

SAVING ME  
AND  
THE SALTON SEA

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SAVING ME  
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A Slow Burn Romance

BB MONTGOMERY



## A SPECIAL THANK YOU

Our first trip to the Salton Sea was in 2019. We were amazed that such a huge body of water was such a full-blown environmental disaster. It inspired me to conduct tons of research as my heart was pulled by what could be a source of time and fun for families, but instead was a shrinking man-made disaster.

During our trip this year, we went to the Ski Inn in Bombay Beach. Sitting at the bar, we talked with Cindi, the bartender. She related tales of learning how to ski on the water and enjoying boating and picnics with her family. She shared photo albums from days gone by with tons of pictures of people and families enjoying the water and the sunshine. I want to thank Sonia and Ernie, the owners of the Ski Inn for allowing me to use their restaurant in my story. Please go and visit them, you'll be amazed.

We also went on the west side of the sea and stayed at the Motel by The Sea in Salton City owned by Gary and Roxie. Gary's grandfather and grandmother had turned an old hardware store into a small, no-frills motel. The rooms were newly decorated and extremely clean and comfortable. Roxie greeted us with a friendly smile and a warm welcome. If you visit the Salton Sea, please go on the web, and book a room with them. Roxie is an avid volunteer that helps the locals with various medical and health concerns.

This story blends fact and fiction. The Salton Sea needs to be saved. Sonia, Ernie, Gary, and Roxie are fighting to save their world from further disaster, and I applaud their efforts. Thank you for allowing me to tell my tale.

BB Montgomery

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Visiting the Salton Sea for the first time in 2019, inspired this book. Since that time, my friends and family have helped me with the research. They would find an article in a magazine or on the internet and share it with me. The folder in my office is bulging with information. I want to thank all the people that has shared my passion for this dying body of water. The mechanics of getting a book out to the world is not a solo task. My cover designer, Deb and my editor, Tenita are very vital in getting this accomplished. Paul, my producer is working on the audio portions as well. Thanks to all of you. Bob is the rock I lean on and bless him for all the time I spend on the computer without a complaint. His support is extremely important, and I can't thank him enough.





## PROLOGUE

Pearl tried to start her old car one more time, only to come to the conclusion that it had finally given up the ghost. As she stepped out onto the dirt by the highway, putting her hand up to shade her eyes, her sunglasses did little to stop the glare from above. The sun was scorching, the wind was non-existent, and sweat was already dripping down her face. As she stared up and down the nearly deserted landscape, her hopes for some sort of indication of civilization were dashed. On one side of the two-lane roadway was a desolate beach leading to the Salton Sea and on the other was smaller sand dunes and a railroad track. As she leaned back against her worn-out automobile, Pearl reflected on the circumstances that had brought her to this point in time.

Her mother had been thrilled that she was in between jobs when she called her earlier in the week. “You’re actually happy that I’m unemployed right at the moment? I find that hard to believe, Mom.”

“Well, it makes you available to help me out.” Her mother’s words were not exactly what she’d wanted to hear. Her suspicions were aroused.

“How can I help?”

“Your brother has gone missing, and I want you to go and see if you can find him.”

“Again? Mom, you know he always does this. He’s done this for years and then suddenly Danny always pops up and he’s fine. Well, as fine as he can be.”

“I’ll not have you talking bad about your brother. He’s just a little different, that’s all.”

With a huge sigh, Pearl gave in to her mother’s request. “Where do I even begin looking?”

“His last text said he was heading to some place in California called Slab City. I think it’s somewhere south of Indio.”

“Slab City! What kind of name is that for a city?”

“Well, you’ll have to look it up on the Internet. It’s just the kind of place he would be at home.” Her mother’s voice broke a bit. “I know that I shouldn’t worry, after all he’s almost 41, but...” She hesitated then added, “Pearl, you know a mother never stops worrying no matter how old her children become. Danny might have bitten off more than he could chew this time. Will you help? You know I can’t leave your father by himself.”

Without hesitation, she reassured her mother. “Of course, I’ll set out in a day or two. I’ll keep in touch.”

“I can give you some money, if you need it.” Her mother added.

“No, no, I’m fine. I love you, Mom.” The lie came not so easily off her tongue. What Mom doesn’t know about my finances won’t hurt her, she thought to herself. She worries enough about Danny, no sense in adding to her problems.

Once she got off the phone, Pearl opened the door and sat once again behind the steering wheel. With one last small prayer, Pearl turned the key and much

to her delight the old beater she called a car slowly chugged to life. Slamming the door shut, Pearl pulled back onto the deserted blacktop and headed south. She didn't push her car very hard but rather babied it slowly down the road. The warm air rushing through her open window didn't help sooth her frazzled nerves. The car was chugging with very little life left in it, the air was stifling, and she anxiously looked for a place of refuge until she could figure out what to do about her car.

As she looked out at the barren landscape, Pearl noticed that she was perhaps, the only thing alive in this arid desert. The area was dotted with scrub brush and no trees. She finally noticed that there weren't even many birds flying in the sky. The entire desolate scenery matched her mood. I should have left earlier, she reflected as another bead of sweat dripped down her neck in between the curves of her breasts. At least I dressed sensibly. She looked down at her cargo shorts and tank top.

Just as she rounded a turn in the road, Pearl's hopes soared as she noticed a structure not too far down the road. The closer she got, the more her car struggled, and she realized that this might be her only hope for rescue. Hope didn't live long as she approached the fenced-in compound. There were several buildings she noticed, but no sign, no name indicating who owned this site. She took in the high chain link fence and with trepidation saw the razor wire on top of it. This was obviously a place that wouldn't welcome visitors who weren't invited.

As she turned her dying car into the open gate, Pearl realized she had no choice but to try and secure some help. Just inside the fence, the car made the decision for her as it gasped and finally quit running completely.

With a deep breath, she opened the door and hesitated before she headed for the few steps up into what looked like an office. Before entering, she looked around and saw that all the buildings appeared new and mostly made of metal. She noticed off to the left an older mobile home, but right in front of her view were two huge storage tanks. They looked like the tanks that stored gasoline. Behind those tanks she could see a much bigger building, perhaps a warehouse of some sort. There were no signs nor any indication of what type of business this was.

Taking a moment to collect herself, Pearl finally knocked softly on the metal windowless door. When she didn't get a response, she rapped harder and listened for someone to come and open it.

"Come in!" She heard a masculine voice from the other side of the barrier.

Summoning up an extra bit of courage, Pearl opened the unlocked door and stepped inside. The first thing that hit her was the difference between the stifling heat outside and the much cooler air-conditioned atmosphere on the inside. She brushed back a sweaty lock of hair from her forehead and tried to adjust her eyes to the darkened interior. She saw a single person, a man standing behind a desk with his head downward focused on something on the top of it.

He was tall with dark, collar length hair but he didn't even look up to see who had just entered his world. The only thing that interrupted the moment were his words, "You're late!"



## CHAPTER ONE

“I beg your pardon.” Pearl uttered. “What am I late for?”

“Shut the door and put your things down over there on that desk.” His words were definitely orders, but when he finally looked up from his work, his small smile softened them. “Work,” was his simple reply.

She put her purse down after closing the door and turned to the tall, muscular man. The most striking feature was the piercing green eyes looking at her expectantly. “I think there’s a misunderstanding.”

“Okay, I’m willing to start over if you are. I did tell the agency that I wanted you here first thing in the morning, not...” he checked his watch before continuing, “at almost noon.”

“Listen, I said there was a misunderstanding. I’d like to clarify if you don’t mind.”

“By all means.” He waved his hands as he rested against the big wooden desk.

“I am here because I have car trouble. I don’t know who you’re expecting, but I’m not your person from the agency.”

He stood straight up. “You’re not here for a job?”

She hesitated at his question. Pearl needed a job, but this was too absurd. Or was it a blessing? Her

thoughts tuned into the opportunity knocking here. “What kind of job?”

“Look, I called the temp agency in Indio asking for an office worker to do some typing and light filing. If you’re not here from them, then you have to get out of here. We’re not equipped to have strangers in the compound.” He strode over to the door, ready to open it when she stopped him.

“Wait! You mean you won’t help me? My car has stopped running inside your fence and it won’t start. Look, I can type and if you help me, I’ll help you.” She pleaded, surprising herself with the spur of the moment offer.

With his eyes squinted, he spoke, “I need someone for at least two weeks!” His words were spoken with authority. “What were you doing way out here anyway?”

“I’m looking for my brother.” When she saw the doubt on his face, she added. “He’s kind of a wanderer and my mother wanted me to come and see if he’s alright.”

“Your brother just kind of wanders in the middle of the desert? This is the Salton Basin, lady, not Las Vegas or Hollywood! No one comes here to just ‘wander’.” He spoke harshly.

“He sent a text to our mother that he was going to a place called Slab City.”

His laugh was totally unexpected. “He’s a Slabber? Now, I understand why you call him a wanderer. Those people are lost souls and are better off left alone.”



“That’s a pretty cynical way of thinking, isn’t it?” She spoke what was on her mind. Once again, she pushed her wild curls back from her forehead.

“I call it like I see it. I don’t sugarcoat anything.”

“I can see that. What about my deal? You help me with my car, and I’ll do whatever things you need done.” She waited for his response.

“Wait here.” He gave no further explanation but instead disappeared into an office and closed the door. She could hear him on the phone but couldn’t discern his words. Feeling trapped and dependent on a stranger, Pearl took a seat behind the desk he’d indicated earlier. She looked around the room and started to realize the walls were bare, void of any information that might shed some light on what this place was or what business her reluctant host might be conducting. Suddenly he came out and handed her a piece of paper.

“Where’s your keys?”

“Are you always this abrupt?” Pearl reached into her purse.

“Unfortunately, yes. Fill out this application while I take a look at your car.” He took the keys from her open hand and quickly headed out the door leaving Pearl to stare at the paper.

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed a pen from the holder on the desk and started filling out the generic job application. Pearl chuckled as she put in her information but hesitated when it asked for her full name. Finally, she put down what she felt was the best thing for her.

Upon completion, Pearl stood up and wandered to the door. There were no windows in the building and as badly as she wanted to peek outside, she knew she couldn't do so without him becoming aware of her activity. Sighing with defeat, she sat back down and practiced some deep, calming breathing techniques to try and relax.

It wasn't very long when her reluctant host returned. "Your alternator might be the trouble. It's not a big deal, but I don't have the tools or parts here to fix it."

"So, what does that mean?"

"I'm going to take you up on your offer to help me. In return I'll have your car towed to Indio for repairs."

She thought for a few long moments and responded, "How much are you willing to pay me for my work here?"

The look on his face showed his surprise. "How about this? We'll work for the next two weeks and then at the end of that time and after your car is up and running, we'll re-evaluate our deal." He waited for a reaction.

She laughed and noticed the look of shock on his handsome face as her laughter wasn't what he'd expected. "Sure, why not."

Without further conversation, he grabbed the application and stared at it. "Your name is PJ? What does that stand for?"

"That's it. I'm PJ. Who are you?" She challenged.

"I'm Jake." He stuck his hand out for her to shake.

She put her much smaller hand into his and for a split second, felt the electricity pass between them. “Does that stand for Jacob?” Her voice held a touch of sarcasm.

“Jake is good enough. Now, let me show you what I need you to start on while I catch up on my own calls.” For the next few minutes, her new boss explained the log on for the computer and indicated a huge stack of hand-written papers. He pointed to an icon on the desktop. “This is the place you enter the information from these forms. It should flow easily into the program. I’ll be over there if you have any questions.”

“Wow, a five-minute training session.” She smiled to soften her mockery. “How many assistants have you gone through?”

“What makes you think that?” He sat behind the big desk with a frown darkening his handsome features.

“That phone conversation. You called the temp agency and they told you there wouldn’t be anyone coming today, didn’t they?” She looked at him, waiting for an answer with a big smile on her face.

“You know, as I think about it, this might not work. I don’t normally make impulsive decisions.” He was tapping a pen on the surface of the desk.

She hesitated before answering. “I think we can work together and both of us can accomplish our goals. I know I can come on rather strong, but I can rein it in for the next two weeks. I promise.”

He hesitated and Pearl thought for sure that he was going to cancel their deal, but to her surprise, he

finally spoke. “Okay, we’ll try it, but you’ll have to realize that I’m not a man to waste time on idle conversation. I believe in getting down to work.”

“Point taken.” She grabbed from the huge stack of papers and started her task of entering the data into the program. Neither of them spoke for the next several hours, when finally they heard a knock at the door.

She looked up but didn’t react. He rose slowly from his chair and went to answer the door. She listened as another male voice responded to his questions. Finally, Jake went out the door, closing it firmly behind him. Pearl got up, stretched her back muscles, and once again wished for a window to look out of to see what was going on outside. She reached for her bag, drew out a bottle of water and took a deep sip.

Startling her out of her drink, the door abruptly opened, and Jake stepped in to ask her a question. “What do you need out of your car before it’s taken to the garage?”

For a split second, she paused to think of her circumstances. “I have my overnight bag and some snacks. If he takes my car, where am I spending the night?”

For the first time since meeting the stoic Jake, she saw him show a little bit of nervousness. “There’s only one place and that’s the trailer at the north end of the compound.”

She was quick with her response, “And where are you staying?”

If he was uncomfortable, his face didn't show it as he answered, "I live in that same trailer."

"Wow, this just keeps getting better and better." She laughed despite the situation. "Where exactly would the temp stay?"

"I would assume that he or she would live in Indio and drive back and forth each day." His response showed no emotion.

"Well, it seems I'm at your mercy, aren't I?"

"The accommodations are completely safe for both of us. The trailer has one bedroom at the front and the other, mine, is at the rear." His look challenged her response.

With a huge smile, Pearl replied, "I'm so glad to hear that you'll be safe!"

His laughter was the last thing she expected, but it was contagious and soon they were both enjoying the moment. "Look, it's only for two weeks and I think we can survive, don't you? So, PJ, come out here and get the things you'll need, and we'll let the mechanic get on his way." He held the door open for her.

Pearl got up and made a great effort to pass by him without making personal contact, although she couldn't really discern why that was important. Once she was out the door, Pearl found herself taking a deep breath of the hot, dry air. She hurried to her car and gave the mechanic a big smile. "I hope it can be fixed cheaply and fast."

The young man in the greasy overalls looked up from his perusal of the engine and smiled. "I wish I could say that, but this is a rather tired, worn-out

machine. I won't know until I get it up on the rack and do a more complete examination."

"Thanks, I appreciate any effort you can make. I just need it up and running as soon as possible." By then Jake had come up to the car and stood next to her.

"Just let me know when you figure out what's wrong. Put it on my account, okay?" He spoke to the younger man.

"Sure, Jake, I'll have something for you first thing tomorrow with any amount of luck." The mechanic finished loading her car onto the flatbed tow truck and with a wave of his hand, left the compound and headed up the road towards Indio.

Jake went to lift her suitcase from the ground when she stopped him. "I think I'll just crash in the office, if you don't mind."

He grabbed the bag. "I do mind. I don't keep the air conditioning up in the office at night. You'll be fine in the trailer with me." He held up his hand to stop her protest. "I have to work late, and you can have your privacy while I'm not there." He started walking across the gravel towards the trailer not waiting to see if she was following, but obviously expecting her to keep up with his big steps.

With a sigh, Pearl finally caught up with Jake. "What are you, some kind of scientist?"

Without missing a stride, his quick retort put a stop to any more questions or conversation. "No."

Pearl got the hint and walked faster to keep up with him. In no time at all, they reached the mobile home and as he reached up to open the door, Jake

stepped back and indicated that she should go in first. She gave him a quizzical look before stepping up into the cool interior of her temporary home for the next two weeks.

He was right behind her and quickly shut the door. “Your room is to the right. I’ll put your stuff in there.” She stood there waiting for him to move as she looked around at her temporary surroundings. Everything was neat and clean, all things seemed in their place. “Not what you expected?”

His nearness startled her; Pearl visibly jumped. She quickly stepped into the living room and turned to face him. “Not exactly.”

“Oh, I know, I’ll bet you expected a typical guy’s room, all messy and dirty.”

Her embarrassment showed when the blush crept up her cheeks. “I guess I’m the opposite of a male chauvinist, aren’t I?”

“I don’t think that’s something that really exists. I’ve always been neat and tidy. When I was a boy, as soon as my feet hit the floor, I turned and made my bed in the morning. My mom always seemed to brag about it.”

There was a moment of awkwardness that Jake quickly broke as he pointed to the right. “The room you’ll use is this way.” He led her to the bedroom on the end of the mobile home carrying her suitcase. Once in the room he put her luggage down on the end of the bed.

“Make yourself at home. The fridge is full, and I’ll be along much later, so don’t wait up for me.” He left abruptly.

She was stunned by his fast exit and as she heard the door to the mobile home slam tight, Pearl finally moved. Her curiosity was piqued and with Jake gone, she moved about the space freely. The kitchen was spotless with no dirty dishes in the sink, not even a crumb on the counter. She hesitated for just a minute, fighting her own scruples, but moved silently into the opposite end of the trailer to inspect his room.

He was right she thought to herself, he was a very neat person. His bed was crisply made with nothing that appeared out of place in the rest of the room. One thing that stood out was the lack of personal affects. There were no pictures, photos or anything that would give her a clue about him. Feeling that her intrusion was enough, and her curiosity satisfied for the moment, Pearl moved back into the kitchen. Her stomach growled as she opened the refrigerator to inspect the offerings. It had been a long day even though it was just early evening, Pearl thought as she reached for a chunk of cheese. Pearl also grabbed a package of sliced ham and put her goodies on the counter.

With a quick search, Pearl took out a small plate, a knife, and a box of crackers. This will do, she thought in silence but before she took a seat at the breakfast bar, she opened the fridge one more time and found a bottle of water. "This will mostly definitely do." She spoke to the empty room. It didn't take long to finish her evening meal and as she cleaned up her mess, Pearl wondered what she was going to do for the rest of the night.



Her ringing phone made the decision for her when the face indicated her mother's name. "Hello. What's up?"

"Pearl? Have you found your brother yet? I thought I would've heard from you by now."

She took a deep, cleansing breath to tamp down the usual guilty feelings her mother seemed to invoke and softly responded. "I've had some difficulties with this trip." She was deliberately vague, not wanting to add to her mother's worries.

"Like what? Is it your brother?"

"No, Mother, I had some car troubles."

"When you tell me that, I know you're probably trying to keep other things from me. What happened to your car? You should've replaced that old thing a long time ago."

"I know, I know. It's just that I haven't had any extra money for that sort of thing. I found someone to help me, and I actually got a job for the next two weeks. As soon as my car gets repaired, I'll go and look for Danny. I'll keep in touch. Try not to worry too much."

"When you become a mother, you'll know that a mother always worries about her children." She repeated her words from the other day causing Pearl to roll her eyes back in her head. "What kind of job did you find?"

"Well, when my car died, it happened close to a kind of construction yard and the fellow that seems to be in charge needed a clerical person. I can do that, and he said he would get my car fixed. Mother, I don't think you really know how barren this place is. It's in

the middle of a ridiculously hot desert and I was lucky that I had some place to land.” She took a drink of her water, stared at the plastic bottle, and wished for a second that she had something a lot stronger.

“Well, you be careful. There’s a lot of weirdos out there in this world of ours. I don’t need to lose track of both of my children. Call me in a few days and let me know if you’ve found Danny.”

“I promise, Mom.” She ended her call. Pearl rose and made sure her dinner mess was cleaned up. She didn’t want Jake to be upset at all that she’d left his place disturbed. Stretching and finally realizing that she was tired, Pearl turned off all the lights but a small one over the stove. Satisfied that she had done everything right, she headed to her room and opened her bag.

The silence was almost unbearable, but not wanting to disturb her host’s routine, Pearl put on her night clothes that included her favorite faded tee shirt and stretchy shorts and lay down on the bed without pulling back the covers. She was used to falling asleep with the noise of the television in her own room, but not finding one, Pearl stretched out and tried to relax. The bed was comfortable but the most important thing she finally acknowledged was the fact that she was tired, very tired.

Pearl had no idea of how long she’d been asleep, but the noise coming from the front room startled her awake. It took a few confusing moments for her to recollect where she was and how she’d come to be there. As a sense of reality washed over her, Pearl sat

up and strained to hear more sounds coming from the living area of the mobile home.

She could hear the refrigerator being opened and the sound of cupboards being opened and closed. Pearl checked her phone to see that it was well past ten. She'd been asleep for several hours, but the appearance of her host, for reasons unknown, prompted her to seek his company.

"Do you always work this late or is it because of me?" He didn't twitch or move a bit at her intrusion but kept doing what he had been working on at the kitchen counter.

"I'm used to keeping my own time without anyone to answer to," was his curt response.

"Sorry." Pearl turned to go back into her room when he stopped her.

"Wait! I'm just not used to having someone in my space. Sorry if I sounded abrupt. Please join me." Jake reached and pulled the barstool next to him out for her to sit.

With just a moment's hesitation, Pearl finally sat down next to the mystery man. "I'm really sorry to land on your doorstep unwanted and unannounced."

He didn't respond to that comment but continued with his own thoughts. "I checked your work, and you did a good job of entering that data."

"Well, thank you. I just simply filled in the blanks. It didn't seem that hard." She replied. "What exactly do those numbers represent anyway?"

He finally stopped eating the sandwich he'd prepared and turned to look directly at her. "Do you know anything about the Salton Sea?"

Pearl shrugged her shoulders. “Not really, I live in Arizona and normally avoid California if I can.”

She got the rare laugh from her host at her response. “Did you talk to your mother?”

It took her a minute to adjust to the change of topic, but Pearl finally answered, “Yes, as a matter of fact she called me because I hadn’t kept in touch with her as she had expected.”

“Ah, Mothers, you gotta love them.”

With a small giggle, Pearl answered, “I do love my mother. What about yours? Don’t you love her?”

It seemed he wasn’t going to answer as he took a long swig of his beer and the final bite of his sandwich. Finally, with the silence closing in around them, Jake spoke. “I love my mother, but I’m not fooled by emotions that lead to an unconditional situation.”

“Wow! That’s heavy. What exactly do you mean?”

He didn’t appear eager or ready to answer her question. “I think it’s late and we need to get an early start tomorrow. I have another huge stack of data for you to enter.” Jake stood up and cleared his dishes. She watched as he rinsed his plates and stacked them into the dishwasher. He moved to spray the counter with disinfectant after putting the food back into the refrigerator. It was obvious that he had developed a routine as his movements were almost mechanical, without any thought to the process.

“By the way, don’t go outside unless I’m with you.” He was heading toward his end of the mobile home and turned to see if she heard him.

“Why not?” Pearl had never been one to keep her mouth shut.

“I released the guard dogs and they rather like skinny little girls.” She didn’t expect such a personal comment. To divert attention from her personal anxiousness, Pearl posed another question about the business he was conducting on this site. “There are things here that need that sort of protection?”

“I’ll take you to Slab City tomorrow to see if you can find your brother.”

Was this man deliberately being evasive or was that his normal personality? “You are quite the secretive man, aren’t you? I find it awfully hard to follow the change of conversation with you. What does a trip to Slab City have to do with us talking about the guard dogs?”

“You’ll see, you’ll see. Now please, just listen to me and stay in here until I put the dogs in their pen in the morning. Okay?” He stood there waiting for her answer.

She gave him a mock salute and a huge grin. “I’ll be right here, safe and sound, until you give me the word.”

“Good night, PJ. See you in the morning.”

She stood there staring at his backside as he went down the short hallway to his bedroom. Finally, Pearl moved to turn out the lights in the living room and kitchen area and then went to her room at the opposite end. Once again, she lay down and tried to unwind, this time she pulled down the covers. Allowing her wild, unbridled thoughts to flow freely, Pearl’s mind wandered to her brother and his

mysterious pursuits. “What in the world am I doing here in the middle of a blazing, hot desert in California with a strange man?” She spoke softly as to not disturb the man at the opposite end of their living quarters. As soon as she heard her own question, her mother’s voice was responding in her mind. “We do for family; we always have and now your brother needs our help. You know I would do it, but I don’t drive after dark, and I can’t leave your father on his own.”

With a huge sigh, Pearl felt herself relaxing enough to finally fall asleep. Her slumber didn’t last long however when a loud noise coming from the outside, startled her awake. Shaking the sleep from her mind, she got up and went to the small window at the side of her bed. Pushing the curtain back, she peered out into the night. About the same time, she got her eyes adjusted to the view from her window, she heard the dogs barking loudly as they scrambled past coming from the other end of the compound.

Just when she thought she saw movement from the other side of the fence, her door burst open, and Jake grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the window. The two of them tumbled down to the floor in a pile.

“What the hell?” Her voice demanded.

“I told you that things could be dangerous out there.”

Pearl tried to pull out of his arms. “No, you didn’t! You told me to stay inside. You didn’t say anything about stuff happening out there! What in the hell is going on?”

“The Slabbers like to attack this place every now and again. They are a bunch of druggies that think something of value is in here and those idiots actually think they can get it.”

He helped her up as they both finally found their feet. “Sorry about that.”

Once on her feet, Pearl faced him as she pulled away. “I’m fine.” He was bare-chested and his tanned muscles were hard to ignore, but she quickly averted her glance away from his boxers and focused on his face.

Jake stood facing her, his piercing green eyes stared into hers and for a few precious moments he seemed to struggle with his thoughts. “You will soon see what I know. This area is under siege by many different factions. The Salton Sea is a huge environmental disaster and anyone that lives in this area knows that. The lake is dying and no one, not the government nor any of the private citizens will lift a hand to correct that. Under this body of water could be the largest source of lithium in the world. The rich ones want to mine the lithium but could care less about the health disasters still occurring in the area.” He paused, but added, “Slab City is a lawless area just east of here. It’s so bad that even the local sheriff’s department won’t venture into it for any reason.”

He stopped, shrugged his shoulders and was about to speak when they heard a loud noise again, just outside the mobile home. “Damn! That does it!” Jake moved towards the door but turned to demand, “Stay here! Get down on the floor and whatever you do, don’t get up!”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m getting my gun and those bastards are going to know I’m tired of their games.” With that said, he moved quickly out her door and down the hallway. She was already on the floor, but her natural curiosity got the best of her. With one swift movement, she crawled on hands and knees down the hallway trying to find him.

“You’re not going to shoot them, are you?” Pearl stood up and faced him.



## CHAPTER TWO

“You don’t listen very well, do you?” Jake opened a closet in the hallway and grabbed a key from a hook just inside the door. As he reached into the gun safe hidden in the back and took out a pistol, she pleaded.

“Jake, you can’t just shoot them!”

The look of disgust showed clearly on his handsome features. He reached for some ammunition despite her protest. “PJ, you and I haven’t even known each other for a single day, and I can’t honestly expect you to believe anything I say, but do you really think I’m the type of man that would kill anyone?”

Without hesitation, Pearl responded, “You’re right about us meeting less than 24 hours ago.” She paused, “I know that you’re a man that helped a stranded stranger and that you took me in without knowing anything about me, but with you standing there armed for bear, it’s hard for me to believe that you wouldn’t harm those people out there!”

They stood there in the dark of the front room, neither seemed sure of their next move. Finally, she saw Jake’s demeanor relaxing as he slowly placed the gun back into the safe. As he locked the door, he turned his back to her. “I wouldn’t have shot them. I

was only going to shoot in the air to warn them that we were armed.”

“And dangerous?” She teased and noticed his small attempt at a grin as he turned around.

“Come here.” He led the way to the other side of the room. Pearl saw they were heading towards a door by the kitchen. “I want you to see what I’m talking about.”

She stopped. “I’m not going out there.”

“It’s going to be safe, I promise. They are on the other side. This will allow you to see what they’ve been doing without putting you in danger. Get your shoes on and don’t turn on any lights.”

Curiosity got the best of her, and Pearl quickly agreed to follow his lead. After grabbing her sandals and joining him, she noticed that he had taken the time to not only put on his shoes, but a tee shirt and shorts. For reasons that Pearl didn’t want to dwell on, she was grateful.

Before she followed Jake, she commented, “Maybe I should put on some different clothes.”

“You’re fine. No one is going to see you.” Without waiting for her reply, he slowly opened the back door and they both stepped out onto a small, wooden deck. It was completely dark outside, but the heat was still prevalent.

“I’d expected it to be a little cooler.”

“Here at this time of the year, it can still be over one hundred degrees at midnight. Step right behind me and try to be as quiet as you can.”

“Aren’t the dogs going to come after us?” She suddenly was afraid.

“Listen, they’re still preoccupied with the Slabbers. Even if they came over, they know me, and I have the commands to stop them from chewing us up.” His teasing remark surprised her. Up to this point in the short, short relationship, he hadn’t shown much of a sense of humor.

He moved quietly down the steps onto a small concrete sidewalk and put his hand back for her to grab. “Just follow me.”

Putting her hand into his seemed very natural. They walked the full length of the trailer and just at the end, he stopped and peered around the corner. “Come up here and use these.”

Jake handed her a pair binoculars. As she took them, he directed her. “Look over in that direction. See the dogs at the fence? Point them that way and you’ll see some real live Slabbers.”

“Wow! These have night vision capability. I’m impressed.” She held them up and took a few seconds to find the dogs at the fence. Once she had her bearings, Pearl moved in the direction of the people on the other side. “Oh my God! Those people look like something out of a sci-fi movie! They look like a cross between zombies and those nuts in that Mad Max movie!”

“You thought I was exaggerating, didn’t you?”

She continued staring at the sight before her and finally lowered the binoculars, the disbelief showing vivid on her face. “Are they for real? I mean who dresses like that?”

“Slabbers!”

Just then a flaming object grabbed their attention as it flew over the fence. “What in the world is that?”

“It’s a Molotov cocktail. Watch out, sometimes they actually hit their target.” He pulled her back behind the side of the mobile home. Instantly, the object hit the ground a few yards away and flamed upon impact.

“What’s a Molotov cocktail?”

“It’s a homemade firebomb. They put gas or some sort of flammable liquid in the bottle and light the wick or most times a rag and toss it.”

“Wow, you learn something new every day. It looks dangerous, but can it do some serious damage?” Her curiosity was aroused.

“Definitely, it’s fortunate for us that they are usually high or drunk and their aim is very poor. I’m not really sure what they think is in here, or maybe they’re just looking for something to do after dark. So far, no one nor the dogs have been injured.”

“What is in here?” She asked.

“Nothing. Let’s go back inside.”

As she followed, Pearl noticed he didn’t take her hand and even kept a safe distance ahead of her steps. The stars were the only light in the skies tonight and she hesitated for just a moment to take in the atmosphere surrounding the compound. She heard the start of an engine outside the fence and realized that the dogs would soon be coming back to their posts.

He held open the door at the top of the back deck and as she passed him, Pearl felt a sense of safety as

well as coolness from the interior. "What happens now?"

"They'll go back to Slab City, and we'll be left alone for a while." He shut the door and locked it. Jake reached for the light over the sink and turned it on. It cast an eerie light over the room.

She turned to face him. "I heard a vehicle starting up, what are they driving?"

He had gone to the refrigerator and taken out a beer, offering her one. She shook her head in the negative but sat at the breakfast bar waiting for him to answer.

"There is a mixed bag of tricks living there. Next to a cardboard shack you can find a half a million-dollar RV. Most of the residents don't have any transportation other than a bicycle but a few have what most would call a 'beater'. They're cars that barely have windows or wheels. They're kept together by spit and bailing wire."

She laughed aloud at his last statement. "That sounds just like something my grandpa would have said. Why does anyone live there?"

"Most have some sort of criminal record, usually something little but they just can't seem to live by society's rules. What about your brother? Why would he be there?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "Danny is definitely one of those that has had trouble living with society's rules." When she saw the knowing look on his face, she defended her brother, "He's not a criminal, if that's what you're thinking. He's just always been a drifter, going from one cause to another."

“Does he have his own car?” Jake pressed.

“I’m not sure. He doesn’t have a driver’s license, but that’s never stopped him from being behind the wheel of a vehicle. I know he’s had trucks in the past, but currently, I just don’t know.”

“When’s the last time you spoke with him?” He took a long drawl on his beer.

She squirmed in her seat, but finally straightened up and looked at Jake. “I haven’t spoken to Danny in over two years...” She held up her hand to stop his next question. “My mother hears from him at least weekly.”

There was a silence settling between them. Finally, Jake finished his drink, set the bottle on the bar, and stood up. As he stretched to relieve his tired muscles, he spoke, “I’m sure you’re tired. I know I am. Ready to hit the hay?”

“I’m not sure I want to go back into that front bedroom. That’s where they’d hit first, wouldn’t they?”

Jake seemed to understand her hesitation. “I don’t think they’ll be back. They don’t usually have ‘staying power’ and once they do their stupid stunts, they’re gone. I understand your hesitations though. Why don’t you take my room and I’ll bunk down in here?”

“No way. I’ll take the couch. This has got to be the weirdest day I’ve had in a long time.” She got up and went over to plop down on the sofa. “This’ll do. I’ll just go and grab my pillow and a blanket.”

He seemed to accept that she was determined to have it her way. “I’ll get what you need. We shouldn’t

turn on any more lights than necessary. I know my way around.”

He returned quickly and held out her pillow and a cover. She gladly took them and was organizing her makeshift bed when his voice came from behind her. “Sleep tight.”

She wasn’t startled as she’d sense his presence but pretended surprise. “Oh! Yeah, you too.” As she sat down, he was already moving away.

“I’m an early riser, but don’t feel you have to get over to the office until around 9:00. I have plenty to do.” He disappeared down the short hallway.

Pearl punched her pillow but before lying down, realized he’d left the light on. She got up and as soon as she shut it off, the darkness settled over the room. Walking carefully, Pearl made it back to her bed for the night and as she settled in, breathed a sigh. Her thoughts were racing wildly through her brain, and she struggled to quiet them. It hadn’t even been a full day and yet, she’d experienced more turmoil and excitement than in her entire last year of her life. “Wow, Mom, what have you gotten me into?” That was her last thought as sleep finally took over.

The sun shining through the small kitchen window finally penetrated her slumber. Pearl rolled over and sat up, stretching her achy limbs. For a few moments, she just sat there listening for sounds in the trailer that would indicate he was still there. Hearing nothing but her own breathing, Pearl got up and grabbed her blanket and pillow. Making her way to the front bedroom, she swiftly made up the bed and

found her makeup bag. In the bathroom, she faced herself in the mirror.

“Ugh! Could I look any worse?” When her reflection offered no response, Pearl washed her face and proceeded to do some serious damage control. Reaching for a hair clip, she did her best to pull her unruly locks into an organized off the neck hairdo. Finally giving a shrug of her shoulders, she toddled back out to the kitchen. It was there that she eventually saw his note.

She read the bold, scrawled note with a grin on her face. “PJ, have something for breakfast, you’ll find plenty of things to choose from. The dogs are in their pen, so come on over and get started on your input.”

“What? No hello? No good morning? How about signing the note?” She put it on the counter and did a quick search for food. In the refrigerator she located something that she didn’t expect to find. “Hotdogs! Now we’re talking.” Once she found the bread in the pantry, Pearl put her treasure in the microwave and feasted on her favorite morning food.

With a smile on her face and her small backpack on her shoulder, Pearl made her way across the compound. As she walked, she noticed the broken glass where the homemade bombs had hit last night. Turning around, she went back to the trailer and found what she needed.

The sun was shining, and the day promised another hot one, but cleaning up the mess was important to her. She took the broom and dustpan and tried her best to clean up the broken glass. She finally succeeded in getting the area cleared of at least



three spots where the damage had been done. Just as she was folding the paper bag down, Pearl saw a distinct shadow come upon her. She slowly stood up and faced Jake. “Well, good morning! How’re you doing today?”

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Thanks for asking.” She smiled to soften her sarcastic retort. “I was obviously cleaning up the broken glass.”

He shifted his weight before responding, “Our yard guy can take care of this. He’s due any time now.” Jake reached for the paper bag she still held in her hand.

“I was not aware that you had a guy that takes care of the yard.” Together they walked towards the office.

“There’s no way you could have known, but I’m sure he’ll be grateful.” He opened the office door and waited for her to enter. She checked the time on her phone as the coolness of the interior greeted them.

“Wow! It’s hot even this early.” She held up her phone for him to see the time.

Jake didn’t acknowledge her comment as he glanced at her phone, but instead, “I figured we could work for a few hours and then by lunchtime, I’ll take you to see Slab City.”

“That would be great. I’d like to see if I can find my brother.”

He stopped sorting through the mail. “Don’t expect too much PJ. You just have to see Slab City to understand what I’m talking about.” With those solemn words, he disappeared into his office, shutting the door behind.

Pearl picked up the stack of papers next to her computer and started entering the data. Yesterday, she just tried to input the figures, but her attention today was on what they represented. What business was Jake in? What was in those two huge storage tanks?

A short, light knock at the door alerted her and brought Pearl to her feet. Before she could respond, Jake was out of his office and heading to answer it. "Hey, Lucas, come on in."

She watched as a shorter blond man walked into their area. His look towards her was one of surprise. "Hello." He spoke to Pearl.

"Hi, yourself." He looked to Jake for an explanation.

"Lucas, this is PJ, she's helping me with some of the computer work." Without looking in her direction, Jake spoke to Pearl, "PJ, this is Lucas, he's a man of many talents and he keeps this place up and running."

"Lucas, nice to meet you."

Jake grabbed the bag of broken glass and handed it to him, "We had some visitors last night. PJ cleaned up the glass."

"Them damn Slabbers again, huh?"

"Yeah, but their aim is still pretty bad."

"Thank God for that." Lucas took the bag and turned to Pearl. "Thanks for this."

She gave him a big smile. "You're quite welcome."

As Jake opened the door to let him out, he gave some final instructions. "Just check around and see if they hit any other place. Let me know what you find."

“Sure thing, Boss. Nice to meet you.” He spoke directly to Pearl.

“You too!”

Once the door closed behind Lucas, they both went back to their tasks without saying a word. Jake went into his office but left her at the front desk to continue working. After some time, Pearl finally stood up and stretched her achy muscles.

“Me, too.” His voice startled her. “Ready to take your ride?”

“I guess so. What do I need to bring?”

“Nothing. Eh, listen, PJ, I don’t want you to expect too much.”

“You’ve said that before and I appreciate your concerns, but I really just want to see if I can find my brother.” She stood up and grabbed her backpack.

“I’ll honk as soon as I pull up front. I have to go get Teddy.” He left quickly out the front door as she waited behind her desk wondering who was going along for their ride.

It wasn’t long when she heard what she thought was a squeak of a horn. Pearl got up and quickly opened the door only to be stopped short. Parked before her was Jake in an almost antique jeep. He honked the inadequate horn again. She laughed and ran down the steps of the deck.

“Where in the world did you get this?” She asked as she looked around. “I thought you had to get Teddy.”

“I’ll have you know, young lady, that this is a classic Jeep. It’s a 1949 military jeep that I’m positive has seen some combat action and his name is Teddy.

He's named after Theodore Roosevelt, you know our 26<sup>th</sup> President." When he saw the look of confusion on her face, he explained, "Teddy Roosevelt was in charge of the Rough Riders, one of the toughest cavalry units fighting in Cuba."

"Oh, I get it! We're in for a rough ride!" He waited for her to buckle in and then with a start, Jake punched the accelerator.

In no time at all, they were headed down the same road that had led her into this situation. The open style of the Jeep didn't allow for much conversation, but Pearl reached over and put her hand on his arm to draw his attention.

He immediately looked in her direction and responded, "What?"

"How far away is Slab City?"

"It's only about 15 to 20 miles, but we'll go past Bombay Beach and then we'll turn off once we've reached the town of Niland. There's another sight you'll be amazed to see, but for today, I think visiting Slab City will be enough."

The open air of their vehicle combined with the hot desert temperature didn't lend to a smooth, comfortable ride. It was hot. There was no other way to say it. She brushed back at her hair that had come loose from her clip. Finally giving up, she took the clip out and just let nature take its course.

She watched the landscape fly by and was amazed at the lack of life. The desert was unforgiving, and it showed in the absence of trees, structures, and energy. As they rounded the bend of the highway, she saw a few structures starting to show on her side of

the vehicle. The entire trip allowed her to track the shoreline of the Salton Sea. Other than a few scrub bushes, there was no evidence of life, although an occasional bird flew overhead. Again, she touched his arm. "What's over here?"

"That's Bombay Beach. It was once a thriving community, but now the only thing that can be classified as a real business is the Ski Inn. They advertise that they're the lowest bar in the western hemisphere. There are still people living here and you'll get to meet them eventually." He chuckled.

His small bit of laughter was a surprise, but she found herself liking this side of the man. "Hey, wait a minute. Isn't Death Valley the lowest place? Is the bar really open?"

"Yes, maybe if we don't spend too much time in Slab City, we can stop in and get a burger on the way back. By the way, Death Valley doesn't have a bar."

She laughed at his small attempt at humor.

They drove on as she observed the different structures on her side of the road. Things were a bit weird as the landscape was dotted with extremely unique art objects. These were things that one wouldn't find in a fine art museum in New York City, but perhaps as street graffiti in the slums of most large cities in America. She felt that it could best be described as "thought art". Each person that contributed seemed to place deep thought on their efforts. One place they went by depicted all sorts of children's toys attached to the outside of the house. "What in the world is that?"

"They call it the Toy House." His answer was short.

“OMG! I love it!” She clapped her hands with glee. Pearl avoided looking his way.

“You’re as unique as that house.” She barely heard his words above the sounds of the road.

“I would really like to spend some time in Bombay Beach. I want to see what other art objects are displayed.” She spoke aloud her thoughts about the town they were driving through.

“If you stay long enough, there are plenty of sights to see.” He slowed down as they came to the small town of Niland. He stopped by the side of the road allowing Pearl to see the entire main street. She held her hand up to shield her vision from the glaring sun overhead. “Not much of a town, is it? What happened here?”

“There was a massive brush fire two summers ago that reduced the town by half the population. I believe they’re down to only about 500 to 600 people.”

“That’s terrible!” She stated with empathy.

Jake started the Jeep up again and they went down what was considered the main street in the small town. He turned north on a small two-way road and followed several other cars.

“There seems to be more traffic than I would’ve expected.” She commented.

“You’ll see what they’re looking for in a minute,” Was his only response.

The traffic seemed to grow as they inched along on a rough, rural road. As Pearl was looking around, she almost missed the obvious. Jake pulled the rough and

tumble vehicle to the side of the road. “Wow! What in the world is this?”

“This is Salvation Mountain. I told you we’d see some strange things today.” He allowed her to take in the sight before their eyes. There were several cars parked on the side of the road with people roaming around the sight. She observed people walking on the man-made structure, taking pictures, and reading the biblical passages painted on the huge, colorful mountain.

“Who made this? I’ve never in my life imagined that something like this could exist. It’s so colorful.”

“A man name Leonard Knight started this tribute to God around 1984, I believe. He strongly believed that he was supposed to spread the message that God is Love. He worked until around 2011 when he was placed in a facility in El Cajon for dementia.”

“That’s sad.”

“He did get to come back and see his mountain in 2013 before he died in 2014. It’s now managed by a public charity.”

“I never knew something like this existed here in the middle of this desert.”

“It gets about 2,000 visitors a week, so they say. It’s made of adobe bricks, discarded tires, used car parts, and thousands of gallons of paint.”

“That’s amazing!” Pearl watched as a young family unloaded from their minivan and headed across the road to walk up on the mountain. She saw two of the boys run ahead only to be called back by their father.

“Do you want to go over and walk on it?” He asked.

“Not this time. I’d really like to move on to Slab City and see if I can find my brother, if you don’t mind.”

“If that’s what you want.” He started the old Jeep and slowly headed onto the rough roadway beyond the manmade mountain. Traffic wasn’t especially busy, but with all the people walking about, he had to take care.

Finally, Teddy the Jeep, moved around the back of the colorful monument and she was sure they’d taken a wrong turn. The road turned from roughly paved into a barely discernable dirt track and before she knew it, she was seeing various structures.

“What is this place?” Her voice was strained.

“This is Slab City, PJ. I tried to warn you. I didn’t want you to get your hopes up for finding your brother.”

She couldn’t believe her eyes. Right next to a plywood shack was a half million-dollar recreational vehicle. Everywhere was evidence of unregulated structures and what looked like piles of trash. “How can people live like this? Why doesn’t the government do something?”

He pulled over to get out of the way of any incoming vehicles and looked over at the shocked look on her face. “Most of the people that live here consider this the last place where they can live off the grid. Like I told you earlier, they are usually criminals of varying degrees from petty thieves to those wanting anonymity.”

“How did they find this place?”



“This was a military training base called Camp Dunlap but was completely abandoned around 1956. They tore down all the buildings but left the concrete slabs, thus creating the name. A quit claim deed was issued by the Department of Defense in 1961 to the state of California, but, get this, with no restrictions. It’s since become a haven for those that want to become lost and a lot of them consider it the last place in America to be truly free.”

“I can’t imagine my brother being here. Danny has been strange all his life, but I can never see him wanting this kind of lifestyle. How many people live here?”

“During the summer, there are only around 200 people or so. In the winter, it could be as much as 4,000 or more due to the RV’ers. They come here because they don’t have to pay any money for renting a space to park.”

“Well, then it shouldn’t be hard to find my brother.” She stated firmly.

Jake looked directly at her. “And, how, do you propose to do that? Look around! There aren’t exactly house numbers or street names. If he’s here, he’s probably just like the others and he definitely doesn’t want to be found!”



## CHAPTER THREE

Fighting back anger and tears, she looked around at the entire scene before her eyes. Jake had parked in the dirt lot next to a building that touted itself as the Slab City Information Kiosk. It was nothing more than a three-walled structure built on the soft dirt, no bigger than most people's bathrooms. On one outside wall painted in brightly garish colors was a peace sign and words indicating that it was the last free place in America. A sign indicated something for sale was posted inside but there was nowhere to sit and little truthful information.

Across the street was a structure built of broken, old television sets with various messages in place of the screens. Any other day, any other time she would have chuckled at the words indicating strong political and personal views of life.

As they sat there an older model car passed and she noticed that the car was adorned with old dolls and parts of dolls. The heads of old baby dolls were glued to the front bumper and Barbie dolls were pasted on the hood. The occupants of the car slowed down and stared in their direction.

"Look, PJ, I know this is a lot to process, but we're attracting attention and I think we'd best get moving."

“Maybe they might know where my brother is; maybe I can talk with them.” She started to unbuckle her seat belt when his harsh words stopped her.

“Don’t you get it? These people are the dregs of society. There is no law here! They wouldn’t help you if they could. Put your seat belt back on. We’re leaving!”

Before he could start the Jeep, she jumped from the vehicle and ran towards the ‘doll’ car, waving her hands. Jake shot out right on her heels but not before grabbing a plastic bag full of things from behind his seat.

“Hey! I was wondering if you could help me.” She stopped several feet from the strange vehicle. The sight in front of her made her shudder. The three men were all adorned with tattoos, piercings, and dirty, filthy clothing. She doubted they’d had a bath or any sort of personal hygiene routine in a very long time.

“Yeah, sure, babe. Can you help us?” The three occupants were laughing and staring at her. “Where can we find the bowling alley?”

By then Pearl realized that Jake had come up to her side. She looked to him for support. He spoke with a laugh, “You know, I think it’s closed right now. How about you help the lady and I’ll share this with you?” He held up the bag.

“We could use some stuff. Is that what you got in there?”

Again, Jake laughed before he spoke. “It’s not the good stuff you’re talking about, but I’m sure you could use this.”

They talked among themselves before finally looking her way again. “What’s it you want?”

She pulled her phone from her pocket and quickly scrolled to a picture of Danny. “I’m looking for my brother. Have you seen him?”

“I can’t see it very clearly. Can you bring it over here?” One of the guys prompted. As she went to move in, Jake took her by the arm and followed closely. Understanding his silent message, Pearl held out her phone as far as she could without getting close enough for them to grab her.

“Oh, yeah, he was over visiting us just last night.” One spoke with a sickening grin.

Her face lit up, but her hopes were immediately dashed when they all started laughing as one guy added, “Yeah, we was watching the football game and eating popcorn!”

Jake quickly handed the plastic bag to them, and they revved their engine, pulling out so fast they sprayed dirt and gravel all over the two of them. “Sons of bitches!” He pulled her toward the Jeep and ordered Pearl.

“Get in! We’re going.” She didn’t object, her heart was beating so hard in her chest. Pearl couldn’t remember ever feeling so scared in her life. He was driving fast, and she had it in her mind to say something but withheld her words.

They went past Salvation Mountain and at the turn in Niland, he barely stopped before heading in the direction of the compound. Pearl shut her eyes and allowed the noise of the road and the heat of the day to penetrate her wounded pride. He was right, she

thought miserably. Her brother, if he was in such a place, probably didn't want to be found. What am I going to tell mom, she thought to herself? As she felt them roll over several big bumps in the dirt road, Pearl opened her eyes.

"I'm not hungry." She stated as he pulled into the Ski Inn dirt parking lot and shut down the engine.

"I am." Without further words, Jake exited the vehicle and strode over to a block wall hiding the entry door of the bar and went inside, letting it slam firmly behind him.

"Can this day get any worse? Can this trip get any worse?" Pearl exclaimed aloud with no one to hear her frustrations. The sun was high in the sky with heat beating down on anything alive, her included. She was sweating profusely. Her anger was fueling the already scorching atmosphere in the space of her seat in the Jeep. The bright light of the day would normally make her happy and lighten her mood, but it only aggravated the situation. Just then her phone rang and without even looking at the display, Pearl instinctively knew it was her mother.

"Hello, Mother." She tried to make her voice sound as normal as she could.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just sitting here in the heat of this horrible desert and not any closer to finding Danny and am extremely frustrated with my efforts."

"I'm sure you've done your best, dear."

Taking a deep cleansing breath before answering, Pearl finally spoke, "I'm not done yet, Mother. I'll call you back in a few days and will hopefully have some

better news.” With that statement made, for the first time in her life, Pearl hung up the phone before she could hear her mother’s protest.

Taking a deep breath, she got out of the vehicle and with a determination in her step that she didn’t really feel, Pearl opened the door of the bar and walked into the darker, cooler interior. The first impression she got was a scene from a 1950s diner with Formica topped tables and mismatched chairs. The low ceiling and every surface of the bar was covered in dollar bills taped, stapled, and otherwise attached. Closing the door softly behind her, Pearl continued to move further into the bar. As her eyes adjusted to the dark environment of the room, she saw that to her left was a separate area with a pool table. In front of her were tables and just as she turned, she heard Jake.

“Ah, there you are!” She looked in the direction of his voice. She moved closer to him as he was sitting on a stool at the bar. She watched as he turned to the older woman behind the bar and spoke, “I told you she’d be in soon. You can go ahead and put our lunch order in now.”

“Here, PJ, sit down and cool off.” He patted the barstool next to him. “Tell Tina what you want to drink.” His manner was one that totally confused her due to their recent encounter with the people from Slab City.

She sat down as he asked but kept her eyes on Tina, their hostess. “What’ll you have, sweetie? We don’t have a lot of those big city foo foo drinks, but I can make most anything.”

She immediately liked Tina. “I’d just like a white wine, Chardonnay, if you have it.”

“Ooh, I got a good one. I’ve been saving it for someone special.” She moved her overweight frame to the other end of the bar. From a small cooler underneath the bar, Tina produced the bottle and held it up victoriously. “Wait till you taste this! I might even join you.”

Pearl felt herself relaxing and gave her host a huge smile. “I’d like nothing better than to share a drink with you.” She noticed Jake was silent during their exchange but refused to look directly at him.

He spoke up anyway. “I ordered us some lunch and before you protest, I’ll have you know Tina’s bacon cheeseburgers are the best in the state.”

Surprising him with her answer made Pearl smile. “That’s fine. I like Tina. I can believe she’ll make a wonderful burger.”

Just about that time, Tina came back with a generous goblet of wine. “Try this, little one. Tell me it isn’t the best glass of white wine you’ve ever tasted.” She dared.

Grinning widely, Pearl took the tall glass and slowly swirled it around and then lifted it to her nose to sniff. “Will you look at this Jake? We might just have a connoisseur in our midst.” Tina’s gravelly voice was heard around the room.

Pearl spun around on her barstool to see just how many people were in the bar. There was a young couple snuggling at the corner table and a few locals at the other end of the bar, but other than that, they



were basically alone, she noted as she turned back to Jake.

“Just give me a good domestic beer anytime and I’ll be happy as a lark.” He lifted his bottle to his lips and took a deep swig.

“Oh, you’re just a crude man, Jake.” Tina teased him. “It takes a classy person to appreciate the finer things in life.” She lifted her own glass and together she and Pearl touched them for a toast. “Here’s to you, Girl. May you find the things you seek in life.”

The lady behind the bar couldn’t have spoken words truer to the point in Pearl’s life at this very moment. She took a sideways glance at Jake, but he didn’t meet her gaze. As soon as Tina moved to help the regulars, she tapped him on the arm. “I owe you an apology.”

“You owe me nothing.” He spoke softly, appreciating her need for privacy.

“Jake, look at me. You’ve been helping me since I landed on your doorstep and I behaved badly when you tried to save me from those, those...” She didn’t know how to finish her sentence.

He finally turned and faced her. “PJ, you’re a greenhorn. You’ve lived your life with those rose-colored glasses on believing the good in everyone around you.” He held up his hand to stop her protest. “Yes, I’m a first-class cynic amongst other vile things, but at least I see life as it is, not as I imagine it to be.”

Her shoulders slumped and she reached to take a sip of her wine before answering his accusation. “Blame it on my upbringing or my genes. Regardless, I am sorry, I could have put us in danger.”

“We weren’t in any danger. I had it covered.”

“Are you carrying a gun?” She tried to keep her voice down.

His silence confirmed what she already knew.

Pearl leaned on the bar in front of her and took another sip of the wine. She was trying to wrap her thoughts around who this man was sitting next to her, a man she was dependent on for the meantime. Changing her tactics, she asked, “What was in that bag you handed them?”

“It was just some snacks and gift cards.” He shrugged like it was nothing.

“Where would they use gift cards?”

“The mini mart in Niland takes them for gas and groceries. They can also use them in Calipatria at the dollar store.”

“Why would you do that? I was under the impression that you have a very negative opinion of those people.”

He took his time giving her an answer. “Regardless of my personal thoughts, they are part of the human race. I’m not really sure why I do it.”

She smacked him on the arm, “You better watch out, you might just become a bleeding heart like me.” Before he could respond, Tina came up carrying their food. She placed it in front of them along with silverware and napkins.

“Let me know what else you need.” She hustled away.

“Wow! This smells great.” She grabbed the huge sandwich and took a big bite, dropping some of the condiments back into her plate. “I didn’t realize how

hungry I was. Oh, my goodness, these are home cut fries!”

The man with few words did the same and soon the only sound they heard was the jukebox playing some old country tune. A few more people wandered in, and Tina was busy taking care of her customers. Finally, Pearl pushed back her empty plate and finished off the glass of wine.

“Want another?” He asked.

“Of course, she does.” Tina was right there with the bottle and before Pearl could protest, she poured another generous amount for both of them. “Here’s to you!”

Pearl smiled and took a big drink. “Thanks, Tina. Your burger is truly the best I’ve ever had.”

“This one here comes in at least three or four times a week. I’m surprised he’s not a fat mess of a man.”

“You know that’s not the case, Tina. Your Ike is as skinny as a rail.” Jake teased her back.

“Wait a minute! You don’t mean Ike and Tina, do you?” Pearl was astounded.

Her laughter was contagious and soon the entire room resounded with glee. “Yes, I’m sorry to say, it is me and Ike. He’s never left bruises on me, have you honey?” She hollered at the thin man near the end of the bar. All they got was a wave from him.

“This is too funny! Can I tell my friends that I’ve met Ike and Tina?” Pearl teased.

Just then Jake’s phone signaled an incoming call. As he looked at the display, he spoke to both women. “I’ve got to take this. Be right back.”

Tina took advantage of his absence to push for more information, “So, how long have you known Jake?”

“Not as long as you’ve known Ike.” Pearl retorted. Tina just smiled and waited.

Squirming nervously, Pearl giggled and finally answered, “I’ve actually known Jake just over a day. I came here looking for my brother and my car broke down near his compound. He needed some help in the office and we agreed to trade my secretarial skills for car repairs. That sounds weird, huh?”

“Not really. I’ve known Jake for a little over five years now and although he comes across as gruff, he’s just a big teddy bear.” She laughed at her own words.

Pearl shook her head before replying. “I don’t see him as a teddy bear at all. As much as he’s helped me, he’s opinionated, stubborn and pretty much a cynic.”

“Just wait until you get to know him.” With a change of topic, Tina pressed, “What does PJ stand for?”

She chuckled before saying, “If I tell you, you have to promise to keep it to yourself.”

“Honey, I’m a bartender. I don’t keep secrets, I share them with everyone that sits here. You should know that!”

Before Pearl could answer, Jake came back into the room and right up to her. “That was the mechanic. I’m afraid the news isn’t good.” He didn’t sit back down, but rather pulled out his wallet to pay for their meal.

“I’ve got mine.” Pearl reached for her backpack but was immediately stopped by their host.

“Stop you two! This one’s on the house. I’ve enjoyed some real company today and not just those two old farts down there.” She pointed to the two men at the end.

“Now, Tina, you shouldn’t talk that way about your husband.” Jake admonished.

Now it was Pearl’s turn to be surprised. With that she turned around in her barstool to really take a good look at the skinny old man sitting there, puffing on his cigarette, and talking with the man next to him.

“Hey, he’s not much, but he’s all I got.” Tina laughed. “Now get out of here, you two. I think you’ve got things to talk over and decisions to make.”

Pearl got up, grabbed her backpack and side by side they went out of the cool interior into the heat of the day. “I can’t believe it’s still miserably hot out here.”

“It’s the middle of summer and we’re in a desert.” That was all he said as they got in, started the Jeep, and turned down the roadway towards the compound.

Conversation was once again impossible, but her thoughts were scattered and random. Just when she thought things couldn’t get any worse, they just did. Pearl looked over at Jake and tried to consider the two different sides of her unenthusiastic host. The words from Tina had helped create additional insight into his character. Once they pulled into the compound and as the gate rolled shut behind them, Jake stopped in front of the office.

“I’ve got more work to do, but you’re welcome to go on over to the trailer and chill.”

“No, I need to get some work done too and you need to tell me what the mechanic said.” She followed him into the office.

“I was hoping to save that conversation for another day.”

“Not on your life, mister. I need to know what I’m facing.” She plopped down on the office chair and put her backpack on the desk.

Jake went to his office but not before telling her, “Okay, I’ll let you know what he said, but first, we need to get some work done.”

Frustrated by his exerting control, Pearl followed him into his office. “I need to know, and I need to know now!”

His look of surprise showed that he wasn’t used to having his decisions challenged. “PJ, I have a report that has to go out in just a few minutes. I spent most of my day helping you and I’d appreciate some time to get my report finished and sent before you and I tackle the problem of your car.”

Immediately she felt guilty. “You’re right. I’ll just go and work on the data.” She turned to go, but before leaving Pearl spoke, “But, I expect us to have a complete and thorough conversation about my car and the consequences of its breakdown.”

Once back at her desk, Pearl started inputting the stack of data into the spreadsheet. As she blindly typed in the figures, she started wondering what the numbers actually represented. Concentrating on the cells in the spreadsheet, Pearl started seeing a pattern

in certain rows. The rows and columns weren't labelled clearly which allowed her to only imagine what she was observing. They both worked in silence for several more hours when Jake finally emerged from his office.

"Okay, I've gotten my report sent off and it's time to face the music."

"What exactly does that mean?" She looked up from her computer.

"Let's go to the trailer and I'll fill you in on the details."

Pearl stretched her achy muscles as she stood up. She grabbed her backpack and together they went out of the office. She noticed the Jeep was gone.

"What happened to Teddy?" She referred to their vehicle of choice.

"Lucas always puts him away. He lives right back there." Jake pointed to a small structure at the back of the compound.

"Wow, I didn't notice that before. Does he have a family living there, too?"

"He has a wife, and they are working on creating a family, so he tells me."

"Ahh, how nice."

"I knew you'd like that."

"And you don't?" She challenged.

He ignored her retort but as they approached their place for the night, Jake replied, "I'm glad for him. Lucas is a good man, and his wife completes him."

Those were some serious words for a man that professes to not needing a family. She decided to let that go. There were more immediate problems that

she needed to tackle. As they entered the trailer, Pearl asked, “What’s for dinner?”

“There’s a grill out back. Do you like salmon?”

“Oh, yes, I love it. What else do we have to go with it?” She went to the refrigerator and looked at the contents. “How about a salad and maybe a baked potato?”

“Sounds good. I’ll light the grill. You get the other stuff ready.”

As Pearl prepared the salad ingredients and prepped the potato for baking, she tried not to reflect on how domestic this scene might appear to an innocent bystander. This is a man that has stated quite clearly if not emphatically how much he doesn’t believe in the family dynamic, she admonished herself silently. This was going to require some serious self-talk, she thought.

“PJ!”

She abruptly turned around and saw him standing just inside the back door. He had obviously been calling her. “What?” She demanded back.

“I wanted to let you know that the salmon would be ready in about ten minutes.”

“Sorry, I was just deep in thought about my immediate problems. I’m ready whenever you are.” She hoped he would accept her not exactly truthful answer.

“We’ll just eat at the bar, nothing fancy.” He went back out and let the door shut behind him.

She accepted that this was his way of letting her know that this was nothing, but a simple meal shared by two people and not anything more. In no time at



all, he came through the back door with a platter of salmon. "I'm ready, are you?"

She'd just finished putting their plates on the bar along with napkins and silverware. "What do you want to drink?"

"I'll have a beer. There should be some wine in there if you want." She lifted her glass to show him.

He almost chuckled but she was convinced he quickly turned to avoid her seeing it. They sat side by side, but conversation was limited to the comments about their meal. "You do a mean job of grilling. This is good."

"This is a good salad. Thank you." He returned the compliment.

As soon as they were done, they both worked together to clean up their meal. Pearl took the lead on stacking the dishes. "I know that each person likes to load the dishwasher their own way, so do you want to do this?"

"Sure." He moved closer to her only to open the machine and start loading the dirty dishes.

"So, are you going to let me in on what the mechanic said?" She finally asked.

He looked up and seemed to be weighing his words. "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Oh, I'm definitely a good news person. Give it to me." She finally sat back on the stool.

"Well, the good news is that your car can be fixed."

She pondered on this information for a bit, and then pushed him to give her more. "And the bad news?"

Right to the point, "It's going to cost around a thousand dollars." He waited for her reaction but didn't get the one he expected.

She burst out with laughter. "Are you kidding me? That whole car isn't worth that kind of money! What the hell am I going to do?" Pearl could no longer sit still. "I've got to get out of here!" She headed toward the front door.

"PJ, you can't go out, the dogs are loose."

"Then get them under control! I need to do some serious walking!" She went to open the door but was stopped by his command.

"Stop! You can't go out there! You just have to calm down."

"Oh, that's easy for you to say. I'm the one stuck here in the middle of this God forsaken desert in the middle of the summer with a car broken down, no money and with a man that's, that's..." She stopped herself.

"That's what? Please continue." His sarcasm wasn't wasted on her.

"A man that's been very helpful but at the same time, very mysterious." She stood tall and faced him with a courage she didn't particularly feel.

"Get your shoes on!" Jake ordered and she complied. As soon as she was done, he opened the door but waited for the dogs to come. With just a single command, the two vicious looking Doberman dogs sat by his side. "Come on."

She kept her eyes on the dogs but cautiously followed close by his side as the dogs stayed. They walked over to the driveway that went around the left

of one of the big tanks. She wanted to ask about them, but the timing wasn't right with her current mood. They came to the tall, two-story building at the back of the property. Automatic lights came on illuminating the side metal door. With a huge ring of keys, he finally found the one he was looking for and unlocked it.

Once he flipped on the lights, she was amazed to see a nicely stocked gym. There was a treadmill, a punching bag, and several benches with weights. "Go ahead, pick your poison." Without waiting for her to decide, he went over to the bag and proceeded to put on gloves. With his back to her, Jake started pummeling the hanging bag with all his might.

Not waiting for a second invitation, Pearl went over to the treadmill and started her own workout. She had always walked her frustrations away and this was no exception. She had committed two weeks to Jake, but had hoped to have her car repaired, find her brother and be on her way before that time was up. The room was cooled only by a swamp cooler, and she could feel the beads of sweat dripping down her forehead. She wiped at her upper lip and chuckled. It had always been a source of sweat, too.

Jake stopped for a minute and went over to an older sound system on a shelf. Soon they were listening to some good old rock and roll pouring into the room. Without so much as a glance at her, he went back to his savage workout. She felt herself staring as his muscles rippled with each punch.

Stepping up her own routine, Pearl increased her tempo and incline. It seemed to do the trick as she felt

the tension in her body start to subside. Walking had always been a source of pleasure as well as giving her the ability to sort through her thoughts and troubles. She never really thought of it as exercise, but more a way of relieving stress.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't realize that he'd finished torturing the bag and had moved on to the weights. The sudden noise of the weights clanging alerted her that he was lifting an enormously heavy bar. She watched in fascination as he lay down and pressed the huge metal objects above his head. Up and down with consistent movements, he appeared lost in his own thoughts, too.

With only the music in the air, each individual worked to overcome the situation immediately facing them. She was pushing herself further and further with the rhythm of the treadmill and her feet pounding on the rubber surface. The heat in this barren desert was unbearable, the cooler doing little to give any comfort in the room. She used her sleeve to try and wipe some of the moisture from her face.

"Here!" Jake startled her and she almost tripped over her own feet. He handed a small towel to Pearl. "You about done?"

With a deep sigh, she stepped to the sides of the machine and shut it down. "I think I can sleep now. I'll have to come up with a plan B tomorrow for my car. Thanks for the gym."

"Don't mention it. I work out in there almost every day. You're welcome to use it whenever you feel the need. We can talk about the plans for your car when you're ready."

As they walked back around the tanks and up the few steps into the trailer, she welcomed the cool interior. Before leaving him to go to her bedroom, Pearl spoke, "I'll call my mother and see if I can get her to help me out with a rental. That way I won't be dependent on you any more than I have to."

Before she could get any further, his offer came unexpectedly, "Why don't you just use Teddy for now. You still owe me two weeks work."

Pearl's mouth dropped open at his surprising offer, but as she was almost speechless, she just smiled before turning and disappearing into her bedroom. Shutting the door, she leaned against it trying to get her composure. Just when she thought she was starting to get a grip on what type of man Jake was, he threw her a curve. Some space was very much needed right now, she thought as she readied herself for bed.



## CHAPTER FOUR

She used the small bathroom connected to her room to wash up as she stripped off her sweat-soaked clothes. Taking a sponge bath to cool down, she pushed random thoughts out of her head. Pearl put on her pajamas and turned off the light. She crawled into the bed but found that she was far from sleepy. A light from the compound was shining in from the far window, giving the room an eerie glow.

Pearl was working hard not to think about his offer to use the Jeep. She looked around the room and admired the décor. It was simple but very relaxing with cool tones of blues. Just like his bedroom, this room lacked any sort of personal items. It was as if he wasn't here on a permanent basis but rather a temporary assignment of some sort. There were no personal clues for her to figure out what he was doing here.

What is the name of the business? Who owns the company? What do those figures that she's been entering represent? Finally, Pearl felt herself relaxing enough to get some much-needed sleep.

Another day, another dollar, she thought as the sun came streaming into her room, waking Pearl. Quickly jumping up and getting dressed, she went out into the living room only to find another morning

note from Jake. It was in his usual bold strokes instructing her to eat and get on over to the office. She chuckled as she noted it too was not signed just like yesterday's note.

Once she ate, Pearl left the trailer, determined to find out something personal about her temporary boss. This was all too freaky, she thought. Stepping into the office, she could hear him on his phone but as soon as he knew she was there, Jake got up and shut his office door. Par for the course, she mused as she sat down and fired up the computer. It appeared he'd added to the stack of papers on her desk, and she started to enter the figures.

Her hearing had always been great, but she could only catch a word or two. None of his conversation made any sense but she did discern that his tone was one of unhappiness and bordering on the edge of anger. Finally, his call ended, and Jake came out to greet her.

"Hey." He had another batch of papers to give her. "We'll work for a bit, but I want you to learn how to drive Teddy."

She looked up at him. "I do know how to drive. I learned when I was a mere sixteen-year-old."

He gave her a half smile. "Yes, I'm sure you are a great driver. However, Teddy is a special ride with his own set of quirks, and I think you need to be aware of that."

"Now that sounds intriguing. I rode with you yesterday and I didn't sense any sort of problems."

"Awww, that's because I know Teddy and he behaves for me." With that unusual show of humor,



Jake went back into his office and left her there to puzzle over his offer. She hollered to him, “You talk as though it’s a living being.”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” His voice was tinged with laughter. They worked until lunch time and finally Jake appeared with his baseball cap on and the keys to the Jeep.

“Ready?”

“I am so ready.” She stood up and stretched. “Where are we going?”

“To lunch and you get to drive.” He held open the door, waiting for Pearl. “Teddy awaits!”

Lucas was standing by the vehicle, smiling when he saw Jake hand the keys to her. “Have fun, lady.” His grin was full of mischief, causing Pearl to wonder what she’d gotten herself into. She climbed into the driver’s seat and started to put the key in when Jake stopped her. “Wait a minute. I want to show you something in case Teddy gets stubborn and doesn’t want to cooperate with you.”

He went around to the back of the vehicle and reached in to grab what looked like a long metal handle and handed it to her. “This is your key when he acts badly.”

“What in the world is this?” She held the heavy metal object.

“It’s the ignition key when Teddy gets stubborn.” He waited for her reaction and wasn’t disappointed when she laughed.

“Okay, I give. How does it work?”

Jake took it from her and guided Pearl to the front of the old military style Jeep. “You put this in there.”

He pointed to a slot. "I have to warn you, though, not just anyone has the strength to turn the crank. After all, you are just a girl." He actually laughed out loud and waited for her reaction.

"Give me that!" She rose to his challenge.

Pearl struggled to insert the tool, but eventually found the correct slot. Before attempting anything, she looked up to Jake, "Okay, how difficult is this?"

"You just need to turn the crank clockwise, but be very careful, as Teddy can be contrary, and you could break a finger as the crank comes back to clip you. Do you want me to show you?" He offered, knowing full well she'd decline.

"I wouldn't want to disappoint you, but I think I can do this." She took a firm grasp on the cranking arm and readied herself for a strong turn. Mentally, Pearl did the turn in her mind before holding on tightly and with a quick flip of the crank in the clockwise direction, Teddy fired up. With a huge grin filling her face, Pearl looked up to see his surprised look.

"Good job, rookie. Let's go." He got into the passenger side. "Rarely does Teddy behave so well with that crank being used."

"Where we headed?" She asked as Pearl took the driver's seat with a victory smile in place.

"Corvina Beach Campground. It's just up the road a few miles. I want you to see the lake and the devastation up close."

She started to push the gas pedal, but not before Jake reached over and put a wide brimmed hat on her head. For a second, she was taken aback, but took it

off and looked at the unexpected gift. "Thank you." She placed the hat back on her head and tied the strap underneath her chin.

"Ready?" She prompted.

"Gun it!"

With that encouragement, Pearl pushed the gas pedal, and they lurched forward. It took several long minutes before she got the hang of the delicate touch of the gas pedal, but once she'd mastered it without stalling the engine, Pearl grinned from ear to ear.

They cruised up highway 111 but it wasn't long before she saw the signs announcing they were coming close to Corvina Beach. She struggled to turn Teddy onto the path leading to the beach as the older vehicle didn't have power steering. But with a certain amount of muscle power, Pearl finally steered their way down the route to the beach. It was a dirt road with very few people in sight.

"Someone can stay here for as little as \$10 a night. You can see they have some picnic tables and there's very little crowding. Pull over there." He directed.

She stopped and shut off the engine. "Ooh, what is that smell?"

"It's rotting fish and dead birds along with chemicals from the fields some twenty miles away spilling into the water. This is why I wanted you to come here. Most people don't take the time to understand even the simplest thing about the Salton Sea, let alone realize that this is the worst man-made environmental disaster in the United States."

For once she could see emotion coming from the man sitting beside her. Jake was obviously passionate

about fighting for the causes of the Salton Sea. It brought home to her once again that she'd not yet found her enthusiasm in life.

"Let's get out and walk down to the water." He prompted. She joined him and the closer they got to the water's edge; the rotting smell increased causing Pearl to put her hand up to her nose. She stumbled but before she could fall, Jake grabbed her. "You don't want to tumble onto that." He pointed down.

"What is that? I thought it was sand, but that doesn't look like any beach sand I've seen." She started to put her hand down but again he stopped her.

"PJ don't touch anything here. That's mostly broken shells, crushed barnacles, some clay, and even some ground up fish bones. It's also mushy underneath with seepage from the agricultural chemicals that I told you about from the farms further up north in the valley. It can be kind of like quicksand."

"I guess I find it hard to believe that a place like this exists. How did this happen?"

They walked a little further until their footprints started sinking too deeply in the soggy beach. He stopped and stared out at the water. "The history really starts as far back as 1615, but I'll not make you listen to all of that. In 1905, there was a canal being built from the Colorado River when it rained like hell for days. The canal burst and the end result was flooding into here. It used to be called the Salton Sink. The sea was fed by the Colorado River for another two to three years."

“What happened then?” She was intrigued not only by the story but by his strong feelings for this area.

“In 1907, the railroad closed the breach, and the lake was no longer getting fresh water. The government was convinced that the lake would be gone by the 1920s, so nothing was really done. In the 1950s and 60s, this became a hotspot for the Hollywood scene. Up further on the north side, they built a yacht club and stars like Frank Sinatra, Cary Grant and even Randolph Scott started to become regular visitors.”

“Wow! I had no idea this was even here let alone with such a history.”

“Everyone boated, fished, swam, and enjoyed the warmth of the desert and the cool water. But, by the early 1980s everything started falling apart. The salinity levels continued to grow and what started as a sports fisherman’s paradise soon grew into deep concern for the environment of the sea in the 1980s. Birds started dying because the fish could no longer live in the salty water. The Dead Sea is considered the body of water with the highest salinity levels at 37ppt. This,” He pointed to the water, “has recorded levels as high as 57ppt.”

“Okay, I’m not a scientist. What does that mean 57ppt?”

“In layman’s terms, it means that in one liter of water there are 57 grams of salt. It gets a little more complicated than that, but that’ll help you understand it somewhat. Ready to go and get some lunch?” He turned and started back to the Jeep.

Pearl struggled to follow his big footsteps and was relieved when he turned to wait for her. “Is that what you’re doing here? Are you working for someone that does environmental stuff?”

“Sorta, kinda,” was his only reply as he got into the passenger side.

“You are definitely the most mysterious man I’ve ever met.” She exclaimed as she went to start their ride. The key turned and Teddy fired up the first time.

“I think he likes you.”

She couldn’t explain why, but his comment pleased her. He hadn’t answered her question, but if anything, Pearl was persistent and determined to get back to the subject he was obviously avoiding.

They got back on the main road and traveled a few more miles to the bar in Bombay Beach. One of the things she’d noticed was there weren’t many cars on the road in the middle of this heat. She wheeled into a parking spot and as she shut down Teddy, Jake spoke, “I’m impressed. You haven’t stalled him at all.”

“It seems you’re not the only one he likes.” She teased as she led the way into the cool bar and restaurant.

Tina eagerly greeted them and wiped off a clean spot on the bar. This time there were a few more people in the restaurant and the jukebox was playing loudly. Jake sat down and pulled out the stool for Pearl. “What’ll you have? I know what you want.” She pointed to Pearl and went to the cooler at the far end of the bar. She raised the bottle they’d had drinks from yesterday and Pearl nodded.

As she turned to speak to Jake, she noticed he was on his phone. He didn't notice her attempt but seemed deeply involved on the screen and whatever messages he was dealing with on the device.

"Something wrong?" She asked.

He didn't react right away, but eventually raised his head putting his phone down on the bar. "No, it's fine. Just taking care of a few things."

Tina served their drinks and grabbed a pen and paper. "What's it going to be today?"

Pearl looked to Jake, but when he didn't answer, she turned back to their host. "I loved that burger we had yesterday. I'll do that again."

Both women looked to Jake, but he was back on his phone again. Tina huffed, "He's getting the same thing too."

He stood up and announced, "I'll be right back. I have to take care of this." Striding with determination, Jake went back out the door, leaving her to muse over his sudden departure.

Tina brought the bottle of wine and refreshed Pearl's glass. "What's with him?"

"I'm not sure. He's not a man of great conversation, is he?" She took a sip.

"I think he's a very intense person. You know kind of a deep thinker. He's been coming in here for about two years now and in all that time, I've never known him to have anyone with him. You're the first."

"That's only because for the moment, he's stuck with me."

“You said that you came here looking for your brother. Did you find him yet?” Tina wiped absently at the bar.

“No, we went to Slab City yesterday, but didn’t get a chance to look around. There were some pretty creepy characters and Jake got us out of there before something bad happened.”

“Your brother’s in Slab City? Oh, my, sweetie, that can’t be good.”

“I’m beginning to realize that after seeing the place. I never considered myself naïve, but this trip is opening my eyes to my lack of worldly exposure. How long have you been living here?”

“Me and Ike found this place about ten years ago. Sonia owns the Ski Inn and she hired us. She’s treated us well and we’ve been running things since. We weren’t going to stay but one thing and then another happened and we’re still here. Those Slabbers don’t usually come in here but every now and then we get one or two of them through the door. They’re not all bad, my cook is living over there. He’s really a nice guy and dependable. It’s the few that are bad news and I steer clear of that kind.”

“I can see why.” She turned to look at the door expecting Jake to come back into the bar.

“Why would your brother be in a place like Slab City? Is he homeless? You know most of those people are vagabonds, living off the grid. They’re not the cream of the crop in society.”

Pearl gave a big sigh. “Danny’s always been kind of a dreamer. He’s really intelligent, you know, school wise. I always told him that he was the type that



didn't have the sense to come in out of the rain. He's always been looking for that next easy ride." She looked up suddenly, "I'm not knocking my brother, but he's just a different sort of person."

Tina reached over and patted her on the hand. "You're a good sister, aren't you? You're over here looking for him and that shows you care."

"Well, yes, I do care for him, but I'm really here because my mother asked me. She has to take care of Dad and after seeing the slabs, I'm glad it's me and not her. You think I'm a greenhorn, you should meet my mother. She would never believe that a place like that exists."

"Aw, the things we do for family, huh?" Tina and Pearl both looked up when the front door opened as Jake walked back in to the cool, dark room.

"Hey, you ready for another one?" Tina asked.

"Not just yet. Hey, I've got to run down the road for a little bit. You okay with waiting here for me?" He spoke to Pearl.

"Does that have anything to do with the messages on your phone?" She was curious.

"Yes."

"Does it have anything to do with my brother?" She could tell by his reaction that she hit the nail on the head. "Jake, I need to go with you if it involves my brother."

As he looked to see Tina listening intently to their conversation, he put his hand on Pearl's shoulder and nodded for her to follow him. Jake put some bills on the counter as they both started to leave.

“I’ll have those burgers ready for you when you get back!” Tina spoke loudly behind them.

As soon as they were outside, Jake turned and faced her. “Yesterday, when I gave that bag to those guys, I put a...” He struggled with his choice of words. “I have a friend that is an electronics wizard. He gave me some tracking devices to use, and I put one in the bag as well as dropped one in their car.”

“You mean a bug? Isn’t that what they’re called?” She was trying to grasp the meaning of his actions.

“In the movies, yes, they’re called bugs. My buddy is really good at what he does, and I’ve had more than one reason since I’ve been here to track and find certain people.”

“You know, I’ve asked you several times and you’ve never answered. What exactly are you? Are you a scientist, an environmentalist, or just a common ordinary spy?”

Before he could answer, his phone pinged again. “Look, we’ve got to go before we lose them. Hop in!” Jake took the keys from her and soon they were cruising down to the main road. Instead of turning left to go to Slab City, Jake kept on the main road for another few yards until he came to a rather rundown gas station. He brought Teddy to a quick stop just beyond the gas pumps. He turned to her and commanded, “Stay put!”

Jake got out and headed around to the back of the small combination gas station and mini market. There was a delivery truck blocking her view and that added to the bad feeling Pearl had in the pit of her stomach. She looked at her phone and noted the time.

I'll give Jake just five minutes, then I'll go and check on him, she thought to herself.

The glare of the sun made her appreciate the hat Jake had given her. The wind was non-existent, so the heat settled down on the environment like a heavy blanket. She heard the roar of a motorcycle and turned to see an old, rusty machine pull into the gas pumps. The rider was alone and as he dismounted, she noted that although he was dirty and dusty from his ride, his appearance was one that would match those living in Slab City. He wore old aviator goggles and as he removed them, she saw the sunburn ring around his face. He had the look of a raccoon with his mask of dirt and sun on his face. He wore an old ratty bandana over his pony-tailed hair.

She realized she'd been staring when the man looked over and gave her a grin. Pearl turned her head to avoid having any further contact with the stranger. She heard the mechanical squeak as he removed the gas cap on the bike. Taking a quick peek again, she saw that he was pumping gas into the antique motorcycle. Pearl looked at her phone to see that only a minute remained before she'd promised herself to go and look for Jake.

"Oh, what the hell!" She exclaimed as she got out of the Jeep, grabbed the keys, and went in the same direction as Jake had just a few moments earlier. Pearl couldn't help herself as she turned around to check out the man pumping gas. He'd finished and was just sitting on his motorcycle staring at her, following her moves. Goosebumps covered her arms as a feeling of doom flowed down her body. She

cautiously rounded the corner when Pearl saw Jake talking with several guys. She didn't recognize them, but then she thought, she'd only seen them once and under the circumstances and with the fear she'd felt, she doubted that she'd be able to know her own brother.

Not knowing why, Pearl ducked back behind the building. She wanted to observe but not be observed. They were too far away for her to hear any of the conversation, but she detected that it wasn't necessarily anything but a casual talk between several guys. She watched as Jake passed something over to one of the men. She also noticed that the three men checked out the object before turning back to him.

Suddenly, the tone of the scene changed from a more casual conversation to a more intense situation. She saw Jake take a defensive stance. She remembered that he told her that he had carried a gun with him to their first visit to Slab City. The other men backed up a bit, giving some space between them and Jake.

What do I do? She thought with panic. Jake had distinctly told her to stay in the Jeep, but her natural curiosity had driven her to seek him out. She did nothing. Just as she'd decided to make her presence known, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning around, Pearl looked directly into the dark eyes of the man from the motorcycle. He held his fingers up to his lips signaling her to keep quiet. The shock of the entire situation wouldn't have allowed her to say a word even if she'd wanted to speak.

Before she could get her wits about her, the man wandered directly into the tense situation between Jake and the three men. “Hey, guys! What’s up?” He stumbled in his steps appearing to be drunk.

Jake took that opportunity to pull out his gun but before he could do anything, the motorcycle man doubled up his fist and hit the first man hard, knocking him back into the others. “Go!” He ordered Jake.

By that time, Pearl had come around the corner and was headed right toward them. “Jake! Let’s get out of here!” She tried to pull him toward the Jeep.

“This isn’t his fight. I have to help him.” But before he could move back to help their rescuer, the other three men had taken flight in their beat-up car.

The motorcycle man was grinning and laughing when he walked back around the building up to where they were standing. “Hey, man, you alright?”

Jake stuck out his hand to thank the man for his intervention. “I owe you, man. Thanks.”

“No problem.” He started walking away from them back to the front of the mini market.

She went after him. “Hey, we are really grateful. How can we repay you? Can we pay for your gas?”

The man had already reached his motorcycle and fired it up. As he went to slip his goggles down on his eyes, he grinned and replied, “No, Pearly, I’m fine. See ya later.” With that he gunned his bike and took off with a roar leaving her standing there in complete and utter shock.



## CHAPTER FIVE

“Let’s go.” Jake prompted her. When she didn’t respond, he doubled back and took her by the arm. “PJ, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“That was my brother.” He could barely hear her words as Pearl spoke so softly.

“What? Are you sure? Why didn’t he stay?” Jake started to pull her back to the Jeep. “Let’s go catch up with him. PJ!”

Shaking herself out of the stupor Danny’s appearance had put her in, Pearl jumped into the vehicle and Jake sped out of the parking lot. “Can you see him at all?” She asked Jake.

“Nah, this is probably hopeless.” He raised his voice to be heard over the noise of the engine. After a few miles, he pulled over to the side of the road. “Are you absolutely sure it was your brother?”

“Yes, it’s been a few years since I’ve seen Danny, but it was definitely him. He called me by a name only he uses.”

“What name is that?” Jake pressed. “PJ?”

She hadn’t wanted to get to this point, but finally admitted to herself that it was time to come clean. “My name is Pearl, Pearl Ann Johnson. Danny always called me Pearly.”

Jake stared at her for what seemed like forever, but finally spoke up. “Why didn’t you tell me your real name when I first asked?”

“You’re going to think this is a silly explanation, but I’m not happy about being Pearl. It’s an old family name, but throughout my childhood, I was teased unmercifully.”

He didn’t react right away, but rather started the Jeep and returned to the roadway. They traveled back to Bombay Beach where he pulled into the bar. “I’m still hungry. How about you?”

“You know, you change topics faster than anyone I’ve ever known. Don’t you have something to say?” She didn’t move from her seat.

“We’ve all had childhood traumas to deal with. I’ve even had my own, but you get over it at some point in time, don’t you? Let’s go eat.”

Her stomach growling prompted Pearl to climb slowly out and follow Jake back into the bar. “There you two are! I’ll put your order in now.” Tina greeted them.

They both sat down on the very same stools as earlier and saw that the place was a little more crowded than before. “I’ll have that beer too.” Jake spoke.

“So, what are you going to do?” He asked the silent woman sitting next to him.

She pulled her phone out of her backpack. “I’m going to text him and see if he’ll answer. He looks pretty bad, doesn’t he?” Her fingers flew over the keyboard on her phone. “I should probably get the



number my mother has. Maybe he's changed phones since we last spoke."

"I wouldn't know."

She looked up. "Of course, you wouldn't know. How stupid of me."

Jake put his hand over hers to stop her. "PJ, it's okay. You've had quite a shock. Just take some deep breaths and we'll come up with a plan to find where he's staying."

Tina had placed a full glass of wine on the bar and Pearl reached for it now. "I'm all confused. Why wouldn't he stay and talk with me? Wait, what about those guys? What happened back there?"

He hesitated but looked directly at her. "I told you about the bug and it led me to those guys. I knew they were outside of Slab City and figured it would be the safest place to confront them. When I said that it was a lawless place, I wasn't exaggerating. If they come out to Niland, the law will hopefully interact if they get out of line."

"That makes sense, I guess. But what did you think they could do?"

"For the right amount of money, Slabbers will do most anything. I tried to bribe them, but that was my mistake. Most of those people are drug users and what I offered them, wasn't enough. They figured me for more. See, I feel stupid too."

She laughed. "We're a pair, aren't we?"

He actually grinned, "We are at that."

"If your brother hadn't interrupted, it could have been a bad situation gone worse. I'm not as street wise as I think I am."

Tina made her appearance at that time, and they stopped long enough to enjoy their lunch. She stood there chatting about this and that while they ate, not expecting them to respond. She left for a few minutes to take care of her other customers but returned to check on them. "Need anything more?"

"You know if you have more of that wine, I'll take another glass. I feel like I need it." Pearl kept checking her phone but there was still no response from Danny.

Once they finished their drinks and the meal, Jake sat back and waited patiently. She looked to him and smiled. "I think I'm ready to go if you are."

"Yep, we have work to do. Thanks, Tina." He started to get out his wallet when she stopped him. "You already paid. Remember?"

They were halfway to the door when she stopped them. "Wait, if you give me a picture of your brother, I'll keep an eye out for him."

"That's a good idea." Pearl walked back and showed a picture from her phone. "It's several years old and I'm sure he's a lot different now." She knew he looked poles apart from that photo but was still reeling from her encounter with her brother.

Tina took the phone from Pearl's hands. She punched in her number and then handed it back. "Text me that picture. I'll let you know if I see him."

"Thanks, Tina. I appreciate it."

Just as they pulled into the compound, Jake announced that he had stuff to do with Lucas. "You can work in the office in the meantime. Call me if you need me."

“I’ll need your number.” She held out her phone. He put his number in and left her at the door. Pearl silenced his ring but added his number to her contacts.

As she went into the office, Pearl suddenly got an idea. Her cousin was married to a man involved with an environmental group. Maybe they could give her more information about the Salton Sea. She sat down and looked at the stack of papers waiting to be input into the computer, but instead Pearl sat back and took a deep breath.

She searched in her contacts and found her cousin’s number. As soon as her cousin answered, Pearl found herself a little homesick for family. “Pearl! How are you? What are you up to?”

“Cousin, you won’t believe where I am.” She fought back emotion as her voice cracked.

Her cousin’s laughter helped relieve the tensions of the day. “Raven, how are you and Chase doing?”

“We are living life and loving it. Where are you?”

“I’m in California. I’m at a place called the Salton Sea. Have you ever heard of it?”

“On my God! Yes, Chase and I were just involved in a conversation with the OPP just the other day about the Salton Sea. What in the world are you doing there?”

“It’s a long story, but I came looking for Danny. You know how my brother was always on the weird side?”

Raven’s laughter had a calming effect on Pearl. “Mother got a call and he said he was in a place called

Slab City. She asked me to come and find him, so here I am.”

“Did you find him?”

“Well, yes and no. My car broke down and I found myself in a place where this guy helped me. His name is Jake...I’m sorry I

don’t even know his last name. We had kind of an incident today and I think I saw Danny. Oh, this is all so strange. But I called to see what you can tell me about the Salton Sea. I know that you and your husband are into protecting the environment and this is definitely a place in need of major help.”

“What do you need from us?” Raven asked.

“Could you do some research and let me know what you find? Jake is extremely dedicated to protecting this area and I want to know why.”

“Ooh sounds like you have a vested interest, cousin. Is he handsome? Or maybe he’s loaded?” Raven provoked.

“Oh, you’re just awful, cousin. Let me know what you find out. I love you. Give my best to that good looking husband of yours and kiss that beautiful baby.”

“I’ll do that. Take care!”

Once she’d hung up, Pearl sat there for a few minutes reflecting on her life and her cousin’s. They were both about the same age and yet their lives had taken very different paths.

Raven had survived a life-threatening car accident only to find the love of her life on the mountain that she loved so dearly when she was recuperating.

“Damn! I wish this stupid office had a window!” Pearl stood up and opened the front door, only to regret her actions when the hot air outside rushed into her cool room. Feeling defeated, she slammed it quickly and went back to the work she’d been avoiding.

For another hour or so, she worked hard inputting the data into the spreadsheet. Finally, Pearl rubbed her tired eyes and sat back for a minute. In order to avoid thinking about Jake, she went to the internet. She searched for the Salton Sea and found a multitude of articles. One of the papers she looked at showed a timeline for the Salton Sea. Pearl was fascinated with the fact that there was so much information available.

As she printed off the information she’d found, Pearl was standing at the printer when Jake finally came through the office door. “Hey! How’s it going?”

“It’s going.” She responded. “Did you get everything done that you wanted to with Lucas?”

“Yes. What are you working on?” He started for his office but stopped in the doorway.

“I found a lot of stuff on the Salton Sea. I was working on the stack of papers on my desk, but I took a small break to do some research. Hope that’s okay?”

“Sure. What did you find?” He didn’t leave his doorway but leaned against it waiting for her to answer.

“One of the most interesting things I found relates to what you said about the history starting back as early as 1615. Do you know that a Spanish ship actually sailed up the Gulf of California and into Lake

Cahuilla? That's what it was called back then." She quit reading the papers in her hand and looked up when he didn't respond.

The grin on his face was heart stopping. Pearl felt her cheeks grow hot as something instantly changed between them. Needing to find a distraction, she went over to her desk and sat down, putting the object between them. "I know you probably already knew all of that, but I found it very interesting."

"I did know that, but your enthusiasm is fun to see. I knew if you stayed here long enough, you'd get hooked on the Salton Sea."

"Have you ever found anything like they talked about in the article? I think they said someone found a gold cross."

"Most of those stories aren't exactly true, but it makes for some fun reading. You know how legends grow with time and many repetitions."

"Ah, you're the guy that likes to pop my balloon. I'd rather believe that I could go out there and find some of those pearls that the ship was carrying. Wouldn't that be fun?" She challenged him.

"Yeah, it'd be great, pearls for a Pearl. Anything else?"

"Oh, I called my cousin. She and her husband are involved with an environmental organization, and I asked her about this place. She was totally aware of it and even said that the last meeting with their immediate group was all about it."

He perked up, "Which group are they with?"

"It's the OPP, you know Operation Perfect Planet. They got involved when Chase found someone on

their mountain illegally storing nuclear waste in an old mine.”

“I’ve heard of them. I even thought about contacting them myself.”

“Raven is a new mother, but her and Chase still live up in the Bradshaw Mountains outside of Prescott, Arizona. They fight for causes wherever they find them.”

He questioned, “Her name is Raven? That’s most unusual.”

Pearl laughed. “We all know her as Raven, but her real name is Kate Blackinger.”

“Okay, I have to ask the obvious then. Why do they call her Raven?”

“When she was nearly killed in a car wreck, she went to the home she’d inherited from her mother and dad in the Bradshaw Mountains. It’s a rather unique place. The locals call it The Powder Box House as it was built from old blasting powder boxes they used in the local mines. She went there to heal but stayed pretty much to herself. The locals saw her as an image of ill omen, a person to stay away from and they did.”

“Wow! You have a unique family.”

“We do and for the most part, we’re a happy bunch.”

“How did she meet her husband?” He asked as he sat down at the chair beside her desk.

Pearl hesitated before she responded. “This must be boring to you. You’re a man that’s already said he isn’t into the family scene.”

“Yes, I have my family issues, but your people seem so very interesting compared to mine. Please fill me in on how Raven met her man.”

“She was alone in her home when Chase showed up on her back porch with a bullet wound. She helped him heal and, in the process, he told her about the illegal dumping in the abandoned mine site up on the top of the mountain.” Without realizing it, Pearl sighed. “They fell in love and along with a band of locals, they saved the environment and now they have a small son.”

“Sounds like a fairy tale.”

“Not your cup of tea, huh?” She watched the different looks cross over his face. He was good at hiding his emotions, she thought, but Pearl thought she noticed a slight crack in that tough façade.

“You think I could contact Chase? Maybe he could update me on what they’re doing to try and save this place.” Jake acted casual about his request, but Pearl could feel his passion surface once again.

“I’m sure he’d love to talk with you. I have a question for you.” She fiddled with a pencil on the desk.

“Shoot.”

“For a man that has such negative feelings about family, why in the world would you offer to pay money for information about my brother?”

That question clearly made Jake extremely uncomfortable, and she had a strong desire to let him off the hook, but Pearl felt an equally strong need for an answer. She sat patiently while he obviously struggled with his response.



“I’ve been on my own for a very long time now.”

“And...” She prompted him for more.

Jake stood up and crossed the room to his office, “Maybe a small part of me envies what you have with your family.” With that, he went in his office and shut the door behind himself.

Pearl didn’t know how to react to that. His honesty was heart breaking and yet, was there a deeper meaning to it all? Taking a big sigh, she lifted the papers she’s just printed about the sea and stared at the contents. He was right about one thing, this was a place that could pull at a person’s heart and soul. She pushed back thoughts of finding her passion in life.

Pearl worked without interruption for another couple of hours when she heard Jake open his door. “I think we’re done for this day. What do you think?”

“I could use a break. I’d like to use the treadmill if you don’t mind. I’m not hungry right now.”

His reaction was one of mild surprise. He stammered, “Oh, sure. I’ll just follow you and unlock the gym.”

“You can come if you want to. I just feel a need to burn off some steam. I’m not used to sitting for so long.” Pearl tried to explain.

In silence they walked in the stifling heat around from the office back to the warehouse. Jake opened the door and let her in.

She stepped in but hesitated. “Do you want to come in too?”

He paused but finally answered, “I know this is a strange situation, for the both of us. I understand if you need some time to think, some time to be alone.

Just come on over when you're done. I'll lock this door and all you have to do is pull it tight when you leave."

"Thanks." She put her backpack down on the floor next to the treadmill. As soon as she got on, Pearl noticed he still hadn't left.

"I'll put on the music. I always find it makes my workout easier when I can hear my favorite tunes." Once he turned on the stereo, Jake went out the door, just barely pulling it shut.

For just a few precious moments, Pearl just stood there taking in what Jake defined as a 'strange' situation. That was putting it mildly, she thought. It's time to check in, she thought grimly as she pulled her phone from her backpack and punched in her mother.

"Pearl!" Her answer was quick. "What have you found out? Where are you? Is that music I hear?"

This was not going to be easy. Pearl ignored the questions and asked one of her own. "Mother, how long has it been since you've seen Danny?"

"Why do you ask? Have you seen him? Is he okay?"

"Mother, I want to try and make you understand that this is an extremely weird place. Slab City is inhabited by derelicts, hippies, and people avoiding the law. It is like nothing I could've ever imagined in my life. These people live in cardboard shacks, tents but there are even huge expensive motor homes in between. The local law officers won't go there for any reason. The inhabitants seem to have gone off the grid and live with their own rules for society."

“Oh, my. What about your brother?”

“Jake and I went to meet some of those people to try and bribe them into giving us information about him. It could’ve been a very different ending if it weren’t for this man intervening into our very serious situation.”

“Okay, enough is enough. Pearl, you need to get out of there and come on home. We’ll figure out some other way to find Danny.”

“I can’t come home. I don’t have a running car and I made a commitment to Jake. I’m going to stay for another two weeks. He’s promised to pay me and then I can get my car fixed. Mother, I need you to give me Danny’s number.”

“Okay, but I am worried about you.”

“I’ll be fine. Just give me the number.” As her mother repeated the information, Pearl wrote it down on an old envelope in her backpack. She’d compare numbers later.

“If you hear from him, tell him to call me right away!”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

An out and out lie wasn’t a normal character trait for Pearl, but she crossed her fingers and spoke to her mother. “I’ve just told you everything. I’ll keep in touch. Love you.” She then ended the call. With a huge sigh, she reflected on how close to living on the edge this trip made her with her own moral fiber. She’d not been truthful with Jake about her name, she told her mother she didn’t need money, and now she couldn’t bring herself to tell her about what a horrible state in which her brother had seemed to be.

Putting her bag down, she went over to the machine and started it up. Feeling the need to release some stress, Pearl revved up the speed and the incline. She felt herself starting to burn off some steam as she listened to the older rock and roll tunes. Her mind raced to the moment she recognized her brother. What in the world has happened to him? She searched her memories for the last time she'd seen him.

Her mother and dad had celebrated their fortieth anniversary and along with friends had a big party at the house. Danny had put in an appearance but didn't stay long. She mused he had been clean shaven and was dressed in jeans and a nice shirt, nothing like the man she'd seen earlier.

Not realizing the time flying by, Pearl was surprised by Jake's appearance. She stopped the treadmill and reached for a towel to wipe off her sweat-soaked face. "Hey." She greeted him.

"Are you going to work out all night?" He walked over and shut down the music. "Ready for some dinner?"

"Yeah, I think I could eat now. What are we fixing?"

Together they walked out the door into the blazing heat across the compound to the trailer. She noticed a strange vehicle parked in front. "What's that?"

"It's a side by side, a utility vehicle. Lucas uses it to get around doing all the stuff I need him to do. I thought you'd like to meet him and his wife. I've invited them for some dinner. I thought we'd grill some hamburgers."

This was a total surprise for Pearl, but she found that she liked the idea of not being alone with Jake tonight. She shook her head to clear the thoughts as to why she favored company. As they entered the room, she immediately smelled something delicious. “Oh my God, what is that wonderful smell?” She spoke to the couple at the kitchen bar.

“I made some appetizers.” The young woman spoke up and came to offer a hand. “I’m Isabella and I’m married to this rogue.” She pointed to Lucas.

“Can you all excuse me for a moment while I clean up? I’ve been working out and I’m sure you don’t want me close.”

“Yes, we’ll wait for you. What do you want to drink? I’ll get it ready for you.” Jake agreed to her beverage request.

Pearl went quickly to her room and shut the door. She scrambled through the clothes in her suitcase, looking for something a little nicer than her usual jean’s shorts and tee shirts. She went and performed a quick sponge bath before donning her shorts and tank top. Taking one last look in the small mirror above the bathroom sink, Pearl was glad for once in her life that her hair had a natural curl. A little bit of water and she could fluff her curls into a suitable hairdo.

She grimaced but accepted the face staring back at her. I’m not trying to impress anyone she tried to convince herself before leaving the room.

“Ah, there you are.” Jake handed her a glass of white wine which she eagerly took.

“Help yourself to these.” Isabella offered her a plate of very wonderful smelling goodies.

“What are these?”

“These are empanadas, mini tacos, some guacamole, and some mini taquitos. If you feel adventurous, I have some salsa that’s got a real kick to it.” Isabella spoke proudly of her offerings.

After tasting one of the empanadas, Pearl exclaimed, “This is fantastic. Are they hard to make?”

The two men were busy filling their plates. They each sat around the small dining room table, enjoying their appetizers. “If we eat all of this, what are we having for dinner and will we still be hungry?” Lucas asked.

“Sorry, buddy, I am not as talented as your lovely wife. I only have burgers planned. In fact, I should go light the grill.”

“I’ll help.” Lucas grabbed his plate and followed Jake out the back door.

“Thank you so much for fixing these.” Pearl spoke to the other woman.

“You’re so welcome. We usually have Jake over at least a couple of times each week for dinner. You know those bachelors don’t take time to cook real food.”

“I’m afraid I fall into that category too. I just grab whatever is easiest which is usually what is not good for me.” Pearl added, “I bet you’re curious about who I am and what I’m doing here?”

“I don’t want to pry, but it’s so unusual for Jake to have someone here. I’ve known him for just over five

years but my Lucas; well, they go back all the way to their college years. He was best man at our wedding.”

“Now that’s very enlightening.” Pearl mused over that new fact about Jake. “I came here to try and find my brother. He told my mother that he was staying in Slab City.” When she saw the startled look on Isabella’s face, Pearl expanded. “I had no idea about that place. Jake took me there and we tried to find someone that could give us information on Danny. So far, it hasn’t worked. Oh, wait, I forgot to tell the reason I’m here.”

Isabella stopped her. “Lucas told me that your car broke down. That kind of leaves you stranded here, doesn’t it?”

Even though she’d just met this woman, Pearl felt an immediate connection to her. “As it turns out, Jake needed some help in the office and I’m able to earn my car repair money. This is all very weird to say the least.” She laughed and Isabella joined her.

“Well, at least you have a sense of humor about it all.”

“What else can you do?” Just then the two guys came back in, and Jake went to get the burger patties. “Jake, what can I do to help?”

“You can set the table. There are some chips in the cupboard and Isabella brought some pasta salad. It’s not much, but it’ll have to do.” He went out with Lucas right on his heels.

The two ladies set the table and refreshed drinks. It wasn’t long before the guys brought in the burgers, and they all sat down to eat. The conversation was casual as they all enjoyed their simple meal. They sat

there after finishing but the talk was about current events and the heat. Finally, Lucas turned to Pearl. “Jake says you’re doing a good job entering all that data. What do you think of our little operation here?”

She looked to Jake before answering. “Honestly, Lucas, I have no clue what you guys are doing here. It seems that it’s a deep dark secret.”



## CHAPTER SIX

The awkward silence in the room lasted for just a moment or two when Jake interjected. “I didn’t know how long you were going to be here, so I didn’t feel the need to tell you about our operation.”

“Is that an apology?” Pearl smiled as she teased him. Jake was obviously uncomfortable with this turn of events. She decided to let him off the hook. “Jake, I would have done the same thing under the circumstances.” Turning to Lucas and Isabella, she continued. “I don’t know how much he has told you, but I came here looking for my wayward brother. The car I was driving should have been scrapped a long time ago. It was the only thing I had and unfortunately for Jake here, it died in the compound yard.”

“It worked out, though. We’re getting that data entered and our reports are almost completed, thanks to your efforts. Now, can I refresh your drinks?” He stood up and grabbed her wine glass as well as his own.

“I’ll help.” She jumped up. “Isabella, more wine for you?”

With a nod, the other woman smiled and thanked her. Lucas patted his wife’s hand and the tension in the room was finally broken.

The conversation for the rest of the evening was very light and soon, Lucas got up and announced they should get back to their home. Jake and Pearl stood on the small deck and waved goodbye to their guests. As they crossed back into the front room, Jake turned to her. "PJ, I'd like to fill you in on what we're doing here now."

"You know, that's not necessary. I was just teasing earlier. If it's not an illegal operation, I really don't need to know. After all, like you said, I'm only going to be here for another week and a half." She started clearing the table of dishes and settings. He pitched in and together they cleared the kitchen completely.

"You know, I think I'm ready for bed. See you in the morning." She turned to go to her room when he stopped her.

"PJ, thanks."

"You're welcome." With that she got to her room, shut the door, and plopped down on the bed. Boy, she needed a girlfriend to talk to right now. To the innocent bystander, this was a very normal scene for two couples. Dinner, drinks, and conversation was standard social behavior except she and Jake were not a couple, they weren't even friends. Or were they?

So as to not dwell on that, Pearl got up and went to the bathroom. She turned the water on in the shower, stripped off her clothes and stepped into the hot stream. She turned the water up as hot as her skin would tolerate, trying to cleanse certain thoughts from her being. She'd only been here three days but what an amazing challenge her life had become in that short time.

Once out, Pearl put on her shorts and tee shirt but before she could get into the bed, there was a soft knock at her door. As she opened it, Jake stood there with a cupcake in his hand. "You didn't get dessert. Isabella baked these and they're good." She stood aside and allowed him in.

"Thanks. I never turn down chocolate." He found the only chair in the room and sat down in it without an invitation.

She took a little bite of the creamy frosting. When he didn't speak, she prompted Jake. "Something on your mind?"

"I'd like to get the number for your cousin's husband."

"His name is Chase and here I'll text it to you." She leaned over and grabbed her phone, punching in the number for Jake. "I'm sure Raven's filled him in by now. They are so dedicated to their causes and I'm positive they'll welcome a chance to hear more about this one."

"That's great. I want you to know that what we're doing here is not going to hurt the environment. In fact, we hope to leave this place much better than it was when we came."

She smiled as he rose, ready to leave. "I think I know that much about you by now. Sleep tight."

Jake reached over and patted her on the head like you would a small child. He went out and shut her door behind himself.

Pearl peeled the paper off the cupcake and practically shoved the entire thing in her mouth. A pat on the head, she thought to herself. What the hell

was that? “Well, what did you expect?” She asked herself as she crawled in between the covers.

Just as she was relaxing and feeling the sweet peace of sleep flowing down her body, she heard a ping on her phone. For just a moment, Pearl thought she might ignore it when the second ping sounded. Grabbing her cell, she saw with complete surprise that it was a text from her brother.

“Hey, Pearly, WRU here?” It was the number she had for Danny.

It was straining her brain to remember all the acronyms people texting often used. Oh, that’s right, she thought. WRU means why are you here?

“Mother sent me looking for you. She’s worried.”

“Y”

“She’s worried and I am too. I’ve seen Slab City and that’s no place for you.”

“WTF I’m a grown man!”

“Danny, meet me. Let’s talk.”

“G2G TTYL”

“Danny! Meet me!” She repeated but she realized that he had already signed off. She lay back and thought over this latest encounter. At least he’d made some sort of contact. Maybe Jake was right, the people in Slab City were on their last leg and didn’t want to be saved. It was a disturbing thought, but her family ties wouldn’t allow her to forget trying to help him.

Sleep came fast but didn’t last. Danny’s situation was vividly on her mind, and she found herself sitting up in bed. She looked around, there wasn’t a television, and her phone was charging, but she saw a

small bookshelf in the corner. Maybe there was something she could read that would put her to sleep.

As Pearl ran her hand across the spines on the books in the shelf, a particular one caught her attention. It looked like a personal diary, and she pulled it out. The cover was well worn but there were no indications that could clearly identify the owner or writer of the book. She opened it carefully and ran her hand over the first handwritten page. It was the thoughts of someone unknown and they were very personal.

Pearl crawled back into her bed and with only the night light burning on the stand beside her, she started reading page by page. The entries started over seventy years ago and were written by a woman. The nearest she could figure was that the woman was about the age of twenty or younger and single. She read with avid interest at the feelings the woman poured out onto the sheets of aged paper. The only indication of the proper owner of the journal was the name barely discernable on the first page was that of Mary. There was no last name, just Mary.

Waking up the next morning, Pearl found the book beside her on the bed and the sun streaming through the small window. She hurriedly got up, dressed, and went for some food in the kitchen. Pearl was shocked to see Jake sitting at the kitchen bar sipping a cup of coffee.

“What are you still doing here? Has the world ended?” She joked as she helped herself.

“I actually have to run into Indio today for some supplies and I wondered if you’d like to come?”

“Sure. After living in the big city, it’s hard to get used all the silence around here. I just run to the store or the bank whenever I need to go.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call Indio a big city. There’s maybe 100,000 people that live there. They’re mostly migrant farm workers due to the large agricultural area surrounding the Coachella Valley.”

“It’ll be fun. I came through there to get to here, but I was in a hurry and didn’t even get off the freeway.”

“We’ll leave in just a few minutes. So, get ready.” He got up and went out the door, shutting it behind.

Pearl looked down at the shorts and top she was wearing and wondered if he didn’t think they were suitable. Shrugging her shoulders, she went to her room, ran a comb through her hair and grabbed her backpack. This is how it has to be, she thought. I’m not a fancy person.

Pearl went out the door but stopped short as she saw the big red 4x4 pickup truck parked there. Jake was standing by the driver’s door talking with Lucas. She waved and came to stand by them. “Where is Teddy?”

“He’s not going to Indio. He likes to hang out here but going into the city is not his style.”

She laughed at his answer. “I think Teddy would love the big city. It’s you that’s too concerned for his welfare.”

“Let’s go.” They both waved to Lucas and started on their journey.

As he turned onto highway 111 heading north, she commented, “This is nice, but I like Teddy.”

He looked over and smiled, "I prefer him too, but this is nicer because of the air conditioning as well as the speed."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"We need to pick up some stuff from Costco and then some stuff from the hardware store. Is there any place you need to go?"

"Not necessarily. I don't really need anything from the hardware store, but I'll look at the goods at Costco and see if I need anything. This is going to be fun."

"I'm not sure that's the word I'd use to describe this trip."

"Aren't there some casinos in Indio?"

"Don't tell me you're a gambler?" He turned to her.

"Not really, but I do like the occasional visit to the casino, although right now I can't afford it at all. Can we go and see the mechanic? I'd like to see if he's come up with some options for me."

Jake hesitated, but acquiesced. "Sure, we can go and see where he's at with the repairs." With that, he turned on the music and they went the rest of the some forty miles without any conversation.

As they approached an intersection, Pearl questioned, "Where does that go?"

"If we turned left here, we could go on down Highway 86 and around the western side of the Salton Sea."

"Can we do that? I would love to see what's on the other side."

"That's a trip for another day. If you were to try and drive all the way around the sea, it would take

approximately two hours or so and that's without stopping to see the sites."

"Really? What sites are there?" She was intrigued.

"We'd have to go to Salton City and Salton Beach. It was the place that all the celebrities used to go in the fifties."

He turned to stare at her. "Don't you remember? I told you that Frank Sinatra, Randolph Scott, and Cary Grant worshipped these shores! I'm not kidding, this was the place to be back then!"

"Wow! I can't imagine it being like that. How sad."

"Yes, it's the reason I'm dedicated to doing what I can to save the sea. There were all kinds of activities for families to enjoy like boating, fishing, picnics, swimming and just lying on the sun-soaked beaches."

Pearl tried to envision the sea being such a wonderful place but found it hard to believe. The scenery around them was that of a stark desert environment. Even though she lived in Phoenix and the desert was all around her home, Pearl thought this area was even more desolate. The landscape was dotted with small creosote bushes amongst the blowing dust and sand. "I'll bet when the wind blows hard, it would almost be impossible to drive on this road."

"This area is known for the wild dust storms. The wind blows almost all the time, but it can kick up a helluva traffic problem when it really gets going." She noticed that the buildings were starting to show up on either side of the road indicating they were starting to enter the city.

"Where are we going first?" She finally asked.



“Home Depot is on the right side, so we’ll start there. Costco is just across the street so that’ll be next. If you see any place you want to stop at, just let me know.” He pulled their vehicle into the parking lot and together they went into the huge hardware store. She just followed along, watching at the things he was loading into his cart. It appeared an odd assortment of electrical, plumbing, and small building supplies.

“This must be boring for you.” He spoke.

“I’m fine. This isn’t exactly my type of store, but I’m okay with it.”

Once loaded into the bed of the pickup, Jake drove across to the big warehouse store. “If you want, you can just wait out here for me.”

“No way, I’ll get a hot dog and wait for you in the snack area.”

Jake chuckled. “I did notice that’s what you had for breakfast yesterday. Really?”

“I’ll bet you didn’t know I eat them cold with a slice of bread and nothing else.”

“That’s disgusting.” He gave her a frown.

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.” She caught up to him and together they went into the store.

“I’ll go to the deli and wait for you there. Hey, can I have the number for the mechanic? I’d like to talk to him and see if he’s come up with a cheaper fix for my car.” If she saw Jake’s hesitation, Pearl didn’t say anything about it.

“I’ll text it to you. I’ll see you in a bit.” He walked away with his cell in hand and within seconds, she got the text with the mechanic’s number. She noticed, unlike her brother, Jake used complete words, no text

slang. Pearl stood in line but as soon as she got her food, found a table near the checkout line. Sitting down, she took a bite of the delicious hotdog and then punched in the mechanic's number.

Once he answered, she reminded him of her predicament. "I'm Pearl, the owner of the disaster you towed in from the Salton Sea."

"Hey, yeah, I've been talking with Jake. Did he tell you what's wrong?"

"Not in so many details. He did say it would cost around a thousand dollars to fix. Is that right?" She took another bite of her meal.

"That's a pretty old car you have there. I haven't worked on one like this in a long time. To put it simply, it needs a new manifold. I thought it might just be a blown head gasket, but the further I dug into it, I realized that the manifold is warped."

"All that sounds like a foreign language to me. Can you find a used thingy instead of a new one?"

After he got done laughing, the mechanic spoke between chuckles. "It's a manifold and I could probably look for one in a junkyard. That's going to take some time."

"It would be cheaper, right?"

"Yeah, it would save some money. It's a lot of labor though and that's the same whether it's a used part or a new one."

"Well, then let's go that route. I just need it to get running long enough to get back home to Arizona. I'll get rid of it then." She explained.

"Okay, I'll keep in touch and let you know if I can find a new thingy." He teased her.

“Thanks, oh, what’s your name?”

“People just call me Tuffy.”

“Thanks so much, Tuffy. Keep in touch.”

As soon as she hung up, she saw Jake coming through the check out with a huge cart packed full of stuff. She went over to help him push it to the door of the building. “What did you do? Did you leave anything here for someone else?”

When they got to the pickup, he jumped up in the back and she handed the bulk items to him. “I only come to town every couple of weeks, and this will keep us supplied till the next trip.” She watched as Jake put the items needing to be kept cold into a huge ice chest. He was very organized, and she was impressed.

“I talked with Tuffy. He’s going to look for the part in a junk yard. He says it’ll be cheaper that way.”

Jake jumped down and they sat together on the tailgate. “That’s good, PJ. I’ve had him do several things for me and he’s very reliable. Did you enjoy your hotdog?”

“Very much. You didn’t get anything to eat, did you?”

He chuckled, “Have you ever grazed your way through the samples in there?” He pointed to the giant warehouse.

They had a good laugh together but finally the heat got to them. “Let’s get out of here.” Jake reached to help her down. The touch of his hands around her waist sizzled new emotions. She quickly backed out of his hold. “So, where else do we need to go?”

“You said you liked to go to the casino.”

“Oh, no, Jake, I can’t afford that right now. It’s not at the top on my list. What else is there to do here?”

“Well, if you want to golf in one-hundred-degree weather, there are plenty of courses around.”

“I think I’ll take a pass but thanks for the offer. I guess we should just head back.”

He started the big four-wheeler and headed back down the highway. “One last chance. Are you sure you don’t want to go and gamble a bit? I can spot you on your paycheck.”

She giggled, “I think that’s a big no. I need to save any money I get for getting that car repaired and then back to Phoenix.”

“What about your brother?”

Pearl thought for a moment before answering, “I got a text from him last night. He asked me why I was here and when I told him, he got angry and signed off. I’m beginning to think you’re right and I should just let it go.”

As they were stopped for a traffic light, Jake looked over and pressed her, “But your strong family ties have you doing things you don’t really want to be doing, huh?”

“Wait! That sounds like you’re trying to protect me from my own decisions. Do you think you need to save me?”

“Someone has to.” The light changed and he pushed the big truck forward. Jake turned the volume up on the radio and an old rock and roll song filled the cab of their truck. Pearl took this as his way of stopping the rest of their conversation.

“If you’re hungry, we could stop at this really good Mexican food restaurant and have dinner.”

“You know, I think I’d like that.” Even though she wasn’t hungry, Pearl felt she needed a distraction.

He pulled off the highway and went onto several side streets, parking the truck in front of a building. “I know it’s not much to look at but wait till you taste the food. It’s the best authentic Mexican food you’ll ever have.”

She smiled. “That sounds great. I could use a good margarita, too.” Pearl climbed down out of the truck, and they went inside. They were greeted by a friendly, smiling hostess and quickly seated at a booth.

“I know this doesn’t look too fancy, but I promise you, you won’t be disappointed.”

“Jake, I know we haven’t known each long, but I would hope that you’ve figured out by now that I’m not a fancy person.” She laughed and added, “Look at the car I drive!”

The server came and after a few minutes, each of them decided on their choice. Once she left, Pearl commented, “I have such a hard time deciding sometimes. My eyes are always bigger than my stomach.”

“I never seem to have that problem.” Jake responded.

“Of course not. You men seem to be able to eat what you want and not worry about where it might settle.” She laughed and as the server gave her the drink she ordered, took a sweet sip. “Oh, my goodness. This is great! Thank you.”

“I told you.”

Their food came quickly and the next several minutes were spent in silence as each enjoyed their dishes. The music overhead was a mariachi type sound. There were several diners in the small space. The smells from the kitchen were tempting and Pearl found herself enjoying the moment.

Their server came for a final check and offered dessert. “No way, thanks, but I am totally stuffed.” Pearl answered. “You go ahead.” She prompted Jake.

“No way!” He leaned back and patted his stomach. To the server, he said, “Thanks, but we’ll just take the check.”

In no time at all, they were walking out to the truck. She helped herself into the high vehicle and Jake fired up the powerful engine. “Let’s get back.”

They barreled down the highway in the waning daylight hours and within just a little time Jake was pulling into the compound. There was still enough light for them to see that Lucas was waiting.

“I texted him.” Jake justified. “I’m getting better at that.”

“That’s good. You depend on him, don’t you?”

“I do. He’s a good man to have here. You can go to the trailer if you want and relax. Lucas and I will secure these things.”

“I’ll help if you don’t mind. I’m not used to sitting around doing nothing.” She reached for a box of the supplies.

“I’ll tell you what. You can take the stuff for the trailer and put it where you think it should go.”

The three of them started organizing the various supplies into several basic groups. Pearl started

gathering the food stuffs and walked the short distance to the trailer with her goods. Once inside, she put the freezer items in the top of the refrigerator and sat the pantry things on the counter.

Trip by trip Pearl went back for the supplies designated for the trailer and soon she had an entire counter full of stuff. With her last load, she spoke to Jake. "I'm going to put all the stuff away. See you in a few. Lucas, thanks for your help."

She closed the door behind her and went to work putting various supplies in their respective places. Pearl stopped for a moment and poured herself a glass of wine. She found the stereo unit and put on some classic country music. Suddenly, she sighed and stopped. This is so much like the first time I've ever felt at home, she thought pensively. What does that mean?

It wasn't long when Jake finally walked through the door. "Can I get you a beer?" She asked.

"Yeah, that'd be great." He sat at the breakfast bar. "Great! You got everything put away. Any problems?"

Pearl refilled her wine glass and joined him at the bar. "No, but it might take you a while to find things when I'm gone." She gave a small laugh. "Did you guys get everything taken care of?"

"We did. Are you hungry at all?"

"No, not after that huge meal, how about you?"

"No, I'm good. Can I ask you a question?" Her voice expressed the hesitation she felt.

"Earlier you talked about my strong family ties. Why do you think you need to save me from that?"

“PJ, I’m a victim of dedication to family. For years, I did what I thought was best for everyone in my family except me. It cost me my own goals and dreams.”

“Care to expand on that?”

“I come from a large family. I have seven other brothers and sisters.”

“And?”

“We lived in a very dysfunctional home. All my life each of us competed for our parent’s love and affection. I guess it doesn’t really need saying, but I was not one of my parent’s favorites. At some point in time, I decided that I wasn’t going to play that game anymore. This job is the first thing I’ve done for me.”

“So, you think I’m doing the same thing?” She rose and helped herself to more wine and gave him another beer.

“What do you think?”

“That’s annoying.” She interjected.

He actually laughed out loud. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be annoying. I just don’t want you to waste as much time as I did. PJ, you need to do what’s best for you in life. Please, don’t make decisions based on what your mother wants or thinks.”

She took a deep breath before answering, “I think I’m getting to that point, Jake. I really need to start doing what I want in life. So, you don’t need to save me, I’m going to save myself.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. If anyone of my family walked up to this door, I’d welcome them in, offer them some food or drink and we’d have some polite



conversation.” He waited a second before continuing, “It’s here that I won’t let them in anymore.”

Jake put his hand up to his heart.

Without hesitation, Pearl reached over and put her own hand on top of his. It was a moment between them. Jake slowly lowered his head and placed a slight kiss on her lips. It wasn’t sexual nor tempting, just warm and caring.

Almost at the same time, they pulled back and avoided looking at each other. The only light on was the one over the stove and it shed an almost romantic glow over the scene. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable. Time seemed to stand still. Breaking the stillness was the ring on her cell. It was her mother’s ringtone, but Pearl chose not to answer. He didn’t say a word.

She finally stood up and went to the refrigerator to refresh her wine. “Do you want some more?”

“Sure, why not?”

Pearl refilled her wine glass and gave him another cold bottle of beer. She sat back down beside him and took a sip of her cold drink. “So, what’s next?”

“I contacted your cousin and her husband. They want to come and see what I’ve done here, so I just need to figure out where to put them and how long they’re going to stay.”

This bit of information surprised her. “I can’t believe you invited them here. What about their baby?”

“Raven seemed to think that someone named Hattie would be able to take care of little Ward. Does that make sense?”

She laughed. “Hattie is quite the character, but she would be the ideal nanny for the baby. He’s named after Chase’s father. I’m sure they know what they’re doing. It’ll be fun to see my cousin. I haven’t seen her for a long time. Why did you invite them here?”

“I’m hoping that Chase has enough contacts in the environmental world to help the company I’m working for get a very lucrative contract.”

“That’s not quite the answer I expected from you.”

“Pearl, they’re a very honorable and trustworthy company. Several big corporations including various car manufacturers are ready to tap into the lithium deposits here but for very greedy reasons. My company is working to make profits but not at the expense of the sea. They have a plan to help the recovery of this area.”

“So, it’s not just about the money for you.” It was more of a statement than a question.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“You’ve only seen a fragment of the devastation here. I want to be part of the recovery. This whole lake could be a beautiful spot again. It probably won’t happen in my lifetime, but I’d like to think that I had a part in saving it for future generations.”

“Wow. That’s the most words I’ve heard from you since we met.”

He just looked over at her and smiled with what was becoming his familiar look for her. “Where do you think we can put Raven and Chase up?”

“I could sleep on the couch, and they can have the front room.” She volunteered.

“I was thinking that I would sleep on the couch, and they could use the back room.”

She turned on the stool and looked at the small sofa in the front room. “You wouldn’t fit.”

“It would only be for a night or two. That would give them time to see everything and give me some ideas on what, if anything, OPP could do to help save the sea.”

“When are they coming?”

“I think day after tomorrow. Chase said he would text me with the exact timeframe.” Jake finished his beer and stood up.

She got up and put her empty wine glass on the counter. She looked at him, “I’ll take care of that in the morning.”

“I’m sure you will. Good night, PJ.”

“You know you can call me Pearl, now that you know my full name.”

“I know, but I think you’re always going to be PJ to me.” Jake walked the short hall to his room and waved over his shoulder to her.

A little deflated but slightly grateful, Pearl shut the only light off and turned to her bedroom. Checking her phone before stripping her clothes off, Pearl saw that it was later than she realized. The display reminded her of her mother’s call from earlier. Taking a deep breath, Pearl simply placed her phone on the charger as she crawled into the bed. The air conditioning cooled the entire room and the coolness of the covers felt great on her over-heated skin.

Pearl lay there and finally allowed her mind to think about the kiss they’d shared earlier. Unconsciously she touched her fingertips to her own lips as if to feel his touch again. What did it mean? Probably nothing. She picked up the old diary again and read some more entries until finally, she grew tired enough to sleep.

A small noise outside the window startled Pearl awake. She didn’t hear the dogs barking but got up to look out anyway. It was purely dark with no moonlight, and she had to stare for a bit to adjust her eyes to any movement. Finally convinced it was nothing, Pearl went back to bed. She couldn’t shut off her mind. Her thoughts wandered all around popping

in and out of her head. Suddenly sitting straight up in bed, her eyes wide open, Pearl whispered to the darkness.

“What if he invited my cousin and her husband so they could take me back home? What if he wants to be rid of me?” Her quiet words weren’t the only thing that disturbed Pearl. Lastly, she said, “Why do I care?” Sleep finally claimed her active brain, but it wasn’t comforting.

Waking more tired than when she went to bed, Pearl dragged herself into the shower. Putting on her last set of clean clothes, she reluctantly went to the kitchen. There was no sign of Jake except his usual brusque note. The bold scrawls on the little scrap of paper told her to eat breakfast and come to the office.

She went to her room, grabbed a load of her dirty clothes, and found the small laundry off of the kitchen. She shoved everything in, added soap, and shut the lid. As she ate her breakfast of coffee and a sweet roll, Pearl thought once again about his reasons behind the invitation to her family. Pushing those thoughts aside, she hurried to the office.

Mixed with the heat today, Pearl noticed a difference in the humidity. She looked to the sky before stepping into the office. “Hey.”

Pearl let her eyes adjust to the darkness before answering Jake. “Hey. Is it my imagination, or could it rain today?”

“That’s not really a possibility. This time of the year, Mother Nature just teases us. This place may only get a little over three inches of rainfall for the entire year. It could get windy and muggy during

these summer months. You need to do yourself a favor if the wind does kick up.”

“What’s that?” She sat at her desk.

“Wear a mask when you go out in it. The wind stirs up the toxic dust and it causes major lung and breathing problems for the residents all around the valley.” He reached to a bookshelf and handed her a small box. “Take one to keep in your pocket.”

“Is that another problem with this area?”

“It’s a major one. The rate for children and adults having COPD or asthma is 150 times the normal rate for the entire state.”

She let that information sit in her head for a moment. “Is that why your company is including restoration efforts in the deal?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can you tell me what all these figures are that I am entering into this database?”

“On a daily basis, Lucas goes out and collects samples of the sand, the water, and even the air. Before you came, I would help him, but now I can concentrate on the final reports. He processes them and these are the figures that we end up with. We monitor the conditions of the climate and watch for any anomalies or hiccups that might need special note.”

“Wow.” She spoke with amazement. “Why?”

“We will use these reports to supplement the company’s proposal to mine the lithium.”

“Jake, what exactly are the things we’re tracking?”

“There’s arsenic, selenium, DDT, and copper. There are others but those are the most crucial. They

have discovered cyanobacteria algae growing here. Cyanobacteria can affect the skin, liver, and nervous systems of people and animals. They've made the determination that even boiling or filtering the water doesn't make it safe."

"Oh my God, that's terrible." Pearl responded.

"It gets worse. There are more than 150 species of birds that are completely gone from this area. This information is constantly tracked by members of the National Audubon Society. PJ, I'm afraid that this is just a ticking time bomb that will go off when its least expected."

"I don't know what to say. Jake, I am starting to understand why you care so much about this project."

"Let's get to work. Can you get through that pile of papers today?"

"I'll try. Oh, I put a load of laundry in before I came over. I'll have to go and put them in the dryer soon. I hope that was okay."

"Absolutely, I should have thought of that sooner. If you want, I can go to the trailer and take care of them for you."

"That's not necessary. I'll take a break soon anyway."

"Sure. I understand." He turned to go into his office but before he disappeared, Jake turned to speak. "PJ, thanks a lot for your help."

Pearl felt herself blush, a reaction she felt she hadn't experienced in a long time. "Just remember that when you write out my paycheck."

He disappeared into his office to break their awkward moment and she just sat there doing

nothing. What is happening here? Her wayward thoughts ran rampant. Shaking her head, Pearl grabbed the first of the papers lying on her desktop and started entering the figures. She worked steadily for a while and then realized she needed to go across the compound to put her laundry into the dryer.

“Jake, I’m going over to do my laundry. Do you want me to bring back some lunch?”

Without leaving his office, he answered. “Sure, bring whatever you want. I’m not picky.”

She grabbed the hat Jake had given her and headed out into the bright sunshine. The weather was about the same, but the humidity seemed to have increased. “You gotta love to sweat to live in this.” She spoke out loud.

The walk from the office to the trailer was clear. There were no trees, shrubs, or objects in the way of her path. Feeling something amiss, she stopped and looked around but shrugging her shoulders, continued to the front porch. As she climbed the few steps, Pearl heard someone call her name.

The sound came from the front end of the trailer. “Who’s there?” She didn’t move from her spot.

“Pearly, can we talk?” Her brother stepped out from his hiding spot.

“Danny! What are you doing here?” She started to move to him, but he came her way instead.

“Open the door.” He commanded.

She did as she was told, and he quickly followed her inside. She turned to face him. “Danny, you shouldn’t be in here. This is a private place.”



“What are you doing here then?” He looked around at the clean and neatly furnished space.

“I came looking for you but my car broke down here. Jake has been awesome and helped me with my car. He even gave me a job so I could pay for the repairs. My turn, what the hell is wrong with you? Why do you look like a derelict? What are you doing in Slab City?” She was almost out of breath as she finally stopped and looked at her brother.

When he started to sit down, she stopped him, “Danny, you can’t stay. We can meet somewhere else.”

The grin on his face told her that he was just testing her resolve. “Ok, Pearly, I’ll go.”

“Call me and we’ll meet at the Ski Inn. Okay? Mom is worried and I want some answers.”

“Yeah, sure.” With that simple answer, he went to the door and without waiting for her to say anything, disappeared. She went to the window and saw him slinking across the compound and out the front gate. She heard the drone of his motorcycle as he pulled away.

She sat down at the kitchen stool to stop her shaking body. What in the world was he playing at? Her brother was filthy, unshaven, and definitely not the same man she knew a few years ago. What would Jake say about him being here in the compound?

“I’m glad that office doesn’t have windows now.” She got up and dealt with her laundry before making them some sandwiches for lunch. As she loaded a tray with their food, Pearl struggled with her dilemma.

Putting on her hat, grabbing the tray, and managing her way out the door, Pearl walked cautiously across the compound. She found herself looking around the front gate to make sure Danny had truly left the area.

Knocking on the door with her foot, Pearl waited. Jake opened the door slowly but quickly grabbed the tray from her hands. They went to the small conference table at the back of the room and sat down to eat. "This looks good. I didn't realize how hungry I was. Thanks for doing this." When she didn't answer, Jake looked up. "What's wrong?"

Pearl sat her uneaten sandwich down and faced him. "My brother was in the compound. When I went over to the trailer, he was hiding at the end. I sent him on his way."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Jake, as far as we know, he's a Slabber and I'm not sure he can be trusted right now." She fretted.

He reached over and put his hand over hers. "PJ, he saved me before and he can't be all that bad. You need to find out what's going on in his life. I wouldn't have objected to you talking with him."

"I panicked. I don't know you and I'm on your turf. Hell, I don't even know my own brother these days."

"PJ, I'm not sure what to say. How did you leave it with him?"

"I told him to call me, and we'd meet at the Ski Inn." She looked to Jake. "Thank you for being so nice about this. I think I know how you feel about family and the pain in the ass they can be and I'm so sorry that mine is causing problems."

They finished their lunch without any more conversation and Pearl put their dirty dishes back on the tray. "I'll take this back to the trailer. I need to check on my laundry anyway." She grabbed it and quickly made her exit.

"Damn!" She exclaimed as she walked back to the trailer. Pearl checked on her clothes, hung up the ones that needed it and folded the others. Back in the kitchen, she cleaned up their lunch mess but sat on the kitchen stool to ponder. Pulling her phone from her back pocket, she punched her mother's number.

"Pearl! How are you doing? Are you on your way home?"

"Mother, there's something you need to know. I've seen Danny and he's a mess. I didn't even recognize him until he called me Pearly."

"Oh, my!" The despair her mother must be feeling showed in her voice.

"I'm telling you this because he showed up here in the place where I'm working now, and I sent him away. It's kind of a private company and he was trespassing."

"Why did you do that? He's your brother!"

Pearl took a deep breath, pulled her phone from her ear and sat quietly just for a few thoughtful seconds. "I just wanted you to know what I've discovered. I'll handle this my own way. I love you." She disconnected the call.

Pearl finally got up and went to the office. Jake was in his space, so she sat down and got to work, not wanting to see him at this time. She concentrated on the figures and started to see patterns developing.

“PJ. PJ!” Jake was calling her from the doorway of his office.

“Sorry. I was working on this stack of papers. What do you need?”

“We need to make a decision on where Chase and Raven are going to stay. I just got a text and they’ll be here first thing in the morning.”

“I’ll be on the couch. They can have the room I’m staying in. I’ll wash the sheets when we get back over there and get it ready for them.”

“You sure? I can stay on the sofa.” Jake offered again.

“That’s a pie crust promise, easily made, easily broken.” The laughter helped Pearl release some of her pent-up frustrations. He gave her a bigger smile than she’d seen yet.

“That’s more like it.” He commented.

“Jake, I’ll figure this out, sooner or later.”

“I know you will. PJ, I may not have known you very long, but I trust my instincts and I think you’ll be just fine. How much longer are you going to work?”

“Well, you see I have this real mean guy for a boss, and I’d better give him a full eight hours today.” She grinned at him.

“Why don’t we both go over and get that room ready for our guests. I’m tired of staring at that computer screen.”

She got up, grabbed her backpack and they started for the trailer. They didn’t get too far when Lucas and Isabella came driving up in the side by side. Lucas stopped by them and turned the loud vehicle off.

“Where you two going?” Jake asked.

“They’re having some live music down at the Ski Inn. Isabella feels like dancing.” He reached over and patted his wife on her knee. She was grinning. “You two want to come with us?”

Jake didn’t even glance at her before turning down their offer. “Nah, we’ve got to get ready for PJ’s relatives. You remember, Lucas, I told you they were coming to help us.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Isabella asked.

Pearl spoke up, “No, we’re just going to get the bedroom ready. Raven and Chase will be here first thing in the morning.”

“That’s an unusual name.” She spoke.

“Her real name’s Kate, but for as long as I can remember, we’ve called her Raven. You two will get to meet both of them tomorrow.” Pearl offered.

“Oh, maybe then we could all go to listen to the music. He’s just a local, but we hear he’s pretty good. You know we don’t have much to do around here.”

“We’ll see how things go tomorrow. You two have fun.” Jake answered.

Lucas started up the vehicle and as Jake and Pearl finished their walk across the compound, she noticed Lucas closing the gate behind them. The noise of the side by side grew dimmer as the pair disappeared out of sight.

Once inside the cool interior, Jake turned to ask her, “You didn’t want to go, did you?”

“How could I possibly answer such a gracious invitation?” She teased. When she saw his discomfort, Pearl let him off the hook. “I didn’t want to go. It

might be something to do tomorrow night with Raven and Chase, but I have stuff to do tonight.”

“We have stuff to do. I’ll help.” He went to the front bedroom and started stripping the sheets off the bed. She was right behind him, gathering her stuff and straightening the area.

“Where am I going to put my bag?”

“You can put it in my room. There’s space on top of the dresser. Are you sure you want to take the sofa?”

“I’ve slept in worse places, although not lately.” She grabbed her bag and started down the hall. “I’ll be fine.”

“Here I’ll take that. You put those sheets in the washer. What do you want for dinner?” His voice got softer as he disappeared into his room.

Putting the sheets into the washer, Pearl started the machine and came back into the kitchen at the same time as Jake. “You know, I’m not very hungry. How about you?”

“Sometimes I just have some cheese and crackers, kind of just a snack meal.” Jake responded.

“Ooh, that sounds perfect. Have a seat and I’ll get us something to eat.”

As they sat at the kitchen bar, eating, each seemed in their own private world. “I have a question.” She spoke softly.

“What?” Jake selected some cheese, ham and a cracker and stuffed the entire little snack into his mouth.

“Why did you kiss me?”

“You seemed to need some tenderness and that’s the only way I knew how to show it to you.”

She looked directly at him before replying. “I did need it and I want to say thanks for that.”

“I’m not a game player, PJ. I’m not coming on to you.”

“I actually believe you. Jake, this has been the most unusual situation I’ve ever been in, but I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything in my life. You’ve been extremely kind and generous. I thank you for that.”

“It’s not been hard to be kind to you.”

They both sat there in silence for a while, enjoying their simple meal. She was surprised at that. Here she was in the middle of the desert, in a strange place, dependent on a man she barely knew and yet, Pearl felt more comfortable here than she had in any place she’d ever been.

“Well, I’d better get those sheets in the dryer.” She got up to clear their plates.

Jake rose at the same time, “I think, if you don’t need me, I’ll go over and work out.”

“Go for it. I’ll just clean up.”

“Do you want to come with me?” He offered.

“No, I’m good. Have fun.” She felt his need for some privacy and solitude and encouraged it.

Jake left promptly. Pearl finished cleaning the kitchen and started to arrange her bed on the sofa. She found some blankets in the linen closet along with an extra pillow. She went to the bedroom at the front and grabbed the book she’d been reading. With just a little light on the stand at the end of the couch,

Pearl settled down to continue her reading. This diary had completely captured her curiosity and she wanted to see what was happening next.

Mary, the main character in the story was relating tales of romantic escapades. Pearl could only guess, but it seemed that Mary was a virgin experiencing the normal teenage urges. The main difference was that the moral virtues and acceptable behaviors were so very different than those of today. She appeared to be totally enamored of a young neighborhood boy, but he was not of her social status, and she had to pretend she didn't even know that he existed due to her parent's disapproval.

Pearl chuckled at that. She considered her own situation. What would Mary's family think of her staying in the same home with a man that she barely knew? What would her own mother think if she knew the entire story?

She felt herself tiring and Pearl put the book down. She snuggled into the couch, pulling the covers up. Sleep soon took over her conscious mind and Pearl succumbed to it. She was startled awake when the front door opened at the same time as a loud bang sounded just outside.

Pearl jumped up and went to help Jake up from the floor. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"Them damn Slabbers! They usually attack every couple of weeks, not in the same week."

It was then that she noticed blood dripping down his leg from just above his knee. Pearl jumped up, grabbed the roll of paper towels, and started blotting at his injury. "Can you come over here and sit down?"



He struggled but with his arm around her shoulders, Jake made it to the chair next to the sofa. She put a wad of the towels on the seat to keep the blood from staining the upholstery. "I'm sure it's looks much worse than it really is." Jake said as Pearl reached up and turned on the bigger light.

"I'll be the judge of that. Hold this and apply pressure. Where do you keep your first aid kit?"

"There should be one in my bathroom. Look in the cabinet under the sink." He did as he was told and kept the pressure on his wound.

She was back quickly with a small kit and several other things she'd found in his medicine cabinet. She placed the towel under his leg. "Just a minute." Pearl moved fast to the kitchen cupboard and grabbed a plastic bowl.

"I'm going to pour some peroxide over it to clean it so we can figure out how bad it really is and then we'll know what we're dealing with." He flinched as she cleansed the wound. They nearly bumped heads as they both bent to see the cut. "Oh, that's not so bad." He commented.

"How did it happen?" Pearl took some gauze and proceeded to use the peroxide and continued cleaning his knee.

"I was walking across when I thought I saw them near the gate. When I started sprinting toward them, one guy threw a Molotov cocktail over, but the idiot forgot to light it. Thank goodness for that because I got hit directly with it and if it had been lit, I would have suffered burns too."

“Oh, my God, Jake!” Her voice trembled with fear at the prospect of how much more serious this whole incident could have been.

“Has it stopped bleeding?” He leaned back in the chair.

“No, it doesn’t seem to be slowing much. Are you okay?”

“Dammit! I’m on blood thinners.”

“Jake, we need to get you to a hospital. Give me Lucas’s phone number.” When he didn’t respond, she demanded, “I’ll go out there and yell for help!”

He handed her his cell, and she quickly found the number she needed. “Lucas, are you here? This is Pearl and Jake’s been injured. He’s bleeding and I can’t get it stopped.”

She hung up and turned to Jake. “He’ll be right here. They got home a little bit ago.”

“It’s not necessary. We can get this stopped with a little patience and pressure.”

Within minutes, there was a knock at the door. Without waiting for an invitation to come in, Lucas walked through the door. He bent down and inspected the tear in Jake’s skin. “Hey, buddy, we need to get you to the hospital.”

“Damn!” Was Jake’s immediate response.

“This looks pretty deep and with your condition, I don’t think we should take a chance.” He met Pearl’s gaze and an unspoken thought passed between them.

“Where do we go?” Pearl questioned the two of them.

“Calipatria is closer and probably not as crowded as the hospital in Indio. Come on, Jake, let’s get you

in the truck. I've got it parked right outside. Let me wrap this tightly around your leg to stop the flow as much as we can."

In just a few minutes, the three of them were screaming down the road to Calipatria. "How far is it?"

"We'll be there in about twenty minutes or so. He'll be fine. Jake's tough."

"Quit talking like I'm already dead." His voice penetrated the cab from the back seat.

She couldn't see the expression on Lucas's face, but Pearl was sure it matched her own. Concern for Jake was paramount in her feelings and actions. The miles ticked by and soon she saw lights of the small city coming into view. Lucas seemed to know the exact route to the hospital and in no time at all, they pulled into the parking lot.

"I'll go get a wheelchair." Lucas spoke up.

"You'll do no such thing. I can walk." Jake was adamant.

Lucas and Pearl exchanged glances as Lucas got out of the truck and went to the door of the emergency room. She got out and opened the back door. "Jake, I'll help you out."

Just as Jake made it to the ground, Lucas pulled up with a wheelchair and an attendant to assist. "How about a ride?" Jake looked to his friends and gave in. "Sure."

Once inside, the nurses and assistants assessed his condition and quickly wheeled Jake down the hall to an examination room. Not exactly knowing what to

do or where to go, Pearl felt Lucas take hold of her arm. “Let’s go find a cup of coffee.”

The short trip down the hall, lead them to a waiting room. “Ah, I’m sure this is fresh, and we’ll love it.” He teased.

Once they got their drinks, Pearl joined Lucas on the hard, plastic chairs. “Thanks so much for coming. I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t aware he had a condition like this.”

“In case you haven’t figured it out, Jake doesn’t like to admit to anything he considers a weakness.”

“Oh, my, that man doesn’t have a weak part in his body.” She took a sip of the not-so-great coffee without noticing the knowing look from Lucas.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Their time was spent in idle talk and restless pacing but finally a medical professional appeared. "Lucas, good to see you." The doctor stuck out his hand.

"Doc, it's been a while, hasn't it? This is PJ, she's working for Jake."

Pearl smiled at the friendly man. "How's he doing?"

"There were several cuts, and one was particularly deep, so we put in a few stitches. He's lying back there with his leg elevated for a bit. Jake is tough and he'll be screaming at us to let him go very soon. Sit tight and we'll bring him out."

As the doctor went to leave the room, he turned to say, "Enjoy that lovely coffee. See ya, Lucas. Nice to meet you, PJ."

"Do you know him?"

"I grew up in this area. As a young man, I couldn't wait to get the hell out of here. I went to college down south in San Diego. That's where I met Jake. The doctor and I grew up together. He just went a different route."

"But you all came back here. Why?"

"The doctor came back because he's needed here. Jake has this passion for the Salton Sea. His

grandfather used to live over in Salton City and he remembers the stories about boating trips on the water.”

“Jake was too young to do that, right?”

“Yes, but he vividly remembers the heartbreak his Poppa felt when the lake started declining. It seemed to make a huge impression on him. I think that’s why he’s doing everything he can to help save the sea.”

“Why did you come back here? I understand that this area has some serious health concerns when the winds kick up. Jake told me you and Isabella are trying to start a family. Aren’t you worried about raising a little one here?”

“Jake and I are working on something that may take care of all that. He’s determined to rectify the damage to the basin, and I believe in him.”

“I’m starting to believe in him too. He’s got a huge passion for his cause.”

“Did you find your brother?”

“That’s kind of hard to answer. He showed up out of the blue in Niland and saved Jake and I from what could have been a dangerous situation. He didn’t hang around, though. I’ll be damned if I can figure out what’s going on with Danny.”

“Is he into drugs? That’ll sure mess up a person.”

“He must be if he’s involved in Slab City. Danny’s always been a free spirit, but this is extreme even for him.”

“Have you had a chance to talk with him?”

“Not really. He showed up in the compound earlier, but I sent him away.”

“Why?”

“I had no idea how Jake would react to that and I’m impending into his privacy enough. Jake has made it very clear how he feels about family. I told Danny I would meet him at the Ski Inn, all he has to do is text me.”

Lucas had a confused look on his face before speaking, “I’m not sure that you got Jake figured right.”

“I’m sure. He’s made it very plain that family is not something he’s into nor something he wants.”

They both looked up to see Jake being wheeled into the waiting room by an attendant. She flushed a little at his presence. Pearl looked to Lucas. She wondered how much Jake had overheard of their conversation. If Lucas was bothered, it didn’t show on his face.

“Hey, Jake. How’s it going? How do you feel?”

“I feel like I need to get out of here. The doc put in some stitches, the bleeding’s stopped and I’m ready to get out of this place.”

Together all three headed out the sliding glass doors and Lucas helped Jake up into the truck. The trip back to the compound was made in silence. Once he got Jake settled in the trailer, Lucas said his good nights.

She sat down on the sofa next to him. “We should’ve put you into your bed. You’ve got to rest. Did the doctor give you something for the pain?”

“Yes, but I’ll just have a beer instead. Would you get me one?”

Pearl hesitated but got up and secured a cold brew for him and another wine for herself. “We’re awful, aren’t we?”

He grinned and took the drink from her hand. “I don’t think I ever professed to be a great human being to you, did I?”

They laughed, clinked glasses together and she sat back down by him. “Put some music on, can you?” Jake requested.

Pearl agreed and went to the stereo on the bookshelf by the front door. She dug through the CDs in his case, finally selecting some smooth jazz. “You know they make a player that you can use your phone with, and you don’t need to keep these discs around.”

“Hey, I’m an old-fashioned guy. I should think you would’ve figured that out by now.”

“I think those pain shots the doctor gave you are kicking in, let’s get you to your bed.” She took his beer and sat it on the coffee table. “Come on, help me, Jake. I can’t lift you by myself.”

As they struggled, she put all her weight into helping the drugged man to his feet. Once there, they slowly made their way down the hall to his bedroom. She got him close to the side of his bed and he fell backwards. Pearl removed his shoes and shirt but stopped at taking off anything else. He was already semi-conscious, so Pearl just adjusted his large frame straighter on the mattress, shut off his light and left the room.

What a night, she thought as she adjusted her own makeshift bed on the sofa. As she started to doze off, a random thought entered her brain. Maybe, just



maybe, if her brother is somehow connected to Slab City, he could stop these senseless attacks on the compound. These were her last ideas as she fell into a deep sleep.

The pounding at the door, woke her suddenly. Pearl jumped to her feet to stop the noise as she pulled it open. Standing there on the small landing was Raven and Chase.

“Pearl!” Raven pushed the door wide open, and they both rushed in to give her a big hug. “What a lazy bones. How come you’re not at work? It’s almost noon!”

About that time, Jake came stumbling down the hallway, limping in pain. “What the hell!”

The look on her cousin’s face as well as her husband spoke volumes. As a first impression, it didn’t bode well. “Jake! Be careful.” Pearl went to help him to the kitchen stool.

“Jake, this is Chase and Raven Tanner, my cousins. He got injured late last night and we spent a lot of time at the hospital.” She looked to Jake with a silly expression on her face and added, “I don’t even know your last name, Jake.”

“McGrath. I wondered how long it would take you to ask.” Jake replied.

“Oh, my God. Are you okay?” Chase went over to talk directly with Jake, ignoring the uncomfortable interaction between the two of them. “What happened?”

Jake turned to Pearl, “Do we have coffee made?” His words sounded more like a plea than a question.

“Not yet, but Raven and I will get it going.” She motioned for her cousin to follow her into the kitchen area. To Chase, she asked, “Could you help Jake to the couch?”

Chase understood the situation immediately and offered Jake some help in getting him in a better place to sit. “Thanks, man. This leg is killing me.”

“What exactly happened?” Chase asked.

The two women huddled in the small kitchen as the guys talked on the other side of the room. “Pearl, what’s going on?”

Two identical conversations were going on, one between the women and one with the men. Pearl was confident that with a few small exceptions, the stories were the same. “Look, Raven, I’m sorry this was not the greeting we had planned, but we’ll get things straightened out.” She gave her cousin a huge hug. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Let’s make some brunch, okay? We came straight here and I’m sure my guy would like to eat.” With equal efficiency, the two women whipped together a simple meal and placed it on the small table.

“Hey, Jake, do you want me to bring you a tray?” Pearl asked.

The look he gave her was answer enough. “Here let me help you up.” She went to his side and as he grabbed hold of her arm, she heard him say. “Thank you. I don’t mean to be grouchy.”

“I know. I can’t honestly say I would be any nicer if it were me.”

As they all sat around enjoying their meal, Chase was the first to speak. “Jake, I’ve never seen the

Salton Sea, but I've done lots of research even before you called. I understand it's quite a disaster."

"That's an understatement. This area is in serious need of a definitive plan for recovery. You'll see when we get to take our drive."

"Will you feel up to it?"

"Sure. You and I can go over to the office first and I'll share all the data I've collected so far. The cousins can catch up on the family gossip and I'm sure there's lots of baby pictures."

Once the meal was done, Jake stood up on his own. "I'll just grab a hat and we'll head over."

"Will he be okay?" Pearl asked.

Raven grabbed Chase by the arm. "I'm sure Jake's just as tough as this one. Remember, he was lying by my barn in the middle of the worst storm ever with a gunshot wound."

"Oh, that's right and if I recall you only had your home remedies to help him heal. You don't happen to have any of those natural things with you now, do you?"

"I'm sure the doctor took good care of Jake, but you might have some things in the kitchen that I can use to relieve some of the pain, if he needs it later."

Jake had just come back into the room, "I'd much rather have natural stuff than any of those pain pills Doc gave me. You can search the cupboards for ingredients. Thanks, Raven for offering."

Chase kissed his wife on the cheek and the two men went out the door. "You like him, don't you?" Raven asked a simple question.

“Of course, I do. He’s rescued me from my dead car, gave me a job and has gone to great strides to help me find Danny.” Pearl started collecting the dishes and clearing the table.

“You know what I mean. I get a distinctive vibe going on between you two.”

Pearl opened her mouth then shut it. She turned to load the dishwasher and faced back to Raven. She opened her mouth and closed it again. Raven laughed loudly and hugged the other woman. “Give in, Girl.”

“It’s only been five days. I can’t possibly like him the way you’re thinking.”

They sat at the kitchen bar. “Listen, I found Chase with a bullet in his side, took him in and we got involved in the most wonderful escapade. Pearl, I knew from the time that handsome man asked me to help him that he would become the most important person in my life. It didn’t take long for him to think the same way.” She giggled.

“What am I going to do?” Pearl’s voice showed the disbelief of her new discovery. “He said I only had two weeks and this week is almost done. Oh, God, I wish it wasn’t just noon, I’d have a drink.” All she heard was her cousin’s laughter which didn’t help. “You’re terrible! Do you remember when we were kids and you tormented me with all sorts of spiders and bugs? This is a new kind of torture.”

“I don’t remember that at all.” Raven spoke sarcastically as she switched subjects. “So, what are we going to do today? Chase and I are very interested in this area. I never thought I would have a desire to help the environment but then we had little Ward and

I think about the world we're leaving him and his children. It's heartbreaking to think that most people don't have the first clue about what damages are happening right in their very own neighborhoods."

"Wow. You know I remember you as this weird little girl that pretty much stayed by herself and was so scared of practically everything and now you're out saving the world. Want to walk over and see the office?"

"Sure, but first let me call Hattie and check on Ward and by the way, I remember you as the daredevil amongst us."

Pearl ignored that last remark. "I'll just clean up the rest of this mess and my bed. Let me know when you're ready."

It was just a few minutes later that Raven came back into the kitchen. "Hattie loves that little guy. She's so good with him."

"I've heard she's quite the character. I'd like to meet her sometime."

"You would absolutely love her. She as crude as a mountain woman could be, but there's no one else I would want backing me up because once Hattie commits to you she's your friend for life. She was crucial to saving our mountain from nuclear disaster. She even got shot helping us at the end."

"She sounds like someone I absolutely have to meet." They opened the door, and the morning heat was ever present.

"You know I'm used to living up on the Bradshaw Mountains. I don't know how a person could live in this horribly hot atmosphere."

“You’re just puny.”

As they crossed the compound, Raven noticed the open space between the fence and the trailer. “How in the world did they get a bomb over that fence?”

“I’ve learned that they throw what’s called a Molotov Cocktail. It’s simply a glass bottle filled with flammable liquid. They put a rag down inside the bottle and light it on fire before it’s thrown over the fence. It’s very light and easy to throw.”

“That’s sick! Why do they do it?”

“Jake says that they think something of value is in here. I think it’s those Slabbers on drugs with nothing better to do.”

“Do you really think your brother is a part of that society? I remember Danny as a small, timid child. Could he be involved in such an ugly world?”

“Raven, I don’t know. I can’t imagine my brother doing stuff like this, but if you saw him like I did, you’d have your doubts too.” They reached the office door and went into the cool room.

Pearl could hear the voices of the two men in Jake’s office. “Hey, guys, we’re here.” The women walked in and saw them looking over a desk full of documents.

Jake looked up and gave Pearl a slight grin. She read him hiding his pain in that look. “Hey, how about we go for a ride. Chase can drive and you can rest a bit.”

“That sounds great. I’d like to see the Sea.” Everyone laughed at Chase’s feeble joke.

“Okay, let’s go. You can drive my truck, it’s more comfortable and we’ll all fit.” Jake agreed. He picked up his phone and sent a text to Lucas.

“Lucas will be out front in just a few minutes. PJ, can you grab some snacks and drinks to take along?”

“Sure, I’ll be right back.” She went out the door to the trailer. She waved as she saw Lucas pull the truck up but didn’t stop to talk.

By the time Pearl had grabbed a small cooler and a basket of snacks, she heard them honk for her. She ran to his bedroom and looked for the bottle of pain pills the doctor had given them. Finding them, Pearl shoved the bottle in her backpack and quickly ran outside to greet them.

She jumped into the backseat of the pickup next to her cousin. The guys were already buckled in and with Chase at the wheel, the four of them started out the gate and down the road.

“Where are we going?” Pearl asked.

“I thought we’d take them up to Corvina Beach first, then come back down to Salvation Mountain, Slab City and finally dinner at the Ski Inn. Does that sound good?” He asked her opinion.

With a little hesitation, Pearl finally agreed. “Don’t expect too much.” She said to Raven. “I was in shock the first time we went to Slab City. I shudder to think that Danny might be living there.”

Raven patted her hand but said nothing. For the next several hours, the four of them took in the sights such as they were. At each stop, Raven and Chase gained more information for OPP and their efforts to help save the environment at the Salton Sea. As they

drove through Slab City, Pearl found herself intently looking for her brother. Jake had given his blessing for them to meet, and she wanted more than ever to find out what was going on with Danny.

This time they stopped so that Chase and Raven could walk up Salvation Mountain. Pearl chose to stay with Jake due to his injury. “You could have gone with them, you know.”

“I have some more time to walk this structure. Before I have to go home, I hope you’ll be able to do it with me.”

“You bet, PJ. I like your cousin and her husband. I think they can help me get the contract that we want.”

“How are you feeling? I’m sure you have some pain.”

“I do, but it’s tolerable. When we get back to the compound, I would love to see if Raven could come up with something to manage the pain without a manufactured drug doing more damage to my system.”

“I’m sure she’d love to help. Raven is the best.” About that time, Chase and his lovely bride returned to the truck. “That was very interesting. I can’t imagine someone dedicating their entire life to this type of work.”

“Leonard Knight was totally committed to the idea that ‘God is Love’. He died trying to convince the world of that message.” Jake related the history of Salvation Mountain.

“Are you all ready to get to the Ski Inn? We can have dinner and listen to the music. They’re having a



local entertain. Lucas and Isabella went last night and said he was pretty good.”

“That sounds great, but do we have time to go down the coast? I’d love to see the Red Hill Marina or what’s left of it. The information I got was that there is also mud pots and signs of volcanos.

“There are actually five volcanos in this area but they’re not what you’d expect. We’ll check them out though.” Jake added.

“Sounds great, let’s go.” Chase started the truck and soon they were heading further down Highway 111. “We can eat our picnic goodies there.”

Chase was a very careful driver and within a few miles, they turned west towards the sea on a rural road. The directions on their GPS were a little confusing, but eventually the roadway led them right to the spot. As they all got out of the truck, Pearl was the first to comment, “I keep expecting something spectacular, but in a pretty sense, not this.” She pointed to the devastation in front of them. What they were looking at was once a cement dock that hadn’t been in the water forever. They could see what used to be some boards belonging to a wharf. Dirt and dust swirled around with the light wind blowing.

Jake went around to the back of the truck and put the tailgate down for seating. Pearl brought the basket out and they indulged in the crackers, cheese, and lunch meats she’d packed. She put in some fresh fruit and cookies.

“A meal fit for a king.” Jake commented.

“Hey, we’re going for a walk. Do you two want to come?” Chase asked.

“Nah, we’ll just stroll around here. It’ll be good to give this leg a little exercise.” Jake responded. “Take a ton of pictures, it might help our cause.”

When Raven and Chase moved away from them, Pearl turned to Jake, “I brought the pain pills. Do you need one? Before you deny it, I know you are in pain. It shows in your face and your movements.”

Reluctantly, he held out his and took the proffered pills. “Thanks. When we get back to the compound, I’ll have Raven work on her black magic potion for me.”

“Here, eat another cracker with that pill. It’ll help with the absorption.”

“Thanks, PJ. I said it before, but I’ll say it again, I like your cousin and her husband.”

Pearl grinned and replied, “I like them too. She was almost like a sister growing up. When our families got together, we would team up against a third cousin. You know how two girls can get along, but three can’t? Our other cousin Deborah would always choose one of us and the other was left out. After years of this, Raven and I decided that we would join forces against her.”

“Did it work?”

She laughed, “It was one of the best family gatherings I’ve ever been to, and we loved throwing Deborah for a curve!”

He joined in her laughter, “I can just see you two as partners in crime. I can see why she’s called Raven with that long black hair and those mysterious eyes.”

“Yes, that’s one of her amazing physical traits. She was in a horrible car wreck in the city years ago. It

nearly broke her, but she just went to her family home in the mountains and slowly but surely, rebuilt the person she was and then she met Chase. He helped give her purpose and meaning to life.”

They were sitting on the tailgate of the truck, the sun was shining overhead and there weren’t any other sounds as most of the birds around the sea had moved on or had died off. He reached over and put his hand on her leg, “Thanks, PJ.”

“You’re welcome, but I feel I have so much more to be thankful to you for you.” She remembered her words to Raven earlier and started to look away as if he could see it in her eyes.

Their moment was interrupted by the appearance of Chase and Raven. “This is such an amazing place. We want to be an integral part in restoring the sea. Thank you so much for calling us and allowing us the opportunity to help.”

Jake acknowledged with a nod.

“Ready to go to the Ski Inn? After this great snack, we might not be ready for a meal, but we can listen to the music.” Pearl suggested.

After they all piled into their regular seats, Chase fired up the big truck and down the road they went. It was only a short drive back to the highway and then up to Bombay Beach.

“Look for the only entrance to Bombay Beach. I believe its Avenue A.” Jake told Chase.

When they pulled into the normally empty parking lot, Chase had to maneuver between two other vehicles to get them parked. “How’s this?”

“Wow, I’ve never seen this parking lot so full. This musician must be very good, every person for fifty miles around must be here.” Jake spoke aloud. “You guys are in for a treat. We haven’t had this much excitement in our area for a very long time.”

As they headed toward the entrance, Pearl felt Jake put his hand on her shoulder for support. Under her breath, she spoke softly to him, “You okay? Should we just head on home?”

“No, I’ll be fine. Let’s enjoy this time with our company.” When they finally got through the front door and edged themselves to the bar, Pearl heard her name being called. “PJ, Jake! I saved a table for you guys.”

Tina’s voice was heard over the din of the conversation in the crowded room. She was waving wildly at the foursome as they worked their way to the bar. “Lucas said you might stop by, so I saved this table for you. How’s the leg doing, Jake?” She asked but didn’t wait for an answer, rushing to get them sat down.

Once they were all seated, Tina took their drink orders and left. “This is a rather unique place, isn’t it?” Raven spoke.

Pearl laughed. “I know you’re used to more sophisticated places, aren’t you?”

Chase chimed in, “You obviously haven’t been up in the mountains in Copper City! We have the Ore House! Martha, the lady that runs it is just as much a character as your Tina!”

Pearl laughed loudly, “It gets much better, Tina is married to Ike!”

“No way!” Chase and Raven responded at the same time.

“Not Ike and Tina, like in Ike and Tina Turner?” Raven finally asked.

“One and the same.” Pearl laughed. They all joined in on the festive atmosphere. The room was full of people, laughing and talking. Pearl was glad to see this much business for Tina.

“Hey, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” Raven spoke to her cousin. “When did you become PJ?”

Pearl looked to Jake. “I’ll let you handle that one.” He spoke.

“Well, when I landed unannounced on his doorstep, Jake wanted me to fill out a job application. You know I’ve always thought of Pearl as an older woman’s name and...and I wasn’t sure how much I could trust this guy, so I told him my name was simply PJ. It’s kind of stuck and most people around here know me as that.”

“I like it. It fits the new you.” Raven approved.

“I’m not sure I’m a new person, I just have a new name.” Pearl admitted.

“Oh, I can see a difference in you.”

“Like what?” Pearl prompted Raven to say more.

“Well, you’ve always been, mmm, kind of unsettled. You know how you’ve gone from job to job with no real goal in mind? I think you might have found your niche.”

The two men were having their own conversation across the table, but when Jake heard Raven’s last comment, he turned to listen to the women’s

conversation. “I think everyone needs something in their lives that guides their movements in life, don’t you?”

Raven readily agreed. “My own direction changed dramatically twice. When I was so desperately injured in that car wreck, I went to the mountains to recuperate and find myself.” She snuggled into Chase. “When this man landed on my doorstep, I found my real lot in life. We try to enjoy every day to the fullest and value the smaller moments. I know that being new parents can be dull for our friends, they have to listen to every little miracle that Ward accomplishes, but to us it’s a blessing to see the world through his eyes.”

“That’s awesome!” Jake and Pearl both agreed.

“My paintings are starting to really sell and that allows us to stay at home with him. It also funds our dedication to, for lack of a better way to say it, save the world from self-destruction. If it hadn’t been for Chase, who knows what would have happened in that old mine shaft.”

“What exactly was being done?” Jake asked.

“My father’s company was trying to illegally store nuclear waste down deep in the mine shaft. Their intention was to pour concrete over the containers and bury them without letting anyone know that stuff was there.” When he saw the look on Jake’s face, Chase added. “Oh, my dad didn’t know what was going on; he would never have allowed such a horrible thing to happen. He was just a financial backer until this lady let him know what they were doing with his money.” Chase leaned over to his wife.

“Wow! Well with just the little bit you’ve seen today, this area needs some serious help in order to save the Salton Sea and the surrounding Coachella Valley.”

Tina came back with their drinks and asked about food. “Jake, you never did tell me how you’re feeling? Them damn Slabbers need to be stopped!”

“I’ll be fine. Doc gave me a couple of stitches and in a few days, you’ll never know it happened. Thanks for asking.”

Tina patted him on the shoulder, “You know I care for you. Now, what’ll it be for dinner? That guitar man will be here in about an hour. I know you want to stay and listen to him. He’s really good.”

They each gave an order and soon were sipping on their drinks. “Jake, I did have a thought last night.”

“Wow, that’s great!” He teased and she swatted at his arm. “I’m sorry. What were you thinking?”

“If Danny is somehow connected with Slab City, maybe we could talk him into stopping the attacks on the compound. He might have some influence there.”

“That might work. You need to figure out how to get hold of him. You can’t talk to him if you can’t find him.”

Just then the door opened and a man with a guitar case walked in. Tina went and greeted him, but the foursome didn’t pay much attention. Their food came and as they were enjoying the café fare, Pearl looked to see the guitarist setting up.

“I think I just found him.” Pearl said and pointed to the man on the small bandstand.





## CHAPTER NINE

Pearl struggled to get out of her chair, around Jake and directly to the guitar man. “Danny! What the hell!”

The man standing in front of her was totally different than the Danny she’d seen over the last few days. He was clean shaven, with clean jeans and a Ski Inn tee shirt on his slim frame. His hair was still long but shining with a fresh washed look. “Hey, Pearly, you’re surprised, huh?”

“What in the hell is going on?”

Without realizing it, Jake had come up behind her. He stuck out his hand to her brother, “I’m Jake, nice to meet you. So, you’re our entertainment for tonight.”

With a big wide grin, Danny shook his hand.

“Yes, Tina and Ike have given me this opportunity and I hope you all like it.”

“PJ and I would love a chance to talk with you afterwards.”

“Yeah, sure. I have to get set up now.” Danny started arranging his equipment and they left him to his task.

Before they got to the table, Pearl spoke, “Jake, I am totally confused as to what he’s up to. You saw

him behind the store in Niland and now he looks like the perfect musician.”

“PJ, let’s just enjoy the music and we’ll make sure we talk with him when it’s all done.”

As they got back at the table, Chase and Raven had finished up their meal and were ordering another round of drinks. “We ordered two more for you guys. What’s going on?” Raven asked.

“The musician is Danny! Can you believe it?” Pearl was beside herself.

“I know it’s a very strange situation, but we can’t get anything solved right now.” Jake tried to calm her down.

Most of the evening was rather enjoyable even though Pearl had no idea what her brother was up to. Ike went up and introduced him as Jaxon Roy Knight, another shock to her system. Despite everything, he played and sang very well, and the small crowd enjoyed his old country tunes, as well as some familiar rock and roll music. Pearl enjoyed her brother’s performance. Raven and Chase did some dancing as well as Lucas and his wife, but there wasn’t much opportunity for Pearl and Jake.

As the music was wrapping up, Raven could see that Jake was struggling with his leg and the pain it was causing him. “Hey, guys, I think we should go. Jake needs some rest.”

“PJ, go and invite Danny to come and see us tomorrow. Make sure it’s early. I want to take a trip around the sea and go to the west side.”

Once she spoke to Danny, the four of them got into the truck and drove back to the compound. Lucas and

Isabella were right behind them, and they shut the gate for all.

As they entered the trailer, Raven turned to Jake. "Can I make you a poultice for the pain?"

"I'd love that. Have PJ help you search the cupboards for whatever things you would need. I'm going to get into my gym shorts that way you can have easy access to the wound."

Raven and Pearl searched the kitchen and in no time at all found several ingredients that would suffice. Jake came out from his bedroom and took a seat on the sofa with his leg stretched out on the coffee table.

"This is amazing, Jake. I took note of what Raven used so I could duplicate if needed." Pearl was proud of her cousin.

"Well hopefully we won't need this again." They both watched as Raven spread the poultice on his wound and then cover it with a soft gauze wrap.

"There! That should help with the pain, Jake. I think the doctor did a great job with the stitches, they were very small and neat."

"I don't know about you two, but I'm ready for bed. All that dancing wore me out." Chase announced.

"Sleep tight you guys. We'll take our trip around to the other side of the sea, including Salton City and other wonderful sites." Jake's sarcasm was evident. "Oh, don't go outside without me, the guard dogs are out now."

Before turning in, Raven asked her cousin, “Are you sure you don’t want the bedroom? We can crash out here.”

“I wouldn’t hear of it. I fit on that couch perfectly and Jake and I agreed on the arrangements for your visit. So, go and get some sleep.”

“Did Danny agree to come by in the morning?” Jake asked.

“Yes, I only hope he can explain some of his weird behavior. Let me help you get to your bed.”

With a lot of effort by both, Pearl slowly moved him down the short hall to his bedroom. “PJ, you can have this room. I can sleep out there.”

“Not on your life. I want you to get some real rest. How’s the leg feeling?”

“I think Raven’s stuff is helping.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up to her. “Thanks for all your help. I’ll be better in the morning, and we can take our ride. It’s going to be an all-day affair, so get your rest too.”

“Thanks, I am tired.” As she got to his doorway, she turned to speak, but Jake had already fallen asleep. Pearl turned off the light in his room and found her way to the couch for the night. The only sound that could be heard was a light snoring noise from Jake’s room. She hadn’t closed the door but felt it was better in case he needed her in the middle of the night.

The light streaming through the front windows on either side of the door brought Pearl wide awake. Straightening the covers so people could sit, she scampered to the kitchen area and started the coffee

brewing. It wasn't long before Jake came slowly from his room. He plopped down on the stool, and she put a fresh cup of the hot, strong brew in his hands.

"Thanks. How'd you do?" He pointed to her make-shift bed.

"I think I was so exhausted, I just crashed. I didn't move much at all." She was moving about gathering ingredients for their breakfast.

"Do you want some help?" Raven's quiet voice came to them. "Chase is in the shower. It helps him wake up."

"That sounds good. Raven, can I wash this up?" Jake indicated his injury.

"Yes, that would be fine. Just don't scrub too hard near those stitches. I'll make another poultice if you want."

"I would love it. I felt it worked just fine and with no big drug after affects. Be back shortly."

"What are we fixing for breakfast?" Raven asked.

"I thought just some good ole bacon and eggs with toast. Sound okay?"

"Wonderful. Let me help. I can fry the bacon if you want."

Side by side the two women worked making enough food for the four of them and a little extra in case Danny showed. As if on cue, there was a slight knock at the front door. When Pearl opened it, she saw her brother standing there with a big grin on his face and a box of sweet rolls.

"Peace offering, sis?"

Pearl invited him in and finally gave Danny a hug. "This is the brother I remember. You do remember our cousin, Raven, don't you?"

"Absolutely. You're as beautiful as ever, cousin." He stuck his hand out, but she pulled him in for a family hug.

"Where did you get these rolls?" Raven asked.

"Tina makes them. She's a lady of many talents."

"Which brings me to my question from last night, what the hell is going on with you?"

His small laugh showed his nervousness. "Pearly, I've been dealing with some bad stuff for a while now. I was traveling with this band. We had small gigs in local bars and stuff. I got caught up with a woman, kind of a groupie, and she was bad news."

"This sounds like a plot for a B-movie. How did you end up here at the Salton Sea?"

"We were doing pretty good playing at one of the casinos up in the Indio area. I'm a man prone to bad habits, Pearly. I got caught up in gambling, drinking, drugs, and that rotten woman. It didn't last long, but I ended up owing money to the wrong people. As soon as I was broke, that wicked woman left me to face it all by myself."

"Danny, why didn't you call me or Mother? We could have helped."

He rolled his eyes and yet his laughter held no humor. "You can't be serious. You know how Mom is, I'd owe her forever and the lectures I'd have to endure would be endless."

He turned to Raven, "Sorry you have to hear all this dirty laundry about your kin."

“All families have their dark secrets.” She turned to flip the bacon in the pan.

“So, when I first saw you at that gas station, did you expect to see me?”

“No, that was a total shocker. I mean, Mom, told me you were looking for me in a text, but I had no idea you were really here. At first, I wasn’t sure it was you. You’ve changed a bit since we last met.”

Just then Jake came out of his room all fresh and clean. He offered his hand to Danny. “Hey, glad you could make it. Did I interrupt something?”

“Yes, Danny was just telling us about his life, sort of.” Pearl responded. At the confused look on Jake’s face, she expanded, “He was just telling us about the incident from the gas station.”

“I sure owe you for that one. I thought I could handle a few street punks, but I really don’t know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t come along.”

“Slabbers are their own unique bunch. I barely fit in, but I had to find some place to hide for a while.”

“So, it was all a disguise?”

“Yeah, and the best part was you were totally convinced. I believe you even called me a ‘derelict’, didn’t you?”

“Oh, God, Danny, I’m so sorry.” Pearl immediately responded.

“So, how did you get with Tina to do your music?” Jake asked.

“I was sitting on my bike in the shade of a palm tree strumming my guitar when Ike came up and offered me a beer inside. He said he liked my playing. I told him that his woman probably wouldn’t want a

Slabber coming in and he motioned me around back.” He took the cup of coffee offered by Raven.

“They’re nice folks. He let me into one of those old hotel rooms that they don’t use anymore. Ike pointed to the shower and found me some clean clothes to wear. He’s a man of few words, but he said to come in and play for them when I was ready.”

“She like my playing and offered me the gig. She wasn’t aware that I was the brother you were looking for until I told her. I didn’t want to be dishonest with such a nice woman.”

“So, you did all of this when?” Pearl asked.

“The day you kicked me out of here.” He held up his hand to stop her apology.

“Pearly, it was probably the best thing you could have done for me. It was the punch in the gut for me to start getting myself straight again.”

Jake spoke up, “Why the phony name?”

“I still have people wanting to find me and I figured a phony name would buy me a little time.” He grinned and spoke again, “You like the name? I thought Jaxon Roy Knight would be a cool guitar man name.”

“So do I dare ask how much money you owe?” Pearl’s hesitation showed.

“You don’t want to know. I’ll figure something out eventually.”

Jake finally asked him, “How long has this been going on, how long have you been in hiding?”

Danny knew what Jake was asking. “It’s only been about six months. Before you have to ask, I don’t intend to get you two involved at all. I’ll high tail it



out of here after breakfast and that way you should be safe.”

“Oh, wow, I hadn’t thought about that part of it.” Pearl realized that once again Jake was helping her. To him, she asked, “Do you think we could be in some sort of danger?”

“It’s a possibility, but with the compound being secured, I think we’ll be fine. There’s one thing you could maybe help with, Danny.”

“Name it.”

“If you have any power at all over those damn Slabbers, could you let them know that there’s nothing in here of any value? I’m damn tired of their little bomb presents and now I have to deal with this.” He pointed to the bandage on his leg.

“I’ll try but you know by now that they live by their own rules.

“You two have been awfully quiet, have we scared you half to death?” Pearl asked.

Raven looked to Chase and together they laughed. “I guess we haven’t shared our adventures with you yet. We’ve had to deal with men with guns, kidnapping and near nuclear disaster. I think you have a way to go to top the challenges we’ve faced in our life. Oh, and the first time I met Chase, he had been shot and was bleeding all over the snow on my garage doorstep.”

“Wow! I had no idea. I’m sorry we haven’t kept in closer contact. Obviously, everything came out alright, right?”

Chase got up and started cleaning up the dishes. “The cleanup down in the mine will take more time,

in fact, several more years, but other than that, we're good. I wouldn't have met this wonderful woman if I hadn't been chasing the bad guys."

All got up and the kitchen was quickly cleaned. "We should get going, if we're going all the way around the sea today." Jake announced.

Danny came and hugged his sister. "I won't put you in harm's way. I'll keep in touch and let you know where I am and what's going on."

"Listen, just shoot me a text if you can't call. Do it every day so I won't worry. Okay?"

"I will, but I have to ask, what are you going to tell mom?"

"I'm not sure. Jake has been helping me understand some things about myself and my relationship with my family, mother in particular."

"Good for him! Pearly, I feel you've always put mom and dad ahead of yourself. Even now, you're here doing something you probably didn't want to do, but you came anyway. Am I right?"

With a huge sigh of resignation, she looked her brother right in the eyes and agreed. "I have been doing some serious re-evaluation of my existence and I think I'm ready to make some definite changes."

"Wow, that's really deep. I'm glad for you. But, I've got to go. I promise to keep in touch daily." Danny went over to Raven and Chase and gave them hugs and goodbyes.

Finally, Jake met him at the door. "Hey, thanks for helping Pearly out. Sorry you've gotten mixed up with this crazy family."

Jake's laughter was laced with sarcasm. "If only you knew. I just want you to do your best to keep her out of your mess, if possible. She's had enough troubles in her life, PJ, deserves some fun and good times now." He took Danny's hand in his own and with direct eye contact a common bond was cemented between the two men.

As soon as the door shut behind her brother, Pearl felt some tears welling up in her eyes. She went to Jake's bedroom to find a space in which to compose herself. For a few minutes the others left her alone, but eventually it was Jake that came back to check on Pearl.

"Are you going to be okay?"

She wiped at her tears as he pulled her into his grasp. He didn't speak but just held her close to his muscular frame. Pearl wrapped her arms around his waist and allowed herself to melt into his embrace.

"It'll be okay, PJ. I think he's ready to make amends and he'll be fine."

When she pulled back to look at him, for a minute Pearl thought it a mistake. As Jake lowered his head to place a kiss on her waiting lips, she knew it was not. Their lips met and she felt the passion she'd been craving for what seemed like far too long. It didn't last as long as she'd hoped for, but she was still satisfied.

"We'd better go, our company is waiting to go on our day trip." He spoke softly, his lips brushed her forehead as a last display of affection.

"Okay." Was all she could manage.

Showing a solid front, they both met Raven and Chase in the front room. “Ready, guys?” She spoke with a confidence she didn’t really feel.

“Should we pack some snacks?” Raven asked.

“Oh, yes, let’s do that. I’m not sure what if anything is available on the other side of the sea.”

The two women went to the kitchen and found various snacks and food that they could eat on their trip. They also packed some drinks including soft drinks, wine, water, and beer. The guys had gone out to get the truck ready. Soon the women came out and upon getting onboard, Chase started the engine, and they were off on their trip.

“Let’s stop at the visitor’s center first. The information on the walls is a bit outdated but the people that run the center are very knowledgeable. You and Raven can gather a lot from them.”

“Sounds great, just tell me where to go and we’ll be there.” Chase agreed. The trip up the highway allowed them to see the desolation of the beach on the left and the blowing dunes by the railroad tracks on the right. Everywhere you looked there were houses boarded up and tagged with graffiti, but next door could be an occupied home. It was the strangest place Pearl had ever seen.

The four of them spent a small amount of time in the center and were the only people in the building. As Jake had said, they received some excellent details about the Salton Sea.

Once they were all loaded up again, Jake informed them of their next stop. “You’ll want to go to the North Shore Beach and Yacht Club. This was the

main place to be in the fifties and sixties. There are pictures of movie stars as they frolicked in the sun. Now, it's finally being updated, and they use it as a local recreation center. Some life is slowly coming back to the area, but the main deterrent is the rotten and dying atmosphere of the water."

Once there, much of the time was spent taking pictures of the area. Everywhere they could see evidence of a dying world. The beach was made up of mostly crushed fish bones and once again they had to cover their noses from the stench in the air.

"This is such a mixture of new and old. It feels like you're in some sort of time machine. On one hand this building is being updated and cleaned up, while just over there is a rundown building full of graffiti and neglect." Pearl could feel the sense of a declining environment all around them.

They walked around when she finally exclaimed, "What in the world is that?" Pearl pointed to the edge of the water. In the distance, they could see what looked like people playing in the water, but the closer they got, they could see a fantastic piece of artwork. "Wow! Is this the weirdest place you've ever seen?" She asked the others.

"Look, over there it looks like a surfer." Raven pointed to the long metal structure. It appeared to be at least ten separate standing objects connected together to project different creatures from the sea.

"Someone took a lot of time and energy to create that for us to enjoy. What imagination and talent!" Chase took several pictures of the long collection.

“Are we ready to move on? I know this is the fast version, but I think you guys will get the entire picture of the devastation.” Jake limped a bit as they headed back over the uneven sandy beach area to get back to the truck.

“Are you doing okay?” Pearl asked.

“I’m fine.” His retort came out a bit harsh, but he put his hand up to smooth his fingers down her face. “Thanks, we can rest in a bit.”

The big truck took them north until they got to the cutoff at Mecca. “How big is this place?” Chase asked.

“There are only about 7,000 inhabitants. A lot of the people that live here are struggling with all sorts of lung problems connected to the dust in the air from the shrinking water.” He gave directions to Chase as they turned onto 66<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Just a short mile later, they turned south on California Highway 86.

Raven laughed, elbowed Pearl lightly to get her attention and pointed out the nice gas station on the corner before they turned. “Here I thought we would be in the middle of nowhere. Maybe we didn’t need to pack this big picnic basket.”

“I’m sorry I’m so distracted, Raven. I just can’t help but worry about Danny.”

“Hey, I totally understand. I don’t think I told you that my brother was kidnapped by those men. I was beside myself with concern.”

“You have been through a lot! I’m so glad you’re here. The timing couldn’t have been any better.”

“Wow! Look at all those palm trees. This has to be some sort of tree farm.” Pearl pointed to the acres and

acres of trees. “I didn’t expect such greenery after seeing the sands near the compound.”

“There is still a lot of life in this area and that can be surprising. Let’s just try to enjoy ourselves. I’m glad the guys are getting along too.” Raven said.

It was only a few miles, maybe six, when the Salton Sea came back into view. All around were fields along with empty dirt lots. It was a pretty open area and not one Pearl would consider a beautiful landscape but looming up on the right side was the Santa Rosa Mountains. The mountain range extends up to Palm Springs and ends just before Salton City.

“Turn left into Desert Shores. I want you all to see what used to be some top-notch places to live.” Jake pointed to the sign. “Follow this road to Monterey and turn left.” He kept giving directions to Chase and soon they ended up on a road right next to the sea. As they looked to the right, Pearl could see some large homes but the canals up to their back docks were as dry and dusty as the rest of the area.

“Isn’t that a shame?”

“Some of these homes were owned by movie stars because they could have their own private docks. I can show you pictures that have the water right up in these canals about ten years ago. Now they sit there falling in disrepair with a view of dust and dirt.”

Once back on the highway, Jake instructed Chase to stop in Salton Sea Beach. “It’s more of the same, but here there are quite a lot of families trying to make a living. I think they’re down to about 260 people. Most of these people live below the poverty

level. Add that statistic to the fact that most of them suffer lung diseases such as asthma and COPD.”

“We can go now. Hey, PJ, there’s a little casino coming up, do you want to stop?” He changed the subject.

“I’m game if everyone else wants a break.” She welcomed a short stop, it would give her a chance to completely recoup from all the drama with her brother. It would also give Jake a chance to rest his leg. All occupants of the vehicle agreed as Chase pulled onto an old, paved road that was more dirt than blacktop and followed the curve to the rather new looking buildings. They drove passed a combo gas station and market and found lots of empty parking spaces in front of the Red Earth Casino.

“I feel like I keep saying this to you, but don’t expect too much. It’s small but fun for a change of pace.” She felt Jake’s hand on her back as the four of them went through into the cool, dark atmosphere of the casino.

It was the same as many of the local casinos she’d been to around Phoenix only smaller. There were new machines as well as some of the older type. It was clean and brightly decorated with a bar and a player’s club. “This is nice. I think it’s cute. What do you play?” Pearl asked of Jake.

“If I gamble, it’s not on these machines.”

“Oh, then you’re a table man.” She concluded.

“You seem to know a lot about a casino.”

“It’s one of the many jobs I’ve held, you know jack of all trades, master of none.” She shrugged her shoulders.



They wandered the floor while Raven and Chase had gone to the other side to check out one of her favorite machines. “Why haven’t you mastered anything?”

Pearl stopped and sat down at a video poker machine. She waited to respond until she’d put in a twenty-dollar bill and played her firsthand. “I guess I’ve never found my passion. When I was first on my own, I thought of my future as my three C’s.”

He grinned. “What are your three C’s?”

“I always thought I wanted to end up in life with a condo, dealing cards, and a cat.” She laughed at herself.

“What happened?”

“I stayed for a short period of time with a friend who had cats. When I had to use a lint brush to leave the house each day, I decided that a cat wasn’t for me.”

“And the condo?”

“I stayed in a duplex with the adjoining wall. My bedroom was against the neighbor’s.”

He seemed to be enjoying this trip down her memory lane. “What was the problem with that?”

“They were very amorous people. I could hear their bed banging up against the wall and shouts from her screaming his name and encouraging him to ‘do it now’.” She blushed from the memories.

Pearl punched the buttons on the slot machine and waited for him to ask about the cards. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Okay, you’ve explained the cat and the condo, but what about the cards?”

“I loved playing blackjack, and I thought that must be the best job in the casino. They always looked like they were having so much fun.”

“Not all things are as they seem.”

“Whoa, pretty profound words so early in the day.” She smiled as she teased him.

He ignored her taunts and pressed her for more. “What about dealing cards? What went wrong with that?”

“I was what the other dealers called a ‘house’ dealer. In other words, I took the money from people at the table. Because of that, I didn’t make very good tips. When there was a big tipper in the house, they call them a George, I wouldn’t even get a chance to make some good money because they wouldn’t play at my table.”

“Can that be true?” He asked.

“Yes, I don’t know why it works that way, but some dealers just win money for the house. I was one of those people.”

“Why would they call the big spenders a George? That doesn’t make sense. You’d think they would at least choose Benjamin Franklin, he’s on the hundred-dollar bill.”

“It’s because the big tipper hands out so many dollar bills, he might as well be the man on the bill, George Washington.”

Just then Chase and Raven came up, smiling and laughing. She held up a handful of bills. “Look what we did!”

Raven pushed the cash out button, jumped up and hugged her cousin. Jake removed the ticket from the

machine and all four of them headed for the door. He stopped long enough to get cash for her ticket.

“Where to now?” Chase asked as he got behind the wheel. “There’s so much to see, but I’d like you to see the Salton Sea Campground, it’s in Salton City. Head just down the road and turn on North Marina Drive.”

“Will we be able to walk on the beach?” Chase asked.

“Yes, I want you to. It’s a rather quiet day for the wind, so the smell shouldn’t be too overpowering.”

There was virtually no traffic to speak of and with little effort, they soon pulled onto the sandy beach at the campground. “Are we going to be safe driving on this?”

“Yes, just don’t go too near to the water. The last time I was here, I spent most of the day helping some guy get his truck out of the sand down there. He had it buried up to the axles. Here, this should be fine. We can walk the rest of the way.” Jake instructed.

“Are you going to be okay with the walking?” Pearl tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

“Absolutely. Let’s go.”

As they got outside, Pearl did notice a pungent smell in the air. “I thought you said it might not stink.”

“Oh, this is mild. You should be here on a very windy day.” The four of them stood silently taking in the scene. There were signs of neglect everywhere, with half a picnic table sitting at what used to be a campsite. Pearl noticed the many palm trees dying in the sand, most with their tops missing.

Jake pointed out an old school bus parked further down the beach. “There’s no charge to stay here, so you get some really nice vehicles next to some that look like they’re on their last leg.”

Chase hugged Raven to his side. “Jake, this is a travesty. Look this should be a beautiful place for families to enjoy time by the water. What is anybody doing about this?”

“To be totally honest, no one is taking any action. When Sonny Bono was alive, he took this project on and some little progress was made, but since then...I’m guessing it would be political death for anyone to dedicate their actions to protecting and helping this sea.” His heartbreak was evident, and Pearl moved closer to his side.

“I’m shocked. This is as bad as those guys trying to nuke our mountain.” Raven spoke with tears in her eyes.

“What about the lithium mining that supposed to be going on here?”

“Well, that’s a horse of a different color. This area could be the world’s largest supplier of lithium due to the salinity of the lake. What I would like to see is that any company that wants to mine the lithium has to dedicate resources to saving or restoring the sea. They shouldn’t be able to financially gain if they’re not dedicating funds to protecting area and providing help to the residents in the area for their medical problems.”

“I absolutely agree!” Chase looked to Jake. “We’ll take tons of pictures to show OPP. I’m positive they’ll start some activity to help correct this area.”

“Thanks man. After hearing about you and Raven, I just knew I could count on you guys to help the cause.”

“I’ve got so much more to show you, ready to go?” He asked the group.

“Sure! I think I might be getting hungry. Do we want to have our picnic now?” Pearl asked.

“I’ve got a better idea. There’s a little motel just up the road. I’d like to introduce you to the owners and then right next to them is Johnson’s Landing. It’s a restaurant and bar and the food is great.” Jake recommended.

As they got to the truck, Pearl’s phone rang, signifying her mother’s ringtone. She looked to Jake, “I’d better take this. I won’t be but a minute.”

“Mother.” She motioned for the others to get into the truck.

“I just heard from your brother. What did he mean that I should let you alone? I’m just not understanding you two. I’m just a mother that cares for her children. You’d think that most children would be grateful for a mother’s love.”



## CHAPTER TEN

Taking a deep sigh before responding, Pearl tried to make her voice sound not as frustrated as she felt, “Mother, I’m kind of in the middle of something, so I’ll call you later when we are back home. By the way, Raven and Chase came to visit me.”

“Oh, that’s nice. How are they doing? Well, sounds like you’re busy. I’ll let you go. Tell them hello from me.” As usual her mother was easily distracted and seemed to forget her accusations.

“I will. I love you.” With that Pearl quickly disconnected the call and climbed into the running truck. “Sorry.”

Jake turned in his seat to look straight at her, “Everything alright?”

She reached and patted him on the shoulder, “I’m good. Let’s go and meet your friends.”

With a few more directions, Chase guided them to the entrance of the Motel by the Sea. As they drove on the dusty road through the rounded gateway announcing the motel Pearl had her doubts about the status of the business being legitimate. They got out and Jake rang the doorbell on the outside wall. The entrance was unlike a normal hotel lobby with no windows to allow them to see into the room behind the wooden door.

As they waited, Pearl and Raven noticed the fire pit off to the side. It was surrounded by various chairs, and they could imagine people sitting around, laughing, and talking in the night when the heat of the day had passed.

Roxie greeted them from the right side of the building. She came around the corner and hugged Jake enthusiastically. "My, oh My! You get better looking every time I see you. Who are your friends?"

"This is PJ, she works for me. This is her cousin Raven and her husband Chase."

"Well come on over, we'll sit in the shade. Who wants to sit in the sun in this heat?" She laughed. Roxie removed her gardening hat and gloves and encouraged each to take a chair. Pearl had expected an older woman, but this woman was about her age with a comforting smile.

"What brings you over here from your side of the lake?"

"Chase and Raven are with the OPP."

Roxie interrupted, "The OPP, what's that?"

Raven answered, "It stands for Operation Perfect Planet. We try to help people keep in tune with our world, you know do no harm to the planet we live in?"

"Oh, I think I remember now. I have heard of you folks. So, are you here to help us save the sea?"

Chase responded with enthusiasm, "We sure would like to gather enough information to get the OPP involved. How would you feel about that?"

"I would love it. Gary and I haven't been here that long, but we have friends that have been here forever and I'm sure they'd love to talk with you."



“We’re headed over to Johnson’s. Let anyone that’s interested know and we’ll spend some time with them.”

“You’re such a sweetie. If only I wasn’t married.” She teased until Gary walked outside to the covered patio.

“Hi, I’m Gary, the better half of this place.” The laughter surrounded them all. He stuck out his hand and greeted each of them. Again, Pearl was caught off guard that the couple was much younger than she had expected.

“If you all believe that I have some swamp land in Florida I’d like to sell you. You mangy devil!” She spoke to Gary. “God knows how you can’t live without them though.”

Chase quickly agreed to everyone’s amazement. “Hey! This one saved my life; how could I do without her?” He kissed Raven full on the lips in front of everyone.

Not to be outdone, Jake placed a peck on Pearl’s cheek. Roxie prodded him, “You can do better than that, son!”

Instead, Pearl grabbed Jake by the shirt and pulled him in for a searing kiss on the lips. “There, mister, take that!”

The patio was full of laughter. The ruckus allowed the shocked Jake and an embarrassed Pearl to blend in with the frivolity. She avoided looking him straight in the eye but as he grabbed for her and put his arm around her, she melted into his arms.

“You all are something else. Go on over to Johnson’s and I’ll get ahold of some of the folks for

you. Hell, we'll just join you too." Roxie ushered them out the gate.

"How far is it to this restaurant?" Chase asked. "Hey, Jake, you want to drive?"

"Nah, you're doing great. It's just a stone's throw down the road."

Jake was right as they had barely gotten buckled up when he pulled into the roughly paved parking lot. "Hell, Jake, we could've just walked. Oh, wait, you would've had troubles." Chase teased his newfound friend.

Jake punched him in the arm but stopped to wait for Pearl. Once she was up with him, he grabbed her by the arm and together they walked up to the entrance. Before going in, Pearl noticed some activity on the sand outside the bar. "What is that?"

"Those are paragliders, or some call it paramotoring."

"Wow! That looks like fun." Pearl responded.

"This area seems to support a lot of enthusiasts. They love to come, and the atmosphere is just right for them. In fact, every February pilots from all over the country and even around the world converge to do their thing. Would you like to try it? There's a company that comes here on a regular basis and you could take lessons." He offered.

Pearl took a quick look directly at Jake to see if he was serious. "I think that would be something fun. Maybe if I stay long enough, I'll check it out."

Just before they entered the single glass door, Pearl pointed to the shoreline. "What's going on out there?"

They all stepped back and looked. It appeared to be hundreds of hay bales being put on the sand between the water and the parking lot.

“We’ll have to ask inside.” Jake answered.

She immediately noticed the informal atmosphere as she looked at the simple tables in the main floor. This place appealed to her, and she walked with the others to the bar. They were greeted by the friendly bartender and quickly served the drinks they ordered.

“Do you want to sit here, or should I get you a table?” Tony asked.

“We were told to sit at the bar and imagine the days gone by when the water was just beyond that window.” Jake responded.

“You must have been talking with Roxie or Gary.” Tony laughed but wiped the spots clean for them before they sat down.

“I’ll get you some menus, but I highly recommend the pulled pork today. It’s great.”

“That sounds good to me.” Pearl agreed and soon all four of them were ordering the same dish.

“Can you imagine this place at the height of its glory?” Chase asked. “I look out there and envision the water full of boats and the beach full of families, playing and sunbathing. What in the world went wrong?”

“Mankind is what went wrong. This whole thing was created as an error but then to compound the problem, the government decided that the lake wouldn’t even last twenty years. They thought that they would save money by doing nothing. Fast

forward over 100 years and this is the result of men and government rulers doing nothing.”

Raven turned to Pearl, “Too bad it’s so hot, otherwise we could sit out on the deck.”

“That would be nice, but I’m not willing to sit out there and sweat.” She replied.

Raven turned to speak so that her back was to the men. “He likes you.”

“Stop it. I have too many family problems for Jake. He’s made it very definite from almost the first time we met, that he’s not into family and the obligations that that demands. He’s had some serious problems with his family, in fact I don’t even know who he has as far as a mother, father or siblings. It doesn’t matter if I like him or he likes me, there are too many ‘family’ obstacles.”

The bartender appeared around then with their food choices. As he sat the plates in front of the foursome, each one reacted similarly. “Oh, my goodness.” Raven was the first to speak out loud. “This is enough to feed an army. We should’ve split this feast.”

“You are so right.” Pearl agreed. They each did their best to eat the wonderful food, but eventually the women, at least gave up.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly eat another bite.” Pearl pushed back the plate.

“Can I get you anything else?” The bartender asked with humor in his voice. “We have fresh pie cooling in the window.” He pointed to the four huge pies behind him on a ledge.

“Are you serious? I couldn’t eat another bite if it would save my life.” Pearl stated firmly.

They both looked to the men sitting beside them and laughed. “You two are awful! How can you eat so much?” Raven asked.

Just then Jake’s phone signaled an incoming call. “I should take this.” He left the bar and headed through the door to the deck outside. Pearl watched intently trying to figure out the importance of the call but couldn’t determine what it was until she saw the stressed look on his face.

Before he came back, she asked the bartender about the hay bales on the beach. His sarcastic laugh indicated that they wouldn’t like the answer.

“It’s a case of too little, too late. It’s supposed to help with dust mitigation. The intention of the government is to help prevent the dust that causes so many lung problems flying all over the valley and at the same time, help any grasses or plants that would want to grow on the sand.”

“Wow, that’s got to be the most absurd idea I’ve heard in a long time.” Chase interjected.

Soon, Jake came back in and announced to the rest of them, “We’ve got to back to the compound. That call was from Lucas, and he needs me to get back there right away.”

“We’ll miss the interviews from the locals.” Chase spoke up.

“It can’t be helped. There’s been some activity and I need to be there. I’ll call Roxie and let her know that we’ll come back another day, if possible.”

In the confusion of the change in their plans, they gathered up their belongings, paid the lunch bill, and loaded back into the truck. “Chase, just head back up to the main road and go north. It’s the fastest way. It should only take us about forty-five minutes or so if we’re lucky.”

“This sounds serious, Jake. Can you fill me in on the problem?” Chase tried to talk softly so the women in the back seat wouldn’t hear.

“I’ll let you know as soon as we get to the compound.” Jake made it clear that he didn’t want to share information with the women.

The trip back was made in silence but fortunately it went as fast as possible. When they pulled up to the compound, the gate was closed and locked. Jake slowly got out and opened it allowing the truck to pull through. After locking the gate, he walked to the truck, opened the door, and told the others, “You can all go to the trailer and rest. Chase, if you want, you can come with me to the office.”

Pearl jumped out and quickly confronted Jake. “If this involves my brother, I want to be included.” She was adamant.

“PJ, I’m not sure what’s going on here, but I need you to listen to me without argument. I’m going to meet with Lucas and if you and your family are involved, I’ll let you know. There are many facets to what this compound is all about and there could be a different option I have to deal with right now. Please.” He added.

She took a deep breath as she instantly realized not only had their relationship reached a new level,

but Jake also really needed her cooperation in this current situation. "Okay."

She looked to Raven and together the women walked to the trailer. Once inside, Pearl went straight to the thermostat and turned it down to cool the interior.

"Hey, Pearl, what's going on? Did he tell you anything?"

"All he said is that it could be something else and nothing that includes Danny." She turned to her favorite cousin, "You've been involved in something big like this, what do you think?"

"I've been doing some research and the one thing I can't find is who Jake's working for in this place. You'd think there would be some sort of visible connection to a big corporation or something, but I can't find it. Have you noticed any sort of company name or logo on those stacks of documents you've be inputting?"

Pearl shook her head, "No, not a thing. The papers are all handwritten and on plain notebook type paper."

"What about the program? Is there an icon on the desktop? Is it something we can look up?"

"When they're done over there, we can get in the office, and you can see the icon for yourself. I didn't recognize it but maybe you might. How about a glass of wine? I don't know about you, but I could use one right now."

"Yeah, that sounds great." Together they sat at the kitchen bar and waited.

“I know, I’ll text Danny and see if he knows anything.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea, just don’t let on about this. Let him tell you if he knows anything.” Raven recommended.

“Oh, you’re good.” She quickly texted her brother and then sat her phone on the counter between them. They waited. “Tell me about your art. I didn’t realize that you were a painter.”

Raven laughed, “I wasn’t until my car accident. I know that sounds crazy, huh?”

Pearl reached over and hugged her cousin. “I’m so sorry I didn’t keep in touch with you.”

“Don’t blame yourself it’s not entirely your fault. When I came out of the coma and was finally able to get around on my own, I literally ran to my home in the mountains and hid there for a very long time. My own brother and sister had to come to me and then they didn’t stay long. I was in a very bad way.”

“I can relate but I’m sure not in the same manner as you. I’ve felt disconnected in life myself. I haven’t been in the same horrific car wreck that you were in, but I have felt so lost for a few years now. I don’t mean to belittle what you’ve been through by no means.”

“Pearl, you know the old saying, ‘God only gives us what we can handle’? I think that applies to each of us as individuals. I don’t think my own sister could have gone through the car wreck, and the subsequent mental and physical challenges. Don’t compare your struggles with mine. Please, let’s just promise to keep in touch from here on out, okay?”



“Deal!” Just as she stuck her hand out to shake with her cousin, Pearl’s phone signaled an incoming text. “It’s Danny.” They both leaned over to see his response. As they read it, Pearl and Raven looked up and confirmed. “He doesn’t know what’s going on here. What does that mean?”

“I think that means that whatever is going on today is not due to Danny and the casino money he owes.” Pearl concluded. She looked up, “So what is the emergency important enough for Lucas to call Jake back here?”

“Let’s have another glass of wine and wander over there with a few beers.” Raven proposed.

Together the two women filled their glasses, and they took cold beers from the fridge and headed out into the heat of the late afternoon to walk across to the office. “Oh, my, I could never get used to this kind of heat.” Raven spoke and they laughed together.

Once inside the office, the women heard the men talking in Jake’s office. “Hello!” Pearl called out.

Jake was the first to poke his head out and greet them. “What’s up?”

“Have you two solved the problems of the world yet? We bring beverages to celebrate your victory.” They held up the bottles.

Chase popped around him and came to grab the offered cold drink. He kissed Raven on the lips and grinned. “Thanks, I could use this right now.”

Jake came over to Pearl, took a beer from her and lifted it to his lips. Her eyes followed that motion and Pearl found herself wanting those lips on her own instead of that bottle. “Thank you.” He spoke softly to

her alone and against her own willpower, Pearl found herself smiling at his small graciousness.

“So, what was the crisis and where’s Lucas?” She asked, trying to bring herself to her senses.

Jake looked to Chase before answering. “It seems that I’ve upset the powers that be and Lucas went home to Isabella.”

“What in the world does that mean?” Pearl pressed for more of an answer.

“The people that came to the gate today pressed Lucas for the lack of information coming from this office. He panicked and that’s why we had to come back early. I’ve been on the phone to them and for the meantime, have them pacified.”

“I still don’t understand all of this. Someday, you’ll have to explain it to me.” She shrugged her shoulders. Pearl was starting to understand this good-looking man standing next to her enough to know that he would explain what he wanted, when he wanted and for now that was good enough.

“It’s still daylight, how about we go to the Ski Inn?” Jake offered.

Just then the door was thrown open and Lucas stood there. “Hey, Boss, I have a better idea. Why don’t you all come over and we can eat, maybe play some cards, or just visit. Isabella is making some enchiladas and she always makes way too much.” Lucas patted his stomach, “That’s how I got this!”

“What do you all think?” Jake asked.

“The cards sound great, but I’m too full to eat again!” Raven volunteered. “We could go and rest for

a moment. How about we all come over in say, about an hour?"

They all agreed with that and Raven and Pearl headed back to the trailer.

"This is so much fun. I can't say it too much, but I'm having a ball with you here." They took a moment to give each other a quick hug.

The two guys finally showed up in the trailer. Jake's limp was a bit more pronounced, drawing Pearl's attention to his plight. "Hey, why don't you two sit over there and relax. I'll bring you something to drink."

"Two beers will work, thanks." Chase plopped down on one end of the sofa and patted the other end. "This space looks like it's made just for you."

Jake didn't fight the attempts to get him to take a load off his feet, but easily gave in to the pampering. "I'm aware of what you all are doing, but I do appreciate your thoughtfulness." Raven gave them both a cool brew.

"Do you guys want something to snack on?" Pearl asked.

"Not at all. I'm still feeling that great meal we had at Johnson's. How about you?" Chase asked Jake.

"Not on your life. If I know Isabella, she's making a ton of enchiladas and even though I'm not hungry, I know I'll have some of them. If you've ever had Isabella's Mexican food, you wouldn't spoil your appetite at all." Jake reached for the remote and music floated through the air for all of them to enjoy.

Pearl watched as the guys were on the couch and talking softly. Her curiosity was piqued as to how

much of their conversation centered on the crisis at the compound. She'd only been here six days now, but she felt that Lucas wouldn't have called them home for just a few men at the gate. Something else was going on and with a deep breath, Pearl swore to herself that she was going to find out what that was. It was time.

After an hour, with a few drinks in hand, the four of them walked slowly to the back of the compound and to the small stucco home. Before knocking, the door was opened wide, and Lucas greeted them. "Please come in!"

As they all stepped into the small front room, Pearl was impressed with the cleanliness and neatness of the beautifully decorated area. She saw that the house was of the older adobe style and Isabella certainly used her talents to promote a comfortable and stylish welcome to guests. Isabella came around the corner from what appeared to be the kitchen to smile and meet their guests.

"Welcome to our home! We're so glad you all could come and join us. Come on into the family room."

"Isabella, this is my cousin Raven and her husband Chase." Pearl and Raven sat their drinks down on the huge island in the middle of the kitchen.

"Isabella, thank you so much for inviting us." Raven said.

"It's the least we could do after interrupting your plans for the day. I'm so glad to meet you and your husband. Lucas, mix up some margaritas for our guests. Their glasses are empty." Isabella directed her husband.

Lucas put some soft rock music on the stereo and quickly prepared their drinks. The guys were huddled over at the other side of the room and the women were busy chatting and watching Isabella finish preparations on her meal.

“It’s too bad that the weather is so damn hot, otherwise we could sit out on the patio.” Lucas announced to the room. “Well, maybe that wouldn’t be a good idea anyway with the wind starting up. The stench wouldn’t be conducive to being outdoors let alone eating out there.”

“What can we help you with?” Raven asked. “Lucas told you we weren’t hungry, didn’t he? I’m sorry we’re not after all the hard work you’re putting in on those enchiladas.”

“Yes, but I’m counting on the wonderful smell to entice you all to try a little anyway. Raven, I understand you have a little one. How old is your son?”

“Little Ward is fifteen months. He’s named after Chase’s father. I miss him, but this is a worthy cause and Hattie will take great care of our son.”

“Is this Hattie a relative?” Isabella asked, but immediately added, “Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a nosy busy body. It’s just that Lucas and I are trying to start our family and I wonder about things like that.”

“Hattie isn’t a blood relative, but Chase and I couldn’t ask for anyone better to take care of our son. She’s as rough a person as you’d ever meet, but under that rowdy exterior is a woman that would lay her life on the line for us. She did just that when we were

fighting for our cause on the mountain. Hattie took a bullet!”

“Oh, my! How awful for her.” Isabella then turned to busy herself with the oven and their dinner.

The commotion of getting the dishes and the participants to the table allowed no room for any other conversation. Pearl sat next to Jake, facing her cousin and Chase with Isabella and Lucas at each end of the table. She enjoyed the music and the voices chatting in the room. Pearl hadn’t realized that she had room for any more food, but when it was passed, she helped herself to a small plate of goodies.

It was a great evening with food, drink, and friends. They all ate to their hearts content and then sat around swapping stories and tall tales. There was laughter mixed with some solemn moments. Pearl learned a lot about those sitting around the table except the one mysterious Jake McGrath. She smiled at him but behind her grin were the thoughts of talking with him later.

“Have we seen any of your paintings, Raven?” Isabella asked.

“I’m sure not. I sell some through an agent, but I like to keep a low profile.”

“She’s so modest.” Chase exclaimed proudly. “She still has the general store in Copper City handle most of them for the tourists. Can you believe it?”

“Do you have a website? I’d love to see some of your work.” Isabella persisted.

Chase pulled out his phone. “I always keep some of her best pieces on hand. Here, look.” His phone was passed around the table with each person admiring

the paintings done by their guest, even Pearl had to give her cousin huge accolades.

“Raven, I had no idea! These are spectacular! You are so talented. I think you should paint some of your impressions of the Salton Sea. If you wanted to bring some attention to the plight of this area that would go a long way to accomplishing that.” Pearl encouraged.

Without any bravado, false or otherwise, Raven responded quietly, “I’m already burning to have my paints and a canvas in front of me. This has been an incredible trip and I’ve found tons of inspiration.”

“How long are you going to stay?” Lucas asked.

Chase looked to Raven before answering, “We, unfortunately, have to leave tomorrow.” He reached over and patted his wife on her shoulder. “We’ve never left Ward at all, not even a weekend. I’m afraid we’re typical new parents. I hope you understand.”

“Of course, we do.” Pearl said.

“Absolutely, we can’t thank you enough for coming. I hope you have enough information to help us save the sea.” Jake echoed the sentiments of the woman sitting next to him.

Pearl reached over and touched her cousin’s hand. “I’ve loved seeing you two and I’ll miss you. I promise to keep in touch.”

“Me, too.” Raven confirmed.

The evening ended up with dessert. Isabella was an awesome cook and they reveled in her classic custard dish of flan. “Oh my God! This is absolutely heaven.” Pearl and the others raved.

“You’ll have to teach me how to do this.” Pearl begged.

“Absolutely, I would love to.” Isabella answered with enthusiasm.

Jake finally stood up. “Well, this has been great, but I think we need to get back home. Lucas, Isabella, this has been the best of times. Thank you both for your hospitality.”

“I’ll let the dogs out after you call.” Lucas told Jake. As the four of them walked out into the dark night, the heat greeted them. The walk was short, but they all welcomed the air conditioning of the trailer when they entered.

“If you guys don’t mind, I think we’re ready for bed. We’ll get up early and head out.” Chase spoke to them. “Don’t think you have to get up, we’ll let ourselves out. This has been great.”

“I’ll be up.” Jake said. “I’ve never been much of a late sleeper. I’ll have to handle the dogs anyway.” He stuck his hand out to Chase but was surprised when he was pulled in for a manly hug. “Thanks, Jake. We’ll be in touch as soon as we get home and make some calls.”

Raven and Pearl hugged tightly and even allowed a few tears to fall. “I promise I will keep in touch better from now on out. Send me some pictures of those new paintings and little Ward.”

“You send me updates too.” Raven looked over at Jake and then back to her cousin and whispered softly, “I’ll want to know how you two are doing.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

As everyone went to their bedtime places, Pearl stretched out on the couch. The air conditioner was humming, but other than that, the only thing she could hear was her own breathing. Her mind wouldn't shut down as she thought about her life. Try as she might, Pearl couldn't forget the kiss from Jake and his touch at her back when they walked back to the trailer.

She punched at the pillow and tried once again to relax enough to fall asleep. The little light on the microwave seemed to penetrate her closed eyes. In what seemed like hours, but probably wasn't, Pearl finally succumbed to her tiredness. Her dreams weren't pleasant. She had a repeating dream most of her life when she was stressed, and this is the one that came to her tonight.

Pearl was in her old high school hallway, looking for her locker. Once she found it, she couldn't remember the combination and with the late bell loudly ringing throughout the nearly empty halls, the panic set in with her wildly spinning through combinations, but she continued to be locked out. This particular dream had several variations and tonight seemed destined to play through each one of

her most frustrating moments as a young impressionable teenager.

Even though Chase and Raven tried to be quiet, she opened her eyes to find them lugging their bags across the floor to the front door. “Hey, you two, I see you!”

About that same time, Jake came stumbling from his room. “I see you too! Give me a minute and I’ll put the dogs in their pen.” He slipped on some flip flops and out the front door he went.

It wasn’t long before he came back, and Jake opened the door and waved at them to come on out. The dawn was just starting to light up the compound behind him. “Thanks so much for coming. We’ll keep in touch.”

“Drive safe.” Pearl waved as they drove through the now open gates. “Want some breakfast?” She asked of Jake.

“Nah, I’m good with just a cup of coffee.”

“How about we change that bandage on your leg? Raven left me some of her homemade salve. We should have cleaned it and changed it last night.”

“Now that sounds like something I could use. Let’s do it.” He stepped into the front room. “Where do you want me?”

“Just sit on the kitchen stool. I’ll get it from the fridge.”

As she cleaned the wound and applied new salve on the cut, Pearl looked up at him. “Jake, I have questions and when you’re ready, I’d like to talk with you.”

“I know you do, and I’m surprised that it’s taken this long for you to speak up. Let’s get dressed and go to the office. It can best be explained at the computer.”

“That makes sense. I’ll go and get a shower, have a bite to eat and I’ll meet you over there.” She grabbed the old bandage stuff and threw things in the garbage.

“Did Raven show you how to make that salve?”

“Yes, I think I can duplicate her stuff.”

“That’s great. I prefer to use that and not the drugs the doc gave me. I feel like it’s healing just fine now.”

Pearl gathered her sheets and pillow and headed to the front bedroom. Once there, she realized her bag was still in Jake’s room. Not thinking, she went back down the hallway to his room and was shocked into silence when she saw him standing there with his naked backside to her. He was toned, tanned, and reaching for his clothing on the bed.

“Whoops!” She quickly turned around. “Sorry, I didn’t think!”

After just seconds, she heard him speak. “PJ, it’s okay. I have my pants on now.”

“I’m so sorry. I need my bag.” She avoided looking at him directly but held out her hand. When she didn’t feel him hand her bag over, Pearl finally looked up at him.

She waited for him to speak, and it appeared he was waiting for her to say something. Without giving in, she grabbed her bag and left his room. Pearl could hear his soft laughter as she went down the hall.

With a firm click, she shut the door to her room and went on to take her shower. Deliberately taking

more time than she normally would, Pearl hoped he had left for the office, allowing her time to breathe and settle.

She went to the kitchen and grabbed herself a hotdog for breakfast along with a cold bottle of water. Finally walking across the graveled yard, Pearl reached the office door, but hesitated before opening it. “Get a grip!” She spoke firmly to herself.

Upon entering the office, Pearl noticed his office door was shut and she grinned with relief. She wasted no time in getting to her desk. Grabbing the stack of papers, Pearl started to input the data as she had for the last week. As she stared at the spreadsheet on the computer, she realized that the patterns were starting to make some sort of sense. One of the columns showed the figures were getting higher, while the list was diminishing. Suddenly Pearl remembered Jake talking about the high salinity of the Salton Sea. He used the term as ppt, parts per thousand. The realization was finally dawning on Pearl. He and Lucas were measuring the salinity on a regular basis. As she studied the columns and rows, Pearl saw that the figures were also represented at least twice a day.

Staring so intently at the screen, she failed to hear that Jake had come into the room. “Hey.” She jumped at the sound of his voice so nearby. “You scared me! Don’t do that.” Pearl said, her tone showed the shock he’d provided.

“What are you looking at?” He moved even closer to her side of the desk. “Oh, I see you have the spreadsheet up. Is it making any sense?”

“I think I’m starting to see one thing for sure. You and Lucas are recording the salinity levels of the water. What I don’t understand is why?”

When he moved around to sit at the chair in front of her desk, Pearl started to breathe a bit easier. Jake ran his hand through his hair, ruffling it even further. “The company I represent is trying to get the rights to mine the lithium from under the sea. There’s a side benefit and that is geothermal power that’s much more reliable than solar or wind.”

“When I did the research the other day, I did find several articles about the energy side of things. But what do these figures have to do with all of that?”

“I’m trying, no pushing for my company to add a third element to the contract.”

“Which is?”

“I want them to become responsible for the restoration of the Salton Sea. The lithium will be there, the geothermal power will be there, but most of the people living around this lake will not if something isn’t done to save them from the dust. The more the water shrinks, the more toxic dust there is to swirl into the winds that blow disaster to the residents.”

“I think I see. If we can somehow inject a fresh source of water into the sea the salinity levels will diminish and hopefully, the shoreline will not recede. Am I close?”

“You are spot on, but it’s more than that. There are already eleven companies involved in geothermal power and one huge project that’s just starting up involves both the lithium and the power. I want us to

be on the right side of history. My company is not just about generating profits, we are an ethically motivated business that involves the people in the area.”

“So, if the contracts for the other companies are already approved, why the extra effort?” She looked directly into his wonderfully green eyes.

He didn’t waiver, he made full on eye contact and with a slight satisfied grin on his face, “Because it’s the right thing to do!”

In that moment, her heart soared, and Pearl knew she was head over heels in love with this man. Pearl broke the eye contact and looked back to the computer screen. She finally found her voice and spoke, “Is that why we were called home? They, whoever they may be, doesn’t support your dedication to the environment, do they?”

“They’re more inclined after the phone call yesterday.”

“What are you going to do?”

He avoided answering her, but instead asked a different question of her. “Did you enjoy having your cousin and her husband here?”

She shifted gears with him, “I loved it. I should’ve kept in closer contact with Raven. I promised her I’d get better at it in the future.”

They both sat there in silence for a minute or two. Pearl asked first, “I have another question.”

“Shoot.”

“When we had to take you to the hospital, you told me you were on blood thinners. I know it’s a very

personal question, but why are you taking that medication?”

“When I was a young child, I had rheumatic fever. I survived but the doctors put me on a regimen of blood thinners to help prevent stroke. I’ve been on it ever since.”

“Does that mean you have heart damage?” She asked and then added, “I know I don’t have the right to ask, but I’m just curious.”

“I’m fine. I’ve followed my doctor’s treatment plan to a T. I get regular checkups and it’s been completely controlled for years.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. That’s your personal information and I have no right to it.”

“Hey, I’d ask it of you, if I had to spend the night in the emergency room. No problem.” Jake’s answer came across as if it were no big deal, but Pearl felt it meant a lot more to him that he’d like to reveal.

They both sat there for a few moments, then she spoke again, “Where do we go from here?”

“I wish I could pretend that I didn’t know what you mean, but, PJ, I don’t know where we go from here. I’m starting to get used to you, you know.” Jake was uncomfortable with the conversation but seemed determined to pursue the subject.

“That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever been told by a guy.” She laughed and soon he joined in. “How about we get a full day’s work in for now?”

“How about this? We take Teddy for a ride and go back to the other side to finish our tour and then we work tonight.” He offered.

“Ooh, that sounds great! Want me to get some goodies?”

“Nah, maybe just some waters and we’ll have one of Johnson’s great burgers before heading back here. I’ll go get Teddy and tell Lucas.”

As they started out the gate, Jake told her, “I called Roxie and told her we’re coming. She’s going to try and gather the locals that we were supposed to interview yesterday. We can talk with them and share the information with Chase and Raven.”

“That sounds great. I know they’ll want to learn as much as they can about the sea from people who have lived through all the changes and experienced firsthand the devastation.”

Jake let Pearl drive and she carefully maneuvered the old vehicle down the road. Pearl enjoyed the landscape as they passed sites that were now becoming familiar to her. Even among the devastation, she could start to see something beautiful. The mountains to the west seemed to tower over the lowly valley with high fluffy clouds crowning the peaks. It’s too bad those clouds don’t produce rain, she thought. It would be a wonderful respite for the lake.

“Want to stop at the casino?” Jake asked as she slowed down for a car turning in it.

“Nah, I would rather visit Johnson’s and talk with the locals.”

“Okay. Let’s get there.” She pushed the older Jeep and down the road they flew.



As they pulled into the parking lot, Roxie was just walking across the road. She waved and greeted them. "Hey, good timing."

Once inside, the air conditioning felt good as they found a table and ordered some drinks. "Join us."

"I will. The people I told you about are coming, so I wanted to be here to make introductions. You'll like these two old-timers, they're funny and full of information."

As the door opened, an older couple walked in, and Roxie waved them over and made introductions. "Sit, have a drink, it's on Jake." She winked as she spoke.

"Well, I'll leave you now. You're in good hands with Jake here." Roxie went back out the front door, leaving the foursome to talk.

"Hi, I'm Pearl. I work for Jake and am new to this area. I've done lots of research on the internet, but I have to be honest, nothing is the same as getting information firsthand. Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with us."

"Hey, most days are pretty uneventful in our lives, so this was a chance to meet some new people."

After they got drinks and a plate of appetizers, Jake started the conversation. "As Roxie told you, I'm Jake and we're working on the other side of the lake. What are your names?"

"I'm Emma and this here's Will. We've been here our most of our lives. Well, we live up in Salton Sea Beach, but this whole area has been our home. When you say you're working on the other side, what exactly do you mean, young man?"

Jake showed a stunning grin before answering. “That’s a fair question. The company I work for is trying to come up with a resolution to restore this beautiful sea.”

Will gave a huge guffaw and Emma snorted. Pearl looked to Jake and waited for his response. It wasn’t long in coming. “I can appreciate your disbelief.”

“Listen, sonny, I appreciate that you’re concerned, but you have to understand, we’ve had over thirty years of people just like you. All we have to show for it, is this damned oxygen tank I have to carry all day long.” Will held up his portable tank to emphasize his point.

Pearl spoke up, “I’ve only been working for Jake for a week now, but I can honestly say that a more sincere, caring person you’d never meet. He loves this place. From the first minute I met him, Jake has demonstrated his dedication to the cause of restoring the sea. He’s got a plan and he’s sacrificing his own job by pushing the company he works for into supporting the cause.”

Emma hooted and Will joined with his raucous laughter. “Girlie, you are something else.” To Jake, Emma pointed her crooked finger, “I hope you appreciate this one, young man, she’s your best asset.”

“She’s been a delight, I can assure you that.”

“So, what’s the plan, young man?” Will asked.

“I’m working on a plan that will build a pipeline from the Pacific Ocean to the Salton Sea through a tunnel. We’ll pump in water to fill the lake and pump the brine out of here back to the ocean.”

Emma hooted again. "It sounds like it could work a whole lot better than those damn hay bales!"

"You don't think those will help at all?" Pearl asked.

Will took his time answering, but finally spoke. "It can't hurt, but I think it's just something to fool us again."

Taking a different tactic, Jake asked Emma, "Do you mind if I ask how old you are?"

With a mischievous grin, she said, "Honey, I'm old enough to know better and still young enough to try." When the laughter died down, Emma spoke. "I'm proud to say I'm 73 and still going strong. Why do you ask?"

"I can only hope to live as long as that." Jake commented.

"If you think I'm going to say it's clean living, you'd be sadly mistaken. I like my wine, used to smoke, and I eat junk food. I used to be a good cook when the kids were home and being raised, but now it's just the two of us, it's a whole lot easier to eat here or grab a sandwich."

"She was the best cook. I miss that." Will added.

"Your arms aren't painted on, you know how to operate the stove." She retorted, but her laughter softened the words.

Pearl was enjoying the lively banter between them. "How long have you been married?"

"I've been with this ball and chain for over sixty years, but I wouldn't have it any other way. We've been through all sorts of life, but I wouldn't have wanted anyone else by my side."

“Ah, you’re getting mushy now. I might cry.” Emma teased him.

“When did you move to the Salton area?”

“We came here when we were just newly married with two kids. Will got offered a job with one of the local farmers as foreman and it was a great opportunity for our family. We’re still in the same house but everything is run down now.”

Will spoke up, “I’m ready for another beer.”

Jake signaled the bartender, and another round of drinks were delivered to the table. “Need something more to eat?”

“Sure, some of those crinkle fries and how about more of these here appetizers?” Emma said as she took a drink from her glass.

A grin passed over Jake’s features as he locked glances with Pearl. She knew he was tickled by this couple’s character and the information they were sharing. Pearl knew that Chase and Raven would have thoroughly enjoyed the interaction.

“Too bad, Chase and Raven couldn’t have been here to meet you guys.” She offered.

“Who are they?” Emma asked.

“My cousin and her husband. They came to help Jake figure out how to get the OPP involved. It’s Operation Perfect Planet and they are an organization that helps the world deal with environmental disasters.”

“I think I’ve heard of them. That might be a good thing to have them involved.” Will said.

“It certainly can’t hurt. Can you tell us about some of your best memories on this lake?” Jake asked.

Will grinned. "That's easy. Most everybody that lived here during the good times had a boat. We taught the boys to fish, swim and even water ski out there. It was some great family times."

"Everything we did involved the sea. It was that way for everyone around here. I worked at the marina while Will ran the farm. When the boys got old enough, they worked as lifeguards and helped with the boat rentals. We really didn't think it would end, at least not in our lifetime." Emma's voice showed the emotion she was feeling about the loss of their lifestyle.

"I guess we're just stupid for believing it could last." Will added. "You know, you young folks are so much more aware of the world you live in and keep on top of things that affect your lives. We aren't from that generation."

"There's no way you or anyone else that lived here could have expected this beautiful wilderness to turn into the biggest environmental disaster in the state. The politicians from years ago were eager to turn a blind eye to what was happening. The best thing we have helping us is modern technology."

"You're talking about that social network stuff, aren't you?" Emma asked. "We don't do that internet junk. Me and Will barely know how to handle these darn cell phones." She held up her old flip phone.

Pearl had to stifle a laugh and avoided looking at Jake. "What would be the thing you want most?"

"I want my lake back. I want to fish again and take out my boat. I want my house's value to be where it

should be so I can get the repairs it needs.” Will didn’t hesitate to answer her.

Emma added, “I don’t think they can do anything to ever put it back, but it can be livable, can’t it?”

“I honestly believe that the sea can be saved, but it will be different than the one you remember. With the method I have in mind, it will become salt water rather than fresh water, but it will have a renewal source. There can be fish that live in it and boating can be a part of the fun. It’s just not going to be a dying body of water along with the clouds of toxic dust infecting the entire valley.”

“If they do anything at all, it probably won’t be in our lifetime anyway.” Emma’s words were softly spoken. In a tender moment, Will reached his gnarled hand over and patted hers. The moment wasn’t lost on Pearl. To them, she spoke, “You know not everyone wants the lake restored.”

“Why do you say that? Pearl asked.

“You know the military used this place to practice dropping the bomb on Japan? They actually lost a plane and the crew. It rests on the bottom of the lake.”

“I didn’t know that.” Pearl looked to Jake for confirmation, and he shook his head in affirmation.

He spoke up, “They never recovered the plane, and some consider this a gravesite for those guys.”

Emma added, “There are those that would rather it just be left alone. I’m not sure why, but they feel strongly about leaving it to nature.”

“You ready to get on home?” Will asked her.

“Sure, that stew’s probably smelling pretty good by now. Although I’m not very hungry after those

snacks. Did we help you young folks?" She asked as they struggled to their feet.

"You were great. Thank you for taking time out of your day." Pearl and Jake stood up, too. They watched as both Emma and Will moved gingerly out the door, each helping the other.

"We'll be like that someday." Pearl broke the silence. Without commenting, Jake paid their bill and motioned Pearl to follow him out the door. He handed her the keys to Teddy, which she gladly took. Once started, she drove them up the highway and back around to the compound. The sun was starting its slow descent to the west and a beautiful crimson scheme painted itself across the horizon.

"Should we put Teddy away?" Pearl offered.

"Nah, Lucas will take care of him. Let's go over and sit on the deck and enjoy this view." He started ahead of her but stopped to make sure she was with him. "I know it's still warm, but this is something worth seeing. We can have some cold water and watch the sun make its way down."

"That sounds great. I agree it is beautiful. We have some gorgeous sunsets in the valley, but my view is blocked by other apartments."

He went inside and grabbed some cold-water bottles and by the time he got back out, she'd dusted off the cushions and was sitting there waiting for him. Jake sat down and took a sip before speaking, "Thanks for what you did with Emma and Will."

"I didn't do anything."

"You have this way of making people feel at ease and they opened up to us. Thank you for that."

“You’re welcome. Do you remember when we talked about being a dealer? That’s one of the things that happened to me, and the other dealers teased me about.”

“Why?”

“I would deal my cycle and then on break, I’d talk about the people at each table. The customers would tell me things that were a surprise, and the other dealers would question how in the world I could find that out.”

“Like what?”

“It seemed to just happen. For instance, one day I went up to a table and a regular was sitting there. When I said, ‘hey how’s it going?’ he nearly broke down in tears and told me that his wife left him.” She looked over at Jake. “I don’t know why he told me that. I mean, I just simply asked about his day.”

“That’s what I mean. There’s something about you that makes people comfortable. I’m glad you have that ability.”

Pearl laughed. “I think we got some great information. It was more emotional rather than factual, but can it help our cause?”

The look Jake gave her was heart-warming. “Do you realize what you just said?”

Pearl shook her head as she went over the last thing, she’d said to him. “I guess I don’t know what you mean.”

His grin was illuminating, and she felt her heart beat harder. “You said ‘our’ cause.” Jake waited and then added, “Does that mean you’ve found your passion?”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Pearl stumbled over her words but managed to deflect answering his question as her mind raced over which passion he was talking about; was it him or the Salton Sea?

“What about the information we got from Emma and Will? Can it be used?” She avoided direct eye contact but instead pretended great interest in the setting sun.

It seemed that Jake realized what she was trying to do but was determined to press her. “PJ, are you finally ready to quit being a jack of all trades and master of none?”

As soon as his words hit her conscious mind, Pearl laughed with relief. He didn’t know. “We’ll see.” She pointed to the huge tanks sitting behind the office. “Tell me what’s in there?”

“I guess you’re ready. I told you that Lucas and I are gathering samples each day and that’s where we’re getting our information.”

Confusion showed on her face. “I thought you were getting those samples from the sea.”

“We’ve recreated the exact formula in that tank. Lucas is good at that sort of stuff. What you’re looking at is a scale model of what I think will cure the Salton

Sea. In that other tank is water similar to the Pacific Ocean.”

Her eyes lit up, “Oh, I get it. You’re pumping the ocean water to the Salton water and then you’re taking the briny water from the Salton and putting it in the ocean tank.”

His grin was almost her undoing. She felt her heartbeat as her pulse raced wildly through her veins. “You got it. It’s the proof that we need to convince the world that we can fix this body of water.”

“That’s amazing. I talked a little with Lucas when we were waiting in the hospital for you. He said you two met in college. You must have some sort of science degree.”

He laughed. “Not exactly. My degree was in hospitality.” Jake waited for her to react.

“No way! How does that help you do this?” She joined in his laughter.

“It doesn’t. Lucas got his degree in environmental science and he’s teaching me. We make a great team.”

“Is that because he’s smarter than you?” She teased.

“I think that comment calls for something stronger than this. You want a glass of wine?” He was already on his feet reaching for her water bottle.

“That sounds great. Can I help?”

“No, you just enjoy. I’ll be right back.” Just as he left, her cell phone indicated a text message. Pearl viewed the text and noted that her brother was checking in with her.

Jake came back out and as he sat down, he spoke, “Have you heard from your brother?”

“Funny you should ask that. I just got a text. It was short and simple. He said he’s doing good and not to worry.”

“I hope he had some influence with those Slabbers. I’m tired of their intrusions.” Jake rubbed at the injury on his leg.

“How’s it really feeling?”

“I’m going to be fine. It’s now more of a nuisance than pain. It shouldn’t have happened at all.”

The sun was finally gone, and the darkness surrounded them and the compound. Even the heat seemed to give in to the moment and give them some relief. “This is nice.” Pearl spoke.

Just as they were deciding on going in, they heard a voice coming from the distance. “Hey, you two! What are you doing?”

“Hey, Lucas, come and join us.” Jake encouraged, but as soon as they saw his wife was with him, he added. “Isabella, it’s great to see you.”

Jake stood up, “What can we get you to drink? Isabella, some wine?”

“I’d like a water, please.” She said with a grin.

“Come on! You can do better than that.” Jake pressed.

It was Lucas that finally answered as he pulled his wife close to his side. “Jake, PJ, there’ll be no alcohol for this little woman.”

Before he could continue, Pearl jumped up and exclaimed, “Oh, my God! You’re pregnant!” She ran and the two women hugged and giggled.

Jake put out his hand to shake Lucas’s, but the men ended up in a manly hug. “Congratulations, you

guys! I know this is something you've wanted for a while."

"Hey, Jake, get him a beer and some water for this one."

Once everyone was sitting around the deck, the conversation was lively and exciting. "So, when are you due? When did you find out? Are you happy? Oh, that's a stupid question, of course you're ecstatic!" Pearl stopped as she realized everyone was watching her.

After all laughter, they sat and enjoyed their time. "What do you hope for a boy or a girl?" Pearl asked Isabella.

Isabella spoke, "I know it sounds mundane, but I just want a healthy baby."

"I agree." Lucas immediately confirmed. "We just want a happy, healthy baby."

"That sounds perfect. Here's to you two!" Pearl raised her glass. "Stay healthy and safe."

The guys were talking, and Pearl sat there enjoying the companionship. "So, how about you and Jake?" She heard Isabella ask quietly.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You have been the only woman I've ever seen here and it's obvious that he cares for you."

Pearl looked over to confirm that the guys were not listening before answering. "I'm here for a short period of time and it's not like we are anything other than an employee and an employer. Jake didn't want me here."

"He may not have invited you, but I can see that he's very comfortable with you here."

“You’re so sweet, Isabella. Thank you.” Pearl tried to divert the conversation about her and Jake. “I am so excited for your news.”

“How does that sound?” Jake interrupted the women.

“How does what sound? We weren’t listening.” Pearl questioned.

“Jake wants to take all of us out for dinner at the Ski Inn to share the news with Tina and Ike tomorrow night.” Lucas answered.

“That sounds perfect. Maybe your brother will be performing.” Isabella suggested.

Pearl shook her head, “I don’t think Danny’s going to be there. He’s trying to keep a low profile. It seems he’s in trouble with some tough guys in the Indio casinos.”

“Oh, my! That’s not a good thing. I’m sure you’re very worried for him.”

Lucas looked to Jake. “Have you met him?”

“Yes, we invited him here a few days ago and we got the whole story. He and I had a talk about keeping his troubles away from PJ and the compound. He agreed.”

“Wow, it sounds like he’s in real trouble.” Isabella offered.

“Yes, but let’s not let that ruin your wonderful news! I can’t wait until tomorrow night.” Pearl spoke injecting happiness into her voice.

Lucas stood up and helped his wife to her feet. “We need to get going and get this one her rest.”

“Don’t start it, I’m not even two months along. I’ll be fine.” She patted his cheek lovingly.

“Oh, let him baby you. Enjoy it while you can.” Jake encouraged the loving couple as they went down the steps and disappeared into the darkness heading to their house.

“Time for us to go in. I’m not really hungry, are you?” Pearl asked of Jake.

“Not really, but how about a bowl of ice cream? We have chocolate syrup too!”

“Now you’ve hit on my weakness. I love ice cream, especially if it’s chocolate.”

He held open the door for her and once inside, the cool air-conditioned room hit her. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used that heat out there. This feels great! Pearl kicked off her shoes and sat at the kitchen bar.

Jake gathered the dishes, spoons, and all the ingredients for their dessert. “Do you want help?” She offered.

“Oh, no. This is my specialty. You just sit back and watch a master at work.”

She grinned at his playfulness. “You want some music?”

“Sure, you know how to turn it on. Someday, I’ll get one of those fancy devices, what do you call them?”

“You mean a virtual assistant better known as ‘Alexa’. I can just see you talking to her.”

“Do you have one?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be without her. She is very handy.”

He waited for the music to start but kept performing his magic with ice cream. “Handy? For what?”

“Well, she plays my favorite music, answers questions, starts my vacuum. Oh, she tells me when I get packages. You can even program her to keep a grocery list, to remind you of appointments, and some people use her to set the thermostat.”

“And then when they get so fat and lazy, she can call the ambulance when they have a cardiac arrest.” He laughed at the look of shock on her face. “See! I am a born cynic.”

“I think that’s your armor.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you want the world to think that way about you, so you’ll be left alone.” Pearl grabbed the spoon and dug into the big bowl of the frozen dessert as he joined her.

“Mmmm, this hits the spot. I love ice cream, especially chocolate with chocolate syrup.”

“Me too.” They sat next to each other, listening to the bluesy music and enjoying their snack. Words were unnecessary at this moment. As soon as they were done, she got up and cleaned up his culinary mess. “Hey, we should probably clean that cut and put on a fresh poultice.”

“Yeah, let me go take a quick shower. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay. Remember, don’t scrub. Just allow the water to gently flow over the stitches.”

He gave her a small salute as he disappeared into his room. Pearl went over and turned on the small light and searched for the diary. Finding it stuck between the couch cushions, she opened the book and picked up reading where she’d left off. It seemed that

Mary was having a hard time staying away from the neighbor boy. They would sneak out and meet at an old, abandoned barn down the lane. So far, their secret meetings had just been to talk and laugh.

Pearl enjoyed hearing their secrets written in careful penmanship on the yellowed pages. She figured the time of the novel to be around the late forties or early fifties. That must have been a wonderful time to live in, she thought with a wistful smile on her face.

Pearl remembered her grandmother talking about her years living in Indiana during the fifties. She could sit for hours and listen to the fantastic tales of a much simpler time. Her grandmother seemed a lot like Mary in this diary.

Jake came in the room with just his gym shorts on, his hair was still wet, and his chest was bare. Pearl could feel her cheeks flushing and avoided looking at him. He plopped down on the couch next to her.

“What are you reading?”

“It’s a book, kind of a diary I found on the bookshelf in my room. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure. I don’t know half of what’s in here. I had this trailer brought over from my mother’s place.” He stopped as if he had already given out more information than he had intended.

“Let’s get that poultice put on and wrap this back up. It’s looking good, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I’m glad Raven taught you about this stuff. I’ve never been one to depend on taking pills to get through the day.”



As she worked on the wound, Jake asked, "So what's the book about?"

"It seems that some young girl living in the fifties wrote in this like a diary. She was a very good writer and tells some cute stories about her life."

He picked up the book and looked at the worn cover. "It's pretty old looking."

"You know that gives me a thought. Do you back up the computers in the office?"

"Not really, I'm not much of a computer man. I know how to do what needs to be done, but other than that, I'm pretty ignorant. Why do you ask?"

"Well, looking at how delicate that diary is, I'm lucky that it's still here for me to read. I was just thinking maybe you should get an external hard drive to back up all the data. You ought to keep it in a separate place like here in the trailer. Electronics fail but that way you wouldn't lose all your data."

"That's a great idea. I'll have Lucas go to Indio and get one tomorrow. He has to go for some other supplies anyway. Write down what we need, and I'll let him know. Thanks!"

She was done gently rubbing the poultice on his leg and reached across him for the bandage. She realized immediately when the mood changed. Pearl looked up to Jake just as he was turning her in his arms. She wanted him, she wanted him to kiss her. There was no hesitation when he lowered his head and she adjusted herself up to take his kiss.

His lips were soft and probing. She wanted to return his fervor and did. When it seemed like it would last forever, it ended. Pearl leaned into his

chest, hiding her face. She could feel his heart beating and felt her own matched his rhythm. Words didn't seem to come to either one of them. Pearl reached up and ran her hand gently down his cheek.

"Hey..." His voice was ragged.

"Whoa, Jake, that was fantastic." Her words came out as breathless as she felt. Pearl adjusted herself away from his touch. With the bandage in hand, she proceeded to cover the poultice without saying anything. His skin was heated, and she enjoyed touching him.

"PJ, I know we probably shouldn't be doing this, and I don't know what to say right now, but I liked it too."

She finally found the strength to get up from the couch, grabbing the leftover poultice. "I think we can look it as living in the moment for now." Pearl covered the remainder of his treatment and put it back in the refrigerator.

"That's not the way I usually do things. I'm a man with a plan and..."

"And I'm not part of your plan. Look, Jake, I get that but don't burst my bubble tonight. I enjoyed it and I'm pretty sure you liked our kiss. That's all it was, no lifetime commitments, no promises of a future together. It's just a simple moment of pleasure." Pearl was busy cleaning a kitchen that was not in need of any attention.

He came up behind her and when she felt his touch on her arms, Pearl leaned back into his bare chest. "I'm not going to say I'm sorry for kissing you."

Her voice squeaked when she tried to speak. Clearing her throat, Pearl finally managed to say, "I'm not saying I'm sorry either."

She felt him place another kiss on the top of her head. "Go and get some sleep. We've got work in the morning." The coolness she felt indicated that he'd gone to his room. Slowly Pearl turned off the lights, grabbed the diary and went to her room.

"I'm not sorry." She said aloud as she shut the door. Pearl tried to not act like a love-stricken teenager, but Jake's kiss and touch had affected her deeply. "I really need to call Tuffy and see if my car is fixed."

Once in bed, she opened the book and started reading with avid interest. Mary and the boy next door were meeting on a regular basis now. She finally named him. He was Matthew. Their relationship was still just as friends, but Mary's words indicated she felt so much more than she was willing to reveal. She feared his rejection. How ironic, Pearl thought to herself.

Her eyes popped open bright and early the next morning. Pearl felt confused with emotions, eager to see Jake and yet afraid that it could be uncomfortable between them. She didn't want that at all. She'd enjoyed this accidental encounter with him despite the beginning and the reason for her trip.

As Pearl entered the office, she noticed his office door closed and could hear voices coming from within. Getting to her desk, she grabbed the stack of papers and started entering the data. Her curiosity was piqued as to the identity of the man in Jake's

office. Growing up, mostly in her teen years, that trait usually got her into trouble. She tried to ignore the voices, but the office was small and not very soundproof although she couldn't tell what was being said, Pearl definitely picked up on the tones.

The door to his office suddenly opened and a distinguished looking man came out first. What struck her was the suit and tie immaculately worn. Why would someone wear an outfit like that in this unbearable heat? She looked at Jake but the frown on his face told her the conversation didn't go well, whatever it had been. She placed a proper smile on her face and stood up to greet them.

"Is this the young lady we were talking about?" The man with the suit and the slick hair put a grin on his face that instantly made her uncomfortable. Hesitantly, she stuck out her hand to meet his as he went to greet her.

"This is PJ, my assistant." She turned to look at Jake as his words and mood seemed to be one of a defensive stance.

"Oh, my mistake." The smooth man opened the door but before he stepped out, turned to Jake. "We understand each other?" He didn't wait for an answer, but put his sunglasses on and disappeared, closing the door behind him quietly.

"Who was that? Are you in trouble?" When he didn't answer, Pearl's instincts kicked in and with an ache starting in the pit of her stomach, plopped down on her chair. "He was looking for Danny, wasn't he?"

"Now don't go getting upset. I handled it. He won't be bothering us again."

“How can you be sure? How did he know that Danny was here?” She pressed him.

“He was on a fishing trip. He went down to the Ski Inn asking around about new people in the area. This isn’t exactly a place that new people are moving in to regularly. The bartender sent them here because of you. He doesn’t have the slightest idea that you and Danny are related.”

“Why did he ask if I was the one you were talking about?” Pearl persisted.

“Like I said, he was told that you were here and new to the area. He’s looking for a man, Danny. He’s not looking for you.”

“He was creepy, wasn’t he? The minute I touched his hand, I felt a dark cloud above my head.” She shivered and added, “See! Someone just walked over my grave!” His laughter startled Pearl. “It’s not funny, Jake!”

“What exactly does that mean, ‘someone walked over your grave’?” He could barely ask between chuckles.

“I’m not really sure. Mother used to say it all the time when she got goose bumps. I looked it up once and the best thing I could find is that way back in medieval times, a person would get goose bumps when they walked over the place where they were going to die.”

“You don’t actually believe that stuff, do you?”

“I’m not sure. I certainly wouldn’t want to die here in this office. There was another variation that Mother used to tell. If you wanted to disrespect

someone after they passed, you would walk on their grave.” She stated.

When Pearl thought he would laugh again, she saw a more serious look on his handsome face. “PJ, I’m sure we’re going to be fine. No one is walking on anyone’s grave. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you or myself.”

“Should we try to get in touch with Danny?”

“Yes, I think you should alert him that we’ve had contact with someone. He needs to be aware and on his toes.” Jake went behind her desk and pulled her to her feet in a big, comforting hug. “PJ, we’re in this together.”

She reveled in his comforting hold and loved leaning on his strength. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s not necessary. You are not responsible for this.”

“No, I’m not, but my brother is and if I hadn’t come here searching for him, you wouldn’t be involved. For that, I’m sorry.” Before the moment could get out of hand, they heard movement at the office door. Pearl quickly pulled out of his arms and turned to see who was entering.

“Lucas! Back so soon?” Jake walked over and sat down on the chair next to her desk.

If he noticed anything, Lucas didn’t say a word. Instead, he handed a bag to her and one to Jake. “I hope this is the right thing. I’m not very good at computer stuff, but the guy at the store said it would work. I got two. He said that it was best to keep the backup information separate from each of your computers.”

“PJ, why don’t you back up your computer first? I want to catch Lucas up on the latest developments.” When he saw the look on her face, he reassured Pearl. “It’s all going to be fine. Stop your worrying.” With that the two men walked into his office and closed the door.

Frustrated with the entire situation, Pearl went to her desk and sat down. She knew she should do something, but what? Jake said she shouldn’t worry, but for most of her adult life Pearl hadn’t depended on anyone but herself. Trying to keep herself busy, Pearl ripped open the package on the external hard drive. She’d done this on her own computer not too long ago so following the guided steps, in a very short time the information on her desk computer was being saved to the drive.

Finally with a determined look on her face, Pearl got up and knocked softly on Jake’s office door. “Come in.”

“I know that you wanted to update Lucas, but I feel as this involves me, I should be included in the discussion.” She stood there with her arms crossed in front of her body. Pearl hoped she portrayed a firm position.

Lucas looked to Jake. Jake squirmed in his chair. Pearl stood pat. Time ticked on the clock behind Jake’s desk. Finally, he gave a tight grin. “PJ, you’re entirely right. Have a seat. I’ll bring you up to date with what I’ve told Lucas.”

For the next hour the three of them talked about the situation with Danny, the Slabbers, and the visit with the man from the casino. They formulated a

comprehensive plan of controlling the compound and each other as best they could. Jake was going to get security cameras installed at the gates and each building first thing in the morning. Finally, the ringing of the office phone startled all of them. "Hello, Isabella. Yes, he's here." Jake handed the phone to him.

"Yes, love, I'm sure we're going to the Ski Inn. You get yourself a rest and we'll be ready around five. Yes, I love you, too."

To them he said with a small grin on his face. "She's so happy and anxious to celebrate our baby news."

"And that's as it should be, friend. We'll all go to the Ski Inn later and have a great time." Jake reassured him.

"If you all agree, I think the less Isabella has to worry about, the better." Pearl prompted. The men shook their heads in agreement.

"If we are through, I need to get the backup done on your computer." Pearl stood up. "Sign on for me, please."

"Okay, we have to get some samples for today. Ready, Lucas?" Jake stood up and together they went out of the office.

She sat there and completed the same procedure for Jake's computer. With both backups completed, Pearl sat at her own desk. Her mind was too agitated to settle down and input figures, so she finally gave up. Grabbing both external hard drives, Pearl walked out of the office and traipsed over to the trailer.



She was just pouring herself a glass of wine when Jake came through the door. "Can I get you something?"

"Yeah, that sounds great." He sat beside her at the kitchen bar after she got his beer. "Are you okay?"

With some hesitation, Pearl finally looked directly at him. "My whole life has been turned upside down. My brother's on the run from God only knows who, my car's broke down, I've made a huge mess of my life and I'm attracted to a man that I shouldn't be. So, what do you think?" Pearl shrugged her shoulders.

"You're attracted to me?"

"That's all you got out of what I just said?" She smacked at him.

"PJ, we'll get through this. I called a security company I've dealt with before and they'll be here tomorrow morning. Did you text Danny?" When he saw her nod her head, he added, "Any response from him?"

"Not yet. At least we've tried."

Checking the clock on the wall, Jake finally spoke up. "We need to get ready for our dinner." They each went to their separate ends of the trailer and proceeded to clean up for their date. Pearl hesitated over that word and refused to acknowledge that it was anything but a friendly meal between them, Lucas and Isabella.

Just as she suspected Tina made a huge fuss over the news of a baby coming. She plied them with drinks and food and told everyone in the place that would listen. Pearl teased her, "Tina, you would think that you're the one having a baby!"

“God forbid! I wouldn’t have the energy.”

As the evening wore on, Isabella finally announced that she was ready to go home. They piled in and headed up the highway when Lucas suddenly exclaimed, “Jake! The compound is on fire!”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Oh, my God!” The tension in the truck was palpable. Horrible thoughts raced through each person’s mind.

“Call 911! Get some help here!” They were closer now and all they could see was the office fully enflamed.

As Jake pulled the truck through the open gate, he stopped just to the safe side of the drive. Both men jumped out and grabbed hoses from the trailer, aiming them as best as they could towards the burning building. “Jake, can’t we use the water in those tanks?” Pearl was right beside him.

“It’s sea water.”

“Salt water can be used to put out fires. Do you have one of those big draining hoses? We can use it, I’m sure.” He quickly handed his water hose to her and ran to the tank closest to the office. Lucas laid his hose down and ran to help Jake hook the drain hose up to the huge tank. “You take it! I’ll turn on the valve.”

The noise was overwhelming as the fire was devouring the small building. Their efforts were not going to save the structure, but it would at least keep it from spreading to other areas of the compound. Pearl turned to see where Isabella was and finally

located her standing over by the truck, covering her face with her shirt. Ashes were flying in the air, fueled by the slight winds blowing. The heat was almost unbearable but each of them knew that help was not going to come in time. It was up to them to save what they could or at the very least prevent the other buildings from catching on fire.

Her feet were soaked from the water flowing from the hose and by this time, Lucas and Jake had the big drainage line focusing it on the office. It didn't have a lot of pressure, but it was still effective in slowing down the progress of the blaze.

What seemed like hours but was probably only a few minutes, they realized that the fire was finally dying out with their efforts. The entire area was covered in water and the smell of burning wood was strong in the air. Jake and Lucas shut the big hose down and he came over to her. "PJ, give it up. It's a total loss, but at least the other buildings weren't affected."

When she didn't look at him or let go of the hose, Jake finally took hold of her shoulders. "PJ! Give it up! We've done all that we could! I can hear the fire engines coming down the highway. PJ!" He finally grabbed the hose out of her hands and shook her hard. "PJ! It's over, let it go!"

"This is all my fault! Oh, my God!" She cried with anger and frustration vivid in her words and voice.

Lucas came to stand beside them. "PJ, this is not your fault! This could have been the Slabbers, the mob, hell! It could've been faulty wiring."

With both men standing there confronting her, Pearl strained to regain her composure. In her mind, she knew that things could happen like this, but with her heart she knew without a doubt that if she hadn't been here involved in Jake's life, this would not have happened.

Before anything more could be said, the fire engine from Mecca pulled into the compound. They jumped into action, and everyone was ordered to stand back. Lucas went immediately to Isabella and found her a place to sit down on the tailgate of the truck. He lifted her as gently as he could, so she didn't have to climb.

Pearl stood off to the side away from the others. The pain of her involvement was almost unbearable. How can I make this up to him? I need to get out of here and let him get back to his life, she thought miserably.

His voice was tender as Jake spoke just to her. "I know what you're thinking, and you can forget it. You still owe me another few days of work and probably even more now. I can't recreate those files without you."

"I can't believe you would hold me to our bargain after this!"

"PJ, I'm a man of my word and you appeared to be a person that would keep a promise. We don't know how this happened. They'll do an investigation, and the truth will be found, but in the meantime, don't even think of leaving me." He corrected the last statement quickly, "Don't even think of leaving here until we get this office back up and running!"

With that, he stalked across the drive to speak with the firemen. They had the flames out now and were checking for hotspots. The place was a steaming mess with water and debris everywhere. The air smelled horribly with fumes from melting plastics and wood. Lucas and Isabella approached her. "PJ, I'm going to take Isabella home. She doesn't need to be stressed out with what's going on here. I also need to check on the dogs. I don't know what happened to them."

"You do that. I'll be here with him." Pearl nodded towards Jake.

"I'll be back as soon as I get her settled."

Isabella reached out and hugged Pearl. "It's not your fault. Just take care of Jake. Okay?"

The tears threatened again, and all that Pearl could manage was a nod of her head. She watched the couple walk hand in hand up the drive to their little home. She let the tears flow freely now with no one near to see them. There were a lot of turmoil and people in the compound. The firemen were mopping up their operation and she noticed several cars from the sheriff's department were parked just inside the gate. After a while, Lucas came back and went up to join the conversation with Jake and the sheriff's deputy.

Pearl stepped back away closer to the truck and took a seat up on the tailgate. "Pearly, what happened?"

Danny's voice startled her but when she looked up, it was his appearance that shook her the most. Her brother was standing there dressed as a security guard. She unleashed her anger on him.

“You need to get the hell out of here! This is all your fault! Those goons you owe from the casino paid us a visit this morning and tonight the office is burned to the ground. You have a lot of nerve, Daniel Wayne!”

“Oh, wow! Using the middle name means you’re really serious.” He tried to joke.

She slapped at his arm. “I am serious you idiot! None of this would have happened if I hadn’t come here to find you. If mother hadn’t talked me into coming to check on you, I wouldn’t have met Jake and your lurid past wouldn’t have affected his life!”

Danny leaned against the bed of the truck and looked at his sister, trying to figure out what to say. He didn’t have a chance because Jake walked up to them. Danny straightened up and turned to face the other man. “Jake, I’m sorry about all of this.”

“Hey, Danny, it’s not your fault any more than hers. What’s with the getup?”

“I’ve been employed by a security firm out of Mecca. I’ve been assigned to a retirement community and monitor the visitors coming into the property.”

“Hey, it’s a living. How’d you hear about this?” Jake questioned as he waved his hand toward the scene in front of them.

“It’s really just a coincidence. I was traveling back to Slab City after my shift and saw all the commotion. I wanted to make sure you all were alright.”

“That’s pretty unbelievable!” Pearl spoke with anger still laced in her words.

“Look, Pearly, I told you the truth. I wouldn’t hurt you or your guy at all!”

Before she could speak again, Jake hopped up on the tailgate, sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Hey, I know you’re upset, but anger is not going to help anyone right now.”

“I know what you’re saying is right, but I can’t help the feelings I’m having. This is so frustrating.”

“PJ, I need for you to calm down and help me give the sheriff a list of things that were in the office. The insurance company will need it too. Can you go over to the trailer and grab a notepad and start making that list?”

Without an answer, she jumped down from the truck and strode to the trailer, leaving her brother and Jake alone. “Hey, man, I’m sorry if this has anything to do with me.”

“We won’t know anything for a while. She’s just upset right now. It’s been an emotional week, and this was just the topping on the cake.” Jake tried to console him.

“What can I do to help?” Danny offered.

“Why don’t you come and help us rebuild the office. I’ll have the company buy the supplies and between Lucas and I we can get a head start on getting it completed. If you can pitch in, then we’ll get it done faster.”

“I...I don’t think Pearl would want me involved.”

“What better way to show her that you want to help than by coming and repairing the damage?”

Pearl returned then, hurrying up to Jake, “Look! I didn’t remember doing it, but I just found the backup drives on the kitchen counter. We have all the data



ready to load into new computers.” She held up the devices to show him.

“That’s great! Now, let’s start that list and see what we can remember.”

“Hey, I’m going to head out. Pearly, I am sorry.”

It was all she could do, but finally she gave Danny a forced answer. “Danny, I know you didn’t do this yourself, but don’t you think it’s time to take responsibility for your actions and your choices in life?”

Without saying a word, her brother left them, and she soon heard his motorcycle start up. “I can’t say it enough, but I’m really sorry that we got you involved in our family crap.”

“PJ let’s just start that list. I’ll get on my phone and get some new computers delivered tomorrow. We have hope thanks to your idea of getting our data backed up.”

He was interrupted by the deputy as he walked up to them. “Jake, I think we’re done here for now. Please don’t cross the yellow tape until the sheriff releases the site. We’ll have a car stationed just outside the gate for tonight. You can go ahead and lock the gate; he won’t need access.”

Jake stuck his hand out and thanked the young man for all his help. “Just let us know what you need to finish your investigation and we’ll comply.”

“I know you will. Talk to you soon.”

Lucas came over after closing the gate. “I’m going to go home. By the way, I checked on the dogs and they’re okay. I’ll talk to you in the morning and find

out what the plan is going to be to get back into business.”

“Sure thing. PJ let’s go. My leg is starting to hurt, and I need to get off my feet.”

“Oh, Jake, I didn’t even think about that. I’ll refresh your poultice and the bandage.” She fell in step with him.

Once inside, she quickly grabbed the covered dish containing the poultice and a fresh bandage. “Sit on the couch and I’ll take care of this.”

“I think I could use a beer. Can you do that too?” His laugh was weak.

“Of course.” She went about stirring up the poultice and gathering her wine and his beer.

Once she had all the things in her hand, Pearl sat down on the sofa next to Jake. She went to hand him his beer and as she did, she laughed out loud. “You should see yourself.”

“I wouldn’t talk, lady. With all that smoke and ash on your face and your hair in a mess, you wouldn’t take top prize in any beauty pageants.” He took a long draw on the cold bottle of beer.

She fussed with her hair, but finally gave up knowing it was useless. He was right, all that water just added to her natural curls, and they wound up tighter than ever. “Okay, so we won’t win any of those gorgeous awards, but we can lay claim to fame for being firefighters.”

“Yes, we can do that. Hey, how did you know that we could use salt water on the fire?”

“I used to date a fireman for a while, and he loved to talk about what he did for a living. I used to ask all

sorts of questions just to make him think I was interested.” She chuckled softly.

They sat in silence for a little bit. “I want you to know that I asked Danny to come by and help us rebuild the office.” He waited for her reaction. For a minute, he didn’t think she was going to say anything.

“You and I have danced around the topic of family and what it does or doesn’t mean to a person. We obviously have very different views on the subject. I only have one brother and that’s Danny. You, on the other hand, have a huge family and while I try to keep a relationship with him, you don’t seem to be interested in having any ties with your brothers and sisters. I think the best thing we can agree on right at this moment is to agree to disagree when it comes to family.” She expected to rile him but was surprised at his response.

“PJ, you might just be right. I’m exhausted, how about you?”

“I am. It’s not only a physical tiredness, but also an emotional drain on my system. What are we going to do now?”

Jake picked up his cell and started running his fingers over the keyboard. She watched with interest as he seemed intent on his quest. “Okay, to start with, we’ll have new computers delivered tomorrow or the next day. We can’t even begin to build on the sight of the old office until the fire department releases the site. So, I’m thinking we need to move the office back further away from the fence. What’d you think?”

“Where would you move it? I mean, I agree, but where?”

“I’m thinking that dirt parking lot to the south would be the best place. We never seem to use it, and this would give us some space from the road.”

“I think that’s a great idea and besides, we could start right away. We wouldn’t have to wait for clearance from the fire department. Don’t you have to get some sort of permits to build?”

Again, Jake started his fingers moving on his phone. In no time at all, he looked up at her with a smile of satisfaction. “We’ll have the lumber delivered in a day or two and we can start building the office. The fire chief can help us get a special permit to rebuild. I have a guy that can come and dig the footings and lay the blocks for the foundation. We’ll raise it so you’ll have a few steps to the door. Then we can put up the walls and the roof and before you know it, we’ll have a new office space.”

“You’re not a man to let grass grow under his feet, are you?”

“No, I’m not, but I am tired and it’s time to get some rest.” With that he struggled up on his feet. “Are you ready?”

“I am. I’ll see you in the morning.” She smiled for the first time since the fire.

Once on her feet, Pearl cleaned up their glasses and put away the last of the poultice. She was just about to turn off the light when she sensed Jake behind her. Slowly she turned to face him.

“Thanks for being here. I’m glad for your help.” He bent down and placed another one of his sweet, tender kisses on her lips and she relished in his touch. “I’m getting used to having you here.”

Her sarcasm wasn't wasted on him, "Wow and it only took about a week!" Feeling the need for more, she put her hands on his strong shoulders and pulled him in for a proper kiss. The contact between them increased and Pearl felt the satisfaction she'd been craving. He was the first to pull away.

"If I don't step away right now, we won't sleep in separate beds tonight." The challenge was thrown down.

Pearl didn't release her hold but lay her forehead on his chest. With deliberate and careful words, she spoke, "I want more, but now is not the time. I think we both know that."

"I'm so glad you can be the strong one. PJ, sleep well. I'll see you in the morning."

They walked like condemned men to their opposite ends of the trailer without looking back. Once in her room, Pearl went to the bathroom and attempted a wash up from the aftereffects of fighting the fire, too tired to take a shower. Ultimately giving up, she shut off the light, stripped the stinking clothes from her body and plopped down on the bed. Pearl finally gave in to the total exhaustion that was overtaking her mind as well as her physical being. Without bothering to put on her pajamas, she crawled between the sheets and gave in to what she needed most. The cool sheets felt good on her naked skin. Pearl found the sleep she craved almost right away.

The smell of coffee brewing teased her senses. After a quick shower, she searched through her clean clothes and found some shorts and a top that would be okay for her day. Pearl reached down and grabbed

a stack of dirty clothes. As she got into the front room, she noticed his stack of dirty clothes by the laundry area.

“Good morning. I was waiting for your clothes before I started the washer.” He got up and took the dirty garments from her hand and to her surprise, Jake started their laundry.

“That seems a bit intimate, doesn’t it?” She laughed.

“You mean our clothes washing together or are you referring to something else?”

Ignoring his teasing, Pearl went and found a cup of the hot brew. After a tentative sip, she sat at the counter beside him. “What are we going to do today?”

“I got a call from my electronics guy. He can’t deliver the new computers and printers until tomorrow. The lumber might get here today, but we can’t do anything until I get the footers dug.”

“I hear the frustration in your voice. Sounds like you need a diversion.” She spoke her thoughts aloud.

The wicked grin on his face showed what his thoughts were, and Pearl quickly put a stop to it. “No, not that kind of diversion. How about we take a ride up to the casino in Indio?”

“You want to go gambling?”

“Actually, I was thinking more of a fishing trip.” She waited for it to dawn on Jake what she really meant.

“We don’t know which casino your brother owes. There are several in the Indio area and a few more in Palm Springs. That’s a lot of gambling to do until we find the right one. I have a different fishing

expedition in mind.” He got up and refilled his coffee cup before adding, “We need to replenish the water in that tank from the sea. How about we go down by Bombay Beach and fill our tanker truck and then we’ll have lunch at the Ski Inn. There should be a lot of interest about our fire there and we can see what fish we can catch.”

“Okay, I know the gossip is probably buzzing amongst the locals.”

“But first I want to go over to that parking lot and stake out the area for the backhoe guy. If he shows up, he can start digging the footers and I don’t have to be here.”

“Do you need my help?”

“Sure, get your shoes on and meet me out there.”

Pearl grabbed her tennis shoes and in just a few minutes was out the door, greeted by the hot sun overhead. Back tracking, she went inside and grabbed the sunhat Jake had given her earlier. Her cell phone rang and as she looked at the display saw that it was the car mechanic Tuffy.

“Hey! What’s up?” She asked.

“I got good news. I found the part we need, and your car should be ready in just a day.” When he didn’t get a response, Tuffy tried again, “PJ? Are you there?”

Shaking her head, she found herself flooded with mixed feelings. With her car repaired, she had no reason to stay here with Jake. Her brother was in charge of his own problems, and she had no real reason to be here.

Shaking the clouds of doubt from her head, Pearl finally responded, “Tuffy, that’s great. Sorry, I just wasn’t expecting your call. We’ve had some stuff to deal with here.”

“Hey, no problemo. I understand. I have those sorts of things happen to me all the time. I’ll call you when it’s ready, okay?”

As she shut the call off, Pearl took a moment to collect her wits, but failed. Finally, she made a conscious choice to ignore the call. In her mind, she knew she’d have to tell Jake about the car, just not yet.

“Glad to see you put the hat on, it’s blazing out here today.” He was standing by the pile of rebar stakes and with a scowl on his face, looked over the space in front of them.

She looked over in the direction of the burnt-out building with the various firefighting personnel starting to move through the debris. The air was still heavy with the smell of destruction. “What exactly are they doing over there?”

Jake handed her a ball of heavy-duty string and she followed him to the corner of the lot. “They’re digging for clues as to how the fire was started.” He stood up and stared at her. “Didn’t your fireman boyfriend tell you that?”

She laughed and for a moment thought he was jealous, but quickly dismissed that idea. “We had other things to talk about and it didn’t always involve his work.”

She watched as Jake pounded one of the rebar stakes into the ground. He handed her a tape



measure and instructed Pearl to hold it on the stake. Once she did that, he took it and looking down at the numbers Jake walked straight up the lot and once he seemed satisfied, pounded another stake into the ground.

They repeated the process until they had marked out a rectangle shape in the lot. She was impressed that he knew so much about how to do this sort of thing. “I have a question.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of you, PJ. What?” He stood next to her as they both glistened with sweat in the hot sunlight. “How do you know if this building is going to be square? I mean it looks like it is, but how can you be sure?”

“Hold that end of the tape on that post.” She did as he instructed and then watched as Jake went to the opposite corner.

“Oh, I get it. We’ll measure the other angle and if they’re the same, we have a building that’s not crooked.” She grinned.

“You ask more questions than any other woman I’ve ever known.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve been told that.” She stopped when he did. “It probably won’t be the last time either.” Pearl laughed.

They both looked up as Lucas came from his home. “Hey, what are you guys up to?”

“I’m teaching PJ the complexities of building our new office. What do you think?” Jake pointed to the strings attached to the rebar.

“I think it’s perfect. It’s a little bigger than our other space, isn’t it?” Lucas looked over at the huge pile of burnt debris. “Any news from them?”

“Nah, nothing yet. I think it’s way too soon. They just started this morning. I don’t think we’ll hear anything for at least a week or more.” Jake watched as the inspectors sifted through the rubble.

“You want me to go and fill the water truck?” Lucas offered.

“I told PJ that we’d go, and do it after we got this done. You can just take the day off if you want. There’s not much to do except wait for stuff to be delivered. I ordered the lumber, called the backhoe guy, and the computers will be here tomorrow.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all under control. I think I’ll take Isabella to Indio to shop for baby stuff. She’s so excited and wants to get started on a blanket.” He grinned with pride.

“Just give me a minute to call the lumber company and see what time they expect to get here.” Jake got on his phone. “They’ll be here in about an hour. Can you wait until then?”

“Sure. I’ll just go and tell Isabella to get ready. You two going to be alright with the water truck?”

“Yeah, no problem. We’ll both get an early start in the morning with everything. If those computers come tomorrow, PJ, you can start putting the data back in the logs.”

“It sounds like we’ll have a lot to do in the next few days.” Pearl said. Her mind raced to the news from the mechanic. Am I living on borrowed time, she thought sadly?

Jake's cell buzzed and he looked at the display. "This is our backhoe guy." He started a conversation and waved at Lucas as he walked away.

"I'm glad you're here, PJ. He's a different person now."

"I'm not sure how to take that. I'm pretty sure part of this is my fault, well me and Danny's fault." She pointed to the damage to the office.

"We don't know what caused that. You need to give yourself a break. Jake doesn't blame you and neither do I. He likes having you here, I can tell. I'm going to tell Isabella we'll go to town. You enjoy your ride on the water truck."

"Oh, I'm sure I will. Tell her I said hello."

Lucas waved over his back as he walked towards his little home at the back of the compound. About the same time, Jake finished his call and came back to her side. "The footings will be dug day after tomorrow. Ready to go and get the water?"

"Yes, just let me go and freshen up a bit."

"I could do with a cool drink myself." Together they walked to the trailer and once inside savored the cool environment. "Sometimes, you don't realize how hot it is out there until you get in this wonderful air conditioning."

Without answering, she walked to her room, went to wash her face and try to restore some semblance of order to her hair. Looking into the mirror, Pearl knew she had to tell Jake about the call from the mechanic. There was no real reason for her to remain here with the repairs finished to her car and that caused tremendous sadness to her heart. Shaking off those

depressing thoughts, Pearl finally went back to the front room.

“Ready?” He asked.

“Jake, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Now that sounds ominous. What’s on your mind?” He sat on the nearest kitchen bar stool and waited.

She opened her mouth to speak but shut it. Once more Pearl tried to find the courage to tell him about her car but was stopped by a knock at the door. Jake held up his finger to signal that she should wait just a minute.

Upon opening the door, they both saw the county sheriff standing on the deck. Jake turned to Pearl and stated the obvious, “This can’t be good.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jake turned back and addressed the sheriff. “Bill, how can I help you?”

The sheriff leaned and looked around at Pearl and then back to Jake. “Can you come out here where we can talk in private?”

“This is PJ, she’s my assistant and you can talk in front of her. You want to come in?”

“I think it’s best you come out to the site.” He turned, fully expecting them to follow.

Jake looked to Pearl before stepping out to trail behind the sheriff. Both were completely surprised as they saw several deputies putting up crime tape around the entire burned-out building. “What’s this?” Jake hurried up to step beside him. “Why the crime tape?”

As they got closer to the edge of the tape, Pearl could see several detectives alongside some of the firemen. They were bent over and gently probing a pile of debris. She strained to see what they were poking at as she held her hands to shadow the sun out of her eyes. The sheriff came to stand directly in front of her view, blocking the scene from her eyes.

“Miss, I don’t think you want to see this.”

“Bill! What’s going on?” Jake demanded.

“They found a body.” Both Jake and Pearl were shocked into silence. Jake moved closer to see but failed to take in the scene. He finally found his voice, “Who is it? Can you tell? Oh, those are dumb questions. You couldn’t possibly know yet.”

“All we know right now is that it’s a woman. The crime scene will be stabilized so that we can protect any and all evidence in order to determine several things and get the answers to your questions.”

Pearl’s voice was soft, “You mean like how she died but the most important thing of all, who she is? What was she doing in there?”

“Jake, we’ll need to talk to each one of you. Who else was on the property yesterday? We’ll want to interview everybody that has access to this compound.” Jake just nodded.

Pearl found herself fighting back tears and anger. How could something like this happen? How did this person get into a locked yard? Why was that woman here? Who in the world was she?” She felt Jake’s arm come around her shaking shoulders.

“PJ, none of this is your fault.”

“I wasn’t really thinking of that right now.” She leaned into his strength. “How could something like this happen? Why?”

He led her away from the site. They made their way back to the deck on the trailer. In the small amount of shade, Jake pulled two lawn chairs together and they both sat down. He shook his head in amazement. “I don’t know how she got in here or why she was here. I know Bill will do a thorough job of investigating things and we’ll get some answers.”

“Shouldn’t you call the people you work for? Won’t they want to hear it from you instead of on the local news?” She couldn’t stop shaking. Her nerves were getting the best of her.

They both looked up as they heard Lucas speak. “Jake, what’s going on? Why is the sheriff here?”

“They found the body of a woman burned in the debris.”

“Oh, my God! How could that be?”

“I’m as baffled as you all are. We went together last night, and I distinctly remember shutting the gate. The only people that have a key are you and me.”

The sheriff’s voice interrupted their conversation. “That’s one of the questions I have. Are you positive, there are only two of you that can lock and unlock that gate?”

“Absolutely! We’ve been having trouble with the Slabbers, and Lucas and I have been diligent about keeping this place secure.” Jake rubbed his hand through his hair. The sheriff was called back to the scene by one of the deputies. When he was out of earshot, Lucas spoke.

“Jake,” His voice was showing his concern, “You gave a key to your brother, the attorney, remember?”

This bit of information shocked Pearl. “I thought you didn’t speak to your family. Why would you give a key for this place to your brother?”

“You still haven’t told her?” Lucas asked.

“No.”

“You haven’t told me what?” When he still didn’t respond, she pressed. “What haven’t you told me, Jake?”

He blew out a huge breath. "This is my company. My grandpa left me his entire estate. I started this company with my inheritance."

The total look of confusion on her face spoke volumes as she looked from Jake to Lucas and back again. "That doesn't clear up anything. What else?"

"My brothers and sisters were mad as hell. They thought it was unfair that Grandpa favored me. I struggled with his decision for a long time before I finally decided what would be the right thing to do about it."

"Then who have you been sending those reports to? Who do you answer to, Jake?"

"I created a trust and it's monitored by a group of basically independent people that don't have a vested interest in the money. It's kind of a board of directors but their only concern is that I'm being responsible with the funds."

"You gave them that much power?"

He looked her straight in the eyes as he answered. "Yes." For a moment, he bent his head down as if in defeat. "You know how we've been having those conversations about how often we make decisions in life based on the pressure from our family? Well, I felt that this would be the best way I could prove to them that they would eventually get their share of Grandpa's money."

She shook her head, "I'm still not following this. How can they get their share if you own the company?"



“I set it up as a trust for each one of my siblings. Once we are successful, they’ll start getting checks from the profits.”

“Oh, my God!” She exclaimed. “I can’t believe you. You’re either a saint or a fool!”

“Right now, I’m feeling very much the fool. I need to contact my brother and find out if he gave the key out to someone.” He stood up, went into the trailer, and shut the door.

Lucas looked to Pearl. “Don’t be too harsh in your judgement of him. You won’t find a better man anywhere.”

“I’m not judging. I’m entirely too stunned to think about anything right now, except for that poor woman stuck in the fire.”

Just then a big flatbed truck loaded with lumber pulled up to the open gate. A deputy went to the driver and after a small amount of conversation, the truck was allowed into the yard. Lucas immediately went across to the old parking lot area and started directing the delivery guy.

Pearl leaned back and shut her eyes. She tried to sort out all the emotions flying around in her head. It seemed that she and Jake had so much more in common than she could ever imagine. With a deep sigh, she came to a very unsettling revelation. They were both suckers for their family’s demands. To feel loved and needed, they self-sacrificed their own needs and wants. Jake spoke about feeling like a fool right now and she knew she could completely relate to his statement.

Finally, taking a deep cleansing breath, Pearl got up and went over to help Lucas with the lumber being unloaded. “What can I do?”

Sensing her need to be busy, Lucas pointed to the smaller items at the front of the load. “You can unload those boxes of nails and such. Just put them in a stack over there.” She got busy, working hard to keep her eyes from straying to the burned site. It was hot, the lack of a breeze was stifling but she worked tirelessly unloading boxes of nails, screws, and smaller boards.

Lucas and the truck driver were using a loader that could unload the larger bundles of boards and pallets of cement blocks. All the items looked like various parts of a giant puzzle. She glanced over at the trailer to see if Jake had emerged yet, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She stopped for a moment and took her hat off to use it as a temporary fan. Pearl wiped at the sweat flowing down her face on her shirt sleeve.

“Maybe you should stop and go sit in the shade for a break.” Jake’s voice was just behind her back.

“I’m fine. I want to stay busy.”

“I can understand that, but I don’t need you passing out.” He tried to touch her on the shoulder, but she pulled away.

“I’m fine.” She went back to work unloading and stacking the supplies from the delivery truck.

He didn’t say anything more but went to talk with Lucas and the delivery driver. She tried not to but couldn’t seem to keep her eyes from going in his direction. Pearl watched as Jake lifted heavy boards

and carried them to the stack that Lucas had started. She saw his muscles strain with the loads and wondered if his leg was bothering him. He wasn't one to let that small injury keep him from helping the others.

Just as they were finishing up another vehicle came to the front gate. It was a simple white van and after the interaction with the deputy, the young man behind the steering wheel pulled up to the trailer and got out. Jake waved and went over to greet him. After a brief conversation, they went to the back of the van and soon Jake was lifting some smaller boxes out and up the steps into the trailer.

Curiosity got the best of her and soon Pearl went over to help the two men. Lucas was still finishing up with the lumber delivery. The young man introduced himself and handed her a small box to carry. As she went to step in through the door, she bumped solidly into Jake. He grabbed her by the arms to help steady her and the boxes she carried.

"Sorry." Was all she could muster as a response.

"Just put the boxes on the kitchen table and we'll assemble the computers later."

She found herself unable to respond. So much had happened in just the last hour that it had thrown her normal good nature into a tailspin. Pearl ducked her head and quickly placed the packages on the table and headed back out for more. She stopped as the last box was put with the others. Jake was near and spoke, "PJ, we'll have time to sort out the complications between us later, but for right now, can you at least look at me?"

Taking a deep breath, she looked up and witnessed the pain etched in his handsome face. "I'm not mad, I'm just confused. It seems most of our time together has been with a whole lot of drama, huh?"

"I can certainly agree with that."

"Did you get a hold of your brother?" She asked.

"I had to leave a message, but he'll call as soon as he can, I'm sure." He started to open some of the packages.

Pearl reached for the box closest to her and joined Jake in his efforts. They worked in silence as they finally had all the equipment opened and out of the boxes. "Why don't I get at least one computer put together?" She offered.

"Sounds good. I need to go out and see how I can help Lucas." He hesitated as if he wanted to add something, but finally just went out the door.

Before she could get busy putting a computer together, her cell phone chimed. She looked to see it was her mother and groaned. "Bad timing, Mother," Pearl spoke before answering the call.

"Mother. How are you doing?" She tried to inject some enthusiasm in her voice. "What's up?"

"I want you to come home. I can send you some money, just tell me how."

"Mom, I'm fine." She crossed her fingers at yet another lie. "My car should be ready in a day or two and that'll give me enough time to finish the job for Jake."

"Oh, you're just trying to upset me. I'm sorry I made you go out there and I'm sorry your car broke

down, but you need to come home where it's safe." Her mother's voice whined on and on.

Patience, she told herself before responding. "I'm safe and doing fine. I'm not trying to upset you. I want to finish this job. I'll be home in a week. I love you. Bye." She ended the conversation.

I do want to see this through, especially now with the mystery of a burned body out there, she thought sadly. Shaking those thoughts away, Pearl turned on the computer and watched the startup menu booting. While waiting, she unwrapped the printer and proceeded to get it ready. Pearl worked her way through the other boxes and found a modem. She was glad there was nothing on the small table except for the office equipment. Carefully she arranged the computer, the printer, and the modem.

As time went by, Pearl got all the pieces connected and soon everything was up and running. She decided to grab the backup drive and reinstall the data they'd been collecting. Not sure how to proceed, she plugged the device into the new computer and waited for instruction on the screen. She followed the step-by-step directions and soon the data was downloading.

Without knowing how long this was going to take Pearl opened the front door and looked at the activity outside. Jake and Lucas were out at the pile of lumber talking and the detectives and the firemen were still sifting through the debris. Both delivery vehicles were gone.

Even though it was still hot, she went and sat down in the shade on the deck. Where do I go from here? Her thoughts were chaotic with extreme

emotional upheaval driving them into the various areas of her mind. She looked directly at Jake and her heart lurched. She loved him but he'd given her no indication that he even remotely thought of her in the same way. Now she was aware that his family was as intense with drama as her own. Pearl realized that Jake was walking in her direction, and it gave her cause for concern, but she didn't have time to react.

He took the seat next to her and for just a few moments, there was just silence between them. He reached over and put his hand on her arm. The contact felt right, and she let that be her guide to her words. "I know you're upset with everything going on, but Jake I'm the last thing you have to worry about."

Pearl hoped her words that were meant to soothe would hit their mark. Neither of them looked anywhere but straight ahead. "I know you're probably mad as hell that I've been riding you about your family obligations when all the time I was doing the opposite of my own advice."

"Funny, but I'm not mad. Just confused. Anyone that says family is everything doesn't have families like ours, huh? You must have loved your grandpa very much. I think you do care for your brothers and sisters, too."

"I have some of the best memories of being with him. I was very small, but I can still remember how he smelled of pipe tobacco. I used to sit on his lap as he read the evening paper and the whole time, he talked with me like I could understand what he was saying." Jake removed his cap and rubbed his hand through his messy hair.

“Our family gatherings were okay but certain amounts of drama always seemed to happen. I was a quiet child and I think that my grandpa tried to help protect me from all that craziness. I loved him a lot for that.”

Her eyes teared up, but Pearl tried to hide it not only from him but from herself. Even though she had only the one brother, she had lots of cousins and had felt the same exact feelings Jake had just confessed.

He stood up and she joined him. He tentatively reached to pull her in close to him in a warm, caring embrace. Pearl felt herself loving his touch and pressed herself closer. They just stood there for a few precious minutes enjoying the contact and the seemingly mutual understanding of their immediate family concerns.

Lucas came to the deck. “I hate to interrupt, but if we’re going to go and get the water, we should go now.” He looked embarrassed as if he interrupted a very precious scene.

She pulled away without looking at Jake. “Hey, no problem.” Pearl spoke to Lucas.

“Sorry about the change in plans. You okay with staying here?” Jake asked.

“Yes, I’ve got to get in there and finish the computer. As soon as that one is done, I’ll set up the other.”

They went their separate ways, but Pearl gave one last longing look in Jake’s direction. She couldn’t be so wrong to think that he had feelings for her, could she? Her thoughts went unchecked, but her tears didn’t. Pearl sat on the lawn chair and finally allowed

herself to let her feelings flow along with the tears. It seemed that emotions from years ago came flowing in full force. Pearl couldn't remember the last time she'd had a good cry. Her shoulders shook and she finally gave in to the overwhelming feelings her escapade to the Salton Sea had caused in her life. For the next several minutes, Pearl just gave in to her misery.

The world kept turning, the firemen were working, the sun was shining, and Pearl indulged in her own world of extreme feelings. She felt sensations of guilt, dedication, failure but more recently awakening, confliction and finally new love. Her eyes hurt but not nearly as bad as her heart. I need to get away from here, her thoughts were guiding her. As soon as Jake gets back, I'll let him know my car is going to be ready and I'm leaving. Those thoughts brought another batch of tears.

Finally, Pearl knew she needed to finish this pity party and she got up to go into the trailer and work on the computers. She felt a renewed commitment to complete this project so that she could leave with a free conscience. She had agreed to give Jake two weeks, but with the recent circumstances Pearl felt she'd given him a fair swap. She'd given him her heart and in exchange, he'd helped her find her brother but most importantly Jake had helped her find herself.

For the next hour or so, she worked on the other laptop and as she finally put the finishing touches on both computers, Pearl felt a sense of accomplishment. Once she started the input from the external drive, Pearl went over to the refrigerator and looked for a snack. She looked at the bottle of Chardonnay and



was tempted but finally chose a more reasonable piece of cheese.

As she was sitting there watching the computers do their thing, Pearl heard a knock at the door. Thinking she'd rather be alone, but knowing she was obligated to answer, Pearl went and opened it. Standing there before her was Danny. He tried to smile but fell short.

"Pearly."

She pulled him in, and they hugged tightly.

"Hey, hey. What's this all about?"

The tears returned in full force. Try as she might, Pearl could not contain her emotions. Her body wracked with sobs and the desperation of futility. Her brother just held her tightly and ran his hands soothingly down her back. Finally, she felt herself getting a hold of her emotions and Pearl pulled away from her brother, finally shutting the door to the heat outside.

"I'm just having a hugely bad day."

"I don't buy that for a minute. What's really going on?" Her brother voiced his opinion. "Pearly, I know you and this is so unlike you. The only time I remember you crying was when you were angry not sad. What's got you pissed?"

With huge shudders and a strong attempt to get control over the tears and her emotions, Pearl finally spoke. "I've found my passion in life."

Danny waited for her to finish her thoughts. He watched as his little sister struggled with that revelation. She moved to the refrigerator and offered him a beer. He took it and still waited patiently for

her to gather herself as he took a seat at the breakfast bar.

“You’re awful, you know? I want you to push me for information. I want you to be the one to drag the truth out of me.” She took a deep breath, “I don’t want to have to be the one to say it, damn it!”

“Say it, Pearly.”

“I love Jake and I want to save the Salton Sea beside him for the rest of my life!”

The air in the room seemed to disappear as she sat down beside her brother. He reached over and put his hand over hers on the bar. For several precious minutes, brother and sister sat there and cherished the moment.

“Danny, I love you and I’m glad you’re alright.”

“I love you too. You’re going to be fine you know.” Danny reassured her.

“They found a body in the burned office.”

“Oh, my God!” He exclaimed. “You probably should have led with that. What did Jake say about that?”

“It seems that he’s the legal owner of this place.”

Danny seemed to be too astounded to respond. He waited for her to explain further as he took another sip of his beer.

“Jake inherited a bunch of money from his grandpa and his sisters and brothers were all mad, so he’s trying to please everyone by saving the Salton Sea.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“He’s got a plan to save the sea and if it’s approved, this operation could make money. His

family will all gain from the profits.” When she saw the confusion on her brother’s face, Pearl tried to explain more, “His grandfather left his entire estate to Jake. As a very young child Jake remembered the love his grandfather had for this area and by trying to save the sea from disaster, he can not only honor him he can share his inheritance with his brothers and sister.”

“Wow, what an honorable thing to do.”

She finally grinned and agreed with her brother, “It is, isn’t it?”

“He’s a good man, Pearly. Where is he now?”

“We had to use the water from one of those tanks to help put out the fire so Jake and Lucas went to get the water from the sea to refill it. Those tanks out back are part of his experiment. He and I were going to go, but then the sheriff told us about the body they found, and everything fell apart.”

“Any idea how she got in here?” Danny asked.

“Jake has a call into his brother, a lawyer. He evidently gave him a key to the gate. It’s all very confusing.”

“Hey, let’s take a walk.” Danny stood up.

“Are you nuts? It’s over a hundred degrees out there.”

“We need to walk the perimeter and see if there was another way in besides the front gate.” He patiently explained. “Get your hat and a bottle of water.”

Reluctantly she got up and did as her brother requested. Together they were soon walking around the fence line of the property. It was hot, there was no

wind, and she felt the sweat starting to form under the brim of her hat. She had given her brother a bottle of water too and noticed he was cooling himself down with a few drops. They walked slowly around the inside of the fenced compound, looking for any sign of another way into the property.

Feeling the vibrations from her cell phone in her back pocket, Pearl looked at the display before answering it. "Raven, what a surprise."

"I told you we would stay in better contact. How are things going?"

"Oh my, you won't believe what's happening." Pearl walked beside her brother and explained the most current situation to her cousin. Raven was shocked.

"I can't believe it! How awful for you and Jake. Do you think this is related to Jake's efforts to save the sea?"

"We're not sure of anything right now. He's called his brother to find out about the key he gave him for safekeeping to the property. We won't know anything more for a day or two, I'm sure. Danny is here and we're walking the fence to see if there's anything disturbed or if there's another way in."

"That's how I got into the mining company when Chase and I were trying to get evidence of their illegal activities."

"Are you serious?" Pearl asked.

"Chase had found a hole in the fence by an alligator juniper tree. I had to climb the tree and drop over inside. Look for something like that."

“I don’t think that’s possible here. There are no big trees around and the bushes aren’t big enough to hide a hole in the fence, but thanks for the idea. We’ll keep looking and I’ll call you back as soon as I find out something.”

“Oh, wait, I wanted to let you know that we found a website that details the ideas to save the sea. It seems there are eleven other plans you can go over to see how Jake’s thoughts and efforts compare.”

“That’s great. Yes, just text me. Thanks, Raven.”

To her brother, “You heard everything?”

“Yes, there sure is a lot we didn’t know about her, isn’t there?” He started walking again and Pearl followed.

They were just making turning up the other side back to the office when Pearl noticed a long white van pulling into the compound. She noticed the official looking emblem on the side of the door. “Uh oh, it looks like the coroner is here.”

Danny took her by the arm and turned them both around to head back the way they just came. “You don’t need to see that. Let’s just go and see how Isabella is doing.”

Without protesting, Pearl knew her brother was right and allowed him to guide her to the small home not far away from their spot. As he was about to knock on the door, Isabella pulled it open. “Hello you two. Come in out of that heat.”

She looked to the vehicle at the front gate before shutting the door. “Looks like the coroner’s here. That must be a terrible job. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thanks, we have water.” Danny replied.

“What were you two doing out in this heat?” Isabella asked.

“Danny thought it would be a good idea to walk the fence line and see if there were any holes or another way to get in here.”

“Oh, that is a good idea. Did you find anything?”

“Not really, we were just finishing up the other side when they came to pick up the body. Danny didn’t think I needed to be there to see that.”

“That poor girl. I wonder who she was?” Isabella spoke out loud the thought that was on all their minds.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Here comes Jake and Lucas. Come on Danny, I want to talk with them.” She turned to give Isabella a quick hug. “We’ll keep you updated.”

“Let’s quickly finish that side of the fence.” They both hurried up and as they progressed down the line, it was clear that there had been no breach in the fencing. She noticed that Jake had pulled the water truck just inside the gate and was jumping down from the cab of the older, well-used vehicle. She waved but if he noticed, he didn’t return her greeting. The two men had a brief discussion before walking directly to the action in front of the burned out building.

“You okay, Pearly?” Her brother’s voice interrupted her random thoughts.

“I’m fine. I just want to make sure he’s doing alright. This has got to be very stressful on the guy.”

“You’re totally hooked on him, aren’t you?”

She opened her mouth to speak but closed it without responding. Finally, Pearl turned to face her brother. “Yes, I am. It seems that others realized it long before me. Raven saw my love for Jake and now you. It’s happened so fast that I haven’t had time to take it all in.”

“He seems to be a great. You could do worse.”

She swiped at his arm, but Danny managed to stay out of the way of her playful slap. They kept walking up the fence line and were almost to the site of what was left of the office. “Do you think he knows?”

“He has a lot on his mind right now, but he’d have to be totally blind not to see that you care deeply.”

She stopped in her tracks. “That’s all the more reason for me to leave here. My car is now ready and you’re fine, so my purpose for being at the Salton Sea is moot.”

“You’re not going to stay and see where this is going?” Danny was surprised at her declaration.

“He doesn’t feel the same way, I’m sure.”

“Do you know that to be a fact?”

“It’s complicated.” She replied.

“That’s bull! That’s what couples say when they’re too scared to try.”

Before she could reply, Pearl saw that Jake was walking over to them. The look she passed to her brother warned him not to repeat their conversation.

Jake came close to her side. “You doing alright?”

“I’m fine. Danny thought we should walk the perimeter to see if there was a hole in the fence, you know another way in.”

“Did you find anything suspicious?” This he asked of Danny.

“Nah, everything is fine. We didn’t see any way that someone could get in other than the front gate. Too bad you didn’t have cameras installed.”

“Yeah, I should have done that a long time ago, but other than the Slabbers occasional attacks, it didn’t seem necessary.”



Pearl watched as the medical personnel loaded the gurney into the back of their van. She couldn't see anything as they had completely covered the body with a sheet. She shuddered as the reality of that person's horrific death hit home. Jake's arm suddenly went around her for comfort. She looked over at him and said a silent thank you.

"When will they know anything?" She asked.

"They said maybe with any amount of luck, they might have some information within 24 hours."

"Did you hear from your brother?"

"No, but that's not unusual. He always has such a busy schedule that it sometimes takes several days to hear back from him. I think I need to text him the importance of my call. He often shoots back a quicker reply that way."

"That's a good idea, Jake. We need to find out who she was and why she was in here."

His hesitation caught her attention. "Maybe I'm afraid of what we'll find out."

"Jake, if there's anything I can do, just tell me." Danny offered.

Lucas finally spoke up and told them he was going to check on his wife. "I'll be back after lunch."

"I'm not hungry. I think I'll just go over and work on the new office space." Jake started to walk away from them.

"I'll help." Her brother volunteered, leaving Pearl to decide for herself what she wanted to do. Needing to keep busy, she found herself going into the trailer and firing up the computer. But instead of working on

it, she noticed the book she'd been reading and went over to the sofa to sit down.

As she opened it to the last page she'd read, Pearl noticed she was almost finished with the forbidden love story. She realized that she'd gotten caught up in the weathered pages and was sad to see such a beautiful tale coming to an end. Much like my life, she thought sadly, but quickly shook those depressing ideas out of her head.

As she started to read again, Pearl saw that Mary had sent a note to Matthew and asked him to meet her at the barn.

My love, there are things we need to discuss, she wrote. Pearl felt an ominous cloud was about to rain on their newfound love. Mary's words continued on the page:

*"My heart is broken. I had to tell Matthew that we could no longer see each other. He did not take it well. His anguish showed all over his handsome face. We held each other one last time and as I left the barn, I looked back to see the tears falling from his eyes. It is not in my nature to hate but at this moment in time, I have very little love in my heart for my parents. They are forcing me to marry a man I do not love just to satisfy social convention."*

Pearl wiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks. She turned to the next page, but it was blank. The next page contained signatures. She grinned as she recognized a young girl's work. Mary had obviously practiced writing her name as a married woman. It

was scribbled several times on the page. All young girls do that at some point in their youthful days.

Turning a few more pages she saw there was only one more entry in the antiquated journal. The ink was newer and seemed different. It appeared to have been written with a shaky hand.

*“Jacob and I have had a good life and I don’t have but one regret. I just found out from one of Matthew’s distant family members, his grandniece Rae that he committed suicide a few months after I married another and moved away. I never knew. That breaks my heart all over again. Could I have done more to make him understand? Could I have prevented that tragedy?”*

Pearl gasped at the revelation in the worn pages. What a burden to bear, she thought sadly. Putting the book carefully down on the cushion next to her, Pearl just sat there for a few minutes. There is too much sadness right now to deal with in her mind and heart. Determined to get busy, shoving the gloom aside, she got up and started making some lunch. Her hands stilled as she assembled the sandwiches, and her mind took over. Do I want to live with any regrets?

Pearl went to the window facing the new office space. She watched as Jake and Danny worked at moving lumber and supplies. They appeared to move companionably side by side without speaking. Her heart was involved with both men. With a deep sigh, she knew that her brother was going to be fine. Danny can take care of himself, she thought with a sense of

sisterly pride. He needed to settle with the casino owners, but other than that, Danny seemed happy and content with his choices in life.

“Can I say the same about my own decisions?” She asked aloud, but not wanting to answer her own question, she turned back to finish the lunch preparations. Pearl finally put all the food on a tray and carried it out to the guys. The sun was starting its downward descent into the horizon, but the heat didn’t give up as it penetrated the environment.

“How about some lunch, guys?”

“Hey, that sounds good.” Her brother moved a few concrete blocks to create a small table. Once she placed the tray down, both men reached for a glass of the iced tea and a sandwich. Jake looked up to her and grinned. “Thanks, PJ. I appreciate it. I’m glad to see you wearing your hat.”

Her small grin was thanks enough.

“I’ve offered Danny a job.”

“You have! Why? He just got a new job.” She couldn’t contain her surprise.

“I need someone to help Lucas and I build this office. We need to work fast and he needs something to keep him out of trouble.”

She turned to her brother. “Do you know anything about construction?”

“Pearly, I know a lot about everything. You’d be shocked at what I can do.”

“Another jack of all trades in the family, huh?” Jake teased her. Danny joined in with their laughter.

Jake's phone rang and he answered quickly. "Nick, thanks for getting back to me. I've had some major trouble here."

They couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but Pearl was aware of the serious tone from Jake. "Your secretary is missing? What about the key for the compound? You still have it secured, right?"

Jake got up and started pacing as the words between the brothers got heated. "Why on earth would your secretary take the key? How would she even know what it unlocked? Damn!"

Pearl got up and went over to his side. She reached over and put her hand on his arm. Jake turned to face her, his anguish all over his face. "You need to send me all the information on your secretary so I can tell the sheriff. Yes, of course I think the two incidents are related. Yeah, send it now." Jake shut down the call and stared out at nothing.

"Jake? What's going on?"

"I'm not sure, but I think my brother's secretary made off with the key. I don't know why she would do that, but he's going to send me all her information and I'll have to see if I can connect the dots to this." He pointed to the burnt building.

"This just keeps getting more and more confusing, doesn't it?" Pearl commented. Jake turned and pulled her into his strong arms. They stood there for a bit just trying to make sense out of a senseless situation.

"Hey, Jake, what's happening?" Danny joined them as they pulled apart. He listened intently while

Jake told him the news his brother had just shared. His phone indicated a text and Jake opened it.

“We need to print this off. Let’s go inside.” He put his hand on her lower back as they walked toward the trailer. When Danny didn’t follow, Jake spoke, “Come on, man. You have to help us figure this out.”

Pearl took one last look at the investigators still working the crime scene. She turned back to put the sight of the tragedy out of her mind for now.

“I think I’ll just go and get ready. I’m playing at the Ski Inn tonight. Thanks, Jake, for everything.” Danny shook his hand and gave his sister a hug. “Keep me informed. You two are smart enough to figure all this mess out.”

“Can you print this from my phone?” Jake asked as they entered the trailer.

“Sure.” She sat at the computer and soon they were both looking at the secretary’s original job application. Jake was leaning over her shoulder, staring at the information on the page.

“She just lists an initial for the first name. It looks like she uses her middle name, Rae.”

Something peculiar struck Pearl as she read over the application, but with Jake standing so close, she found it hard to concentrate. “What else do you see on this application? Look at her address. She lives over in Salton City.”

“That’s not so rare. A lot of people go to Indio for a job. There are not many opportunities for a good paying job here.” He reached brushing past her arm to move the cursor down on the document. She visibly reacted and made the mistake of turning to

look at him. Their faces were within inches of each other. Time stopped as she tried to control her breathing.

He lowered his head and placed a strong kiss on her lips. She gave as good as he did and didn't protest when he reached to pull her up to stand directly in front of him. Pearl melted into his arms, and they pursued the physical attraction they'd been trying to ignore for days.

No regrets. Her thoughts from earlier popped into her head. Pearl took him by the hand and led Jake down the hallway to his room. He stood there by the bed and waited for her to make the first move. Pearl reached up and pulled his tee shirt up over his head. Jake slowly tugged at her top and did the same. She stood there in just her bra and shorts. When he ran his hands down the front of her body, she heard the moan come from her own mouth. Jake kissed down the same path his hands had just blazed.

With one swift move, he undid the front latch and her bra fell away exposing her breasts to his tender kisses. She grabbed a handful of his thick, dark hair and pulled him closer. Without knowing how it happened, they were suddenly laying on his bed, hands caressing, feeling, and reacting to the heat building between them.

Pearl felt her hands at his waistband as she tried to remove his shorts. Jake stood up and with one swift movement was standing there in front of her, naked and unashamed. She started to remove her own shorts when Pearl felt his hands on her own. She gratefully allowed him to strip her of the final piece of

clothing between them. He lowered himself back onto the bed and turned her to face him.

Before he could speak, she put her fingers on his lip to silence whatever protest or offer he was about to make. She smiled tenderly and replaced her fingers with her lips. Their passion lit up and soon he was on top of her. Pearl felt the love for this handsome man surge as they reached the peak.

He rolled off and gently scooped her to his side. He placed a more tender kiss on her sweat-soaked forehead. She reached over and hugged him. “That was great!”

His laughter surprised Pearl. “I expected something different.”

She tilted up on her elbow and looked at him. “Like what?”

When he didn’t answer right away, Pearl spoke. “Jake, I wanted this as much as you. I’ve suddenly realized that I don’t want to live my life with any regrets.”

“Now that sounds more like the PJ that I’ve come to know.” He placed a kiss on the tip of her nose.

She noticed the light from the window was waning and realized that night was falling. As she went to move, Jake held her tighter. “Aren’t you hungry? It’s time to think about something for dinner.”

“I’m hungry but not for food.” He rolled over and placed another sizzling kiss on her lips. Pearl responded to his touch and soon the thought of dinner flew out of her brain. They spent much of the night like two people on fire for each other, loving, kissing, and touching. Eventually, she laid next to



him and found herself totally satisfied. His deep breathing told her that he was falling asleep, and she allowed the peace of their lovemaking to flow over her being. No regrets was the last conscious thought Pearl had before she joined him in slumber.

“Hey, PJ, the sheriff will be here in a few minutes. Wake up.” The sun was shining through the curtains on his bedroom window.

She felt Jake’s hands shake her gently. Allowing the fog of sleep to lift, Pearl rolled over and looked straight into his vivid green eyes.

“What?” Her voice was scratchy.

“I called the sheriff and he’ll be here shortly. You need to get up.”

She sat straight up and quickly reached for the covers when she caught the sly look on his face. “It’s too late, I’ve already had the pleasure of seeing all of you.” He bent down and gave her a searing kiss.

“I’ll just get cleaned up.” With a quirky grin on her face, Pearl stood up and calmly walked naked down the hallway to her bedroom. She didn’t turn around when she heard him chuckle at her boldness.

She had dressed and the coffee was brewing when they heard the knock on the front door. Jake got up and invited the sheriff in. “Morning folks.” He tipped his hat.

“Would you like a cup?” Pearl held up the pot and offered him some of the fresh brew.

He shook his head. “No thanks, I’ve already had three cups. Can we sit here at the table?”

As soon as they were all settled, he pulled a file out of the small briefcase he carried under his arm. “I

heard from your brother Nick, and here's the research we've done on his missing secretary." The sheriff handed a small stack of papers to Jake and Pearl.

"I don't know this person." Jake finally spoke after glancing through the documents. "Do you think the body you found was her?"

"We've confirmed that it was. Are you sure you don't know anything about her? Why would she be on this property?"

Pearl was still looking at the paperwork but had an ear tuned into the conversation between Jake and the sheriff. Suddenly her heart stopped as she read the full name of the secretary. She looked up to meet Jake's gaze.

"What is it?" He asked.

"I think I know why she would be here." Her voice was barely heard.

"How in the world could you possibly know why she was here?" He kept looking at the various emotions crossing her features.

Without speaking, Pearl got up and found the diary she'd been reading. She handed it to Jake. "What was your grandfather's name?"

"I'm named after him. It was Jacob."

"And your grandmother's name?"

"Mary. PJ, what is all of this about?"

"That diary was written by your grandmother. She was committed to marry Jacob, but she was in love with Matthew. Her parents broke up their relationship because he wasn't the man they wanted her to marry." Pearl tried to explain.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not following your train of thought."

"Yes, please, young lady, explain why you think that." The sheriff agreed with Jake.

"Open the book and fan through the pages. You'll see what I mean."

Jake did as she said until he came to the page where Mary had played with writing her name as a married lady. Boldly scrawled on the page were Mary's attempts.

*Mrs. Mary Murdoch*

*Mrs. Matthew Murdoch*

*Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Murdoch*

When he didn't respond, she held up the document she'd been looking at, "Here! Look at her first name. She bears the name! I've never heard of a woman with the first name of Murdoch, have you?" She grabbed the book from his hand and turned to the final entry. "You can read this for yourself."

Jake's face showed the shock he felt as he read the last entry. "I know my grandmother's signature. This is her handwriting alright. Oh, my God! She even mentions her by name."

"That still doesn't explain why she was here and why she sat fire to your office."

"How did she die?" Pearl finally asked.

"We're not officially done, but it appears that the office lit faster than she expected, and she tripped and hit her head trying to get out." The sheriff added, "Once the coroner completes his work, we'll update you."

“What happens now? How can we find out why she wanted to destroy the compound?” Jake rubbed his hand through his hair.

“We’re still investigating. This new information gives us a key direction in which to go.” The sheriff stood up, ready to make his exit. “We will get right on this and let you know what we find.”

Once the door shut behind the older man, Pearl felt Jake’s anger as it seemed to fill the room. “Jake?”

He turned to face her, “We’ve had the ‘family’ conversation and we’ve even agreed to disagree, but this is exactly why I choose to keep my family at arm’s length.”

“Please don’t make assumptions. The sheriff will investigate and let us know what he finds out about her. We don’t know anything other than a young woman lost her life.”

“Why would anyone hold a grudge for so many years? She couldn’t even have known my grandfather let alone my wonderful, sainted grandmother and yet she decided to burn down my entire life’s work.” He was incensed.

“Jake, listen to me. Please stop this and wait for the sheriff’s report.” Pearl pleaded for him to gain control of his erratic emotions. “Blood doesn’t make family, love does!”

“You can wait if you want. I intend to find out what I can about this travesty.” With those words, Jake stomped out of the trailer and slammed the door firmly behind him.

For a few seconds, Pearl just stood there digesting the situation. Thinking to herself, how much time can

I give him to realize that he can make his own family with love? Grabbing her phone, she sent several texts and then went to the room she had occupied for the last two weeks and started packing her stuff. When all was packed, she cleaned the room as best as she could. Finally with one last glance, Pearl moved her bags to the front room.

Her glance to his bedroom down the hallway was short lived as Pearl made the firm decision to ignore the pull of emotions from the passion they'd shared just a few hours ago. She knew from the first time they met that their idea of family was extremely different. She sat down on the couch and waited.

Time ticked by until Pearl finally got up and grabbed her bags. As she opened the door of the trailer and stepped out, Pearl was stunned at the scene before her. She stepped out on the wooden deck and saw Jake standing by Teddy.

"Danny's not coming." He stated with his hands crossed over his body. "If you really want to go, Teddy and I will take you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can't let you go." He finally admitted, his voice tinged with emotion.

"My car is ready, and I need to go home." She stated with false confidence. Neither of them had moved.

"Do you love me?" His voice was barely heard from the distance. "You said that family is based on love, not blood."

Her small voice said, "Yes."

There was a moment of silence between them before Jake rushed up on the deck and took her in his arms. "Please forgive me, PJ. I love you."

"What about family? What about this whole mess? What about our differences?" She pressed.

"How about we work through it together?" He proposed.

## EPILOGUE

### *Six Months Later*

“Raven, I’m so glad you and Chase could come.”  
Pearl hugged her cousin tightly.

“Do you honestly think I’d miss your wedding? Tomorrow is a huge day for you two.”

“How are the rooms at the Motel by The Sea? I hope Hattie is settling in with little Ward.”

“She’s a little out of her element. You know I don’t think she’s ever been out of the mountains. She’s so supportive of us, though, I think she’d follow us anywhere.”

“Come in and we’ll talk.” Pearl opened the door to their trailer. She poured a glass of wine for both, and they sat cozily at the breakfast bar.

“I knew this day would come. I was so sure that Jake and you would end up together. So, spill. How did everything turn out?” Her cousin pushed for details.

Pearl sat for a few moments to reflect on the last six months. “I was ready to leave. I was so tired of his attitude about family, and I was convinced that he’d never be ready for a loving relationship with me.”

“So, what happened to change your mind?”

“He was standing outside ready to take me to my repaired car but then he asked me if I loved him. I said I did, and the rest is history.” She grinned.

“What about your differences? How’s that going?” Raven asked.

“We’re working on them. When I told him that family is based on love, not blood, that stuck in his brain. He asked for my forgiveness.”

“That is so romantic. I’m glad for you, Pearl.”

What happened to the investigation about the woman that died in the fire?”

“The sheriff, Bill, did such a good job investigating. She was raised by her grandmother, the sister of Matthew. That woman was so bitter and twisted about her brother’s suicide that she poured her resentful attitude on poor Rae. She even named her after her brother.”

“How awful for her to grow up carrying a burden that wasn’t hers to hold.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine that kind of pressure. She befriended Jake’s sister and eventually got the introduction to Nick, his brother. As soon as she gained his confidence, Rae pumped him for information about this operation. Remember when we thought it was the Slabbers trying to sabotage this place? She actually paid them to throw those homemade bombs over the fence to try and disrupt the business.”

“How did she die in the fire?”

“The office went up so fast with the fire, she stumbled to get out and hit her head hard enough to



pass out. She didn't have a chance to survive. It is so sad." Pearl sighed.

Just then there was a slight knock at the front door. Pearl got up to answer it.

Jake's voice reached her from the outside. "Don't open the door all the way! I hear it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride the night before the wedding."

Pearl laughed, "What do you want then?"

"I want you to have these to wear tomorrow." His hand held a jewelry box as he poked it through the partial opening.

She took the red velvet box as she fought back some joyful tears. "What is this?"

"Pearls for a Pearl. I love you. See you tomorrow." He walked away and she shut the door.

"Raven, look what he gave me." She opened the box and held up the perfect strand of pearls.

"Oh, my God. What a wonderful man."

"Yes, he is. I can't wait to stand beside him and declare my love for all to hear." Pearl sighed. "Do you know he even paid off Danny's gambling debts so we could all be a family and Danny can work freely with us without worry."

"What about the fight to save the Sea?" Raven asked.

"We're still fighting but I feel that soon the powers that be will decide on a plan and hopefully, we'll get the approval that we need. You know how it goes with politics. Jake and I will never give up our fight to save this wonderful place."

THE END

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

“I always love to hear from my readers. Please add your name to my mailing list and I will update you monthly with a bulletin. I will also include notices of upcoming books and free giveaways.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A professor on the path to her Master's degree posed this question – “If you were arrested today for something you are passionate about, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” B. B. Montgomery's passion for writing spans back to her childhood. As a human resources trainer for over 25 years as well as an instructor at the local community college, she has written numerous facilitator's guides, participant guides, and collateral pertinent to the subject being taught in her classes. She finally found the time to pursue her passion, dust the manuscripts sitting on her bookshelves, and finish what she started years ago. Yes, there is enough evidence! She lives in Surprise, AZ with the love of her life!

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