

They Call Me
RAVEN

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B. B. MONTGOMERY

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There are so many that help me create the tales I tell. I'd like to thank those who contributed, but really didn't know they were helping. I love my mountain home and to see the destruction on the side of the hill is devastating. Bob is the stronghold of my world and without him I cannot imagine how my world would be and probably wouldn't want to be there for any amount of time. I thank him with all my heart for supporting me in this endeavor.

PROLOGUE

Raven looked up from her painting long enough to stare out the window at the falling snow. It had been constantly coming down for the last three days now. To most people a dreaded situation, but to the tall, dark beauty standing at the wall of windows, it was heaven. She loved the solitude of her loft and the snow just added an additional blanket to her privacy. The piece she'd been working on wasn't going according to her plan, so Raven welcomed this break in her day. As she placed her palms on the glass between her and the outside world, Raven could feel the cold soaking through the window into her soul. With a deep breath, she turned and walked slowly back to the painting, but the soft whining of her loyal companion saved her once again.

"Beau, what's up?" She spoke softly to the dog by her side. Raven reached down and patted her dog on its head. Beau's tail wagged with gratefulness and he rubbed up against her leg for more affection. Raven loved her wire-haired pointing Griffin with his curly brown hair because he was such a wonderful companion.

"We'll go down in a bit. I know it's almost your dinner time." Raven turned back to clean up and put away her paints. Her own stomach signaled that she

hadn't eaten all day either. I shouldn't deprive myself like this; she chastised herself for skipping meals.

With one last look out into the nearing dusk, Raven hesitated as she thought she saw a flash of light below near the barn. Now turning to stare more intently at the location of the beam, she squinted her eyes and put her head closer to the cold surface of the window in an attempt to see the light again. Not seeing anything, Raven shrugged her shoulders in defeat.

"It must be the snowflakes." She spoke to her dog that sat patiently, waiting by the steps, ready to go downstairs. She turned off the lights to the loft and made her way down the steps.

As Raven made it to the bottom, Beau was already dashing to the kitchen, eager for his meal. She reached into the storage bin and gave her faithful companion a treat. "That'll hold you until I can mix your dinner." Beau was too busy chewing on the biscuit to give her a second look. Raven quickly mixed his food and set it down on the mat. Beau gave up his treat to come and sit beside the dish. He always waited for her to give the command before he approached his food. As soon as she spoke, he was diving into his meal.

Raven turned on the radio that sat on the kitchen counter. Soft country tunes soon filled the room from her favorite cd. She went to the refrigerator and with the doors wide open, shopped for the ingredients for her evening meal. Grabbing the necessary things to make a simple salad, Raven was soon sitting at the kitchen table attempting to enjoy her fare.

There was the slightest of sounds but all of a sudden, Beau perked up and went directly to the back door, barking loudly. Raven got up and quickly opened the door to the mudroom. She grabbed the flashlight before donning her parka and snowboots. As she opened the back door, her heart was pounding hard in her chest. Perhaps it was just a critter looking for some food in the trash cans, perhaps it wasn't anything, but with the sighting of the light earlier, Raven was anxious to check it out.

Pulling the hood of her jacket, she bundled up to cover her head from the still-falling snow. After grabbing the snow shovel, Raven stepped out on the concrete back porch. With several huge scoops, she finally had the snow cleared enough to venture out onto the back lawn. Slowly, with her LED flashlight leading the way and Beau by her side, Raven took hesitant steps toward the barn. The wind was blowing and shifting the snow everywhere and she shivered as it cut through her warm clothes. As she got closer, Raven could see what looked like a pile of old clothes lying by the closed barn door, covered with a light dusting of snow. Halting a few feet away from the object, still shining her flashlight, Raven realized it was a man and called out. "Hey, who are you and what are you doing here?" The sound was almost indiscernible, but she distinctly heard the male voice trying to get her attention.

"Help me!" His voice held pain and showed the strain he was obviously under. The man rolled over and looked up into her startled eyes. "Please."

Without hesitation for her own safety, Raven leaped into action and bent down to inspect the man and his condition. As he stared blankly up at her, she put her hand on his face. He was feverish and his breathing was labored. "Where are you hurt?"

When he didn't respond, Raven spoke a little more harshly. "You've got to help me here. What's happened to you? What are you doing here?"

Struggling to even move, the man reached down and tried to open his coat. Seeing the amount of pain that the effort this was causing him, Raven unbuttoned the jacket and suddenly understood his most immediate problem. "We've got to get you inside. Please! You have to help me. You're too big and heavy. I can't do this alone!" The wind was blowing even harder now and she had to focus as it blew the snowflakes into her face.

As the injured man struggled to sit up, Raven put her arms around him and proceeded to help the best she could. "I'm called Raven. What's your name?" Her attempt at keeping him alert garnered a crooked but weak smile as the dirty, disheveled man managed to finally get in a sitting position. "Chase."

“Okay, Chase, do you think you can get to your feet? We’re going to have to get you inside so I can see how badly you’re injured.”

“I’m not sure I have any more strength.” His breathing was still coming in short spurts and Raven felt it was all he could do to talk. The howling of the air around them dampened his weak words.

“I’m going to go and get my wagon. I use it to bring in firewood to the house. I think we can use it to get you inside. Will you be alright for a minute?”

“Sure.” He replied but she wasn’t convinced. Raven paused but knew that time was of the essence and left him anyway. Before she quickly dashed up to the mudroom, Raven ordered Beau to stay. He went over and sat next to the silent man. Once in the room, she dragged the oversized wagon outside along with an old quilt. It might not hold him completely, but she felt they could use it to hold the bulk of his weight.

Chase had his eyes closed but heard her come back to his side. As he opened them, he looked at the wagon and then at her. “I don’t think that’ll hold me.”

“Probably not, but it can give me the help I need to get you into the house. Chase, try to sit on the wagon sideways.”

“I’m too heavy. You don’t look strong enough to pull me.”

“I’m stronger than I look, so just get on and let me do the rest.” She was determined that time and the weather was not on their side and needed to push him into moving faster. “Chase, do it!”

With the snow still lightly falling on them, the two people worked together and finally had Chase in a semi-sitting position in the wagon. Without a second thought, Raven tugged at the heavily loaded wagon and eventually got it moving towards the back door. Beau followed closely beside. She heard Chase moan as the wagon hit bumps on the pathway but didn't stop as she was totally convinced that he was in bad shape and until they could get into the house, she couldn't help him at all.

Once she got the wagon up over the little step to the concrete porch, they reached the back door and as the wagon rolled over the doorstep into the mudroom, Chase nearly fell out of the wagon. Against the strength of the storm, Raven struggled to close the back door. She stopped long enough to make sure he was okay and with one last yank on the wagon, Raven got him into the mudroom. "Stay put." She commanded and left him there.

Just as quickly as she left him, Raven returned with the rolling chair from her office. "Chase, take a deep breath and let me help you into this." By hugging him to her, Raven finally got him into the desk chair. "Okay, now we're going to get you into the guest room." By this time they were both soaking wet from the snow and a bit from sweat at the physical effort it had taken to get him into her house.

Carefully, using every last bit of her strength, Raven pushed the chair into her guest room. Once there she pulled back the covers on the bed. As she turned to help the exhausted and injured man from

the chair, she heard him speak. "I'm dirty and bleeding, I'll ruin your bed."

"Nonsense! Get in there and we'll be able to assess the damage." She wasn't going to stop her efforts to help this stranger now.

Chase was entirely too weak to protest and with his last amount of energy, literally fell from the chair onto the bed. As he lay there, Raven started to remove his muddy boots and once done with those, reached around to see about getting him out of the wet jacket. His eyes were closed, but she could tell he was still conscious as he winced when she attempted to remove one arm from the coat at a time. It seemed to take hours instead of just minutes as he was heavy and of no help to her. The snow had soaked his clothing thoroughly and she could feel that precious minutes were taking more of a toll on his immediate health situation.

Raven's breath caught in her throat as she surveyed the large stain of blood on his left side soaking through his shirt. Whatever had happened, her immediate concern was to clean his wound and make sure that the bleeding had stopped. With grit and determination, Raven lifted his shirt and exposed the injury. "Chase, I've got to get this up over your head. Can you lift up at all?"

With one last push of energy, Chase managed to sit up enough to remove the offending garment. As he lay back, Raven was astonished at his tan, muscular chest exposed. This was a man used to being outdoors, she thought. Shaking her head to garner her wayward thoughts, Raven looked down to his left

side. It took all of her concentrated effort to not gasp out loud at the bloody mess there. Looking to make sure that he was not aware of her movements, she went silently from the room and went to gather the needed supplies. Lastly, she brought a glass of water and a bottle of whiskey she possessed.

Sitting on the side of the bed, Raven soaked the washcloth in the water basin. "Chase, this is not going to feel good." When she got no response, she reached over and placed the warm cloth on his side. He barely moved as she continued to clean the dried blood from the area. The surprises weren't going to be over, she realized as it dawned on her that his wound had been caused by a bullet. "Oh, my God! How did you get shot?"

The only response she got was some semblance of mumbled words she couldn't understand. Raven had to make sure that the bullet wasn't still in there, so she pushed as gently as she could and rolled him over enough to check for an exit wound. Sure enough it was there and Raven gave out a sigh of relief. "Well, at least Mr. Chase, whoever you are, we don't have to deal with my digging a bullet out of you."

She used the simple first aid supplies to further clean up the wounds. She saw him shiver and realized that she needed to get him out of the rest of his wet clothes. Recognizing the difficulty of getting him out of his jeans, Raven decided that he was just going to have to keep wet pants on even though she knew it would be better to get him dry. She did at least unbutton them to give him a little more breathing space.

It took several more minutes to clean the wounds entirely and once satisfied that the bleeding had stopped, Raven placed her homemade poultice on the areas and then completely covered them with bandages. Finally, exhausted with all the excitement and strain of finding this injured man on her doorstep, Raven stood up, covered Chase with the blankets and left him alone.

Through this entire episode, Beau had never left her side. She was surprised that he'd kept silent and hadn't barked at the strange man. "Beau, what'd you think? I'm guessing that you would be barking your head off if you thought he was a bad guy."

Before she sat down on the couch, Raven stoked the fireplace and once that was done, finally put her head back to rest. Beau jumped up beside the resting woman and placed his head on her lap. She reached down and stroked his short fur gently.

"What am I going to do with him? Who is he and how did he get shot? Is he a bad guy or one of the good ones? Beau, I wish you knew the answers." In no time at all, Raven dozed off and the house grew still with only the sounds outside and the fire crackling in the fireplace. Her sleep didn't last long as she was awakened by a crash coming from the guest room.

Beau beat her into the room and the scene before them both was of Chase laying on the floor moaning. Raven ran across the carpeting and quickly bent down to him. "What were you trying to do?"

"I was reaching for the whiskey you left on the stand. I need something to take care of this pain." His words were laced with the ache he was experiencing.

“All you had to do was call, I’d have come to help.”

“You’ve done enough, I didn’t want to bother you anymore.” His answer was short. “I’m not helpless, well not entirely.”

“Then help me get you up and we’ll get you back in the bed.” Her voice was soft, not displaying any emotions she might be feeling.

With great effort and her help, Chase was soon on not-so-steady feet. It wasn’t that difficult to help him back to the safety of the bed as he just had to fall back onto it.

He was mesmerized by her calm demeanor. Here was a woman that had no idea who he was, nor how he came to be injured, and yet, she was giving him care and concern with no regard for her own safety.

As he lay back on the bed, Raven took a moment to make sure the bandages were still in place. As she turned to grab the whiskey and a glass, Chase spoke. “Thanks. I’m sorry to be so much trouble.”

“Rest now. We’ll talk more in the morning. Here, take these. They’ll help with the pain.” She held out her hand so he could take the small pills. Raven offered him the water or the whiskey and no surprise to her, he chose the alcohol. Once he downed them with a swig of the liquor she’d handed him, Raven said, “Good night.” With those simple words, Raven and Beau left the room. Before he gave in to the pain and exhaustion, Chase allowed himself a moment to wonder about his unwilling hostess.

Raven went to the linen closet and efficiently made herself a temporary bed on the sofa. Beau tipped his head to the side and she laughed at his confusion.

“Come on, baby, we’re going to sleep out here tonight. He might need us again.” She patted the couch and as he jumped to join her, Raven scooted over to make room. The two of them lay there listening to the howling of the storm blowing outside the safety of their home.

The morning hours gave way without much sunlight. The snow was still coming down, but the peace she’d felt the day before because of the weather now eluded Raven. The only thing Raven could be grateful for was the fact that the wind had subsided somewhat. She had an unwanted and uninvited guest in her house and in her space. Beau nuzzled her hand, indicating that he was aware of her stress and anxiety. “It’s okay, fella. Let’s get you fed and then we can check on our patient.”

Their morning rituals were handled in a faster mode than normal as Raven was anxious to get some answers from Chase. She fed Beau but neglected to fix anything for herself. Before going to the guest room, Raven went to her own closet and dug through some of the older clothes she had hanging there. In the past, she had been a much larger size than now and she’d always kept a few of her sweats just as a reminder. Maybe these will fit him, she thought as she grabbed an old tee shirt too.

She went to her bathroom, washed her face and combed her long black hair into a smooth, straight wave that fell closely around her shoulders. One last look in the mirror and she went down the hall to his room. Softly knocking on the door casing, Raven

stuck her head into the guestroom. "Are you awake?" She asked before coming further into the room.

"Barely." His voice was rough and Chase moaned as he tried to raise himself up further in the bed.

"Don't hurt yourself. Just stay put. You've been through a lot and I don't think you want to open that wound again. I brought these. I hope you can fit them."

"Why are you doing this? I could be a serial killer or drug dealer and yet, you've put me in your house."

His words surprised her, but Raven stood her ground. "I helped you just as I would anything that was injured."

Chase looked properly chastised. "I'm sorry. That doesn't make me sound very grateful, does it? Thanks. What was your name again? I was pretty out of it last night." As he spoke, his voice was labored and broken with the energy it took to talk.

"I'm called Raven." She stood there with her long, dark hair curling down her back and framing her white creamy face. She wore a simple vee neck tee shirt and her well-worn jeans. A half smile came as she watched the emotions cross over his face. Raven waited for the next question as it always came.

"Who calls you Raven?"

"The locals."

It appeared that he was going to have to push if he wanted more information about the unusual name.

"Where exactly am I?"

She raised her eyebrows at this question. "Where do you think you are?"

He hesitated before answering, "I'm tired. Can we talk later? My side is killing me." Chase avoided the rest of the conversation by closing his eyes.

Although Raven felt he was putting her off, she allowed him that privilege for now. When he was stronger she was confident that she'd get the answers to her questions. "Are you hungry? I can fix you some breakfast."

"No, not really. I just need to rest and get my strength back."

With that declaration, she left the room and went back to her kitchen. Finally deciding that starving herself wasn't going to get rid of her unwanted guest, Raven went over and started the coffee maker. "Beau, want a treat? I can fix us some eggs." Even though she knew he didn't understand, one thing Raven was sure of was that when she was in this room, Beau knew he had a chance at a treat like a yummy scrambled egg. Her faithful friend went to his usual place and sat down, waiting patiently for the goody she was fixing.

As they both sat down to eat their morning meal, Raven reflected on the events of the last twenty four hours. What was she going to do with this unexpected visitor? If she had the internet, she could do some research and try to find out more about him, but she was basically off the grid way out here. That was one of the things she loved most about living on her family's land. For a long time now, Raven had valued her privacy and solitude and she wasn't about to regret that now. She was going to have to rely on her gut feelings and instinct.

“Beau, I need a distraction. Let’s go to the loft and paint.” She put her dishes in the sink but as she turned to head up the stairs, Raven looked at her dog. “You need to stay with our guest.”

As they walked past the guest room, Raven saw that Chase was sleeping soundly. She stood there for a few minutes to observe him. Although his breathing was shallow it was steady. “Beau, stay.”

She could see that her loyal companion would rather follow her, but always obeying his master as usual, Beau stayed as commanded.

Once in the loft, Raven went to the wall of windows and stared out at the now clear skies. It wasn’t snowing just yet, even the wind was calm, but she felt it could start anytime now, even the wind was calm for now. This was without a doubt the worst weather she’d experienced in quite a few years. Raven allowed herself to go back in time when she’d first made the decision to give up on city life and retreat to the family homestead. Her parents, God rest their souls, had left the 640 acres to all three of their children. Raven, as the oldest, was allowed the original house, while her brother, Lochlin took the hunting cabin and her sister, Annie had the cottage by the lake.

Her house was called the Powder Box Church as it was originally constructed in 1939 of old blasting powder boxes from the local mining operations. Sabino Gonzales constructed the building as a church for the Mexican American families that worked in the local copper mines as they weren’t allowed to enter the other churches frequented by the white families.

Raven's family became the owner in the 1940s when they shut down the mines and most of the residents of Copper City left for other job opportunities.

Raven and her siblings were all content with the living arrangements. It seemed her parents knew each of their children's wants and needs very well. Most people wouldn't be happy at all with the lack of technology in their home, but to Raven it just helped her maintain her seclusion and privacy. Although right now it would have been nice to have access to a cell phone or an internet connection, she thought dismally. Who was the mystery man in her guest room?

Shaking off those thoughts, she got to her current project and as she immersed herself into the painting, Raven felt the block from yesterday melting away. She watched in wonder as the colors from the forest became vivid on the canvas. Seeing her thoughts come alive in front of her, Raven marveled at the effort. Sometimes she felt as though her hand was guided not by herself but some other force. Suddenly she saw a shadow of a face in the upper right corner of her painting. Her breath caught in her chest as she realized it was her houseguest. It was an image blending in with the sky and clouds in the painting, not meant to be in the forefront.

As she stopped and stood back, Raven slowly put her brush down and stared at her half-finished piece. What did this mean? She'd only laid on eyes on this man just a little over twelve hours ago and yet he had made a definite impression on her subconscious.

Working without thinking, Raven cleaned up her brushes and put the paints away.

Still in a daze, she moved slowly down the stairs to the guest room. Beau stood, eagerly wagging his tail at her appearance. As she peeked around the corner she saw that Chase was sleeping soundly. A quick look at her watch showed her that it was well past time for a lunch meal.

“Beau, I’m sorry, buddy. Let’s get you a snack and go outside.” They moved to the kitchen, grabbing some doggy treats and Raven donned her jacket and snowboots from the mudroom. It took quite a bit of effort to push the door open due to the drifting snow from the storm, but eventually Raven was successful. Once again, she had to use the shovel to clear the back stoop of the snow. Beau seemed very happy to finally have a romp outside and Raven felt herself feeling the same delight. They walked for a bit as far as they could in the deep snow piled around. It was a dry snow and their footprints sank in the deep piles of the cold substance. As they got close to the spot where she found Chase, Raven noticed a backpack that she hadn’t seen the night before. It was almost completely buried beneath the white powder.

“Beau, this might be just what I wanted.” She reached down and picked up the heavy object. Maybe, just maybe, there’ll be something in here that will tell me who is sleeping in my house, she thought hopefully. It was starting to snow again and Raven and Beau hurried into the house. Raven laid the backpack on the table and went to check on Chase.

As she poked her head around the door, she could see that he was awake. "Chase, how are you feeling?" She moved closer into the room.

"It's kind of embarrassing, but I need to visit the little boy's room. Can you help me?"

"Sure. I'm sorry, I should have thought of this earlier." She moved closer to the bed and waited for Chase to move to the edge.

"I might as well take these and change into something more comfortable." He indicated the sweats and shirt she'd given him earlier.

"I hope they fit. It will definitely be a lot easier on the injury." With a lot of effort, he was on his feet and with her help they soon found themselves in the bathroom. "Can you do this alone?" She hoped his answer was in the affirmative.

"I'll be fine. I'll call you when I'm ready." He looked at Raven to see that she was calm. This mystery woman certainly intrigued him. She appeared calm, cool and collected even when presented with the situation they were presently experiencing.

The door was left open and he noticed that she ducked away unseen into the hallway. Struggling to keep his balance, Chase pulled his jeans down and off. The effort caused him a great deal of pain but he managed to keep his poise. Once he'd completed his mission, he sat down on the seat and proceeded to pull the sweats up and as he stood, he tried to pull them up over his hips. He had to lower them a bit to avoid the extremely tender areas of his wounds. "Damn!"

His curse brought her into the room. "Are you okay?" She stopped as she saw him struggling to stand. "Chase, let me help you." Raven quickly went to his side and putting her arms around his waist, helped Chase to his feet. "Let's get you back to bed."

Once in the bed, he rolled onto his back and looked up to his dark angel. "I never considered myself a weak man, but this has certainly put a damper on my strength and stamina." He looked to his rescuer, "Raven, thank you for all you've been doing."

"I hope that you would do the same for me. But I don't know when I would ever need rescued from a bullet wound." She tried to smile at her little joke.

He grinned but she could see that her words hit home. "Chase, what happened to you? Why are you here?"

"Raven, I'll answer all of your questions, but I just need a few days. I do owe you that much."

"I should change the poultice on your wounds. It works best if it's fresh." He looked up to her and asked, "Is this your creation? I seem to remember my great aunt making such things, but I didn't think people used them these days."

"When you live in such a remote area as I do, you have to learn the ways of the old ones in order to survive. I don't just run to town when each little thing happens."

"You call this little?"

The look on her face showed her regret. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to belittle what you're going through. I simply meant that I have learned to take

care of myself out here. You must be worn out by now. Can I bring you something to eat? It will help you regain your strength.”

“Yeah, I think I could eat something now. Don’t go to too much trouble, though. I’m not sure how much I could get down.”

“I’ll bring the new poultices when I bring your lunch.” She quickly left the room. She could hear his soft laughter as she retreated down the hallway.

Raven took her time preparing a small lunch of soup and crackers with a half of chicken salad sandwich. Once she had the ingredients on the tray, she also included the new poultice for his wound. Beau was at her side and she looked down at her faithful companion. “What’d you think, buddy? Should I send him on his way?”

As her dog whined to the question, Raven agreed. “I know I can’t really do that, but I don’t want him in my space for very long. You should know that.”

With deliberate steps, the two of them walked down the hall into the guest room. “I have your lunch. I’d first like to change the poultice and put on fresh bandages.”

“That’s fine,” Was his only reply.

She worked swiftly and soon had new bandages with a fresh poultice on the gunshot wound. As soon as Raven was done, she put the tray on his lap. “Anything else I can get you?”

“Like I said before, you’ve already done too much. This smells good. I hope I can do it justice.” Chase tasted a bite of the sandwich and the look on his face pleased Raven. “This is great! Is this homemade?”

“Of course, what did you think that I ran down to the local fast food place and picked it up?” She was teasing and he soon realized that her whole face lit up when she was pleased. “I’ll leave you to finish your lunch. I have to take care of Beau.”

With those words, he was left to his meal. Chase felt his appetite was stronger than he originally thought. He was soon munching away on the food she’d prepared.

Once in the privacy of her own kitchen, Raven stopped long enough to take a deep breath. Her thoughts were chaotic as she mechanically prepared Beau’s noon meal. When she finally fixed herself a sandwich, Raven sat down at the kitchen table to figure out a plan of getting rid of her unwanted house guest. The thing she valued most in her life these days was her privacy and her solitude. This man was invading her world and the sooner he was gone, the better.

Two

As she sat there contemplating her immediate future, Raven noticed the backpack she'd picked up earlier. She was definitely intrigued by the item sitting there on her table. It might contain some of the answers to her questions. Before making any decision about opening his backpack, Raven finished her lunch slowly and carefully. Beau, in the meantime, had also completed his bowl of food and had come to sit by her side, placing his head on her leg. Time ticked by as Raven thought about her next course of action.

Deliberately and purposefully, Raven got up, put her dirty lunch dishes in the sink, and turned, she stared at the compelling item still sitting on her table. I don't have the internet, I don't have a telephone, so would it really be an invasion of privacy if I look in his bag? Raven allowed these thoughts to ramble through her mind uninterrupted.

As she walked around the table closer to the bag lying innocently there, Raven rubbed her hands over the dirty, rather wet canvas item. Torn by her staunch morals and her burning desire to learn more about the unwanted guest, Raven hesitated. Just when she'd made up her mind, Beau barked startling her out of the movement she'd made towards the backpack. At

that same time, she heard her name coming from the guest bedroom.

“Raven!”

She hurried down the hall in time to find Chase trying to get out of bed. He was in obvious pain as he attempted to stand up. “Chase! Let me help you. Where were you trying to go?”

“I’ve got to get something to help with this pain. It’s killing me.” He sat back down on the bed.

“I’ll get you some more medicine. I’m afraid I don’t have anything stronger than a common over-the-counter aspirin. It’ll have to do.” She sat down beside him carefully and put her hand on his leg. “Come on, let’s see if you can get back in bed and I’ll bring them to you.”

“Bring more whiskey. I don’t think there’s enough left in that bottle.” He grimaced but complied with her orders.

“I hate to be the bearer of more bad news, but I don’t have anything stronger than a glass of wine.”

“What is this, some sort of convent?” His sarcastic remark was softened with a grin. Chase laughed as she escaped to the hallway.

Soon Raven grabbed more pills from the bottle on the kitchen table and a glass of wine, then hurried back down the hallway. “I brought the red. It goes well with the aspirin.”

“Awww, funny.” He took the pills she handed him along with the glass of wine.

“You know you shouldn’t use alcohol to take your medicine, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mom, I know.” He popped the pills into his mouth and took a huge swig from the wine glass.

“You’re incorrigible!”

“I know. You’re spot on and the amazing thing is you don’t even know me. Here, sit down and talk to me.” Chase patted the side of his bed.

Raven complied and turned to face him. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I thought you might want to know a little about the stranger in your home. I feel that perhaps I’ve upset your privacy.” His words hit home as she fidgeted with her hair.

“What do you want to know? You must have a million questions, but I gotta warn you, you can only ask two a day. So ask wisely.”

His teasing nature was not what she had been expecting and it caused her a little moment of hesitation. Once she regained her composure, Raven asked him, “What’s your full name?”

“Chase Tanner.”

“How did you get to my house? I didn’t find any snow mobile or vehicle and you were pretty messed up.”

His surprise showed on his face that she hadn’t gone directly to the obvious question. As she waited for Chase to give the answers to her questions, Raven took the time to notice his hair was of a golden brown color and wavy down the back of his neck. If he was cleaned up, he might be rather nice looking, but right now his disheveled appearance just added to the mystery of the man.

“I had a four-wheel drive truck and until it started snowing harder, I was doing fine. I had to abandon it when it got stuck.” He stated the facts quite unemotionally and waited for her reaction.

“And where and when did you get shot?”

“Ah, ah. Remember, you only get two questions a day.” He wagged his finger at her. “Now it’s my turn. What’s your real name?”

“What makes you think Raven isn’t my real name?” She got up from the bed and at the door turned to face him. Her long almost black hair framed her shoulders as she stood there with her hands on her hips. When she saw that he wasn’t going to back down, Raven finally spoke. “My name is Kate. It’s Kathleen Blackinger.”

For a fleeting second, Chase quickly covered his surprise with another question. “Why does a beautiful woman like you live out here alone in the middle of nowhere?”

Raven’s stance indicated that she was not going to answer his question. “Ask something else,” was her soft demand. She waited patiently while she watched the thoughts run through his mind.

“Did you look in my backpack?” He challenged the dark, mysterious woman standing in the doorway, poised and ready to fly from his space.

Raven didn’t hesitate, “I wanted to, but I couldn’t bring myself to betray your privacy as my guest.”

“Then you did find it.” It was a statement rather than a question wanting an answer.

“If you want, I’ll bring it to you.” Raven offered.

“Nah, I’m tired. You hold on to it.” He slid down in the bed. “Raven, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be back with your dinner when you’re ready.” With that, she left his room and made her way down the hall to the kitchen. With Beau by her side she sat at the table and he finally cuddled up to her. As she reached down to pet him, Raven’s thoughts were spoken aloud. “What do we do with him?” She changed the subject, “You know we need to bring in some more firewood, don’t you?” She stood and went to the mudroom to get her warmer clothes on as she prepared to go out and face the frigid weather. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to buddy.”

Raven knew he would be by her side as she faced the drifting snow and freezing temperatures outside. “I love you.” She reached down and cuddled her faithful companion before heading out the door. As they both went out the door, Raven noticed that the snow had subsided for the moment. She grabbed the snow shovel and started clearing the back porch as well as the path leading to the wood pile. Working for quite a while, Raven could feel the tension leaving her limbs and she smiled as she loaded the wood she needed for the fireplaces.

Once she had the wagon full of logs, Beau and the lady of the house pulled their load to the back porch. “You know some people might think my life here is boring but you know Beau, that I have a wonderful place here in my world.” Her dog barked at her words as if he understood what his master was saying.

Slowly and methodically, she unloaded the firewood into the rack on her back porch. Once she completed that task, Raven and Beau went into the kitchen to prepare something for their dinner. Her freezer was fully stocked as well as the pantry. Raven chose to make a wonderful stew that might be able to take care of their meals for several days. Although she enjoyed cooking, Raven felt that her time was best spent painting. Her parents left her the family house free and clear, but household expenses were needed and she paid for them with the profits from her artistry. About every two weeks or so, she would take her most current works down to the local general store in Copper City and wait for the tourists to buy, but with this horrific storm setting in, Raven felt that tourism would be down to a minimum. She wasn't really worried as her needs were few.

She worked deliberately chopping meat and vegetables to put into her favorite beef stew. Her mind wandered as Raven worked but she tried not to think about how long it would take Chase to heal.

Suddenly Raven heard her name being called from the hallway. She hesitated only a moment before wiping her hands clean and heading towards the guest bedroom. As she entered the room expecting another emergency, Raven could see he had scooted up and was propped against the headboard. "What'd you need? I thought you'd hurt yourself again."

"This hurts so much, I can't rest. I need your company."

At seeing her hesitation and the almost look of fear on her face, Chase continued. "I'm not used to sitting

still and doing nothing. There's no television in here, so what do you do all the way out here for entertainment?"

She actually laughed a soft chuckle. "I have plenty to keep me busy but as far as a television, I'm lucky to have electricity. There's no reception for any electronics up here in the mountains."

"Not even a cell phone?" His look of surprise was what most people showed when they found out how remote she was in the middle of the Bradshaw Mountains.

"I prefer it that way. I have a cell phone, a computer and a tablet but like I said I don't have any WI FI, so they're of no use. But, speaking of electricity, I'm very surprised that we've not lost it due to this storm." She still stood at the doorway.

"What happens then?"

"I have a back-up generator that will kick in when the power goes off." Her matter-of-fact attitude let him know that she expected them to be without the main source of power soon.

He grimaced as he tried to adjust his position on the bed. "Chase, you really need to try and rest. You're going to reopen that wound if you're not careful and I don't think I have the ability to patch you up."

"I know, you're right, but it's the pain. I'm pretty much a baby when it comes to dealing with injuries."

"Most men are." She quipped, but immediately looked apologetic. "I'm sure you don't deserve that, I'm sorry. I have a natural remedy for pain, but it's not very easy to take." Raven waited for his reaction.

“At this point, I’ll try anything.” He shut his eyes.

“I’ll be right back, then. Rest.” With those quiet words, Raven quickly went back to her kitchen and reached for the necessary things to make her tonic. Soon the room was full of the smell of ginger. She’d almost forgotten her favorite remedy. It took almost an hour, but soon everything was ready and Raven silently moved back to the guest room to check on Chase. If he had fallen asleep, her help wasn’t immediately needed. All that she was concerned about was that he was resting comfortably. His eyes were shut and his breathing was easy, but as soon as he heard her footsteps, Chase opened his eyes.

“Well, Doc, what’d you got for me?”

“Give me a minute and I’ll be right back with your cure.”

Carrying a small tray with the bark tea flavored with ginger and a towel on it, Raven appeared tentatively in his room. “Drink this tea. I love the taste of it, but some don’t like ginger.”

He obeyed and when he was done, handed her back the cup. “What else do you have?”

“I need you to roll over so that I can place this hot towel on your wound. I want to change the poultice after.”

Chase rolled to his right side and pulled his shirt up and the sweats down a bit to allow her easy access. Raven hesitated before touching his tanned smooth skin. With Chase more awake and aware, all of a sudden this type of contact seemed much too personal for her comfort. She could see his stomach

was flat and he obviously worked out as his abs were tight and sculptured.

“Is this okay?” His voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Sure...sure.” She pulled herself together enough to remove the poultice. When that was done, Raven placed the warm towel soaked with ginger over the fresh bullet wound. He flinched a bit but soon relaxed and allowed the warm, soothing cloth to do its magic.

“What is this?”

“I soaked this towel with ginger, it is an excellent natural remedy for pain. Many use it to relieve the discomfort from arthritis and muscle strain.”

“Are you some kind of witch or something?” He tried to tease.

She laughed quietly before answering. “There are those that would agree with you. But no, I simply believe in using natural methods rather than poisoning my body with all the chemicals they put in the so-called modern medicines.” She removed the towel and reached for another to put on the same spot. Slowly and very gently she rubbed across the cloth in order to help the healing process soak into his skin. After a short time, Raven lifted the cloth and allowed the wound to dry before replacing it with another fresh poultice.

As she started cleaning up her supplies, Chase pulled his shirt down and the sweats up a bit. He rolled over onto his back and gave a sigh. “Are you okay?” She immediately asked.

“I’m great, considering. You are an amazing woman. Thank you so much for this.”

“I’m going to go and finish our stew. You need to try and get some sleep.” Raven tried to walk away calmly but found herself disturbed by the skin to skin contact as she had ministered to his injuries. As she cleaned up the medicinal supplies in her kitchen, Raven kept her mind occupied with painting ideas, the snowstorm and anything else that would prevent her from thinking about the sexy stranger in her guest room.

After putting all the ingredients in her stew pot, Raven went to the loft to paint after leaving Beau to guard the guest room door. For a long time now, she’d found that this was where she was most at home. As she got to the top step and moved further into the loft, Raven realized that it was still snowing. Never in all the years she’d been living here on the mountain had she seen such a storm. She gathered her paints and supplies and turned to her latest canvas. Staring from the upper corner of her work was the face of her guest. In just a little over 24 hours this man had invaded her world and her mind, but how?

Shrugging off her wayward thoughts, Raven got busy and soon was deeply involved in her painting. She worked feverishly; her hand seemed driven by emotions, emotions that she thought she’d put safely behind herself. When Raven was painting, time was of no consequence and she found herself so deep in concentration that before she knew it, darkness had settled all around the house. Raven hesitated for a moment not wanting to stop but she looked to the

wall of windows and with a sudden start, Raven stopped in mid-stroke.

With fast actions, Raven put her paints away and cleaned up her supplies. As she nearly flew down the stairs, Beau got up from his guard position outside the door to the guest bedroom.

"I'm sorry buddy. You know how it can be. I'll get you something to eat. Come." They both went straight to the kitchen and she quickly gave him a snack before getting his evening meal ready. She checked the slow cooker and smelled the delicious flavors of her stew.

Quickly checking on her guest and seeing that he was still sleeping, Raven went back to the fireplace and added fuel. The heater was still working, but it helped to keep the fire going too. Raven went back into the kitchen fed Beau and then helped herself to a bowl of the flavorful food. As she indulged in her favorite meal, Raven savored the delicious blend in her dish. Finally finishing, she filled another bowl for her guest.

"Chase, are you ready to eat?" She asked as she entered his room.

He struggled to sit up, but finally succeeding, Chase took the bowl she offered. "Wow, this smells good."

"I'll leave you to it." Raven started to leave the room when he stopped her.

"Please, Raven, sit and talk with me while I eat." When he saw her hesitation, Chase added, "I won't bite I promise." His sudden grin was meant to convince Raven to stay.

Taking a deep sigh before answering his challenge, Raven came closer to her guest. “Chase, I took you in because you were injured and in need of immediate medical attention. I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but I am living out here on my own because I like it. I don’t need the company of another human being to justify my existence. I know that sounds harsh and maybe unrealistic in today’s social media world, but it’s the way I have chosen to live my life.”

“Wow!” His reaction was not what she expected.

“I’ll be back to collect your dish when you’ve finished.” With those words, Raven went silently out of the room.

She went to the kitchen and worked efficiently to put away the rest of the stew as well as her own dish. Once the kitchen was clean and sparkling, Raven went to the mudroom and brought in several loads of firewood to stock the box next to the fireplace. Her faithful companion followed her from task to task, wagging his tail. Finally, she reached down and patted Beau, “I was rude, wasn’t I?”

Raven took a minute to sit down on the sofa and reflect on her current circumstances. She didn’t ask for this, but Raven felt she’d done what was expected of her. As she contemplated her behavior, Raven came to the decision that she’d been rude. Going over to the end table, she grabbed a deck of cards and a tablet of paper. Finally after taking a deep breath, she slowly walked down the hall and before entering his room, Raven knocked on the door casing.

“Come on in.”

“Are you finished?” She went closer to his bed. “Can I get your dirty dish?”

Chase handed her the bowl but still didn’t speak.

“I think I owe you an apology, Chase. I am not used to entertaining and if I’ve offended you, I am sorry.”

“I deserved everything you dished out. I realize that I’ve encroached upon your home and I have no right to press you to change your routines.”

“Can we start over?” She moved closer to him.

“What did you have in mind?” Chase sat up further in the bed.

“Are you up to a game of cards?”

“Sure, what kind of cards? Poker? Did you bring any money?” His eyes twinkled as he gave his suggestion.

“I’m afraid it’s not a popular game in the convent.” She reminded him of his comment from earlier.

His rich laughter surrounded the room and Chase clutched his side. “You’re killing me.”

Raven pulled a chair up to the side of his bed and proceeded to shuffle the deck of cards. “It’s a game called 3-13. It’s a variation of rummy. Do you want to play?”

“Sure. Do we bet money?”

“Not now, but if you stay long enough, I’m sure we can come up with a way to pay your rent.” Her voice was soft, but full of humor and Raven was rewarded with a full smile from her guest.

After explaining the rules and nuances of the card game, she dealt the cards. “Let’s play the first as a

practice round, then we can get down to the nitty gritty.”

Once she saw that Chase understood the game, they played the first few rounds. They were matched pretty evenly and it prompted her to propose a challenge. “If I win, you have to rest for at least the next 24 hours.”

“And if I win?”

“You have to rest the next 24 hours.”

His enjoyment reverberated throughout the room and Raven found herself captivated by this man’s ability to laugh in spite of his obvious physical pain. In no time at all, they completed their rounds of the 3-13 game and Raven was officially declared the winner.

“Okay, I win. You rest. I’ll be back down to check on you before it’s bedtime.”

“I am a little beat. I think I can sleep now.” Chase scooted down into the bed and proceeded to cover up with the quilt.

Just as she got to the door, Raven turned to ask him one more question. “With you being here, are we in any danger?”

THREE

“Possibly.” Chase waited for her reaction, expecting the worst, but definitely surprised when she spoke.

“Could you elaborate a little more on that.” She leaned against the door casing waiting for him to answer. Raven watched as he seemed to gather his thoughts before he responded.

“You are the calmest woman I’ve ever met.”

“And you’re avoiding the answer. I think it’s important for us to be prepared. I don’t want to be blind-sided.” Raven folded her arms over her chest and waited.

“I’m not a bad guy, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

She grinned at his confession. “I’m not thinking anything at this point, but I really would like to know what’s going on with you and your mysterious appearance on my doorstep.”

“I might have made a few people mad.”

“That’s all? You have a bullet hole in your side and all you can say is ‘I might have made someone mad.’” She pressed for more information. “People don’t go around shooting others for no reason.” The words were strong, but her delivery was more subtle.

“You’re right about that.”

When Raven saw that he wasn't going to elaborate on that comment, she urged him, "Should I lock the doors? Should I barricade the windows? Come on, Chase, help me out here."

"I don't think danger is immediately imminent, but how would you get any help out here anyway?"

"I have a CB radio that I can rely on to get help or any information I might need."

"Oh my God. I can't believe you're relying on such an archaic form of communication to keep safe."

"Until you got here, I didn't need anything to keep safe." She stated quite simply.

He looked quite abashed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to put you or anyone in harm's way."

"I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself. I would've helped anyone that needed it."

"I believe that, Raven."

"So, what is our plan as of this moment?"

"Lock the doors and windows and in the morning we'll decide what else should be done." As a second thought, he added, "Do you have a gun?"

"Yes, I always keep a weapon in the house."

With a self-serving grin, Chase asked. "Do you know how to use it?"

She didn't answer but stood straight up and proceeded to step away from the door. "Chase, get some sleep and we'll talk a lot more in the morning."

Once again, his laughter followed her down the hallway. Raven had decided earlier that she was going to sleep in her own bed upstairs until she received the new information from her unwanted guest. "Beau, I

guess one more night on the sofa won't be so bad. You'll keep watch for us, won't you, buddy?"

She stoked the fire and added another log. Before lying down on the couch, she went to the front closet and reaching in past the jackets hanging there, Raven ran the combination on her gun safe. Pulling an old handgun, a six shooter of her dads, from the interior along with several bullets, she turned and went to the couch.

As Raven settled in, her wayward thoughts kept swirling around. What kind of trouble was Chase into and how did he get shot? Would they have any more things to worry about? As thoughts swirled about in her head, she absent mindedly loaded the gun. Carefully, after loading it, she put the pistol under her pillow. It'd been a long time since she felt the need for this type of security. Her memory took her back to when she first came to live in the Powder Box house. Her world had been shattered while living in the city. Raven's only escape from the tragedy in her life was to the Bradshaw Mountains and the solitude of her family home. Even then, Raven didn't rest or relax right away and had felt the need for additional security for quite a while.

Shaking off those negative feelings, Raven tried to unwind and allow the cozy world of sleep to occupy her mind. Watching the flickering flames in the fireplace, Raven felt herself finally able to let go of those negative vibes. Beau had jumped up onto the couch and cuddled into her side. She found herself stroking his soft fur and slowly, but surely, Raven found the safe haven of sleep enveloping her body.

The snow had subsided, but the wind still howled outside and visions of more snow piling up by the back door invaded Raven's subconscious thoughts.

By morning, the sun was trying to break through the cloud cover and the wind had finally settled down. Raven went upstairs to her bathroom and after trying to refresh her hair and face, wandered down to peek into the guest room. She felt there would be time later for a more complete shower and cleansing routine. Chase was snoring lightly so she trekked down into the kitchen to start something for their breakfast meal.

Feeling the desire to put something hot into their stomachs, Raven made a meat and cheese omelet along with toast and hash brown potatoes. Putting all of the items on a tray, Raven carried it carefully down the hall into Chase's room. He was just rolling over to greet her.

"Wow! You went all out this morning." She placed the tray on his lap and grinned at the compliment. "Please, Raven, pull up the chair and join me. This is enough food to feed an army."

She enjoyed his laughter when she pulled a fork from the pocket of her jeans. Raven held it up for him to see.

"Ahh, you came prepared."

They ate together in companionable silence. As soon as they finished, Raven stood to clear their tray and plates. "I feel I need to get out of this bed today." Chase announced.

His announcement surprised her. "Are you sure? It's only been two days. I wouldn't want you to re-injure that wound in your side."

"Raven, your poultice has performed a miracle and my side is healing fine. If you help me, I can get up and perhaps, get a shower or at least clean up a bit." He saw her hesitation and pleaded further. "I promise I won't do any more than I can and I won't hurt myself further. I don't want to be a burden to you any longer than I have to."

"I washed your clothing and if you want to try and shower, you can put them back on afterwards." She was shocked that she felt a bit of sadness at his request. It'd only been a little over 48 hours, when Raven realized she was unsure of her feelings about Chase's presence in her life.

"Is it snowing?" Chase asked as he slowly and carefully scooted closer to the side of the bed.

"Not yet." Raven put the tray on the edge of the dresser and turned to help him in his attempt to get up and out of bed. As she put her hands on his back and arm, Raven felt a bit of a jar at their physical contact. It was one thing to touch him when he was thought to be incapacitated, but now that he had declared himself to be able to move around, she felt very aware of her unwanted visitor's threat to her security. Shoving those feelings aside, Raven helped Chase to his unsteady feet.

"Careful." She ordered in her own timid way.

They moved ever so slowly toward the bathroom where Chase promptly sat down on the makeup stool at the counter. Raven went to the shower and turned

on the water, allowing it to warm up. "I'll get you towels and washcloths. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'll be fine. If you could bring my clean clothes and set them there, I'll get dressed."

She hesitated and he responded. "I'll be very careful and I'll call loudly if I need help. Trust me."

With a long look, Raven finally gave in to his request. A funny thing just happened when he asked her to trust him. Raven did, although she couldn't explain why. She had placed confidence in a stranger that had literally dropped on her doorstep just a few days earlier. "I'll be just outside the door if you need me. Remember, I never became a nurse for a reason, so don't hurt yourself further."

Raven quickly left the small room with Beau at her side. She took the breakfast tray to the kitchen and cleaned all of the remains of their meal before retreating back down the hall to stand outside of the bathroom. She leaned against the wall and listened to the sounds coming from the room. She heard the water running and heard a few groans from her unplanned-for-guest as he attempted to shower. Under other circumstances, Raven would feel like a spy, but with the bullet wound in this man's side, she knew being ready to help him was a good thing. In just a very short time, Raven heard the shower shut off. Wanting to give him his privacy, she walked softly down the hall to the living room and stoked the fireplace so that if he needed to get warm, it was ready.

Time ticked by as she waited for Chase to get out of the bathroom. When she finally heard him open

the door, Raven actually felt herself let out her breath. She looked up as she heard his bare footsteps on the floor. He was bare-chested and had on the sweats she'd given him instead of his jeans.

"Well, you survived. Come in and sit close to the fire. I don't need you getting pneumonia on top of a bullet wound." She tried to make a joke to cover her nerves.

Chase trudged over to the sofa and sat next to her. They both were silent as the fire jumped and cracked. She avoided looking directly at him; her nerves were already stretched too tightly.

Chase used the towel he'd carried in to help dry his unruly hair. "Thanks for stoking the fire. It helps warm a body. I tried to put my pants on, but it hurt too much so you'll have to lend me these sweats for a bit longer."

"I should go and prepare a fresh poultice."

"That's why I didn't put on my shirt." Both of them struggled with the tension in the room. Raven quickly left and while in the kitchen, took several deep breaths. What is happening? She thought about their situation and allowed her mind to wander into an area she didn't really want to be. She was attracted to him.

"Raven, could you make me some of that ginger tea while you're in there?" His voice broke through undesirable thoughts and for that, she was grateful.

"Umm, sure." Pushing herself to get back to reality, Raven hurriedly made the tea and took it to him. Chase was now standing in front of the fireplace and she observed his skin looked a lot tanner than

before. She swallowed before walking up to the tall, muscular man and handed him the cup of steaming tea.

As he turned, Chase pointed to the couch and the blankets she'd left there. "Have you been sleeping there?"

"Yes, my room is upstairs and I felt that you might need me." She started back to the kitchen but his voice stopped her.

"You are one very special woman, Raven."

"Please don't talk like that to me. We don't have any idea or knowledge about each other, but one thing you must believe. I am not interested in any relationship with anyone." With that said, she retreated into the kitchen, where with shaking hands Raven prepared the medicine for his wound.

When she finally found the strength, Raven returned to the room with his poultice. Chase was sitting on the sofa but had taken the time to fold up the sheets and blankets. She was surprised, but didn't say a word about his kindness. "If you'll stand here, I can put this on you."

He complied without speaking. Once she was satisfied with the tape, Raven invited him to lie down on the couch. "If you want, we could play more cards. Perhaps you'd rather rest."

"What can I say to reassure you that I'm not a bad guy? Raven, I didn't mean anything except to express my gratitude for your help. If you hadn't found me, I'd be dead." Chase struggled but finally pulled the shirt down over his head.

"I wouldn't have wanted that for you."

“How about this, it’s a new day so you get two more questions to ask me.” His grin was infectious and she felt herself smiling back at the freshly cleaned man.

“Okay. What do you do for a living?” Her question surprised him.

His hesitation gave her a small clue as to who this man was sitting in her living room. “I’m the son of a very wealthy man and because of that; I don’t need to work for a living.”

“Wow. I didn’t expect that.”

“Does it make you think any less of me?” He teased.

At first she was startled by his question until she looked and saw the grin on his face. “I was right earlier, you are incorrigible.”

“Guilty as charged.” He spoke proudly.

“Okay, I get another question.” She stated.

“Me first. What do you do for a living?”

“Hmmm, good question. While I am not the daughter of a wealthy family, I only have to earn enough money for my monthly expenses. My mom and dad left this house to me and all I have to do is make enough to buy groceries and pay for little stuff, like the power and upkeep on my home.”

“But you still didn’t say what you did to earn that money.” He pushed for a more detailed answer.

She hemmed and hawed a moment but finally answered, “I create stuff that the tourists in our area seem to like.”

“Are you sure you’re not a politician? That’s the biggest un-answer I’ve ever heard.”

“Un-answer? Is that even a word?” She countered, but laughed with him. Raven looked as the room grew darker. “Oh, look, it’s starting to snow again.” She got up and crossed over to look out the sliding glass doors.

“How can you be so excited when it’s been doing this for over three days now? It’s actually the reason I’m on your doorstep and an unwanted guest in your house.” He slowly rose and came over to stand next to her at the door. They were both staring out at the white flakes falling solidly by now.

She turned to face him. “I love nature and this is part of a wonderful blessing for our woods. We’ve been in a drought for over seven years now and this will help.”

“You’re a half full kind of person, aren’t you?”

“And you’re not?”

Before he could answer, they both turned to look at the noise in the sky. Reacting unexpectedly, Chase grabbed her by the arm and pulled them both back from the huge glass door. The whirling blades of a helicopter stirred up the falling snow and they both watched as it swooped above the tall pine trees surrounding the house. Just as quickly as it came, the machine disappeared over the tops of the trees into the swirling snow and clouds.

Raven turned to look at Chase. “Who was that?”

“I’m not sure, but it could be the trouble you asked about last night.” Chase reached over to his side and Raven was immediately aware.

“Did you hurt yourself?” She started to pull his shirt up to check the wound, but Chase put his hand over hers and stopped her.

“I’m fine. I didn’t hurt anything.” He sat down and turned to stare into the fire.

“So what happens now?” She probed.

Chase put his face in his hands and didn’t answer right away. She waited patiently while he composed himself. “I need to leave here. I don’t want to put you in harm’s way.”

“Chase, we don’t know who that helicopter belonged to, it could have been the Forest Service. They sometimes fly over to make sure all is well at my place.”

“I just don’t want something bad to happen to you.”

“I really think it’s too late to worry about that and you’re in no shape to go out there in all that snow and bad weather. We’ll just have to figure out another way to protect you.”

“You mean us, don’t you? You’re involved now whether you meant to be or not.” His tone was grim and the look on his face didn’t give her much hope.

“How far away do you think your truck is and do you have any warmer clothes in it?” She asked in that calm demeanor he was getting used to from her.

The confused look on his face showed that he didn’t follow her train of thought. “Chase, if you have snow clothes or something similar, we can take the snowmobile and go to Copper City and get some help.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. Is there a sheriff or some sort of law in that town?”

“Oh, heavens, no, but there are people there that could help us and we’d be safe. You’ve heard of safety in numbers?”

“I’m not sure I feel up to traveling very far just yet. My side is killing me just from the little I’ve done so far today.” With that he lay back on the sofa and looked up to her. “Can we talk about this later? I know it’s a lot for you to process, but, I promise, I’ll not let anything happen to you.”

His words seemed sincere, but she felt he couldn’t back up his promise in his current physical state. Still her hands were tied for now. “Here, let me get you the blankets. I’ll stir up the fire.” Raven moved about and helped make Chase comfortable on the sofa.

Soon he was sleeping on the couch and she moved about doing little things to keep herself busy. She hadn’t seen the helicopter and would’ve felt better if she’d known it belonged to the Forest Service. “Beau, we need to do something to take care of this restless energy. Let’s go outside and shovel some snow.”

She donned her warmest winter wear and was on the back porch with Beau using the shovel to clear the area of the huge piles of snow that’d built up over the day. Even though Raven tried to keep busy, her mind was able to wander and wander it did. Who was Chase Tanner? What had he done to get shot? Who could possibly want to come after him? These hills have always offered the security and safety she craved after leaving the hustle and bustle of the city and suddenly his presence had changed all that.

After a little over an hour, Raven was finally exhausted and feeling the chill down to her bones. She hollered for Beau and together they went back into the mudroom. Stomping the snow off her boots, Raven quickly removed all of her winter clothing and went into the kitchen. Before taking care of her needs, Raven tiptoed into the living room to check on Chase. He was still sleeping on the sofa and it appeared that he hadn't moved since she left him.

Moving quietly back into the kitchen, Raven grabbed a quick snack for her faithful companion and went to the pantry for herself. "Beau, I feel the need for something to warm my innards." She grabbed the bottle of red wine and went to the china cabinet to take down one of her mother's wine glasses. As she poured a generous portion of the dark burgundy beverage, Raven tried not to think of her current predicament. Lifting the crystal glass to her lips, she allowed the liquid to go slowly down her throat. As she sat at the kitchen table, Raven enjoyed the solitude of the moment.

"Let's warm up that beef stew." She got up and gathered the leftovers from the refrigerator. Soon the smell of the savory soup infiltrated the kitchen. Every moment or so she went and checked on Chase. He hadn't seemed to stir but she knew he was going to be hungry soon.

"Beau, maybe I should make some biscuits to go with this stew." Getting busy, Raven gathered all the ingredients and soon had dough ready to cut into her favorite bread stuff. As she turned the oven on to

preheat, Raven felt his presence before turning around.

“That smells wonderful.” Chase’s deep voice sounded from the doorway. “Wow, biscuits too?”

“Yes, what would beef stew be without a biscuit?” She grinned at him. “Want to join me?” Raven lifted her glass of wine.

“Now you’re talking.” He slowly moved to the table and took a seat next to hers. Raven poured the same generous helping for him and added more to her own glass. “Do you need some help with those biscuits?”

The surprised look on her face prompted him further. “Lady, you’re looking at a man that can find his own way around a kitchen.” He got up and after washing his hands at the sink, Chase met her at the island next to the stove.

“Do you need this?” Raven held up the rolling pin.

“Yes, that’ll do nicely. Do you have a biscuit cutter or do you just use a jar lid like I do?”

Once again, Raven looked completely surprised that he even knew what to use to cut the biscuits out of the dough. “I’m impressed.”

They worked side by side for the next little bit and once they had them in the oven, Chase refilled their wine glasses and raised his for a toast. “Here’s to working together. It’s fun, huh?”

She answered in her quiet tone, “Yes, yes it’s been great having someone to talk with for a change.”

“Why do you live out here by yourself?”

“Is that your second question for today?” She challenged.

He didn't hesitate. "Yes, I want to know why a beautiful, caring person like you prefers to be alone rather than with other people." By the look on her face, Chase knew he hit a sore spot.

Raven fought the temptation to flee but it took a great amount of strength to remain sitting at the table. While she gathered her thoughts, the timer went off for the stove. When she started to get up, Chase stopped her. "Allow me."

He went about getting their bowls full of the stew and added a few of the just fresh hot biscuits to a plate. As he sat everything in front of them, Chase finally spoke. "It's okay, Raven, you don't need to answer my question. Let's just enjoy this wonderful meal." He watched as she physically relaxed and let out a huge sigh. Raven didn't respond but instead reached for her food.

Eating their meal in silence was not entirely uncomfortable as the food was very good. Raven filled their glasses once again and polished off that bottle of wine. She had avoided looking at him directly but when Raven finally pushed her empty bowl back, their eyes met.

"I would like to try and answer your question, but it may have to be done in stages."

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable, Raven. I have no right to demand an answer. In fact, I'm the intruder in your home and I am extremely grateful for your hospitality. I'm sorry if I've pushed you for information that I have no right to. It's not like we're best friends or that we've known each other forever."

“Actually, it might be kind of cathartic to answer your question about my choices in lifestyle.” She gave him a slight grin. “Remember, I get one more question today, too.

As they worked together and cleared the dirty dishes and put away the leftover food, Raven was very aware of the man beside her. They didn’t touch, they didn’t speak and yet it was as if he was invading her space on a very basic level. To break that connection, Raven quickly spoke, “This is good enough. Let’s go and get warm by the fire. You’ve got to be worn out and I don’t want to be the reason you have a relapse. Shall we go into the front room by the fire?” She carried their wine glasses and placed them on the coffee table.

Once in the living room, she stoked the fire before sitting down on the chair next to the sofa. Chase made himself comfortable on the couch as he adjusted the pillow and blankets to support his wounded side.

Finally turning to face him, Raven took the chair and sipped another drink of the wine. “I loved living in the city. I had a beautiful home, great friends and a blossoming career. It was everything most people strive for in life, right?”

As Chase waited for her to continue, the blaze crackled in the fireplace. Time stretched and the darkness fell completely outside. The silence was only interrupted by the noise coming from the fire.

“It all came literally crashing down on the day of February 3rd at 2:22 in the afternoon five years ago.” Her agony was palpable and Chase found himself

wanting to go to Raven and hold her until the pain disappeared. He didn't press, but waited for her to continue.

They hadn't bothered to turn on any lights, so together Chase and Raven sat in the darkness amid the flickering flames. Under other circumstances someone looking in would think this was a rather romantic setting. Raven added in a small, calm voice, "I was involved in a horrific traffic accident. My life changed forever that day."

"Wow! That must have been devastating for you."

"It was, not only for me, but for the man I was supposed to marry." She finally looked directly at Chase even though she couldn't see his eyes. "He was killed that day and I was the driver."

FOUR

The silence hung heavy between the two but Chase finally cleared his throat and spoke softly in the dark. "I'm at a loss for words, Raven. I don't know what to say."

"Words don't help. Right after the wreck many of my friends and my family tried to find the right things to say, but it was all in vain. It didn't help at all." Her voice cracked with emotion as she rose from her chair. "Are you alright for a little bit? I feel the need to be alone."

"I'll be fine. I'm just going to sit here and enjoy the warmth from the fire."

"Beau, stay." She ordered her dog and left. Her footsteps could be heard on the stairs in the house and soon Chase looked up to the sound of her soft steps in the room above.

Before starting her work, she turned on the twinkle lights surrounding the entire loft. It looked as though the stars had come down and settled right in her room. Soon, Raven was painting but not on the picture she'd started earlier. This time her brushes took her to a world of fantasy with a lordly looking man on a charging black stallion. It was all the dark colors on her palette but somehow it helped release the black mood that had settled on her earlier

downstairs. In her painting the swirling clouds above the rider were ominous and forbidding. His eyes were alive holding a fury all their own. His sword was raised as though to strike down an enemy and his steed seemed to mimic its master with its mane flowing in the wind and power emanated from his very being.

When she was in this kind of mood, Raven could stand and paint for hours. Beau was suddenly at her side and she absently reached down and petted him kindly. She knew the instant that Chase entered her studio, but still stood facing her work. His footsteps came close behind Raven and she found herself holding the air in her lungs. His breathing was a bit labored and as she started to turn and face him, Chase reached out and put his arms around her small body tentatively. She could hear him release a sigh when Raven allowed herself to relax back into his grasp.

“You seemed like someone that needed a hug. I wish I had something magical to ease your pain.” His tender words were muffled into her hair. She was breathing hard as she melded her small frame tighter into his grasp.

The trembling woman didn’t speak but instead turned slowly to put their bodies face to face. Not knowing where this was going and not really caring, Raven raised her head and placed a small tender kiss on his surprised lips. Chase allowed her to decide how far this moment was going to last. Her eyes were closed and when done tasting his lips, Raven laid her head on his chest.

“I can feel your heart beating.” She was speaking but the words were muffled by her nearness. Her hands were up around his neck by this time. “Did the climb up the stairs hurt you?”

“Nah,” was his short reply. Chase didn’t want to disturb what was happening between them.

She finally pulled back and looked into his tawny eyes. “I never noticed you have the same colored eyes as your hair. They’re like golden brown.”

“And I now know what you sell at the local general store.” He pulled out of their embrace and slowly walked around the loft. Chase knew he was in her private space and tried not to intrude. He just took a quick glance at the works scattered about the room, some on easels and some hung on pegs on the wall.

“No one has been up here before.” Her statement was made quietly but spoke loudly about her feelings.

“Do you want me to leave?”

When she didn’t answer he took more time to take in what she had created with her works. The emotion she put into her art was blatantly displayed on the canvas surrounding the loft. While he was doing that he noticed she put some distance between them. “You’re very talented. Have you always painted?”

From behind her current painting, Raven’s reply could be heard. “That’s a very funny question. Is that a third question for the day?” The humor was back in her voice and it pleased him.

“If you’ll allow it, yes.”

“Only if I get three too.” She bargained.

“Deal.” Chase had come to stand beside her and looked now at the painting still wet on the canvas. He

immediately recognized his own face as the one on the rider. “You are really very good.”

In order to distract him from the painting, Raven pulled Chase’s arm and indicated that they could sit on the sofa facing the wall of windows. As he settled down on the big, overstuffed couch, she went to a mini fridge and pulled out another bottle of wine. “Would you like another drink?”

“Ahhh, holding out on me, huh? Sure, it helps keep the pain down.”

After pouring two generous helpings, she went over and took a spot on the opposite end and faced the window. “On a clear day, you can see forever from that direction and this way, you can watch the trees and whatever critter decides to visit the forest.”

“I can see why this is your favorite spot.”

She hadn’t said that, but it was just another example of Chase’s ability to understand her. She took a long sip of the chilled wine and then spoke to him. “I never painted before the car wreck, didn’t have any talent for it. I’m one of the very few people in the world that comes out of an accident like that with another whole new ability.”

“Really! I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Neither had I until it happened to me. Once I recovered enough from the physical problems to get around, my sister brought me a paint set to occupy my time. We were both shocked when we saw what I could do with some paint and brushes.” She grinned at the memory.

“You haven’t mentioned your family before. Where does your sister live?”

“Oh, I have a brother too. They both live in Phoenix and have very busy careers and families. Lochlin inherited the family hunting lodge. It’s about 10 miles over that way.” She pointed to the wooded side of the windows. “My sister Annie got the lake lodge and it’s over the opposite direction about five miles away.”

“Do they come up here often?”

The hesitant way he asked the question caused Raven to turn and take a close look at him. Maybe he was nervous now that he found she had family that could look in on her. Shaking off those negative thoughts, she gave him an answer that seemed to help him relax once again. “They usually only come up in the summer. Lochlin brings some of his buddies up to hunt during hunting season, but that’s not right now.”

She’d covered up with an afghan and snuggled down to get more comfortable. This is nice, she thought to herself. Raven was surprised that she felt at ease with this mysterious man. She could feel his eyes on her and she decided it was her turn to ask.

“Now, if you’re up to it, I get one more question for today.” The teasing look in her eyes caused him to grin.

“Go for it.” He took a long sip from his glass.

“Are you married?”

This question completely threw him off his game and he almost choked on the drink he’d just taken. “Where in the world did that thought come from?”

“Just curious, I guess.”

“Okay, I want to know why you haven’t asked the most important question that should be on your mind?” He sat up straighter.

She didn’t respond right away but seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “Perhaps I don’t want to know the answer.”

“You’re the most complex woman I’ve ever met.” He sat back and seemed to like the way she didn’t demand information from him.

“Let’s just take it slowly and in time, I’ll want to know. I’m a firm believer in ‘if you don’t want to hear the answer, don’t ask the question.’” Raven sat her empty wine glass on the stand next to the sofa and laid her head back on the puffy, cushions surrounding the back of the couch. She offered the end of her blanket to Chase and he reached for the comfort she was offering.

“Are we relaxing here for the night?” His voice was soft in the dark.

“I am.”

Without any further conversation, they both settled on the respective ends of the comfortable furniture and soon both of them were sound asleep. Beau placed himself in the middle on the floor and seemed to watch over the couple.

The noise from outside didn’t come crashing into her dream world; it crept softly into her subconscious. Until Beau barked, Raven nor Chase came alert to the fact that something wasn’t quite right. Beau announced the arrival of company again and this time, Raven jumped to her feet. She turned

to Chase and gave a blunt command, "Stay. I'll see who it is."

"I don't have to hide behind a woman." He protested.

The look on her face and her words were in conflict. "And, we don't have time to argue about this. You're not supposed to be here, remember?" She made her point and turned for the stairs. With one last attempt at convincing him this was the best course of action, Raven pleaded, "Please, Chase, I can handle this."

Upon seeing him give in, she dashed down the stairs and hurried to the kitchen. She could hear the snowmobiles coming closer now. Raven hurried up to make some coffee and tried to stop her heart from pounding out of her chest. As soon as the coffee was done, she poured a cup and was just sitting down at the table when a knock came from the mudroom door. Taking a calming breath, Raven went slowly to the back door and opened it with a smile.

"Hello. How can I help you guys?" She faced two burly men dressed completely in snow gear. The one was just removing his goggles and with no smile, he spoke. "Ma'am, we're just checking on the whereabouts of a certain man."

"Would you like to come in?" She hid behind her false bravado as she stepped aside to allow them to step into the house.

Neither man moved. "Ma'am, we are just checking to see if you've seen our man."

As innocently as possible, Raven pressed the issue. "Is he with you two?"

“Not really.”

“Where are you from? Why do you want this man?”

“We are with the CMT mining operation on the other side of the mountain. The man we’re looking for broke into our facility.” The speaker of the two looked at the other man before speaking again. “He’s not someone to be trusted and we just wanted to get him before he could cause more harm.”

“I’ve been on the mountain for years now and I never heard of your operation.”

He tried to smile but failed miserably in her opinion. “We’re just a mining operation trying to find valuable minerals so our investors can make some money. He caused damage to some of our equipment and we want to take him to the sheriff for prosecution.”

“Well, if that’s the case, he should be punished, but I haven’t seen anyone since the snow’s been falling.” Raven crossed her fingers behind her back, she hated lying, even to the likes of these guys.

They still hadn’t moved from the back steps even though she held the door open. “Here’s our information.” The big man handed a business card to Raven. “Call us if you see him. Remember, he’s armed and dangerous. We’ll come as soon as possible.” With that, he put his goggles back on and the two of them went to their snowmobiles. Just as quickly, they left her property.

It took all her concentration and determination not to disappear as soon as they left, but Raven wanted to show that she wasn’t hiding anything or

anybody and her presence on the back step would go a long way to convince them she was innocent, she hoped.

As soon as the two men were out of sight, she returned to the safety of her own kitchen. She started for her cup of coffee when she realized that Chase was standing just outside the room in the hallway. Slowly she turned and her gaze focused on the gun in his hand. It was the one she'd taken out of her safe and put under her pillow the night before. Raven raised her eyes to face his.

"I thought you might need some help." Chase shrugged his shoulders.

For a moment her heart stopped. She was stuck in her position by the table. A million questions raced through her mind. Could she be wrong about Chase? Could he be dangerous and a threat to her well-being just like that man just said?

"Raven, I was just trying to help." He started towards her at the table, but seeing the look on her face, Chase stopped.

"What did they say? Raven, I'm not going to hurt you, I swear!" When she didn't move nor reply, he pleaded. "Raven, please give me a chance to explain." Chase slowly walked to the table and placed the gun upon the wooden surface. "I took it yesterday from under your pillow. I thought I should have it in case we needed it."

She finally sat down but not before pouring another cup of coffee for him. "I told you to stay upstairs. I could handle it." Her voice was firm and brooked no arguments.

“And I can see that you did. I’m sorry for doubting you.”

She sat silently and sipped from the cup. The tension stretched between them. Raven’s thoughts swirled around in her head. Chase had been right when he teased her about not asking the most obvious question about his mysterious appearance on her doorstep. Her gut feeling told her that he was not a threat in her life, but the facts seemed to point in a different direction.

Chase didn’t speak, but watched as the doubts and questions passed over the expression on her face. As she sat there calmly sipping on a cup of coffee he was convinced she didn’t even taste the contents. This woman was totally different than any other female companion he’d ever had in his life and he wanted more than ever to have her trust and her belief in him.

Finally Raven got up and went to the stove. “Are you ready for breakfast?” She started reaching for the skillet when his voice interrupted the quiet tone in the room.

“Why don’t you yell? Why don’t you ask me what you really want to know? Why are you acting as though this was a normal day in your life?” He sat back down and placed his hand on his side. His comments showed that he needed, no, wanted her trust.

Noticing his movements, Raven went to him. “You’ve done some damage to your injury, haven’t you?”

“This isn’t about me, Raven. It’s about you and me! It’s about you trusting that I am not the bad guy.” In spite of his protests, he allowed her to check the wound on his side. Her touch was gentle and once again he valued the care and concern of his host. Chase put his hand around her wrist and stopped her movements. “Raven, please believe me. I wouldn’t do anything that was unethical or illegal. I only took your gun because I wanted to help protect you. I know that my actions out there have upset certain people and I just didn’t want you hurt or in danger just because you’ve helped me.”

“Chase, let’s have some breakfast and then we can decide where we go from here, okay?” She wanted to establish some calmness to their situation for the moment. Since her accident, Raven found that routine helped calm her nerves. She could once again center her thoughts and decide on a plan of action.

They ate the breakfast of eggs and bacon that Raven had fixed. As she stood to clear the table of their dirty dishes, Chase spoke. “Let me do this. I need to feel useful. You’ve been taking good care of me but I’d like to start helping out.”

She stopped him from standing up by putting her hand on his shoulder. “Chase, thank you for the offer. I think the best thing you can do is get some rest. I’m not sure what the day will hold for us and I need you to get your strength up. Okay?” Her smile was sincere.

“I am tired already. I’m sorry, Raven. I don’t mean to be such a burden.” Chase finally got to his feet and

left the room, heading down the hallway to the guest bedroom.

Once he was gone, she stood for a minute and stared out the kitchen window. She let out a big sigh. This was becoming a huge, tangled mess. I need a plan, she thought to herself. As soon as Raven cleared up their dirty dishes, she went to her room and started rummaging through her closet, grabbing clothes and putting them in a pile on her bed. Reaching into the closet again, she grabbed a duffel-type bag and stuffed most of the clothes into it.

She returned to the kitchen and sat the bag down in the mudroom. As she thought about her next move, Raven walked softly down to the guest room to check on Chase. She noted that he was snoring softly and for that she was grateful. Raven had a lot to prepare before this day was out and not having to worry about him was a benefit.

Taking the steps to the loft, she went to the wall of windows and looked out at the landscape. Raven was grateful that the snow had stopped falling for now and the sun was shining down on the forest surrounding her house. As she stared at the woods, Raven thought about her life to this point and was amazed about the many twists and turns. She believed in fate and with that in mind, embraced the events ahead of her and Chase.

For several hours, she painted with Beau at her side. He seemed to sense that something wasn't quite right so he leaned into her at times. Raven reached down and patted her companion with loving care. "Beau, we have an adventure ahead of us. I'm not

sure you can go.” The loyal friend at her side whined quietly as though he knew what Raven had in her mind to do. “We’ll see, boy, we’ll see.”

It was late enough in the afternoon to go and fix a meal, so she cleaned up her paints and brushes and slowly climbed down the stairs. As her footsteps reached the hallway to the kitchen, Raven realized that fragrant smells were coming from that room. As she and Beau stepped in the room, Chase greeted them from the stove. “I hope you don’t mind. I was getting hungry and thought I’d heat up some of that stew you made the other day.”

“Let me help.”

“You can set the table and get Beau a treat.”

They sat companionably at the table eating. There wasn’t much conversation until they finished. “Did you paint today?” He asked already knowing the answer.

“Yes, I spent most of the day up there. How did you do? Did you get some much needed rest? How is your side?”

“I’m healing nicely, thanks to you.” He got up to remove their dirty dishes. “Let’s get serious here, Raven. What’s ahead? What are we going to do about this mess?”

“I’ve been thinking about that all day and I’ve come to a decision.” She came up beside him and together they washed and dried the dishes. She was grateful that Chase allowed her time and space, that he didn’t push her.

“We need to leave here and I know the perfect place for us to hide, while I find out how you got shot

and why.” She waited for him to react and didn’t have to wait long.

“No! Absolutely not! I won’t have you getting in any further than you are right now.” He didn’t yell, but his determination showed in his voice. “I’ll leave here, but I’m going alone, Raven. I can’t believe you’d put yourself in more danger by trying to help me! Why? I can’t allow you to do that!”

“Are you through?” She paused. “It’s the only logical solution. I’m already involved and those two men knocking at my door will soon find your truck and while they didn’t look too intelligent, it won’t be hard for them to realize that this is the closest place that you could’ve come.” She went to the pantry and started putting some grocery items in a cloth bag.

“Stop! What are you doing?”

“We’ll need some food. I’m not sure how much was left at the cabin. You know instead of fighting me, you could start helping pack supplies.”

Chase grabbed her hands and stopped her movements. “Raven, get this through your pretty head, you aren’t going!”

She shrugged off his grasp and continued gathering stuff from the cupboards. “Okay, okay, Miss Stubborn, tell me about this grand plan of yours. How are we going to get to this cabin?”

“The snowmobile.” She stated simply.

“You have a snowmobile?” His tone was of definite surprise at her calm response.

“Yes, it’s in the barn next to where I found you.” Raven took the bag and put it next to the duffel of clothes. “Come on, we need to find you some warmer

clothes to wear.” She went to go down the hallway but again, Chase stopped her.

“Raven, this is insane!”

Finally she stopped and faced him. “Chase, you’ve been shot. Two big muscular men were here today looking for you and I’m not going to be a sitting duck for what comes next. Didn’t you ever play sports? Remember the old adage, ‘The best offense is a good defense?’ I think we need to go and then you can tell me the whole story and together we’ll decide what happens afterwards.” She waited for his reaction and when she didn’t get one, continued, “Chase, I’m not going to sit and wait for them to decide my fate! We get to make that decision if we go and get some time and space to evaluate the situation. Don’t you see?”

“I can see you’re determined to go. Raven, I don’t approve but if we’re going to do this, we’re going to do this my way.” Chase followed her to the spare room on her floor. The curious look on her face showed that she was intrigued by his statement.

“We need to find some warmer clothes for you. These things are really old, they belonged to my father. Perhaps we can find something that will work for now.” Together they searched through the closet and dresser drawers for any sort of clothing that would help keep Chase warm on the trip. Once they were satisfied they had enough, the two of them returned to the living room downstairs.

“What are we going to do about this?” He asked, lifting his shirt to show the bandage on his side. “I’m not sure how bumpy of a ride I can survive.” As she

looked at his toned abdomen, Raven gathered her composure.

“Well, I thought about that and I hope you’ll be receptive to a kind of weird idea.” She watched for his expression before continuing, “I told you I was a lot heavier a few years ago, well, I used to wear a slimming foundation under my clothes. It’s made of spandex and it would hold you nice and tight.”

His laughter was not what she expected but welcomed the break of tension in the room. “You want me to wear a woman’s girdle? That is too much, Raven.”

“It’s not really a girdle. Chase, it would help do the trick to hold you together while we ride the snowmobile.” She joined in with his amusement of her suggestion. “I’m going to wrap it tightly and then we’ll slip the foundation garment up to help hold it all together.”

“It sounds like you did more than painting upstairs. You did a lot of thinking, didn’t you? Well, have you ever seen a cowboy wearing a girdle when he gets shot? He just gets up on his horse and rides off into the sunset!”

“I told you that I’m not going to be a victim here. We need to level the playing field and that can’t be done with us sitting here waiting for them to make a move.”

“You don’t even know who ‘them’ is, lady.”

“I don’t need to know ‘them’. If they would shoot you and then come looking for you, there’s something stinky on the other side of the mountain. We’ve always been a friendly, calm land in this part of

Arizona. I can't remember a time when people would take up arms against each other even when the gold rush was on; although it was more of a copper rush than gold."

"So, what now?" He asked as they sorted the clothes on the couch.

"Well, we have clothes and some food. I'm not sure. Let me think." She sat down after stirring the fire and adding a log.

"We need to take the gun and some extra ammunition. Do you have any other weapons that we should take?" He pressed for an answer.

"What do you have in that backpack of yours? I'm sure there is a weapon or two in there."

"You still didn't look in there?" He was intrigued.

"Of course not, that's your private property and I'm not one to invade another's confidentiality, especially when you're a guest in my home."

"Well, lady, you'd be interested to know that the only thing that shoots is my camera. I don't own a gun and I certainly don't carry one in my backpack." He went to the kitchen and retrieved it from the table.

"We'll take this." Just then Beau rubbed up against his leg. "What about him? We can't just leave him here." He sat down and the friendly dog jumped up next to Chase on the couch.

"I had a special basket made for Beau but I thought we might need that space for our supplies. I'm not sure he can fit on the snowmobile with all of that stuff."

“We’ll make room for this guy.” Chase ruffled the fur on his companion. “When were you thinking that we need to go?”

“I’d rather not travel in the dark, but I feel that they won’t be watching us then. So, as soon as it’s dark we’ll load everything and leave.”

“Okay, that sounds good but with one very important change.” He stood and waited calmly waiting for her reaction.

“What change?” It didn’t take long.

“I’m going to be the only one on that snowmobile.”

FIVE

“What in the world are you talking about?” She demanded as she shot off the couch, finally showing some fire. “We agreed that we both need to go and I’m not going to let you leave alone. Besides, you wouldn’t know how to get to the cabin without me.”

“I didn’t say I was going alone. I said I was the only one on the snowmobile.” He turned to Raven. “If someone is following, then it’s me they get, not you!”

“And how the hell am I supposed to get to you?” She was not satisfied with his plan.

“I’m sure you know how to ski. All you do is wait an hour and then jump on those skis and come to meet me.”

“Oh, wow! You’ve obviously thought this through.” Her voice was laced with sarcasm.

“What! Raven, my intentions are true. I don’t want you hurt. If I go and they follow, then I’m the only one they get. When you come later, you’ll be safe.”

“In the first place, you don’t even know where to go and in the second place, I don’t think you can drive the snowmobile with your injury. Really, this is a very unstable plan.”

“Oh, and your plan is the best?”

“Yes, it is. We go together and take our chances that they aren’t watching and we can get away. I can drive and you can protect your side as best as you can.” Her arms were folded in defiance in front of her body.

For several minutes, they stood there face to face. Her arms were crossed; his stance was one of staunch determination to get his own way. Finally, Beau barked as if to break the standoff between the two. Raven, sensitive to his needs, but without breaking eye contact reached down and petted her favorite guy. “What’s it going to be Chase?”

He let out a huge sigh and came to her side. Chase reached out and ran his hand up her arm. “I’m going to give in to your plan only because I haven’t the strength to fight you further. I’m going to rest for a bit. Come and get me when it’s time to leave.”

Her skin felt cool after his touch left her arm. This is getting way too dangerous, she thought. He’s becoming more important to me than I want or need. Finally, Raven went back to the couch and sat down, relaxing into the corner as she watched the last of the embers fade away. Her eyes closed and as Beau jumped to lay by her side, Raven fell into a soft slumber.

“Raven, it’s dark outside. It’s time to go.” She heard his voice through her sleep-infused brain. She felt Chase shake her again and struggled to shake off her drowsiness.

Suddenly she was wide awake and leapt to her feet. “Oh, my God, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s okay, we can get loaded and go now.” He was dressed in some of her father’s old clothes and appeared ready to go on their journey to the cabin.

“Give me a minute and I’ll be ready.” She dashed from the room. “Did you wrap your side?”

Chase didn’t reply directly but indicated that he was ready to get out of her house. She accepted his answer without question.

Just as quickly, Raven returned with her ski suit on and together they went to the mudroom. Beau was following right behind them and in no time at all, they had reached the barn. As she rolled the door back, Chase and Beau dashed inside. Without turning on any lights, Raven walked directly to the snowmobile with Chase right behind her. They loaded all their bags and Beau jumped into his basket. She motioned Chase to get on behind her before starting the snowmobile.

“We’re going to go as fast as we can, so hold tightly.” With a quick turn of the key, their mode of escape started and Raven moved the bike to head out the door. She didn’t turn on the lights to the bike and before shooting out of her driveway, Raven got up and closed the entrance to her barn.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” was his reply.

Raven revved the engine and the group of absconders shot across the drive and out onto the snow covered track. She was extremely grateful that the snow had ceased falling and their only challenge was the darkness and the possibility of being captured by two thugs that had seen fit to put a bullet

into Chase. Raven looked to the sky and saw that what little moon there was hid its face behind the scattered clouds in the night sky.

Raven was in complete control of the powerful machine and drove it with the confidence of someone who had mastered it. Even without headlights, Raven knew the path she needed to follow. She kept on the road for a while but in no time at all, made a sharp right turn into the woods, heading steeper up into the mountains. She could feel Chase holding on tightly and her only hope was that it wasn't hurting his wound too terribly much.

The trek through the dense forest wasn't accomplished easily, which caused Raven to slow their progress down a bit. It was horribly jarring and rough even for her. When she finally stopped for a minute, Raven turned to ask Chase, "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Let's just keep going. I don't think anyone is following us, so just go." He demanded.

Raven heard the tension in his voice and responded by gunning the machine. The only sound was the humming of the engine. The ground was now getting rougher and she felt the bumps in her own ribs and could only imagine what it was doing to Chase.

"How much further?" She finally heard his voice over the drone of the engine.

Raven pulled the snowmobile to a stop and turned to face her companion. "Are you okay? We have a way to go and it's only going to get worse. Can you make it?"

Chase took a deep breath before answering. "I can do this, Raven. I just didn't realize how hard it would be on me. Maybe I should've ridden in the basket with Beau." Raven took the time to check on her dog and saw that he was snuggled in his blanket.

"We can't stop here. We're just a few miles away, Chase. Hang in there, okay?"

"I can do this. Just go." His words were strong but his voice was not. Raven decided that the best course of action was just to move on and get to the cabin as fast as possible.

The next few miles were spent on the snowmobile crawling sometimes very slowly through the thick forest. She tried to stick to the smoothest routes but that was nearly impossible as they traveled over uncharted paths. All of a sudden, Raven could feel his hands losing their grip around her waist.

Beau sensed their danger and barked. "Chase!" She yelled at her passenger just as he fell to the side. Raven stopped the motor and grabbed Chase just before he hit the ground. "Chase, you're not okay. Why didn't you say so? We could've taken a break. Damn!"

"Help me back on the damn thing. I can make it." His voice was strained but she heard the determination in his voice.

They both struggled to get the big man back on the snowmobile, but once it was accomplished, Chase commanded her to get moving. "Raven, get me to safety."

As she gunned the engine into action, Raven felt his tight grip on her sides. The urgency in his touch

spurred her into action and she pushed the snowmobile faster and faster into the woods and up the side of the mountain.

The sky was still clear and with no moon, it was more difficult to maneuver, but finally Raven made into a clearing that was totally familiar to her. Relief was the predominant emotion she felt at the site of the old family cabin. She moved the snowmobile slowly to the side of the structure and as she got off, Raven realized that Chase had almost passed out.

“Chase, we’re here. Please, let me help you.” She reached for her passenger as Beau jumped to the ground.

“You’re going to have to be my angel once again. I don’t think I can help you much.”

“Stay put while I open the door.” Raven hurried to the small rough structure and pushed the crude door open. As soon as she got back to the vehicle, she saw that Chase was about to fall off. Placing herself by his side, she pleaded, “You’ve got to hang on for just a few feet. Please, Chase, we can get you in and then you can rest.”

Moving at a pace slower than a snail, together the two made it just inside the cabin when he collapsed to the floor. Beau came to his side, licking his face as if to comfort the silent man. Raven went as fast as she could and gathered their supplies. As she looked at the snowmobile, a thought occurred that she should move it behind the cabin, but her most immediate concern was to get Chase into the bed and tend to his wounds.

Beau hadn't left the side of the still quiet man but when she re-appeared, his look up to her was one of anxious concern. "Beau, you're a good dog. Thanks." Raven tried to adjust her eyes to the darkness of the space inside the tiny lodging.

"Chase." She called. "Come on, you've got to get up and go just a few feet to the bed." When she got no response, Raven shook him. "Please, Chase! Help me!"

"Seems like we just went through all this not too long ago," was his weak reply. "Give me a minute or two and we can get it done."

"Okay, you rest for a minute while I hide the snowmobile. I'll be right back." As she stood, she added, "Don't move."

His pathetic laugh reassured Raven that he was going to be alright. With more energy than she felt, she started the engine and swiftly moved it under a lean-to out back of the tiny wooden home. Before leaving the small area, she reached for an old tarp to cover the snowmobile. When Raven finally got back into the cabin, she saw that Chase had finally rolled over and was at least trying to gather some energy.

"Are you ready?"

"Let's get it done." He looked up at her and tried to smile but failed miserably.

Before bending down to help the injured man, Raven went over to the only bed in the room and pulled the quilt down. As she returned Raven saw that he was attempting to sit up. "Come on. Let me help you."

“Someday soon, I’m going to stop depending on you.”

“Yeah, right.” She replied as Raven reached under his arms and pulled him to his feet. They both stumbled to the edge of the bed and Chase fell to the soft mattress with a groan. As soon as she stood up, Raven noticed the blood stain on the side of his jacket.

“Chase! Didn’t you wrap your wound? Why didn’t you wear that foundation I found for you?” Her voice displayed anger but they both knew it was covering up the fear she was feeling. “Damn!”

With a voice far weaker than she’d hoped for, Chase tried to reassure her. “Raven, I’m going to be okay. Just get this place warmed up and then you can put on a new bandage.”

Not wasting any time, she hurried about gathering the kindling and the wood needed to build a fire in the old, stone fireplace. This cabin had been in their family for as long as Raven could remember and as far as she knew no one knew when it was built or who had occupied it originally. The family rarely used it as it was extremely remote, but now and then an occasional traveler wandered in and put themselves up for a night or two. The mountain had its own honor system and so far it had always been respected. If it was used, it was replaced, that way the firewood was ready, the dishes were clean and the cabin was more than ready to welcome its next guest.

“Now to you.” She said as she approached the injured man still lying quietly on the only bed in the small room. Raven took care when she removed his

jacket and his shirt, exposing the still bleeding wound. "I can't believe you did this! What were you thinking? Don't answer that!"

It was quite a chore to remove the many layers of clothing, but finally Chase was laying there in his jeans and not much more. "These have to come off too. I'm going to have to irrigate that bullet hole before we treat it. You just rest here until I get some water boiled."

As she stood up to leave, Chase grabbed her hand. "I promise you that this is the last time you'll have to take care of this." He pointed to his side.

"I know, I know." After putting a kettle of water on the hook over the fireplace, Raven found her supply of herbs in the bag she'd brought with them. She knew that if she didn't get this thing under control, he was going to be in big trouble with infection.

After just a few minutes, the water was hot and ready to use. Raven grabbed a hot pad and brought the kettle to the rough counter by the wash sink. As she waited just a bit for the water to cool enough to put into a coffee cup, Raven reflected on the turns her life had taken in just a few days of knowing Chase. Shaking her head to refocus, Raven poured the still hot water into the huge mug and went to the bed.

"Chase, you're going to have to lean over the side. I need to pour this hot water over your wound to wash it out. This is the only place to sleep tonight and I don't want to get the mattress all wet. Can you lean over the edge?"

"I'll try." He would cooperate no matter the cost. With a great deal of strength, Chase scooted to the

edge and with his left side hanging over the edge of the bed, he instructed her. "Go ahead. I'm ready."

Trying hard to make sure the hot water hit its target, Raven poured the nearly boiling water over the freshly torn wound and into the metal bowl below. She could see him grimace, but Chase didn't make a sound until she was done. "Go ahead and lay back."

Once Chase adjusted himself on the bed, Raven checked his injury. "I think we've got it clean enough. I'll wait for it to air out and dry before I put another poultice on it. I'm going to bind it tight though so don't get too comfortable." What she didn't tell him is that she wanted to make sure it wasn't still bleeding. The rough trip up the mountain tore open the bullet hole and Raven was very concerned that he could be bleeding too much.

"When is it going to be daylight?" His weak voice penetrated her dreaded thoughts.

"Not for a while. We have a few hours at least. Rest, Chase."

Carefully she reached for the bowl with the bloody water and went to the door to toss it out. Once that task was accomplished, Raven stoked the fire and soon the heat was starting to penetrate the cold damp air of the little cabin. Before returning to his bedside, she took stock of the supplies on the shelf above the stove. Not knowing how long they'd be there, Raven was dismayed to find only a few cans of soup, some vegetables, and a tin of canned meat. Good thing I brought my leftover stew, she thought.

There was no electricity but with the snowfall outside, she could place anything needing

refrigeration into a snowbank and it would keep just fine. The fireplace gave enough light for her to move about without tripping over anything. After storing her perishables, Raven shut the outside door firmly and looked for a comfortable place to sit down. Seeing nothing but some hardwood chairs, she found herself looking at the bed where Chase was finally asleep.

“Chase, I’m so sorry but I have to wrap your wound.” She tapped him on his shoulder. He slowly opened his eyes but the pain was clouding his expression. “I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

As quickly as she could, Raven put the last of her poultice compound on his wound and gratefully observed that the bleeding was minimal. “This isn’t going to feel good, but I have to get you to sit up so that I can wrap this bandage tight enough.” With a lot of effort, he struggled to sit. Chase finally was in a position to allow her to put the dressing around his midsection. He groaned as she pulled it tightly and pinned it in place. “Now, you’ll be able to rest. Here, I found something you might like to help with the pain.” Raven held a bottle of whiskey in front of him.

“Now that’s the best thing you could’ve done for me yet!” His humor wasn’t wasted on her. She smiled as he took a big swig out of the bottle and then fell back to rest on the bed.

She moved to clean up her supplies and after doing so, Raven sat on the hard wooden chair closest to the fire. Absently, she poked at the embers burning and added a couple of logs.

Finally, her exhaustion and the weight of her circumstances settled down hard on her shoulders.

Slowly, she crossed the floor and tenderly rolled Chase over to the back edge of the double bed, Raven crawled into the softest space in the cabin. With one deep sigh, she settled into a peaceful sleep next to the man she felt very responsible for keeping safe.

“Yoo Hoo!”

Raven heard the call through her sleep addled brain. “Anyone in here?” She struggled to sit up but felt Chase’s arm around her waist.

The door was swung open wide and as Raven stared at their visitor, she saw a familiar smile. Raven finally got loose of his hold and got up from the bed. “Hattie! You’re a sight for sore eyes!”

The older woman struggled to shut the door against the wind and the now falling snow. As she turned and shook the snow from her big frame, Raven marveled at the look of the lady in front of her. Hattie was of a mysterious age, no one on the hill seemed to know how old she was, or how long she’d been living on the mountain. Hattie tugged the stocking cap from her head and stomped the snow from her boots.

“How the hells bells are you, girl? What are you doing up here?”

Raven laughed at the reaction from her old time friend. Hattie was known in the mountain as having a not-so-polite way of conversing. By this time, she saw that Chase was awake and observing the interaction.

Hattie turned her attention to him and commented, “Who the hell are you?”

The shocked look on his face was laughable and Raven found herself breaking with uncontrollable mirth. Most of the people that knew Hattie

understood her uncouth way of speaking, but people that hadn't met her were usually shocked by her foul mouth.

"Hattie, this is Chase. He and I are staying here at the cabin for a bit."

Hattie looked from Chase to Raven and back again. "Oh, I'm sorry, Girl. Did I interrupt something private? I can go if you want."

"Oh, no, no. Hattie, Chase and I just needed to get away from my house for a bit. It's nothing romantic or anything like that."

"You sure could've fooled the bloody hell out of me, Girl. It's none of my business, you know." Hattie spluttered.

Chase finally sat up and managed to respond. "Please stay. We'd like the company."

"Well now, young man, I accept your kind offer. How bloody nice of you!" Her booming voice reverberated through the small cabin. "I'll make the coffee. You two get yourselves up and we'll have a bloody wonderful breakfast." Hattie moved toward the stove and left Raven and Chase in her wake.

As the two looked at each other, Raven lifted her shoulders in defeat. Chase tried to move out of the bed, but seeing his difficulty, she went to his side. "Don't move. I'll give Hattie an explanation."

"I can get up. You don't have to defend me." He was adamant.

"I can hear you two, you know." Hattie's bluntness didn't surprise Raven.

"Hattie, I can explain."

“Oh, you don’t owe me any bloody hell explanation, Girl. I’m just here because this bloody hell storm was getting to be too much and I needed a place to hunker down.” The older woman moved about making coffee and getting things ready at the table. “I’ve seen a man shirtless before, but it’s been a long time since I’ve seen a man with a bullet hole in his side.” She turned to face the two shocked people standing across the tiny room and laughed a great belly roll.

“How did you know?” Raven finally found her voice.

They waited until Hattie stopped her merriment at their expense. “Kate, my girl, we all know that you don’t leave that fortress of yours and so you haven’t heard the latest gossip on the mountain. Everyone is very aware that this young man did some damage at that mining site and he suffered a barrage of bullets trying to escape so he wouldn’t get caught. You better come over here and get a hot cup of java before you fall down.”

Her boisterous laugh filled the little cabin as both Raven and Chase found their way to the table. He moved gingerly and sat on the hard wooden chair. “How’ya doin’ young man?” Hattie finally addressed him directly.

“I’ve been better.” He weighed his words, not knowing how much to trust this crusty hulk of a woman. “Why do you call her Kate? It seems this whole world knows her as Raven.”

“I’ve known Katie since she was friggin’ knee high to a grasshopper. These locals don’t get past the façade she puts up to keep them away. I know how

bad she hurt after that mother truckin' car wreck. They don't know!" Hattie took a deep breath before continuing, "I'm sorry if my way of speakin' offends you, but, young man, I've always been a woman that speaks her mind."

Chase smiled as he looked at Raven for silent confirmation and at her nod, he stated, "Hattie you're a breath of fresh air."

"Oh, what a wily one you are!" To Raven, she spoke, "You need to be wary of this one, Katie, he's a charmer!" Hattie cackled aloud.

"Hattie, what exactly have you heard about Chase?" Raven finally spoke to her old time friend.

Hattie grinned a rather ragged smile with a few teeth missing. "It seems that CMT is putting out a sort of bounty on this fine young man. He did some extensive damage on their site."

"What are they hiding? Chase had to have a good reason."

Hattie looked from her to him and again her laughter resounded throughout the small room. "I'd expect nothing less from you, Katie. You always did sponsor your bloody champions!"

"You talk like that's a bad thing." Raven defended herself.

"Not at all, Girl. I respect you for sticking to your principles."

Chase finally took hold of the conversation. "I think it's time for me to come clean with you, Raven. I don't want you any more involved than you are."

Hattie addressed him, "What the bloody hell are you hiding, young man? Katie deserves the truth!"

Chase slowly stood up and rubbed his hand through his unruly hair. When he finally faced the two women, the strain of the last few days showed on his face. "You're right, Hattie. Raven has been wonderful and she deserves to know what actually happened on the other side of the mountain."

The stretch of silence seemed endless, but finally Chase spoke, "I'm a part of OPP. You may know it as Operation Perfect Planet. It's an environmental group that helps businesses produce and grow without endangering the planet's resources or people." He stopped and looked at both of the women, making sure he made eye contact with each. "We're not a radical group and always use peaceful methods."

"That doesn't explain your bloody hell bullet wound, young man!" Hattie bluntly spoke her mind.

"We got an anonymous tip that the mining operation was using the mines to illegally store radioactive and nuclear waste."

"Shut the front door!" Hattie was the first to respond to his startling statement.

"Do you have any proof of that?" Raven asked.

"That's what I was trying to get when they discovered I was there. The pursuing chase produced this." He pointed to the bandage on his side.

Raven stood up and paced around the table. “Storing that stuff could be devastating to life on this mountain. Why in the world would someone do that?”

“Greed, pure arty ole greed, Girl!” Hattie spoke the obvious. “I’m hungry. Anyone else want something to eat?” The older woman stood and proceeded to go to the stove.

Chase laughed, Raven looked shocked, and Hattie started looking for something to cook. “Wait, wait! You want to eat when we might have a crisis on our mountain?”

Hattie turned to face Raven with a big smile on her face. “It’s friggin’ great to see you come to life, Girl. You’ve buried your emotions for far too long.” She thumbed toward Chase. “It took this good lookin’ man to wake you up! Bloody good job, young man!”

Raven turned to him. “Chase, you’ve got to help me understand what the hell is happening. What are we supposed to do now?”

“I’m making pancakes. I found this mix and in no time at all, we’ll have damn good food.” Hattie interrupted.

“Chase?” Raven prompted him again.

“I have the evidence on my camera. I thought I put it in my backpack but after checking the other night, I fear I must have dropped it when trying to get to your place.”

“Oh, my God! That means we have to go back over your path from my house to your truck.” She went to the only little window in the tiny lodge and pointed out the again falling snow.

Hattie stopped her work in the kitchen long enough to put in her two cents worth. "I can help."

With a confused look on her face, Raven realized she had been meaning to ask Hattie a couple of questions herself as well. She posed her queries to the other woman. "Hattie, what are you doing up on the mountain in the worst storm we've had in years? Why aren't you in the warm comfort of your own home down in Copper City?"

She watched her squirm before answering. "Well, that's a bloody good question, Girl."

"I'm sure you think so, now answer the question."

"Okay, I'll come clean."

"That's better."

"They've offered a bounty for that one!" She pointed to Chase before continuing. "Before you get your panties in a bunch, I'm not going to do anything or tell anyone. After meeting that damn handsome fella over there and after seeing how enamored you are of him, I couldn't in all good conscience give him the bloody hell up to those mining fellas."

Raven felt the red blush of embarrassment creep up her face. She turned so that no one could see before talking. "Hattie! Shame on you!"

The laughter from Hattie wasn't what she expected, but it was a normal response from the mountain woman. "Katie, you're right! Damn shame on me. I'm so glad I met you though, young man, before I made a huge mistake and went for that bloody bounty!" She continued to bustle about the table and soon motioned for them to join her.

"Let's eat before we decide on our plan!"

With a shrug of her shoulders, Raven smiled and sat at the small table. Chase joined them and Hattie proudly presented her pancakes. "Eat up! I even found some brown sugar and made this syrup! You couldn't ask for a better bloody meal, could you?"

They dug into their food without any conversation and soon Chase pushed back from the meal. "Hattie, dear lady that was awesome! I'm impressed that you could make a meal with practically nothing! Thank you."

Hattie's loud, boisterous laughter reverberated around the room. "Girl, watch out for this silver-tongued devil!"

After the two women pitched in and cleaned up their meal and the dishes, they turned to find Chase had lain back down on the bed. It was obvious that his wound was giving him some trouble.

"Well, Girl, it looks like its bloody well up to us. He's in no shape to go anywhere."

"I think you're right. Chase, can you give me any details at all as to where your truck might be?"

"If you two can give me a few hours, I can go with you and help."

"Now that's bloody well laughable, young man. You're in no shape to go anywhere let alone a bumpy friggin' ride on a snowmobile! Your job is to give us the details and we'll do the rest." Hattie bustled about gathering her winter clothing, getting ready for a cold, wet ride.

"I don't like this, not one bit!" Chase protested.

With laughter, Hattie addressed Raven. "Isn't he cute? He thinks he has a say so." Her chuckled

resounded in the room. “Come on, pretty boy, give us a map.”

Disgruntled, Chase took the piece of paper Raven offered him and as accurately as possible, he drew the spot where he thought he left his truck and headed out on foot. “I don’t like this, not one bit! Two women doing work I should be doing!”

“Are you grumbling to us? You can save your breath, Pretty Boy. We are strong friggin’ women with a mind of our own and you can thank your lucky stars that you have us here to help you!” Her stern words were laced with laughter as they readied for a trip out into the snow-filled mountain area.

When Raven came over to gather the map, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. “Raven, if anything should happen to you, I’d never forgive myself. Please, please, be careful!” He then pulled her close enough to place a kiss on her startled lips.

Hattie’s raucous laughter could be heard all the way out the door. Raven crossed the little room and hesitated long enough to give him a smile. “Be safe. We’ll be back soon. I’ll leave Beau here to help you.” She gave Beau the command to stay.

The two women fired up the snowmobiles and swiftly made tracks down the mountain. They’d gone for about an hour when Hattie stopped and allowed Raven to pull up beside her. “I thought the best friggin’ idea would be to start at your place and head back down the road to the east. What the hell do you think?”

As Raven pulled her goggles up and looked around, she saw that the snow had slowed down. “I

think that's probably the best idea. I can check to see that my house is okay." With that, they both started the noisy machines and wasting no time, drove rapidly to the Powder House. The trip down the mountain went far faster as she didn't have to worry about hurting Chase further.

Just before leaving the security of the woods, Hattie raised her hand to slow them down. "Let's just check the landscape before we go barreling balls to the wall down there." She reached into her saddle bags and grabbed a pair of binoculars. It seemed a long time as she peered through them before announcing to Raven that all was clear. "I don't see anything that looks bloody unusual. Here, Girl, you look."

Raven took the offered binoculars and took her time perusing the house and the surrounding area. She knew every nook and cranny and would recognize if something was out of place. So far, so good. Now all they had to do was start at the place she found him right by the barn. "Let's go down to the barn and start exactly where I found him. We might get lucky and find the camera there. Wouldn't that be great?"

"Humph!" Hattie snorted. "I've never in all my years had that kind of bloody luck! If I did, I'd have found that gold vein and been rich by now." She hooted with her usual laugh.

They started their vehicles and soon were in the driveway next to her barn. Raven got off her snowmobile and walked to the exact spot where she first found Chase. With all the snow, there was no indication of him or his camera. Both Hattie and

Raven searched the area but after a bit, declared it useless to continue their efforts.

“Why don’t you go in and gather some more food before we head up to the road? I have a feeling that we’re going to need some sustenance when we get back to that cabin.” Hattie chuckled.

Raven went into the mudroom and then further into the kitchen to gather some necessary provisions. She tried to grab things that would keep and help them make it through the next couple of days in the cabin. Once she completed her task, Raven joined Hattie out in the courtyard. “I’ve been thinking, unless Chase knew where my house was, he’d more than likely take the road when his truck broke down. I think we should go up the lane and onto the road, looking for his vehicle. Make sense?” As she mounted her trusty vehicle, Raven waited for agreement from her companion.

“Alright, Girl. I don’t think we’re going to find his camera with all this snow, but we need to give it the bloody college try, don’t we?” With that, Hattie fired up her machine and slowly they took the path that led to the dirt road.

It was very slow going as the snow had piled extremely high over the past week. Carefully and stopping often, the two women searched thoroughly for the lost camera. Each stop produced disappointment as they found nothing.

“The only thing I feel we can hope for is to find his truck.” Raven finally voiced what both women were thinking out loud.

“We need to bloody hell keep looking. If we find his truck, we can do a double backtrack and maybe we’ll get lucky. Ha!” Hattie exclaimed.

The snow had stopped and they wanted to take advantage of the clear skies. Each woman pushed her vehicle forward and as they came around a bend in the road surrounding their mountain, Raven was startled to see the outlines in the snow of the cab of his truck. “Hattie, there it is!”

“Good bloody job, Girl!”

As they got closer and slowed their machines down, each woman was careful to not disturb the snow surrounding the submerged truck. Raven shut down her snowmobile and carefully got off. Slowly, she walked closer to the truck. She noted that there were fresh footprints in the drifts.

“See anything, Girl?” Hattie was still seated on her snowmobile. “What do you need me to do?”

“Those guys from the mine must have been here. There are tracks everywhere. Go up the road for a way and see what you can find. If it was them, we should be seeing their tracks coming from that way.”

Raven walked closer to his truck, sinking deep in the piled snow. The tracks were starting to be covered with the newly fallen stuff and it was hard to navigate but she managed to get close enough to reach for the door handle. It was an older truck and as she tried to pry the door open, Raven found that although the door wasn’t locked, the snow blocking it prevented her from pulling it open. She listened as Hattie’s snowmobile moved away from her location.

With one last strong effort, Raven pulled on the driver's door and almost fell on her bottom when it finally gave way. Raven peered inside at the cab and its contents. Hoping the camera would just be there on the seat, she was disappointed when the obvious didn't happen. It took a great deal of energy to push her way into the front of his truck, but finally Raven found herself planted on the seat. "Okay, Chase, what are you hiding and where do I find it?"

She could see that someone else had already searched the inside of his vehicle. Slowly and methodically, Raven searched under the seats, up behind the seats, and into the glove box. When she didn't find anything significant, Raven found herself just sitting there thinking. If I were him, where would I hide anything important? Her thoughts ran wild. The snow started again lightly. She heard Hattie off in the distance. Maybe Hattie would find the camera, Raven hoped for victory.

Finally giving up, Raven went to move out of the seat and as she bumped her head on the sun visor, a small plastic container holding a memory card fell onto her lap. As she heard her companion's vehicle in the near distance, Raven quickly put the item into her pocket. She wasn't exactly sure why she wanted to hide it from Hattie, but Raven always depended on her first instincts. I'll have to get my tablet to see what's on this memory card, she thought to herself.

"Find anything, Girl?" Hattie shut down her vehicle and came over to the door of the truck. "I'm real sure we're not going to find that camera. There's too much bloody snow to find anything out here but a

cold and their tracks do come from that direction.” She chuckled at her own joke.

“Well, let’s double back and go slowly to make sure we didn’t miss anything. Okay?” Raven proposed as she avoided directly lying to her.

“I think that’s a bloody good idea. Let’s try to imagine being him and how he must have stumbled from here to your house.”

“I think that’s great. Let’s separate but keep parallel and maybe we’ll get lucky.” They both started their snowmobiles and slowly, very slowly they drove down the dirt track from his truck to the lane leading to the Powder House. It was a little difficult to keep the vehicle running at such a low speed, but both women maintained an equal distance apart. Each of them were constantly looking in the path on either side for any sign of the camera or anything that might look suspicious.

Suddenly she stopped and waved at Hattie. “Look, the snowmobile tracks from those guys take off here through the woods.”

Hattie pointed to the east at the top of her home. “They must have seen your house and made the deduction that he would too. Then we’ve got to follow their lead.”

It seemed like inch by inch, but Raven was sure that they were covering several feet at a time. The terrain was tough and every now and again, they had to maneuver around trees and bushes. It was difficult to keep the powerful machine heading straight down from the road to her place, but soon they could see more of her house rising above the horizon.

“I think this is a friggin’ waste of time, Girl.” Hattie hollered above the noise of their vehicles.

“We’ve got to follow through with this. If there’s any chance at all, I want to do a complete and thorough job of searching.” Raven moved forward and Hattie followed.

Again their pace seemed patiently slow, but the two of them kept their snowmobiles on the path that they’d been following from the two guys from CMT mining. Soon enough her house came into plain view and although they were finding nothing, Raven was determined to follow this to the end. Finally, they pulled their snowmobiles into her courtyard and to the very spot Raven had found Chase.

Raven shut down her vehicle and as she got up and walked around the spot that Chase had been laying on, she couldn’t see anything at all. She looked to Hattie who had finally shut her machine off. “I’m sorry, Hattie, I think this has been an exercise in futility. He was right here when I found him. If there was a camera, those guys must have found it.”

“Those snakes in the grass, they’re low-life, chicken thieves. Let’s get back to your cabin and figure out a new plan.”

“I’ll be just a minute. I want to grab a few more things and then we can go.” Raven went to her back porch. She quickly went in and to her office. She grabbed her fully charged tablet and the power cord. Once back into the kitchen, she grabbed a sack of potatoes and some bread.

Hurrying out to the courtyard, she found Hattie looking over the spot where she found Chase. “Find anything interesting?”

“No, I just wanted to do a bloody double take and you’re right, Girl, there’s nothing here now.” Both women mounted their machines and in no time at all were headed back to the mountain cabin.

Just down the road a piece, Raven waved at Hattie to stop. “I think that we need to circle around and not give a direct path to our hideout. How about we split up and give them something to wonder about?”

Hattie’s hooting laughter was loud, echoing across the mountains in the late afternoon. The snow had stopped again and before they separated, Hattie spoke, “Listen to me, Girl, you be careful! Them there chicken thieves wouldn’t hesitate to use you as bait for your young man. I’ll see you there!” With that she gunned her snowmobile and headed further down the road, the brightly colored whip flag swaying in the breeze. Raven turned around and went back towards her house before heading up into the woods for the cabin.

Slowly and methodically Raven deliberately zigzagged and maneuvered her vehicle around trees, shrubs, and jagged rock formations so as to fool anyone that might be looking to follow her. She’d been traveling through these woods for the last several years in all kinds of weather and felt she knew her way forwards and backwards. As she looked to the sky, Raven was grateful that the snow had stopped for now and although the sun was going down behind the mountain, it was a beautiful day in

her world. Unconsciously, she found herself longing to see Chase and to make sure he had fared well during her absence. Quickly, she stopped those wayward thoughts. Raven tried to convince herself that she didn't want Chase to become so important in her life. Aloud to no one, she firmly stated, "I've been fine on my own and I don't need a man in my life."

As she headed further up to the cabin Raven took the time to shut off her snowmobile and waited, listening for any evidence of someone following her. While she sat there, a small distant droning sound reached her ears. Her heart rate started to speed up as she realized someone could possibly be following her. Looking around for a place to hide, Raven got her bearings and realized there was an old mine shaft just ahead on the right. These mountains contained many old mines and finding herself praying that whoever it was wouldn't hear, she started her own machine and quickly found the place she was looking for buried behind some scrub trees. She turned into the old mine shaft and swiftly shut down her snowmobile. Raven could only hope that whoever it was wouldn't see her and just pass on by.

Thankful that it had stopped snowing, Raven hunkered down to wait until the danger had passed. She sat patiently on the vehicle and listened for any sounds that would indicate danger. This might be a good time to look at the memory chip on her tablet, she thought. Grabbing her tablet and the chip, Raven set about discovering whatever was on that disk. Although it was darker in the cave than she'd want,

Raven was still able to see her tablet and start to view the pictures on the disk she'd found.

As she perused the images on the disk, Raven was surprised to find that Chase had captured most of the illegal activity at the mine, at least on the outside. Various pictures showed trucks loading dirt and ore while other incoming trucks were captured unloading huge metallic barrels. All in all, she saw that he'd taken at least two or more dozen pictures. Just as she was coming to the end of the photos, Raven's attention was drawn to a louder sound right outside the mine. Quickly, she shut the case to her tablet and sat oh so quietly, waiting to see if anyone would come closer.

She could hear voices but they were far enough away that she couldn't distinguish the words. Her heart was beating so loudly she felt they would hear. Time ticked by. Before her car accident, Raven had not been a very patient person, but since then she realized that patience was indeed a virtue. She sat quietly and waited. Soon the voices stopped and she heard the sound of their vehicles starting. She prayed that they would go far, far away and very fast.

When she could no longer hear their engines, Raven got off her snowmobile and ventured to the front of the old mine. Darkness had almost settled and she found it difficult to see anything much less the bad guys. Counting on her instincts, Raven finally went back and started her vehicle and very slowly headed out of the mine.

As Raven steered toward the small cabin, she found herself reviewing the photos on the small disk.

If he had these pictures, why did he want them to go and find a camera that didn't matter? Was this a wild goose chase? If so, why did he want to get herself and Hattie out of the way? Her trust level of Chase and his motives was still on shaky ground and this little trip didn't help confirm her belief in him.

The rest of the way was accomplished without any further incidents and Raven found herself extremely grateful to finally see the small light emanating from the cabin. She pulled her vehicle into the lean-to and with weary footsteps finally went into the front door of their hideaway. Just as she crossed the threshold, Beau jumped at her. Lovingly Raven hugged him and was as genuinely happy to see her four-legged companion as he was to see her.

"Raven, where the hell have you been?" Chase was standing at the table.

"I've been avoiding those two creeps that are apparently after you and chasing down a lost camera, which by the way, we didn't find." Her words were laced with sarcasm.

"I'm sorry. I was worried about you. You and Hattie have been gone a long time." He sat down on the hard wooden chair and put his head in his hands. "Raven, please fill me in on the details. Did you find my camera?"

"We didn't, but I did find this." She held out the memory card.

His face lit up as he reached for the small disk. "At least they didn't get this. Too bad I can't show you the pictures I took. It would show you what they're doing that's going to destroy your world."

Raven held up her tablet and smiled. “I brought this! Wait a minute! Where’s Hattie? She should have been here before me.”

“I thought you two were traveling together.”
“We decided that splitting up was the best plan. Those guys couldn’t follow both of us unless they separated too. Oh, Chase, I’m worried. She really should have been here by now.” Raven’s fears showed in her voice.

“I think she’ll be fine. Hattie seems to be an independent sort. Maybe she just decided to go on home.”

“No, this is not good, Chase. I have a bad feeling about this.” She said.

“Let’s give it a little bit of time. She might have detoured for who knows what. Hattie is a woman able to take care of herself, I think. You know her better than I do. Wouldn’t you say that about her, Raven?”

Raven sat down on the chair by the fire. It was warming to her cold body and she hugged Beau while she thought about the latest developments. Hattie did know how to take care of herself, she reflected. She was a woman of the woods and most of the locals regarded her as a sort of mountain icon, from the handmade leathers and furs she wore, to the traps she set in the hills. Hattie had been in these parts for as long as Raven could remember. In fact, she recalled, as a child she was entirely intimidated by her visits to

the Powder House. Her parents welcomed Hattie in on those stopovers and often she would stay a day or two enjoying their hospitality.

“Okay, we’ll give her a little bit more time.”

“What are you going to do then?” He challenged her.

“I’m not sure. Are you hungry? What have you eaten today?” She got up and went to the bags she’d brought from her house that she’d placed on the table. “I have several things that we can warm up.”

Chase came over and took the chair next to her and Beau. The dog left Raven for a moment and nuzzled the hand Chase offered, but soon went back to lie at her feet. “I don’t think I could eat right now. I had something earlier but for the most part I’ve just been laying on that bed and trying to heal as fast as I humanly can. I can’t stand this!”

“Do you want to look at those pictures?” Raven offered.

“Not right now.” He looked frustrated, so she allowed him space. They both sat there and stared into the flames as the fire crackled and popped. Words seemed unnecessary.

Minutes went by and the two of them just sat there reflecting on their current situation. Raven finally spoke, “What do we do now? I thought this would be a safe place for you to heal.”

“I think we need to go over the mountain and let you see for yourself what this company is doing to the environment.”

“You can’t make the trip.” She spoke with a calmness in her voice, reflecting the gravity of the situation.

He didn’t answer right away but instead got up and grabbed her tablet and the disk. “Maybe this’ll convince you that we need to stop their operation in its tracks!”

As he loaded the disk onto her tablet, Raven squirmed. Maybe I should let him know I’d already seen most of the pictures, she thought, but there wasn’t any opportunity to confess. He quickly brought the photos onto the tablet and encouraged her to join him at the table.

“Most of these photos are self-explanatory, but I can assure you that they don’t do justice to what is really going on up there.”

“Where were you when you were taking these pictures?”

“I was up on a hill just above the main compound. There are several buildings and back closer to the actual entrance to the mine are more structures and what looks like offices. I tried to get pictures of the actual workers so that we could know who is involved in this horrible travesty.” He kept flipping through the photos on her tablet.

Suddenly Raven shouted, “Stop!”

Chase looked up at her abrupt interruption.

“Go back!” She commanded.

As Chase hit the back arrow on her tablet, Raven’s breath caught in her throat. It was a picture of two men standing in the middle of the compound by what

looked like a warehouse type structure. “What? Do you know those men?”

“That’s my brother, Lochlin! What would he be doing there? Chase, when you watched these men, did it look like they were friendly or arguing? This picture gives me no clue why he would be there.” She stressed over the picture, trying to get an idea as to why her brother would be at the mining operation.

“Then that’s another reason why we should go over the mountain and check it out. I honestly don’t remember the moment; I was just taking as many pictures as I could before they caught me.”

“This is getting to be such a mess! Hattie’s missing, my brother was there and you’ve been shot! Just a few days ago, my life was very simple.” She moaned.

“Simple and safe. Raven, I’m a firm believer that people are put into our paths for a reason. I’m here to help you and you found me so you could help me. Think about it. We’re supposed to be together to take care of exposing this illegal dumping.” He put his hands over hers.

“I never thought of myself as an activist, let alone having the strength or courage to take on a big corporation. Damn! What I wouldn’t give for a cell phone right now. I need to get a hold of my brother.” She cursed her own need for privacy.

“I have one of those, but up here it won’t do any good, there’s no reception.”

It was completely dark outside by now and Raven knew in her heart that Hattie was not coming. “I’m so worried about Hattie.” After a short pause she asked,

“How can we get to the mining site? Are you sure you can make the trip?”

“We have to, there’s no one else to do this.” He replied.

“Well, then, that’s that. We need to get some sleep and leave at dawn. How far do you think it is from here?”

“I have no idea. I don’t really know where we are, but I’m sure you’ll be able to figure out a path.” He replied. “Next to Hattie, I think you’re quite a mountain woman.”

Raven blushed but turned quickly towards the fire so that he wouldn’t notice. She faced the bed and realization dawned on her that once again they would have to share a bed. He must have interpreted her embarrassment as he spoke from right behind her. “Raven, we’ll be fine. Besides, I’m too wounded to do anything that remotely resembles sexual advances.”

She laughed weakly before facing him. “Chase, we can get this done. We have to stop those guys from destroying our world.” When he started to blow out the oil lamp, she stopped him.

“Just lower it, in case Hattie comes back.”

“You’ve got such a good heart. Come on, let’s try and get some sleep. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.” He went to the bed, climbed in and scrunched up in the back by the wall, and patted the bed by his side. “Come on, Raven, you’re exhausted and need to get some rest.”

Without further protest, Raven slipped out of her heaviest clothing and now down to her tee shirt and jeans, crawled into the bed next to Chase. Taking a

deep breath, she gave into the comfort that was so welcome in her tiring day. In no time at all, they both fell asleep to the sound of the wind whistling outside and the fire crackling inside.

The next morning, trying to be careful so as to not disturb Chase, Raven moved out of the bed. The fire had almost gone out and a chill was settling on their little home like a blanket. She padded her socked feet across the rough plank floor and ever so carefully poked the embers in the fireplace. As she went to add a few pieces of kindling, his gravelly morning voice startled her.

“Don’t worry, I’m awake.” Chase struggled to sit up.

“I’ll warm up the coffee.” She offered.

“That’d be great and then we better get moving. With Hattie not showing up, I can share your bad feelings about all of this.” He moved to get dressed but his movements were deliberate and careful.

“You’re still hurting, aren’t you? Chase, maybe I should go alone.” She knew that he wouldn’t agree, but felt she had to offer her suggestion. The look on his face showed that he had no intention of taking her up on her offer.

Raven bustled about the kitchen area, getting coffee and some food supplies for their trip. When he finally came over to the table to get his cup, Chase brushed up against her in jest. “Did you sleep well?”

“Actually, I did. I guess I was so tired that I would have slept anywhere.” She teased, but quickly her tone turned somber. “I feel something bad has

happened to Hattie. Maybe those guys found her when they couldn't get to me."

Chase changed the subject, "Let's get this poultice changed and then wrap me as tight as you can. It's really feeling a little better." He peeled off his shirt and bared his torso for Raven to administer to his medical needs.

I've got to get my head checked, she thought to herself as Raven tried to slow down her heartbeat at the sight of his muscled chest. Upon removing the elastic bandage, Raven took a close look at the wound on his side. It wasn't as red or irritated as before, but it was a long way from being healed. "Chase, I only have enough of my poultice ingredients for one or maybe two changes. We've got to make sure that we're back to the Powder House by then."

"All we need to do is get a few more pictures for evidence of what they're doing there. Once I turn those photos over to the OPP organization, the world will know and it can be stopped." He spoke confidently.

"We don't have your camera."

"Your tablet can take pictures, can't it?"

"Well, yes, but they're not very good. Wait a minute! I can text my brother once we hit the top of the mountain. That way I can make sure he's not involved in this mess. I don't understand why he was there and what it all means. This is all so very confusing." It finally dawned on Raven that she needed modern technology every now and again.

"Come on let's get going, we'll figure things out as we go." She wrapped up his side as tight as he could

stand and they gathered up their supplies. As they went outside, she realized that the sun was finally shining and there appeared to be no snow in the immediate forecast. Beau was by their sides, tail wagging in anticipation of getting outside.

“At least mother nature is on our side. Leave the door unlocked. We always do in case someone needs a safe haven.” She commented.

Firing up the snowmobile, the peculiar threesome loaded themselves up and soon they were on their way. Raven drove slowly, making her way through the woods. They had decided to avoid the roads, hoping that they could remain undiscovered. If their situation hadn’t been so dire, Raven would have taken time to enjoy the stately, snow-covered pines with the sun shining down on the surrounding forest. Little diamonds of light sparkled all around them. Every now and again, she stopped to allow Chase to get up and stretch. “Are you doing okay?”

“As good as can be expected.” He added, “I’m fine, really. Do you know where we are?”

“I’ve got a good idea. If we keep heading that way,” she pointed to the west, “we should run right into the mining site.”

“I’m ready if you are. Come, Beau!” He called for the dog. “By the way, do you know how big the Bradshaw Mountain area is?”

“The entire mountain range is about 40 miles long and 25 miles wide. It covers high pines as well as a high desert type of terrain. My brother lives over by the ghost town of Bradshaw City which as the crow

flies is about 10 miles. Our land is like a skinny rectangle in the middle of these mountains.”

“Wow, you really know your stuff. Are you ready to go?”

“I am, if you are.” She replied. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He nodded and soon she guided the snowmobile through the woods with the morning sun leading from behind them. Again, she stopped several times to permit Chase to stretch and rest. At least the sun was shining allowing them to travel faster and further. “How far do you think we have to go?” Raven asked of Chase.

“It’s not too much farther from here. I think I recognize this area. Let’s go a little further, but keep it slow. We don’t want to alert them that we’re here.” He instructed her.

In spite of the racket from their vehicle, Raven made sure she traveled as slow and quietly as possible. It wasn’t easy as the machine made what seemed like a ton of noise. “Would it be better if we walked from here?”

Chase responded loudly in her ear. “That might be better. I’m up to it if you are.”

In response to his words, she immediately shut down their transportation. Beau jumped off first and then the two of them followed to the edge of the woods.

Trekking through the soft, dry snow was not easy as each step caused their footsteps to sink down halfway up to the knee. Chase indicated that she should follow him as his feet were bigger and would

make a bigger path. Beau seemed oblivious of the danger and strife as he was having a ball bouncing up and down through the snow.

“I have a question for you, Chase.” She spoke about something on her mind.

“Shoot.”

“Why did you send us on a quest to find your camera when all you needed was the disk?”

“That’s not entirely true. I needed the disk, yes, but I wanted my camera to take more pictures for evidence. I have to get this information to OPP and the weight of their organization will take charge and end this illegal mess.” Chase spoke honestly and with conviction.

“What was left on your camera? What will those who found your camera see on it? Will they be able to identify you from the pictures?”

“I’m not sure. I wasn’t in any of them so without this,” he indicated the wound on his side, “hopefully they won’t be able to identify me.”

“As we get closer to the mine, look for cameras on the trees. I figure that’s how they discovered me.”

“That seems logical.” She agreed. Raven told Beau to heel, that way he’d be directly by her side.

They stepped lightly and each of them was looking diligently up in the trees for any evidence of cameras and security measures. Chase’s steps were deliberate and calculated as it took all of his strength to move forward. “So far, so good.” She commented. “I don’t see anything in the trees. How much farther away?”

“It’s not far, just a few more yards. Can you make it?” He teased.

“I think I can do this far better than you.” She teased right back.

Raven was glad that Beau was not a dog to bark randomly, so when he finally stopped and growled, she knew something was up.

With just a snap of her fingers, Beau came bounding back to her side. Quietly, she bent down and ruffled his fur. “What’s up, Bud?”

“Does he sense something?” Chase questioned.

“I’m not sure, but I know that he’s very aware and we should pay attention to his movements.”

Silently and moving slowly, they soon came to the edge of the mountain cliff. The woods were still very thick up here, so Raven felt that they were hidden by the shrubbery and trees. As she peered down below, they had a very clear view of part of the mining operation. “There’s not much action down there.” She commented.

“Probably due to the storm. They can’t do too much moving around with all this powder.” Chase answered, coming up to stand beside her.

She made a point to look at the compound surrounding the site. There was a tall fence with barbed wire on top, so scaling it was near impossible. To the left, Raven could see a gate where a lone man stood his post. There were several metal buildings and a few smaller wooden structures, but nowhere could she see any people moving about. “This seems to have been a wasted trip.”

“Not really,” was his response. “I wanted you to see the layout of the land as it were. We’ll come back when the weather isn’t so bad and then maybe we can

figure a way to get in there and get some true shots of the stuff they're hiding."

The look she gave him spoke volumes.

"What? You mean you don't want to pursue this travesty?" Chase challenged her.

"The main reason I wanted to come today, was to see if my brother was here. I need to send him a text right now, so I can find out what he was doing at the mine." She reached into her jacket and pulled out her tablet. Deftly Raven typed a message to Lochlin. She hoped it was worded casually enough as to not alarm him.

"Wait a minute." Chase put his hand up. "What do you hear?"

She paused and intently listened to the slight whirring in the distance. "It's a drone! We need to get under some sort of cover! Quick!" They looked around desperately trying to find some shelter. Suddenly Chase pushed her towards a towering Alligator Juniper. Its branches were full of snow and the ground underneath was also covered with the light powdery stuff. Towards the back of the huge tree were several large bushes. When she hesitated, he shoved her under the tree into the brush. Ignoring the scrapes at her clothing, Raven covered her face to keep from getting scratched.

"Come on, Beau!" She encouraged her faithful companion to join them. He did with his tail wagging, joining in on the game. As he let out a small bark, Raven shushed him with a treat from the pocket of her snowsuit. The white color would help her to blend

in with the snow but the bright blue color of Chase's clothing would be hard to disguise.

With quick movements, she hurriedly started to cover him with snow. Realizing what she was doing, Chase flattened down and helped to use the white powder as a blanket. The drone was a little closer now but seemed to move in a definite pattern at the edge of where they were hiding. In no time at all, the whirling machine disappeared beyond the row of trees in front of them. She let out her breath. "I think we're okay. I don't think they caught sight of us."

"We'd better hope not. That might be how they discovered me the last time I was here." Helping each other, they abandoned their hiding place and as they dusted off the snow and debris from the tree, Chase spoke, "Raven, we need to come up with a plan to get into that compound. We have to have pictures of the illegal barrels loaded with nuclear waste."

"Let me check my tablet and see if my brother has responded." With that said she pulled it from inside her jacket and looked for a text. "Yes, he says he's at home."

"Where is that? Does he mean he's up here on the mountain or at his home in Phoenix?"

She quickly typed in the question and waited for an answer. "They must have WIFI down there in their offices. I'm getting four bars and great speed." Lochlin's answer came in and she read it to Chase.

"He's at the hunting lodge. That surprises me. Lochlin only comes up during hunting season and then it's with a bunch of his buddies. He doesn't really like the snow."

“Maybe we should go and visit him. Is it far?”

“From here it is, but from the little cabin it isn’t. Let’s go back and plan to visit him tomorrow. We don’t want to wear you out all in one day.” Raven turned and started back to where they left the snowmobile. Reluctantly Chase followed.

“I know you’re probably right, but I can’t help feeling so damned worthless.”

Beau once again bounded passed them with all the fervor of a young child. He was having a ball and it caused Raven to laugh out loud. “Wouldn’t you love to be him? He doesn’t have a care in the world.”

Chase didn’t answer but allowed a slight smile to cross over his handsome features. “I’d love to be him right now, without anything to be worried about.”

“It’ll be alright, Chase. We just have to do our homework and find the evidence.” She reassured him.

“Come on, Beau, let’s get home.” Raven encouraged her dog. She ran ahead of Chase and joined her gleeful dog, running through the knee-deep snow. As she fell near their snowmobile, Beau ran up and barked his excitement. When she finally sat up, Raven saw the smiling countenance of Chase staring down at her.

“Are you having fun?” He asked.

“Yes, you want to join me?”

“I wish I could, Raven. I wish I could.” He referred to the wound on his side that prevented him from becoming part of their fun.

“Soon, you will. Let’s get home and let you rest.” She climbed up on the motorized vehicle and waited for both Beau and Chase to join her. As soon as that

happened, Raven fired up the machine and soon they were making their way back through the thick forest landscape.

Their trip had taken the better part of the day and as they closed in on the final path to their temporary abode, Raven was extremely observant about their surroundings. She felt Chase's hold on her relaxing a bit and she stopped shortly. "I think I need a little rest. How about you?"

"You're doing this for me, aren't you?" His voice expressed his doubt.

"Yes and no," was her response. "I feel the need to take a small break and visit the lady's room." She started to walk off further into the dense trees but his voice stopped her. "Raven, please be careful. We don't know if they saw us or not."

"Fine, I'll take Beau with me." She motioned for her hound to follow her. "Come on, you can protect me, big fellow."

It wasn't long before the two of them came back into view. She noted that Chase was pacing around their vehicle and looking around. The noise they made alerted him to their presence and he finally relaxed as she walked closer. Chase was enchanted with her looks. Her long black hair swung freely with the breeze in stark contrast to her white snow suit. She laughed and her eyes sparkled with merriment. Beau was running circles around her and she laughed out loud at his antics. Raven was very much different than when he first met her. Was it only a few days ago? It seemed like a lifetime.

"Ready?" He asked.

“I want to check my tablet for any more messages from my brother. As she looked at the text, a puzzled look came over her face.

“What is it?” He asked.

“Nothing. Let’s get back to our hideaway. I’m suddenly starving.” With that they once again loaded and were swiftly on their way. The skies were still blue and there seemed to be no evidence of any more snow coming, at least not today. They stopped once more and Chase pursued his question. He noticed that she was acting differently, that although they were moving swiftly, Raven kept looking around. “What’s wrong? You were laughing and smiling and then you looked at that text. What upset you?”

Reluctantly, she showed him the text.

“What’s wrong with that? Your brother wants to see you. He said he’s coming to your house tomorrow.”

“I guess you wouldn’t know. He has never in all our years called me ‘Sis’. That’s not him responding to my texts.”

Chase reread the information. “How would you know that?”

“My brother would never call me ‘Sis’. He’s always called me by my proper name as Kathleen.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that something has happened to him and it involves that mining company and those guys that came looking for you. We need to get over to his place and see if we can find anything to indicate what’s happened to him.” She now felt more pressure back on her shoulders. “This is why I’ve been up in

these hills since my wreck. I find it difficult to deal with this sort of crisis.” She looked at him. “I guess you think I’m weak.”

“Raven, we all handle stress differently and if I’d been in the kind of crash you’d been in, I’m not sure I’d be acting any different than you. I don’t think you’re weak at all. Let’s get going and we’ll figure out a plan tonight.”

The final leg of the trip to the little hideaway went by fast and as they pulled up to the door, they both noticed that Hattie was back. Her snowmobile was parked just to the left under a big pine tree and they saw smoke curling from the chimney.

The very same person came busting out the door upon hearing their approach. “Well, look what the danged cat dragged in!” Hattie hooted at her own remark. “Come in, I’ve got some news for you!”

“Hattie, where have you been? I thought you were coming straight back here.” Raven questioned the rugged woman.

“Hell, Girl, I had me an idea that I should go to town and dig around for whatever danged information I could get.” She hustled to the table. “I got me some good news and some bad news. What the hell do you want first?”

EIGHT

Chase answered Hattie as Raven sat down solidly on the wooden chair next to the fireplace. "Let's have some good news, Hattie."

She hustled over to the fireplace and lifted a lid from the skillet sitting to the edge of the hearth. "Look what I got us for dinner!" Hattie proudly showed off three huge steaks ready for cooking.

"Hattie, those look great. I am hungry." Chase smiled at the rough mountain woman standing before him. He looked to Raven and was concerned with the stress she must be feeling.

Her voice was strained and a little weak, but Raven finally asked for the other news. "Hattie, what else did you find out in town?"

"Girl, I know you've been through damned hard times, but I also know you are a lot stronger than you give yourself credit. I went into the Copper City Bar and talked with the locals. They saw your brother in there about a week ago and he was talking about the devastation on the mountain by that damned mining company. He hasn't been seen since."

It seemed like all the air was sucked out of the small room and for a short time no one reacted. Finally Chase spoke, "Raven, that doesn't mean that

he's in trouble. It could mean any number of things. We need to think about this logically."

"Hells bells, let's eat our steaks and then we can come up with a plan." Hattie started about fixing their dinner ignoring the look passed between the two.

Chase sat down beside her and took Raven's hands in his own. "Listen to me. We can come up with a plan and tomorrow we'll put it into place. Your brother is going to be alright."

"You can't guarantee that. I've been through one major tragedy in my life and I don't want to have to do it again." She got up and walked out the front door with Beau hot on her heels.

Before Chase could get up, Hattie stopped him, "Let her be, young man. She needs to figure this bloody hell stuff out on her own. You need to rest. I can see you've run out of damned energy and you won't be any good to her."

Chase sighed loudly and finally gave in. As he crossed the short space to the bed, he turned to Hattie. "I hope you've got a good plan to help us. She's got to save her brother, you know."

"I think I got the best bloody hell plan. I just need to know, young man, that your intentions are you know like they say honorable." She hooted and turned her attention to the steaks cooking on the fire.

"I don't want to hurt her but as far as intentions, Hattie, we've only known each other a few days. Even you have to admit that we've met under the worst conditions any two people could meet."

"Oh, hell, young man! Who really gets to meet their soulmate under picture-perfect conditions? You

young folks are just so God awful with your ideas of excellence.” Hattie was working away at the fireplace cooking their steak dinner.

Chase looked to the door. “Should I go out there?”

Hattie’s raucous laughter was loud. “I would think that you could damn well figure that out on your own!” She turned her back and continued preparing their meal.

Chase bundled up and went out the door, shutting it softly. The sun was starting to set and although the snow had stayed away, there was plenty of the white powder everywhere. He looked for her footsteps and soon found Raven standing under a big tree. She looked so forlorn and lost, causing him to come up to her and pull her into his arms. Raven offered no protest, just sank into his chest.

“It’ll be alright. We’ll figure something out tonight and tomorrow we’ll launch our attack.”

“They shot you. What makes you think that Lochlin is okay, that he’s still...” She stopped mid-sentence and looked up to him with tears brimming in her eyes.

“I almost invited this,” He pointed to his side. “I did try to destroy some of their equipment and took all those pictures. Your brother was just there as a local, not a protestor.” He tried to get her to see the reason in his statements. When he saw that she didn’t react, Chase changed his tactics. “Raven, who else has your brother got? If you don’t face this, he’ll be all alone out there.” That got a reaction.

“Oh, my God! You’re right! I have to help him.”

“We, Raven, we will help him. We’re in this together.” With that he guided her and Beau back into the warmth of the cabin, where wonderful smells greeted them. Hattie looked up from the fireplace and smiled. Beau went over and found his spot by the older woman.

“Good job, young man. I bloody well knew you’d get her to see sense.”

“Hattie, what can I do to help with dinner?” Raven asked.

“You find us some plates and get that table set. I’m ready for some damned meat!”

Chase went to the bed and stretched out while the two women got their meal ready. His handsome face was lined with pain and weariness, but he never uttered a word. Raven looked over and went to him. “I wish I had something for your pain.”

“Well, Girl, I got just what that young man needs.” Hattie went to her duffle, pulled out a bottle of whiskey and a medical kit. Proudly she held both up and exclaimed, “A shot of this God awful stuff will perk you right up! Then we can get some proper bandage on that wound. I also got me a pack of those bloody hell antibiotic pills.”

“Hattie, I don’t care what they say about you! I think you’re an angel.” Chase’s gruff voice echoed in the tiny room.

“Do you really think that a drink of that is wise?” Raven questioned.

“Nothing about this adventure would be considered wise, but I’d sure like something to dull this ache.” He reached for the offered bottle and

raising it to his lips, took a long drink. "Wow, you're right, this is God awful stuff."

Hattie hooted her agreement and reached for the bottle. After she too, took a snort, she offered it to Raven.

"Oh, what the hell." Raven reached and took a timid sip of the golden brown liquid. She choked a bit, but took another and felt the whiskey burning down her throat. "This is terrible!"

"Okay, gang. I got this bloody meal ready for us." Hattie brought the entire skillet and sat it in the middle of the table. "You are in for a special Hattie treat!" When she lifted the lid, they both looked in and saw a skillet full of steak and potatoes. All smelled wonderful and Raven suddenly realized how hungry she really was after all.

Chase got up and joined the women at the table. All ate in silence, even Hattie. Once they had consumed most of the delicious meal, Raven got up and started to clear the table. She went to her bag and got a can of Beau's food to give to him. With that task done, she spoke, "I'll do dishes because you did all the cooking, Hattie. Sit over by the fire and relax."

"Hells bells, Girl. I'm not so old and feeble that I need to rest."

"I didn't mean it that way." Raven laughed. "Why don't you talk to Chase and figure out a plan for us to get into that compound."

The two of them got up and went to sit by the fire, while Raven attempted to wash the dishes. They had to conserve water so she went out and got a pan full of snow. Using the snow and some dish soap, she soon

had everything as clean as it could be under those circumstances. Raven felt tension and stress relieving a bit with the simple task of everyday duties. Taking a deep breath, she allowed her thoughts to go to the past.

Upon getting home from the hospital after the car crash, Raven found that her whole world had suddenly and completely changed. One thing that helped was doing simple things like feeding Beau, doing dishes, watering plants and simply putting around her apartment. Looking back, it seemed that the healing process took a lot longer for her mind than her body, she mused.

The two had their heads together and Raven deliberately tried not to listen to their talk. Another thought just entered her brain. Moving to the family home was one of the best things at that time, but did it really help her clear her mind? This idea was one that had popped into her consciousness every now and then, but Raven quickly dismissed it. Fight or flight – she'd heard that before. Was that what she did when she moved into the middle of nowhere?

Shaking these random ideas from her head, Raven went over and joined them. "What did you two decide?"

"Well, we're not in complete agreement, but Hattie has a sound idea. It involves some risk for all of us." He let that sink in to Raven.

"Okay, I can handle it if you all can. Let's hear it."

"I've asked ole' Mack to have a couple of his horses ready for us in the morning. Chase and I are going to ride them to the mine while you go to your brother's

house to check it out. We need to find some sort of proof that he's been there and that they have him. You need to try and contact him again. He's got that blasted internet up there, doesn't he?"

"Yes, Lochlin doesn't like being shut off from the world when he's at the lodge. I'll do my best, but what are you two going to be doing. Chase, do you think you can ride a horse? You've had enough trouble on the snowmobile." She stated her concern for him.

"I think it might actually be easier. I can go with the flow of the movement of the horse rather than jostling over the bumps of the trail on that machine. I can be as tough as one of those cowboys in the old westerns. You know the ones that get shot and just keep on riding. Besides, we need to be as quiet as possible when we get close to the mine."

"How will you get in? They have a guard at the gate, don't they?"

Looks passed between him and Hattie. "I made a hole in the fence way in the back near a bunch of trees that had overgrown back there. I don't think they've found it as it was pretty well covered."

"What about a camera? You said yours was lost."

"I got me one of those new-fangled things when I was in town. You'd be damned surprised how many people are willing to help when you need it." She hooted her usual laughter.

"I think it's time to get some damned sleep." Hattie announced.

"Are you staying here?" Raven asked.

“I can’t bloody well leave you alone with this scallywag, can I?” She pointed her thumb to Chase. He was already getting up from the chair.

“Hattie, why don’t you take the bed?” He suggested.

“I’m not used to such comfort, young man. I’ll be just fine on the bloody floor. Raven can sleep there with you.” Hattie turned to him and pointed her gnarled finger, “Don’t think for one minute that I don’t sleep with one eye open! You just bloody hell watch yourself and behave.” With that, Hattie hoisted her large frame out of the chair and scooted things around to make room for her bed roll.

While Hattie was rearranging her stuff, Raven took the medical kit and found some antibiotic cream, fresh dressings and an elastic bandage that would go around his waist. There was also some hydrogen peroxide to clean the wound. It took several minutes but they were both finally satisfied with the results. Raven handed him one of the pills and as Chase reached for the whiskey, she frowned. “I don’t think it’s a good practice to take pills with alcohol.” She heard Hattie’s raspy laughter from behind her, while Chase took a drink from the bottle anyway.

“Young man, you better watch out for this one. She’ll have you under control in no time at all.” As they both turned to look at the mountain woman, Hattie had already stretched out on her bed roll. She’d removed the heaviest of her clothing and was snuggling down into her freshly made bed. “Turn the lamp off so we can all get some rest. Tomorrow could be a big day!”

With that Hattie rolled over and commenced falling asleep.

Raven got up from the side of the bed and turned the oil lamp down. As she padded back, she could see Chase settling in on his side of the bed and for a moment, Raven was acutely aware of their situation. Thank goodness Hattie was here, she thought. I am getting closer to him and I'm not so sure that's a good thing. Finally giving in to her tiredness, Raven sat down on the edge of their sleeping quarters.

"Come on, I promise I won't bite." Chase patted the space beside him.

Raven removed her boots and the smaller jacket she'd kept on and slowly lay back on the small bed. There were times she'd stayed at this very cabin and felt that this bed had been a whole lot bigger, but with the large frame of Chase next to her it seemed very small indeed. Trying not to touch him, she lay back and with a huge sigh, tried to unwind.

"Relax, Raven. We've got a lot to do tomorrow and we need our rest." His whispered words seemed to land right in her ear. He was awful close, she thought as she shifted more to the edge of the bed. As his deep rich laughter reached her ears, she could feel it in his body and felt him reach out for her. Carefully and tenderly, Chase pulled her to him. "Just breathe."

His touch and nearness was comforting and Raven soon found herself relaxing. He was right, they had a big day ahead of them and they all needed to be at the top of their game. She could hear Hattie's soft snoring and the wind was starting to blow again outside. Chase's breathing was slowing as she felt him

succumb to his exhaustion. The hardest part of giving in to sleep was shutting her mind down. As a child, Raven used to think of all the nicest things in her world in order to finally get to sleep and that's exactly what she started to do.

The first light of dawn was coming in through the small window at the east end of the cabin when Raven felt Chase moving about on the bed. "Its bloody hell time to get up, you two!" Hattie's gruff voice interrupted her comfort. "Time's awasting and we have some god awful work to do today."

Raven opened her eyes and looked at the huge woman towering over them. "I'm glad to see you behaved, Young Man." With that comment, she laughed and went to the front door. "We might be in for another damned storm. But now that I think about that, it might be to our bloody hell advantage." Beau took advantage of the open door to escape and conduct his business. He seemed eager to get out into the world.

When Hattie turned back she saw they were both up and starting to bundle up for the cold, brisk weather. Chase was moving slowly, but spoke to Raven. "I want to thank you for taking care of the medicine. I am starting to feel a bit better."

"You'll need to take another antibiotic." Raven told him. "But this time without the whiskey." She handed a bottle of water and the pill to the laughing man.

It was just a matter of minutes for them to get ready to head out into the fresh mountain air. Before Chase got onto the back of Hattie's snowmobile he came to Raven and put his gloved hands on either

side of her face. "You shouldn't take any chances. Be careful and we'll meet up here by mid-afternoon. We won't have any way of communicating, so don't make me worry! Don't take any risks you don't have to when you're looking for your brother."

"I'll be safe, but you've got to make the same promise. I don't know if you could take another gunshot wound." She felt her eyes tear up a bit before adding, "I don't know if I could handle another bullet wound to take care of, but I just want you to be safe. You need to take care of Hattie. She's no spring chicken, you know." Raven didn't take the time to wonder why she was upset. Was it because she'd have to take care of another wound or that she'd be upset if he was hurt in the process?

"I heard that!" Hattie hollered at them. "Come on, let's get this bloody hell job done!" She revved up the snowmobile putting a stop to their goodbye scene. Chase placed a quick kiss on Raven's lips and with one last look, gave her the thumbs up signal for success.

Raven started her own snowmobile and soon the two teams were off in opposite directions on their separate missions. Beau settled down in his basket, eager to be out in the open spaces. Raven took a moment to pat him on the head as they headed towards her brother's place. The skies were clouding up, but so far no snow, just wind whipping through the trees.

Lochlin's house was approximately three miles from the little cabin. Both of the homesteads were located higher up in the elevation and among

extremely thick vegetation. She had to drive carefully through the dense pines, oaks, and junipers so her trip was longer than she first expected. If she could've used the roads, Raven would have been there in no time at all. As she approached her brother's home, Raven slowed down, shut her machine off and just sat there for a few minutes. She was able to view his cabin from where she sat at the edge of the woods and Raven looked intently at his home. Raven stood up and Beau joined her at her side. All seemed quiet as she peered at the scene before her. The beating of her heart was the only sound short of the usual noises coming from the living forest. Raven lifted the small binoculars to get a better view of the surroundings near her brother's cabin. She chuckled a bit as she looked at the structure. It was more the size of a lodge than a cabin. Her father had used it just as Lochlin did but he invited many more friends and needed all the space the great lodge provided.

As she perused the lodge and the surrounding area, Raven didn't detect any movement or action. Deciding to go closer, she spoke to Beau, "stay close and keep calm." He seemed to understand her directive as they both moved through the trees and shrubs to get near the lodge. She said a silent thank you to her father as he built the structure without killing any more trees than necessary thus giving her cover and enabling her to get right to the steps to the upper deck. Instead of using those steps, though, she decided to enter her brother's place through the door to the laundry room in the basement.

Stretching high and reaching for the flower pot at the edge of the upper deck, Raven carefully lifted it and removed the spare key. Each of the siblings let the other know where the keys to their own places were hidden in case of such an emergency. Walking as quietly as possible, Raven unlocked the basement door but before entering, she listened for any noise coming from the interior. After a few minutes, she and Beau approached the stairs leading to the first floor. Step by step she made her way up to the living area of the lodge.

As her head popped above the floor, she quickly looked around and made the determination that there wasn't anyone in the lodge. As she went from room to room, Raven carefully looked for any evidence that her brother had been here. The entire first floor was neatly kept and void of any recent use. She was puzzled as Raven had expected to see evidence of her brother's recent stay. Still intently listening for any sounds of activity, Raven and Beau took quiet deliberate steps up the stairs to the bedrooms above.

One by one, she looked into the various bedrooms and at the end of the hallway, Raven opened the door to her brother's suite. If he'd been there, she couldn't see any indication that Lochlin had been in residence recently. Slowly and deliberately she went through his room. The bed was made, there was no suitcase in evidence and as she entered his bathroom, Raven could see nothing that indicated that Lochlin had even been in his home for months.

This was so puzzling, she thought as she continued her examination of his bedroom and bath. "I don't

understand, Beau,” she finally spoke aloud. “If he was here, there should be some indication of that.” As she went out of his room and back downstairs, Raven ventured into his office.

Upon looking around and still finding no evidence of a recent visit, Raven spoke to her silent companion. “Maybe I can use this time to do some research on that mining company.”

As she had told Chase earlier, her brother had all the latest electronics and Wi-Fi in his home. She sat down at his desk and fired up the computer. For several long minutes, Raven searched the internet for information and printed off multiple sheets of paper. Beau had stayed at her feet the entire time, but suddenly he perked up and growled low. Alert to his warning, she shushed him and quickly shut down the computer and grabbed the printed pages. Just as fast, Raven signaled Beau to follow. They went back to the basement entrance and silently closed the door. As she put the key back under the pot above her head, Raven heard the footsteps and voices of possibly two men on the upper deck.

Beau was very well trained and with a hand signal he sat silently by her side as she smashed herself up against the wall, hoping that they wouldn’t think to look below and discover her whereabouts.

“I still don’t understand why we’re here.”

“Look, man, we know she’ll come to check on her brother so if she’s not here now, we’re supposed to leave this note. It’ll help her give up that photographer.”

“It doesn’t look like any one has been here.” One man spoke to the other. “You want me to break a window?”

“Nah, out here in the wilds, most people hide a key. Look around and see if you can find it.” She looked up and watched through the slats of the deck as the two men moved about searching for the key she just put back in its place.

“Check that flower pot. If it’s not under the mat, that’s always a favorite place.” One instructed the other.

She held her breath and prayed for invisibility as one of them lifted the pot. “I found it!” He got back up and just as quickly, the two men unlocked the door and entered Lochlin’s home. Knowing she had to get away as fast as possible, Raven looked to the nearest trees. The view from the room above was directly looking out into that part of the forest. She had to wait patiently until they moved further into the interior of the lodge.

Estimating where they might be so she could move safely into the cover of the woods, Raven waited and counted. Finally she decided to take a chance and with all the speed she could muster, Raven dashed to the trees with Beau running right beside her. As soon as she felt she was safe, she looked back and saw that they hadn’t discovered her movements. “Beau, we’ll have to wait until they go so we can get that note. Oh, I don’t like this at all.”

It wasn’t really very long before she observed through her binoculars that it was the same two men that had visited her at the Powder House just a few

days ago. They locked the door, put the key back under the flower pot and then taped a note to the door. She watched as they trudged through the snow and up the lane disappearing over the small hill. That's why I didn't hear them pull up, she thought to herself. "Beau, they didn't want me or anyone to hear them coming up to the lodge. I can't blame them. I did the same thing."

Raven sat on the snowmobile a bit longer watching the clouds form overhead. She thought about Hattie's comment about another storm coming and had to agree with the mountain woman. It was getting colder, not warmer as the clouds covered up what little sunshine there was in the day. Finally, deciding that she'd waited long enough to be safe, Raven ordered Beau to stay while she dashed back to her brother's house. She continued to look up the lane as she took the steps and ran to the door where the note had been placed. Grabbing it and then heading back down, Raven ran to the woods and finally let out her breath.

"Beau, this is all too much for my nerves. I've been living like a monk for so long, I don't know if I can stand all this dangerous stuff." She encouraged her favorite companion to get in his place and once secured, Raven started the snowmobile. She hadn't even taken time to read the note she'd stashed in her pocket. Several times during the journey back to the cabin, Raven shut the machine down and waited, listening for any sounds that she was being followed. The clouds were forming into more ominous objects overhead and she feared they were in for a frightful

storm again. It was a little past noon when she finally came into sight of their refuge. She looked for any sight of Hattie and Chase, but found none.

As she parked her snowmobile behind the tiny cabin, Raven helped Beau down and he scampered into the woods to do his duty. He was such a joy, she thought to herself. When he was finished the both of them went into the cabin and Raven found herself hungry. She found some of the leftover steak and cut up some slices to munch on while she gave Beau his favorite food from her backpack. She stoked the fireplace to warm up the old cabin. Feeling restless, Raven went to a small closet and found an old sketch pad. Using her skills, she found herself drawing the features of both the men that had visited her own home and that of her brothers.

The only sounds were the distant rumbles of thunder. "Beau, I'm afraid we're in for more storms. I hope Hattie and Chase are alright. I don't think they need to be caught out in this weather." He came by her side and placed his head on her leg. "You're such comfort! I love you, boy."

Suddenly, Raven remembered the note in her jacket pocket. Going over to grab her coat from the hooks by the door, she was startled by the sound of a snowmobile coming towards her. Oh, please let it be them and not those other guys, she silently prayed. Afraid of looking out the window, Raven hid behind the small cabinet in the kitchen. There was very little space in which to hide, but she hoped that it would cover her enough.

As the door started to pop open, Raven grabbed the broom leaning on the wall next to her. It wouldn't do too much damage but at least she could give herself time to run out. As she raised her meager weapon, Raven prepared herself for the worst, but hearing a familiar sound, she dropped the broom. Hattie's loud laughter was a welcome noise to her nervous system.

"What the bloody hell, Girl! Were you going to hit us with your broom?" Hattie bustled into the room and her presence filled it with friendship. "We got some great pictures today."

Chase wasn't as chipper as Hattie when he finally got into the small space. He went to the bed and with a moan, sat down on the edge. With slow motions, he pulled off his boots, coat and one of his shirts. She could tell he was in pain, but looked to Hattie for answers.

"How'd he do?" Raven asked quietly.

"Oh, hells bells, he's a regular cowboy. He handled that horse just like he was damn well born on it." Hattie was finally removing most of her heavier coats.

Chase lay back on the bed, but finally asked, "How'd you do today? Did you get to your brother's place? What did you find?"

Before answering him, Raven went to her coat and finally retrieved the note along with the pages she'd printed from her research at her brother's place. She related her story to them both. "Here is the note." She stated as she handed it over to Chase without taking time to read it first.

He studied the crudely written note but as he raised his head to stare in her eyes, Chase realized that not only was he to be bartered, but she was now caught in the middle.

“What? What does it say?” Raven pressed him.

“They know you have me and they have your brother.” He watched the emotions play across her fine features. “Raven, they want you to trade me for Lochlin.”

“Is this for real? This isn’t the old west, is it? What in the world is going on here?” Raven exclaimed as she jumped up from the chair at the rough kitchen table and started pacing the small wooden floor.

“Calm down, Girl. We have something to tell you.” Hattie nodded her head towards Chase. She stayed at her place by the fire. “Go on, tell her.”

Chase hesitated but finally spoke. “Raven, we saw Lochlin. They have him in one of the smaller offices next to the main warehouse. He seemed fine under the circumstances.”

“Why on God’s green earth didn’t you get him out of there?” She was on fire with emotion.

It was Hattie that answered her question. “We’re going to do that very thing, but think about it, Child! Hellfire, if we’d gotten him out of there, they wouldn’t stop coming after you! We have to have a damn good plan before we help him.”

Raven felt the tears run down her cheek. “He’s innocent in all of this, don’t you see? I’m the one that helped Chase. I’m the one they should be after, not my brother. I will not lose someone else.” It was a simple but definite statement that didn’t demand any more explanation.

“I need to get out of here.” She stood up and started putting on her outer clothes. Chase got up and crossed the room to stand in front of the door.

“You’re not going anywhere!” His stance was one of power and authority.

“The hell I’m not!” She charged for the door but once again it was Hattie’s voice that stopped her.

“Bloody hell, Girl! No one would blame you for wanting to help your brother, but we have to do this with a plan. Raw emotion is only going to get you hurt and possibly your brother too. Damn it, Katie, sit down.”

“I need to go to Copper City and call my sister. She needs to know what’s happened. Annie might be able to help. We’re a family and maybe, just maybe she’s got other ideas on how to free Lochlin.” The two of them stood facing each other, both unwilling to give in.

“If I have to knock your damned heads together, don’t for one bloody minute think that I won’t do it! Now both of you come over here and let’s get a plan put together to get us out of this mess.”

It was almost simultaneous when Chase and Raven both gave in to Hattie’s demand. Raven took her jacket off and placed it over the back of a chair and plopped down on it, the anger and fear still showing on her face. Chase moved more slowly but he, too, found a chair and as they sat at the table, Hattie commented, “Now that’s more like it.”

“I think we should go to town. During the winter there aren’t many people, but maybe the forest service or the sheriff’s department will be there. They

sometimes come to town to check on everyone's welfare after a big storm. We need to get the law in on this. What they're doing up there is illegal and someone needs to know about it!" Raven spoke with firm determination in her voice.

"I think that'd be a big mistake." Chase held up his hand as she started to protest. "Let me finish before you jump!"

"No, you wait a minute, Mister! I think Katie has a great idea." Hattie interjected.

They both looked at her with surprise showing in their faces. "Okay, Hattie, go on. What are you thinking?"

She hooted that laughter that was uniquely hers and went on, "I don't know why I bloody hell didn't think of this before. Have you ever heard the phrase 'hiding in plain sight', you have haven't you?" When they both responded in the positive, she laid out her plan. "Let's go to Copper City and you can call your sister, and Young Man, you can call those OPP people and let's get some help in getting that damned mining operation busted wide open!"

"You said they know that Chase is with me. How are we going to get him into town without anyone seeing?" Raven asked the obvious.

"I'll have him with me. You'll come in later alone. No one knows what he bloody hell looks like and we can get a room in the hotel while we plan and make those important connections." She sat back and smiled a look of complete satisfaction.

Neither of them spoke as they both seemed to mull over her suggestion. Chase was the first to speak up,

“I think it might just work. How would you explain my presence to the hotel attendant?”

She hooted again before explaining, “I’ll just let him know you’re some damned fool flat-lander that got stuck in the snowstorm and I had to bring you to town to thaw out!”

“How do you know they don’t know what Chase looks like?”

“All they know is that they’re looking for someone that got shot.” Hattie said.

“She’s right, Raven. They only saw me from the back as I was running to get away.”

“Are you sure the hotel is open? Most of the town is basically shut down during the winter and with this huge storm, I doubt that anyone is hanging around waiting for some tourists.” Raven wasn’t yet convinced.

“Hells bells, Girl, you know that greedy some of which Ed is always ready to overcharge some poor innocent fool for a room.”

Chase laughed out loud at her choice of words.

“Hey, I am trying to contain my foul language! Some people have reminded me that I need to keep it clean!” Her dark stare at Raven provoked more laughter from the two. “So we’ve got a plan?”

Chase looked to Raven and waited for her to speak. “Yes, Hattie, I guess we can go to town and get some help from somewhere. I can do some more research about this dumping thing and call Annie. She might have some ideas. It’s going to take more than just the three of us to get Lochlin out of their grasp safely.”

“That’s the way, Girl! Let’s get some dinner and some sleep. This one and I’ll head out first thing and then you follow later.” Hattie moved to gather fixings for their meal.

This left the two of them sitting there, each in their own deep thoughts. Finally Chase got up and went to the bed. He was hurting and it showed by his slow, deliberate movements. Raven got up and found the antibiotic pills to give him. She found the whiskey bottle and also offered it to Chase to down the pills. He looked up into her eyes and challenged, “I thought that you didn’t approve of using this to take those pills.”

“Right now my world has been turned upside down and I’m all for whatever it takes to get through the day.” She sat down on the side of the bed. “I’d like to take a look and refresh that bandage if you’re up to it.”

Hattie watched the exchange between the two of them with a knowing look on her face. She chuckled to herself and turned her back to the fireplace, giving them a small amount of privacy. It didn’t take Raven long to clean and apply a fresh bandage on his wound. “How’s it going?” He asked.

“I can honestly say with all the movement you’ve been doing, it’s not looking too bad. I think you’ll live.” Raven helped him with his shirt and made sure he lay back on the bed to rest. As she rose to leave, he grabbed her wrist. “Raven, I am truly sorry that you and your brother have gotten dragged into this mess. I would never do that to you if it could’ve been helped.”

She seemed to weigh her words before answering him. “Chase, somehow I know that you mean every word you’ve said, but it doesn’t change the facts. My brother is totally innocent in all of this. Why he went to the mining site directly, I don’t know. All I really know is that we have to get him out of there and stop those bastards.” She gently pulled her arm and went to sit at the table. With Beau at her side, Raven found what little comfort she could in petting her faithful companion. She knew in her heart that Chase was sincere, but it didn’t lessen the danger to her brother and that was a very hard thing to deal with and it was stirring up memories and feelings she thought she had overcome.

With an ear-deafening boom, the storm that had been threatening all afternoon finally made its appearance. Raven nearly jumped out of her seat. Hattie exclaimed, “Hells bells! That’s loud enough to wake the dead!” Chase sat up and looked to the women. “Are you guys okay?”

“Yes, I think we’re fine. With that thunder, that means this is a wet storm and could possibly turn into an ice storm.” Raven commented.

“Is that a bad thing?” Chase inquired.

“You sure are a bloody flatlander, aren’t you?” Hattie teased him again.

“Hattie, he’s just a city boy, that’s all.” Raven joined in with her playful banter.

“Okay, now that you two have had your fun, what’s so bad about an ice storm?”

“Well, Young Man, it’s going to make traveling to Copper City bloody hard on all of us. You see with

rain coming down in this freezing weather, it makes that water turn into ice that clings to the trees.”

Raven took over from there. “An ice storm can snap off the tops of those huge pines like a tornado could. Some time ago, we lost an entire section of my woods from an ice storm.”

“Not to mention that it’s going to freeze on top of the snow and the road will be slick. We’ll be like a pig on ice trying to stay on the track.”

“Wow! I had no idea. Then maybe we should all travel together. I don’t want Raven to be alone.” He looked to her for confirmation, but didn’t get it.

With a shake of her head, she vetoed his idea. “They suspect that you’re with me. It would be a dead giveaway if we all went into town together. I’ll be fine. I’ve dealt with this kind of weather before. Besides, I don’t want any more casualties at the hands of those guys at the mine.”

Chase grimaced as she reminded him of his part in the kidnapping of her brother. “I am sorry.”

“Nonsense! You’re no more responsible for that than I am! Just get your mind on our bloody mission and all will turn out fine!” Hattie chastised him.

The three of them sat at the table and ate the simple fare of bacon and eggs that Hattie had cooked. Once done, Raven cleaned the dishes as the others tried to relax. They all reacted as another clap of thunder shook the little structure that was their safe haven right now. “I think we need to try and get some sleep. Morning isn’t going to come soon enough.” Raven commented as she hugged Beau to her side. He was the best of dogs. His demeanor didn’t allow him

to become all excited at things like this, for which she was very grateful.

Hattie moved to make her sleeping spot next to the fire and soon after, Chase settled back on the bed. “Are you coming?” He asked of Raven.

Beau had moseyed over to find his spot next to Hattie and the fireplace. Raven, for a second, felt abandoned but quickly dismissed that thought. Unlike interacting with some people in her life, she felt that Beau loved her unconditionally and was always there for her. Putting out the lamp, she removed her boots and outer clothing. In her socked feet, Raven crossed the room and with a huge sigh, she sat on the edge of the small bed.

“I still don’t bite.” Chase quietly commented as he felt her hesitation at once again sleeping next to him. She didn’t respond as she laid down, trying hard not to touch him. She had on her jeans and tee shirt as did he, but feeling the heat of his body and the sound of his breathing so close seemed so much more intimate than she wanted. He reached over to put his arm around her and Raven found herself in conflict. Her mind wanted to reject his hold, but her heart found it comforting and finally, Raven surrendered to his touch.

“Raven, give me a chance and we’ll get your brother home safely and that mine shut down. I promise.” His voice was soft in her ear.

Without turning to face him, she spoke softly back. “I know you think you can make such a promise, but I won’t hold you to it if we fail. I truly wish you had that kind of power, but you don’t and we both know it.”

With that said, she adjusted herself more away from him and tried to go to sleep. Raven heard and felt the huge sigh that Chase let out as he reluctantly accepted her words.

“Raven, I know you’re overwhelmed. I accept that.”

“I don’t think you have the slightest inkling of what I am going through right now. I do appreciate that you, at least acknowledge the emotions I’m feeling. I am grateful for that.” Her voice cracked with the raw emotion this entire situation was creating for her. “I want to cry. I want to scream. I want to find the magical words that would make all of this go away.”

Chase allowed the silence between them to settle for a few minutes. He gently and tenderly pulled her closer. “You’ve depended on yourself for so long now. Raven, please allow me to be your strength. I want to repay you for the kindness and caring you’ve given me. Lean on me for now. I can take care of this for you and your brother.”

She heard the confidence in his voice and felt the comfort of his grasp. During the months and years following that horrible car wreck, she had felt desperately alone. It would be so wonderful to have someone to help carry the burden this time. She struggled with her heart and her mind. “Chase, let’s just take this a day at a time. I can’t do any more than that.”

“I’ll take it. Sleep, pretty lady. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.” They both turned as they heard the crude snoring coming from Hattie. With a slight chuckle,

Raven told Chase, "I think we need to sleep on this." With one last adjustment of her position, she added, "Thank you, Chase. I know you mean well."

"That's all I can ask for now." With those final words, all in the small cabin finally settled down for the night. The rain poured outside but the episodes of thunder had slowed down and all they heard was Mother Nature exercising her power and might over their world.

"Hey, you two, it's bloody time we got going. I ain't fixing any breakfast so we'll have to eat in town. You, young lady, are on your own." Hattie was up, dressed and waiting not so patiently for them to move. She bustled around the small space cleaning and readying things for the next visitor.

Chase moaned and tried to keep Raven from leaving his side. "It's going to be so cold out there. I don't want to leave this warmth." She pushed at him and was soon warming her hands at the fireplace.

Hattie opened the door and exclaimed, "Damn it all to hell! We're in for a bad trip! Get your lazy butt in gear, young man. I'm going to go and bring in firewood for the next visitors to this lovely home away from home." With that she wrapped her scarf around her neck covering her face except for her eyes and headed out to the woodshed.

"You'd better get up and dress or she'll drag you out into the freezing cold without any warm clothing." Raven teased. "I wouldn't push Hattie. I've seen what she can do when she gets riled."

"Ahh, you're just trying to scare me. I'm not afraid of a little ole' lady." His words were brave but his

actions showed he wasn't as confident as he wanted her to believe. He dressed in his warm clothes but just before heading out the door, Raven handed him a knitted cap.

"Put this on to hide that hair of yours. Also Hattie might have an extra pair of goggles."

"Don't you worry about me, I've got Hattie to protect me. You're the one that's going to be alone." He had just taken a step closer when Hattie pushed open the door with an armful of firewood. They both had to move quickly out of her way as she stocked the wood bin by the fireplace.

"You ready, Young Man? We bloody well need to get going. I, for one, am going to be glad to get inside a warm place with a nice soft bed and a shower." She bustled about gathering her things.

"I offered you the bed." He reminded her.

"Yes, you did. But we all know that you needed some rest so's that blasted bullet hole wouldn't open back up." She moved to the door with her hands full. "I did appreciate that you're a gentleman."

Raven moved to hold the door for them as the wind had kicked up. Hattie turned and gave a big bear hug to her. "You wait at least a few hours before heading into town. I don't want to bloody hell worry about you, so behave! And don't take no chances."

"I'll be fine. I think this weather will keep the bad guys away for now."

As they moved out the door, Chase turned and placed a tender kiss on her lips. She wasn't really surprised, but having Hattie witness this affection

made her a little uncomfortable. “Be very careful, Raven. I’ll expect to see you in just a few hours.”

With that, they mounted the snowmobile and soon Hattie and Chase were gone. Raven waited until she could no longer see them and the chill of being outside was starting to seep into her bones. Beau came to her and she welcomed his furry warmth. Raven puttered around the cabin straightening things Hattie has missed. She hoped that they didn’t have to come back here. “Well, Beau, it’s just you and me again.” He whined at her comments.

“Oh, I’m not complaining. It’s just that I’ve grown used to having Chase around. I know it’s only been a few days, but he kinda grows on a person.” She sat on the hard chair next to the warm fire and allowed rambling thoughts to crowd into her mind. She hoped they could find some help in Copper City in the form of a sheriff or even a Forest Ranger.

“We’ve got to find a way to free Lochlin. He’s gotten mixed in this mess and I’m sure he doesn’t even know what’s really going on.” As the flames flickered in the fireplace, Raven tried to think of how to get her brother released. The minutes ticked by with Raven growing more and more restless. Inactivity was not her usual style.

“It’d be nice if I had my paints. I could use this time to release some of this stress. Beau, you’re such a good partner. You never argue with me.” She petted him. Raven got up from her seat near the fire and started searching through the few cupboards that were mounted on the kitchen area wall. Raven retrieved the sketching pad she’d used earlier. She

looked up at the ceiling as a loud clap of thunder shook the little cabin. Well at least I can keep busy with this while I wait, she thought to herself.

Moving over to the table and turning up the small oil lamp, Raven started the pencil moving over the bare page. Most people have various ways to occupy their minds and release stress, but the artist in her craved for this type of relief. Raven listened to the weather outside and allowed that unbridled storm to influence her drawing. Beau assumed his usual position at her feet with his head over one foot.

When she was in her artist mode, Raven could lose all track of time and this particular session was no exception. She watched in amazement as the drawing came to life under her ministrations. Finally, Beau whimpered and she realized it was time to get loaded and go to town. Raven got up and checked to find the fire was almost out, so she left it. "Sorry, Beau, I know we have to go before it gets dark. You know how I get when I'm creating." She reassured him with a hug.

With one last glance at her drawing, Raven carefully closed the notebook and tucking it in one of her extra shirts, placed it in the backpack. She called Beau to follow her outside and pushing hard against the wind, Raven firmly closed the door behind them. The snowmobile was a bit hard to start, but she figured it was the freezing cold air and the rain from earlier. Finally, giving it one last try, the vehicle struggled to life and they began their journey to Copper City. She stopped just down the road and pulled her long hair into a ponytail, then tucked it down inside her jacket. As she zipped it up tightly

around her body, Raven reached for a blanket from the saddlebags and wrapped Beau tightly to keep him as warm as possible against the mind numbing cold. She made sure her wool scarf covered most of her nose and mouth. The goggles she wore would help keep her eyes from tearing up.

“Okay, Beau, let’s go. Hattie and Chase are going to start worrying if we don’t get there soon.” With one last look around, Raven gunned the machine and started down to the main road to town. What little daylight there had been was starting to disappear giving Raven the hard task of keeping the machine on the right path. Hattie had been spot on when she said the road was going to be extremely icy and difficult to drive on in this cold, wet weather.

In these hills under the best of conditions, the roads were often impassable. The county charged taxes but rarely kept up on the maintenance of the rough tracks in the hills. She struggled to keep the bumps and ice from knocking her completely off the path. Even though Copper City was just a few miles away, she felt it was going to take hours to get there. Beau whimpered as though he could sense the stress in her being and she stopped for a minute to pat him on the head. “You’re such a good boy. We’ll be there shortly. Just a few more minutes, buddy.” Raven felt she was trying to convince herself more than her companion.

Starting the snowmobile up again, Raven pressed the gas and inched forward. In her heart she knew that the vehicle wasn’t performing correctly, but with all the courage and positive thinking she could

muster, Raven pushed forward slowly. Gaining her bearings, Raven realized that she should see some lights from Copper City just around the next curve in the road. The wind had subsided a bit as well as the biting, stinging rain as she held tightly onto the handlebars of her vehicle to keep it on the right track.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, Raven finally made the bend in the road and peering through the trees, did see a glimmer of light from one of the homes in town. Finding herself letting out the breath she didn't know she was holding, Raven pressed the thumb tab to speed up her progress. Just as it should have lurched forward, the snowmobile sputtered and died. The cold silence surrounded her and Beau. "Well, buddy, we'll need to go the rest of the way on foot."

Her dog had already jumped from his place in the basket and appeared ready to make the last few hundred yards to warmth and safety. "Don't be so eager. This is not going to be easy." She warned him. Grabbing her saddlebags and her backpack, Raven started the tedious journey to town. The road was icy which helped her make the decision to stay on the edges. Keeping her eye on the dim light ahead of her, Raven took very careful, deliberate steps edging slowly to Copper City.

Darkness was almost upon her but this wasn't her first concern. She knew to keep her feet moving was the most important thing in the cold, damp forest. Without proper knowledge of the dangers in the woods, a person could get lost and possibly die within just feet of safety. She'd been here in the Bradshaw Mountains long enough to hurry her journey to town.

She alternated between carrying Beau and allowing him to walk, but knew it wasn't good on his paws to stay on the icy ground.

Through it all, Raven kept the lights of town in her sight and finally she felt that she was soon going to be in a safe place. Beau was in her arms as she approached the buildings at the edge of Copper City. Most of the homes were dark as they were only used as summer places, but the lights were shining out from the hotel windows and proved a welcoming sight. Once she started up the wooden steps, Beau jumped from her arms and happily danced around. He seemed to know that their danger was over and they were safe.

As she opened the door, the owner looked up from working at the front desk. Ed was a scraggly older man much like Hattie. They both seemed to be permanent fixtures in these mountains, ageless and just as rough as the environment in which they lived.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" He exclaimed. "What on earth got you to abandon your fortress?" Ed's voice was gravelly and his manner was blunt.

"Ed, nice to see you too!" Raven reached down to pat Beau on his head as he seemed to sense the tension in the room.

"I didn't hear your vehicle. Did you walk all the way?"

"No, my snowmobile broke down just outside of town. We had to walk a short way. Do you have a room for me and Beau?"

“Just the two of you?” Ed’s suspicions finally came out as he pointed a scrawny finger at her and Beau. He looked around her to the door as if expecting another person.

“Of course, Ed. You know I live alone.” Raven knew that he was looking for Chase but she held her smile as innocently as possible. “Now, how about that room. I could use a warm bath, too, that walk here was very cold and damp.”

“You know a bath is extra.” Ed kept writing on the documents and only looked up when he didn’t get her response.

“Of course, Ed, I’d expect nothing less of you.” She gave him her sweetest grin to soften her sarcasm.

“Here,” Ed turned and grabbed a big brass key from a board on the wall, “Take the last room at the top of the stairs on the right. If that mutt of yours barks, he won’t disturb anyone back there.”

“Oh, you have other guests?” She acted surprised.

“Yeah, Hattie brought some flatlander in after he got his truck stuck in the snow. You’d think they’d learn, darn fools.” He was obviously done speaking and went back to his books.

Slowly Raven went to the well-worn steps and trudged up with Beau following behind. The wooden stairs showed the age of the over hundred year old building. She was bone tired and the cold had taken its toll on her energy. Quietly pushing herself down the long, dimly lit hallway, Raven found the room Ed had indicated. Just as she was putting the key in the door, she was startled by a hushed voice.

“Where have you been? We were worried.” Chase pushed her into the now open door and quickly shut it behind them.

“I broke down just outside of town and had to walk the rest of the way.” She stated simply.

“Damn! I knew we shouldn’t have let you go by yourself.” He took the bags she was still holding and pulled her to him for a warm, wonderful hug.

“Chase, I’m fine. I’m just cold and tired and need a bath. Stop fretting.” She sat back on the bed and started to remove her cold weather clothing. “Now, go back to your room before we give ourselves away. I’m going to get a bath and a good night’s sleep and then we’ll plan our next move.” She looked up to him just in time to see his longing.

Ignoring that look, Raven asked, “How’s Hattie doing?”

“She left just as soon as we got settled in our room. What type of hotel is this anyway? No baths in the rooms, paper thin walls, and a clerk that looks like the walking dead. What gives?”

“Welcome to the 1800s.” She laughed at the surprise showing on his face.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” He exclaimed.
“Have a seat and I’ll fill you in on this stately establishment.” Chase hesitated but finally found his voice.

“Let me get your bath ready and when you’re done, we’ll talk.” He went to the door but before he left she spoke.

“Chase, I am quite capable of drawing my own bath.”

“I’m sure you are, but you’ve been taking great care of me. Let me at least do this for you.” He didn’t wait for a response but left her in the room.

“Well, what’d you think of that, Beau? It might be nice to have someone take care of me for a change.”

She tried to get her stuff gathered for a bath, but her energy level was definitely lower than normal and Raven found herself sitting back in the bed and shutting her eyes.

“Raven, come on. Lady, let’s get you to the bath.” She heard his voice in her foggy brain. Raven tried to open her sleepy eyes, but failed.

Chase took her in his arms and soon she was being carried down the short hall to the bathroom. His touch was wonderful and she felt herself snuggling into his body. He shut the door behind them and soon

he was helping her remove her clothing. Chase marveled at how beautiful she was with her dark ebony hair and toned body. Raven didn't fight but instead found herself holding onto his strong frame.

"Raven, if you continue this, I can't guarantee that I'll be the gentleman you expect." His words penetrated her sleepy state of mind and she suddenly reacted.

"Chase, I'm so sorry. I'm just exhausted and I didn't know what I was doing. Did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm okay. Get undressed and I'll wait for you in your room. Raven, you need to warm your body. We don't need you getting sick." With those last words, Chase grabbed the clothing she'd discarded and quickly left before she removed anything more serious.

She took off her final scraps of clothing and as she put her hand in the steaming hot water felt a little of her tiredness dissipating. Then she stepped into the big, steaming copper tub. Everything about this establishment reeked of a century long ago gone by. The sconces on the wall barely lit the small room and cast strange shadows on the walls. Along with the tub, there was an old-fashioned wash stand and a toilet tucked away in the corner behind a flowered curtain. In spite of the age of the room, the hotel had been updated with some modern plumbing allowing the visitor to enjoy the use of the tub. Ed did charge extra for these amenities but she just grinned at the three dollar charge he'd put on her bill.

She had tied her hair in a ponytail for the ride and left it for now. She was too tired to wash her long

locks. Just as Raven finished washing, a small knock on the door indicated Chase's return. He stuck his head inside enough to speak, but not close enough to see her undressed state. "I brought your sweats and a tee shirt. I didn't dig any further in your bag so I'm afraid that's all I have for you."

Raven was impressed by his thoughtfulness. "That's great! I need to get out and feed Beau. He's been so good and I feel he's been neglected a bit."

"I already took care of that. I found your stash of his food in the backpack. I dried him off as much as I could and he's a little dirty but no worse from the wear. He's lying down at the foot of your bed and seems very happy to be in a warm spot. I'll let you get out and get dried off." He closed the door quietly and she felt his kindness thrill her heart.

The air in the room chilled her a bit as she climbed from the now cooling tub of water. She briskly dried the moisture from her skin and slipped into the limited clothes that Chase had brought to her. Raven felt a bit naughty putting on the tee shirt and sweats without any under clothes, but the warmth and softness of her familiar clothing satisfied her needs. Anxious to make sure that Beau was safe, she hurried down the hall to her room. Upon opening the door, Raven saw that her favorite companion was cuddled up close to Chase on the floor.

"There she is." Chase spoke to the dog next to him.

Beau went to her and as she bent down to smooth his fur, he licked her up and down. She giggled at his enthusiasm and finally looked to Chase. "Thank you for taking care of him."

“No problem. He’s a very good dog.”

She went to the bed and found a place to sit. “You said that Hattie went out when you got here. Where did she go?”

“Well, to say it in her words...’she went down to the bar to shoot the shit and find out who knows what and who can help us.’” He laughed as he quoted their traveling companion.

“That definitely sounds like Hattie. I hope she can find out something that will help free my brother.” Raven plumped up the pillows behind her and found herself sinking back into them. She allowed Beau to jump on the bed and cuddle at her side.

“You look exhausted. I’m going to go and allow you to get some sleep.” Chase stood up and came to the bedside. He bent down and she knew he was going to kiss her, but Raven didn’t fight it, she wanted him near and reveled in the small, intimate touch of his lips to hers.

“Sleep tight, Raven.” His voice was ragged with desire but both of them knew it wasn’t the time, nor the place. After he left the room, Raven didn’t allow herself to think about their relationship as she didn’t have any answers to her own questions. The tiredness of her body and mind finally caught up to her and she gave in to the peaceful refuge of sleep.

The knocking at her door finally penetrated her sleepy mind and Raven found herself scrambling out of bed. “Good Lord, Girl, are you going to sleep all bloody day!” Hattie pushed her way into the room and found the desk chair to plop down upon.

“What time is it?” Raven asked.

“It’s almost seven in the morning and we’ve got things to do.”

“Okay, okay. Just give me a few minutes. Do you want me to come to your room?”

“Sure, that’ll be great, I’m in six. Chase is already getting us some equipment.” With those words, Hattie hefted her big frame off the chair and out of the small hotel room.

Raven hurriedly donned her jeans and several layers of shirts. She had no idea what Hattie had in mind, but wanted to be ready for the day, her brother’s very life might be dependent on their efforts.

Beau ate his breakfast with gusto as she tied her hair back in a familiar ponytail. Finally Raven felt that she was ready for anything. With a certain amount of caution, she headed down the dark, dreary hallway to the room Hattie indicated. Knocking softly, Raven waited impatiently for someone to answer. It wasn’t long for the door to be opened and she stepped in with trepidation.

In addition to the usual people she expected, Raven was surprised to see one man she had heard of but had never interacted with directly. He stood as she entered and stuck his hand out for her to shake. Jim was a big typical mountain man with his plaid flannel shirt and worn baseball cap. She wasn’t sure why he would come to help them. “Raven, I’m so sorry to hear about your brother. I hope I can help get him home safely.”

“I’m not sure I know you.” She spoke with wonder in her voice.

“Katie, you know this man. He’s come to check on you and your family many different times. He knows there’s something bloody hell wrong up on the other side of the mountain and he wants to help.” Hattie spoke bluntly as usual.

“How do you think you can help?” Chase’s voice was heard over the silence in the room.

It was a few seconds before the man answered. “I know what’s going on in those mountains and until I can obtain proof to take to the authorities, I have to help you on my own.”

“We’ll take it!” Raven expressed her gratefulness. “But, I have to confess, I don’t remember your name. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. I know you’ve come to the mountains with your own kind of pain. I checked on you because of your family and in particular your brother, Lochlin. I would just drive by to see that you had enough firewood, or to make sure that all appeared normal at your home. I’m Jim, Jim Baxter.” He held up his hand to stop her response. “My family has been living in these mountains for five generations now. I can’t bear the thought of some idiot screwing up our environment just to make a buck.”

Raven went to him and stretched her hand out for him to shake. “Nice to meet you, Jim. I’m thrilled to have your help.”

Throughout this exchange, no one seemed to notice the silence surrounding Chase. He stood back and watched the interaction between Raven and the stranger with avid interest. He finally spoke, “Again, I ask, what help can you provide?”

Jim responded to his question. "I have the only backhoe business in the Copper City area and I've done work for the mining company. I can get us in there through the front gate."

"That's great! We can go right in and get Lochlin out." Raven was excited that finally there seemed to be a way to help her brother escape.

"Not so bloody fast, Raven. We have to come up with a plan for us to be successful." Hattie's gruff voice threw a darker shade of reality to the conversation.

"How do we know that you're not just here trying to collect the bounty on my head?" Chase finally spoke what was on his mind.

"Hattie has known me and mine for years. She can vouch for my character." Jim wasn't disturbed by Chase's accusation.

"Now settle down you two! We needed help, Chase, and we have someone that can get us in the front door of that bloody hell place. Jim's right. I've known him and his kin a long time. He's damned good people."

"I heard about the bounty, but until you just admitted it, I didn't know you were the guy they are looking for." Jim's comment made Chase nearly blush.

"I guess I fell into that one." He stuck his hand out to shake the other man's. "I'm Chase Tanner. Thanks for your help."

With the tension in the room finally settled, everyone found a place to sit while they tried to come up with the best plan. "What I don't understand,"

Raven's voice penetrated their thought process, "is why my brother is still a captive. I mean Lochlin is a very strong, virile man. He would definitely try to escape on his own."

"I thought of that." Jim agreed. "The only thing I can think of is they have him drugged."

"That was my thoughts exactly. Bloody Hell!" Hattie put in her two cents worth.

The look on Raven's face spoke volumes and they quickly amended their thoughts and words. "Raven, we can't be sure. It's just one thought."

"No, I think you're right. Lochlin would fight with all his might to get out of a situation like this. He has to be subdued somehow. Oh my, we need to get to him as quickly as possible." She sat on the edge of the bed in Hattie's room and tried hard to fight back the tears threatening to fall.

"How about this?" Jim's voice penetrated the silence in the room. "I pull up at the front gate with my backhoe. The manager always goes to Prescott for supplies on Friday, so it'll only be the peons in charge." He turned to Chase. "You could be in my cab as my helper. If we put you in winter clothes and all, no one will think anything about it. Once we're in, we'll find Lochlin and trade you for him."

"And then," Chase picked up the plan, "Hattie and Raven could have horses by that hole in the fence out back. I'll meet them there and we'll be gone before they know what's happened. I'm sure I can overpower the guard because he'll expect me to be doped up like Lochlin and I can surprise him when he checks on me."

“How can you be sure that the manager will be gone?” Raven asked.

“Jim, here knows just about everything that happens on this bloody mountain. Don’t ya?” Hattie spoke. “He’s better than the bloody phone company when it comes to communication.”

“You make me sound like the town gossip.” Jim objected.

“Nah, that’s my position in Copper City society!” Hattie hooted her laughter at her own joke.

“All I know is we’ve got to get Lochlin out of there before they decide to get rid of him completely. What’d you think they’re going to do with him?” She posed the question to Chase.

He struggled with protecting her from the truth or laying it out on the line. Finally, he answered Raven, “I think that they’re willing to do anything to protect their operation up there. They don’t care about you or me or the environment.”

“Then it’s settled. We go on Friday. Everyone keep quiet about any of this.” Raven spoke with conviction. “I’m sure that all of us being in this room hasn’t escaped Ed’s attention. So, each go to your own room and stay out of sight. I need to call my sister and let her know what’s been going on with Lochlin.” Raven turned to the door.

“Do you need to use my phone?” Chase offered.

“No, mine should be charged by now. I brought it from home when Hattie and I were there. Thanks anyway.” With that she left the room and hurriedly made her way down the hall.

She heard the others leaving Hattie's room and with Beau at her side, went to the small desk and sat down. This was all too much, she thought miserably. Lochlin somehow got involved in this huge mess and she was falling for the guy that was the cause of their troubles. Beau nuzzled her and Raven realized he needed to go outdoors. Without making her phone call, she donned her outer clothes and walked silently down the hall finally finding her way out the back door of the small hotel. The sun was shining on the new fallen snow, making the sparkles look like diamonds on trees and surrounding buildings.

Beau bounded about after doing his duty and she smiled at his innocence. "It would be nice to be you." She spoke to her faithful friend. "What I wouldn't give to not have any cares in the world." Raven was startled as she heard Chase behind her.

"Raven, I promise this'll be over soon and we'll all be alright." He tried to reassure her.

"We shouldn't be seen together." She started to walk away.

"I just wanted to let you know that Jim and I are going to get your snowmobile and get it to the shop. I know you're upset, but please trust me in this. We are going to get your brother out and stop those guys!"

"I wish I could be as confident as you. I really don't think the four of us have the power to bring down a company as big as CMT."

"I've done some research since getting to town and I've made a few phone calls of my own. We'll do fine." He didn't really give her much information, but somehow she believed him. "Raven, you wouldn't be

mixed up in this chaos if it weren't for me. I give you my word, that come Friday, we'll be successful."

With that bold statement, Chase left her to muse over his declaration. He was right about one thing, he was the reason she and her family were up to their necks in trouble. Suddenly she realized that she hadn't placed the call to her sister. Calling Beau, Raven went back to her room and with not so steady hands, dialed her sister.

"Annie?" Her voice cracked.

"Raven! What on earth? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect to do that. I'm afraid we have a situation up here in the mountains."

"You're scaring me, Raven. Calm down and tell me exactly what is going on." Annie tried to speak in a calming manner but she knew her older sister wouldn't call just to chat.

"I don't even know where to begin. I found a man with a bullet wound on my back porch. Somehow there's a mining company on the other side of the mountain conducting illegal storage of radioactive nuclear waste and Lochlin has been kidnapped."

"Oh, my. You're not really making much sense, sis. Please start at the beginning."

It took almost an hour for Raven to finally explain the entire situation so that Annie could understand. They cried and laughed and bonded as the sisters that they were until finally Annie announced, "I'm coming up there. I need to be in on this to help Lochlin and you."

"No, Annie, that's not a good idea. Do you know Lochlin's latest girlfriend? Should we at least call her?"

You need to stay home with your family. We can handle this on our own. I just wanted to call you and hear your comforting voice.” Raven was firm.

“I don’t think his girlfriend needs to be notified. They’ve only been seeing each other for a few months. It’s not like they’re married or even serious. You know our brother, he changes girlfriends like I change my underwear.” Annie replied. “It sounds like you might have something for this Chase guy. What’s he like?”

“Annie! It’s not like that at all! I just helped him when he needed it. Now he’s promised to free Lochlin and help us shut down this horrible operation.” Raven protested.

“Oh, I must have misunderstood.” Annie gave in.

“Now don’t go getting mushy on me. I just called because you needed to know. I’ll keep you informed. Stay home with your hubby and kids. They need you and I need you to be safe.”

“Raven, please, please, be sensible and don’t do anything stupid. I don’t know these people that you’re depending on to help, but I love and trust your judgement. Are you sure you shouldn’t just call the sheriff? Let me know as soon as you can on Friday. I mean it! I’ll be sitting on pins and needles until I hear from you.”

“Believe me, the sheriff wouldn’t be of any help. We’re frozen in up here and it would take them much too long to organize an effort to save Lochlin. We have it covered so far.” Raven didn’t sound as confident as she would’ve liked.

Annie caught onto that. “Raven, I can be there in just a few hours. Are you sure you don’t need me?”

“No, you stay put. I promise to let you know as soon as this is over.” They said their goodbyes and soon Raven was resting on her bed. The clock said it was almost one in the afternoon and she suddenly felt the need to get out of there.

As she went to the door, Raven ordered Beau to stay and quietly she went down the stairs and past the front desk. Ed raised his head to greet her in his own gruff manner.

“Going somewhere?” He asked.

Wanting to tell him it was none of his business, but thinking better of it, Raven smiled. “I’m going down to the saloon, Ed. I’ve left Beau in my room but I’m quite sure he won’t be of any trouble.” She wanted him to know that her loyal friend would keep anyone from entering without her.

“That mutt better not make any messes, if you know what I mean.” He went back to his bookwork, mumbling under his breath.

She wanted to giggle but restrained herself as she stepped into the still, cold outdoors. The sun was shining but clouds were forming and up here in the Bradshaws, anything could happen as far as the weather. Taking brisk steps, Raven used the wooden sidewalks to move closer down the street to the local saloon. She was confident that this time of day and with the horrible weather, there would be very little patrons to gawk at or bother her. She hadn’t been out of her house much over the last few years, only to get the needed groceries and art supplies she’d ordered.

There was little activity in this community and with the storms the last few weeks, only the strong

dared to be out and about. During the summer months, however, Copper City was quite the day trip location for the city folks that wanted a break from the heat in other parts of Arizona. Due to the high elevation, the weather in the summer could heat up in the day to only around 85 degrees but cool down immensely in the evening. She loved this area and tried to think about that rather than the trouble for her brother.

She pushed through the double doors into the Ore House Saloon. It was the only official bar in the small town and the owner lived in the rooms above. She mused over the many characters that inhabited this part of her world, Hattie, Ed, and now as she allowed her eyes to adjust to the darker environment of the saloon, she looked to see Martha standing behind the bar serving a beer to another local.

Martha looked up and smiled in recognition. “Well, looks like the frozen tundra got you out of your fortress. Welcome, Raven, what can I get you?”

“How about one of those special drinks of yours?” Raven asked as she made her way to the opposite end of the bar. The entire room was made of wood, wooden floors, wooden walls, wooden tables, and wooden bar stools. Adorning the wooden walls were dollar bills tacked up by tourists with their names and dates on them. It was definitely a fire hazard by most standards but the visitors to the saloon loved to participate in the tradition. Raven pulled out the saddled stool and sat down upon it. She chuckled as she placed her feet in the stirrups.

“It doesn’t get old, does it?” Martha asked as she placed a drink in front of Raven. “People love sitting on those saddles and having their pictures taken. One of the best things I ever did for this old place.”

“I like the pink look, Martha.” Raven referred to the older woman’s short, spiked, definitely hot pink hair. “Does the juke box still work?”

“Absolutely, it’s just like me, old but functional! I’ll even give you the first quarter for your song.” Martha handed her a quarter from the plastic tip jar on the counter. “Pick something lively. This place has been dead for weeks due to that nasty storm.”

As soon as the place filled with music, Martha leaned over to talk with Raven more privately. “Talk is, Raven, that you’ve found yourself a man.”

This is why Raven chose to come to the saloon. There was nothing like some good old-fashioned gossip to find out what was going on in town. She leaned in and smiled, “Now where in the world did you hear that? You know that I’m up at the Powder Box House all by myself.” She took a sip on her drink. “Hmmm, this is good.”

“Glad you like it. It’s my new specialty. I call it the Ore Cart.” Martha chuckled. The saloon had been in her family for over a hundred years and many thought the name was because of the mining here in the area, many thought it was a play on words for a house of ill repute, but the simple truth was it was Martha’s last name. As a local business owner, she had enjoyed all the ideas and conceptions people had about the name and it led to a profitable business.

“Now, dearie, you might as well spill your guts because I already know a few facts and I wouldn’t want to share misinformation.”

Raven laughed at her blatant honesty. “I’ve always admired your directness, Martha, that’s one thing I can count on around here.”

“But you’re not going to give me anything, are you?” Martha wiped a cloth at a spot on the spotless bar. “I saw a flatlander in town with Hattie. Some say he got his truck stuck in the snow. Some say he’s the one that’s been with you. Some say he’s the same one giving that ole’ mining company hell. What do you say?”

Again, Raven laughed and hoped that Martha would give up her efforts to dig information out of her. Just then, the door opened again and Jim walked into the saloon. Raven noticed he’d combed his dark hair and put on a clean shirt. The man was definitely handsome in a rugged mountain man sort of way. He raised a hand to Martha and then sat himself on the stool next to Raven.

“Hey,” was all he said to her.

“Hi, Jim. Did you get my snowmobile into town?”

Martha was still standing there watching the conversation with more than avid interest. Finally Jim turned to her, “Martha how about a beer?”

“Sounds like you’re trying to get rid of me, Jim Baxter. But I can respect that. You want some time with beautiful Raven. I understand you two.” She left her post and sauntered down the bar to find a bottle of beer for Jim. Once she delivered it, she went to the

opposite end and started talking with the local that had been there all the time.

“How you holding up?” Jim asked quietly.

“I called my sister.”

He interrupted. “Annie? How’s she doing?”

“I’m surprised that you remember us. I’m sorry that I can’t say the same for me.”

“My kin have known you and yours for a long time.” He took a swig of his beer. “I know that you’ve been going through some rough times, Raven. I’m sorry for that.”

“Maybe I’ve been wrapped up in my own world. Maybe for too long, I guess. It seems that a lot of people have cared for me even when I wasn’t aware. Thanks, Jim.” She patted his arm.

“What did Annie say?”

“She wanted to come up here, but I told her to stay put in the valley. We don’t need another Blackinger in trouble, do we?”

“No, that wouldn’t do. We took your vehicle to the shop and it should be finished later today.”

“I appreciate that. I need it to go with Hattie and get the horses.” She sipped her drink.

“Don’t worry, Raven. This will work. I’m sure of it.” He looked down the bar at the quiet exchange between Martha and her customer. “I hope we can keep our plans under wrap for the next day or two. We don’t need any bounty hunters looking to score the money for your friend.”

She thought about that before responding. She’d only just met Chase and yet, she did think of him as a friend, perhaps even more. “I think Chase can take

care of himself, but it wouldn't hurt for all of us to keep him in sight."

Jim signaled Martha and she brought down two more drinks. She lingered just a bit to see if she could obtain any information from the two of them, but as soon as she saw that they weren't going to give up any tidbits, wandered back down to the other end of the bar.

"Who's that Martha's talking to?" Raven asked.

"He's known as Professor here. Seems he used to teach at some university somewhere, but no one seems to know which one and where. He inherited the old Undertaker Parlor and has been struggling to renovate it. Truth be known, I don't think he has a clue about construction or building and he's just plain weird." Jim filled her in on what he knew about the man.

She giggled at the information Jim shared and the two of them exchanged smiles. He was a nice man, she thought, I have been in the Powder Box house too long. It was nice having some conversation with people even under these circumstances. "Thanks for the drink, Jim."

He smiled bigger and leaned in just a bit closer. "Anytime, Raven. I like to buy drinks for beautiful ladies."

Just then the door opened behind them and she felt a cold wind on her back. As she turned, she saw the angry look on Chase's face. Jim leaned back out of her personal space and turned to greet the other man. "Chase, come and meet Raven." Jim hoped that Chase would follow his lead.

Before Chase could respond, Martha came to that end of the bar. “You must be that flatlander Hattie rescued.” There were no secrets on the mountain.

Raven held her breath as she saw the look of anger pass and one of humor took its place on his handsome face. “Well, I guess news travels fast here.”

“What’ll you have? The drink is on the house.”

“I’ll have one of what this pretty lady is having. That looks good.” He moved closer and shook hands with Jim while keeping his eyes on Raven.

“See, Raven, you should’ve come down off your mountain years ago. You got all these young bucks chomping at the bit.” She laughed as she left to make Chase a drink. Raven had never thought of herself as beautiful, but her milky white skin and dark ebony eyes would attract any man. Her lips were a natural pink and what little makeup she used, enhanced her looks.

Chase found his way to the other side of Raven and as he sat down on the saddle stool, she could feel his warmth.

“Hello, I’m Chase.” He stuck out his hand for her to shake. Going along with the charade, she put her hand in his and suddenly felt the familiarity of his touch.

“They call me Raven.” She spoke the same words from the night she found him on her doorstep.

His reaction told her that he remembered. “Why would anyone name such a beautiful woman ‘Raven’?” His playfulness intrigued her and she encouraged his banter.

“When I first came to the mountain, I was suffering and trying to recover from a horrible car accident. I carried a lot of guilt and depression with me. A raven is often associated with loss and ill omen. The locals found my black hair and lack of socializing similar to that of the bird.” She tried to talk to both men and looked from side to side as she spoke.

Martha brought back more drinks for all of them. As Jim reached into his pocket for money, she stopped him. “This is on the house. This is the best entertainment I’ve had in here in years.” With that, she laughed and headed down to the other end of the bar.

Chase got up and put more quarters into the jukebox and soon several old country tunes filled the room. The light from outside was dimming as the storm was settling into the area. Martha turned the sconces on the wall up adding to the ambiance.

“Thank you!” Chase held up his drink to salute their hostess. Afterwards, he turned to Raven and Jim. “So, where do we go from here?”

By this time the drinks were affecting Raven’s normal sense of control and she giggled. “I don’t know.”

Jim turned to Chase. “I think we need to get her out of here, but I’m not sure how without raising the

suspensions of the locals.” He indicated Martha and the man at the other end of the bar.

As if on cue, the door opened one more time and Hattie walked into the establishment. She saw the three of them at the end of the bar and was immediately aware of the danger.

“Martha! How about a beer for me?” Hattie sat down in the middle of the bar, looking from one end to the other. As Martha sat her beer down, Hattie asked the other woman, “How long has those two bloodhounds been after that girl?”

Martha chuckled, “She came in alone but as they got here, each one of them has tried to overcome the other.”

“I think I need to damn well intervene. I know Raven and she would want a friend in this case. Don’t you agree?” Hattie tried to elicit Martha’s help.

“I guess so. I’ve never known her to be in town for this long and never have I ever seen her in such a situation.” Martha agreed with her latest customer.

Hattie downed her beer in one big gulp and rose to go to where Raven was seated. “You two jackals had better watch out! Come on, Girl, we’re going to get you out of here.” Raven gave her a weak smile and stumbled down off the saddle stool.

“Whoa, Girl! Let’s get those bloody legs underneath you before we move!” She looked at the two men. “As for you two, you should be horsewhipped for trying to get this poor girl drunk!” When she saw they were both going to protest, she added, “One more word outta you and I’ll bloody well do it myself!”

The two women moved slowly toward the door and finally reaching the outdoors, Raven turned to Hattie. "Thanks, I didn't know how we were going to get out of there."

Hattie hooted. "Well, I'll be damned! You're not drunk at all."

"No, Hattie. I don't drink much but I can hold my liquor. I just needed a way out of there so that they were all convinced that we didn't know each other." Raven walked on her own down the same wooden sidewalk to the hotel.

"Why on earth did you go in there in the first place?"

"I figured, like you did, that if any gossip was going on, it'd be in there."

"And was it?"

"Martha did her best to get information out of me but I think our little act convinced her otherwise." Raven smiled and as they went in the front door of the hotel, she saw that Ed was in his usual place behind the front desk.

"Hello, Ed, you ole rascal!" Hattie greeted their host.

He didn't even look up, but acknowledged their presence by saying, "I hope that dog of yours didn't chew up the bed. You know he might need to be let out!"

Raven just chuckled and went up the stairs. Once in her room, Beau wagged his tail eagerly. She opened the door and together they went down the back stairs. Once outside, she stood and watched as he did his duty. Carefully she picked up the droppings in the

plastic bag she carried in her pocket and deposited them in the closest trash can. Before she could open the door, she heard her name being called from around the corner.

Slowly, she went to see who was standing there and was caught by surprise. She was grabbed and a quick kiss was placed on her lips. "Chase!"

"I wanted to do this the moment I saw you in the bar with Jim." He let her go, but stood very close.

"You know we shouldn't be seen together."

"Who is here to see us?" He challenged.

"You know what I mean. You should go inside and rest. You know you're still recuperating from that bullet wound."

"I'm fine. Hattie's been giving me those antibiotics and I'm able to cleanse the wound myself. I can move a whole lot better. See." He said as he took her in his arms again.

"Chase! Let me go. We need to be more careful. I'm going back to my room. I suggest you do the same." She pushed herself out of his grasp.

He was grinning when she left. It was hard to leave the comfort of his arms, but Raven knew they had to be discreet. Her brother's life was on the line. As she made her way up the back stairs, Raven could hear Ed talking with someone at the front desk. She heard her name and paused to listen. Beau stood silently by her side.

"No, I don't think they suspect anything. Look, I did what you wanted and gave her a room. How much more do you want?" Ed's scraggly voice raised a bit.

“Keep an eye on her. We want to know when she’s going to make her move. You’ve been paid plenty.” A male voice she didn’t recognize replied.

“She’s got that Baxter man helping her.” Ed volunteered.

“That’s not a problem. He does work for us. Any sign of the man that’s with her?”

“No, she came in alone.”

“What about the man that Hattie brought in? Could that be him?” She wanted so badly to peek around the corner, but felt her life was already in danger enough.

“Nah,” Ed replied. “He’s just some city guy with no brains. Got his truck stuck. Lucky for him that Hattie found him.

“Like I said, keep your eye on her. If she leaves town or anything, we want to know.” Shortly after that, she heard footsteps and the front door open and close. The only other sound was Ed’s grumbling. As quietly as possible, Raven went up to her room. Once there, she went to the window to see if she could spot the person who was in the hotel, but the clouds and weather prevented that. She struggled to remember the conversation she’d just overheard. Someone was definitely on to her and was paying a good deal of money for information about her movements. Her heart was pounding as she tried to figure out how to let the others know without any more personal contact.

“Beau, find Chase.” She opened her door and sent her dog down the hallway.

As she shut her door, she said a silent prayer that Chase would understand the message she was sending through her faithful buddy. Shortly after, there was a slight knock as Chase entered her room. “Raven, what’s going on?”

“Chase, I overheard a conversation with our hotel owner and someone else, I didn’t recognize the voice. They know why I’m here.” She went to him and threw herself in his arms. He soothed her as best he could, but finally asked, “Raven, what exactly did you hear?”

She related the entire conversation and told him that she tried to see the person that had left the hotel but was unable to identify him. “I don’t know who we can trust. I don’t know if it’s Hattie or Jim or those jerks at the mine. Chase, we need to figure this out or my brother is doomed.”

Chase paced up and down in the small room. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting for him to come up with something, anything that would help their cause. “Chase!”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking.” He tried to focus his thoughts.

“We need a plan, Raven, but I really think that we need both Hattie and Jim. I think we can trust Hattie, but I’m not sure about Jim. We just met him and I didn’t like that he was hitting on you at the bar.”

“Chase! That’s the most ridiculous reasoning I’ve heard in ages. Jim was trying to keep Martha and that local guy from figuring out that we knew each other.” She tried to reason with the pacing man in her room. Finally he stopped and came to sit beside her on the bed. “Raven, we have no choice in this right now.

Let's not tell Hattie or Jim about the conversation you've heard. We were safe in the little cabin. I knew this was a dangerous move to come to town. We've got to get back up there and launch our rescue from there. It seems that they're not aware that we're all in this together, I think that'll be to our advantage."

"I want to call the sheriff. We need to let the law know what's going on up here." When she saw him shake his head, Raven pleaded further. "Chase, your life was in danger and now my brother's is and who knows what they have planned for me."

He took her hands in his. "Raven, please trust me. We can handle this on our own. I think that bringing in the sheriff will only put Lochlin in more jeopardy."

She reluctantly agreed without reason. She did trust Chase and knew he would do anything to protect her and keep them safe. "Let's get packed. I want to get to the cabin and figure out the last details on how to get into the mining site." He stood up and took her in his arms. "Raven, I'd never put your life in any more danger than I already have. You've got to trust me."

She raised her head and looked into those beautiful eyes of his. "I do trust you. I don't know why, but I do." With that she placed her lips on his and they shared a tender, intimate moment.

"How are we going to get back to the little cabin?" She drew back and asked.

"Jim said your snowmobile was ready. You just need to go to the repair shop and pick it up. I'll gather my stuff and leave a note for Hattie and Jim to meet us at the cabin on Friday morning. I'll walk to the

woods at the edge of town and you'll come directly from the garage and pick me up."

"What about Ed watching me?"

"Just put your bag out on the back steps and then go out the front door. If he says anything, tell him you're going to get something to eat. I'll bring your bag with me. Be very, very careful." With those last words, he kissed her quickly and left the room.

Raven quickly threw everything she owned back in her bag and with one last cleansing breath, called Beau and together they went down the stairs. Ed was at his usual place behind the front desk and as he looked up, she thought she saw surprise on his face. "Where you off to?"

"I need something to eat. I'm going to Martha's." She didn't hesitate, but as she started toward the front door, Ed stopped her. "Martha ain't going to let that mutt in her place. You might just leave him in your room."

She almost chuckled at his attempt to stop her, but Raven turned and with all the courage she could muster addressed the older man. "Beau needs to eat, too. I'm sure, unlike some, Martha will love him as I do. Thanks for your concern." With that she turned and headed out the door without any further uncertainty.

She was sure that Ed would place a phone call to those that wanted to capture her, but survival drove her forward. As fast as she could, Raven made her way to the garage. Once there she quickly paid for the repairs to her snowmobile and trying to feign a casualness she didn't feel, Raven smiled and thanked

the young man. She fired up the vehicle and Beau jumped into his basket.

As she turned up the lane away from Copper City, her heart was beating hard in her chest. Raven could only hope that their escape went unnoticed. The sky had finally turned ugly and the storm was once again threatening. She hadn't put on her warm outer clothing so as to not make Ed suspicious and was starting to feel the chill. Beau's blanket was in his basket and she stopped long enough to cover him up before heading out of town.

The woods were starting to appear thicker and she stared long and hard to see Chase. What if he didn't get out there? What if he had trouble getting her bag and his? She struggled to keep her mind on the trail when she finally saw him standing in a copse of trees. He hailed her and as she shut the vehicle down, Chase loaded the basket in the back with their bags.

"Go!" He ordered.

She restarted it and soon they were heading through the woods up to the small cabin on the side of the mountain. There were no words between them as she avoided the main roads. It meant slower going, but most importantly was to be safe and not seen.

She felt him tap her on the shoulder and Raven stopped their progress. "Turn it off. I want to make sure no one is following." He ordered.

They sat there for several minutes, avidly listening for any sounds that might indicate another vehicle. "We can go now. Let's make sure we stop every now and again, just to be sure." Chase tightened his hold on her waist and they started again. The storm that

had been forming earlier was finally starting. At first it was just a light rain, but they both knew that it would soon turn into trouble for them. Raven gunned her machine and they flew faster over the snow trek.

She made several changes in their direction trying to fool anyone that might follow. She even headed down the road a bit to the Powder Box House but soon turned up towards the small haven on the top of the mountain. As they had agreed, she stopped a few more times until finally they headed straight for their home away from home.

Finally arriving, she parked behind the cabin as she had before and they hauled their bags inside. Chase went to work starting a fire and Raven took care of Beau. He went over to the fireplace and curled up beside the now blazing fire. Chase reached over and petted him affectionately. This action brought a smile to Raven's face.

"I bet you're hungry too." Chase got up and reached for his bag. "I managed to get some supplies from the general store in case we needed them. Look!" He proudly held up a can of beef stew. "It's not going to be as good as yours, but it'll be a little easier and quicker for now."

They worked together and soon sat down to a bowl of stew along with some crackers and cheese. "Now for your surprise!" He pulled out a bottle of wine and proudly displayed it for Raven. She giggled, "I never drank so much before meeting you! That looks good. I'll get the stemmed glassware." Raven went over and found the tin cups they'd used before and he poured generous portions for both of them.

The fire was crackling as they sat at the small table and they finally heard the thunder outside grow stronger and louder. "I think we made it just in time." She finally spoke, breaking the comfortable silence between them.

"Yeah, we made it to safety." He agreed.

"I did have a thought on the trip up." Raven turned to face him. "Won't they connect your disappearance with mine? Won't they figure out you're the one they're looking for?"

"I thought about that, but your safety is paramount. Besides, by the time they figure it out, we'll have completed our mission and it won't matter." He took a sip of his drink.

"Did you leave a note for Hattie?"

"Yes, but I was careful and didn't give away any locations."

"What'd you say?"

"I thanked her for rescuing me and said that maybe someday soon we could meet at our favorite place, meaning this cabin. I think she's smart enough to figure out what I meant. At least, I hope so. We sure need the help of her and Jim."

"I'm sure she'll show up. She's in this too deep not to see it through to the finish." Raven agreed. She reached over and poured more wine into their cups and raised hers. "Here's to a wacky situation, but to some good help."

"I'll drink to that."

They sat for the longest time each lost in their own thoughts when Chase finally got up and reached for his side. She noticed the movement and immediately

got up and moved over to him. “Let me check your side.” As he started to protest, she spoke, “I know you’re a tough guy and practically healed, but let me check it for myself.”

Reluctantly, Chase removed his shirt and stood there bare chested for her to see. The casual, comfortable atmosphere in the tiny room suddenly changed and they both felt it. “Oh, my.” Her words came out breathless and she took a half step backward.

“Raven,” Chase said nothing more but took that slight step forward.

Slowly and without thought, just following her instincts, Raven placed the palm of her hand on his chest. She could feel his heart beating as hard as her own and as she avoided his eyes, Raven moved closer into his space. Finally she found her voice, “This is so wrong on so many levels.”

Chase still didn’t speak but instead took her other hand and placed it on the other side of his muscular, tanned torso. She then looked up and caught the wanting look in his eyes. She knew it matched her own desire. The sky was almost completely dark outside and the only light was from the fireplace. It gave a warm, romantic glow to the room. She found herself taking a deep breath and then moved even closer to him. Raven stopped within inches of touching their bodies and lifted her head. He bent down and they allowed their lips to touch.

The thunder cracked overhead, but Raven didn’t hear it as she reacted to his kiss. She wanted more and pressed herself closer as she made her desires

known to Chase without any words. The storm outside was nothing compared to the tempest swirling between them. When he went to unbutton her shirt, Raven didn't protest but instead helped him with the fastenings. Soon they were chest to chest as she hadn't bothered to put on her bra earlier. He reached up roughened hands and removed the band holding her long dark tresses. He ran his hands through the ebony strands and put his lips on hers again.

Raven moaned and deepened their kiss. She rubbed her hands over his shoulders and went to pull him closer when she felt him flinch a bit. "Oh, Chase, I'm sorry. I forgot your wound."

"It's nothing." His voice was gruff with need. They stood there facing each other both afraid to make the move to the bed and yet both knew they wanted it. Raven knew it was up to her. She grabbed his hand and they moved the short distance to the bed they'd shared for days but not in the way they were going to now.

When he went to speak, she put her fingertips on his lips to silence any words he wanted to say. Instead she started to remove all of her clothing and smiled as he did the same. When done, Raven laid down upon the bed. Chase sat down beside her stretched out body.

Understanding her need for silence, Chase allowed his hands to speak to her. He gently ran them up and down her breasts and then moving lower he softly touched her abdomen. She sighed but smiled her satisfaction at his tenderness. Raven wasn't shy about

her needs but also wanted to please him. She pushed him back and as he lay down beside her, she reciprocated by using her hands to pleasure him. She was ever so gentle around his right side and the bandage that still covered the bullet wound.

The snowstorm outside was growing as well as their needs for fulfillment. Raven finally crawled on top of Chase, being careful to not press her knee into his side, it had been a long time since had been with a man. But as he entered her, they matched each other's rhythm. As she reached her peak, Chase joined her and together they rode their own storm of ecstasy. Finally satisfied, she rolled over onto her side of the bed. Still the only sound in their haven was the wind outside and the fire crackling inside.

Chase rolled over to look at her. "Raven?"

"Yes?" She marveled at his caring and respect for her and her needs. He seemed to be completely in tune with the fact that she felt words were not necessary. As he held her around the waist, Chase leaned over and placed one more tender kiss. Her lips were swollen with their shared kisses and she eagerly returned the affection.

"No regrets?" He asked with some trepidation.

"No." A simple reply was all she offered. "Some more wine?"

"Sure. It goes well with what we just shared." He tried to joke his nervousness away.

She stood at the edge of the bed, completely naked and not at all shy as she spoke to him. "Chase, it was my choice and I don't have any regrets. You shouldn't

either.” With that she walked across the room and poured each another cup of the wine.

She could feel him watching her but she was confident in her own body and was pleased that he appreciated her form. Raven smiled as she handed him his wine. “Here’s to making wonderful love.” She sat down on the edge of the bed. Chase traced his fingers over a long scar on her right hip. “I didn’t notice this before.”

“It’s from the car wreck.” She looked down at the long thin mark on her delicate skin. “I’ve almost forgotten it was there.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had to suffer.”

“You know the physical pain wasn’t as nearly bad to deal with as the mental. I escaped by coming to the mountain.” She reflected on her decision from years ago.

“I think you’ve done fine. You are a very strong lady and I admire how far you’ve come.”

“I think I’ve made more progress since meeting you than the five years before that.” She bent down and kissed him again. “Thank you, Chase.”

He took her in his arms and placed a long, searing kiss on her waiting lips. Soon they were in another embrace and time ticked by as they loved each other. Finally they both fell asleep with limbs entwined. The storm outside subsided and all in the cabin were at rest.

TWELVE

Chase woke to the cold, still temperature in the cabin and quickly got up to stoke the fire to life. Beau was awake as he eagerly nuzzled Chase around his legs. "You might need to go outside, huh, buddy?" He quietly put on his pants and boots but not wanting to wake her, just grabbed his heavy coat and took the dog outside. The storm had certainly made itself known as freshly packed snow had covered everything in sight. He saw that it had covered their tracks and for that he was grateful. He shivered but patiently waited for Beau to finish his romp around the yard of the cabin.

"Come on, boy. I'm freezing and I want my warm bed again." He wanted so much more but was reluctant to voice that aloud. As he entered the cabin, he saw that she was still fast asleep and he marveled at her beauty. Beau resumed his spot at the front of the fireplace and Chase tried to warm his hands before crawling in beside Raven.

"Ooh! Your hands are cold. Where in the world have you been?" She jumped as her warmth was disturbed by his chilliness. He kissed her to silence her. "If you must know, I've been taking care of your buddy. He needed to go outside."

She kissed him again and pressed her warm body next to his. "I'll get you warm again. I'm grateful for you taking care of Beau."

"How grateful?" He teased.

"This will show you." She pulled him on top of her waiting body and soon they were wrapped together in loving blissfulness. Just as they were enjoying the aftermath, Raven heard a sound that she recognized. "Chase! It's a snowmobile. Hurry, get up and get dressed."

As the sound grew louder, each struggled to gather and put on all their clothing. Raven felt nervous and frightened. Could it be Hattie? Could it be the miners from CMT? She gathered her band and put her hair back in a ponytail. Chase looked as anxious as she. Together they made the bed and Chase assumed what appeared to be a casual position at the table.

Raven was making some coffee when the door burst open. She let out a huge sigh of relief when Hattie came barging through into the cabin. She filled the small space with her presence.

"You two mind telling me what the bloody hell is going on?" She was stripping off her outer clothes and placing them on the hooks by the door.

Raven turned her attention to making their coffee to avoid Hattie seeing the blush creep into her face. Chase sat up straight and cleared his throat. "I'm not sure what you mean, Hattie."

The older mountain woman looked from one to the other closely. "I'll address that thing later. What I'm bloody referring to is why the change of plans and you two leaving town in a hurry." She plopped down

on a chair by the fireplace and reached down to pet Beau. "I thought we were all going to leave Copper City in the morning and then I got that blasted note under my door."

Raven finally turned to face her. "That's my fault. I overheard a conversation between Ed and some other man." She then repeated the information as best as she could. For the first time since knowing Hattie, Raven found the older woman speechless.

"Hattie, I felt it was immediately necessary for Raven's safety to get her out of town." He added to the drama in the room. "I'm glad that you got the note and correctly interpreted it. We need your help tomorrow."

"Oh, bah! You know I'd never abandon this young lady." She pointed to Raven. "I'd protect her with my life, so curse the some of which that would do her any harm."

Both Raven and Chase looked at each other in total confusion as to the deeper meaning of Hattie's words. It seemed to Raven that she was sending someone a message of warning.

"Now as to the other situation." Hattie again stared at one and then to the other. "You're both grown adults, but I've never been one to keep my bloody opinions to myself, but do you really think it's wise to get involved now?"

Raven squirmed uncomfortably as she avoided looking at Chase. Finally when she saw that he wasn't going to respond, she spoke up. "Hattie, I appreciate your concern, but as you said we're both adults. It just happened, we didn't plan it."

She stopped with her explanation as Chase started to get his outer clothes on. "Where are you going?"

"I need some fresh air. Hattie, thanks for being here." With that he opened the door with Beau on his heels and as he shut the door he heard Hattie exclaim. "Girl, you have been through so much. I should've kept my bloody thoughts to myself. I've never been one to do so, but maybe I should just learn to be more like other folks."

"Hattie, I really appreciate that you care enough to speak up. We'll be fine. I agree with you that maybe the timing isn't the best, but he has become a special person in my life." Raven turned and poured a cup of coffee for herself and her older friend.

"What do you really know about him?" Hattie pressed her.

"I know that he is the son of a rich man and doesn't work for a living. I know that he is a member of OPP and that's why he was up at the mining site."

"And what else, Raven? What other bloody hell information you have about our friend out there? Is he married? Is he a man with a record? Does he have a dozen bloody kids out there somewhere?"

"Stop it! Okay, underneath it all, you're probably right on some level. I haven't thought this through. Why are you so suddenly concerned?" Raven asked.

They both looked up as Chase stood in the doorway. "Tell us both, Hattie, why all of the concern now?" He demanded as he shut the door behind himself.

Sensing the tension, Beau sidled up to Raven and she petted him to calm them both. Both Chase and

Raven were waiting for Hattie to answer their questions. The older woman finally got up from her place at the table and went to stoke the fire. She seemed to be in a struggle with herself as she turned to face them. "I would like you to answer a question, Chase."

"Sure."

"What does CMT stand for?" She baited the hook.

Now it was Chase's turn to squirm as he looked at Raven first before answering. "Please understand that I didn't know this would get all that complicated."

"What are you talking about? Answer her question, Chase. What do the initials in the mining company stand for?" Her heart was beating hard as if she knew the answer was going to once again cause her world to blow up.

"Cochran, Moore, Tanner." He waited for her reaction and as he watched, he saw confusion then anger cross her pretty features.

"You mean to tell me that your father owns that mine? He's the same one that shoots at his son and kidnaps my brother and is destroying the environment on this mountain?" She went to him and slapped him across the face.

"It's not what you think." Chase grabbed her hands.

"You couldn't possibly know what I'm thinking. I think I've been the biggest sucker on the planet since you hit my doorstep."

"Listen to me, Raven. My father and I haven't spoken in years. He didn't even know I was here. My father has never been to these mountains. He's just

the money man in all of this. It's managed by an outside company to do the day to day operations."

"Well, why the bloody hell are you here? Why this mountain? Why this mining operation?" Hattie interjected her own thoughts.

"I'm not proud of it, but I was here to prove to my father that what I do is important. OPP wanted someone to come here and prove to the public that illegal nuclear waste was being stored and I volunteered. Raven, I was here because what is happening on this mountain is wrong. My father and I have had differences of opinion since I was a teenager. He wouldn't ever listen and I thought this would show him that there has to be a different way in the world, that my way was equally important to his way of doing business."

"And my brother?" She was still angry.

"I didn't choose your doorstep deliberately, it just happened. I didn't think they would shoot me. I am incredibly sorry that you and your brother have gotten involved in my family's dirty laundry. Believe me, if I could go back and change it, I'd never have been at your house." Chase ran his hands through his hair and started pacing the little floor.

Hattie looked again from one to the other and shook her head. "Is that why you don't want the sheriff involved?"

"Partly. I also know that with all this snow they'd be a long time getting here. I wanted to get the proof for OPP and my father. I had hoped that he would pull the plug on this operation and start the cleanup process on his own before it became a news scandal."

Chase looked to the women for some sort of chance for peace to come back between them.

“Well, Raven, my girl, what do you think?” Hattie asked softly.

“I can’t believe you would keep such an important detail from me.” Her voice was ragged with various emotions flooding her being. “At least you should’ve told me before..., before that.” She pointed to the bed. Raven avoided looking in Hattie’s direction.

He came to stand directly in front of her, but she backed away. “Raven, please forgive me. I never meant any of this to happen.”

The pain in her heart showed through her eyes as she looked to Chase. “At least you’re decent enough to ask that after wrecking my life. The man that hit my car and destroyed my world didn’t even do that much.”

The look on his face was one of astonishment.

She put on her warmer clothing, grabbed her bag and headed for the door. “I’m going home. Come, Beau!”

“Wait! Raven, I understand that you’re upset, but we have a job to do tomorrow. Please, stay and let’s work this out.” Chase pleaded with her.

“Upset! Chase this is beyond upset. Your life was in danger and now my brother’s is and you think we can work this out? I need some space. I need my own house and my own things about me.” She turned to Hattie before leaving. “I’ll meet you at the Isabella Trailhead in the morning at 7:00 sharp!”

Chase looked at Hattie, “Please tell her to stay with us. She could be in danger too!”

Raven answered instead. “They’re not going to hurt me. They think I know where you are and they won’t get that information if they injure me. I do have to thank you for one thing, Chase. I finally found myself again. Since that accident, I’ve allowed the circumstances to determine my path. Well, no longer! I have found me again and I’ll play the game my way! I have Beau and a gun and they won’t stand a chance in my own house!”

Hattie went to her and pulled Raven into a big bear hug. “You take care, Girl. These are bloody bastards and they aren’t above hurting you if they can. Be safe. We’ll meet in the morning.”

Once outside, Raven fired up the snowmobile and with Beau settled in his basket took off for the Powder Box house. This was exactly what I needed, she thought as she took a huge cleansing breath of the fresh mountain air. The sun was shining on the fresh fallen snow and without regard for caution; Raven took the straightest path to her home. She tried to shut out the thoughts of Chase and Hattie and the conversation they must be having right now.

Shoving aside feelings of betrayal and shame, Raven soon came to the drive of her home. She stopped for a moment to survey the area around the house, looking for signs of intruders. As she looked around, Raven was convinced that no one was there, right now at least. Moving more slowly than before, she coaxed her vehicle into the barn. She observed that the snow was fresh with no footprints and felt a small sense of relief.

Once inside the mudroom, Raven removed her outer clothing and boots and went into the kitchen. She sighed as this was one of the most comfortable rooms in the entire house. Going over to the counter, she started her coffee and went to the refrigerator, looking for something to eat. Grabbing an apple, she moved from room to room, looking for any evidence that someone had been in there. Everything seemed to be in place and she finally took the stairs to the loft.

Her heart stopped as she took in the destruction in her studio. Red paint had been spilled everywhere and rubbed onto her latest works of art. The painting she'd been working on last with Chase's image in the corner had been slashed. She was numb. Where there should be fear, anger and anxiety, there was nothing but sheer determination surging up from deep within her being. Those men were not going to get away with any of this. Beau whimpered behind her as he sensed her emotions.

"It's alright, buddy. I can redo all of these. They're not going to defeat me." She felt her backbone stiffen as she swore to make them pay for this horrible stupidity. "First things, first. We need to get this house warmed up." With one last glance at the damage to her work, Raven went back downstairs and started the huge fireplace. It would take a while, but the whole house would soon be warm again.

In the kitchen, she pulled one of her frozen stews out and started the crockpot. Soon the wonderful smells of cooking would help soothe her wounded pride and nerves. She fed Beau and as soon as he was

finished, Raven spoke to him. “Well, buddy, we’ve got to clean up that mess upstairs. So let’s get started!”

As if he understood, Beau jumped eagerly towards the stairs. Raven gathered some cleaning supplies and soon they were in the loft. She leaned the damaged paintings up against the wall and started scrubbing the ugly stains of red paint. It was not going to be an easy task, but she had plenty of mineral spirits and could see her work starting to pay off. It was several hours but finally Raven had her studio back to some semblance of order. There would always be traces of the destruction but she felt that once again, she could handle it.

She sat on the overstuffed sofa and leaned back to reflect on the progress she’d made emotionally since Chase came into her life. Others, including her own brother and sister, had kept trying to get her back to civilization and a more social status, but she’d resisted. In the flash of a minute, a stranger that had landed on her doorstep gave her back her confidence, her determination and her pride. How strange, she thought. Suddenly she was inspired and grabbing her paints and a new canvas, Raven started creating.

As usual hours passed by while Raven was in her creative zone. She watched as the colors created the very thing that was on her mind. Her hands mixed the colors on the palette and her mind put her thoughts on the canvas. Beau found his usual place on the floor by the heater vent. The sky outside the plate of windows was clear and they both enjoyed their solitude and peace.

As the smell of the stew reached her nose, Raven finally subsided her movements on the piece in front of her. She stepped back and studied the colors and designs on her print. Raven was always amazed at the creativity on her canvas but this was exceptional. During her recovery from the accident after realizing she could paint, Raven's works were often of a darker nature. She had used blacks, reds, and the deeper tones of her paints. This was a definite shift from those colors. She noted the light at the top of the painting with fluffy white clouds adorning the sky but she definitely realized the face of the man on her mind was the rider on the horse.

"Come on, Beau. It's time to eat." Together they went down the stairs and soon they were both enjoying their favorite foods. The silence in the room was comforting and yet, she'd somehow gotten used to the presence of her wounded guest. I'm going to miss him, she thought to herself. If her brother's life hadn't been involved, she might be able to forgive Chase's omission of that certain piece of information.

When they were both done with their meal, Raven cleaned up her kitchen and went into the front room to stoke the fire for the night. This old house held the heat very well, but for the long haul, it was necessary to load the fireplace. As she was finishing with this task, her ears were tuned in to the sound of something mechanical. Raven went to the front window and watched as the snow was scattered by the props of a landing helicopter. She couldn't see the machine but knew whoever it was had just landed in

her meadow beyond the tops of the trees surrounding her house.

“Beau, get ready. I’m not sure this is a friendly visitor.” She grabbed the gun out of her backpack and found her place at the kitchen table. Raven had tucked the gun under the table in her lap. She was ready for anything. It wasn’t very long and yet it seemed like an eternity when finally she heard the footsteps on her back porch. The knocking was pronounced and demanding and Raven finally got up to answer the summons.

“Where’s my son?” Beau was immediately at her side with a slight growl at the tall, silver-haired man standing on their doorstep.

“I’m not sure I know who you’re talking about?” She attempted a stall.

The look on his etched face showed she didn’t quite get away with it. “Now, look, young lady. I haven’t heard from Chase in several years and when I finally get a call, his life’s a disaster. Let’s not play games. My son needs me and I’m not going to fail him this time.”

Raven half expected him to push his way into the house, but he stood there on the porch waiting. “Why don’t you come in and we’ll talk. She pushed aside the mudroom door and allowed the older version of Chase to come into the kitchen. “Can I offer you something to drink?”

When he finally sat down on the closest chair, Raven’s heart melted a bit as she saw the worry lines on his face and the defeated slump of his shoulders. She went to the coffee pot and poured him a warm

cup. As she went back to her chair, the gun clattered to the floor and she looked up to meet his eyes. "You're a feisty one, aren't you? You were prepared for the worst, weren't you?"

"Living out here alone, one has to be ready for anything. Danger comes in many different forms." She picked it up and placed it on the table next to her seat.

"Maybe we should start over. I'm Ward Tanner and I need your help."

"I'm called Raven."

"I know. My son's message stated that fact."

"What else did he say?" She was not willing to give any information until she knew what he was up to with this appearance on the mountain. Suddenly a thought occurred to her and she asked another question. "Wait, when did Chase call you?"

"Two days ago. He left a very long message and wanted me to call him back. By the time I could, his phone went straight to voicemail." Ward took a drink of the coffee.

"And then you just hopped into a helicopter and came here, came to my house." It was a statement rather than a question. She thought about Chase asking her to trust him, that they would be successful with rescuing her brother. This must be how he planned to accomplish that.

"Look, I'm not proud of my relationship with my son and if I have a chance to repair it, I'm going to do anything I can. I've been a foolish old man." His words mimicked Chase's, both men suffered from too much pride.

“Okay. I ask again, how much did Chase tell you?”

“He said there were some major problems at the mining site and that he wanted to give me a chance to make it right before the authorities were involved. He also told me that he had been shot and that you had helped him recuperate.”

“How did you know where I lived?” She was not going to let him off easily.

“I’ve only visited this area a few times, but everyone here knows of the Powder Box house. He said that he was in the most incredible house with a very beautiful woman.”

“That sounds like Chase.” She seemed to be doing some very deep thinking when Ward interrupted her thoughts.

“Raven, please tell me the rest. Tell me what I need to know to help Chase.” The older man pleaded. “Do you have anything stronger than this?”

She laughed and got up from her seat to grab the last of the wine from her pantry. “You are his father alright!” She poured a generous portion for both of them. Raven then invited the older man into the front room. “Let’s go into where we can get a bit warmer.”

Raven led the way and they both chose their seats. Beau went over and sniffed at Ward’s feet. Convinced he was alright, he came back to lie next to Raven on the sofa.

“This is a beautiful place.”

“Yes, it is. I’m very fortunate. My parents were good to me and my siblings.”

The look of pain that crossed his worn features spoke volumes. Ward finally looked to her, “I wished

I could go back and be the father that Chase needed. I was too busy making money. I had my priorities all wrong.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. We all make mistakes but the important part is to move forward and do the best we can.” She felt a little weird comforting the stranger sitting across from her but her upbringing demanded this social grace.

“You’re just being kind, but I do appreciate the effort. Raven, please help me help Chase. Tell me everything that’s going on.” He pleaded.

“Ward, I really feel it’s not my place to tell you everything, but I know you need more information.” She took a long sip of her wine. “My brother has been kidnapped by the men that run your mine.”

“What the hell!” He exclaimed.

“You’ve got to stop that mining operation. They’re illegally storing nuclear waste. The whole mountain seems to be aware of their activities but your son is the one that has the proof.”

“Where is he? Why isn’t he here with you?” Ward pushed for more information.

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. How in the world did I get in this situation, she thought to herself. “Ward, he appeared on my doorstep, I took him in and helped him heal, and in the process my brother was kidnapped. Chase neglected to tell me that you were the T in CMT. That was important information that he should have shared with me.”

“Well, I’ll just go up there and demand an accounting of the entire situation. I’ll get your brother released and shut down the whole damn thing!” He

jumped to his feet and started to pace the floor in front of the fireplace.

“That’s the one thing you can’t do! Ward, you said you wanted to improve your relationship with Chase. Let him do this his way!”

“What is that? What is his plan?”

“I’m going with Hattie in the morning by horseback to the back of the property. Chase is going in with our local backhoe operator in disguise and to get to my brother. Once they can get him in the backhoe cab, Jim will take him out of there. Chase will then work his way back to the hole in the fence where Hattie and I will get him out of there.” She thought it sounded like a good plan but everything depended on timing.

“I don’t like it! There are too many flaws. Someone could get hurt.” He looked to Raven. “I could go up there and we’d be done with this, like that.” He snapped his fingers, but she could see pain and something else cross his features. “I’d just ruin any chances of a future with my son if I did that, wouldn’t I?”

She didn’t answer him but rather went back to staring at the flames in the fireplace. Raven waited patiently for the older man to come to grips with his own feelings. “I’m going with you and Hattie in the morning. I’ll let him do this his own way, but I’m going to be there as a backup plan.”

“Okay. Please just let Chase run this operation. He was trying to save your company’s reputation as well as my brother’s life.”

“There is one more thing he said on the message.”

“Oh?” She was definitely curious.

“Now that I’ve met you, I completely understand.” Ward turned to face her. “He said he’d looked into the eyes of the woman he would love for the rest of his life and her name was Raven.”

THIRTEEN

Raven sat there in shocked surprise at Ward's revelation. She knew she had started to have feelings for Chase but for him to state this fact to his father was a real bombshell.

"You don't have to say anything. I know all of this has been a great deal for you to take in; with my son landing on your doorstep, your brother kidnapped, and now Chase's declaration of love." He came to stand in front of her. "Raven, we need to get our heads straight before tomorrow. Do you have a place for me to stay?"

"What about your helicopter?"

"I had my pilot land and I got off. I just have to signal him and he'll leave. He'll come back when I call him." He was a man in charge, she could clearly see that.

"I can put you up in the same room as Chase. I'll change the sheets and you're good to go." She got up and quickly left the room to complete the task at hand. A little space from the situation was needed. Once she came back, she saw him petting Beau who was sitting next to him on the sofa. There was a lot to be said about a man and a dog.

"We have to get up early and meet Hattie. We should get some sleep."

“Is that your way of telling me to go away?” He challenged her.

Raven hesitated before answering. “Yes and no. I have been on my own for the last few years and until your son came into my life, I wanted only that. Please allow me some time to re-evaluate the circumstances in which I now find myself.” She tried to word her request diplomatically.

“That’s fair enough. I need to alert my pilot to go and I could use some rest myself.” He rose and went to the back door. She didn’t want to listen in on his conversation, so Raven started up the stairs to the loft. She was just on the second step when Ward came back into the house. “I’ll see myself to the room. Have a good rest, Raven.”

She felt herself bristle a little at his dismissal of her presence, but Raven shrugged her shoulders and continued to the loft. Darkness had fallen on the mountainside and though there was still tons of snow covering everything, all seemed calm. The calm before the storm, she allowed that thought to creep into her mind. Not wanting to dwell on the possibilities of tomorrow, Raven took up her paints but instead of starting her work, she found herself unsettled and not able to dive into her art. Beau crawled up on the sofa and soon fell asleep.

There was no wind and the stars finally started to pop brightly in the dark night sky. She turned on the strand of lights that allowed a little magical touch to her studio without adding any stark brightness.

Raven was in no hurry to get to tomorrow. Maybe they should’ve let Ward do his thing, she thought.

Raven quickly banished that thought as she realized that Chase needed to do this in his own way. He did call his father, a fact that surprised her. He must have called him when they first hit Copper City. Father and son both had pride problems, but they both seemed to want to mend their broken fences. She smiled at that thought.

Before settling on the comfy couch, Raven went to the wall of windows and looked toward the direction of the small cabin. Her mind wandered and she found herself wishing she could talk with Chase. She wasn't really mad at him, in fact, she missed him. Her escape to the country had allowed Raven many months of silence and reflective time to think about her life. Since Chase's arrival, however, she found herself ready to have conversation again. Raven placed her hands on the cool window panes and willed him to receive her thoughts of comfort and forgiveness.

When she finally got to the couch and sat down, Raven reached over and stroked Beau's soft fur. Between the twinkle lights and the stars outside, the room had a soft glow. Raven found herself sinking down in the soft comfort of the couch and soon she was fast asleep.

"Raven, wake up!" She felt strong hands shaking her. "We need to get going."

She struggled to shake the cobwebs out of her sleepy mind as Ward spoke again. "I thought you said we needed to meet at 7:00 this morning. We're going to be late."

She jumped up as his words penetrated her foggy brain. "We will be fine. Hattie will wait for me, us."

She started down the stairs as she realized Ward was staring at the destroyed paintings she'd sat against the wall earlier.

"Who did that?" He pointed to the destruction.

"Your employees no doubt. They wanted to hurt me, to send a personal message." She went to the stairs and started down, not caring if he was following or not. Raven quickly donned her winter clothes hanging in the mudroom. Ward joined her there not soon after.

"I'm sorry, Raven."

"Why? You aren't to blame. I can repaint them."

"You're an independent cuss, aren't you?" He challenged her.

"Yes, and you'd best not forget it." Raven bent down and hugged Beau. "Not this time, buddy. You have to stay here. It's just not safe." Beau whined but obeyed and sat by the table. She put some food in his dish and once done, they were out the door. Once on the snowmobile, she waited as Ward mounted up behind her. "Hattie will be waiting."

They took off with a start, speeding up the lane and onto the main road. Raven was thankful that it was a clear day. She headed towards the Isabella Trailhead, the agreed upon meeting place. The noise of the machine didn't allow for any conversation, for which she was grateful. I just want to get this day done and over with, she thought to herself. Ward was holding on tightly. As they rounded the bend, she could see Hattie with two horses just ahead up near the tree line on the mountain.

Raven shut the vehicle off and waited for Ward to climb down. Once he was off, she looked at Hattie as she heard her exclaim, "Well if it ain't the bloody king come down from his kingdom!" She hooted and Raven found herself smiling.

"And who might you be?" He asked.

"I'm the bloody woman that's helping your son rescue Katie's brother, that's who! I'm Hattie!"

"I'm Ward Turner."

"Of course you are. I'd recognize you as the bloody father of that there boy who's in charge of this rescue operation." Hattie turned and gave Raven a great big hug. "Looks like your privacy was interrupted. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, really. I did get some time to think and sort things out."

"Good, girl. Now let's get you some disguises. I wasn't prepared for no tag along, but what the hell? We'll make do, won't we?" She went to one of the horses and grabbed some rough looking furs. "We're going to look like some friggin mountain men just moseying along as to not alert them there drone things." With a strong throw, Hattie tossed several of the fur pieces to Ward.

"What the hell is this for?" He demanded.

"I just told you, your majesty."

"Why are you calling me that?" He was obviously put off by her brazenness.

"Cuz you're just like the big chief lion, head of the pack. He don't ask for no one else's bloody opinion, he thinks he knows what's best for all." She pointed a gnarled finger at Ward. "Up here on this mountain,

we don't cotton to a big chief lion telling us what to do. We know this area best and you bloody well listen to us."

"My son's sour opinion of me has definitely swayed your ideas. You better understand one thing right now, Hattie. I love my son and only want what's best for him."

"Good! Now that we have that straightened out, let's mount up." She got up on her horse and waited for Ward to make up his mind. Raven could see he was struggling with the idea that he wasn't in charge and didn't appreciate Hattie's attitude.

Raven put the furs around her shoulders as best she could. It wouldn't be her choice of clothing, but she felt Hattie was right. They needed to disguise themselves and this might just pass the security drones. As she mounted her horse, Raven turned to Ward, waiting.

With a great big huff of indignation, he finally came and mounted behind her with the furs in hand. "I never met such determined, independent women in my life!"

Hattie hooted, "Well, then you just haven't been bloody alive. It's no longer the medieval century, your majesty, women even have the right to vote!" She laughed as she spurred her horse into action.

"Am I going to have to listen to that all day?" He asked.

Raven urged her mount to follow Hattie. "Probably, she's a little rough around the edges, but I couldn't ask for a better friend."

“That’s putting it mildly. I think she’s as abrasive as sandpaper. I hope you’re right, though, about her being a good friend.” He took time to put on the fur disguise and soon they were headed up the mountain to the backside of the large property belonging to the mine. “Where are we headed?”

“Just beyond that rise is the back fence of the mine. The trees are very thick up there and hard to fence around. Chase managed to get a hole in the fence big enough to get through without someone noticing it. We’re going to wait until he sends a signal letting us know that Jim and my brother are out of the site and headed to town.”

“What kind of signal?”

“Hattie provided them with a walkie-talkie.”

Ward interrupted her, “A walkie-talkie!? What about a good old-fashioned cell phone?”

“Up here the cell phone towers are few and far between. A walkie-talkie out performs them for reliability. We needed to be sure that we could communicate with each other.” She patiently explained to the man behind her.

The only response she got was a grunt of acknowledgement not agreement. They worked their way through the thick trees and Raven found herself looking upward for any sign of the drones. Her stomach was in knots as she prayed silently for success in their mission to rescue her brother and get Chase out unharmed. Timing was going to be everything.

It didn’t take long and they were soon at the spot they needed to be, but the look on Hattie’s face

showed there was more trouble. “Damn! Them bastards fixed the bloody fence!” She dismounted followed by the others and they all stared at the newly repaired fence.

“Hattie, what are we going to do? We’ve got to let Chase know. He can’t get out this way.”

Hattie took the walkie-talkie out of her pocket and attempted to get a hold of Chase. She tried several times, to no avail. She looked up into the grimacing face of Raven. “Maybe they’re in a place and can’t respond. He’ll get back to us, I’m bloody he will when he can.”

“Well, I can’t wait.” She looked up at the huge Alligator Juniper Tree that the fence was wrapped around. Its branches were well over the fence and Raven found a plan forming. Ward finally spoke up as he followed her viewing the giant tree. “You’re not actually thinking what I think you are? It’s time that I step in and take over this miserable operation.”

“Like hell you are!” Both women spoke in unison.

“My son’s life may be in danger.” He growled back at them.

“My brother’s life already is and I’m not going to have some, some overgrown ego put it into further peril.”

“You tell him, Girl! If Raven thinks she can get over this fence, then that’s what we’re bloody well going to do.”

“Then, you’d better take this.” Ward unbuttoned his jacket and removed a pistol and holster. “I’ve never ran into such stubborn, pig-headed women in my life.” He stopped his rant and then added, “I

admire your determination, Raven. Please ignore an old man's protests. I'm just feeling very stupid. I should've monitored this site more. I should've known what they were doing. I should've given my son more support."

Raven gave him a look of understanding. "Thanks, I'll be fine." She took the holster and put it on under her jacket and then zipped it back up. As she was looking at the gigantic tree, Raven had to decide which way to get on the limb that went over the fence.

"Listen to me, Katie. Once you get over there, the men change into coveralls in the small shed by the closest building to where we are right now. Get in there and put on some of those and you'll blend in a lot better."

"Okay, you two need to go to the front gate. Watch for Jim and his backhoe coming out and then I need a distraction so I can get to Chase."

"How do you think you'll find him?" Ward asked. "This is going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Keep trying to get him on the walkie-talkie and I'll just work my way to the building where they were keeping Lochlin. Once we connect, we'll give you guys a signal on the walkie-talkie and you need to make a huge commotion." She talked more confident than she felt, but they had to do something.

"You honestly think you're just going to walk out the front gate?" Ward persisted, he was shaking his head in disbelief. "I just wish you'd let me handle it."

"No, Ward, this is the only way."

“I hope you love him enough to keep him safe, Raven.” Ward spoke quietly and looked her in the eyes.

She avoided giving him a direct answer but instead stared at the tree. Finally deciding the best route over the fence, Raven told Hattie. “Hold my horse still. It’ll get me higher on that branch.” While Hattie did as she was told, Raven slowly stood up and got herself on top of the saddle. With one swift movement, she had her arms wrapped around the branch. Just as quickly, Raven pulled herself on top of the limb. Slowly she edged out as the branch dipped under her weight. The canopy of the tree had helped keep most of the snow off the lower branches, and she could slide along without being hampered by the snow.

Ward looked to Hattie. “I sure hope she knows what the hell she’s getting herself into with this foolish escapade of hers.”

“My Katie girl is a very determined person and I know she’ll bloody well succeed. Now don’t get yourself all up in a tither, she’ll be fine and so will that dandy son of yours.”

They both turned and looked when they heard a sound near the fence and saw that Raven had indeed found a way over. She was now standing on the snow covered ground and looking rather pleased with herself. “Now go you two. I’ll be as fast as I can.”

“Stay in the tree line as long as you can.” Hattie advised needlessly. “Come on, old fool. They’ll need us at the front gate.”

“Old fool, my ass. Look who’s talking.” Ward mumbled as he mounted the horse and waited for Hattie to lead the way.

She just chuckled and kicked her horse into motion. Hattie looked one last time at the disappearing figure of Raven as she worked her way through the trees toward the buildings in the center of the compound.

Raven moved cautiously and tried to remain undiscovered as she maneuvered through the trees toward the small building that housed the uniforms used by the miners and workers. She’d shed the furs as she neared the entrance to the building. Raven would be out in the open in just a few feet. Her heart was beating hard as she was ever alert to any activity near her location.

The mine employed around 30 people on a regular basis and she could see only a few of them hanging about the vicinity of the mine opening. With the roads all snowed in, Raven imagined that not all employees could get to work. As the horn sounded signaling start time the few employees that were there started entering the huge gaping hole in the side of the mountain. Raven took advantage of this movement to dash quickly across the open space to the back of the small structure. There were no windows in the building, just a door around the corner. It was open and she could hear voices from within but Raven had to move closer in order to determine what they were saying.

“Weren’t we supposed to get a newbie today?” It was the voice of a woman.

"I thought so, but maybe they're still in the office doing paperwork." Another female voice offered.

Taking a deep breath, Raven walked around the corner and stopped at the open door. She gave a weak smile and stepped tentatively into the small room. "Hello."

"So, you're the new one. Hi." One woman offered a greeting. She turned to the other, "I think she looks about a size eight, what do you think?"

"I'm betting a size six." They both turned to Raven, waiting for some sort of confirmation.

"The eight would be better. What's this for?"

"Your coveralls." The first woman spoke down to her.

"Oh, yeah. Can I put them on over my clothes?" Raven asked.

"Of course, it gets dirty in that hole, unless you want to ruin your own clothes." The second woman answered as she handed Raven a hangar holding the dark blue uniform. "You can sit over there and put them on."

"Oh, wait, did they give you the order?"

Raven hesitated, convinced she was now going to be caught in her deception. Just then, the second woman spoke to the first, "You know how slack they are in the office. It's just like them to forget again." She then turned to Raven, "Just get your uniform on and go back to the office. Before you go down in the hole, bring us that order."

She couldn't pull those coveralls on fast enough. Her hands were shaking, her heart was pounding, and she knew any minute the real worker would walk

through that door. Raven got up and hurried to the entrance. Before getting outside, she gave a small wave and practically dashed out into the main yard.

She had to hurry now as the chance of getting caught just multiplied tenfold. Raven trudged through the packed snow toward the building where Chase had said they'd held Lochlin. Just then she heard the sound of a piece of machinery and looked to see it was Jim on the backhoe heading to the front gate. Raven moved stealthily toward the storage looking building. The door was shut and it appeared that there wasn't anybody nearby.

She pulled her cap down as low as she could and hoped the coveralls would help her blend in with the rest of the crew. Before putting her hand on the doorknob, Raven reached in her jacket, pulled the gun out of the holster, and put it in her shaking hand. She reached and tried the door to see if it was locked. Raven found the door unlocked. With her hand trembling, Raven took a deep breath and as quietly as possible, started turning the knob.

Suddenly she heard a voice behind her. "Hey, what are you doing there? That's a restricted area."

Without turning around, she answered. "Oh, I'm new. I thought this was the office." She felt the man move in closer and once he was directly behind her, Raven turned and put the gun in his gut. "Let's go in together."

"What the hell!" The younger man exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"Open that door and step inside!" She ordered.

He hesitated but as she poked the gun tighter into his abdomen, he finally turned and opened the door. As soon as he walked over the threshold, he was hit from behind and fell to the floor out cold. She spoke before the attacker could come after her. "Wait!"

"Raven?" Chase's shock at seeing her was evident on his face as he pulled her in and quickly shut the door behind them both. "What the hell are you doing here?" He demanded and then suddenly grabbed her and hugged her tightly to his big frame. He took the gun out of her hand. "I can't believe you had this gun in his chest."

"Chase, they fixed the hole in the fence and we've been trying to get you on the walkie-talkie. I had to come in and get you." She was extremely glad to see him. "I saw Jim going out the gate. Did you guys get my brother? Is he okay? Did they hurt him?"

The grin on his face confirmed his answer. "Of course, what'd you think I'm doing here? He's been drugged, but I think he'll be fine. He recognized Jim, so I'm pretty sure he'll recuperate." He pointed to the man still lying on the floor unconscious. "This was his guard. Now, how are we supposed to get out of here?"

She backed up and looked him in the eyes. "Straight out the front gate." She waited for his reaction.

He laughed out loud but stopped when he saw she was dead serious. "Raven, how the hell do we do that?"

She took a deep breath. "We'll have some help."

"Oh, that's right. Hattie." He started to look for something to tie up the still unconscious man. When

he found some duct tape on the shelves along the wall, Chase turned the man over and started wrapping tape around his hands.

“Well, yes but she’s got someone with her.”

The tone of her voice caught his attention. He stopped what he was doing and stood up, facing her. “Who? Who would come to help us?”

“Your dad is with Hattie.” She waited for a reaction.

“My father? Why didn’t he just come storming through the front gate like he always does!”

“I told him you had a plan and he should let you do what you thought was best.”

“He just simply said yes? That doesn’t sound like my father at all.” Chase’s confusion showed.

“Chase, we really need to get some sort of signal to them and get the hell out of here. I don’t think it’ll be long for them to realize I’m not their new employee.” She indicated the coveralls.

“You’re right. I gave the walkie-talkie to Jim in case he needed some help. I figured I could get out before Junior here came back from his break. Any ideas? How can we get them a signal?”

She thought for a moment. “Does your dad carry a cell phone?”

“All the time.”

She bent down and searched the pockets of the man they’d knocked out. Grinning with victory, she found his cell phone and gave it to Chase. “Try to call your dad. It might not work, though. Remember, our cell phone capability up on the mountain is not very

reliable, but maybe here at this site they might have a booster tower.”

Chase hesitated. She noticed that he didn’t appear eager to talk with his dad. “If you want, I’ll talk to him.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

She heard some movement and wished she had a way of peeking outside to see what was going on in the yard. Chase had dialed the phone and was speaking to his father. She tapped him on the arm. “Chase, I think we’ve gotta get out of here now!”

“Okay, Dad and thanks.” He put the phone in his shirt pocket as he ushered Raven towards the door. They both stopped as they heard multiple voices just outside.

“Oh, we’re going to get caught!” Raven’s panic showed in her voice.

“No we’re not. Here take this.” Chase handed the gun back to Raven. “Now, put that gun in my back and march me out of here!”

“I don’t like this plan of yours, but I don’t have any other idea.” She took the gun and a deep breath before opening the door.

Two men were taken by surprise as Chase and Raven stepped out into the yard. “Who are you?” The question was posed to her.

“I’ve been told to take this man to the front office.” She pushed the gun into Chase’s back and prodded him forward.

“Wait a minute! Who are you? I’ve never seen you before.” The bigger of the two stepped in front of them, causing Raven to pull herself to her fullest

height. "I don't know who you are either. That doesn't mean I don't have a job to do. Do you want to be the one to prevent me from taking this prisoner to the office and have to explain it to the boss?"

Her aggressive demeanor caused a flash of indecision in the man and he started to step away. Suddenly, there was a huge commotion at the front gate triggering the two men to dash towards the noise. Raven and Chase didn't hesitate but instead headed toward the same area. She could hear one man saying that someone tried to get in the gate.

"Chase, that's our diversion. Let's stir up some more noise so we can get out of here." By then a crowd of workers was gathering to see what the hullabaloo was about. Raven saw Hattie was off of her horse with Ward slumped down on his saddle as though injured.

They went up to the nearest man and asked, "What's going on? Who is that woman?"

"She came busting through the gate demanding that we help her partner. Evidently he's had some sort of accident, maybe even a heart attack or something."

"They're not supposed to be in here. Someone needs to get them out the gate." Chase spoke loudly causing others around them to agree. The scene reminded Raven of an old western movie where the crowd was incited for a lynching.

Just then they heard the sound of a gun. The crowd started moving in any direction, with people running for cover. Raven looked to see Hattie had her pistol in hand, ready to shoot in the air again. Chase

and Raven took that moment to go around the back of the crowd and without anyone noticing, they made it out of the gate and disappeared into the heavily wooded area.

Hattie was watching and when she saw they were safe, she mounted her horse and grabbing the reins of Ward's ride, spurred her animal out the gate in a quick dash. By this time, Ward had sat up again and they bolted down the road as quickly as they could. Several shots were fired from within the mining site but they didn't stop to look back. As they made the bend in the road, Ward hollered over at Hattie, "How are we going to get Chase and Raven?"

"Raven knows her way through these woods. They should come out down by where the two main roads come together. We'll be far away enough to pick them up. Jim will be there also to help." Her words came out breathlessly.

"Won't they follow us?"

"They might try, but we have a great head start and I don't think they want to bring this fight onto public land." She started slowing her horse down as they came to the crossroads. The road had been cleared between the mine and their trucking site at the bottom of the mountain. The rest of the roads were still snowed in from all the weather they'd been having. Sure enough, Chase, Raven, Jim, and her brother were all there to greet them. Her brother was still sitting in the backhoe and slumped back on the seat. She could see that he was still under the effects of the drugs they'd given him. But his weak smile gave

her some reassurance that he'd be alright soon enough.

As they drew to a stop, Ward jumped from his animal and went to his son for a big manly hug. Everyone was hugging and almost in tears when Raven screamed. "Hattie!"

She watched in horror as the mountain woman fell from her horse into a heap on the ground. When they ran to her, Chase bent down and rolled her over. The blood soaked snow where she'd fallen was an alarm that something was dreadfully wrong.

"Hattie?"

With a weak, strained voice, she spoke, "Them bloody bastards got me."

FOURTEEN

“Chase do something!” Raven demanded. “We’ve got to get these two to a hospital. NOW!” She was past the point of hysteria. She looked up at him with huge tears pooling in her eyes.

Chase turned to his father, but Ward was already on his cell phone. He could hear him order his pilot to come and get them.

Chase bent back down and talked to Hattie and Raven. “Hattie, hang in there. We’ve got the helicopter coming for you and Lochlin.”

Hattie tried to sit up, but both Chase and Raven gently pushed her back down. “Don’t move! You’ll only make things worse.”

“If you think I’m getting in one of those bloody awful contraptions, you’re crazy!” Hattie spoke with a lot of feistiness. “Just get me off this blasted cold snow and I’ll be fine.”

“Chase, help me remove her coat and let’s see where she got shot. We need to try and stop the bleeding.” As tenderly as they could, both of them removed some of her furs and a coat. Raven tried to put them underneath her as a shield against the cold of the snow. She moaned each time they moved her, but Hattie cooperated as much as she could.

Raven breathed a small sigh as she saw that the injury was just a flesh wound. She'd taken a bullet on her right side but it hadn't penetrated. She was bleeding bad enough to raise concern. "Hattie, the good news is that you just took it on your side. They didn't have very good aim."

"That's bloody well good for me, them bastards couldn't hit a target as big as a barn!" She tried to laugh but failed as it hurt too much.

Ward finally got off his phone and came to see how she was doing. "I've got my pilot coming. He wasn't far away and should be here in a few minutes. He'll take both of you to the hospital in Prescott." He bent down and patted Hattie on her good side. "You're a tough ole bird and I know you'll make it through this."

"Look who's talking, old man!"

Raven and Chase looked at each other and laughed at the exchange between Hattie and Ward. "I think they like each other, don't you?" Raven said to Chase.

Ward stood up as did his son. "Son, I think that we need to go back there and do some serious cleaning. I had the pilot contact the sheriff and they've got a group coming on snowmobiles. The sheriff is coming in on his helicopter."

"Are you sure you want to do that? It'll mean bad publicity for the mine."

"This has gone way past publicity. The people running that place are dangerous. God only knows what else has gone on in the mine." Ward responded. Raven was listening intently to the conversation.

“I want you to get your people, you know OPP. Have them come, once it’s safe, and help clean up this mess.”

“Dad, that’ll mean a hefty fine from the government. You didn’t know what was going on but you’re going to be the one to pay.” Chase tried to reason with his father.

“No amount of money is worth someone’s life. You were shot, Lochlin suffered being kidnapped, and now Hattie has to deal with a life-threatening injury. The nuclear waste in that mine would do irreparable damage to the environment. I want the mine shut completely down, sealed off and the land surrounding returned to natural forest.” Ward was adamant.

Just then they could hear the whirring of the helicopter blades as his pilot was coming down to land. Each ducked their head to avoid the swirling snow. Raven bent down to help cover Hattie’s face.

As soon as the machine came to a stop, Chase went to help Lochlin. Ward talked to Hattie, “Can you get up on your feet at all? We can carry you if need be.”

“The day I bloody well can’t get on my own two feet, is the day you can put me in the ground.” She reached for the hand he offered and with Raven’s help came to a sitting position.

“Here, let’s wrap this around your waist. That’ll help stop the bleeding.” Chase brought an elastic bandage from the medical kit on the helicopter. Together Raven and Chase, trying hard not to hurt her further, put the large bandage tightly around her middle. Hattie was a stubborn, prideful woman but they heard her moans and groans as they moved her

about. "Sorry about that, Hattie. We need to get you on your feet, when you can."

Ward came back over and between the three of them, they got her lifted onto her feet. "Take time to get your breath, woman." He spoke gruffly to her.

"I got my friggin breath, old man. Let's get this thing done and over with." She started to shuffle ever so slowly to the waiting helicopter with their combined help.

Chase spoke to Raven, "I think you should go with them to Prescott."

"You're entitled to your opinion, but I'm going with you and Ward to the mining site. I want to see this through to the end just like you do." She saw that Hattie was finally settled in beside Lochlin and patted her friend on the knee.

"You tell him, Girl. Those bloody bastards need to know that us mountain folk stick together and they can't get away with this crap!" Hattie leaned back and waited for the pain to subside.

Raven looked to her brother. "Are you going to be alright?"

"Kathleen, I knew you'd find a way. Thanks." He too was exhausted from the trauma of being held captive. "I love you."

Tears formed in her eyes and she gently grabbed his hand. "I love you too, brother. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"You need to be very careful. They have a lot to lose and I think they'll stop at nothing to protect their little golden nest egg." He warned his sister.

“I have good help with me. Ward is going to clean up this mess and see that those responsible are going to pay.” She climbed down from the helicopter and waved as the pilot started up the machine. Raven ducked to keep snow from her eyes but as soon as he took off, she looked to Chase.

“I’m ready whenever you two are!”

Chase hesitated, but he knew she would not be put off. He climbed up on one of the horses and indicated she should get on behind him. Ward was already mounting the other.

“Aren’t we going to wait for the sheriff?” She asked.

“I think we need to get started back there before they have a chance to pack up and leave.” Ward replied. “They should be here shortly.”

“Do you really think those men at the mine would do that?”

“I think they know that they have been exposed and no amount of money is worth the price they’re going to pay.” He answered and with a quick heel tap on his horse started back up the road to the mine entrance.

Raven grabbed Chase tightly around the waist and they followed Ward up the same road. “We’ve been through so much, but I do want to tell you that I wasn’t really angry. I just needed some space.”

“Raven, I am learning a lot about you, and having space is very important to your sense of well-being. That’s something I understand and appreciate about you.” He patted her hands that were tightly clasped in front of him.

“Thank you, Chase. I am a little afraid right now. Aren’t you?”

“I hate to admit it, but yes. I think the people that we’re dealing with will do anything to get away with their illegal operations. Greed is a strong motivator for most criminal types. My father is strong and he wants to do what’s right. That, too, is a strong motivator.”

“He is a formidable man. I will agree with that.”

Chase chuckled lightly, “You seem to have made quite an impression on him.”

“I don’t know what to say to that. Chase...we’ll have a lot to talk about once this is all over.” They covered the rest of the miles in silence. As soon as they rounded the sharp hairpin curve that would lead them directly into the entrance of the mine, Raven’s stomach tightened up with anxiety.

Ward stopped just at the bend in the road and allowed Chase and Raven to catch up with him. “Are you two ready? This may be dangerous and I don’t want any more people to get injured at my expense.”

“Dad, it wasn’t your fault.” Chase tried to console his father.

“Son, one thing you need to learn in business is that the man at the top is always responsible. You do know that I could spend some time in prison when this comes out?”

Raven held her breath until Chase answered. “That’s why I tried to do it my way, Dad. I know you’re just the money man but the world won’t understand.”

“I appreciate what you were trying to do son, but I think you know deep down inside that I’ve always taken full responsibility for my actions. This won’t be any different. We’ve got to stop the violence and stop the illegal storage on this mountain.”

“I think we should just sit here a bit and watch the gate. That way the sheriff will have time to get here.” Raven offered her opinion.

“That’s just what we’re going to do.” Ward responded. “I just want to make sure that no one leaves that site. We don’t know who all is involved in this mess. It could be just the general manager and his office staff or even the employees working in the mine could be involved. That’ll be for the EPA fellows to figure out.” He moved his horse into the woods for cover and they did the same.

“I should have come up and checked on this operation.” Ward spoke quietly. “I’m not one to usually trust others to spend my money, but I was getting good earnings.”

Neither her nor Chase volunteered any words, they just allowed the older man to reflect on the choices he’s made where the mine was concerned. “There were no red flags, dammit!”

As they all sat there hidden among the trees, Raven took the time to notice that the sky was a brilliant blue with no clouds in sight. The snow covered everything like a blanket of white but the road near the mine had been plowed, probably by their own equipment. This had made their journey back to the mine entrance a lot easier than before. In her mind, she was already putting the colors on a

canvas. Raven loved this forest and the mountains that had become her haven and home.

A distant noise entered her thoughts and she focused on her surroundings more closely. "Listen, I think that's the sound of a vehicle coming up the hill."

Ward quickly ordered Chase to grab the rope on the side of his saddle. "Son, let's grab one of those felled trees and pull it in the road. We need to block access to the mine."

"What if it's the sheriff?" Raven asked.

"Then, we'll clear it, but we can't let anyone in until he gets here." Once finished, they all watched in the cover of the pines as a big truck climbed slowly up the slippery slope. As it passed, Chase recognized the emblem on the door as the mining company's logo.

"Dad, I think it's the general manager."

"We can't let him get back in there." Ward spurred his horse into action. Chase and Raven quickly followed. They were almost to the truck when the driver got out and turned to face them all. The gun in his hand said he wasn't going down easily and Ward stopped short.

"Don't even think about it!" His words were menacing. "I'm going to get to my office and you'll all be my guests! Get down from those horses."

Raven waited for Chase to dismount. Ward was already on the ground when she started to climb down and fell hard on the ground at Chase's feet. The horse bucked and in the confusion, Ward jumped at the manager and was able to disarm him. "Good job, Raven!"

“Are you alright?” Chase bent down to help her up. She started laughing and looked up at him. “I’m fine. I don’t know what came over me.”

Ward spoke, “Let’s get this bastard to his office. We can hold him there until the sheriff comes.” Then they crossed the last few yards to the gate. “Don’t try anything funny, Don.”

At the surprised look on the general manager’s face, Ward continued. “Yes, I know who you are and I know who your accomplice is in Copper City. You two are going to pay for what you’ve done!”

The man guarding the gate saw the situation and quickly opened it. “I don’t get paid enough for this!” He exclaimed.

As they trudged toward the office, they heard the sound of snowmobiles coming up the road. Chase said, “Dad, if that’s the sheriff, I’d better go back and help them move that log.” Raven looked to Ward, “I can stay and help you or I can go with Chase.”

“Go! I’ll be fine. This one’s not going anywhere.” He pushed the man forward through the office door. The lady at the front desk was startled to see her boss coming through the door with a gun in his back. “What on earth is going on?”

“Nothing for you to be alarmed at, young lady. The sheriff will be here shortly and you might be of a great help to him.” He indicated a chair by the door, “Sit!” Ward ordered the manager.

In no time at all, the entire mining site was filled with the sheriff and his deputies. There was added confusion as the employees came up from the mine for their lunch break. They were surprised by the

activity and many just stood back to watch. The sheriff started barking orders. “Which one are you?” He finally acknowledged Ward.

After several minutes of explanations, he got on his phone and called for backup. “This isn’t going to be easy to sort this all out. I’m not even sure that you’re innocent in this fiasco as your name is on the company papers.”

“I understand that. I’m prepared to take responsibility for my lack of action.” Ward seemed defeated.

Soon there was a separate investigator talking with each of them. With all the snow and storms lately, Raven was surprised that so many people could get to the site. She realized that they must be using the employee entrance from down the mountain. It was the only completely cleared route from town. She heard one of the deputies tell the sheriff that the Environmental Protection Agency had been notified and that an agent was on the way from San Francisco.

Suddenly, Raven just wanted to be in her own home with just Beau beside her. The overwhelming sense of chaos was about to suffocate her. When she didn’t think she could take anymore, Raven noticed Chase was at her side. His comforting touch helped soothe her nerves. “Deputy, I think she needs to go and see her brother at the hospital. Can’t you get more from her later if needed?”

“That’s not my call, but you can talk to the sheriff if you want.”

Raven flashed him a grateful smile as Chase crossed the small room and spoke to the man in

charge. She watched as the sheriff shook his head in the affirmative giving her permission to leave. With a reassuring smile, Chase came back to stand beside her. "He said you could go. Dad's pilot will be back down at the junction by now and he'll fly you to Prescott."

"What about you?"

"Dad's going to need me and I intend to stay right here until they get it figured out. I've got those pictures that they'll need." Chase gently pushed her to the door. Once outside, they went to the nearest deputy. "Can you give her a ride back down to the junction?" When he hesitated, Chase confirmed that she had the permission of the man in charge.

Raven turned to Chase and they hugged before he gave her a tender kiss. "I'll be along soon enough. Go and check on that brother of yours. I'm sure Hattie has given the doctors enough hell by now. They'll need you to settle her down."

With one last kiss, she got on the back of the snowmobile and was soon heading down the mountain. The helicopter was there waiting and she eagerly climbed on board. In no time at all, she was at the hospital in Prescott. Once Raven thanked the pilot, he took off again back to the site she presumed.

Raven entered the emergency room and immediately found a nurse at the station. "I'm here to see my brother Lochlin Blackinger. They brought him in just a bit ago on a helicopter."

"Oh, yes, you'll find him in the room just down the hall."

Raven was so surprised to see not only her brother but her sister Annie was there too. Eager and happy hugs were given as the tears flowed down her face. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Your guy Chase called me. He said I would find Lochlin here and you’d be here as soon as you could.” Annie explained.

“Hey what about me? Her brother spoke up. Both sisters went by his bed and gave him big hugs. “Are you doing okay? What did the doctor say?”

“I’ll be fine. They just used some sleeping pills and pretty much kept me out to the world.”

Raven spoke softly, “Why were you even there?”

In a voice that betrayed his feelings, Lochlin related the story. “I got a text from Jim saying that things were wrong on the mountain at the mine where he had been doing some work. He felt that something more serious was going on and as a local with somewhat of a reputation I needed to see it for myself. My timing couldn’t have been more perfect for them. It was the same day that Chase had been taking pictures and wreaking havoc with their equipment. I’d been wanting to check on you anyway with that storm being so bad. I didn’t even take time to think, just jumped in my truck and headed up to the mountains. I stopped in Copper City to see if maybe you were at the hotel. When I told Ed, that little weasel, I was going up to the mine to check on their operation, he told me to use the lower road as they’d plowed it. I’m such a fool! They had already seen Chase on the surveillance and knew he had

pictures. They thought he and I were in it together. What an idiot I've been."

"Don't say that! You were coming to help me, or so you thought. That's sweet." Raven tried to console her brother.

"Raven, both Lochlin and I have been so worried about you, since the accident. You've been so distant. We didn't know how to help you and were worried sick." Annie added, as a serious look crossed her features. Lochlin shook his head in agreement at her statement.

"Oh, my God. I am so sorry. I've been so selfish. I never took time to think about all of that and how this was affecting you two." Raven was suddenly aware of her own actions and how they hurt the ones she loved. "Please forgive me."

"All is forgiven, Kathleen. Let's just make a pact going forward to have more contact and communication between the three of us." His voice cracked with the love he felt for his sisters.

"Oh, Raven. I totally agree. Please no more hiding on the mountain." Annie rushed to encourage her sister.

"I agree. I don't ever want to be the cause of worry and concern for either of you." They all hugged one more time but were interrupted by a knock on the open door.

A stern nurse entered the room and glanced around landing her eyes on Raven. "You must be the one that old woman's calling for! She wants to speak with a Raven person. What kind of name is that for a

young woman?” She mumbled as she crooked her finger indicating that Raven should follow her.

Raven laughed and told them she’d be back shortly. “It appears Hattie is up to her usual tricks. Don’t go anywhere.”

The nurse led her down the hallway and into another room, where she could hear Hattie hollering. “What the hell do you think you’re doing to me? That hurts like bloody hell!”

“I can hear you all the way down the hall!” Raven stated as she entered the room. There was a doctor and several nurses standing around the bed but obviously not getting anywhere with the treatment.

“There you are! Tell these jackals to leave me alone!”

“Hattie, you need to let them treat your wound. I will stay here and hold your hand, if you want.” Raven came to stand next to the bed. “You don’t want it to get infected, do you?”

“Why don’t you take care of it for me? You treated Chase’s gunshot wound just fine.”

She looked to the doctor for some sort of help. “Maybe you could help her out of her clothing while we get things ready.” He offered as he pulled the curtain allowing the two women privacy.

Raven saw through the fearsome façade that Hattie was putting forth. She was scared and needed some comfort. “Come on, let’s get you out of those clothes and into this lovely gown.”

“Humphh! It’s about as lovely as a blasted garbage bag!” Even though her words were negative, Hattie started to help Raven remove all of her cold weather

clothes. "I'm not sure you want to see me in my birthday suit, but I think I need to get down to my bloody skin so them jackals can do something about this blasted gunshot."

"Let's put it this way, I've seen worse and I've also seen better. I just want you to get this treated so we can get you out of here." Raven continued to relieve her of her clothing as there were several layers. Finally, she started putting the gown on her friend. "It's a lovely drab green that should match your eyes."

Suddenly both women started laughing. "Raven, you're such a dear girl. It's so good to see you shining again."

"I do feel better than I have in years. What an adventure!"

"How was it going when you left the mountain?"

"I'm not sure. There seemed to be more and more people showing up and the EPA person is still on the way. I just got so overwhelmed that I had to get out of there. Chase was instrumental in helping me get away."

"You're in love with that scalawag, aren't you?" Hattie questioned.

Raven stopped her motions but finally looked her square in the eyes. "Yes, I do believe I've fallen for the scalawag."

"I'm happy for you. All of this mess will get straightened out, but it's always better to have one another to lean on in the hard times. You keep that in mind, Katie."

By then the doctor and his nurse came back into the room. "Are you ready?"

Hattie looked to Raven and sighed. “Sure, you blasted quack. Do whatever you think you have to but do it bloody fast. The sooner I get out of here, the better. Go back to your brother, Girl. I’ll see you a little later.”

With a quick kiss on Hattie’s cheek, Raven left the room and scooted back down the hallway. She was just about to open the door when a firm hand stopped her movement. Startled, she turned and came face to face with Chase. “Wow! Oh, I’m so glad you’re here.”

She allowed him to move her from in front of the door and swiftly placed a kiss on her expecting lips. “I’ve wanted to do this all day,” he said.

“You feel so good. Wait, what are you doing here? Is it all over?” The grimace showed his answer but Chase responded anyway. “My dad was taken into custody until they can sort everything out. The general manager, as well as Ed, the hotel manager, are also being kept behind bars.”

“Ed! Little ole country hick, Ed? I’m shocked.”

“Greed is a great motivator. He was well paid for giving information to the GM about your location, your relationship to Lochlin, and all sorts of things. It’s amazing how far reaching this operation is and who all is involved. I’m confident that my father will prove his innocence and that the true bad guys will be the ones that pay. His lawyer should have him out before the day is over.”

About that time, the door to Lochlin’s room opened and Annie poked her head out. She was as blonde as Raven was dark. “I thought I heard your voice.” She came all the way out into the hallway.

“And this must be your friend. Hi, I’m Annie and I’m so grateful for your call.”

He took her small hand into his own and smiled but Annie could see he was looking at her sister. “Nice to meet you.”

“Come, let’s introduce you to our brother.” Annie encouraged them to move into the privacy of the room.

As they entered the room, Raven saw that her brother was trying to sit up. He’d obviously heard the conversation and wanted to present a more formidable position. “Lochlin, this is Chase.” Raven spoke.

“Hey, man. Thanks for helping me get the hell out of there in one piece.” Lochlin extended his hand and the two men shook.

“I’m just so sorry you got dragged into the middle of my mess. If I hadn’t landed on Raven’s doorstep,” Chase stopped as the other man raised his hand.

“Don’t go there. I’m a firm believer in fate. You were supposed to be there. She needed you, only she just didn’t know it at the time.” Her brother’s words caused more tears to well up in her eyes. “It’s the truth, Kathleen. Out of bad, good things can happen and you are back to the beautiful person you’ve always been.” And to Chase, he added, “I thank you for that.”

Chase turned to Raven, “This isn’t the best setting for this, but I want you to know that I love you.” Annie exclaimed at his declaration as Raven’s tears now fell freely.

With some difficulty and strong emotions flowing, Raven spoke to him. "I know. Your dad told me."

All in the room showed surprise at her statement, but Chase just laughed. "That's just like him. He got there before me as usual."

"You aren't mad, are you?" Raven asked.

"Nah, not now. My dad and I have finally come to an understanding after all these years. Well...what do we do now?"

"First off, this." She planted a searing kiss on him. "And then, I tell you how much I've grown to love you in such a short time. Hattie just now told me that it's better to have someone to lean on in the hard times, I want that person to be you, Chase. We'll get through this together."

EPILOGUE

Three months later

“Hi, honey, I’m home!” Chase came through the kitchen door of the Powder Box house. Raven was up in the loft, but yelled down at him anyway.

As he eagerly climbed the steps Beau by his side, she turned laughing. “You never get tired of saying that, do you?”

“I never get tired of doing this either.” He took her in his arms and gave her a breath-taking kiss. “Me neither. I love you. What has you in such a good mood?” Raven put down her paints and turned to see the huge grin on his face.

“We didn’t expect it to happen this fast, but Dad has been completely exonerated of any criminal charges. Those letters that the general manager produced were forgeries and our little buddy Ed from Copper City has been talking his head off. He didn’t want to spend any time in jail, so he gave them everything he knew about the whole operation.”

“Oh, Chase, that’s so wonderful. I’m so glad for Ward. It’s been hard on him. Will there be any fines from the government?”

“All three of the partners will pay equal parts of that hefty fine and then dad’s buying out the partners

and shutting everything down.” He replied snuggling up to her.

“How’s the restoration on the mine going?” They took their usual seats on the sofa facing the wall of windows with Beau at their feet. Spring had definitely come with new growth throughout the forest. It was great to see the expanse of greens, blues and browns in the landscape coming to life. They often sat here just enjoying nature and each other.

“The EPA has gotten all of those canisters removed and sent to an approved storage facility. You know the next step would’ve been to encase those canisters in the mine with concrete. I’m glad they didn’t get that far. It would’ve been a nightmare to find them and remove those things then.”

“So you like overseeing this cleanup project?”

“This is definitely my cup of tea. With the help of OPP and the EPA, it’ll be back to some sort of normal in a few years.” He sighed, “Though it’ll never be really normal, just not an environmental hazard.”

“How’s your father handling your involvement in the cleanup?”

“He was the one that insisted I be put in charge. He and I have really knocked down some serious barriers to our relationship. I love being back in contact with him.”

That’s wonderful for you and your dad. I’m also glad we had Lochlin put in the internet dish thing. Now I can keep closer contact with him and Annie, too.”

Chase’s laughter was genuine. “You’re so not technical are you?”

“Not really. I still like my privacy.”

“Does that mean you would prefer to be here alone?” He teased.

“Not at all. I’ve loved you being here. In fact...” She didn’t get to finish.

“Dad was still at the mining office. Why don’t I call him and have him come for some dinner? I think we need to celebrate. Do you think you can get a hold of Hattie? It wouldn’t be a proper party without her here. We could even invite Jim.” Chase wanted something to mark the end of what could have been a huge disaster for the mountains.

“I’ll try her. You call your dad and Jim and we’ll put on a feast for them.” She got up and went downstairs with Beau and Chase following her to the kitchen. “How about some steaks? I’ll get them thawing.”

Chase was already on the phone when Raven found hers on the counter. She dialed the number she had for Hattie and soon was smiling as the mountain woman accepted their invitation. “You know we should probably call Annie and Lochlin to see if they could come too.”

He got off the phone after talking to his father. “I agree. This will be fun.” As he turned to leave the kitchen, Chase asked her, “You started to say something up in the loft. What was it?”

“I’ll tell you later. Let’s get ready for company.”

They worked together cleaning the house and preparing their dinner. To Raven’s surprise, both her sister and brother said they would come. It wasn’t long before they heard the rough running truck that

Hattie drove coming down the drive. They both went to the kitchen door and greeted her.

“Hey, you two! Thanks for the bloody invitation!” She clamored down from her vehicle and headed to give them a huge hug. “I’ve been up north on the mountain checking on that blasted cleanup project you got going. It looks like we won a big one for ourselves.”

“Come on in Hattie. What can I get you to drink?” Chase offered.

“I don’t suppose you’d have some of that special rot gut we like, would you?”

“Of course, just for you, Hattie.” Chase left the room to get the drink for her.

“How are you feeling? Everything healed up good, I hope.” Raven inquired.

Hattie lifted her shirt and proudly showed off the scar the bullet had left. “It takes more than them damned bastards to get the best of me! This here is a bloody badge of honor. What about you, Katie? Have you told him yet?”

Hattie would have to wait for an answer but grinned at the shock on Raven’s beautiful face. She hooted that usual laughter of hers as she accepted the drink from Chase, who’d just come back into the room. “Who all’s coming to this here shindig of yours?”

As soon as they gave her a list of the people, they heard several vehicles coming up the lane. In no time at all, they were all seated around on the wrap around porch. Chase made sure everyone had something to drink but was surprised when Raven declined.

Ward cleared his throat to get their attention. "I know this is Chase and Raven's party, but I just want to say how proud I am of all of you. This mountain could have seen a disaster of epic proportions and you all saved it. I'm especially proud of my son for taking the lead to get this brought to the right people's attention. Here's to you, son." Everyone raised their glass but Raven just leaned in and gave him a slight kiss.

"Thanks, Dad. We'll have this area back to almost original in the next few years. I wanted all of you here to thank you for your part in helping clean up that mess." He looked around at the eager faces on the porch. "I mostly want to thank this beautiful woman beside me. If she hadn't stepped into action, I might not be here. Raven, you know how much I love you!"

"When you going to make an honest woman of her, you scalawag?" Hattie pressed him.

"Well, that's another reason I wanted you all here." He got down on one knee and pulled a ring case from his pocket. Raven was caught off guard as he opened it and showed her the shiny diamond ring sitting in the black velvet. He first turned to Lochlin. "With your permission, brother, I would like to make this woman my wife."

Lochlin laughed. "If I said no, she'd hit me for sure. Of course, I'd be honored to have you in our family."

"Well, Raven?" Chase asked her finally.

"Oh, yes. This makes me so happy." She held out her hand and allowed him to put the ring on her hand.

“Katie, don’t you have something to ask him?” Hattie’s eyes twinkled with orneriness.

“What’s she talking about, Raven?” The look on his face showed puzzlement.

“I’ll be right back.” Raven left them all stunned into silence.

She wasn’t long and when she returned, Raven was carrying one of her paintings. Chase was standing and she went to him so that he could turn the canvas to see her work. What he saw made him tear up.

“Well, what the bloody hell is it?” Hattie spoke before the others could.

Slowly he turned the painting so that all could see. It was a picture of himself and Raven but what definitely caught his eye was the baby he was holding in his arms. They were surrounded by the trees and standing on the ridge just beyond the Powder Box house. He looked up to her and all she could do was smile in affirmation.

“Does this mean what I think it does?” He spoke quietly.

“Yes. We’re going to be parents. Are you ready?”

“More than you’ll ever know. I love you, Raven.”

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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