

# Spirits and Love

Rebuilding the Desperation Depot

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ISBN: 9798462299674

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B. B. MONTGOMERY



## **Acknowledgments**

This book is the last of The Ante Up Series and saying goodbye is hard to do. They say it takes a village to raise a child. I think that very same thought applies to writing my books. Tenita is my editor, my friend and one of the hardest working women I know. Paul is working rigorously to put his amazing voice to the audio book and the promo videos. Deb is not only my cover designer, but recently has published her own books under the pseudonym of Lewis Kirts. I wish her the best of luck. My daughter, Tina, created the lyrics for a song used at the end of the book. Bob has taken a more active part in creating this tale of mystery and fun. He is the best when it comes to supporting my efforts. I thank each and every one of you!



## Prologue

“Are you sure it’s safe now?” Ellie stood next to John on the sidewalk across the street from the huge gaping hole where The Desperation Depot Hotel and Saloon had once stood. The sun was rising just beyond the jagged walls of their investment, giving a surreal yellow background to the ragged walls left standing. Not all was lost, but it certainly looked like an enormous amount of work was needed to restore the grand lady to her former status as a prominent structure in the mining town of Jerome, Arizona.

“Yes, I talked with the engineers and,” John pointed to the metal poles supporting the inner walls, “see those beams, they’re holding things together until we get the front wall rebuilt. The city inspector has also approved the stability of the building. We’re good to go. I got the permits all approved.”

The early morning hours were just a bit cool at this time in March. The winter had been extremely mild and with the warming of the climate, both Ellie and John were eager to start the rebuild on the hotel. “What else did the engineer say?”

“Most of the damage from the bomb was limited to the cellar, the kitchen and the front half of the lobby. It’s a good thing that Bill or Rose, whatever you want to call him or her, didn’t know much about making a

bomb. It could've wiped out the entire building and half the city block."

John was referring to their narrow escape from death months earlier. John Clarke, had been the sheriff of Yavapai County for years and was mentoring Ellie Parker, an upcoming deputy when their paths crossed with Bill Brennan. Bill had changed identities completely and became Rose after he successfully robbed the Stardust Casino in 1982. Following a trail of stolen poker chips, the two ended up as captives in The Desperation Depot as their intended target planned to blow them up along with any evidence that would link him to the robbery and murder of one of the sheriff's deputies.

"That company you hired to clear the debris did a good job." She commented. "I'm glad we didn't have to do that part."

"They hauled off several huge dumpsters and as you can see, we're now ready to get to work." His enthusiasm was evident in his voice. "Ellie, this is something I've always wanted to do. Just imagine how wonderful we can make The Depot again. You don't have any regrets quitting the sheriff's office, do you?" He looked to the woman standing near him. Years earlier, Ellie and John had been in a relationship that ended poorly. When she came back to Prescott from Las Vegas, the fire between them sparked and grew into something strong and good.

"No, I'm glad we're doing this together." She returned John's smile. "When do we start?"

"That's why we're here today. Let's go over there and I'll show you the plans I've had drawn up." John

took her by the hand and together they crossed the busy street. The town of Jerome is a major tourist destination and on any given day, traffic could be hectic.

“We can’t go in here, can we?” She indicated the chain link construction fence blocking the entire front of the hotel.

“No, I’ve made arrangements to get in through the back. I had the guys put in a temporary door in the lower hallway that we can use for now.” He retrieved a big ring of keys and soon they walked into the space.

The wood floors had been scratched and in some places scorched by the after effects of the bomb. The creaking of the wood beneath their footsteps made Ellie walk a little more carefully. “Are you positive that this is safe?” She stopped at the end of the hallway and looked over the edge at the basement area below.

“Oh my, John. We have so much to do. Where in the world do we begin?”

“Right here.” John beckoned Ellie to join him at the improvised table. A piece of plywood had been placed over two sawhorses and on top of it was a huge roll of blueprints.

“I’m not sure I know anything about reading blueprints.” She hesitated, but bent over the page on display.

John proudly pointed to the drawing on the first chart. “This is how The Depot will look once we rebuild the front. Isn’t it going to be great? This is called the elevation page.”

Ellie looked at the details and admired the strokes on the page. “This is great! It’s a lot different than the old building, isn’t it?”

“Do you approve? I mean, you’re an equal partner in this venture and I want to make sure that you’re on board with the changes. I wanted to keep the rustic look that fits in with the town, but I also wanted to make some distinctive changes that would entice people to see what’s inside.” He pointed to the larger upper deck area. “I figured that when great weather is here, we can use this outside deck to host large parties. Underneath that deck, we could set up outside tables for the various happenings this town has, like parades and you know the famous Halloween events. The tourists love to sit outside and enjoy our beautiful climate.”

Ellie looked up to meet his gaze. “You’re very excited about this, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Aren’t you?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t have invested my money if I didn’t want to make this a success. I like the changes.”

John leaned down and placed a kiss on her lips. “What about the changes in our lives, Ellie? When do you want to get married? I know we thought about doing it right after we closed that case, but I was thinking that we could get married just before the grand reopening. What’d you think?”

She laughed at his fervor. “I think it sounds great, if we’re still speaking when we get through the rebuilding of this space. You know that lots of couples have difficulties trying to do a simple remodel on

their house.” She gestured with her hands, “This is major.”

“I know that there will be disagreements on how to proceed, but we’re so good together, I can’t imagine anything that would stop me from loving you as much as I do right now.”



## One

“Knock, knock,” came the voice from the front door.

“Aubrie, come in!” Ellie greeted her friend as she held the door open to accommodate both her and the baby carrier. “How’s little Dillon?” She took the baby from his carrier and held him close to her. “He smells so good. Why is that? Why do babies always smell sweet?”

Her best friend laughed. “Trust me, he isn’t always sweet smelling. You should be around when diaper changing time comes. By the way, love the new hair color. What exactly is that called?”

“Well, you know me. I tried the blonde thing, then the highlight/lowligh thing and so now I thought I’d try the almost black thing.” She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “I see this little guy has your red hair and you’ve lost all the baby weight.” The other woman beamed at the reference to her compliments. “I’ve had to work hard with that. Yes, he definitely appears to be leaning towards my red roots.”

Aubrie followed her taller friend to the kitchen where they sat down at the table. Once drinks were offered, she asked, “So, you’re really moving to Jerome? Where are you going to stay? What about your uncle?”

“John has worked all week to get the two rooms at the back of the hotel ready for us. The smaller room is for Shotgun and we’ll take the larger one for now.”

“I still can’t get used to calling him Shotgun after all this time.” Aubrie chuckled. “Shotgun Willie. It sounds like a character out of an old western movie. What is his real name anyway?”

“His name is William Parker.” Ellie replied.

“Isn’t that the real name of Billy the Kid?”

After curbing her laughter, Ellie answered. “No, he used several names but William H. Bonney was the one most people knew. My uncle is a character all right, but I love him and wouldn’t make this move without him.”

“He’s okay with it?”

“Oh, yeah. He realizes that he can’t do much in the way of construction, but he can do phone work and help round up the needed supplies. He sees himself as the local eccentric that people will love to come and talk with once we open.”

“Oh, I can definitely see him in that role. Are you really ready to get your hands dirty?” Aubrie asked.

“You should know me by now. You and I haven’t got a lot of years as friends but we have a lot of history. Remember being kidnapped by Deputy Chuck? That was a horrible and scary time, but we kept our heads and are here now to talk about it.”

“Thanks to you and your cool head. I didn’t mean to imply that you can’t do this type of work. You’re the most capable woman I know. I was just wondering about you and John working so closely together. How’s that going to be?”

“Funny you should ask. We had a conversation about that and he seems to think we’ll be fine.” Ellie repeated the conversation she’d had with John the week before.

“Can I ask a personal question? You can say no, if you don’t want me to.” Aubrie said cautiously.

“Shoot. You and I are close enough to be honest with each other.”

“Why haven’t you and John gotten married? We all thought you would go to city hall after you both got out of the hospital.” She squirmed, before adding, “I know it’s none of my business, but woman to woman, I was just curious.”

“Boy, you’re right on today. We had that conversation too. We agreed that once the Depot was finished and before we open to the public, we’d have a ceremony and invite all of you to witness. Now, I have a question for you.”

“Sure.”

“Do you still sew? Do you have time to help with redecorating the rooms at the hotel? I’m not so good with those sorts of things and I’d love your help.” Ellie prompted her friend.

With a huge grin, Aubrie agreed. “I’d love to! You know how good our Bed and Breakfast turned out. What sort of décor were you thinking of?”

“I knew I’d asked the right person. Why don’t you call and give me some time next week that you can come over and see for yourself. It’s going to be very hectic though and I don’t know how this little one will do with the commotion.” Dillon had fallen asleep and she snuggled him closer to her own body.

“Oh, that’s okay. I think I can get Phil and Betsy to watch him.”

“How is Betsy doing?” She asked tentatively.

“About the same but we gave Phil the option to retire. He took it and now they live in the cottage just like they should.” Aubrie said. “We think of them as the grandparents we don’t have and they love it. Tuck hired a guy and he fills in with the day to day repairs. My man still handles the weekend work.”

“So, you’ll call me and I’ll know when to expect you.” Ellie was pleased that her friend agreed to help with the decorating part of their project.

“What are you going to do about your house here?” Aubrie asked.

“I’ve interviewed some people and have settled on a nice couple. They seem really nice and responsible. I think we’ll leave Shotgun’s little apartment vacant for now.”

“I’ll miss having you here in Prescott.”

“Aubrie, it’s not that far to Jerome. You and Tuck and the little one here could come and we’d find a space for you.” Ellie snuggled the baby closer to her breast.

“Oh, I know. It’s just that you and I will be in the same business and you’ll come to understand that the weekends and holidays will be the busiest. I have enjoyed having you here to talk with and visit when I needed a break.” Aubrie smiled at her friend. “Well, I’d better be going and let you continue your packing.”

The women got up and moved to the front door. Ellie handed the sleeping child to her friend reluctantly.

She placed a tender kiss on Dillon's forehead before letting go of the little one.

As Ellie opened the door to allow Aubrie to leave, she noticed the big truck just pulling in her driveway. "Looks like John's here to pick up my boxes." She waved to him.

As the two women hugged each other and said their goodbyes, John walked up to the front door. "Aubrie, good to see you and little Dillon." Ellie enjoyed watching him stroll up the path to her house. John was a tall, dark headed hunk of a man. His hair was always out of control, but John did his best to hide his nearly black tresses under his cowboy hat. Even in his crisp white shirt, with no sheriff's badge displayed, he exuded authority and confidence. He grinned at the two women and waved.

"Always great to see you, John. I've got to go and get home to fix dinner for my guests and that man of mine."

With everyone finally gone, John moved into the front door of Ellie's house. He turned and gave her a passionate kiss. "It's great to see you."

Ellie loved his kiss and touch. She smiled and replied, "I didn't get much done with Aubrie's visit, but we can load some of the boxes I've already packed."

They moved into the living room where John saw that she had indeed loaded a few dozen boxes. Together they worked for a few minutes and put the entire load into the back of his pickup. "What do you want to do for dinner?" John finally asked.

"How do you feel about leftovers?" She asked tentatively.

“Sweetie, anything you fix is okay with me.”

“Okay, you can help me.” Ellie lead the way to her kitchen. Together the two of them created a delicious meal of meats, cheeses, and vegetables. As they sat down to enjoy their meal fare, John asked, “How’s Aubrie and the baby?”

“They’re doing great. I asked her to help us with the décor in the hotel rooms. She agreed as Betsy and Phil will watch the little one.”

“How is Betsy doing?”

“Aubrie said she was okay, but I have a feeling that they aren’t sharing the real story. Phil took the retirement they offered.”

“That does sound suspicious. I hope she’s really okay.” John offered.

As they cleaned their dinner dishes and the kitchen, Ellie asked, “Are you staying here tonight?”

“Is that a proposition?” He grinned.

“Of course.” She countered.

“Then I accept. We can take this stuff over tomorrow.”

Early the following morning, John and Ellie started the short trip up and over the mountains to the little mining town of Jerome. This was going to be their new home together and she felt a touch of nerves as the forest scenery passed by. “You’re awfully quiet over there.” John prompted her.

“I’m just thinking.”

“Uh oh, that’s a bit dangerous this early in the morning, isn’t it?” He teased.

“Are you sure we can do this? Aren’t you a bit nervous about starting such a big project?”

“El, it’s going to be okay. We’re going to have some disagreements and tough decisions but we’re able to do this together.” John tried to convince her.

As they rounded the bend in the road, Ellie saw the view point turn off just ahead. “John, pull over here. I want to talk with you.”

John carefully negotiated his truck into the parking lot of the view area. Once he shut his vehicle down, Ellie opened her door and went to the rock wall and sat down. John joined her there, waiting patiently for her thoughts to settle.

Finally she spoke, “I’m afraid and I don’t want to go into this huge project without you knowing my feelings and thoughts. I realize that there are differences between men and women when it comes to making lifetime decisions. I’m not trying to cause trouble, I’m trying to save us some.”

He took her hand in his. “I know that you feel this is a big undertaking, but Ellie I know we have the brains and the money to do it right. You have to have faith.”

“Oh, John, I have faith. What I don’t have is confidence. I’ve never done any construction stuff. I’ve only done intellectual things. I’ve helped my uncle run his business and attended the university to get my degree, but that’s all been with my brain not my hands. I don’t know how I can help you.” She finally stated the thoughts on her mind.

“Sweetie, I think I understand where you’re coming from.” He looked her in the eyes. “El, I promise you that we’ll be fine. I have confidence in your abilities to help with the rebuilding of The Depot. I

wouldn't have invested in this project without my faith in you. Look over there." He pointed to the scenic view of the Verde Valley in the distance with Jerome just around the bend. "We are just small potatoes compared to that. I know that things will be rough but that's what makes a strong relationship. You have to have some bad times to appreciate the good ones."

"Oh, John, I love you." She moved into his arms.

"I love you, too." He pulled her to her feet. "El, we'll be fine. It's not going to be easy, but with each other, we'll get it done." John hugged her tightly to his big frame.

"Let's get on down the road." She told him.

It was just another mile or two when the big truck took the last curve of the mountain road and suddenly, there was their new town in front of them. The first thing a person would notice about Jerome as you look up the steep hillside on the left is the number of homes and structures built high on the slopes. The land on the right of the road drops sharply as the mountain continues downward.

"You know it always amazes me how people live on these sharp inclines. I mean, look at that driveway. How in the world do you get in and out of there without hitting someone?"

John just laughed. "I'm sure that accidents are quite frequent on those types of driveways. We'll be more fortunate as we have plenty of parking in the back of The Depot."

Traffic was light as it was still pretty early. When they backed the truck up to the rear entrance, Ellie

noticed all of the construction crew's vehicles parked along the buildings. "Wow, that's a lot of trucks. How many guys you got working in here?"

"Come and see!" John invited her. As soon as he opened the door the sounds of hectic activity reached her ears. They walked down the hallway into the main lobby and saloon part of the hotel. It seemed that men and women were everywhere, moving about with tools, boards, cement blocks and just about anything you'd see on a construction site. John handed her a hard hat, which she laughingly put on and patted it to make sure it was on tight.

"Oh, my God! You really got the ball rolling." Ellie pointed to the floor. "They've almost got the entire floor rebuilt all the way to the front."

"Yeah, and look at the block wall going up." He moved her closer to the edge of the new floor. As Ellie looked over to the basement below, she saw several workers laying those cement blocks at the front of the building.

"Why are you putting up those kinds of block? Shouldn't we use the red brick like the other walls?"

"Very good. I'm glad you noticed. See, I told you that you'd be good at this." He grinned. "We want to make sure that both of those side walls will be strong and using the 8x8x16's will accomplish that goal. We'll use a brick veneer that will give the look of that old brick on the outside. On this inside we'll put some sort of dark wood."

"I'm impressed. John, you really know what you're doing, don't you?"

“I just live to impress you.” He placed a quick kiss on her lips. “I’ve got more to show you.” He took her hand and led her back down the hallway. “Ready?”

Ellie shook her head and as John opened the door to their living quarters, she stepped cautiously inside. She looked back at him as he waited for her reaction. He didn’t have to wait very long as she continued into the room. “John, this is amazing! I really envisioned we’d be living in a bedroom until we get this place opened. This is wonderful!” She removed the hardhat and placed it on the breakfast bar. Ellie ran her hand down the new countertops in her small kitchen.

“I didn’t expect you to do all this!” There was a great room effect with the kitchen area and the living area combined into one room. The room was freshly painted with an ivory white coating on all walls. The hardwood floor appeared to have been recently re-done but a shine was evident. “Is this the original flooring? How in the world did you get it to clean up? I thought everything was damaged due to the blast of that stupid bomb.”

His wide grin showed that her comments pleased John. “Yes, it is. I worked my ass off but I wanted our little home to be pleasant. Come and see the bedroom.” He pressed his hand to her back and guided her down a very short hallway. Pushing a door open, she put her hands to her cheeks and exclaimed, “You brought your huge king size bed over here? Maybe that’s why I haven’t seen too much of you in the past week or so.”

“El, I want our time here to be homey and a great start to the rest of our lives together. Once we’ve got

The Depot up and running, we can hire a manager and they can live in here.”

“What are we going to be doing?” Her curiosity was piqued.

“Travel, sit on my porch in Prescott, who knows!” He stated proudly. “I’m ready to do something besides being a sheriff.”

“You don’t miss that at all?”

“Not one bit.” He stated emphatically.

“I can’t believe it. You were the sheriff for a long time. It just seems to me that you’d miss it just a little.”

“I miss the people I worked with but, I can honestly say that this is what I’ve always wanted to do. I can’t wait to see this grand old lady come back to life and to be able to use my hands to do that is reward in itself. Now look in that door and check out the bathroom.”

Even though it was small, John had utilized the space efficiently. The entire space was like a small, custom apartment and she appreciated his efforts. Ellie turned and gave him a big kiss. “Thank you, it’s all wonderful.”

“There’s more.” He led the way back to the kitchen, grabbed her hard hat and told her to put it on. “I have your project all laid out.”

“That sounds scary.” She followed right behind him as John headed up the stairs to the floor above into mezzanine. They were greeted by the noise of saws and hammering and the smell of fresh cut wood. People seemed to be moving about working on their various parts of the rebuild.

Once they reached the landing, Ellie exclaimed, "You've saved the lock boxes!"

"Yes and that is going to be your job. I think you should go through each one and make sure the locks work and then decide where we're going to put them. I had a duplicate key made of the one you found and you need to see if it fits each of the boxes. Once that's decided, we'll make up keys for them all. You'll find that key in the first box on that stack."

"I'm so excited that we're going to keep them in here."

"It wouldn't seem right to have The Depot rebuilt and not have those." John referred to the two dozen metal lock boxes piled on the floor. Back in the day the saloon was a house of ill repute and the madam, Magdalena, had them put in so the miners could keep their valuables in there while they were indulging in their pleasures with the various ladies of the night.

"What was it the miner's called them?"

"Squirrel hole was the name they used. It's how our last case got started, remember?" John knew she couldn't forget.

"Oh, I remember when I found that key in the woods in that old abandoned car, I felt it was significant and then the games began. This'll be fun."

"Well, sweetie, I'll leave you to it." He placed a kiss on her cheek and as he headed down the stairs, John turned to see Ellie getting down on the floor to work with the boxes. That was just like her, even though there were a few ragged chairs left in the mezzanine, Ellie would want to get down and dirty with her efforts. She reached for the box on top of the nearest

stack and opened it looking for the duplicate key. What she found instead was a small cotton bag. Carefully, she pulled it out and was surprised when it jingled.

The light in the area was not very bright, so she got up with the bag in hand and went down the hallway to the back bedroom. This part of the hotel was still very much intact, just a little dirty and neglected. Ellie opened the door to bedroom in the back and stepped out onto the in the broad daylight. She and John had stayed in this very room when they were working on the case of the stolen poker chips from the Stardust Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. She smiled as she remembered their time together. She had learned a lot from John on the steps necessary to successfully solve a crime.

Ellie went to the rail and soaked in the crisp morning air. The sun was shining brightly on the town now and she could see people starting to move about from the various stores and restaurants. Over a million tourists visit this little burg situated on the side of Cleopatra Hill annually. It was a community of artists and crafters but the most notable thing about Jerome is that it is known as the largest ghost town in America. She shivered and for a quick moment felt a bit unnerved. Ellie looked around behind her but noted she was alone.

“I must be loony. Magdalena said goodbye when this place blew up.” Ellie laughed nervously. Shaking off those wayward thoughts, she finally looked at the small bag in her hand. She turned it over and found it appeared to be an old flour sack. Sitting down on one

of the deck chairs, she opened the bag and looked inside. It was full of old, rusty keys. As she turned to dump them out on the stand next to her, Ellie was startled by John's voice.

"What are you doing out here?" He stepped out onto the deck. "What's that?" John pointed to the bag and the dozens of old keys lying on the small table. He joined her in the other chair.

She looked at him in surprise. "I thought this was what you left for me."

"No, not at all. When I got downstairs, I realized I had the key in my pocket. That's why I came up here. Ellie, I checked all of those boxes and there was nothing in them. I don't know where this came from." He picked up the canvas type bag to examine it more closely, but quickly put it back down on the little table.

"It seems to be an old flour sack material. I remember Aubrie telling me that her Aunt Alta used to make clothes out of them. Back in the day it was sometimes the only material a woman could get."

They both stopped talking and looked at each other. "Oh, no, don't say it! We are not dealing with a spirit here." He saw Ellie smile and start to say something when he cut her off. "Listen, this isn't possible. You tried to convince me before but I'm not buying it."

"John, she saved our lives. If Magdalena hadn't led me to the bomb, we'd all be dead! You know it but you're just too stubborn to admit."

"Like I told you when we were working on that case, we deal in facts, Ellie, nothing but the facts."

“Then how do you explain this?” She held up the bag again.

“Right now, I have to get back to work. You figure it out.” John stood up and started to exit through the open door, but stopped to say, “El, don’t get carried away with this. Clearly, I didn’t check those boxes carefully enough. I just missed that bag.”

Ellie’s laughter followed him as he went back down the hallway and to the stairs. She took a moment to look over the keys as she separated them with her fingers. They were much like the original one but it appeared each one was unique from the other. They were tarnished and dirty but she felt it just added to their character and mystery. As she started to pick them up and put the keys back into the bag, Ellie realized that there were more keys than boxes. More curious than ever, she quickly got up and traveled back down the hallway, sitting once again on the floor in front of the containers.

One by one, she took each box and using the keys from the bag fitted the right key for it. It took quite a while, but she finally had all the keys in their right places. Ellie counted the remaining ones and realized she had six leftover. “Hmmm, I wonder what these fit?”

“Talking to yourself?” Ellie heard John’s voice from behind, startling her. She smacked him in the shins with her hand. “Don’t do that!”

“What, you thought I was the ghost?” He sat on the floor beside her and hugged her to his side. “What’s all this?”

“Well, I matched all of those keys and each box now has the one that will open it. These are the leftovers.”

John reached for two of them. “Have you tried to see if one key will work in the other box?”

“No, I didn’t think of that. As soon as I found the correct match, I went on to another.” She watched as John experimented with the two boxes he’d grabbed. The two were amazed when the key only worked in one box.

“Ellie, when you used the original key last year to get that map, I really thought that one key would open any and all of those squirrel holes. You told me that you were in such a hurry that you just picked one and it opened.” John reflected on their assignment last fall.

“I told you that I felt I was guided by an unseen force and you laughed.” She retorted.

“Oh, please. Don’t start with that again.”

“See! John, you’ve got to be more open-minded about this. Remember what the guy at that old woman’s birthday party asked you?”

“Yes, he asked if I believed in God.”

“Well, that makes the point that you can’t see God and yet you believe. You should extend that kind of thinking to this situation. It’s entirely possible that there are angels among us.” Ellie climbed to her feet and stuck the remaining keys into her pocket before asking, “I’m getting hungry, are you?”

“Yeah, why don’t you go up the street and get us something. I’m supposed to meet a guy in a few minutes.” He also got up and reached for his wallet.

“I’ve got money. What are you in the mood for?”

“How about something from The Haunted Hamburger? Sound good to you?” He reached for her and pulled Ellie into his arms.

“Sounds good to me. I need a walk anyway.”

“You’re going to walk up the hill?” He questioned. “That’s a lot of steps to take.”

She placed a kiss on his lips. “I can do it. I need to stay in shape.”

He snuggled her tighter as he increased his hold on Ellie. “I love the shape you’re in. If we didn’t have a house full of people, I’d show you how much I love you.”

Ellie laughed and pushed him back. “If you don’t stop this, we won’t get any lunch, Mister. I’ll be back in a few.” She went downstairs and into their new home to grab her purse. As she headed out the back door, Ellie stopped to breath in the fresh air before starting her journey around the building and onto Main Street. There was a lot of activity as people were moving in and out of stores, viewing what crafts and art pieces the various vendors were offering. She crossed the street and started her trek up the many steps to The Haunted Hamburger restaurant at the top of the hill. There were customers tasting some of the local wines at Passion Cellars. She waved as she stopped to catch her breath. I should have counted the steps, she thought to herself. This is better than any cardio routine I could do.

After a few more stops to breath, Ellie finally made it to the top. The Haunted Hamburger was a must see place for the many tourists that were here. As she

stepped into the lobby, Ellie was amazed at the amount of people waiting for a table. She spoke to the young lady and ordered two of their famous hamburgers to go. "I'll just step outside to wait."

Ellie reached for the door the same time a couple was coming in and she stepped aside to allow them to enter. Her eyes caught the look of a woman just coming up the sidewalk. "Pearl, how are you doing?"

The other woman looked at her and smiled. "Ellie, I heard you were going to be in town and here you are. How's the rebuilding coming?"

"As a psychic, don't you know?" Ellie teased.

Pearl smiled at the joke, but waited for an answer.

Ellie cleared her throat and responded. "We've actually just started, but John has things rolling right along. We hope to be ready by fall, just in time for the Halloween festivities."

"Oh, that'll be wonderful for you and John and Jerome. All of us business owners welcome you." Pearl patted her on the shoulder. "Ellie, be sure of the path you take."

Before Ellie could ask her to explain, the door opened and the young lady handed her the bag of food. When the hostess went back inside, Pearl followed her and the door closed.

## Two

Ellie was torn between following Pearl for an explanation and the need to get the food back to John while it was still hot. She decided on the latter and headed back down the steps to The Depot. Maybe she just meant to be careful on these steps, Ellie thought. She shrugged her shoulders and proceeded across the street back to The Depot. John is probably right, I need to concentrate on the facts and not let my mind run wild, she thought to herself.

When she reached the back door and went inside, she realized there wasn't as much noise and chaos as before. The crew must be out to lunch. John was coming down the hallway when he saw her. "Sweetie, I'm starving. Everybody's already taking their lunch. Let's eat in our little apartment."

He opened the door and they sat at the breakfast bar. "Did you get drinks?"

"No, I didn't want to carry them. Do you have something?"

He went and opened the refrigerator and gestured. "What would you like?"

She laughed as she took in the fully stocked appliance. "I'll just take water for now. Do you have any beer or wine in there?"

“What’s a fridge without libations?” He pointed to a bottle of wine. John came back and joined her on the bar stools as they enjoyed their burgers.

“Hey, you said you had to meet a guy. What for?”

“You are going to be so excited. The deal isn’t completely solid but I guess it won’t hurt to tell you.”

“Come on! Spill the beans! Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“I had one of the men try and salvage the bar, but he finally convinced me that it was beyond repair. So, he put me onto this guy from a little town in New Mexico. There’s a bar closing its doors after nearly one hundred years in business. They have a fantastic, old bar that looks close to the one in The Palace and I think we can get it!” His enthusiasm was catching.

“Oh, my God! That would be fantastic. When will you know?” She finished her burger and started cleaning up their lunch.

“I made an offer and if they accept, I’ll have to go to Silver City and get it. I hope they’ll let me know in a day or two.”

“I’ll miss you when you’re gone.” She said.

“What? You don’t want to go with me?”

“I’m sure driving a big truck to New Mexico and loading a super heavy bar would be an exciting thing for me to miss, but I’ll pass. I have a million things to do here.” She laughed at the phony hurt look John put on his face. “Seriously, we need to go back to Prescott and get my uncle and my car. That couple that’s going to rent my house wants to move in as soon as possible. I’m going to store the rest of my

personal things in uncle's little cottage. You can help me do that, too."

"I thought you said you had a million things to do." He emphasized the 'you'. She just laughed and put her hard hat back on. "Are you ready to get back to work? We don't want to set a lazy example for the crew out there, do we?"

John grabbed her before she could get too far away and placed a light kiss on her lips. "I love you."

"Oh, John, I love you too. We still have to go out and work, though."

"Alright, slave driver." He followed her out the door and down the hallway.

"Can you come upstairs, so I can show you where to put those boxes?"

"Sure, I'll have one of the carpenters meet us up there. I'll be right up." John waved at one of the men working on the main floor. All of the noises were back in full force for now. Ellie took the stairs in a bound and stood in the middle of the mezzanine area and looked at the two walls as possible places for the lock boxes. The original placement was on the wall next to the hallway, but the blast had dislodged them as well as loosened several other boards in the mezzanine.

Ellie walked over to the railing and went to lean over to see what was keeping John, when she nearly fell as a few of the newels were also wobbly. She had to force herself to fall backwards instead of over onto the floor below. John and the carpenter were just coming to the top of the stairs and saw her fall on her bottom. He quickly ran over and helped her to her feet. "El, are you okay? What happened?"

“I was looking over to see if you were coming up and the railing was loose. I guess I have to be more aware.” She looked at the man behind John.

“Oh, this is Stan. He’s the one that’s going to mount those boxes. Stan, this is Ellie Parker.” He made the introductions but continued, “Although I think we need to get that railing secured first, don’t you?”

“Sure, that shouldn’t take long.” Stan answered in agreement. Looking to Ellie he asked, “Have you decided where you want me to mount these boxes?”

“I think that the original location is good as long as you can put them in there securely. John, what do you think?”

“I agree. That’s where we first found them and it seems only fitting to return them to their original place. Stan, can this wall be shored up?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll get on that just as soon as I get that railing fixed. Anything else, John?”

“No, that’s it for now. Thanks.” John watched as the other man went back down the steps.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I should have been more aware. Luckily I have enough padding on my bottom.” She laughed weakly.

“I like that padding.” John pulled her into his arms. “See, we have worked together a whole day and we still love each other.”

She giggled and gave him a kiss. “I’m glad that we’ve survived an entire day. Now go. I have work to do.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to take some measurements for Aubrie. She wanted to know the details of each room so she can come up with ideas for the décor.”

“You’ll need a tape measure and some paper, then. I’ll bring some up.” He left her for a moment.

Ellie went over to the wall where the boxes were going to be put and placed her hand on it, carefully. After nearly falling over the railing, she knew to be cautious. The original hotel was very old and she looked at the sconces mounted high on that same wall. One of them was slightly askew and Ellie reached up to straighten it. As she turned the sconce, suddenly a panel in the wall slid open.

“Oh, my God!” She was shocked as she realized this was a secret door. She stuck her head into the dark space still being very careful, not knowing what was in the hole. Suddenly, John came back up the steps and startled her when he put his hand on her shoulder. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She let out a small yelp. “Don’t do that to me! You scared me half to death!”

“What’d you find?” He moved closer to the opening and like Ellie stuck his head into the hole. “Can you believe this? A secret passageway. Wonder where it goes?”

“My thoughts exactly. You got a flashlight?”

John pulled a small LED one from his back pocket. “I’m game if you are. Let’s see where this ends up.” He took her by the hand and together they ventured slowly into the dark space. He led the way but she was very close to his back. When John stumbled over a

loose board, so did she. Ellie laughed at their bumbling steps.

John was shining the light up and down the narrow space trying to keep an eye out for anything that might be crawling in the area. They came to a set of steps and he realized that they had a choice. "Which way? Up or down?"

"Wow, this is so amazing. Did you even suspect that this hallway was here?"

"Not at all, but you know this might explain how your resident spirit could move around in the place." He turned to look at Ellie. "Are you doing okay?"

"Absolutely, I wouldn't miss this for anything. Lead on, mister."

He took another second and finally decided on the steps to the left that led upwards. They trudged slowly and carefully when they finally reached the top. It appeared to be a dead end when John brushed his hands over the wall in front of them. He finally found what he was looking for and pushed on the lever.

A panel just like the one in the mezzanine slid open but only partially. "I think it's stuck. It probably hasn't been used in a very long time."

Ellie stepped beside him and together they used their hands and helped the door move and finally a space big enough for her to go through opened up. "Careful." John warned.

She stepped in and turned to help him push the panel the rest of the way. John was then able to join her in the space on the other side. Together they turned to view the room. "Where are we?" She asked.

“I think we’re above the hotel rooms. I had no idea there was another floor in this building.” He moved further into the room.

“John, look at this.” She pointed to a portrait on the wall. “I think that’s Magdalena. At least that’s what I remember her looking like when I saw her in the tunnels down below our basement.”

“Are you still convinced that she was there?” John’s doubt was evident.

“Look, I’m telling you she saved our lives! When we were stuck in that hole, she showed me the bomb that nearly blew us to smithereens!”

“Okay, okay. I’m not convinced but I can see you think you saw something. What do you suppose this room was used for?”

She looked around at the furnishings and then spoke, “I’d say that this was a sort of retreat or private space for someone. Look at the small table with the candle. There’s an open book as though someone came up here to relax and read.” Ellie wandered over to see what type of book it was. She dusted off the page and saw what it was. “Is this a coincidence or what? The book is titled ‘The Haunted Hotel: A Mystery of Venice’. How weird.”

“Maybe that’s where your madam got the idea to haunt her own hotel.” He teased.

“Funny. When was that book published?” She asked him.

John turned the yellowed pages carefully to the front and read the date to Ellie. “It’s written by Wilkie Collins and published in 1879.”

“The date coincides with the time that Magdalena and The Desperation Depot would have been in existence.”

“El, you’re not really believing that she used this room and that this stuff is left over from that time, are you?”

“You have said yourself more than once that we deal in facts not opinions. Well, Sheriff, look at the facts all around this room.”

“I’m not the sheriff anymore but I will look at the facts if you insist.” He laughed.

Slowly and methodically, John viewed the room as objectively as he could. He noticed that a layer of dust covered everything and that it had been a very long time since anyone occupied the area. There was a small stand with a bowl and pitcher for water, a little couch covered in velvet, and several pictures of the town of Jerome, including one of The Depot. She watched as he processed the information and waited patiently for his conclusion.

“El, I don’t have any explanation for all of this. I’ll have to think about it. Are you ready to go back downstairs?”

“Aren’t we going to see where the stairs end up down the other way?” She was definitely curious.

“Sure, we can but I want to get my gun first. You never know what we’ll find.” They were back at the panel in the mezzanine and as they stepped out of the hidden hallway, John said, “Stay here and don’t go on your own.”

She feigned indignation but laughed at the stern look on his face. “I mean it, Ellie. I’ll be right back.”

He took the stairs two at a time and just as promised, John was back with his pistol. "Let's see what's on the other end of this secret passage."

Once again he took her by the hand and they cautiously took the hallway to the right this time. The steps were narrow and the area was dusty and covered with cobwebs. John tried his best to knock them down so they wouldn't get to her, but it was an almost futile task. "John, listen."

They both stopped and in the silence of their space, they could hear the noises of the construction on the other side of the wall. "We must be near the kitchen and bar area." She spoke in a whisper.

"I think you're right." As they stepped a bit further, they came to a sort of landing. "I'll bet there's another panel here somewhere. Help me search this wall for a lever like the one we found upstairs."

She put her hand on the rough surface of the interior wall and started to feel for anything that might resemble a lever or latch of some sort. Suddenly she found a cold metallic bar sticking out of the wall. "Here! I think this is it."

John stopped her before she could move it. "Wait, we don't want to startle anyone. I'm not sure I want anyone to know this hallway exists, either."

He put his ear to the wall and she copied his movements. They were silent as they listened for any sound of someone on the other side of their space. Finally convinced that they wouldn't surprise anyone, John slowly pushed the lever up and as the panel started to open, he told Ellie, "Sneak a peak in that crack and see if you see anyone."

Straining herself, Ellie leaned in and put one eye in the small space trying to detect any movement. "John, this is the office behind the bar. We're alone. Go ahead and open the panel."

Together they stepped into the small office. As they turned to see what was on the wall, they noticed a bookshelf had disguised the opening. "I'll be damned!" John stated. "Who would've ever known?"

"Do you think the stairway continues on down?" She wondered aloud. "John, this is so strange."

"I think we need to see where else it goes. Let's go back through the opening."

Ellie was ready and soon they were taking more narrow steps further down. There were more cobwebs and it seemed that the stairs got even more constricted. Ellie found that she had to almost move about in a more sideways fashion. "John, are you okay? This is getting harder to move forward. Do you suppose it doesn't go anywhere but just ends?"

"I'm sure it ends up somewhere. The question is, where exactly?" As if to answer his question, they found themselves at a dead end.

"Great! Now what?" Exasperation showed in her voice.

"Like before, look for a lever." John suggested.

Together they searched and very quickly, he found what they were looking for on the wall. "Be careful, John. We don't have any idea where we are now. I don't hear any construction sounds."

The panel started to move, but stopped when only a small opening was evident. There was neither sound nor light coming from the other side. Ellie stopped

John from pushing on the panel. "I'm afraid. I have a bad feeling about this."

"El, I understand what you're feeling, but we've got to see this through. This is our place now and we need to know everything about it including these secret passageways. We'll be careful. If you want, you can wait out here."

"Not on your life, Mister. We're in this together. Let's go." She reached up to push the panel even further open.

"I love you, woman. You're the strongest woman I know."

His praise made her smile and Ellie reached up to place a kiss on his cheek. "You sure talk sweet, Sheriff."

He kissed her this time full on the lips. His touch caused her pulse to beat more rapidly. "If you keep that up, we'll not get to see what's on the other side of that panel."

He pulled back and looked her straight in the eyes. "We'll finish this later then." With that, John reached up to help her push the panel fully open. Before stepping into the dark space, he used the flashlight to shine and light up the space first. They both looked in at what appeared to be a fully furnished room. Ellie saw a table holding an oil lamp and tapped John on the arm, pointing to it. "Wait here." He slowly went into the room and lit the lamp with one of the kitchen matches laying there. Soon an eerie light filled the small room. She joined him beside the small table and together they looked around the room.

"What in the world?" She finally spoke.

“This looks like an escape room of some sort. Look, there is an icebox.” He pointed to the corner of the room.

“And look at that little cot. Who do you suppose used this room?” They separated and each went to see what they could see. The room was furnished with a hooked rug in the middle of the room and several comfy chairs in an intimate setting, next to each other only separated by a small stand. Perhaps it had been used as a meeting place. Cobwebs adorned the corners and a fine layer of dust covered everything.

Ellie moved over to a bookshelf loaded with books. She hesitated touching the classics but instead read several of the titles. “John, you’ve got to see these books. They’re all in mint condition and probably worth a lot of money.” When he didn’t respond, she turned to see what he was doing. He was standing by the bed just staring.

“John!”

“Ellie, do you have your phone with you?” He finally spoke.

“Yes, why?” She pulled her cell from her back pocket and moved to his side. Ellie looked where he was pointing.

The stand beside the bed wasn’t dusty or dirty. There was a cup of cold coffee sitting on the stand with a crushed out cigarette butt in the ashtray. “How can that be, John? someone’s been down here lately. Oh, my God! This gives me the willies.”

“Take a picture of everything in this room. We need to figure out how far down we are. When we leave, count the steps up to the office. How did this

room survive the blast from that bomb Bill planted? El, look over at that wall and look for some sort of panel. As near as I can figure, on the other side is the space where we were held captive. I think we're down in the old mine shaft."

"You've got to be kidding! How can this be? Who would be down here? Who..." She stopped in mid-sentence and looked at John.

"Don't even go there! There's no such thing as spirits or ghosts, Ellie. There has to be a logical explanation for all of this."

She shut her mouth and did as he asked. Doing so carefully, she ran her hand over the wall. In the meantime, John was searching every corner of the space looking for clues as to who might have been there recently. "I'm not finding anything here. This appears to be a stand-alone room. There seems to be no lever. What are you seeing?" She spoke softly.

"Like I said earlier, I think someone is using this as a kind of escape. I'm not seeing anything of a personal nature, no pictures, no clothing, no indication if the occupant is a man or a woman. At this point, we only know that they smoke and drink coffee." John stood there with his hands on his hips and pondered the situation.

"I've got a lot of pictures. I'm not sure how good they're going to come out with that light being so low." She added to his thoughts.

"I think we need to go back up and get a better lighting system before we come back down here. For now, we need to keep this discovery to ourselves. I wonder if the Jerome Historical Society has any

records for this building. They might have some diagrams or at the very least some information about the layout of the hotel. El, we have to do this on the sly. I don't want anyone to get wise to what we've discovered." He went over to where she was standing. "Are you okay?"

"I'm a little freaked out about all of this. I know you don't believe in the supernatural, but John, I can't imagine someone being able to get in this room without us knowing."

"We've only been here on short visits. Now that we're moving in, we'll be able to monitor the hotel on a regular basis. No one's going to get in without us being aware. Let's go upstairs and figure out our next move." He started to blow out the lamp but before he did, John turned the flashlight back on and instructed her. "Ellie go over to the panel and remember we want to count the stairs."

"Okay. Hurry, I don't like it down here." Ellie stepped back out into the narrow hallway and waited for John.

In no time at all, they were closing the panel with the lever and as they traveled up the rough staircase, John could hear Ellie counting. When they finally got to the landing that led to the office, she announced, "I counted twenty-one steps."

He smiled and took a second to give her a short kiss. "You are so much fun to be with and I couldn't love you more than I do right now."

"Aw shucks, mister. You make me blush."

“Let’s go into the office from here.” He tripped the lever and as the panel slid open, they heard the construction noises and she felt herself heave a big sigh.

“I feel safer now that are we back in reality.” She plopped down onto the chair next to the desk, while John took the seat behind it. Just as they got comfortable, a knock came on the door. John looked at her before responding.

“Yes?” At his prompt, one of the guys on the job stuck his head into the office. “Hey, boss, we have a problem that needs your attention.”

“I’ll be right out.” John let him know.

“Go. I’ll just sit here and think about our next steps.” Ellie told him.

John left the room and she grabbed a notepad from the desk. Ellie started making a list of what she thought should be their plan. She thought about their discovery and started writing down the questions for which they needed answers. After a bit, she just sat there and contemplated. One of the fears of moving to Jerome and taking on The Depot was that she would be bored. Ellie felt she was a born investigator, someone who loved to dig in and research a situation.

It was just a short time later when John returned to the office. “Did you miss me?”

“Of course. What was the emergency?”

“Nothing really. They needed me to give approval for a minor change to the layout of the kitchen equipment. There’s a pole in the way of where the original cabinets were located. So we just shortened that counter and added more to the other side. What

were you doing here?" He picked up the tablet and started reading her list.

"I just wrote down what I thought was necessary. It's not in any particular order. What do you think?"

"This looks like a pretty good list. Right now, I don't have anything to add, but I'm sure I'll think of something."

Another knock on the door caused John to curse. "What now?" He opened the door and was very surprised to see Seth standing there.

"Seth. What can I do for you?"

"I see that you're rebuilding The Depot and I wondered if I could help." He seemed a little hesitant. "I know that you probably don't want me, but I'd like a chance to redeem myself in your eyes. I can be a really good employee. I had no idea that Rose or Bill, whatever you want to call him, was evil. Really."

Ellie got up from the desk and came around to say hello. "Seth, we don't blame you for anything that Bill did. You couldn't have known. He was very good in his disguise."

"He sure was. I had no idea I was working for a nutcase." Seth had been the bartender at the original Desperation Depot when they were working the case of the missing poker chips. He also was raised in a group home in Cottonwood with the now deceased Deputy Chuck. They considered themselves 'brothers' but Chuck went bad and had kidnapped Ellie and Aubrie before he ended up dead at the bottom of the Sundance Mine in Prescott. She could understand the young man wanting to set the record straight with John and Ellie.

John stepped aside and signaled for Seth to step into the office. “Let’s talk. What have you been doing since this place went up in smoke?”

“I’ve bounced from place to place, but I heard that you were going to open this back up and honestly, I just want a chance to make amends.” He stood there shifting from foot to foot nervously.

“I don’t think you need to worry about anything. You weren’t responsible for any of the trouble we had. It turned out that when you talked with Carson about our whereabouts, he was one of the good guys, so no harm there.”

“John, don’t you think we could use Seth’s help here now. He could be a gopher for supplies and things. Maybe he could go with you to Silver City if we get that bar.” Ellie appealed to him.

“Seth, how much do you know of this place? I mean the layout and floor plans.”

Ellie could see where John was going with this. She was curious too. Maybe Seth could shed some light on the hidden staircase and the escape room downstairs.

“Well, I’ve been all through the hotel, but I’m not sure what you want to know.”

John and Ellie exchanged glances. John went to the desk and pulled out an application. “Here, fill this out and let me know when you can start.”

A look of relief passed over the features of the young man as he quickly took the piece of paper and grabbed a pen from the container on the desk. “Can I fill this out now?”

“Yes, you can use that table over there.” Ellie motioned for John to step outside in the hallway. “We’ll just be out here in case you need us.”

“What do you think?” Ellie asked him.

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘keep your friends close, but your enemies’ closer?’ Well, that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Do you really think of Seth as an enemy?”

“Don’t you?”

## Three

Ellie just gave him a look and stepped back into the office where Seth was just finishing his application for a job. “Done?” John followed close behind her but said nothing. Seth handed her the document and stood up, ready to leave.

“Just give us a day or two and we’ll call you.” She gave him an encouraging smile. “We just got here ourselves and haven’t gotten organized.”

“I appreciate whatever you can do. I’m willing to do just about anything. I really loved working here and hope we can start over. I don’t want you to continue to think poorly of me.” He reached out to shake their hands and then left them alone in the office to ponder his visit.

“Well, mister, what do you think?”

“I already said my piece.”

“So stubborn. I think we can use his help in organizing things around here. Plus, I think he knows more about the layout of this place than he lets on and this will give us an opportunity to pick his brain.”

“Ah, then your motives for hiring him aren’t so different than mine. I’m not the only cynic in this office.” John laughed. “I’ve got to get back out there and see what progress they’ve made before quitting time.” He

went to the door and gave a wink. "Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone."

Ellie sat there for a moment pondering what her next task should be and decided that this room needed some organization. She went to the file cabinet and opened each drawer to ascertain what they held. After an hour or so, she came to the conclusion that they needed to box this stuff up and start their own bookkeeping system. She located some storage boxes and drawer by drawer, she loaded them and labeled the contents on the outside.

She was a 'lister' by habit, so Ellie started creating yet another list of supplies they needed to set up their own files. After completing that, she started on the desk. Carefully examining the contents of each drawer, Ellie finally came to the conclusion that the entire contents of this office needed to be boxed up and saved for later inspection. By the end of several hours she had a wall of boxes ready to transport somewhere else. When she finally looked around, Ellie was satisfied with the progress she'd made and slowly headed towards the door. She was startled by someone on the other side opening it just as she reached for the knob.

"John! If you continue to scare the wits out of me, you'll stunt my growth!"

"You sound just like my mother." He teased.

It was then she realized there wasn't any construction noise coming from the rest of the hotel. "Is it quitting time?"

"Yes, and I'm starved! Where are we going for food?"

"Do you want something nice or fast?" She asked.

“Let’s go to The Asylum. I could go for a good steak and a nice glass of wine. How about you?” He gave her a special grin.

“Sounds great, but give me a minute to freshen up.” She took him by the hand and together they went down the hallway to their new apartment.

Ellie went into the bedroom and started digging in a box for a fresh top. It was a bit wrinkled but she put it on anyway. “John, I’ve got so much to do. When can I go back to Prescott and help Uncle get ready to move in here?”

“Why don’t you take my truck and go tomorrow?”

“That won’t work. I need you to take me so I can get my own car. I don’t want to be here without transportation. I might need to run down to Cottonwood for supplies or something.” She gave him her reasons and waited for John’s response.

“That makes sense. If we get up early, I can take you and then get back here to supervise these guys.” He was ready so they walked down the short hall and out the door to his truck. John drove the short distance up the main street around the bend and turned his big truck up the narrow street to the Jerome Grand Hotel.

“Wasn’t this the hospital during the height of the mining days?” Ellie asked.

“You don’t know the history? I’m surprised. For over thirty five years this was the main hospital and during all that time, they had a death a day! Some of the deaths were pretty gruesome and unexplained.”

“Wow! That’s where we’re having dinner?”

“It’s the best place in town and besides, it’s been updated and they’ve done their best to make the spirits happy so they won’t bother the patrons.” He teased her.

She playfully slapped at his arm as he pulled into a parking space. “Oh, wow, this is beautiful. You would never know that it had been a hospital.”

In no time at all they were seated at a table with a window overlooking the town and the valley beyond. “John, this is very romantic. The stars are just starting to pop from the sky. Thank you for bringing me here.”

They took their time over their meal, enjoying each course. John got the steak he wanted and she chose a salmon salad, which was absolutely delicious. “You know, we should try and steal this chef away for our place. No, I take it back. I would gain so much weight and that wouldn’t be good.” The server offered the dessert menu, but both declined.

“Do you want to tour the hotel?” John asked.

“I think I’d rather see it in the broad daylight.”

“Afraid you might meet a ghost?” John teased again.

“I have a feeling that you’re not going to let that go, are you? Maybe, you’ll have the next visit from our madam. Don’t sleep too deeply.” She kidded him right back.

The night air was a bit cool, but the stars were beautifully bright in the darkened sky. The activity in the town was starting to die down. Even though visitors were everywhere during the day, this was still a small town that practically rolled up their sidewalks

by nine at night. Even the bars were almost void of patrons.

John pulled his truck into the space at the back of their hotel and soon they were inside relaxing in their great room. "I am tired, aren't you?" He asked.

"Yes and no. I feel like I got a lot done, but on the other hand, none of my work shows. Cleaning that office was a good thing. Where are we going to put all those boxes?"

"I'll figure that out tomorrow after I get back from Prescott. Do you want to watch some television?"

"Is that a hint, mister? Do you have ulterior motives?"

"Always. Let's go to bed, woman."

It seemed that the night passed way too fast. Ellie had trouble getting to sleep. Her mind wouldn't allow her to relax and as she glanced at the clock for what felt like the millionth time, she finally got up and went out to the front room. Ellie grabbed her computer and started making notes about the hidden staircase and the room at the very bottom. Old habits die hard, she thought. She had always written notes down when she couldn't figure out certain details of any situation.

She must have dozed off, because the next thing Ellie felt was John shaking her awake. "Sweetie, what in the world are you doing out here?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I just came out to put my thoughts down in writing. You know if I don't do that, I'll forget some things."

"Are you ready to go to Prescott? I want to get back here as soon as I can."

“Give me a few minutes and I’ll be with you ASAP.” Ellie jumped up and in no time at all, came from their bedroom all dressed for the trip.

“Do you want to stop for some breakfast?” John asked.

“Not really. I’m not too hungry this morning after that great meal last night. I know you want to get back to The Depot anyway. Is that okay with you?”

“I’m good. I’ll just get some fast food on my way back.” The trip to Prescott, barring any accidents or traffic problems only took about an hour. As John pulled into the driveway of her home, they saw that Shotgun was up and sitting on the porch.

“Uncle, how are you doing?” She gave him a hug.

“Girl, I couldn’t be better if I tried. Are you here to take me to our new digs?”

John laughed at his expression. “I’m glad you’re eager to get there. I was afraid you wouldn’t want to leave your friends here.”

“Well, Sheriff, I intend to make lots of new friends. I’m looking forward to being the highlight of your saloon when it opens.” Shotgun got up and followed them into her home.

“Uncle, are you all packed?” Ellie asked.

“Yes, I had the girls help me. They wanted to say goodbye and we played cards yesterday.”

“You know, once we’re open, they are more than welcome to come and stay at our hotel. It would be fun to see them again.”

“How long do you think the remodel is going to take?” Shotgun asked of John.

“If all goes smoothly, we should be open for business near the end of September. If things don’t go well, we hope to at least open the saloon and restaurant part first. So far, everything seems to be going as planned.”

John turned to Ellie, “I need to get going. I’ll see you in a little while. Drive carefully.” He placed a full kiss on her lips. His touch still gave her butterflies and for a fleeting second, Ellie wished they could travel together.

“Be careful, mister. Uncle and I will be there by mid-afternoon. Let me know if you need me to bring anything.”

John left and she turned to her uncle. “Let’s get your things loaded in my SUV. I also need to put several boxes in your cottage. The people I rented this place to want to move in next week.”

“I can’t help much.” His response showed his frustrations at his physical limitations. He picked up his cane and stared at it with disdain. “I can remember when I didn’t need anything like this blasted crutch.”

“Uncle, don’t be so hard on yourself. You know most people in their eighties need some assistance getting around.” She waited for his response.

“Balderdash, Girl, you know I’m not a day over seventy-five!” Ellie laughed at his reaction. She knew his age, but she sometimes had to jolt him out of feeling sorry for himself.

For several hours, she loaded his boxes in her car and at her uncle’s insistence, she took a break. Shotgun had a cold beer waiting for her at the kitchen table. There was a light knock at the back door and as

she looked through the window, saw that the girls were on her porch.

The ladies lived just down the street. Her uncle met them when they were walking down past the house just after they moved into their place. He wasn't a shy person and immediately made friends with Barbara and Jean.

"We got wine! We wouldn't want you to leave without having a little celebration." Barbara held up the chilled bottle of white wine.

"I'll get the glasses." Ellie volunteered. "Uncle, do you want wine or a beer?"

"Oh, he'll share some wine with us one last time, won't you Willie?"

He laughed and shook his head in agreement. "I'm going to miss you girls."

"Oh, but not for long. We want to come and visit you. You know how we love Jerome. You can't get rid of us!" Jean giggled just like a young school girl. They all sat there enjoying their wine and talking.

"Well, Barbara, we better get going. They have to get on the road and we have bingo later. Too bad you can't go with us, Willie. We will definitely miss you."

"Now don't go getting mushy on me." He spoke gruffly. "You know I can't stand weepy women."

As the party broke up and the goodbyes were shared, Ellie carried the last box of her personal stuff to the little cottage out back. When she returned to the empty kitchen, her uncle was gathering his cowboy hat from the rack by the front door. "Girl, we better get on the road or John will think we got lost."

“You’re right. Are you hungry? Should we stop for food here in Prescott?” Ellie buckled herself into the car.

“Nah, I was hoping you had something on the stove for us.”

“Sorry, Uncle, I haven’t gotten into a routine yet. I’ll find something in the refrigerator. John stocked it and I’m sure we can come up with a good meal for all of us. I have something to talk with you about.”

“Shoot. What’s going on?” Shotgun replied.

Ellie started relaying the tale of the hidden staircase and tried to explain it all in great detail so she could get her uncle’s take on the mystery. She was confident that John wouldn’t mind her sharing their discovery with him. When she and John were trying to solve the stolen poker chips mystery, Shotgun was most useful. When the two of them lived in Las Vegas, he had a sort of pawn and collectibles shop. Shotgun had worked with the local authorities and was considered an expert in regards to the poker chips the casinos used. His information was instrumental in their ability to solve that particular case.

Shotgun was silent until she finished her story. “Wow, that’s amazing! Although with that place, nothing would surprise me. That original building was well over one hundred years old. I’m sure that Magdalena had several secrets installed in that place. I’ll bet we will discover even more bombshells.” He laughed as he reflected on his choice of words. “Maybe that wasn’t the right word to use, but you’ve got to admit it is funny now.”

She joined in with his joke and laughed out loud. "Uncle, I'm so glad you're coming to live with us."

"Now don't you get mushy on me. I'm just coming along to supervise you two. You know you still have that temper and when a couple takes on a major building project, it can be trouble."

"I told John that very thing, but he seems to think we'll be fine." Ellie was always able to talk bluntly with her uncle, ever since she came to live with him after her parent's death and several foster homes. She loved the old man sitting next to her.

Their trip was eventless and soon they made the turn onto Main Street. It was about three in the afternoon and Ellie found herself rather tired already. Loading and moving so many boxes both into her car and into her uncle's cottage had taken its toll on her body. When she got out of her car, Ellie stretched and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I can't be more help, Girl." Shotgun remarked.

"You know I'm fine. I get a lot of help from you. I can handle these little jobs. It's those brain things that you're best at."

As soon as she opened the back door, the noise of the workers invaded her space. Shotgun commented, "Wow! John is really serious about this project, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. You haven't seen it since the blast went off last year, have you? It was bad, but once John got the debris removed, he found that it wasn't as bad as we originally thought. He's got a big crew and they are going to town. You want the tour first?"

“You bet!”

They walked the short way down the hallway and ran right into John. “There you two are! What took you so long?”

Shotgun shook the other man’s hand and replied, “I had to say goodbye to the girls. They’re going to miss me terribly.”

John grinned. “I’ll bet. Barbara and Jean love having you to fuss over.”

Shotgun looked around. “Want to show me what you’re doing?”

John looked to Ellie for confirmation. “Please, John, I’ve got to unload the car.” Before she could move, he hollered over at one of the guys working on the floor. “Hey, Toby, could you give Ellie a hand for a minute.”

“John, that’s okay, I can do it. You show Shotgun around.”

She turned to go but before she could get a few steps down the hallway, Ellie was joined by the young man Toby. “Hi, John wanted me to help you unload some boxes.”

She turned and looked back at John who just grinned. “Thank you. I am tired and do appreciate your help. It’s not much, but as you can see my uncle can’t do it.”

“No problem.” By this time they were at her SUV and she opened the back hatch. She had managed to load the open space packed to the brim. “Wow! Lady, you sure can pack a car.” He laughed but reached in to grab a box.

“I’ll help. At least we don’t have to go far. My uncle’s room is just inside the back door.”

Together they moved back and forth and soon the car was empty and her uncle’s space was full. “Thank you so much, Toby. I do appreciate the help. Can I offer you something to drink? I think we have beer.”

“Oh, no thanks, the boss wouldn’t approve of drinking on the job. I should get back out there.” He started backing out the door, but stopped short. “I was glad to help and to meet you. See you around.”

As Toby stepped out into the hallway, Ellie saw John standing there. The look on his face wasn’t exactly a happy one. “Done?”

Ellie smiled and decided to ignore his unhappy expression. “I’m so glad you had him help me. I feel sore muscles where I didn’t even know I had them.” She went to him and gave John a quick hug.

“Is it almost quitting time?”

She watched as he took a big deep breath. “They’ll be leaving shortly. Your uncle will be here in a few minutes to start unpacking his things.”

“Good. I want him to get settled. What are we fixing for dinner?” Ellie headed to their door and turned waiting for him to follow. “John?”

“Let’s just order a pizza for tonight. We can get a routine going tomorrow. Does Shotgun like pizza?”

“Absolutely. He’ll eat almost anything. I could use a beer. How about you?” She went into their apartment and over to the fridge.

“Yeah, I could use a drink, too.” He sat at the breakfast bar.

“John, are you okay?” She finally approached him.

He paused for a moment before answering. "I'm fine, El. I just felt a little pang of jealousy." When he saw the look on her face, he added, "I'm not proud of it, but I will try to contain it in the future."

She sat on the barstool next to him and patted his hand. "John, I've never known you to admit to such a thing like that. I'm surprised that you would. You know before I moved to Las Vegas away from you and Prescott, I deliberately tried to get those types of feelings out of you."

"I think the timing for our relationship just wasn't right, but I'm so glad you moved back and we got a second chance. I love you, you know." John pulled her closer and placed a kiss on her lips.

About that time a slight knock came on their door. She laughed. Her uncle stuck his head in without waiting for their reply. "Girl, what are we doing about food? Oh, can I have a beer, too?"

John got up and retrieved a cold bottle and handed it to him. "Are you getting settled?"

"That'll take me a while, but I want to thank you for doing this for me, John. It's a great place and I think I'll be just fine living here."

"You're welcome. I thought you'd want to come and keep an eye on our girl, maybe keep her out of trouble."

"Good luck with that." Shotgun laughed.

"Excuse me fellas. I'm standing right here. I don't need anyone to keep me out of trouble." Ellie went to the refrigerator, looking for dinner ideas. "Hey, guys how about breakfast for dinner?"

“I thought we were going to order a pizza.” John replied. “Would that be alright with you, Shotgun?”

“I think it’s a great idea. This one has worked hard today and I think she needs to rest. Order it, John, and I’ll pay for the pizza.”

Ellie came around the bar and gave her uncle a kiss on his wrinkled cheek. “You’re too good to me.”

A short time later they were all enjoying their pizza from Grapes Restaurant and Bar just up the street from their place. “This is so yummy. What kind of food are we going to offer?” Ellie asked.

“I don’t think you want to compete with this. I consider myself a pizza snob and this is the best!” Shotgun contributed his two cents worth.

“We’ll have to give the menu some serious consideration but I agree with your uncle, this is fantastic.” John spoke but stopped long enough to take a big bite of his slice.

After they all finished, Shotgun got up and headed to the door. “Again, John, thanks a bunch for making me feel welcome.” He went out the door and they heard his own door open and close.

“You do realize that that’s the most emotion he shows.” She explained to John.

“El, I know how much he means to you and he’s becoming one of my favorite people too. I just want to make him comfortable. Speaking of comfortable, let’s go to the bedroom and stretch out on the bed and watch some television.”

“I have a sneaky feeling that you have ulterior motives again, mister.” She laughed but started down the

short hall to their bedroom. John turned off the lights and joined her.

The noises of the construction crew pounding away woke Ellie the next morning. She patted the space beside her in the bed, but John had already gotten up and left their room.

As she put on her robe, Ellie tried to straighten her hair and washed her face before going out to the great room. She found a little love note from her man. He wrote, 'Sweetie, have a lazy morning. I have lots to do and you can help your uncle get settled. I'll see you at lunch.' The note was signed with his declaration of love.

"I bet if I start cooking some bacon my uncle will be here in no time at all." She talked to the empty room and started her task of making breakfast for the two of them. Just as she had predicted, a soft knock came on her door. "Come in, Uncle."

"How'd you know it was me? I could've been one of those construction guys and here you are in your pajamas." He was using his cane this morning.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't fuss. You know I have to use this danged thing some days."

"Did I smell bacon?" He asked the obvious.

"Of course, it's almost ready. Have a seat." She indicated a nearby bar stool.

"I thought I could help you get some of your boxes unpacked and get you settled in so we both can start to help John with this massive rebuild."

“That sounds good. Thanks.” He said as she placed a hot cup of coffee in front of him. “Any idea what I can do to help?”

“I think John wants you to make phone calls and order supplies, maybe even monitor the deliveries so that whatever the worker’s need, it’s here ready for them. He’s doing some of the work himself and that would take a load off of his mind.” She put the finished breakfast meal in front of her uncle.

“I can do that.” He agreed before diving into his meal.

“I know you can. I’m going to be working on lists of things to do and buy. Aubrie is going to meet me someday next week to help with ideas for redoing the rooms. That’ll require lots more lists.”

“You’ve always been a great list maker, Girl. I think we can help take some of the mental tasks off John’s plate.” Shotgun pushed back his empty plate and got down from the stool. “When you get dressed, come on over and we’ll do as much as I feel like before lunch. John will be here and we can get started on what he needs done.” He left quietly.

Ellie went to the bedroom and donned her working clothes consisting of jeans and a tee shirt. She put on her hiking boots, pulled her long hair back into a tight ponytail and headed across the hallway to her uncle’s place.

They worked for a few hours putting things in their place. She marveled that John had made sure there was plenty of storage space for all of Shotgun’s things. His little apartment had a separate living room divided by a wall and a very short hall to the bedroom and

bath. He didn't have a kitchen but John put in a table area with a small hotel size refrigerator and a microwave on the tiny countertop.

“Uncle, are you satisfied with these arrangements?”

“What's not to like? Your man is very considerate and I appreciate everything he's done for me and you. Now, when are you two going to make it official?”



## Four

Ellie gave her uncle the look before speaking. “As a matter of fact, we discussed that very thing just the other day. Before we open this place to the general public, we’re going to get married and have both the wedding and reception right here.”

“About damn time.” Her uncle looked at the silent woman standing there in front of him. “You don’t exactly look like a woman happy to be marrying soon.” His observation was blunt.

“I love John. You know that, but...” She stopped. “But what?”

She found his comfy chair and plopped down before continuing. “Uncle, I love John very much, but I’m not sure we’re heading in the same direction anymore.”

“Is that because he quit being the sheriff?” Her uncle prompted Ellie to add more to her explanation.

“Yes and no. I totally understand his reasons for quitting. He was good at what he did but his heart just wasn’t in it anymore. I, on the other hand, was just getting my feet wet in the art of investigation and crime solving. I do like a good mystery, Uncle.”

Shotgun went to his fridge and grabbed a beer. He held one up to see if she would join him. “Not right now, thanks.” Once he got his cold beverage, he went

to the other recliner in the room and sat down. "You were the most curious child. I can remember having to rescue you from various situations when you got in too deep." He laughed gruffly. "Remember when you accused old Mrs. Murphy of killing her husband?"

"Uncle, I was only a kid and you have to admit that Mr. Murphy disappeared suddenly."

"Yeah, he went on a hunting trip but you saw his wife loading up a gun and when she got into her car and left, you just knew she was going to hide the weapon." He laughed again.

Ellie chuckled with him. "Well, it seems that he needed the other type of gun and she was just taking it to meet him at the edge of town. My imagination did get the best of me at times back then."

"Back then? What about you following the trail just last year? You were convinced that Carson Layne was the thief and murderer in the stolen poker chips case. He ended up working for the government and was one of the good guys."

"That's not fair. He was following John and me and was acting totally weird. Even staying at Tuck and Aubrie's Bed and Breakfast didn't shed any clues as to his true identity." She defended herself. "Maybe that's why I would like a chance to redeem myself. I could be a good detective. I have some natural instincts that would serve me well in that line of work."

"Girl, I admit you'd be real good but you have other skills too, skills that wouldn't put you in harm's way and would keep you safe."

"So that's it. You don't want me to be a detective, do you?"

“It has nothing to do with my wishes. I would just feel a lot better in my old age if I knew you were with someone that would take good care of you. I won’t be around forever, you know.” He spoke softly.

“Uncle, I love you. I know you have always wanted what was best for me and I appreciate that. I’ll be fine. Maybe I can solve the mystery of those hidden stairs and that room downstairs. I wish you could go with me but those steps were hard for John and me to follow. I don’t think you could make it.”

“Damn! I get so tired of being a cripple.”

“Stop saying that about yourself. You’re not a cripple.” Ellie hollered at him.

“A truth is the truth, Girl. I’m not getting any better and as I get older, it gets harder and harder to get around. You might as well face it; I’m not going to be here indefinitely.”

She stood up and started moving around trying to keep herself busy. Finally she turned to her uncle, “I don’t want to hear anymore. I promise to take it easy and marry John this next fall. I don’t want you to have a fit.”

“When was the last time I had a fit? And for the record, I don’t want you to do something just because I want it. You need to carve out your own life based on what you want. I’ll manage to accept whatever you decide.” His love for his niece was the driving force behind his words.

“Uncle, I couldn’t have asked for a better parent.”

Just then a knock on the door stopped them in their conversation and John walked through into the room. “You two look guilty. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Shotgun’s just trying to boss me around.” She teased.

“Are you ready for some lunch?” She asked, but was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone.

John stepped back out into the hallway and finished his call. He came back grinning from ear to ear. He grabbed Ellie up and swung her around. “We got it! We got that beautiful bar from New Mexico!”

“Oh my God, John! That’s great.” She turned and explained the whole situation to her uncle.

“I’ve got to get a truck and someone to help me. The guy says he’ll knock a thousand off if we come right away.”

“How about taking Seth? It would be a good chance to get to know him and see if you want to hire him.” Ellie suggested tentatively.

“I don’t know about that. Whoever I take will have to stay at least one night away, maybe two.” He sounded unsure of Seth as a road trip companion. “I would want to leave first thing in the morning.”

“Who else could go at the drop of a hat? I would suggest Tuck, but I’m not sure of his schedule. He might be in the middle of a big case and can’t leave.”

“One way to find out, I’ll call him.” John went out the door and into their apartment. She could hear him on the phone talking to his friend still working as a detective for the Yavapai County Sheriff’s office. She would feel safe with Tuck as his traveling buddy. When Tuck first moved to Prescott, he and John didn’t get along, but that was a complete misunderstanding. Tuck was in Prescott working unofficially as an undercover agent trying to solve the murder and

disappearance of his stepfather. That's when the stolen poker chips were first discovered in the attic of Aubrie's inherited home by the Hassayampa Lake.

"Oh, Uncle, you know I was just remembering when you and I first came to help Aubrie with those stolen poker chips. So much has happened since then."

"Yes, that's more reason for you to do something safer. You and Aubrie got kidnapped by the now dead Deputy Chuck, and after chasing down that nasty guy Bill Brennan, you nearly got all of us blown sky high. Think about it, Girl." He shook a gnarled finger at his niece.

"I wasn't responsible for us getting blown up. If you remember right, I found the bomb and got the building cleared before it exploded."

"But you claimed it was with the help of a ghost, the spirit of Magdalena. Now of all things, we're here trying to rebuild the house of ill repute she owned during the heydays of this town."

"Uncle, you don't believe me? I'm crushed. I swear that she appeared to me and showed me the bomb. How in the world would I have known it was there?"

He laughed gruffly. "Girl, I believe you think you saw something, but like I said before you've always had a huge imagination." He tried to get out of his chair, but it took several attempts.

This didn't go unnoticed by her. "Uncle, I think we've done enough for today. I need to help John get ready to go to Silver City to pick up that bar." She placed a kiss on his craggy cheek and quickly left his room.

When she entered their apartment, John was just hanging up his phone. "Are you done over there?"

"I am for today. Uncle was getting tired and if I stayed, he'd try to keep up with me. This way he'll nap. Did you get Tuck to go with you?"

"No, he is in the middle of a case that he can't abandon. It seems that I'll have to ask Seth to go. I think you might be right about this being an opportunity to see what makes him tick." John headed to their bedroom.

"Can I help you pack?" She followed him. "Did you already call Seth?"

"Could you do that for me? I'll pack and then we can be done at the same time. We'll have some nice 'us' time." He gave her a loving look. They both finished their tasks and for the rest of the day, John and Ellie worked on organizing their own space. "It's getting close to dinner, I'll see what uncle wants to eat."

When she knocked on his door, Ellie had to wait a minute for him to answer. Shotgun sleepily answered his door, "Hey, what's up?"

"I just wondered what you want to eat for dinner."

"Just something simple will do. I'm not very hungry, so don't do too much."

Ellie's instincts were roused. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I think I'm just tired. After a good night's sleep, I'll be good as new." He reassured his niece.

"Okay. I'll call you when the food's ready."

When Ellie entered the room, John was watching television and drinking a beer. "Want one?" He held up his bottle.

“I’ll get it. How about just some soup and sandwiches? Uncle isn’t very hungry and seems a bit worn out.”

“Anything simple is fine with me. I’ll have to get into bed early, so I can get on the road first thing. Will Seth meet me here or do I have to pick him up?”

“I told him to be here at 6:00 in the morning. Is that okay?” Ellie moved behind the breakfast bar and started searching for the sandwich ingredients.

“That’s great. I think we’ll drive straight to Silver City. It shouldn’t take over six or seven hours. Once we get that thing loaded, we’ll stay there for the night. Barring any trouble, Seth and I will be back late tomorrow night. I’ll let you know, okay?” He came to sit at the bar and watch her moving about preparing their easy meal.

“Please do, I’ll worry if I don’t hear from you.” Ellie smiled at him.

“And I’ll worry about you. Please, Ellie don’t do any investigating into the hidden stairway while I’m gone.”

Ellie scrunched up her pretty features into an exaggerated look of disappointment. “Like I would do that!”

“I know you would, but it could be dangerous. I want to be there when we have the proper lighting and can explore it together.”

“Do you think I can’t handle a little examination on my own?”

“I know you have the skills to properly uncover anything that needs discovering. It’s the unknown

that I'm concerned with, Sweetie. Please give me your word that you'll leave it for when I get back."

With her fingers crossed below the edge of the breakfast bar, Ellie gave him a forced smile and shook her head in agreement. Just at that moment, Shotgun knocked on their door and put his head in the room. "Is it ready?"

"Yes, please come on in. I just heated some soup and made us some sandwiches. Here come and sit beside John."

John looked at her with a questioning expression on his face. She pretended not to notice him and instead came around the bar to grab a seat next to her uncle.

"Hey, Shotgun, would you do me a favor while I'm gone." John's voice was strong. They both were enjoying their meal.

Ellie leaned over and looked at him, while he spoke.

"Sure, just name it."

"Can you make sure this one doesn't get into any trouble?"

His look told her that two can play that game. He continued to explain to her uncle.

"What makes you think, she's going to get into trouble?"

"Really? You raised her and you have to ask that?"

"Hello! I'm sitting right here. I am a full-grown woman and don't need a babysitter." With sweet sarcasm in her voice, Ellie continued, "Remember the nice 'us' time you wanted? Well this line of conversation will not get you that!"

“I wouldn’t mess with that, if I were you.” Shotgun laughed and pushed himself back from the food. He reached for his cane and started towards the door. “I’m going to go and let you two sort this out amongst yourselves.” His laughter could be heard until he shut his door.

“Really, John!” She spouted. “I’m not a child that needs someone to keep an eye on!”

John reached for her and as she protested, he placed a strong kiss on her lips.

“That won’t work,” Ellie added as soon as he released her. “You just need to relax and take care of yourself. I’ve been doing my own thing for quite a while and don’t need you to ride roughshod over me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to come on as being so overbearing. I just love you and want you to be safe while I’m gone.” The look on his face made her laugh at the exaggerated pout.

“I know you mean well but, John, I can look after myself. If I need your help, I’ll ask. I’ve never been shy about speaking my mind, have I?”

“No, that’s one area you don’t lack in, speaking your mind.” She swiped at him with a playful slap at his arm.

“Are you ready to go to the bedroom? Can we agree that this is over?”

“Sure. I’m not ready to go to sleep, but we can find something to do, can’t we?” She taunted.

“You, lady, are a tease. I accept your offer.” He got up and started turning out the lights. Ellie followed closely behind and soon they were enjoying each other’s company.

The alarm on his phone went off, waking both of them. "Oh, I haven't gotten up this early in a very long time. I'll get your coffee made." She started to get out of bed when John stopped her.

"Don't bother. We'll grab some breakfast down the road." He was up and leaned over to place a tantalizing kiss on her pouty lips. "I'll call you when we get there."

"Bless you. Drive safe, love." In no time at all, there was a momentary silence. Ellie was just falling back asleep when strange noises entered her subconscious. Shaking off the cloud of drowsiness, she realized the construction crew was busily at work. "Ugh! I can't wait for the big stuff to be done!"

As she dragged herself out of bed, and putting on her clothes, Ellie heard another familiar noise. It was her uncle knocking on the door. "Come in, Uncle. I'll have coffee ready as fast as I can."

"John get away?" He took a stool at the bar.

"Yes, I hope everything goes well and he gets that bar without any delays or trouble."

"What are you going to do today?" Shotgun asked.

"I think I'm going to work up in the mezzanine today. I want to put those lockboxes in order so Stan can get started on mounting them. Each thing we accomplish gets us closer to opening our doors for business."

"I'd help but you know navigating those stairs is rather difficult. It's not impossible, you know. It's just that if I don't have to, I'll pass."

"Why don't you just take it easy and do what you can to finish getting settled. Just holler when you

want some lunch. You know you can always come over here and help yourself to whatever you want in the fridge. This is just like our place in Prescott. I want you to feel at home. John is putting in an old-fashioned elevator, you know.” She placed a quick peck on his craggy cheek.

“I know, I know. Don’t worry about me. You do what you need to do and I’ll be fine.”

As she opened her door, the sounds of work became louder and for a second, she hesitated. “I’ll be glad when we don’t have to listen to that.”

“It’s only been a day or two. Quit your whining.”

She smiled a sickening sweet grin and left her uncle to his morning coffee. Instead of heading out to the lobby, Ellie went out back to her car and gathered her flashlight and her gun. She hesitated for a moment, thinking of John’s warning about not exploring the hidden staircase alone, but shrugged her shoulders and proceeded back in and right up the stairs to the mezzanine. Before anyone could see it, she tucked her revolver in the back of her pants and pulled her blouse out to cover it.

Once in the mezzanine, Ellie went to the bannister and looked over to see how the work was proceeding. She was happy to see that the front block wall was progressing fast and the first floor was now complete all the way to the front wall. As she leaned over, Ellie saw the young man Toby that helped her unload her car. He looked up and waved and she felt compelled to acknowledge his greeting. He smiled at her gesture.

Ellie withdrew quickly, embarrassed, and not sure about what just happened. It’d been so long since

someone flirted with her and even though it felt good, she felt she was betraying her relationship with John. “Stop it!” Ellie admonished herself. “You’re making way too much of this.”

She moved to the boxes and the wall in which they would go and pondered the order in which she wanted them implanted in the wall. As Ellie worked on this puzzle, she tried desperately to ignore the pull of the hidden stairway. Unexpectedly, she thought she heard a sound coming from the other side of the wall. Ellie knew its origin was from the hidden stairway.

Goose flesh rose on her arms. She looked around to see if someone was standing behind her but finding no one, Ellie went to the sconces mounted on the wall. She looked to see that the candle holder was still in its place and found it to be so.

As she contemplated the decision in her path, her cell phone rang from her back pocket and Ellie answered. “Hello.”

“Sweetie, how’s it going?” John’s voice haunted her conscience. It was as if he knew she was about to make a decision regarding her promise.

“Hey! How’s it going with you?”

“You’re not there already, are you?”

“No, no, we decided to stop for something to eat. We’ll get on the road again. The whole trip is only six or seven hour’s total. We’ll be there today.”

“Well, drive safely. Let me know.” She once again crossed her fingers.

“Take care, sweetie. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I love you.” She replied.

As soon as the phone went dead, Ellie looked at the wall with the hidden staircase behind it. How could she betray John's confidence? How could she decide to do what he and Shotgun didn't want her to do?

Ellie looked at her phone and saw that it was almost time for lunch. In order to avoid making a decision about the hidden stairway, she quickly headed down to her apartment. Ellie knew Shotgun would be there, wanting lunch. This was definitely the safest choice for right now.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Ellie heard her name being called. She turned to see the Stan coming toward her. "Are you ready for me to install those lockboxes?"

"That sounds good. Let's go back up and I'll show you what I'm thinking. How are things going?" She made some conversation.

"Things are going well. I have to say, this is one of the most interesting tasks I've done in a long time. I usually work on new construction, not a restoration like this." Stan's work boots made a thumping noise as he followed up behind her on the stairs.

"What do you think is so unusual about this job?" They had reached the mezzanine and moved closer to the wall where he was going to be working.

"Well, this project for example. What is the significance of these locked boxes?"

"You've obviously not heard the story behind them. The madam of this bordello was trying to run an honest business, not like many of the other prostitution houses in Jerome. While many of the miners

were getting pleased by the women, their money was being stolen right out of their clothes by others. Magdalena wanted to steal the customers from those other houses, so she had these boxes put in. Instead of being called the mezzanine, it was known as the Lusty Lounge. It was a great marketing ploy as she gained a huge cut of the sexual business.”

“I heard that you found a map in one of these boxes that lead you to a treasure.” Stan prompted her.

“That’s partially true.” Her curiosity was piqued by his interest in the boxes and the story. In fact, her investigative senses were in full force. “John, he was the sheriff at the time, and I found a map in the box that led us to where we could find more clues as to who stole those poker chips from the Stardust Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas in 1992.”

“Wow! That must have been really exciting! As a kid, I thought I wanted to be a policeman, well maybe more like a detective.” Stan interjected.

“Why didn’t you pursue that line of work?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Things happen, plans change.”

Ellie noticed his obvious lack of real details, but for the moment, let it slide. “Well, Stan, here’s what I was thinking for these.” The rest of their conversation was strictly about the placement of the lock boxes and once Stan understood what she wanted, Ellie excused herself.

“I’ll take care of this, don’t you worry.” He reassured her as Ellie went downstairs.

She walked into her apartment and was greeted by her uncle behind the breakfast bar. “What’re you

making?” She opened the coat closet and quickly put the flashlight and gun on the top shelf.

“I thought you could use my best comfort food.” He smiled and looked up at his niece.

“And that is?”

“Why, little lady, it’s my world famous grilled cheese and tomato soup combo.”

“That sounds great! Can I get us drinks?”

“I’d like some ice tea.” Her uncle responded.

“Okay. Did you get some unpacking done?”

“Sure. Although, I only got a few boxes opened and put in place. But, I figure a few each day and in about a month I’ll be completely unpacked.” He chuckled.

“Sounds like a plan.” She answered distractedly.

“Okay, spill it! What’s on your mind?”

“Sometimes I hate that you know me so well.” She reached for the sandwich he had placed on the counter in front of her. “I had a very interesting conversation with that Stan guy just now. He was more than interested in the map and the treasure that John and I supposedly found.”

“That doesn’t really sound so out of line. Everyone in town knows of our little escapade here. You can’t keep a thing like this building blowing up a secret.” His voice held some humor in it.

“Uncle, I know that it’s not a secret, but it’s just the way he talked. When I asked a question back, he was extremely vague and, like a politician, didn’t really answer me.”

“So, your spidey sense was activated?”

“Oh, Uncle, don’t make fun of me.”

“Girl, I would never poke fun at you. I have lived with you for a long time and have watched that sixth sense of yours save us a time or two. What are you going to do about it?” He reached for his drink.

She finished her lunch and stood up from the stool. “Right now, I’m going back upstairs. I don’t think I want to leave him alone up there. I wish I could get up there without him knowing it.”

“Why don’t you use the hidden staircase?” Uncle teased her.

“You, sir, are a rascal. You know that entrance to the mezzanine is right on the wall where he should be working. I couldn’t very well sneak up on him, could I?”

“Aw, Girl, you’ll figure something out.”

“I’ll see you later. Rest for now.” She left the room and seriously considered the very thing her uncle suggested, but Ellie ultimately decided to just use the main stairs. As she quietly took the steps slowly, Ellie peeked over the edge of the mezzanine looking for Stan. She tried to not let him see her but as she took one more step, Ellie realized he wasn’t there.

Moving even slower and carefully, she finally made it to the top step and listened for any sound near the wall hiding the staircase. She observed that he had started mounting the boxes in the space she had indicated, but he’d only made a little progress. Suddenly, the sound of his boot steps coming from the hidden staircase reached her ears. In a panic, Ellie dashed down the hallway leading to the guests’ rooms. Thank goodness, the rooms were not locked, she thought as she slipped inside the first door.

The creaking noise of the panel to the hidden stairway gave his entrance away and Ellie pulled the door almost shut, allowing just enough room to listen to his movements. What am I going to do now? Her heart was beating faster and the palms of her hands started to sweat. As if to give her a way out, Stan started pounding on the wall. He must be getting back to the job of mounting those boxes.

Under the cover of the noise his work effort was making, Ellie slipped out the door and down the hallway to the very end room. She went into the room and made a big deal about slamming the door behind herself. It worked. She could hear Stan coming down that hallway as he approached the door and knocked.

“Ellie, are you in here?”

She opened the door and put a look of surprise on her pretty face. “Oh, there you are! I came up a little bit ago and since you weren’t in the mezzanine, I decided to check on this room. Those French doors heading outside don’t always close properly and I wanted to make sure they were shut.”

“I can look at them after I finish the other job, if you want.” He volunteered but didn’t offer any explanation why he wasn’t where he should have been.

“No, that’s okay. I’m sure your foreman will have other things for you to do.” Ellie turned and started out of the room. When she realized he wasn’t following, she turned back.

Stan was just standing there in the middle of the room. He appeared transfixed with a blank look on his face. “Stan? Are you coming?”

He shook his head as though to clear his thoughts. A grin showed on his face, but it didn't reach his eyes. Ellie had a sudden memory of the same look on Bill Brennan's face and she shivered with alarm. "Stan, where were you when I came to the mezzanine?"

"Why, I was downstairs getting a new drill bit."

## Five

She simply said that she'd see him later and tried hard to appear calm as she went back down the steps to her apartment. When she burst through the door, her uncle was startled awake from his position on the recliner.

"What the hell? Is the place on fire?" His words were more gruff than usual.

"He was in the hidden staircase! Uncle, when I got up there Stan was nowhere to be found!" She was pacing around the small space of her new home.

Shotgun finally sat the recliner back in its upright position. "Maybe he was getting a tool or some more nails."

"That's what his excuse was when I asked him. He said he needed a drill bit."

"Then why don't you believe him?"

"I was standing close by the wall, trying to figure out why he wasn't there working. When I heard footsteps behind the wall, I had to dash to the closest room. I barely got myself inside the door when he came back out onto the mezzanine."

"Are you absolutely sure? This isn't your active imagination working, is it?"

"Uncle! I swear he is up to something! He asked those questions about finding treasure and he said he

normally works on new construction not remodels. There's just something weird about him."

"You need to calm down and talk to John. Don't do anything rash." He finally got up and moved towards the door. "Ellie, I'm going to do some more unpacking. You stay here and you do the same until John calls."

When she heard her uncle close his own door, Ellie didn't move right away, but stood still weighing her options. Many thoughts were swimming around in her head. It wouldn't have been that difficult for him to find the opening just like she had. If he was an honest person, he would have shown her what he found. Instead, Stan chose to lie about his whereabouts.

Ellie finally moved to the fridge and reached for the bottle of wine. After pouring a full glass of the white wine, she plopped down on the closest bar stool. Finally, the noises of work being done out in the saloon came to a halt. The workers would be leaving and there would be privacy for her to decide what to do.

The clock on the microwave showed that it was almost five in the afternoon. Where did the day go she wondered? Just as she was thinking where John might be, her cell phone rang. The display showed it was the man she loved, but Ellie hesitated with a guilty conscience. His timing was most fortuitous. Finally, she answered and tried hard not to act differently so as to not alert him.

“Hey, honey how are you guys doing? Are you there?” She tried to calm her nerves and sound normal.

His frustration showed in his tone. “Yes, we’re here but things are getting a little complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dammit, El, I wish you were here with me. I don’t handle things well when it doesn’t go according to plan.” His voice was heavy with stress.

“John, what exactly is going on?”

“The bar is not intact...at least not here in this location. The front part is here but the hutch from the back wall isn’t.”

“Where is it?” She was secretly glad that he was so preoccupied by his problem that he wouldn’t notice the distraction in her voice and dig into her situation.

“It’s down in Deming, about sixty miles south. The good news is we can hit Interstate 10 and be home faster, but it takes us a few miles out of the way through Phoenix. I don’t relish the idea of driving through that damn busy city.”

“Did you get the part from Silver City loaded?”

“Yes, and we’re going to head to Deming now. The back bar is what we’re picking up there. This guy thought he could get it back before we got here but he didn’t, so we have to go there.”

“You sound tired, John. Just take it easy. Get a motel room in Deming and then in the morning you can head back here.” She was concerned that he might be too tired to drive.

“Wait till you see it, Ellie. It needs a little tender loving care but that old mahogany will shine right up.

I'll call you in the morning. Sleep tight, Sweetie." He hung up his phone and she just looked at hers.

Ellie knew what she was going to do from the very first moment Stan lied to her. Going to the front small coat closet, she grabbed the big flashlight and her gun. This time she put the holster on and strapped it tightly on her hips. Without any further thought, she went out her door and walked softly to the main saloon, past the bar and down the short hall to the office. Looking behind herself, Ellie backed into the small room making sure no one was lingering in the work space.

"I was right!" Shotgun's gravelly voice startled her. He was sitting behind the desk with his hands folded on the leather top in front of him.

"Uncle! What the hell!" She spoke sharply.

"My 'spidey sense' was working just as good as yours. I knew you'd try to go in that blasted stairway by yourself!"

She was furious, but one thing Ellie had never done in her entire life with her uncle was turn that anger on him and she wasn't going to start now. "You just have to understand. I need to go and see where he went. I took some pictures with my cell when John and I were in there. I can use them to see where he was and perhaps find out what he was doing."

"Then I'm coming with you." He stated firmly.

She took a deep breath, "Uncle, you won't be able to make it. It's narrow and steep. John and I had to turn sideways down by the lower part."

"I'll go as far as I can. That's the only way I'll let you go in there, Girl." Ellie knew that tone of voice

and saw the staunch determination in his weathered face.

“Won’t you listen to reason? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“That’s the exact same thing I could say to you.” He wasn’t backing down. For what seemed like forever, there was silence between them. They each stood their ground and appeared to be waiting for the other to give in. Finally, she let out a huge sigh.

“Okay, you win.” When she saw the big grin spread across his face, Ellie finished her concession. “Uncle I’ll go get another flashlight...” Ellie stopped and laughed out loud when he pulled a big camping-type lantern from underneath the desk.

“You take this one and I’ll hold that one shining down on you.” He got up and looked at her eye to eye. “Lead on, I’ll be right behind you as far as I can.”

Hesitating only slightly, Ellie reached behind the bookcase and felt for the lever that would open up the panel. After a few attempts, she finally ran her hand over the small, metal piece sticking just enough out of the wall. She had to struggle with it a bit, but soon enough it gave way and the entire bookshelf whooshed open revealing the stairway and landing behind.

“Well, I’ll be darned!” Shotgun stuck his lantern in the space and was amazed as the light illuminated the entire space. He could see the cobwebs but more importantly he looked down to see a man’s footprints. “Look here. Are those yours?” He pointed to the smaller prints coming down from above and even continuing down the steps below.

“Yes, those have to be mine, but it’s hard to tell which ones are John’s and which would belong to Stan.” She bent down and studied the boot marks. Finally, Ellie felt she could tell the difference between the two male prints. “I can see the difference, but I don’t know which ones belong to John. Wait a minute!” She bent down further and studied the steps from above.

“John and I only came down these steps from the mezzanine.” She pointed to one set of male prints. “Look, these are headed up. These prints on the landing have to belong to Stan. We didn’t go up from here, we went into the office and then on down the steps to the escape room below.” She took her cell phone out of her pocket. “Uncle, bring that big lantern and light up this particular footprint.” She then snapped several shots including some close ups. Once satisfied that she’d correctly identified Stan’s prints, Ellie turned to her uncle.

“I’m going to go up to the mezzanine first and then on up to that top room. I’ll see if I can trace where he went and record the information in my phone.”

Before she took another step, her uncle tapped her on the shoulder. “Girl, be careful. I don’t think there’s any immediate danger but we don’t know what if anything he did. I’m going to go up the steps as far as I can, shining the light to help you.”

“Don’t hurt yourself. I’ll be talking and you’ll be able to hear me all the way, I would think.” With their plan in place, she moved slowly up the steps, one at a time, taking in all of the details she could observe. She deduced that the workman had gone up at least

to the mezzanine. Once she was there, Ellie hollered down to her uncle, "Hey, can you still hear me?"

When he spoke, Ellie was surprised to hear him so close. "I'm halfway up. What are you going to do now?" She could hear him breathing hard and it pained her that her uncle had to strain so hard to climb simple steps.

"I'm going to go on up, but you can stay where you are. I'll yell and let you know when I've reached the top room. Please, just rest where you are."

"I'm not a damned invalid, Girl! I'll take it easy, don't worry so." His voice was calmer as he had a little time to gain his breath.

Ellie knew better than to take his harsh words seriously. She knew it was his own frustrations that fueled those thoughts. "Ok, just listen for my voice."

She moved further up the steps to the top room. Once there, she shouted down to let her uncle know she was at the top. Ellie could see that Stan had made his way up here as she took in his footprints. Nothing seemed disturbed, but he had obviously searched the area. Perhaps he was looking for the treasure he thought they had found.

"I'm coming back down, Uncle. There's nothing here."

As soon as she reached him, Ellie spoke, "I want to go to the steps below. According to his tracks, he just looked around up there. Maybe he did more down below. Are you doing okay?"

"If you ask me that one more time, I'm going to leave and take my lantern with me." Shotgun threatened but without any conviction of his words.

“Okay, okay, I get your message. I’ll stop with the nagging.” Ellie pushed past him and got to the landing by the office. She waited patiently while her uncle slowly made his way to the same spot.

“I’ll go down a few steps and shine the light as far as I can.” He spoke.

“It’s twenty-one steps so only go down as far as you need to so that the light is good. It’s a straight shot so I think a few steps would work.” She took the stairs downward one at a time slowly.

“How do you know the exact count?”

“John had me count them when we came back up. He’s very methodical about his investigations.” She took one more step at the part where the walls narrowed. “I’m going to move slower now as this is where everything is so close. If I was claustrophobic, I couldn’t be here,”

“Be careful.” Shotgun said unnecessarily.

Ellie continued to look closely for Stan’s prints. As she counted down the steps, Ellie finally realized she was almost on the landing that led to the escape room. “Whoa!”

“What? What’s happening?” Her uncle’s anxious voice was heard from above.

“You won’t believe this, but his footprints just stopped.”

“They can’t have disappeared into thin air. Look again. Maybe he turned in a different direction.” Shotgun offered.

“There is no other way, it dead ends just beyond the secret panel.” She debated on her next move, but realized that for now, their search was over.

As Ellie walked up the steps, she found her uncle had already retreated to the landing leading to the office. Her mind was running through several scenarios but reaching no conclusions, she admitted temporary defeat.

“Let’s go and sit down. My brain is tired and I know you’ve got to be worn out.”

He extinguished his lantern, not offering any protest. They both shut the panel behind the bookcase and headed out of the office. Ellie made sure she locked the door and just as they were turning down the hallway to her apartment, her cell phone rang.

“I’ll be, it’s that man of yours. He has a sixth sense too!” Shotgun chuckled at his remark.

She opened her door and answered her phone at the same time. “Hey, how’s things going?”

Before John spoke, she had a feeling that things were still in a mess. “It’s not. We’re in Deming, but we can’t get the back bar until later tomorrow. I’m not happy about any of this.”

“Get some rest, love. Tomorrow things won’t look so bad.” She tried to comfort him.

She heard him take a calming breath, before speaking again. “What’ve you been doing today? Anything exciting happen?”

Ellie looked to her uncle before answering. “Just the usual stuff, construction work, unpacking and getting those lockboxes put up.” She looked to see her uncle shake his head.

“Well, sweetie, I’m going to get some sleep. I’ll call you in the morning. I love you.” The phone went dead.

“Don’t start with me!” It was her turn to shake a finger at her uncle. “I’ll tell him when he gets home. He’s got enough to worry about without me adding to his problems.”

“Girl, I don’t need to lecture, but you can’t start a life with him unless you two can be totally open and honest. Got a cold beer in there?”

She gestured to him and together they went in to settle down after their short adventure. Ellie took a few swigs on her beer, and then turned to her uncle. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Since when have you ever had to ask? Go for it.”

“Were you ever married? I came to live with you after my folks died and if I remember right, I was about nine.”

“That’s right. It took me several years while you were in foster care to convince the courts that I was fit to be your parent, a single male parent at that.”

“So...” she prompted him to explain.

Shotgun took a long drink of his beer, nearly finishing it. “I married the woman I considered my perfect mate, about two years before you were born. You’re actually named after her.” He let that soak in a bit. “I loved her dearly but I knew I wouldn’t get to keep her.”

Ellie waited patiently for him to finish his thoughts. She felt that it was still difficult for him to speak about her.

“When I married Eleanor, I knew she was very ill with a disease that she’d never heal from and it did eventually take her life. She had an incurable cancer in the brain. I loved her and wanted to make her last

days as fun and carefree as possible. We had three great years and I've never regretted my decision. Your father and mother honored her memory by naming you after my beloved. That's why I fought so hard to get you when they passed."

The ticking of the kitchen clock was the only sound as both people seemed deep in their own thoughts. The little window on the far wall showed that the sun was setting finally and she went to turn on the light over the kitchen.

"Why do you ask, Girl?"

"Well, my question seems moot after this information."

"Ask anyway."

"I wanted to know if you'd ever been married, because I wanted to know if you felt during that relationship that you weren't always true to yourself. Now that I've said it out loud, it seems rather childish and trivial."

"You're having trouble being yourself and loving John." Shotgun stated it in very simple terms.

Ellie let out a huge sigh. "I love him. I want to be with him."

"But?"

"I feel like I'm losing bits and pieces of me by trying to be what John wants me to be."

"For example..." Shotgun encouraged her to continue her thoughts aloud.

"One main thing is that he's completely and thoroughly ready to stop being a sheriff. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely understand that. He's been living up to his family's tradition and now he's gotten a

chance to live his own dreams. I, on the other hand, had just started becoming an investigator and don't feel that I've completed what I set out to do. I mean, I spent a lot of years and money getting my degree and now, it seems like a useless piece of paper."

Her uncle didn't respond, but sat there ready to listen to more.

"Are you hungry? We should get something to eat."

"Don't worry about that just yet. I feel you have more to say."

"You mean that I have more to whine about, don't you?" She laughed and tried to lighten the mood in the room.

"Eleanor, this is serious. I know you love John but these days, love isn't enough. He loves and respects you and he is an intelligent man. I just feel that if you two could talk it out, you'd come to a mutual conclusion. You've just got to give him a chance."

"Oh, Uncle, don't misunderstand me. I will give us every chance. I just have to figure out how. I'm ready for some dinner." She ended the conversation and got up to find something in the fridge she could turn into a meal.

For the next hour, she worked on their food and after they ate, they watched a game show on television. Finally, Shotgun patted her on the knee and said his goodnight.

"You'll figure it out, Girl. You're the smartest person I know and I have faith in your decisions."

She laughed and kissed him on his cheek. "Sleep tight. I'll see you in the morning."

As Ellie cleaned up their meal and the dishes, she reflected on her conversation with her uncle. He was the best, she thought. Shotgun was from an older generation and for him to sit there and listen to her feminine concerns was really reflective of his genuine character.

As she gathered her shoes, Ellie went over to make sure their apartment door was closed tightly. Something just occurred to her as she had her hand on the doorknob. At their home in Prescott, she always kept the back door unlocked so her uncle had easy access to the fridge or to her if needed. With John gone and Stan being mysterious, she hesitated keeping the apartment unlocked. Taking a big sigh she spoke aloud, "I'm not going to start being afraid now. After all I've been through I can take care of you, Stan!" She made her promise to an empty room.

She did, however, pop her head out into the hallway and listened for any sound other than her uncle shuffling about in his space. I've got to get myself under control, she thought. After closing her door, Ellie moved to her bedroom and got into her comfy clothes. Being a creature of habit, she placed her folded work clothes on the chair next to her bedroom door, ready for use the next day. Propping the extra pillows up on the headboard, she turned the television on and proceeded to surf through the channels. Just as she settled on a program, her cell rang.

"Hi, John. I thought you were going to get some rest."

“I just had to hear your voice before I settled down for the night. Seth and I had some great Mexican food but now I’m ready for sleep.”

“How’s it going with him? Have you changed your mind about him being the enemy?”

“He’s okay. I’m not letting my guard down, but I’m almost convinced that he’s just a young man with a hard start in life. He’s talked a lot about his relationship with Chuck. I feel he’s really been given a hard blow in life when Chuck died so violently. I think we’ll be fine having him work for us.”

“Oh, I’m so glad. I feel the same way. My years in foster care weren’t horrible, but it wasn’t the same as being a part of a loving family.”

“Well, you sleep well and I’ll let you know when we’re on our way tomorrow. I hope to get loaded as early as we can.”

“Okay, love, just let me know.” She signed off.

I do love him, she reflected upon the conversation she’d had earlier. Uncle’s right, she thought, I need to have an honest and open conversation with John. With that last thought, Ellie turned off the television and settled down in her bed, finally falling asleep.

With the sound repeating in her mind, her eyes finally popped open. What little light there was in the room, enabled her to make sure that she was alone before moving. Ellie looked to each side of her bed and waited to hear it again. There it was, but her mind was unable to make sense of the noise. Driven by her innate curiosity, she moved slowly to the edge of her bed closest to the closet. Out of her nightstand,

Ellie silently pulled out her pistol and a small flashlight.

In her bare feet, she stepped slowly toward the bedroom door, her hand filled with the loaded revolver. As the door was already open, she moved silently closer to the front room down the darkened hallway. Ellie strained to listen for any noise or movement coming from there. Hearing nothing but the beating of her own heart, she took more careful steps and got closer to the front room. Holding her gun in front of her body, ready for any necessary action, Ellie stuck her head around the corner of the wall.

The light from the clock on the microwave was the only illumination but it seemed enough for her to make the assumption that she was alone. Whatever the sound, it hadn't come from within this space. It must have been in the hallway. A sudden thought crossed her mind. What if it had been her uncle? What if he needed some help? It took all her might to restrain any sudden moves. She must not allow fear to rule her actions. Deliberately and cautiously, Ellie moved closer to her door but as soon as she was almost ready to open it, something caught her eye.

On the stand just by the front door, she noticed the object. There was barely enough light from the nightlight plugged into the wall socket, but there was no denying it. The book from the room at the top of the hidden staircase was now laying on her stand. She and John hadn't removed anything from the rooms they had inspected after finding the hidden spaces. With her investigative instincts kicking in, Ellie backed over to the kitchen and grabbed rubber

kitchen gloves from the drawer. She didn't want to mess any prints up by handling it herself and these were the nearest thing she could use. Her hand shook as she reached out and lifted the book and held it in front of herself. She turned it over and over looking for any sort of mark or print but found nothing obvious. Convinced that she was completely alone, Ellie flicked on her flashlight and confirmed that it was indeed, the very same book. She was holding the antique book about a haunted hotel.

As she looked at the microwave clock, the time registered as 2:35 am. She'd been asleep for several hours before hearing the noise. She could now confirm that the sounds she'd heard was the opening and closing of her apartment door. Why would someone put this book in her room? What was the significance of it? With her heart beating hard in her chest and her hands shaking, Ellie worked with deep breathing to control the fear consuming her entire body. As she found herself starting to calm, Ellie went to find someplace to sit.

Finally turning on the light next to the couch, she sat down and turned the book over and over in her hands. It still was covered lightly with dust and it appeared that the only impressions on it were her own. Can a ghost leave fingerprints she mused? Ellie almost laughed at the absurdity of her own thoughts. Maybe Magdalena was active once again and trying to leave her more messages. With that idea in her mind, she opened the book and delicately fanned the yellowed and worn pages. She turned to the first page and started to read. It was not the type of book she

would normally pick, but Ellie read with the intention of gaining clues as to why this novel was placed in her possession.

Finally as the sun started showing in the small windows in the room, Ellie put the book down. She rubbed at her tired eyes and knew she needed to make coffee. Her uncle was an early riser and it was obvious that she wasn't going to get any more sleep, so caffeine was most definitely called for this morning. Just like clockwork, Shotgun walked into her apartment.

"What are you doing up already?" And then as he really looked at her, he added, "Have you been up all night?"

After starting the brewer, Ellie walked back to her sofa and lifted the book to show her uncle. "Look what appeared on my stand earlier this morning."

He came closer and looked intently at the book. "What's that, besides being a book?"

"Oh, that's right, you didn't see it. When John and I went up the hidden stairs all the way to the top of the building, we found a room. I'd describe it as a lady's room where someone would go to rest, perhaps even read. This book was on the stand next to the bed." She showed him the title.

He chuckled as he commented, "Kind of appropriate, huh? You said it was in that room? Then the obvious question is how did it get in here in the middle of the night?"

"Even more to the point is who put it in here? She added.



## Six

“I do have to say, Girl, you certainly have a knack for attracting weird situations. Do you have an extra pair of those gloves? I’d like to take a look at it.”

After donning his gloves, Shotgun carefully took the book and sat at the breakfast counter. She watched as he almost reverently opened to the first page. “It’s not an easy read is it?”

“Not really. I had to concentrate to keep from falling asleep. I’m not sure there’s a message in there for me. I have no idea why someone would take it from that room and put it in here in the middle of the night other than to scare me half to death.”

Shotgun continued to flip carefully through the pages in the book. “Do you think this is an original? I know nothing about how books were published way back then. I wouldn’t have expected it to be a soft cover like this one, but I really don’t know.”

“I think I need to do some research on that.” She mused.

“Wait! What’s this?” Shotgun was almost to the back of the small book, when he found a photograph. It was stuck in between pages and he struggled to pull it out without doing any damage. Together they finally inspected the photo.

“Uncle, it's Magdalena! This looks like a wedding picture.”

“Are you sure it's her?” He asked.

“I'm positive! It's definitely the image I saw last year.” Ellie took the photo and held it closer. “I wonder who this man is? I wish they put the date on these pictures like they do now.” Ellie commented.

“Uncle, what do we do now?” She looked at him, waiting for an answer.

“When is John going to be home?”

“If everything goes right, he'll be home late tomorrow night. Why?”

“This is turning out to be something that he can handle and I think he would know where we go from here.”

She took a deep breath before replying to him. “I tend to agree with you...” She raised a finger to make her point, “But only because for the moment, I can't think of any other plan!”

“So, what are you going to do today?” Shotgun inquired.

“I'm going to get dressed in my work clothes and keep a close eye on Stan. He's creepy and I have to be able to prove it to John!” She stood up and headed to her bedroom.

“Why don't you tell me how you really feel?” She heard her uncle's chuckle but ignored it as she grabbed her work clothes to get dressed. When Ellie pulled on her jeans, she heard the tinkle of the extra keys from the lock boxes. She dressed quickly and dashed out to the kitchen.

“I think I have an idea!” She took the keys from her pocket and laid them on the counter in front of her uncle. “These are the extra keys from those boxes upstairs. There has to be at least six more of those squirrel hole boxes somewhere around here. Magdalena is trying to tell me to find them. In his own stupidity Stan might be right, there may be treasure here in this place.”

“I think you’ve gone too far, Girl.” He replied but tried to soften his words by adding, “Tell me why you think that?”

She took the picture and went to the desk in the corner. As she poked around in the drawers, Ellie finally found what she was looking for and quickly brought the magnifying glass back to the counter. “Look at the size of that diamond ring on her hand!” He used the glass lens and squinted his eyes to see what his niece was talking about.

“Okay, I’ll give you that, but why do you think that jewelry is still here in this place? Connect the dots for me.” Shotgun challenged.

“Okay, John said he put a key in the top lock box for me, but when I opened it, there was an old bag full of keys. I matched each one to a box and these were left over. He came up to the mezzanine because he had forgotten to put what he thought was the master key in the box. Don’t you see, Uncle, she put that bag of old keys in there for me to find! It was another one of Magdalena’s signs. If there is a treasure like that diamond ring, it’s got to be in one of those missing six boxes.” As she saw the look on his face, Ellie grew more impatient.

“I know you and John think I’m nuts but I’ve seen her! She’s the reason we’re still alive! Please, if you can’t believe in her, trust me! There’s so much more to this situation than meets the eye and I intend to find out what’s going on behind those hidden panels.”

He looked up at her and sighed. “Okay, I think I can follow what you’re thinking. I know you’re set on this and far be it from me to try and talk you out of it, but you’ve got to promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Uncle! That’s unreasonable! Who knows what you would do, especially if you were in my situation.” She pleaded with him.

“Think about it, Girl. All I’m asking you to do is before you make a move or do something that might get you into a scrape that you stop and think about it. Would I do the very thing you’re thinking about doing?”

Ellie laughed. “I think that’s a whole lot of double talk, but I get the gist. I’ll not go off on an impulse. I’ll do some extra thinking before I make a move that might get me into a mess.”

“Keep your phone on you at all times and I’ll do the same.” He spoke firmly.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be very careful.” She went to the desk once again and grabbed her small notebook. It fit nicely into the back pocket of her jeans.

“What’s that for?”

“I take notes. It’s a memory aide that John taught me to use. In the course of a conversation, someone

might say something that's not pertinent at the time but its importance becomes evident later on."

"That's some good training stuff. That John's such a smart man." Shotgun said.

"Yes, he is and by the way, I'm going to have a serious talk with him when he gets home. We need to clear the air and start anew. I'm not even sure that he's aware of my doubts and insecurities."

"I knew you'd come around. I'm proud of you." He praised her.

"Well, I'd better get up to the mezzanine before our creep decides to do something he shouldn't. I hear the crew's wake up call." She opened her door but turned to say one more thing, "Uncle, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Go on! Get out of here."

She shut the door as she laughed at his embarrassment. For years, he'd been hard pressed to demonstrate much emotion but as they grew closer and closer together, it became easier for him to match her displays of affection. Just as she headed toward the stairs, her cell rang and she stopped to take it.

"Hey, love, what's happening?" She saw his name on the display.

"We're up and just finished eating and I've tried to call the guy that has the back bar, but so far, no contact." His frustration was showing in his voice.

"Hey, take it easy. It's still very early in the morning and you've got all day. Find something to do. I'll bet there are some local wineries. You know I like a good bottle of wine."

“Sweetie, I don’t think the wineries are open at this time of the day, but I do appreciate your suggestions.” John’s tone was a bit lighter. “Seth and I will find something to do. You be careful.”

She hesitated at his words of warning, but asked anyway. “Be careful of what?”

“All those good-looking construction guys around there! Don’t tell me you haven’t looked.” He teased.

“Honey, you know I only have eyes for you. Talk with you later.”

As Ellie turned back around, she nearly got bumped off her feet. “Oh, man, I’m so sorry!” It was Toby, the young man that had helped her unload her vehicle a few days earlier.

“I’m sorry too. I need to start watching where I’m going.” She felt a flush creep up her cheeks. This is ridiculous, she chastised herself. John’s warning echoed in her mind.

“Are you okay?” He put his hands on her arms to steady her.

“I...I’m fine. No problem. How’s it going?” She backed up out of his grasp.

“Just working hard! This is going to be one beautiful place when we get done.” He spoke proudly.

“Well, we’d better get back to work.” She stepped away towards the stairs.

“See ya later.” He grinned.

“Not if I can help it.” She mumbled under her breath. I don’t think this is the type of trouble my uncle was talking about, she thought to herself, but this sure won’t help things.

Stan greeted her as she approached the top of the stairs. "Hey! How are you today?"

"I'm good. Ready to get these things done?" She had a hard time being nice and polite with him. "John should be home later today and I'd like to have at least one project done to show him." She grinned to soften her words.

"I'm already on it. How do you like what I've done so far?"

"It's good. Do you think we could be done today?" Ellie tried to ignore the surprised look on Stan's face indicating that she was going to be working alongside him.

"Oh, you're going to help me?" He obviously wasn't pleased with this new bit of information but tried to cover up his reaction. "I'm not sure how much there is that you can do, but let's get to it."

He grabbed another one of the boxes and proceeded to place it in the framework he'd constructed. Without asking for her help, he continued to place the remaining boxes in their respective places as she just watched. It was just about an hour later that Stan finally turned to her and spoke, "Are you sure you want to stay here and watch me? I'm sure there's something else you could be doing."

It took all she could do to keep her smile in place and her mouth shut, but Ellie just stood there. She was convinced that he didn't want her here but that just made her more curious about his motives. "I'm fine. You know being a supervisor has its advantages." She watched the smile fall from his face but he kept silent. She was determined that he

wouldn't have any opportunities to go behind the hidden panels but it took all of her strength to stay there.

She was extremely thankful when her cell phone rang. Ellie recognized her uncle's ringtone and quickly answered. "Uncle! What's up?"

"Having fun yet?" He teased. "How's the shadowing going?"

"It's just great. I'm helping Stan with the lock box installation. Where are you?" She tried to act nonchalant.

"I'm in the office. If you need me, just come down the hidden staircase." Shotgun teased her.

"You know I might just do that. Thanks for checking in." With that, she hung up.

"That your uncle?" Stan asked the obvious.

"Yes, have you met him yet? He's staying across the hall from our apartment. John was so thoughtful to make room for him." She went back to her position at the edge of the now diminishing pile of metal boxes.

"No, I haven't had the pleasure." His tone wasn't one of friendship.

"How long have you known John?" She asked what she hoped seemed to be an innocent enough question.

"Oh, I don't really know him personally. I just work for the general contractor that's doing this remodel. I think he knows John." He kept working and didn't turn around to face her as he answered her question. As he finished up on the current one, Ellie reached down and handed Stan the next box to be installed.

They worked this way for the next hour or so and she could finally see the wall filling with the boxes. It was very close to the way she remembered it. "This is looking good."

"Thanks, not bad if I say so myself." He stood back as if to admire his work. "I still don't understand the significance of doing all this work."

"Oh, that's okay as long as I understand why this needed to be done." She smirked as she retorted.

"Well, you're the boss. Or rather, you're with the boss and that's what pays the bills." His remark was just as pointed.

Before she could reply, her cell rang again. As she saw it was John, Ellie walked over to the edge of the steps to take the call. "Hey! Good news, we got the back bar loaded and are on the road! We'll be there in about seven hours." His voice showed the delight he felt at finally accomplishing his goal.

"Oh, that's the best news I could hear right now. No more problems?" She looked to see if Stan was listening to her conversation but if he was, he wasn't making it obvious.

"No, you were right. I just called the guy and he agreed to meet us early and it's all done. El, you're going to absolutely love this piece. It's huge but beautiful. It's going to take a lot of TLC but the luster of this old wood is going to shine through." John was happy.

"I can't wait to see it. Drive carefully and I'll see you later tonight." She hung up.

"Problems?" Stan asked.

"Not at all. John found a beautiful bar for the saloon and is bringing it home tonight. I'm going to go

and tell my uncle the good news. I'll be right back." She needed some relief from this mysterious man.

Ellie quickly took the steps and went around the old bar and into the office. Her uncle was still there, sitting behind the desk working on some paperwork. "Hey, left your guard duty? What gives?"

"I just got a call from John and he'll be back tonight with the bar."

"And you left your post to tell me that?" He pressed.

"No, dammit! I can't stand that guy. He's sneaky and I have a gut feeling that he's up to something devious."

"Then shouldn't you be up there watching him?" His grin irked her.

"Laugh all you want! I know in my gut that our mysterious carpenter is up to no good!"

"What would John tell you? Can you just go on gut feelings?" Shotgun pushed.

The look on her face suddenly changed. "Of course not! I'm going to get my laptop and take it up there with me. I'll do some research on him while I'm watching." She went to her apartment, retrieved her computer but before heading up to the mezzanine, Ellie went back into the office.

"Is there a file there somewhere that has the names of the crew working here? I can't do much digging if I don't even know his last name."

Shotgun handed her a paper he was already holding. "I wondered how long it would take you."

She just smiled. "You're so smart!"

Not wanting to leave Stan up there too long on his own she dashed with computer in hand up to the mezzanine. He was still working away on the boxes so Ellie found one of the old chairs to sit down upon to do her work. He finally turned to see what she was up to and commented, "Oh, got something to do, huh?"

What she wanted to do and what she actually did was two different things. Ellie wanted to stop this verbal tennis match and just confront him about her thoughts, but she was completely aware that successful information could often be gained by playing the game. "Oh, I'm sure that you're much better at installing those boxes than I could ever be. I'm just going to work on the designs I need for this area." It was all she could do to keep from gagging.

He seemed to accept her explanation for staying in the immediate area as Stan went back to his task. She did start another list for the things she felt they needed for the mezzanine. Much of the furniture before the blast was dilapidated and other than the few chairs left in the room, it appears that John had the rest of the stuff hauled off. Ellie wanted a page on her computer to go to just in case he decided to check on her.

For a while the two of them seemed to be keeping busy with their different tasks. The noise of the construction activities surrounded them but each of them continued with their own individual duties. She glanced up at him occasionally and felt he did the same when he thought she wasn't looking. The time ticked slowly by but soon she heard the worker's on

the floors below gathering for their lunch time. Ellie waited to see what Stan was going to do.

“Well, I think I need a break. I’m going downstairs to have some lunch. What about you?” He looked directly at her.

“I think you’re right. I’ll go and see what my uncle wants to eat. See you back up here later.” She started to walk away when he stopped her. “I won’t be back up this afternoon. The foreman has something else for me to do. The rest of the boxes will have to wait until tomorrow.”

Trying hard to keep her features from showing the surprise she felt at his statement, Ellie replied, “Well, I guess they will.” They both walked side by side down the stairs and at the bottom they each went in a different direction without another word.

Once she entered her apartment, the first thing Ellie noticed was the lack of her uncle’s presence. Without hesitation, she went out her door and across the hall to his. She knocked lightly but pushed the door slightly open and called his name. “Uncle! Are you here?”

When Ellie entered his space, the first thing she noticed was that it was dark, no lights were on and the television was off. “Uncle?” She tried again, this time a little louder.

Shotgun came stumbling into the living area rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Hey, sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“Are you okay?” She was immediately concerned.

“Sure, sure. I just fell asleep. What time is it?”

“It’s time for food. What do you want?” Even though she was alerted to her uncle’s unusual activities, Ellie tried to act nonchalant.

“Oh, something light. I’ve been tired today. Don’t know what’s with that.” He went to his mini-fridge and pulled out a bottle of cold water.

Without betraying her real concerns, Ellie tried to put a casual spin on her tone. “Come on over and we’ll have a salad or a fruit plate.” She turned so he wouldn’t see the concern on her face.

When she finally shut her own door behind her, Ellie leaned on it for a moment. Something is seriously wrong with him, she thought with extreme distress. She quickly pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed John. It rang and rang, but he didn’t answer. Ellie left a quick message and then headed to her kitchen to make some lunch.

In a very short time, Shotgun walked into her apartment and sat himself at the breakfast bar. “What’d you come up with?”

“I thought we’d just do some sliced meats and cheeses with crackers. I have grapes and strawberries too.” Ellie fussed about setting things out on the counter.

“How’d things go with your ‘creepy guy’?” He asked as he helped himself to more of the snacks.

“He’s a slick one, Uncle. It was like watching paint dry. I would watch him and I’d find him watching me. I wish I could just tell the jerk what I think and be done with it.” She put a cracker with cheese into her mouth.

“But you won’t.” He stated firmly.

“No, I have to be patient and we both know that’s not one of my virtues.”

He just laughed and continued enjoying his light lunch. Ellie watched him closely for any signs that he was having some sort of health concern. “Are you okay?” She finally just asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You wouldn’t lie to a girl, would you?”

Shotgun didn’t reply right away, but instead munched on his snack tray. “Eleanor, I’ve not been feeling exactly up to snuff, but I don’t think it’s something for us to worry about.”

She was shocked by his disclaimer. Her uncle never used her full name unless it was serious. With a deep breath, she tried to gain more information. “What exactly do you mean by not feeling up to snuff?” When he didn’t answer, she added, “Uncle, tell me exactly what you’re feeling. Are you light headed? Do you feel dizzy? Is your breathing different?”

“Since when did you become a bloody nurse? I said I’m not up to snuff and that’s all I can say. I’ll let you know if more is needed.” He was adamant.

“Okay, okay. You know I love you and I’m only concerned for your welfare.”

He looked up from eating his lunch and gave her a weak smile. “I know, Ellie. You are the best thing to happen to me and I wouldn’t want to alarm you. I promise I will let you know when we need to pursue this temporary problem more completely if at all. Now eat your lunch.”

She knew it was the end of their discussion. Ellie didn't like it but she had lived with her uncle long enough to know that he meant what he said. "Fine. You will let me know when I can be worried?"

"Of course! I'm just a bit tired. I think being as old as I am, I'm entitled."

She went about cleaning up their lunch and tried to not think about his state of health. "Sure, you're an old fart and you can feel any way you want." Ellie teased, but inwardly she tamped down her fears for his state of health. She couldn't remember a time when he'd ever complained or been sicker than a simple cold or the flu.

"I'm glad you agree. Now shouldn't you get back to guarding your 'creep'." He teased.

"Unfortunately, he's got other duties. I think he is on to me and my suspicions." She mused.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I think I'm going to go into the hidden stairway and go down the stairs to inspect the area where his footsteps disappeared." She waited for him to protest.

"Just be careful. Take your phone and keep in touch with me at every step." Shotgun instructed her.

Trying hard not to show her shock at his concession, Ellie just shook her head. "I'll keep in touch with you at almost every move. I won't be long as I don't want anyone to catch me or to detect my movements inside the walls."

Her uncle got up from the barstool and looked her directly in the eyes. "I'll be in the office until you get clear. Don't do anything that will put you in danger."

“You know I’ll be careful. Thanks for offering to help me.” Together they both went out the door and headed for the office. On the way, she tried to locate Stan and soon saw him on the other side of the large room working with Toby. She breathed a sigh of relief. Knowing his whereabouts made her feel a bit more in control of the situation.

“Thanks for not fighting me on going in there.” She pointed to the wall behind the bookshelf. “I want to see if I can find some sort of evidence proving that Stan went down there and show it to John when he gets home.” Ellie grabbed her flashlight and felt her back pocket to make sure she had her phone. She pushed the proper lever and soon the wall opened up allowing her access to the space behind.

“You watch yourself.” Shotgun cautioned.

“I’ll be careful. I won’t be long.” She stepped onto the landing and got her bearings before taking the steps downward. She looked back to see her uncle standing in the opening with another flashlight.

Once again, Ellie was very slow and methodical in her search for his footsteps. Upon finding the correct ones, she made sure that her own steps didn’t mess up his. She counted the stairs and found that his steps disappeared just before the 21st step, right at number eighteen. She pulled her phone and took as many pictures as she could even though the lighting wasn’t exactly ideal.

She put her phone away and used her hands to slowly feel up and down the wall in the area but found nothing unusual. It was clumsy going as she had to hold the flashlight in her right hand but still try to use

it to skim over the walls. Ellie tried to keep calm as she felt through the cobwebs. She could only hope that there were no spiders or creepy crawlers still living there.

“Damn!” She cursed under her breath as the small light fell from her hand and left her in the dark as it hit the floor. Ellie bent down and tried feeling on the step above and the step below to find her torch. What a mess, she thought with frustration. I didn’t want to screw up the footprints, but my safety is paramount, her inner voice reminded Ellie of her promise to her uncle.

Just as she was about to give up and go back up the stairs in the dark, her left foot hit something sticking out from the bottom of the wall by the step. Excitement bubbled up from within as she put her hand down to try and define the object more clearly. With the fingers of her left hand, Ellie could feel it was metal and only protruding from the wall just about an inch. Having no idea what she was touching, Ellie tried to push it forward with no success.

Well, she thought logically, if forward doesn’t work perhaps backwards will give me some sort of results. With a little more effort, she pulled the metal back and with a sudden whoosh, the entire wall next to her opened up. Oh, my God! It was another dark space. Struggling to once again find her flashlight, Ellie finally brushed against it on the step below in the opposite corner. Quickly grabbing it and turning it on, she pointed it to the room she’d just found.

Before stepping into the space herself, Ellie shined her light to the floor and sure enough, there were

fresh steps! “Ah ha!” She exclaimed aloud. Stan had found that area. Now more than ever she realized that she had the proof she needed. Her curiosity was piqued about the new discovery. She lifted her light and found that it was yet another hallway. It wasn’t a room like she’d expected, but rather a wide pathway to more hidden spaces.

Taking her cell from her pocket, Ellie excitedly dialed her uncle’s phone. It was promptly answered but it wasn’t his voice. Fear constricted her words.

## Seven

“Who is this?” She finally found the courage to speak.

“This is Toby, you know the guy who helped you the other day.”

“Where’s my uncle? Is he okay?” She talked louder as the reception was kind of fading in and out.

“He said he had to go and would I answer this if you called.”

That makes no sense, she thought to herself. Her uncle would have just taken his phone with him. “Where are you?” Ellie tried to gain more information.

“I’m standing in the main lobby. Your uncle was walking by and asked if I could answer this for him.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there. Don’t move from that spot.” She ordered as she started up the stairs. Once she got at the landing by the office entrance, Ellie pushed the lever slowly just in case Toby was not being truthful. As soon as she realized that the office was empty, Ellie pushed in and closed the secret entrance fast. Without hesitation, she went out of the office door and found Toby right where he said he was standing. He just grinned and handed her Shotgun’s phone.

“Thanks.” Without saying anything further, she headed down the hallway to her uncle’s suite. Ellie didn’t knock but just pushed her way in and immediately saw that her uncle was in distress. He was sitting in his recliner but was not relaxed. His breathing seemed labored and his skin had an ashen pallor. She took his phone and called for emergency help.

“You don’t have to do that. I’ll be fine in a minute or two.” Shotgun protested.

“You don’t have any say in this right now. You’re obviously not fine and I won’t risk your life because you want to be stubborn!” Ellie turned her attention to the emergency dispatcher and the questions she was being asked. She went to him and put her hand on his forehead.

“I don’t have a fever.” He didn’t open his eyes as he spoke and it appeared that it took extra strength just to say that much.

“They’ll be here in just a minute or so. You know the fire station is just up at the bend in the road.” The dispatcher kept her on the phone and just as promised, Ellie heard the sirens coming from the rear entrance. Walking swiftly to the back door, she opened it just in time to allow the paramedics to head into the hallway.

The confusion of the next few minutes helped Ellie keep her worst fears at bay. Questions were asked and answered either by Shotgun or herself. The emergency people were conducting fact-finding procedures to determine the best guess analysis. She watched her uncle’s frustration levels rise but there was little she could do. Finally there seemed to be a break in the

process and Ellie turned to her uncle, "I'm going to lock the office so I can go with you."

"Go with me where, Girl?" He demanded.

One of the emergency technicians answered before she could. "We're going to take you down to Clarkdale and get a few more tests. We want to eliminate a few things and have a doctor look at you." They all started to move aside to allow another man to bring in the gurney.

"If you think I'm going on that dad-blasted contraction, you've got another think a coming!" The EMT looked to Ellie for help.

"Uncle, let's take this trip to town and get some answers and then we'll know what we're dealing with and you can start feeling better." She tried to comfort him.

He seemed defeated and this broke her heart. Finally with a big sigh, Shotgun agreed. "I'll go, but I'm not staying in no damn hospital! Got that?"

"I know, I know." She placed a kiss on his forehead as they put him on the gurney. "Uncle, I'm going to be right behind you." He reached up and patted her on the cheek.

When he was finally rolled out down the short hall and into the ambulance, Ellie ran as fast as she could to the office. She made sure the secret panel was in place and as she stepped out into the hall, securing the office, she practically bumped into Stan.

"Whoa! What's happening? I saw them take your uncle out in the ambulance. Anything I can do?" His words were sincere but she didn't feel any warm emotion in them.

“I have to go. John will be here shortly. He’ll handle things here.” She pushed her way past the man and hurried to her car. The road to Clarksdale was rather smooth once one got out of the town of Jerome. She took the time to call John but only got his voice mail. Ellie left a detailed message and continued on her route.

The next several hours were spent with Ellie in the waiting room and her uncle getting several tests. She never heard from her guy, but that didn’t surprise Ellie. If John was on the way to Jerome, it was usually the mountain roads that didn’t help the reception on their cell phones.

Finally a doctor came to the waiting room to give her the latest news on her uncle’s condition. “Ms. Parker?” Once she stood up, the doctor approached her.

Her heart was full of dread, but the doctor immediately put her at ease. “Your uncle said you’d be anxious to hear about his diagnosis.”

She stood up right away and stretched her hand out to greet the physician. “I’m Ellie, how’s he doing?”

“Well, let’s sit down and I’ll explain things to you.” The older man’s demeanor helped put her fears at ease.

“Is he behaving?”

“For a man such as your uncle, I’d say he was doing just fine.”

“He’s being his usual pleasant self then?” She asked.

The doctor laughed, but quickly got serious. “Ms. Parker, your uncle has a condition with his heart.”

Ellie's face showed how disturbed she was as the news hit her. "What's wrong? Is he going to be alright?"

"Right now, we suspect atrial fibrillation. He has all the symptoms; such as shortness of breath, tiredness, weakness and a few others. We have to do more tests, but I think we're on the right track."

She resisted the urge to react as a typical female. Ellie had always prided herself on the ability to handle the unusual as normal.

The doctor watched the emotions flow across her pretty face and waited. "Are you okay?"

She didn't hesitate, "I'm fine. My uncle is everything to me and I want him taken care of, no expenses spared." Before the doctor could respond, her cell phone rang and she looked to see it was John. By the look on her face, the physician spoke, "Go ahead and answer it."

With a whole lot of relief, Ellie quickly took the call. "John, Shotgun's in the emergency room. There's something wrong with his heart. Where are you?"

"Sweetie, I'm almost to Jerome. We just passed Interstate 17 and will be there in about thirty minutes. How's Shotgun doing?"

"John, we're in Verde Valley Medical Center in Cottonwood. I thought we were going to Clarkdale, but they brought us here." She looked to the doctor for confirmation. As she saw his nod, she repeated the information to John. "We're right off the main road. John, please come quickly, but drive safely!"

Ellie returned her attention to the doctor waiting patiently by her side. "I'm sorry, but John is my

fiancé and he's on his way. I had to let him know what was going on."

"I'm sure he's a great comfort to you. Let me take a moment to reassure you that your uncle is doing fine. We just need to do some more tests like I told you before. We'd like to keep him overnight." He stopped as he noticed the look on her face. "That look tells me that you don't think that's a good idea."

"I know that you're the professional and you certainly have all the degrees and certifications that make your ideas the best." She spoke with hesitation.

"But?"

"I know my uncle and I feel obliged to let you know that your staff here would feel a whole lot better if I took him home and brought him back for those tests." She explained.

The doctor obviously didn't want to agree but he looked back to the nurses at the station and then to Ellie. With a short time of deliberation, he agreed. "Okay, Ellie, I'll let him go with you for now, but before you leave I'll have the scheduler set up those tests and give you the dates and times. The only reason I'll agree to this is if you absolutely promise me that you'll have your uncle here for those procedures."

"Are you going to give him something to help him in the meantime?" She asked.

"Actually his symptoms were very mild and have stopped since he got in here, so nothing more than something to help him relax right now. Once we determine a more accurate diagnosis, we'll move on to some treatments, such as getting him on blood thinners. That's another reason for you to make sure he

gets the tests I'm ordering." The doctor stood up and started to move away.

"Thank you so much. I'll be here when he's ready to go." Ellie picked up her phone and dialed John's number. He answered almost right away. "I'm just pulling into the parking lot. How's he doing?"

"He's fine. I'll fill you in on the details when you get in here." She hung up and waited for him to appear. When John came in, Seth was walking right behind him. They seemed to be interacting like old friends and for some odd reason, this made her smile. She met him halfway and he grabbed her in his big frame for a comforting hug. "How are you? How's Shotgun?"

"Hi, Seth." She took a moment to greet him. "Let's sit over here and I'll fill you in." They all sat down and she explained the events leading up to the trip to the hospital.

"So, he's coming home tonight? That's good." John said.

"Why don't you and Seth go ahead and go to Jerome. I'm sure we'll be right behind you." She encouraged them to go.

"How about I send Seth on ahead and I'll come with you and your uncle?" John offered. At the look of relief on her face, he turned and handed over the truck keys and told Seth to be careful on the curvy roads to Jerome.

"You didn't have to do that, but I'm so glad you did." She gave him a proper kiss and snuggled into his arms.

“Is he really going to be okay?” John referred to her uncle.

“I think so. The doctor seems to think that his condition is mild and that we may have caught it soon enough. It could be his heart, or high blood pressure, or even high cholesterol. All is treatable but the most important thing we need to do is get those tests done so we can narrow it down. We’ve just got to keep an eye on him. You know how stubborn he can be.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan.” They both looked up when a nurse wheeled Shotgun into the waiting area. He was definitely unhappy at being in a wheelchair and this caused Ellie to turn her head to hide her smile.

“John! It wasn’t necessary for you to come.” The older man spoke gruffly. “I’m fine.”

“Hey, no problem, it’s actually on the way. You doing okay?”

Shotgun just nodded as he directed, “Then, let’s get the hell out of this place.” He tried to stand up but the nurse put her hands on his shoulders. “We’ll wait until we’re outside and you can get into the vehicle.”

Shotgun gave her a look of disdain, but acquiesced anyway. They all walked out the double doors and as soon as Ellie dashed to her vehicle and brought it up to the entrance, the nurse allowed Shotgun to get out of the wheelchair. All three quickly departed the local hospital and were headed the few miles up the hill to the little town of Jerome with Ellie choosing the back seat.

“I’m sorry you had to cut your trip short, John. I think my niece, God love her, panicked.” He cleared

his throat before continuing, “Ellie, I love you dearly, but I didn’t think this hospital trip was entirely necessary.”

“That’s your opinion, but I think I’ll trust the doctor’s judgement over yours. They told me we have to come back for those tests next week.” She leaned forward closer to her uncle, “Before you think of protesting, don’t bother. I have John’s support on this and you, sir, can’t fight both of us!”

When she leaned back, Shotgun looked over at John. “Is that right?”

“Sorry, but I’m with Ellie on this one. You’ll be fine and as soon as we know what we’re dealing with, things will get better.” John kept his watch on the road, as the sky was darkening and rain was threatening to fall, avoiding eye contact with Shotgun. The narrow two-way road was dangerous enough in good conditions.

“Seems to me that you’ve got far more important things to worry about than some old fool’s health.” Shotgun looked around to her, “Did you tell him?”

“Tell me what?”

“I was going to wait until we got back to The Depot. I wanted to show you rather than try to explain what’s happened.” Ellie answered.

“Well, now that the cat’s been let out of the bag, why don’t you fill me in with the details? We’re almost there anyway.” John insisted.

Ellie started to relay the information about her suspicions of Stan. She tried to give details rather than opinions in the manner in which John had trained her to do as an investigator. When she

finished, they were just pulling into the parking space at the back of their hotel. They'd been gone for several hours and it appeared that it was just quitting time for the crew. The workers were getting into their vehicles or standing about talking and Ellie found herself looking for Stan, but didn't see him.

Seth had parked the big truck with their new bar next to John's pickup and was standing there talking with some of the construction crew. John went over to talk with him while she helped get her uncle into his room and settled down for a rest. John stood at the open door patiently while Ellie got Shotgun a drink and something to snack on, but as soon as he could, he ushered her out of there and into the main lobby. "I didn't see Stan, did you?" He whispered even though it appeared the building was void of the workers.

"No, I looked at them all, but maybe he's already left. I'll go back out and see if all the cars are gone." She quickly walked the short hallway and opened the back door. It appeared that most of the cars and trucks were gone with the exception of an older truck parked further down the back alleyway. When she came back in, she asked, "Where did Seth go?"

"I told him that we'd get a bunch of the guys and unload that huge, heavy monster tomorrow. He bummed a ride home with one of the guys he knew."

She took a deep breath. "John, can I see the bar?"

The look on his face spoke volumes as he was excited and thrilled that she asked. "I would love for you to see this beauty. El, you're going to love it! Wait,

don't you want to show me what you found behind the wall?"

"You bet I do, but let's give everyone time to get out of there and then we can explore in privacy."

"Good idea." John agreed. Together they went out the back door and to the rental truck. John pulled out a key from his pocket and unlocked the padlock on the back. He hesitated. "I want you to love this as much as I did once I saw it."

Ellie immediately recognized the importance of this find. She reached up and placed a kiss on his lips. "I can't wait. I'm sure you found a great deal."

After he climbed up into the back of the rental truck, John turned to give her a hand getting up. The space was almost full even though there were just two pieces of furniture. They had covered them with a couple of moving pads and he pushed one of them aside so she could see the back bar. "Oh, John, you're absolutely right. This is going to be perfect in The Depot." Ellie rubbed her hand over the smooth surface of the dark, cherry wood. It was dusty and neglected but with a lot of hard work and attention the well-made back bar would shine once again.

Once they got down out of the truck, John made sure the lock was closed and together they went back into their new home. "I'm going to check on uncle, then we'll go exploring." She told him.

John was waiting for her at the old bar. She stood for a minute watching him as he walked around from end to end. "You're figuring out how to get this one out of here, aren't you?"

He looked up and grinned, "You know me well. You know this bar is still in good shape, it's just not as grand as the new one. Maybe I should put it on the web and try to sell it. It would be nice to see someone get some more good use out of it instead of just dumping it." He ran his hand over the top and finally asked, "Ready to show me the new stuff?"

"Absolutely! Let's go in from the office." Ellie led the way, unlocking the door first.

"Why'd you lock this door? You know that if Stan has found the entrance from the mezzanine, he could have just as easily entered the passageway from there."

"I thought of that, but there was no evidence that his footsteps led to the office entrance. They just kept going down to the new opening and then back up to the mezzanine."

"Good job, El. You've done well with the details."

She beamed at his praise. "I tried to leave his footsteps undisturbed, but when I dropped my flashlight, I'm afraid I might have smudged some down there. But on the bright side, I wouldn't have found that little lever!"

John had opened the secret panel behind the bookshelf and was gathering his light when she interrupted him. "Do you want to go first?"

"No, lead on. You know where you're going. I'll be right behind you."

She tentatively stepped on the landing behind the wall and quickly pointed out Stan's footprints. "Watch for these."

Before joining her, John went to the office door and locked it for a little security against someone coming in and finding the bookcase opening accidentally. He followed her carefully stepping in her prints. They moved slowly amid the narrow staircase until they finally reached the eighteenth step.

Both felt a need to whisper. It was something about the entire idea of a hidden staircase and the mystery of what they'd found, that encouraged discretion. "The small lever is right here." She bent down and delicately searched for the tiny piece of metal that she'd used before to open the new space. It took longer than she thought, but finally Ellie placed her finger on the tip and suddenly with a distinct sound, it opened.

"Wow!" John spoke with surprise. "It doesn't appear to be a room but rather another hall."

"That's exactly what I thought." She agreed.

"Shall we go?" He suggested.

"I want to, but something nags me. Look down there." Ellie pointed to Stan's footprints. "He's been in here. Should we put something in the panel to keep it from closing? I'm suddenly feeling a whole lot of apprehension."

"El, I think we're okay for now. There wasn't anyone up there when we came down. We have our phones, our flashlights and I brought this." He pulled his weapon from the back of his jeans.

She laughed and showed her gun too. "I guess old habits die hard. Let's go then. I'm dying to find out where this leads. I'd rather you lead the way, this is

new territory for both of us. Watch for his footsteps and let's see how far he went."

Ellie placed her hand on John's back and together they carefully walked down the dark, dank hallway. It was wider than a normal hall and wasn't exactly straight, but filled with spooky webs and a chilly dampness. "Ooh, I don't like this one little bit." She finally voiced aloud what she'd been feeling.

"I agree with you, but I think we need to see where this is taking us, don't you?" John challenged once again. It seemed a definite pattern in their relationship, but one she welcomed. He helped her grow in strength and she helped him gain new emotional horizons.

As they walked, the path seemed to meander but they kept going. John encouraged her to talk. "Tell me what you've discovered about our guy Stan."

"Shotgun gave me his last name and I did just the usual internet research. It doesn't give you much, but..." She hesitated.

"What?" He prompted.

"I hope you'll approve. I contacted Carson. He's supposed to get back to me in the next day or two." She waited for John's reaction and was pleasantly surprised when he spoke.

"I think that was a good choice. I would've thought about contacting Tuck, but as we're not connected with the sheriff's office anymore, I wouldn't want to put him on the spot. What did Carson say? Is he still working 'unofficially' out of Las Vegas?"

They stepped slowly as they talked and Ellie was conscious of the cobwebs, the darkness, and the

shadows that were possibly hiding unknown critters lurking in the crooked hallway. “He asked when we would be ready to take on a case. He still wants our help in solving some of the biggest cold cases in our area.”

At those words, John stopped and turned to her. “I’m not ready. I want to get this place up and running before I even consider taking on some investigative work for Carson.”

“I told him that’s what you’d say.” She replied.

He tried harder to see the look on her face but the dim light from their flashlights didn’t allow an accurate view and had to reply determined on her tone of voice. “How do you feel about it?” When she hesitated, he added in a kinder tone, “El, tell me how you really feel.”

They had stopped moving completely. Ellie recalled her uncle’s words about being honest in their relationship and offered him these words. “I like doing this. Here we are down in the depths of this building trying to figure out the mystery plaguing our hotel and I feel it’s my cup of tea. I know we need to get this hotel opened and start getting some return on our financial investment, but on the other hand, this type of activity feeds my blood and my brain. I love digging in and trying to figure out what happened or what’s going to happen next and who’s involved. I’m totally glad that this hidden staircase showed up as it gives me something to concentrate my brain activity on and try to put the pieces together.”

He pulled her closer and lowered his head to give her a supportive kiss. “I know that about you, Miss

Eleanor Parker. You are good at putting the puzzle pieces together.”

“So where do we go from here?”

“Do you mean literally or figuratively?” When she didn’t immediately reply, John added, “El, we’ll figure it out. I’m just glad you were honest with me. Shall we continue?”

“Yes, let’s do. I’m anxious to see where this leads. Do you have any idea where we are? I mean, where are we as far as the world above us exists? I feel like we’ve gone way left away from the room we’d been in when the bomb went off.”

Suddenly, John grabbed her by the arm and gently put his hand over her mouth. All the senses in her body became alert. She strained to listen, trying to understand why he’d stopped their progress. Ellie finally heard a slight noise coming from behind them. She couldn’t distinguish what was making the sound or where it was coming from, but her instincts told her that whatever it was, it wasn’t going to be good for them.

Ellie was standing there poised to run in whichever direction John indicated, but so far they were just trying to discern what the sound was and how much trouble they could expect. As if to answer her silent questions, they both heard the noise of the panel being shut. Without any communication between the two of them, Ellie and John both started to run toward the direction of the opening.

As they reached where the opening should have been, they realized that they had indeed been shut in

the hidden hallway. “John! Who did this? What are we going to do?”

Once again he put his hand over her mouth to silence her protests. As Ellie looked up to meet his gaze, she realized that whoever shut the panel could still be on the other side listening. It was all she could do to still her beating heart and calm her heavy breathing. As time ticked by, John finally signaled that they could talk.

“El, I know this is scary. I’m not exactly thrilled about it either, but we’ve got to remain calm. You’ve been excellent in situations much worse than this, so I know you can keep your wits about you and help us get out of this place.” He reassured the shaky woman.

Taking several big deep breaths, Ellie finally was able to talk rationally. “John, if there’s a lever on the outside of the panel shouldn’t there be one on the inside?”

“Good job! You could be right. Feel around this wall and see what you can find.” John bent down and started running his hands up and down the flat surface in front of them.

Not wanting to admit it aloud, he kept trying to find the source of their release. In a short time later, Ellie finally admitted what both of them didn’t want to in short, gulping gasps.

“John, we’re stuck! There’s no way out from here!”



## Eight

“John! What in the hell are we going to do?” Ellie felt the panic rise up from deep within her soul. “I’m so sick of being stuck in these situations! First Aubrie and I got kidnapped and put in the Mormon Girl Mine, then we all got put in the depths of this building and now once again I’m in a dark, damp hole! If I wasn’t so scared, I’d laugh.”

“Why don’t you?” He prompted. “You know laughter releases tension.”

If he could have seen the look on her face clearly, John knew he would be in big trouble. Ellie often had a problem controlling that temper of hers, so when he heard her laughing, John was shocked. Suddenly both of them were standing in the near dark of an unknown space in the bowels of their hotel chuckling gleefully as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Before the laughter could turn into tears, John took her in his arms and held Ellie tightly. Just before he could bend down and place a kiss on her lips, movement just down the hallway caught his attention.

Ellie felt the sudden tension in his grasp. She raised her head and saw that he was staring behind her. She turned just in time to catch a slightly green glow disappear in the space they’d just left. “Oh, my God! It’s Magdalena! You saw her!”

He quickly let go of her and ran to the spot. John looked around the smooth sloping of the hall as he tried to find evidence of what he's just observed. Ellie was right on his heels also trying to find proof of their encounter. Finally Ellie turned and faced him, "Admit it! You saw her!"

"I'll admit to nothing other than someone is trying to scare us. Ellie, we deal in facts..."

She interrupted him, "I know, I know, just the facts. Well, I know what I just saw and the fact is that you're not willing to admit that you just experienced something you can't explain!"

He shook his head. "We need to figure a way out of here."

Despite her frustrations with him and the fact that he wouldn't admit what they saw, she took her phone out of her back pocket and tried to call her uncle, but the reception was almost nonexistent. "This won't help."

"Here's what I'm thinking, let's try to take that hallway as far as we can. Maybe there's a way out down there." He waited for her almost predictable reaction of sarcasm but instead she said, "I agree. We obviously can't stay and we need to get out of here."

"You know many times in these old buildings, there were escape routes. We can only hope that this is one. Ready?" John stuck out his hand for her to take.

Reluctantly, Ellie agreed and hand in hand, they traveled back to the spot they were in when the panel door was closed. "John, who do you think shut that door?"

“I think the obvious answer is your pal Stan.”

“Don’t call him my pal. He’s a creepy guy and I’m determined to find some proof that’ll confirm it. Maybe it was Magdalena. Maybe she wants us to follow this path.” She stated her thoughts aloud.

“Oh, please! You’re the most intelligent woman I know and I can’t believe you actually think that the ghost of a woman dead for over a century is guiding us to some secret destination!”

“I know it sounds crazy, but I have to trust my instincts here. It’s helped me before and it can help me this time. One thing I do know is that we can’t lose sight of why we came down here in the first place.” She shined her flashlight on the rough, worn floor of the hall. “There! Those are Stan’s footprints and he was heading this way. We need to keep on them and see what he was up to down here.”

“You’re right about that. Step carefully and let’s get going. We need to find a way out of this place.” Without another word, they both continued down until they came to a fork in the hallway. One jutted off to the left and the other turn a swing to the right. Ellie looked to John. “What do we do now?”

They both searched the area, making sure they could discern any clues. The darkness of the hallway lit only by their flashlights didn’t lend to a productive investigation. But, with a cheer of success, Ellie cried to John, “Look! Stan’s footprints stop here! He didn’t choose either hall. I don’t know why we didn’t notice it before. His steps go back down the way we just came.”

“You’re right. I don’t know why we didn’t notice it before. Where does that leave us?”

She took a deep breath and looked forlornly from the left to the right hallway. “It leaves us up the creek without a paddle. I don’t know how to choose.”

“I’d love to say you take the high road and I’ll take the low road, but I don’t think it would be wise at all to split up at this point.” They both stood there debating when Ellie came up with a plan.

“Why don’t we? We could each go say twenty steps into each hallway and then come back and compare what we think and what we found, if anything.”

John didn’t answer right away, but she felt he agreed with her plan. “El, I don’t like the idea of separating especially under these circumstances, but I agree it might be our only way of making an informed decision.” He pulled his weapon and indicated that she should do the same. “Which do you want?”

She looked from side to side and finally chose the hallway to her right. “I’ll take the high road. John, only take the twenty paces that we agreed upon and then come right back here.”

With a shake of his head in agreement, he turned and slowly took steps counting as he went down the left hall. Ellie did the same with a huge amount of apprehension. The bizarre circumstances of their situation were not wasted on either of them. With guns drawn and deliberate steps, they each traveled down their respective paths. As she finally reached her twentieth step, Ellie shined her light all around the area in which she stood.

One thing finally dawned on her was the fact that she had felt that she was climbing slightly uphill with each step. It wasn't a huge change, but a definite one in elevation. Just as she started to turn around, Ellie saw a dim light coming from further down her hallway. She smiled and knew that John would just scoff, but Ellie knew it was the right way to get them out of here.

John arrived at the same time she did where the hallways intersected. "Well?" He asked.

Without hesitation, she pointed to the right. "This is the way out."

"What makes you so damn sure?"

"Let me answer that by asking you a question."

"El, we really don't have time for this." John's frustrations were definitely showing, but he seemed to wait for her to explain.

"Did you notice a change in the elevation in that hallway?" She prompted.

When he realized where she was going with this, John replied, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I noticed that the hall seemed to be sloping downward. It wasn't much, but enough for me to realize that it would take us further down into the old mining tunnels from the old copper mines here in Jerome."

She smiled. "Well as much fun as that would be, I felt the opposite in my hallway. It was very distinctly climbing upward, not much you see, but enough that I could tell it would take us to the surface. There was another sign, but I know that you wouldn't believe me, so I won't tell you about that one."

John's sarcastic chuckle made her smile. "Let's get with it then, unless you'd like to stay in this lovely area."

"Not on your life. We need to see if we can get out of here." She was adamant.

Ellie indicated that John should lead the way into the right hallway and together they both started the trek up the mysterious path. "I'm going to count the steps as we go along."

"I think that's a great idea." John agreed. "I'll take photos at certain points along the way."

"Oh, that's a great idea too. You know I find it surprising but I'm not as afraid as I think I should be. How about you?"

"El, when I'm with you, I could never be afraid of anything. You have the most wonderful way of thinking about things and help me open my mind to all sorts of possibilities." He kept moving forward.

She wished that he could see the grin on her face as his words of praise washed over her being. It was all they could do to illuminate the hall they were traversing. Ellie tripped over a small bump in the flooring, but she managed to maintain her balance.

"You okay?" John asked.

"I'm fine, but what did I trip on?" They both leaned over and shined their flashlights at the same spot. "What in the world?" She bent down and picked up the strange object. "At least it wasn't a bug or a rat or something as disgusting as that." She spoke in a whisper.

John picked the small, metallic item from her open palm. He turned it over and tried to determine exactly

what it was but failed to identify it. “It looks like it’s supposed to be attached to something right here.” He pointed to the short chain with a loop at the top.

“I know what it is! It’s a watch fob.” Ellie took it back from him.

“A watch what?”

“It’s a fob. In the Victorian times, men used a fob attached to their pocket watch so they could get it out of their pants easier. Shine your light on it closer.” She rubbed at the dirt in an attempt to get a better idea of what the object depicted on the round smooth surface. Look, I think it’s an engraving of a miner’s pick.”

“I think it’s made of gold. John, this is really old.”

“I didn’t think gold would tarnish. Look there’s a darkened place on the edge.”

“I’ll have to do some research on that as well and see if I can find anything out about this medallion and its depiction of the miner’s pick on the end of this fob. We need to figure out how it got here too.” She turned to move on down the hall.

“I’m sure your spirit lady put it there for us to find.” His sarcasm wasn’t wasted on her.

“Funny, I’m confident that you’ll come to believe in her the longer we stay here in her home. She’ll show up to convince you some day.” They were walking slowly but carefully as John finally made an observation. “I feel like we’re definitely climbing more upward but do you also sense a slight breeze coming from ahead?”

“Now that you mention it, I do. It feels rather good and could be an indication of an exit to the outside. Do you have any inkling where we might be?”

“Not a clue. Are you still counting the steps?”

“I’m trying to, but I may be off a bit.” She stopped as the surface under her feet suddenly changed. “John?”

“I feel it too. We were on wood and now it appears that we’re walking on dirt. Granted, it’s packed down really good, but it’s dirt just the same.”

“This reminds me of walking in a cave and certainly not a hallway.” She commented.

“That could be how this started. Maybe it’s a cave and at some point in time, they created the hidden hall and connected it to The Depot. You know back when Jerome was running full bore as a wild mining town, people needed an escape route. Do you remember how many times this town burned?” John was rambling but his statements were based on fact.

“Wait! I think I see a light.” She stopped him.

“That’s a good one. You see a light at the end of the tunnel?”

“You know something? Since you’re no longer the High Sheriff, you’ve found your sense of humor.” She hugged him. “Now shall we get the hell out of here?”

“Lead on, dear lady, lead on.” They stepped a little more lightly as the light became more obvious. Finally they reached the end of the tunnel. As they looked out between the rusted wrought iron of the gate covering the entrance to their space, she knew they were seeing another hidden way into their hotel. “What now?”

John looked through the wrought iron posts to see a lock on the outside of the gate. He put both hands on it and shook. "Stand back. I'm going to get us the hell out of here."

Ellie stared out trying to make out the landscape and figure out their location in the town. "I think that light is coming from a streetlight across the way. It's getting darker, so the glow we're seeing has to be artificial. John, be very careful. I'm concerned about getting back to my uncle."

"I know you are, so am I. Get back a few feet in case this thing falls the wrong way." John put both his strong hands on either side of the gate and with one huge breath pushed with all his might. To his surprise, the gate opened easily with a raspy, grating sound. It didn't open completely, but there was enough of a space that both Ellie and John could squeeze through to the outside. They had to make their way past several dense sage and creosote bushes. As they pushed through the overgrown foliage, John tried to help keep the stickers from some of the shrubbery from hurting her as he cleared a path beyond.

Within minutes they were free and both looked to define the area around the entrance to the tunnel. "Look, there's the Daisy Hotel. I think we've come out on Diaz Street. If so, the only light is coming from the businesses up there." She turned and looked up to the road behind them. "That's Hull Street and we've just avoided the main stores from here."

"That's probably the intention of whoever carved out this tunnel, an escape route that allowed them to

come and go unnoticed.” John agreed with her deductions. He took the time to go back and push the gate shut as well as trying to smooth the bushes back into place allowing the gate to remain hidden. He stuck his hand out for her to take. “Come on, let’s get back to the hotel.”

They had to climb up the hill, through the thick shrubbery onto Hull Avenue and then further up to First Avenue into the alley behind The Depot. The back door wasn’t locked as they hurried in and down the hallway. Ellie knocked softly on her uncle’s door and went right in to check on him. He was sleeping in his recliner and she gently kissed him on the forehead. He didn’t stir but she wasn’t alarmed as the doctor had given him the medicine to help him relax.

John was right behind her and together they covered him with a cozy comforter. Shotgun just shifted in his chair but didn’t wake up.

As they headed to their apartment, a thought occurred to her. “John, if somebody was using that entrance to get into the hotel, it appears to have not been used in quite a while.”

“I agree. So what is your point?”

“My point is that this information takes us back to where we started. Stan and Magdalena are our only two suspects for closing the panel when we were inside that hall.” She waited for his reaction.

He went to the refrigerator and took out a beer. He held one up to signal her and Ellie nodded her head. “Sure, I’ll take one.”

They both took their refreshing brew and settled on the couch. Ellie talked to their virtual technology

and ordered her to play some music. As they sat there, both enjoying their beverage, each of them contemplated the situation they'd just experienced.

"I'm not sure what our next steps should be. What do you think?" John allowed Ellie to offer her input.

"Why don't we see, if anything, Carson found on our boy Stan?"

"That's a good start. Why don't you call him?"

She pulled her phone out and pushed Carson's number. It was just seconds when he answered. "Ellie. How are you? I was just going to call you."

"I'm sitting here with John and we'd like to know what you found out about our boy Stan." She put her phone on speaker.

"Hey, John! How's the retired life?"

John chuckled. "I've been busier now than I ever was with the sheriff's office. It's just a different type of busy. How are things with you?"

"Like I told Ellie earlier, I need you two. I have several cold cases I'm working on not far from your location and I'd love your skills, your energy and your reasoning abilities to help get them solved." Carson tried to tempt him.

"We'll think about it, but in the meantime what did you find out about our guy?"

"He's an interesting one. Stan has a typical wannabe background. He's been involved in several get rich schemes but never successfully, and never charged with anything more serious than a traffic ticket."

"I'm confused, Carson." Ellie spoke up. "He's here and I think he's as crooked as a dog's hind leg."

After Carson's laughter calmed down, he spoke, "Ellie, I trust your instincts. I'll do some more digging. In the meantime, keep me informed as to what's going on and I'll let you know what I find." They said goodbye and for just a few minutes, just sat there.

"Let's get some of those flip charts and start putting down our thoughts." She got up and pulled a pad of blank charts from the closet. Ellie peeled off several of the big pieces of paper and stuck them to the wall. John commented, "They look like big sticky notes."

"That's the idea. Just start calling off things that are in your brain about the hidden staircase, Stan and whatever else you're thinking." She grabbed a marker and stood at the first chart.

"I've got a better idea." He got up and took one of the pens from the box. "You do your list over there and I'll do mine over here. Let's set five minutes and then we'll compare."

"Ooh, you're good. Ready?"

"Do it!" For the next five minutes they both were writing furiously on their respective chart paper. "No peeking!" She teased him as she saw John look over at her work.

"As if! Time's up. Now you come over here with your pen and circle things you didn't think of and I'll do the same." John set out the plan.

Within another minute, they both stood back to compare lists. "Your list is greater than mine, but then you've done more investigating than I have."

"This isn't a contest. We're a team and I think you've written down some great ideas, too." She confirmed the goal for them. "We want to get a plan put

in place to discover if it was Stan in that hallway or if someone else is using that tunnel to get in here.”

“I think we need to find out if there’s something in this hotel valuable enough to entice people to take the chance of getting caught.” John spoke his thoughts aloud.

“So how about we take that sheet of paper and make a list of questions we have to get answers for and then we’ll have our unofficial investigation started.”

They worked for the next hour and when they finally exhausted their brains, John and Ellie stood back and viewed the charts on the living room wall. “I’m ready for another beer, how about you?” He asked.

“Sure. I think we need to get more information from Carson about Stan.” She replied.

John hesitated before he answered her. “I think you are very good at this.”

“What do you mean?”

John turned to her and took her hand in his before speaking. “El, I know that I’m done with enforcing the law, but I’m not sure you are. If you want to work with Carson, I’d not object.”

The look on her face definitely showed the surprise she was feeling about his declaration. “John, I don’t know what to say.”

He reached for her and she willingly went into his arms. “I love you and I want you to be happy. I know that couples very often have different goals and this can make things difficult between them. So, like I

said, if this is what you want, I completely support you on that decision.”

“John, I’m so impressed. It makes me love you so much more.” She placed a passionate kiss on his lips.

“If you continue to do that, we won’t get anywhere with this investigation. We need to prioritize our questions so that our plan is put in place.” His words stated what his body objected to as he didn’t let her go.

They pulled apart, but the electricity in the room surrounded them both. Ellie looked at the charts to help her focus on their goal. She hesitated looking at John.

“Hey, how about something for dinner? We need to get Shotgun and feed us all.”

“You go wake him and I’ll fix us some eggs and bacon, you know breakfast for dinner.” She encouraged him.

In no time at all, they were gathered together at the breakfast bar and eating the bacon and eggs Ellie had prepared. She watched her uncle with a new interest. “Are you doing alright?”

“Girl, I’m fine. Stop watching me with those hawk eyes of yours. I promise that if things aren’t right, I’ll let you know.” He took a sip of his coffee.

John looked from Ellie to her uncle. He didn’t usually like to interfere, but he felt his input was necessary. “Shotgun, I’m sure that her intentions are in your best interest.”

All that could be heard in the room was the scraping of their utensils as they each ate their own meal. It seemed that each one was in their own world of

thoughts. Ellie didn't want to face the fact that her only relative was having some scary medical problems. Shotgun didn't want to face the fact that his health was tenuous at best. John wanted the love of his life to relax and allow nature to take its own course.

Finally, Shotgun spoke, "What did you two find out about the hidden staircase today?"

John filled him in on their discovery and all the details they'd found with the tunnel. Ellie was too wound up to contribute much to the discussion. "So, do you think it's Stan?" Shotgun asked John.

"With that gate not really locked, I'm not convinced that Stan is our only suspect." He looked to Ellie for confirmation.

Pushing back from her stool at the breakfast bar, Ellie finally looked to the men in her life. "I agree with John."

This answer seemed to stymie both of the men.



## Nine

“**W**ow, John, I think that’s a first.” Her uncle grinned at his niece as he spoke to the big man sitting next to him.

Before John could answer, Ellie jumped in. “You two are so smug! I don’t always disagree, only when I think there’s something different to consider.” Their laughter could be heard over the clatter of Ellie cleaning up the kitchen. She deliberately tried to make more noise than they were, but finally gave in and joined them.

“Okay, I admit, I can be a little argumentative, but...” With that statement, the guys burst into more laughter. Ellie threw the dishcloth at them. “You two are going to be impossible to live with in this place! I need to get some fresh air.” Ellie smiled to show that she really wasn’t angry and headed out the door. As she stood in the hall outside their door, she thought about her uncle once again. She stuck her head inside and told them, “You know I love you both, don’t you?”

Without waiting for them to survive their surprise, Ellie went out the door and started up the stairs to the mezzanine. Once there, she contemplated her desire to be by herself and realized that the sun was about to set and immediately hurried down the hall to the last room. Once she opened the door, Ellie went to the

balcony doors and stepped out onto the wooden deck. She smiled as the beautiful Arizona sun was indeed showering her world with a grand blazing sunset. Ellie sat down on the deck chair and took a deep breath. This was the peace and serenity she'd sought since leaving the hospital with her uncle and John.

"There's no place on earth that has sunsets like this!" She spoke aloud and allowed the quietness of her town to surround her with enjoyment.

Over the rooftops of the building in the far distance, she could see the orange tones lighting up the mountains to the east of Jerome. She felt her muscles relaxing and for several minutes, Ellie just soaked in the atmosphere.

"Here, I thought you might want this." She heard John's voice behind her. When she turned, Ellie saw the glass of wine in his hand. She stood up but before taking it, hugged herself into his body. He held her tightly. "It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

"Even more so now that you're here." Ellie took the glass and lifted it to her lips. "You are so special, Mister."

He grabbed the other chair and scooted closer to hers. They sat there in silence, sipping the wine. After some time, John asked, "What is our next step?"

"Until we hear more from Carson, I think you need to work with our boy Stan. Maybe by being in close contact with him, you can use those great instincts of yours to help us determine more about our only suspect."

“Sounds good. In the meantime, why don’t you see if you can get ahold of your lady Magdalena.” He teased.

Ellie turned to face him. “John, I know you’re teasing but I really do wish I could contact her. I know you don’t believe it, but she’s helped me, us, more than once. I would love to figure out how to communicate with her.”

“You’re serious aren’t you?”

“Absolutely! I’ve always tried to keep an open mind even with things in this world I don’t understand. You’ve constantly pounded in my head that we deal in facts and I know that’s how you’ve been a successful sheriff and I can appreciate that too. But...”

“I knew there had to be a ‘but’.”

“John, in this world today, there are so many variables that cannot be explained by logic and reasoning, so I’m just taking what’s being offered. If that includes help from a spirit, then I’m glad she’s on our side.”

“I’ll support whatever methods you want to use, if it’ll help us solve the mystery of this building. Now, let’s go watch some television. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow, including putting a proper lock on the gate at the end of the tunnel.” He stood up and put out his hand to help her.

When they both were up and inside the room, Ellie told John, “I’m going to look at those boxes once more and then I’ll be down.”

“El, don’t stay too long, I’ll miss you.”

“I won’t.” When she saw the look on his face, she added, “Really. I’ll be down in just a few. Go.”

When John finally headed down the stairs, Ellie went to the wall containing the lock boxes. She just stood there staring at the boxes that Stan had already mounted into the wall. She looked at the stack that was still sitting there to be installed and counted seven. Stan was almost done with his task and this would mean that he would not be available to their immediate investigation. Maybe, she thought to herself, John can come up with something to keep him close.

Just about then, she heard her name being called from below. "Ellie, there's someone here to see you."

For a split second, she expected to see Magdalena. A silly, stupid thought, she thought to herself. She responded to John, "Okay, send them up."

As she listened to the footsteps up the staircase, Ellie half expected her spirit to show, but soon the short blond haired woman appeared. She waited for her to come up on the landing before greeting her. "Hello."

"Hi! I'm Josie. I heard you were rebuilding the Depot and I wanted to be the first to ask for a job." Josie stood there in front of Ellie. "I know I'm not as young as you probably want, but I'd sure like to work here in Jerome again."

"Please have a seat." Ellie indicated the only two chairs in the mezzanine. Once they were seated, Ellie spoke, "I wish I could offer you a beverage, but I'm afraid we don't have any. Why would you want to work here? We won't be open for at least six months."

Josie hesitated but only for a moment. "Have you been to the haunted hotel? I was one of the last babies born there when it was still the only hospital in Je-

rome. I've been a waitress and server for all of my life down in the Phoenix but it's time for me to come home. Yes, I'm not the usual young chicky that you'd want for a server, but I'm local and I'm good. I want to come home."

The look on Ellie's face showed her astonishment at the other woman's declaration. "I don't know quite how to respond to that."

"My mother tried to keep us off Main Street after dark. She used to try and keep us safe from the night life on this street, but my older sister didn't listen. She'd come down here to The Depot and watch the activity and then come home and we'd whisper secretly throughout the night. I was all of maybe four or five years old. She would hide across the street in the shadows. She saw the ladies and the men and wondered about all the fun they seemed to be having. Of course, we didn't understand it at the time."

"Did you know Magdalena? Wait a minute, you'd be too young to know her."

"I didn't know her personally, but I knew of her. She was real, if you know what I mean. She was murdered way before I was born but her legacy carried on through part of the 1940's."

"How so?" Ellie was excited to actually meet someone that had actually lived in the same town as Magdalena.

"According to the tales we used to hear when Momma didn't think we were listening, she was one of the more honorable madams on the street. Magdalena ran a reputable house, even though it was a pleasure palace, she wanted that to be the only means

of income. There were plenty of places like the Depot on this street, but they would steal every last dime from the miners in any way they could. See those squirrel holes over there? That's one of her ideas."

Ellie was stymied. She was intrigued with gaining some information but a little suspicious about the timing of Josie's visit. "How did you hear about us?"

In spite of herself, the rich laughter of the other woman made Ellie smile. "Are you kidding? A town like Jerome has no secrets. Please, don't be upset. I'm very serious about wanting a job. I can do bartending, serving, cleaning, and just about anything you would need to run this place."

"So help me understand the history. It seems that I'm missing several facts." Ellie prompted.

"Magdalena was the madam in this hotel. There seems to be a lot of unknowns about how she got the money, but she managed to buy three parcels of land here on Main Street. It was listed as a boarding home for women, but everyone knew it was really a bordello."

"When exactly was that?" Ellie was so excited, she encouraged Josie to continue.

"Give me a minute to think. Prostitution was against the law at the time, but it continued into the 1940s without interruption. She had her house up and running from the early 1920s, I believe. The important thing to know about her was that even though she took half the pay from her girls, she provided shelter and medical treatment. In that day and time, a girl working as a prostitute could expect to get a sex-

ually transmitted disease within her first year. Magdalena took care of them.”

Ellie sat there in amazement. “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s a lot to take in, I realize, but I’ve lived here off and on most of my life. I would be a great asset to The Depot and I hope you hire me.” Josie was confident.

“Wait a minute! You seem to be too young to know this stuff first hand.”

“Oh, thanks, you’re my new best friend. Yes, I wasn’t privy to firsthand knowledge, but my older sister, like I said earlier, was so eager to share what she learned and knew. Remember I said that nothing is secret in this town and as I grew, I learned a lot from those that lived in those times. There are a lot of regulars here that love to share the stories from those wonderful days gone by.”

“Josie, you’ve been a delight. Yes, I think we can find a place for you here. In fact, how about starting right away?”

Josie laughed, “Are you serious? What in the world would I be doing?”

“I have a lot of research to do and you could help me by doing some of the other things that need to be done if we’re going to open in time. You said you could do anything.” Ellie waited for Josie’s response.

Josie’s laughter was refreshing. “You got it. I can help in lots of different ways and I’d love to renew this grand old lady. When do you want me to start?”

“Come by at 9:00 in the morning and we’ll figure out what you can start on to get this place open by fall.” Ellie stood up at the same time as Josie. “I have

a good feeling about you, lady. We'll get along just fine."

Together they went down the stairs and Ellie escorted her out the door. After saying goodbye she shut the door and went to check on her uncle. Ellie knocked lightly and upon hearing his voice, went in. "Uncle, how are you doing?"

Shotgun was sitting on his chair watching the television when he heard her. "Hey, how's things going?"

Ellie sat down on the edge of the sofa and faced her uncle. "What're you thinking about?"

He hooted, "I was just thinking about that new hallway you two found. I'd love to have been there with you guys."

"You would've been as scared as I was, you silly goose. How are you doing? You took the medicine the doctor gave you?"

"Yes, I knew you'd be here to nag me, so I didn't want to disappoint you." He teased his niece.

"Are you really doing alright?"

"Yes, Girl, I'm doing fine for an old fart. Quit your damned worrying. I'll be fine. You need to spend more time with your man and not me."

"I'll go when I'm good and ready." She spoke with a false bravado.

"Eleanor, please stop worrying about me and go and spend time with John. I'll be fine, I promise." Her uncle spoke with a serious tone to his voice. "Now, go."

"I love you, Uncle. I'll be back later to check on you."

"Don't bother, I'll be fast asleep."

She placed a soft kiss on his cheek and with a wink left his room. Ellie went across to her own apartment and found John watching some sports thing on the television.

“Hey, honey, how did the talk with Josie go?”

“I hired her. She starts tomorrow.” Ellie grabbed a beer from their fridge, but upon turning to him, she took a second and approached the couch.

“Hired her to do what exactly?” He took the fresh drink she offered.

“I’m not sure, but Josie has tons of information we can use about this place and Magdalena.” She waited for his reaction and wasn’t disappointed.

“Are you nuts? Why would you encourage that sort of behavior?” John said, not with anger but with curiosity in his tone.

“Listen for one minute and don’t judge! What if we use the hidden hallways to our advantage?” She watched the confusion roll over John’s handsome features.

With a laugh, Ellie continued, “You’ve heard of escape rooms?” With a nod of his head, John agreed. “What if we somehow advertise and use those various hallways as an escape room type of adventure? You know the old hospital is now the main hotel in town and everyone comes to get a chance to see a ghost. Well, our marketing could sell occupancy in the place, not only as a former bawdy house, but for extra money they could have access to the hallways and those rooms to search for treasure or solve a murder or something to that effect. Remember playing a board game as a kid where you had to gather clues and solve

who got murdered, where and with what weapon?" Her enthusiasm was shining like a beacon and she expanded on her ideas.

"John, with more information about Magdalena it will only add to the appeal of reserving a room here. Having Josie here will give me that sort of data and in the long run it will help me create realistic adventures for our guests." She waited for a reaction from John. "Say something, anything."

John pushed the mute button on the remote and turned to face her. He placed a kiss on her lips and ran his hand down her cheek. "El, I love you more than life itself and if you think this can work, I'm all for it."

"You're not just saying that, while hoping I'll not follow through with these plans?"

"I can't believe you'd think that I would do that." He feigned being insulted. Ellie faked a fist to his chest. "You're terrible!"

"I know and yet you still love me." In no time at all the mood changed and she snuggled into him and their lips met in a sensual kiss. It was a long, searing kiss that finally ended when she pulled back and looked him in the eyes. "Shall we finish this in the bedroom?"

"Definitely." He got up quickly and put out his hand for her to grab. They shut off the lights and headed down the short hall to the room they now shared.

Ellie felt a little nervous. It seemed like they'd been so busy moving and getting things done in the hotel

that they'd neglected the most important thing, their relationship. "I love you, John."

"And I love you too, El. Let me show you how much." He started to take off his shirt as she did the same. Soon they were in the bed they shared and enjoying the prelude of their lovemaking. She'd grown to know what John loved as he did for her. She loved the feel of his roughened hands on her heated skin. John softly rubbed his hands up and down her sides. As their passion increased, so did her desire for John. Whatever doubts she'd had recently seemed to disappear when she fully felt his love.

As they lay there in their big bed, Ellie hugged herself to his side and placed soft kisses on his bare chest. "That was wonderful."

"I think so too. We need to make sure that we take time to enjoy each other through this construction ordeal. It'll help smooth out the rough patches." John agreed with her.

"Are you happy?" She spoke quietly, holding her breath for his answer.

"Adamantly, pretty lady." His answer made her smile. "I can't wait until we open this place and we can get married."

When he didn't get a response, John tilted her head up so they could see each other. "El? Something on your mind?"

She smiled to reassure him that her thoughts were only on their lovemaking. "I'm just thinking about how great this felt and I agree that we need to make time for us in the middle of all of this chaos." It wasn't in her nature to lie but she couldn't hurt John by

telling him of her doubts about their new life's path. He was genuinely happy and Ellie only wanted to be happy too, she just wasn't sure at this time in her life what it would take to make that happen.

He placed a tender kiss on her lips and seemed to accept her explanation. Ellie was grateful for that. She did love John and would never deliberately hurt him. She just hoped that they had enough time for her to figure out what in life would give her happiness and peace.

"Are you hungry?" She asked.

"Not really, but if you want something go for it. I'm tired and ready for some good rest."

"I'll go out into the living room and do some research. You rest, love. I'll be back shortly." She got up and put on her sweats and gave him a sweet kiss. Before leaving the room, she searched through her pockets and found the watch fob that they'd found in the hidden tunnel. With it firmly in her grasp, Ellie made her way to the front room, first shutting their bedroom door so as to not disturb John.

Ellie debated but eventually grabbed a wine glass from the shelf and poured herself a glass of white wine and settled down on the couch. She rubbed the watch fob in her hand, feeling the different textures in the object. It appeared to be gold, but she knew that pure gold didn't tarnish. Finally, Ellie got up and went to the kitchen. Under the sink, she found the dish soap and a kitchen rag. With a little soap and water, Ellie scrubbed on the watch fob and soon the item was shining like the gold she knew it to be.

As her cell rang, Ellie first looked to see the time. It was almost ten but she answered it anyway. “Carson, this isn’t your usual number. What’s up?”

“Right to the point, Ellie, that’s one of the things I like most about you.” Carson’s deep voice made her smile.

“What did you find out about Stan? I assume that’s the reason for this call.”

“Yeah, I’m calling from my home phone. I’ve put in a long day but I wanted to get back to you and John.”

“You still have a landline? I thought nobody had those anymore.” She laughed.

“Well, call me one of those dinosaurs, but I still like to have a backup. You know technology can fail.” He explained.

“Okay, okay. What did you find out about our boy?” Ellie’s curiosity was piqued.

“It took quite a lot of digging, but I finally found he changed his name quite some time ago.” He paused.

“Carson, give! Stop the drama!”

“His former name was Stan Paulson.” He waited for that information to sink into her brain.

“Paulson, Paulson. Why does that sound familiar?” She heard Carson chuckle as she went through memories in her mind. “Wait a minute! Don’t tell me that he’s related to Deputy Chuck!”

“Okay, I won’t.”

“Son of a....” Ellie stopped herself. “I thought Chuck was raised in a group home in Cottonwood.”

“He was, but his brother Stan was much younger and went into the foster system. He spent most of his formative years with a family and took their name in

the end. They helped him get it legalized and as a minor, his files were sealed. It took a lot of digging, but I found it." Carson spoke proudly of his accomplishment.

"That confirms it! Stan is here because of information he got from Chuck. He knows about the chips and the money and he's looking to cash in on the fortune he thinks is still in this hotel. Oh, I can't wait to tell John. He'll send him packing for sure." Ellie took a sip of her wine.

"Whoa! Wait a minute, Ellie. If Stan's here for the wrong reasons, we need to catch him in the act. You know the routine, we have to put him at the scene of the crime, the law can then put Stan right where he belongs." Carson knew she'd realize the finer points of the legal system, but still felt the need to help her reach the right conclusion.

"You're right of course. I think that's the lesson John keeps trying to teach me. I can be taught eventually, you know." She teased.

"Ellie, you are the best. You're going to be a great addition to my team." Carson spoke proudly.

"About that," She spoke with hesitation in her voice, "I haven't made any final decisions just yet."

"How about John? You know, you two have a great talent and we could solve a lot of cold cases for the different authorities."

"Don't get me wrong, I can't speak for John, but we've had some conversations and I think he's leaning towards staying out of law enforcement for good. I've also let him know that I'd love to work with you on certain cases. So, for now, we have a lot of work

here in the hotel to do, and I'd like to see if you'd give me some time to make a final decision." She waited for his reaction and response.

"Absolutely! I know that you guys have made a big financial commitment with rebuilding The Depot. So, let's just keep in touch and by fall, we can revisit my proposal."

"Thank you so much, Carson. I appreciate your help and your continued support of our project. We will keep you informed and, of course, you'll come to the wedding just before our grand re-opening." Ellie's appreciation of his patience showed in her voice. "Thanks again for the information on our boy. We've got a mystery to solve here but it keeps me out of trouble, sort of." She laughed.

"I've gotten to know you quite well, Ellie, but keeping you out of trouble is near impossible. Tell John I said good luck with that. Keep in touch." Carson hung up.

She huffed at the phone before laying it on the coffee table in front of the couch. Ellie got up and retrieved the extra six keys from the top of their breakfast bar. Carefully, she put the watch fob and the old brass keys in a straight line in front of her. She stared at them, wishing that they could talk and tell her their story. "I wish it was that easy!"

"Talking to yourself is the first sign of mental illness." John's voice startled her as she looked up to see that handsome man standing bare chested wearing only his boxers in the door of the short hallway. He came over and sat down next to her. "Are you ready to give it up for the night? I can think of something else where

you can spend your pent up energy.” He snuggled a few kisses on her neck.

She turned into him and they shared a deep, full kiss that left her breathless. Once they broke apart, with ragged breathing, Ellie spoke, “I got a call from Carson.”

“What did our crime fighting friend have to say?” He was still pressing light, feather kisses on her neck.

She giggled, “You’re making it very hard for me to concentrate.”

“That’s my intention.”

“John!”

He stopped but kept her near, pressed into his side. “Okay, what did Carson have to say?”

“He found something very interesting about Stan.”

That bit of information stopped John. “What is it?”

“Stan’s last name was changed when he was a youth. His birth name was Paulson.” She watched the changing emotions flash across his face.

“Will this never end? How in the hell did Chuck get passed the security checks to become a deputy? Why didn’t they find out about this brother?” John was obviously upset.

“Carson said he had to go deep. I’m guessing that being in the foster system things aren’t always up to date, and besides, it was when he was a minor. Those records are always sealed, right?” She knew that John wouldn’t take this new information well. “What do we do now?”

John didn’t respond right away and she’d been with him long enough to know that his brain was sifting through the possible scenarios for handling the

situation. "I think I need to sleep on it and we'll finish this discussion in the morning." He looked to the objects on the table in front of them. Carefully he picked up the now shiny watch fob. "Gold, huh?"

"Yes, it is. I just laid these things out so I could sit here and think about the meaning..." She hesitated.

"Go on, tell me what you're thinking." John's quiet voice encouraged her.

"I believe that someone or something is trying to send us a message. Look, we know that we have a bunch of mysterious hallways and rooms. We need to take stronger lights down into that latest passageway and look for another secret panel." She looked to see what expression John had on his face.

He started to speak, but hesitated as though choosing his words. "Ellie, at this point, I'm willing to believe there's something very unsettling about this hotel and you've proven yourself with those wonderful instincts of yours."

"So?" She prompted.

"So, continue to believe and let's work together to solve all of these unknowns before we open for business. You might have a great idea about creating a mystery escape party theme for The Depot. I just wanted to rebuild a grand old hotel and kick back to enjoy the company and profits. Who knew?" He rubbed his hand through his ruffled hair and finally stood up.

"Come on, pretty lady, let's go to bed and try to get some sleep. We've got some decisions to make about our boy Stan and what other investigating we need to

do.” She took his hand and shutting off the lights, they both traveled to their room.

Ellie lay there in the bed, trying hard to get to sleep, but her brain just wouldn't shut down. A lot happened tonight in their relationship. She smiled as she recalled John's admission about Magdalena. That was as close as she was probably going to get from him, but that was a lot. Just as she rolled over, a slight glow from down the hallway caught her eye. Ellie discharged it as being overtired and eventually fell into a deep sleep.

## TEN

“Come on, sleepy head. We’ve got work to do.”  
John patted her on the bottom.

Ellie stumbled out to the kitchen and put on the coffee pot. John came out dressed and ready for the day. He sat down at the breakfast bar. “I’ve come to the conclusion that we give Stan enough rope to hang himself.”

“I agree, but that means that one of us has to keep him in sight at all times.”

“That’s why, he’s going to be put on the bar renovation. I’ll have him take out the old bar and help put in the new one we just got. That’ll take a lot of supervision, don’t you think?” He winked at her with the implications of his plan.

“I’d better get dressed. I have Josie coming this morning and I don’t even know what work I’m giving her.” She started back to the bedroom, but John’s voice stopped her.

“Why don’t you have her help Shotgun?”

She came back into the room. “You know, that might be the best idea yet! She’s near his age and it would free me up to help watch our guy.” She placed a quick kiss on John’s cheek and hurried back to dress.

When Ellie returned to the front room, John had already left and she moved to clear their coffee cups.

A soft knock at the door alerted her but before she went to answer it, she took the flip charts and stuck them on top of each other and covered the entire stack with a blank one. "Hey, Josie! Right on time. Come on in."

"Wow, this place is great." She went over and sat on the sofa.

"Want a cup of coffee?" Ellie offered.

"No, I've already had a few cups and that's my limit. So, what do you want me to do? I'm ready for anything."

"I hope you mean that because I'd like some help with my uncle. He had a medical situation and needs some extra care. What do you think?" She sat down next to Josie and waited for an answer.

"Well, I'm not a nurse, but I can provide some assistance with preparing meals and that sort of thing, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm talking about. Have you ever met him?" Suddenly Ellie's attention was focused on the stuff lying on her coffee table. "Did you touch that?" She asked Josie but at the startled look on her face, Ellie amended, "Of course, you didn't. Sorry, but there's been some strange things going on here and each time it happens, it completely rattles me."

"So, you didn't put those keys on the table?"

"Yes, I did. Last night I was sitting here concentrating on those six keys and that watch fob and how they came to be in my possession. I arranged them in a row but, I didn't put that shiny dust all over them."

“Ellie, that stuff is gold dust. You’ll notice that it is shiny but doesn’t sparkle. If it was all glittery, it would be what they call fool’s gold.” Josie was a bit surprised that the other woman didn’t recognize the precious mineral.

“Oh, my God! You’re right. How in the world did it get there? What does this mean? I have to tell John.” Before getting up, Ellie touched some of the dust lightly and stared at the golden stuff on her fingertips. She got up, but realized that Josie was watching her reaction with intense interest. “Oh, wait. Why don’t you follow me and I’ll take you across the hall to meet Shotgun.”

“Shotgun?” Josie’s face showed the confusion she was obviously feeling.

“Are you ready to run? Are you sorry you wanted to work here again?” Ellie laughed but led the way across the hall anyway. She knocked and upon hearing her uncle’s voice, opened his door. She went in and found him sitting in his recliner watching the news. “Uncle, how are you feeling this morning?”

“I’m fine, but did you forget my breakfast?” His voice was a bit gruff, but the smile on his face softened the words. “Who’s this pretty thing?”

Without waiting for Ellie, Josie came forward and put her hand out to shake his, “I’m Josie. I’m starting work here today for Ellie and John.”

“She didn’t hire you for me, did she?” He pointed his craggy finger toward his niece.

“Absolutely not! Although, I wouldn’t mind spending some time with such a handsome man.” Josie’s

words made Ellie laugh out loud and Shotgun joined in with her.

“Ellie, my dear, you better watch this one. She’s full of piss and vinegar!” Shotgun spoke with humor.

“Uncle, I really have to go and talk with John. Can Josie stay here with you? It won’t take long.”

“Of course, but why don’t we go over to your place and she can get us something to eat?” He put the leg rest of his chair down and was trying to stand up when Josie came to his side to help.

“That’s a good idea. Josie, do you mind?”

“Come on and we’ll get some food. While I cook, you can explain to me why your niece calls you Shotgun.” Together they went across the hall. It gave Ellie time to scurry to the front of the hotel. She scoured the area full of workers looking for John. She saw him standing with Stan by the old bar. Bracing herself to try and appear normal, she wandered up to him and gave a slight kiss on his cheek.

“Hey, pretty lady, what was that for?”

“I noticed you left for work without giving me a kiss and I didn’t want you to start your day that way.” She grinned suspiciously.

Stan observed the entire interchange and just stood there with a big grin on his face. “John, you’d better not do that again.”

John looked from Stan to Ellie and finally took a deep breath. “El, what can I do for you?”

“Can I talk with you for a minute?” She tried giving him subliminal signals, but saw that John was confused with her behavior. “Please, just give me a minute.”

“Sure. Can you excuse us?” He addressed Stan but didn’t wait for him to agree when he took Ellie by the arm and guided her around the corner into the office. Once the door was shut, John turned and spoke, “El, what the hell is going on? I’ve got work to do.”

“I need you to come and see what happened with the keys on our coffee table.”

“Do you realize how nuts that sounds? El, please tell me what is going on!”

“When Josie came in and sat down on the sofa, we both saw the gold dust spread over the keys and the fob. Look!”

“I know you think you’re making sense, but I’m more confused than ever.”

“Then come with me and see for yourself.” She demanded as she held up her hands for him to see the gold dust on her fingertips.

John shook his head, but followed Ellie out the door anyway. He told Stan as they passed the old bar, “I’ll be right back. Just keep working on removing the supports that hold this bar in place.”

They could hear laughter as Ellie and John approached their apartment door. He gave her a very surprised look, but with no response from Ellie, he opened the door anyway. The sight before them was almost unbelievable. Shotgun was sitting at the breakfast bar eating but Josie was sitting on the top of the bar next to him, swinging her legs and chatting away. Her uncle seemed totally absorbed to the point that neither of them noticed they had company.

Finally, John cleared his throat and they both stopped their chitchat. “Hey, guys. What’s up?”

Shotgun's grin was better than any medicine a doctor could prescribe.

"I'm here to show John something." Ellie spoke as she pushed John towards the coffee table.

"Oh, he definitely needs to see that gold dust." Josie giggled.

They ignored her taunt and both came to sit on the sofa. Ellie just waited for John to see the evidence. As he stared at the dust spread all over the keys and the fob, John felt his stance on the unknown wavering. "Well?" She prompted.

"El, I'm getting more and more unable to explain all these weird happenings."

"Well at least you can admit that. What do we do now?"

"I think we're definitely being sent some sort of a message, but what?" He studied the scene before him.

"John, I'm convinced that there is a treasure here and whoever did this, wants us to find it. I think there are six of those boxes yet to be found."

"But what about the fob? What has that to do with anything?" His voice showed his frustration. "Why sprinkle this setting with gold dust?"

From across the room, Josie's voice was heard. "Everyone knows that the Madam of this place took gold dust and flakes from the miners in trade for services from her girls. Magdalena was one of the richest women in her time in Arizona. Of course, it wasn't a state back then, but just the same, she had tons of wealth."

Together they both looked at the woman still sitting on the edge of their breakfast bar. “Josie, what else can you tell us about Magdalena and this place?”

With that invitation, she jumped down from the bar and came over to take a seat on the chair by the coffee table. “Did you know she was murdered? It happened right out in front, right on the streets. The most awful thing is that nobody raised a hand to help her.”

“Are you kidding? She was killed? Who did that?” Ellie was the first to respond. By that time, Shotgun had come over to sit in the other chair and join in the conversation.

“Wow! The plot thickens with this place.” He snickered.

“Well, she’d decided that this place was getting too civilized and was going to sell out. There was a man in her life and he called himself her husband, but no one knew if it was the truth or not. He was a man that lived off her generosity and her mood. I believe his name was Ethan, but I could be wrong about that.”

“So what happened?” Ellie was eager to learn more about her favorite spirit.

“Well, he was down the road in another place, drinking heavily and bragging about how he could get money from her anytime he wanted. He was a known gambler and not a very lucky one at that.”

“So he owed someone money?” John entered the guessing game.

“He owed tons of money to some not so nice people. This town was full of wicked people. Can you

imagine yourself living during that time? What a hoot!” Josie laughed.

John stood up, “El, I’ve got to get back out there. Don’t do anything until we can talk about it.” He went to the door and she followed. Once in the hall, she asked, “John, this is all great information. I think Josie and I will work in the office and try to make sense of the files. We’ll be close by, in case you need me, you know, with Stan.”

“Sweetie, I think I can handle the likes of him. You keep yourself busy with setting up the office. Whatever we need in supplies, just order online and they’ll deliver. I’m sure you and Josie can clean it up. The blast didn’t touch the office, but the former owner wasn’t exactly a great bookkeeper.” With that he placed another quick kiss and strode down the hallway.

Ellie was torn with her emotions and feelings. Maybe it was just John’s brusque way, maybe it was her own doubts and insecurities, but she felt he was treating her like a little woman that should stick to the kitchen. Taking a calming breath to stop her negative thoughts, Ellie walked back inside. Shotgun and Josie were sitting next to each other on the couch in what seemed like a not so serious discussion. “What are you two talking about?”

“Oh, I was just telling this one about you and John and how much you two seem to have trouble communicating with each other.” Her uncle hit the nail right on the head.

“We’re working on that. Right now, Uncle, Josie and I are going to tackle getting that office setup. You want to help?”

“Nah, I’m just going to rest. Get me for lunch, though.” He stood up and reached across Josie for his cane. She quickly grabbed it and handed it to the older man with an easy grin for him.

They separated in the hall with Shotgun going to his place as the women walked into the main lounge, right past the bar. It looked like quite a task, but John and Stan had a few extra hands including Toby and were getting ready to move it out of place. “Where are you going to put it?” Ellie asked.

“I thought we’d put it over on the wall by the bandstand for now. Do you think you could put it online? It’s still in decent condition and someone may want it. I hate to throw usable stuff away.”

“Sure, we’ll do that first thing.” She handed her phone to Josie. “Can you take some pictures? Get quite a few and we’ll use the best ones.”

Ellie looked to the front wall with a smile. “John, I can’t believe how fast they’re getting that done. It won’t be long before we can use the front door to this place.”

“I put a fire under them. It’s amazing what an incentive money can be. I offered a small bonus if they would get this place completely closed in within a week.”

She stood there and grasped his meaning. Right now, the way the building stood, anyone with a little imagination could figure how to get in. If they shut

the holes, then they could better control who had access and then narrow down the list of suspects.

“Josie, once you get done come into the office.” Ellie gave her directions. She went past the men working and opened the door behind the bar.

Soon enough Josie came into the office in time to witness Ellie kicking the file cabinet. “Whoa! Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure. I think I need to get out of here and take a walk. Would you do me a favor?”

“Sure. What do you need?” Josie responded.

“Take those office boxes and put all of the files out of those cabinets into them. Try to make some sense of order out of them and label each box. I don’t think we’ll ever need them, but you never know. I’ll help for now.” They worked side by side for several hours. Very soon the office was taking shape as the boxes were beginning to be filled. She stopped to take a deep breath. “Josie, are there any hiking trails here in town? When I get a little fidgety I love to hike in the woods. It helps me deal with my angst.

“I don’t think there’s any directly in Jerome. There’s several beautiful trails on the road back to Prescott, but nothing you can walk to from here.”

“I’m sorry that your first day is going to be this weird but I really need to get out of here and into the fresh air.”

Josie looked up from the current box she’d been working on and gave a grin to her new boss. “I’ll be fine. I think I’ve got an idea of what you want here. Go.”

“I’ll be back in time for lunch.” Ellie’s relief seemed to fill the small room. “Thanks, Josie, I can’t tell you how much this will help me.”

She went slowly out the door of the office and as she walked into the lobby and bar area, Ellie was relieved that John was nowhere to be seen. Moving as fast as she could, Ellie went down the hall to the back door and out. Once out in the open, she walked down the alleyway to the sidewalk that led around to the front of their hotel. Out on the front pathway, there were quite a few tourists already and she quickly blended in as they made their way past the various shops and storefronts.

She didn’t stop until she was halfway down the block. This is ridiculous, she thought to herself. I’m a grown woman and if I want to go for a walk, I shouldn’t have to ask for permission or tell anyone. What is wrong with me? Why am I having such doubts and anxiety? Ellie wandered aimlessly with no particular goal in mind. People shuffled past her as they talked and chatted amongst themselves. Even in the mid-morning hour, Jerome was a bustling tourist town. People loved the shops, the artists, and the restaurants. Everyone seemed to be happy to be here. The sun was shining and for a wonderful spring day, it was a boon to the economy of this town.

A street musician was attracting a small crowd and Ellie stopped to enjoy the entertainment. She allowed herself to relax a moment and listen to the words of his song. The minstrel sang a tune about love gone wrong but with very whimsical words. The people

listening started to clap and move along with the light, carefree theme of his music.

“Ellie? Ellie Parker?” She heard her name being called from just behind. Carefully, she turned to see a local policeman waving at her. He was very young and in uniform but it was his boyish grin that caught her attention.

Not what she really needed at this time, but Ellie raised her hand and waved back. He came forward and stood next to her. “I don’t think you remember me, but I sure remember you. I was there when The Desperation Depot blew up last year. I’m glad to see you’re alright. I’m just a part time officer with Jerome. My name is Gary.”

“Well, Gary, nice to see you.”

“I heard you and the former sheriff were rebuilding the old hotel. I’m glad. It’s been a part of this town for a long time. We all hated to see it nearly destroyed. How are things going?”

“Fine. We are moving forward and hope to be open by September. How are things in Jerome?” Ellie tried to avert the conversation back to him.

“Ah, you know how it is. We mostly deal with shoplifters, drunks and parking violations. This isn’t exactly a cesspool of crime.” He laughed at his own words. “Don’t you miss your life as an investigator? I bet that was exciting. My chief says that John was one of the best sheriffs this county ever had. He’s really glad you two are going to be in town. Your skills could be valuable if we need some extra help.”

Oh my God, this is really bad timing, Ellie thought with more anxiety bubbling in her veins. “Hey, Gary,

I've got to get back to work. Nice meeting you." She stuck out her hand and he eagerly shook it.

"The chief said he'd be by to visit in the next few days. It sure was nice running into you." He smiled a boyish grin as she turned and walked away.

As the street turned sharply to the left, Ellie realized she was headed to Haunted Hamburger. One look at the phone in her back pocket said it was nearing lunch, so with a new purpose in mind, Ellie hurried her steps. Once inside, she ordered four of their delicious hamburgers with fries and sat down to wait for the order.

The walls were adorned with memorabilia and bookshelves filled with souvenirs for sale. The tourists loved all the coffee cups, tee shirts, wine glasses, shot glasses and several dozen items splattered with the Haunted Hamburger name and logo. She made a mental note to ask John about what they should offer. They should be getting that stuff ordered as soon as possible.

A young lady came out with a big bag and signaled her that the order was ready. Ellie paid, thanked her, and went out the door. This time she took the shortcut all downhill on the concrete steps to Main Street. She crossed Main and turned left and followed First Street to the back alley. As she opened the back door, John greeted her.

"El, I was just coming to see if I could find you. Josie said you went out for a breath of fresh air. Everything okay?"

She held up the lunch bags and with a forced smile said, "I brought burgers!"

He helped her with the food and together they went into their apartment space. Shotgun and Josie were already there with their heads together talking about something on the television. "Hey, smells good. I'm starved." Her uncle looked up.

"I'll bring yours to you. I got them loaded. Josie, I hope that's okay."

"Hey, a burger from Haunted isn't any good if you don't load it up with all the goodies. Can I help get the drinks?"

"Sure. John, you go and sit. We'll take care of this." She put her hand on his back and gently guided him away from the counter. Ellie tried to ignore the fact that he'd been very silent since their encounter in the hallway.

Under her breath, Josie explained, "He came in looking for you and I wasn't sure how to handle it. He seemed disturbed when he found out you'd gone for a walk. I mean really upset. He asked me if I was sure that you went outside. That doesn't make any sense."

Ellie realized that John thought she'd gone in the hidden hallway again. If the situation wasn't so tense right now, she'd have laughed out right. After everyone ate, she'd explain it to him and things would be alright.

Josie joined Shotgun at the sofa and they ate their meal on the coffee table. John joined Ellie at the breakfast bar. He ate without speaking and she did the same. Shotgun hollered from his seat, "Thanks, this hits the spot." Josie echoed his words.

"How's yours?" She finally asked the silent man sitting next to her.

“It’s great. Thanks for doing this for us.”

In a quieter tone, she explained, “I know you think I went exploring in the hallway, but I promised you I wouldn’t do that, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did and I’m sorry for acting like a jerk. When Josie first told me you went for a walk, I immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. She was a little put off by my attitude.”

“Can you blame her? This has been a helluva first day for her. John, we’ve got to work on being more honest with each other, both of us.” Ellie explained.

She noticed that he didn’t look her in the eyes, but he did agree. “You’re right. I don’t know why I have a problem with your independence.”

“You’re just an old-fashioned type of man, that’s all. It’s something I’ve known about you since the day we met. It’s something I accept.” She held up her hand as he went to interrupt. “Okay, I know that I don’t always accept it, but I hope and pray that we can both do what it takes to make this a very happy relationship, you know one of those that ends happily ever after.” With that, she kissed him on the cheek.

John smiled as he pushed the remains of his lunch back. “I’ve got to get back out there. I want that new bar in place so they can start redoing the flooring.”

“Go! Josie and I’ll be working in the office.”

“Good. I’ll see you later.” He was distracted and that left Ellie curious about his state of mind. She shrugged it off and got up to clean up their lunch papers and trash. Josie jumped up to help.

“Uncle, we’re going back to the office. Will you be alright?”

“Of course, I’m just going to sit here and watch some television.”

“I should be getting some calls from the doctor about those tests we need to get done for you.” Ellie reminded him.

“Don’t worry yourself about that. I’m starting to feel better already.”

She gave him one of those looks and heard his snort of protest as the two women left the room. “Is he sick?” Josie asked.

“We had to take him to emergency. They want to do some tests on his heart. He’s lived his life on his terms and not always taken care of his body.”

“Have any of us done everything right, when it comes to our health?” Josie asked.

“No, I guess not.” When they got back into the office, Ellie pulled out an application and handed it to the other woman. “I forgot to have you fill out one of these. If you could take a minute and do that, I’d appreciate it.”

She noticed the reluctance showing on Josie’s face but watched her take the application anyway. “You can use the desk. Just clear off a spot and fill it out.”

Ellie tried to stay busy while her new employee worked on the paper before her. She went through one more file cabinet, carefully putting the files in one of the boxes. As she put the lid on and labeled the box, Ellie noticed that Josie had stopped writing. “Everything okay?”

As Josie pushed the application back, she looked up and faced her new boss. “I think I need to tell you something before I finish this.”

Without saying a word, Ellie waited for her confession. “I was fired from my last job. I was working as a cocktail server at a casino in Phoenix when they let me go.”

“What happened?” Ellie had expected something entirely different. She wasn’t sure but she had a feeling that Josie was about to admit something more, something to do with The Depot. You’re being silly, she admonished herself. Just like John and her uncle have told her in the past, she was letting her imagination get the best of her.

“We had this really obnoxious, but extremely wealthy customer at the casino. It made me sick to my stomach how the management catered to him. He was arrogant to the point of abusive, but they wouldn’t say anything to him. He dropped hundreds of thousands at that place every year. Money talks!”

“That’s unfortunately the truth in some places.”

“Well, he wasn’t happy with the drink I brought him and he threw it in my face. I told that son of a bitch exactly what I thought of him. They fired me on the spot!”

“Those bastards!” The two women stood facing each other, and then suddenly they burst into laughter.

“Josie, I want to thank you for telling me and being honest. It doesn’t matter to me and I can assure you that rich, obnoxious millionaires won’t get away with anything like that here. Now, finish that paperwork so you can help me haul these boxes to the storage room in the back of the kitchen.”

A short time later, the two of them each carried a box and headed to the undamaged part of the kitchen. Things were still in pretty much of a mess and they had to dodge around the crew of people working on the remodel. Ellie pointed to the piece of plywood covering up the blast hole. "That's where we were when the bomb blew. If you go into that pantry at the back is a door that leads down to a part of the tunnel system under this town, well there was until it got blown up."

"Wow! You guys were lucky. How did you escape?"

Ellie stopped and faced her before answering. "It was Magdalena. She helped me find the bomb and we barely had time to get out."

"There are so many stories about that blast. I heard about her but I wasn't sure I believed it." They moved into the storage room and found empty shelves on which to place their boxes.

Ellie pushed the boxes to the far back of the shelf but struggled to get them square with the wall. When she finally did, they both were shocked to see another panel open up behind the boxes. "What the hell!" She exclaimed.

## Eleven

“Oh, my God!” Josie exclaimed.

“What in the world is that?” Ellie added. She tried to feign shock but underneath the only surprise was that they’d found yet another secret panel. “I need to tell John. Would you go and get him? I want to protect this and make sure no one else sees it.”

Josie quickly left the storage room and in no time at all, John was following her back. He and Ellie made eye contact and shared a moment. “What in the world?” He exclaimed.

“We were just putting these boxes up on that shelf and look what happened! Do you suppose that there’s a room back there?” Josie’s voice showed the excitement she was feeling.

With another glance at each other, John addressed her question. “I don’t think it’s safe for you two. I’ll get one of the guys to help me and we’ll inspect what’s back there.” He hoped that would satisfy the curiosity of their newest employee.

Ellie put out an expected protest. “Wait, I think we can do it.”

“No, El, you know I don’t want anything to happen to you. Please just let me do this my way.” He winked over Josie’s head so only she could see.

“Sure, John. Just let us know what you find. Come on, Josie, we’ll go finish packing.” They walked away and went back into the office.

Josie spoke once the door was closed, “Are you going to let him do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you dying to see what’s behind that shelf?”

“Of course I am, but John will let me know once he makes sure it’s safe.” She tried hard to act nonchalant. “Come on, let’s get these file drawers emptied. That way we can start building our own records.”

Reluctantly, Josie came and they worked side by side for the next hour or so. The silence was palatable but each time Josie looked her way, Ellie just smiled. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to pretend that she was fine with John’s decision. In her mind, she went over the conversation and totally agreed that Josie should be kept away from the hidden room. The end results were that she was not allowed to participate in the discovery.

Finally, Ellie called a halt to their day. “I think I’m done. What about you?”

With a sigh, Josie plopped down on the chair behind the desk. “I’m pooped! You’ll tell me what they found?”

“Of course! I’ll let you know first thing in the morning.”

“Oh, you want me to come in on Saturday?”

“Oh, my God, it’s going to be the weekend. No, I don’t want you to be here tomorrow. See you on Monday. I think I need a few days off myself. Hey, Josie, you know I think John would want this to be kept

a secret. We're trying to rebuild and are finding out all sorts of surprises. So, please?" She pleaded.

She walked Josie out the back and once it was shut, leaned against the closed door. She heaved a deep sigh but swiftly resuming her energy, Ellie hurried down the hall to find John. She didn't find him at the space where the old bar used to be and as she stood there contemplating where he might be, she heard a voice. "Hey, Ellie, how's it going?"

Slowly she turned to find Stan just behind the bar. "Hey, Stan, what're you doing?" This is so not what I wanted to happen, she thought.

"I'm just finishing up the flooring so we can get that new bar in here tomorrow. You looking for your man?"

Oh my God, this man has got to go, Ellie thought to herself. He's just such a creepy guy. Instead she put on a forced smile and asked him, "Do you know where he is? I really need to talk with him."

"Oh, sure. I think he went into the kitchen. He said he needed to check on the new stove installation. You two seem to have trouble keeping track of each other, don't you?" He laughed like he made a great joke. She didn't respond to his jibe, but instead went directly to the kitchen. There were still a few workers in there, but no John. Trying to be nonchalant, Ellie went around them and into the storage room. She saw that the panel had been shut and the office boxes were still in place on the shelf, but again, no John.

As she went out of the kitchen, she once again went by Stan. "Find him?"

“No, but would you let him know I’m looking?”  
Upon receiving his nod, Ellie continued to her apartment. As she entered, she saw that her uncle was still on the sofa but seemed to be avidly interested in an old war movie.

“Hey, Girl, how’s it going?”

She plopped down next to him and as he reached out his arm, she snuggled tightly into his grasp. “Thanks, I needed that.”

“You can be such a girl.” He teased.

“Well, in case you hadn’t noticed lately, I am a girl.” She quipped back.

“What’s going on?”

With a moment’s hesitation and a deep breath, Ellie shared the afternoon’s events. “So, Josie was there when we found another secret panel. I’m not so sure that she will keep it a secret and I’m positive John doesn’t want anyone else to know.”

“You didn’t go in and explore?”

“No, Good Lord knows I wanted to but with Josie there, I acted surprised and immediately had her get John. He played the big, protective man and told us that we shouldn’t go in there.”

Shotgun laughed. “I would’ve loved to been there and seen the look on your face. Bet you had to bite your tongue too!” He hooted his delight.

“You’re not helping.” She admonished him.

“I asked her to keep this discovery a secret, but I’m not sure she can be trusted to do that.”

“Did you tell John?”

“No, I can’t seem to find him. I don’t think he’d go into the hidden panel while there are so many workers still here, but he’s not around right now.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s around here somewhere. John’s got a lot on his plate. He seems driven to get this place completed and opened by the fall.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re probably right. I think I’ll start something for dinner. Maybe the smell of a good home-cooked meal will bring him home.” She got up and went to the fridge looking for the makings of dinner. Soon the aromas of something cooking wafted over to her uncle.

“Ah, Girl, you could always create something wonderful out of nothing. Smells delicious. What are you making?”

“It’s just good ole’ tacos, Uncle. I know how you and John love them.” She kept busy at the stove, slicing and dicing. Ellie heard the footsteps of the workers down the hallway to the back door and automatically looked at the clock. It was quitting time. She figured that John would be coming down to their apartment soon.

“Uncle, come over and sit here at the bar. I’ll dish yours up.”

“I can wait for John.”

“No, eat it while it’s hot. He’ll be here soon, I’m sure.” She tried to convince herself more than him. “Come on.”

Shotgun moved slowly and was soon seated at the counter with the plate of tacos she’d placed there. “What to drink?”

“Just give me a beer. Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I think I’ll check on John and see what’s keeping him. I’ll be right back.” She went out the door before he could protest.

Even though the whole area was still lit up, things felt a little eerie as she moved into the main lobby and bar area. “John.” She called as she moved further into the kitchen area. Something isn’t right, she thought to herself. Those natural instincts that Ellie often relied on kicked in and she moved with more determination to the storage room.

Reaching up to move the office boxes, Ellie had to try several times until she finally triggered the secret panel. Moving the metal storage shelves was a bit harder but she finally succeeded. She turned all the lights on as she’d not taken the time to bring a flashlight, but it was still not enough to illuminate the interior of the space. As she looked around, Ellie saw a candle sitting on the sideboard. She quickly lit it and with a deep sigh of courage, stepped into the darkened space.

The candle flickered, casting weird shadows on the area. “John?” She tried again. Her gut was telling her that he was in here and she trembled at the thought of him being hurt or worse. The floor was rough and uneven, causing Ellie to walk very carefully. It reminded her of the words from Pearl that first day she’d run into her, ‘be sure of the path you take.’ Surprised by the memory, the words of the psychic made her pause for a moment. Since finding all the hidden panels and the different twists and turns behind the walls, Ellie realized that she’d been choosing many paths and not actually sure of any of them. Her actions to this point

had been purely random and without any real thought about the end results or the consequences.

Just then she heard a moan coming from beyond what appeared to be a wall. "John!" She moved rapidly in the direction of his voice causing the candle to almost flicker out.

"El, stop! It's not safe. Don't move!" His voice was strained and she was immediately concerned.

"Are you alright? What happened?" Without regard for her own safety, she took a few tentative steps closer to his voice.

"I think I might have broken my ankle. Go back and get another flashlight, mine fell when I tripped." He punctuated his response with another loud groan. "Hurry, El."

Tracing her steps backward was difficult while at the same time trying not to trip or fall over anything. Once in the kitchen, she hurried back to their apartment and grabbed several of the flashlights. Her uncle must have gone to his own space as he wasn't still on the couch. Not wanting to take the time to explain her predicament, Ellie hurried back to the kitchen and into the space behind the shelves.

"John, I'm here and I'm coming to get you."

"Go slowly and watch everything you step on." His voice was strained which only helped to spur her into action. "El?"

"I hear you. I'm being extremely careful. Hang in there. What happened? Can you talk to me? It helps direct me." Not knowing his full predicament, she wanted to keep him aware and conscious.

He talked but his words came in spurts with deep breaths between thoughts. "I was not looking down, so please, watch your feet."

"John? Come on, I can hear you more clearly. I must be getting closer."

"I thought I was walking on dirt...but it's not. I think it's an old wooden plank floor. They're rotten and when I stepped, I fell through. I'm stuck, El."

She could hear the desperation in his tone and tried to hurry. As she rounded the corner, Ellie saw just his upper body sticking out of the floor. It was all she could do to restrain herself from dashing over to him. He had his back to her and Ellie proceeded at a snail's pace getting as close to him as she dared. "I'm right behind you. Are you just hanging there or are your feet touching anything below?"

"Don't come too close! I am barely touching something below with my right foot. I think the left is broken and none of this feels very steady." His breathing was shallow.

"I'm going to look for a rope. I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere." Ellie tried to make a joke.

"Funny."

She went slowly backwards, the floorboards were creaking as she stepped over them. Once back in the kitchen, she ran to the main lobby. There had to be a rope or cable somewhere, she mused, with all this construction stuff lying around. Finally, she ran down the hallway and broke into her uncle's room. "Uncle! I need your help! John's fallen through the floor."

Shotgun was sitting in his recliner but immediately got up and stiffly followed her. They found a long

strap that had been used to hold the boards together in shipment. Ellie pulled at it until she got it loosened. Once they got to the hole in the kitchen, she ordered her uncle to tie the one end around the support beam holding up the second floor. He used the loop on one end and ran the other end through it. Shotgun pulled the long end to her as she stood in the opening.

“Where is he?”

“A few feet beyond that wall. You stay here, the flooring is really rotten.”

“You be careful, Girl.” He said needlessly.

Treading as softly as she could, Ellie pulled the long end of the strap behind her until she rounded the wall. “John?”

“I’m here. Did you bring a rope?”

“Yes, I have one of those straps they use to hold the boards together when shipped. Is it at all possible for you to get it around you?” She moved closer but heard the boards creaking worse as she stepped towards John.

“Don’t come any closer! Can you toss me that strap?”

“I can try. Are you able to get it under your arms by yourself?” She tossed it but had to try several more times before getting into his grasp. Finally John had the end of it in his hands and he struggled to get it wrapped under his arms and around his chest.

In the meantime, Ellie got down on her hands and knees and slowly made her way across the rickety floor. Each time the boards beneath her squeaked and moaned, she stopped and waited, holding her breath and praying that she was still safe. The lights were

shining and she could see John as he worked to get the strap underneath the other arm. He was breathing hard and all of Ellie's senses were alert to the immense stress John was under with the task.

Lying down on her stomach, she inched ever so slowly across the roughened surface until she could reach out and touch him. "I'm right behind you. Hand me the other end."

"You shouldn't have come over here. I don't know how long this floor will hold me, let alone you." Even as he spoke, John tried to get the loose end up to her open hand. One more attempt and she successfully grabbed it.

"I'm going to scoot over to your left. As soon as I get this end completely under your arms, I'll move back and try to pull you up." As she heard her own words, Ellie realized that the situation was dire and the only way she could be of any help was with her uncle pulling too.

"Uncle!" She knew that John would be alarmed that Shotgun was there trying to help given his current medical condition.

"Ellie, he can't help. He shouldn't strain. We can do this."

Shotgun's gravelly voice came from just on the other side of the wall. "I'm not in the ground yet! Come on, Girl, let's give it our best try."

"Okay, guys, on three. One. Two. Three." She felt her uncle pull on the strap and at the same time, Ellie gave it all she had. John used his right foot to push himself up with all his might as the floor moaned and squeaked. As his upper body cleared the edge of the

hole, he rolled over and together they crawled back to the edge of the wall just as most of the flooring around the hole crashed down into the dark space below. The room was instantly enveloped into darkness as their flashlights fell into the gaping hole.

Ellie grabbed him and pulled as did Shotgun. Once beyond the wall, they rolled over and lay there trying to gather their breath. "Come on, you two! You can't take a chance that this part of the floor won't cave in too!" The light from behind him in the storage room helped show the way.

John moaned in pain as she grabbed him and tried to help get them into a safe place. "Can you stand on that foot at all?" She asked.

"I don't think so. It may not be broken, but I may have pulled some tendons or something." Scooting along by pulling his body with his strong hands on the rough surface, John finally got to the opening and looked up to see Shotgun with the office chair waiting for him.

"Here, if we can get you up, we can roll you to your room."

John's laughter was weak, but a good sign. "Smart thinking, Shotgun." With each of them on either side, they were finally able to get the big man into the chair. "We need to block that opening."

"I think that the main thing is to get you to the hospital." Ellie spoke her opinion.

"I can see that this storage room door has a lock on it. Do you guys have a key?" Shotgun was investigating the door and lock.

“I think we got keys to the entire place. So, go ahead and lock it. We definitely don’t want anyone getting in there for obvious reasons.” His voice showed the pain he was feeling.

“Let’s get you into our apartment.” With that both she and Shotgun pushed the office chair down the hallway. They struggled as the floor was still rough and the chair didn’t want to roll smoothly.

“I’m going to call the paramedics.” Ellie started to move away from him.

“No! I think it’s just majorly strained. Let’s ice it and then make the decision in the morning.” When he saw the stubborn look on her face, he added. “Please, El, I know my own body and I feel I’ve just pulled a muscle or something. Indulge me.”

With John and her uncle both staring at her, Ellie finally gave in. “Fine! You’re a grown man and I’m not your mother. If you end up not being able to walk, so be it.” She stormed over to the refrigerator and grabbed a plastic bag from the drawer to fill it with ice. Once done, she took the bag over to John. “You need to get off that silly chair and sit on the couch so you can put your foot up.”

He struggled to get from the office chair to the couch, but sheer determination flashed across his face as he strained to make the move. Once he got there, she went over and gently placed the cold compress on his ankle. John adjusted it and took a deep breath.

Shotgun was still standing at the door as he witnessed the exchange between his niece and John. “You two have really got to figure a way to

communicate that doesn't involve arguments." With that he laughed and shut the door behind himself.

"He's right, you know." She agreed aloud. "Everything seems to be one big competition between us." As she went over to the couch, Ellie sat gingerly on the edge. "Are you really okay?"

"I could use something for the pain, but other than that I feel really lucky that it wasn't worse."

Ellie got up, placed a quick kiss on his cheek and went to their bathroom to get some pain relievers for John. She looked up into the mirror for just a split second and took a deep breath. Do we really argue that much? The thoughts her uncle put into her head taunted her.

Putting her own thoughts and feeling aside, Ellie went back down the hall to give John the pills. When she approached the front room, she saw that he'd shut his eyes and perhaps fallen asleep. Moving quietly so as to not disturb him, she went to the kitchen nook and grabbed a wine glass.

"Can I have one of those?" She was startled at the sound of his voice.

"Sure. You can take your pills with it." She laughed as she poured a second glass of wine and took it over to him.

"Thanks, sweetie. I appreciate it."

They sat there for a few minutes appreciating the silence and savoring their choice of beverages. "Thanks for coming to my rescue. I don't know how I would've gotten out of there if you hadn't come looking for me. I love you."

She didn't speak right away, but when she did her voice broke. "I can't imagine something horrible happening to you." Ellie took a moment to gain control. She looked him right in the eyes and spoke again, "I can't imagine my life without you in it, John."

They sat in silence. Each was in their own world of thoughts. Ellie finally got up and started to dim the lights. "Are you hungry?" Her words broke the stillness in the room.

"Not really. I'm enjoying sitting here and doing nothing. I'd rather not be in pain, but those pills seem to be helping. Come, sit by me."

Willingly, she found a comfortable spot on the sofa where she wouldn't hurt his ankle. Ellie found herself taking a cleansing breath. So much had happened in the short time they'd taken up residence in their hotel, some good, some bad. She leaned back into his chest and felt the strength of his heart beating with hers.

"El?" He spoke softly.

"Yes?"

"We need to develop a plan."

She sat up and turned to look at John. "A plan for what?"

"I think we need to set a trap. Someone is obviously trying to find something in this building that they think is valuable. We are not the only ones that know of the hidden panels and stairways. We're being played, Ellie, and I don't like it."

She was thoughtful for a few minutes. "I think you're right, but by whom?"

"That, my love, is what we're going to find out."

Intrigued, she asked, “Okay, Sheriff, how are we going to do that?”

“Let’s think about the players. Who have we just met? Who is new to our world?”

“Well, first off the top of my head is Stan.”

He chuckled. “You’re so funny! What about Josie? What about Seth?”

“If you’re going to go that far, then every construction worker on this job is suspect including that nice boy Toby.” She was thoughtful, but suddenly her expression changed. “Wait a minute!”

John did just that.

“You’re always on me for going off on my own. What were you doing in that newest spot? Why didn’t you wait for me?”

Looking properly chastised, he replied, “Your enthusiasm is rubbing off on me. I was curious and just happened to be in the kitchen when I decided it wouldn’t hurt to peek in behind that panel.”

“I don’t believe that for a second! What the hell provoked you to go into that space alone?”

“I told you, it was your zeal for the mysterious. I’ve spent the last few years trying to keep you grounded, but I think the opposite happened.”

She laughed but added, “I know you try to keep me on the ground, but I’d like to think I help you get into the clouds and enjoy the view from there.”

He leaned in and placed a tender kiss on her cheek. “I do love you, El.”

“I love you, too. I do thank you for trying your best to keep me on the ground. It doesn’t always work, does it?”

He laughed and hugged her closer. “How’s that working with trying to get me to try my wings?”

This moment was special and Ellie wanted to enjoy it for as long as she could. “John, I still don’t believe your reasons for going into that space without me. Come on, fess up, what really caused you to do that?”

“Aww, Ellie, is this really necessary?” John stalled.

She giggled, but responded, “Yes, it is necessary. I really need to know why you went into that room without me.”

He leaned back and tried to put some distance between them. His demeanor was one of resignation. Finally, John confessed, “Okay, okay! You want blood?”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

With a moment of hesitation, he finally spoke, “This isn’t something I want to admit.”

“I wished I was one of those patient people in the universe, but I’d be the first to admit, I’m not! What are you talking about?” She pushed him for an answer.

“I saw your spirit! I saw Magdalena!”

## Twelve

Her mouth dropped open at his admission. She started to speak several different times, but stopped before any sound came out.

“Say something, anything!” He encouraged her.

Finally, Ellie spoke, “I can’t believe you admitted that. All this time, you’ve been adamant that Magdalena was a figment of my imagination and now this.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

“I went into the kitchen to make sure the guys taped off those wires over the new island and it’s kind of hard to explain, but I felt something move just behind me. When I turned to see who was still in there, I saw nothing. There was no one there, but as sure as I’m sitting here now, I felt it.”

She smiled at his confession.

“I can see you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Not really, I’m just glad that you don’t think it’s all in my mind now.” She stood up and faced him, “John, I had my own doubts at first. You have to admit that it’s a really bizarre situation to be in where you can’t depend on the reality we’ve always known. Everything in our training says that we need facts, but this....” Her voice trailed off.

“Pretty weird alright.” He agreed.

“What happened next?”

“As I turned, it was like I couldn’t see her directly. There was a sort of green light out of the corner of my eye and then I saw the fuzzy shape of a woman. When I tried to turn and look at her full on, the image just sort of faded. Man, all of this is so creepy.”

Ellie felt for him. Her first experience with Magdalena was very similar. It left her doubting her own senses. “I can relate to what you’re saying. She is rather elusive.”

“You can say that again. As I stood there transfixed, not sure what to do, she moved into the storage room and I just knew she wanted me to follow.” He shook his head. “As I’m saying all of this out loud, I’m not sure I even believe my own words.”

“What next?”

“I went into that storage area and saw that the panel was already open. I didn’t see her or the green lighting, but I felt she went in before me. I grabbed a flashlight from the workbench and slowly made my way in.”

“What’s the area like?”

“When you first step in you’re in a small room, kind of like an anteroom. The floor there is rough but it felt very solid. There wasn’t anything in the area, no furniture, no shelves, nothing.”

“As we’ve been exploring these hidden stairways and rooms, I didn’t think about it being dangerous. I mean it was certainly precarious, but I didn’t even contemplate that the stairs or floors would be unsafe.”

“Neither did I. We now know better.” John adjusted his left leg on the couch. “Could you put some of those pillows underneath?”

She adjusted some of the small pillows and gave his leg some more support. “How’s it feeling?”

“It’s definitely throbbing, but I’m convinced I didn’t break it. It’s a bad sprain but nothing more serious than that.”

“I still think we should take a trip to the hospital in Cottonwood, just to be sure.” She knew as soon as the words were out of her mouth that John would decline her suggestion.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. I am starting to get hungry. Why don’t you see what Shotgun wants and we can order something.”

“He already ate. I fixed tacos earlier. I’ll call him and see if he wants to come over and talk while we eat.”

As she disconnected the call, Ellie told John. “I’m going to fix our plates and then way we can all relax. Why don’t you finish your story?”

She went behind the bar and retrieved a bottle of water for him and poured some more wine for herself. “Oh, I see how it is.” His sarcasm wasn’t wasted.

“You don’t need any more alcohol, Mister. Let’s see how the night goes for you first.”

Just then Shotgun came into the room. “How’s it going?”

“I’m fine. It’s not broken, I’m sure.”

To Ellie, her uncle asked, “Did you find out how it happened?”

“He told me part of the story, but now that you’re here we can hear the rest of it.” They both took a seat on the side chairs and waited for John to continue.

“Like I said, the first room was bare but just around the wall, I saw that damned green glow again.” He looked directly at Shotgun to see his reaction.

After his chuckle died down, Shotgun said, “So, you finally agree she exists.”

“Yes, but unlike Ellie’s interactions with her, mine ended in this.” He pointed to his foot.

“Do you think she did it deliberately?” Ellie’s surprise was indicated in her voice.

“What else? She led me into that next room and the floor caved in beneath me.”

They all sat there for a few quiet moments thinking about the reasons behind Magdalena leading John into danger.

“More?” She asked of John and he responded with a shake of his head.

Shotgun said, “I want to hear the rest of John’s tale.”

“There’s not much more to tell. I was walking across the floor following her, when I heard the crack of the wood underneath my steps. I twisted this left ankle trying to turn fast and get back to the edge. When I realized the floor was giving way, I just prepared to be landing down below.”

“What stopped you from going all the way down?” Ellie asked.

He thought for a minute and then a confused look crossed his handsome features. “That’s another

strange part of all of this. Suddenly my right foot rested on something down below. It was enough to keep me upright and from falling all the way down.”

“See! She did that. Magdalena kept you from falling into who knows what!”

When he started to protest, John suddenly stopped. “Given what I’ve just been through, I guess anything is possible.”

“I think we need to see what exactly is down there. Maybe that’s what everyone is searching for in this old place.” Shotgun spoke.

“Yeah, but how? It’s the next logical step but we can’t get on that floor, it’s too rotten.” Ellie added on a side note, “At least the area is now lit up, both flashlights are now down there.”

“You have another challenge. Josie was with you when you found that panel. She’ll be very curious and expect some answers.” Her uncle’s comments raised yet another problem for them to overcome.

Ellie groaned and put her head back on the top of the chair. “What are we going to do? How are we going to get out of this mess?”

“Go and get some more easel paper. We need to start brainstorming and come up with a plan. Shotgun, you can help us with this.”

Ellie organized the existing sheets of notes and then added several more blank ones to the wall. “It’s a good thing we don’t have any décor in here. Pictures and paintings would just get in the way of our work.” She joked.

“Use ‘Ways to investigate the hole’ for one chart.” Shotgun suggested.

“That’s great. Let’s label another with ‘Suspects’ at the top.” John added.

“I think the last one could just be the parking lot.” Ellie added, but upon seeing the confused looks on the faces of both men, she clarified. “The parking lot is where we put ideas that don’t particularly fit on the other sheets, but are too important to be left out.”

John smiled, “You obviously paid attention in some of your classes while getting your degree. Good job, El.”

They worked for about half an hour when their momentum finally slowed down. When Ellie stood back to look at their new lists, she was pleased. “I think we’ve done well for now. Thanks, Uncle, your ideas will certainly add to the solution.”

He struggled to get up, but once on his feet, Shotgun shuffled to the door. “Don’t stay up too late, you two.”

“Take your medicine!” Ellie hollered after him.

“Yeah, yeah,” His voice trailed off as he let himself into his apartment.

“I’m sure he was cursing me for nagging.” Ellie confirmed what she had been thinking.

“He knows you have his best interests at heart.” John reassured her.

“I know. Now, let’s look at these lists. Anything jumping out at you?”

“The first thing I notice is that we need to find a way to get into that room below. I am inclined to believe that we’ll find some answers down there. I like your idea that there may be another panel in the basement area below the kitchen. The only thing

about that is the area was pretty much messed up with the blast from the bomb. I mean, it's not totally gone, but it could be dangerous to dig around down there." John spoke.

"I liked Shotgun's idea of maybe using a drone. I don't know the first thing about doing that, but I'm sure two smart individuals like us can learn."

"Why don't you get on the computer and order one. The sooner we get this mystery solved, the sooner we can finish our work and get this place up and running."

She grabbed her laptop and with a few strokes on the keyboard, Ellie completed the task. "Good idea. Now, what about tomorrow and Josie? What are we going to tell her?"

John adjusted the pillows underneath his left foot. "I think we can let her know that the floor is unstable as this is the proof. We'll just keep the door to that storage room locked for now."

"Okay. It sounds like we have a plan at least for tomorrow. Now how about we get you to the bedroom?"

"I don't think I'm in any shape to do what I think you're suggesting." John teased with a wink.

"You're awful! I wasn't implying any such thing. I just wanted to get you more comfortable." She smiled at the familiar grin on his face.

Together they finally were successful at getting him upright and down the hall to their bedroom. "I'm glad you put a television set in here. I'm not quite ready for sleep and as you're out of commission..." Ellie teased.

“Watch away. I’m going to try and get some sleep.” He fluffed his pillow as he adjusted his injured foot under the covers.

“Are you sure it won’t bother you? I could just read.” She offered.

He reached over and patted her. “You won’t trouble me. I’ll be just fine with a good night’s rest.”

Ellie’s concentration wasn’t on the old television show on the screen, but rather on the steps ahead. John had finally agreed that they did indeed have a real mystery to solve and the most astounding revelation was that they both had now seen their resident spirit, Magdalena. Her curiosity was stoked with the floor below their latest hidden room. Was this the treasure that others seemed to be looking for in the hotel?

As she set the timer on the remote, Ellie reflected on her frustrations. Was Stan as suspicious as she thought? What about Seth, was he as innocent as she’d tried to convince John? Why had Josie showed up at this time? How many others were involved in the treasure hunt that they weren’t aware of? Finally exhausted, she dozed off to a restless sleep.

“El, I need some help getting out of this bed.” John’s gentle pushes on her backside, stirred the sleeping woman awake.

“Oh, okay. Give me a minute.” Her voice reflected her sleepiness. In just a few moments, Ellie moved off her side of the bed and came around to help John.

With a little bit of struggling, they finally got him up into a standing position. John stood there for a few seconds to gain his balance and slowly tried to

move to the bathroom. He moaned and groaned, but did manage with her help to make it to the doorway. "I hope you don't need my help now." She tried to lighten the mood.

"You're funny and I love that about you, but I can handle this part just fine on my own."

Heading back to their bedroom, she looked at her bed, but instead of climbing back into the huge, comfortable spot, she started to get dressed. Josie should be here soon and before starting with her, Ellie wanted to get her uncle some breakfast.

"John! I'm going to make a light breakfast. Will you be alright? Do you need my help?" She raised her voice.

"I'll be fine on my own. It's just not very easy with this banged up ankle."

As she went into the kitchen, a soft knock at the front door alerted her that the day was already starting to make its demands on her time. She was grateful when her uncle poked his head around the corner. "Hey, Girl, how's our guy doing?"

Ellie noticed he was carrying one of his canes as well as using one to maneuver into the room. "I thought maybe this might help."

They both turned as they heard John bumping down the hallway towards them. The frown on his face told volumes about the frustration and pain he was experiencing. "Hey, Shotgun! I think that's just what I need." He finally made it to the counter and reached for the cane. John experimented with it around the living room slowly.

“I still think we should take you to the hospital.” Ellie voiced her opinion one more time.

“Look! See how good I’m doing with this.” John spoke with more confidence as he went one more circle around the room. “I’ll be just fine. There’s too much to do today. I’ve got Seth helping the crew install that new bar. I don’t have to be physically involved, but I do want to make sure they put it exactly where I want it to be in the lounge.”

She looked to her uncle for some backup. “Sorry, I’m with John on this one. If it was broken, he couldn’t get around at all. Just to make sure he doesn’t overdo anything, I’ll be right there with him.”

“Oh, that’s so comforting.” She spoke with sarcasm. “It’s like the blind leading the blind. You’re supposed to be resting with your heart issue and he shouldn’t be up on that foot. I feel so much better with you two doing all the planning.”

“I don’t think she’s serious, do you?” Shotgun spoke to John.

“Nah. She’ll come around, though. Come on, let’s get to work.” Ignoring the indignant look on her face the two men went for the door.

“Oh, no you don’t. You at least have to eat this meal! I swear you two are impossible!” Her crossness didn’t last long as she saw at the mock sheepish looks on their faces. They all laughed and as they sat at the counter to eat, Ellie kissed each of them on the cheek. “I’m going to work! You guys get to clean up.”

They heard her laughter all the way out the door and down the hallway. “I think we lost that one, don’t you?” Shotgun asked his partner in crime.

Ellie was smiling when she turned the corner but her look suddenly changed as she saw Josie talking with Stan. She backed up and tried to watch where they couldn't see her. It was already too noisy for any words to reach her ears, but the conversation didn't seem too friendly. The look on Josie's face was one of consternation and Stan seemed to be explaining something she didn't like or didn't want to hear. Did these two know each other? How would that be possible?

As she heard the door behind her open, Ellie was prompted to confront the two across the room. She walked with determination and as she got closer, Ellie noticed they were both extremely uncomfortable upon seeing her approach. "Hey, you two! I wasn't aware that you knew each other. What's going on?"

Josie was the first to respond, "Oh, I don't know this guy. I was just telling him that he cut me off out back. I was headed for a parking spot and he just shot past me into the space."

Ellie waited for Stan's reaction. He jumped right in on the situation, "I was telling her that I'd been parking in that space all week. She obviously didn't accept that answer."

They were good, Ellie thought to herself. She didn't buy it for a minute, but in learning interrogation procedures, Ellie learned to not speak too soon. She just smiled and waited for them to continue this charade. Stan shuffled his feet but didn't add anything, while Josie avoided looking at either one of them. Finally she put on a smile and turned to face Ellie.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make such a fuss. I just don’t like being treated rudely.” She looked at Stan.

“Hey, yeah, sorry about that too.” His words were good but his tone was one of insincerity. Ellie knew they were both lying but for now she’d just gained a great deal of information.

“Well, let’s get to work.” She turned to lead the way to the office, expecting Josie to follow.

When they got to the door, Ellie turned to see Stan shaking his head. He avoided looking their way and very quickly moved toward the bar where John finally was standing. Josie went into the office first and started pulling open the file drawers. “I assume we’re going to finish emptying these cabinets.” She waited for Ellie’s answer.

“What was really going on out there with Stan? I don’t buy that story about a parking space.” Ellie sat on the edge of the desk and faced the other woman.

Josie didn’t speak right away, but found the chair across from the desk and sat down. “You’re good. This is your police experience coming out, isn’t it?”

“I need to trust the people that work for me and with me. If I can’t, there’s no use in us being here.” Ellie stated the facts quite simply.

“I can appreciate that and I totally agree. Really, Ellie, I was just trying to settle something with him. It’s a little embarrassing; I may have stepped out of my area of authority.” Josie maintained eye contact the entire time while speaking.

When Ellie didn’t respond, Josie added, “I found him in the kitchen near that storage room. I think he’s snooping around trying to find that stupid treas-

ure people are talking about in town. I told him to mind his own business if he wanted to keep his job.”

Ellie’s first reaction was to fire them all and get on with the rebuild, but suddenly John’s words about Seth popped into her brain. Keep your enemies closer, he’d said earlier and right now she wasn’t sure about who was an enemy and who was a friend. After taking a deep breath, she tried to make her smile seem sincere. “I’m sure your intentions were good, but like you said, I also think you realize that you crossed the line. Please, next time, if you have suspicions about someone or something, just bring your thoughts to me and let me and John deal with it. Okay?” She hoped her words portrayed a certain amount of confidence that she didn’t really feel towards Josie right now.

“I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. I’ll come to you, I promise.” Josie appeared contrite.

Ellie jumped up and with a forced enthusiasm, spoke to her. “Now, you remember the pictures you took of that old bar? Let’s get them posted online and see if we can get it sold.”

“I can do that! Should I use that computer?” Josie pointed to the older version sitting on the desk.

“Oh, no. I don’t even know if that thing runs. I’ll go and get my laptop. I’ll be right back.” As Ellie left the office, she looked for John. There were a dozen or more guys hanging around and in the middle of them was the man she was seeking.

It appeared that a huge amount of discussion was going on and she hated to interrupt him, but John needed to know about the situation between Stan and

Josie. As she got his attention, without any signal passing between them, John excused himself from the group and came her way. "What's up?"

They moved far enough away so that others couldn't overhear their conversation. Finally, he asked, "What's going on? The look on your face tells me we got more problems to deal with."

"When I came out to go to work, I saw Josie and Stan having a rather heated discussion over there." She pointed to the area. "I confronted both of them, but all I got were lies. When Josie and I got to the office, I challenged her to tell me the truth."

"Can't let go of the detective side of you, can you?" His voice teased her gently.

Ellie hugged him. "I love you. You know me so well."

"So what did she say when you pushed for answers?"

"Josie told me that she caught him in the kitchen near the storage room. She seems to think that with all the rumors in town about our 'treasure' here that he is only working here to find it." Ellie did air quotes when she spoke of the treasure.

"Son of a bitch! As if we don't have enough to deal with and now this. All sorts of creeps are going to come out in search of instant wealth. There is no treasure!" John pounded his fist on the wall. All of the men standing near the space for the new bar looked over at his explosion.

"John! We'll deal with this, but we don't need to aggravate the situation."

“I know, I know. Sorry. I expected complications with the construction, but I didn’t anticipate all of the mystery stuff.” He rubbed his hand through his dark brown unruly hair, a habit she had grown to love.

“I have a thought. Why don’t we invite Carson to come and give us a hand? You can concentrate on the rebuild, I can get the decorating done, and Carson can handle the mysteries surrounding this place.” She waited while he mulled over her suggestion.

The conversation by the group of guys deciding how to install the new bar started getting louder and John felt pressure to resume control over the plan. “El, let’s talk about this at lunch. You keep your eye on her and I’ll keep track of Stan and Seth.” He bent down and placed a quick kiss on her lips. “I’ll meet you in a few hours and we’ll make a decision together.”

With a grin on her face, Ellie went to their apartment, grabbed her laptop and went straight to the office. She gave it to Josie and as her helper started downloading the pictures of the bar, Ellie finished unloading the filing cabinets. “How much do you want for the bar? I’ve done some research and I think you could get a decent price. It does have some history here in Jerome.”

She laughed, “How much do you think history is worth? I think John just wants to get it out of here so we can get moving faster with the remodel.” The two agreed on an amount to post on the ad and in no time at all, they were getting some views from people surfing the web.

“Let’s get all these files in the boxes and I’ll have John get some of the guys to take them to the kitchen by the storage room door. I think we’re almost ready to start setting up our new files.”

Josie spoke, “I’m really sorry about earlier. I hope we’re okay and you’ll allow me to continue working for you.”

“Let’s just move forward. It’s almost time for lunch and John and I have some things to discuss. You’ll be alright on your own?”

“Oh, yeah. I have some errands to run. I’ll be back in about an hour if that’s okay.” Josie stood by the office door.

“Sure, that’ll work out just fine.” They both left the office at the same time and as Ellie went into her apartment, she stopped long enough to see that Josie went out the back door.

As she prepared lunch for John and her uncle, Ellie looked over at the charts on the living room wall. She reviewed their brainstorming and tried to find something, anything they’d missed. They hadn’t actually listed their suspects on the papers lining the walls, but at the top of her list were Stan, Seth, and now Josie. There could be others, but as of now those suspects were unknown. That’s a thought that alarmed her.

Soon the door opened and the two men limped in each holding onto a cane. Her heart ached for both of them, but she knew that John’s injury would eventually heal while her uncle had lived with his disability for as long as she could remember. “Sit you two! I’ll grab some ice for your foot. I made sandwiches. What

to drink?” Ellie bustled around getting them both comfortable on the sofa with their lunch in front of them.

She went back and filled a bag with ice and gave it to her guy. “Can you put your foot up on the coffee table?” She plumped a small pillow to place underneath his injured ankle and gently placed the towel-covered ice bag on his swollen foot.

“Thanks. This thing is throbbing but I’ll be fine in a day or two.” John reached for his food and took a big bite.

Ellie joined them and for a few minutes they each silently enjoyed their food. “Take the time to enjoy your sandwich, John. You’re eating way too fast. Those guys will wait for the boss.”

Shotgun laughed.

“Hey, what does that mean? Six equals a key?”

“What are you talking about?” Ellie asked John.

He pointed to one of their flipcharts. “When did you add that? What do you mean?”

As she got up and went over to the wall, Ellie turned and faced the two men. “I didn’t write that!”



## Thirteen

“John, we’ve got to find out what’s in the floor below that room! That’s got to be a reference to the six keys we have left over.”

When she didn’t get an immediate response, Ellie continued, “I think that those leftover keys belong to more of those boxes and they are located in that room below.”

“Are you saying that our spirit wrote on our charts?” John’s disbelief was evident. “Ellie, I can’t believe it!”

“I’m telling you that I didn’t write that. Look! It’s not even close to matching my handwriting! Magdalena is helping us once again!” Her voice matched her enthusiasm. “I think the most important thing we need to figure out right now is how to get into that room below.” She considered John one of the most intelligent men she knew, but it could be so frustrating when he refused to admit the obvious.

Shotgun finally spoke up, “I agree with her, John. I know you don’t want to admit it, but something or someone is directing us to find whatever is hidden in this building.”

“All that’s well and good, but with me and my bum leg and you with your cane that leaves only you know who to do the actual investigating.” He pointed his

thumb in Ellie's direction. His demeanor was still one of non-believing as well as trying to prevent Ellie from any further exploring without his assistance.

She turned put both hands on her hips and faced both men. "I am more than qualified to figure out what's going on down there. The only thing you need to do is help me determine how to get it done!" As an afterthought, she added, "I'll need you both there to help support my efforts, of course."

"When is the drone going to be delivered?" John asked.

"I think it'll be here tomorrow, but we need to have an alternative plan for trying to get in from the basement below."

"El, that's going to be too dangerous for any one of us. The blast from last year created a mess down there and I was just going to have the construction crew block off the entrance. I can't support you trying to go in from down there, even if we could find the entrance to the hidden space."

She started to say something but thought better of it and shut her mouth. But the pressure was too much for Ellie and she finally spoke, "I know you would rather be the one, but with your help I can get this done. It's so important to find out what's down there, don't you think?"

With deliberate resignation, John agreed. "You're right, we need to find out what the hell if anything is hidden here. We need to get back to work and finish this day, for now. El, you go and work in that office with Josie. Shotgun and I will get the bar put in place.

Tonight, we'll formulate a definitive plan how to investigate."

"Sounds good." She agreed. They all got up, cleaned up their lunch stuff and headed back out to the lobby area. When Ellie arrived in the office, she found she was alone. For some reason this pleased her and Ellie went to work on the last of the filing cabinets. This cabinet seemed more disorganized and she found several files that attracted her attention.

Ellie figured that even though Rose had owned the hotel, she didn't have an active interest in the management. These files had to have been created by the former manager. She pulled several folders out and placed them on a special pile for later. Just about then Josie popped through the closed door.

"Hey! How was your lunch?" Ellie asked.

"I went for pizza up the road. I needed to get some local tee shirts to send to my nephews. They always want Jerome stuff for their birthdays." She came over to the desk. "Are we almost done getting the files empty?"

"Yes, I want to take those files to go through tonight. I think everything else can go into the boxes."

"Hey, that reminds me, what did you guys find in that room behind the storage shelves?" Josie asked.

Ellie had dreaded this moment but she knew she had to give her some sort of an answer. "I'm sure you noticed John's limp? Well, he tried to go into that room and nearly fell through the floor. We locked the door so no one could get in there and get hurt." She hoped that would satisfy the other woman's curiosity, but soon found out that Josie was not to be put off.

“So, he didn’t find anything?”

“No, he fell into the rotten floor before he could get anywhere. I came looking for him for dinner. My uncle and I had to rescue him before he could fall all the way through. It’s a dangerous situation and we need to get the guys to board it all up.” Ellie wanted to cross her fingers with that little white lie.

“You’re not going to find out what’s below? I can’t believe you guys aren’t curious! There could be tons of gold down there.”

Ellie’s senses were alerted but her demeanor was one of nonchalance. “We have to get this place open and we really can’t mess with rumors and local gossip.” She avoided exchanging glances with the other woman, but instead appeared to devote her concentration on the files in her hand.

Josie seemed resigned to the fact that her employer was not going to talk about the mystery room anymore, so she applied her efforts to clearing the files from the old cabinets. They could hear the construction noises coming from the other room as well as the sounds of men’s voices.

“I hope they get that bar set. Did you get any replies to the post?” Ellie asked.

“I did, but none seem very serious. Maybe we’re asking too much.”

“Why don’t you research and find something comparable? I know that might not be easy, but I think we can come close and find a fair price for ours.”

They continued working but soon Ellie realized the noise from the lobby had subsided. She pulled her phone from her back pocket and was shocked to see

that they'd worked well after five. The construction crew was generally done around four.

"Josie, I'm so sorry. We can stop for today. I don't mean to be a slave driver." She laughed and hoped Josie would appreciate her sense of humor.

"You know I don't mind. I can't wait to see this wonderful property alive again."

"Okay, lady, let's get out of here. I'll see you tomorrow." She opened the office door and waited for Josie. Once they exited, Ellie made sure the office was securely locked behind them. As they approached the apartment door, Josie turned to speak, "I hope you guys reconsider blocking off that secret room. I think you really need to see what's in there. I'd be happy to help seeing as John is not able to right now." She volunteered.

"We'll see. Thanks for your work today." When she opened the door of her space, Ellie hesitated long enough to make sure that Josie had closed the door behind herself. The other woman's offer wasn't a complete surprise but it added to her suspicions of Josie's motives for being there.

She was greeted by John as she herself shut the door. "Hey, you're awfully late. Everything okay?" He had his foot propped up on the sofa with a bag of ice on the wounded ankle.

She came over and leaned in to place a soft kiss on his lips. "How are you doing? I noticed the bar is in place. Did you get finished?"

"We got it in place and partially secured. I had hoped to have it all done so we could work on the

back bar tomorrow, but without my ability to help..." He shrugged his shoulders.

She sat down on the sofa beside him and leaned back into his large frame. With a big sigh, they both seemed to revel in the close contact. "I'm pooped. I'm sure you are too." Ellie revealed.

"I knew this project was going to be a lot of work, but I guess I didn't realize that we'd run into some of the weird things that we have. I'm not sorry that we started this and I can only hope you agree."

"It's definitely become a challenge, but I'm not sorry either, John. I think the mystery we've uncovered is the most exciting thing for me." His laughter was infectious and soon they were both enjoying the moment. They both looked up as Shotgun came through the door. "What's gotten into you two? Did I miss out on the fun?" He hobbled over to the breakfast bar with a couple of bags in each hand.

Ellie got up and went to help her uncle. "What have you got here?"

"Well, I thought you've done so much with our meals, I'd help out." He started removing cartons from the plastic bags. "How about some Chinese food? I thought it sounded good."

"Tonight anything that I don't have to fix sounds great!" Together they dished up the assortment of menu items on each of their plates. She sat John's plate in front of him along with a beer and then found her seat on one of the side chairs along with her uncle in the other.

"This was really sweet of you, Uncle. I truly appreciate it."

“Yeah, thanks, this is really good. Where did you get it? I didn’t know we had a restaurant here in Jerome that serves this.” John added.

“I had that nice boy Toby bring it in from down in Cottonwood. We’ve worked hard today and I thought it would be a nice surprise for all of us.” For the next several minutes they ate in silence, each enjoying their meal and savoring some downtime. Finally pushing back his plate, John asked, “How much is left to do in the office?”

“We’re done. I need to put all those old files in the storage room and the stuff I ordered should be delivered tomorrow. I’m keeping that old desk. I kind of like it. It has character. Josie and I will rearrange the furniture and in a day or two, I’ll start building the spreadsheets for the building costs and all that stuff.”

“How’d it go working with her today? Any questions about the room?”

“Oh, yeah, she definitely wanted to know what we found. I didn’t want to, but I told her a lie. I said that we were going to board the entrance up because it was too dangerous, which actually isn’t a lie. Just as we were leaving, she volunteered to go with me into the room because you can’t.” Ellie waited for a reaction from either of the two men.

“Well, when you think of our suspect list, I think her pushing for answers puts her at the top.” Shotgun volunteered his thoughts.

John scratched his chin. “I think you just gave us a way to snake out our guy.”

“What do you mean?” Ellie asked.

“If they think we’re going to board up that room, they’ll try and get in there before we get it done. If someone is really looking for a hidden treasure here, they might change their plans and search faster and harder.”

“Oh, that’s great. You can talk to the foreman so that our guy Stan overhears and I’ve already told Jossie. What about Seth? Was he there helping you today?”

“Yes, he was actually very helpful. I’m almost ready to take him off our suspect list.” John confessed.

The look on her face confirmed the surprise she felt. “I am most impressed with you. First you tell me that you now believe in Magdalena and then you have changed your opinion about Seth. What could possibly be coming next?” She was teasing him. “You’ve grown so much since leaving the sheriff’s office and I, for one, am proud of you.” Ellie got up and moved closer to her man to place a meaningful kiss on his lips.

“I think that’s my cue to leave.” Shotgun struggled to his feet.

“Leave that, I’ll clean up after us. Thank you once again for dinner.” She moved closer and patted her uncle on the back. “That was awfully nice.”

“Bah! I’ll leave you two to do your planning.” He turned to face John, “Just let me know what to do to help.”

“Will do. Thanks again for dinner.” John waved from his place on the couch. Once the door was shut, Ellie turned to him, “Do you think he’s okay? We have

a test next Monday at the clinic down in Cottonwood, maybe we can get a few answers as to his current state of health.”

John patted the space on the couch beside himself, “Come here, I think you need a hug.” They both enjoyed the personal contact for a few moments. Ellie felt herself relaxing into his chest.

“El, I think we need to stand firm and decide what we’re going to do to find out who’s looking for any treasure.”

“What if we put a camera in that storage room entrance? We can disguise it so that they won’t see it, but it should show us anyone that is a bit too curious.”

“That’s a great idea. Can you go to Cottonwood tomorrow and get one? I’m pretty sure we won’t be able to buy it here.”

“I think we should call Carson. He’ll have that type of equipment and would be more than willing to help us out.”

“I agree.” John reached for his cell phone. When Carson didn’t answer, he shot him a text and was involved in a conversation with him. Ellie got up and cleared their plates. They both were finished with their tasks about the same time and as John struggled to get up from the sofa, he reported the results of his talk with their friend.

“He didn’t answer, so I just sent him a text. Carson says he already has someone here.” John waited for her excited reaction.

“Who is it?”

“He didn’t say and I didn’t ask.”

“Well, why in the world wouldn’t you want to know? How are we supposed to tell the good guys from the bad? It could be anyone.” She was definitely aroused. “You need to text him back and get the name of his guy. This is absurd!”

“El, he’ll let us know. He must be busy with something important. He’ll call me back, I’m sure. Let’s go to bed and in the morning we’ll figure out exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Only if you promise that we’ll have a definite plan. We’ve got to get control of this situation or all of our efforts and money will be for nothing.” She insisted.

“I totally agree, Sweetheart. It’s time for us to be the ones in charge. Rest easy, we’ll have something concrete to go on tomorrow.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as they both slowly walked to their bedroom.

Surprisingly enough the next morning, Ellie found she’d slept soundly and with waking, she was ready to face the day. Getting up gently so as to not wake John, she went to the kitchen and started frying bacon. That should stir my gentle giant, she thought to herself.

It was still very early, but the sun’s rays were starting to shine through the high windows on the living room wall. It was a good thing, but she missed the view from her home in Prescott. The front bay windows from her living room showed off the beauty of the woods. She allowed her thoughts to stray further in thinking that if they stayed here, she’d like to move

into the room above with the balcony that overlooked the Verde Valley.

John startled her when he came up from behind and wrapped his strong arms around her. “Where are you at, Pretty Lady?”

“What makes you say that?”

“I can tell when you’re into your deep thinking mode.” He pointed to the bacon.

She quickly pulled the skillet off the hot burner. “Damn!”

“I don’t think it’s burnt. I love your efforts anyway.” John kissed her. “So, what were you thinking so seriously about?”

Without hesitation, she replied. “I miss our view of the forest in Prescott. I was thinking that if we stay here, I’d like to move upstairs to that back room with the balcony.” Ellie continued her cooking task while waiting for a response from John.

He didn’t release his hold on her as he spoke. “I think that’s a great idea. I, too, miss all that greenery and the view of nothing but the forest. We’re both country people at heart aren’t we?”

“Yes, I know that I lived in Vegas, which isn’t exactly green lush trees and such, but it never felt like home. When we came back to Prescott, I finally found that I was at peace with my surroundings. So, what do you think of my idea?”

“I agree with the idea of a better home for us, but once this place is finished, we still have to make a decision about keeping it or moving on.” He left her to pour a cup of coffee and to refresh hers.

“So, it sounds like this is temporary.” She confirmed his statement.

“I think so, but we don’t have to decide right now. Speaking of that, what are your plans for work today?”

“The office furniture and computer stuff I ordered should be delivered today. So first thing, I want to rearrange the existing files and that beautiful old desk to be ready.”

“Sounds like you have a plan. Remember we’re going to spread the word that we’re going to board up that space in the storage room. I hope to get the installation finished on the base part of that old bar and then I can get the guys started on the back bar.”

“You’ll let me know if you hear from Carson. I’d really like to know who the good guy is from the bad ones. It’d make things a whole lot easier, don’t you agree?” She dished his breakfast on a plate and sat it on the breakfast bar.

John went over and sat down to eat his meal. “I do agree and I’ll let you know as soon as Carson tells me the name of his guy. Don’t worry, El, we’ll be fine. Nothing is going to happen today.”

About that time, they heard a knock on the door and Shotgun poked his head in to say good morning. “Hey, I thought I heard the smell of bacon cooking.”

“You old goat! There’s no way you could smell bacon from across the hall!” Ellie teased her uncle.

“Well, at least I hoped I smelled it and I was right.” He sat down at the plate she’d sat on the bar for him.

After they both finished their plates, the two guys got up and headed for the door. Shotgun turned and

spoke to his niece, "Thanks! That was a really great meal, kiddo."

"Get out of here you two! I'll see you later." She stated, cleaning up the remnants of their breakfast. Once done, she dressed and headed for the office. Just as she unlocked the door, Josie appeared behind her.

"Hey, good morning." Her cheery manner seemed to irritate Ellie more than please her. There's no way she could be Carson's undercover person, could she? Shaking off what she considered ridiculous thoughts, Ellie turned and greeted her worker in a more friendly way.

"Josie! You seem cheerful this morning."

"I for one, am glad that we can get this office in order today. You said the new furniture, computer, and printer are coming and I can't wait to get this all finished."

"I agree with you. It would make me feel like we're finally getting somewhere. Thanks so much for your help."

"You're so welcome, but that's what you're paying me for. I see they're getting the bar installed. Did you want me to check on the ad and see if we've had any offers?"

"That sounds like a good idea. Give me a minute, I need to go and check with John about something. Be right back." Ellie went out the office to the main lounge. She found him and signaled that he should come over to her.

Once alone, she asked, “Josie is checking the offers on that old bar. How’s it going with spreading the news?”

“I think the word is out.”

“Any more news from Carson? John, I’m finding it hard to trust my own instincts. Josie seems sincere and it’s very hard for me to believe that at her age she works undercover for Carson.”

“Just keep working through it, El. We’ll get this solved, somehow.” He placed a small kiss on her cheek and started back to supervise the crew’s efforts at installing the bar.

As she went back to the office and opened the door, Ellie saw that Josie was struggling with the old desk. “Hey, what in the world are you doing? That thing’s too heavy for one person to move!” She joined in and they both heaved and shoved until they got it in the place that Ellie had indicated.

“Isn’t that better?” She asked.

“It’s all about what you want and like, but yes, I like it here better. You can see who’s coming through that door. I just don’t like my back to the door and this is perfect.” Ellie agreed.

Just then there was a knock. They both chuckled as Ellie opened it. The delivery guy was there with several large boxes. “Please sign here.” He pushed an electronic tablet in her hands.

Soon, there were several large boxes sitting in the office area. “Where do you want to start?” Josie asked.

“You can open the computer and get it set up on the desk. I’ll start setting up the printer. There should

be a small two-drawer file cabinet in another box. Oh there it is!”

They both worked side by side, opening the various boxes and setting up the equipment. Finally, Ellie looked to her companion and spoke, “I’m ready for a break. It’s got to be close to lunchtime. Let’s quit for now and after our meal, we’ll finish this entire setup.”

“I’m ready. I have some things to do. I’ll be back in about an hour. Is that okay?” Josie offered.

“Sure, sure. I’ll see you later.” They both exited the office and once again, Ellie made sure Josie left the hotel out the back door before she went into her apartment.

John and her uncle were already there. Both were behind the breakfast bar fixing sandwiches for lunch. “Hey, we hope you’re hungry. We’ve got great club sandwiches ready.”

“I’m already beat and we still have half a day to go. How did it go for you guys?” She sat at the breakfast bar as John placed a plate filled with her sandwich and some chips.

“We finally got that beautiful old bar anchored and will now start on that back bar. That’s going to be a bear as we don’t want to take a chance of shattering that old mirror.”

“You know a small lift might help hold it up until the guys can get it nailed in place.” Shotgun offered.

“That’s a great idea.” John picked up his cell phone and started a search. He quickly dialed and was talking with someone about getting the lift delivered quickly. “They can have one here in an hour. Thanks, that should make things a little easier.”

“Hey, a thought just occurred to me. When you moved that old desk, what was the flooring like underneath? Do we need to replace it?” John poised his question to her.

“You know, I didn’t really pay attention to it except that the floor was dusty. I’ll make a point to double check and let you know tonight.” She got up, stretched and headed to the door. “I’d better get back there. See you later. Oh, and get the name of Carson’s man. I can’t stand not knowing.”

Upon entering the office, she realized that Josie had not returned and it gave her a chance to investigate the floor more closely. Stepping out into the kitchen, Ellie grabbed a broom and dashed back into the office. As she started sweeping the old vinyl floor, the broom caught on the edge of a hole. She bent down and tugged at the ragged vinyl and suddenly an entire square piece pulled loose. In order to get a closer look, Ellie sat down and pulled the vinyl up. She was shocked to see that underneath was a trap door. There was no way to pull it up but her investigation was cut short when she heard Josie’s voice from the other side of the office door.

Not wanting to share her discovery she quickly replaced the vinyl. Ellie jumped up and grabbed the closest box and sat it down on top of the flooring. Just as she accomplished that task, Josie came through the door, still chatting with someone in the kitchen.

“Oh, there you are!” Ellie hoped her voice sounded calmer than her beating heart. “I heard you coming.”

“I was just talking with one of the guys working in the kitchen. Some of them are local boys and I know

most of them. It's great to reconnect. I'm like the mom or even grandma they love to chat with, you know the cool one. What were you working on?"

"I was just going to unpack this box. You can keep on setting up the computer. This looks like it might be the printer. I think we can set it over on that cabinet for now."

"That sounds good. I am almost ready to start this baby up. Are you ready for that?" Josie sat down at the desk.

"Sure, let's get this office up and running. I'll set up this printer and you can connect. If we don't have good enough WiFi, I'll contact the local tech company and get it updated."

"Let's try it first and I can help with that if we need it." Once again Josie volunteered and surprised her.

They worked for several more hours and finally got the computer as well as the printer working just fine. Ellie stood up and stretched her back after bending over for most of the day. "I think we can call it a day. If you don't object, I'd like to ask a big favor for tomorrow."

"Sure, shoot."

"I made an appointment for my uncle down at the hospital in Cottonwood for a stress test for his heart. Could you take him? I know it's a lot to ask, but I need to get this set up here completed." She waited for Josie's reaction.

"I can do that. He and I sort of hit it off. Us old farts can relate to each other, you know." She grinned at her boss. "What time does he need to be there?"

Ellie filled her in on the details but added one final tidbit of information. "I have to warn you, he thinks he's fine and doesn't need to go. I want to prove to him one way or the other that the test will help us know for sure if he has a heart problem that needs attention or not."

"I'll be here to pick him up and don't you worry. We'll get along just fine." Josie assured her.

"Great. Now go and I'll do a few things here. I'll see you in the morning when you pick Shotgun up for his appointment, okay?"

Ellie heaved a big sigh when she was finally left alone in the office. Throughout the second half of the day, her mind was solely on the trap door she found under the space where her old desk had stood. She went over and locked the door to ensure privacy and went to the spot on the floor. She pushed the debris from the printer box out of the way and lifted the piece of vinyl.

With a clear view of the trap door, Ellie ran her hands across the old worn wood searching for a way to lift it up. Finally, she felt a small loop of metal in the end closest to her but the ring to lift it was missing. Stopping to think for a minute, she realized she needed to find some sort of hook to pull open the latch on the trap door.

Concentrating so hard, Ellie didn't hear the door open until two booted feet came into her view. Scrunching her face up at being caught in the act, she looked up to see John staring down with a quizzical look on his face. "You were going to tell me about this trap door before you went exploring, weren't you?"

## Fourteen

She feigned innocence. “Why, Mr. Clarke, why in the world would you ask such a thing?” Ellie stood up to face him and saw the glimmer of humor shining in his eyes. She punched him playfully on the arm. The lack of noises from outside the office indicated that the crew had quit for the day. Just as well, she thought, we don’t need anyone knowing about the latest secret space.

“I have a really great feeling about this. Let’s find something to get that trap door open.” She started looking around the office for anything that would work. John pulled a pair of channel lock pliers out of his back pocket and held them up for her to see. “Perfect!”

Before she could kneel down, John pulled her into a warm embrace. “That’s what I love about you most, your enthusiasm!”

“I thought it was my good looks all along.” They shared a quick kiss. Ellie grabbed the tool and bent down to see if it would fit on the ring on top of the door. “This will work, but this seems very heavy. Can you help me at all? Don’t hurt your foot.”

John grabbed the desk chair and that allowed him to get closer. He could grab the pliers and with a great effort, together they finally succeeded in getting the

door open. "Ugh! It smells very stale down there." Ellie waved her hand and turned her face away from the opening.

"Can you get on your stomach and stick your head down there?"

Without hesitation and completely agreeing with John, Ellie was already laying on her tummy. She edged herself further into the open space until her head was almost completely in.

"Wait, let me get hold of your ankles, there's no sense you falling in head first." She felt his strong grip on her ankles and a sense of trust and comfort washed over her being.

"Can you see anything at all?"

"John, I see our flashlights shining off to the left! This is the entrance we've been looking for!" She scooted back and turned up to stare at his face. "You know what we need to do!"

"El, I can't help you. I really don't want you to go down there by yourself." He shook his head. "There's no one that can help us because we're not sure who to trust!"

She sat up and grabbed her phone out of her back pocket. "Carson, this is Ellie Parker and we need you now!" She put the cell on the floor next to her and John.

"He's got to call back after that message." Ellie was positive that their friend would react instantly to her cry for help. Time seemed the only thing moving in the small office area as they waited not so patiently.

John got up and headed to the door. "I'm going to find an extension ladder."

“Wait a minute! How did you get in here? I locked that door.”

He grinned as he held up a massive ring full of keys. “There’s no place I can’t get into! I have the power!”

She laughed at his statement. “I am really liking this side of you. Leaving the sheriff’s office may have been a very good decision for your stress level. If you’re not careful, you may keep me in stitches with your renewed sense of humor.”

“Very funny. I’ll be right back.”

“I can help you. It might be too difficult using that cane and trying to carry a ladder.”

“I can handle it. This ankle is not throbbing as bad anymore. I’ll be right back.” John leaned his cane next to the door as he went out.

She stayed right where she was with her legs dangling in the hole, trying to send mental vibes to Carson to return her call. In no time at all, John came back inside the office but without anything in his hands. “I thought you were going to get us that ladder. How else can we get down there?” Suddenly she realized the look on his face was one of disgust and anger.

A voice from behind John answered her question. “I’ve got the ladder!” It was Toby. “You and I will get down there just fine.” He used the end of the ladder to knock John down and then let it fall to the floor beside the wounded man.

When Ellie went to rush to his side, Toby produced a gun and pointed it right at John. “Take one more step and I’ll make sure he doesn’t ever get up!”

“Are you okay?” She spoke to the injured man.

“The only thing wounded is my pride. He was waiting in the lounge for me; he heard everything we talked about. I was totally taken by surprise. I would’ve never suspected you of being a treasure hunter!” John slowly struggled to sit up; he wanted to be able to move if the opportunity presented itself.

“Ah, I see you two have been doing some investigating. I hope you’ve finally found it.” He waved the gun at both of them. “Stop moving both of you! I’m very good with this.” Toby waved the gun about. “I won’t hesitate using it.”

John kept talking. “We haven’t found any treasure, that’s all rumors. Small towns can create a lot of gossip that just isn’t true.”

As he kept Toby occupied, Ellie stealthily reached for her phone. Just as she put her hand on it to drag it underneath her leg, it rang. She didn’t get to see who it was before he marched over and stomped on it. It was broken beyond repair.

“Damn you! That could have been my uncle. He’s not well and might need me. You know that!” She cursed the man. Toby grabbed her by the hair and spun her around to stop John from his immediate reaction of trying to rescue her. John sat back down, struggling with his injuries. “Don’t even try!”

Using her hair to bring Ellie to a standing position, he pulled her towards John. Before getting close enough though, he grabbed a roll of the packing tape from the corner of her desk. “Use this and wrap him up. Do it right or he’ll pay.”

Taking the heavy duty packing tape, Ellie looked at John as she wrapped his hands behind his back. "I'm so sorry."

"No talking! Just wrap it all the way around him now." He ordered. In just a few minutes he was trussed up leaving little room for escape.

"You do know that I'll get free eventually and when I do, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." John threatened.

The evil laughter that came from Toby sent chills down her spine. He was very unstable, she thought miserably. How are we going to get out of this one?

"Now, big man, your girlfriend and I are going down there to gather the treasure. I trust you'll not do anything stupid as I'll have this on her at all times."

"You don't need her. You can go down and search by yourself."

"Nice try, but as you well know she's my insurance for a free and clear path out of here." Toby then put the gun in Ellie's back and shoved her over to the hole. "Grab that ladder and put it down in that opening. Don't try any tricks, I've got your man covered and he'll get shot first."

She struggled with the heavy aluminum ladder but finally got it down in the hole. "Make sure it's steady. We don't know what's down there and I wouldn't want you to fall and break a leg or two." He ordered.

She shook it until she felt it was on more solid ground. "What now?" He handed her a lantern. "Turn it on and start down the steps. Don't ever forget that I've got this on you at all times. Wait a minute!" Toby grabbed one of the cleaning cloths she and Josie had

been using and went over to John. He stuffed the rag in his mouth and wrapped more tape around to secure it.

“You’re a bastard! You didn’t have to do that!” She showed her disgust with his actions toward John.

“Oh, how sweet, you’re so concerned for him. You two deserve each other. Now get moving.” He was right at the top step as he watched her slowly descend into the dark space. The illumination from her lantern started to create spooky shadows in the room below. She brushed her hand to knock some cobwebs down and shivered at the thought of running into the occupant.

“Keep moving. I don’t have all day.” He bent down to try and see where they were going.

The further down the ladder she moved, the more Ellie realized that their surroundings must be some sort of a storage area. She could see several wooden crates and some barrels. Perhaps this was just a food storage area, she mused in her mind. She finally reached the bottom step and when Ellie put her feet on the surface, she realized it was a dirt floor. When she went to move away, Toby poked the gun in her back again. “Don’t even think of it!”

“I can’t believe you. You were so nice to us. What in the world do you hope to gain?” Ellie turned and faced him.

“I had you guys completely fooled!” He laughed with satisfaction. “I am going to be rich, lady! Rich! Do you understand that? I’ll never lack for anything ever again.”

“You’ll never get away with it.” She stated with a calmness she wasn’t feeling.

“That’s what your type always says, but there’s one thing you don’t know. I have insurance.” He waved the gun in the direction of the light from the flashlights they’d dropped earlier.

Stepping very carefully on the uneven ground, Ellie moved slowly towards that spot. “What kind of insurance?” She finally asked, dreading the answer. She moved her hand up to rub her nose as the damp, musty air of the space was disturbing her sinuses. Toby quickly responded with another poke of the gun in her back. “Don’t try anything.”

Just then a familiar voice came from the trap door above. “Hey, Buddy, you down there?”

“Yeah, we’ve just started exploring. Come on down.” Toby responded.

“Is that Stan?” She asked with surprise.

“Sure is and we’re going to be rich together. Surprised, aren’t you?”

“Not really.” She pretended indifference.

His laughter grated on her nerves. This was a twist to their situation she hadn’t expected and it didn’t bode well for her and John. She could hear Stan’s footsteps on the ladder and they both turned to see him come down to the dirt floor.

“Hey! I like what you did to the wonderful ex-sheriff! Nice job!” They laughed together and it was all she could do to remain calm and appear unaffected by their cruelty. “What have you found?”

“Nothing, we just got down here.”

“Well it was all worth it for me. I gave our friend up there an extra kick as I went by.” His grin sent chills down her spine.

“You are a son-of-a-bitch! When this is all over, you will pay, I promise you with every breath in my body! You may even end up like your brother Chuck!” Ellie spoke slowly and deliberately to the evil man standing in front of her.

“Ah, I see you’ve done your homework. I’m not surprised you found out. You may be a lot of things that my brother and I despised, but Chuck did say you were a good detective. Lady, after today, you’ll never lay eyes on me again. Once I avenge my brother’s death, I’m gone!” He spat out the words and came menacingly close.

“Let her alone. We need to find that treasure and get out of here!”

Stan swung around and pointed his finger at Toby. “Don’t you forget who’s in charge here! I’m the one that allowed you in on my plans!”

For a moment they both stood there facing each other. Ellie was sure it was going to come to a physical confrontation, but suddenly there was another voice coming down the ladder.

“Hey, boys, did you forget to let me in on the plan?” Josie’s words came out sweet and teasing but it effectively put a stop to the standoff.

Ellie was too stunned to respond to Josie’s entrance. The two men looked at each other and very quickly the situation turned back to their conflict. “Why did you invite her?” Stan growled at the other man.

“I didn’t, I thought you included her.”

“Guys, I have a small confession to make. I knew what you were planning and I didn’t want to be left out. I want a share of the treasure. You think I want to keep working at my age?” Josie produced a gun and pointed it at them.

Ellie felt her own heart beating so hard in her chest that she felt she would faint. Josie had to have walked past John and yet she had done nothing to save him. I’m on my own, she thought with dread in her heart. Pain surged through her body at the thought of John being trussed, kicked and God only knows what Josie did as she went past him.

The standoff among the three people in the dank, musty basement seemed to go on for much longer than it actually did, but finally Stan seemed to relax first. “Fine, old woman, you can get a part, but we have to find it first, so let’s get busy.”

“I’ll check these crates over here.” Toby volunteered.

“You watch her, while I check over here.” Stan ordered Josie as he went in the opposite direction. “Don’t underestimate that one, she can be tricky.”

“Oh, I got her number. Don’t you worry.” With those words Josie poked her gun into Ellie’s side and prompted her to move closer to some barrels near the wall that divided their space from the next room and they stood there watching as the other men started investigating the crates.

“I can’t believe you’re involved in this plot. I trusted you!” Ellie pleaded.

“Shut up! I don’t need to hear your nagging voice.”

Ellie's mind was reeling. How do I get out of this situation alive? How do I help John? She refused to let herself think that John was not going to be okay.

About then, she heard Stan shout. "Hey, look at this! I think there's something in this crate." Toby ran over to him and together they ripped at the boards on the top of the wooden box. Josie even moved a little closer out of Ellie's reach.

Just as she decided she should make her move, Ellie's eyes caught a sight in front of her on the wall. It stopped her in her tracks. Directly ahead implanted in the wall just under the trap door entrance, she saw the missing lock boxes she knew must exist. The squirrel holes were embedded into the old stucco, all six of them. This is what the message on the easel chart meant, six equals the key! The treasure has to be in those six boxes. She knew she had to prevent those three from finding the boxes. Stan already knew about them and he would probably be smart enough to connect the boxes with the treasure they were seeking to find.

The dampness of the room continued to work on her sinuses as she sneezed. Josie spun around to make sure she was not moving, and satisfied that she was standing still, turned back to the men and their activity. Ellie knew she had to get out of here before they decided she was no longer needed. Her heart was pounding so hard and her palms were sweating, but not knowing what state John was in as well as her uncle, drove her to speak up. "You guys are wasting your time! John told you before, that it's just gossip. There is no treasure here, just old crates and dusty junk."

Stan turned in her direction and raised an object out of the crate. "What do you call this then?" He held up a rotten cotton sack, it appeared heavy. "I bet there's gold in this bag."

Toby reached for it but Stan pulled it away before he could lay a hand on it. "Mine! You find your own."

Ellie's laughter was heard throughout the darkened space. It stopped the two men in their tracks. "You'd better shut up!" Stan shouted at her. "Don't you see? She's trying to stir us up against each other." Stan tried to convince Toby.

"You all know there's no honor amongst thieves! Better watch out, you two, that Stan is a greedy person!" Her voice echoed in the dark.

She didn't anticipate how fast Stan could move as he came across and shoved her down. Ellie felt blood running down her arm. She'd skinned her elbows trying to keep from falling completely down on her butt. "Shut up!" He screamed at her and smacked her across the face. "If you value your life, I won't hear another word out of you."

"That wasn't necessary." Josie spoke quietly. "I had this on her. You didn't need to do that."

Stan turned to her. "Old lady, your presence here is only because I'm amused. Don't push it!"

Toby took advantage of the confusion to unwrap the item in the cloth bag. His voice showed excitement. "Look! It has to be solid gold!"

"It's a stupid candlestick, you idiot!" Stan stormed back and grabbed the item out of his hands. "This isn't the treasure. There has to be gold!"

“You guys are too much! That’s obviously a crate of decorative items. Magdalena used only the very best items to embellish her rooms in the brothel. I keep telling you there is no treasure!” Ellie spoke though her nose was bleeding and used the tail of her tee shirt to try and stop the flow.

“Keep on talking and you’ll be in the same shape as your man!” Stan threatened. “Toby, open another one of those crates. There has to be something of value in them.”

Josie spoke to Ellie, “You better shut your mouth. He’s not going to take much more sass from you.”

“You should talk. They don’t need you and you’re just as expendable as I am.” Ellie taunted back. They both watched as the two men went from crate to crate. All they found was old décor items and by the end of their search, Stan’s frustration level was at its peak.

He slammed his fist on the top of one of the old wooden barrels. “Where the hell is it?”

“We’ve opened all of those crates, all that’s left is these barrels.” Toby stated the obvious.

“Well then get busy. You start over there and I’ll open these. There’s got to be a hammer or an axe or something down here.” They both started scouring the area and soon she heard Toby shout. “Hey! I found a metal bar you know something like a crow-bar.”

“Give it to me!” Stan ordered.

“Get your own! I found it and I’m going to use it.” The battle between them was back on again.

Ellie forced a loud chuckle. “You two are just like little boys on the playground fighting to be king of the monkey bars!”

“Don’t aggravate them.” Josie whispered, “You’re already treading on thin ice!” She grabbed her by the arm. “Ellie, you’ve got to play it smarter. They’re dead serious and if they don’t find something of value, you’ll be the one to pay!”

“As if you care!” Ellie spat back, “I’ve got to get out of here and see to John!”

“You two need to shut up! You sound like a bunch of cackling old hens. I’m going to come over there and show you who the king is!” Stan threatened. “Old woman, you better get her under control!”

“Woohoo!” Toby’s cheer resounded through the damp, darkened basement. He’d been working to get one of the old wooden barrels opened while they were all arguing. “I think I’ve found something!”

Stan rushed over and together they worked to get the top opened completely. Not particularly caring about breakage or damage, they both reached in and started pulling canvas bags out. Toby pulled the drawstring open on one and reached in to retrieve the contents. “Look! It’s jewels!”

Stan grabbed the bag from Toby’s hands and quickly turned to empty it on the top of the crate next to them. He grabbed the closest flashlight and used it to illuminate the gems. “I think you’ve found it! There are rubies, emeralds, and look, a diamond or two!”

Ellie felt Josie move forward to see for herself. In a split second, she used her full body to knock the other woman off her feet. Scrambling on the ground, Ellie

reached for the gun that had fallen onto the poorly lit floor. The two men were oblivious to the struggle between the women on the other end of the room. They were too busy pulling more of the dirty cloth bags out of the barrel.

Every part of her body hurt, but Ellie was determined to come out the victor over the fight for the gun. She finally used her elbow and smacked Josie right in the face. When she groaned, Ellie took advantage of her pain and found the weapon. Finally pointing the gun in the other woman's face, she ordered, "Stop right there or I swear to God, I'll shoot!"

"Ellie, I'm on your side. Carson sent me!" Josie managed to whisper.

## Fifteen

Ellie was stunned but only for a second. “How can I believe you?”

“Seriously! Who else knows about your relationship with Carson?”

“Why would he send you?”

“You mean why would he send an old woman?” Josie managed a weak laugh. “What can I say, he trusts me.”

Now it was Ellie’s turn to be shocked. She was suddenly aware that the guys had become alert to the two women and their scuffle. She had to make a split second decision. Relying on her instinct, Ellie pushed the gun back to Josie. “You’d better not be lying to me. I promise you’ll regret it with every bone in your body!”

“I believe you. I’ve never seen such fighting spirit. We’ll get out of this okay, just have faith in me.” Josie stood up and waved the gun in her face. In a much louder voice, she ordered, “Get up or I’ll shoot you where you lay.”

Slowly and deliberately Ellie got to her feet. When she turned toward the two men coming across the room, her face showed the confusion and anxiety she was feeling. Stan was right in front of her with a

smirk on his face. "You think you're so good! This old woman got the best of you!"

To Josie, he said, "Good job. Now keep her in line and we'll open the rest of those barrels."

When he walked out of their vicinity, Ellie kept her face focused on Stan but to Josie she spoke very softly. "How was John when you came past him? I mean, is he okay?"

"After I received Carson's call, I talked with your uncle before I even came down. He came and took care of John. Shotgun called the police and if we can just stall for some more time, they should be able to figure a way out of this mess."

"How? There's only one way down and they'll shoot anyone before they could get down here to help us." Her voice broke as she stated the facts.

"Hey! You two need to come over and start loading up that stuff. Use anything you can find to get those jewels out of here." Stan's loud voice interrupted their conversation.

Ellie didn't hesitate to reply. "If you think I'm going to help you steal from John and I, you're as nutty as I think you are!"

"Hey, old woman, get her in line. Use those cotton bags and load that stuff up so we can get the hell out of here." He ordered Josie.

Josie put her gun in Ellie's back and nudged her toward that first barrel they'd opened. "Make it look good." She coaxed her.

Ellie put on a good front. She stumbled, dragged her feet and just generally moved very slowly over to the barrel with the jewels. Finally both women were

there and Josie reached down to grab one of the old cotton sacks and threw it at her. "Fill this with as many of those gems as you can." She ordered loudly.

Ellie started to load some of the jewels but stopped suddenly. "These aren't real."

"What do you mean?" Josie asked with surprise in her voice.

"I'm no jeweler, but anyone with a brain can see that these are just costume jewelry. They're probably fakes worn by Magdalena's girls. Check it out."

Josie reached down and grabbed a handful for herself. "Oh, my God! You're right! Those idiots think they've found the treasure." She had to stifle a laugh so as to not alarm the guys across the room. "Load up those bags."

"What? They're not real and besides, Magdalena's not going to like her things being stolen."

"Yeah, but those guys don't know that. If they think they have a king's ransom in gems, they'll be eager to get out of here. Whoa, wait a minute! You've seen her? I thought she was only another myth about this place."

"Yes I've seen her, so has John. She's probably watching this whole situation right now. I expect she'll be helping us soon."

"You really believe that, don't you?" Josie was astounded.

"You bet I do. She's the reason John and I are alive today. She showed me the bomb before it went off so I could get everyone out of the building the first time we had to be here at The Depot. She's the reason I

agreed to go in with John and buy this place. It needs to be rebuilt. I truly believe it's what she wants."

"We'd better get as many bags loaded as we can. Stan doesn't seem to be a very patient man. As soon as they try to leave, maybe the guys will have figured out how to capture them up there." Josie said.

"Oh, I see, maybe John and Shotgun are upstairs waiting for them to show their heads. I'm just worried about what they have planned for me." Ellie confirmed her own fears.

They both quickly started loading as many of the bags as they could. In the meantime, the men were expressing their disgust at finding nothing but more décor items in the other barrels. Soon, Stan came stomping over to them. "We gotta to get out of here before your uncle comes looking for you. Toby!"

"What!?" His reaction once again showed his displeasure at Stan's power play.

"Get over here. There's nothing more. We've got enough to make us both rich." Stan waited for the other man to respond.

As he walked up, Toby looked from Ellie to Josie and then to Stan. "What about them? You know I agreed to come along for the treasure, I didn't agree to hurting two women."

"I knew you were soft. I just needed you for an extra pair of eyes." He suddenly pointed his gun and fired a shot, wounding Toby. "I don't need any of you!" When he went to aim his gun at Ellie, Josie spoke up.

"I'm afraid you're wrong there. You need her to get out of here. Think about it, Stan. John wouldn't do

anything that would allow Ellie to get hurt.” She tried to reason with him.

He then turned his gun on the older woman. “Maybe you’re right. I need her but I don’t need an old woman slowing me down.”

“You’re not very smart, are you?” Ellie’s words taunted the already agitated man.

“Lady, I’ve had just about enough out of you! Shut the hell up or I swear I’ll shoot you just for fun!”

“I guess you do need me. I can keep her quiet.” Josie suggested.

Both women held their breath until he figured out what to do. Out of the corner of her eye, Ellie suddenly saw the familiar green light indicating Magdalena was near. She stifled a smile as the spirit’s presence gave her a sense of comfort.

“Fine! You can help carry some of this stuff.”

“Let me help him first.” Josie pushed. “He’s bleeding badly.”

Toby was unconscious on the floor and she could see blood quickly staining his shirt. He was wounded on the right side, so she quickly reasoned that the bullet hadn’t hit his heart. Maybe it was just a flesh wound, perhaps he was still alive and she could do something to stop the flow. When Stan didn’t immediately reply, she moved closer to Toby. Ellie quickly found some of the canvas bags and handed them to her.

Working as fast as she could, Josie stuffed the bags inside his shirt and applied pressure to the area. She reasoned that Stan’s patience was not going to last and she wanted to do what she could to save the

man's life. "That's good enough. Now, let's figure out how to get out of here."

"We aren't going up the ladder?" Ellie asked.

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you? I bet John is ready to hit anyone that sticks their head up out of that hole or maybe your uncle has an old shotgun ready to blast my head off, huh?"

"Well good luck finding another way out. John and I've looked and found nothing but that trap door!" She used her words to keep Stan off balance. "You know they're going to figure out that you did this. You're not going to get away with it!"

"If you say that one more time..." He stopped in mid sentence.

Both women looked in the direction Stan was staring. Magdalena was standing just to their left in her full glory.

"I'll be damned! She is real." Josie was the first to react.

"What the hell is that?" Stan finally found his voice.

"That's the real owner of this brothel and she's mad as hell. You're trying to steal her fortune."

"I don't believe you." Stan was backing up slowly away from the apparition.

Ellie laughed out loud, "You don't believe your own eyes?"

"This has got to be some sort of trick you set up. Ghosts don't exist."

As he kept backing up, Ellie realized there was somebody in the shadows just behind Stan. She kept her features stoic as she suddenly realized it was

John. He was moving sluggishly and definitely favoring his left foot.

“You’d better give it up! Magdalena isn’t going to give up her treasure easily.” Ellie tried to keep him distracted as John moved even closer.

Josie finally became aware of what was happening and joined in with Ellie. “I’d listen to her if I were you.”

“Well you’re not, old woman! I’m tired of the both of you!” He aimed his gun in their direction but just then, John jumped out of the shadows and threw his body at Stan. The gun flew in the air and both men ended up wrestling on the dirt floor. Anger fueled John’s movements and in short order he had Stan knocked out on the floor beside him.

Ellie flew across the room, grabbed the gun and helped John sit up. He was dirty and his foot was hurting, and as she hugged him to her, Ellie could feel him flinch. “Are you alright?”

“I will be in a minute.” With that, John reached over and punched Stan right in the ribs with all his might. “I’m not the sheriff anymore, punk!” He turned back to her and grinned, “I’m better now.”

Once he was up on his feet, John hobbled over to the opening and yelled, “It’s alright. Come on down and get these two!”

Soon the room seemed too small as it was filled with policemen and emergency personnel. They found a crate and both of them sat down next to each other. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m good. How about you?” He tenderly touched the bruise forming on her cheek where Stan had slapped her.

Josie came up to them. “You know you two have a way of getting into a lot of dangerous stuff. Carson told me about that case you worked last year.”

“Josie, I have you to thank for keeping this lady safe. You put yourself in harm’s way but I find it hard to believe that you were the one Carson put in place to keep an eye on things.”

“Me, too. I mean I’m trying to be politically correct here, but aren’t you a little old to be playing detective?” Ellie added.

“Who do you think taught Carson all he knows? I’m his mother!” She laughed as she saw the stunned looks of the two people sitting in front of her. Finally John and Ellie looked at each other and joined in with the laughter.

“I’ll be damned!” He finally spoke. “So it runs in the family.”

“It seems that great investigators are also running in your family. You two make a great team and I know that Carson’s been trying to get you to work with him.” She held up her hand to stop John’s protest. “I know you have to think about it. I just wanted to say it’s been a pleasure working with you and I hope you’re not too upset that we decided to keep my identity hidden. Carson and I both felt it was best for me to just appear as part of the regular crew.”

Ellie spoke up first. “Well, I have to admit I’m a little miffed. I really don’t see that you being here

needed to be kept a secret. I, for one, prefer to know who's on my side and who isn't."

John didn't respond immediately, but instead put his arm around Ellie. "I know that each decision in a case has to be weighed heavily. A good detective has to determine how it will impact the investigation. I, like Ellie, would have preferred to know. But with that said, I guess if it all turned out good, then I'm fine with the way Carson and you handled it."

Just then one of the policemen came up and addressed the group. "We need each of you to give a statement. Who wants to start?"

"I'll go, if that's okay with you two?" Josie volunteered.

"I'm good with that." Ellie said and John agreed. Ellie was grateful that Josie instinctively knew they needed some time alone.

When the other woman moved to another place in the damp, but now well-lit basement room, she turned to John. "I have a question for you? How in the hell did you get down here?"

Before answering, he motioned to someone standing just to their right. "Come on over."

Ellie was completely surprised when Seth stepped closer to them. She had only been concerned with John and hadn't noticed the younger man. "Seth! How did he help?" She said to John.

"He stayed after the rest of the crew left. He'd overheard Toby and Stan talking about their plan. Pull up a crate. Why don't you fill her in on the rest?" His voice was becoming ragged and his breathing seemed labored. His physical movements to get down

into the lower room to help her were beginning to take their toll from the injuries he'd sustained at the hands of Stan. He held his hands around his middle.

"Your ribs are hurting, aren't they?" Ellie asked. "What about your foot?"

"Yeah, Stan gave me a pretty good kick." He grinned and added, "I paid him back though. Sweetie, I'll be fine. I've had a lot worse injuries when I was the sheriff. I was just so worried about you."

"Just like I was sick with not knowing what condition you were in upstairs." She placed a soft kiss on his lips. Both of them just leaned into each other as John indicated to Seth that he should take over telling their story.

"I started becoming suspicious of those two when I kept seeing them in deep conversation. Each time I got close, they clammed up and hard as I tried, I couldn't get them to open up to me. Yesterday, I was just coming down the hall from the kitchen and they were the only two people standing at the new bar. I backed up and heard them planning how to get down into the basement." He stopped for a minute to gather his thoughts.

"How did they know about this room?" Ellie asked.

"That's my fault. Remember we were going to let everyone know that we were going to seal off that panel in the storage room? Well, it seems that Stan did some investigating on his own." John admitted. "I guess my plan worked." He grinned weakly.

Seth picked the tale up again, "He's not really a stupid person, just a greedy one. He put two and two together and figured out that John's injury came from

that hole in the floor. He told Toby that he crawled over to it and after shining his flashlight down could see all these barrels and crates. He was convinced that the treasure was in these old containers.”

One of the emergency personnel came over at that time and stopped the conversation. “The Chief wants me to see if you two need some medical help. He said that he knows you two are tough but he still wants us to have a look at your injuries.”

Ellie and John exchanged glances and both looked over to the Police Chief and waved. “He’s, of course, referring to the blast we survived last year. We’ll be ready in a moment. Thanks.” John reassured the EMT.

“After the crew left, I drove down the block and walked back. It’s really very easy to get into this place right now, so I just hid out behind the old bar until I heard voices.”

Chills ran up and down Ellie’s arms. This whole situation could have turned so much more damaging to them. She placed another kiss on John’s shoulder. He reacted with a squeeze of his arms about her.

“That’s when I heard their plan. They were going to use you, Ellie, to go through that hole in the floor. Stan told Toby that he was to stall John and keep him occupied at any cost. The whole thing went better for them when you two discovered the trap door. Toby took advantage of that opportunity by following John as he retrieved the ladder.”

“It could have been so much worse, couldn’t it have?” Ellie spoke what she felt that both of them had been thinking.

“Yes, we were lucky that Seth and Josie were on the spot.” He turned to their newfound friend. “I think we owe you an apology. We were definitely suspicious of you before and when you showed up out of the blue asking for a job here again, well...”

“I don’t blame you. I knew something wasn’t quite right with Bill or Rose but I didn’t do anything. I’m just glad you two came out of this alright.”

“So what happened above while Josie and I were trying to survive down here?”

John spoke up then, “Josie came and saw the shape I was in and immediately ran to get Shotgun. Once he was there, they called the police. While your uncle took care of me, she slipped down the ladder to help you.”

“What a brave lady!” Ellie remarked.

“Yeah I would definitely agree. If I’d known that she was going to do that, I would have stopped her. We could have figured another way to get down to you.” John said.

“One thing you still haven’t answered is how you got down here.” Ellie pressed for more details.

Before he could answer, the police chief came towards them. “John, Ellie, Seth.” He acknowledged each person sitting there.

“Chief, sorry we’ve had to meet like this again.” John started to stick his hand out to shake the other man’s but pain caused him to grimace and stop the effort. Ellie stuck her hand out instead. “Nice to see you.”

“You know you should have let the EMTs look at you. Last time we were in a basement with you and your lady it was a gunshot, wasn’t it?”

They all joined in the light laughter. “We’ve really got to stop all of this, don’t we?” John spoke. “What can we do for you?”

“We’re finishing up here, but we need to talk with the three of you. I realize that you’re tired and injured so I’m willing to let you two to come into the station tomorrow. Does that work for you?”

“Sure, that’s very generous of you. We appreciate it. Do you want to talk with Seth now?”

“I’m ready.” Seth replied as the police chief shook his head in the affirmative.

By now the room had been cleared of people leaving only John, Ellie and a police photographer. That person was shooting pictures of the entire basement area but finally turned to face them. “I’m just about done.”

“We’ll follow you out.” John stated to the man. To Ellie, he softly whispered, “Now you can see how I got down here. You’re going to be really upset that you had to climb through a hole and down a ladder.” He chuckled lightly.

They sat there in silence just holding on to one another. John’s breathing had calmed though he was still taking easy shallow breaths. Ellie knew they should get upstairs and have the emergency personnel check out his wounded ribs.

They watched patiently as the photographer finished up his task. He turned to them, “I’m ready to leave when you are.”

It took a great deal of strength for John to stand but with Ellie's help they started toward the back of the room. The lighting had been diminished as all of the personnel had taken their flashlights and lanterns with them. John stumbled a bit over the rough uneven floor. "John, can you make it?"

"Sure, I just have to take it slow." To the photographer, he spoke, "You go on ahead. We'll be just a minute." The man nodded and found the old staircase just ahead.

Ellie watched with intense curiosity. "Don't tell me that there's a stairway from above."

"Okay, I won't!" John chuckled. "Before you ask, the entrance is in the same storage room at the end. Seth knew of that particular secret panel. He said they used to store extra booze down here. The space was so poorly lit they stopped using it before some employee could break a leg or something worse."

"Oh, my God! John, I forgot to tell you with all the excitement. I found the six missing squirrel holes!"

With that bit of exciting news, John stood a little straighter. "Are you kidding me?"

"I was as surprised as you are. They're just over there under the trap door hole." Ellie pointed in the direction of the ladder and beyond. "I saw them just as Josie was moving away from me. That was before I knew she was on our side and I was about to make my move."

"They didn't see them?"

"No, if they would have, I'm sure Stan would've gone for them first. He knew the story behind the boxes."

“So, do you have the keys on you?” John started to move closer to the wall.

“As a matter of fact, I do. I honestly didn’t know where to put them to keep them safe, so I just stuffed them in my pocket.” She reached and pulled out the keys along with the watch fob. “But John, we’ve got to get you upstairs to get checked out. This can wait.”

His laughter rang out in the room. “You’re so special. I love you. I’ll be fine. We’ve suffered through enough trouble and I, for one, definitely need to see what’s in those boxes.” He took the keys she offered, but stopped and turned to face her. “You need to do this. You’re the one that has believed all along. Besides, I think Magdalena likes you best.”

John reached up and swiped at the cobwebs. “Which key fits which box?”

As Ellie studied the boxes, she reached down and took a key to try in the first one. She grinned as it did the trick. As she opened it, John held the flashlight up so they could see what was inside. With a confused look on her face, Ellie reached in and pulled out the contents. She handed the poker chips to John as she turned the strap of bills over and over in her hand.

“How can this be? I expected something from Magdalena, not from Bill. This means that he or she knew about these boxes and whatever was in there originally is now gone.”

“Not necessarily. You’re the one that believes; maybe she took this stuff from Bill and put it here in her special place.”

Ellie laughed at his suggestion. “Okay, let’s look in the other ones.”

One by one they found the right key and took out the contents. "Keep track of which box held which stuff." Ellie said.

"Why?"

"I just feel like we're intruding. This was her private location and I'm just thinking that we'll put some of this stuff back." She looked at his expression and saw it soften as she spoke her thoughts aloud.

"Wait, I'll get us a board to put this stuff on so we can see what we have here." Ellie walked over to a small crate and lugged it back. "Are you sure you don't want to go upstairs and get looked at? I can still hear people up there. I'm sure Shotgun and Josie are wondering what we're up to." John pulled his phone from his back pocket and quickly punched Shotgun's number. "Hey, no, no, we're fine. We're just doing some clean up down here. No, we don't need any help. We'll be up in a few. Thanks."

"They're curious, huh?" She spoke and John nodded in agreement.

"Let's gather these things and haul everything up there in the good light. It's all people we trust, so I think Magdalena's possessions will be protected." They looked around for something to carry the objects in and quickly found a few of those canvas sacks. "Separate each group as they came out of the boxes." John spoke in reference to Ellie's earlier comments.

"You are such a good man, John Clarke. No wonder why I love you so much." She pressed her lips to his.

It took small deliberate steps, but finally they made it to the top of the old staircase into the storage

room. They were greeted by Josie, Shotgun, and a few remaining police officers. As they all went into the kitchen, the emergency technician came forward to greet them. "Could you both just have a seat? We'd really like to see what medical treatment you need."

With a look at each other, Ellie and John handed their precious cargo over to Josie and Shotgun. It seemed they understood the importance so they both just held the bags tightly to their bodies. What felt like hours was only just a few minutes when the paramedics deemed that Ellie was just bruised and battered but with no serious injuries. John, on the other hand, needed his ankle wrapped and secured with a brace to keep it stable. The recommendation was to go to Cottonwood and get x-rays, but John reassured them he would do so tomorrow.

As things were being finished, John spoke to one of the officers. "Tell the chief we'll be in first thing in the morning. I really just need some rest right now."

When the room was cleared, John instructed Josie to lock the back door. "I know that we need to get this place secured and that's going to be my first priority. For now let's go into our apartment."

"Where's Seth?" Ellie asked.

"The chief took him to the station, but I expect he'll be back soon. You guys going to share your secret?" Shotgun asked and indicated to the bags.

"You bet! Come on." Ellie started down the short hall with John by her side. Josie helped her get drinks and snacks before they all were seated around the coffee table.

Shotgun had put the dirty, cotton bags there. "Ready?" Ellie asked.

"Come on, let's see what was in those boxes." John replied.

"First, I'd like to know the story." Josie asked.

Ellie filled her in on the six extra keys as she placed the bags in what she thought was the right order. As she finished her story, she told them, "John and I feel kind of like intruders. Those lock boxes were her special collection and I'm not sure we're going to keep anything we found." Ellie waited for their reaction.

Shotgun spoke first, "I can see how you might feel that way and I tend to agree. One thing you have to remember is that Magdalena seemed to be directing you to find her treasure and maybe, just maybe, she wants you to keep it." He sat back and winked at his niece.

"I've thought of that too. Let's see what is all in here."

Ellie opened the first bag and dumped out the chips and cash. "I recognize that!" Shotgun said. To Josie, he explained that those were the stolen poker chips from the old Stardust Casino in Las Vegas and that's the crime John and Ellie solved last year.

When she tried to dump out the contents of the second bag, they were all shocked. Ellie had to help the item come out by pulling gently on it. A crumpled document, that had been folded several times finally rested on the coffee table surface. "I'm afraid I'll tear it, but we need to see what this is." Carefully she

opened the yellowed piece of paper. “Oh, my, this is the original deed to The Desperation Depot.”

They all leaned in and even though it was extremely faded, they were all able to see her signature at the bottom. The date was not entirely legible, but Ellie was convinced it was legitimate. “I don’t think this is worth any money but think of the historic value!”

“Again, I don’t understand her need for placing this in a locked box.” John shook his head.

“Let’s see what else we have.” Ellie reached for the third bag and felt that it was very heavy. She opened it and poured out several smaller dirty bags. John reached over and picked up one and hefted it in his palm. “I’ll bet this is gold.”

Sure enough, when they pulled the drawstring on each of the smaller bags, Ellie and John could see that they held gold nuggets, flakes, and even some gold dust. “That’s what I’d heard about this house. They took most anything of value in payment for services rendered. This would have been part of her cut from the girls.”

“This is like opening presents at Christmas.” Ellie commented.

In the fourth bag, they found a beautiful necklace and a ladies ring. Shotgun recognized the ring. “Where’s that picture we found?” Ellie got up and retrieved it from the book on the stand.

“You are so right, Uncle. Look, it’s on her hand.” She handed the picture to him. They each took a turn admiring the beautiful precious jewelry.

John watched as a certain look passed over Ellie's features. "You're going to want to put those back, aren't you?"

"I think so. This belongs to her and no one else should wear it."

She reached for the fifth bag and handed it to John. "You get the honors." He smiled tenderly and took the bag from her hand. Carefully, John pulled the drawstring open and reached in to pull out a pocket watch. "Oh, I bet it goes with the watch fob." Ellie pulled the fob from her pocket and handed it to him.

He opened the snap on the end of the leather piece and placed the miner's fob in its place. It fit perfectly and they all knew that it belonged to that watch. John pushed the top of the watch and opened it to look at the face of it. On the lid was engraved the words 'To The Love of My Life' along with her name below.

"This watch was given to a special man, wasn't it?" Ellie asked.

John held the watch affectionately in his big hand. "I wonder who he was and what happened to them?"

"Remember I told you that she was shot?" Josie spoke up. "I'll bet my last bottom dollar that if he'd been there, she wouldn't have died in the street with no one helping her."

To break the somber mood in the room, Shotgun prompted, "Let's see what's in the last bag."

Feeling the bag, Ellie stated, "It's paper again. There's no weight to it." She reached in and pulled out a pack of worn pages. They, too, had been folded and with great care, Ellie opened the papers and

placed them on the flat surface of their coffee table. "It's stock certificates! Look, this is three shares of Coca Cola stock bought in 1919. Oh, my God, I wonder if they're real. I wonder how much they're worth now."

"That's some research for another day. Right now, I'm glad that the treasure hunt is over and we can get back to the business of opening this hotel." John stated simply.

"Do you think we're really done with trouble?"

"El, the police chief is aware of the things that have been going on around here. I fully intend to have this place completely burglar proof tomorrow and we need to get on with the business of rebuilding The Desperation Depot."

"What about all of this stuff?" Shotgun asked.

"That's going to be Ellie and Josie's task. We can get a safe for the office and you can store this stuff in there until we figure out what to do with it all. Now, can we please get on with things? I want to get married in the fall to you, Miss Ellie Parker and I won't allow anything to stop that from happening."



## Epilogue

*Six months later*

“Can you believe we did it?” Ellie and John were standing across the street from their completed hotel and saloon. The Desperation Depot was now finished and tomorrow they would be married in a ceremony in the lobby.

“Are you ready?” John took her by the hand.

“I’m glad we decided to have this private party tonight with just our friends. It’ll be fun sharing the details about Magdalena’s treasures that we found.”

“How do you think Shotgun’s going to take the news? Do you think we should have talked to him in private first?”

“I think he’ll be fine. He’ll be with Josie and us and it’s all good news anyway.” She stepped with John off the curb and headed across to The Desperation Depot. Ellie looked with pride at the front of the newly remodeled building. John’s plans did the grand lady justice with all the improvements. People were ready for the grand re-opening and the day after their wedding, they’d open the doors for business.

“She looks great, doesn’t she?” Ellie asked. “You did a great job.”

He squeezed her hand. “We did a great job and look, we’re still together just about to get married.”

Ellie smiled up at him. "I do believe I'm ready to be your wife, Mister Clarke."

At the front door, there was a sign posted announcing the opening date for the public. Several people were strolling by as the sun started setting and the tourist traffic was slowing down for the evening. John put his key in the front door and opened it. They stepped into the anteroom and she waited while he locked up the exterior doors. Just as they pushed through the swinging bar doors, their family and friends started to cheer.

It was a wonderful chaotic scene of hugs, handshakes, and kisses. The room had been decorated with paper wedding bells and streamers. Each of the high top tables had been set with lit candles, confetti and flowers. The new bar was laden with gifts. Someone came and pushed a glass of champagne in each of their hands. Ellie felt a tug at her sleeve and turned to see her uncle grinning from ear to ear. She turned into him as he grasped her into a big hug.

"Congratulations, Girl! I love you."

Tears filled her eyes and she placed a loving kiss on his weathered cheek. "We had just planned on having a few drinks and appetizers. Did you do all of this?"

He shook his head but she could see that he was a bit choked up and didn't speak. Josie came and gave a big hug to the both of them. "I helped him. We all felt that you two needed a wedding shower."

Soon the band started playing softly in the background and a few of their friends began dancing. The music helped calm the frenzy and Ellie found herself

looking for John. She saw him talking with Carson and went over to them. "Carson, you too?"

"You two are very much loved and this is just a way for all of us to show it." He returned her hug. "Ready to eat? They won't start until you two do." He indicated the long table loaded with all kinds of dishes. As John and Ellie started to fill their plates, others followed.

"Hey, buddy! It's about time you joined the club." Tuck slapped John on the back. John sat his plate down and the two men shared a man-hug. "It's so good to see you. Where's Aubrie? Did you bring little Dillon?"

About then Aubrie came up and the two women hugged and exchanged greetings. "We left Dillon with Phil and Betsy. She's not doing well enough to join in on this, but we'll take lots of pictures and share when we get home."

"Aubrie, you know you two can stay in one of the beautiful rooms you helped decorate."

"Oh, we wish we could, but I think we'll go home and relieve our baby-sitters. They will come to the wedding tomorrow and we've hired a young girl to come with us. If you don't mind, she'll keep Dillon upstairs during the wedding."

"Of course we don't mind. We want to see everyone tomorrow." All four of them found a table to sit down at and soon they were enjoying the food and the company.

Aubrie finally asked the question that was on everyone's mind. "So, did you finish your research? What

have you found out about those stock certificates, the gold, and well, all of Magdalena's treasures?"

Ellie looked to John before answering her friend. "We're going to tell all when we're done eating. I know that our friends and family are very curious."

The band had stopped playing while everyone was eating. The room was filled with laughter and conversation. Ellie looked around and smiled with emotion. It was a small gathering that had started out just as a type of rehearsal dinner and now looked like a wedding shower. The love in her heart for John as well as these people overwhelmed her and she caught a few tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Sweetie?" She heard John's soft words. "Are you okay?"

"I'm more than okay. I have the man I love and am going to marry tomorrow and all of my closest friends here around me. I'm very happy." She leaned over and kissed him.

Several cheers went up from around the room as people observed their display of affection. She pushed back her plate and asked John, "Ready?"

"Lead on. I'm right behind you." They went to the bandstand and Ellie tapped on the microphone. As soon as they had the group's attention, she started to speak.

"What a surprise! Thank you all for coming. We wanted to share a private moment with you all, as that wedding list has grown to include the whole town, I think." A roar of laughter responded to her comments.

“We know that you’re all curious about the latest information on our treasure find. I would like to thank you for being patient as the research on those items has been intensive and taken a long time.”

John added, “Just an update on Toby and Stan. Those two will be tried in a few months and I expect Stan will be put away for quite a while. Toby healed from his gunshot wound and is singing like a bird. He’s showing regret at his actions and I think that’ll help him get a lighter sentence.”

“Okay, now for the good stuff. It really starts with the stock certificates. I’ve found out that they’re legitimate and they belong to Magdalena’s only living relative. Before I say anything more on that, I just want you to know that those three shares of stock are now worth over \$1.4 million dollars!”

They reacted like she thought they would with a whoop and several whistles. She looked to her uncle who was sitting there next to Josie holding hands. “With all the splits and things that stocks do, one share has become 9,216 today. I don’t completely understand all the stock market stuff, but I do know that someone is going to be very happy.”

“Who is it?” A voice in the group hollered. “Did you find them?”

“I didn’t have to look very far.” With that she got down from the bandstand, went over to her bag and pulled out the certificates. As she came closer to her uncle, Ellie watched his eyes and saw a look of utter surprise. “Uncle, I never knew that you and my father were adopted.”

“I was told but back then records are sealed on such things, and to be honest, the Parkers were my parents in every sense of the word. I was from a generation that just accepted things. They were great to me and your father and we never questioned or lacked for anything else. So, Girl, what are you saying?”

“Uncle, you are the last surviving descendant of our wonderful spirit, Magdalena.” She waited for his reaction and was pleasantly surprised. “I’m so glad that we got the doctors on top of your heart problems and now you’ll be here long enough to enjoy it all.

“I’ll be damned!” He took the stock papers she’d placed on the table in front of him.

To include the room, she spoke a bit louder, “Magdalena came from Mexico and brought her eight year old son with her to Jerome. She quickly sent him back east to a boarding school in Boston. No records exist that tell how she got the money she had, but with it Magdalena bought three lots on Main Street. When she was killed, her son came and made sure she had a proper burial. He married a local girl and they had a daughter in 1933. When that girl was barely seventeen, she had twin boys, back in the day, they would have said ‘out of wedlock’ and those babies were promptly put up for adoption. The Parkers grabbed at the opportunity to have two baby boys to raise and you were taken to a small town north of Las Vegas.” She stopped to take control of her emotions as she saw that Shotgun was taken aback at the amount of information.

He cleared his throat in order to speak. "Yes, I grew up in a little rural town called Ely along with your father. As soon as we grew old enough, though, the bright lights of Las Vegas called to us and we both moved to a small, two-bedroom apartment and found work. I can't believe you found all of this information and I find it extremely difficult to believe that I'm related to our resident Madam."

"Well, believe it Uncle, and these are yours. You know, I felt there was a connection between Magdalena and us all along."

"Everything we found in the boxes is yours too." John came to stand by her.

Josie reached over and patted his hand. She swiped at some tears in her own eyes to keep them at bay. "Wow! This is something to find out, huh?"

"What in the world am I going to do with all this?"

John turned to face the room and located Seth and a pretty girl sitting next to him. "There's more. Ellie and I are taking a long cruise for our honeymoon. Seth, you along with Shotgun and Josie will be in charge of The Depot while we're gone."

"Oh, man, you're not going to be happy until you have the whole room crying." Seth's voice broke as he spoke.

"Well, we might as well give it all to them. Carson, when we get back, I am going to work with you on the occasional case." She grabbed John by the arm. "This man will help, I'm sure, because he knows that I can't control my natural curiosity when he's not around." Again they all laughed.

“We want to thank you all for coming and sharing this special moment for us. Please enjoy the food and drink. Thank you so much for the wonderful gifts. We’ll see you all tomorrow afternoon for the wedding.”

John took Ellie’s hand and together they walked onto the dance floor. The band had gathered again and as they listened to the words of the song that Seth’s friend Monté was singing they were inspired to dance. She sang, “When two hearts meet its faithful and true, when two hearts meet, it’s everlasting.”

Finally the evening ended and as they said goodbye to their last guest, Ellie and John locked the doors and headed to their apartment. She kissed her uncle on the cheek. “I love you.”

He replied in kind and they both went into their respective apartments. When she walked down the short hall to the bedroom, she saw John standing by the bed.

“What is it?”

“I think your long lost relative is at it again.” John pointed to the pocket watch along with the necklace and ring lying on the nightstand.

Ellie just laughed. “I guess she wants us to wear this at our wedding tomorrow.” When she saw the confused look on his face, she added. “John, this was locked in the safe in the office and we’re the only ones that have the combination. I think it’s her wedding gift to us.”

He took her in a warm embrace and placed a steamy kiss on her lips. “I love you.”

The End

“I always love to hear from my readers. Please add your name to my mailing list and I will update you monthly with a bulletin. I will also include notices of upcoming books and free giveaways.”

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## 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!

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