Anger started to fill the young girl's voice.

Willie took over. "What'd mean? He dumped you?"

"No! That I could take, I guess. I mean, he just stopped coming around. I never heard from him again. When I went to his apartment, the landlady said he was gone."

"Sherry, I'm so sorry." Ellie tried to show sympathy.

"My friends said it was for the best, that he was a loser and a big talker. But you know, I can't help but wonder."

"Why did your friends think he was a loser?"

"Well, he always bragged about how he was going to be a big shot someday, that he was going to have lots of money. I kept trying to tell him that I didn't care, I just wanted us to be together."

"He was just a deputy. How come he thought he was going to have lots of money?" Ellie pushed for more information.

"Chuck was a dreamer. He always had some sort of money making scheme he was working on. It just never mattered to me, you know." She took a deep breath and paused. "I'll be back. I have to take care of my tables."

"What now, girl?" Her uncle allowed the next steps to be her decision.

"I think I need to find where he took her on those picnics. Perhaps that would be a clue as to how much he was in the area around the lake." She paused to take a drink of her cold brew. "I also need to find out

where they were in Vegas and if he met with anyone in particular or if they were just there innocently.”

“Good ideas!” Her uncle agreed.

About that time, the young server came back. “Sorry, I have a job to do and some days they are so demanding!” She grinned at her own joke, pointing her thumb back at the tables in the small bar room.

“I did my fair share of serving. I know what you mean.” Ellie tried to establish a bond between them.

“Really? Where did you serve?”

“At The Palace on Whiskey Row. It was while I was getting my degree and I needed the money for classes.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I’ve been trying to save for a new car but it’s not so easy to make a lot of money here. No offense,” the younger girl looked to Willie, “but a lot of these older people just don’t tip very well.”

Willie’s laughter could be heard around the room and several heads turned to see what was so funny. The young girl didn’t seem to be embarrassed at the commotion, but Ellie didn’t want to make a scene.

“Stop it, you two!” She admonished.

“I like you.” Sherry spoke to Willie. “What else did you want to know about lessons or whatever? You’re here for a reason, aren’t you?”

“I like you too, young lady. We want to know what you are willing to share about our friend Chuck.” He just laid his cards on the table.

“Let me go wrap up my last table and I’ll come back and talk with you.” She grinned and left them.

“You sly old dog!” Ellie spoke in awe to her uncle.

“Girl, you got to know what you can say and to who. I learned that a long time ago. That young’un is just lonely and wants to have a friend.” He finished his beer and signaled the older woman behind the bar for two more.

As the bartender brought them two more cold beers, she smiled at Willie. “Get what you want?”

“Darlin’, I just needed to get some information from that young lady. I always need to get a great smile from you.” His eyes shone with mischievousness.

“You old devil. I know your type.” Her words were negative but the tone was one of flirting. “Here, if you need to see my smile some other time.” She passed a note and Ellie surmised that it contained the older woman’s phone number.

It wasn’t long before the server was approaching them as she peeled off her apron. “Whew! I’m glad this day’s over. I did too much partying last night and my head is hurting.” She grabbed the stool next to Willie. “So, what can I tell you about that bum Chuck?”

Ellie spoke first. “When you say he took you on picnics, where exactly was that?”

“I was just new in town and didn’t know much about this area, so I asked him to show me some of the forest. He drove that old beat up truck of his out to a small lake... um, let me see if I remember the name.” She got up and went around the other side of the bar and poured herself a soda.

“Lynx Lake? Goldwater Lake?” Ellie prodded.

“No, neither one of those sound familiar. It was a funny name.”

Ellie hesitated, hopeful before mentioning. “Has-sayampa Lake?”

“Yes, that’s the one! I thought it was a weird name and asked him what it meant, but he didn’t know. It was way back on the road and set up against a mountain. There was this beautiful old house there. I can remember thinking how neat it would be to live there.”

As she plopped back down on the bar stool, she grinned. “He said that he was going to make enough money to buy the lake and that old house for us. What a loser!”

“Is that where you had your picnic?” Willie’s gravelly voice penetrated her thoughts.

“No, he took me up a small trail and when the truck couldn’t go any further, we walked. I wasn’t used to hiking and it was rather rough going. We finally got to an old abandoned shack and a mine.”

Ellie had to control her excitement and she tried to maintain a sense of calmness she didn’t feel. “Can you remember if the mine had a name?”

“Yeah, I thought, what a weird name for a mine – The Mormon Girl mine. Isn’t that weird?” She played with the hair from her ponytail as she talked.

Ellie couldn’t contain herself, “I’ve been out there. It’s kind of an eerie place for a picnic, isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly what I thought but he wanted me to see that old, abandoned car.”

“What on earth for, girl?” Willie questioned.

"I asked him the same thing and he said that the key to his future was in that car." She just laughed and Sherry took another sip from her glass of soda.

Ellie exchanged a knowing look with her uncle. He understood exactly what his niece was thinking and the thought scared him.

"What do you suppose he meant by that?" Her uncle asked the young girl.

"I have no clue. He was weird and I just thought it was nothing. Really!"

"You said he also took you to Vegas. What did you guys do there?" Ellie was almost too excited with the information she had just gained that she could hardly continue the interrogation.

"I thought that we were going to visit the casinos and play and drink, but all he wanted to do is visit a friend of his." She pouted.

"Where did you stay?"

"We were at Harrah's on the strip. You know the one right across from the Mirage?"

"You said that he wanted to visit with an old friend of his. Where did you do that?"

"We went to downtown in the older part of Vegas. I really didn't like it very much. There were a lot of people but most of them seemed down on their luck. I like the action and the night clubs on the strip better. Don't you?"

"I used to live in Vegas with my uncle here, but we didn't do much gambling and usually avoided the casinos. Where did you go to meet his friend?" Ellie almost held her breath, hoping to gain more valuable information.

“We went to the Golden Horseshoe and he gave me money to gamble with while he went to the bar and met with a man.”

“How did you know he met with someone?”

“He was being so mysterious that I couldn’t help myself. I acted like I was going to the slot machines and instead I watched him as he waited at the bar.” Sherry almost looked guilty.

Willie added his input. “Why were you suspicious?”

“I guess I knew that he had ulterior motives for taking me there. He wanted it to look like we were just on a fun weekend, but he hardly gambled and when we weren’t in the room, we were just walking around. I’m not completely clueless, you know.” She seemed tired of their questions.

“On the contrary, girl, I think you’re very bright. You’d dumped him sooner or later. You’re too smart for a guy like that.” Willie soothed her ruffled feathers.

“Yeah, I am.” She seemed satisfied with his praise.

“Would you be able to describe the man he met in the bar?” Ellie pushed further.

“I’m not sure. It was just a glance and I was afraid Chuck would see me, so I didn’t stay long.”

“Was there anything that stood out for you when you saw the guy?”

“Yeah, there was one thing for sure. He was bald, heavy set, and had a huge nose.” She giggled. “That’s not very nice of me to say, is it?”

Ellie laughed with her but inside was very excited to learn more about the mystery man. Shortly after that, Sherry announced she had to leave.

"I should go. I have a date and he isn't a loser." She stood up. "I hope I helped you."

"Oh, you did!" Ellie complied. "Here, take my card and call me if you hear from Chuck or if you just want to talk."

"Girl, don't pick anymore losers." Willie's gruff voice encouraged the young server.

"Oh, don't you worry, I'm wise to those guys! I think this one is a keeper." She smiled, put Ellie's card in her pocket and left them on their stools.

"What now, girlie?" Willie questioned his niece.

"Let's go home, uncle." She rose and helped Willie to his feet. They soon were in her car headed down the road to home.

As they entered the front door and Willie hung his hat on the peg, he turned to her. "Ok, spill the beans, what are you planning on doing?"

"What makes you think I'm planning anything?" She answered coyly.

"I know you, and I can almost hear those gears in your head turning. What's your plan?" He hobbled to the kitchen and sat down at the table. This room was the one they did most of their sharing. It was the hub of their households and both of them enjoyed the comfort and peace of this place.

"Want some coffee or a snack? Anything?"

"Yeah, I want you to tell me what you're going to do." He was persistent and she knew she would have to give him an answer.

“Uncle, tomorrow morning early I’m going to go back out to that mine site and inspect that car. He told Sherry that the car was the key to his future. Maybe he left some notes, a map, anything and I intend to find it.”

“I’m going with you. You shouldn’t be traipsing around in the woods alone. There’s all kinds of critters and danger and a girl shouldn’t try to do this on her own.” His words were meant to scare her, she was sure.

“Uncle, it’s not a place you can go. It involves riding one of those all-terrain vehicles and then at the end of the trail, some difficult hiking. I had a hard time climbing over downed trees and up and down some slippery, dirt hills. Besides, I’ll be fine.” She tried to sound confident.

“Then you should call the sheriff and have him go with you.”

“Not yet, not until I have something concrete. I need to do this on my own.”

“I’ll be back in time to fix dinner for all of us.” She turned her back and stared out the kitchen window.

“All of us?”

“You invited the girls, didn’t you? Well, I invited John to come, too.” She waited for his response.

“That’s great! It’s about time you started seeing someone.”

“Uncle, this isn’t a date. It’s just the five of us getting together and sharing a meal. Don’t make anything more out of this than there really is.” She tried to curb his sense of matchmaking.

Her uncle got up and started to the back door. "Girl, I'm going to rest for a bit. Call me when you've decided what we're doing for dinner."

As soon as he shut the door, Ellie finally sat down at the table. She wanted to take notes so she wouldn't forget anything important that Sherry shared. She found her notebook and started writing. She also formed a few ideas of what to look for and where, when she got out to the car in the morning. After that she made a quick meal for her to share with her uncle. They ate in silence and as soon as the dishes were done, he announced he was going to retire for the night.

She was anxious for some time alone herself and welcomed the silence of her little house. The ringing of her phone startled Ellie. She wasn't expecting a call and lifted it to see the caller's ID. It was John.

"Damn!" She thought about not answering but decided against that move.

"Hey." Ellie tried to make her voice sound normal. She felt caught and guilty.

"I just wanted to check with you one more time about dinner tomorrow. Sure I can't bring anything?" Just hearing his voice did funny things to her being.

Ellie ignored the smile spreading over her face. "I'm sure. I have everything ready to go. I'll just pick up something for dessert and we'll be set."

"Let me bring that. I make a mean brownie."

Ellie laughed out loud. "What? Are you kidding me? The big, bad sheriff can bake?"

“Oh, now you’ve done it! It’s on. I’ll bring the best brownie you’ve ever tasted. See you all at six!” With that he hung up.

As she settled down in her bed later, Ellie felt good. She couldn’t help the grin that seemed to be a permanent fixture on her face. This wasn’t due to a handsome sheriff, she silently admonished herself, but Ellie knew he was going to be in her dreams.

Four

Before leaving the house, Ellie stood still in the hallway and just thought for a moment. Finally deciding, she turned back to the den and reached into the closet. Taking down a shoebox, she took out the gun her uncle had given her years before when she first started into her criminology path at the college. She took out the holster and carried the items to her car.

The sun was just peeking up over the horizon when Ellie started her car. She slowly backed down the drive and as quickly as she could, headed towards Walker Road and the lake. She loved these early morning hours. The air was fresh and only a few cars were on the streets of Prescott. As she drove down the two-lane road and passed Lynx Lake, she could see the clouds forming high up in the blue sky. She knew she had to drive carefully as the deer liked to move at this time of the day. It wasn't unusual for a few of them to stray close to the edge of the road looking for the tall grass to eat.

She had texted Aubrie the night before and got permission to get one of the off highway vehicles to make her trek to the site of the mine and the old wrecked car. She asked her friend to keep her request

a secret for now and she knew she could count on Aubrie.

She pulled into their drive and went past the house to the small barn out back. One of the OHVs was parked with a small plastic bag sitting in the seat. As Ellie reached down to see what was in the bag, she grinned. Her friend had put a small snack and some sodas in the zippered bag. She got on and put her goodies in the saddle bags on the back, Ellie felt as nervous as one of those deer by the road. She didn't exactly know why, but she felt she was doing something that perhaps she shouldn't. Maybe her uncle's warning hit too close to home.

As she put the holster and her gun around her slim waist, it made Ellie feel that it had been the right decision. You never know what danger lurks in the forest. Her short trek to the trail leading to the mine was soon completed and as she started her hike to the car and the mine, Ellie felt her nerves on edge. She looked around her surroundings and although the sun was shining, she was alert to possible threats lurking in the woods around her. The only sounds were her footsteps and a few screeches from the ravens that flew overhead.

As the mining shack came into view, she felt the excitement of discovery coursing through her veins. Perhaps she was close to finding another clue in the case of the missing deputy. This would prove she could be a detective, she thought confidently. Ellie edged closer to the old, abandoned car. She had done some research on the internet last night and was convinced the car was from 1951 and was definitely a

Plymouth. She moved slowly and took her phone from her back pocket, taking dozens of pictures of the car from all angles. Getting closer to the interior, Ellie felt more nervous and for just a short second, wished she would have asked someone to come with her.

“Come on, girl.” She spoke aloud to herself. “Buck up! You can do this.”

There was so little left intact on the bullet-riddled car. The interior was completely void of seats, just rusty floorboards and debris from the forest covered the bottom. She looked to the dash and saw that like everywhere else, someone had stripped all of the instruments and devices leaving gaping holes. Where the glove compartment should have been was even more rusty, broken metal parts. Most of the interior was almost unrecognizable as far as where the speedometer or any of the gauges should have been. She found herself wondering why anyone would strip the car like this. Ellie hesitated getting closer, but knew if anything was hidden in here, she was going to have to get in and search all possible places.

Putting her long hair back into a ponytail and rolling her long sleeves down to button them, Ellie braced herself for any spiders or other creepy crawlers that might be waiting for her to enter. She carefully crawled into the back seat area, trying hard to put her gloved hands where she wouldn't get cut from sharp metal objects poking up. Instead of sitting down, Ellie balanced on the balls of her feet. She continued snapping pictures and then carefully putting her phone in her back pocket, Ellie started poking

around to see if she could find what she was looking for in the wrecked vehicle.

So far, so good, she thought as she continued her search. No scary creatures had come out and she moved swiftly to finish her perusal of the back seat space. Convinced that there was nothing there, she got out and took a moment to gain her composure. Ellie wasn't really afraid of anything except snakes. Oh, she didn't like spiders or bugs, but they didn't frighten her like a snake would.

She had brought the treat bag with her and took a moment to sit on a downed tree and enjoy a cool drink of soda and eat one of Aubrie's famous chocolate chip cookies. As she checked the clock on her phone, Ellie smiled and felt she still had plenty of time to continue her search. She looked upward and noticed the clouds were starting to form more of their billowy beauty. Summer monsoons were common this time of the year, but these clouds were still white and non-threatening.

Determined to find something worthy, she took a deep breath and went back to the car again. This time, Ellie got into the front of it and started looking around. As she poked and probed, her diligent search revealed nothing. She finally admitted to herself that perhaps she was not going to find anything. As she sat back down on the log to think, Ellie noticed that the clouds had now changed and she thought she heard the rumble of thunder in the near distance.

"Oh, this is not good." She said as she went over to the car once again. She peered into the engine compartment and saw that the motor was still there. With

her gloved hand she felt around both sides and leaned over to reach as far under the engine as she could. "I don't even know what I'm looking for!" Her frustration was starting to show.

Suddenly she stood straight up. She looked around at the dense forest surrounding her position. She did a double take and then took a deep breath. "I must be hearing things. There's nothing there." She looked back at the car for the millionth time. "Where would I hide something in a car?"

Laughing out loud, Ellie went around to the trunk of the old vehicle. "Of course, if I was going to hide something it would be in here!" As she popped the trunk lid open, Ellie grimaced. It looked like rats or squirrels had made a nest amongst the rust and debris inside. Slowly she put her hand in and started rummaging around, looking for anything that would be the answer to her quest. She searched on both sides and towards the back seat area. After several long minutes, Ellie sighed in exasperation. "This is useless! I'm not going to find anything of importance." She stood upright and slammed the trunk lid down hard. Ellie heard the sound of something falling inside and realized her mistake.

Slowly she opened the trunk again, her delight was evident as she reached in and took the single key out of the bottom of the trunk. She then looked up to view the inside of the lid and found a small, worn leather pouch. Carefully, she removed the key and the pouch and as she put the trunk lid back down was startled by a voice.

“Find what you were looking for?” She immediately recognized John’s voice and grimacing at being caught, slowly turned around to face him.

He took in the sight of her standing there with her gun strapped on her hip and her gloved hand holding her treasures. The guilt she felt showed in her beautiful, yet a bit dirty, face. “What are you doing here? I thought I heard something a moment ago. Were you sneaking up on me?”

He came nearer, making her more nervous. “Don’t try to turn the tables on me El. What’d you think you’re doing here all by yourself? The woods are not safe for a woman alone.”

“I’ve got protection.” She said indicating her gun.

He looked down at the gun and proceeded to lift it from the holster. “Where in the world did you get this? It’s practically an antique.” He was turning the gun over in his hand.

“Shotgun gave it to me. I’ve taken classes and practice at the range at least once a month.” Her tone was defensive.

He finally looked at her. “Ellie, one of the first lessons you should learn is that our detectives work with partners.”

She knew what was coming. “If you’re going to lecture me about not telling you what I was doing, that street goes both ways.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I see. You want to play ‘the best defense is a good offense’ game. You were upset that I didn’t share my thoughts about Carson Layne.”

“Yes, I was. I felt like you didn’t think I was an equal in this investigation.” She still held the objects she found in her gloved hand.

“We are a team but I can see that we need to work on a few trust issues.” He seemed to want to say more, but instead he directed her attention to the summer monsoon storm forming overhead. “Are you ready to get out of here? I don’t really want to get caught in the rain.”

“Wait! How did you know I was here? Who ratted me out?” When she saw he wasn’t ready to reveal his source, she continued. “I bet it was my uncle, wasn’t it?” She paced around to the other side of the car, putting some distance between them.

“No, Ellie, it wasn’t Shotgun. Now come on. Let’s go.” He held out his hand for her to grab. When she hesitated, he started to lose his patience. “We can settle all of this later, but for now, let’s go.”

Just then a loud crack of thunder sounded overhead and Ellie jumped at the nearness. “Wow! I think you’re right for now. This doesn’t mean we aren’t going to have that conversation!” She ran ahead of him holding her treasures tightly in her grasp. They were soon back at the OHVs, where they didn’t hesitate firing them up and scooting back down the rough track.

Just as they got to the house at the lake, the skies opened up and rain pelted down on them. Ellie pulled her bike into the barn first with John close behind. The rain had turned to hail by now and Ellie knew they were going to be stuck in the barn for a little while.

“Okay, Sheriff, spill the beans. How did you know where I was today and why did you feel the need to rescue me?” She sat down on a bale of hay by the open door. “I’m quite capable of taking care of myself you know.”

He came and plopped down on the same bale of hay, much closer than she would have wanted. Ellie held her ground though.

“I figured it out for myself.” When he saw the look of skepticism cross over her fine features, he continued. “Tuck said that Aubrie told him you needed one of those bikes. I knew you found something in the mine and I put two and two together. What did you find yesterday?”

Now was the time for some truth. It wasn’t like Ellie to be dishonest. “I found a pencil, you know a golf pencil. I knew it had to be from your deputy.”

“And?”

“And my uncle and I went to the golf course marked on the side and we found someone that knew Chuck.” She seemed not so willing to share.

“And!”

“And, we talked with Sherry, a server at the clubhouse. “She was a young girl and over a year ago, she was dating him.”

“And!” His voice showed he wasn’t going to be put off.

“Okay, here’s the whole story.” Ellie proceeded to fill him in on the details of their conversation with Sherry. She left nothing out. When she was finished, she waited not so patiently for his reaction.

His direction of conversation surprised her. "Tell me more about your gun."

"Shotgun ran a sort of unofficial pawn shop in Las Vegas years ago. Someone put this in and never came back to get it. He knows the value of things and he kept it for me. When I signed up for school to get my degree, he gave it to me for encouragement." She removed the revolver from her worn holster.

"It's a Colt?"

"Yes, it's a 1971 Colt Diamondback 38 special." She held it like a prized possession.

"And that holster? Did it come with it?"

"No, that belonged to my dad. He was Shotgun's younger brother and they used to collect guns and such. Uncle kept it for me too." She showed the initials carved into the soft leather. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the pencil."

"There, was that so hard?" John patted her knee. "That was a technique you can use in interrogating a suspect."

A look of comprehension dawned on her face, "I see. You get them talking about something personal and then they start to trust you and open up. Wow!"

She turned to look out the barn door and saw the rain was starting to subside. "I'd better go or there won't be any dinner for us."

"Wait a minute. Aren't you forgetting something?"

She started to protest and then realized what he was talking about. Ellie went over to her OHV and removed the found objects from her saddlebag. She brought them back for John to see.

He inspected the key first. It was an older key on a corroded ring of wire. The wire was completely rusted together at the ends making it impossible to get the key off the ring. He tried rubbing at the key so they could read any markings or indications of what it would unlock.

“What do you think it belongs to? I’ve never seen a key like this. It’s so ornate.” She leaned in closer to him and felt his muscles in his arm. A little buzz of electricity ran down her side. He turned to her and when she looked up, he bent down and placed a small kiss on her lips.

“John, we shouldn’t be doing that.” She leaned back.

“Didn’t you like it?” He teased.

“That has nothing to do with it. We’re supposed to be partners on a case.” She stood up and stammered more. “I can’t let myself be hurt again. I’m going home.” Suddenly she stopped and looked directly at him. “I just want to make one thing clear. I want to solve this case and I want to solve it with you, but we need to keep things on a professional level!”

He stood and looked back at her, not flinching when he replied, “We are going to finish this together but whether you want to admit it or not, we can’t deny there is more between us than a professional relationship.” With that he stormed out of the barn ahead of Ellie.

Ellie stood there for a few seconds to gather herself. She then grabbed the snack bag and the key and followed him out the door. He went to his truck but Ellie headed up to the back porch of the house. She

knocked and at the same time opened the door and went in.

“Aubrie?” She called again.

Aubrie came into the kitchen and smiled at the sight of her disheveled friend. “What in the world have you been doing? Did John find you?” Her question was innocent enough but Ellie felt a little betrayed.

“Yes, he found me and he wasn’t happy.”

“Are you upset with us?” Again, Aubrie’s question was sincere.

“I don’t mean to put you in the middle of John and me, but I just wish he hadn’t been told.”

“I know you want to do this to prove yourself, but it can be dangerous in the woods. There’s been a bear sighting and we even have its picture on our critter camera. Tuck only let him know that you borrowed a bike.”

“Aubrie, I’m sorry. It just seems that when John and I get together, we’re like oil and water. We just don’t mix.” She finally sat down at the kitchen table.

“Here have some cookies and a cup of coffee. Everything will work out between you two. You’ll see.”

The two women chatted about other things for a bit and then Ellie announced she needed to get home. “I have to cook some dinner for my uncle and his two lady friends. You’d love them. They are so nice and good for my uncle.”

She stood and went to the back door. They gave each other a hug and Ellie thanked Aubrie for the snack bag. With a wave, she headed to her car.

Ellie put her newfound evidence on the seat next to her as she thought about her morning. She stopped at the grocery store for dinner supplies and was soon pulling into the driveway of her home. She got out and as she reached the kitchen, her uncle came from his little home to help.

“Did you find anything?” He was never one to mince words.

“Yes, I did.” Her excitement finally showed. “Uncle, look at this.” She put the key and pouch on the table in front of him.

“Well, what do ya’ know.” He lifted the rusty ring of wire holding the old, antique-looking key.

“It was hidden in the trunk lid of that old car I told you about. I’m positive it has to belong to our deputy buddy.” Ellie bustled about the kitchen getting lasagna ready to cook for their Sunday dinner.

“When will John be coming over?”

Ellie hesitated and avoided looking at her uncle. “I’m not sure he’s going to come.”

Now she had her uncle’s full attention. “What happened?”

“What makes you think something happened?”

“Girl, I can read you like a book.”

“And you know how that infuriates me!”

All she got was his laughter in response. “So, spill the beans. Did you and the sheriff have another run in?”

“You might say that. Tuck told him I asked for one of his bikes and John figured out that I was going back to the mine.”

“And the sparks flew.” Shotgun laughed.

“Really!” Her frustration was showing. She finished the big pan of lasagna and started making the salad. “What time are the girls coming?”

“I told them to come around 5:30 and have a cocktail first. You got those wine coolers they like, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I found a few new flavors for them. I got you your usual and I found a bottle of red wine I thought I would like to try.” She bustled about the room making sure the table was set and everything was perfect. As she looked at the table, she stopped. Should she set a place for John? Oh, what the hell. I can always remove it.

It was nearing time for company and everything was ready. The lasagna would be put in just as they came so all would be piping hot. She was busy with the cooler, putting in ice and their drinks when the doorbell rang. “Uncle, get that, okay?”

Her uncle got up from his usual place at the head of the old oak table and limped to the front door. She could hear the voices of the girls. They all came bustling into the large kitchen. She turned to greet them.

“Ellie, so nice to see you! My don’t you look pretty.”

“Thank you, Jean. You should’ve seen me earlier. I was a mess.” She gave the older woman a big hug and turned to give the same to Barbara. “You two always look so cute. That’s why this one likes to hang with you both.”

“You know I always like to be with beautiful women.” Shotgun agreed. “Ready for a drink? Ellie bought some new flavors for you to try.”

They were all talking and laughing and enjoying their drinks when the doorbell sounded again. They looked at each other and then her uncle rose to answer the door. "Never mind, I'll get it." Ellie reluctantly got up.

As she opened the door, Ellie looked blankly at the tall, handsome man standing on her doorstep. "I'm surprised to see you, Sheriff."

He grinned knowing that she deliberately was trying to bait him. "I was invited. You do remember that, don't you?" He still stood on the porch.

Hesitantly, she stepped aside to allow him entry. "Come on in. We're just having drinks. What can I get you?" She was playing the gracious host.

"I'll have what you're having." He followed her into the kitchen. He greeted her uncle, "Hey, Shotgun. Nice to see you again."

"I'm having a glass of red wine." She turned to see his reaction but got none.

"That's fine." He still kept his grin in place.

As they walked into the kitchen, Shotgun got up and came to shake John's hand. "John, glad you came. Let me introduce you to the girls. This is Barbara and this is Jean. Watch out for them, they like to speak their mind."

John then removed his cowboy hat and tipped his head to acknowledge the two ladies sitting around the table. "Ladies, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Sheriff Clarke!" Barbara spoke first. "We remember you. You came and spoke at our ladies group last spring. Do you recall that?"

“Of course, it was the Purple Hats just down at the recreation center. You wanted me to talk about keeping yourselves safe at home.” He gave his award-winning grin.

“Yes, and you were so divine. All of the ladies loved the talk and you.” Barbara said.

He turned to Ellie. “I left the dessert in my truck. I’ll go and get it.” He left the room but not before putting his hat on the rack aside her uncle’s.

“My, oh my, what a surprise. Willie, you didn’t tell us that your niece was dating the sheriff.” Jean spoke with a twinkle in her eye.

Ellie turned from her duties in preparing the meal, to respond. “Oh, no. I’m not dating John. We are simply working together on a case. No, no, not dating.”

Willie had kept silent during the exchange, but gave an exaggerated wink to the girls. “Me thinks the lady protests too much!”

“Stop it all of you!” She spoke in a hissed whisper as she heard the front door open and wanted to put an end to this teasing before he got back.

They all had very suspicious grins on their faces but said nothing when John came back into the room. He carried a container and Jean got up to help him. “This looks absolutely delicious. What a thoughtful thing to do.”

Ellie’s curiosity was aroused and she, too, came to look at the big plate of home baked brownies. John reveled in their praise.

“Thanks, John. Here’s your wine. Hope you like it.” She handed him a goblet and was surprised by the

contact as their hands touched. This is ridiculous, she chided herself.

Jean directed her question to the sheriff and interrupted an uncomfortable moment between Ellie and John. "You just called Willie by Shotgun. Why?"

"You aren't aware of his nickname? I'm shocked he's kept that secret from the two of you." The sheriff teased.

"Now, John, no sense in bringing up the past." Willie teased.

"Come on. Now you have to tell us." Barbara encouraged. Everyone waited for Willie to confess his secret.

"Oh, alright. Many years ago in downtown Las Vegas I owned a little curio shop. It was just off the main Fremont Street block. If you've ever been to downtown Vegas, you know it can be rougher than me." His voice was raspy.

"It was more like an unofficial pawn shop." Ellie added. "Uncle dealt with the less than upright citizens of the city that needed some extra gambling money."

The girls didn't seem shocked. Jean spoke up. "We've been to Sin City before." They both giggled like younger women. "Barbara here is quite the black-jack player."

"Shush. You'll make them think I'm a card shark."

Everyone laughed at their banter. It was a fun atmosphere around the kitchen table and Ellie found herself relaxing more even with John there. She got up to refill drinks and he stood to help her. He brought over their glasses and she put more of their beverage of choice into them. Willie raised his glass

for more beer. John reached over and grabbed the empty mug from him.

“Go on Willie.” Barbara encouraged.

“One night I heard the bell over the door, but didn’t hear the footsteps. I was in the back grabbing a bite of supper. When I came through the door, I was greeted by a gun stuck right in my face.”

The girls gasped. “Oh, my. What did you do?”

“The young man wanted all my cash. I didn’t say a word but headed behind the counter and over to the register. I had one of them old NCR models right on top of the glass. I could see he was real nervous and I didn’t want to scare him into doing something we’d both regret.”

“That must’ve been very scary.” Jean spoke.

“I can honestly say that I was shaking in my boots. He kept waving the gun around and yelling at me to get the money out.” Willie stopped for a moment but continued. “I told him that I had a special button under the counter I had to push to open the register. He was so nervous that he just told me to do it and get the money. He couldn’t see that I reached for my shotgun instead.” He chuckled reliving the story again.

“Well, what happened?” Barbara asked.

“He was so surprised that he just ran out the door, rambling about a crazy old man with a shotgun, that he forgot he had one himself! The name kinda stuck and soon people just started calling me that.”

“He’s well known and respected in the downtown area by the locals.” Ellie added.

“Yes, he’s even an expert in the area of poker chips and the law enforcement world uses his knowledge to solve cases all the time.” John added.

“Wow, we didn’t realize that you were so well known.” Jean spoke up.

“Ah, it’s not that big of a deal. I’m just sorta retired now and enjoying my time with my niece and you two ladies here in Prescott.”

“Are you helping the sheriff with the case he’s working on right now?” Barbara asked.

“Well, I haven’t been asked just yet.”

“Okay, Shotgun, I’m asking. What do you think of that key?” John officially asked him.

Ellie got up and retrieved the key from the desk in the corner of the kitchen. She placed the lasagna in the oven and brought her find to the table. Everyone was looking at the key and the pouch.

“Have you ever been to Jerome?” Jean asked everyone.

“Sure, but what has that got to do with this key?” John was surprised at the question.

“I was born there. My momma used to talk about the ladies of the night.” She looked and saw that she had everyone’s attention. “Jerome was a big mining town and along with that kind of prosperity came the seedier side of human nature. There were many bordellos and as the sun set, momma made sure that we were safe in our house. The activity all along the main street was openly displayed with the ladies trying to earn their money for the night from the miners.” She paused and took a sip of her wine cooler.

“There was one place called Desperation Depot.”

“Desperation Depot?” Ellie asked.

“Yes, it’s still there, although now it’s a saloon and steakhouse with a few rooms above the bar.”

“Well, the owner of the Depot at the time tried to keep her place more respectable. She had storage lockers for the men to put their valuables in when visiting one of the ladies.” Jean looked around and explained further. “Some of the rougher places were known for not only taking the money for services, the ladies would pick the pockets of the patrons.”

“That key is from the Desperation Depot.”

Five

“Oh, my God.” Ellie exclaimed. “Can you imagine that?”

Everyone seemed stunned. From the most unlikely of places, a valuable piece of information just fell in their laps. “Do you realize that you just helped us put together another piece of the puzzle?” John finally voiced aloud the thought that everyone else was thinking.

Jean clapped her hands together in jubilation. “I helped solve a case! Does that mean I’m a detective?” Barbara laughed along with her friend.

Just then, the bell for the oven buzzed signaling the lasagna was ready and Ellie got up with her oven mitts on, removed their dinner from the oven. The people at the table chatted on about the origin of the key. John got up and came to help Ellie with dinner.

“That’s okay. I can do this.” She tried to dismiss him.

“I can help. Want me to put the salad out?” He went to the refrigerator and removed the cold dish along with the salad dressings. He went to the table and sat things down.

Ellie saw that he was determined but doubted it was just to help with their meal. When he came back to her side, she got her answer. “Ellie, do you realize

that we've just discovered something that those federal guys don't know? What do you think our next step is?" His voice was low and she knew he didn't want the others to overhear.

"I think we need to go to Jerome and visit the Desperation Depot!" Her voice was firm.

"Exactly."

"What are you two plotting over there?" Her uncle's voice finally penetrated their conversation.

"What on earth on you talking about?" Ellie acted offended.

"Girl, you can't fool me!"

"Time to eat." She announced to end her uncle's interrogation. They all sat down and started their meal. Everyone was in a great mood with the discovery of the key's origin. The girls were always cheerful and a pleasure to be around. Her uncle relished in their attention and Ellie was grateful for their kindness to him. She sat back and took in the scene before her. She had a family. Ellie finally looked to John. He seemed to fit in here with her uncle and friends. It was as though he'd been a part of their group for a long time. As she let the notion creep into her awareness, she knew this was too dangerous.

"Ellie!" Her uncle's voice penetrated her thoughts. "What's on your brain, girl?"

"I'm sorry, Uncle. What did you ask me?"

"I just told you that this was delicious." He knew she was already thinking about her next steps in solving the deputy's disappearance.

“Oh, yes,” Barbara agreed, “I love your lasagna. But I’m entirely too full for some of that great dessert just now. How about a game of cards?”

The rest of the evening was spent in friendly competition. John fit right in and was as anxious to win as the rest of them. After a game of cards, Shotgun announced he was ready for dessert and in no time at all, the evening was over. The girls bid their goodbyes and soon her uncle left for his cottage. She was suddenly nervous as it was just the two of them in the room.

“Ellie, I’m not going to bite.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re standing there like a scared rabbit. I’m not in the habit of attacking unwilling women in their own home.” He laughed and went to get his hat by the front door.

As he opened it, he turned to speak. “Ellie, I’m going to pull you from your job for a temporary assignment. That way we can pursue our lead.”

She was dumbfounded. “Why?”

“I need to finish this case and I need you to help me.”

“What will people think?”

“I don’t care. I’m the sheriff and I can do what I need to do to pursue justice.” He pushed his hat down on his head. “Be ready in the morning and I’ll come to get you to go to Jerome. Oh, and bring an overnight bag.” With that he left a stunned Ellie standing in the doorway.

As he disappeared down the drive to his truck, she slowly closed the front door. What was he thinking?

How could he put her in this situation? What would her coworkers think? Ellie went through her kitchen and out the back door. She knocked on her uncle's door and was relieved when he answered.

"What's up?"

"Uncle, can we talk a minute? I need the wisdom of your years." She didn't wait for him to answer but walked through the open door when he stepped aside.

"Girl, you haven't asked that of me since you were a whole lot younger. What's troubling you?"

"The sheriff is taking me off my desk and putting me on a temporary assignment." She plopped down in the closest comfy chair.

"And you have a problem with that?" When she didn't respond, her uncle continued, "Isn't that what you've studied for? Isn't that exactly what you've wanted all along?"

Her face was twisted with the dilemma she was facing. "Uncle, the assignment is with him. I have to work side by side with John."

Her uncle finally sat down on the chair beside her. He reached a gnarled hand over and patted her on the knee. "Eleanor," he started.

"You never call me by my full name unless it's serious. What, uncle? What insight could you possibly have for me?"

"Girl, you are the strongest and most confident woman I've ever known. I'm from a different generation, but I respect and admire the person that you have become. It's time for you to acknowledge that you have very strong feelings for our sheriff. It's not a bad thing." He waited for this to sink in. "He is

without a doubt one of the best lawmen I've ever known. And you know that I've worked with a lot of those guys in Vegas. It can not only help your skills as a detective, but if you follow this through it could get you to come to grips with all those pent up feelings about your childhood that you've kept hidden for a long time."

She felt a few tears forming in her eyes. "I know that you and others don't think that I've ever dealt with the death of my parents, but I've done the best I could over the years and thanks to the love you've given me, I've never felt that I've missed out on that."

He, too, wiped at his eyes. "I love you like the daughter I never got to have. I can't be a complete substitute for your parents. You never got to have a normal family life with them traipsing around the world, doing their goodwill missions. I did the best I could."

"Oh, uncle, you did a great job. I just am so perplexed about these feelings I have for John and the path I've chosen as a detective."

"Why can't you have both?"

"My heart tells me I can, but my head tells me it's not possible. I just keep going over and over it in my mind." She finally stood up and leaned over to give him a huge hug. "I love you, uncle."

"Me, too, girl. You'll figure it out. Just relax and let nature take its course."

With that she went to her room and packed a small bag. Before going to bed, Ellie worked on her tablet researching all she could find on Jerome. Finally, she felt she wouldn't sleep a wink, but knew she had to

try. After what seemed like forever, Ellie finally fell into a troubled sleep.

Just after dawn, she heard John knock at the front door. With a sly grin, Ellie opened the door and greeted her guest. "Bet you thought I wouldn't be ready this early!" She knew she caught him off guard by the look on his handsome face.

She was equally shocked though with the way he was dressed. Instead of his usual jeans, boots and western shirt, John was in a pair of golf shorts and a brightly flowered collared shirt. On his head he sported a baseball cap with a local high school team logo adorning the bill. His boots were replaced with white athletic shoes.

"What's with the getup?"

"I figured we'd need to go incognito. I am the sheriff for the county and although my face isn't that recognizable, I don't want anyone to think we're on any official business." He knew she was curious.

"And..."

"And I thought we'd pose as a couple. I thought we could get a room in Jerome." He waited for her to blow sky high. Instead he was astonished with her laughter.

"Us? Are you kidding?"

While he let her try to get used to that idea, John reached down and lifted her bag. "Ready, Darling?"

"Funny, real funny." She made sure the door was locked and started to follow him to his truck, but instead John went around the side to her garage.

"I thought we'd take your SUV. My truck doesn't fit with this outfit." He grinned at the amazed look on

her face. This was a side of John she'd never seen. Shotgun had told her to relax and let nature take its course. So with a big sigh, she opened her garage and handed him the keys.

They were soon on the road through Prescott to the two-lane highway leading to Jerome. The sun was starting to come further up into the light blue sky bereft of clouds. During normal driving conditions the short trip could be accomplished in about an hour and a half, but she could see that John had other plans. He first stopped at a local café where they ate a big breakfast. The next stop was at a roadside fruit stand where they bought fresh fruit and some snack items. She never questioned him, but was determined to just take it easy and see what was next.

"Having a good time?" He finally spoke.

"Yes, yes I am."

"You sound surprised. Does that mean you were dreading my company?"

"Oh, don't start trouble. I didn't say that. I'm just a little caught off guard. I thought we were working on a case, not taking a vacation."

Instead of the retort she expected, John just laughed that deep baritone sound that could melt her heart. He reached over and patted her on the leg. "Let's just let nature take its course."

She looked at him as he practically quoted the same advice her uncle had given her the night before. A little put off, she turned to stare out the window and the beautiful mountain scenery going by. The Black Hill Mountain Range was a beautiful part of

Arizona that allowed visitors to camp, hike, and just in general enjoy the cool, pine weather.

“What hotel were you thinking for us?” She tried to steer them back to the business at hand.

“The Connor Hotel.”

“The Connor Hotel? Don’t you know that it’s supposed to be haunted?”

“No, I guess I wasn’t aware of that fact. It’s fairly close to the Desperation Depot. So I figured we could just walk down to it and look for what our key opens. Who haunts it?”

“The story goes that a woman named Ann Hopkins found out her husband was cheating on her with a local teacher. The teacher was having lunch in the hotel restaurant and Ann threw some sort of acid on her. She spent time in jail and the teacher survived but Ann’s ghost haunts the hotel.”

“You don’t say! That could make our nights interesting.”

“Nights?!”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you that we are going to be here for a few days?” John feigned innocence.

“No, you did not tell me any such thing. Why would we do that?”

He now turned to face her before speaking. “Ellie, this is huge! We have the first lead in this case in a year and I’m not going to rest until we find that low-life, son of a....”

She finally understood what was driving John. He obviously was taking this as a personal failure. “John, you can’t have known he was going to turn on you. No

one could have predicted that Deputy Chuck was greedy and conniving.”

“I should have been more on top of his activities. I would have been able to see the trouble that was coming.”

Once again Ellie tried, “John, let’s just do what we can. Don’t set yourself up for failure.”

“Failure is not an option.”

“Isn’t that a famous line from a movie?”

His expression changed from one of seriousness to laughter. “Yes, it did sound familiar and corny. I just want you to know that cracking this case is very important to me. I don’t want this blemish on my record.”

“You mean as the high sheriff?”

“That’s right, little lady. I can always count on you to keep me grounded.” He did his best John Wayne imitation and once again the mood was much lighter between them.

“Was your father in law enforcement, too?” Ellie wanted to know more about this handsome man.

“I come from a long line of lawmen. I was named after my great-grandfather John R. Clarke. He was one of the original Arizona Rangers from 1906 to 1908.”

“I’ve heard of the Rangers. Aren’t they active today?”

“Yes, my great-grandfather was part of a group in 1957 that along with the approval of our governor helped re-establish the Rangers. The current group consists now of unpaid volunteers but they do assist and help when called upon. John was the last surviving

Ranger when he passed away in 1982.” He spoke proudly of the accomplishments of his distant relative.

He was slowing the car down as they came around the last turn that took them into the town of Jerome. Ellie loved coming to this little community and quietly reflected it had been too long since she last visited.

“This is such a unique settlement, don’t you think?” John asked of her.

“I love it. Each time I come, I feel as though it’s for the first time. Jerome seems to renew itself daily.” She marveled at how most of the homes and buildings were built right into the side of the mountain. At one time, in the height of the mining boom, Jerome was a town of 15,000 people. Nowadays there were approximately 450 permanent residents. In the past, Jerome boasted a rather bawdy reputation with numerous saloons and brothels. These days the small hillside town was home to artists, musicians, craftsman and hermits. It is one of the most visited tourist spots in the state because of the artistic atmosphere along with the appeal of the local haunted houses and businesses.

“It’s too early to check in. Anything special you want to do?” John’s question interrupted her thoughts.

“How about we visit the jail? Maybe you could arrest a criminal or two while we are here and we need to know the routine.” She teased.

“Funny Lady. Let’s just park and walk for a bit.” He found a space in front on Main Street and they were soon walking down the main stretch of the town.

Even this early in the morning, the town was bustling with people coming and going from the various shops and restaurants. The sun was shining down but it was still not too hot and Ellie was enjoying her time with John.

“Hey, let’s go in here.” John’s voice interrupted the silence. “Look at those pieces of art there. Isn’t that something?”

“Wow! I’m always impressed with the imagination of some people. It looks as though the artist is using leftover car parts to make adorable statues.”

“Look at that cute little doggy. I think it’s made of an old piston from a car.” She pointed to a small metal figurine sitting on the floor.

“I like this one. Look it’s a bat.” He smiled at the frown on her face. “Oh, not your cup of tea?”

They spent several minutes looking around at the pieces. Each one was unique and utilized different parts from all over the house and garage. It was a very relaxing time and Ellie found herself intrigued with this side of the man beside her. In the past when they dated, years ago, they just didn’t seem to talk about anything more than stuff happening in the sheriff’s office. She suddenly realized that maybe that’s what happened to drive them apart. They had never taken the time to learn about the likes, dislikes, and interests of each person.

They browsed a bit longer and then John announced that he was hungry. “Hungry? We just had breakfast a little bit ago.”

“That was at least three hours ago. Let’s go and find something to eat.” He took her by the elbow and

steered her out the door. "There! Let's get a burger." He grabbed her by the hand and they crossed the street and took the long steps up to the door of The Haunted Hamburger.

Ellie liked the feel of his big, strong hand wrapped around hers. She didn't try to pull away like her head told her to; instead she let her heart rule on this one. They found a table and soon were ordering two burgers and a couple of beers. The music was loud and conversation flowed around the room. After they ate, once again they took off down the sidewalk, exploring each little shop and enjoying the warm sunshine.

Towards the end of Main Street, Ellie saw the Desperation Depot. Her excitement was too much to contain. "John, there it is! Let's go check it out!" She now grabbed his hand and pulled him eagerly towards the two story structure. The Depot sat off by itself across the street. There was a vacant lot on one side and a small grassy area on the other. In front were several cars parked at an angle but the thing that drew her attention was the balcony above the entrance. They had a mannequin dressed in the style of a saloon girl from the old west days. She was sitting inside an old ore cart and being pushed by another male mannequin dressed as a leering miner.

Laughing, she exclaimed, "Look at that!"

"You should see it on busy weekends and holidays. They have real people up there and it's quite a show." John said. She felt him tug her back and turned to see the stern expression on his face.

"What is it?"

“Ellie, we have to do this right. We are just a couple on vacation, okay?”

“Sure, I can do that. I’m not a mind reader so you’re going to have to tell me what you’re thinking.”

“This is a criminal investigation and it could get dangerous. Let me take the lead and you follow, okay?” When he saw her hesitation, he added. “For now, okay?”

“Okay. You’re the boss.” She gave a mock salute but softened it with a smile.

Convinced that she would let him take the lead, John allowed Ellie to pull them in through the swinging doors of the Desperation Depot. It wasn’t as dark as she expected it to be but everything about the place lived up to her expectations. There were several people sitting on the tall stools at the long bar directly in front of them. To the left was a stage where she was sure a band would play later. A small dance floor area surrounded the bandstand. To the right were numerous high top tables and a few couples seemed to be enjoying their drinks and conversation.

They went up and took two stools at the bar and as soon as the young man came over, he ordered two cold beers. “Alright, sweetheart?” He said.

She turned to see that the bartender was watching them and she leaned in and put a small kiss on John’s lips. “Perfect, honey.” It was all she could do not to laugh out loud at the look of shock on the sheriff’s face. He obviously never expected for Ellie to kiss him. She turned around on her stool to look at the rest of the room, but mostly to give herself time to gain her composure. That small kiss, that slight skin

to skin contact had made an impression on her, too. Ellie allowed herself a few minutes to reflect and remember years ago when they first kissed. It contained the same electricity now as it had then.

The bartender quickly returned with their beers and they both took a drink. "You guys staying in town?"

"Yes, we were thinking of getting a room over at the Connor." John replied.

"Oh, man, you should come here. The owner has been redoing the rooms upstairs and they're looking real nice." He didn't seem in any hurry to leave them.

Ellie leaned into John, "Oh, honey, we should have checked this place out first. It's got so much character." He put his arm around her and pulled Ellie even closer.

"You see that picture there." The young man behind the bar knew he had their attention. "It's an original from the days when mining was king around here." He pointed to the big picture over the bar. It was a nude woman stretched out on a lounge chair with a young man sitting on the side next to her. A brocade cloth was draped down the side but she was still lying there in all her glory.

"This was a house of ill repute back then." He spoke proudly.

"Wow! There must have been a lot of action on paydays." Ellie commented.

"Sure was. Magdalena, that was the lady that owned The Depot in those days, was always glad to take their money." He left them for a minute to take

care of another customer at the other end of the bar, but returned right after.

“You seem to know a lot about the history of this town.”

Ellie encouraged him to talk.

“Yeah, I’ve been here a long time. I live down in Clarkdale but I got this job years ago and I do alright so I stay.” He liked to talk, that was obvious.

“What else can you tell us about The Desperation Depot? What about that name? How did that happen?” John plied him with questions.

“According to legend, this structure was one of the last to be built. They wanted to put it up on Main Street, but there wasn’t any room for the size of building they wanted. Up on Main, the miners could go from place to place very easily. It was meant as a joke but to come here, they said, you’d have to be desperate. That gradually became the unofficial name but it stuck. The Desperation Depot was named officially and Magdalena had to work very hard to get her fair share of business.”

“What did she do?”

“One of the main things she did was to make sure that the miners were treated fairly. She didn’t water down the drinks, and she never allowed cheating in the games.” He pointed to their drinks and asked, “Ready?”

“No, thanks. I’m not quite ready for another.” Ellie shook her head no.

“I’ll have one.” John told him. “What are some of the other things Magdalena did?” He didn’t want to

miss out on any chance of getting some valuable information.

“Up the street in the other saloons and brothels, many times as the men were engaging in their social activities, their pockets were picked. So, Magdalena put in some little lock boxes, kinda like safe deposit vaults and the miners could put their valuables and money in those and then when done, get their stuff back intact.” He laughed as he related the stories of the past.

Ellie and John joined in with his laughter. “That sounds funny.” Ellie said.

“Yeah, it seems weird, doesn’t it? We have those vaults here today because they were built into the wall and if we tore those out, the whole wall would be compromised. The miners called them squirrel holes.” They all laughed at the unusual name.

It took all her strength not to look directly at John when she heard what the bartender just said. She was so excited and wanted to run upstairs to see for herself, but Ellie contained her enthusiasm. “Do you use those vaults today?”

“Nah, they are just there. I’m not even sure that we have the keys for them all.”

John finally took charge. “I’m John.” He stuck his hand out and introduced himself. “This is my fiancé, Ellie.”

The young man eagerly shook their hands. “I’m Seth. I hope you enjoy your time here in Jerome. If there’s anything I can do, just let me know.”

“Is there any chance we can see the rooms? Maybe we can come here instead. I just love the history of this place.” Ellie pleaded to John.

“Seth, any chance of seeing a room? It seems my fiancé is taken with your tales of adventure.”

“Sure. Let me get someone to take over for a few minutes and I’ll take you upstairs.” He went over to a server and they saw her agree.

Soon the three of them were going through a door next to the bar and up the stairs. As they reached the top step, Ellie nudged John. As they stepped on the landing, she saw they were in some sort of lounge area. The ceiling still had the original copper tiles and sconces that once held candles that adorned the walls. They moved into the middle of the area and noticed that the décor was chosen to emulate furniture from the period of the mining days. The red velvet loveseat and chairs were embellished with gold fringe. But the sight that caused her to take a deep breath was directly in front of them. Both she and John saw that embedded in that wall were at least two dozen of the small vaults they were seeking. Seth was talking about how the renovations on the twelve rooms had been going and how much the current owners were dedicated to restoring the Depot to its former grandeur. Ellie didn’t really hear a word he was saying but was concentrating on those lock boxes in the wall.

John took her by the elbow and followed Seth into the closest room. Seth was rambling on but his words were falling on deaf ears. John finally spoke loudly.

“Ellie, do you want to stay here?” John’s words interrupted her wildly rambling thoughts. “What do you think of this room?”

She shook her head to clear her mind and quickly appeared to be looking the room over. It was decorated with soft tones of beiges and browns. She hadn’t really expected the modern touches in the room, but appreciated the effort put into the redecorating. She went to the bathroom door. “This couldn’t have been original, could it?”

“No, there weren’t individual bathrooms in those days. They used outhouses out back. But, with a little imagination and whole lot of work, each room now has its own bath.” Seth spoke proudly of the place for which he worked.

“Do you have a room for us?” John spoke up.

“Sure. During the week, we usually aren’t fully booked. We can go and get you checked in.” Seth said. Both of the men started out the door, when John realized she wasn’t moving.

“John, you go ahead. I want to look around if it’s alright.”

He squinted his eyes at her. “Ellie, I think we both should go and register.” He was trying to send her a message.

Reluctantly, she joined the two men and they went back down to the bar. Once there, Seth got busy getting them checked into a room. Soon they were headed out the door and up the street to move her car to the parking spaces behind the Depot.

She was silent and John allowed it until they got into the privacy of her car. “Okay, out with it. Where’s that beautiful brain of yours going?”

She took a deep breath, but quickly unloaded on him. “I have so many questions! Why are we doing this undercover? Why don’t you use that wonderful title of yours, Sheriff, and get a search warrant and open those boxes?” Just when he thought she was done, she presented him with one final stunning question.

“What aren’t you telling me about this little trip of ours?”

Six

“I don’t know what you mean.”

With her eyes showing disbelief, she answered him. “John, none of this is making sense. You pull me, a lowly assistant from the basement, to help you solve a major cold case and then we’re on a ‘vacation’ trip to Jerome and you don’t think I’m smart enough to figure out that you’re withholding important details?” Her voice was starting to rise along with her blood pressure. “And another thing, there are too many unanswered questions about those lock boxes.”

“Now that’s something I can deal with.” He finally spoke. John took advantage of the turn of conversation to steer her away from her more personal demands. “What questions do you think need answered about those lock boxes?”

“For one thing, how could Deputy Chuck get his hands on a key and for that matter, is it possible that he put something in there and a year later it’s still there?” She was definitely distracted by the mystery of the lock boxes.

“Well, I’m assuming that the boxes were all opened when the new owners took over five years ago. I figure they didn’t want to damage the ones that didn’t have keys, as its part of the unique décor in there. I also figure that they didn’t think they’re all that big of

a deal really.” He thought for a minute. “You saw that some of the boxes still had keys sticking in the hole, so our infamous deputy could have simply taken one of those when he put his stuff inside.”

“Then our next step is to find out who knew Chuck and if they remember when he was last here.” Ellie was almost thinking aloud.

“Right. You have good instincts, Ellie.”

“Then we will want to use that key and see which box it unlocks and find out what’s inside.” She let her enthusiasm override her desire to have John answer all her other questions.

“Whoa, wait a minute. We can’t just go in there and stumble our way around. Timing is going to be everything. We need to do some research, question people and find out all we can about Chuck’s activities while he was here.”

“John! How can you be so calm? We might have the ultimate clue to solving this whole thing right under our noses and you want to be patient and wait?”

John started the car before answering and slowly pulled out of the parking space. “Ellie, one of the most important tools a good detective uses is calm, methodical logic. You can’t be like a bull in a china shop.”

“I’ve never been called that before!” She stopped before saying something she might regret.

“Listen, we want to get our evidence but we also want to obtain as much information about Chuck’s presence here in Jerome. There may be other contacts and other people involved in his scheme.”

“You’re right.”

“Now was that so hard?” He teased.

“You’re impossible.”

“I’ve been told that a time or two.” John pulled into a parking space and retrieved their bags. In silence, they went in the saloon and saw that Seth was waving at them.

“Hey, you two. I’ve got the key to your room. It’s up those same stairs and all the way to the back. There’s a great view of the valley and it has a balcony.”

“Seth, thanks so much buddy. I’m sure my fiancé will love it.” John winked at Ellie.

It took all her will power to not roll her eyes at the gesture, but instead she gave him an award winning smile. Together they took the stairs and found their way to the end of the hall. Once he opened the door to their room, Ellie stepped through.

“Wow! Look at this!” The room was as elegant as any suite in any hotel in which she’d ever stayed. Directly in front of them was the king size bed which she chose to ignore for now. But on either side of the bed were two French doors that led to the balcony. Walking as far from the bed as she could, Ellie went to one of the doors and as she opened it, she was impressed with the beauty of the view. Since the entire town was built on steep hills, they had an unobstructed view of the towns of Clarkdale and Cottonwood in the valley below.

John had come to stand at her side. She could feel him, sense his presence and even smell the wonderful scent that was his alone. All of her nerves were on edge. Ellie hadn’t completely thought through this

trip of theirs. Staying in a hotel room with him was a bit more than she'd bargained for in the investigation. All of those feelings from years before were coming to the forefront and she was going to have to deal with it sooner or later.

"El?" He quietly interrupted her wildly rambling thoughts.

"John, I don't think this is such a good idea."

He reached out and covered her smaller hand with his. It felt good to have him touch her in such an innocent but intimate way. For just a moment she allowed the physical contact, but quickly pulled her hand from underneath his.

"John, do you have ulterior motives for this trip?"

He could see that she was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. "Ellie, I have no ulterior motives. You wanted me to mentor you and I'm doing just that. This is part of what being a detective means. Sometimes you'll be in extremely uncomfortable situations and you just have to figure out how to handle yourself in them."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Not in the slightest. Ellie, this is a serious investigation and as you are personally involved, I think it's great for you to be a part of it."

"Then that brings me back to my question. Why aren't you doing this with the power of your office?"

"Think about it for a second." He wanted her to realize the answer on her own.

Ellie turned back to the view and stared at the scenery before speaking. "I think what we're doing is kind of not so proper. I mean, that if the federal guys

are supposed to be handling this case, then we're infringing on their territory."

"Now you got it. I knew you were a smart person. If we get some concrete evidence and a definite way to go, I'll pull them in and we'll have to share our information. But until then, I don't want to look any more foolish than I already do."

"You mean because it was your deputy involved." She stated that fact. Even though she was supposed to not let her heart get involved, Ellie felt her past love for the handsome sheriff grow a bit more.

"Now, what do you want to do first?" John stood up and stretched his lean body. She watched that fancy golf shirt tighten with his muscles in his arms and felt her pulse start to beat a bit harder.

"Let's go bar hopping."

The look on his face was priceless. "What are earth do you want to do that for?"

"The best way to find out about our deputy's life here is to interact with as many locals as we can. The best way I know to gain information is with a little alcohol."

His laughter was contagious and soon they were arm in arm going back into the room. "I just need to freshen up a bit and then we can go." She went into the bathroom. After a quick check in the mirror, Ellie was with him at the door and they left their room.

The first stop was a local bar up on Main Street called Paul and Jerrys Saloon. It was a simple place with only a juke box, no live music. They pulled up a couple of stools and sat at the bar. After ordering a few beers, John was tapped on the arm by the man

sitting next to him. "You're not from around here, are ya?"

"No, but why do you ask?"

"That there fancy shirt. I ain't never seen such a colorful shirt on a fella before." The others next to him all laughed.

Ellie held her breath for a second, not sure how John was going to react. His response surprised her.

"You know I agree with you, but sometimes to make the little lady happy, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

All of a sudden, the man slapped John on the back and declared, "I like you, young fella. It takes guts to look like that just for your woman." Soon the tension in the bar was released and the sounds of music once again filled the room from the juke box. Conversation restarted and the moment was quickly forgotten.

John looked to Ellie and grinned with his victory. She wasn't sure that her heart was back to beating normally, but she returned the smile.

"Is this here your little woman?" The older, scruffy man pointed a gnarled finger at Ellie.

"Yes, this is Ellie and I'm John." The sheriff offered his hand to shake the other man's. "Do you live here in Jerome?"

"Sure do. I have for most of my life. Everyone knows me as Zeke. I used to have my own little mine but with these useless hands, I had to give it up." He held up his hands to show how gnarled and twisted they were.

"That looks painful." Ellie spoke up.

“Little lady, it is but I can still hoist my beer.” He laughed at his own joke and raised his bottle in salute to the couple.

“Looks like you’re ready for another. Let me buy you one.” John signaled the bartender and soon the three were chatting away.

“You two on your honeymoon?”

“Oh, no.” Ellie immediately replied.

Zeke nudged John in the elbow. “Looks like you’ve got yerself a purty independent lass. You’re in for some trouble, young man.” Again his raspy laughter filled the room.

John laughed with him. “Now you know why I have this shirt on!”

“You two are having a lot of fun at my expense.” Ellie feigned being insulted. “I think it’s a good looking shirt.”

“Of course, for a girl.” Zeke continued his insults with laughter.

John finally tried to turn the conversation in order to gain some valid information. “You know a lot of people here, Zeke?”

“I know just about everybody. I even know those that come regularly but don’t live here.” He tipped up his bottle.

“A buddy recommended we come here to Jerome. Wonder if you saw him?”

“I sit on this stool every day and have for years now. If your friend was in here, I’d know him.” Zeke bragged. “What’s his name?”

“Chuck, Chuck Paulsen. He’s a deputy over in Prescott.” John waited for any reaction from the older man.

“No, can’t say as I remember him. Maybe he just didn’t come in here. Like I told you, I know just about everyone that visits this here place.” Zeke sat his now empty bottle down and proceeded to get off his stool. “I’ll be back.”

John looked to Ellie and was about to speak when he noticed the frown on her face. “What’s up?”

She leaned in close and whispered. “Don’t look now, but that bald-headed man in the back by the juke box seems to be following us.” She allowed John to place a small kiss on her cheek. To anyone looking in, they were just having a special, intimate moment.

They continued nuzzling, but their conversation was anything but loving and affectionate. “Why do you think that?”

She placed a kiss on John’s lips before answering. “He was in the lobby at the Depot and I thought he was also in the Haunted Hamburger place. I don’t think I told you that when I spoke with Sherry, I had her describe the man that Chuck met in Vegas. All she could remember is that he was heavy set, bald and had a really big nose.”

“That’s pretty important news to leave out.”

She pushed at him playfully, but he felt her anger at his comment. “You’re such a funny man, John.” He knew she would have liked to have hit him harder, but for anyone watching in the room, she restrained herself.

“I think I need to go to the restroom. They’re in the back and I can get a look at him then.” John stood up and took advantage of the game they were playing and placed a searing, kiss smack dab on her lips. He laughed as he walked away but avoided looking back at her. John knew she would be even more furious that he did that. While he was gone, Ellie took her small notebook out of her purse. She scanned the pages of her notes when she talked with Sherry and saw right there in black and white the description of the man in Vegas. Damn! She cursed herself for not remembering to share this fact with John before.

She casually sipped the last of her beer, but it wasn’t just a moment and John was back. “Let’s test him.” In a louder voice, he added, “Time to go, sweetheart.”

“Thanks!” He waved at the bartender as they exited the dark tavern. “This way.”

Instead of heading back to the Depot, John took her up the street to the Jerome Fire Station. It was up on the hill further and away from the tourist shops and restaurants. As they walked, he grabbed her hand and leaned down to speak softly to her. “You’re doing great. I’m sorry for upsetting you with my comment.”

This was not something she expected from him and had to wait a minute before answering. “You know I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize our investigation. I even wrote it down in my notebook, but I can see how even the smallest of details can’t be forgotten or left unsaid. I’m sorry, too.”

They came to stand in front of the fire station and John told her to smile while he took her picture with

his phone. She went to him and looked over the photo. "Now you go and let me get one of you. That outfit deserves to be recorded for posterity."

He started to turn to her when the look on his face suddenly became very serious. She twisted around to see what he was staring at and came face to face with the object of their attention.

"Sheriff? Sheriff Clarke?" The bald man addressed the pair.

They were caught! Ellie was about to panic when John stepped in to handle the situation. He was instantly by her side and even shielding her a bit from the stranger.

"You must be Ellie Parker." Their unwanted visitor smiled, or at least tried to smile, at the two. His grin was rather menacing instead of warm and friendly.

"I'm sorry but do I know you?" Her voice came out shaky and not at all confident like she would have wanted. She reached over and put her arm on John's back. As she ran her hand around his waist, Ellie had to work extremely hard not to show her shock at the gun she felt tucked in the waist of John's golf shorts.

"Oh, now I'm the one sorry. I seem to have surprised you guys. I'm Carson Layne. I'm a former coworker of Tuck's while he worked in Las Vegas. I'm staying at their B&B at the Hassayampa Lake."

She didn't feel John relax like she thought he would. He was still very alert. "What are you doing here?" This time she made sure her words held some confidence.

"Ellie, it's obvious. Carson is playing tourist." John interjected.

Now it was her turn to be surprised. Why was John coming to this man's defense? John stuck out his hand and heartily shook the other man's. "Ellie and I decided to have a little vacation. We love Jerome, don't we, El?" He hugged her tight to his side. She realized he was telling her something.

She snuggled into him and smiled. "John and I are staying at the Depot. Are you staying the night too?"

"I hadn't planned on it. I might have to, though. There's a lot to see in this little town." His smile was still phony but his words seemed innocent enough.

"Well, nice to meet you, Carson. Maybe we'll see you around." John gently pushed Ellie to move down the street. Before she could speak, he made eye contact and indicated that they should get further away before speaking.

After a cursory glance around to see that they weren't being followed, John stopped and was staring intently into the store front of an art store. She stood next to him and pretended to be appreciating the view in the window but wasn't even seeing it.

"What was that all about?" She couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. "That guy gives me the creeps."

"Have you ever heard the phrase 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies' closer'? Well, that's just what we should do."

"I think so, but what has that got to do with that man?" Ellie was still shook from the brief encounter.

"It means that until I know what he's up to, Carson is my new best friend. I don't think any of this is a coincidence. You said you saw him before now."

“Yes, he was in the Depot when we first got there and then I thought he was in the hamburger place and then finally at the bar.” She turned to face him. “John, I’m so sorry I forgot to tell you about him the other day.”

“Hey, you’ve done great. I might not have noticed him right away but you were very observant and now he no longer has an advantage over us.” He pulled her closer and took that moment to place a tender kiss on her forehead.

“You know we shouldn’t be doing that.” Her protest wasn’t very strong and suddenly she wanted so much more than a light touch of his lips. Ellie raised her head and placed a passionate-filled kiss on his waiting lips. He reacted with fervor.

A couple walking by caused them to pull apart. “I think we need to get back to our room and regroup.” John took her by the elbow and they quickly went down Main Street to the Depot. As they walked through the saloon, Seth waved at them.

“How’s it going? Did that guy find you two?” At his question, they both stopped suddenly.

“What guy?” John was all ears.

“That bald dude. He said he was a friend and was supposed to meet you two. I just pointed him up the street.” Seth kept cleaning the bar and didn’t seem to think it strange about the encounter with Carson.

“Did he say anything else?” Ellie inquired.

“Nah, just that he was late and he was sorry he missed you guys. I told him you were staying here and that you’d be back eventually, but he seemed anxious to find you.”

She and John looked at each other. Exasperation showed on their faces. Seth was oblivious to his mistake among other things. "Seth, did it not occur to you that we wanted to be alone?" Ellie tried another tactic.

Seth finally looked up from his cleaning duties. "Gee, I'm sorry. I guess I didn't think about it. The guy knew your names and even had described how you looked. Did I do something wrong?"

John finally let him off the hook. "It's okay. We just didn't tell anyone we were coming here. I guess Carson figured it out on his own. Come on, Ellie, let's go to our room." As they walked away, John stopped. "Hey, buddy, do me a favor. Don't tell anyone else where we are, okay?" He smiled to soften his words.

"Hey, dude, you got it! Sorry, man." Seth's look of sorrow was pitiful, but the two of them felt he'd learned his lesson.

As they climbed the stairs, Ellie commented. "You let him off pretty easy, don't you think?" They continued past the lock boxes as both of them stared at the mysterious vaults. "When do we get to try and find the one that Chuck used?"

"All in good time, all in good time." He walked on and opened the door to their room.

"Oh, my God! Look at this!" Ellie exclaimed. John immediately pulled the gun from its holster. He tried to stop her from entering the room, but Ellie had already run to the things scattered beside the bed.

He looked at the room in horror. It was completely torn apart, their bags and the contents were strewn everywhere. The drawers in the night stands were

flopped down on their sides. There wasn't a thing left in its place.

"Oh my God! John, the key! Where did you put it? They got the key!" She was hysterical as she scrambled to look through the stuff lying all over the floor.

"Ellie, Ellie!" He went to her and pulled her up to face him. "I've got it! They can't have known about the key. No one knows about it and I have it!" He pulled the leather pouch out of his pocket. "See?"

She slumped against his strong chest and heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God!"

"Who would do this?" She turned from him and headed to the phone on the desk. As she picked up the receiver, John stopped her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to call the police."

"Stop, Ellie. Put the phone down. We can handle this."

The look on her face showed the disbelief she was feeling at his announcement. "Why not? John we have an obligation to report this, don't we?"

"Sit down and take a deep breath. Listen to me and try to understand the situation we're in with this case."

Ellie sat on the edge of the torn-up bed. She was convinced that she wasn't going to like where John was going with this, but she was determined to hear him out.

He paced back and forth before coming to face her. "Here are the facts. We are here unofficially, conducting an investigation in which we have no right to be involved. Only a few of us know about the key and

you trust those that know, right? When you and your uncle came to Prescott to help Aubrie with the chips, you kept the information to yourself because someone inside the feds was leaking information. That fact is the same today. We still don't know who the mole is and until we can verify that information, we need to tighten the circle around us." He took a deep breath.

"Then the thing to do is assess if anything is missing, right?" She stood up and gave him a weak smile.

He grabbed her and gave her a huge hug. "Ellie, this will all be straightened out once we find out where our deputy is and what's in that box. I knew you'd understand. Besides, maybe this was one of your spirits. Maybe the ghost wanted a change of clothes!"

"Very funny. That still doesn't mean I feel good about not letting our boy Seth know about this mess. I wonder if he's involved or just a not-so-smart man." She went to her bag and started searching the floor for her belongings.

"Another thing, use your cell phone out on the balcony and let your uncle know to tell the girls to keep all of this a huge secret. Don't alarm them. Just let them know that it's part of the investigation. Okay?"

"Sure." She grabbed her phone and was heading for the balcony when she turned to speak. "You need to contact Tuck and find out all you can about our bald friend out there!" With that she left the room and missed the surprised look on John's face with her command.

Seven

“Zeke was right. She’s a handful!” John muttered to an empty room as he went about cleaning up the debris. He referred to the old man from the bar up the street. “I’m going to have to be on my toes to keep up with her.”

“I heard that!” Her voice came from the open door. Ellie just finished up her conversation with her uncle and strode back into the room. Soon they had assessed the damage and for the most part had everything picked up and put back into place.

“I’m not finding anything missing. Are you?”

John ran his hand through his hair, his frustration showing. “No, there doesn’t seem to be anything gone from my stuff either.”

“Well, where do we go from here?” She stood in the middle of the room and looked directly at him.

“I’m hungry! Let’s go downstairs and have a steak!”

“Are you nuts? How can you think of food at a time like this?” When she didn’t get a response from him, she continued. “Oh, I get it. This is another one of those famous lessons. Right, Sheriff?”

His laughter made her smile. This was a very different side to John, one she’d not seen in their past relationship. He had been very serious and totally

dedicated to his work. This behavior could be more dangerous to her heart. "Okay, let's go and find a hunk of meat to satisfy your appetite."

"First, tell me what you think we are going to find out by going downstairs." He took her by the shoulders.

Ellie thought for only a moment. "If our boy Seth is involved, he'll be surprised that we're not upset and calling the police. His behavior ought to show his guilt to some degree."

"And..." John prompted her for more.

"And, if our bald friend is down there, we can check on him and keep a close eye to see if the two of them may be in this together." She was proud of her input.

"Right! Now let's go and get some beef!"

As they left their room at the end of the hallway, they were surprised to hear voices coming from the lounge at the top of the stairs. In the short time they'd been cleaning up their room, they could see a temporary bar had been set up in one corner with a table full of food and people milling about, talking and laughing. The look on Seth's face gave Ellie what she was looking for and she turned to see that John had caught it too.

They both walked to the bar. With a big smile on her face, she spoke to the nervous bartender. "Seth, what's going on here?"

"It's one of the locals birthday party. She's pretty popular and they wanted to celebrate in style. What can I get you to drink?" He avoided looking directly at the couple.

His movements weren't wasted on either of them but Ellie wasn't ready to let him off the hook. "Gee, I don't know. We aren't really invited, are we?"

"Oh, it's okay. I'll square it with them. Let me get you something cold to drink." He turned for a moment, but quickly put two beers on the bar top. "Here, it's on the house."

They both took the cold beers and walked away from the bar. "He's real nervous, isn't he?" John spoke quietly. Before their conversation could continue, a sweet voice interrupted them.

"Are you two here for the party? Doesn't Emma look beautiful? She just loves to celebrate and we all love her so much, too."

Waiting to see if the older woman was finished, Ellie smiled and then responded. "I think Emma is enjoying herself, don't you?" She nudged John when he didn't join in right away.

"How old is she this time?" He quipped.

"Oh, you were always so quick with the wit." The other guest responded with a big smile. "You know she'll never tell any of us the truth. But between you and me, I think she's pushing 80. I'm sorry, but I've forgotten your names. Remember, me? I'm Shirley."

"Shirley, I'm John and this is Ellie." They both smiled and went along with the game.

"You guys go on up and get some food from the buffet before it's all gone. I'll let Emma know that you're here. She'll be so delighted." The older woman walked away leaving a stunned couple behind.

"What now? She thinks we belong here." Ellie asked.

“Let’s stay for a bit. What better way to gain some information than to talk with a few of the locals?” He ushered her towards the long table loaded with all sorts of foods. They filled their plates all the while keeping their eye on the nervous bartender. He was laughing and putting on a good show, but Ellie could detect that their continued presence was causing him quite a bit of concern. As they found a small table to sit and eat at, another elderly man found his way to their side.

“Mind if I join you? There seems to be no other place for me to sit?”

“Sure, please have a seat.” John invited cordially.

“I’m John and this is Ellie.”

“Glad to meet you. I’m Ben. Great party, huh?” He sat down and started to eat.

“Nice to meet you, Ben. How long have you known Emma?” Ellie went along with the ruse.

“Oh, goodness. I’ve known her since she was just a little girl. We went to the school here together. She and I were both born in the hospital here in Jerome.” He didn’t skip a beat as he talked and ate.

John and Ellie looked at each other in surprise. “You were born in the haunted hospital?” She finally asked.

“Well, young lady, it wasn’t haunted back then. Although in its 23 years of business, they say there was a death a day.” He laughed. “I guess that’s why they say it has spirits roaming about on a regular basis.” He chuckled again. Ben saw the look on John’s face and continued, “You don’t believe in spirits?”

“No, I deal in facts in my line of work and if I can’t see it or touch it, I don’t believe in it.” John stated confidently.

“Do you believe in God, young man?”

This caught him totally off guard. He looked to Ellie for some help, but immediately saw that none was coming. “Sure, I believe in God.”

“Can you see Him? Can you touch Him? If you believe in Him, then I think you need to open your mind to the possibilities of spirits in our world.” Ben took another bite of his meal. “You know the Depot is haunted by its original owner, Magdalena.”

“Wow! I had no idea.” Ellie said.

“She’s what you’d call a good spirit. Even though she was a madam of this here place, she tried hard to do good in the town. If there was someone needing a meal, she’d provide it. If there was someone needing clothes or shoes, they’d soon have them. She tried hard to run a decent brothel by not cheating the men or letting her girls do unsavory things.” Ben chuckled and continued, “Well, some may say their line of business was unsavory, but Magdalena would make sure the girls didn’t steal from the men.”

“Have you seen her?” John asked.

“Yessiree. I saw her on the balcony in the last room down the hall.” He seemed oblivious to the look passing between the two.

“What.... What was she doing?” Ellie asked tentatively.

“I was staying here that night because I wasn’t feeling so good. You know as you get older, the ole ticker can give you some trouble on occasion. As a

matter of fact, it was on this very night a year ago. We were all here celebrating Emma's birthday as usual and they just said I could stay. I live a little ways off and it's kind of remote out there, so they thought I should be close to medical help if I needed it."

"Did you? I mean, did you need medical help?" John and Ellie were listening intently to the old man's story.

"Well, that's the funny thing. I was sleeping and all of a sudden I felt that someone else was there. When I opened my eyes, I saw her just at the doorway. She was looking in and I realized that my heart was pounding so hard, I could hardly breathe. I reached over and dialed the desk for help. It wasn't serious, but if she hadn't been there, I might not have woke up. I believe she was trying to keep me from dying in my sleep. It just wasn't my time." He smiled and looked at them. "She's a pretty lady dressed in a shiny satin, frilly gown. I'll never forget her."

Nothing was said for a few minutes between them. Then an elderly woman with a shiny, plastic crown on her head came over and joined the group. "Ben, are you ignoring me on my birthday?"

"Emma, you know I would do no such thing! I was just talking with this young couple and got carried away." He placed a light kiss on her cheek.

"Who are these nice friends of yours?"

"I thought they were your friends, this is John and Ellie."

It was time for an explanation and Ellie looked to John. "Emma, we are staying here at the hotel and

Seth, the bartender, said you would love to have two more adoring fans to celebrate your birthday.”

The older woman patted her hands together in delight. “Of course, you are welcome! I love the attention, you should know. In fact, it’s time for my birthday dance and you, big man, can give me the first dance.” She took John by the arm. He looked to Ellie for help but once again, none was coming. Ellie was laughing so hard, she couldn’t speak. She knew John was definitely not the dancing in public type. The DJ was playing a lively country tune and she watched with glee as Emma clung to John and moved around on the dance floor.

“Come on, young lady, you’re not going to just sit here.” Ben grabbed her and pulled her out to join the other couples dancing. Soon, though, Emma moved up to them and indicated that they were going to change partners. John eagerly took Ellie into his arms and they moved in a swing type dance pattern across the floor.

The look on Ellie’s face told how surprised she was at his graceful moves. “I can’t believe you know how to dance this well. You never used to like doing this when we were together. You know, come to think of it, several things have changed about you since way back then.”

“You approve, I take it?” He seemed eager to hear her response.

“Yes, yes, I do.” She snuggled up and thoroughly enjoyed being in his arms. The music was over way too soon, she thought and he guided her to the bar.

“Let’s give our guy a little more misery, okay?” The teasing glint in his eyes made her heart beat a little harder for this tall, handsome man.

“Seth, how about a couple more beers?” John stared at the young man.

“John, I think I’ll have a glass of white wine.”

Seth moved quickly as though to get them from in front of him. He was still very uncomfortable and it showed in his mechanical, choppy movements as he placed the drinks on the bar.

“Thanks, buddy. How are things going? Making good tips?”

“Uh, yeah, things are going fine. How’s it with you two? Enjoying your stay?” As soon as the words were out, you could tell he regretted opening the door to that conversation.

“Well, now that you mention it, things are not going well, Seth.” John’s tone instantly changed to one of seriousness. “I think you know what I mean, don’t you?”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Seth stood back from the bar to put some space between him and the sheriff. “I told you I was sorry for giving that guy information about where you were headed. I really am sorry.”

Ellie put her hand on John’s arm as a signal. She suddenly felt that Seth really didn’t know anything about their room being searched. “Thanks, Seth, just don’t give anyone else information about us. Okay?” To John she spoke, “Honey, let’s go and dance some more.”

As they walked from the bar, John questioned her. "What was that all about? I thought you wanted me to get tough with him."

"I did until I realized that he doesn't know anything about our room being ransacked."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes, I am. Call it just a hunch, but I think if he had been involved, he wouldn't have stuck around for this party. He would have bolted." They reached the dance floor and John took her into his arms. It was a slow country tune and she felt herself melt into his embrace. The chandelier lights were glowing softly. There were others dancing but Ellie felt as though it was just the two of them. He spoke softly as they moved in musical rhythm together. It was as though they had been dancing as a couple all their lives. "So, was it the ghost Magdalena?"

She stopped abruptly and looked up at him. "John, that's not funny! I know you don't believe but I'm not so positive. That's a scary thought."

He pulled her back into the movement of the dance before he spoke again. "I'm sorry, El. I didn't mean to scare you. I was trying to make a joke."

"And that's another one of the differences in you. I don't remember you having such an obvious sense of humor."

"I've always had a sense of humor. It's just that with the responsibilities of the job, it's not always something I let people see. I do have a very serious job, you know." The words were far more serious than the look on his face and she had to laugh.

After the cake was cut, the room started clearing as people left the party. Soon it was just a few guests left and John took that opportunity to tell Ellie it was time to go. This was a moment she had been reluctant to acknowledge as it meant going to a room for the night she had to share with John.

Emma thanked them for coming and invited them to her party next year. Ben and Emma left the area together and with a huge sigh, Ellie started to walk slowly down the hallway to their room. She could hear the staff starting to clear the remains of the celebration but other than that, the only sound was her own heart beating.

John got to the door ahead of her and motioned for Ellie to step behind him as he opened it. He pulled his weapon from its holster and slowly pushed the door open. As he stepped in, Ellie was right on his heels. They had left several lights burning and could quickly see that everything was as they had left it earlier. Breathing a sigh of relief, Ellie went to the television and turned it on, anything to have some noise in the room to help soothe her fractured nerves. The air conditioner was one of those mounted in the wall and it started up with some effort.

"Ellie?" His voice startled her as he was very close to her side.

"What?" It came out as a demand more than a question.

"I'm not going to bite. Do you want something else to drink?"

“No, I’ve had enough. Wait, maybe a soda? I can go back down and see if Seth is still there and snag a can or two.” She started towards the door.

“Ellie, stop! I’m not going to ravage you or anything like that. We’re going to sleep in this room and that’s all.” He seemed frustrated with her behavior.

“Ravage? That’s the furthest thing on my mind.” She lied, more to herself than him. “And besides, I was just wondering where you were going to sleep. That little sofa doesn’t look very comfortable.”

“That’s why I’m going to sleep right here.” He plopped down on the bed and started to remove his shoes. He lay back and fluffed the pillows as he grabbed for the remote control to the television. “Let’s find a good old movie to watch.”

Ellie finally gave in. “Okay, you’re right. This is an awkward situation. Given our past, I never thought I would end up in the bedroom with you again. I am uncomfortable but I guess if you can make the best of this situation, so can I.”

She grabbed her bag and went into the bathroom to change. As she re-entered the room, John smiled. “I remember those pajamas. I was always impressed that you wore practical things to bed and not those silly flimsy things.”

She stopped dead in her tracks and looked down at her favorite flannel night clothes. “I think I should be insulted, but seeing how I don’t care about your opinion, I’ll take it as a compliment.” Ellie hoped her false bravado would convince him that she wasn’t still interested in him. She went to the closet in the corner of the room and took out the extra pillows and blanket.

As she climbed in on her side of the bed, Ellie made a wall between them out of the extra linen and pillows.

He laughed out loud but helped her fluff the last of the wall in their bed. "I think this will work! I certainly can't climb over that."

Ellie picked up one of the pillows and hit him square in the face. When he started to retaliate, she surrendered. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. What did you find to watch?"

They enjoyed one of the older movies they both had loved and laughed together. Soon, both were yawning and John finally spoke. "Are you ready for lights out?"

"Sure, why not?" She got up and went to the bathroom door. Ellie turned on the light and pulled the door almost shut to allow a small ray to shine into their room.

"I can't believe you still remembered to do that." He commented.

"What? Oh, the light. Well, I've just gotten used to it myself, especially when I'm in a strange bed." She crawled into her side of the bed and grabbing the covers, rolled over to try and get some sleep.

"What, no goodnight kiss?"

"Funny!"

Within a few minutes, she could hear that he had indeed fallen asleep. That man could fall asleep in a tornado! She suddenly remembered that John had that ability. She, on the other hand, was too keyed up to find slumber right away. The last time Ellie glanced at the clock beside the bed, it showed that it was well past midnight.

Sometime later, Ellie awoke with a start. Don't open your eyes, Ellie told herself. The feeling that someone or something was in the room was overwhelming. She was scared to see and prayed that the feeling would go away. When her curiosity got the best of her, Ellie finally opened one eye to try and see around the room. The trickle of light emanating from the bathroom was enough for her to see that, although they were alone, someone had been in there. The curtain from the patio door was blowing slightly and she held her breath. She was positive that they had secured that door before getting into the bed.

Now, with both eyes wide open and her heart racing, Ellie slowly crawled from the bed. She dare not make a sound in case whoever had come in was still there. She wanted so badly to wake John, but that would create noise and Ellie was in stealth mode. As her feet hit the ground, the bed creaked a bit and she stopped dead in her tracks. Waiting for what seemed an eternity, Ellie finally moved into an upright position. Inching her way over to the desk in the corner of the room, Ellie reached for the gun in her purse. That was really stupid of her not to have her weapon close by the bed, Ellie chastised herself.

As she crept across the carpeted floor, her ears were alert for any sound other than the beating of her heart. Finally convinced that no one was in the room, Ellie was headed back to the bed to wake John when an eerie glow from his side of the bed caught her attention. She stopped completely and stared at the object on the night stand. She was reminded of the iridescent light that a person usually saw around the

flame of a single candle. She finally found the courage to move closer to the nightstand and as she was almost able to view it more carefully, Ellie was shocked to see it was the key to the lock box!

Why would this key be glowing? Why did John not have it hidden or secure somewhere in this room? If someone had been in the room, why did they not see it and take it? All of these questions popped into her head as she cautiously reached out to take the key. As John went to move in the bed, Ellie again stopped to make sure he was still asleep. She took a deep, steady-breath and as she carefully removed the key from the stand, Ellie realized that she was going to use it.

Not bothering with her slippers, Ellie moved to the door and ever so slowly opened it as little as she could to slip out into the hallway. She was grateful that the Depot was old because the halls were not very well lit by the antique wall sconces. This allowed her to slink down the aisle to the lounge and find herself facing the wall with the lock boxes. The area had been completely cleaned of any evidence of the birthday party earlier and the lights had all been lowered.

What little light there was coming from the candelabra overhead, had been turned down to allow a weird ambiance to the area. Ellie stared at the wall of locked boxes and debated which one to try first. All of a sudden the hair on the back of her neck started to tingle. She slowly started to turn around to see if anyone was there, when she felt a hand on her right shoulder. Without warning, another hand was quickly clamped over her mouth to prevent her from screaming.

“Hold still!”

Eight

With adrenaline surging through her veins, Ellie quickly and as hard as she could planted her elbow backwards into her attacker's ribs. As he reacted, she stomped with her barefoot on top of his arch. His hold on her relaxed and she swiftly turned to place another blow upwards to his nose with the palm of her hand. Seeing who the attacker was, she stopped her motion in midair.

"John! What the hell?"

"What do you think you're doing?" John shot right back, but before she could answer, he grabbed her by the arm and started to push her towards their room.

"Wait!" She reached back and took the key out of the lock box.

John was furious, she could tell. She had never seen him in this state. She didn't protest, but instead allowed him to pull her swiftly into their room. Safely inside, he released her and turned to lock their door.

"Do you mind telling me what the hell you think you were doing?"

She avoided looking directly at him while she composed herself. When Ellie felt her heartbeat finally returning to a normal pace, she turned and faced him. "I think you owe me an explanation. You scared the life out of me!"

“Oh, don’t for a minute think you’re going to turn this around. You had no business trying to unlock that box. You had no business being out in the middle of the night alone!” He paced back and forth. Finally, she could see that he was winding down and Ellie took advantage of that moment.

“John, I know you’ve said you don’t believe in spirits, but I was guided!” As she saw the look of derision on his face, she took a deep breath and continued, “I was fast asleep when I felt something or someone in the room.” Ellie walked to the open balcony door and pointed. “Did you happen to notice this was open? I didn’t do it and you didn’t do it, so how did the door get open?”

“Bull! I still don’t believe in ghosts or spirits.” He wasn’t going to give in so easily. “Besides, a spirit wouldn’t need to unlock and open a door. Wouldn’t they just move through it or the wall?” He mocked her.

“Where did you put the key when you went to bed?”

He looked around and she saw that she had stumped him. Ellie was now moving on in full force. “John, that key was on your night stand and I tell you it was glowing!”

“You can’t honestly believe that!” He still wouldn’t be convinced.

“I am telling you the truth! Just because you are too stubborn to admit it doesn’t mean it’s not reality. I ask you again, where did you put the key?” Ellie pushed.

As he went over to his bag, John kept looking at her. He rummaged through it and finally pulled a sock from the bottom of his duffel. The look on his face changed dramatically as he realized that the key she held up for him to see was indeed the one he planted in his sock.

“Still don’t believe? I’m telling you someone was in this room and wanted to help me, us.” Ellie was more spooked than she wanted to admit to him, but kept pressing. “John, explain to me how that key got out of your sock in the bottom of your bag and onto the night stand. Who opened the balcony door?”

Suddenly his face lifted. “Who says that key is the right one?” He dumped the entire contents of the duffel and searched frantically for another key. Upon not finding one, he looked to her in amazement. “Okay, Miss Smarty Pants, how did you know which box to pick?”

“I know you’re going to laugh at me, but I just knew. When I was standing there in front of that wall of boxes, my hand went straight to the one you saw me at. The key fit, John!”

“We work in a world where only facts matter. Not conjecture, not paranormal behavior, just facts! This is not going to cut it!” He went and stepped out on the balcony for a moment to collect his wits. He examined the door for signs of forced entry but found none. John finally went to the edge of the balcony to think for a moment. Ellie followed him and leaned against the handrail, enjoying the warm summer breezes.

“Sometimes, we have to open our minds. Sometimes, we have to believe in things that can’t be explained.” Her words were spoken softly. “When my parents died and I was sent to foster care, I was devastated, confused, and just generally angry.” She now faced him. “One of the things that helped me the most was dreaming and believing in a better world. The fact was that I was in a stranger’s home with no one or nothing to call my own. I could have let that anger consume me but, John, I didn’t. I believed and wished for a better life than the one dealt to me. The dream was that someone would come and claim me. That’s what kept me going until finally my uncle did just that.”

“I know you’ve had it rough. Each one of us has had our own demons to deal with.”

“What are your demons?”

The huge sigh John let out told volumes. “I’m the sheriff.”

“I don’t understand. I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“It’s a long story and we should get some sleep, if we can.” His heavy steps toward the door made her heart break.

“I think we have tons of time. Tell me about it.”

John continued inside and finally stretched out on the bed. He patted the area next to him. “Come on. I think rest is the best thing for both of us.”

“But I want to get into that lock box. Come on, John, aren’t you the least bit curious?” She stood by the edge of the bed.

“Of course I want to see what, if anything is inside. I also want you to slow down and understand what’s happened to us in the short time we’ve been here.” He watched as she reluctantly sat on her side of the bed. Ellie meticulously straightened their wall of blankets and pillows before looking up at him.

“Okay, I admit there’s been a lot going on. We ran into Carson the creep, our room was ransacked, we had a visit from a ghost and now it appears someone is once again intervening on our investigation, our unofficial investigation.” She laid back against the pillows. “John, if we’re here unofficially, why do I get the feeling that someone knows what we’re up to?”

“Now, that’s the direction you should be pursuing. Who did you tell that you were coming here with me? Who knows about the key?”

“I told you that my uncle and his friends know. That’s all I told. What about you? Who knows you’re playing hooky from being the sheriff?” Ellie wasn’t one to give up and he soon found himself a little uncomfortable.

“I told my assistant that I was going to be off this week for a little R & R. I’ve not taken much vacation time and she was thrilled that I was finally going away. I talked with Tuck a little about what we’d found and that we were going to come to Jerome to find out what was in that damn box.”

“And you trust your admin?”

“Of course, she’s been loyal since coming to work in my office. She’s capable and bright and very efficient.”

Ellie studied on that information for a minute. "Does she have any clue as to what you'd been doing? Does she know you're with me?"

"She's aware of my location. I have to keep her informed for emergency purposes. As far as being with you, she thinks it's wonderful that I'd take you under my wing and train you in the art of becoming a detective." He bragged a bit.

"I've seen her in the cafeteria. She's very pretty, even though she wears far too much makeup. Maybe she has ulterior motives working for the eligible bachelor sheriff. Don't you have a cell phone that the department is aware of? Why does she need to know your whereabouts?"

"Give me a break! I don't think of her that way and she knows it. Besides, she's quite a bit older than I am."

"How? How does she know it?"

John seemed stymied for a bit. "El, you know as well as I that as sheriff, I need to let someone know where I am at all times. I've never taken her out not even to lunch for any reason. I've kept our relationship on a professional level at all times!"

"You know for such a smart man, you sure can be dumb!" Ellie turned and turned off the light on her side of the bed.

She saw his light extinguish and felt his side of the bed move as John adjusted himself for a few hours' sleep. Men can be so incredibly clueless at times, she mused. She had seen his secretary and even accidentally overheard several conversations in the employee cafeteria. This was a woman with an

infatuation with her boss. Rose had always acted a bit superior due to the fact that she worked for the “man”. Ellie had felt her coolness more than once as she knew that Rose finally figured out that John and she had a past, such as it was.

She heard John snore a bit and smiled. He was a typical man, able to sleep under any circumstance. Ellie felt her own body relax and soon the two of them were deep in sleep.

“Come on sleepyhead. Let’s get some breakfast. I’m starving.” John gently pushed her.

Ellie rolled over to avoid looking directly at him. “Go away! Leave me alone!” Her long hair was strewn over the pillow and John longed to touch it, but resisted.

“I have coffee!”

“Devil! You know my weakness! Not fair.” She finally sat up and took the cup he offered. As she took a sip of the hot brew, life seemed to stir back in her veins. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long, but we have things to do. So get moving. I’ve already had my shower. It’s free for you.” He went to the balcony and opened the doors. “It’s going to be another hot day.”

“What’s on our agenda?”

“Do you know that there’s over 87 miles of tunnels below us from all the mining? I want to check out some of the history by going to the museums in town. We can have some conversation with the locals and see if we can find out anything more about our buddy’s activities here. Now, move it, woman!”

Ellie reluctantly got up from the bed. She stretched her aching muscles and slowly trudged to the bathroom. "I'll be done in a minute. What's for breakfast?"

"They serve a good meal downstairs. I don't think Seth is going to be there but maybe the other bartender can give us some information."

"You think the bar is going to be open?"

"El, this is a small town and the bar is also the restaurant. We're not having drinks just breakfast." He teased.

"You know spending too much time with you will drive a girl to drink." She shut the door before the pillow he threw could hit her.

Ellie found herself humming and smiling as the warm spray of water hit her body. She didn't want to question where this good mood was coming from, but instead concentrated on the events in the middle of the night. I could have sworn that someone was in our room, she thought. I know someone or something moved that key onto the night stand.

As she finished up, she could hear John on his phone and she hurried to find out who was on the other end. He finished up his conversation just as she stepped into the room. Ellie was towel drying her hair and combing through the long, tangled locks. "Who was that?"

"I called Tuck to see what I could find out about Carson."

"And?" She was impatient with him.

"And, he filled me in with what details he could. He seemed surprised that he was here in Jerome."

"What's your impression of the whole thing?"

“My suspicions are definitely aroused. Tuck didn’t come straight out and say it, but I don’t he trusts Carson’s motives too much.”

“I thought he was Tuck’s mentor when he worked with the Feds in Las Vegas.”

“He was one of many, but Tuck feels that they weren’t close enough to warrant this ‘visit’ to Prescott. Carson disappears during the day and is very vague about where he was or what he was doing.”

“That’s not really weird. I would probably not share with people about my day.”

“Aubrie and Tuck both said that most of their guests are very enthused about Prescott and the mountains. They’re very eager to talk about what they saw and ask a lot of questions for things to do while they stay at the B & B. Carson, to our knowledge has never been to our forest. You would think he’d want those same suggestions.”

“So it seems he has his own agenda.” Ellie thought about this as she started to brush her hair into its’ usual ponytail.

“You don’t have to do that, do you?”

“Do what?”

“Why don’t you just leave your hair down? It’s beautiful that way.” John suddenly seemed embarrassed by his suggestion.

She felt surprised by his personal attention to her appearance, but tried to shrug it off like no big deal. “Sure, why not.” She grabbed her purse, checking to make sure her weapon was in it and turned to see if John was ready to leave their room.

They walked together down the hall but just before going down the stairs, Ellie turned to look longingly at those lock boxes. "Come on, El. We'll get there soon enough."

He took her by the elbow and gently guided her to continue their journey for their morning meal. As they found the place practically empty except for one couple at the bar, John chose a high top table near the door.

A perky young girl came and gave them menus and quickly took their order. As she brought their order, the young lady placed everything just so and nervously asked, "Everything alright, Sheriff?"

Both John and Ellie looked up at the server and then at each other. "What makes you think I'm a sheriff?"

"Oh my, aren't you?" She backed up a step. "Seth told me you were here. You aren't the sheriff over in Prescott? I'll kill that guy. He must be teasing me. I'm so gullible! I am so sorry." The server turned to leave them.

"Hey, don't worry. I am the sheriff, but we're not here on official business." He took Ellie's hand in his as he spoke the next words. "I'm spending some special time with a very special lady. We'd like our privacy so if you'd keep our secret, I'd personally appreciate it." He placed an emphasis on his request.

"Oh, sure. I guess Seth shouldn't have said anything either. Your secret is safe with me." She seemed extremely eager to leave the table.

"Can you believe it!" Ellie was the first to exclaim. "What does this mean?"

“Let’s finish our breakfast and take a short walk and we’ll talk about it then.” Ellie ate what she could, but this new twist in their investigation was one weird situation and she didn’t quite know how to deal with it.

Soon they were headed out into the now bright sunshine walking up the sidewalk to the main part of town. As soon as they were on their own with no one to overhear, John spoke up.

“I want you to know that in all my years of police work and conducting investigations, this is one of the most unusual cases I’ve ever worked on.”

“So, it’s not just me thinking that this is very, very complicated and it just keeps getting worse?” Ellie asked for some much needed confirmation that he too was very confused by all the events.

“Here let’s sit on this bench and recap where we are in this.” John encouraged her to join him in the shady spot.

Ellie pulled the small notebook from her purse. She didn’t see the smile on John’s face as he watched her scribbling some notes.

“What’d you got?” He asked.

“So far, we have a missing deputy, a mysterious key, a former agent following us, a ghostly visitor in the night, and a bartender that knows you’re the sheriff. What did I miss?”

“Not much! Good job. Now where do you want to go from here?” He was pushing her, giving her the lead in the investigation.

“I want to get whatever might be in that box. I want to find out where our deputy went and one thing

still puzzles me. We have never found out who the mole was inside the agency in Vegas. That same person could be behind our troubles currently.”

“By the way, nice moves last night. My ribs are still sore.” John said.

“You deserved so much more! You scared the living daylights out of me.”

“I’ll remember to never sneak up on you again.” His laughter was genuine. “What do you want to do now?”

“I think we need to get Tuck to conduct some kind of research on Seth so we can see if there’s a connection between him and Chuck. Maybe you can contact the Vegas boys and see if they’ll share information about Carson.” She was thinking aloud.

“I’m not sure I want to do that. It might alert them to the fact that we’re poking around in this case. They aren’t going to like that too much.”

“You’re probably right about that. How can we find anything out about him and his motives for being here?”

“What do you think about turning the tables on him? Let’s put a tail on him and see what he’s up to and where he’s going.”

“Oh, I like that. But he knows both of us, who are you going to get?”

“I’ve got a guy I can trust. I don’t think you know him. He doesn’t work out of Prescott. I’ll give him a call.” John stood and walked a few feet away to talk on his phone.

While he was talking, Ellie took a moment to look around and just take in the sight of this small town.

She loved it here and could see herself visiting again under different circumstances. She watched tourists browsing in and out of the various stores and shops. Some carried packages and some not, but all were busy taking pictures. It seemed no matter what day of the week Jerome was a busy little mecca. People of all ages, types and generations braved the summer heat to get a glimpse of the history and culture in this mountainside town.

John finished his call and came back to sit on the bench. "It's covered. We'll get some information in a day or two about the comings and goings of one Carson Layne. Now what?"

Ellie pointed to a shop directly across from where they were sitting. "Let's go in there."

John turned to see which direction she was pointing and then quickly looked back at Ellie. "You want me to go in to see a fortune teller? You've got to be kidding."

"She's not a fortune teller, the sign says she's a psychic. Maybe she can help us with this case." Ellie stood up but John quickly stopped her.

"El, you can't be serious. I already told you that I don't believe in that stuff."

As she started across the now empty street, he followed reluctantly. "Look at it this way you'll get some great entertainment and something else to tease me about later." She smiled and put her hand on his arm, "Please, John, just indulge me."

The front window of the small storefront was completely blackened. The only lettering on the glass was a few words, listing the psychic's name and

hours. A bell over the door tinkled when Ellie pushed it open and the small breeze from outside caused several wind chimes to play a welcoming melody. Inside the small room was decorated in soothing warm tones, with a few candles burning on a shelf.

“Wow, not what I expected.” John commented.

“What did you think? Did you expect velvet curtains trimmed in gold fringe with a table and a crystal ball?” She teased him.

They both turned when they heard a small voice. “Hello. I’m Pearl. Welcome.” The psychic was a small, plump woman with beautiful grey eyes. Her graying hair was flowing about her face and Ellie instantly felt a connection to this calm, demure woman. She indicated that they should sit on the matching tan chairs while Pearl took the leather wing back facing them.

“How can I help you?”

“What, you mean you don’t know?” John’s skepticism was obvious.

“Oh, I see. You don’t believe?” Pearl’s voice was still very calm and soft.

“John, don’t be rude.” Ellie chided him.

“I’m so glad you two have finally found your way back.” As Pearl saw the look of surprise on Ellie’s face, she continued. “You have been together and apart many times throughout the years. Yes?”

“Yes, we were together several years ago and now, well, we’re not really together, as a couple, I mean. We work together, that’s all.” Ellie stammered out what she hoped was a logical explanation of their relationship.

Pearl just smiled. "Many people come through my door seeking something. I just thought you two were looking for an answer."

"We are but not for us personally, as a couple, I mean." Ellie stopped for a moment to compose herself. "I'm not usually so tongue-tied. We are looking for someone. Perhaps you can help us with that."

Pearl didn't react immediately but soon asked. "Do you have something that belonged to that person with you?"

Ellie glanced over to John but could see that stubborn look cross over his handsome features. He wasn't going to be too eager to hand over the key. "John, let her see it."

Grudgingly, John reached into his pocket and pulled the key out for all to see. He didn't let go of it, but instead lay it in his open palm. Pearl seemed amused with his reluctance to allow her to touch it.

"May I?" She asked in that quiet tone of hers.

He stretched out to place it in her open hands. Pearl took the key and closed her hand over it. For several ticks of the clock, no one spoke and both Ellie and John waited for her to finally speak.

"The person you are searching for has been found. I'm afraid, however, it may not be the news you were seeking." With that said, she stood and handed the key back to John with a smile.

They both stood and headed toward the door which Pearl had opened for them. "I'm still very happy for you two and I know that you will finally accept your destiny."

As they stepped into the bright summer afternoon, Ellie felt a bit unbalanced. She crossed to the other side of the street and found herself sitting on that same bench. John was coming up behind but slowly and as he started to sit beside her, his phone startled both of them.

He answered and she could tell by the shocked look on his face that the news wasn't something he expected. He abruptly hung up and turned to her. "El, we have to go. They think they've found Chuck's remains."

Nine

“Oh my God, where? What’s happened?” She rose and together they hurried back down the street to the Depot. As they entered, she looked to the bar and saw the same young lady that had waited on them earlier. She waved as they crossed to the stairs.

“John, let’s get that box open!” Ellie pleaded once again.

“We don’t have the time and I don’t want anyone to be able to see us doing that. Come on, we’ve got to get back to Prescott fast!” He practically pushed her in front of him down the hall.

Once in the room, John carelessly shoved his things back in his bag and helped Ellie do the same. She was full of questions but felt that once in the car, he’d calm down enough to tell her what was going on.

“I’ll get the car. You settle the bill and I’ll wait for you out front. Hurry!” His orders were such that she knew she’d better move fast. She turned to hug him unexpectedly and when he looked down at her, John took a quick breath. “It’s going to be okay. I’ll fill you in on everything once we’re on the road.” He placed a small, reassuring kiss on her lips.

John took their bags and scrambled for the door and the car. He soon pulled to a space in the front and waited impatiently for Ellie to appear. She came out

and as fast as they could, the couple was back on the road to Prescott.

Once out of the town limits, John sped up. "First off, I don't want you to think that the psychic was right." He heard Ellie's laughter.

"Okay, spill the beans. What's going on?" Ellie pushed for more information about the frantic phone call.

"Are you aware of the Sundance Mine back by the lake?"

"Not really."

"The mine is above the Senator Highway just around the bend from Tuck & Aubrie's house. It's been inactive forever. Not too long ago, I think six months or so, a company bought the rights to the land and the mine. They started digging and trying to find ore of value."

"And?"

"I just got the call that they found Chuck and his OHV at the bottom of that mine. Well, we won't know officially until forensics gets through with the remains, but everyone is pretty sure it's him."

Ellie shuddered with the horror of such a death. "How terrible! No one, not even Chuck, deserved such a way to die."

"We need to get out to the site. I'm sorry we didn't get the contents of that lock box, but we'll be able to finish this investigation. Now we'll have more to go on with this discovery."

The trip back through Prescott and out to the site was accomplished a lot faster than Ellie thought possible. John drove carefully, but swiftly. As soon as

they arrived, one of the deputies approached the car. When John stepped out, the deputy had to keep a smile from crossing his face at seeing John so casually dressed and definitely out of uniform.

“Sir, they haven’t brought the body up yet. We were waiting for your orders.”

“Who’s in charge here?” John barked out his question.

They walked to the edge of the deep, huge hole and an older man approached John. He introduced himself and soon a deep discussion was in place on how to get the remains out of the hole.

“What’s going on, John?” Ellie was by his side.

“They didn’t move anything until they talked to me. I can’t see any benefit in putting one of my men down that hole to look for evidence and possibly putting them in danger. This entire site is not very stable.”

It took over an hour to get the proper equipment in place and in the meantime John called Tuck to come over and assist. Shortly, the place was crawling with people in various capacities. Ellie tried to help as needed, but found herself observing the activities from a safe place just beyond the gaping hole. As she saw John coming out of the mining shed with a pair of coveralls on, she knew what he was planning.

Ellie moved quickly to his side. “What’s going on? What are you doing?”

“I’m going to go down in that hole and see what I can see.”

“I thought you said it was too dangerous.” The fear in her voice was evident.

"I said I wasn't going to put one of my men down there." When he saw she wasn't going to give up on this conversation, John took her by the elbow and moved her to a more secluded spot so they couldn't be overheard.

"John, this is not necessary. Any evidence that would be down there is over a year old and it's not worth an accident to find out. Can't you have the photographer shoot the scene from up here?"

"Ellie, this is my job. I have to see what's down there and assist the mining crew on getting the remains and the OHV up here. Then, we can take a more thorough look for evidence."

She tried to compose herself. Ellie took a deep breath and willed herself to get some control over her rampant emotions. She looked away to get a perspective on the situation. If she had been in John's shoes, Ellie knew she would have made the same decision. Finally with a renewed outlook, she turned to John. "This is what you meant about your demons?"

"That's right. Now, let me go and do my job." He turned to walk back to the crowd gathering at the edge of the mining hole, but after just a few steps, he looked back at her. "El, thanks."

With heavy steps, Ellie followed John to the edge of the scene. She watched as the crew strapped him into some sort of rigged harness attached to the huge mining equipment. The idea was to lower John into the hole so that he could take pictures and survey the scene more closely below.

"I know how you're feeling."

When she heard the quiet voice of her friend, Ellie turned to Aubrie and gave her a huge hug. "I'm so glad you're here, but should you be? I mean with the baby and all."

"I'm fine. The doctor says whatever I was doing before pregnancy, I can do during, as long as I rest and take it a bit easier." She looked back to the intense work scene at the edge of the mine.

"I remember when Tuck was waiting for the car to be brought out of the lake. I thought I would die, but not for me, for him. I know that you care a lot more deeply for John than you'd like us all to believe. I can only imagine the fear that you're feeling about this." Aubrie continued. "Ellie, it's the nature of their business. Actually, it's the nature of your chosen job, too. You have to be tough to get through a situation like this and I think you're that person." Ellie looked over at Aubrie at her accurate perception.

All they could do is wait and pray. Ellie and Aubrie stood off in the distance, trying to see but not interfering with the men at work. She knew John's safety was paramount on everyone's mind and one little slip up could be disastrous. Eventually someone brought two lawn-type chairs for the women to sit on and Aubrie waved at Tuck for his thoughtfulness. He was at the edge of the pit directing the equipment operator on his movements of the giant machine. They had several huge lights shining down in to make the void as bright as possible.

"So what's the history of this mine?" Ellie asked of Aubrie, knowing her friend had done extensive research on the local terrain. It was useful information

for the visitors that came to their bed and breakfast business down by the Hassayampa Lake.

"The mine was started in 1938 and ended production in 1948. They were mining lead and copper. You know most people think that all the mines around here are strictly gold and silver, but the truth is that most were not."

"So they just left this big hole in the ground?" Ellie was astonished.

"Basically that's what it was. Although some time ago, the forest service put a cable and barbed wire fence around it. The kids would come up here and have boondockers, you know big keg parties."

"You've done an amazing amount of research about this area, haven't you?"

"Yes, we get visitors that are interested in a variety of things, wildlife, geography and dreams of finding gold. I like to have information for just about any request."

"What about your latest guest, Carson? What's he interested in?"

Aubrie took a few minutes before answering that particular question. "He's kind of an odd fellow. He hasn't asked many questions about the area and what there is to do, but is gone for most of the day. I haven't quite figured him out."

"Do you trust him?"

Aubrie turned to look at her friend now. "That's a strange question to ask? Has something happened? Why do you ask that?"

“John and I were in Jerome and I felt we were being followed and sure enough it was Carson! He scared me half to death.”

“Does Tuck know this?”

“I’m not sure John talked to him about that. John’s got someone tailing Carson and maybe we can find something out about his travels all day long. I know John called Tuck to do some research on a bartender we met in Jerome. This is all getting so complicated.” Ellie stood up to move closer to the pit to see if she could figure out what was going on down there.

She felt her heart stop as she looked down at the huge chasm and saw John down there dangling by a few ropes. This was a dangerous business and he was in the middle of it. He took a moment and looked up. Seeing her, John smiled and gave her a thumb’s up sign. The equipment operator continued the slow descent until Tuck signaled him to stop.

John was at the bottom and was starting to take pictures of the scene. She could make out the OHV but other than that, it was hard to see any details. In what seemed to take forever, but she was sure was only minutes, John signaled for them to bring him up.

Ellie backed off and watched as his head finally appeared above the edge of the hole. Without realizing it, she let out the breath she’d been holding. Tuck and the sheriff were in a huge discussion, so she moved on back to the chair she’d vacated.

“He’s up. Everything okay?” Aubrie asked.

“At least he’s safe. What they’re discussing now is beyond me. I’m sure they’re trying to figure the best way to get the remains and the bike out of there as much intact as possible.” This sitting around was wearing on Ellie’s nerves. She wasn’t used to such inactivity. She rose again, but her friend’s voice stopped her.

“Ellie, they’ll be fine. Sit here and tell me what’s been going on with you and the sheriff.” Aubrie patted the lawn chair next to her.

Reluctantly, Ellie finally submitted and sat down. “You know I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“I know, but girl to girl, I feel you need to unload. So, spill the beans.” Aubrie encouraged her friend.

Ellie turned and confided. “I think you know that I care for him. But, he is so damned difficult at times! I have a mind of my own and it conflicts with his and then we have to both back down from expressing ourselves.” She heaved a big sigh and rolled her neck to relieve the tension mounting.

“Isn’t that the way with most couples?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been with anyone since John. My uncle loves all the girls and isn’t exactly the settling down type. You and Tuck are the closest examples I have to a real couple.”

The activity near the excavation was continuing and Ellie found herself feeling very useless right now. “I want to be involved but here I sit!”

“I don’t know what to say. I can feel your frustrations and I also know that if there was something you could be doing, John would have you helping. I think everyone here is feeling that same way. Look around.

John is the only one doing anything right now.” Aubrie tried to console her friend.

“Arghh! You’re probably right.” The two ladies sat there in silence for a bit more. Ellie noticed that her friend was squirming in the chair.

“Are you okay?”

“I have to use the bathroom. Being pregnant has increased my trips to the ladies’ room.” She tried to laugh it off.

Ellie stood up and addressed her. “Let’s get you to your house. I’m not doing any good here but maybe there, I can help you. Give me just a minute and I’ll tell John what I’m doing.” She walked over to the pit and checked out the action or lack of it. John was all the way down in the bottom. It must be at least 20 to 30 feet deep and she wasn’t liking the fact that he was down there alone.

Tuck was manning the site and making sure that John’s rigging was safe at all times. “Ellie, he’s going to be just fine. You don’t have to worry.”

“I know, he’s got you. I just wanted to let you guys know that Aubrie and I are going to the house. She’s not very comfortable here and there seems to be nothing I can do but sit and wait.”

“Hey, thanks so much! She wanted to come along but I knew she wouldn’t be very happy staying away from the bathroom.” He laughed. “We’ll keep you two informed.” Just then John signaled that he needed more slack on the ropes. Tuck’s attention was immediately on the task at hand and Ellie waved meekly from above to the man below. He gave a small wave

but quickly averted his attention to the scene in the pit.

“Okay, let’s get you home and in a more relaxed place.” She helped Aubrie to her feet and the two women walked to the car. They were soon pulling up into the beautiful curved drive and around to the back of the sprawling, old home. Ellie admired the way that Tuck and Aubrie had brought life to the homestead with some love and hard work.

“Let’s sit on the front porch. I can turn the fans on and we can have a real girl visit.” Aubrie went into the house and returned shortly with a glass of wine for her friend and a tall glass of lemonade for herself.

“How did you know?” Ellie smiled at the tall wine glass. She saluted her companion and took a cool sip of the chardonnay. “I’m just sorry you can’t join me.”

“I’m okay. I want to give this baby all the chances I can to have a healthy, normal birth and life. I’ll join you in a few months.”

“I’m excited for you guys.” Ellie took another sip and then turned to her friend. “So, you and Tuck are getting along okay?”

“We’re head over heels in love. He was thrilled to find out about the baby and now that we have this beautiful home and our business, we can settle back and enjoy all of this.” She indicated the woods and the surrounding peace and quiet. “When are you and John going to stop fighting the attraction you have for each other?”

Ellie sighed and then started slowly to speak. “You’re the only one I could be this honest with, although my uncle is pretty sharp about these things.”

They sat in silence for a few moments just enjoying the fan and the slight breeze blowing. "I really care for John. We can't seem to get past some important issues between us."

"Like what?"

"You know the story. Years ago when I was first living here in Prescott, I was going to college, working at The Palace and I met him. If you believe in love at first sight, it was what happened to me. He came in there often for lunch and we just clicked. When he asked me out, I was so excited."

"So, what happened?"

"He was just a new sheriff and was so dedicated to the job, that I felt neglected. I even felt taken for granted many times. I did understand the dedication to the job, but I also believe that a person needs a rounded life." Ellie took another sip.

"And now?"

"Now, we have a case to solve. I like working with him. We're good together. We don't always agree, but that just makes it more interesting." Ellie moved to change the subject. "What do you think of finding what's left of the deputy?"

"I'm surprised. I figured he was long gone and out of the country by now, not stuck down in the bottom of a hole on the side of our mountain."

"Me too. I think this case just keeps getting more and more complicated. Has Tuck talked about who he thinks was the mole?"

"Not really. We sort of don't talk about that. It's almost as if he just wants to get on with things. He got some closure when his stepdad was found, but then

with the move here and us getting married and now the baby, I think he's content with going forward." She hesitated for a moment and then continued, "Although with these new complications, he might get back into the discovery mode."

"What do you mean 'discovery mode'?"

"That's what he calls it when he needs to figure out a case. He has his old room fixed up as an office with big white boards and all. The way Tuck's brain works best is when he can scribble his thoughts down and then he stares at them. It's amazing that he can let his mind wander until he sees a connection and then the solution usually comes to him."

"I'm learning that each detective has their own instincts and methods." She laughed. "I'm not sure I've developed my own methods. Right now, I'm learning how John does things, but I've found that I have my own ideas sometimes."

"That's a good thing. I know you will come to find your own way of doing things and it'll be great!"

The sun was starting to slip over the mountains beyond the lake and the temperature was cooling around them. For the middle of summer, it could be hot in the day and when the day was ending, it would cool down considerably. This time of day gave each person some relief from the heat.

"Hey, I know. You want to come up and see Tuck's office? I'm sure he wouldn't mind." Aubrie started to get up.

"I would love to see it, if you don't think he'd get mad."

“Nah, you know Tuck. He’s pretty proud of himself.” She laughed as the two went upstairs to the back of the hallway. As they opened the door, Aubrie showed her pride in her man’s organizational abilities.

“Wow! He really is organized! Look at this.” Ellie walked into the center of the office. On all four walls were white boards with various notes scribbled on them. She looked to see that each note was color coded and linked to an ongoing investigation.

“I could learn a lot from this. Can I take some pictures with my phone? I think this is something I could utilize.”

“Go ahead. I’m sure that Tuck will be pleased that someone likes his way of thinking.”

“I remember taking his class at the college. He was a great speaker and made it interesting. I think he should go over to the Yavapai College to see if he could help out there.”

“What a great idea! I’m sure he’d love it. Let’s go downstairs and see if we can rustle up something for dinner. I have no idea when they’ll be done with that investigation, but I do know that my man will be hungry.”

Once in the kitchen, they got busy figuring out what to fix that would keep until the guys showed up. Ellie filled her wine glass again and soon they were sitting at the small kitchen table chatting.

Just then the back door opened and the men walked in. They were dirty and looked tired from their work. Tuck went to his wife and gave her a big kiss. John came and sat down at the table next to

Ellie. "I'll fill you in on our way back to town. I'm beat and need a shower."

"Oh, John, can't you stay and have some stew? I know you have to be hungry." Aubrie said.

Tuck suggested they have a beer and eat a hot meal, John just sighed but agreed. The conversation around the table was minimal and as soon as they finished, Ellie stood up to help clear the dishes.

"Oh, don't worry about those. I can take care of this mess. Get him home so he can get some rest." Ellie convinced her.

"Let's go, John. Your truck is still at my house."

On the ride back to town, John filled her in on what little details he had. It seems that the deputy had been killed execution style and thrown into the open mine pit and then the OHV was pushed in on top of him. "I'm positive it's Chuck, but the scene was over a year old and we probably won't get any useful evidence to lead us to the killer."

She could tell by the low tone of his voice that John was taking this hard. Ellie felt that words wouldn't help so she kept quiet. The sun was starting to set as they pulled into her driveway.

"Do you want to come in?"

"No, I'm going to go home and get a hot shower. I'll talk to you tomorrow." He gave her a long look before moving to his vehicle.

"Should I go to work tomorrow?"

"No, I think we need to evaluate where we are and then formulate a new plan for our research. I'll call you in the morning."

Ellie walked slowly up to her porch and as she opened the door, turned to see John staring in her direction. She waved meekly and went into the house, shutting the door behind herself. She leaned up against the door and waited for his engine to start. It seemed that long minutes ticked off before she heard him fire up his truck and pull out of her driveway.

“He knows.” She slumped against the door. “Oh, my God, he knows.”

Ten

“**H**e knows what?” Her uncle’s voice startled Ellie and she quickly moved into the shared kitchen of her home. “What have you done, girl?”

She went to the refrigerator and grabbed a cold beer before answering her uncle. “I’ve done something that I need to own up to, but, Uncle, as much as I love you, I need to tell John first.”

“Then do it!” Was his simple answer. He went over to the refrigerator and grabbed another beer. “I’ll see you when you get back.” He went out the back door to his own quarters.

Slowly she reached down and took her suitcase to her bedroom. Ellie opened it and looked at the old, manila envelope lying on the top of her clothes. She took a deep breath, grabbed it and headed out the door to her car.

As she pulled up to the small house on the hill that John lived in, Ellie stopped her vehicle in his driveway and sat there contemplating her confession. He wasn’t going to be happy with her at all and that didn’t sit well on her mind. It took all her energy to get out of her car and walk the short path to his front door. As she rang the bell, she had a sudden urge to flee, but fought it. After what seemed an eternity, Ellie rang the bell again. She finally heard him unlock

the door and she took a deep breath as he opened it wide.

“Ellie! What a surprise.” John greeted her but she found herself realizing that although his words indicated amazement, his tone spoke otherwise.

“I have a confession to make.”

“Do tell. Come on in.”

It was then that she noticed he was toweling his hair dry. His chest was bare and it looked as though he had quickly pulled on a pair of gym shorts. As Ellie went through the open door, she could barely make it passed John without touching him. He smelled clean and fresh and she noticed his skin was still damp. Another sensation swept over her as she fought the urge to run her hand down that muscular chest. Old familiar feelings surfaced with a vengeance and Ellie found herself dreading the upcoming conversation even more.

“Can you help yourself to a drink while I put on more clothes?” His tone was one of teasing. John was going to make this more difficult than she could ever have imagined. She tried to smile and went through the doorway to the kitchen in the back of the house.

It felt like he was deliberately taking his time and when she had almost finished her beer, John finally appeared. This time he had on his usual jeans and a tee shirt. His feet were bare and he startled her as he walked silently into the room. “Want another one?”

“Uh, no. This is fine.”

He finally came over to her as she was staring out the back window into the night. John stuck his hand out. “Give it to me.”

“What?”

“The key, Ellie, the key. You’re not a very good pickpocket.”

She sighed heavily and reached into the pocket of her jeans, extracting the key to the lock box and slowly put it in the outstretched hand of the sheriff. She avoided touching him directly.

“What about that confession of yours?” John lifted the cold bottle of beer and much to her dismay her eyes followed it to his lips. I have it bad, she thought.

“Can we at least sit down?”

“Sure.” He indicated the chair at the kitchen table in the corner. “Let’s get comfortable.”

His sarcasm wasn’t wasted on her. “You’re enjoying this aren’t you?”

“Not really. I thought we were getting somewhere with that trust issue.”

“Oh, John, I’m so sorry. Maybe I’m not cut out to be a detective. I just can’t seem to follow the rules.” She hung her head down.

“Tell me what’s happened.” His voice was calm and she felt a small reassurance that all of this could work out between them. It was becoming more and more important as her heart got more involved with this handsome man.

“When you left me off at the Desperation Depot to gather my stuff, I used the key and opened the lock box. No one was around and I did it so quickly that I haven’t even had time to open the envelope.” Her words came out fast in an effort to ease the pain of betrayal he must be feeling. She pulled the worn,

faded envelope from her bag and placed it on the table between them.

John got up and walked around the room, he seemed to be struggling with her confession.

“Please say something.”

“Ellie, I knew you would find a way to get the contents of that box. I have a small confession, too. I let you get the key and I hoped you would follow through.” He sat back down and moved closer to her.

She jumped to her feet. “You used me! How could you! I’m the one on the hook if someone finds out about this.” Her words flew like arrows to the target.

He rose and went to her. “Ellie! Do you remember the demons we talked about? This case is mine! I have to get to the bottom of it before...”

“Before what?”

“That’s not important right now. What is important is that we finish what we’ve started. Let’s work together and get this solved.”

“Together? I’m not sure you and I know the meaning of being together.”

With those words, he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. She knew he was going to kiss her and should stop it, but it had been too long without his touch. This was the part of their past that they’d never had a problem with. Ellie raised her head and their lips met. The flame of desire was immediately sparked and neither one could do anything to stop it, even if they wanted.

He raised his head, but she wouldn’t let him. “Don’t stop, John. I know we shouldn’t, but...”

“Be damn sure, Ellie.”

“I’m sure.” She didn’t hesitate and looked him straight in the eyes. “I’m sure.”

Arm in arm, they went down the hall to the master suite. She felt a bit nervous until he came and kissed her again. She ran her hands up over his broad shoulders and into his still damp hair. Ellie reached down and started to pull his shirt up over his head. Together they soon had both of their tops off and stopped kissing long enough to finish undressing.

As he pulled back the covers on his huge king size bed, John spoke softly as to not break the spell they were under. “I’ve missed you. Let me show you how much.”

Their lovemaking was leisurely and tender. Each took time exploring familiar places. The evening darkness had settled on the land and the house. The only light was one from the front room. It gave a romantic glow to the bedroom down the hall. Ella could hear her heart beating loudly and felt that John could hear it too. She kissed him feverishly and wasn’t shy with her touch. It was more than wonderful and she reveled in the intimacy between them. Maybe they can learn to be together, not only physically but emotionally.

When all was said and done, they cuddled on the big bed and just let the silence envelope them. She was determined not to live with regrets and this time with him was precious.

“Hey, you hungry?” John’s voice penetrated her near sleepy state.

“Maybe. What’d you got in mind?” She rolled over and looked at him perched on the side of the bed. He

was bare chested with just his jeans on the lean body of his.

"I make a mean omelet." He grinned and leaned over to give her a long, searing kiss.

"If you keep doing that, we'll not get anything to eat."

He sat up and patted her on the bottom. "Come on. We'll get something and then take a look at what's in the envelope."

Her curiosity was suddenly peaked and she hurriedly got out of the bed. As Ellie looked around for her clothes, John came up behind her and handed her his big flannel robe. "I don't want you to put too many clothes on." His evil grin touched her heart as she knew he planned more of the joy they just shared. With a great reluctance, they both realized that if they didn't stop what they were doing, there'd be no food.

In the kitchen, they worked side by side and created a quick omelet. John grabbed some juice and as they sat at the small kitchen table, they both ate without talking. The envelope lay there between them and Ellie had to force herself not to grab for it and tear it open. Finally when finished, she picked up the packet and held it in her hands.

"Open it." He encouraged her.

She looked up at him. "Are you sure? You should be the one to see what's inside."

He leaned over and pulled her onto his lap. "This is how we do it together." He reached for the envelope and with one of his hands held it. She reached up and slid her finger under the sealed tab and very carefully, pulled the single document from within. John then

took it from her and laid it on the table in front of them.

“It looks like a map.” She spoke quietly. It was indeed a hand drawn map. The yellowed paper and the faded ink made it difficult to read.

John pushed her up and got up to brighten the light over the table. They both looked at the map and continued to see if they could recognize any familiar landmarks. “Isn’t that Interstate 40?” Ellie finally asked.

“Yes, that’s definitely the highway.” John agreed.

She finally turned to look directly at him. “What do you think this is?”

“I’m not sure, but it is definitely something we need to check out.” He reached to pick up the map and as he did, she exclaimed, “John, there’s a note on the back!”

They both read in amazement the scribbling on the back of the map. “To my brother, if you’re reading this it means I’m gone. Go to the spot marked on the map and find what I left behind. It will give you the security we never had as kids. Love you, Chuck.”

“Did you know he had a brother?” She asked.

“I thought he was an orphan with no family. He was raised in a foster home over in Cottonwood.” John’s look of puzzlement spoke volumes. “I need to do some digging, but we can’t do anything more tonight.”

“Well, I’d better get dressed and go on home.” The words came out hesitant.

He turned to Ellie and pulled her into his arms. "Please stay and we'll take that trip in the morning." He nuzzled her neck.

"You make it hard to resist when you act like this."

"I don't want you to resist. I want you in my arms and in my bed."

She sighed but smiled at his admission. "Let's go, sheriff." They spent the night in each other's arms. It was blissful and Ellie allowed herself to finally relax and believe in them. I do love him, she thought. A tiny little sliver of doubt crept in as he hadn't said anything about love, but she quickly dismissed it.

The light crept into the room from the east, waking them both. Ellie stretched and went to get up, but his strong arm came around preventing her from moving off the bed. "If we want some coffee, you're going to have to let me go."

She laughed as he groaned and released her. "Make it fast, lady. We need to shower and get on the road. We'll stop for breakfast down the way." He barked out his orders and she turned to give him a sarcastic salute.

She quickly put the coffee on to brew and hurried to join him in the shower. The water was hot and it felt good, but what felt better was the loving embraces they gave each other. It took a huge amount of will power to finish and get dressed. Their drive would take them a few hours to get to the spot marked on the crudely drawn map, if they could even find it.

After breakfast, John was on the phone to his assistant, Rose. He gave her orders for several of his

detectives but soon they were almost to the interstate and his calls were done.

“How did Rose take it?”

“What do you mean?” John asked. “Don’t tell me you’re still on that?”

“I’m telling you that she has more than a professional relationship in mind.”

“I think you’re cute when you’re jealous.” He grinned.

“It’s not just jealousy. There is something about her that isn’t quite right. Call it a gut feeling or a hunch, but I think there’s more to your assistant that meets the eye.”

“Look at that map and tell me what road we’re looking for.” He directed her and the subject to a safer topic.

“It shows number 151 off of the interstate.” The map gave them an approximate road in which to turn off and head toward their destination. As they turned onto the rough track, John exclaimed. “I know where this leads. We’re going to the Johnson Canyon Railway Tunnel. Look at the indications, see if he put in anything about the old Welch Station.”

Ellie’s voice showed her enthusiasm. “Yes, it shows a square right on the map and the arrow now says we should go right from there. This is so exciting.”

“It’s not going to be easy. We can only drive so far, if I remember correctly. The road has washed out from not being maintained.”

“I’m not afraid of a little hike.”

“I know you’re not. You impress me, Ellie.”

She felt herself blush at his compliment. "Stop it. It's not that big of a deal. What's the Welch Station?"

"The Welch Station was part of the railway system. It was built around 1882 and it was used for keeping track of the train's progress. During World War II, this route proved to be so important that guard stations were put in place at either end of the tunnel to prevent sabotage."

"Wow, who knew? I've lived in Prescott for a long time, but never ventured up to Williams or Flagstaff. The only time I used Interstate 40 was to go through Kingman and up to Las Vegas."

"Someday we'll have to take the old Route 66. Just outside of Seligman, you can follow it to Kingman and down through Oatman. It's a pretty drive."

She loved that he talked about a future for them. Maybe they could work through their differences, she thought hopefully. They traveled along the rough track of a road, hitting bumps and brushing along the overgrown trees and bushes crowding the path. The sun was now directly overhead but the cool air conditioning of his truck didn't allow the heat to penetrate the cab.

"Oh, look, there's something over there." She pointed to the left of them. John slowed down and eventually stopped the vehicle next to a slab of concrete. They both got out and went directly over to what was left of the Welch Station. "Can you imagine civilization all the way out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Was this station used by passengers?"

"I'm not sure. I think its purpose was just to report the comings and goings of the trains." John went back to his truck and reached behind the seat for a gun and holster. As he strapped the weapon on himself, she exclaimed, "You look just like your relative must have with that old revolver on your waist. I remember you made a comment about my old gun. Why don't you have your service revolver?"

"I'm not on official business here and I like to wear this one now and again." He smiled, "It reminds me of my great, great grandfather too."

"You're not expecting trouble, are you?" She spoke.

"One never knows what's around the corner, El. You always have to be prepared." He took out his phone and snapped a picture of her standing there on the corroded steps. Her hair was down and softly feathered down her back, the light shone on her different colored streaks. He was overwhelmed by her beauty and crossed the distance between them to place a lingering kiss on her lips. "Now let's get down that road and find the tunnel."

He locked the truck after grabbing some water bottles for each of them. "Here you take these and I'll get a shovel." The sun was bright, but not too hot in this high desert location. He put on his cowboy hat and found a cap for her. "Ready?"

"Lead on, sheriff. Do you think we'll find something to dig up?" They headed east towards their destination. Along the way, they saw various items left over from the active railroad days. Ellie put a small railroad spike in her pocket and marveled at the beauty of the canyon trail. The trees were mostly

scrub pines with the occasional tall Ponderosa tree down in the gulley. The track had not been driven on in quite some time and John was glad he hadn't tried to drive his truck over it.

Soon the curving path took them along a small bend and as soon as they got around the corner, they saw evidence of the tracks left over from the abandoned railroad. He stopped their progress long enough for them to drink and refresh their energy.

"Doing alright?" He asked.

"I'm fine. I never minded the heat and if we keep it slow, I think we'll be good." She sat down on a big boulder close to the track. "How much farther do you think we have to go?"

"I don't remember. It's been a long time since I made this hike, maybe a mile."

"Don't you feel like we're the only two people in the world? It's so quiet and empty out here." She marveled as the only sounds were the ones made by the nature around them and the crunching of their feet on the dirt path.

He got a wicked gleam in his eyes. "That gives me an idea."

She laughed as she immediately knew what he was thinking. Their love making had stirred the ashes of their feelings and she found it hard to resist him. "Stay on your side of the lane, mister. We have a job to do here."

One more turn in the road and there it was the entrance to the Johnson Railway Tunnel! She stopped and took several pictures with her phone. "That is

amazing! How in the world did they build this way out here? When did you say it was completed?”

“If I remember right, it was around the 1880s. Wait ‘til you see this tunnel. It is very unique.” Encouraged now by the proximity, they both hurried to see inside. They had to scale some dirt, rocks and debris that had slid down from above the tunnel due to the erosion of the mountainside. Once on top of the landscape, Ellie could see down inside the tunnel.

“Is that a metal ceiling?” The tunnel was rounded with metal plates sloping down each side to rest on a solid brick wall.

“Yes, it’s called boilerplate. The original tunnel had a wooden ceiling but due to the height of the trains and their smokestacks, it caught on fire. Several men lost their lives in the blaze and they then constructed the ceiling as you see it now. Pretty neat, huh?” He rubbed his hand over the smooth metal sides.

“Why is it so deep in here?”

“That’s kind of funny too. As the trains got bigger and bigger, they had to dig the tunnel deeper because it was easier than redoing those boilerplates.” They walked through the tunnel, looking at the graffiti scrawled on the sides of the walls. Evidence from many visitors was written everywhere.

“It seems a shame that they couldn’t leave it alone.” She lamented.

As they came out the other end, Ellie looked around at the surrounding area. She turned back to look at the top of the archway. “John, come here. Look at that!” She pointed to the top of a rough

structure to the side of the tunnel. "What do you think that is?"

"Maybe that's the remains of the guard station. Let's climb up there and see." He grabbed her hand and looked for an easy access up the side of the mountain. They struggled as the dirt was loose and they had to be careful from slipping and falling down the hillside. Once on top they moved carefully to the wooden ramshackle guard station. Ellie stuck her head inside and backed out.

"You go ahead. I definitely don't like spiders."

John laughed and moved in front of her. He carefully stepped into the dilapidated small, wooden building. "There's nothing in here but the critters. El, let's look at that map again."

She waited for John to step out and they found a rather smooth boulder to place the delicate, aged paper on and proceeded to look at the clues roughly sketched on the map.

"You know that only on pirate maps does 'X' mark the spot!" She teased him. They both stared at the document in front of them.

"I feel we're in the right spot. Look around and see what you can see." John directed her. He continued to look for any clues on the aged paper to see if they were missing something important. "Look at this. Does that look like a key to you?"

"John, it looks just like the key we had for the Depot."

"Can you figure out where it is and where we are in relation to the points on the map?" They were both in

deep concentration as they tried to ascertain all the important parts of this puzzle.

“John! Look at this!” She was excited as she moved closer to the edge of the hillside.

“Be careful!”

“Look, this is the top of the tunnel archway below. You know the middle stone of the arch is called a key-stone. Get it? It’s a key stone.” She emphasized her words.

He stood straight up and joined her at the edge. They both looked down on the keystone rock just below. There wasn’t any place to bury something down there but Ellie was encouraged.

“Look, it’s got to be right here somewhere.” She started to closely examine the dirt they were walking on and soon found something she considered out of place. “Okay, look at the area around here. What do you see?”

“Rocks, bushes, cactus.” His voice showed his discouragement.

“Yes, silly, but look at this pile of rocks. What’s different about them?” She pointed to a little stack of various shaped rocks.

John leaned his head to the side and stared where she was indicating. “They’re different, aren’t they?”

“Yes! All the others are white or tan. These are red like the rocks of Sedona. Oh, John, this is where it’s buried, whatever it is!”

“Good thing I brought this along.” He took the shovel and started to dig.

“Careful, we don’t want to damage whatever we find.” Her heart was racing and she couldn’t wait to

see if they were right. It didn't take long for his shovel to hit something solid. John looked up and their eyes met. "This could be it!" Before reaching down into the hole, John pulled rubber gloves from his back pocket. "Put these on. We want to preserve any usable fingerprints, if we can."

Once gloved, he carefully scraped the dirt off around the object. It was a metal box not much larger than a shoebox. When John had finally gotten enough dirt from around it, he gently lifted the container from its hole. For a second, John hesitated.

"What? What are you waiting for?"

"Hike up there and look over the other side. Make sure no one else is here."

"John, we would've heard them. No one else is within miles of this place." She spoke with frustration.

"Ellie, just humor me and do it."

She shook her head but complied with his demand. Ellie walked up the small hill and was finally on top of the landscape and could see all around their location. When she came back to him she gave her report. "We are completely alone. Not a soul in this area but the heat and the critters crawling on the ground in the shade."

He gave her a look of thanks and found a convenient boulder to set the box on before they opened it. With great care, John pried the rusted lid off the metal container and they nearly bumped heads to see what was inside.

Eleven

“**W**hat in the world?” Ellie was the first to speak. The box held a number of items, but the one that John drew out first was a strap of bills. The strap was marked that it held twenty thousand dollars. The bills seemed to be in good condition, but they both could see that they were of the older variety. The picture of President Jackson was much smaller and there were no security fibers woven into the bill. The top bill was marked as a series from 1992.

As he kept turning the pack of bills over in his hand, Ellie reached in and took out a small, ragged business card. “John, what is your assistant’s last name?”

By the edge in her voice, he suddenly looked up and saw the card she was holding. Ellie turned it towards him and he saw that it held the name Rosa McMillan, Hair Stylist and it was from the Stardust Hotel and Casino!

“None of this makes sense! Rose is my assistant’s name not Rosa. This can’t be her. That casino was imploded in 2007, if I remember correctly.”

“It makes perfect sense! I have always wondered how the chips got in Aubrie’s attic. Don’t you see? This Rosa must be a relative and she somehow got a hold of them. According to my uncle and Tuck, Har-

old was down here on a tip to retrieve those old poker chips.”

“But they said the chips and cash were never found from that robbery. Bill Brennan got away free and clear!”

“It’s pretty obvious that the chips weren’t all missing. That’s not to say that he didn’t pay people to help him disappear, people like a beautician. I remember reading all the articles and one of the things they found in his apartment were books on how to change your identity. John, for the first time in following this case, it’s starting to make some sense.” She couldn’t stop herself from getting excited. “When Shotgun and I talked with that server from the golf course, she told us about going to Vegas and how Chuck met with some guy in a bar downtown. He could have given Chuck this stuff in order to convince him to come into partnership with him and get those other chips back from Aubrie.” She suddenly stopped herself. “That’s probably why he ended up dead in a hole. Whoever that guy was wanted this stuff back!”

“Whoa, slow down. Let’s not jump to conclusions. We need to back up a little and figure this all out in a logical, sensible order.”

“But, I think we need to talk with Rose and find out what she knows. She’s tied into this, I just know it.” Ellie was pacing back and forth, trying to convince John to move into action. “Maybe she’s the mole! Remember someone was giving information to the guy Chuck was working with and it could’ve been her.”

She turned as she heard John's laughter. "Now, I know the sun is getting to you! She didn't know about those chips. I didn't even know about them until you two were kidnapped."

He bent over and reached for the last two objects in the box. As he looked at the faded, delicate old photograph he turned it over to see if there was any writing on the back but found none. John handed it to Ellie. It was a picture from long ago of two little boys arm in arm. It must have been summer as they were standing in a yard with only their jeans on and bare chested. The grin on their faces showed the love they had for each other. The sun was shining brightly overhead and they both appeared wet as though playing in the sprinklers.

"Wonder who these guys are?" She voiced aloud what they were both thinking.

"I'm guessing one of them is our deputy Chuck. If we can find out who the other is, maybe some of our questions will be answered as to why he did all of this." John opened the small cloth bag and looked inside.

"Here are more of those missing chips." He showed the contents to Ellie.

"What now?" She stood up straight and stretched her weary body. The movement didn't go unnoticed by her companion.

"Are you making suggestions?" His comment made her laugh.

"And if I was?" She teased back.

He moved closer to her and she felt her heart beat faster. There was something about being all alone in

the wilderness with this tall, handsome man towering over her. The urge to give in was too much, but she had to let common sense rule. "Now, who's had too much of the Arizona sun?"

"Nice try, lady." He pulled her to him and their lips flamed as they touched. How can he stir her so much? John ended the kiss but didn't release her completely.

"I'd love to follow through with your suggestion, but we have some important work to do." He laughed as she playfully punched him on the arm.

"That's the way it was when we were together in the past. Always work!" She teased once again, but seeing the look on his face change, Ellie reassured him, "John, I was teasing. I know that's one of the things that we have to work on and we will. Really, I was just teasing." She put her hand on his chest.

He reached up and held her hand in his. "El, if I could go back, I'd change a few things. Believe me."

"I know I would too. Now, let's get going and figure out our next steps." She loaded up the box with everything they'd found, but when she turned to see if he was ready, Ellie stopped. "What is it?"

"I think I hear an engine. Quick, help me cover up the hole and try to hide that box." They had placed the box into a single plastic bag so as to not disturb any fingerprints. He bent down and as fast as he could John put the dirt back into the hole. Ellie tried to put the rocks back in place and smoothed the surface. She strained to hear the same noise John had, but failed. "John, are you sure you heard something?"

"No, I'm not, but I'm not taking any chances."

With the sense of urgency showing in his voice, she took off her cap and tried to cover the small, metal box as good as she could. They both stood up and John indicated they should go across the top of the tunnel and climb down the other side. "They would have to walk this way just like we did, right? Then won't we meet them on the way to the tunnel?" She was nervous and nearly slipped while scaling down the rocky side of the hill to the flat path below that lead into the tunnel.

"Careful." His words were unnecessary but it showed his concern. John indicated that she should remove her gloves as he did the same. Quickly, John pushed the gloves into his back pocket. He put his hand under her elbow to help keep her steady and together they reached the trail back to the truck.

With her heart beating hard, Ellie found it difficult to keep from running in the opposite direction. What kind of trouble was coming their way? She finally heard voices and definitely knew that they had company in this wilderness. As they rounded the bend, John and Ellie saw a man with two young boys hiking towards the tunnel. She felt herself relax as she realized that this group was probably not going to be any danger for them. One of the young boys ran towards them. "Did you guys see the tunnel?" His excitement was catching.

"We sure did. It's great." Ellie answered.

"Dad says it's really neat. Mom didn't want to come. She can't walk this far." The innocence of youth shared things with strangers.

Ellie grinned. "Well, you'll have to take lots of pictures to show her."

By this time the father caught up to them. He smiled and put out his hand to greet John. "Sorry about him. He's a hard one to keep under control."

"No problem. You'll love the tunnel. Have a great day." John wanted to keep the contact to a minimum.

As they moved to go past the group, Ellie turned to John. "Why the big rush?"

"We just need to keep moving. We've got to get a plan in place for our next step. I just didn't want too many questions about that box you're carrying."

"You're probably right." As a second thought, she continued, "Do you think they might be able to find any fingerprints on this stuff?"

His huge sigh spoke volumes. "El, I think it'll be okay. I really don't think they'll get anything of value. I can only imagine that this stuff has been buried for quite a while."

"You're probably right, but I just want to do things the right way. They had reached his truck by this time and as they climbed into the cab, John turned to her.

"You're doing great. I just want you to realize that everything we're doing is on the sly."

"Why? Why are we not conducting an official exploration of this case? I've felt that you're holding something back from me from the very beginning and I would really appreciate it if you would come clean now." Her tone of voice was not demanding but, Ellie was determined to get some answers.

John started the engine and turned the air conditioning on high, but didn't make any attempt to drive

the truck away yet. "This case is my biggest failure. I didn't know what was going on right under my nose. You and Aubrie got kidnapped, there was an agent killed and dumped into the lake, and one of my deputies is tied into this whole mess." He removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair. She could see the emotions pass over his face and her heart lurched. Ellie was hooked.

"I'm not going to stay as the sheriff, Ellie. I'm tired, and I want to pursue other things before my life is over."

His news shocked Ellie. "John, your life is far from over and you're not a failure!"

"You don't understand, do you?"

"No! I don't! Why in the world would you think you're a failure?"

"Let me put it to you this way. Do you feel like you've done everything you wanted with your chosen path? Do you have any regrets with the choices you've made?"

As she thought about it for a few seconds, Ellie shook her head. "I have no regrets. No, not really."

He waited patiently for Ellie to expound on her thoughts. She didn't take long. "John, I have always wanted to do what we are doing right now. My uncle has always encouraged me and teased me at the same time about the way my brain works. I'm always asking questions and analyzing situations and because of that, I knew I'd be good at investigating stuff like crime."

"He was right to help you develop that natural tendency. You are good at research and thinking

through circumstances. You're also good at reading people."

She glowed at his praise. "But... but you're good at it too."

"The main difference is, this is not what I would have chosen for myself."

Now this shocked Ellie. She was speechless as he put the truck into drive and they started back down the rough track to home. The sun was now setting lower in the sky and Ellie adjusted the visor to block the rays from hitting directly into her eyes.

They were just pulling onto the interstate when she finally asked, "What would you want to be doing instead of law enforcement?"

He laughed. "Took you long enough."

"That's not fair. Of all the things I would have expected you to say, not being a part of the sheriff's department is not one of them!" She stared forward at the passing landscape and tried to reign in her chaotic thoughts.

The miles seemed to disappear and soon they were on the outskirts of Prescott. It was nearing dinner time and John finally spoke. "Want to stop and get something to eat?"

After just a second, Ellie spoke. "Let's just go to my place. Uncle will be there and I haven't checked in with him for too long. I'll fix us something there." She didn't look directly at him but waited for his answer.

"Sure, Ellie. Your uncle might be able to help us digest everything that's gone on."

“Are you okay with sharing information with him? You know Shotgun. He isn’t one to be shy about giving his opinion.”

“I’d appreciate his candor at this point. There are too many things happening and I can’t seem to connect the dots.”

It was just a few short minutes and they were pulling up in her driveway. The lights were burning in the back of the house towards the kitchen area.

“Oh, good. Uncle is in the kitchen now.” She got out of the truck but reached back in to get the metal box. As she opened the front door, Ellie called out to Shotgun, “Uncle, is that you?”

“If it’s not, you’d be in trouble, girl.” Shotgun chuckled. “John, nice to see you. I didn’t expect you.” As he looked from his niece to the sheriff, he added, “It’s good to see you two finally figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” Ellie asked.

“That you belong together.” His short reply made her sigh.

“Uncle...” She stopped because she knew it was useless to try and convince her uncle of something that she knew to be true herself.

John grinned at the exchange between the two. He saw the love in her uncle’s eyes for his niece and respected that.

“What are you fixing for dinner?” Shotgun asked.

“What do you want?” Ellie knew he could take care of himself, but was pleased that he depended on her occasionally.

“How about some of those tacos you make? The girls sent over some of their special hot sauce and I

know John here would love it." He left to go to his little home and get that jar.

"He's something else, isn't he?" John came over to pull her into his arms, but Ellie resisted. "What? What's wrong?"

"We haven't settled our discussion from earlier."

"Can't it wait until later? I'm starved." Just then the back door opened and her uncle came into the room.

"Wait 'til you taste this. Those girls know how to spice up a taco." He put the sauce on the counter and took his usual place at the table. "Do you want something to drink, John?"

"Sure, let me get us a couple of beers." John helped himself to a couple of cool brews in the refrigerator and handed one to Shotgun. "El, you want something to drink?"

"Yes, I do, but I'll get it." She grabbed a wine glass from the shelf and poured herself an ample amount of white wine. After that, she started the prep for their meal of tacos. It was a relief to be busy and she soon felt herself relaxing.

"So, what've you two been up to?"

She glanced over at John. He had sat himself down at the opposite end of the small kitchen table. He looked to her for a moment, but turned his attention to the grisly man waiting for an answer.

"Well, we've been investigating the missing deputy case."

"Then you've succeeded, haven't you? I mean his body was found at the bottom of that old mine, wasn't it?"

If John was surprised, he didn't show it. Ellie watched the exchange between the two men. "You keep your ear to the ground, don't you?"

"I still like to keep my faculties sharp. It helps keep me young." Her uncle cackled loudly and the sheriff joined in with him.

"That's what I like about you. You are one sharp man and Ellie and I need your help." He got up and grabbed the metal box from the counter. By this time John had put all the objects into plastic evidence bags so they could be handled without damaging any prints.

As he placed it on the table in front of her uncle, John sat closer so they could look at the objects together. He opened the container and scooted it over so Shotgun could see its contents for himself.

"Where did you find this little box of goodies?" Shotgun lifted each item one at a time and reviewed it carefully. "Wow! You got yourselves a fine batch of treasures."

"Remember the key? Well, your niece helped herself to the lock box at The Desperation Depot and we found an old, hand drawn map. It lead us to the Johnson Canyon Railroad tunnel and then to this box. It's been quite a journey so far." John waited for Shotgun to review the items. The older man took his time, studying each piece carefully. He turned the objects over and left nothing for further review.

"John, do you realize that you may be able to solve the Stardust robbery? I'm thinkin' that you're closer than anyone else has ever been." Willie looked up at the sheriff.

“Is this money the real deal?”

“As near as I can tell. These here chips are for sure.”

Ellie listened to her uncle intently yet remained silent. She had always admired this man in her life and marveled at how smart and intuitive he was in most situations.

Shotgun picked up the picture of the two boys once more and studied it further. “Look at the background. Do you see anything that looks familiar?”

John took the faded photograph and peered at it more closely. He moved his attention to the background of the picture and try as he might, couldn’t pick up on what Willie was saying. “I guess I’m not seeing what you are. What is it?”

Shotgun put his gnarled finger on the hills behind the boys. “That there isn’t a mountain, it’s that Tuzigoot monument. This picture was taken in Clarkdale near Cottonwood.”

“I’ll be damned! You’re right. How could I miss something like that?” John stared at it some more. “This means that these boys must have grown up in Clarkdale or Cottonwood. But, what do they have to do with all of this stuff?”

“That my friend, is what you and that lovely niece of mine need to figure out.” He laughed that gravelly sound of his and got up to get another beer. “Dinner ready?”

“Yes, let’s eat and then we can study these things again.” She cleared the table and they all sat down to eat the simple fare. The conversation was almost nonexistent as they each seemed deep in thought. As

she stood to clear the leftover food and the dishes, Shotgun finally asked a question.

“John, how long has your secretary been with you?” He watched the sheriff, waiting patiently for an answer.

“Ellie asked me the same question. She’s been with the sheriff’s office for a little over a year and she came to me about that time when my other assistant retired.” He seemed a bit defensive with the tone of his answer.

“Did she come to work for you before or after the car was removed from the lake?”

John thought for a few minutes and Ellie waited anxiously for his answer. “Now that I think about it, I believe it was just after we took the car out of the water. I still believe you two are off in your thinking if you mean that Rose is involved in this whole thing.”

“Why, John? Don’t you think it’s much more than a coincidence that a business card with a name very similar to hers is in this box of stuff? We’ve got to talk with her. We need some answers about this.” Ellie held the small card up and waved it in the air.

John ran his hand through his dark hair. “You’re both right, I know. This isn’t going to be easy, though.”

“Son, you’re a professional lawman and you know sometimes you have to do the hard things. I know you’ll be fair. This little lady might know something and might not, but you have to give her a chance to talk with you.” Shotgun stood up and stretched his weary bones. “I’m going to watch TV in my room. Talk to you guys later.”

After her uncle had gone to his cottage, Ellie and John cleaned up the dinner fixings and dishes. They worked without speaking and soon all was clean in the cozy kitchen. John pulled her into his arms and kissed her waiting lips. "I'd better go. Meet me in my office first thing in the morning and we'll talk with Rose together."

"Are you sure you want me there? She's not exactly friendly to me."

"We are a team and as such, we'll do this together." He reluctantly let her go and started for the front door. Before he could open it, she was there. "Sure you don't want to stay?"

"Oh, darlin', I would love to but I need to think about this case. I want to get this thing taken care of, and then sweet lady, we'll take care of us." He placed another searing kiss, grabbed his hat from the hook and opened the front entry door.

John took one long last look before he went out. She could read the unsaid message he was sending. Ellie smiled and slowly closed the solid oak door. As she stood there, her back leaning against it, Ellie sighed. Maybe, just maybe, this could all work out and we can be together.

Putting those thoughts aside, Ellie went to her office and grabbed a few of the sheets from an easel pad. She smoothed the big white papers and stuck them to the walls surrounding her desk. Grabbing a handful of different colored markers, Ellie crossed over and started scribbling her thoughts on the papers. She tried to color coordinate her thoughts as she

put them down on the various sheets. It wasn't long before she had three full sets of notes.

Finally taking a deep breath, Ellie stood back to stare at her work. I like this, she thought. It seemed to help clear up some of the confusion. She was startled by her uncle's voice.

"What ya doing?"

"Stop sneaking up on me!" She took a few calming breaths, "I'm trying to make sense of this case."

"Looks good. What do you see when you look at all of that?"

"I see three different situations working. I was trying to make it seem like it all fit together, but as I started jotting my thoughts down, I think I see there are very separate issues going on with all of this."

"Like what?" Her uncle found the desk chair and plopped down on it.

"Well, for one thing. Carson Layne doesn't seem to fit, but I was trying to make him a part of this."

"Sometimes coincidence is just that, girl. Maybe the guy is really on some sort of prolonged vacation. You know, trying to find himself after all those years at the agency."

"Did you know him, Uncle? You had contact with a lot of those guys."

"Sure, I worked with Harold and Carson on a few cases."

"Well, what did you think of him?" She sat down on the edge of her desk studying her charts, waiting for her uncle to answer.

“Better yet, why don’t you tell me what you think of him?” Shotgun threw the question right back to her.

She thought for only a moment. “I don’t like him. I feel he’s sneaky and he’s here for a reason.”

“Then, maybe, you should go with that.”

“Are you saying that he’s a part of this mess?” She gestured towards the flip charts.

“I ain’t saying any such thing. I’m merely pointing out that maybe you should listen to your instincts. Do yourself a favor and take this one step further. Put up another sheet and write down questions you have that are as of yet unanswered.”

“Oh, good idea.” She worked diligently with her uncle making a comment here and there. Finally spent, Ellie leaned back and looked at the sheets with all the questions she had developed.

Uncle Willie was still sitting there quietly and watching the emotions play across the pretty features of his niece. “What are you seeing, girl?”

“I think I’m seeing two, maybe three different scenarios. Just like I said earlier, I’ve been trying to make all of these situations fit together in one nice, neat little package and the more I look at this, the more I find that it does not all fit together.”

“What is a priority to you, right now at this time?” Her uncle prompted.

“We need to talk with Rose and find out what she knows and then we can get some answers to those questions.” Ellie pointed to the chart that she wrote under Rose’s name.

“That’s a good start. How do you want to handle that one?”

Ellie hesitated before answering. “That’s not going to be easy. She already doesn’t like me but John said I should be there when he questions her about the business card we found.”

“How are you going to handle that?” Shotgun wouldn’t let go.

Her answer came out slowly, but well-thought out. “If I were in her shoes, I’d want someone that felt some empathy. I wouldn’t want to feel like I was being attacked.”

“Good! Go with that when you question her in the morning.” Her uncle slowly got up and carefully walked across the office towards the kitchen.

“Uncle!” She called as she followed him.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge before turning to face his niece. “What?”

She grabbed him in an unusual hug. They loved each other, but physical demonstrations were not their usual show of affection. “I can’t thank you enough for helping me with this. I will start getting some answers and then we can crack this case.”

“I have one last question for you girl.” He backed off from her embrace.

“What?”

“When are you going to do something about the love you have for John?” He left the room and her house without expecting an answer from the stunned woman.

Twelve

“Damn!” She knew that her uncle was now completely aware of her feelings for John and he wouldn’t let go of that notion until she did something about it. Ellie turned out the lights in her kitchen and slowly made her way to the bedroom. As she dressed for bed, Ellie let her thoughts run rampant. Maybe we could be together, maybe we could be a real couple this time, she thought with a smile on her face. It was with this thought that she fell asleep and her mind allowed her to think of the future they could have.

The next morning, Ellie dressed with care as she faced the task of questioning the sheriff’s assistant with apprehension. This was not going to be an easy interview. John had already felt the sting of betrayal with his deputy turning on him and if Rose was involved, she wasn’t sure what it would do to the sheriff.

After arriving at the department, she carefully checked her appearance once more before heading upstairs to the sheriff’s office. She dreaded coming face to face with Rose, but Ellie squared her shoulders and appeared much more confident than she felt as she stepped into the front office. The chair behind the desk was not occupied and Ellie let out a sigh of relief. Ellie’s heels tapped a soft staccato sound as she

crossed the hard wood floor. She knocked lightly at John's office door and waited for an answer.

"Come in." She heard his familiar voice.

The sight she was greeted with was Rose sitting across the desk from John and the assistant was crying. Rose didn't lift up her head and Ellie looked to John for an explanation. The look on his face moved Ellie into action. She went and sat down beside Rose. "Rose, I'm here to help. I know that you and I've never had much time to talk, but maybe I can listen to you now."

Through sobs, the older assistant tried to speak. It was a few minutes before she gained enough composure to look up at Ellie. Through mascara stained eyes, Rose spoke slowly. "I am a twin to Rosa. Having similar names was not a fun thing throughout my childhood. We were teased unmercifully." Another wave of tears started and both John and Ellie waited patiently.

"My sister was a hairdresser at the Stardust in Las Vegas." She started, but looked to both of them before continuing. "But both of you already knew that, right?" Rose didn't wait for either of them to give her an answer. "She was a good, kind, person, but we lived very separate lives. She was the wild one, the daring one and loved the lights and activity of Las Vegas. I moved away when I was old enough, in fact, I moved here to Prescott and we didn't keep in contact much after that." She looked to Ellie. "I've felt that she was always a shadow on my life. She was the life of the party, I was the quiet mouse in the room. People, friends, family... they always kept comparing the

two of us and I fell short of their expectations. When she disappeared, I was contacted to clean out her things and talk with the police.”

“What did you do with her stuff?” Ellie asked quietly.

“Most of it was kept in one of those storage rooms. I didn’t have my own home and it wouldn’t fit into my small apartment. A little over a year ago, just before I took this position, I was able to buy one. I got everything out of storage and started furnishing my house.” A new wave of tears came but didn’t last too long. John handed her a new box of tissues.

“When I started unpacking her things, I found two bags of poker chips from that casino. How much trouble am I in?” She finally looked to John as she asked that question.

“Let’s just get the rest of your story and then we’ll know what to do and where to go from here, Rose.” He tried to speak calmly and tried to reassure his assistant.

“What did you do when you found those chips?” Ellie steered the conversation back to her tale of trouble.

“I didn’t know what to do. For a long while, I didn’t do anything, just stuff them into a box and put them on a shelf in my closet.” Rose stopped for a moment to get her bearings. “It was then that I dug and got more of the story about my sister. It seems that some guy robbed the Stardust of a ton of money and chips and somehow, Rosa got involved with him. Now, don’t you think for a second that she was part of the robbery! She would have never done that.”

“How did she get the chips?” John pushed for more information.

“The newspaper said that she was paid to help that guy change his identity. If anything was wrong, she didn’t realize it, I’m sure of that!” Her defensiveness was vivid.

“I’m sure your sister didn’t realize what she was doing. What else did you learn?” Ellie could see that the assistant was becoming protective of her family and they needed her to continue sharing her tale.

“I only know what most of you have read in the newspaper. There was no money, only chips in the bags!”

Ellie and John exchanged knowing glances but said nothing allowing the distraught woman to continue. “I notified the casino and was instructed to call some government place like the CIA or FBI, something like that.”

John cleared his throat, “When was that, Rose? When did you report those chips?”

“Let me think.” The air was thick with anticipation as both Ellie and John knew the importance of this new information. “I think it was in 1993. Yes, that’s right.”

“Oh my God!” Ellie couldn’t contain herself. She knew the look on John’s face was not one of approval at her outburst so she avoided looking his way.

“What! Is that bad?” The distraught woman was immediately aware of the tension in the room. Before anyone had time to react, there was a knock on the door. John indicated that the ladies should go into the conference room attached to his office before he

crossed over and answered it. Much to his surprise, Carson stood there ready to place another knock.

“There you are!” He spoke as he entered the office unasked. “Hope I’m not interrupting, but there was no one in the outer office.”

Ellie and Rose were listening to the conversation as the door to the conference hadn’t shut completely, leaving a small opening. Even though it wasn’t necessary, she put her finger to her lips signaling that Rose should keep quiet.

“Come on in, Carson. I’ve been wanting to talk with you.”

“Great! That makes two of us.” Carson sat his huge frame down on the chair Ellie had just vacated.

“How can I help you?” John played the good host.

“Well, I was just wondering about that crime scene up on the hill behind Tuck’s place. I hear that you’ve found the lost deputy involved in the missing chips case from Vegas.”

John waited a few minutes while he composed his answer. He owed this man nothing, but to put him off would only provoke more questions. “That’s right. The remains of the deputy were found at the bottom of an abandoned mine shaft. What’s your interest in any of this?” He wanted to throw it right back to the man.

“I would like nothing better than to see Harold’s killer behind bars.”

“But, you’re retired from all of this. Tell me, professional to professional, what’s your real motivation in finding Harold’s murderer?” John put

on his sternest sheriff look and stared Carson right in the eyes while waiting for his answer.

"I worked with Harold. I knew him not only as an agent but as a father and husband. I feel I owe it to him to make sure his death isn't in vain." Carson didn't pull any punches.

John sat back in his chair and finally realized that the door to the conference room was open enough for the ladies to hear all of the conversation. "I can appreciate what you're saying, but you know and I know that as a retired agent you have little if none in the way of authority here." He put up his hand to stop the other man's protests. "I'll make a deal with you. You keep me informed of any and all information you find out about this case and I'll not exclude you from what I find that will help solve Harold's death."

Carson stood up and stuck his hand out for the sheriff to shake. "I appreciate your honesty and I accept your deal, sheriff. Thanks." With that he left the office and upon his exit, the two ladies came out of their hiding spot.

"Carson Layne! Of all the people to come to your office today! Why are earth would you make a deal with that devil?" Ellie came right to the point.

"Rose, why don't you go and get some coffee for all of us. I think we need a bit of a break, don't you?" He tried to calm the wide-eyed woman.

"Rose?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll be right back." His assistant left the office in a rather dazed state but as soon as she was out of the room, John turned to Ellie.

“You’ve got to learn to restrain yourself. Ellie, it’s important that you keep some remarks to yourself.” His anger was evident but she also saw a man trying to restrain himself.

“John, we can’t trust that man. It’s all too convenient with him showing up here in Prescott just when things are starting to break on this case.” Ellie was pacing back and forth, spewing energy and anger. “Tell me one good thing about sharing information with that man!”

When the sheriff didn’t answer her right away, she stopped and turned to face him. “John! We don’t know who the mole is. It’s probably going to turn out to be Carson Layne! Then what? Are you willing to put your life in his hands? I’m not!”

“Ellie, calm down. You’re reaching conclusions without facts!”

“All I know is, I was kidnapped and nearly lost my life because someone was sharing information with the wrong people! I’m not willing to put myself in harm’s way again. I will not trust him, until you can tell me who is giving important information to the bad guys!” John didn’t answer and Ellie soon followed his look to the open door. Rose stood there with a tray of coffee cups with a startled look covering her pretty face.

“Rose? Are you alright?” He went to take the tray from her shaking hands. As soon as they were all in his office, John firmly shut the door.

“It was me.” Her voice was barely heard in the still room.

John quickly glanced to Ellie with a look on his face that warned her not to over-react. She got his message but had a hard time keeping her mouth from not dropping open at the statement made by Rose. In the meantime, the assistant sat down on the chair she had vacated earlier and held her head in her hands. The tears were falling freely again and they all waited in silence.

Ellie went to the chair and sat beside Rose. She put her hands on the woman's quaking shoulders. "Rose, try to tell us what you mean. It might help to talk about it."

They saw the shaken woman take a deep breath as if to calm herself before she said anything. "I promised my Poppa on his death bed that I would do everything I could to find out what happened to my sister and clear her name. I didn't do anything illegal or unethical, or so I thought until just now." She stopped for just a moment.

"What did you do that makes you think you're responsible for Ellie's kidnapping?" John was the one to ask the question.

She finally looked to Ellie before speaking. Her voice was shaky and she had to stop several times before completing her answer. "I told someone about the chips I found." She gulped as she continued. "I also told them about a smaller bag, I even gave them to him."

"Who, who did you give them to?" It was all John could do to keep his voice calm, and non-threatening.

"It was Chuck, your deputy. We first met in the cafeteria about two years ago. He was nice and funny

and I enjoyed his company at lunch. I didn't have that many friends."

Ellie felt a small stab of guilt at her admission, but shoved it aside. "What else did you and Chuck talk about? Did you two ever date?"

"Oh, no, I'm too much older than him. We didn't meet outside of work. He told me about his girlfriend and I wasn't really interested in him that way. He was just someone to talk with at lunch." Rose reached for a cup of the coffee from John's desk. "I'm really sorry, Ellie, if I was in any way responsible for your kidnapping." To the sheriff, she pleaded. "Am I in trouble? Have I done something legally wrong?"

"Like I said before, we need to get the whole story and then we'll know where we're at." He went to his side of the desk and pulled out a recorder. "Do you mind if we record the rest of this conversation? I don't want to miss any important details."

"Should I have a lawyer?" She dabbed at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

"You're not a suspect, Rose. We just need to get down everything you know. You'd be more of a material witness."

"I trust you John. If it would help solve this mess and help me clear my sister's name, I'll do anything."

"Let's start at the beginning, the first time you and Chuck had any conversation concerning the Las Vegas robbery, the chips, anything about all of that. Okay?" He encouraged her to remember all the specifics that she could. They spent the better part of the morning and soon John felt that he'd gained everything she knew. He had done most of the talking and

Ellie sat and watched, fascinated at his ability to put Rose at ease enough to gain valuable insight into her side of the story.

"I think that's enough for today. El, do you have anything you want to ask?" John finally turned to her and waited.

"Have you ever talked with Carson Layne, the man that was in here today?" She wasn't sure the sheriff would approve of her question but she caught the smile on his face.

"No, I didn't get to see him, but I didn't recognize his voice either. I'm sure I haven't spoken with Carson about anything." Rose took a deep breath to clear her mind.

"One more thing. Why did you give Chuck the small bag of chips and your sister's business card?" Again the look on John's face said she was asking great questions.

"I trusted him. He came from a bad childhood and I was so impressed that he'd seemed so successful. He was raised in a group home in Cottonwood and I can remember thinking how much he'd missed not having a loving family like I had. He promised to use his connections and help me clear my sister's name. I believed him." The assistant showed her embarrassment at trusting someone she shouldn't have and Rose moved restlessly in the chair.

"You couldn't have known. We were all taken in by the good-looking, young deputy. Right, John?" Ellie tried to console the woman.

The sheriff was in agreement but the look on his face showed that he didn't like admitting his mistakes

out loud and especially in front of someone that works with him. “Ellie is right. I didn’t know how corrupt our young friend had become and I’m supposed to be the expert. Rose, thank you for all you’ve done. I suggest that you go home and take some time for yourself. I know I don’t need to remind you, but I’m going to anyway, don’t tell anyone what we’ve discussed today.”

As Rose stood, she looked from one to the other. “You can bet I’ll never tell another soul what we’ve talked about today. I have learned my lesson; Sheriff, I hope you know that you can trust me to keep things to myself.” With one last look, the assistant took herself on wobbly legs out the door and shut it softly behind herself. John turned to find Ellie staring out at the view from the window behind his big desk. He came up behind her, not quite touching but she knew he was there.

“Well?” He finally asked.

“I need to get out of here and do some serious thinking.” Ellie turned and headed towards the door. “I’ll talk with you later, okay?”

John hesitated, but then realized that her mind was made up and his company wasn’t what she wanted. He followed her and at the door to his office, John stopped her and placed a small kiss on her lips. “Be careful.”

The look on her face was confusion. “I’m always careful, sheriff. I just need to expend some energy.” When she saw the crooked little grin cross his handsome features, she added, “Not that kind of energy.”

With that she strode away and he listened to her heels clicking on the hard tile floor.

A short time later, Ellie pulled into her driveway and quickly ran up the back steps. She could smell something delicious cooking and went to the stove. Uncle was making his wonderful beef stew. Even in the heat of day, his dish of blended beef, carrots and potatoes was a welcome fare in their household.

"There you are, girl." Shotgun came in the same door. "I see you found my stew. Did you give it a good stir?"

"I sure did. It smells heavenly."

"Where've you been?"

"Glad you asked. Want a beer?" She didn't wait, but pulled two frosty bottles from the fridge and plopped down at the kitchen table. "Doing anything special right now? I have some news to share with you about the case."

"I always have time to chat with you, girl, especially about the case. You know I can't resist a good mystery." He also took a long draw of his cold beer.

Ellie filled him in on the interview with Rose and tried to give the information as facts, keeping her opinion out of it. When she finished, Ellie waited patiently for her uncle to digest much of what she'd just told him. She knew from her long relationship with her favorite guy that he would need a few minutes to mull things over. Finally, he asked, "Did you get all of your questions answered? You know, the ones you put up on the flip charts?"

"Let's go into the office and see. I'm not sure." She led the way down her hallway. The walls were lined

with the sheets she'd created and Ellie walked right up to the one with Rose's name at the top. They both stood there studying the questions and finally, she spoke aloud, "It looks like I have the answers to all my questions."

"But?" Shotgun prompted.

"But, Uncle, it still doesn't feel right. I am totally convinced that I'm missing something big, something important."

"With the whole case or just with her?"

"Right now, it's just about Rose. Although I know there are other key points that I just can't connect. I'm going to go hiking. I'll be back in a while."

"You be careful out there all by yourself." Her uncle's warning mimicked John's.

This comment stopped her in her tracks. "Uncle, why would you say that to me?"

"No special reason. I know how damned independent you are and I just want you to be careful when you're out in the woods by yourself. You know there's lions, and tigers, and bears out there!" He cackled at his own joke.

"You are so funny! I always take my trusty gun, so don't you worry your pretty little self." She pulled her hair back into a tight pony tail, changed her clothes, grabbed her hat and out the door she went.

Ellie drove to the woods by the Hassayampa Lake and further up the road, she stopped and parked her vehicle. As she locked her SUV, Ellie breathed in a huge gulp of the fresh mountain air. Grabbing her water bottle, slinging her backpack over her shoulders, and adjusting her hat, Ellie started out through

the dense forest. This was her usual method of clearing out the cobwebs in her head when things became complicated. Ellie loved the outdoors and with the shade of the trees to keep the summer heat from being too much, she hiked her way up to the top of the hills.

Without really realizing where she was headed, Ellie soon came through the woods into a small clearing. Just above her high on the mountainside was the structure for John's cabin. Ellie carefully picked her way up the rocky hill and soon she was standing at the steps to his deck. He had done some work, she observed. One by one, Ellie took the steps and soon was standing on the wooden floor. She walked into the middle of the surface and stared with wonder at the walls now standing around the edge. It was only the bare bones, just two by four exterior walls, but he had done some amazing work.

"I wonder when he had time to do this?" She spoke aloud as she admired his handiwork. "Maybe that's how he clears his brain." Ellie looked for a place to sit down and decided to sit on the front deck. Dangling her feet over the edge, she slipped her backpack off and reached inside for a snack. The only sound was a few birds chirping in the trees along with the occasional wind blowing through the pines. She soon found herself relaxing and marveled at the scene before her. From his cabin deck, she could see the tall majestic mountains of Flagstaff miles away. No wonder he chose this place to build, she mused.

Before long, nature called and Ellie found herself heading to the best outhouse on the mountain. As she

shut the door, Ellie heard the sound of something or someone tromping through the woods below. Reaching for her weapon, she slowly opened the door, hoping it wouldn't make any sound that would alert the intruder as to her whereabouts. When the woods were as dry as they were right now in the heat of summer, footsteps were easy to hear and Ellie tried to make as little sound as she could when she left the bathroom.

As she rounded the back corner of John's cabin structure, Ellie had her weapon ready. What she saw made her laugh. Over at the little pond the sheriff had built, were a couple of ravens scrapping with a flock of turkeys. Each group was trying to establish dominance over the only source of water up here on the side of the mountain. Other than the birds squawking at each other, the sound she could hear was her own heart beating loudly. Damn those guys with their warnings! She thought as she put her gun away and turned to take the stairs up to the deck again.

Still watching the action at the little pond, Ellie nearly tripped over John standing at the top of the steps. "It's good to see that you at least had your sidearm with you." His deep voice startled her. John had to grab her to keep her from falling backwards.

"You rat! What'd you think you're doing?" She smacked at him. "You scared me out of my wits!" She pulled away from him. "What're doing here? Are you following me?"

"I should ask you the same question. This is my place, remember?" He was grinning the entire time.

“I was hiking and accidentally found my way here.” She knew it sounded as lame as it was. To change the subject, Ellie complimented him on the progress he’d made. “When did you find the time to do all of this?”

“Not unlike you, I have to spend some energy sometimes and this is how I enjoy doing it. Would you mind giving me a hand? I want to get the floor down on the upstairs and it generally takes two.”

“Sure. I’ve never done any construction work.”

“I’m confident you can handle this. I just need you to pull up the sheets of plywood as I hand them up to you. Think you can do that?” He went over to a stack of the wood and pulled the plastic covering from it.

“We need to put all that up there?” She indicated the top of the floor joists.

“We’ll go slow and rest a lot. It won’t be as hard as it looks. I’d really appreciate it.”

“How do I get up there?” There were no steps built yet.

“Here’s a ladder. I’ll get you some gloves.” He handed some soft leather gloves to her. “El, I really appreciate this.”

“It might be fun. I’ve never built a cabin before.” She then added, “I know lifting a few boards isn’t quite building, but it’s a start. Who normally helps you?”

She climbed up onto the ladder as John handed her the first sheet of plywood. “Here put this one right at the edge so you have a place to stand. My cousin, you should remember him, is usually one I can rely on, but Matt’s out of town working up in Montana this summer.”

“Oh, yeah. I do remember him.” She finished climbing the ladder and stood on the first sheet of wood she’d just placed. One by one, they worked as a team and soon the pile of lumber was neatly stacked up on the rafters.

“Come on down, now. Be careful.”

She finished taking the last step of the ladder and as her feet hit the floor, John handed her a cold beer. “Time for a break.” They went to the side and sat down with their legs dangling over the edge of the deck.

“That was one of the things I missed most about being an only child with my uncle.”

“You mean no one to help you?”

“Well, that and no one to confide in or be close to. I think everyone needs a buddy or a sister or brother that understands you and helps you with little everyday stuff.” She suddenly stopped and turned her head to look at him. “John, those two little boys in that picture; one has to be Chuck and I’ll bet you money the other is our buddy Seth!”

Thirteen

“That’s a huge leap. What in the world makes you think that?” John showed his confusion at her logic.

“We were just talking about the connection between people, especially siblings and it dawned on me that Seth had a lot to say about those lock boxes. He also knew that you were the sheriff. I’m thinking he wanted us to open that box. I’m thinking that his friend or brother Chuck told him about the key and what was in the box.”

“Whoa! Slow it down. You’ve got to get a hold on that vivid imagination of yours. There’s absolutely nothing to connect those two.”

“Not true! Remember that Seth told us that he grew up in Cottonwood? Well, so did Chuck according to Rose. She said he was raised in a group home. In a small town like Cottonwood, it wouldn’t be hard at all to find out if they were in the same home at the same time.”

John just shook his head. “I think it’s too far-fetched.”

Ellie wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Use that fancy phone of yours and the power of being the head honcho and make some calls. John, I know I’m right. I can feel it in my gut.”

He was still shaking his head, but pulled his phone from its case and quickly dialed it. As soon as he was done making the calls, John turned to her. "If this is right, I'm going to raise you to status of psychic." He laughed.

"I'll take the status of detective instead." She retorted back. With that she stood up and stretched her back. "It's time for me to head on home. Good luck with your work here."

"Wait. Stay."

She turned to see the look of longing on his face. Her heart wanted so much to stay but her head was telling her to go. "I want to but I need to get home and see how my uncle is doing. I feel I've been neglecting him."

"At least let me take you to your car."

"I really need to walk. I'll be fine. Let me know what you turn up with information about Seth." With that she grabbed her backpack and walked to the stairs at the edge of the deck. "I can't wait to see this finished. You're doing a great job. Who knew you were a carpenter?" She teased and then took the steps down to the ground.

"I wish you'd stay." He made one last effort to keep her there.

"Call me later." Her voice carried as she disappeared into the forest, back to her vehicle. On the way home, Ellie stopped at the store for a few groceries and listened to her favorite singer on the radio. She worked hard to keep herself from having any thoughts about why she didn't stay when John asked. Upon getting into her back door, she saw that

Shotgun was already scrounging in the refrigerator for something to eat.

“There you are. What’s for dinner?”

“What happened to your stew? Did you eat it all?”

The sheepish grin on her uncle’s face gave her the answer.

“Uncle, I swear I don’t know how you stay so skinny! She shook her head but with a loving look, told him. “Why don’t you call the girls and see if they want some Mexican food? I’m in a cooking mood and I feel like tacos, enchiladas, and maybe even some tostados.” She started putting the ground beef on to fry. As she worked putting things away and pulling more ingredients from the fridge, her uncle stared at Ellie.

“What’ve you been up to? What’s got your goat?” He reached into the open refrigerator and helped himself to a cold beer. “Want one?”

“Nah, I think I’ll pour myself a glass of wine. It helps me cook.” She laughed at her own joke. “Nothings got my goat, Uncle. I just feel like I’ve been neglecting you and want to spend some time with you. Go and call the girls.” She bustled around the kitchen chopping and dicing and just generally keeping busy.

Before he left to go and call his friends, Shotgun turned and posed a volatile question. “John coming for dinner?” He chuckled at the look that crossed her face. “No need to answer, girl. That looks speaks volumes.” He snickered out the back door.

Ellie slammed the pan she’d been holding down on the counter. “He can be so frustrating!” She continued working like a woman possessed and soon her dinner preparations were almost complete. As she sat

down at the kitchen table, Ellie recalled all the special times spent in this room with family and friends. The afternoon sun was setting down below the tall mountains just to the west of her place and cast a warm, comforting glow on the fragrant kitchen. The table was prepared with her good china including cloth napkins and candlesticks. She hesitated to question what was driving this domestic urge of hers, but quickly dismissed it.

With one more sip of her wine, Ellie finally got up to complete the meal when she heard the front door bell. At the same time, she heard her uncle open the back door with girlish voices following close behind. Quickly she went to the front door and as she swung it wide, found the handsome man she'd been avoiding thinking about standing there. John grinned but before he could say anything, she grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him down to her for a searing kiss. When they finally parted, she softly spoke to him, "I don't have any idea why you would want to put up with me, but I'm awfully glad you're here."

"I brought dessert," was his simple statement. He held up a container and a plastic bag.

From the kitchen, Shotgun greeted the sheriff. "John, so glad you're here. The girls were just asking about you."

He stared down into her eyes before reluctantly giving up their embrace. With another quick kiss on the lips, John smiled up at her uncle and strode across the room into the cozy kitchen. The girls both came up and gave him a big hug and a kiss on the

cheek. They giggled like school girls when he returned their kiss.

“What’ve you been up to, Sheriff?” Barbara asked coyly. Both of the older women loved to flirt with the younger man and did so unashamedly.

“You’re a charmer, young lady. I’ll have to watch myself around you.” He played back with her.

Ellie finally had all the food placed in the center of the table. “Okay, if you guys can stop flirting long enough, our meal is ready. I hope you all are hungry.”

“My God, girl. You’ve made enough for an army. What’s got into you?” There was a fragrant assortment of Mexican dishes. One platter held at least two dozen tacos, while another casserole dish oozed with his favorite chicken enchiladas and yet another few dishes held the makings for tostadas. All of the smells of the cheese, spices and meat wafted through the room.

“I had to work off some frustrations and you know I love to cook under pressure.” She laughed as she realized how much she had made for their small group. “Have any other friends you’d like to invite?”

“Let’s sit. I’m ready for some good food. Sheriff, you’ve been keeping this one so busy, I’ve missed some meals.” Shotgun sat himself down at his usual place at the head of the table. He indicated for the others to join him and soon lively conversation filled the room with noise and laughter.

As soon as they seemed to wind down from indulging in the banquet, Shotgun approached the subject that was on all their minds. “How’s the investigation going?”

For a few seconds, Ellie didn't think John was going to answer, but then he cleared his throat and spoke. The girls and Shotgun were anxious and it showed on their faces. "I think we're getting to a point that I'll have to confess to the feds about our secret investigation."

"No! We've done so much. You can't really mean that." Ellie was the first to respond, jumping up from her chair.

"Let's hear him out, girl." Her uncle interrupted her tirade. Ellie shot him an angry look but sat back down and motioned for John to continue.

The sheriff had to work hard to hide his grin, knowing it would only aggravate her. "Ellie, I know that together we've done a good job on uncovering some great evidence and new leads; but it technically isn't our case to handle. Think of it this way, if you were on the other team, how would you feel about our investigation? I've broken a few rules over the years and so far, it hasn't come back to bite me, but now I think we should come clean."

She thought long and hard and knew John was right, but to give up what they'd accomplished was definitely going to be hard. "Couldn't we work with them instead of just completely letting it go?"

The girls and her uncle had remained silent just watching the exchange between the two. Finally her uncle spoke up, "John, I think Ellie has a good idea. Can't you keep doing your thing and just keep them informed? I'm sure you know who's handling it for the Vegas team. Maybe you could just sit down and

share what you've stumbled on and see how they react."

"I shouldn't have even talked with all of you."

"But, then you wouldn't have known that the key was from The Desperation Depot." Barbara spoke the obvious. "We haven't told anyone that we've been helping you solve a crime, have we?" She looked to Jean for confirmation of her statement. The other woman shook her head in agreement.

"You're right about that and I thank you for your help. It would've taken us a lot longer to figure out where that key belonged." He seemed deep in thought.

"John, I realize that you've been doing a lot of this to help me learn and I appreciate that. What's more important to me is that we solve this crime. We can work with the feds or we can continue on our own, the call is yours." Ellie spoke softly.

"How about that dessert? I know John baked something good." Shotgun directed the conversation from the two of them.

"I'll help you."

"Me, too." Both of the girls jumped up and grabbed the bag from the counter. All seemed to be ready to allow some privacy to the young couple sitting at the table.

"John, whatever you decide is fine with me. I've enjoyed working the case and learning from you."

"But you'd like to see it through to the end." His was a statement, not a question.

She reached across the table and took his hand in hers. "John, it's your call. I can't deny that I'd like to

finish this together, but I also felt that we should have come clean about our activities to someone. I'm just not sure who that would be and who you trust."

"That settles it, then. We'll finish this together and I'll talk to Tuck about who would be the best person to talk to eventually."

"Was this some sort of test?" She asked suspiciously.

"Not at all. This is called communication. We need to keep each other aware of what's going on in our heads. Ellie, you've come a long way, but there's still more to go with your trust issues."

"I know, I know, you're right." She acquiesced.

Right about then, the girls brought over the huge, delicious-looking strawberry pie John had brought. "Look what we have!"

Soon they were all partaking of the pie and whipped topping. The two older ladies teased John about his talent in the kitchen. Shotgun laughed along with their flirting. Ellie found herself relaxing and realized John was right. She could feel him looking her way and as she turned to glance back, she got a spoon full of whip cream on the nose.

"Oh, you rat!" She acted like she was going to retaliate, but at his warning look, she backed down.

Amid the laughter in the room, Ellie felt the sexual tension between her and the sheriff. In order to diffuse that, she rose and motioned for him to follow her into her office. "John, I want you to see what I've been working on."

"Don't go too far, we'll want to play cards." Shotgun announced.

As soon as they got into the room, John spun her around and put his strong arms around Ellie. She raised her lips for the expected kiss and for a long moment, savored his touch. "That's not why I brought you in here, but it feels good."

"I thought it was a play for time alone."

"While that sounds awesome, I wanted to show you this." She stepped out of his embrace and waved her hand to the wall full of poster charts. He stepped back in awe and looked at all of her notes.

"You did all of this?"

"Yeah, who else?"

"Tuck uses that same method to work on his cases. I like your thoughts. Tell me what you've done here." John plopped down on the office chair. "Walk me through your thought process."

Ellie took her time and explained each comment she had written on the charts. The different colors help coordinate the three separate scenarios as she saw them. John was silent while she spoke about each detail. Finally she stopped and turned to see him staring at her. "Well?"

"You're good, El. I think you're going to make a top-notch detective."

"What do you mean by that? The job is already filled." Her tone indicated that she felt they were beating a dead horse.

"I lost to another person, remember?"

"For that particular position, yes, another person was chosen." He could see by her reaction that his words intrigued the beautiful woman standing far too close.

“What do you mean by that? Is there another position available?”

“I have had an idea on the table for quite some time. I felt the department could use another investigator just to handle the older cases, you know, cold cases. El, what you’re doing here is excellent. You’ve done remarkable things by getting information from people that have not even been discovered by the other guys. You’d be perfect for this.”

“How come you haven’t posted it?”

“I hadn’t found the perfect person for it until now.”

“Don’t you have to post it for others to apply?”

“Yes, but in the meantime, you’d be the Acting Cold Case Investigator. Once it’s posted, you’d be interviewed along with any other applicants.” He again watched for her reaction to his offer.

Ellie paced around the room and hesitated before reacting. Her mind was racing as she finally had in front of her the opportunity of a lifetime. What would everyone think? Did she get this chance because of her relationship with John or because of her own abilities?

John remained silent and waited for the wheels to turn in her head. He didn’t have to wait long, though. She came to face him head on. “Okay, I’ll take it temporarily, but there are conditions.”

“And those would be?”

“That I am not treated any different when the interviews come, that you have no input or influence in any way!” Her voice indicated that she was adamant about no preferential treatment.

“Deal.”

“How about my other job with the department?”

“We’ll have to open that up for others to apply. If you don’t get this position, you’d be out of a job for a while until something comes up.”

“Who do I report to as the Acting Cold Case Investigator?” As she asked the question, Ellie already knew the answer.

“That, my lovely lady, would be me for now. Once I turn this over to Human Resources, I’ll have to add this position to the organizational chart and assign a chain of command. Do you have a problem with that?” He reached out to pull her close, but she resisted.

“People will think that I got this opportunity because of my relationship with you.” She stated flatly.

“I’ve never known you to worry about what others think, so why now? You’ve worked hard, you have the education, and now you’re getting field experience. All of these things are crucial to the success of being a top notch investigator.” His frustration with her hesitation was evident. “Take the chance and show everyone, but more importantly, show yourself that you can do this!”

“You’re right! I accept your challenge.” She put her hand out to shake his, but instead John pulled her into a tight hug and placed a blistering kiss on her lips.

“Now, I’ve got to go. Put on your best suit and meet me in my office around 9:00 in the morning. We have a material witness to interrogate.” He got up and as he headed out of her office. Ellie was fast on his heels.

“Not so fast, mister. Did you find something out about Seth and Chuck? Why didn’t you say so when you first came in tonight?” With that last question, they came to the kitchen where they were greeted with curious stares from her uncle and the girls sitting at the table enjoying a three-handed game of cards.

“Watch this, girls. They are better than any evening television program. They do like to knock heads!” Shotgun cackled as he watched the fireworks between the sheriff and his niece.

“I wanted to see what you’d do when I suggested that we give up the case and what you’d decide when I let you know that there was a position for you in the investigative unit. Ellie, this is serious business and you have to be aware of all the risks, including to your personal life.”

“What in the world do you mean by that?”

“If you don’t know by now, I can’t help you.”

“So, this was a test! I asked you that earlier and you denied it. John Clarke, I’m going to be the best investigator you’ve ever had in your sheriff’s department! You don’t need to keep testing me, Sheriff, because I’ll pass whatever test you have every time you feel you need to give it!” With that she stormed over and grabbed her glass of wine and downed it.

John walked slowly to the door, grabbed his hat off the rack, and saluted Shotgun and the girls. As he went out the front door, he popped his head back in and spoke to Ellie, “Don’t be late!” He didn’t slam the door but rather closed it ever so slowly as to emphasize his departure.

“Ooh, that man is impossible! Can you believe his nerve?” She went to the fridge and refilled her wine glass before turning to face the people at the table. “Okay, someone say something!”

“Wanna play cards?” Her uncle laughed as Ellie sat down and joined them for a game. They played for over an hour when the girls announced it was time for them to go. After they left, Ellie waited for her uncle to broach the subject of the scene between her and John but he discreetly left without a word.

“Sleep tight, girl.” Shotgun said.

“Night, Uncle.”

Now in the silence of her room, Ellie snuggled down into the covers and tried to find some peace. The most important thing on her mind was the statement John had made about the price or risks she’d have to pay for being an investigator. Was he talking about himself? They’d had discussions about the regrets over their own life choices and maybe he was trying to tell her something. She finally fell asleep and rested as best as she could for the night.

Reaching his office just before nine, Ellie straightened her blouse and adjusted her suit coat. She’d put on a simple pair of dark slacks along with a white blouse. Once topped with her jacket, she checked the final look in her full length mirror and was satisfied. Ellie wasn’t sure to bring her weapon, so she opted to leave it at home.

Rose was at her desk when Ellie got off the elevator and as the two ladies greeted each other, she felt her nerves calm a bit. “Is the man in?” She laughingly referred to the sheriff.

“Yes, he’s expecting you.” Rose tried to smile a comforting grin, but failed to help the shaky nerves of the tall newly confirmed investigator.

“You’ll do fine. Think of this as your newest challenge and, now that I know you better, I know you can handle him and whatever he dishes out.” Her grin was now reassuring and Ellie felt her confidence returning as she stepped to the door.

Her knock was answered by a curt response. “Enter.”

Not willing to let him see her nerves, Ellie quickly stepped through the door and boldly walked to the edge of his big desk. “Reporting in, Chief!” She stood straight and tall and mimicked him with a salute.

“Very funny, El! Very funny.”

He stood and she then noticed that he was dressed as the high sheriff with his official uniform shirt and badge. “Where are we going?”

Before answering, he reached down on his desk and grabbed something. John tossed it to her and it took all of her reflexes to not drop it. She turned the shiny metal over in her hand. “What’s this?”

“It’s your badge. All investigators carry them.”

“That was fast.” She rolled it over and looked at the shiny gold emblem. The number was 17522. She ran her fingers over the raised letters and numbers. It felt amazing in her hand. Ellie had waited a long time for this opportunity. He was beside her before she realized John had moved.

“Like it?”

“How did you get this done so fast?”

“The ladies in HR like me.”

"I'm sure." She replied with sarcasm.

"Ready?" He turned to leave his office expecting her to follow.

"Where are we going?"

"Jerome."

As they got into his official SUV, Ellie felt a new sense of apprehension. They were finally going to confront Seth and she wanted to make sure she was prepared. Ellie pulled her notebook from her jacket pocket and started reviewing the notes she'd made from the beginning of their investigation. The trip to Jerome was made quickly and soon they were pulling to the front of The Desperation Depot. As she started to open her door, John stopped her.

"Ellie, you take the lead. When we walk in there with our uniforms, Seth is going to know that we're on to him. I have no idea how he's going to respond. Regardless, we need to let him know that Chuck's been found and remember that he considered him his brother. This is not going to be easy."

"I'm ready." She spoke a lot more confidently than she felt.

As soon as they walked through the door of the saloon, Seth looked up from behind the bar. Upon seeing the tall, imposing sheriff with his official uniform shirt and his shining badge displayed, Seth knew their visit was serious. As the duo approached the long, wooden structure, Seth excused himself from the only patron in the bar and came to meet them. "Is this an official visit, Sheriff?" Even though his words were intended to be brave, the shaky tone of his voice betrayed his nervousness.

“Is there someplace we can talk in private?” Ellie spoke with an authority she didn’t particularly feel.

In no time at all, the three of them headed out the back door and Seth led them to a patio behind the saloon. It was empty at this time of day and soon they were all seated at a table.

“You all look so serious, so I can only assume that this isn’t going to be a good thing.” Seth tried to break the silence.

“Seth, when was the last time you heard from your friend, Chuck Paulsen?” Ellie tried to soften the blow.

Seth appeared immediately distraught. “I haven’t heard from Chuck in over a year.”

John spoke up, “You knew who we were when we came to visit, didn’t you?”

Seth hung his head in shame, avoiding eye contact with him. “Yes, I recognized you from pictures Chuck showed me.”

Ellie touched his hand and he raised his head to look her in the eyes. “Seth, we have some bad news for you. We’ve found Chuck’s body.”

The bartender was visibly upset. He obviously wasn’t expecting this type of news. “Where? When?”

As they filled Seth in on the details of the mine and the remains they’d found, Ellie watched the young man for visible signs. How much did he know? Judging by his reaction, Ellie came quickly to the conclusion that Seth was unaware of Chuck’s demise.

Seth held his head between his hands. “He was my brother. We were the only family each other had. I had always hoped deep down inside that he found

what he was looking for and was living it high on some island. How did it happen?"

"His body was found at the bottom of a mine up on Mt. Trittle." Ellie gave a few facts. "You knew about the key, didn't you Seth?"

The silence seemed unending, but soon Seth answered. "Yes, I was the one that ransacked your room. Chuck told me that if anything ever happened, he would give me a key to one of the boxes upstairs and that he'd take care of me. I knew as soon as you two walked in here that you must have found it. He just disappeared and I never knew what happened to him. I told you that I recognized you, Sheriff, from the pictures Chuck had shown me. You have to believe me, he wasn't a bad guy, he... he just had ambitions. We were alone in the world as boys and he always felt that our lives were lacking. He talked about being important someday, about being someone big."

They just sat there for a few minutes, each into their own thoughts. Ellie watched Seth for any clues as to the truth behind his story. She wanted to believe him but there was so much to this situation that still needed explaining. "How much of Chuck's activities did you know about?"

"What do you mean?" The look on Seth's face was misery and sadness.

"I mean, did you know who he saw when he went to Las Vegas? Who did he hang out with here? Did he have a girlfriend? What can you tell us, Seth?"

"He had been seeing a waitress over at the golf course. I don't remember her name. I never went with

him to Vegas.” It appeared that Seth was trying to jog his memory. “How did you find him?”

“There’s a new mining operation up on Mt. Trittle and they had been carving out the old mine. We should have DNA confirmation soon, but, son, I’m convinced it’s Chuck.” John answered his question.

The pained look on Seth’s face showed that he really did care for the deputy as a brother. “What happens now? Who did this? Do you have any clues?”

“That’s what we’re working on. We need any and all information you might have about Chuck’s life before he disappeared. We need to know who he was in contact with and anything else you might think of. Even if you don’t think it’s important, Seth, it might be just what we need to know.” Ellie tried to convince him to help them.

“What about that other guy? He was asking about Chuck on the day you guys stayed here.”

“What guy?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah, you know that guy that said he was your friend. He said his name was Carson, Carson Layne.”

Fourteen

It was all she could do to not show any emotion at the name Seth mentioned. Ellie didn't even look over to John for fear she would not be able to keep her mouth shut.

"Are you sure?" John finally spoke.

"Sure I'm sure. He was in here just after you guys left the saloon. He came up and started chatting about the town and all, then he asked me if I knew where his friends were. He meant you two."

Ellie didn't get a chance to pursue that line of questioning because just then a young lady poked her head out the back door. "Seth, it's starting to get busy in there. Can you come and help?"

Before answering her, Seth turned to John. "Can I go? Am I in trouble with the law?"

John didn't answer right away, but looked to Ellie. "What do you think?"

"I think he needs to stay put. Don't leave town and keep in touch with us if you remember anything else. This is far from over, Seth." She was firm in her response.

He was extremely eager to leave the uncomfortable situation but as Seth walked towards the back door of The Depot, he turned to speak one last thought. "I don't know if this will help or not, but that guy

flashed a badge. I didn't look closely enough but it was maybe FBI or something like that. I knew you were the sheriff, so it just made sense that he was someone you knew and I felt okay to talk with him about Chuck. I'll be more diligent in the future." Then he disappeared inside the door.

"Come on, let's get you out of here before you explode." John took Ellie by the elbow and escorted her around to the front of the bar where their vehicle was parked. John started the car and moved into traffic, still waiting for her to say what was definitely on her mind. Several times, Ellie opened her mouth to speak but closed it without saying anything. They were back on the road to Prescott when she finally spoke. It was not the explosion he'd expected, but rather some cryptic conclusions.

"We need to talk with Tuck and bring him in on this. What did you find out about Carson from the guy you've had trailing him? It appears that someone is trying to point us in Carson's direction, but now all of that seems too obvious."

"What? You don't want to go after your favorite suspect?"

"Very funny, John. Mocking me won't help us solve this case. If it's Tuck's day off, let's go out to the lake and have a talk."

"Better yet, let's invite him and Aubrie to your house. I'm sure you have lots of taco prep leftover and we can show him your flip charts. It'll help bring him up to date. Besides, if Carson is out there, we wouldn't be able to talk openly."

"Ooh, good idea! Call him." She encouraged.

John placed the call and soon they were all set for dinner with Tuck and Aubrie. It was a great coincidence that Tuck was off for the day and Aubrie needed to come to town for her doctor's appointment. They would meet at Ellie's house just after four in the afternoon. "What now? We have some time to kill before we have to go to your house."

"Shouldn't you go to the office? I mean, how much days can you be out, Sheriff?" Ellie was curious about all the time off John was taking.

"Everything's under control. Where did you want to go?" He reached over and patted her on the knee.

"I'm not sure. Don't you find it strange that Seth didn't ask about the contents of the box? Maybe he already knew what was in that lockbox." She was thinking out loud.

"I think you need to take your mind off of this case for a little while." John turned the car around and headed back towards Jerome.

"Where are we going?" She was confused about his movements.

"Let's go to the casino for a little while."

"Are you nuts?"

"No, I seriously think you need to give your mind a rest. What better place to do it in than a noisy, hectic casino?" He kept going through Jerome and down off the mountain towards Cottonwood.

The Cliff Castle Casino was just a few miles away on Black Canyon Highway 17, just after Cottonwood in the town of Camp Verde. In the years Ellie had spent in Las Vegas, she realized she wasn't much of a gambler. She found that most locals avoided the

pitfalls of gambling with their hard-earned money. She was surprised that this was what John had suggested. "You're going into a casino in your uniform and badge?"

"Of course not. I always have a change for obvious reasons. I don't always want to advertise the fact that the 'high sheriff' is coming." He used her teasing words to describe himself.

As soon as they were down off the mountains, John pulled his vehicle over and got out. He had managed to find an area off the road that allowed him to do so safely. Ellie also got out and looked around at the view of this little valley. It was a pretty area. It didn't have the high pines, but rather was dotted with scrub junipers. John reached into the back seat and quickly retrieved a bag. As he started to remove his shirt, she couldn't help but admire his tanned, muscular body. He was toned and in great shape. John pulled a dark tee shirt over his head and carefully put his uniform shirt back in the bag.

"Like what you see?"

She came to his side and smoothed her hands over his chest. "Of course, I've always liked your body."

Upon hearing her words of praise, John took her in his arms and kissed her. "I've always liked yours too." He teased back.

"I can think of another way to spend a few hours." His words were husky with emotion.

"Me, too, but I think we'd better keep it clean now that I report directly to you, boss." Her words were meant to remind them that they were still on a case.

“Besides, it will give me a chance to do some research about the casinos and their security measures.”

“Always thinking, aren’t you?” He reluctantly released her and as they climbed back into the vehicle, John laughed. “I do love you, you know.”

Ellie tried not to let the shock of his revelation show. “Sure you do.” She pretended to join in on his teasing banter.

John allowed her to rebuff his declaration for the moment. “Let’s go and gamble, lady.”

The passing scenery could have been an iceberg, for all Ellie could concentrate. She couldn’t believe John chose now to declare his love for her. Why? Why now?

John pulled his car into the parking garage and soon they were on the gaming floor. “What do you want to do? You like the machines or the tables?”

“I never gambled much, so you pick. I’ll just follow you.”

“You didn’t gamble when you lived in Vegas? I find that hard to believe.”

“I was busy with school and my uncle. I couldn’t really see working so hard for my money just to have it go so fast at the casino.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I think that you’re either a gambler or not and I happen to be not.”

“Well, let’s try this and see if you can win some money.” He pulled out the chair at a blackjack table for her. After ordering a couple of drinks, John handed her a stack of chips. “Try your luck with these.” For an hour, the couple played and Ellie saw her stack of

chips growing. She was amazed that she was doing so well.

“Look at you!” He teased.

“I’m surprised. Like I told you I never really sat down and played at the casino.” She was playing with the stack of chips when an idea suddenly popped into her head. “John, what happens to a casino when they get robbed?”

The look of confusion on his face mirrored his words. “I’m not following you. What are you thinking?”

“I mean that they have insurance right? If I have a business and I suffer a loss, my insurance kicks in, right?”

“Oh, I can see the wheels turning in that beautiful head of yours. That’s pretty dangerous.”

“John, if a bank gets robbed, they’re insured so what’s to say a casino doesn’t have the same coverage. When they robbed the Stardust those many years ago, was there insurance for that loss?”

“I’m not sure, but we can look into it. What has any of that got to do with this case?”

“I’m trying to connect the dots. The world knows that organized crime had a hold on Las Vegas for years. If they are the reason that nothing has ever been found of Bill Brennan or the bulk of the money and chips, then it stands to reason that they simply claimed it on insurance and then fed the recovered money and chips back into their system. They get paid double for their dirty deeds.”

“You know you should write crime fiction stories. You can weave a tale that would impress the best

mystery writers. Ellie, let's stick to the facts, okay?" They were finished with playing and left the table to cash their chips at the cashier window.

"Done?" She asked of him.

"Yeah, let's go to your house and get ready for our guests." There was very little talk on the way from the casino back to Prescott. Each seemed lost in their own deep thoughts.

"Do we need anything from the store?" John asked before they reached her home.

"No, I've got everything and there's plenty to drink."

"Then if you don't need any help, I'm going to run to the store and get some wine. I'll be right back."

Ellie wanted some time alone and readily agreed to his request. "Go! I'll be fine. See you in a bit." She dashed to her front door and let herself in as she heard a sound emanating from the kitchen.

"Uncle? Is that you?" Ellie looked around at an empty room, puzzled as she was sure she had heard someone in here. Nothing seemed to be out of place and she was almost convinced it had been a figment of her imagination when she spied an envelope on the floor by the table.

Before checking on the note, she pulled her weapon from under her jacket and cautiously walked toward the back door. When she reached for the door knob, her hand was shaking and Ellie had to take a deep breath. The door was closed, but not locked and for a moment, Ellie just stood there listening for any other sounds. As she turned to retrieve the envelope, the back door suddenly opened.

“Hey, girl, what’s happening?” Ellie spun around, weapon in hand, but stopped abruptly when she saw who it was.

“Uncle! You scared me half to death. Quick, look outside and see if anyone’s out there!”

Shotgun complied but saw nothing. “What’s wrong? What the heck you doing with that gun?”

“I just got in and heard a noise. I thought it was you but all I found was the back door unlocked and this envelope lying on the floor. Sorry if I scared you.” Ellie put her gun on the table and reached down and finally picked it up. Upon examining the letter, Ellie found a half-scribbled note on the back of it.

“What’s it say?”

“It says that ‘Rose is not what she seems’. That’s mysterious.” She turned it over to see that it was mail addressed to her. “This is my mail. Someone was in here and used this to send a very strange message.”

“Call John right now.” Her uncle ordered.

“I don’t need to; he’ll be here in a little bit. He just dropped me off and was coming back shortly. We’re going to have Tuck and Aubrie over for dinner and pick their brains about the information we’ve collected on this case.” She stared at the message scrawled on the back of her mail as she sat at the kitchen table.

“I don’t like this one little bit, girl. Whoever it is, they’ve invaded your home. We never lock that door unless both of us are gone. I was here all day. I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“You didn’t hear anything, Uncle?”

“Aw, you know me. I had the tv on and probably too loud to hear anything going on outside.” Her

uncle was visibly upset at the knowledge that some stranger had been in her house. She could have been hurt or worse. "I want you to rethink your decision to get into this profession. Your life has been in danger more than once already."

"Uncle, I appreciate your concern, but I have everything under control."

"Girl, is this becoming a personal vendetta?"

"It became personal the day Deputy Chuck kidnapped me!" She was adamant with her response. "I will not stop nor be stopped until I solve this damned case!"

"I've never been a detective, young lady, but I do know that you have to maintain a distance between yourself and the case you're working on. You have to remain objective!" It took a lot for her uncle to chastise Ellie, as she had learned over the years in his care. She turned to face him now.

"Uncle, I'm remaining objective. I'm checking and double checking the facts and I'm not going to do anything stupid. Just when I think I've figured one thing out, another pops up. Just look at this! Someone is following our every move and now they're trying to send us in a definite direction." She raised her hand to stop his protest. "I will continue to be careful. From now on, we'll lock this back door even when you're home. I'll get a security system, whatever it takes to secure this house, but I'm not going to stop investigating!"

"What's going on in here?" John's voice penetrated their conversation. "I can hear you guys all the way out the front door."

"You've got to talk some sense into that thick skull of hers." Shotgun prodded the tall lawman.

"El?"

"When you dropped me off, I came through the front door and when I thought I heard my uncle in the kitchen, I found this." She held up the envelope. Immediately John took it from her hands and read the handwritten note.

"Did you check the house?" Upon seeing the look on her face, the sheriff walked cautiously down the hall and checked each one of the rooms. Upon finding that they were all empty, he called Ellie to join him in her office. "Is this how you left everything?" He wanted her to look closely and determine if anything was out of place. As Ellie looked around, she shook her head, "Yes, nothing seems missing." Then her eyes came to look at the charts she'd posted up on the wall. The chart containing Rose's name was circled in a big red marker.

"I didn't do that." She pointed to the addition on her notes. "It's almost the same message that's on that envelope."

With a bright red marker, the intruder had added the words, 'one and the same' to Rose's name. "What does this mean? John, none of this makes sense. Why break into my house and give me some mysterious message about Rose?"

"I'm not sure. We've already talked with her and you were satisfied with her responses, weren't you?" John looked to the frightened woman standing next to him.

Shotgun spoke up, "I think it's time to bring in the big guys, John. Someone is obviously on your trail and you need some bigger power." He stood there leaning heavily on his cane, his care and concern for his niece was etched into the lines on his face.

"You might be right, Willie."

Just then the doorbell sounded announcing their dinner guests. Ellie dashed to the front door and greeted them. Once Tuck and Aubrie were seated around the big kitchen table, John offered everyone a drink. Ellie bustled about pulling dishes out of the fridge and started to put their meal together.

"Can I help?" Aubrie offered.

"No, no, you just sit there and relax. With your bed and breakfast business, I know you rarely get to sit down while someone else prepares the food. Enjoy!" Ellie lifted her glass of wine in a mock toast.

Aubrie lifted her glass of cranberry juice. "This is good, but not as tasty as a good glass of wine would be." They all joined in the laughter.

The conversation was of a general nature, with no one bringing up the subject of the current investigation. All in good time, Ellie thought. Once we get the meal over with, we can go into the office and have a good brainstorming session. Shotgun joined in with dinner and in no time at all, the meal was consumed.

"Ellie, that's great Mexican food. Where did you get that hot sauce? It's got a kick but not too much." Tuck asked.

"My friends make it. You've met the girls, haven't you?" Willie answered.

"Yes, I have. They're two wonderful ladies."

There was a small bit of silence, then Tuck finally broached the subject that was on everyone's mind. "Okay, are you all finally going to tell us what's going on? The tension in the room when we first came in was so thick you could've cut it with a knife."

"I think we'd better adjourn to my office. It can best be explained with the charts I created. Aubrie, there's a comfortable chair in there for you. We want your input on this case, too, since you were originally involved."

With all their drinks refilled, they traipsed down the hallway into her office. Ellie was grateful for the large space as the men seemed to fill the room. Tuck went right to the charts. "I'm impressed, Ellie. I can see things are getting more and more complicated, aren't they?"

"That's not that half of it. Look at this." John handed the envelope with the message on it to the tall, blue-eyed man. "You've been in law enforcement a long time, Tuck. What can you make of this?"

"Off the cuff, I would think someone else is doing their own investigation. They're definitely trying to point you in a certain direction."

"I'm just sick of all of this!" Ellie exclaimed. "We just keep uncovering more and still can't connect the dots! Tuck, this is your method of thinking, is there anything that stands out as you look at all of this?"

"You've done an amazing job of putting your thoughts and discoveries down, Ellie. I'm very impressed with your thoroughness. There is one thing I've been wanting to ask though."

"Go for it!"

“How did you know which box the key would open at The Depot?” Tuck looked at Ellie and waited for it to sink in. All eyes in the room turned to see the struggle cross her pretty features. Before answering, Ellie took a small sip from her wine glass and looked John in the eyes. With just a small nod from him, she knew he was behind her in this.

“First, I would like you all to know that what you’re about to hear may sound a little crazy, but most of you know that I’m of sound mind and body.” She started.

“We’ll be the judge of that.” Shotgun interjected and everyone laughed including Ellie.

As she related the story of Magdalena and The Desperation Depot there wasn’t a sound in the room but her voice. Ellie told of the birthday party they attended and then the events in their room. When she spoke of the key glowing, even Ellie found it hard to believe. “It all came down to the phone call John got about finding Chuck’s body and the fact that we didn’t have any more time. I had to act fast and with a quick prayer, I put the key in that particular box and it opened.”

“Did you try the key in any of the other boxes?” Tuck asked the question that was on the other’s minds.

“No, I didn’t have time John was waiting for me and I just grabbed the map and ran.” Upon giving Tuck the answer, Ellie took a moment and realized where he was going with this. “Do you think that the key would’ve opened more than one box?”

"I'm thinking there is an opportunity to gather additional information." When he saw the pained look on her face, Tuck added, "I don't mean to criticize as I, too, have made that very mistake. I only mean to help you learn as you move on your chosen path in the sheriff's office."

She looked at John and saw that he agreed with Tuck's conclusion, but without condemnation on her actions. Ellie took a deep breath and spoke softly, "Tuck, I loved your class when I took it at the university. I know that you're one of the best and I appreciate the help. You're right. I did miss a chance to gain additional information."

"Girl, no one is faulting you. This here investigation is a personal journey for you. Don't be too hard on yourself." Shotgun tried to console his niece.

"I'm not." When she saw the look of doubt, she added, "Really, Uncle, I'm not beating myself up. I can move forward and still conduct a proper investigation."

Aubrie finally spoke up, "Ellie, I've only known you for a short time, but I feel like I've known you forever. I also have a deep faith in your abilities. Remember when we were kidnapped and put in that old mine? If it weren't for your cool, calm thinking I don't know how we would've made it out alive. You are brave and so smart. I know you'll find the answers to all of this." She waved her hand indicating the information scrawled on the charts around the room. As she stood up, Aubrie indicated it was time for her and Tuck to go home.

Shotgun, Tuck, Aubrie, and John all got up to leave. They'd had a good dinner and although Ellie didn't feel like they solved anything more on their investigation, she was satisfied with the company and advice. John lagged behind until the others had left. It was then that Ellie realized he'd not said but a few words in the office.

"What?" She prompted him.

"You're not going to do anything rash, are you?"

"Like what, sheriff?"

"Ellie, I know you and this whole case isn't sitting well. I just want to know what your plans are now." He stood in the open doorway of her house.

"For starters, I'm going to bed and then tomorrow I've got tons of research to do." She went to the kitchen and grabbed the box of evidence and tried to hand it to John. "Here, this should be in a secure place."

"You have a gun safe, right?" When she nodded, he added. "Just lock it up in there. I don't want to move this to the office just yet."

"What about the person that broke in today? Are you concerned about that?"

"Of course I am but technically they didn't break in. You left your back door unlocked, remember? This will be secure locked in your gun safe. And... keep all doors and windows locked, okay?" When he saw the look on her face, John added, "Do you want me to stay? Are you worried?"

"I'm not afraid, if that's what you're implying. I can take care of myself, sheriff. Now, go. I'll be fine." She pushed at him to go on out the door.

“I know you can take care of yourself. I just want you to know that I’m here if you want me.” He bent down to place a tender kiss on her lips.

“I know you’re here for me and I appreciate that. Uncle will sleep with one eye open, I’m sure.” He was out the door and almost off the porch when she stopped him, “Oh, wait, do I have an office or someplace I can do some work on a computer?”

“Of course you do. Come and see me in the morning and I’ll show you where it is.” With that he left and she found herself wishing for just a little bit that she’d asked him to stay.

Instead of going to bed, Ellie took a little time cleaning up their dinner dishes. Doing everyday tasks such as this helped free her mind and allowed the cobwebs to be dusted away. As she finished up and went down the hallway, Ellie stopped for one last look at the charts in the office. She plopped down on the big comfy chair and stared at the notes she’d made as well as the intruder’s notes on the chart about Rose. What could it possibly mean?

Fifteen

Upon waking, Ellie realized that her sleep hadn't been refreshing. As she tried to straighten the torn up bed, she tried to capture the tormenting dreams she'd had. As a child before coming to live with her uncle, Ellie would experience many upsetting dreams and even nightmares. She'd learned to wake herself up and think about pleasant and happy thoughts to dispel the darkness of those events. During last night, Ellie had to wake herself several times and ended up just lying there with her eyes wide open.

Even though she thought John might not be in his office, Ellie made the journey to the department at the crack of dawn. She could spend some time in the cafeteria if needed, she thought. As she stepped off the elevator and crossed the tile floor to his office, she could see the light on. Rose wasn't at her desk and for a moment Ellie was grateful. She knew the notes on her charts made her doubt the assistant's sincerity.

Ellie knocked lightly on the door to his office and entered as soon as she heard his voice. "John?"

"El! What are you doing here so early?" He rose and came around the desk to give her a hug.

"I had trouble sleeping and I decided to get an early start. Can you show me where I can work?" She felt a little out of whack and wanted some alone time.

"Sure. I had them set up an office just across the way." He led her out of his glass doored entrance directly across the hallway into a smaller office. "Well, will this do?"

Ellie looked around and appreciated the small, but very open office. She had the same glass door that allowed her to view the comings and goings in the hallway. There was a huge window behind the desk allowing the beautiful summer sunshine to flow in and fill the room with the warmth and beauty of the pines just across the street. "This will do just fine, John. Thank you so much."

"I'll leave you to it, then, unless you need my help."

"No, I actually have lots of research to do and to be honest, you'll just get in the way."

His laughter made her smile as John's good nature appreciated her candor. He left her to herself and crossed over to his office. He had an inner door that he could close should he want to, but for now, she noticed he left it open.

The techy guys were on top of their game as she had a computer and all the stuff needed to work in her new office. Ellie took her jacket off, and sat down at the desk. As she signed onto her laptop, Ellie noticed that John was watching her. This might not work, she thought to herself. It's going to be hard avoiding him to concentrate on her work. But before long, with her list in hand, Ellie was staring intently

at the information she was digging up on the screen before her.

Deeply entrenched in her research, Ellie didn't notice the various people coming and going down the hallway. Lunch came and went and still, she poured over the information on the screen. She printed page after page and made notes for future referral. Ellie was startled when John opened her door and popped his head into her office. "Ellie!" His tone of voice indicated it wasn't the first time he'd called her name.

"What? I'm sorry, I guess I didn't hear you." She waited for him to explain the interruption.

"Have you been in here all day? Did you have any lunch?" He stepped inside and closed the door.

"I didn't realize it was so late. I've found some really great stuff and just kept going. I wasn't hungry."

"I just stopped by to tell you that I have several meetings over at city hall and won't be done until later. I wondered if you wanted to meet for dinner or something afterwards." He was curious to hear about her research.

"I'll just call you, okay? I have a few more things I want to check and then I'll head home." Her answer showed John how distracted she was at the moment, so he crossed the room and gave her a little kiss on the head.

"Don't work too late. We'll meet up later. Gotta go!"

It wasn't very long after John had left her office when the email came through. Ellie couldn't believe her eyes when she read the results of her inquiry. She looked across the hallway to find Rose sitting at her

desk. A plan immediately started forming in her head. Quickly, Ellie scribbled a note on a pad and stuffed it in an envelope. She shut her computer down, grabbed all of her notes, and scurried over to John's office.

"Ellie, how's the research going?" Rose greeted her with less than enthusiasm.

"Just great! I know John's at meetings, but could you put this on his desk, so he'll see it when he gets back?" She handed the hastily scrawled note to Rose. Reluctantly, Rose put the envelope down to the side of her desk. "Sure, I'll make sure he gets it."

"Thanks so much. See you later." Ellie tried to act casual, but felt that her beating heart could be seen through her jacket. She shut the glass door behind herself and turned to give one last little wave to the assistant. Rose hadn't moved but was simply staring at the handwritten note lying on the corner of her desk. She didn't see Ellie wave and leave the office hallway.

Driving as fast but safely as she could, Ellie pulled into her driveway and headed straight to her uncle's home. She knocked briefly, but was too anxious to wait. As she opened the door, she could see her uncle watching the news and arguing with the people on the television. "Uncle! When will you figure out they can't hear you?"

"Hey, girl. What'd you doing here?"

"I need you to be a distraction."

He sat up straight before asking, "What are you up to?"

Ellie lifted the packet of papers and waved them triumphantly in the air. "I've got the solution to this case!"

He grinned from ear to ear and slowly rose from his favorite chair. "Really? Have you caught the culprit?"

"Not yet, that's what I need you for." She waited for her uncle to process what she was asking of him.

"What about John? You know he won't approve of this plan of yours, especially if it means putting yourself in harm's way."

"Uncle, I am not going to put myself or you in any danger. I've already baited the trap. I just need you to help me get the guilty party put behind bars." When she saw him hesitating even further, she added, "Please, Uncle. You can trust me to do this right. Besides, John is busy in some meetings and we need to move now."

"I'll go, but I don't approve of keeping this from John." Her uncle moved to put his boots and hat on and turned to her, "I'll meet you at your car."

She grabbed him in one of their unusual hugs and rushed out the door. "I have to grab something and then we'll be on the road."

Ellie hurried to her office and opened the gun safe. "Please be in there." She begged of the inanimate object. A huge smile crossed her face when she retrieved the Desperation Depot key from the box of evidence John had given her to hold. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" She quickly put the key in the pocket of her jeans, grabbed her extra gun and rushed out to meet her uncle.

As soon as they were underway, he asked, "Okay, spill the beans. Where we headed?"

"Jerome! Uncle, I've figured it all out and we may even solve the robbery of the century!"

"You mean you know where Bill Brennan's money is hidden?"

Ellie took the hour long car trip to Jerome to fill her uncle in on the research she'd been conducting all day. When she finally slowed down to enter the town of Jerome, Shotgun finally spoke. "I'm proud of you, girl. You've connected all the dots. But you still didn't tell me who the trap is baited for?" The sneaky grin on her face told him the answer. "You're not going to, are you? Well, this'll be fun. What do you want me to do?"

"I think that you should go in first and be that wonderfully charming man you always are. I'll be in but not for a bit. That way, they may not connect us as being together. It'll be safer for you."

"What about that bartender fellar? Won't he recognize you?"

"He would if he was going to be here. I called and he's off today, so whoever is behind the bar shouldn't know me."

"You sure you can take of yerself? I'm not totally helpless you know."

"Uncle, I would never call you helpless. You're here, aren't you?"

As she found a parking space a few doors down from the Depot, her uncle opened his door to get out. He stopped and patted her on her leg. "I'd never forgive myself if something happens to you. Be careful,

you hear?” With that he climbed from her car and leaning heavy on his cane, headed down the wooden sidewalk through the swinging doors of the saloon without looking back.

Ellie backed her car out of spot and turned up the street. She was going to window shop for a bit to give Shotgun time to establish himself at the bar. As she walked down the sidewalk, Ellie took the time to evaluate how busy the town was and to see if too many people would be in the way. During the slow walk back to the Depot, she noticed how few cars were parked in front. She was grateful for the lack of attendance as Ellie didn't know exactly how her confrontation was going to go down.

Squaring her shoulders, Ellie made sure her jacket covered both her weapon and her badge. She didn't want to raise any eyebrows with her entrance. Their plan had been that Shotgun would sit himself at the bar in a central place so he could see the entrance and then she would sit a few places away. Ellie waited a moment as she entered the darker interior of the saloon. It was a huge contrast to the sunny day outside as she allowed her eyes to adjust.

She looked to the bar and didn't see her uncle, but as she surveyed the room, her heart stopped. The room was entirely empty except for her uncle and another. Shotgun was sitting at a high top with the object of her search. It took all her strength to maintain a stoic look on her face as Ellie crossed the wooden floor to the table.

“Rose, you didn't waste any time getting here.”

“Well, well. I was just having a nice little talk with your uncle here.” The other woman’s voice was laced with irony.

“Girl, I think you’d better sit down. This one means business.” He pointed a crooked finger at Rose. The look on his face didn’t show any fear, but Ellie could hear it in his voice. Slowly she pulled out a stool next to her uncle and across from Rose. When she finally sat down, she could see that Rose had a gun in her lap.

“Armed are you?” Ellie hoped her voice sounded a lot more confident than she felt. “How’d you know this was my uncle?”

“Honey, you’re not messing with an amateur. I make sure I do my homework.”

“What now?” Ellie put her cards on the table.

“Well, honey, we’re waiting for John. I did like you told me to and left that note on his desk. He’ll be reading it about now and head right for this place. Have a glass of wine on the house. It’ll take him about an hour to get here.” Rose laughed a menacing sound and signaled the bartender to the table.

“Miss Rose, what can I get for you and your friends?” The young lady seemed oblivious to the tension around the table.

“Ellie? Shotgun? What can we get you?” She was playing the role of the perfect hostess.

“I don’t want anything.” Ellie’s brain was in full working mode, trying to figure a way out of this mess safely. She was deeply regretting bringing her uncle into such a threatening situation. I should have thought this through more, she thought to herself.

“Hell, I’ll have a beer.” Shotgun’s gravelly voice interrupted her thoughts. She looked to him and prayed he could read her mind. She hoped he knew she was telling him to be safe. He gave a slight nod as though they had just communicated. Her heart was full of love for this man.

“Sure you won’t have a glass of white wine? I know that’s your favorite.” Rose was enjoying the fact that she had Ellie off her game.

“Let my uncle go. He’s of no use to you.”

“Ahh, that’s where you’re wrong. It will keep you in check knowing that any moment I could cause him great harm.” Rose leaned in to finish her statement. “Don’t think for one minute that I won’t hurt him or you. You have something I want and as soon as the mighty sheriff gets here, we’ll play our game.”

A chill went down Ellie’s spine and she visibly shivered. This was a very sick individual sitting there calmly holding them hostage. She’d obviously underestimated this adversary.

The bartender brought back Shotgun’s beer and a glass of wine for Ellie. She was determined to keep her head straight and had no intention of clouding her judgment with alcohol. Rose took her drink from the young lady and spoke to her. “Dear, do me a favor and as soon as our other guest arrives, put that sign on the door and lock it. You can go home. I can handle it from here.”

“Are you sure, Miss Rose? I can stay and help with your private party if you want.”

It appeared that this was just another day in the life of The Desperation Depot. Ellie thought the name

was appropriate considering the situation they were in with Rose. "No, sweetie, you just lock up when the sheriff gets here and have a nice day off." Rose gave her a sweet smile, but Ellie could see that the look didn't reflect in her eyes.

As the bartender left their table, Rose put a cloth napkin on the table and pushed it towards Ellie. "Put your weapon in here and slowly push it back to me and no tricks."

Ellie did as she was instructed and placed her firearm in the folds of the napkin. As she pushed it slowly back to Rose, Ellie looked her straight in the eye. She didn't speak but sent a message of warning about the harm Rose had threatened.

"Oh, relax, Detective. If you all cooperate, everyone will come out of this just fine. It's a shame, though, you are just a day old as the newest detective on the staff and your first case is going to end so badly. I guess you won't get the position permanently, will you?" Rose lifted her glass in a mock toast as she enjoyed toying with Ellie's emotions.

Just then someone came in the front swinging doors and Ellie's hopes raised. It was short lived as a man and woman crossed into the bar. Rose signaled to the bartender who came around and greeted the young couple. "I'm sorry, folks, we're closing due to a private party. Here's a couple of drink tickets for tomorrow. Please come back then." She ushered them out the door.

"Isn't the waiting the worst part?" Rose asked.

"You're pure evil, lady." Shotgun took a slow sip of his beer. "Just wait till John gets here."

“Oh, I can’t hardly contain myself. I’ve waited for this day for over a year now.” Rose was undeterred.

“Why do you want to hurt John?” Ellie asked.

“Why not?” Was her only reply.

The time slipped by ever so slowly. There was no noise in the saloon, only the occasional clanging of bottles or glasses in the bar. Neither Ellie nor Shotgun attempted any conversation and Rose seemed content to make them suffer with their own thoughts. Finally, they all turned as the swinging doors opened slowly and John walked into the room. He came immediately to Ellie. “What in hell were you thinking? Why didn’t you wait for me?” Suddenly he realized that Rose was sitting there with a sarcastic grin on her face.

“Rose, what are you doing here?”

“Let me answer that one, John. I’d like you to meet Bill... Bill Brennan.” Ellie watched the myriad of emotions run across her handsome sheriff’s face.

“You’d better sit down, Sheriff, before you fall.” Rose laughed without humor in her voice. She clapped her hands together and spoke to Ellie. “Congratulations! You’ve accomplished what dozens of lawmen couldn’t figure out. I’m impressed.”

Ellie saw the look of complete surprise cross her uncle’s worn features and put her hand over his gnarled one. “Are you okay, uncle?”

“Girl, I’m completely flummoxed. How in the world did you figure this out?”

“I’d love for her to relate her tale, but I’m afraid we have more pressing things to do.” Rose interrupted

and signaled for the young bartender to lock the doors and leave.

"Have a seat, John. We're going to have a conversation as soon as we're alone." Rose got up and took the napkin holding Ellie's gun and went to stand close to John. "I'll take yours too." She opened the napkin to show him the weapon.

John slowly pulled his from the holster and handed it to Rose. "The other one, too." She indicated that he was holding out on her. With a dark, grimace on his face, the sheriff reached around to the back of his waist and pulled a smaller firearm and dropped it in the napkin. "You sure had me fooled, Rose, or should I call you Bill?"

"Oh, Rose is just fine as that's who I am now." She smiled up at him. "Funny what a ton of money can do for a person."

"What now?" He asked.

"Oh, my, another impatient one. She's going to give me the key and then as soon as I gather all my money, I'm going to disappear again." Rose stuck her hand out waiting for Ellie to hand over the key to the lock boxes. When she didn't move as fast as Rose had wanted, Rose stuck her gun into John's ribs. With a sharp intake of her breath, Ellie reached into her pocket and retrieved the key and reluctantly placed it into the open palm of their captor.

"What about us?" John asked the question no one wanted the answer to but they needed to know.

"Well, I think you all should see the entire Depot. I mean the things that the normal visitor doesn't get to see. You must know that this town is built on miles

and miles of tunnels dug for the mines. Oh, I can see by Ellie's expression that she has also done extensive work on the town of Jerome. Get up and go ahead of me and no funny business." She waved the gun openly now that there were no witnesses.

Rose led them past the bar and into the kitchen, where she opened a huge, solid door. She waved the gun and indicated that they should all enter. "You go first, Ellie, then your uncle, and finally I want to keep my aim on you John." As Ellie passed her uncle, he gave her a small nudge in the side. She didn't make any eye contact nor acknowledged the movement in any way. Not sure what it meant, but hopeful that he had a plan, Ellie turned to Rose. "Where do you want me to go?"

"When I bought this saloon, I found a very interesting fact about this pantry. Go to the end by the flour barrels and push on that third container."

When Ellie pushed, suddenly a wall opened up and they could all see another room. As she hesitated, Rose called from behind John, "Go on in! Don't be afraid!" Her evil laugh was heard in the small room.

Once everyone was in, Rose reached behind herself and shut the outer door to the pantry. It was dark, but only for a second as an automatic light turned on above their heads. "I found this little hideaway quite by accident one day. Isn't it marvelous?"

"Enough is enough, Rose. What do you intend to do with us?" John's voice showed little restraint as he pressed his authority. "Let them go. They can't hurt you."

“Oh, but you all can hurt me. Don’t you see, I’ve avoided the authorities for over twenty years and I don’t intend to get caught now, at least not by some two-bit lawman and his wanna be detective! Now reach up and take that drawbar from the door at the end of this room!” She instructed Ellie.

Ellie turned to look at the huge door at the end of the room. It reminded her of the doors in a castle with rusted hinges and a heavy, solid board resting on two brackets at the side. She struggled to lift the board so that they could open the door. John started to move forward, but Rose abruptly stopped him. “Oh, no you don’t. No funny business, remember?”

“You, uncle, you help her.”

“He can’t! Don’t you see that he’s hurting and needs his cane to lean on?” Ellie pleaded.

“Oh, my heart bleeds. Get over there and help her!” She ordered Shotgun.

With exaggerated effort, they stood side by side and worked at the heavy board. In the process, Shotgun managed to let Ellie know he had one of his old pistols tucked in the back of his jeans. When they finally succeeded to get the drawbar out of the way, they both stood to the side and Ellie managed to get the weapon in her hands. She quickly tucked it into the side of her jeans and turned so that Rose couldn’t see it.

“Now, open it and get inside.” She ordered.

One by one, they filed into another darkened room. Ellie could see they were on a landing and there was a long wooden staircase leading down into total darkness. Rose only put one foot into the room.

"I'll leave you to your new home. If you go down that stairway, you'll find some candles in the mine. This is only one of a few entrances to the miles of mine trails from a private building. If you travel long enough, you'll find a way out in a year or so! It's been fun, but I've got to go. You all stay and have a blast!" As she started to back out, Ellie grabbed the gun from her side and started to shoot at the evil woman. Rose raised her gun and shot wildly, striking John in the process. As soon as Ellie screamed, Rose quickly slammed the door shut and they could hear her struggling to put the drawbar back in its place.

"Oh, my God, John! Are you alright? Where are you hit?" She was instantly by his side and struggled to find the wound.

Shotgun went to the door and tried in vain to see if it would open. He looked down and there was a glimmer of light from below the solid wood. "Looks like you might have hit her, Ellie. I can see some drops of blood." He went to John's side and helped Ellie look for the wound. Stumbling in the dark, hindered their ability to see how bad John was shot. "John, you've got to help us. Where are you hit?" Shotgun demanded of the slumping man. John was sliding down the wall into a sitting position on the floor.

"Use your phone, Uncle, and give me some light." She ordered. When he didn't react, Ellie looked up into his eyes. "Girl, I don't have my phone. She took it!"

"Mine, too." She sat on the floor next to the sheriff. "John, can you help us? Where are you hit?"

“It’s just a flesh wound in my arm. I’ll be fine. I’ve gotten worse over the years. Give me just a minute and we’ll come up with a plan.” His voice sounded weak.

“You wouldn’t lie to a girl, would you?” Ellie was trying hard to remain calm, but as she felt over his arm, there was so much blood.

“Uncle, do you think you can take care of him while I go down those steps and see if there really are some candles?” She knew that John was hurt much worse than he was letting on and if they didn’t get something to stop the blood, they would have more problems to deal with.

“Yes, go! We’ll be fine.” Shotgun leaned over as well as he could and motioned her to get busy.

Slowly, step by step, Ellie made her way down the rickety staircase. Several times, she had to stop and keep herself from falling. At one time, the board she stepped on gave way and Ellie struggled to keep upright. Finally she found herself stepping down onto a dirt floor. Feeling around in the dark, Ellie prayed that the only living thing in the darkness was herself. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to be trapped in another mine!” With a new determination, Ellie walked around in what seemed a small room. Feeling her way around, she felt a shelf on the wall. Carefully, she ran her hand over the rough board and was elated that she found several items. Ellie grabbed everything and went to go back up the stairs, trying to be careful but as fast as she could.

“What’d you find?” Her uncle’s voice greeted Ellie in the dark.

“I found this stuff. I’m not even sure what everything is, but surely it’s something we can use.” She let her found treasures drop on the floor next to John.

John reached out and ran his good hand over the things on the floor. “El, I think this is a candle. Did you find any matches?”

“I’m not sure.” Her frustration was showing in her curt answer. “I’m doing the best I can.”

“I know what this is. It’s a miner’s axe. It’s not in very good shape, but maybe this can help us break through.” Shotgun was hopeful.

“Uncle, that door is solid! A little, old axe isn’t going to break through that door.” She sat down on the floor next to John and put her hand up to his head, checking for a fever.

“Girl, use your head. I’m not going to even try to break down that door, but the wall next to it, should be very old.” Her uncle wanted to try and help their situation.

“Or it could be red brick.” John’s voice was faint as he continued, “A lot of these old buildings were made of adobe brick.”

“Well, let’s hope this one was made of wooden framework.” Shotgun started picking his way through the wall next to the door.

Ellie straightened up and reached under her blouse. She deftly slipped off her bra and reached over to the sheriff. “John, let’s try to use this to make a tourniquet. It’ll help stop the flow of blood.”

His weak laugh told volumes. Ellie gently lifted his arm and put her bra around his shoulder and attempted to tighten it around the area. “John, we’re

going to get out of this. I refuse to be trapped in another mine again!" She hoped her protest sounded more positive than she really felt.

The sound of Shotgun tapping away at the wall was the only noise they heard for quite a while. With the restaurant closed, there was no hope of any of the kitchen staff hearing them. Ellie kept a watchful eye on John, but grew restless with the knowledge that his wounds were much more serious than first thought.

"Uncle, are you having any luck?" She was desperate to get out of their prison and get the sheriff the help he needed. "Girl, I'm getting there. We're in luck, it's not brick, thank God."

"Ellie, tell me how you figured out that Rose was Bill Brennan." John's voice was weak but clear.

"I first looked at the birth records and found there were Rosa and Rose McMillan, but Rose was still born. It wasn't hard then to figure out that Bill used Rosa to help him assume Rose's persona. The real clincher was when I dug through the county records and found out that a small corporation bought the Depot those five or six years ago. It was registered to RMBB, LLC. In Las Vegas. Upon further digging, I found that Rose was the principal in that company. So, I asked myself, how did an administrative assistant have enough money to pay cash for this place?"

"Good work, El. Why didn't you let me know you were planning this trap?"

"But I did! Well, sort of. I knew you were in those meetings and wouldn't answer a call. If you check

your phone, you'll see I left a text message. How are you feeling now?"

"I'm okay." Was all he could say.

She knew he was lying as she reached for the injured spot on his arm. There was so much blood. John was growing weaker by the minute. "Uncle! We've got to get him out of here!"

Just then Shotgun punched a small hole through the wall next to the solid door. "Okay! I've got a tiny opening. I just have to make it large enough for you to get your arm through and release that bar."

Shotgun stopped his hammering as he thought he heard a noise on the other side of the wall. "Help!" He hollered through the little opening. "Help! We're in here!" He shouted not knowing if it was help or more danger in the other room.

Sixteen

There was a lot of noise and in just minutes the heavy door swung open. Shotgun and Ellie stood to the side until they could see who was out there. As soon as she heard the male voice, Ellie stepped in view. "Carson! Oh, thank God." Putting aside her shock at seeing Carson Layne in the doorway, Ellie added, "Quick, John's wounded and needs immediate medical attention!" Just then the small pantry room filled with people. She could see the local police as well as some medical personnel.

Ellie stepped into the pantry to allow room for the gurney and the EMTs. She reached for her uncle and both of them made their way into the kitchen. They waited by the counter until she could see the medical crew finally bringing John into the larger room.

"How is he doing? He's lost a lot of blood." She was extremely worried.

"Nice job with the tourniquet." One of the EMTs commented and indicated her bra. "We're going to get him into the ambulance and then we can assess the damage. This tourniquet was a good idea; it helped slow down the loss of blood." Just then John raised his good hand and indicated that he wanted Ellie to lean down.

Ellie tried to stop the flow of tears as she leaned down to hear the words John spoke breathlessly. "My last official duty as sheriff is to fire you!"

She grinned at his words and added her own. "You can't fire me – I quit!" With that she placed a kiss on his lips. "We'll have plenty of time to decide who's got what authority."

She watched as he was loaded into the ambulance and when she saw the medical team working on him, Ellie wanted some answers. "Uncle, stay with him while I go and find out what the hell is going on here!" Her uncle quickly complied.

Ellie worked her way back into the now crowded saloon, looking for Carson. Upon seeing him in deep conversation with what she presumed was the local police chief, she quickly asserted herself into the middle of the two men. "Okay, spill the beans! What are you doing here?"

"You're welcome, Ellie." Carson's sarcasm wasn't wasted on her.

"You know I'm grateful, but, Mister, you have a lot of explaining to do." She wasn't going to budge an inch.

"As do you, detective!" Carson shot right back.

"Okay, tit for tat. I go first!" She stood there with her arms crossed and determination on her face. "Who the hell are you?" She demanded.

"You know who I am, I'm special agent Carson Layne. I didn't completely retire, I am on a restricted assignment. Harold was my partner and friend and the agency allowed me to take on his death as a 'last' case." He showed her his official badge. "My turn,

what the hell did you think you were doing sticking your nose into our investigation?"

"In case you didn't realize, I'm involved up to my eyeballs in 'your' case. Over a year ago, I was the one kidnapped and beaten in the head. I have every right to be a part of this situation. My turn. Did you get Rose?" She wanted this to be over and capturing Rose or Bill was a crucial part to put an end to this misery.

"Yes, we got her driving down to Cottonwood with a trunk full of money." He was proud of the capture.

"Thanks to my 'interference', huh?" She goaded him.

"Okay, I'll give you that one. You want credit for solving this case, right?"

She took a deep, cleansing breath before answering the arrogant man standing before her. "Credit has nothing to do with it. I wanted to find out what happened to Deputy Chuck and one thing lead to another and before I knew it, I was knee deep in this mess."

"You're good, I'll give you that. Your instincts found things that we hadn't been able to." He seemed to wind down his personality a bit before continuing, "I'm grateful, Ellie, really I am."

"I still have a ton of questions, but I need to go and check on John. We'll have time later to finish this conversation." With that she turned and practically ran to the ambulance. Shotgun was standing just outside the closed door of the emergency vehicle.

"Uncle?"

"He's going to be fine, girl. He's lost a lot of blood but they feel they have him stabilized enough to take

the ride down to Cottonwood. Do you want to ride with him?"

"I want to talk with John." She pounded on the door to get the attention of the EMTs.

As they allowed her entrance, Ellie went and sat beside the gurney. John's eyes were closed but she could see his breathing seemed steady but shallow. "John?" Her voice choked as all her bravado suddenly left her body.

"I'm fine, El. Thanks to your lovely tourniquet." He tried to laugh but seemed to lack enough energy to do so.

"Don't talk. I just wanted you to know that they caught Rose and all of the money that's left. John, I'm so sorry. I know it was my actions that got you shot." With those words, she finally released the tears. "I'm sorry." The broken words came again as she bowed her head.

John reached up with his good arm and patted the top of her head. "It's okay. Go. Finish this job for us. I'll be okay."

Ellie stretched to give him a kiss through all the breathing apparatus. "I'll come to the hospital as soon as I get done here. I love you, John."

"I love you, too."

It was all she could do to leave him in the ambulance, but Ellie knew she had a job to finish and John wouldn't have it any other way. As she stepped down, her uncle was right there to help her. "Is he gonna be alright?"

“Yes, Uncle, he’s got some blood loss but other than that I think he’ll pull through. We’ve got some work to finish. Ready to help me?”

“You betcha!” Her uncle took the lead and together they went back into the Depot. The room was swarming with agents, police and forensic type personnel. The two of them went up to Carson.

“Carson, I’d like permission to search the tunnel entrance.” Ellie felt it would help grease the wheel by asking for his consent. She wouldn’t bother explaining to him the feeling she had about the tunnel and that there was more down there that needed to be researched. He wouldn’t understand.

“I don’t see a reason why, there’s nothing down there that would help. But, knock yourself out.” He then instructed a man standing close to give her two flashlights. “You will let me know if you find something?” The sarcasm in his voice was pointed.

“Absolutely.” Ellie gave him a mock salute and left the room along with her uncle.

She opened the drawbar and taking a deep breath, walked into the room they were locked in just a while ago. “Uncle, you can’t take those steps, but you can use your flashlight to help me get some light down there.”

“What do you expect to find?”

“I’m not sure, but just call it a gut feeling.”

“You seem to be doing pretty good with those instincts of yours. Be careful.” Shotgun then lit his torch and shined the bright beam as Ellie carefully took the rickety stairs once more.

She was surprised to see that the area was much larger than it had felt before. She went to the shelf where she'd found the miner's axe and checked out if it held anything else of value. There were matches and a small almost burnt out candle that she'd missed earlier. "Oh, that would've been nice to have."

Suddenly and without any warning, Ellie felt a cold draft on the back of her neck. She stood completely still and allowed the feeling to wash over her body. Someone is down here, she thought, as her heart started racing. "Uncle, can you see me?" She didn't raise her voice but wanted his confirmation.

"Yes, Girl, I see you. You doing okay?"

"Do you see anything, anyone else?"

"Are you daft? All I see is you. Maybe you should listen to Carson and just get out of there. I don't like it."

Ellie didn't respond but instead concentrated on her surroundings. She turned ever so slowly just in time to see a fluorescent green glow move over to her right. Memories of the key glowing on the nightstand during their stay earlier came surging forward. The light seemed to be moving into another area of the room and without hesitation, Ellie followed slowly. She couldn't get a definite idea of a person, but something was definitely happening to encourage her to investigate.

"Are you coming back up?" Her uncle's voice penetrated the stillness of the area.

"Not just yet. Try to keep your light shining on this space."

“I can hear you now, but I’ve lost sight of you. I don’t like this, Girl.”

She stepped into a corner of the huge space as she followed the green glow. Ellie couldn’t believe her eyes. Standing before her was a soft, blurry image of a lady dressed in the costume of days gone by. “Magdalena?” Ellie spoke so softly, she could barely hear her own voice.

The shadowy figure didn’t respond, but simply stretched her arm out to indicate a bundle of something lying on the floor. “Oh, this can’t be happening. I don’t believe in ghosts. Do I?”

When Ellie started to slowly take a step forward, the image disappeared. For another few seconds, she stood transfixed in the same spot. Shaking her head to clear her wayward thoughts, Ellie moved closer to the package in the corner. “Oh, my God!”

She quickly stepped backwards to get away, almost tripping but deftly caught herself and when she finally got back into the main area, hollered up to her uncle.

“Uncle, quick get everyone out of the Depot. I think there’s a bomb down here and if I correctly read the time, we haven’t got but a few minutes. Hurry!”

“You come up here, right now!” Shotgun ordered his niece.

“I’m on my way. Get moving! Uncle, we all need to get out of here.”

Without caution, she took the wobbly steps and was right behind her uncle. She ran up to Carson, “Get everyone out of here! There’s a bomb in the tunnel and we haven’t much time.”

It took a few seconds for Carson to react. "Are you sure?" The look on his face was skeptical.

"I went through all the police training and you've got to believe me! Get out now!" She ordered him and the people standing around, gawking at her declaration. "I know a bomb when I see one!"

Carson saw the seriousness on her face and started ordering people out of the building. It seemed to take forever, but in no time at all, it was just Ellie, her uncle, and Carson standing in the saloon. "Go, Uncle. We're right behind you."

Just then over Carson's shoulder, standing in the doorway to the kitchen, she saw the image again. Magdalena gave a small wave and then disappeared.

Just as Carson and Ellie were heading towards the swinging doors, a huge explosion sounded from below causing them to break into a run. As they stepped on the front sidewalk, a blast blew them onto the street and debris started falling from the building. Fire erupted, and the noise was deafening as Ellie tried to get herself in an upright position. Her ears were ringing and she felt blood running down her neck, her legs felt too weak to support her body, and her right arm refused to cooperate, but Ellie managed to start belly crawling further away. Ellie looked for Carson and could see he too was moving on his hands and knees.

Just then strong hands reached for her and Ellie looked to see one of the local policemen helping her to her feet. With his arms around her, they managed to get at a reasonably safe distance away and turned around to look at the entire building on fire and

collapsing in a huge heap of flaming debris. The sirens from the fire engine could be heard coming down the street. Jerome in all of its history had burned down several times, so speed was of the essence in order to prevent a disaster from levelling the entire town.

Her rescuer found a bench and as he placed her gently down, Ellie looked for her uncle and Carson. She could see both of them and all seemed alright. "Ma'am, I think your arm is broken." The young officer looked around and upon seeing a medical person, hollered. "Joe, come over here. I think her arm is broken. She needs some immediate attention!"

Shotgun had managed to get out before her and seemed no worse for the wear. He had lost his cane, but hobbled towards his niece as fast as he could. He sat down and pushed her hair back on her forehead. She was bleeding, but it didn't seem to be uncontrollable. "Eleanor, this is too much for an old man like me. I couldn't live with myself if something were to happen to you."

Ellie lay her head on his slender shoulder. "Uncle, I'm so tired. This case has consumed me and I just want to go to sleep for a week." With that, she passed out and if it hadn't been for the EMT, Ellie would have fallen off the bench onto the dirt ground.

"Wake up, pretty lady." Through a cloud of fog in her head, Ellie heard the pleading in the male voice. "It's time to open your eyes and face the world."

"Hey, Girl, open up and look at us." Shotgun's gravelly voice penetrated further into her subconscious. Struggling against what felt like a strong current, Ellie

managed to slowly open her eyes and as the fog cleared and her focus sharpened, she could see the two men on either side of her hospital bed. She looked from one to the other, but her eyes teared when she could clearly see John.

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you. Am I okay?” She could barely be heard.

“You’re going to be fine.” Her uncle was the first to respond but not before looking over to John for confirmation.

Ellie didn’t notice the looks between them, but as she went to move herself further up in the bed, she grimaced at the pain. “I think you’re trying to fool me, Uncle. What is this?” She raised her right arm and indicated the cast covering most of it.

“Just lie still. You’ve been pretty beaten up and need to take it easy.” Her uncle’s voice was firm but tinged with love.

Ellie turned to look over at John. “How are you? Shouldn’t you be in bed too?”

“I was but we needed to make sure you were alright.” He sat down in the chair next to her bed. “It was a clean shot. It went straight through with very little damage.” He indicated the bandages on his left arm.

“How long have I been out?” She felt the cobwebs starting to clear out of her head.

“Just a little over 48 hours.”

“I’ve been out for two days!” She was completely surprised. “What happened with the fire? What did they do with Rose?”

“Glad to see you awake.” Came Carson’s voice from the doorway. As he sauntered into her room, Ellie couldn’t help the feelings of dislike from rising in her system. She fought them down and tried to smile.

“Carson, just the man we need to see. You can fill us all in on the case.” She still needed closure.

“Well, technically, you are all civilians and I shouldn’t be sharing information.”

Ellie’s memory snapped into the forefront and she turned to confront John. “What the hell do you mean your last official act as sheriff was to fire me?”

“Took you long enough.” John laughed. “Carson’s right. The meeting I was at was to tender my resignation with the mayor. I tried to tell you, El. There’s other things I want to do. Besides, if I remember correctly, you quit!”

“Can you two stop long enough for this man to fill us in on the details?” Shotgun interrupted their discussion.

Carson had pulled up the last chair in the room and waited for them to listen. “The Depot was completely destroyed but they managed to keep damage to other buildings at a minimum. Rose is being held in your jail in Prescott until we can figure out which jurisdiction will have the final authority.”

“Are you keeping her in the women’s side or the men’s?” Ellie couldn’t resist. Seeing the look on Carson’s face, she looked to John. “You didn’t tell him?”

“I wanted to save that little jewel of information so you could be the one to share it with him.” John’s rich laughter was a welcome sound in the room.

“Withholding information again, Detective?” Carson’s tone was one of teasing.

“Oh, Carson, you have no idea who you’re holding, do you?” Ellie played along.

“Enlighten me, please.”

“Rose is really Bill Brennan. You know, the one and only robbery suspect of The Stardust in 1992?”

They all laughed at the look of amazement on his face. Carson was totally stumped. “Are you sure you two want to quit the law enforcement business? You are a great team!”

Ellie felt her uncle place his hand on her shoulder. He had been worried and she didn’t feel she could place him in that situation ever again. “I’ve had a great time, but, I’m with John. There are other things I want to do.” Her uncle squeezed her shoulder in agreement.

“I hope one of those things is that you want to marry me.” John spoke with tenderness and reached across her bed for Shotgun to hand him a jewelry case. “I had your uncle hold this for me. This isn’t exactly the proposal I had planned. I know you deserve all the bells and whistles, you know, flowers and champagne, but I love you, Ellie, and can’t wait. Will you marry me?”

Epilogue

One week later.

“Come on, Uncle. John’s here and waiting for us.”

“Don’t get yourself in a tizzy, Girl. I’m coming.” Shotgun reached for his hat on the rack and together they walked out to the waiting vehicle.

John came around to open her door and give her a big kiss. “Are you up to this?”

“Sure! We haven’t had time for family and friends for a while and I’m definitely ready for some down time. It was great of Tuck and Aubrie to invite us all for a barbecue at their house.” She got in and they started the short journey to the Hassayampa Lake.

A little bit later, John pulled his SUV up to the front circle of the beautiful little Bed and Breakfast. A soft breeze was blowing but the weather was warm even for the middle of summer.

Aubrie and Tuck came out as soon as they heard the vehicle to greet their guests. Ellie could see the baby bump starting to form under her best friend’s blouse. Tuck had two beers in his hand. He quickly handed one to John and Shotgun. “Welcome! It’s time to celebrate!”

Aubrie came forward and grabbed Ellie’s hand. “Let me see it!” She indicated the beautiful ring on

Ellie's left hand. Both women admired the sparkle of the diamond that John had placed on Ellie's hand after she agreed to marry him.

"Come on in, everyone! We've got some snacks for starters!" Tuck led the way into their homestead. They all headed to the parlor where a table was laden with what looked like tons of appetizers. As they got into the room, Ellie noticed Phil and Betsy were seated over by the window seat.

"Betsy! It's so great to see you. How are you feeling?" She placed a light kiss on the older woman's cheek.

"I'm just fine! Everyone fusses so, but I am getting better each day." Betsy looked at her husband. "This one worries too much."

"Everyone help yourself to snacks. We're not going to eat for a little bit, but you all can see Aubrie outdid herself. Now, what's everyone drinking?" Tuck headed over to the bar. He donned a comical apron and everyone laughed. The homemade apron showed several cowboys without shirts showing off their rock hard abs.

"Did you make that, Aubrie?" Ellie asked.

"Yes, isn't it just a hoot!"

In no time at all, the room was full of conversation and laughter. It felt good to be able to relax and enjoy the company of good friends. Ellie adjusted the sling on her right arm but grabbed her glass of wine with her left hand, but before she could drink Tuck made an announcement.

"Everyone, I'd like to propose we salute our two heroes! Looks like they solved the case of the century."

All in the room raised their glasses but just before they could respond, Carson entered the party.

“Carson! Come and get a drink. We were just about to toast John and Ellie!”

“I’d like that.” He took the cold beer offered.

“Again, to the best team of crime fighters I know!” Tuck continued.

“Here! Here!” All agreed including Carson.

“So what happens now?” Phil asked. “I heard you both quit the law enforcement business.”

John and Ellie looked to each other before he answered. “Yes, we’ve both decided that there are other things we’d like to do.”

“Like what?” Aubrie asked.

Ellie laughed a little before answering. “Don’t think we’ve lost our minds, but we bought what was left of The Desperation Depot. We’re going to rebuild and become hotel owners!”

“You have lost your minds!” Phil spoke his thoughts out loud.

John grinned and confirmed what Ellie had said. “We fell in love with the place and we know that we can rebuild it into a fine place for Jerome. I like working with my hands and this one is great as a helper.” He pretended great pain when she poked him in the ribs.

“There’s only one thing we didn’t prove, though.” Ellie’s voice was sad when she looked to Tuck. “We couldn’t find any evidence to connect Rose or Bill to your stepfather’s death. We don’t know how the chips got here in your attic and Rose isn’t cooperating very much.”

Carson spoke up. "For those of you that don't know. Bill Brennan and Rose are one and the same. When the authorities had searched his Las Vegas apartment, they found all sorts of books on how to change your identity. I guess he took it to the extreme and became Rose. It seems Rose was in this area at that time, but we've found nothing to put her near Harold."

Aubrie suddenly jumped up from her chair. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! I have the connection." With that she raced from the room and returned quickly with a stack of rather worn books. "These are my aunt's journals. I've been reading them because I can't do much physical activity right now."

"Sweetie, I don't think we're following your thought process." Tuck spoke to his wife.

"Don't you see! Auntie wrote in her journal every night, recording the day's events. I just came across the ones that covered the time when Harold was here just before he disappeared." She opened one of the cloth covered books and scanned through the pages.

"Here! Listen to this!" Aubrie read from her aunt's daily journal.

"Had a rather strange visitor today. She said her car broke down and she had walked several miles to my home. I welcomed her as anyone would and invited Rose to stay at the house as long as she needed. What was most unusual was the fact that she carried a rather large bag. It looked very heavy, but when I offered to help her, she declined adamantly and pulled the bag closer to her body. Oh, well.

Some people are very possessive about their belongings. Harold is supposed to be back from town any time now. Must go and fix dinner."

"That's not the only entry. A few days later, she wrote this." Aubrie continued.

"My visitor, Rose, seems rather put off with Harold. He has been nothing but polite, but she doesn't want anything to do with him. I thought I heard the attic door, but when I went to investigate, I didn't see anything but Rose coming out of her room. Something is not quite right with her. She hasn't made any attempt to get her car fixed and appears to be staying longer than I thought. Oh, well. I always help when I can."

"There was one more entry and I think you'll all agree that this is most damning." Aubrie's voice broke when she started to read the last journal note.

"Harold's gone. I don't know when he left. That's not like him. He always tells me good-bye and gives a little kiss. Funny thing, Rose is also gone. No goodbye, no thank you, nothing. All of this is very weird. Perhaps I should call the sheriff. I'll think about it for a day or two."

There was silence in the room. Each person seemed to be digesting the entries in the journal and coming up with their own conclusions. Tuck reached

over and gave his wife a little hug. "Well? What do you all think?"

Carson cleared his throat and spoke first. "I think we can use this to coax a confession from Rose. We now know how the chips got into the attic. We know that Harold was here following a lead and Rose accidentally stumbled into the scene, or did she? That puts her right in the middle of his disappearance."

"Then, that about wraps it all up. I am truly sorry about your dad, Tuck." John finally added his thoughts. "I can leave office with a clean conscience and start my new life with this beautiful woman." He hugged Ellie to his side.

"Are you two really going to rebuild The Depot?" Phil asked again. "It seems such a waste of your talents as detectives."

"I might have a solution for that." Carson interjected. "I am starting my own investigative service and will be assisting various governmental agencies when needed. I could use a pair like you two."

John looked at his bride to be. "First things first, Carson. I have to get this woman to the altar and then we'll talk about what's ahead."

"Let's go to city hall tomorrow, Sheriff! I'm ready!"

Everyone raised their glasses to toast the couple.

About the Author

A professor on the path to her Master's degree posed this question – “If you were arrested today for something you are passionate about, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” B. B. Montgomery's passion for writing spans back to her childhood. As a human resources trainer for over 25 years as well as an instructor at the local community college, she has written numerous facilitator's guides, participant guides, and collateral pertinent to the subject being taught in her classes. She finally found the time to pursue her passion, dust the manuscripts sitting on her bookshelves, and finish what she started years ago. Yes, there is enough evidence! She lives in Surprise, AZ with the love of her life!

Other books by B.B. Montgomery

A Fast Affair
Day Trip Destiny
Love is a Dam Mystery