

Love is a
Dam Mystery

Copyright © 2017 B. B. Montgomery
A High Pines Press Publication
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America

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

* * * * *

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

* * * * *

Formatting and cover design by Debora Lewis
arenapublishing.com

Cover photo courtesy of Shutterstock

* * * * *

ISBN-13: 978-1977898890
ISBN-10: 1977898890

Love is a Dam Mystery

B. B. MONTGOMERY

Many of us have our fondest childhood memories. Visiting my Aunt Alta in Jackson, Ohio, was one of mine. The house is real, Aunt Alta was real, and Tuck is certainly real. The story is in my heart and my imagination.

Thanks to my editors, Steve and Tenita for all of your hard work in keeping me in line.

*Thank you to my love, Bob,
for giving me more memories.*

Prologue

“What do you mean you quit your job?” Sarah questioned Aubrie loudly.

“Shhhh.” Aubrie tried to quiet her nearest and best friend.

“What in the world is wrong with you? What are you going to do?” Sarah spoke in a quieter voice but was still obviously agitated.

Aubrie avoided her friend’s eyes as she answered. “I am going to move. My Aunt Alta passed away and left me the opportunity of a life time. I’m moving to Prescott, Arizona.”

Once again Sarah’s voice raised beyond the standard allowed in the library. “You’re moving to Arizona! Exactly when is this going to happen?”

Aubrie gently took her friend by the arm and guided her through the front door and outside. As soon as they were out in the brisk, fresh air, Aubrie attempted to explain.

“Sarah, my Aunt Alta died six months ago and the lawyers finally got everything settled. She left me 500 acres, a lake, and her house outside of Prescott.” She continued, “Please try to understand. Dad’s been gone over two years now and other than my friendship with you, there is really no reason to stay here in

Tonopah any longer.” She reflected wistfully at the activity in her small town.

“When will you be leaving?” Sarah asked more calmly now.

“Tomorrow.” She raised her hand to stop her friend’s protest. “I deliberately didn’t tell you until now because I was afraid you would talk me out of my decision.”

“Aubrie Anne Anderson, have you lost your mind? This town is the only home you’ve ever known! What in the world are you going to do in Prescott?” Sarah tried to reason with her best friend.

“This is precisely why I didn’t tell you until now. I was born here, my mother died here when I was just a toddler, I took care of dad all those years, and I have worked in this library since high school. Sarah, I need some adventure. I need something new in my life. I didn’t want to give you a chance to talk me out of this. Please try to understand.” She pleaded with her friend.

“Oh, Aubrie, I do understand. I have Dave and my kids and I have always known that you wanted more than the lot you have been given in life.” She looked at her friend with tears forming in her eyes. “I’m just being selfish. I don’t want you to leave. I’ll miss you terribly.”

Aubrie grabbed her dear friend and held her tightly. The two ladies hugged each other for a few minutes. “I will miss our time together.” She spoke between snuffles. “This is a huge step for me and I really need you to understand. I need your blessing.” Her voice broke and the erratic emotions caused her normally low tone to become shrill.

“Oh, Aubrie, you know I want only the best for you.” Sarah answered quickly. “Yes, of course, you have my blessing. But, I have a million questions.” She checked her watch and reluctantly assured her friend. “I have to go and pick up Jeremy from the sitter. Can you come over for dinner?”

Aubrie started to shake her head, but seeing the distress in her friend’s eyes, quickly changed her answer. “Sure, but only for a little while. I have so much to do before the morning.”

“See you at 6:00!” Sarah stated and hugged her friend once more before dashing across the small parking lot to her car.

Aubrie slowly went back into the small town library. She had just a few more hours before saying goodbye to her life in Nevada. She went over to the desk and finished packing up her box of personal belongings.

All too soon, it was time to close the doors and Aubrie quickly completed her duties one last time. She was to leave the keys in the book depository outside. A tear formed in the corner of her eye as she dropped the key in the box, but she was determined to leave with no regrets. As she got into her SUV, her cell phone started to ring.

“Hello.” She stated without looking at the number on the screen.

“Miss Anderson?” A male voice inquired. “Miss Aubrie Anderson?”

“Yes, this is her speaking.” She tried in vain to recognize the mature voice on the other end.

“This is Phil... Phil Flood. I’m the caretaker on your aunt’s property in Prescott.” He waited for it to

register in her mind before continuing. "I'm afraid we have a bit of a situation. I had to make a decision regarding the lake." He seemed quite concerned.

"What's wrong with the lake? What decision are you talking about?" She responded in her quiet, library voice.

"Well, it seems the authorities from the state determined that there was a gate valve at the bottom of the dam that needed repaired." He seemed in no hurry to continue, so Aubrie prompted him.

"And, what exactly is the situation?"

"We had to drain the lake and have repairs made on the dam." He seemed a bit reluctant to continue. "I have been making decisions for the property since your aunt died and I guess I just didn't realize that the final transfer papers had gone through. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, Mr. Flood. I realize that things have been a bit difficult for you and Mrs. Flood. I thank you for taking such good care of the place for my aunt as well as in the interim." She appreciated his dedication.

"Please call me Phil." His voice reflected distress. "The draining of the lake wasn't really that bad. It's what they found that's the problem."

"I'm not sure I understand. What exactly are you trying to tell me?" She once again prompted him to complete his thoughts.

"There was a car at the bottom of the lake by the dam." His voice was gruff. "Miss Anderson, there was a skeleton in the car!"

One

The nearly nine-hour trip from Tonopah to Prescott gave Aubrie plenty of time to think. After receiving the phone call from the caretaker, she knew she needed to drive straight through and get to the house as soon as possible. She recalled her friend's reaction at dinner last night when she told her about the latest developments in her recent inheritance. It brought a smile to her face when she remembered Sarah's shocked expression upon hearing about the car and the skeleton in the now drained lake.

Sarah had been full of questions about Aubrie's aunt, the house, the lake, and her intentions of opening a bed and breakfast. Aubrie patiently explained that although she had not visited her aunt for over fifteen years, they kept in touch via the internet. Aunt Alta had been her dad's oldest sister. She was childless, had never married, and had no one else to leave her property to but Aubrie. The inheritance included the two-story house, the lake and 500 acres in the heart of the Prescott National Forest. Another reason that prompted Aubrie to try her hand at running a bed and breakfast was the fact that her favorite aunt had left a sizeable amount of cash, stocks, and bonds. She didn't share that bit of information, though. She felt that

some things were very private and was reluctant to share even that with her best friend. She did tell Sarah that her dad's house had sold and would provide some monetary relief until she could get her new venture up and running.

The evening light was fading fast as Aubrie slowly drove her SUV over the dirt road leading to her new life. She had pulled up the map directions on her phone, but struggled to follow them and keep her eyes on the rough track at the same time. The road wound and curved through the forest past several cabins and structures. She finally reached the cross-road and smiled as recognition dawned on her. She maneuvered in a sharp left turn onto the path that would take her past the lake and ultimately to her new home. Aubrie realized that despite a fifteen years absence, she felt a sense of coming home settle around her tired frame.

Reassuring herself, she proceeded slowly over the bumpy road avoiding the rocks and holes. The sun was almost down now and a beautiful sunset sparkled over the mountains and the tall pine trees. She came upon the now dry lake bed but it was too dark to see the car at the bottom of the dam. She made a mental note to check out the car and the dry lake in the morning.

As she turned the next bend in the road, she saw the drive that lead to her new life, to the adventure she suddenly craved. She turned her vehicle and headed toward the dim light in the short distance. Aubrie was grateful that the February weather was void of snow. It was briskly cold and the wind blew

softly outside her vehicle. As she pulled up to the front of her aunt's house, she noticed the smoke curling from the chimney.

She smiled as she climbed wearily from her vehicle. Aubrie reached in, grabbed her overnight case, her purse, her jacket, and headed up the steps to the front porch. She pushed open the front door and called out, "Mr. Flood, are you here?" Her voice resounded in the large spaces of the front room. She went over to the pot belly stove that emitted warmth and as she sat her things down on the sofa, put her hands out to warm them.

"Mr. Flood?" She tried once again to determine if the caretaker was in the house. It was obvious he had taken the time and consideration to prepare for her arrival.

She jumped at the sound of a man's voice. "You must be Aubrie." She turned around and caught her breath as she took in the tall, grinning man standing in the doorway to the dining room. He was wearing an apron and had oven mitts on his hands. His grin reached his eyes and she found herself mesmerized by their color. Were they green? Were they blue? Or maybe they were a tawny brown.

"I'm sorry if I startled you." He was moving from the doorway and coming closer as he took the oven mitts from his hands. "I'm Tuck." He stuck out his hand to shake hers.

Aubrie shook herself and tried to regain her usual calm, collected demeanor. "I... I thought you were Mr. Flood." She stammered as she tentatively put her hand in his. Big mistake, she thought as she suddenly

became aware of his grasp. His big hand was rough, calloused but that wasn't what shook her. His touch felt warm, inviting, comforting and yet, like an electrical charge was passing between them. She quickly took her hand from his and nervously went back to the stove as if to warm her hands again. "What are you doing here? Who are you?" She finally turned and faced him as she asked her questions.

"I'm sorry, I thought Phil told you about me." He came to stand beside the stove. "With Betsy's health failing, Phil has had trouble keeping up with the house and all. He hired me to help you with the improvements on the house." He could see by her reaction that everything he was telling her was new information. "Maybe it would be better if we sat down and had some dinner. I'm sure you're tired and hopefully hungry. I have a beef stew on the stove and I can put the biscuits in and we can eat in just about ten minutes." He waited for her to respond.

"That sounds great. I'll just take my stuff up to my room and wash up unless you need some help." She offered.

"You go ahead up to your room. Phil said you would stay in the rose room. I have logs in the fireplace ready to light so you can stay toasty all night. See you in a few minutes." He headed back through the dining room and into the kitchen.

As she watched his backside disappear through the doorway, Aubrie shook herself out of her temporary stupor. She grabbed her things and headed up the stairs. Upon reaching the landing at the top, she turned to the left and went into the room she had

always stayed in when visiting Aunt Alta. It was if stepping into the past as she looked about the room. From the same familiar bed with the chenille spread and the iron headboard, to the rose patterned wallpaper and the lamps glowing softly in the night, nothing had changed. She dropped her things onto the chaise lounge and lovingly rubbed her hand over the worn, rose-patterned material.

She and Auntie had many a great conversations while sitting in this room. She sat down and for a few minutes let herself remember one of those favorite talks. Auntie never lectured but gave her tips and hints on life on a regular basis. She fondly remembered, at the tender age of twelve, Auntie told her to always make her bed. "If you don't do anything else, at least make the bed and your husband will think you've been busy all day." The twinkle in her eye held a young girl's interest. To this day, Aubrie never left her bedroom without first making the bed.

Aubrie was anxious to wash up a bit and decided that now was the perfect time to check out one of the improvements she and Aunt Alta had emailed about. She realized that Tuck would be waiting and quickly went to the bathroom out in the hallway. The old sewing room had been turned into a bathroom and she approved the nice, clean arrangements of the new facility. However, when she turned the faucet, nothing happened. Again, another memory crowded its way into her mind. The house was very old and, when she first came to visit, there had been no indoor plumbing. The necessary trips to the outhouse out back were a fun thing for a young girl. Auntie had finally

gotten a water line and a faucet hooked up to the back porch by the kitchen. Until then, all water was brought to the house from the spring well out back in buckets.

“I wonder why this doesn’t work. No time now to find out.” She shut the faucet off and went to her room. As she looked around, she found the familiar pink ceramic water pitcher and bowl located on a stand near the window. She poured some water in the bowl and used the wash cloth to freshen her face.

Aubrie looked into the mirror above the stand and noticed how disheveled her natural red hair looked. The usual tight pony tail had straggles framing her pretty face. Aubrie wore no make-up, never had, and for a moment wondered what Tuck thought of that. “Who cares what he thinks!” She put down the wash cloth and smoothed back her hair and headed downstairs before she could think about it again.

“There you are.” He was just putting the food on the table. Her stomach growled in hunger and she hoped he didn’t hear.

“Ah, I can tell you’re hungry.” He didn’t seem to notice her embarrassment as he held out the chair across from his. “I hope you don’t mind eating in the kitchen. That dining room table seems far too big for just the two of us.” He sat himself on the other side and reached for the pot of beef stew. He put his hand out for her bowl.

They ate in silence for what seemed an eternity. She was a lot hungrier than she had realized and soon had finished two biscuits and a huge bowl of the tantalizing stew. “That was great! Thank you so much. I

can clean up, if you want. I appreciate you opening up the house for me.” She struggled to keep things normal. “You must be ready to get on home. It is getting late.”

For a minute, he seemed at a loss for words, but soon regained his power of speech. “Aubrie, there are a few things we need to talk about. It appears that Phil has neglected to keep you updated on the situation around here.”

“Oh, I’m aware of the car and the skeleton in the lake. That’s why I got here as fast as I could.”

“That’s not the only thing we need to discuss.” He stalled before continuing. “I’m staying in the house. I’m in the room at the back of the hallway. Phil thought it would be more convenient so I can work on the house. You might have noticed there is no water in the bathroom. There are tons of repairs that need to be done with this old place.”

She quickly rose from her chair and started clearing the dishes from the small table. Her hands shook as she tried to appear normal and she prayed her nervousness wasn’t showing.

“I’ve upset you.” He stated rather matter-of-factly.

She could see this was a man to be reckoned with, a man that wasn’t going to let things go, and a man that spoke his mind. Well, Aubrie, she reminded herself, you wanted some adventure and here it is. She almost laughed out loud with that thought. Slowly she set the dishes down and turned around to finally face him.

“I’m not upset, more like caught off guard. I agree we need to talk. However, I am extremely tired from

my drive and I think the best plan of action would be to wait until the morning when our heads are clear and rested." She wanted to regain control of the situation. Without waiting for him to agree, she went to the front door and started out on the porch.

"Wait, let me help you get your things." He followed quickly in her steps as he anticipated her intentions.

"That won't be necessary. I'm just going to get my small bag. The rest can wait until morning."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Again his abruptness startled her.

"Mister... I don't even know your last name." She stood her ground and addressed him in the porch light. "What is your name anyway?"

"I told you my name is Tuck." He watched the emotions play across her face. "My full name is Thaddeus Tucker Thompson." As he saw her reaction and the attempt to hide her smile, he continued, "Now, you see why I go by simply, Tuck. I was born in Kentucky and while attending school in Moores Hill, Indiana, my school mates gave me the nickname Tuck. I like it much better."

"Well, Tuck, you are not here to take care of me. I've been coming to this house for a long time and I'm quite capable of doing things for myself." She went down the steps to her SUV, opened the back door, and reached in to take her smallest suitcase out of the car. As soon as she had it in her hand and turned around, she bumped into him.

Without a word, he took the suitcase from her grasp and headed back up the stairs and into the

house. She pushed the button on her car alarm and followed him inside. He took the stairs in a hurry and quickly put the suitcase into her room. He walked over to the fireplace and lit the logs so the room would be warm for the night. When he turned to leave, Tuck nearly bumped into Aubrie. He reached out and grabbed her arms to keep her from falling.

She felt that same electrical charge as his hands burned through the long sleeves on her shirt. She avoided looking up into his eyes. I've got to get away from him, she thought desperately. I'm tired and over-reacting, that's all this is. She tried to convince herself. "I'm fine. Thank you for your help." She pulled back and stood by the open door. "I'll see you in the morning." She dismissed him.

Those green eyes smiled at her. He knew what she was doing and for a moment was tempted to challenge her. But, he agreed with her. She was tired and needed some rest. She needed time to assimilate the little bit of information he had given her, as there was so much more for her to deal with in the morning. He walked slowly to the door and crossed ever so closely to her as he walked out of the room. He smelled the soft fragrance of her perfume. "See you in the morning, Aubrie."

As she shut the door, Aubrie let out her breath. She wasn't even aware that she had been holding it. The car and the skeleton in the lake weren't the only dangerous things in her new world. Thaddeus Tucker Thompson you are going to be a challenge for me, she thought seriously, maybe even more than the car and skeleton in the lake.

Aubrie placed her suitcase on the bed and pulled out her sweat pants and a top that matched. She shrugged out of her jeans and blouse and proceeded to get into more comfortable clothes. She shut the suitcase and placed it on the lounge chair. For just a few moments, Aubrie sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to relax. What am I going to do with a man living in the same house? What am I going to do with a car and skeleton in the lake? What am I going to do with a house that has no indoor plumbing?

Thinking of that reminded Aubrie that she should take care of her trip to the facilities before trying to sleep. She slipped on her shoes and silently crept out her bedroom door. The house appeared quiet with no lights on other than in her bedroom. She listened for any sound from the room at the back of the hallway before moving down the steps. Auntie had always kept a flashlight by the back kitchen door for those night trips to the outhouse. The stairs creaked a bit and each time she stopped for a few minutes. She didn't want to alert Tuck about her intentions. She'd had enough of his wanting to help. Since her mom had died, she was the one to take care of the house, her dad, and herself. She hadn't needed anyone and liked it just that way.

She reached the kitchen in the darkness. Nothing had changed since she was here fifteen years ago. The furniture was still the same, even in the same place, as when her aunt was alive. She went to the hook where the flashlight was kept, but didn't find anything there. "Great, now what am I going to do?"

“Are you looking for this?” His voice startled her as he held up the flashlight.

She screamed. “What are you doing? You nearly scared me out of six years growth!” She flipped the kitchen light switch on and glared at the grinning man.

“What are you doing sneaking around in here?” He threw the question right back to her.

“If you must know, I need to visit the facilities. I wasn’t aware that I needed to inform you of my intentions.” She snapped back at him. He loved the flash of blue in her sapphire eyes.

“I knew you would need to do that. I put a chamber pot in your room. I presume you used to use those when you stayed with your aunt.” He had the most annoying habit of answering her questions without appearing upset or insulted.

“I never liked using those things. Auntie always helped me get to the outhouse no matter what time of the night I needed to go.” Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment. Talking about such a private function of life with a complete stranger was taking its toll on her usual calm demeanor.

“Then I’ll help you.” He opened the back door and motioned for her to follow him outside. The night air was suddenly brisk and she felt the cold even through her sweat shirt. She shivered but bravely stepped outside with him.

They walked side by side, without touching down the path and followed the short route to the bathroom. As they approached, an automatic outside light turned on and made their trek a bit easier.

“Oh, that’s new.” She exclaimed, grateful that she didn’t have to stand so close to him to walk by the light of the flashlight. “Look at the place. You’ve been busy. It looks like a doll house.” She was used to the gray, weather-worn building and this freshly painted building was a beautiful sight to see.

“I’m glad you approve. I figured that would help as long as we have to use this bathroom, at least until I get the water lines installed. I’ll wait out here for you.” He was the perfect gentleman and she couldn’t help but grin at his gesture.

Aubrie went into the room and quickly did her business. The room was far from the rustic wooden seat and rough wood side walls that she remembered from her childhood. It had been completely remodeled and looked just like a modern-day bathroom with pictures and a real commode. She didn’t dwell on the updates but performed her duty and went back outside. The sooner I get back to my room away from him, the better, she thought.

“Ready?” He questioned her. He turned his flashlight back on and they headed back down the path to the house.

Shortly before they reached the back porch, Aubrie screamed. “What is that?” She pointed to the eyes glowing from a tall pine close to the pathway. She turned and pressed into his arms and held on. Tuck pulled a gun out of the back of his jeans and aimed directly for those eerie eyes. He held onto Aubrie with his left hand and slowly moved her toward the back porch steps. As they approached closer to the porch,

the motion sensor kicked on the back lights and flooded the area with light.

She felt the rumble of laughter in his chest and slowly looked up into his eyes. "Look, Aubrie, it's a family of raccoons." He still held onto her tightly. He tucked the gun back into his jeans and pointed up into the tree.

Reluctantly she lifted her head and peered in the direction he indicated. As soon as she saw the raccoons, she started to let go. "Oh, how cute. How many are there?"

Tuck kept his hold on her as he answered. "I think there's a large one, perhaps the momma, and it looks like two or three babies." She felt good in his arms. He wondered if she realized that they were still embracing.

Suddenly the atmosphere changed as Aubrie grasped the notion that they were still in a rather intimate hug. She tried to step out of his hold, but as she looked up, Tuck was staring down at her. Just exactly when the moment changed, she wasn't sure, but she knew without any uncertainty that Tuck was going to kiss her.

Oh, this shouldn't be happening, she thought to herself, but was totally helpless to stop it. As his lips touched hers, the pressure was at first testing, teasing, and as light as a feather. She had been kissed before, but this one indicated that those were kisses from boys. This was a kiss from a man, an experienced and thrilling man.

She tasted like sunshine and all that was good in the world. He didn't deserve her kisses. He shouldn't

be taking this liberty, he thought, as he deepened their contact. He wanted more of her. He wanted to taste all of her.

Suddenly, she wrenched away with a look of horror. Without saying a word, she leapt up onto the porch and ran into the house. She had to get away from him, away from this intimate contact with a man she didn't even know. What was wrong with her?

Two

Behind the closed door of her bedroom, Aubrie finally took a deep breath. She went to the mirror and looked at her reflection. Who is this person? I wanted adventure, something exciting in my life, but a man wasn't even on the list. I wanted a new location, new challenges, a new occupation, but a man? She kept repeating the information in her mind but found no answers to her problems.

She heard his footsteps on the stairs and a sudden panic took hold of her. Please, please don't let him stop at her door. She held her breath as she heard him reach the landing at the top of the stairs. She could picture him stopping there and contemplating his next move. So far, he had shown that he approaches life's situations head on and doesn't hesitate to say what's on his mind. But for this time only, please let him go to his room. Please let him just let it go for now.

Shortly after, she heard his footsteps heading down the hallway to his room. Aubrie breathed a heavy sigh and started to relax. She waited for a few minutes and then finally got up from her bed and started to dress for the night. She took her hair from its usual tight pony tail and found a nightgown in her

small case. Suddenly feeling the exhaustion that had been there all along, she shut off the light and found her way between the freshly washed sheets of the bed. She was sure that she would never be able to fall asleep, but soon fell into a deep slumber that helped erase all the events of the day.

Tuck hesitated at the top of the stairs. He wanted to knock on her door and explain. Explain what? He didn't know. He had reacted solely on instinct. He wanted to kiss her and he did. What was wrong with that? He could think of a million reasons why he shouldn't have done that. But Tuck was a man that usually did what he wanted to when he wanted to do it. He took a deep sigh and decided that now was not the time and place. They were going to see a lot of each other and he needed to remember his true purpose for being here.

Aubrie stretched and rolled over in the bed as the morning sun came streaming through the windows. She smiled and for a moment reveled in the dawning of a new day in her new life. The fireplace had long since gone out and she felt a slight chill in the air as she put her feet on the floor. She quickly hurried over to the wash basin and poured in a little water to refresh her face.

"I have a lot to do today." She announced to the world and to no one in particular. She dressed in a fresh pair of jeans and another sweat shirt before opening the door to her bedroom. The smell of bacon cooking immediately aroused her taste buds. Oh, is there no end to this man!

As she walked slowly down the old, oak staircase, Aubrie ran her hand over the smooth banister railing. The dark, ebony patina had developed over the years and emphasized the beauty of her new home. She paused for a reflective moment. She couldn't remember exactly how old this house was, but she was sure it had been built in the early 1900s. A house such as this would last forever, she thought fondly. There was character in this place. She would work hard to restore it to the full glory it deserved.

She tentatively approached the kitchen door. Taking a deep breath, she poked her head in and saw him once again with his cooking apron on standing in front of the stove. Last night she hadn't paid much attention to her surroundings. Suddenly she started to as she stared at her aunt's stove.

"Are you cooking on a wood-burning stove?" She exclaimed. "Did my aunt not update anything in this house?" She was shocked that the house was very much the same as it was fifteen years ago at her last visit and very much the same for the last eighty years or more.

"Well, good morning, sunshine!" He addressed her but kept turning the strips of bacon in the skillet. "I hope you have an appetite. I invited Phil to join us as I was sure you would want to discuss the current conditions of your estate and lay out a plan of action."

Even though he was spot on, she was a bit put out by his assumption. "I don't normally eat a heavy breakfast." She put her laptop down on the small kitchen table and went to the coffee pot to pour a hot cup of the steaming liquid.

At the sound of her testy reply, Tuck finally turned and faced Aubrie. "Aubrie, I would like to apologize for upsetting you last night." He waited for her to respond.

"You shouldn't have kissed me." She replied sullenly without looking back at him.

"I'm not sorry for kissing you," He replied quietly. "I said I was sorry for upsetting you."

Once again in a very short time, she was astounded by his blunt and honest reply. "Tuck, we have to work together and that kiss, that intimacy, cannot happen between us again." Even though she was not convinced, she somehow had to persuade him that theirs was strictly going to be a professional relationship. "I intend to get this house and the lake ready for opening in early spring as a bed and breakfast destination. I can see that there is so much to do and I need your help. Phil obviously trusts your abilities. There is so much to do." She repeated again needlessly.

"The house will be ready providing the weather holds. I made a list of the things that have to be addressed first. I am confident you will want to go over that." He ignored her statement about their kiss. Tuck turned back to the bacon.

"If you want, you can set the table for three. Phil should be here any minute."

Aubrie went to the cupboard and took out the necessary dishes to set the table for breakfast. She removed her laptop to the sideboard. She sat down at a spot and just watched this mystery man as he continued cooking their breakfast. Shortly there was a

knock at the back door and without waiting for someone to answer, Phil walked in.

He was an elderly man, walking with a definite stoop to his back. You could tell he had worked hard for all his years as his hands were gnarled and his face was chiseled with lines. She had never met him, but had heard many wonderful things about Phil and his wife, Betsy from her aunt. Aubrie felt like she already knew him. She rose and went to meet him.

“Hello, I’m Aubrie.”

“My, my.” He looked at her in surprise. “You are the spitting image of your aunt. I saw pictures of her when she was younger and you look just like her.” He patted her on the arm and turned to address Tuck.

“You look real cute in that apron there, Tuck.” He teased the other man. “I’m sure that Alta had a prettier one with flowers on it.” He reached for the coffee pot and helped himself to a cup of the hot brew. He slowly made his way to the table and indicated for Aubrie to join him.

“We might as well let the boy alone. I don’t know my way around a kitchen and he seems to be doing just fine.” He took a sip of his coffee. “I’m sure glad to see that you wanted the house. We were afraid that you would just want to sell it.” It appeared that another blunt and honest man was to be part of her new life.

She joined him at the table. “Some of my best childhood memories were here. I can remember coming for weeks at a time in the summers.” She grinned as thoughts of her past came flooding into her mind.

“Alta talked about you all the time. She enjoyed those visits too.”

For a moment, Aubrie felt a pang of regret. I should have visited more in the last few years. It must have shown on her face as Phil went on to speak.

“Now, don’t go getting upset. Alta understood that you had to take care of your father. She was proud that you would do that for him. She loved to talk about your work at the library and she often related details of your life in Nevada.”

“We chatted every Sunday and emailed every day.” Aubrie fondly recalled those sessions. “I was so pleased that you and Betsy were here for her. I want to thank you for that.”

Phil waved her thanks away. “She did a great thing for us, too. We needed a place to call home and she gave it to us willingly. I did odd jobs around here and Betsy helped with cooking and cleaning.” He hesitated for a moment. “When Betsy got sicker, Alta helped take care of her so I could continue my duties here. She was a very giving person, your aunt was.”

By then Tuck had finished their breakfast and was loading the eggs, toast, and bacon onto the small table. “Dig in.” He commanded.

There was little conversation until they had consumed the breakfast that had been prepared for them. Phil soon pushed back his plate and started to talk with Tuck. “Have you gotten that water heater put in yet? Any problems?”

Tuck sipped the rest of his coffee and took his time to answer Phil. “The water heater is in and I have decided that the best way to run the pipes, up to both of

the bathrooms, is to build a pipe chase that runs up the corner in both rooms. It can be disguised as a simple soffit and then decorated like the rest of the room.”

Phil shook his head in agreement. “Sounds great, Tuck.” And then as if remembering that Aubrie was there, added, “That okay with you?”

She paused before answering. “I’m sure that you two experts know better than I what would work for the plumbing.”

“Well, little lady, you are now the person that has to make those decisions. It’s going to take a sizeable amount of money to get this property in shape for a city slicker like you.” He grinned as he teased her.

She suddenly felt a bit uncomfortable and hesitant to tell Phil of her plans for the house and the lake. It’s my house now, she told herself. I can do what I want with it.

“Phil, I want to turn the house into a bed and breakfast. I want to be able to offer the house, the lake, and the surrounding forest as a way for other city slickers to enjoy the great outdoors and unwind from their stressful lives. I hope to be able to open in April or May.” She waited anxiously for his reaction.

“I think that’s great. That will bring this ole girl back to life.” He fondly referred to the house. “But, there’s one thing that may delay your grand opening. There’s the little detail of a skeleton and a car in the lake.”

Aubrie got up, retrieved her laptop, and signed on. “If you guys don’t mind, I like to take notes so that I can refer to the details later.”

A look passed between the two men, but neither objected.

“Now, why would that car and the skeleton delay the opening of the house for business?” She typed as she spoke. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she recorded the information from Phil and Tuck about the plumbing.

When she didn’t get a reply, she finally looked up from her laptop. “Is there a problem?”

“I guess we’re just not used to these talks becoming a recorded meeting.” Phil laughed and gestured to her computer.

A little flustered, Aubrie answered. “I’ve always been kind of a nerd. I have made lists of things to do, recording my homework assignments, and captured important things in writing as long as I can remember.” She avoided direct eye contact with Tuck. “It helps me organize details and then I can formulate a plan of action.” She felt that the more she explained, the more the guys were amused.

“I think it’s a great way to process information.” Tuck quietly agreed with her. “What other facts can we help you with?” He offered.

She shut her laptop and finally looked at him. “I think I will look over the house and make my notes. We can meet later and compare your list to mine.” She got up and gave a quick nod to both men and hastily left the room.

As she climbed the stairs to her room, she tried not to listen to the voices coming from the kitchen. She could just imagine them laughing at her. Surely they

wouldn't be that cruel. No, they would not. She convinced herself.

Aubrie went into her room and sat on the lounge for just a few minutes. She had to get a grip on her feelings, her emotions. She had a future to plan, an adventure to start. She could remember one of her aunt's famous stories. "Honey, there isn't anything you can't accomplish if you set your mind on it. You can do anything in this life that you want to." Auntie would tell her to not to give up on her dreams. She was inspired by her aunt's ability to make her own way in the world. Losing her mother, at such a young age, she often thought of her aunt as the "mom" in her life.

With those words and thoughts in her mind, Aubrie grabbed her laptop and started down the hallway. She spent several hours reviewing each of the six bedrooms and making notes. She did avoid the room Tuck was using. I can do that later, she made a mental note. Maybe he will have to go to town for supplies and I can do it then.

She went downstairs to find the house empty and silent. She took advantage of that privacy to continue her perusal of the living room, family room, parlor, dining room, and finally the kitchen. She stopped and stared at the monstrous stove. How in the world can anyone cook on that thing? Her thoughts strayed to Tuck in his apron. He didn't seem to have any trouble with mastering that wood-burning beast.

Aubrie sat down at the kitchen table and popped open her computer. Thank goodness Auntie had installed Wi-Fi for the house. She quickly went to the

internet and typed in her research request. As she got into the article on cooking on a wood burning stove, she was unaware of Tuck as he entered the kitchen from the dining room. He came over and leaned over her shoulder to see what she was reading.

"I can show you how to do that." His voice startled her as he spoke into her ear. She jumped and nearly fell from her chair. "Don't do that!"

He just laughed and stood up. "Finished with your inspection? Have any questions?" He leaned casually against the counter.

She tried not to stare but took in the tall, handsome man. Those eyes were a definite green today. Maybe it was the grin, maybe it was his confidence, but at any rate she liked what she saw. His tee shirt stretched across his muscled chest and his jeans fit him tight. She cleared her throat, "Yes, I do have a question. Why do you carry a gun?"

Her question obviously unmoved Tuck. He straightened up and ran his hands through his dark brown hair. He appeared to be buying himself some time before answering her pointed question. "Most people carry guns when living in the wilderness." He stated matter-of-factly. He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water.

She seemed to buy his explanation as she moved on to another topic. "Want to compare lists?"

"I thought you would like to take a ride and see the outbuildings. That will complete your list and then we can sit down and set some priorities." He counter proposed.

“A ride?” She seemed to be at a disadvantage with this man. “Where exactly are we going? Should I put on a jacket?”

“A jacket is definitely required.” He headed to the back door and opened it, indicating for her to follow him. She got up and followed him out on the back porch. She stared at where he pointed. “Your carriage waits.”

She stared in horror at the motorcycle-type vehicle sitting in the driveway. “What is that?”

“Don’t tell me that you city slickers haven’t seen an OHV?” He laughed at the look on her face.

“Of course I’ve seen them. They use those things on the ranches back home.” She stared at the off highway vehicle. “I’ve just never had the pleasure to ride one.” Her sarcasm was slightly tinged with fear.

“Well, then, you’re in for a real treat. Get your jacket and we’ll ride.” He prompted her into action.

Aubrie went upstairs and grabbed her jacket and gloves. A certain excitement filled her being as she hurried back down the steps and outside. Tuck was already straddled on the OHV, he waited patiently.

“How does one get on this type of vehicle?” She approached him cautiously.

Tuck rose up and offered his hand to her. “It’s like getting on a horse. Put your left foot here and raise your leg to straddle the seat.”

She did as he said and upon sitting behind him, she felt a sense of closeness she wasn’t exactly sure she wanted. “Don’t you wear a helmet? I’m not sure I feel safe here.”

She felt his laughter as their closeness allowed an intimacy that both excited and scared her. "I don't usually wear a helmet because I am always a very safe driver. But, if you want one, I have one up in my room. We're not going to be driving that fast and I always protect myself and my passengers."

For a split second, Aubrie considered her options and quickly decided that her new life and adventure deemed taking a chance without a helmet. "Okay, I'm going to trust you this once."

"Then hang on, lady. You are in for a surprise." He started the bike and she felt the rumble of the machine under her seat. "Put your arms around me." He suggested and when he felt her hesitation, added, "Aubrie, it's for your stability." He appealed to her sense of logic.

She shyly wrapped her arms around his waist. He chuckled at her feeble attempt to keep a small distance between their bodies. He slowly put the OHV in motion and felt her pull closer to him. My God, she felt good. Who is this timid, little bookworm? Even through the layers of their coats, he could feel her heart beating stronger and stronger as he drove the vehicle down the dirt track to the barn. Just like he promised, Tuck kept a slower, safe pace. He could feel her start to relax against him. He smiled as her warmth enveloped him.

Tuck pulled to a stop as they reached the grey, weathered barn. He dismounted the bike and held out his hand to help Aubrie. She stepped down and quickly took her hand out of his. Aubrie turned and looked at the aging structure. Without waiting for Tuck, she

dashed around the left side of the barn. She poked her head around the corner and called him. "Tuck, come here!"

He strolled to where she was standing. He could see the huge grin on her face and looked in the direction she was pointing. All he saw was a puny little leafless tree. It was just a few feet taller than he was and there was only a few bare branches standing in the cold.

"What?" He questioned, confused at her amusement.

"This tree bears the best apples in the state." She stated proudly. "When I was a child, it was quite the coup to get one of the few apples it produced each year. We all watched and, when they were mature, it was fair game as to who could get one of the four or five apples." She reached out and touched the bare branch with affection. "I was lucky to get one of those apples once!"

"That must have been a prize." Tuck watched the light glimmer in her brilliant blue eyes. Her naturally red hair had come a little loose from the usual tight ponytail and she looked windblown and a little less reserved.

Aubrie turned at the wistfulness in his voice. She suddenly seemed a bit embarrassed. "I should have brought my laptop. I need to record my thoughts about the necessary repairs for this barn."

Tuck went back to their ride and retrieved a notebook and pen from the saddlebags on the side of the bike. "Here, I thought you might want to make some notes. I brought the old-fashioned paper and pen in-

stead of a computer.” He tried to make light of his efforts.

She smiled at his thoughtfulness. “I will try to remember how to use these.” She took the proffered items and started logging her thoughts. “Can we go inside?”

“I’m sure we can pry this door open.” He went to the side door and struggled but eventually got the door to open. He stood back and motioned for her to enter first.

“I see how you operate. You want me to face any unwanted critters. What a guy!” She laughed but stepped through the open door cautiously. The interior was dark, lit only by the sunlight coming through the open door. Carefully she made her way to the middle of the barn, watching for the scurrying of little creatures.

Tuck followed and went over to the huge sliding doors at the front of the barn. With some muscle and good old-fashioned effort, he soon had them opened a bit to allow more light into the structure. It was enough to let them see the inside of the barn more thoroughly.

“So much work.” She muttered to herself. Aloud, she addressed Tuck. “Do you think this barn is safe?”

“Yes, these old structures were built to last for generations.” He spoke with a certain amount of pride for the workmanship that went into building it. “It may look a bit rough, but I think it is structurally sound. We can have an inspection done by one of the local contractors.” He went to the stairs that led into the loft. As he started up, she spoke.

“We were never allowed to go up to the loft.” She stayed rooted in her spot.

He laughed softly. “And I am sure that you obeyed. You never went into the loft, did you?” His green eyes were definitely a bit bluer as he teased her. He started to climb the steps as he sent out his challenge.

Three

Aubrie warred with herself. She knew he was deliberately baiting her, but it didn't diminish her desire to finally climb those dreaded steps to the loft.

She made one last feeble attempt to distract him. "It's past lunch. Aren't you hungry? I could eat."

Tuck stopped his movement up the ladder. "You're right. I am hungry." He descended the steps and without any explanation went outside and shortly returned with a brown paper bag. He moved back up the steps. "Are you coming?" Was the only thing she heard.

She took a deep breath and slowly made her way to the steps leading to the loft. With one hand on the step above her head, she put her foot on the ladder. One by one, slowly and surely, she made her way up to the loft. This shouldn't be so challenging, she thought bravely. It's only a simple ladder, only eight or ten feet tall, she encouraged herself.

Soon her head poked above the top step on the ladder. Tuck was sitting there with the contents of the brown bag spread on a small cloth. He motioned her to come on up. "I packed us a picnic. I figured we would be out on the estate for a few hours."

She slowly made the last step up and quickly moved away from the edge of the loft. She let out a breath and giggled a bit. "Auntie would be so mad if she knew I was finally up here."

"You loved her a lot, didn't you?" He patted the spot on the hay bale next to him. "Come, and taste the best PB&J this side of the Mississippi River."

"Modest, aren't you?" She intentionally sat on the opposite side of their impromptu picnic lunch and faced him. She chose a sandwich from the lunch bag and quietly sat there contemplating her decision to come to Arizona. So much to do, she repeated in her mind.

"Where do you go when you do that?" He asked of her.

"Do what?"

"You get this far away look and go all quiet and I can almost hear the gears turning in your mind."

She laughed lightly. "I've always been an over-thinker. I have to process information over and over until I can get my arms around a solution, a plan. Then I come up with Plan B and Plan C, in case plan A doesn't work out."

He thought for a moment. "There's something I'd like to get my arms around."

The look on her face was a combination of fear and longing. He changed his tactic. "There's nothing wrong with having a backup plan for life. Things don't always go the way we want and we need to be able to bounce back."

“Are you speaking from personal experience?” She could tell she hit a chord in him as she watched him run his hand through his ruffled hair.

“Is your full name Aubrie? Or is that short for something?”

“You know you have a most annoying habit of answering a question with another question.” She stated firmly. In their short time together, she felt like she knew him more than any other man. Not that there had been that many men, she mused.

“There you go again.” He noted.

“Sorry. My full name is Aubrie Anne Anderson. Aubrie isn’t short for anything.”

“Triple A!” He teased.

“That’s cute. I’ve never had a nickname.” She munched on her sandwich.

“Surely the other kids had a nickname for you when you were growing up.” He wanted to pull her out, find more about this shy, bashful lady sitting across from him.

She regressed for a moment and the look on her face was not a happy one. “I was a geek, a bookworm. I didn’t have very many friends and was kind of a loner.” She hesitated, “They did call me a name.” She stopped sharing.

“What was it?”

“They called me Albert.”

“Albert! Why did they call you that?” He seemed confused.

“I was the smartest kid in school. I was valedictorian and all the teachers loved me.” She spoke truthfully without bragging. “It stands for Albert Einstein.

They meant it to hurt, but I felt it was actually a compliment they wouldn't understand."

He laughed out loud. "So you turned it back on them and they didn't even know. That's great!"

She finished her sandwich and stood up. As she looked around the loft, she was aware that his eyes were on her.

"What about your boyfriends? What did they call you?"

She stammered a bit. "I never had a real boyfriend."

"You had a phony one?" He joked. She laughed.

In a very short time, Tuck had managed to make her smile and laugh and feel more carefree than she ever had. The only other time she could remember feeling so happy was the summers she had spent here at her aunt's. Not that her life had been a bad one, she mused. Much of her time growing up had been consumed by taking care of her dad, getting good grades throughout school, completing her master's degree, as well as working full time at the library. There just didn't seem time for carefree, unstructured periods to enjoy each day.

"Hello, Triple A, where did you go this time?" He waved his hand to snap her out of her thoughts.

"I dated but in a small town the size of Tonopah, Nevada, there wasn't a great selection of men." She smiled. "I was more interested in the arts and education, not in ranching or mining. I was an outsider in my own home town." She quickly corrected. "Not that I was treated badly, everyone treated me with friend-

ship and respect. It's just that the romance part of life wasn't for me."

"So, no nicknames, no pet names from boy-friends." He concluded.

"No, none." There was a moment of silence in their exchange and Aubrie felt a need to flee. "I would like to see the lake today. Well, at least where the lake should be." She amended.

"Then, we best get going. During these late winter months, the sun isn't usually cooperative very long." He quickly cleaned up the remnants of their picnic and headed toward the ladder at the edge of the loft. When he saw that Aubrie had hesitated, he held out his hand.

"No need to be afraid. I'll go down first and if you slip, I'll break your fall." He teased.

With that playful comment, she moved cautiously toward the ladder and slowly followed him over the edge. As she reached the bottom step, she felt his hands around her waist. "Just to make sure you don't miss that last step."

His touch sizzled through her coat and she faltered on that step, falling into his chest. "See," he said, "I just saved you..."

She stepped out of his grasp and turned to look at him. "I'm not so sure. I think you may have caused me to slip." She countered.

He mocked shock. "I think I should be insulted. All I'm trying to do is make sure you're safe." His eyes held the grin that showed on his face.

How can I be mad or suspicious of that, she asked herself? He was the picture of innocence. "Let's go

and see that hole that should be a lake.” She went out the door and headed toward the OHV.

Tuck followed after he shut the barn doors. She was already on the back of the machine and he mounted the bike in front of her. Without a word, he started the engine and slowly put it into gear. The trip to the lake was a short distance away and they arrived in no time at all.

She got off after he did and stood there staring in dismay at the lakebed. The Hassayampa Lake was not a very large one by most standards. The lake was the result of the Hassayampa Check Dam built in 1936 as a water resource for the city of Prescott. When full, it is about the size of three football fields and around 40 feet deep. The lake is fed by rainfall and melting snow in the Bradshaw Mountains.

“What does the name Hassayampa mean?” She inquired of Tuck. “I never paid attention when coming to visit Auntie about the name, but now that I own it, it seems important to know that sort of thing.” Her inquisitive mind was fully working.

“Well, there are actually three explanations.” Tuck stared at the empty lakebed before completing his answer. “The first is that Hassayampa is an Apache word meaning ‘river that runs upside down.’ You see the river is above ground, for part of the way downstream, but closer to the town of Wickenburg, it disappears underground.” He moved closer to her.

“The second is from a Mojave word meaning ‘beautiful water.’ That’s kind of a misnomer because the river is dry for most of the year and just a trickle when it’s actually running. And the third explanation

is that it's a Yuma word meaning 'hidden water.'" He watched that curious mind of hers processing the information.

"It breaks my heart to see it like this." She walked slowly towards the shoreline. "Have they fixed the valve at the bottom of the dam?"

"Yes, the repairs were completed a week ago. You can see that the water is starting to fill at the bottom." He pointed to the small pool of water forming behind the dam.

"Why haven't they taken the car out?" She stared at the back end of the car sticking out of the deep mud at the bottom of the dam.

"Well, the sheriff's department has been a bit vague with the details, but I think they are waiting for the lake to fill before retrieving the car."

"That makes no sense at all!" She exclaimed. "Why don't they just get a crane or some type of machinery out here and pull that car out of there?" She realized it was another challenge to her plans to open her bed and breakfast by spring. "Who is that?" She pointed to the man standing near the shoreline closest to the car.

"That's a deputy of the Yavapai sheriff's office. They have decided that this is a crime scene and therefore, it needs to be secured."

She could hear the sarcasm in his voice. "And you don't agree?" She prompted.

"If it's a crime scene, then they're about 20 years too late in protecting the evidence." He laughed and for the first time she felt she was seeing a different

side to Tuck. His laughter was one of bitterness, maybe even scorn.

“Are they sure this is a crime scene? I don’t see any skeleton in the car.”

He walked back to the OHV and grabbed a pair of binoculars from the pouch on the back of the bike. “Here try these. You might be able to see it.”

She raised the binoculars to her eyes and tried to focus on the front seat of the car. It was getting late and the setting sun was casting shadows on the scene. She felt him come up behind her and realized his arms were soon around her. He held the binoculars up to his own face and then lowered them and himself to her height. “This might help. I found the skeleton and you should be able to see it at this angle.”

His nearness was comforting and yet disturbing at the same time. She tried to focus and concentrate on the scene before her. His arms around her were making that nearly impossible. She finally gave up and handed the field glasses back to him. “I think I will talk to that deputy. Maybe he can answer some of my questions.” She stepped determinedly in the direction of the deputy, anything to put some space between her and Tuck. As they moved in the direction of the young man on duty, she tried to gain some semblance of control. Tuck had a way of disturbing the confidence she normally possessed.

“Hello,” She addressed the uniformed officer. “I’m Aubrie Anderson, the new owner of this lake and I have a few questions for you.”

The young man was obviously uncomfortable with their presence in the area. “You aren’t supposed to be

here.” He stated flatly. “This is a crime scene and I’m here to make sure it is protected.”

“This crime scene is my home and I want some answers.” Aubrie stated quite firmly.

Tuck just stood back and watched her in action. He was impressed with her confidence and with the fact that she didn’t back down from her intended target.

“Ummm,” He stammered. “You’ll have to talk with Sheriff Clarke. He’s the one that has all the answers.”

“Where is he?” She persisted.

“He’s in town at the sheriff’s office. You can reach him there.” The deputy tried to dismiss her and Tuck.

“When will he be available?” She continued her questions.

“You can call him at this number. He’s probably gone home already tonight, but he’ll be in the office first thing in the morning.” He handed her a card with the sheriff’s name and number.

“Well, thank you, I guess.” She acquiesced. As she walked away, Tuck followed.

“I’m surprised you backed down.” He challenged her.

“I’ve learned that if you want something important done, you need to go directly to the correct source. And at the moment, that seems to be Sheriff Clarke.” She read the card in the fading light. “We should get back to the house. I’m getting cold.”

He moved in closer and put his arm around her shoulders. “Does that help?” Not really, she thought to herself, it just confuses me. To him, she said, “Some... are you ready to go back to the house?”

“Yes, Triple A, I’m ready to go home.” They reached the OHV and he assisted her onto the back of the seat. She secretly smiled at the use of his nickname for her. It felt fun, it felt right to have him call her a special name.

“It’s going to be a bit colder with the sun almost gone. Hold on tight.” He instructed. She complied with an eagerness she didn’t want to think about. He started the machine and they carefully headed back up the path to the house. It was a short distance from the lake and soon they pulled into the drive at the back of the house. She noticed with dismay that the house hadn’t been painted in a long time and Aubrie made a mental note to add that to the mounting list of things to do.

As they mounted the steps to the back porch and opened the door, a wonderful smell reached her nose. “Is that food I smell?” She asked and turned to him with delight on her face.

“Yes, I put on a roast before we left on our ride.” He went to the kitchen counter and lifted the lid to the slow cooker. “I hope you like roast, potatoes, and carrots.” He stirred the delightful concoction a bit and placed the lid back on the container.

“Is there no end to your talents?” She teased as she removed her gloves and coat. She hung them up on the available hooks at the back door and went into the warm kitchen. Tuck went to the stove and stoked the wood so that the warmth would envelope them.

“Shall I set the table?” She volunteered. The whole atmosphere was one of companionship and family. She was enjoying this time and especially liked being

the one taken care of instead of the other way around. It had been a labor of love, but all those years of taking care of her dad, and their household, left her a bit drained. Having Tuck do the caring was a welcome relief she could get used to.

As they ate their dinner at the small table in the kitchen, Tuck broached the topic of her visit to town. "What time do you plan on going to town tomorrow?" He started casually.

"I was thinking of going shortly after breakfast. That way I can catch the sheriff at his office." She looked at Tuck and added, "Why do you ask?"

"I have to go to the hardware store and get some supplies to get those bathrooms in operating condition. I thought we could ride together."

Aubrie thought on this for a moment. Did she want Tuck to be included in her search for some answers from the sheriff? How much did she really know about him? All of a sudden she had an uneasy feeling. Auntie would call it her woman's intuition. She, however, reluctantly agreed to make their trip to town together. It might be a good time to get to know this mystery man a bit better.

Four

She slept soundly and upon rising, dressed and brushed her long, thick red hair and gathered it back into her smooth, usual pony tail. For a quick moment, she thought about leaving it loose, but just as quickly shrugged off that random thought. As she went downstairs and headed into the kitchen, she stopped and looked at Tuck. He had on that ridiculous apron and she laughed aloud.

“I think we should find you a manlier apron in town.” She helped herself to coffee. “You know I can fix my own breakfast. In fact, I don’t usually eat a large meal in the morning.” She stood close and watched him turn the bacon in the cast iron skillet. He didn’t respond but just turned and gave her one of his award-winning grins.

“How do you know how much wood to put in the stove? I mean, with an electric stove, you just adjust the knob to the right setting.” She watched in amazement at his apparent comfort in the kitchen.

As he finished with the bacon and reached for a smaller skillet to cook the eggs, he spoke. “I can give you some cooking lessons, if you want. You’ll need to know how to operate this baby when you open your

bed and breakfast. The guests will expect a rural, old-fashioned meal with their stay.”

It had only been a couple of days and yet it felt like a lifetime. Being here in her aunt’s house with Tuck touched her heart and made her want more. She had loved her dad very much, but these few days with Tuck abruptly made her realize that there was a huge something missing in her world. He only was here to complete repairs and remodel the house. Once those were done, what then?

“Aubrie,” He quietly interrupted her thoughts. “Let’s eat so we can get on the road to town.” They sat down and with few words, settled into a comfortable silence and finished their meal.

They were soon in his four-wheel drive pickup truck bouncing over the rough, dirt road to the beautiful mountain city of Prescott. The journey took them through the Prescott National Forest and within thirty minutes, they were pulling off of the Senator Highway heading toward the city center.

Prescott was a town of 40,000 people located in the Bradshaw Mountains. The climate was one of the reasons people traveled from the hot desert of Arizona to cool off in the pine covered township each summer. The town square hosted events most weekends that drew tourists and visitors to partake in the festivities. There was a history here and people just wanted a part in it.

“The sheriff’s office is just down past Whiskey Row on Gurley Street. I’ll drop you there and head to the hardware store. Got your cell phone?” He stopped at a red light. When she didn’t readily respond, he con-

tinued, "I thought maybe you would want to speak with the sheriff in private."

It's like he can read my mind, she thought surprised at his perceptiveness. "Thank you, I appreciate that."

He just grinned and slowly pulled the truck over and stopped at the curb in front of the sheriff's office. "Call my number so you can have it in your phone." He gave her his cell number and as she stepped from the older truck, he waved and was quickly moving out of sight.

She opened the door and stepped inside the warm building, anxious to meet with the sheriff and get answers to her questions. The office was bare except for an officer at the front desk. She went up to the young lady and spoke softly.

"I'd like to see Sheriff Clarke, please."

"I'm sorry, you just missed him." The female officer was friendly and smiled her apology. "He stepped over to The Palace for an early lunch. You could probably catch up with him there, if you want."

"I'm... I'm not sure where the palace is and I'm on foot. My ride dropped me here. Is it far?" Aubrie warmed to the friendliness of the helpful officer. She thought she knew much about this old town but had never heard of a palace in Prescott.

"You must be new in town. The Palace is just around the corner. Go out the front door, take the cross walk at the light and you'll find it just two doors down on your right."

The look on Aubrie's face must have convinced the officer to explain further. "The Palace is a local saloon

down on Whiskey Row. They serve some of the best burgers in town. Sheriff Clarke loves to get lunch there. He won't mind if you join him. I'll just call him and let him know to expect you. And you are?" The officer prompted.

"I'm Aubrie Anderson. My aunt owned Has-sayampa Lake and now it's mine. I wanted some answers about the car and the skeleton at the bottom of the lake." She stopped as she felt she had already said too much to her.

"Oh, I am so sorry about your loss. We all loved your aunt around here. She will be greatly missed." She had already dialed the phone and was waiting for the sheriff to answer.

"John, its Kari. I have an Aubrie Anderson here that needs to talk with you. I'm sending her over to The Palace." She smiled at Aubrie while she listened to the sheriff on the other end. "Sure, she'll be right over."

"See! It's fine. He's waiting for you."

"Thank you so much for your help." Aubrie went back outside and followed the young officer's instructions. She was quickly pushing her way through the swinging doors into the warmth of the saloon. She chuckled at the presence of the old-fashioned swinging doors on the front of the building. It was just like the old westerns she had watched on television.

Even if The Palace Saloon had been full of patrons, she wouldn't have had a problem in picking out the sheriff. He was standing next to the bar with his back to her and for a moment she forgot her surroundings. The man was over six feet tall and the uniform shirt

stretched tightly across his wide back. He held his cowboy hat in his hands as he talked with the lady behind the bar. His jet black hair was a bit longer than she would have thought proper for a sheriff and curled just at the collar of his shirt. His deep laughter brought her out of her stupor. She approached the man hoping that her presence was quickly noticed.

The conversation between the bartender and the sheriff stopped and he turned to face Aubrie. He came forward to meet her with his hand outstretched. "Hello, you must be Aubrie Anderson. Nice to meet you. We sure will miss your aunt around here."

"Nice to meet you, Sheriff Clarke. I'm sorry to bother you at your lunch." She managed to stammer out a decent response.

"Why don't you join me?" He put his hand in the small of her back and guided her to a table in the corner of the saloon. The server appeared and gave them menus and water.

"No thank you," She replied politely. "I actually just finished my breakfast. But, if you don't mind, I'll sit with you and have a cup of coffee. Maybe you can answer some of my questions while you eat." She wanted to get on with her plans for her bed and breakfast. There was so much work to do.

He completed his order and turned to her. "I'm sure you have lots of questions. I hope I can give you the answers you need."

"Why haven't you taken the car out of the bottom of the lake?" She stated directly.

"I presume you have seen the lake bed? It's too muddy and we couldn't get a crane big enough

through the narrow dirt road leading to the lake, so we are left with one option.” He sipped on his coffee and watched her.

Aubrie wasn’t a person to fidget and not a person to beat around the bush. “Wait until the lake is full again.” She stated flatly, not really wanting that to be the answer.

“That’s correct.”

“How long will that take?”

“It depends on the weather and the snowmelt at higher elevations. We don’t have to wait until it is completely full. We need just enough water so we can launch a pontoon boat equipped with a crane able to pull the car from the bottom.”

“So you do have reason to believe that a crime has been committed?” She pulled her laptop from her bag and turned it on. “I hope you don’t mind. I’d like to take notes on this. It helps me process the information later.”

“I have no problem with you recording notes for your own personal use. I would have a problem if those notes ended up in a newspaper article, though.” His dark brown eyes narrowed in seriousness as he spoke.

“Sheriff Clarke, I am the owner of that lake now. I intend to open a bed and breakfast by summer and I would be the last person to want negative information in the paper.” She was adamant. “Do you really think there has been a crime committed? Could it be possible that someone just wanted to end their life?”

“Anything is possible.” His answer was extremely vague and she was under the impression that he was reluctant to share what he did know about the car.

“Let me ask you something, Aubrie.” Sheriff Clarke hesitated a moment before continuing. “How old are you?”

She was completely taken aback by his rather personal question, but felt compelled to answer. “I’m twenty-seven. Why do you need to know that? What does that have to do with the car in the lake?”

Instead of answering, he asked another startling question. “How well did you know your aunt?”

“Sheriff Clarke, I hardly think that my relationship with my aunt and my age are pertinent facts to this case.” She stated with a little bluster to her tone.

“Please bear with me for a moment.” He finished his lunch and laid some bills on the table. He rose and looked to her to do the same. “Let’s continue this conversation where I can be completely assured that our talk will be totally confidential.”

She got up, closed her laptop and went out the swinging doors as the sheriff held them open for her. The wind blew quite frequently in this part of Arizona and today was no exception. She bundled her scarf around her neck and tucked her gloved hands into the pocket of her coat, grasping her laptop in her arm. His stride was much larger and she had to hurry to keep up with him.

“Sheriff Clarke, are you going to tell me what’s going on? I’m most baffled by your questions and your behavior.”

He led them to a bench in the town square across the street from The Palace. As he sat down, he indicated that she should join him. When he saw her hesitate, he spoke. "Aubrie, I intend to give you all the information I have at the moment. I just need to know that everything I share with you will be kept in the highest regard for confidentiality."

"Now you're scaring me. If you haven't taken the car from the lake, how can you know that a crime has been committed?" She sat down beside him and wrapped her arms around herself, more in a defensive move than an attempt to keep warmer. She looked closely at the sheriff and in the light of the afternoon sun, could tell he wasn't much older than her. His deep ebony eyes were peering at her. She was sure he was evaluating her integrity as much as she was determining if she could trust him.

"We did a search on the license plate on the car." He paused, before continuing. "Do you know the name Harold Jenkins?" He watched her reaction intently.

"No, that name doesn't ring a bell." She ran the name over in her mind and stated again, "No, I'm afraid I don't know that name. Does it have something to do with the car in the lake?"

"That license plate was originally issued to Harold Jenkins and..." Once again he paused and waited for her reaction. "He was reported missing a little over twenty years ago."

Aubrie digested the information he had just given her and was even more baffled than before. "What

does any of this have to do with me? Do you think that it's Harold Jenkins in that car?"

"Are you living in your aunt's house?" He again answered a question with a question. This was the second man in just a very short time to possess that annoying habit. She thought of the many times Tuck had answered her questions that exact same way.

She took a deep, steadying breath before answering the sheriff. "Of course, where else would I stay? Again, Sheriff Clarke, I ask you, what has this to do with your investigation?"

"Hang in there with me for a minute. Is there anyone else staying with you? Are you alone in the house?"

"I am sure that if you are any good at your job, you already know the answer to those questions." She retorted with impatience.

He chuckled at her edginess. "Yes, I know that Phil and Betsy Flood are the caretakers for the property and have worked for your aunt for over twelve years. They live in a cottage about a half mile back on the property from the main house. I'm afraid my information about Mr. Thompson is a bit vague. What can you tell me about him?"

She looked at him deciding whether or not to help him with his lack of data. Part of her felt a need to defend and protect Tuck and another thought supported the need to get on with this interrogation so that she could learn what she needed to know. In the end, Aubrie realized she would help the law enforcement officer with anything she knew. She sighed and quietly answered his query. "Tuck was hired by Phil and he is

staying at the house in order to help get it in shape to open as a bed and breakfast by spring. Although it now looks like it's going to be late summer much to my dismay. I really don't have much more information than that."

"So, he is living under the same roof as you." He repeated what she had just revealed to him. He sat there for a few moments and Aubrie could tell he was mulling over this information. She had always been a patient person but his behavior was starting to wear down that virtue.

He looked back at her and started sharing facts with her. "Your aunt knew Harold Jenkins. The car was registered to both of them and she was the person that reported him missing." He watched for her reaction. "Your aunt was the sole beneficiary for his life insurance, a considerable sum even back then."

"I guess I'm still not seeing the connections. You'll have to bottom line it for me, Sheriff."

"Your aunt and Harold Jenkins were involved. She came into a lot of money when he was finally declared dead. It took a long time, but she benefitted just the same."

The look of shock on Aubrie's face didn't fully display the astonishment she felt at the sheriff's disclosure. "You have the audacity to sit here and accuse my aunt of murdering someone she knew just to gain financially? You are barking up the wrong tree, mister!" She stood up and was prepared to leave when he stopped her.

"Aubrie, please wait a minute. We won't know anything definite until we can bring that car and the skel-

eton up from the bottom of the lakebed. I told you that I wanted to keep this confidential. I haven't said anything to anyone about this information except you. My job is to find out the truth and I needed to see what you knew about Harold and your aunt."

"Sheriff, I wasn't aware that my aunt ever had any relationship with a man. I haven't visited since I was 15 years old. We kept in constant contact via internet and the phone. She was a wonderful person and always there for me." Her voice choked a bit and she stopped to regain composure. "I am most confident that if she had a relationship with this Harold person, she would never, could never hurt him. That just wasn't part of her nature. If you knew her at all, you should know that."

"You're right and I apologize." He spoke sincerely. "We don't usually have this type of crime in our small town and I guess I just got anxious to solve this one." He grinned at her and she found herself smiling back at him.

"I'm sure once you get that car out of the lakebed, you'll be able to resolve this mystery." She sat back down and they enjoyed a quick moment of silence between them.

"Aubrie, I want you to be careful. This crime scene is getting a lot of attention and I have a feeling there is more to all of this than meets the eye." His warning was sincere.

"Now don't you worry, Sheriff Clarke, I intend to be very careful. I am going to be working so hard trying to get my new place ready to open that I won't

have time for anything else. And I have Tuck there.” She added.

“About him,” Sheriff Clarke spoke with some concern. “We don’t know much about this cowboy... yet. Here, take my card. I’ve written my personal cell number on the back. Call me at any time, day or night, if you need me and please call me John.”

She took the card and looked into his dark ebony eyes. They were so dark you couldn’t see the pupils. “Sheriff... John, thank you. I have always been a good judge of character and for what it’s worth, I trust Tuck. But, I thank you for your concern.” They both turned to look as a horn was honked across the park. It was Tuck in his pickup. She didn’t know how long he had been sitting there, but she suddenly felt a little nervous. She rose quickly and spoke softly to the sheriff.

“John, I have to go. Please keep me in the loop as new information surfaces. I’ll keep our talk confidential.” She put out her hand and he took it in his. It was warm and she felt the strength a sheriff should possess. “Thank you, for your time.”

“Anytime, Aubrie, just give me a call if you need me.”

She walked quickly across the town square and reached Tuck’s pickup truck. He had gotten out and was at the door, ready to open it for her. She couldn’t explain her nervousness, but it was there just the same.

“Got all your supplies?” She questioned to break the uncomfortable silence.

“Yes, I got everything I needed.” He looked straight at her with those mysterious eyes. She tried to discern what color they were today, but failed. “Did you?”

The question was loaded.

She avoided his glance but answered his question. “Yes, Sheriff Clarke had some good information.”

“When are they going to remove the car?”

“You probably already guessed, but with the lake bed so muddy, they can’t get the car out until the lake fills a bit. They’re going to use a pontoon boat with a crane and lift it out that way. It could be a month or two.” Her voice trailed off at that.

“And that interferes with your plans to open by spring.” He stated unnecessarily. “Isn’t there another way to get that damn car out?” He asked adamantly and hit the steering wheel.

She was surprised at his outburst. It was as if the most important thing was to get that car out of the lake bed. Why would it be so significant to him? She had the strangest feeling that there was more to Tuck than meets the eye. “Why did you just honk the horn? Why didn’t you come over and meet the sheriff?” She questioned him.

He hesitated before answering her. “I thought you wanted your talk with the sheriff to be confidential. I wanted to respect that.” He avoided looking her in the eyes.

“He asked me about you. What are you hiding?”

Five

Tuck never gave her an answer. Instead he started the truck and left town heading for the lake. He kept his eyes on the road and never looked over her way. The drive was uncomfortable and Aubrie almost wished she could take back her question. This was an extremely unproductive day, she mused. Sheriff Clarke didn't help with the information he shared and now she had made Tuck mad. I need a plan, she thought. I need to find out what I can about my aunt and Harold Jenkins. I need to talk with Phil about Tuck and the sheriff. I need time to get my thoughts in order. She suddenly sighed. This would have been one of those times when she would have contacted her aunt. Now, who did she have to talk with?

Tuck pulled his truck into the drive and up to the house. He came around and opened the door for Aubrie. "Thank you." She meekly spoke, hoping to break the silence engulfing them. Without responding, he went back around to the driver's side and got back into his truck. He pulled the truck around the house and headed toward the well site up on the side of the hill. She watched him with dismay. How could things go so wrong so quickly?

“I need to clear my head.” She spoke aloud. Instead of going up the porch into the house, Aubrie turned and walked around the house. She bundled up her coat as the wind was starting to kick up and proceeded to walk down the lane. Without being conscience of her direction, she walked slowly among the pines and the oak trees. The oaks looked bleak and barren without their beautiful green leaves. The pines still maintained their green coats and the wind rustled through them.

She stopped for a minute and watched a couple of squirrels chasing each other up and down the stately trees. She smiled as she watched the beauty of nature. Aubrie took a deep breath and continued her walk. The afternoon light was still shining but there wasn’t much warmth filtering through her jacket. She had only visited her aunt in the summer and this side of her new home was very different and provided another angle for her to contemplate for the guests of her bed and breakfast. She had originally thought only to have it open to summer visitors, but seeing the beauty of the cool winter atmosphere could appeal to another type of guest.

As she focused her thoughts on her plans, she felt the tension of the day subsiding. She adjusted her scarf around her neck and took a deep, cleansing breath. She kept her contemplations away from the day’s events and, as she stepped over the rough road, Aubrie thought about how much more she could do with her new business venture.

Before she realized, she came upon the cottage that belonged to the Floods. The smoke rose from the

chimney and drifted into the clouds forming in the sky. She could hear the barking of what sounded like a very large dog. I shouldn't intrude, she thought and started to turn around. Just then, the front door opened and Phil hollered out a greeting.

"Aubrie, what a nice surprise! Please come in and warm yourself by the fire." He stepped aside and motioned her in.

"I don't want to bother you and Betsy. I was taking a walk and didn't realize how far I had come."

"No bother. Betsy has asked about you and would love some company besides me." He winked at her. "She gets tired of holding up the entire conversation herself. I'm not much of a talker."

Aubrie laughed at his joke. So far, she had not experienced his lack of conversational abilities. She stepped into the warmth of the cottage and her senses were pleasantly assaulted with wonderful smells and visions of beauty. She smelled bread baking and her mouth watered. She suddenly realized that she hadn't eaten since breakfast with Tuck. She had thought they would eat in town, but that was before their day ended on a bad note.

She looked around at the comfortably decorated room. The fire was burning brightly in the stone fireplace. There was a sofa and two arm chairs facing each other at angles to allow access to the warmth of the fire. Lace doilies covered the coffee table and end tables and knick knacks covered many of the surfaces in the room.

"I'll go and tell Betsy we have company."

"Please don't disturb her if she's resting."

“Nonsense, she’s having a good day and she will love to finally meet you.” He left her standing in the room.

She removed her scarf, gloves, and coat and went over to sit on the edge of the hearth. The fire did feel good.

“Aubrie,” Betsy spoke softly as she came slowly into the room. “How wonderful for you to visit. Please find a more comfortable seat. Are you hungry? Phil, get us some of that fresh baked bread.” She sat down on the chair closest to the fire.

Aubrie noticed medical tape on her arm and saw the tired look in the older woman’s eyes. She didn’t want to pry into a very personal situation, but couldn’t help wonder about Betsy’s condition.

“I didn’t mean to come unannounced. I was just taking a walk to clear my head after my trip to town to meet the sheriff.” She stopped as she realized she might have shared too much information.

“How was that meeting with John?” Betsy prompted her to continue. “Did he help answer some of your questions about the car?”

Just then they heard Phil talking in the other room. Aubrie couldn’t hear what he was saying but somehow knew he was talking with Tuck on the phone. She squirmed in her chair.

Phil came into the room bearing plates laden with the fresh baked bread and some homemade jelly. “You two girls gonna be okay? Tuck just called and I need to go and see if I can help him with the water lines. He thinks we might be able to get the bathrooms working in the house today.”

“Sure, we’ll be alright. It’ll give us a chance to get acquainted.” Betsy encouraged him to go.

Soon he bundled up and left the warm, homey cottage. Betsy returned her attention to Aubrie. “You were saying...”

“My talk with the sheriff was not very enlightening. He did say he won’t be able to retrieve the car from the lake bed until there is enough water in it to float a pontoon boat with a crane.” She sighed.

“And that is going to set you back in your plans to open your bed and breakfast.” Betsy seemed in tune with Aubrie’s mood as she stated that fact. “What did Tuck think about that?”

“His response took me by surprise. He was very upset. I mean much more than I would have expected him to be.” She found it easy to talk with Betsy. Maybe, just maybe, she could be the sounding board she was missing since her aunt died.

“Betsy, can I ask you something?” She hesitated.

“Anytime, sweetie. I know you must miss your aunt terribly and I also know she loved the talks you two shared.”

The mood in the room was warm and friendly, but Aubrie heard the wind starting to howl outside. She was grateful for the kindness offered by the other woman. “I do miss her. I wish we could have seen each other so much more than we did. Life just gets in the way sometimes.”

“Now don’t you go feeling guilty. Your aunt wouldn’t have wanted you to do that. She knew you had to take care of your dad and your job at the library was important.”

Aubrie let out a great sigh. "Betsy, thank you so much. I know you have been ill and I wouldn't want to burden you with my problems."

"Nonsense. I am doing fine. That Phil makes more fuss than is needed. I know he means well, but I am getting better each day." She pulled the afghan over her legs. "Aubrie, could you put another log on the fire? It's getting colder outside, don't you think?"

Aubrie got up and put another log on the fire and stirred up the coals to get it going. "How well do you know Tuck?" She finally asked, intently watching the expression on Betsy's face.

"I know him as well as I need to. He is an honorable man, a hard worker, and he has been a tremendous help to my Phil."

She looked Aubrie straight in the eyes. "Why do you ask? Has something happened?"

"Well, when Tuck took me to town to meet with the sheriff, he dropped me off so we could talk in private. The sheriff and I were out on a bench in the town square, when we heard a horn honk. It was Tuck. He didn't come over and meet the sheriff, he just honked at me."

Betsy laughed. "So, you're not a girl to be honked for?" She teased.

"It's not that. Well, I don't like to be honked at, but..." She truly wanted Betsy's opinion. "The sheriff asked me what I knew about Tuck. I think he is suspicious of him for some reason." She sat back down and grabbed another piece of the wonderful home-baked bread. As she lathered it generously with the home-made jelly, she continued. "I felt like I was betraying

Tuck when I responded to the sheriff's questions about him."

Betsy was watching Aubrie as she talked. "You like him, don't you?"

That threw Aubrie for a loop. She didn't expect Betsy to speak her mind so abruptly. "What... I don't know what you're talking about? Do you want some more bread?" She tried to distract her.

Betsy laughed and repeated her question, "You do like him, don't you?"

Aubrie blushed and quietly admitted aloud what she had been ignoring, "Yes, I like him. But that has nothing to do with all of this. I need to get the house ready and I need to get that dratted car out of the lake so I can open in late spring." She stated firmly.

"Then trust him. I have always depended on my instinct about people and I feel that Tuck is a person you can count on in the worst of circumstances. He will help you get the house ready and Phil and I will do what we can too." She reacted to the thunder as it struck loudly overhead. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid that we're in for a heck of a storm."

"Oh, I've got to go. I walked over here and if I don't leave now I might get caught in the rain." She rose and started for her coat and scarf.

"If you wait, I'm sure Tuck will come for you. He and Phil can't work in the weather." Betsy tried to reassure her.

Just about that time, they both heard the sound of a vehicle out front. Quickly the front door opened and both men stepped inside. Before Betsy could rise, Phil stopped her.

“Sit, woman. We can take care of ourselves.” He stomped the dirt off his boots and took them off at the door. “Tuck, help yourself to some hot bread. That is if the ladies didn’t eat it all.” He joked.

Tuck moved closer to the women and helped himself to the plate of bread and jelly. He avoided looking at Aubrie directly, but as he turned to Betsy he warmly greeted her. “Hey, Betsy, you’re looking beautiful today.”

“You’re a snake charmer, Tuck.” She replied, “But I love you anyway. Are we in for a big one?” She asked of the two men.

“I’m afraid so.” Phil was the one to reply to her question about the upcoming storm. “Tuck came so he could drive Aubrie back to the house.”

Until that point, she and Tuck hadn’t even acknowledged each other. The tension radiated throughout the room. She finally spoke up. “I can walk. I don’t need a ride.”

Tuck snickered at her false bravery. “I’m afraid you have no choice in the matter. You are not familiar with this area and these storms can be brutal and quick. Let’s go.” He headed to the front door and held it open for her.

Trust him. Betsy’s words infiltrated her mind. Trust him, he is an honorable man. With a deep breath, she finally looked him straight in the eyes. They were a deep brown-looking color at this moment. She hadn’t seen that color before and she felt that he was as conflicted as her. Trust him. Those words played once again in her mind.

“Okay,” She finally agreed and rose from the chair. She gathered her scarf and coat and once they were on, she went to the front door next to Tuck. “Betsy, thank you so much for a wonderful afternoon. Let me know what I can do to help you.”

Betsy stayed where she was but acknowledged Aubrie’s comments. “You take care, missy. Just trust your instincts.” She winked as she spoke.

Aubrie caught the meaning and grinned at the wonderful woman. She realized that she had just met a good friend and confidant. Tuck held open the door and she walked through with him at her side.

The wind was blowing hard and Aubrie bundled her scarf around her face to protect herself. Tuck quickly held open her door and shut it just as fast. Soon they were in his truck heading the short distance to the house. He pulled right up to the back door and they both ran to the porch.

Once inside, he commanded her to start the fire in the stove. “You start this one and I’ll go and light the fires in the stoves and fireplaces in the rest of the house. I’m afraid we’re in for a cold, windy night.” Before he left her in the kitchen, he gave her more detailed instructions on the proper way to build a fire in the antique stove. “I’ll make us some dinner when I get the rest of the house warming up.”

“What about the heater? Don’t we have a heater in this house?” She asked curiously.

“Your aunt had an old coal burner in the basement, but Aubrie, it’s not operable. That’s one of the major things you will have to update before you open your bed and breakfast. I thought you knew.”

She grimaced and realized that they needed to get working on the priority list as soon as possible. But for right now the most important thing to do was get the house warmed up with the stoves and fireplaces.

Aubrie quickly lit the fire in the huge stove and stood there wondering how they were going to get through the night. They hadn't spoken two words since they had left town. She decided that she could get dinner ready. They both had only eaten breakfast and a few slices of bread. Surely he had to be hungry, she thought. He has taken care of their meals to this point. It's time I stepped up to the plate. She laughed at her play on words.

Aubrie went to the refrigerator and scanned the food in the unit. Seeing the makings for some quick omelets, she grabbed the ingredients and started chopping the necessary items. She could hear Tuck upstairs as she worked. Soon she had the makings of a good omelet ready for the stove, but she hesitated as she thought about cooking on the aged equipment.

Tuck walked into the kitchen as she was digging for a proper-sized skillet. He smiled for the first time since their disastrous trip to town. She felt herself responding to that wonderful sight.

"Feeling brave are we?" He indicated her attempt at cooking.

"I know I'm hungry and I hope you are too."

"I could eat. Are you ready for your first cooking lesson?" He went to the hook and grabbed the apron hanging there. As he put it over her head, she recalled fondly the first time she saw him in that feminine

garment. He still exuded all male in spite of the frilly apron he wore.

“I’m ready, if you are.” She challenged back.

“The trick is to keep the fire even. If you get the wood burning too hot, it can be difficult to control the heat. I make the fire hotter in the back of the stove. That way I can pull the skillet to the front and slow down the cooking.”

He put the iron skillet on the front of the stove and added the butter. As she watched, he moved the skillet to the back and she saw that the butter was melting much faster. “See?” He questioned. “See how moving the skillet from the front to the back allows you to control the speed and heat?”

“I see.” She was fascinated with watching him.

“Ready to try and make an omelet?” He challenged.

“You betcha!” She stepped forward and grabbed the eggs. After breaking several in a bowl, she stirred them and then moved to put the concoction into the heated skillet. Using the pot holder, she moved the pan to the front of the stove and watched as the eggs slowly started cooking. She carefully moved the pan towards the middle of the stove and watched the eggs cooking faster. Liking the heat at this placement, she reached for the other ingredients. “What do you want in yours?”

“Load it up. I like it all.” He watched her joy with fascination. She was a quick learner and he could see the satisfaction she was gaining by her newfound talent on the older stove. Tuck stood back while she added the ingredients and deftly turned the heated

omelet. As soon as he saw it was almost ready, he reached for plates from the cupboard. She slid the hot food onto the waiting plate and started her own.

“Go ahead. Sit down and eat while it’s hot. Mine will be ready shortly.” She commanded gently.

Very soon, her food was ready and she put the hot omelet on the waiting plate. She sat down at the small kitchen table and they ate in silence. After their meal, she rose and went to the sink to wash up the dishes.

“I’ll help.” He got up and grabbed a dish towel to dry the plates as she washed.

Suddenly their hands touched as she handed him the plate she held. She felt the energy at that moment and looked up to find him staring down at her. He felt it too, she thought.

“You asked what I was hiding,” Tuck stated quietly while never taking his eyes from hers. “This is what I didn’t want you to see.” He took the plate, set it on the counter and softly took her by the shoulders. He lowered his head toward hers and she knew without panic that he was going to kiss her. She wanted this, craved this, and didn’t want him to stop. His lips met hers and for a few seconds, he just caressed hers tenderly. The feeling was erotic, sensual and yet, tender and caring. He deepened the kiss and soon she realized her arms had wrapped around his neck, drawing him nearer to her hungry body. She followed his example and gave of herself, tasting, and teasing.

All too soon, he ended the kiss. His voice was ragged and just above a whisper when he finally spoke. “I was unexpectedly jealous when I saw you with the sheriff. I know we have only known each other for

just a day or two. I didn't want to admit it to myself, let alone to you to know that I feel something for you."

"I don't know what to say." She responded with her voice weakened and her breath coming hard. He was right. These feelings were all too soon and she wasn't sure how to handle them. She did have strong feelings for this mystery man. His kisses stirred her like no others had in her entire life.

"Aubrie, it's okay. Don't over analyze this. Let's just enjoy today." He held her tightly in his arms and she rested her head in his strong muscular chest. This was so much better than the cold, distant atmosphere they had experienced this afternoon. They stood there for a few moments, when suddenly a huge crashing noise sounded from outside.

Tuck let her go and quickly ran to the front door. As he reached to open the heavy, oak door, Aubrie stopped him. "Look, Tuck! The tree out front has been blown down. If you open the door we might not get it closed again." She was looking out the front window and pointed in the direction she was glancing.

They both stared out into the now darkening skies and saw that the huge oak had indeed been blown down. The wind was howling even stronger than before and they saw that a light snow had started falling.

"I was afraid of this." He stated with concern. "We've had a very mild winter and Mother Nature is making up for it today. I think we're in for a very trying night." He made eye contact with Aubrie and caught the fear in her eyes.

Six

He moved to the kitchen and went into the pantry. She followed out of fear. He grabbed a couple of the oil lamps from the back shelf and headed back into the front room, handing her one. "Aubrie, we'll be fine. This old house has stood through many winters far worse than this storm. We just need to be prepared. The lights will inevitably go out..."

Just as he was talking the power did indeed flicker and ultimately go dark. The only light was from the wood burning stove in the front room. Tuck placed the first lamp on the end table and quickly lit it. Soon a warm glow filled the room in a shadowy light. Aubrie stayed close to him. This was not something she was used to at all.

"I'll save this one for upstairs." He indicated the lamp that he sat down next to the lighted one.

"How long do storms last here? Will we get much snow?" She questioned nervously. It dawned on her that they were trapped together in this house, at this moment, and just after he admitted having feelings for her. She knew she was attracted to Tuck, but beyond that she hadn't allowed herself the luxury of thinking past that fact.

“Sit down, get comfortable. Have you ever played cribbage?” He took a deck of cards and a wooden board with pegs out of the drawer in the end table. He sat them on the coffee table and waited patiently for her to sit down on the other end of the couch.

“I don’t play card games.” She finally gave in and plopped on the end of the sofa.

“Don’t or can’t?” He dared.

She let out a big sigh. The storm outside was reaching new heights of wind and the snow was falling much harder now as she looked out the living room picture window. Resigned to their circumstances, she looked at Tuck and admitted. “I don’t know how. I never played games as a child. I was too busy taking care of the household and dad.”

“This is a game that is generally played by older folks. In fact, it was the only card game allowed in the prison on Alcatraz.” He was shuffling the cards as he spoke.

“Alcatraz?” She questioned with surprise. “What a strange fact.”

“Look it up on your computer. You like verifying facts. I’m sure you will find my details accurate.” He dealt out six cards to each of them. He encouraged her to pick up the cards and went on to explain the rules of the game. “We’ll play a few hands face up so you can grasp the game. Once you are comfortable with the nuances, we can play for keeps.”

It took several hands before she felt ready to tackle the game. Aubrie knew she had always had a competitive side to her nature, but this card game with Tuck

was bringing out the beast in her, encouraging her adamant desire to win.

In just a few minutes, the game was complete with Tuck as the winner. Immediately, she challenged him again.

“Okay, I think I understand the strategy now. Let’s play for real.”

“Real? Do you mean put your money where your mouth is?” Tuck grinned that heart stomping smile that made her heart beat harder and faster. “How much money do you want to put on the game, Triple A?”

“How about five dollars?” She boldly taunted him.

He laughed at the gauntlet she had just thrown down. “You’re on! Be prepared to pay up, little lady.”

They played for a little over an hour and he beat her each time. She took it well but was determined to learn how to play better for the next time. Aubrie didn’t like to lose.

“I think we’ve had enough. This snowstorm is going to last all night and we’ve got to stoke the fireplaces. Do you want to take these downstairs or choose the one upstairs in your room?” He rose and stretched. She tried not to watch the display of muscles as he raised his hands over his head and extended his height. She failed miserably.

“I’ll take the fireplace in my bedroom.” She got up from the sofa and started to head up the stairs when she turned to him. “Tuck, there isn’t a fireplace in your room, what are you going to do to keep warm?”

His eyes twinkled a vivid green in the light of the lamp. "What do you have in mind?" He teased. He chuckled as he saw her nervously avoiding his glance. "Aubrie?" He prompted.

"I was merely concerned about you not freezing to death overnight." She countered. "If you do, who's going to fix breakfast?" With that, she bounded up the stairs and promptly went to the fireplace in her bedroom. Carefully she put another log into the fire and used the poker to stir up the ashes. It was cozy, but somehow it seemed a bit lonely in her room. She changed into her comfortable clothes and crawled up on her big bed. She sat there in the glow of the fireplace, having not lit a lamp as the power was still out, and watched the flames jump and crackle. Her mind took over and she gave it free reign. She wanted Tuck. He had reached a side of her that no other man had in her short life. He teased her, he challenged her, and he excited her. What if she invited him to spend the night in her warm, cozy bed? What then? She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

She got up and shut the door to her bedroom. But as she crawled in between the sheets of her fluffy bed, she found herself waiting to hear his footsteps on the stairs. She glanced toward the windows in her bedroom and realized that the snow was now coming down hard and steady. Phil and Tuck were right, they were in for a heck of a storm.

She must have dozed off, because she awoke to find the fireplace had grown cold. She climbed out of her bed, shivering and went to the wood box. Aubrie found some kindling and threw the small pieces onto

the still glowing ashes. As soon as they started to burn, she added some of the other smaller logs. In just a few minutes, she had a warm fire going again. She sat down on the hearth to get herself warm again. Her thoughts strayed to Tuck. She had missed his steps on the stairs and he must be in his room. Guilt nagged at her as she thought of how cold it must be in his room without a heat source.

Just then a small knock at her bedroom door, startled her out of her thoughts. "Aubrie, are you awake? I thought I heard you stir."

She got up and opened the door. He stood there in his sweatpants and a tee shirt. His feet were bare and she could see that his hair was thoroughly mussed.

"Come in, it's warmer in here." She opened the door fully and motioned for him to step inside. He quickly complied and went straight to the fireplace.

"I thought I heard you up. Are you okay?" His voice was gruff with sleepiness. He sat on the hearth and put his feet up to get them warmer.

"Yes, I'm fine. I woke up because it was getting cold in here. Tuck, we've got to fix that heater. It has to be the number one priority!" She exclaimed and went to stand beside him.

"Triple A, we will go over your list in the morning. Right now I suggest we try to get a good night's sleep. The way this snow is falling could mean challenges for tomorrow."

She slowly responded to his statement. "And how do you think we can get a good night's sleep?" She was half excited and half afraid of his response.

“Aubrie, we are both fully clothed and this room is the warmest in the house. You are a researcher and you should know that the body warmth of two is far better than trying to keep warm by yourself.” He smiled that infamous grin that worked wonders on her normal, reasonable logic.

She slowly turned her gaze toward the big, fluffy, comfortable bed and tried to imagine her and Tuck in there.

“Don’t overthink it, just agree to it.” He stood up and took hold of her hand. He led her across the room to stand beside the bed. “Aubrie,” he gently tipped her head up to meet his eyes. “We aren’t going to do anything that you don’t want to do. I just want to warm up and sleep through the night.”

Trust him. Betsy’s words once again reflected in her mind. He had confessed in the kitchen earlier that he had feelings for her. He didn’t have to do that, she mused. Finally, she crawled into the bed and patted the space beside her. “I like the right side of the bed. I hope you can sleep on the left.”

He got into the left side of the bed and snuggled down into the covers. She laid her head on the pillow, but was not able to completely relax. She lay stiff as a board on her side. The only light in the room was from the fireplace and she was grateful that he couldn’t see her clearly.

“Sweetheart, this only works if we are close to each other.”

She could hear the laughter in his voice as he tried to hide it. She could feel the mattress shift as he moved over to her side of the bed. As he hugged her

tightly to his side, she immediately felt the warmth of his body. Aubrie took a deep breath and relaxed into the circle of his arms. This did feel good. She did trust him, was her last conscious thought before she fell soundly asleep.

Aubrie roused slowly as she moved in her bed and found herself next to a body, a very hard muscular body. She gradually opened her eyes and looked at the man lying next to her. Tuck's chest rose and fell rhythmically as he still slept. It was morning, she could tell, but the usual sunlight didn't shine as brightly through her bedroom window. The winter storm must still be wreaking havoc on their world, she thought. She couldn't tell if it was still snowing though.

She tried to move away carefully without waking the sleeping man. Suddenly, she was caught by his steel grasp. "Don't go yet." His gruff voiced requested gently. "I'm not ready to give up your warmth."

She let him pull her back into his side. Aubrie too was reluctant to give up their warmth. What did all this mean? He felt good; being in his arms felt good. But, what did all this mean to their living in the same house?

"Triple A, you've left me again." He seemed to be able to sense when she was letting her thoughts run wild. "Aubrie, we just spent the night keeping warm and getting some much needed rest. That's all. Nothing else." He stated matter-of-factly.

"Sorry." Was all she could manage.

"No sorry needed. Are you ready to get up and get this house warmed up? He let her go and sat up on

his side of the bed. "I will start the downstairs. You stir up this fire and get it going."

"Is that necessary? I mean we won't be up here until later tonight. Why do we have to keep this fire burning?"

"With no heater in this house, all fires must be kept hot in order to get this old girl warmed up. Tonight will be better than last night if we keep up the stoves and fireplaces." He stretched his body as he spoke and moved slowly around to her side.

"Ready?" He held out his hand to help her get started.

"No, I'm kind of liking this warm cozy bed." She teased.

He bent over her and lightly put a tender kiss on her lips. "I ain't no saint, Aubrie, and spending the night with you by my side has already taxed my good intentions. Now, get out of that bed, woman, or suffer the consequences of your decision."

She jumped up and headed to the hallway before he stopped her. "I put the chamber pot behind the screen in your room. We can't try a trip to the out-house just yet."

How did this man get so in tune with her needs and thoughts? She felt like they had known each other for years instead of just days. "Before you take another mind trip, I'm going to go out and make some yellow snow. So don't peek out your window!" And with that, he bounded down the stairs, laughing out loud.

Just like a little boy, she laughed to herself. Do they ever grow up? Would I want him to? Soon she

had taken care of her morning issues and was building up the fire in her fireplace. She wanted to go downstairs and help with breakfast. As she passed her window, she stopped for a split second and found herself tempted to look out and see if she could see him.

But, the sensible, responsible side of Aubrie took over and she avoided the temptation.

Downstairs, she found that he had already gotten the fire in the pot belly stove in the front room as well as the dining room. He was standing by the stove and was feeding the fire. "Did you peek?" He looked at her with a grin on his face. Those eyes of his were definitely vivid green, a color she noticed appeared when he was in a teasing mood.

"Peek? She peered at him in amazement. He couldn't know that she thought about it, but it seemed that Tuck could read her mind. "Why would I want to peek?" She tried to act nonchalant.

He just laughed and went back to his task. "Do you want me to fix breakfast? Or are you ready for another cooking lesson?"

"I can handle this. Isn't there something more manly that you could be doing, like gathering fire wood?" She shoved at him playfully and moved him out of the way.

"How about another omelet?"

"Sounds great. I'm going upstairs and change so I can go and do my manly tasks." He swatted at her bottom as he walked by.

Aubrie smiled and started humming a little tune she remembered from her aunt. She started prepping

the ingredients for their breakfast. She was just putting his omelet in the skillet when he returned wearing his jeans and a warm flannel shirt. He sat down at the kitchen table and put on his shoes and socks while Aubrie finished their meal and sat it down in front of him.

“Eat up! You’ll need your strength to do all those masculine things that you have to do.” She laughed as he flexed his muscles.

“And what little lady things are you going to do while I’m working hard at keeping this old house warm?”

“I think I need to start in the attic. If I’m going to clean out the bedrooms, I’ll need a place to store all the furniture and personal things that I don’t want guests to have to deal with.” She finished her meal and sat back.

“Tuck, I think we need to get to my list and see if you agree with the priorities. Can we do that later today?” She suddenly realized how much she was depending on him. This thought scared her a bit. “If you’re too busy, we can do it another time.” She offered.

“We can do it later in the day, maybe after lunch. That should give you time to get started on the attic and I can make sure we have enough firewood on the porch to get us through this storm.” He stood up and went to the hooks at the back door. As he grabbed his jacket and gloves, he turned to Aubrie and shot a final word at her before he went out into the cold. “Don’t get too dirty doing all that little lady work.”

Oh, that man could be so dangerous to my world, she thought but couldn’t stop the huge grin from

crossing her face. "What do you mean? He already is." She stated to no one, but hearing the words out loud made her stop in her tracks. I've got to get busy and stay on plan.

She put the food away and as she did, thought about the electricity. It had been off and on throughout the night, but the refrigerator seemed to be holding its own. Everything was cold enough so there was no danger of things spoiling. With that small task done, she climbed the stairs and found her way to the opening in the ceiling for the attic.

As she pulled the rope, left dangling in the hallway, she couldn't help but remember another fond time with her aunt. They used to come up into the attic and play dress up. Aunt Alta had kept a trunk full of old dresses, gloves, hats, and shoes. Both of them would dress up and play tea party. That was one of the things she loved most about her aunt, she was never afraid to let the child inside of her come out and play. Someday, she dreamed, I'll have a child to play dress up and tea parties with too.

Carefully she climbed up the drop down ladder into the attic. Thank goodness the electricity was back on and she was able to pull the cord on the light bulb at the top of the ladder. It didn't let off much light but enough for her to see to the end of the room. She crossed cautiously stepping through and around all the stuff in the attic toward the window. Once there, she pushed the curtain open allowing as much light as possible into the attic. The snow was still falling and the clouds prevented the Arizona sunshine from

glowing through but a little brightness helped the dark interior.

As she turned to survey the amount of stuff located in the attic, Aubrie exclaimed. "Auntie, didn't you ever throw anything away!"

As a child, this room had seemed huge, but today as Aubrie looked about the entire room, she saw that it was bigger than the normal attics of today's houses. It stretched the length and width of the house. She thought suddenly, maybe eventually I could add walls and offer this space as loft rooms. There was plenty of area for that type of accommodations.

She looked around and sat down on top of an old chest. For just a moment, she tried to formulate a plan of action. Perhaps I should just start at the back of the attic and move things in an orderly fashion. Aubrie got up and went to the back corner of the attic. She started moving pieces of furniture on one side and boxes of miscellaneous items on the other, creating an aisle in the middle for easier access.

After several hours of organizing the items in the attic, Aubrie looked around with satisfaction. She felt dusty, dirty, and was actually starting to sweat. She peeled off the sweatshirt she had on earlier and was standing there in her tee shirt and sweatpants when she heard Tuck call her name from the hallway below the attic ladder.

"Aubrie, are you still up there?" He peered at the ladder waiting for her to respond.

She leaned over and stuck her head out the attic opening. "Absolutely! What have you been doing? I've been working extremely hard and I might say it

wasn't all little lady work!" She laughed and he felt himself responding to the warmth she generated by her cheerfulness.

"I'm done with my manly work and wondered if you were ready for lunch and a break." He smiled up at her.

"I have one trunk I want to go through, but I could be ready in about a half an hour." She offered. "I would love a bath or a shower. I don't suppose that's possible, though."

"Sorry, Triple A, we are not equipped for that yet. As soon as this snow lets up, Phil and I are ready to get the water in those bathrooms." He apologized, but his eyes were the usual green when he was teasing. She was suspicious, but said nothing.

"See you in a bit. I'll call when I have lunch ready." He left the hallway, humming a little tune as he went down the stairs.

She went back to her work and headed straight for the trunk that she had sat on when first entering the attic. As she opened the chest, she stared at the belongings. Her aunt must have kept every piece of paper, every letter, every card, and it was going to be a huge job trying to organize and sort through all of it. Her curiosity was getting the best of her as she carefully lifted each item from the trunk. She put the cards in a separate pile and then tried to put any legal-looking document in its own pile. I can sort through each pile after lunch, she thought to herself and grimaced as she looked at the growing stacks of papers.

When she finally got to the bottom of the old trunk, she exclaimed in surprise as she found a big old duffle-type bag stuffed in one corner. She had expected only papers in this trunk, and to find a canvas bag was a treat. I wonder what this can be? As she tried to lift the bag, she realized how heavy it was and stood up to give herself more leverage. With a grunt and extra effort she lifted the bag from its spot in the corner of the old trunk. It was heavy and she only managed to get it over the side when it fell to the floor. The sounds coming from the contents of the bag were noisy and made a curious clanking sound. She was definitely inquisitive about what was inside the bag, but was interrupted before she could open it.

"Aubrie, are you ready? Lunch is waiting." She heard Tuck's voice from the bottom of the stairs.

"Coming!" She yelled back. To the bag sitting on the floor she spoke, "You'll have to wait. It's lunch time and the cook is very impatient." Aubrie climbed down the ladder from the attic and headed to the kitchen.

"Hmmm, smells good." She went over and grabbed a cup of coffee. "What's cooking?"

"Tuck's famous homemade chili." He spoke proudly. "It's the best chili this side of the Rio Grande!"

"My, aren't we modest?" She sat at the table and watched him stirring the spicy smelling brew.

"How did you do with the attic?" He turned around and questioned.

For a moment, her breath caught as she took in the sight of him. Oh, Aubrie, you've got it bad. She shook her head to clear those thoughts away. "I got it some-

what organized. The furniture is on one side and boxes full of mysterious items are on the other.”

“What about the trunk? Anything interesting in there?” He probed.

Aubrie suddenly got a strange feeling about his inquiries into the contents of the attic. Call it intuition, or a sixth sense, but something was wrong here. He seemed way too interested in the contents of an old attic belonging to an elderly woman he never knew. She felt the same way when questioned by Sheriff Clarke.

Aubrie hated lying so she just avoided answering him. “What about you? I hope all of your manly tasks weren’t too hard?” She tried to make light of the situation and direct him away from the attic and its contents.

“I have a surprise for you after lunch.” He stated confidently as he placed two hot bowls of steaming soup on the table. “Eat up!”

They ate their lunch quickly. “Tuck, that was delicious! You could be right about it being the best chili!” She wanted to forget the uncomfortable thoughts from earlier. She was enjoying his company. Maybe it’s being stuck here in the house with him, maybe it’s the snow and the gloomy weather outside, she reasoned with herself. Maybe it’s cabin fever. She had heard of such a thing. I’ll have to look that up if the internet is working, she thought to herself.

“So, what do you think?” Tuck asked and she realized that she hadn’t been paying attention. He could see by the expression on her face that she didn’t have a clue about what he’d been saying.

"Triple A, you've got to stop taking those mental vacations and pay attention." He joked with her.

"I'm so sorry. What were you saying?"

"I said after lunch I could help you with the attic, if you want." He offered excitedly. "I'm real good at lifting heavy stuff."

"Well, you could probably help by bringing the furniture out of the bedrooms so we can put it in the attic. That way, I can start renovating the rooms and getting them ready for guests." She hoped to keep him busy helping but not actually in the attic sorting through her aunt's belongings. Aubrie didn't know why, but she just felt this was something she needed to do by herself.

"Sure." He quickly agreed. "Ready?"

"What about that surprise?"

"That can wait until we get at least one of those bedrooms empty. It shouldn't take us too long." He rose and took both dishes to the sink to soak. He moved the chili to a cold side of the stove and indicated for her to follow him.

"Let's go and you can tell me which room to start with."

"I think we should go with that front room, the one next to mine." She felt like things were back to normal between them.

They went up the stairs and she pointed to the room. "If you could start by bringing up the small stuff, I'll help with the larger pieces."

"Yes, ma'am!" He saluted.

He went into the bedroom and she went back upstairs. She wanted to see what was in that duffel bag

before he came up with a piece of furniture. She quickly went straight to the bag lying on the floor next to the trunk. She examined the outside of the bag for any identifying marks and found none. She zipped open the bag and stared in amazement at the contents.

She heard Tuck as he slowly climbed up that ladder. In haste, she zipped the bag shut and shoved it behind the old trunk. She turned just as his head poked above the opening to the attic and went over to help him with the small nightstand.

“Here is the first of a few pieces I can carry by myself.” He stated firmly.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” She admonished him. “I can come down and help.”

He came all the way up and put the stand down where she pointed. He looked around and surveyed the huge room. “Wow! Your aunt must have saved everything.”

“Yes, I’m afraid she did. It’s going to be a huge task to get through all of this stuff. I’m going to have to decide what to keep and what to get rid of.”

“Did you find any treasure?” He asked harmlessly.

Once again, her radar was up. The question seemed innocent enough and yet, she felt there was more to his curiosity than what it appeared.

“No, no treasure here.” She avoided looking at the bag she had stuffed behind the trunk. “Let’s go down and get the rest of that room’s furniture. Then we can call it a day.”

They worked for another hour and finally had the bedroom cleared of all the furniture and belongings.

She surveyed the attic and was pleased that there was still plenty of room for the other things from all the other bedrooms.

“Ready for your surprise?” Tuck interrupted her thoughts.

“Yes, you go on down and I’ll just make sure the light is out and I’ll join you in a few minutes.” She hoped he wouldn’t question her further.

“Sure. I’ll just get your surprise ready.” He seemed like a child with a secret on Christmas day.

Once he had left the attic, she went to the duffle bag and opened it again. She stared at the bag full of casino gaming chips. She lifted several of the chips and let them run through her hands back into the bag. She looked further for any identification in the bag. She finally found a luggage type tag attached to the zipper on the inside pocket. As she turned it over, her breath caught in her throat – Harold Jenkins! The owner of this bag of chips was the Harold Jenkins the sheriff had asked her about. What in the world was going on? Why was this bag of casino chips in her aunt’s attic? What did this have to do with the skeleton in the car in lake? What was she going to tell Tuck? What was she going to do with these chips? How much were these chips actually worth?

Seven

“Aubrie, are you coming down?” Tuck anxiously called up the ladder.

On an impulse, she took one of the chips and put it in her pocket, zipped the bag shut and put it back behind the trunk. She wasn't good at hiding her feelings and emotions, but she felt a great need to keep this a secret for a while longer until she could do some research. As she climbed down the ladder and put it back up into the ceiling, Aubrie was grabbed from behind.

“Ahhh! Tuck, what on earth are you doing?” He swung her around and set her feet back on the ground. “Ready for your surprise?”

“I'm not sure,” She hedged. “What have you got up your sleeve?” When Tuck was behaving in this fashion, she found it hard to believe there was anything dark about him or that he had any secrets.

“Come here, Triple A.” He motioned for her to come to the door of the bathroom. What she saw made her smile from ear to ear. The old fashioned bathtub with the claw feet was filled with hot, steaming water and bubbles. He had candles burning on the stand and she saw a fresh huge bath towel draped

over the shower curtain rod. "Your bath awaits!" He motioned proudly with a wave of his hand.

"Tuck, I'm speechless. How did you get this done?" She wandered further into the room. She stared at the over-sized tub filled to the brim with bubbles.

"While you were slaving away in the musty old attic, I was heating water and hauling it up here for your bath." He grinned and was obviously proud of his accomplishment. "Manly work is never done!"

"Now, get in that tub, before the water turns cold. It's still snowing outside and I have to stoke the fireplaces and stoves." He went to the door and started to shut it. "Enjoy, Aubrie. Leave some bubbles for me." He turned on some music before closing the door completely. Soft, romantic melodies filled the small room and she couldn't help but smile.

She stripped her clothes off and stepped into the wonderful, hot water. As she slid down into the deep, old tub, she felt her tired aching muscles starting to relax. She took her hair out of the usual tight pony tail and let her amber locks fall into the water. I'll figure out how to rinse it later, she mused. She listened to the wind howl outside and the music swell inside. This was absolute heaven. I'll have to remember this for my guests.

She shampooed her hair and was just trying to figure out how to rinse it when she heard a small knock at the door. "Aubrie, are you ready for a fresh bucket of water to rinse your hair?" How in the world did he know? Was this man a mystic... a fortune teller?

“Don’t come in!” She was suddenly conscious of her naked state, as the bubbles were starting to disappear.

“Don’t worry, unlike you I won’t peek. Just pull the shower curtain around and I’ll set the bucket on the floor beside the tub.” He laughed out loud. “I brought your robe for you to put on when you’re done.”

As soon as she heard the door shut, she reached for the bucket of fresh warm water and rinsed her hair. It all felt so wonderful and she was extremely grateful for Tuck’s thoughtfulness. She stood up and towel-dried her freshly cleaned body. Her muscles ached a bit from the unusual physical work of cleaning the attic and hauling stuff from the first bedroom up the stairs. As she stepped from the tub, she noticed a fresh glass of white wine poured and waiting on the basin stand.

Aubrie couldn’t help but grin with appreciation. She wasn’t one to drink but so many things had changed in her life since she came to Prescott, why not add something else new and exciting to the mix? She lifted the glass and took a delicate sip of the fruity nectar. “Mmmm,” She commented aloud. “Not bad.” This could be a man I could fall for, she thought boldly. Maybe I already have, she thought further. Could that be so wrong? It is rather soon. She let her mind go free as she mused over the events since her arrival here at the lake house. He had already expressed that he had feelings for her and she had to admit that it all felt so good, so right. What harm could come from this?

She sipped again from the glass of chardonnay and felt the warmth from her bath soothing her tired

muscles. She dried herself and put on the robe Tuck had left for her. She was just towel drying her long auburn locks when he once again knocked lightly on the door.

“Aubrie, you done? I could sure use that bath myself.”

“Sure,” she replied, “Come on in. I’m decent.”

He opened the door and took in the sight of her with her hair hanging loosely down her back. His breath caught in his throat as he watched her combing through those beautiful, red curls. This was a sight he had not yet seen and he liked the look.

“Your hair is beautiful. You should never put it up again.” His voice was raspy with emotion.

As soon as he spoke, he realized his comments caused her to once again become self-conscious and shy. She stopped her motions and slowly turned to face him. She blushed a most delicate pink but still stared him in the eyes. “I’ve never met anyone like you before.” She quietly stated.

“Is that good?”

“Yes, it’s very good. I like it and I like you.” She warmed to his grin.

He came closer and pulled her long, still damp tresses into his grasp. Gently he ran his construction roughened hands through her wet strands. “It’s like fire I can touch.” He took the comb from her hand and gently started stroking it through her hair, raking it into gentle falls down her back.

His actions surprised her into stillness. Aubrie allowed his tender ministrations to calm her beating heart. What an intimate act, she thought to herself.

Having a man caress her hair was yet another new experience and one she was immensely enjoying.

“Tuck, you’re bath water is getting cold. I think you need to get in there before it’s too late.” She was reluctant to break the spell they were under, but practicality once again ruled her actions.

“You’re probably right. There is a bucket of hot water on the stove. Do you think you could bring it up the stairs?” He let go of her hair and turned. Tuck reached and pulled his shirt up over his head, revealing his tanned muscular chest.

She didn’t turn immediately but reveled in the sight of his near perfect body. She found herself longing to touch him and run her hands up his torso over his shoulders. Aubrie had never felt these urges before and didn’t know how to react with him.

“Give in, Triple A,” his voice was soft and near. “You want to touch me and I want to feel your hands on my skin. Please.” He tenderly encouraged her to go with her feelings.

She tentatively reached up and put her palm on his chest. She didn’t move but instead felt his pounding heart beneath her hand. He stood there motionless, allowing her time and freedom to experiment. He somehow knew that she was new to this and he didn’t want to break the enchantment they seemed to be under.

She looked up and their eyes met. Slowly he lowered his head and she raised hers to meet his waiting lips. Oh, how she wanted this, how she longed for this, and so much more. This time, she didn’t want to think, she just wanted to give in and feel. She quiv-

ered as he moved her robe just off her shoulders and kissed gently down her neck. Oh, God, this felt so good, she trembled with wanting. She stroked her hand down his chest lower to the edge of his jeans. Tuck was lean and she enjoyed the power she had as his breath caught in his throat at her touch.

She hesitated slightly and he stilled her hand. "Aubrie, if this is too soon, we can wait." His words brought a new reality to their situation. She was torn in two with wanting him and yet, still needing something more from him. Trust him. Betsy's words once again infiltrated her mind. Do I? She questioned herself. Can I?

He felt her pull away mentally and he stepped away from their embrace. He put his hand under her chin and, as he raised her face, he saw the tears forming in her eyes. "Triple A, no regrets, no tears. This can wait until you are ready and the time is right. I've heard that all good things are worth waiting for and I believe you, my sweet lady, are worth waiting for."

She pulled her robe back up and secured the tie around her waist. Was this man too good to be true? This was too much for her to process right now. She was extremely grateful that he allowed her an out, for now. She put on a brave smile and headed to the door of the bathroom. "I'll bring up that bucket of hot water."

Before she could leave, he grabbed the glass of wine and handed it to her. "Here, take this to your room and after you bring up that bucket of water, sit and enjoy the fire." His voice didn't betray the hurt he was feeling at her withdrawal. He wanted her badly,

but having her trust was more important right now. Soon enough he could answer his growing need to possess her as his own.

She left the bathroom before he could disrobe and soon heard him slosh down into the tub of water. She sat the wine glass down in her room and quickly went downstairs to retrieve the bucket of hot water from the stove. It was not an easy task, but she managed to get it up the stairs without too much spilling and found herself staring at the closed bathroom door.

She took a deep breath and knocked softly. "Tuck, I'm coming in. Pull the shower curtain closed and I'll put the bucket on the floor for you." She heard his familiar laughter in response.

She slowly opened the door and as soon as she saw that he had closed the curtain, crossed the floor with the hot water.

"Here you go. Enjoy." She turned and left before he could see her embarrassment.

As she returned to her bedroom, Aubrie retrieved the glass of wine and plopped down on the lounge next to the fireplace. She stared at the flames popping and sipped on the wine. What a guy! She let her thoughts run wild. She did want him... there was something between them. She stopped herself from defining what that something was. She could hear the water draining out of the tub and knew that he would soon be coming out. Her stomach clenched with the nerves she was feeling.

She turned to look out the window in her room. Darkness was definitely falling even though it was still early in the evening. She could see that the snow

had stopped and was a bit sad to realize that their time alone would be coming to an end. Maybe it was for the best, she pondered. That way I won't have to face my feelings for him.

She took another sip and finally felt herself relaxing as the alcohol eased her thoughts. I do want him, she admitted to herself. She thought about the feel of his rock hard chest beneath her hand and a deep sigh left her body. I have lived my life by the rules since I was a child, she continued her wayward thoughts, and I have been reasonably happy. But... but is reasonably happy enough? Her dad would say it was all she needed, but what would Auntie say if she was here?

"Triple A, you're doing it again." His voice startled her out of her deep thoughts. She sat up, almost spilling her wine and turned to see him standing beside the fireplace. She hadn't turned on the lights and all she saw was his profile lit by the flash of the fire. He was rubbing his hair dry with a towel and she admired the play of his muscles in his chest.

"Aubrie?" He once again tried to get her attention.

"Sorry, it's been a habit for so long." She tried to smile and quit staring at him, but to no avail.

"Are you hungry? We didn't eat any dinner and it's getting late." He kept up drying his hair as he spoke.

"I'm not really hungry for a big meal. I guess this wine has filled me up."

"I'll be right back." He left her sitting there on the lounge.

In just a few short minutes, he came back upstairs with a bottle of wine and a plate of snacks. "How about this?" He placed the plate on the end of the

lounge and reached for her glass. The plate held sliced cheese, crackers, and some ham sliced into small bite-sized pieces.

"That looks great." She sat up to allow him room to sit on the chair with her. Aubrie reached for a cracker with some cheese and ham. He added wine into her glass and poured one for himself. He held up his for her to toast.

She raised her glass and clinked it against his and waited for him to speak.

"Here's to the storm ending and life getting back to normal at Hassayampa Lake." His green eyes stared into hers for a few seconds before she looked away. "You have to look one in the eyes when we toast, otherwise...."

"Otherwise, what?" She prompted.

"Otherwise, you won't ever have sex again." His grin reached all the way to those wonderful green eyes of his.

"I've never heard of anything so absurd!" She exclaimed.

"Are you willing to take the chance that it's not true?" He mocked her.

She looked him straight in those beautiful eyes of his and once again touched her glass against his. "Here's to having sex, then." She smiled back at him.

Tuck marveled as the light shimmered on her rosy locks and in her soft blue eyes. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known and he wanted her badly. If only? He stopped those thoughts before they could fully develop. There were other things more important right now.

“Eat up.” He handed the plate of snacks to her and sat down on the end of the lounge. “The snow has stopped and tomorrow we need to cut up that tree out front and free the porch and door from debris. You will help me, won’t you?”

“Of course, although I have never handled any sort of power equipment like a chain saw. But, I am willing to learn.” She helped herself to another cracker with ham and cheese.

They ate in silence for a few minutes and once the plate was clean, Tuck got up and stoked the fireplace. “It’s time for sleep, Triple A. You’ll be warm for the night.”

He grabbed the empty plate and wine glasses and headed for the door. “Sleep tight, Aubrie.”

“You aren’t going to stay here?” She was startled at his retreat.

He sat the dishes down on the stand and came back to face her. “Aubrie, I’ll be fine in my own room. The house has warmed up considerably.”

She stood up to face him. “I don’t want you to get cold.”

Her voice was soft as she spoke.

“Lady, I’ll be fine.” He raised his hand to stroke her freshly cleaned face. “I don’t want to push you into something more than you want. But, Triple A, I’m not a saint and your touch has pushed me beyond my limits.”

He slowly lowered his head and placed a light kiss on her lips. “See you in the morning.”

Eight

It proved to be a long, lonely night for Aubrie. She had only slept with him for one night but that simple act of companionship had left an indelible impression on her. She missed him and his warmth. In the wee hours of the morning, before light had dawned, she finally gave up trying to sleep. Aubrie stepped out of bed and went to stoke the fire. Tuck was right about the house being warmer than the night before. She went to the window and looked out at the dark world surrounding her new home. The sky was clear and the moon lit up the new-fallen snow. She could see the stars twinkle in the sky as the clouds had moved on, leaving a clear, calm landscape in their wake.

Maybe I can get some work done, she thought as she grabbed her laptop. Hopefully the internet is working fine, she implored as she started up the computer. In no time at all, she was logged on and updating her priority list. Aubrie stared at the growing list with amazement. Thank goodness Aunt Alta had left her with a considerable sum of money. "This list is going to take a big chunk out of that nest egg."

As soon as her thoughts concentrated on the money, it reminded her of the casino chip she had found

in the attic. She dashed from the bed and found her dirty jeans. She reached into the front pocket and retrieved the chip. As she turned it over and over in her hands, she marveled at the craftsmanship. The chip was green and indicated it was originally worth \$25.00 from the Stardust Casino in Las Vegas. Living in Nevada, she was aware of casinos but was never much of a gambler and was not knowledgeable of poker chips as a whole.

She returned to the bed and her laptop with the chip in hand. Her fingers flew over the keyboard as she typed in the information from the chip. There was no date on the chip, so she could only search through pages and pages of images of chips. "This is not going to be easy." She pondered out loud.

As a former librarian, conducting research was one of her favorite tasks. She actually thrived on digging for answers.

Aubrie lost time when she was in the throes of an investigation and was surprised when she heard a knock at her bedroom door. As she looked up, she saw that the sun was shining through the windows in her room. She pushed the chip underneath the pillow and shut her laptop before going to answer the door.

"Hi." She breathed her answer as she took in the sight of him.

"Hello, yourself." He came into the room and looked around. "Sleep okay?" His eyes landed on the laptop sitting on her bed.

"Not really. I woke up earlier and found that I needed to get some work done on my priority list." She moved to take the laptop from her bed and placed

it on the desk across the room. As she saw him start to sit down on her bed, she quickly darted back to stop him. "We'd better get going on that tree this morning." She stepped between him and the bed and sat down on the edge.

Her nervousness wasn't wasted on him. "Let me help you make your bed and then I'll go down and start breakfast while you dress."

She jumped up and stalled him by pressing herself against him in an intimate fashion. "I wouldn't want you to have to do little lady work. I'll make the bed and you go down and get the stove going." She reached up and pressed a light kiss on his surprised lips.

Okay, he thought, Triple A, I'll give you this one. He knew she was hiding something, but now was not the time to press for the truth. "You're so thoughtful, Triple A. I'll go down and get breakfast started. We're going to need lots of energy to trudge through that snow and get that tree cut up." He patted her bottom as she turned to start making the bed. She was startled at his touch, but quickly covered up her nervousness by pushing him gently towards the door.

As soon as he left the room, she quickly shut the door. She hurried over to the pillow and found the chip. What am I going to do with this? She looked about the room and in the end decided that back under the pillow was really the safest place for now. She made the bed and hurriedly dressed.

As she shut her door and rushed down the stairs, she glanced back at her room. Keeping secrets and not telling the truth were not things she was used to

doing, but somehow her instincts supported her decisions for now.

Down in the kitchen, Tuck started the stove and put on the coffee. His thoughts were occupied with Aubrie's secretive movements. She was definitely hiding something and his instincts told him that it was important. His feelings told him it had to do with the things in the attic. She found something and for whatever reasons, she wasn't willing to share that information with him. His contemplations were interrupted with the object of his thoughts walking into the kitchen. Aubrie strolled over feigning a casualness that her body didn't portray. She was definitely nervous.

"Want me to make breakfast today?" She asked tentatively.

"Sure, but I have to tell you, I'm starved. I want bacon, eggs, and toast. We didn't have much for dinner last night."

"Okay, not a problem. I can handle that. You sit and I'll get it started." She indicated the chair at the table.

"I think I'll go out and look at that tree while you get started. I need to go to the tool shed and get the chainsaw and some ropes." He headed to the mudroom and started putting on his heavy jacket and boots.

"Great." She agreed cheerfully. "After breakfast, you can teach me how to be a lumberjack!" She teased.

After bundling up, Tuck opened the back door and disappeared out onto the porch. Aubrie heaved a big

sigh. I'm not very good at this, she thought. I hate keeping secrets from him. Who can I tell? Who can help me? She immediately thought of Sarah. Her father works for the local casino in Tonopah and has been in the gaming business forever. He might be able to help me figure out the story behind that bag of chips in the attic.

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and quickly sent a text to Sarah begging her to call as soon as possible. She didn't have to wait long at all. "Hello, Sarah! It's so good to hear your voice." She grinned at the familiar voice and continued, "I haven't got long before he comes back. I need your help."

"Before who comes back? What took you so long to call me? I've been worried sick." Sarah pressed Aubrie for answers.

"I'm so sorry, Sarah, but I haven't got time right now to explain. Tuck might be back soon and I need to get some help from you." She turned as she heard his footsteps on the porch. "Sarah, listen to me! If this conversation gets weird, don't panic. I need you to have your dad call me later today. Okay?" Just then the back door opened and Tuck stomped the snow off his boots.

"Oh, Sarah, how wonderful to hear from you!" She portrayed a calmness she wasn't feeling. "I'm sorry I haven't called. So much has happened since I arrived. We'll have to catch up soon. I've got to go and fix breakfast." She pretended a serenity her beating heart wouldn't allow. "Call me later today, okay? I have a lot of work to do for now. Love you, miss you." And she hung up.

“Sarah?” Tuck questioned.

“Yes, Sarah is my best friend in life. I’m afraid I’ve neglected to call her since getting here. She was worried.” Aubrie went to the stove and pulled the skillet out of the cupboard. She reached for the bacon and started putting the thin slices into the pan. She kept herself busy avoiding Tuck’s gaze. She could feel he wanted more of an explanation, but wasn’t prepared to add more lies to her sins with him right now.

“How bad is the tree?” She changed the subject hoping he would not press her for more information about the call.

“It’s not as bad I suspected. There is only minor damage to the porch roof. I think we can get it cleaned up with very little effort. You still up to learning about the chainsaw?” He could see she was trying her best to distract him. All things in good time, he told himself. She won’t be able to keep her secret very long – it was too far from her nature to be dishonest.

“I think so.” She hesitated with her response. “Is it dangerous? You won’t let me get hurt, will you?”

He came to stand beside her at the stove. “Triple A, I would never allow you to get hurt. You just need to trust me.”

As time stood still, she looked him in the eye. She felt he was speaking about so much more than operating a chainsaw, but couldn’t bring herself to divulge her secret to him. Oh, if only I had known you for so much longer, she wished. I just am not sure what all of this is about, what all of this means.

“I... I do trust you, Tuck.” She stammered her reply and immediately turned back to the task of frying up the bacon.

He just chuckled under his breath and moved over to sit down at the table. “What are we having for breakfast?” He questioned her.

“I thought you wanted some bacon and eggs.” She turned to look at him. “Is that alright?”

“Triple A, anything you make is just gonna be fine. Can I help?” He offered.

“When it comes time, you can make us some toast.” She went back to the task of frying the bacon. Soon things were done and they sat down to eat. The tension was thick and it seemed that neither one of them was willing to break it.

In silence they ate and then together they cleared the breakfast dishes. Finally, Aubrie spoke, “Tuck, we can clean these dishes later. Let’s get to that tree.”

“Fine.” Was his short response. “I’ll go out and get everything ready. You get bundled up and meet me on the front porch, okay?” He gave her the space she seemed to need.

Aubrie let out her breath as Tuck disappeared outside. “Oh, what have I gotten myself into? I’m not good at deception.” Why don’t you just tell him about the poker chips? She questioned herself but came up with no immediate answers.

She went upstairs and put on some warmer clothes, grabbed her boots, and headed downstairs to join Tuck outside. She took some gloves and a scarf from the hooks in the mudroom and braced herself mentally and physically for spending the day in

Tuck's presence. Maybe we will work so hard there won't be any time for conversation, she prayed silently.

The snow-covered ground and the crisp, cold air greeted her with a shock to her system. She'd had no idea that so much snow had fallen. She followed his footsteps down the front stairs and around to the front of the house. "Oh, my!" She exclaimed as she saw the huge pine tree laying across the path and partially covering the front porch. "I thought you said it wasn't very bad!" She confronted Tuck as he was standing there assessing the situation.

"I didn't think it was at first." He walked around the fallen tree and debris. "I'm afraid that we can't bring it down today. If we tried it, we might cause some real damage to the porch." He continued staring at the mess.

"So what now?" She stammered with frustration. "First the car in the lake and now this! Is anything around here going to be easy?"

She heard his chuckle and turned quickly to confront his laughter. "What's so funny, mister? I am quickly getting sick and tired of everything taking so long to fix around here. The plumbing isn't working, the car can't be taken out of the lake until spring, and now this!" She gestured to the huge, hulking mess in front of her.

"Are you sorry, Triple A?"

"Sorry about what?" She countered.

"Sorry that you came here? Sorry that you wanted to turn this beautiful house into a viable enterprise?" He hesitated but continued, "Sorry you met me?"

His vulnerability completely stymied her. “Tuck, I would never be sorry that I met you! I never meant to hurt you.” She went to step closer, but her foot caught on a small branch and she tripped face first in the snow.

He reacted fast but not enough to stop her from falling in the foot-deep soft powder. “Aubrie,” His voice clearly showed the concern he felt. He reached her and quickly helped Aubrie roll over. “Are you okay?”

As she turned over, she took a handful of snow and shoved it into his face. Laughing, she struggled to get out of the way of his retaliation. Soon they were playing like children, throwing snowballs and trying to shove the cold, wet slush into each other’s face. The sun was shining and the air was crisp and it felt good to be alive and outside. She dodged a snowball and tried to run when she felt Tuck tackle her from behind.

She struggled but his strength held her tight as they wrestled in the cold snow. Suddenly the mood changed and she stopped her efforts to get out of his arms. He lowered his head and met her lips in a searing, desirable kiss. She wanted this man and she wanted him now. But, there could be no secrets between them. She had to tell him about the chips first.

He raised his head and looked at her with longing in his eyes. Those mysterious eyes were flashing a dark blue, right now, and she smiled at the change. “What are you smiling about?” He placed a tender kiss on her nose.

“Tuck, I need to tell you something.” She started to confess but her voice wavered as she heard the drone of a small engine coming closer. She twisted her head to find the source of that noise. Tuck quickly got up and helped her to her feet. He moved towards the snowmobile that was heading in their direction. “Phil, good to see you!”

“How’d you two do during that storm?” Phil shut the engine off and dismounted the vehicle. “Looks like you have a tree to clear. Any other damage?” He walked around the tree and surveyed the fallen pine.

“No, everything else seems to have survived just fine. It was rather cold the first night, but once you get this old gal warmed up, she holds the heat really good. Is Betsy okay?”

“Yeah, she’s such a trooper. She never complains. I just try to make her comfortable. We will need to get the tractor out and try to plow a path so we can get to town. She needs to see her doctor tomorrow.” Phil spoke with pride of his wife’s strength to fight her illness.

“We can do that now, if you want. This tree will wait until the snow melts and we can use a backhoe to lift it from the porch. It’s not going anywhere right now.” He turned to Aubrie. “You stay here and keep the house warm. We’re going to get the tractor and try to plow the lane to the road.”

“Is there anything I can do for Betsy?” She offered.

“No, she’s resting and keeping herself bundled up. You stay warm, too.” Phil answered.

“Have you called the county to get their plows on the road?” Tuck questioned Phil as they both went towards the snowmobile.

Aubrie could no longer hear their conversation and moved around the side of the house to go back into the warmth of the kitchen. She wished she could have gone and seen Betsy, but the road was covered in snow and she didn’t want to chance getting lost in it. She shook the snow off her coat and scarf and stomped her boots to rid them of the white powdery mess.

She pushed open the door to the mudroom and put everything up on the hooks. She went to the coffee pot and poured herself a huge mug of the warm, brown liquid. Their romp in the snow had chilled her and she was just now aware of that cold in her bones. She let her mind roam over their playfulness and what could have been the end result. She was sure that after she had told him about finding the chips, they would have ended up in her big, comfortable bed. She wanted him and she knew without a doubt Tuck wanted her too.

Thinking of those chips made her want to talk with Sarah’s dad. It seemed as if fate was on her side as the cell phone sounded in her pants pocket just then. She looked at the face and smiled with recognition that it was indeed Sarah’s father.

“Russ, hello.” She spoke into the instrument. “How are things in Tonopah?”

“Just fine, little one. Sarah said you need to talk with me. How can I help you?” He got right to the reason for the call. Russ was of the old school and not

one to beat around the bush, he just spoke what was on his mind.

"I found something most peculiar and I think you can guide me to the right source to help me uncover the mystery."

"What in the world could I help you with out there in Arizona?" He sounded amused.

"I was cleaning up the attic in Auntie's house and down in the bottom of an old trunk, I found a canvas bag full of casino chips."

She heard his chuckle before he asked, "What's the name of the casino on the chip?"

"It says The Stardust Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. There's no date on the chips but they are all different denominations as far as I can tell. I didn't empty the bag and I didn't count them, but, Russ, there is a full bag of them."

"Are you sure? I mean, are you sure there isn't any date on them?"

"Not that I can see and yes, they are from The Stardust. Why? Is this important?"

"It could be, little one. Don't do anything until I can get in touch with Shotgun Willie. I need to ask an expert to be sure." He sounded a lot more serious now.

"What's up? You sound like something could be wrong."

"Now, don't worry. I will get in touch with Shotgun and he will contact you. Just don't talk to anyone about this until we get in touch with him, okay?"

"Sure, if you say so. You have me concerned that something is wrong. Well, to be honest, I thought

something was astray when I found the bag in the attic. Why would my aunt have this bag of chips? She never even went to Vegas as far as I know.” She voiced her thoughts aloud.

“Just keep this to yourself until he gets a hold of you, okay?” Russ repeated his instructions.

“Sure.” She agreed hesitantly. She thought of how she almost told Tuck about the chips just a little bit ago. “Who is this Shotgun Willie guy?”

“When I worked years ago in Las Vegas, he was the go-to-guy. He owns his own online business now and sells vintage poker chips. He has been around since the dawn of time and knows the gaming industry inside, out, and backwards. He will be able to answer our questions about those chips without a doubt.” He spoke confidently of his credentials. “Just sit tight and he’ll call you soon.” He rang off.

Aubrie stared at her cell phone. This is all so weird. Oh, Auntie, what have I gotten myself into? She thought about how drastic her life had changed in just a week. She wasn’t really unhappy about it, just confused and not in control. “That’s what’s bothering you... you don’t have the usual control in your life that you like.” She said to herself. She had led a very structured life in Tonopah. Everything happened in order, she got up, went to work at the library, came home, cooked dinner for her and her father, and then started it all over again the next day. “What you had was boring, Aubrie Anne!” She stated emphatically. She was enjoying her interactions with Tuck and the thought of owning her own bed and breakfast excited her.

Aubrie decided to go upstairs and check out that bag of chips once again. Maybe before this Shotgun Willie person called she could have some additional details to give him. She headed up the stairs and was soon immersed into the contents of the canvas bag. She had to keep an ear out for the return of Tuck so that she could continue to keep her secret for a few more moments. She couldn't imagine why the secrecy was necessary but she trusted Russ and that is all she had to go on right now.

She had been working for an hour or more, stacking the chips into an organized order. She was nowhere near emptying the bag and could count at least a several thousand dollars in chips. Her mind was staggered at the thought of so much money sitting in a bag in her aunt's attic. She grabbed another handful of chips when she heard an engine outside.

Aubrie dropped the chips and went to the window in the attic. She saw Tuck and Phil coming down the lane in the tractor, plowing as they went. They were almost done and she knew she should put the chips back into the bag and hide it again when her cell phone rang.

"Hello."

"Aubrie Anderson?" The gravelly voice on the other end of the line inquired.

"Yes, that's me." She confirmed.

"This is Shotgun Willie. I need you to describe for me the chips you have in precise detail." He didn't waste any time getting to the point of the call.

"Okay." She thought of how convenient it was that she had them right there in front of her. She went on

to describe the chips in exact detail, telling him how much she had already counted and waited for his response.

“Miss, I want you to follow my instructions to the last detail.” His voice was deep and she was alerted to the seriousness of his instructions.

“Put those chips back into the bag and hide it where no one can find it. Do not tell anyone of what you have. I will be there in less than three days with my niece and we can confirm what I suspect is the origination of those chips.” His tone didn’t brook any argument.

“But, Mr. Willie, what do I have here?” She bravely countered.

“Those chips could be part of one of the most successful robberies in the history of Las Vegas.”

“Oh, my God!” She exclaimed. So many questions loomed in her head.

“Listen to me, miss. There are a lot of ties to those chips, many people would love to know their whereabouts and some of those folks are not the kind you would want to call friend. For your safety, do not tell anyone about them!”

Nine

Aubrie took several quick breaths to calm herself. All of this was quickly becoming so complicated. First, meeting Tuck and her immediate attraction to a man she barely knew. Then, assuming ownership of a huge house, and several hundred acres, including a lake with a car and a skeleton in it, and finally maybe thousands of dollars of stolen poker chips. What was she to do?

She heard the tractor coming closer and knew she had to act fast. She hurriedly stuffed the chips back into the canvas bag and lugged the container into her room. She looked about frantically and tried to think of the perfect place to hide the bag of chips until she could meet with Shotgun Willie and his niece. Swiftly she remembered her secret hiding place when visiting her aunt.

Aubrie moved quickly across the floor toward the fireplace and bent down on one knee. If she knew her Auntie at all, she knew that her secret hiding place would still be there. She moved the rug and ran her hand gently across the floor boards directly in front of the fireplace. Aubrie grinned as she realized that nothing had changed and she tapped gently on the end of one of the floor boards. It popped up to reveal

an empty space just below. She rushed to her bed and removed the chip from under the pillow and ran back to her hiding place.

Just enough room, she thought as she stuffed the duffel bag into the space. Just as she was securing the board back into place, she could hear the engine stop outside. She quickly ran down the stairs, into the kitchen, and sat at the table, willing her beating heart to slow down. She couldn't sit there and remain calm so she jumped up and made some fresh coffee.

The coffee was barely done brewing when the back door opened and Phil and Tuck stomped in. They both removed their coats and gloves and came into the warm kitchen. "Thank you for brewing some coffee." Tuck exclaimed.

"You're welcome. Did you get the lane clear?" She hoped her voice sounded normal and calm.

"Sure did. It was a job though." Phil responded as he grabbed the hot cup Tuck offered him. "I hope the county gets the main road cleared. When I called and explained that we needed to get out to visit the doctor, they seemed to be very cooperative." Phil took another swallow of his coffee. "If you two will make a list, I can pick up any supplies you might need."

"Thank you, Phil." Aubrie responded to his thoughtfulness. "Tuck, do you have any idea of the things we might need? How long before the snow melts and we can get to town ourselves?"

"Already getting cabin fever?" Tuck teased her. "The weather prediction is warm weather ahead. This should be the last of the snow for this year. It's been an extremely mild winter, unfortunately."

“Why do you say unfortunately?”

“This area needs the winter snows to keep the forest healthy and keep the danger of fires from our doorstep.” He stated some new facts for her to mull over. How much more could possibly happen for me to worry about? She was deep in thought and didn’t feel Tuck come close to her side.

“Triple A, stop the worrying. I didn’t say it to make you upset. We’ll just take things one day at a time.” He put his hand on her shoulder in a loving manner. This motion wasn’t lost on Phil. Aubrie caught his sly smile and blushed as she knew the older man suspected the two of them were growing closer.

Phil cleared his throat. “Tuck, you ready to take me back to the barn? I need to go home and check on Betsy.” He headed toward the mudroom to get his winter gear.

“Sure, be right there.” He looked Aubrie in the eyes. “Are you going to be alright?” He smiled his reassurance.

The guilt of keeping her secret made her avoid his glance. She answered casually, “Sure, I’ll be fine.” She didn’t want him to be nice to her right now. She just wanted things to be cleared up between them but she promised Shotgun Willie that she wouldn’t tell anyone just yet.

“Would you like to ride along? We can bring back the snowmobile.” He offered. Maybe she is just tense from being cooped up, he thought. They could take a short ride around to see if there was any other damage from the storm.

Her eyes brightened up at his suggestion. "That would be fun! I've never been on a snowmobile before." She went to the mudroom and started dressing for the cold drive.

The three of them piled onto the tractor and slowly made their way back to the barn. As soon as they were there, Phil made his departure. Tuck removed a cover from the snowmobile kept there and readied it for their little ride. He could see she was preoccupied so he didn't try for any conversation. As soon as the machine was warmed up, he patted the seat in front of him.

"You want me to drive?"

"Sure, if you're going to live in snow country, you might as well learn to handle all the machinery that comes with it."

He could see she was excited at a new adventure.

Once Aubrie was settled on the snowmobile, he proceeded to give her a few quick lessons on the operation of the vehicle. She was an eager learner and he smiled at her enthusiasm. As soon as he felt she knew the basics, he told her to push the throttle and they jumped into a quick start out of the barn. He almost lost his balance but quickly grabbed a hold of her around the waist. As he pulled himself closer to her body, she gasped.

"Do you have to hold me so tight?" She challenged.

"You don't want me to fall off, do you?"

"No, of course not. Shouldn't we close the barn door?"

"Yes, but don't press anything while I do that. I wouldn't want you to leave me here alone."

Tuck shut the door of the small equipment barn and remounted the snowmobile, snuggling up close to her with his arms firmly around her waist. "Okay, let her rip."

She cautiously pressed the throttle and they inched forward. "Where to?" She questioned without turning her head. She could feel his breath near her ear and didn't want to encourage any more intimacy between them.

"Let's just go down the lane to the main road so we can see how bad it is. Phil needs to get out in the next couple of days and we need to see if the snow plows are out yet."

She pressed for more gas and they were soon skimming across the white, beautiful snow. The engine was loud eliminating the room for conversation. He simply pointed her in the way he wanted to go and she followed his directions to the tee. This was her new world and she was a stranger in this land. He seemed to know his way around these back woods and strange as it seemed, she trusted him. Why can't I trust him by telling him about those stupid chips! Her mind wouldn't give it a rest.

"Whoa!" She stopped immediately at the tone in his voice.

"Triple A, you have to be aware of what you're doing! No daydreaming while driving one of these machines!" He reached around and took over the controls. She stared in amazement as he guided them carefully away from the edge of the road. She bent over and looked as the brink of the road gave way to a very steep cliff.

“Oh, my God! Tuck, I am so sorry!” She snuggled back into his arms and the safety of his protection enveloped her. I’ve got to stop my mind from wandering.

They proceeded down the road around the lake. She looked over to see the snow had completely covered the car and the dry lakebed. When it all melted, she thought, maybe the sheriff could get the car out and one of her problems would be solved.

They soon rounded a corner and the dam and the lake disappeared from view. It was just a short distance later, when they came to a fork in the road. This is where the Senator Highway and Walker Road connected. The snow was deeper here as the area was densely covered in shade from the tall pines and the stately oaks. The snowmobile bogged down a bit as this snow was a bit more wet. They were still making forward progress, when Tuck stopped completely.

“What’s up?” She questioned the sudden halt.

“We have company.” His tone convinced her he wasn’t happy with the turn of events.

She looked ahead and saw two snowmobiles coming toward them. As the vehicles got closer, she could see the Yavapai Sheriff’s emblem on the side of the snowmobiles. She turned to see the grimace on Tuck’s face. There was something definitely wrong.

The sheriff got close and shut off his machine. He dismounted and came to greet Tuck and Aubrie. “Aubrie, Mr. Thompson, good to see you survived the storm. His eyes never left Tuck’s face and she could see he took in the intimate way they were sitting on their snowmobile.

She shoved her way out of his arms and got off the vehicle. "John, what are you doing all the way out here?" She came and offered her gloved hand to shake. She saw that Tuck made no attempt to greet the sheriff nor get off the machine.

"We got a call from the county about someone needing some medical attention. We came to check on Betsy." He stated the facts simply. "Is she alright?"

"Yes, she's fine. She just needs to be able to get out for a doctor's appointment in a few days." Aubrie answered honestly. "I'm sorry. It's not really an emergency, just a necessity. I'm sure Phil didn't mean to alarm anyone."

"I'm sure he didn't. After a huge storm like this one, we wanted to make well checks on everyone. Are you alright?" Even though he asked the question of her, his eyes were on Tuck.

"She's fine." Tuck finally spoke. His eyes were definitely a darker brown color. "We were just checking to see if the county plow was out and about."

"It's just down the highway and we should have everything cleared by tomorrow." They seemed as two combatants facing each other in the ring.

Aubrie decided to take charge of the situation. "I don't know what's with you two, but I think the best plan of action would be to take care of Phil and Betsy and the road." She stomped back to the snowmobile and got on.

"John, you want to come to the house and have a hot cup of coffee?"

The two men seemed to reach a silent accord and Tuck retreated back to her. "Sheriff, we'd love to give you a warm cup of coffee." His tone mocked hers.

"Sure, I'd love to get a cup. My deputy would like a chance to get warmed up for a bit." He smiled a knowing grin.

"See you at the house then." Tuck started the snowmobile and quickly took off. He went past the sheriff's machine and turned in the wide part of the road and was headed back.

"Tuck, slow down." She commanded. "Stop it!"

"Aubrie, not now." His tone allowed no argument.

She let it go for now. He was obviously jealous of the sheriff's attention. It was misguided, however, she mused. Sheriff Clarke was concerned about Betsy not her. She even smiled a bit as she thought of Tuck's jealousy. No one had ever shown such emotions for her before.

They quickly arrived at the house and went around to the back porch. Tuck was still not in the mood for any conversation, so she just headed into the kitchen and started brewing fresh coffee. She went into the pantry and grabbed a bag of cookies. He was standing there in the doorway, watching her bustle about the kitchen.

"Look, Aubrie," He started. "About what just happened..."

She stopped in her actions and looked at him. He was definitely not happy and she wanted to let him off the hook. "Tuck, let it go. Sheriff Clarke is here just doing his job. He doesn't have any interest in me." She went up to him and placed a small kiss on his cheek.

That's what I'm afraid of, he thought deeply. He had to get his act in place or she would become suspicious of his behavior. "Come here," He grasped her and held her to him closely. "Let's get this over with and get back to fixing up this grand ole lady. We have a business to get started in just a few short months."

Her heart warmed at his words as he spoke of them as "we." She was filled with mixed emotions. As a couple, they would be a great team to run this business, but couples don't keep secrets from each other. The guilt once again flowed down over her. She had to tell Tuck, no matter what.

They both heard the engines of the snowmobiles and shortly the Sheriff and his deputy were at the back porch. She left the comfort of Tuck's embrace and went to answer their knock at the kitchen door. "Come on in, John."

Soon the kitchen seemed too small with three men in the tiny area. "Have a seat and I'll get the coffee. Have a cookie." She went to the cupboard and got more mugs.

Tuck sat down at the small kitchen table but kept his eyes on the sheriff. "I can call Phil and have him come over that way you can talk with him yourself about Betsy's condition." He tried to steer the sheriff's attention to the reason given for the call.

"That would be great. I haven't seen Phil in a while." The sheriff smiled as Aubrie put a steaming cup of coffee in front of him. That gesture wasn't wasted on Tuck.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. As he stood and went to the other side of the

kitchen, to make his call, he saw Aubrie sit in the chair he had just vacated. She and the sheriff were talking quietly. He gritted his teeth and placed the call to his friend.

"Phil will be here in just a few minutes. He was glad to hear that you were out checking on them." He sat at the only vacant chair across from the deputy as he returned to the table. The young man was obviously new to the job and Tuck tried to enter him into the conversation.

"New on the job?" He questioned.

"Yes, I've just been a deputy for six months. I'm lucky that the sheriff gave me this chance." He idolized the sheriff.

"Chuck was at the top of his class and comes to me with high recommendations." Sheriff Clarke added to the information.

"That's great." Tuck agreed.

"Chuck, have some more cookies. I apologize for them not being homemade, but I am still trying to conquer that beast." She pointed to the wood burning stove. "I remember my aunt making some of the best strawberry shortcake on that thing." She recalled fondly.

"I remember that same dessert. No one could make it better than your aunt." The sheriff recalled some of his memories while visiting one of his favorite residents.

"Did you ever have her fried chicken?" Aubrie grinned with some great recollections. "It was the absolute best!"

“Yes, I was one of the lucky ones. She always seemed to feed me when I came to check on her.” Sheriff Clarke grinned with his memories. “I’m sure you will learn to cook on the stove as well as she did. It just takes time.” He encouraged Aubrie.

She blushed at his encouragement. Tuck chose this moment to exert his proprietary rights. “She is going to be a great cook on that stove with my help.” He bragged. “She’s done well with the few lessons I’ve given her. You should taste her omelet. It’s the best.” He reached across the table and put his hands over hers.

Oh, I see what’s going on here, she reminded herself. Tuck is jealous and he’s exerting his rights on me, rights she wasn’t sure existed. She pulled her hand from under his and addressed the sheriff. “John, when I get good enough, I’ll be sure to invite you over for that fried chicken.” She flashed an encouraging smile his way.

Phil’s timing couldn’t have been more perfect. Aubrie saw Tuck’s eyes darken and felt John straighten in his chair. The poor deputy was clueless about the entire tension-filled kitchen.

As he knocked, Phil opened the door simultaneously and poked his head in. “Hello!” He stomped his way into the mudroom and took in the sight before him at the table. He saw the muscles in Tuck’s face clenching and John’s body held tensely at alert. He stifled a chuckle as he came into the room.

“How are you, John?” He came forward and held out his arthritic hand to shake. “Long time, no see.”

Tuck immediately got up and offered his chair for the older man. “Here, Phil, have a seat. I have to go

out and check on things.” He went to the mudroom and without another word, bundled up and slammed his way out the door.

Phil chuckled aloud as he sat down. Aubrie got up and poured a cup of coffee for him. She went to the window at the back door and looked out to see if she could see where Tuck had gone. She couldn’t find him and her overactive mind started to worry. Where could he have gone? It was getting later in the afternoon and even though the weather had cleared, she couldn’t help but be concerned.

She overheard the sheriff ask Phil, “How long have you known him?” He was referring to Tuck. Her ears perked up as she tried to act like she wasn’t actively listening. She grabbed a broom and started sweeping the dirt that had collected in the mudroom. She swept silently and continued to straighten the little space.

“Long enough, John.” Was Phil’s reply.

“I’ve known you and Betsy for the whole time you’ve been here in Prescott and I trust your word.” The sheriff capitulated.

“John, he’s an honorable and trustworthy man. He keeps to himself and tries to help in every way he can around here. He doesn’t speak much of his past or his family, but I would trust him with my life. Is that good enough for you?” Phil took a long sip of his coffee while the sheriff pondered the information he just received.

“Are you concerned at all about him living here with Aubrie?” The sheriff pointed out.

Phil hesitated before answering this particular question. “I would be more concerned with her living

here alone. She's just a young lady and a pretty inexperienced one at that." He stammered a bit before continuing. "I mean as far as handling a big old house like this one." He clarified.

Both men laughed gently and she became aware that they had stopped their conversation and were looking in her direction. She quickly bent over and started straightening the shoes with her back to them. She was embarrassed and didn't want them to know how much she had been listening.

The sheriff finally got up and signaled the deputy that their time here was done. "Chuck, it's getting late and we need to get back to the truck before it gets dark."

The two men headed toward the mudroom to get their belongings. She moved out of their way and went back into the kitchen. To keep herself busy, she went to the refrigerator and got the left over chili to start heating. Maybe I could try to make some biscuits, she thought to herself. Oh, who am I kidding? Why would I want to try and impress Tuck? He can eat the chili and be happy with that!

"Aubrie, thank you for the coffee." The sheriff's voice interrupted her chaotic thoughts. "We'll come back for that fried chicken dinner when this snow melts." He kidded her.

She turned to him and smiled. "That would be great, John. Maybe by that time, I'll have conquered this stove!" She tried to keep it light. She opened the door for the two men. The deputy thanked her as he moved outside and she felt herself take a step back-

ward when the tall, handsome sheriff moved beside her.

“Aubrie, you’ll be fine. Phil trusts him and his word is good enough for me.”

She wasn’t sure why John felt the need to reassure her. She wasn’t even sure why she needed those comforting words, but they brought tears to her eyes.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to upset you.” He stood in front of her.

“You didn’t really. I just am very confused right now. I have taken on this huge house and all of its problems and I don’t have my Auntie or anyone else to depend on. I’m sort of lost and don’t know who to trust.” She confessed.

“You are not as alone as you think. You have me, Phil and...” He took a deep breath. “And, it appears you have Tuck to depend on.”

When his words were meant to comfort, they only brought on more doubts and thoughts. She looked up to the tall man in front of her and smiled a wimpy grin. “Thank you, John.”

He seemed to want to give her a hug and hesitated before deciding to move through the open door. “Keep warm. This snow will melt in the next few days and spring is just around the corner. You have a lot to do before you can open your bed and breakfast. That’ll keep you busy enough.”

Phil got up and went to the mudroom just after the sheriff and his deputy left. He started putting on his warm clothes. Aubrie was at a loss for words. She overheard the complete conversation between the sheriff and Phil.

Phil opened the back door but stopped short of going out. "Little Lady, you keep yourself warm." She felt he meant so much more than he was saying but his gruff exterior wouldn't allow him to.

She gave him a big hug and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "Thanks, Phil. You tell Betsy I'll be over to see her when most of this snow melts."

He saluted her and headed out the door. As soon as all had left the small kitchen, she felt so alone. She looked about and started clearing the small table of coffee cups and cookies. Once that was done, she went to the stove and stirred the chili that was slowly simmering. Not one to sit still, Aubrie went to the small cupboard over the sink and searched for her aunt's cook books. She found the one she wanted and turned to the page on biscuits.

"Okay, beast," She addressed the hulking stove. "You and me are going to make some delicious biscuits. And I don't want any trouble out of you!" She shook her finger at the inanimate object.

About an hour later, she proudly looked at the golden brown biscuits she had just taken out of the oven. They weren't perfect, but Auntie would be proud. Tuck still hadn't returned and the darkness was looming all around.

"Well, he's a big boy." She huffed. "I'm sure he can take care of himself."

She smelled the biscuits and the chili and realized she was hungry. So in a small act of defiance, she grabbed a bowl and dished herself a small helping of dinner. She took several biscuits and her bowl of chili over to the small kitchen table. She sat there and en-

joyed her meal. It was all good but she couldn't help but think about Tuck. Where was he? What was he doing out there? It was getting late, it was still cold and it was time for him to be home.

Home! Her mind suddenly comprehended that she thought of this as home. What scared her was that she thought of him as belonging here in their home. I've got to get a grip. She quickly got up and washed her dishes.

She put a note on the table instructing Tuck about the meal and left the warmth of the kitchen. On her way up, she stoked the stove in the living room. She didn't waste any more time and headed upstairs to her room.

As she shut her door, she leaned on it to catch her breath and her wayward thoughts. Why did he leave so abruptly? She was just talking with the sheriff and his deputy. Nothing wrong with that, she thought with her anger stirring. She crossed the floor and stirred up the ashes in her fireplace. As she stood there on the rug covering her treasure, Aubrie grasped the idea of a more pressing problem. She pushed back the rug and opened her secret hiding place. There was the canvas bag safe and sound and a whole lot of trouble yet to come.

Ten

Tuck stepped into the back porch quietly. He figured he'd stayed away long enough to send Aubrie a message. He needed to put some distance between them and their advancing interest in each other. He smelled the chili still simmering on the stove and was reminded that he was very hungry as his stomach started growling. He grabbed a bowl and as he approached the stove, saw the basket full of biscuits.

"She's going to make this even harder than it has to be." He grumbled to himself. He put a biscuit in his mouth and grinned as he tasted it. "Not bad, Triple A. Not bad at all." He was pleased that she tried to cook something on her own. Soon, maybe sooner than he wanted, she would need to do things for herself. He would have to move on once....

"Now, you're acting just like her. Letting your mind wander will do you no good." He admonished himself. Tuck moved softly across the kitchen in his stocking feet and sat down at the kitchen table. It was then he noticed the note she had written.

Penned in a dainty format that fit her to a tee, she wrote, "Tuck, have some dinner. Try the biscuits –

hope you approve. I'll see you in the morning." It was signed simply Aubrie.

Such a simple note, but he held it precious in his big, rough hand. She's not going to make this easy, is she? He questioned his decision to put some distance between them. What's wrong with establishing a friendship with her? "Because, you idiot, you want so much more than just mere friendship." He put down his spoon and pushed the bowl of warm stew back.

Keeping secrets wasn't the way to treat a friend especially one you wanted to become more, he thought miserably. He picked up a biscuit and munched on it. These are good, he thought. He reached for the food sitting in front of him and slowly finished the dinner she had left for him. Finally, Tuck put his bowl in the sink and turned off the lights as he proceeded up the stairs. He tried to walk softly so as to not disturb Aubrie. As he reached the landing at the top of the steps, he looked to her room. He didn't see her light on and assumed that she had already gone to sleep.

Tuck turned and headed down the hallway to his room. He softly shut his door.

She heard every movement he made since he entered the house. She heard him ladle the stew from the pot and heard the scrape of the chair as he sat down at the small kitchen table. She heard him put the bowl in the sink. Just like him to leave the dirty dish, she thought with a fondness that came with familiarity.

Aubrie held her breath when she heard him climbing the steps to the bedrooms above. She heard him hesitate and part of her wished for him to come and

knock on her door but the logical part of her knew it was best if he went on down the hallway to his own room.

She felt herself sigh as he shut his door softly in the night. She lay there in her bed with only the light of the fireplace to illuminate her room. She deliberately sent the message that she was unavailable and it appeared that he got that meaning loud and clear.

“It’s for the best.” She tried to convince herself of that. It was still too early for bed, even though it was completely dark outside. Aubrie grabbed her laptop and decided to continue her research into the poker chips hidden away in her room. She searched for Las Vegas robberies and was fascinated with the information she was able to pull up. It wasn’t very long when she came across an article that quickly drew her attention.

“Oh my goodness!” She exclaimed as she read the information on her screen. In 1992 a cashier from The Stardust calmly walked away with over half a million dollars in cash and chips. He was never caught. Could it possibly be that she was in possession of chips from that robbery? Her mind was in a tizzy from this new bit of information. What were those chips doing in her aunt’s attic? The bag belonged to Harold Jenkins. Who was he and what was his connection with her aunt and the robbery in Las Vegas?

She shut down her laptop and lay back in her bed. She stared at the ceiling and let her mind have free reign. To her knowledge, her aunt had never been to Las Vegas. She didn’t like to drive any further than to Prescott. She had never even been to visit them in

Tonopah. So that must mean that someone brought these chips to her, someone she obviously knew. Could that skeleton in the lake be tied in to all of this?

She rolled over and hugged her pillow. I hope this Shotgun Willie person can shed some light on this. A thought suddenly occurred to Aubrie. I have to call him and tell him to wait for at least a week. If the sun keeps shining, then most of the snow will have melted and she could get to town to meet him and his niece. She didn't want them coming here and she needed to be in town alone, without Tuck. Aubrie finally settled into a restless sleep.

The next morning she reluctantly got up, dressed, and went downstairs only to find Tuck had already eaten and gone out. She found the coffee still on and poured a cup. As she sat there, contemplating her day, her cell phone rang.

"Hello."

"Miss Anderson?" She recognized Shotgun Willie's gravelly voice.

"Yes, Mr. Willie. What can I do for you?" She responded quietly.

"My niece can't get away until next week. We will drive down from Vegas and come to you then."

"That's great! We've had a huge snowstorm and I'm afraid that I can't get to town until then. Just give me a call and I'll come and meet you." She was relieved that at least one thing was finally working out.

"Is there a reason why we can't come to you?" He sounded suspicious.

She hesitated before answering once again. For a second time since meeting Tuck, she felt a need to

protect him. "I have a handyman staying in the house and there are caretakers just down the lane. None of them know about the chips and I don't want to raise any suspicions." All of that was true.

"Probably wise, young lady. Okay, we'll call you when we get to town. I'll have Ellie book us a room at the Hassayampa Inn. Are you familiar with it?" He asked.

"Not really, but I'm sure in a town as small as Prescott, I'll find it."

His laughter was contagious and she found herself laughing along with the grizzly older man.

"It's only the oldest inn in the town. It's a historic site. I'm sure you'll be able to find it easily. Call you in a few." He rang off.

She sat and stared at her phone for a few minutes. What a character! Part of her was actually looking forward to meeting him and his niece. Oh, how her life had changed in just a few short weeks.

Over the next five days, their routine became one of avoidance. She got up a little later than Tuck each day and went down to an empty kitchen. Aubrie worked on the bedrooms, lugging what she could up to the attic freeing each room so that she could begin renovations. Each afternoon, she tackled that monstrous stove and made a dinner dish for the both of them. It was usually a meal that could be left on simmer as Tuck didn't come in until after she had gone upstairs.

The sun shone each day and the snow was melting nicely. It was still brisk and the wind blew through the pines. On the sixth day, she finally decided that

she would go mad if she didn't get out. Aubrie wrote a note and asked Tuck to leave a vehicle for her to use.

As she went down to the kitchen, she found the key for the OHV and a note from him. It simply stated that the snow had melted enough for her to use one of the all-terrain vehicles and she should stay on the dirt tracks as much as possible to avoid any accidents. He didn't make the note personal in any way and she found herself disappointed. It wasn't even signed just scrawled in big, bold print.

Quit dwelling she commanded herself. She grabbed the keys, bundled up in the mudroom, and then went outside to start the OHV. It was exhilarating as she headed down the lane toward Phil and Betsy's house. The wind was brisk, but the sun was shining warmly down on the now thawing earth. The pines and oaks bowed gently in the breeze. She saw birds, squirrels, and a surprise visit from a flock of wild turkeys stumbling through the woods.

She stopped her vehicle in front of their house and was immediately greeted by Betsy at the open door. "Well, you're a sight for sore eyes!" She smiled as she greeted Aubrie. "I am so glad to see you. That Phil tries hard, but he just isn't a great conversationalist. I need some girl talk."

The two shuffled inside to the warmth of the front room. Betsy quickly moved to the kitchen to gather some coffee. But Aubrie soon realized that a visit to the Flood's house meant more than just a cup of coffee. Betsy returned with a tray laden with goodies. She admired the variety of cookies and bars ready for sampling.

“Betsy, you’re too much! I will gain a ton if I keep eating all these goodies.”

“You could stand a few pounds.” They sat on the couch and faced the fireplace. “Now, tell me what’s been going on while we’ve been snowbound. I don’t know about you but not being able to get outside drives me crazy.”

“Yes, it can get a bit overwhelming.” She avoided direct eye contact with the older woman. “I’ve been cleaning out the rooms so that I can get them painted and refreshed.”

“Has Tuck been helping you?” The question was innocently asked but Aubrie knew there was more to it than that.

“Ummm,” She hesitated. “He helped me the first day, but he’s been going out since the snow stopped and I assume he’s working on the plumbing or something.”

“What’s on your mind, Aubrie?” Betsy spoke bluntly.

“How long have you and Phil been together?” Aubrie asked in return.

“We just celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary. He’s basically the only man I’ve ever known.” Betsy answered honestly.

“Have you ever kept secrets from him?” Aubrie pushed further.

“We aren’t talking about Phil and I are we?” Betsy probed.

Aubrie got up and walked to the fireplace. She took a small log from the pile and put it on the burning fire. She finally faced her new friend. “No, we’re not

talking about you and Phil. It's only been a few weeks and I have feelings deep and strong for that man. I'm confused, I'm scared, and I don't know anything about him." She finally sat back down and took another cookie.

"What secrets are you keeping?" Betsy cut right to the core.

"Betsy, if I told you, then you would want to tell Phil and then it wouldn't be a secret anymore, would it?" She reasoned with her.

"That depends." Betsy answered softly. "Sometimes girls need to talk with girls and those things aren't really for men. They wouldn't understand it anyway."

"Betsy, this isn't a girl thing. I have a serious problem and I don't know what to do about it." She took a deep breath. "What I can tell you is that I feel like I'm betraying Tuck by not talking with him."

"And why aren't you?" Her friend pried; she could see that Aubrie was very disturbed by her secret.

"Betsy, I've only known him for a few short weeks. Up until now, my life was in order. I took care of my dad, I worked at the library in Tonopah, and I knew everyone in town." Her exasperation started showing as started pacing. "Since coming here, I've taken on a huge, old house, a skeleton in the lake, and a man that sends me soaring with just a look." She confessed.

She heard Betsy stifle a chuckle. "You're in love."

That shocked her to her very core. "Betsy, that's impossible! I repeat... I've only known him for a few short weeks." But as she responded, Aubrie knew in her heart that her new friend had hit the nail on the head. She was in love with a man she barely knew!

Eleven

Aubrie managed to get home on the OHV even though her mind wasn't on the trip. How could this have happened? How could she have fallen for a man she barely knew? What was she going to do about it?

She took a bottle of water from the refrigerator and sat at the kitchen table. This was crazy! Her mind was a very logical one and falling in love practically at first sight was not possible. As she sat there for a few minutes to collect herself, the tone from her cell phone startled her.

She checked the display before answering the call. It was Shotgun Willie and she responded with enthusiasm.

"Willie, how are you?" She was polite.

"Just fine, little lady. We are in town and anxious to see what you have. Can you meet us tomorrow?" He got right to the point.

"Yes, yes..." She stammered. "I'll meet you around noon. Can we meet at The Palace?"

She heard him speaking to someone in the background. "Yes, Ellie and I will see you there at lunchtime. Be sure and bring one of the chips." He hung up the phone as abruptly as ever.

She sat there musing over the turn of events and wondered if she was able to get to town safely when she heard a loud banging noise coming from above.

She jumped and moved up the stairs quickly to find the attic ladder down. She heard another loud crash and didn't hesitate to make her way up. As she reached the floor above, she could see Tuck sprawled across several piles of the stuff she had moved up here earlier.

"Tuck, are you alright?" She moved quickly to his side as he rolled over and stared up at her.

"Fine. I'm just fine."

"What were you doing up here?" She reached to help him stand up but he rejected her hand and moved upright by himself.

Before he answered, he dusted at the dirt on his jeans. "I brought up some of the heavier stuff you couldn't move. I thought I would help."

She turned to see that he did indeed move up some of the small pieces of furniture. Once again her suspicions were aroused but in light of her recent discovery, decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Tuck, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I just tripped over all of this stuff. How much more do you think you can fit up here? Why do you need to haul it all up here anyway?" He stopped in the middle of his rant to look at her. As soon as he saw the expression on her face, he apologized.

"Aubrie, I'm sorry." He reached for her, but she took a step backwards. "Look, I know things have been a bit strained between us."

“You think?” She retorted. “We’ve been avoiding each other like the plague! What is wrong with you?”

“With me? I think the correct question is what is wrong with you?” He flung the question right back at her.

“This is ridiculous! I’m not going to stand here and trade insults with you. I have work to do and so do you.” She went to the ladder and started to climb down but stopped just before her head disappeared. “I need to go to town tomorrow. Do you think the roads are passable?”

He wanted to ask if she wanted him along, but he knew it would be best to avoid that question. “Yes, but you’ll have to go the longer way. The road by the lake will still have too much snow for your car. I’ll draw you a map. You shouldn’t have any trouble following it.” He turned away and started moving the furniture into a place out of the way.

She stared at his back for a few seconds. Her heart swelled with the love she felt and at the same time, she felt the pain of loving alone. He said he was jealous, but his actions the last few days proved otherwise. A day in town would be just what she needed. She could do some shopping at the hardware store, go to the fabric store, and have a great lunch. Meeting Shotgun Willie and his niece would be interesting she was sure.

Aubrie grabbed her laptop and going from room to room, made notes on colors for paint, fabric, and what furniture would be needed. She could hear Tuck up in the attic, moving furniture and boxes. Knowing

he was so close by was making it hard for her to concentrate, but she soon had a complete list of needs.

She went back to her room and printed off the list she had just completed. She sat on the lounge chair and read over the list to make sure she didn't forget anything. She tried to ignore Tuck as he made several more trips up and down the ladder carrying different pieces of furniture. Part of her felt guilty that she wasn't helping him, but the more logical side of her knew he was working off some frustrations.

The afternoon turned into evening and she finally felt the need to go downstairs and cook something for dinner. As she headed out of her bedroom, she nearly bumped into Tuck. He was coming her way and they stood there staring for just a few seconds. He was the first to break the silence.

"I was just going down to fix something for dinner. You hungry?" He questioned her.

She felt a grin starting. It was strange how in tune they were with each other and yet... "Sure, what did you have in mind?"

"I thawed out some steaks earlier. I need some beef!" He exclaimed. They walked down the stairs together and headed for the kitchen. "You make a salad and I'll cook the steaks. Do you want a baked potato?"

She was so glad for the reprieve from their battle that she would have agreed to anything. "That sounds great. Are you going to fry the steaks?"

He feigned shock. "No way, little lady. I'm sure you noticed the grill out back!"

“Don’t tell me you’re going to grill outside in the cold, cold, outdoors? That barbeque doesn’t look very safe!”

“There is no other way to make the perfect steak.” He was busy putting some spices on the two pieces of beef. “Please, don’t tell me that you’re one of those city slickers that wants their steak cooked until it’s as tough as leather!”

“No way! I like it on the medium rare side. No shoe leather for me.” She turned to her task of making a salad. She liked this atmosphere so much better than the tense one that had existed between them for the last few days.

They continued their preparations for the evening meal together. She was busy with the salad ingredients and he kept going out to the back porch to make sure the steaks were cooked perfectly.

“Just a few more minutes. How soon are you ready?” He asked. “I’ve got the potatoes in the oven and the salad is ready. I’ll get the table set and when you’re ready, so am I!” She stated emphatically.

They were soon seated at the small kitchen table eating the most delicious meal of steak and potatoes. Such simple fare, but somehow eating with Tuck made it all so special.

“Let me draw you a map on how to get to town the other way.” He said as he gathered up their dirty plates. Once the dishes were done, they sat back down at the table. He grabbed some paper and a pen.

“When you get out to the main road, instead of going right, you turn to the left. This will take you to Walker Road and into town. It’s a bit longer, but a

whole lot safer than the road around the lake. The snow stays longer on that stretch of road.”

“I’ll be able to make it in my SUV, won’t I?” She was a bit on the apprehensive side. “I don’t have four wheel drive in my little car.”

“You’ll be fine. Just follow this map and you’ll get to town in one piece.” He handed the rough-drawn map over to her. “Are you going to buy some groceries? I think our supply is getting low.”

“Definitely. I’ll make sure that I get that done. I’m going to visit the hardware store and get some paint. If I can get the rooms painted, then I can sew some new curtains and bedspreads.”

“You sew?” He seemed surprised.

“Yes, I paint, sew, and can do some cooking as you well know.” She teased back. “Is there anything you need that I can pick up?”

“I’m fine. I don’t need anything other than some good food. If this weather holds, I should have the plumbing working in the bathrooms.” He announced proudly.

“Tuck, that will be great!” She responded. This was so much better than the cold avoidance they had been living for the past week. “I can’t wait to take a bath without lugging hot water up the stairs. I think I will buy some new bubbles for my bath.”

Aubrie started washing the dishes and was pleased when Tuck grabbed a towel to do the drying. They worked companionably in silence cleaning the kitchen. Once done, he turned to her and issued a challenge.

“Would you like a chance to win back your money in cribbage?”

“I’d love that. Let me go upstairs and change into some comfy clothes first.” She dried her hands and turned to head up the stairs.

“I think I could do that too. Meet you down here in a few.” He followed her up the steps and they separated ways at the landing.

Once in her room, Aubrie put on her sweats and a tee shirt and started back downstairs. She stoked the fireplace in the front room and grabbed the cribbage board. She was just shuffling the cards when Tuck walked into the room. He was gorgeous. He took her breath away. I really need to tell him everything, she thought suddenly. Then, maybe then, we can start over with no secrets between us.

“Tuck, you look comfortable.” She spoke shyly.

“Are you ready to get your butt kicked?” He sat down and adjusted the pegs in the cribbage board.

“Maybe I’ve been practicing. Maybe you’re the one who’s going to lose.” She countered his challenge. It seemed the wrong moment to reveal her secret. She was enjoying their easy, comfortable truce and didn’t want to disturb that. After my trip to town, she thought, and then I can tell him everything. Once Shotgun Willie straightens this all out, I can share the truth about those stupid poker chips.

They played for several hours and finally, she admitted defeat. “You’re too good. I can’t compete!” She gathered up the cards and the board and straightened the pillows on the couch. “I’m ready for bed. I have a

big day tomorrow and I'd better get my rest." She started towards the stairs. "You coming?"

"Not yet, I'm going to make sure that everything is alright." He got up and stretched before moving towards the kitchen. "Sleep tight, Triple A. See you in the morning."

Once reaching the sanctity of her room, Aubrie let out a sigh. He cares, I know he cares. I just have to come clean about what I found in the attic. She crossed her room to stand in front of the fireplace. It was still warm but she added a log anyway. As she stood there on the very rug hiding her secret, she heard Tuck coming up the stairs. She moved away as if he could tell what she was standing on and waited for him to knock at her door.

Seconds ticked by but he didn't knock. His footsteps kept going right down the hallway and soon she heard him shut his door.

It's for the best right now, she consoled herself. Tomorrow things will change, for the better, I hope. With those thoughts in mind, she crawled into bed and fell fast asleep.

Aubrie woke to the smell of breakfast cooking. She quickly dressed and gathered up her things. She opened her door to listen for Tuck. She could hear him whistling while he cooked, so she felt she had enough time to get some of the chips from their hiding place. She moved the rug, opened the floor board, and unzipped the bag. Aubrie quickly removed a handful of the chips and placed them in her purse. Just as fast, she put the board and the rug back in

place. Her heart was beating in her chest as she headed down the stairs.

“Ready for breakfast?” Tuck greeted her at the door of the kitchen.

She jumped at the sound of his voice. She’d been concentrating on her trip and nearly bumped directly into him.

“Oh, you startled me!” She tried to calm herself.

“Fix the toast, okay?” He requested of her.

“Sure.” She was grateful for something to occupy her time.

Soon they were seated at the table eating a hearty breakfast. She was silent as she ate, contemplating the meeting with Willie and his niece.

“You’re awfully quiet, Triple A. What’s on your mind?” God, could this man read her so well.

“Just thinking about paint colors and stuff. Are you sure I’ll be alright?” She changed the subject.

“Here’s your map. Just follow the road and within a few miles you will be fine.” He seemed ready to offer her his company on the way to town.

“Thank you for that. I’ll be okay. It’ll be good to get to civilization and do some shopping.” She just wanted to get on the way and get this meeting done and over with.

“I’ll be back for dinner. Want me to bring us something?” She offered.

“No, I’ll be working all day and I’ll just grab something with Phil and Betsy. Phil and I hope to get that plumbing job finished today.” He continued, “You might as well stay in town for some dinner. You need to have some fun for a change.”

She looked at him. Was he trying to keep her away for the day? She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Her own guilty conscience was getting to her. She was suspecting him of keeping his own secrets.

“Perhaps, you’re right. I do feel the need for a change.” She stood up and gathered her things.

“I’ll see you when I get back.” She headed for the door.

“Triple A, you have my cell number. Call me if you run into any trouble.”

She went outside and approached her car. As she backed up to head out the lane, she suddenly realized that Tuck was standing beside her vehicle. Startled, she rolled the window down. “Tuck, you scared me! What did I forget?”

“Nothing, Triple A.” He came to her window and got really close. “Just don’t flirt with any tall sheriffs.” He bent in and gave a quick kiss to her surprised lips.

She grinned, “Wouldn’t think of it, mister.”

He moved back and waved goodbye. She slowly headed down the lane and turned left on the road to town. She cautiously moved her car over the spots of snow and the rough terrain. At the cross road Tuck had indicated on the hand drawn map, she turned left and climbed up out of the little vacation town known as Potato Patch. The road to town was only a short eleven miles but it took her at least forty-five minutes.

Aubrie was grateful that the elevation was at least 2,000 feet lower than at the lake so the snow was hardly noticeable as she got closer to civilization. Soon she was in Prescott and headed to the hardware store. It took a little while but she left with several

gallons of paint and the equipment needed to update her bedrooms. Another stop to the fabric store and several swatches and ideas later, she checked her watch and saw it was time to meet Shotgun Willie at The Palace.

Traversing around this small mountain town was fairly easy and Aubrie found herself enjoying her new surroundings. Founded in 1864, the town of Prescott was at one time the capital of the Arizona Territory. She loved seeing the historic character of the older buildings. The researcher in her was definitely intrigued and she knew she would enjoy digging into her new home's past.

She found a parking space near the entrance of The Palace and went inside to meet her expert. It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust to the darkness of the restaurant and saloon, but she had no trouble spotting her party.

Shotgun Willie was every bit the character she thought he would be. He stood as she approached the table and she could see time had worn away at this man over the years. He was short and completely white headed – what she could see under that big black Stetson. There were several feathers stuck in the band around the brim of his hat. He wore a western shirt with a huge turquoise bolo tie draping the front. He was hunched over and she could see he was relying on a cane to hold himself upright. He stretched out his gnarled hand to grasp hers.

“Little lady, I’m Shotgun.” He indicated the tall blond lady standing beside him. “This here’s Ellie.

She's a godsend and my niece." He spoke bluntly and to the point.

"So nice to meet you. Please sit." She sat down on the chair closest to her. "Have you ordered yet?"

"No, we just got here ourselves. Let's get that done so we can get down to business." He didn't beat around the bush. He signaled for a server and they all started perusing the menu.

"Ellie... Ellie Parker?" A female voice rang out from across the room. A perky brunette rushed up to the table. She was dressed in an old saloon era dress and had a coffee pot in her hand. "It is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's little ole me." She blushed as the other woman put her coffee pot down and reached for a big hug.

"Are you back in town for good? We sure missed you around here." The server projected her fondness for Ellie. "Does John know you're back?"

Aubrie watched the emotions cross the face of Willie's niece. She was surprised to find out that Ellie had once lived in Prescott.

"No, no, John doesn't know I'm here. I'm only here for a short time." Ellie spoke nervously.

"We'd like to order." Willie broke up the exchange between the two ladies.

"Oh, sure. I can take your order." The server stammered.

Despite the tension, the trio ordered their lunch and soon the server disappeared. Nothing was said for a few long minutes.

“Uncle, I didn’t think it would be that big of a deal that I came back to Prescott.” Ellie spoke softly to her uncle.

He patted her hand. “It’s okay. I just think that it would be better that we don’t draw any extra attention to our meeting with Aubrie.” He explained.

“You’re right as usual.” She turned to Aubrie and proceeded to enlighten her of the situation. “I lived in Prescott until just a few years ago. I actually worked here in The Palace. I was finishing my Associate’s degree at Yavapai College in Criminal Justice when my uncle called and needed me to come help him.” She patted the bent hand of her uncle.

Aubrie was speechless, but managed a weak grin to encourage the other woman to continue her story.

“I had always wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement, but the opportunities here were limited. I found that being a woman wasn’t to my best interest. This is a small town and sometimes has a small town mentality.” She explained.

“I come from a little town in Nevada and I completely understand. I was so grateful for this opportunity from my Auntie.” She empathized. Aubrie felt an immediate connection to the other woman.

“She’s now finished her Bachelor’s degree at UNLV and is only helping me until the right opportunity comes along.” Willie spoke proudly of his niece.

“My aunt supported my decisions too. She was wonderful and I miss her dearly.” She spoke fondly of their relationship. “Shall we get on with our business?”

“Do you have one of the chips with you?” Willie seemed anxious.

She reached into her purse and pulled out several of the poker chips. She carefully laid them on the table in front of him.

Willie picked up one of the chips and turned it over and over in his hand. He handed it to Ellie for her to examine. Aubrie watched as the two of them fingered the chip and saw the looks pass between them.

“What?” She exclaimed. “What do you think?”

“Little Missy, you have found something that many people have been looking for since 1992!” He stared once again at the chip as if it could talk to him. “Some of those people are sorta dangerous.”

“Now you’re scaring me. What am I supposed to do? Are you saying these chips are valuable?” Her nerves were on fire. She had thought she had a good life, albeit a little mundane but this was extremely invigorating. A little danger, a mysterious skeleton and now these chips! What more could a girl ask for?

“They’re not valuable in the sense that you might think.” Willie continued slowly. “That cashier left the casino with more than half a million dollars of cash and chips. He’s never been heard of since. Some think he had an accomplice, one of the security guards. Since 1987, Las Vegas casinos’ chips were more tightly governed. The Department of Gaming required them to change their chips out in order to control the cash flow. A heist such as that one would have caused The Stardust to change their chips out.”

"I'm not following this." Aubrie tried to comprehend the ramifications of what Willie was telling them.

"When a casino changes out the style of chips, they have to give the public notice and a time frame for the patrons to bring in their old chips and redeem them for cash. After that final date, the old chips are no longer valid and are virtually worthless." He paused as the server came over to bring them their lunch. Aubrie watched as he closed his hand over the chips to shield them from the server's view. His carefulness only added to her anxiety.

As soon as the server left their table, he continued his dialogue. "These chips are not worth money in the current economy, however, they are worth a fortune to the insurance company, law enforcement and..." He paused for dramatic effect.

"And..." Aubrie prompted him.

"They are worth something to the underside of the gaming world. Like I told you earlier, the cashier was never heard from again. There are many theories and with those stories are many people looking to find the chips and the cash for themselves."

With that final statement, he looked to his niece to pick up the tale.

"Aubrie, I did extensive research about the chips and about your house at the lake." She hesitated but with an encouraging nod from Aubrie, continued. "I found the newspaper story about the skeleton they found in the car in the lake. What can you tell us about that?"

Twelve

Aubrie's head was spinning. "Are you suggesting that the skeleton in the car and these chips are connected?" Aubrie was astounded, but in the back of her mind was the name tag in the canvas bag full of chips. Could it be Harold Jenkins in the car in the lake? Could he be the robber of The Stardust poker chips?

Ellie and Willie watched the play of emotions cross her face. They waited patiently, toying with the food on their plates waiting for her to speak. The music from the bar, the noise of the other customers, and the people coming and going in and out of the front door didn't help Aubrie contain her erratic thoughts.

"Ellie, what exactly are you asking?" She finally spoke in a whisper.

"Aubrie, this robbery was only one of a few successful thefts in Las Vegas history. You have to know that Vegas was settled by gangsters and unscrupulous types. After all these years, it's very weird to have some of those stolen chips show up in a small town such as Prescott." She waited for this information to sink in. "I've lived here most of my life, well, until a few years ago. This is a sleepy little town and not much happens here in the way of big crime."

“I know what you’re saying is true. I lived in a rural town in Nevada. Yes, there was gambling but on a very small scale and I’m sure there were no gangsters in Tonopah.” Her thoughts were trying to make sense of the facts Ellie was giving her.

“So, we just want to know what you have been told about the skeleton in the car.” Ellie hushed up quickly as the server came back to check on them.

As soon as the woman left, the conversation began again.

“Little Missy, we are concerned that danger is already here. If that car in the lake is connected somehow to these chips, you could be in harm’s way.” Willie had been letting Ellie handle this part of their conversation until now. He held up a twisted hand to hush her protests and questions. “We’re not trying to scare you. We just want to make you aware of the possibility of something going wrong with the discovery of these chips getting out.”

“This is all so surreal. I know my Auntie would never have been involved in something like this, at least not intentionally.” Her mind was reeling with the facts. She looked up to see Willie and Ellie staring at her. She took a deep breath and started to speak when she saw Ellie looking over her shoulder, past her. Her face held the look of shock and she saw that Willie had reached over and put his hand over his niece’s hand in comfort. Aubrie turned to see who the other woman was staring at and came face to face with the sheriff.

Ellie stood. “John, good to see you.” She greeted the sheriff as he approached their table. Her words

were polite but there was no warmth in them, in fact Aubrie detected anxiety.

The sheriff held his hat in his hand and was twisting the brim around and around. His eyes never left Ellie's as he spoke to the other people still seated at the table. "Hello, Aubrie." He finally offered his hand to Willie. "I'm John, John Clarke."

"Have a seat young man. You too, Ellie." They both sat down not sure where all of this was going. Aubrie noted that the chips were definitely gone off the table. She wasn't sure how, she wasn't sure when, but she was positive that Willie didn't want the sheriff to see them.

To Ellie, the sheriff spoke. "Are you in town for long?" It seemed there were many other questions on his mind, but this was the one he asked for now.

Ellie had gained control of whatever emotions had hit her earlier. "I see that Prescott is still the same small town it always was. News doesn't take long to get around, does it?"

The sheriff grinned without guilt. "You know how it is." He looked around the table and posed his next question to Aubrie. "Have you known each other long?" It was a loaded question.

Aubrie didn't hesitate with her answer. "John, we know each other through a mutual friend in Tonopah. Ellie and Willie let me know they were in town today so I came to visit them." She laughed a little and added, "I was getting cabin fever and a trip to town was just the medicine I needed."

“Are you going to join us for lunch, Sheriff?” Willie invited John to stay for a while. Aubrie stifled a smile as she understood Willie’s challenge to the sheriff.

“No, I’ve already eaten. Thank you, anyway.” He looked at Ellie. “I just wanted to see an old friend for myself. You look great, El.” He used his old pet name for her.

“So do you, John.” She replied with hunger in her eyes.

He cleared his throat and started to stand up. “Well, got to go. Crime’s running rampant while I’m sitting here talking with you all.” He laughed. Before he turned to go, he added, “El, I’d like to see you if you have time. Maybe go to dinner. We now have the Longhorn Steakhouse at the mall, if you’d like.”

“I’ll have to let you know. It depends on how long Willie wants to stay here in Prescott.” She avoided her uncle’s gaze.

“Well, you remember the number. Just give me a call.” He left after saying his goodbyes to the other two at the table.

“Well, that was interesting to say the least.” Willie broke the ice.

“Uncle, I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was important to tell you about John.” She stammered. “In fact, I’m rather surprised that he came over here at all.”

Aubrie caught the look of longing in the other woman’s eyes as she spoke. She could feel her pain as she had just recently discovered her own undeclared love for Tuck. She felt a sudden bond with the blond woman staring at her uneaten food.

“Ellie, you asked me about the car in the lake.” She warmed to the grateful look on Ellie’s face at the conversation change. “I spoke with the sheriff and he asked me about a man named Harold Jenkins.”

She felt the tension in the air increase as she watched once again the exchange of glances between Ellie and her uncle.

“You two have really got to stop that!”

“Aubrie, please forgive us. We’ve done extensive research since your call and we’re sorry if our actions are upsetting. We must once again emphasize the importance for secrecy until we can get to the bottom of all of this.” Ellie reached over and patted her on the arm.

“Well, that might be a problem.” Aubrie made attempts at her lunch. “I have someone living in me. He’s been hired to help me get the house ready for roomers. I intend to turn my aunt’s house into a vacation bed and breakfast.” She explained Tuck’s presence in her house but not in her life. The look given by Ellie clearly showed that she understood the unspoken words. Both women were the victims of unrequited love.

“Can you trust him?” Willie interrupted the silent moment.

That word keeps coming up concerning Tuck, she thought miserably. “I’m not sure.” She felt helpless to explain the turmoil of emotions running around in her mind. “He is living in the house so I trust him that way. I don’t know all that much about him, though. He was hired before I got here by my caretaker.” She looked directly at Willie. “And him I trust implicitly.”

“Well, at least that’s a start.” His gruff voice replied.

“You said that John asked you about Harold Jenkins.” Ellie encouraged her to give them more information.

“Was he the one that stole the chips from that casino?” Her voice was a mere whisper as she realized the further complication of that bag being registered to the very same Harold Jenkins.

“No, that man’s name was Bill Brennan.”

“Well, then who was Harold Jenkins and why are you and the sheriff asking about him?” Aubrie was confused.

Ellie motioned for Willie to answer and then waited for him to get his thoughts together. “Harold was a special agent for the FBI. He worked a desk job out of Las Vegas. He was on his way to retirement when the casino was robbed. It was just his cup of tea and he became kind of a mentor to the agents handling the case. I knew of Harold through mutual connections. They came to me for information concerning those chips. With my website, I get all sorts of people wanting to sell or buy casino chips. I’m the resident expert in that area.” There was no bragging in his voice, just a simple statement of the facts.

He waited to continue his tale when the server came to finalize their bill for lunch. No one but Willie had done justice to the great meal. “Ready to step outside?” He stood up and grabbed the back of his chair. “It’s hard getting old. I have to wait and warm up once I’ve been sitting.” His gruff laughter caught Aubrie’s heart.

Ellie immediately got up and went to her uncle's side. He grabbed hold of her arm and the three of them headed out the swinging doors. Willie turned them to the crosswalk and they slowly headed for the town square across the street. They stood in the brisk mountain air under the trees and finished their conversation.

"Little Missy, Harold Jenkins disappeared in 1992, around the same time that car was dumped into your lake. We think that skeleton is the missing agent." He spared no punches in delivering the startling information.

"Oh, my God!" Aubrie exclaimed and looked for some place to sit down. She found a park bench just a few steps away and lowered her quaking body onto the seat. "I have to tell someone." Her voice was quivering as she spoke to no one in particular. "The bag of chips had a tag in it. The name on the tag is Harold Jenkins!" Oh, why am I telling them this, she questioned her own judgment.

Ellie sat down next to her on the park bench. "Aubrie, I realize that this must be very hard on you. I know you're struggling with who to trust and who not to, but the truth is we are here to help. We want to keep you safe and to do what's best for everyone."

"Where is the bag of chips now?" Willie interjected.

"I've hidden it in a place that no one will ever find it." She wasn't ready to reveal her secret hiding place to them just yet. "What are we going to do?"

No one spoke for a few minutes. The wind whistled through the stately pines surrounding the plaza and

Aubrie contemplated her options. She just shared a secret with people she had only known for a few hours and she'd left Tuck in the dark about her find. Her dad was gone, her aunt was no longer here, and there was no one in her life she trusted enough to help her deal with this horrible situation. What was she going to do?

"I need time to think about all of this." She stood and faced the two. "I have to go home." She started to walk away but turned to them. "I want to thank you for coming. I'll be in touch with you in a little bit."

"We're going to be here in Prescott for a few days. Call us, okay?" Ellie understood the confusion and the massive amount of turmoil that Aubrie was dealing with right now.

"Call us, Little Missy, if you need to. We'll be here for you." Willie's gruff voice came from behind her.

"Thank you, I'll be in touch."

She drove home in a fog. Her mind wouldn't shut down and she could only think of the decisions she had to make. She had hidden a very important thing from the man she loved and she didn't know what to do now. If there was truly danger present in her life, she had an obligation to protect the people she loved and that included Tuck. What he didn't know couldn't hurt him.

She drove slowly over the rough track back to the lake and her home. She felt a sense of belonging as she saw the tall stately house come into view. She smiled and reveled in the sense of peace that drifted over her being. She was home and she would do anything to protect her inheritance. As she turned into

the lane leading to her home, she noticed a huge piece of equipment sitting in the yard close to the front porch.

She parked just a few yards away from the backhoe and got out quickly. She noticed Tuck behind the wheel of the huge machinery but nothing was moving and he seemed to be just sitting there doing nothing.

She edged closer to the machine and addressed Tuck. "Tuck, what in the world is this?" By the look on his face, she saw that her presence startled him out of deep thought.

"Whoa! Aubrie, what are you doing here?" He got up and dismounted the huge machine.

"I just got back from town. What is this for?" She patted the yellow apparatus.

"I borrowed it from our local mountain backhoe guy. He said I could use it to get that blasted tree off the porch." He looked up at the tall pine still lying across the front of the house.

"And..." She prompted him to explain why the tree was still there and he was just sitting on the machinery.

"Well," he hesitated before continuing. "Phil was supposed to help me but he needed to take Betsy to town for her doctor's appointment and they haven't gotten back yet. I don't think I can do this by myself." He seemed embarrassed by his admission.

Aubrie immediately volunteered. "Tuck, can I help? I mean I've never been around one of these things, but is there something I can do to assist you?"

"Maybe there is something you can do." He was smiling and she felt her heart beating hard.

“I need to get the bucket in place just above that tree. Then I need to climb up that ladder and put a chain around the tree and attach it to the arm of the backhoe. When I tell you, I’ll need you to raise the bucket and lift that tree off the porch.”

“Tuck, I don’t know how to operate one of these things.”

“I’ll show you which lever to push and you just need to lift the tree a few feet. I need to be over there to guide it away from the porch. Once it’s above the porch, I can come over and get it completely free.”

She looked him in the eyes. She didn’t want to disappoint him but most of all, she wanted to work beside the man she had grown to love. She grinned and calmly agreed. “Okay, show me what lever to push and let me practice a minute before we attach it to the tree.”

As he climbed back onto the backhoe and sat down, he patted his knee. “Come on over. I’ll show you how to operate this baby in five easy steps.”

When she hesitated, he laughed out loud. “Still afraid, Triple A?”

She straightened her spine and went to climb up on the huge machine. As she got in front of him, she hesitated. He gently grabbed her and guided her onto his lap. As he snuggled close, she heard him say, “That’s better. I’ve missed you.”

She felt his breath on her neck. “I’ve missed you too.” She loved the closeness and realized how much she had needed his touch over the last few days. “Okay, show me what this baby can do.”

They spent at least an hour of driving the machine around the yard. Tuck showed her carefully what each lever did. It was all very complicated, but Aubrie was a quick learner. Soon he turned the controls over to her. As she made a final run around the yard, he instructed her to lift the bucket and once she successfully completed that task, he rewarded her with a kiss.

“Well done!” He reveled in her newfound knowledge and could tell she was very pleased with herself. “Are you ready to try this?” He prompted her.

She turned and put her arms around him. The light in his nearly blue eyes sparkled as she drew him closer and gave him a proper kiss. “Thank you for teaching me something new! I love learning and this was something I would have never thought to put on my list.”

He drew her closer and they kissed again. The heat was mounting and he knew if they didn’t get to the job at hand, they wouldn’t complete their task. He reluctantly turned her back around and instructed her to drive them to the porch. Once there, he told her to raise the bucket and as soon as she had the instrument in the proper place, he pushed her up out of his way and he got out of the seat.

“Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Was her not so confident reply. “Wait, Tuck, what’s the danger in what we’re about to try?”

“Triple A, we can do this. All you have to do is raise the bucket until I say stop. I’ll climb the ladder and hook the chain around the tree and the bucket. When I say lift, you just need to get that tree up off the

porch a little bit.” He calmly explained the process. “Once you have it where it needs to be, I’ll say stop, then I’ll come over and we’ll lift that damned tree off. We’ll put it on the ground next to the porch.”

“Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Tuck, you are the most capable man I know and I’m ready to do this.” She showed her trust in his abilities.

He gave her a big kiss and stepped down from the backhoe. He signaled her to raise the bucket as he went over to the ladder. Slowly and carefully she moved the machinery into place just above the roof of the porch. As soon as it was at the right height, Tuck signaled her to stop. She let out a huge breath totally unaware she was holding it. She watched nervously as Tuck climbed the ladder with the chain in hand. It took another few minutes out of her life as she stared at the sight before her. He stepped up on the porch. Oh, my, she exclaimed to herself. I hope that old porch will hold him.

Carefully, Tuck made his way to the tree and stooping down, he wrapped the chain underneath the tree. He signaled her to lower the bucket just a bit. He indicated by putting his hands together to show her how much.

He’s too close, she thought anxiously. What if I come down too far? It might hit him. He smiled and encouraged her to keep the bucket coming down. In just a few feet, he waved her to stop. Reaching up he took the chain and wrapped it around the heavy equipment. Once the chain was secure, Tuck indicated she should raise the bucket.

With a deep breath, Aubrie pushed the lever slowly and with eyes glued to the man and the tree before her, watched as the tree was lifting off the porch. So many things could go wrong and she waited with baited breath until he gave the sign for her to stop. She let out a sigh as she watched him climb down the ladder and hurried over to the backhoe.

“Great job!” His praise warmed her immensely.

When she got out of the seat and started to climb down, Tuck stopped her. He pulled her back onto his lap and wrapped her in his big arms. “Don’t you want to finish the job, Triple A?”

“Of course, now that you’re here and safe. Let’s do this.” She reached for the lever that would move the machinery back. Gradually the tree was clear of the porch and Tuck whispered in her ear. “Now, let it down slowly. You’re doing a fantastic job.”

She watched as the tree was finally lying on the ground before them. The huge equipment made the job of removing the tree appear so easy and simple. An idea suddenly took hold.

“Tuck,” She began eagerly. “What sort of weight capacity does this machine have? I mean, how much can it lift?”

He grinned as he watched her mind working fur-tively. “What do you have on your mind, Triple A?”

“Tuck, could this backhoe lift that car out of the lake?”

Thirteen

“**W**hat do you have in mind?” He probed for her to complete her thoughts.

“Tuck, why do we have to wait until the lake fills completely? We could drive this along that path on the side of the lake and someone could dive into the water as it is now and hook that cable on the car. We could then simply drive the backhoe back down the track and pull that car out of the lake.” She was getting more and more animated as she described the process to Tuck.

When he didn’t respond right away, she continued. “Don’t you see? We could have the answers to the mystery in that car now and not have to wait any more time than necessary. Isn’t that what everyone wants?” She was excited as she felt she held the solution to a very major problem in her life.

After a few seconds, she turned around to look into his face. She could see he was definitely contemplating her idea. He was deep in thought and she hesitated disturbing his deliberations.

“Tuck,” She prompted quietly. “Tell me what you are thinking.”

“Start this baby up. Wait, let me get that tree unhooked.” He pushed her up out of his lap and stepped

down from the machine. As soon as he unhooked the tree, he climbed back up and once again pulled her onto his lap.

“Start her up, Aubrie. Let’s drive it down to the path that goes around the lake and let me see if your idea could work.” He was serious and in deep thought.

She turned the key and pushed the button and started the big piece of equipment up and slowly turned toward the path that leads to the lake. They drove in silence as the backhoe edged slowly down the lane. This type of machinery wasn’t built for speed, rather for endurance.

As the sun was slowly dropping in the west, they came upon the edge of the lake. The sun had done its job and melted most of the snow. There was still a chill to the air and a slight breeze ruffled the leaves of the pines surrounding the lake. It was still just mud and grass at the north end of the small body of water. She could see where the snow melt was helping to feed the water as it slowly filled the chasm. They drove over small patches of snow, but the huge equipment was not deterred. Soon they were approaching the south end of the lake and she could see that water was indeed starting to fill the empty hole. The back end of the car was barely noticeable just below the surface of the clear blue liquid now filling the lake.

She stopped just short of the end of the path. They were at the edge of the lake closest to the dam. The concrete structure appeared larger than it had with

the water flowing behind it. Tuck still hadn't spoken and she turned to look at his face.

"Tuck?" She softly prompted him to voice his thoughts.

"Triple A, I think you have a very good idea. It could work." He gently pushed her up and dismounted the backhoe and walked to the edge of the track. He was deep in thought and she left him to his contemplations. As he walked back to the machine and climbed back into the seat, he spoke to her.

"Aubrie, this could work and we wouldn't have to wait for another couple of months. We need to contact the sheriff and set it up with him." His eyes were deep brown at this moment. "He'll want to be here to supervise and inspect the car once we have it out. It might not be something that you would want to see." His suggestion caught her off guard.

"Tuck, I want to see this through to the end. I need to get this all ready and getting that car out of the lake is uppermost in my mind. It could make or break my success in the bed and breakfast business." She was adamant.

"I understand your concerns, but if it was a criminal act, it could be ugly, even after all this time."

She was touched by his concern for her feelings, but reassured him. "Tuck, let's go home and call the sheriff. I want to see how soon we can get this done and over with."

"Start it up, Triple A. Let's see if you can figure how to get us turned around." He challenged her.

With a lot of backing up and edging forward, she finally succeeded in getting the big machine turned

towards the house. He was laughing and left it completely up to her abilities. She felt pride in his confidence in her.

They parked near the back porch with the sun finally squeezing below the horizon. The chill in the air was more pronounced and she shivered as they entered the cold, dark house. "You start the stove and I'll get the other rooms lit up." Tuck tenderly gave her a hug and went about his business of heating the other rooms in the huge drafty house.

She had made coffee and was staring at the contents in the refrigerator when she felt him come up behind her. He put his arms around her and pulled her into his warm body. Her heart lurched at his nearness, but she snuggled deeper into his hold savoring this contact with the man she loved.

"Hungry?" She finally found her voice.

"Not for anything in there." He whispered in her ear.

"Me neither." She turned into his embrace and raised her lips for his waiting kiss. The heat was no longer being generated by the stove in this room. "Tuck, I want you."

They kissed and her desire for him grew to a point of no return. She grabbed his hand and headed towards the stairs when they heard a loud banging sound from her bedroom. Immediately Aubrie thought of the chips she had stashed below the floorboards of her room. They both bounded up the stairs and reached her doorway at the same time. Tuck pushed her back as he looked into the doorway of her room.

“All clear,” He announced with laughter in his voice.

“What was it?” Her heart was still beating hard in her chest as she slowly entered the room. The light from the fireplace lent a romantic glow to her bedroom.

“Just a log in the fireplace.” He went over and used the poker to make sure all was safely burning again. He turned to her and waited.

She didn’t hesitate and went to him with her arms encircling his waist. They stood wrapped in each other’s arms and finally she looked up at him. “Nothing has changed, Tuck, I still want you.” She spoke more boldly than she ever had in her life. “There is something I need to say, though.” Her voice grew softer as she felt a deep need to share with him.

“What is it, Aubrie?” He encouraged her confession.

“I’m... I don’t have much experience here.” She indicated the bed in her room. She was definitely embarrassed at her admission and avoided looking directly at him. If she had, she would have seen a most tender look cross his handsome face.

She’s about to give me a very precious gift, he thought with mixed emotions. I want to make this a special moment for her, he thought with love and care in his heart. He had come to care for this spirited woman in just a few weeks but he was also keeping a huge secret from her. While he was struggling with his thoughts, he watched as she slowly backed away from him and started to remove her clothing.

As she sat on the chaise lounge, she bent over and removed her shoes and socks. She continued to look

at him as she slowly undid each button on her blouse. Soon she was sitting there just in her bra and panties. The fire from the fireplace highlighted her red hair as she undid the usual tight bun and allowed her auburn tresses to flow down over her shoulders.

That was his undoing. He quickly crossed the room and sat down next to her. He gently pushed her back to lie on the lounge. He stared at her perfect body. He ran his roughened hands slowly up her calves and near her femininity. He stopped just short of touching her there.

He turned and she gasped a sigh of alarm before she realized he was only removing his own shoes and socks. He took off his shirt and undid the button on his jeans before turning his attention back to the beautiful woman lying there waiting for him.

He snuggled down beside her and was grateful for the huge chaise lounge. They fit perfectly together. He reached for the front clasp on her bra and with one swift move had the constraining object removed.

“You’ve had some practice, haven’t you?” She tried to tease but the words came out with a bit of anxiety in her voice.

“Triple A, you’re beautiful and one of a kind. I only hope I am worthy of you.” He tried to reassure her.

“Love me, Tuck.” She hoped the love she felt for this man would encourage him to continue.

He then slowly, and oh so gently, placed his hand on her breast. Gently he rubbed over both of them and watched in delight as her nipples hardened at his touch.

She felt her breath catch in her throat at his gentle ministrations. She reached up and ran her own hand over the finely tuned muscles on his chest. He had very little hair and she reveled in the smoothness of his skin. She heard him sigh and she suddenly realized that her touch was affecting him as much as his was her. This gave her a heady sensation of power and control.

She was grateful that he seemed to be content moving leisurely as they just laid there touching each other and kissing with slow deliberate kisses. The fire crackled next to them and she was in heaven, knowing this man was about to make wonderful, sensuous love to her.

When his hand moved down and reached the top of her panties, she felt ready for more. She squirmed into him and encouraged his exploration of her body. He slipped behind the silky material and stroked downward, feeling her tight stomach clench in anticipation. She helped him remove the last barrier of material between him and her, and soon she was there in all her simplicity, bare and ready for his advancements.

Tuck took her hand and moved it down to the top of his jeans. She felt the soft hair leading down into his pants. The fire he had lit in her encouraged her to be almost brazen in her touch as she moved lower into his jeans. She could feel him, large and ready for her. Suddenly the heat between them was too much for this slow exploration.

Tuck stood up, removed his jeans and gently lifted her into his arms. The skin to skin contact was intoxicating and she snuggled into his chest as he quickly

carried her over to the bed. He put her down gently on the side and pulled the covers down. She moved onto the crisp, cold sheets but the heat of their passion was more than she could bear and she pulled him down to her side.

He kissed her passionately, sweetly kissing small slices of heaven down her neck and soon she felt his breath on her breasts. A small moan escaped her lips as she reveled in his touch and his tenderness. Her hands went around his head to pull him closer. She was on fire and he merely fanned the flames.

She could feel his passion. This was a new and exciting sensation. She rejoiced in the fact that their touching and nearness could stir them into a hotbed of sexual hunger. She was unsure what would come next, but she was definitely anticipating his tender touch.

"Wait here," He rose but bent over to place a lingering caress on her ready lips. "I'll be right back." He left her on the bed and she heard him step over to the jeans they had just discarded. Before she could have any second thoughts, he was back with a condom in his hand. He placed it on the stand next to the bed before returning his attention back to her.

"You didn't go on one of your mental trips, did you?" He teased her.

"Well, you were gone all of ten seconds and I almost did." She was thrilled that he was playing with her. This was the Tuck she had fallen in love with, and this was the man she was willing to give her body to in their moment of desire. He got into bed beside her and placed more tender kisses on her waiting lips.

She was more and more excited with the new feelings and sensations of having him close next to her. She was still a little bashful and didn't look lower than his eyes. She could feel his maleness as it pressed boldly against her side.

Aubrie pressed her hands on his chest and playfully stroked over his shoulders and helped to pull him closer. Tuck gently rubbed his hand down over her stomach and found the moistness between her legs. She squirmed closer into him and placed kisses of her own on his sweat-glistened chest. The heat between them was escalating and she felt like she would burst if he didn't do something soon.

"Tuck," She started, but wasn't sure what she wanted to say.

"What, sweet lady. Tell me what you want." He encouraged her gently. He knew she was unsure of how to proceed and in his desire to take it slow, he felt she was now ready for him. He sure was more than ready for her.

"Love me, Tuck," was her soft reply.

Before responding to her ragged request, he reached for the condom and she turned her attention away as she heard him rip the packet open.

When he reached over and turned her back to face him, she pulled at him and he quickly climbed on top of her. As he entered her, he kissed her tenderly but with intense longing and desire. She found herself clinging to him as their lovemaking burned between their sweating bodies.

She hardly recognized the voice she heard as her own but Aubrie was unashamed as she kissed him

between the moans of delight. She felt a small pang of discomfort in the beginning, but that disappeared as they reached a mutual climax. All too soon he collapsed beside her and pulled her closer in his arms. It was minutes before either of them spoke.

“Okay?” He whispered into her flaming hair.

This is the moment we should tell each other about our love, she thought with a touch of sadness but no regrets. She loved this man and was not sorry about the extreme tenderness they had just shared. “I’m wonderful!” She reassured him.

“Are you hungry?” She questioned him.

“Not really. Are you?”

“No, I’m fine.” She snuggled closer. “I’m much better than fine.” She teased as she placed small kisses on his cheek.

“You’re so right, sweet lady. You are so much better than just fine.” He turned her face up and placed a searing kiss on her waiting lips.

Her breath caught in her throat as his kiss reached the very depths of her soul. I love this man and I must protect him from harm, she reasoned as she thought of the chips and the skeleton in the lake. I need to get those poker chips out of here and to the authorities in Las Vegas. As the chaos of thoughts stirred in her mind, she became aware of the change in his breathing. She glanced up and with a small grin on her face, realized he had already fallen asleep. Aubrie soon joined him in slumber with a smile on her face and love in her heart.

Fourteen

“Wake up, sleepy head.” His voice was tender and teasing as he sat down on the side of her bed. Aubrie rolled over and looked at Tuck with stars in her eyes and love in her heart.

“You’re up already?”

“What do you mean already? It’s nearly ten in the morning.”

“Ten!” She sat up and then realized that the sheet had slipped down revealing her nude state. She grabbed for the covers only to have Tuck stop her. His grin was almost wicked with desire and she found herself staring up into his very blue eyes. She couldn’t have stopped him even if she wanted to as he lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers. She reveled in his touch as his roughened hands stroked down her back and eventually moved to cup her breasts.

A groan escaped her as he released her from his kiss. “If you keep touching me like that, I don’t think we’ll get me out of this bed.” She tried to sound stern but failed.

“Who says I want you out of there?” He quickly stood up, removed his shirt and jeans. He took the protection from his jeans that he’d secured from his room earlier before joining her in the big bed. Their love

making was intense and she found herself becoming more daring as she caressed his glistening body. They reached a rousing climax simultaneously and when Tuck rolled off from her, he pulled her onto his chest. Her long red tresses fell around them and tickled his skin.

"You are so beautiful!" He complimented her and placed a kiss on her parted lips.

"And so are you!" She returned the praise.

His laughter pleased and warmed her. "Men are not supposed to be beautiful. They're rugged, handsome, debonair, but definitely not beautiful."

"Well, say what you want. I think you're beautiful." Her stomach took that moment to growl between them.

"Well, lady, I think it's time to feed both of us. As much as I'd like to stay here with you all day, we have tons of work to do and we can't do it on empty stomachs." With that he playfully smacked her on her bottom and rolled out of the way of her attempt to slap him back.

He didn't seem shy or embarrassed as he walked around her room gathering his clothing. She tried not to stare but was so impressed with his finely tuned body that she couldn't help herself. He took his time dressing and finally turned to her with surprise in his eyes. "Are you going to lie there all day? Do you want me to help you get dressed?"

She quickly turned her eyes away and pulled the covers up higher on herself. "No, you go ahead and get the stove started and I'll be down as fast as I can." She shooed him out of her room.

"You don't have time to take a shower in your newly finished bathroom, so get moving, Triple A!" He went, allowing her the privacy she obviously wanted. He whistled a lively tune as he bounded down the stairs and left her to dress. Aubrie quickly started to get out of bed, when she realized she had a few sore spots to deal with on her body.

"Wow," she murmured. "I didn't realize that making love could make me feel so sore." She stretched in an attempt to relieve her strains. She gathered up her clothes for the day, peeked her head out of her room to make sure he was out of sight, and dashed to the bathroom, giggling all the way. Although she would have loved to linger under the hot water of the finally completed shower, she took only a few minutes to wash up and dress.

She practically skipped down the stairs all the way to the kitchen. She stood in the doorway and watched Tuck as he whipped up a bowl of eggs. He was trying to sing along with a tune on the radio. She went up to him and wrapped her arms around him from the back.

"Who's there?" He teased.

"The woman you just ravaged," was her saucy reply.

"I'm sorry, you're going to have to give me more than that."

Her laughter rang throughout the kitchen as she let go of him to get a cup of coffee. "You're incorrigible!"

"So, what are you going to do today?" He sat their breakfast down on the kitchen table. "I have to meet

with Phil and we're going to chop up that tree out front. Then we need to use that backhoe and tear down the old chicken coop out back."

"Well, I'm going to call the sheriff and set a date to get that car out of the lake. I have to get that front bedroom ready to paint and..." she hesitated before continuing. "I met a friend of a friend in town and I thought I would invite her out to see the house. She seemed to be interested in home décor and maybe she could help me with colors and such." She tried desperately to make it all sound casual. She didn't want to out and out lie to Tuck, but skirting the truth didn't set well with her conscience either.

"That sounds good." He seemed to accept her explanation without doubt. He reached over and put his hand over hers in a touch of intimacy that felt wonderful to Aubrie. It didn't help her feelings of guilt.

Aubrie avoided looking directly at him. All she wanted to do is get those poker chips out of this house and keep her and Tuck from getting into any danger. "Well, time to get busy. I'll do the dishes later." She started to leave the kitchen when Tuck grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap. Immediately she put her arms around his broad shoulders and snuggled into his neck.

"You smell good, Triple A. It's going to be hard to keep my hands off of you today." He spoke softly into her hair. "It's probably best that we'll have people around today. That way we can get something accomplished." He kissed at her hairline. She got up and winked at him.

“That was my plan,” she teased him. “I knew I couldn’t keep my hands off of you either.” With that she quickly left the kitchen and headed upstairs for her phone.

Aubrie reached her room but waited to hear the back door shut before she made her phone call to Ellie. As soon as she heard him slam the door, she dialed the number given to her by Willie.

It was answered by Ellie, just the person she wanted. “Ellie, this is Aubrie.”

“Hello, how are you today? Are you alright? We were concerned when you left us yesterday.” Ellie’s voice showed the worry she felt.

“I’m fine, now.” She couldn’t help blushing as if Ellie could know what had happened since she got back home. “I want you to come out and get those blasted chips.”

“You do?” Ellie’s voice showed her surprise at Aubrie’s request. “Has something happened?” Her tone suddenly changed to one of apprehension.

“No, I just want those chips out of here. I don’t want anything to happen. Can you come out today?”

“I’ll talk with my uncle, but I don’t think there’ll be a problem.”

Aubrie interrupted Ellie, “I don’t mean to be rude, but I think it would be best if you come alone. I’ll have a hard time explaining the two of you, but if you come by yourself, Tuck won’t be suspicious.” She hated deception and hated to make Ellie a part of the lies. “I’ll explain it all when you get here.”

“Just a minute.”

Aubrie heard Ellie talking to someone in the background and assumed it was Shotgun Willie. When she got back on the phone, Ellie told her, "I'll be there in a few hours. Can you give me some directions?"

"Oh, I'm so glad." She proceeded to give directions to her newfound friend. "Now, be careful, there's still some patches of snow and the road hasn't been plowed in a few months. It's a rough go, so take your time."

"See you in a few." Ellie rang off.

Aubrie was thrilled that she would finally be rid of those chips, so she decided to get busy with the front bedroom. She gleefully went downstairs with the intention of getting all of her supplies from her SUV. She grinned with surprise when she saw that Tuck had unloaded all of her paint and materials and put them in the mudroom. She grabbed the paint intended for the bedroom, some brushes, and the drop cloths and headed back upstairs.

Before starting her project, she went into her room and searched for some grubby clothing to put on. She heard the chainsaw and went to the window to see Phil and Tuck hacking away at the huge tree lying on the front lawn of the house. Her heart pounded hard as she took in the sight of the man she had given her heart and soul to as he struggled with the limbs of the tree.

She found her clothes and was quickly preparing the walls for the new coat of paint. The room had one wall with old flowered wall paper and she decided that it was still in good condition, so she'd just paint the other three. She remembered fondly when her

aunt papered that room. As a little girl, she loved the little yellow flowers and pretended she was in a field covered with them.

She'd been working a few hours when she realized that she no longer heard the chainsaw. She went to the window and looked down to see Phil and Tuck loading the pickup truck with all the logs they'd cut up from the tree. Tuck looked up at the window about that time and waved from where he stood. She grinned and waved back eagerly. She watched as the two men got into the pickup truck and drove off with a huge load of logs.

She went back to work and was putting the finishing touches on the walls when she heard a vehicle pull up to the front of the house. Aubrie went to the window and saw Ellie climb from the small SUV. She put the lid on the paint can and wiped her hands on her pants. As she went down the stairs, Ellie was knocking at the front door.

"Ellie, I'm so glad you came. Come in. Please excuse the house. There is so much to do and I'm just one person." She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "Coffee?"

"Sure. It looks like you need a break." Ellie joined in her laughter.

They sat down at the kitchen table and with two hot cups of coffee and a plate of cookies, Aubrie finally took a deep breath. "I know you're probably wondering why I didn't want your uncle with you."

"I'm sure you have your reasons." The other woman was patient and waited for Aubrie to continue.

“My life was very structured and what I would consider normal until a few months ago. I lived in Tonopah, Nevada, and worked at the local library and dated a few guys and everyday seemed the same as the other. Nothing exciting ever happened, but I didn’t realize that my life was boring until I came here.” She sipped at her coffee before continuing. “My Aunt Alta left this house, the lake, and 500 acres to me and I moved here to start the next chapter of my life.”

“And...” Ellie prompted.

“My world has never been so exciting. I’ve never had a man as exhilarating as Tuck in it before. He’s gorgeous, he’s smart, he’s definitely handy around the house and... and I’m in love with him.” It felt good to confide in another person and finally share her feelings.

“You say that like it’s a problem for you.” Ellie softened her words with a smile.

“Well, it’s not really a problem, it’s more. This whole thing has just sort of blown up on me. I came here with the intention of fixing up my new home and opening a bed and breakfast. Instead I have a lake with a car and skeleton in it, stolen chips in my attic, and a man that I can’t resist living under the same roof.”

She took a moment to compose herself. Here she was confiding in a woman she’d just met. But somehow it felt right, she instinctively knew she could trust Ellie to keep her secrets. “How about you? I noticed you and the sheriff seem to have something going on.”

Now it was Ellie's turn to appear uncomfortable.

"You don't have to answer me. I'm sorry if I've pushed the bounds of propriety."

"No, no, it's not that." Ellie reassured her. "John and I do have some sort of history but I thought it was over until I saw him again at The Palace." She looked at her empty cup.

"More coffee?" Aubrie was the perfect hostess.

"Would you think it awful of me if I asked you if you had something stronger? Some wine, perhaps?" She watched the other woman for a reaction. When Aubrie laughed out loud, she sighed.

"I was thinking the same thing. Talking about men seems to warrant something stronger." She got up and went to the refrigerator. "Do you want red or white? I have both."

"Whatever you're having is fine with me." Ellie got up and put their coffee cups in the sink. She looked out the window and noticed the sun was shining in the west. "I lived here for most of my adult life. I worked at The Palace but I was taking classes at Yavapai Community College. I wanted to get my degree in Criminal Justice. I had hoped to get hired with the sheriff's department here."

"Would you like to go upstairs to my room? The fire is burning there and we could be more comfortable." Aubrie suggested.

"That sounds cozy." They headed up the stairs with the bottle of wine. Ellie sat down on the lounge chair and Aubrie pulled up the rocker from the corner of the room. She stoked the fire and added a log. The

afternoons were still a little cool and it felt warm and comfortable in here.

"So, spill the beans. It's time to share." Aubrie coaxed her.

"I've been attracted to John for as long as I can remember. We went out while I worked as a server, but he was extremely dedicated to his career." She took a sip of the red wine and reflected for a minute. Ellie continued, "I wanted him, but I didn't want to be second in his life. When my uncle called and needed me, I guess I just fled."

"Did you finish your degree?"

"Yes, I took classes at the university and got a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. My goal was to come back here and apply at the sheriff's office, but I'm not sure now. You know seeing him stirred up feelings I thought were dead a long time ago. I don't know if I could work with him every day and not give myself away."

"Are you saying that he didn't feel the same way?" There was a distinct similarity between the two women's love interests.

"No, I know John cared for me, but I think his career was more important. I just needed and wanted more from him." She refilled her glass from the bottle and offered more to Aubrie. "What about Tuck? Does he care for you?"

"I think he does. Ellie, I'm not very experienced in matters of the heart. I come from a small town and dated a few local boys, but none of them made me feel like Tuck does." She blushed with memories of their passionate love making. She giggled nervously. "It's

all been happening so quickly. I really know very little about him.”

“I’ve got to ask you a question. You don’t have to answer me if you don’t want to.” Ellie paused. “Why haven’t you told Tuck about the poker chips?”

Aubrie took a deep drink from her wine. She hesitated as if organizing her thoughts before answering. “I have given him my heart and my body, but there is something I can’t put my finger on about him. I know that sounds crazy. Like I said earlier, I don’t know very much about him. He was hired by my caretaker before I even got here.” She got up and paced around the room. “I don’t know where he came from, I don’t know what he did for a living before coming here, I don’t even know if he has a wife or a girlfriend or anything. Oh God, I sound so stupid, don’t I?” She sat back down on the rocking chair.

“No, you don’t. We can’t control who we love.” Ellie responded wistfully. “You can’t manage it any more than I can.”

“We’re quite a pair, aren’t we?” They raised their glasses and toasted to their uncontrollable hearts.

“I have a question for you.” Aubrie challenged the other woman. “Why in the world is your uncle called Shotgun Willie?”

Ellie laughed out loud before answering. “Back in the day, he guarded his shop with a real shotgun. In case, you haven’t noticed, he isn’t a man of stature. He had a pawn shop near the strip in Las Vegas and was robbed more than once. Finally, he got tired of it and kept a sawed off shotgun below the counter. It

soon became known that you didn't mess with Shotgun Willie."

The two women enjoyed the fun and laughed aloud as they poured more wine into their glasses. Aubrie got up and put another log on the fire. It was finally getting darker outside and she could hear the wind blowing. "Ellie, what are you going to do about the sheriff?"

"What are you going to do about Tuck?"

About that time, they heard the back door slam shut and Aubrie's stomach clinched in anticipation as she knew Tuck would soon be climbing the stairs.

"Is that him?" Ellie whispered as she heard his steps on the stairs. They both giggled and looked toward the door.

"Hello." He announced from the doorway.

Aubrie got up and immediately went into his arms. He hugged her tightly but his gaze was locked on the tall blond standing in front of the lounge.

"Don't I know you?" She spoke to him with surprise in her voice.

Fifteen

His gaze was direct and intended for Ellie alone as he hugged Aubrie to his chest tightly. “No, I don’t think we’ve ever met.” He laughed without humor. “I have one of those faces that look familiar.”

Aubrie finally extricated herself from his arms and turned to Ellie. “Tuck, this is my new friend Ellie. She is a friend of my friend Sarah in Tonopah.”

“Nice to meet you.” Tuck extended his hand for her to shake.

Confused but willing to play along for a few minutes, Ellie shook his hand and replied, “Good to meet you, too.”

“Tuck, do you want some wine?” Aubrie sipped at her glass and grinned at him with stars in her eyes.

“Yes, that sounds good. I’ll get a glass from the kitchen and join you ladies.” He left the room in a hurry.

“Isn’t he great?” Aubrie asked the other woman.

“Great, yeah.” Ellie was definitely distracted with her thoughts. She sat back down on the lounge and took a long drink from her own glass.

Aubrie had had enough wine that she didn’t catch the sarcasm and confusion in Ellie’s voice. She giggled and sat back down on the rocker. “I know you

didn't get to see him at his best. He's been working outside all day. But he is the finest looking man I've ever seen in my life!" She sighed with contentment.

"Aubrie..." Ellie was interrupted by Tuck coming back into the room. He had an extra glass and another bottle of wine in his hands.

"Ladies, I thought we could use another bottle." He used the opener and offered each of them more wine. He pulled up another flowered chair into their small group. As he poured more wine into all of their glasses, his eyes watched Ellie closely.

"So, Ellie, do you live here in Prescott?" His question seemed innocent enough.

She exchanged glances with Aubrie before answering. "Actually I used to live here and I worked as a server at The Palace. But I live in Vegas now with my uncle."

"Really! What brought you back to Prescott?" Again the innuendos were there.

"Business." Was her simple reply.

"Tuck, did you and Phil get that wood all put away?" Aubrie interjected. "Can it be used for the fireplaces and stove?"

"Not yet, Triple A. Wood has to season for at least a year. Next winter those oak logs will bring wonderful heat to this old house."

"Ever been to Las Vegas, Tuck?" Ellie's question brought his attention back to her.

"Who hasn't?" He laughed as he answered but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

Aubrie seemed oblivious to the under currents surrounding the room. She giggled, "I haven't! I lived in

Nevada all my life but have never been to Las Vegas!" She laughed again.

"Well, you'll have to come and visit me." Ellie offered.

"But I thought you were considering moving back here and working with John."

Tuck immediately interrupted. "You're in law enforcement?"

Ellie reflected on how much to say to this mystery man. "I've finished my degree in criminal justice at UNLV and was considering coming back home to work with the sheriff's office. I miss Prescott." She hoped mentioning the university would stir some reaction from Tuck but was disappointed when he simply went on with the conversation.

"Have you spoken with the sheriff about joining his team?" He encouraged her to talk about her future plans.

"Not yet, I still haven't decided what I'm going to do. I have to take care of my uncle. He's very dependent on me and I don't think little ole Prescott would do for him after living all of his life in Vegas." She sounded wistful.

"We have a lot in common." Aubrie entered the conversation. "I mean I didn't have to take care of my aunt, but I was the daughter she never had. We were very close and I miss her dearly."

"What about you, Tuck? Are you close to your family?" Ellie pressed once again.

"Not really. My mother passed away over twenty years ago and my step dad has been gone for quite some time too. I've been on my own for a very long

time.” He shut down the personal question. “You ladies ready for something to eat? I’m starving.” He got up and bent over the rocking chair to kiss Aubrie softly on her lips. “Come on Triple A, you need some food in you. You’ve had enough wine for now.”

She relished his care and concern and got up quickly only to find that she was a little dizzy. “Whoa!” Tuck reached out to steady her.

“Take it slowly.” He held her close to his side. “Coming, Ellie? I make a mean grilled cheese.” He held his hand out to help her from the lounge.

Reluctantly, she took his hand in hers. It felt warm and his grin appeared genuine. She felt herself relaxing with this charming side of Tuck. All together the three of them made their way downstairs and headed toward the kitchen. Once there, Tuck poured a cup of coffee for Aubrie and sat her at the kitchen table.

Ellie watched the loving way he cared for her and was puzzled by her earlier suspicions of his presence here. His actions seemed honest as he kissed the other woman gently on the top of her head.

“I can help you, Tuck. I’m really fine now. I feel my head clearing.” She quietly spoke to him as she reached out and ran her hand down the side of his face.

“I know you can, but... Ellie and I can do this. You just relax and we’ll all eat together. What do you say, Ellie? Ready to help with our dinner?”

“Sure. You may make a mean grilled cheese, but I make the best salad ever!” She went to the refrigerator and started gathering the ingredients. She liked this kitchen and was fascinated by the wood burning

stove and the antique furnishings. “Aubrie, people are going to love this house and this kitchen is totally fascinating.”

“I’m so glad you think so. I hope we can get it ready for spring. I’m anxious to make a go of this endeavor.” She got up in spite of Tuck’s frown and started setting the dishes on the table. Soon they were all sitting down together to eat their simple meal.

“You’re right, Tuck. You do make an awesome grilled cheese sandwich. What’s your secret?” Ellie teased a bit.

“I’d tell you but I’d have to kill you afterwards.” He joked back at her.

Suddenly they heard a clap of thunder and lightning flashed brightly out the kitchen window. Just as quickly the group heard the sound of rain falling hard on the tin roof of the house.

“Oh, no. I have to drive back to town!” Ellie exclaimed.

“I don’t think you should.” Tuck suggested.

“Please, stay the night, Ellie. I would be afraid for you to head back to town on these dirt roads in the dark, and with rain falling no less.” Aubrie reached over and patted Ellie’s arm. “We’d worry about you. Wouldn’t we, Tuck?”

He didn’t hesitate to confirm Aubrie’s invitation. “Yes, Ellie I think you should stay the night. Things will be better in the morning.”

Ellie seemed to seriously consider her options when she finally sighed and gave in to practicality. “Okay, but I’ll have to call my uncle and let him know that I’m staying. He’d worry about me.” She got up

and went into the front room to make her call in private.

Aubrie and Tuck got up and cleared the dishes from the table. Together they quickly washed and dried the dinner plates.

Ellie went into the front room and placed a call to her uncle. "Uncle, it's me." She stated the obvious.

"Girl, it's good to hear from you. I was just about to call you with some new developments." His gruff voice was a small comfort to Ellie.

"What's up?"

"Have you gotten the chips yet?"

"No, we've gotten interrupted by her handyman. I don't even know where they are yet." Her curiosity was peaked.

"Well, don't bring them into town. In fact, leave them where they are if they're hidden well." He always spoke direct and when he hesitated, Ellie's nerves suddenly were alert.

"What's wrong, uncle?"

"I talked with my man at the agency and it seems they have a mole."

"A mole! You mean someone on the inside is sharing information?"

"Yes, and definitely with the wrong people. It's going to be very dangerous for you to have those chips in your possession. I'm waiting for another plan from my man. In the meantime, stay put and don't move or go near those chips!" His voice cracked. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you, girl."

She was immediately touched by her uncle's admission, but about that time, she noticed Tuck

lingering near the doorway from the kitchen. Her breath caught in her throat. Could Tuck be the mole? She was convinced she knew him from Las Vegas and now her intuition was on full alert.

“Uncle, don’t worry. I’m going to stay the night and I’ll be extra careful. Call me when you have a new plan.”

“Sure thing, don’t do anything stupid.” He rang off.

She almost chuckled at her uncle’s abruptness. The turmoil she felt far overshadowed the humor in the situation. She turned to go back into the kitchen and face Tuck and Aubrie. Ellie took a deep breath and put on her best game face.

“Well, that’s all set. Uncle won’t expect me until tomorrow. I guess you two have your first guest.” She hoped her act was convincing.

“Oh my, Tuck, we need to get that second bedroom in order. The mattress needs to be put back on the frame.” Aubrie’s thoughts were running rampant.

“No problem, I’ll go right up and get it ready. Where are the sheets and blankets?” He stood up, ready to accommodate their guest.

“Oh, thank you, Tuck. Just put the bed back together and Ellie and I can make the bed. Meet us in my room and we’ll have some more wine.” She gathered up some glasses and another bottle of wine.

The women finished cleaning the kitchen, shut off the lights, and headed up the stairs. They went to Aubrie’s room where Aubrie stoked the fire and they sat down to enjoy the flames and drinks. Soon Tuck joined them.

“So, Tuck, have you been in Prescott long?” Ellie tried once again to get some more information on the mysterious man.

“No, not really. I got here just before Aubrie did. I heard that the caretaker here needed some help and I came out to talk with Phil. He hired me on the spot.”

This information seemed to register on Aubrie’s face. The look crossing her pleasant features was one of surprise as this new information sunk in to her.

“Tuck, I thought you’d been with Phil for quite a while. I didn’t realize that you are as new as me to Prescott.”

Ellie watched the exchange with a new and deepened interest in her hosts for the night. She could tell that Aubrie was indeed surprised by this new information about the man she had just given her heart to, but at the same time, she found it hard to read what was running through Tuck’s mind.

“I’m new this time. I used to visit here with my stepdad after my mom died. We would fish and hike and just hang out in the pines.” He took a long drink of his wine.

“Wow,” Aubrie was thoughtful as she went on to say, “Isn’t it unusual that we all three have lost a parent, and yet we’ve all had a great relationship with another close relative.”

“My, my, haven’t we gotten a little morose.” Ellie commented. “I think it’s time to hit the hay. Where am I sleeping?”

“Oh, wait, I have to make the bed.” Aubrie got up and headed out the door to the hallway.

“Aubrie, that’s not necessary. I can make a bed.” Ellie was quickly behind her and encouraged her to stay near the fire.

“Absolutely not. What kind of an innkeeper would I be if I allow my guests to prepare their own bed?” She giggled and grabbed sheets and blankets from the linen closet.

Together the ladies made the bed without any conversation. “I’m sorry that this room isn’t ready for a guest. I’m working on getting all the rooms prepared but I started in the front. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to sleep in a freshly painted room with the smells and all.”

“Not to worry. I just need a bed and I’ll be fine.” Ellie reassured her. She gave the other woman a hug.

Aubrie was surprised at the gesture. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely! Sleep tight. I’ll see you in the morning.” Ellie walked her to the door.

Aubrie was puzzled by the concern showing on the other woman’s face. “Is everything okay?”

“All is well, Aubrie. Enjoy your time with Tuck.” She tried to convince her that everything was fine in spite of her gut feelings about the handyman in residence.

“Then, I’ll see you in the morning.” She left with a smile on her face as she headed back up the hallway into her room. Quietly she shut the door.

Tuck was facing the fireplace with his hand on the mantel. His shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and her breath caught in her throat. He was gorgeous!

She padded softly up and hugged him from behind. He immediately turned and grabbed her to his strong frame.

"I've missed you today." His voice was muffled as he spoke into the top of her head.

Aubrie's heart melted. "I've missed you, too. This is where I've wanted to be all day."

"Did you get our guest settled in?"

"Yes, she's going to be fine." Aubrie pulled him down onto the lounge, where they snuggled together.

"I think you have way too much clothing on." He whispered.

"I think you're right." She agreed with a hitch in her breath. She slowly sat up and removed her shoes and socks. "Is that better?" She teased with a grin.

"Not quite." He took off his boots and his socks. "What do you think?"

"I agree." She took her shirt over her head and removed the filmy bra covering her milky breasts.

"What about now?"

He took in the sight of her nearly perfect body and took a deep sigh. "Oh, I think you're getting closer, but still too many clothes." He peeled off his shirt and pressed next to her, giving her a long, searing kiss.

It took all of her concentration to put off the sexual sensations he was giving her. She reached down and undid the snap on her jeans and slowly wriggled out of them and was finally laying there without a stitch of clothing on. "Is this what you had in mind?" She was almost breathless and could barely get the words out.

He ran his hand slowly down the length of her small frame and took pride in the fact that he could see her reaction from his touch. "That's what I'm talking about." He kissed her again. She closed her eyes and just allowed her body to feel his touch, his caress.

"Open your eyes, Aubrie. I want to see how my touch affects you. I want you to look at me when we make love."

She opened her eyes and stared at the beautiful green eyes looking back. Her shyness evaporated when she saw him looking at her with longing. "You're still wearing too many clothes, Tuck. Fair is fair." She teased.

Tuck stood up and removed the last of his clothing and grabbed at her hand to lead her to the big, soft bed. They stood there facing each other, not touching physically but she could feel his eyes searing her skin. Driven by her intense feelings for him, she reached over and traced her hand lightly down his chest. He shuddered as her hand moved lower and lower to tenderly caress his manhood.

Aubrie kept looking at his wonderful green eyes to see how much she was affecting his senses. He extended his hands and slowly ran his roughened manly hands on her supple breasts. Her skin flamed from his touch. Suddenly slow was not the speed she wanted to go. She stilled her hands and reached out to push him back on the bed. As she got in bed, she crawled on top of Tuck and straddled his body.

She moved her hips and she heard the moan leave her lips as he entered her. He ran his hands over her breasts and down her tight stomach. She leaned over

and they kissed with a fervor all their own. Together they reached a climax and she fell across his chest breathing hard.

It was several minutes before she moved off to lay by his side. She was still trying to get her breath under control when he spoke.

"You're amazing!" He put his arm around Aubrie and pulled her close to his side.

"So are you, mister." She grinned and placed a tender kiss on his chest. Soon, he reached for the covers and they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Sixteen

“Time to get up, Aubrie. Our guest needs some coffee and breakfast.” He nudged her gently and placed a tender kiss on her cheek. She rolled into him and pressed herself tightly in his side.

“Aubrie, if you keep doing that, we won’t get out of this bed and Ellie will know why.” He tried to ignore the sensations he was feeling.

She groaned, “Oh, you’re right.” She struggled to sit up and get out of the bed. Once she was up, standing there naked, she shook her finger at him. “Once Ellie is safely back in Prescott, I expect you to finish this.”

She giggled and dashed out of his reach as Tuck tried to pull her back into bed. Aubrie dressed and hurried out of the room. Once downstairs she fired up the stove and started making coffee and breakfast. She was becoming adept and cooking on the old wood burning stove and was pleased when the smells brought her guest into the warm, cozy kitchen.

“Good morning, Ellie. There’s coffee ready and soon I’ll have some bacon and eggs for you.” She hummed joyfully as she cooked.

“You’re awfully chipper this morning.” Ellie commented as she helped herself to a cup of coffee.

“Isn’t it a wonderful day? I’m so glad you’re here. I love this house, I love my lake, I think I even am starting to love this old stove.” She laughed aloud.

“You love someone else too, don’t you?” Ellie stated the obvious. She sounded wistful causing Aubrie to turn and look at her new friend.

“You love John, so why don’t you do something about it.” She stated the obvious.

“Oh, like they say, it’s complicated.” She sat at the kitchen table.

“I know what you mean. I think I have to tell Tuck that I love him.”

“You already have, haven’t you?” Ellie indicated the floor above them.

Aubrie blushed vividly and giggled. “Yes, I guess I have. But, I think I need to say the words.” She hesitated. “The only thing is I’m scared. What if he doesn’t feel the same?”

“Aubrie, I’m sure he feels something for you. I don’t think Tuck would be the type of man to take advantage of you.” She suddenly realized that she meant this about Tuck.

“Oh, I hope you’re right.” She went back to fixing their breakfast.

“Tuck! Breakfast is ready.” She yelled up the stairs at him.

He stuck his head out of the bathroom, “Be right there.”

She went back into the kitchen and plated up their meal. The girls sat down and were eating when he appeared. His hair was still wet from his shower and her heart sang.

“You almost missed this meal!” Aubrie teased him.

He sat down and started eating. “What are you going to do today?”

“I’ve got to finish painting that front bedroom. I need to get at least one room finished.”

“Ellie, what are you plans?” He posed the question to the other lady at the table.

“I think I’ll hang here a little and help Aubrie with the painting. I’m not really anxious to get back to town.”

“Great! That would be great.” His words seemed to contradict his feelings.

“What are you going to do today, Tuck?” Aubrie posed the question.

“I think I’ll start getting the house ready to paint. It needs some scraping and repair and then we can get the painters out here to give the ole girl a fresh coat.” He kept eating his breakfast.

“I think that’s a good idea. The better she looks, the easier it’ll be to sell to visitors.” Aubrie agreed with him.

They finished their meal and after clearing the dishes, the ladies went upstairs to paint and Tuck headed outside to start the tedious task of scraping and repairing.

After about an hour of working, Tuck reached for his cell phone. “This is Tuck.” He answered. “Oh, hey, Phil, what’s up?”

“We’ve got a problem. I think that old storage shed out back is on fire. Don’t panic Aubrie. We should be able to get it put out. Bring your fire extinguishers. I’ll get the hose.” Phil hung up.

Tuck dropped his tools and headed into the house. He yelled up the stairs. "Aubrie, I've got to go help Phil. Be back shortly."

She poked her head out at the top of the stairs. "Everything all right? It's not Betsy, is it?"

"No, he just needs my help. I'll see you at lunch." He winked at her and she relished his smile.

Tuck moved quickly and grabbed the fire extinguishers from the kitchen as he went out the back door. He was apprehensive but trusted Phil's intuition about putting out the fire in the storage shed. The snow and the damp ground would keep the fire from creating any real disaster in the forest.

Aubrie went back to the bedroom and saw the Ellie was fast giving the walls a second coat of paint. It was definitely faster and more fun with a helper. "Ellie, thank you so much for staying and helping with the painting."

"You're welcome. Was that Tuck?" She questioned the interruption.

"Yes, he had to go and help Phil, my caretaker, with some sort of a problem. He said he'd be back for lunch." Aubrie related Tuck's words.

"I think I need to get back to town." Ellie was reluctant to leave without talking to Aubrie about her suspicions concerning Tuck.

"I should get the chips, if you're going to leave soon." Aubrie put her paint brush down and started out of the room.

"Uh, no." Oh, God, how much do I tell her? Ellie thought to herself.

“Why not? Isn’t that what you came for? I really think I need to get those things out of here.”

“Aubrie, when I called my uncle to let him know I would be staying, he...”

They got interrupted by Aubrie’s cell phone ringing.

“Maybe it’s Tuck.” She took the call without looking at the display. “He might have more information about Phil’s problem.”

“How are things going?” She questioned.

“Sorry.” The strange voice on the other end responded.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought this was someone else.”

“This is the deputy stationed at the lake. Chuck.”

“Oh, hi. What can I do for you, deputy?” She looked at Ellie and shrugged her shoulders in confusion.

“There is a problem here at the lake and we need you to come over.” He explained.

“What sort of a problem?” She was now totally bewildered.

“The sheriff is on his way. He wanted me to call you.”

This seemed to satisfy her hesitation. “Oh, okay, I’ll be right there.”

He hung up without further conversation.

“Ellie, that was the deputy out at the lake. He needs me to come out there for some problem. I won’t be long. I’ll just take one of the OHVs.”

Immediately Ellie’s radar for danger was aroused. “Are you sure you need to go?”

“He said that the sheriff was coming out. I guess I need to go and find out what else is going wrong.” She put the lid back on the paint and was trying to clean it from her hands.

“I’m going with you.” Ellie sealed her paint can up and was putting the brush in a plastic bag.

“Oh, Ellie, that’s not necessary. I know you probably don’t want to see John.”

“That’s okay. I want to see the car that’s stuck in the lake.” She didn’t want Aubrie to go out alone knowing what her uncle had divulged about trouble involving the chips.

“You probably won’t be able to see the car. The last time I was out there, it was barely visible as the lake is finally filling again.” Aubrie headed towards her bedroom.

“I could use a breath of fresh air. I’ll come with you.” Ellie’s tone was firm.

“Okay, better get your coat. It’s still brisk outside and the ride on that OHV will be cold.”

The two women bundled up and went outside to retrieve the OHV from the garage out back. Aubrie was pleased with herself when she managed to start the bike on the first try.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait until Tuck gets back? He can go with you to see the deputy.” Ellie tried once again to convince Aubrie.

“He went to help Phil and that’s in the opposite direction. Besides, the sheriff will be at the lake shortly. I need to get all of these problems solved so I can open my business.” She patted the seat behind her indicating that Ellie should climb aboard.

A sense of foreboding enveloped Ellie but she knew that she could not let Aubrie go out alone. Reluctantly she mounted the vehicle behind the young, determined woman. It was too coincidental that Tuck was called away just before the deputy called Aubrie.

The two women rode over the rough terrain towards the lake. It was just a short distance from the house and Ellie was diligently checking their surroundings, watching for anything suspicious. Soon she could see the nearly empty lake bed ahead and she craned her neck to see the car. As they moved closer on the path surrounding the lake, she could see the deputy standing beside an older pickup truck. No one else was in sight. Everything about this scene disturbed her sense of safety and security.

“Aubrie, I think we should go back and get Tuck. Please, Aubrie, let’s turn around.”

Aubrie heard her voice and sensed the intense concern but it was already too late. The deputy raised his hand and waved. Sunglasses covered his eyes and his hat was pulled low over his forehead. His stance was not one of a relaxed poise but rather one of a readiness. Ready for what, Aubrie thought as she too sensed trouble. They pulled up and Aubrie shut down the OHV. She waited for Ellie to get off first and then dismounted to go and greet the deputy.

“Hello, Chuck.” She looked around to see if she could figure out what the emergency was. “What’s wrong? Why did you need me out here?”

“Who’s that?” He avoided answering her question, but posed one of his own instead. “I thought you were alone.”

Ellie stuck out her hand as she stepped in front of Aubrie, "Hi. I'm Ellie Parker, a friend of Aubrie's. I came out to see the place and she put me to work. Can you believe that?" She was rambling but she needed to buy some time to figure out a way to escape.

Aubrie suddenly realized that he knew she would be alone. "What's going on? Why did you call me?" She put her hand on Ellie's arm and started to back up toward their vehicle.

"Oh, no you don't!" The deputy suddenly grabbed Ellie and pulled his gun. "Both of you, stay where you are!"

"What in the world! What do you want?" Aubrie's voice shook with fear.

"I want the chips!" He demanded angrily.

Both women were stunned into silence. The wind blew leaves around their feet and clouds scurried across the sky. The deputy sneered and repeated his demand.

"Give me the bag of money and poker chips and I'll be gone." He displayed impatience and his tone was one of anger and desperation.

"Chuck, I don't know what you're talking about." Aubrie tried a bluff. Her mind was racing trying to figure out how this information could have gotten to the young deputy.

Ellie put her hand on Aubrie's arm in an attempt to stall her. "Deputy, I'm sure that if Aubrie had any chips she would give them to you. Please let us go. You don't want to endanger your career with the sheriff." She tried to appeal to his desire for a future with the law enforcement community.

“What career?” He snorted and laughed without humor. “I’m not getting anywhere with the great Sheriff Clarke! He has me out here guarding an empty lake! How ridiculous is that?”

Fear gripped Aubrie as she realized that their very lives were in danger. “Chuck, I’ll tell you where the chips are. You just need to let us go.”

“No, Aubrie, don’t give him anything.” Ellie spoke sharply.

With that, the deputy raised his hand and smacked Ellie across the side of her head with his gun. The blond woman fell in a slump on the ground. Aubrie screamed and immediately stooped down to help her friend. Ellie was moaning with pain.

“Stop it!” He ordered her to get up.

“No! You can go and get the chips. I’ll tell you where they’re hidden.” She felt Ellie’s head and pulled back her hand in shock as her palm was covered with the woman’s blood.

“We don’t have time.” The deputy looked in the distance to see that the smoke plume from the storage shed was dissipating. “Your boyfriend will be coming to look for you. Get her up!”

Ellie struggled to get to her feet. Her head was spinning and she felt sick to her stomach. She fought to maintain her conscious thoughts. She needed to remain aware enough to help them escape from this madman.

“Head to my truck.” He ordered. “You drive!” He spoke directly to Aubrie. As they climbed into his pickup truck, Aubrie was behind the wheel with Ellie in the middle and the deputy got into the passenger

side. He poked his gun into Ellie's side and threatened the women. "Drive and don't pull any tricks or she'll pay the price."

"Why are you doing this?" Aubrie started the truck and pulled onto the dirt track.

"Lots and lots of money." He laughed menacingly.

"Those chips are worthless." Ellie voice was weak but she hoped to persuade the deputy that his efforts were useless.

"Oh, and what are you a chip expert?" His snide remark hit closer to home than he knew.

He gave directions to Aubrie and they turned onto a very rough dirt track. It was all she could do to keep the truck straight on the path. They seemed to bump along for a very long time, when he finally told her to pull into a shaded overgrown area.

"Now get out and don't try anything." He pulled Ellie out his side of the truck. "Grab some branches and anything you can to hide this truck." He ordered them as he waved his gun about.

They worked for several minutes until he finally stopped them. "That's good. It can't be seen from the air. Now walk up that path." He indicated a trail barely noticeable at first glance.

Aubrie turned to help Ellie, but the deputy stopped her. "I'll keep her with me."

"She needs some medical attention. Please let me help her." Aubrie tried to appeal to his humanity.

"Fine, but no tricks! I'm watching you two." He stepped close behind them as they trekked through the rough, overgrown path.

Aubrie pulled Ellie close to her side and tried to move branches and bushes out of her way. "Are you okay?" She whispered.

"I'll be fine. Watch your surroundings and look for anything that will help you remember how we got here. If we get a chance to escape we'll need to know the way out."

"No talking!" Suddenly the deputy's voice was close behind them. Aubrie felt the gun pushed harshly into her back. Her breath caught in her throat and fear seized her heart.

The wind was picking up and they struggled to keep to the path. It was nearly noon and she wondered when Tuck would find them missing. Her heart knew he would help get them back safe.

"This way!" The gruff voice of the deputy interrupted her thoughts of safety. He motioned to the right and pulled back some juniper shrubs to reveal another pathway.

"Where are you taking us?" Ellie finally spoke.

"Wouldn't you like to know!" He stated with superiority. "I just need to buy some time. Once he's out looking for you, I can slip into the house and get those chips." He seemed proud of his plan.

"It won't work." Ellie challenged him.

"Ellie, please don't aggravate him." Aubrie pleaded with her to keep quiet.

He got into Ellie's face. "You'd better listen to your friend or I'll give you something more serious to worry about."

They trudged up the pathway and finally came to a small clearing. Aubrie saw a disheveled, tiny cabin

and next to it carved out of the side of the mountain was a gaping hole. There was a huge metal gate covering the cave and above the metal door was a sign indicating the Mormon Girl mine. She shivered as she realized he was going to lock them in the abandoned mine. No telling what kind of creatures were lurking just beyond the entrance.

He shoved them towards the opening. Reaching into his pocket he retrieved a ring of keys and opened the gate, swinging it wide enough for them to get in. "Don't bother screaming, no one will hear you. We are miles from any civilization. I have to go and check on Tuck and see if he got that fire out." He laughed menacingly.

"You started that fire!" Aubrie accused him of the obvious. "Please don't leave us here."

He started to walk away and then thought twice. As he stepped back to the entrance, he growled, "Give me your cell phones." He stuck his hand out.

Aubrie reached in her back pocket and put the phone in his outstretched hand. Ellie hesitated, "I don't have mine. I left it upstairs in the bedroom." She hoped he would be convinced.

"Hand it over!" He ordered her as he poked the gun between the bars on the gate and pointed it directly at Aubrie. "I'll shoot her if you don't give me that phone!"

She took the phone out of her pocket and threw it at him. He laughed as he walked back down the trail and disappeared into the bushes. They heard an OHV being started, and then the sound of him leaving faded and the two women realized they were trapped.

“Phil, this fire has been deliberately set.” Tuck wiped at the soot and dirt on his face. They had just put out the last of the flames on the old shed. He was grateful that the forest had still been damp with the snow. It would have been a very different story if the trees had been dry and brittle.

“I think you’re right.” Phil held up the burnt gas can. “Why on earth would someone do this?” He scratched at his head.

Suddenly Tuck grimaced. “I’ve got to get back to the house. Aubrie is there.” He headed towards the OHV, but Phil was right behind him.

“I’ll go with you.” Phil climbed onto his own vehicle and started it up.

“I don’t know why, but I feel something bad has happened to her.”

Seventeen

Tuck ran into the house and up the stairs calling Aubrie's name. When he finally got into the bedroom the women had been painting, all he saw was the paint and brushes stowed away. Tuck went to his room and grabbed his gun. He dashed back down the stairs and nearly knocked Phil off his feet.

"Whoa, there buddy. Careful." Phil steadied himself.

"Phil, something has happened. The ladies aren't here. Let's check their vehicles." He headed out the back door and found both cars still in the driveway. As he rounded the corner and looked in the garage, he realized that the other OHV was missing. He studied the tracks leading out of the garage and motioned Phil to follow him. He quickly mounted the remaining OHV.

They rode slowly following the tracks to the road surrounding the lake. As they neared the end by the dam, Tuck saw the OHV parked by the side of the lake. He parked a short distance away and carefully as to not disturb any evidence, walked closer to the abandoned vehicle. Fear gripped his heart as he looked about for any signs of evidence.

“Tuck, come over here.” Phil motioned for the handyman to follow. “Look, there. It looks like blood.”

The dread in his heart made him sick as Tuck bent down and examined the spot in the dirt. Suddenly, he stood up and gazed about. “Where is that deputy? He’s supposed to be watching this lake.”

Tuck pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He punched in Aubrie’s number and waited as the phone rang. Shortly it was answered by her voice mail. “Aubrie, this is Tuck. Call me. I need to talk with you right away.” His panic was overriding his training and good sense. The next number he called was to Sheriff Clarke. As soon as he identified himself, his call was put right through.

“Hello, Tuck. What can I do for you?” The sheriff was all business.

“Did you pull your deputy from his duty at the lake?” Tuck tried to appear casual in his inquiry.

“No, he should be there. What’s going on?”

“I think you need to come out here. Aubrie and her friend might be missing. We’ve had a fire that was deliberately set and your deputy is not where he’s supposed to be.”

“What makes you think that Aubrie is missing?”

“I went to take care of the fire and when I realized it had been intentionally started, I hurried to the house. Aubrie and Ellie weren’t in the house and...”

John interrupted him, “Do you mean Ellie Parker?”

“Yes, she came to visit yesterday and stayed the night. They were painting the upstairs bedroom when I left.”

“I’ll be right there.” The sheriff hung up abruptly.

To Phil, he voiced his fears, “I think something has happened to Aubrie and Ellie. This looks like blood here in the dirt. She hasn’t answered her phone and the deputy is missing.” He started to walk around looking at the scene as he continued, “What were they doing out here?”



As Aubrie and Ellie heard the deputy drive off, they looked at their surroundings and then at each other. Aubrie was near to tears and Ellie was hurting from the blow to her head.

“Aubrie, we need to figure a way out of this mine. We don’t know how long he’ll be gone, but one thing’s for sure,” she hesitated before continuing with the cold, hard facts. “He’s going to kill us once he gets what he wants.” She waited for that information to sink in to her new friend.

“He’s not going to do that without a fight!” Aubrie surprised the other woman. “I won’t just lie down and let him do this. What do we need to do?”

“Do you know anything about this mine? The sign over the door called it the Mormon Girl. Did you ever come here when you were a child?”

“I don’t remember. My aunt and I hiked all through these woods and saw several old mines. This whole area was alive with gold prospecting back in the day. But, I can’t honestly say I remember this

particular mine.” She shut her eyes and concentrated on her memories.

“Most modern mines have an escape route. You know, a back way out of the mine. Do you think this one does?” Ellie was trying to think of any way that might help them escape and time was of the essence.

“No, I know for a fact that these old mines didn’t do that. Most were dug by inexperienced men with no plan other than getting rich with gold.” Aubrie started to walk towards the darkness in the back of the shaft.

“Where are you going?”

“There might be something back here that we can use.” Aubrie moved cautiously allowing time for her eyes to adjust to the encroaching darkness.

“Be careful, I hate to tell you this, but there could be snakes and rats in here.” Ellie’s voice was beside her now.

“They can’t be as bad as that deputy.” Aubrie giggled and soon both ladies were laughing.

They trekked slowly towards the darkness, feeling their way as they went. Suddenly, Ellie tripped and fell into a huge object. “Aubrie, this is an ore cart!” She bent down to feel if it was on a track.

“Follow the rails, and see how far to the front they go.” Aubrie got down and slowly running her hand over the railing, followed it to within a foot of the front gate.

“Ellie, can we use this cart?” She held back her excitement for a moment.

“Push and see if it will roll.” Both women got behind the cart and struggled to push it on the track. “It’s not going to budge!” Aubrie sighed in despair.

“Come on, Aubrie, we’ve got to keep trying. We don’t know how long he’s going to be gone.”

“Tuck will find us. He’ll rescue us.” She stated firmly.

Ellie had been avoiding this moment, but felt now was the time. “Aubrie, I started to tell you something in the bedroom before the deputy called. It’s important that you hear me out now.”

“You sound serious. What is it?” She dreaded what she knew was only going to be more bad news.

“When I called my uncle to let him know I was staying overnight, he let me know that the information about the chips was out. It seems there was a mole in the agency and that’s why he wanted me to leave the chips in safe hiding. We wouldn’t move them until it was safe.”

“But, you said the chips were worthless. Why would someone want to get their hands on them?” Aubrie was confused.

“There was over half a million dollars in chips and money stolen back then. The logical answer is that where the chips are, the money is too.”

“And this mole – what’s that?” Aubrie was wishing she had her computer to do some research.

“It’s someone on the inside sharing information with the bad guys, like our buddy out there, Deputy Chuck.” She spoke with disdain.

Aubrie let that information digest for just a minute when she tried to look at Ellie, but the darkness prevented her from seeing the expression on her friend’s face. “Are you saying that you think Tuck is the mole?”



There that ought to do it. The deputy laid the cell phones down beside a towering Alligator Juniper tree on top of Mt. Trittle. "Let them use their GPS and they'll find a wonderful empty mountain top." He laughed without humor. "Now, to see what Tuck has done to find his woman." He mounted the OHV and slowly made his way down the rough, little-used trail and headed towards a spot overlooking the lake. As he settled into his position, his own cell phone buzzed. He quickly answered and was immediately on the defensive.

"What?" His brow broke into a frown at the words from the caller. "There's been a few complications... she didn't tell me where they are yet, but I've got a plan and we'll soon have the money and those chips." He spoke with more confidence than he really felt. "Don't worry. I'll call you soon." He hung up his phone and turned his attention to the sheriff's SUV pulling onto the pathway surrounding the lake. He watched with satisfaction as the two men faced each other.



Sheriff Clarke adjusted his Stetson as he walked over to Tuck and Phil. Behind him walking at his slow gait using his cane, was Shotgun Willie. Tuck knew then that he needed to confess his deception to the sheriff as Willie's face showed his recognition.

"Sheriff, I think it's time I come clean with you." Tuck cleared his throat before continuing. He pulled his identification from his back pocket and handed it to John.

“So, you’re an agent with the government.” His reaction said he wasn’t surprised.

“I’m not here on official business.” He turned to Phil and apologized. “Phil, I never meant to deceive you, but I needed to be close to the house and the lake.” He could see understanding on the older man’s face and was relieved.

“My stepdad disappeared almost twenty years ago here and I’ve kept close tabs on the news from Prescott. When I saw the article in The Daily Courier about the car found in the Hassayampa, I knew it was his. I had to come and find out what I could about the car and hope it would lead me to his whereabouts. I’m on a personal leave until I can get some closure with all of this.” Tuck struggled with unresolved memories.

“So that means your stepdad was Harold Jenkins, the registered owner of the car.” Sheriff Clarke stated the facts out loud as his mind churned over other bits of information. “Was he an agent, too?”

“Yes, he was my mentor, my stepfather, and my friend. I owe it to him to find out what happened.”

“I have to ask. Why tell me all of this now?” The sheriff probed further.

“I’ve fallen for a certain young lady and she’s missing. I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to her under my watch.” He admitted his feelings aloud. “And, I’ve had dealings with Shotgun here.” He turned and finally shook Willie’s hand. “Good to see you, but, I’m a bit confused. What are you doing in Prescott?”

“Ellie is my niece.” Willie’s concern showed on his craggy and weathered features. “There’s something

you both are not aware of. It's my turn to own up and share some pertinent information."

"Did Aubrie find the chips?" Tuck asked the most obvious question, his senses were on full alert now.

"Yes, son, she did. She contacted me on the advice of a dear friend and Ellie and I came to verify their existence."

"Now, I'm confused." The sheriff demanded, "What's this all about? Are we talking about micro-chips?"

"No, Sheriff, we're talking about poker chips from Las Vegas." Willie proceeded to fill the sheriff in on the robbery all the way up to the most recent phone call from Aubrie.

"Wow! That's a lot of information. What has this to do with my missing deputy and the two women?"

"There's a mole on the inside and the information has been shared with unscrupulous people. There was supposed to be over half a million in chips and cash stolen. The logical conclusion is that where the chips are, the money is too." Willie filled in the blanks.

Realization dawned on Tuck. "That's why the third degree from Ellie. She must have recognized me from her classes at the university. I lectured there on working under cover." His heart was heavy but he chuckled about her attempts. "She tried to get me to reveal my true identity to Aubrie, but I wasn't about to blow my cover. She must think I'm the mole when I wouldn't come clean about my real job."

"Which brings us to today's events. What has happened so far?" This was taking far too long for the sheriff's comfort, but all the details were needed to

conduct a thorough investigation and come up with an effective game plan. Tuck filled him in starting with the fire and concluding with the sheriff looking at the evidence by the lake.

“That is definitely blood. The only question is, whose blood is it?” The look on Tuck’s face was grim as he stood up and looked around for any more signs of evidence.

“Well, like you, I tried to raise my deputy on his cell phone to no avail. I’m going to get the tech guys on locating the phones by GPS but I suggest that we try to follow those truck tire marks as far as we can. Thank goodness the ground is slightly damp and we have a good impression.”

“Phil, why don’t you take Willie back to your place and stay by the phone in case Aubrie would call or come over.” The two younger men knew they needed someone to hold down home base.

“John, why don’t you take my OHV and if you trust me, I’ll drive your truck to my house.” Phil offered.

“I’m going to call in an investigative team to look at the fire damage. Maybe we can get some clues to help us figure out who we’re dealing with. Keep an ear out for them, won’t you Phil?”

“Sure thing.” Phil readily agreed.

“That’s great, Phil. Thanks. We’ll be in touch.” The two older men took off in the sheriff’s vehicle, leaving the sheriff and Tuck to get moving on the search for the missing women.

“Okay, Sheriff, what do we do now?” Tuck questioned.

“Please, call me John. I think we need to stay together and follow these tracks. Do you have your weapon on you?”

Tuck produced the gun he had tucked in the back of his jeans underneath his flannel shirt. “Lead on, John.” They traveled slowly over the dirt, tracing the tire marks in the ground.



“Aubrie, there’s something else I need to tell you.” Ellie was slow to reveal all. “When I was taking my classes at the university, we had several guest speakers from the local law enforcement agencies. Tuck was one of those speakers. Aubrie, he’s an agent with the federal government. He spoke to us about working on under cover assignments.”

“Why would he want to appear as a handyman in a small town such as Prescott and why here at my house?” This was all too much for Aubrie to comprehend.

“I think it has to do with the chips and the money.” She went to stand beside Aubrie. “Aubrie, we need to get this cart moving and try to bust through that gate. I don’t know how much time we have, but one thing I know for sure, is I don’t want to be here when that deputy gets back.” She went to the cart and started pushing with all her might.

“Okay, let’s get out of here.” Aubrie was confused, hurt and determined to free herself and Ellie.

“What in the hell is wrong with this cart?” Ellie slumped down behind the ore cart in frustration.

“Wait,” Aubrie went all the way around the cart. “Isn’t there some sort of brake on these things?”

“You are a saint!” Ellie jumped up and went to the front of the cart. “Here it is! Now all we have to do is figure how to get this rusty old thing to release.”

“Ellie, that’s not our only problem. Once that brake is released, we need to get this cart rolling as fast as we can if we have any hope of breaking that gate. We can’t let it roll slowly or it won’t hit the gate hard enough to help.” She looked around for anything that might help them with their dilemma.

As Aubrie slowly made her way further back into the dark, damp hole, she suddenly felt something run across her foot. “Ahhh!” Her scream had Ellie immediately concerned.

“Aubrie, are you okay? Talk to me!” She demanded as she started back in the direction of her voice.

The breath in her body came hard and fast as Aubrie tried to control her fear. “I’m okay. I don’t know what it was, but something just ran over my foot. Oh, God, I don’t know how much more I can take.”

“What are you doing?” Ellie was by her side by then.

“I’m looking for some sort of rope or twine or something we can tie to the brake handle and pull from the back of the cart as we push.” She explained her thoughts.

“Smart! Let’s find it.”

They searched for several minutes before Aubrie yelled in victory. “Yeah! Look what I found!” She held up a small length of chain. It was a rusty, heavy piece of old metal about four feet long. “We can use this.”

Her excitement was catching. The two took the chain and moved towards the cart. Once there, Aubrie reached for her ponytail and removed the band. She took the chain and wrapped it around the brake and attached it to the wooden handle.

"I don't know how good this is going to hold. But the way I see it, we have one chance to make this all work." She looked to Ellie to see if she agreed.

"Then let's make it work." She braced herself behind the heavy, metal cart. "On the count of three, push with everything you've got. I'll pull the brake and off we go!"

"One, two, three!" Ellie pulled the brake and at the same time both women pushed with everything their lives depended on and suddenly the old cart moved forward. They kept digging in and soon the cart gained momentum. Just a few feet more and they would know if their plan worked. With a huge burst of energy, the women shoved at the ore cart and watched in amazement as it flew towards the old, rusty gate. It scraped against the gate with a horrible, eerie sound and they collectively held their breath, while they waited.

The old gate gave way just enough for the women to squeeze out of their cell. Just as quickly, they headed out into the woods and searched for a path to freedom. They had only gone a few steps when Ellie raised her hand to stop Aubrie. She cocked her head to make sure she heard what she thought she had.

"He's coming! Quick go that way." She pushed Aubrie through a tight group of trees. They scurried as

fast as they could and tried to put some distance between them and their captor.

Luck was on their side when Ellie noticed another mine entrance just up the hill to the right. She tapped Aubrie on the shoulder and motioned for her to change direction. They scrambled as quickly and silently as the forest would allow. Each knew their very lives depended on their successful escape.

Upon reaching the mine, they ducked in and stood perfectly still while they listened for the OHV to pass below their hiding place. Ellie motioned for Aubrie to move back further in the mine. It was damp, musty and dark, but survival drove the women onward back further into the old, abandoned mine.

“Find something to use as a weapon.” Ellie whispered to her companion. “Anything. A board, a piece of metal, anything that will keep us free.”

They struggled to focus their eyes in the dark but managed to feel their way around the mine. Aubrie stumbled and fell, but assured Ellie she was fine. As she put her hands down to help herself up, she found a piece of metal that was just the right length and weight.

“I found something!” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Let’s go back to the entrance and if he tries to come in, we’ll get him.” Ellie spoke with broken confidence.

They stepped slowly over the rough floor of the mine back to the entrance. They waited, trying to control their fear for any sound of footsteps in the woods just outside the mine. What they did hear is

the silence as the OHV noise was quieted. Aubrie grabbed Ellie's arm as terror riveted her body.

"Stay calm." Ellie tried to coax her friend even though her own heart was beating in her throat. She strained to listen for any sound that would give her a clue as to the whereabouts of their captor.

More quickly than she wanted, Ellie heard the footsteps crunching through the woods and prepared herself for the inevitable confrontation. She raised the board she had found and motioned for Aubrie to raise her piece of metal.

As soon as the footsteps were just outside the mine, Ellie signaled Aubrie that they should move out at the same time. The element of surprise was on their side and neither woman wanted to be a victim again.

A noise at the entrance of the mine had both women jumping out with their weapons raised ready to strike.

"Aubrie!" Tuck's voice stopped her in time.

Eighteen

“Oh, my God! Tuck, how did you find us?” Aubrie flew into his open arms and hugged herself to him tightly. Tears flowed freely.

He kissed the top of her head and held her as though he never wanted to let her go. Ellie witnessed the scene with her own tears streaming down her face.

“John!” Tuck yelled down the side of the mountain. “They’re up here!”

Shortly they heard heavy footsteps tromping through the woods. The sheriff bounded through the final copse of trees and stopped directly in front of Ellie. For a split second, neither moved and suddenly they surged into each other’s arms.

Ellie hugged him tightly and listened to the soothing words coming from John. “Are you okay?” He brushed at the blood stains at her hairline.

“How did you find us?” Her question came out breathless. She was thoroughly enjoying his touch; his nearness.

“We followed the tracks of the truck.” And as a second thought, he added, “Where is my deputy?”

Ellie pulled back and looked him straight in the eyes before speaking. "He's the reason we're here!" She spoke with anger lacing her tone.

The sheriff let go of her suddenly with shock showing on his features. "Chuck is the person who kidnapped you!" It was more of a statement rather than a question.

By this time, Tuck and Aubrie were paying close attention to the conversation going on between Ellie and the sheriff.

"Your deputy is a son of a..."

Aubrie interrupted the outburst from Ellie. "He wanted the chips. Someone has paid him some money with promises for more when he delivers the entire bag of them!" She avoided looking at Tuck as she confessed her secret to the sheriff.

John turned to her and questioned further, "What chips are we talking about exactly?" Even though he had just heard the entire story from Tuck and Willie, the sheriff wanted to see what Aubrie would say.

The answer came not from Aubrie but from Tuck. "In 1992, Bill Brennan stole over a half million dollars in chips and cash from the Stardust Hotel in Las Vegas." He stared at Aubrie, willing her to look his way. "He was never caught. It was one of the most successful robberies in Las Vegas casino history."

The silence was deafening. Aubrie suddenly felt extremely tired and just wanted to be home. She turned to the sheriff, and softly asked, "Can we go home now? I'm exhausted and I'm sure Ellie needs some medical attention." Her mind was spinning. How did Tuck know about those blasted chips? Was he as Ellie

had suggested, an agent and the spy inside some mysterious government agency? Did he pay the deputy to kidnap her? She shook her head to clear those horrible thoughts from circling around.

Tuck made no attempt to help her as they traveled down the rough trail back to the OHV's parked below. Ellie climbed on back of the one with John leaving Aubrie to pull herself up behind Tuck. She tried to not touch him but found herself clutching at his waist as he turned the vehicle towards the lake and home. Ellie pointed to a spot in the trail where they had hidden the truck. As the sheriff stopped and climbed down to inspect the truck, Tuck remained seated.

"Why?" His simple question was directed to Aubrie. His tone was laced with controlled patience.

"Why what?" She sat up straight and tried to keep her voice from trembling.

"Why didn't you tell me about the chips?" She could hear the deep pain etched in his voice.

It was easier talking to his back as they both sat rigidly on the OHV. "I didn't know who you were. I'd just met you and I wasn't sure I could trust you." It sounded so incredibly feeble as she spoke the words out loud.

He then turned to face her. "And now, after what we've shared?" His pointed question cut her straight in her heart.

"Tuck, it goes both ways. Who are you? Tuck the handyman or Tuck the government agent?" She could see the chagrin on his face.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sheriff and Ellie returning from the hidden truck. John was

on his cell phone calling in reinforcements. He was ordering the entire area to be cordoned off and a complete investigation to be conducted around the truck and the lake. Once again, the little Hassayampa Lake was the scene of a crime.

They started their trek towards home and soon the familiar sight came into view. Aubrie brushed away a tear and found herself wishing things could have been very different, but stopped herself short. When Tuck shut the bike down, she quickly climbed off and rushed up the stairs. She went through the door and was immediately followed by the rest of them.

"Aubrie, I'll need to talk with each of you for my investigation. But..." John stalled as he looked at the tears on her face. "I know you need a few minutes to compose yourself. I'll be right back as soon as I make sure my team is in place at the lake."

"Tuck, you want to come with me?"

"Sure, I'm not needed here."

His words were terse and hurt, but Aubrie didn't glance his way. She moved to the stairs and motioned for Ellie to join her. Together the two ladies moved up the steps and headed for the bathroom.

"Ellie, sit here and I'll clean your wound. It's looking pretty bad."

"Are you going to be alright?" Her friend questioned her.

Aubrie stopped. "I just want all of this to be over. I had a plan when I came here, I want to start my bed and breakfast and pretend that none of this ever happened."

Ellie met her eyes in the mirror. "Can you really forget Tuck?"

She hesitated quite a few moments before answering. "I'll never forget him, but he betrayed me and I lied to him. We can never get past that. Love has to include trust and truth." She said with more conviction than she really felt. Aubrie continued to clean up the wound on Ellie's head. "How about you and John? You looked pretty close back there." She desperately tried to change the subject.

"There's some history there too." Ellie spoke quietly. "I'm not sure we can get over it either." A silence fell over the two women as they finished in the bathroom and headed downstairs.

They were in the kitchen making some coffee when they heard the front door open. Voices filled the foyer and became louder as the group of people advanced on the kitchen.

John led the medical personnel into the room and indicated the two women. "Start with Ellie, she suffered some head trauma."

"John, I'm fine. I don't need any medical help." She tried to dissuade the sheriff. "Aubrie cleaned up the cut on my head."

"No arguments, Ellie." He was not to be put off.

She acquiesced and led the EMTs to the front room. That left John and Tuck in the kitchen with Aubrie. She nervously pattered around the room, cleaning imaginary dust from the counters. "Would you two like some coffee?"

“Can I ask some of my questions, now?” The sheriff pressed her. “I need to fill in some of the blanks in my investigation.”

Aubrie glanced at Tuck, but saw that he was not going to be of any help. “Sure, have a seat and a cup of coffee.”

Tuck took the chair opposite her as the sheriff sat down beside the trembling woman. He took a notebook from his pocket and started making notes on the small pad.

“Aubrie, first of all, I need to know where you put the chips.”

“I can get them for you, if you like. I’d really like them out of this house as soon as possible.” She started to rise but John stopped her.

“In a few minutes we’ll need them, but for now I have a few more questions.” He seemed satisfied with her response and willingness to cooperate. He continued with his inquiry. “Exactly where did you find them and when?”

“John, this would all be easier if you let me go upstairs and get my laptop. I keep a journal and it contains the exact timeline and information you need.” She got up and left the room quickly before he could protest.

Tuck looked at the sheriff. “She’s hurting and confused.” His words spoke of the nervous woman that had just vacated the room. His concern for her welfare showed that he cared for Aubrie.

“Perhaps she would be more inclined to talk without you in the room.” He watched Tuck’s face for reaction. The sheriff was disappointed that Tuck was

keeping his thoughts tightly hidden behind his stoic expression.

Tuck rose and started to leave the room but turned once again to face the sheriff. "I would appreciate you keeping me in the loop on this case. Even though I was not here officially, I have a vested interest in the outcome."

John got up and came over to the tense man standing in the open doorway. He stuck out his hand, "Of course, Tuck. We both need to keep each other informed. I would appreciate your help and expertise in solving the mystery of the chips, the car in the lake, and the disappearance of my deputy."

"Thanks, John. You have my number. I'll be staying in town for now." He turned on his heels quickly and practically ran down the steps of the porch. The sheriff heard his truck start up and Tuck was gone just as Aubrie returned to the kitchen with her laptop.

"Was that Tuck?" She looked out the kitchen window and saw the familiar truck speeding up the lane.

"Aubrie," The sheriff quietly came up behind her. "A lot has happened and I think he just needs some time to sort it all out."

She wiped at the small tear sliding down her cheek before facing the sheriff. "It's been the worst day of my life. I don't know what to think, I don't know what to do, and the saddest part is that I don't have anyone in my life any more that I can confide in. Auntie was always there for me and then..." She choked on the words before continuing, "And then Tuck came into my life and now... and now." She shrugged her shoulders and walked dejectedly over to the chair at the ta-

ble and slumped down onto it. "And now, he's lied and deceived me and I couldn't bring myself to trust him with my secret about finding the chips. What am I going to do?"

Ellie's voice filled the kitchen. "You're going to open your bed and breakfast and get on with your life." She came over, stooped down beside Aubrie and put her arms around the trembling girl. "Things are going to work out. You'll see."

Suddenly the dam burst and Aubrie was crying hard. John left the room and allowed the women some privacy. They had been through a horrible ordeal and needed this release.

"I am so confused. I love Tuck, but why couldn't I trust him? He left. I don't even know if he'll be back and I don't know if I want him back here. Oh, Ellie, my life was so simple just a few short weeks ago." She hugged her friend back and the tears flowed unchecked.

As Ellie felt her distress subside, she patted her gently on her back. "Aubrie, you should let the paramedics check you out. John will insist and I agree with him. We were in a very traumatic situation and it wouldn't hurt to make sure you're alright."

Aubrie looked at her new friend and slowly got up from the chair. "Lead on, I'm much too tired to fight."

Soon the three of them were sitting in the parlor. The paramedics had examined and certified the two women to be alright, neither needed hospitalization. John had gotten all his answers from Ellie and Aubrie, but felt a strong need to keep close and provide the two women with some care and comfort.

“John, I’d like to get that car out of the lake as soon as possible.” Aubrie’s thoughts swirled around in her head.

“I agree. It might provide some clues about this whole case.”

“Can we get it done tomorrow?” Aubrie pushed.

“Tomorrow!” The sheriff was surprised at her insistence. “Why the big hurry?”

“That mystery has been hanging over my head since I arrived here. It’s what brought Tuck to this area, too. I need answers but I have a feeling he needs the answers more.” She avoided looking directly at either Ellie or John as she spoke, but those two exchanged knowing looks. “We still have that backhoe here and Tuck seemed to think that it could be used to pull that car out of the lake. What do you think?”

“I’m not an expert at handling that kind of machinery. But I’ll see if Tuck wants to man the controls.” He hesitated but continued watching for her reaction, “He’s staying in town tonight. I’d better go and see if I can get a hold of him. Oh, can you get those chips for me?”

Aubrie jumped up and started towards the stairs. “Sure, just wait here and I’ll bring the bag down.” She was unwilling to give up her secret hiding place. She was back just as quickly carrying the heavy canvas bag full of chips. Aubrie gladly handed it over to the sheriff.

“Well, I’ll be on my way. You two going to be alright for the night?” His gaze was focused on Ellie as he asked the question.

"I think my uncle has already returned to town, so I'll stay here. If that's alright with you, Aubrie?"

"Of course, I'd love the company."

"I'm going to leave a deputy here to guard the house." John said as he headed toward the front door. He put up his hand to stop the protest from Ellie. "It's one of my most trusted men. He's been with me for a long time and I know he'd take a bullet for me."

Ellie took a deep breath and responded carefully. "If you trust him, then I guess we can." She walked closer to John.

For a few precious moments their eyes locked, then slowly the sheriff lowered his head and placed a careful kiss on her waiting lips. "I would never put you in danger again."

As soon as John left, Aubrie got up and announced, "I'm really tired. Do you mind if I go ahead and go up to bed?"

"No, in fact, I'm going to join you. It's been the longest day of my life and I feel like I could sleep a whole week." Both ladies climbed slowly up the stairs and parted ways at the top of the landing.

John gave final instructions to his deputy and then headed into town. His first task was to meet up with Tuck. He rang the number in his cell phone and was soon connected.

"Tuck, where are you?" John could hear music in the background.

"I'm wallowing in self-pity. Would you care to join me?"

"Sure, where are you?" John chuckled silently.

"The Palace. See you in a few." Tuck rang off.

John pulled into a parking space close to The Palace and stepped out of his truck. He reached behind the seat and took a denim shirt from a hanger and removed his sheriff uniform shirt. He took his service revolver and put it behind the seat and locked it in the small gun vault. Before leaving the truck, he made sure the bag of chips wasn't visible from the window. Satisfied, he pushed through the swinging doors, greeting people as he made his way to the table in the corner where Tuck was downing another beer.

He signaled the server to bring him his favorite brew and joined the morose man nursing his empty glass. "Hey." He sat down and greeted the server as she placed the full glass in front of him. "Thanks, Ginny. Get my friend another."

"Thanks, John," was Tuck's slurred reply.

They sat there just listening to the noises of people and music all around. It was unusually busy for a week night, but then the small town of Prescott had a loyal tourist following even in the cold weather.

"Did the girls check out alright?" Tuck finally raised his eyes and looked at the sheriff. John could see the pain etched in his face.

"Yeah, the EMT's said they were fine. Ellie has a nasty cut and a small bump on her head, but she's a tough one." His own voice sounded strained as he talked about the tall blond. "Aubrie wasn't physically hurt. She's pretty shook up, though."

Another slow country song started on the juke box and Tuck raised his glass to sip more of the mind-numbing brew. "When I thought I'd lost her, I nearly

went out of my mind.” He stopped and stared blankly at the picture over the bar, not really seeing it.

“I know what you mean. Ellie and I sort of have a history. Both men were lost in their thoughts for several minutes.

“Aubrie wants that car out of the lake.” John spoke matter-of-factly.

“I know.”

“Tomorrow.”

That caused Tuck to face him. “Tomorrow? Why the rush? Hasn’t enough bad happened for one day?”

“She thinks it will give you the answers you came searching for here in Prescott.”

“You can’t stop being sheriff, can you? Pressing for more information, John?”

“Are there more facts?” John countered.

Tuck took another long drink from his glass. “No, you know everything I know. All I want is to find out what happened to Harold.”

“Then you’ll want to there. I need a backhoe driver. Aubrie said you’re good.” He continued to watch Tuck’s reactions.

For several long minutes Tuck stared into the distance and sighed deeply before responding to the sheriff’s request. “I’ll be there. What time do you need me?”

“Where are you staying tonight?” John pushed for information.

Tuck grinned wickedly. “I thought I’d stay here until they kick me out!”

John took a deep breath before responding. “How about you come with me? I have an extra bed at my

house. That way we can ride out to the lake together.” He hoped his invitation wasn’t as transparent as it seemed.

Tuck sipped once again on his beer. “Sure, why not?”

They sat there for a few more songs from the juke box when John got up and signaled their server. “Bring me the check, Ginny.” To Tuck, he added, “Ready?”

Tuck rose and pushed back his chair. With wobbly legs, he made his way to the swinging doors before he turned to face the sheriff. “Thanks, John,” was all he said as he turned and walked through the doors.

Nineteen

“Tuck, you awake?” John’s voice came through the closed door. “We’ve got to get out to the lake.”

With his hair disheveled, Tuck came into the living room of John’s house, boots in hand and his clothes rumpled from sleeping in them. He sat on the nearest chair and rubbed his hand over his face.

“Coffee?” The sheriff asked quietly.

Tuck moaned aloud. “Can you talk without yelling?”

John just laughed. “Here, have some hot coffee. It’ll wake up those brain cells.”

“I don’t think I have any left.” Tuck held his head and tried to get a grasp on his thoughts. “I haven’t done that since my stepdad went missing.” His quiet admission hung in the air between the two men.

Tuck took a sip of the hot morning brew and tried once again to grasp reality. He pulled his boots on and slowly stood up. “Let’s go.”

They rode together in John’s truck. Tuck kicked at the bag of chips on the floor at his feet. “Is that all of the chips?”

“That’s what Aubrie gave me. We need to stop by the office and get them checked into the evidence room before we go out to the lake.”

“Open them up.” John seemed to understand Tuck’s feelings about the discovery of the chips and how they were tied to his stepdad’s disappearance. “I was hoping you could concur with Shotgun Willie’s opinion. You’ve been in Vegas and know the history of the heist. It would help if you could make sure these are the real thing.”

With slow and careful deliberation, Tuck unzipped the bag, but not before fingering the tag that held his stepdad’s name. A deep, searing pain clutched at his heart. His hurt surfaced once again and he found himself wondering why Aubrie kept this important find from him. Slowly, he ran his hand inside the bag and let the chips slide through his fingers. He dug deeper and rummaged around the stash of stolen poker chips. “I don’t think there’s anything but chips in here.”

“If there was cash, you can bet it was disposed of a long time ago.” John agreed.

At the sheriff’s office, Tuck waited in the truck while John took the bag in to be catalogued and recorded. They would know the amount of chips and their value before the day was out. As John climbed back into the cab of the truck, he noticed that Tuck had leaned back and was dozing lightly. His entrance startled the other man and Tuck was immediately alert.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to disturb you.” John spoke quietly.

“No problem.” Tuck adjusted himself and put his seat belt on as they pulled from the parking lot. “Are we all set?”

“While you were sleeping, I made calls to a diver we use and he’ll meet us at the lake. I also ordered a flatbed tow truck to haul the car back here so my team can go over it and collect any evidence available.”

“What about contacting the boys in Vegas?”

“Already done.” John looked over at Tuck as he drove the back road to the lake. “They said you could handle it, if you want.” He waited for a reaction.

Tuck smoothed his hand over his face before responding. “Yeah, I want.” His reply was terse.

The rest of their short journey was made in silence. Each man was struggling with the situation in their own way. As soon as the lake came into sight, Tuck realized that quite a crowd had gathered. He scanned the people deliberately, looking for a familiar red head. He finally laid his gaze on her and sighed.

“You going to be okay?” John pulled the truck in beside the backhoe. As he shut the engine off, he turned to face Tuck. “Vegas said they would send someone else and I’d understand if you didn’t want to do this.”

“I’ll be fine. I have to see this through. I need to see if that’s my stepdad’s car. I need to know the results of your investigation.” Tuck stepped out and headed toward the group of the sheriff’s officers; they had sat up a table under a canopy and were organizing the site.

Aubrie knew the minute Tuck had arrived. She watched as John stepped into the group and introduced Tuck to all of his team. She was in ear shot as she heard the sheriff call him Agent Thompson. Her heart lurched as she took in his disheveled appearance. His hair was sticking out from his cowboy hat and his clothes looked as if he had slept in them. He avoided any eye contact with her and appeared all business with the group. She saw that Shotgun Willie and Phil were included in the team of investigators.

Why didn't he tell her the truth about his identity? Why didn't she trust him with her secret? Why did her heart cry for what could have been? She shook herself out of those thoughts. It would do no good. What was done was done. They couldn't go back and change that.

She saw that the group was breaking up and assumed that the task was underway. Soon Tuck could have some answers and then go back to his own life. A small tear escaped and ran down her cheek, she didn't realize that she was crying until she felt its salty taste on her lip. She quickly wiped it from her face and struggled to regain her composure.

She heard the backhoe start up and avoided looking in that direction. Instead she found Ellie and together they walked along the shoreline path to the head of the dam. A small boat had been launched on what little bit of water was now in the lake and was headed towards the car. Nothing of it was showing above water, but the vehicle was just below the surface. Another couple of months and the lake would be entirely full again.

“At least the sun is shining.” Ellie tried to make small conversation.

“Yes.” Was Aubrie’s short reply.

“I bet that lake is going to be very, very cold. Thank goodness that diver doesn’t have to go extremely deep.” Ellie tried again to get Aubrie’s mind off of Tuck.

“Yes.” Only another short reply.

“Aubrie!” Ellie finally stopped her by grabbing her arm. “You’ve got to get a hold of yourself.”

“I know, I know.” She looked at Ellie, a helpless look covered her face. “I just can’t stand how it ended. I don’t know where it was going, but I know that I really cared for him and now, now there’s nothing.”

“Let it go for now. You don’t have to make any decisions today. John is going to get that car out of your lake and you can get your bed and breakfast ready for guests. You have to let it go.” Ellie pleaded with her.

“Okay, I know you’re right.” She squared her shoulders and turned to watch the scene.

The diver was getting ready to take the plunge into the cold, fresh water. Tuck had the backhoe parked as close to the shore of the lake as possible and John was making sure that all safety people and equipment were ready in case things went wrong.

It wasn’t long and the diver was climbing back into the small boat. As he removed his equipment and pulled the hood off his wetsuit, he gave a thumbs-up signal to the sheriff. John turned to Tuck and indicated that he should start moving the backhoe. As the powerful machine fired up, Aubrie realized she was

holding her breath, waiting to see if their plan would work.

She found herself remembering when Tuck taught her how to drive that powerful equipment. After that lesson, she got her first lesson in life. It was the first time she'd ever made love, she had given herself to him heart and soul. She shivered as though she could feel his hands on her bare skin this very minute.

She heard a shout from the crowd of people standing beside the lake as the rear end of the car appeared just above the surface of the water. Aubrie turned and focused on Tuck. The look on his handsome face was one of intense concentration. At the end of that cable, might be the answer to twenty years of searching for his missing stepdad. She wanted to go to him and hold him; comfort him.

Slowly and surely the old Mustang emerged from the lake, water dripping from its interior. The Hasayampa Lake was filled with water from the hills, including old mine tailings. That water was contaminated from the minerals in those old mines causing the lake to be barren of fish or living things. It was mesmerizing to see the car appear almost intact, but definitely rusted out; the crowd seemed to hold a collective breath.

She could see Tuck working the controls to maintain the constant pressure on the tow line. At long last, the car was sitting on the edge of the lakebed and the crowd surged toward the empty vehicle desperate to get a glance of the interior. The sheriff and his deputies stepped quickly to stop the crowd from approaching the car. John turned to Tuck and drew his

hand across his throat, a signal to cut the engine on the backhoe.

As the silence descended on the lake and the crowd of people waiting to see the car, Tuck deliberately and slowly dismounted the huge machinery and walked slowly, hesitantly towards the car. Together, he and John walked to the side of the Mustang.

Aubrie held her breath and clutched her hand to her throat as she saw the two men gaze into the interior of the car. She watched the knowing glance between them and she instantly knew that the news was not good for Tuck. Her heart lurched and she found herself moving forward closer to him. Whether he wanted it or not, he was going to receive what she had to offer.

As he turned away from the sight in front of him, he saw her and reached for the comfort he knew she was going to provide. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged Aubrie tightly to his chest. She whispered soothing sounds and small words of comfort. He gathered her closer and wept silent tears into the top of her head. For a few seconds, the past was gone, the crowd was gone, and the only thing that mattered was that he loved her and wanted her comfort and love in return.

“I love you, Aubrie Ann Anderson,” He spoke the words she had longed to hear.

“Oh, Tuck, I love you, too! I’m so sorry I hurt you.” She relished his touch, his nearness and wanted to sooth his agony. She turned to look into the still-draining vehicle, but Tuck stopped her.

"It's not a pretty sight. You don't want to see that." She allowed him to hold her once again tightly to his chest.

"Is it...?" She couldn't finish the words.

"Yes." More sobs racked his big frame and for a few moments longer the only thing that mattered was that she was here and she was in his arms.

John hesitated but knew business had to be concluded. "Tuck, we need to get the car loaded on the flatbed."

Tuck raised his head to look at the sheriff. "Give me just a minute longer." A knowing glance passed between the two men. John stepped away to talk with the tow truck driver, giving him more instructions.

"Why don't you go back to the house." Tuck tenderly suggested to Aubrie. "I'll be there as soon as we wrap up this situation."

"Are you sure you don't need me here?" She looked up into those fantastic eyes of his. Today they were as clear blue as the sky. His rough night showed in them, but she knew his strength would prevail.

"I'll need you more later. Please.." He encouraged her to go home. He placed a tender kiss on her lips and tasted the salt of her tears.

At that moment, Ellie stepped up and offered Aubrie a ride back to the house. "Let's go and get some food ready. These guys are going to need to eat."

The two women got on the OHV and with one last look at the man she loved, Aubrie rode away quickly. Once back at the house, the two women started preparing some lunch for the guys, anything to keep busy.

“Ellie, you’ve been to school for law enforcement training and you’ve worked in the Prescott sheriff’s office.” She stopped her task and faced the pretty blond woman. “What happens now?”

“I can only make an educated guess.” Ellie didn’t want to speculate but knew that Aubrie needed some idea of the process that John would take with his investigation. “They should go over the car completely with a fine tooth comb. It’s not going to be easy as the car has been submerged for over twenty years. But with today’s technology, they can gain a pretty good picture of what happened to put that car in the lake.”

“What about the skeleton? Will they be able to tell if it’s Tuck’s stepdad?”

“Yes, they should be able to discern that with DNA testing and such.”

“And then what?” Her analytical mind was working feverishly.

“I’m not sure. When they get here, John and Tuck will fill us in with as much information as they can.” She went to the other woman and put a comforting arm around her. “Just be there for him, Aubrie. That’s all you can do at this point.”

Aubrie knew her friend was right and tried to put her mind into the task of preparing lunch. Her emotions were worse than ever as she savored his words of love, his touch and his light kiss. We have a lot to work through, but we have a chance, she thought to herself. With that knowledge in her heart, Aubrie worked hard and soon had a lunch prepared, waiting for the sound of a vehicle. One glance at her watch

showed her that it was just over an hour since leaving the men at the lake.

She heard the sound of an engine and started toward the back door. Even though she was disappointed, Aubrie greeted Shotgun Willie, Phil, and Betsy with a welcome smile.

"Betsy, what a pleasant surprise!" She hugged the older woman and welcomed them all into the kitchen. "Please have a seat. It's so good to see you, Betsy. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm fine. The more important question is how are you feeling?" Betsy sat at the kitchen table. "Phil's brought me up to date on the news." She had a twinkle in her eyes.

"Yes, I know he must be very excited about getting the car out of the lake."

"Oh, that. Sure that's important, but what I want to know is about you and Tuck. I knew you two were a perfect match!"

Aubrie found herself blushing. She did remember that Betsy had encouraged her to trust Tuck. She didn't realize it back then, but the older woman had definitely been playing matchmaker.

"Phil, Willie, will you all stay and have some lunch with us?" She tried to divert the attention away from her and Tuck.

"Sure. They should be here any minute. They had the car loaded on the tow truck and it was heading into town when we left. They don't have much to do but wrap up the command table. I think they'll be here in a few minutes." Phil answered.

“Great.” Aubrie’s simple reply hid the anxiety she was feeling about seeing Tuck back at the house. She wanted him, loved him, and hoped they could work out their differences.

Ellie and Aubrie were setting the big table in the dining room when they heard the truck pull up at the back of the house. Her stomach did flip flops as she knew he would soon be walking in through that back door. Her hands were shaking as she sat the silverware and plates on the huge dining table. She tried to ignore the sound of the backdoor opening, but the minute he walked through the doorway of the dining room, she felt his presence. Aubrie stopped what she was doing and looked up to meet his gaze. He was smiling and staring at her in the way a woman wants the man she loves to look at her.

“Hey.” He spoke for her alone.

“Hey you, too.” She answered softly.

Somehow they met each other in the middle of the room. Their lips pressed together in a searing kiss, she trembled at his touch. This felt right, this felt like home. She didn’t want any of this to end.

“Are you okay?” She questioned him. “Are we okay?” She asked in a smaller voice.

“All will be well.” He answered while caressing her head with small kisses. “I love you and that’s all that’s important right now.”

“Then there’s hope for us.” She answered back simply and succinctly. That was her neat, put everything in its place personality shining through.

“Let’s serve our guests.”

She smiled proudly as she dwelled on the fact that he said 'our guests.' They went into the kitchen and everyone started carrying the dishes into the dining room. Soon all were seated around the huge dining table, passing dishes and deli trays. Conversation was going on and the most important topic included the huge development concerning extracting the car from the lake. As soon as everyone had finished their meal, the sheriff cleared his throat.

"I know you are all interested in the details as we know them at this point." He waited until he had their attention.

"Tuck, do you want to tell them what we now know?"

"Thanks, John. Yes, I'd like to share the information." Tuck was impressed with the sheriff's leadership skills. He didn't have to include Tuck, but he knew how important this investigation was to his new friend. Tuck sat at the head of the table with Aubrie to his right. All eyes were on him, waiting for him to speak.

"I'd first like to apologize once more for my deception." He focused on the beautiful red-headed woman sitting next to him, before continuing. "I hope you all can forgive me."

Aubrie reached over and put her hand over his and squeezed in a loving gesture, encouraging him to continue.

"The skeleton in the car, on first cursory inspection, was killed before the car went into the lake. It was pretty much intact and..." His voice was strained for a moment as he struggled to clarify. "The skeleton

was handcuffed to the steering wheel and there was a pipe wedged into the gas pedal, which leads us to the obvious conclusion that the person was killed before being put into the car and then driven into the lake.”

All faces around the table were intent on listening to the explanation of the tragedy that happened over twenty years ago. Her smile encouraged him to go on with his story. “By all indications, the skeleton is my stepdad, Harold Jenkins.” At that, his voice broke and he couldn’t finish. John picked up the story from there.

“Our deep investigation will reveal more details, but right now we definitely think that Harold had the chips and someone knew. He must have given your aunt the chips before leaving here that many years ago. He was an agent of impeccable skills and talents and would never have put your aunt in danger. His leaving would help focus the attention on him and not on this house and her.”

“In other words, he sacrificed his life for my aunt?” Aubrie questioned what the others must have been thinking.

“Yes, Aubrie, his actions were entirely honorable. We have to confirm that it is indeed Harold, but all indications point to his identity.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Ellie spoke up, her criminology background curiosity was definitely aroused.

The sheriff looked to Tuck for further explanation. He nodded and gave permission for him to clarify.

Tuck cleared his throat, “My stepdad had a very distinctive feature. He was missing his ring finger on

his left hand.” He kind of laughed. “It was a sore spot between him and my mom that he couldn’t wear his wedding band.”

“The skeleton didn’t have that finger, did he?” Aubrie picked up on the clue.

“Right, as usual. We still have to do the DNA testing but I’m confident that the evidence will conclude what we are all thinking tonight.”

The rest of the conversation was spent on speculation and theories. Dusk was quickly settling on the house and presently Phil and Betsy got up to leave. Then, was followed quickly by John, Ellie, and Shotgun Willie.

As soon as their guest had left, Aubrie darted around the kitchen cleaning up the final dishes and food. So much needed to be discussed and yet she found herself nervous, wondering where they would go from here. She didn’t have to wait long. Tuck had gone outside to put the truck in the barn and secure the property. When he came through the kitchen door, they both stopped and looked at each other for what seemed an eternity.

“Hey, Triple A,” He came over to her and pulled her into his big strong arms. “Forgive me?”

“I should’ve trusted you. I can’t explain why I didn’t, but please tell me you forgive me too.” She hugged him tightly.

He put his hand under her chin and raised her head to look her straight in the eyes. “I do. Please let’s just start over.”

“What happens now? Are you staying here or are you going back to Las Vegas?” She was almost afraid of his answer and waited, holding her breath.

“Triple A, I need to go to Vegas for a few months,” He felt her tremble. “Hey, it’s going to be alright. I love you.”

“Oh, Tuck, I love you, too.” She knew right then and there that they would work through all their problems and things would be fine. “When do you have to go?”

“Tomorrow morning.” He knew that news wouldn’t be welcome. “You’ll be here, waiting for me, won’t you?” He teased.

“I’ll count the days until you get back here.” She reached up and kissed him with passion.

“Trust me?” He asked tentatively.

“With all my heart.” She answered definitively. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Epilogue

Four Months Later

“Aubrie, that’s so exciting. You’ve gotten your first guests.” Ellie sat at the small kitchen table and congratulated her friend.

“Isn’t it great? They’ll be here in two weeks and thanks to your help, I’ll be ready. I can’t thank you enough for spending your Saturdays with me.” She responded cheerfully. “I’m so glad you decided to remain in Prescott. Is your uncle adjusting to this small town? After a huge, busy city like Las Vegas, how is he doing?”

“It was time for him to slow it down. He can do his online business from practically anywhere and here I can keep a better eye on him.” Ellie took a sip from her cup of coffee. The morning sun rays streaked through the kitchen window. “We found this cute house with a mother-in-law set up and we both love it. He took the smaller cottage and that works perfect for him.”

“How are you adapting to working with the sheriff’s office? Is it what you wanted?” She pushed for more information about her friend’s new job.

“Well, I am just handling records right now, but as soon as something opens, I intend to apply for a

deputy's position." Ellie was confident that she would have no trouble gaining that job.

"Won't that put you in closer contact with John?"

"Yes, but I'm pretty sure I can handle that."

"I'm sure you can, but can he?" Aubrie challenged with a laugh.

"We'll see." Was the only answer she was going to get.

"Have you heard from Tuck today?" Ellie tried to change the subject.

"No, as a matter of fact I have not. We've been emailing and calling practically every day, but I haven't heard from him yet this morning." She sounded wistful.

"When is he coming back?" Ellie inquired.

"I'm not sure, but I do miss him. I don't even know if he is staying as an agent, or what he's planning. It's a little disconcerting, but I trust him and we'll figure it out." She stated with confidence.

"You two have come a long way. I envy you."

"I love him and I have no doubt he loves me too. I can't wait to hear from him." Just then a knock sounded at the front door.

"Oh, that might be the guy." As she saw the look of confusion on her friend's face, she further explained. "I ran an ad in the newspaper for a handyman and someone called to say they were coming by today. I'll be right back."

She went to the front door and opened it with a smile ready to greet a stranger, but what she found were those familiar green eyes smiling back at her.

"I've come for the handyman job." He grinned and her heart caught in her throat. He stood there with his cowboy hat shifted back on his head. His hair was longer than when he left and in complete disarray, and the love she felt for him soared.

"It doesn't pay very well, the hours are long, and the demands on your skills might include everything including fixing the kitchen sink." She grinned back and could hardly contain her urge to leap into his arms.

"I hear there might be some fringe benefits." He teased.

"You have a room here in the house and the meals will all be provided, but other than that, I can't imagine what you're talking about." She held her breath.

"This is what I'm talking about, you little tease." He grabbed her and hugged her tightly. She raised her lips to meet his. The heat rose between them as their love was sealed in a kiss. Just then they heard a loud giggle behind them. They looked around and saw Ellie standing there staring at the two.

"What is going on here?" She laughed out loud. "Get a room, you two!" She teased.

"Ellie, so good to see you." Tuck acknowledged her comment with another kiss on Aubrie's waiting lips.

"Yeah, I can tell. I guess I need to go back to town. It looks like we won't get any work done today." She understood their need for a day alone.

"Wait, Ellie, I want you and John to come to dinner tonight. I'll cook some steaks and we can get caught up on news." He issued his invitation with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I'm not sure John is available, but I'll be here with bells on." Ellie agreed. "Why don't you give him a call?" She wanted to see the sheriff but was reluctant to put herself out there.

"Sure, I'll do that." Tuck wouldn't let go of Aubrie and pressed her closer to his body.

"Okay, okay, I'm leaving. See you guys tonight." And out the door she went, laughing all the way to her car.

"I've missed you terribly, Triple A." Tuck nuzzled her neck.

"I've longed for this." She replied with some cuddling of her own.

"Oh, I've longed for so much more." He took her hand, shut the front door and nodded towards the stairs.

She giggled and shook her head too. They headed up the stairs and into Aubrie's room. He looked around in surprise as he noticed his things had been moved to the master bedroom.

"What's this? Have I been evicted from my room?" He was undressing as he spoke.

"I didn't think you'd want me to put the handyman in here, would you?"

"Sweetie, you're going to find out how handy I really am." They both stood there entirely naked with the midday sun streaming through the lace curtains. She moved towards him and soon they were locked in an embrace that wouldn't stop. Words didn't pass between them as they kissed and made up for lost time.

A short time later, she rolled over in the bed and placed a small kiss on his chest. "Tuck, we have company coming. Hadn't you better call John?"

"I already talked to him before I got here, I just wanted to see what Ellie would say. He's coming tonight. Let's get moving and make a special dinner. Have you mastered that stove, while I was gone?"

"You just watch and see." She jumped up and put on her jeans and blouse. "Wait until you see the grill I put on the back porch. You'll love it!" She was so excited to see the house coming together, ready for guests. As she headed to the bedroom door, she suddenly stopped and turned to face him.

"Tuck, how long can you stay?" Her voice was laced with trepidation. "There's so much we have to discuss and so many questions I need answered."

He came to her and put his arms around her. "Triple A, let's not spoil tonight. We have tomorrow to discuss things. Let's just enjoy our time with Ellie and John, okay?" He placed a tender kiss on the top of her head.

"You're right, as usual. I'm just borrowing trouble, like Auntie used to say." She put on her best smile and looked up at him only to drown in those wonderful, mysterious eyes. Right now they seemed a light blue; wonder what that means, she mused.

When he finally got down to the kitchen, she heard him exclaim. "Wow! I love what you've been doing. The front rooms look warm and cozy and this kitchen is absolutely great! You've been busy, my little innkeeper." He went to where she was feverishly mixing up some concoction and tried to pull her against him.

“Here,” she handed him a bowl. “Go pick some strawberries and I can finish the shortcake.”

“You planted strawberries?” The surprise showed on his face.

“It’s amazing what you can find on the internet. I have learned so much about remodeling, planting and I’ve had so much fun!” She gave him a little kiss. “I had to keep my mind off of missing you. Now, go!”

They spent the rest of the afternoon working side by side. They cooked, cleaned, and enjoyed their time together. It was hard for them to keep their hands off each other, but finally at the appointed hour, they had the dining room table set and were just pouring a glass of wine when their guests arrived. It seemed that their house was going to be one of those ‘friends come to the back door’ type of homes. John and Ellie had driven out together and knocked lightly before entering.

Aubrie grinned at their familiarity and welcomed both her guests with a hug and a smile. “Ready for a glass of wine?”

“Do you have a beer?” John asked loudly. “I’ve never been a wine sort of guy.”

“Anything for a friend.” Tuck came up behind him with a cold beer in hand. They hugged man-style and both men toasted with their drinks.

“Ready for a great steak dinner?” Aubrie questioned.

“Who’s doing the cooking?” John teased.

“Oh, that’s man stuff. I’ve got the kitchen covered and you two are operating the grill out on the porch.”

As the men gathered their drinks and headed out, she could hear Tuck ask John, "Have you seen what my woman has been doing? Check this grill out."

Ellie sipped on her wine and looked at her friend. "You are practically glowing. I'm sure that you didn't get any work done on the house."

"Of course not. I was too busy loving my man. Oh, Ellie, I'm so happy. I'm going to hate it when he has to go back to Las Vegas." She shook off that sad thought.

"Well, you never know." Was all that Ellie replied.

Soon the steaks were ready and all four of them were sitting down at the dining room table to eat. Their guests exclaimed at the beautiful china place setting and the wonderful dishes prepared. Conversation was flowing and the topics were about the house, the prospective guests coming and the weather in general. It was a wonderful time and Aubrie hated to think about Tuck not staying here in Prescott.

"Well, I guess you want to know the latest." John finally spoke about the topic in the back of all their minds.

"Sure, fill them in." Tuck encouraged him.

Aubrie looked at him to try and figure out his thoughts. Was he nervous? Was he upset? Would he take the news good?

"Tuck has been informed of all of this information prior, so I'll just bring you two up to speed. The DNA tests confirm its Harold Jenkins." He looked to the ladies before continuing. "He was shot before being put into the car and handcuffed to the steering wheel. They rigged the gas pedal so the car would speed into

the lake and it sank quickly.” He paused to see how his news was being taken.

“And...” Tuck encouraged him to go on with the facts.

“There were no other chips or cash in the car. In fact, there was very little evidence to collect. The forensics team is still going over it and maybe something else will show up.”

“What about your deputy? Has he been found?” Ellie spoke up with a little anger still in her voice.

“There have been no sightings of Chuck. It’s like he’s disappeared off the face of the earth. We are still actively pursuing the hunt for him.”

“Do you think there’s still danger here at my house?” Aubrie voiced her concerns.

John looked at Tuck and a knowing glance passed between the two. “Not really. I think you’ll be safe enough.”

“What was the value of the chips in the bag?” Tuck asked, this was data that the two men hadn’t shared.

“They catalogued in \$345,000.00 worth of poker chips. They have been turned over to the Vegas guys for further examination. There wasn’t anything else in the bag but those chips.”

“So that’s it.” Aubrie concluded. “Nothing else can be done?”

“For now. It’s still an ongoing investigation and I’m working with the Las Vegas feds to help solve the crime.” John took a sip of his beer.

“You need another one?” Aubrie was already rising when she asked.

“Yeah, that’d be great.” John and Tuck both replied.

“I’ll help you.” Ellie offered and went with Aubrie into the kitchen. “Are you alright?” She asked her friend.

“I’m fine. I keep trying to put it out of my mind, but I can’t help but think about the time Tuck has to leave to go back to Las Vegas. I don’t want him to go but I don’t have the right to ask him to stay.”

Ellie hugged her friend. “It’ll be okay. Things will work out.”

“Did I show you the curtains I made for the room Tuck stayed in?” Aubrie hoped a change in conversation would ward off the little black clouds.

“No, I hadn’t seen them. Let’s go up and look.”

As they walked through the dining room, Tuck grabbed her hand and pulled her in for a kiss. She was thrilled and a little embarrassed at his open show of endearment. Ellie winked at Tuck behind Aubrie’s back.

“I’m going to show Ellie the room you were in. Do you guys want to come and look?”

“Nah, that’s woman stuff. We’ll just sit here and drink.” Tuck teased her.

Once upstairs, Aubrie took the right hallway and showed Ellie to the room that Tuck once occupied. They were there for several minutes as Ellie went around the room gazing at the newly sewn curtains and bedding. She took her time and asked questions about the décor. “Ready to go back down?” Aubrie was anxious to spend as much time with Tuck as she could.

Ellie paused a moment longer but soon agreed. She lagged behind Aubrie as they headed down the stairs. Halfway down the steps, Aubrie hesitated as the lighting had been turned up in the front foyer. She took the steps slowly and as soon as the first floor came into view, was shocked to see a small group of people. There was Phil and Betsy, Shotgun Willie, and John, each had a glass of champagne in their hands. From behind them came Tuck and as she took the final step to the floor, she felt Ellie slip behind her to go over and stand by John.

When he dropped to one knee, her breath caught in her throat. "What's going on?"

"Aubrie Ann Anderson, you are the love of my life. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" He held out a red velvet jewelry box and lifted the lid so she could see the beautiful diamond ring.

Time stood still and she looked up to see the anticipation on the others' eyes. She felt a small tear escape and roll down her cheek. She looked back at the man she loved and saw the twinkle in those sparkling, blue eyes.

"Yes, absolutely! I will marry you."

He stood up and quickly slipped the ring on her finger. "I don't want you to escape. I love you, Aubrie."

"I love you, too." She grinned up at him and the people in the room cheered. Someone handed her a glass of champagne and Phil raised his glass to make a cheer.

"May you have the blessings of a great marriage like Betsy and I have had." Everyone agreed.

“Does that mean I’m going to Las Vegas with you?” She looked around at all the hard work she had put into her aunt’s house. It was a labor of love, but loving Tuck was far more important than a house and belongings. Being with the man she loved was an easy decision to make, whether it was in Prescott or Las Vegas, she knew that by his side was her chosen place.

“Oh, wait, John has another surprise for you.”

“John?” She was confused as she looked to the sheriff.

“I’d like you to meet my newest deputy.” He shook hands with Tuck.

She jumped for joy and put her arms around Tuck’s neck and hugged him tightly. “That means we can live here?”

“Honey, I’m the only handyman you’re ever going to want!”

Read on for an excerpt from the next book of The Ante Up Series and follow Sheriff John and Ellie's journey as they continue the hunt for the stolen poker chips.

CHASING CHIPS, FINDING LOVE

Prologue

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

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

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

"Aubrie!" Ellie took a moment to gather her composure. "I'm so sorry! I was just upset."

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

"Alright, Aubrie. Let's meet at The Palace in an hour." Ellie replied.

"Don't do anything rash."

“What makes you say that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, tell me. What in the world has you so upset?”

“Aubrie, I have worked so hard to get my degree in Criminology; Uncle and I moved back here last year so I could pursue my dream of becoming a detective. I know that I can’t start out at the top but come on! I have more qualifications than the man they hired!” She stopped long enough to take a drink of her soda. “I’m sure that Tuck told you I had applied for the position.”

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

“That was awful, wasn’t it?” Ellie agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I envy you two.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now you're using your brain."

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

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

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

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

"El, how are you?"

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

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

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

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

“Aubrie, you don’t have to go. Please stay.” Her friend pleaded.

“Nonsense, I have guests coming tomorrow and there are things to be done.” She grabbed her purse, but before leaving the table, she reminded Ellie. “Remember that thing we were talking about earlier?” Seeing the confused look on the other lady’s face, she elaborated, “You know the help you need?” She nodded her head towards the sheriff.

“Oh, no! That’s not going to happen. That’s a very bad idea.” Ellie shook her head.

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

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

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

“Ellie, you must know that the decision wasn’t mine to make.”

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

“Ellie...” He seemed at a loss for words. “What can I do? It was the captain’s call, not mine. How can I make you understand? How can I help?”

For a moment, she didn’t speak, and then Ellie put a sarcastic smile on her face. Aubrie was right. She

needed a mentor. She needed field experience. "John, you want to help?"

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

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

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!

More novels by B.B. Montgomery

A Fast Affair
Day Trip Destiny

Ante Up Series

Book #1: *Love is a Dam Mystery*
Book #2: *Chasing Chips, Finding Love*
Book #3: *Spirits and Love: Rebuilding the Desperation Depot*

Salt of the Earth Series
Book #1: *They Call Me Raven*
Book #2: *Saving Me and the Salton Sea*

bbmontgomery.com