

Eleven Days:

An Unexpected Love

Book 1 of the Days Trilogy

By
Lora Lindy

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Books by Lora Lindy

Series

Days Trilogy (Romantic/Crime Suspense) Rated R

Eleven Days: An Unexpected Love

Thirty Days: The Hunt for Angelino Marquit

Four Days: The Revenge

The Party Line (Drama) Rated G

The Oak Tree Letters (Mystery/Paranormal) Rated PG

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Rated R for adult language and adult content

~Chapter 1~

"Sharon, I've received the test results from the lab," said Dr. Kemper, lowering his head not wanting to look into her tear-filled eyes. They were swollen as though she had lost the first round of boxing with Muhammad Ali. He distracted himself by looking at the papers he held in his hands, flipping the pages back and forth. He wanted to make sure he did not miss anything. No matter how many times the elderly doctor delivered grave news, it never got any easier.

Sharon's face turned pale as she looked at him. Waiting for the results about her husband James was difficult. She could tell by the look on his face the news would be heartbreaking. Her heart started racing as she shifted from one foot to the other. When he didn't finish his sentence, she snapped at him. "Spit it out, what are the results?"

He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled his cheeks puffed out. "The MRI shows James is brain dead, and there's nothing medically we can do. The machine is breathing for him, and it's keeping him alive. Too much time had passed after his heart attack, and his brain was deprived of oxygen. I'm sorry, Sharon. I wish I could give you better news."

"I do too." She lowered her eyes to her beloved husband. Thoughts of him raced through her mind. She recalled when they met, their first date, their marriage, and the birth of their children. As she remembered the birth of their son, Kismet, tears began to flow. Kismet's head had come out pointed and lopsided, causing James to say, "Look! He's an alien. Honey, is there something you want to tell me?" The doctor laughed for ten minutes.

Dr. Kemper's coughing snapped Sharon back to reality. "You will need to decide when you want to turn off the machine. I'm sure you'll want to talk with family about the details, and allow them time to say good-bye." This was the part he hated the most, when the loved ones discussed the time of death—they never agreed. Some didn't want him to suffer, and some demanded the patient stay hooked up to the machine forever.

"Do you mind if I think about all this?" She needed time alone to think. Picking the day and time to let her husband to die was not a choice she wanted to make, tired or not. Thoughts raced through her mind about the sorrow this decision would cause the family, especially for Lana. Cousins or not, they had been best friends for decades. Now in a fleeting

moment, his life would end. This decision would be a crushing blow to her.

"Absolutely, you take all the time you need. I'll come by in the morning to check on you and answer any questions you might have."

"Thank you." Sharon picked up her coat and kissed James' cheek. "Good night, I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, and I want you to try to get a decent night's sleep." He was never shocked by how distraught spouses acted. Some would scream at the top of their lungs, and others would laugh. Most cried and were afraid to make any decisions, letting the doctor spoon-feed them through the process. Sharon appeared to be the quiet type and wanted time alone to think.

They both walked out of the hospital room without saying another word, but she did glance back at her husband one last time.

~Chapter 2~

Forty-seven-year-old Lana Andrews sat in a hard, orange chair in the hallway of Citizens Memorial Hospital waiting to say good-bye to her cousin. His unexpected heart attack had disarrayed her entire life, everyone's lives. All the loved ones took turns entering his room to say good-bye. Some went in as groups, but she wanted to go in alone. Lana wanted to be alone with James when she said her last farewell.

While waiting for the immediate family to arrive, she reminisced how James had unfailingly been at her side. He had helped her get through her rough divorce, helped her move, went to court with her, and even went head-to-head with her ex. No matter what happened in her life, he always stood by her side. She looked down at the tile floor, and the pit of her stomach hurt—dreading the next hour.

The last person left James' death room. Lana took a deep breath and walked in, trembling. Her hands shook as she reached down and took his limp hand. She spoke with a soft tone, a whisper. "James, I know you can't hear me, but I need to say good-bye. I love you so much, and I'll miss you. I'll miss your guidance, love, and talks. If I could give you my heart to make you strong, I would. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me most." She choked up for a few seconds then finally murmured "good-bye." Lana reached down and kissed his cold cheek. She looked

into his cadaverous face, hoping for some telltale sign of life, but saw nothing.

She took the sleeve of her sweater and wiped the tears away as she looked around the room. Instead of a typical hospital room, it looked more like a Martha Stewart home with all the beautiful colors. The furniture had been stained a dark mahogany, and the bedspread and walls were different shades of green. What stood out the most were the wall hangings. To her surprise, they were happy pictures of trees and flowers. *Are they trying to put me in a good mood?* This would be James' death room, and she didn't want to forget a thing. Nor did she want it to remind her of a happy ending.

Dr. Kemper and his nurse walked in, interrupting her thoughts. He looked at her with sadness and spoke, barely audible. "It's time."

Lana nodded, but her heart denied the reality of it all. All the close loved ones shuffled into the room—one by one. They gathered around James. Nobody seemed to want to touch him, so Lana held his hand. She alone held his hand. As the doctor pushed the button, the beeping slowed down until it flat lined. She expected him to jerk, fight to live. But he didn't. He just slowly drifted away. She took a deep breath as his final heartbeats streamed from his fingers into hers. *Oh, my Lord, I can't let go; I just can't!* Overwhelmingly her heart felt heavy with sorrow.

"Come on, Lana; you have to let go. You know that is what he would want," said Sharon consolingly.

Those words angered Lana. Sharon didn't even attempt to hold his hand the last few seconds of his life. Lana hated her; she hated the doctor, and she even hated James. How dare he die and leave them all alone—he had no right to die. Lana wanted to talk with him one more time. It was all she could do to hold back her anger. "It's so hard," she said with curtness, not wanting to look at Sharon. How could she have signed that paper? Her emotions overtook rational thinking.

Lana knew she shouldn't be hard on her because James had been brain dead for several days. They all loved him so much, and that made it even more difficult. Her mind was in a state of reckless emotions.

The doctor pronounced him dead, and the nurse wrote down the details of time, cause of death and date.

That's it.

It's over—just like that.

Lana walked out the door.

~Chapter 3~

When Lana walked out of her front door, she realized what a sunny day it was for the funeral. The temperature in Chattanooga hovered around eighty degrees. It was much warmer than normal, with only a slight breeze. The trees still held their fall leaves, and they already turned to the bright colors: orange, red, purple, and every other color imaginable. Even with all this beauty surrounding her, all she could think about was her own sorrow. How could the day be sunny when she felt the deepest and darkest hurt she had ever experienced in her life? The sun shouldn't be shining today, and she wished it would hide behind the clouds—she wished *she* could hide behind the clouds.

Once she arrived at the cemetery she sat in the truck a few minutes, contemplated leaving. But she couldn't leave, so she trudged on, unwillingly. She looked over at all the other graves and wondered how their families managed to get through their own tragedy. Then she saw an infant's tombstone and thought, *if this tiny baby's parents can get through this, I can, too*. That one small tombstone gave her courage.

As she got closer to the grave, she fixated on James' casket, and was saddened to know his body lay in it. In an hour, he'd be buried in the ground. All graves should be like New Orleans, above the ground. Hell fell below the ground, and Heaven rose above the ground. Families so freely send everyone to Hell.

She noticed everyone around her looked like zombies wearing black. She wondered how that tradition started. Her grandmother, a devout Pentecostal Christian, told her years ago, "Death is a celebration. Our loved ones have moved on to a better place, and that's a time to celebrate." Today of all days, she thought of that and wondered, *if death is such a celebration, then why don't we wear party hats and party clothes to funerals instead of black?*

Sharon interrupted her thoughts by putting her hand on Lana's, leaning in to whisper, "Look at the view James will have forever." In the distance, the beauty of Lookout Mountain was breathtaking, and James would have loved it. The sun smiled on the sheets of multi-colored leaves made more vibrant by the wet summer.

Lana knew that any other day the mountain would have taken her breath away, but not today. "He would love this place," Lana whispered.

The deep-gray casket sparkled in the sun. She thought he would have preferred a red casket that sparkled. The red one looked more like a sports car, and he loved sports cars—especially Corvettes.

She glanced at the mountain one more time. *My precious cousin, this will be your beautiful view for eternity.* She lowered her head and quietly wept.

After the funeral, everyone gathered at James and Sharon's house. People Lana knew were boisterous with their opinions on death, and their opinions got on her last nerve. She didn't want to deal with their epiphany of wisdom on how she should handle her grief. Instead of dealing with them, she decided to find a more surreal surrounding, the front porch. An old wooden swing sat at the far end of the porch. No one sat out there, not even the children; she would have complete solitude. The swing creaked when she sat down, and it made a struggling squeak when she went back and forth in a slow rhythm. She smiled when she thought about what James might say at a time like this. "The swing is saying you need to lose weight."

She didn't know many of the guests who came and went. They nodded an acknowledgment as they saw her. That suited her just fine because she was content sitting alone. Swinging and listening to all the sounds outside eased the ache in her heart. In the distance, she could hear kids playing kickball in the street; they were taking advantage of the last few days of the warm weather. Three houses down, an older man was mowing his yard for the last time this year. Inside, dishes clanked as people made their plates of food. Lana kept swinging in a slow, steady rhythm.

After an hour, Sharon walked outside to say good-bye to friends and saw Lana.

When she glanced up, the sun was shining on Sharon showing the gray in her shoulder-length hair. Through the years, she had gained a little weight, but she did have three kids, and gravity had taken its toll on her midsection. Some of the chubbiness was from being so short; she couldn't

be over five feet tall and didn't have a long torso to help hide her weight. Even with all that happened; she walked with some perkiness during her mourning. And thank God she changed out of that black dress.

When the guests left, she walked over and joined Lana. "How are you?" Sharon crossed her legs.

"I've seen better days. I'm a strong person, and I will get through this. I just have to figure out how."

She put her arm around Lana and gave her an affectionate squeeze. "Of all the people who loved him, I think you'll miss James the most. I think sometimes you were closer to him than me."

"Well, I did have many more years with him than you did. If you remember, I was the first person you were introduced to," she said as she noticed Sharon's swollen eyes and the puffy bags under them. It was sad to see her so heartbroken.

Sharon reminisced, "I remember the first time James introduced us. You were getting ready for a date and had messed up your eye makeup, so James offered to help. You let him put on your eye shadow; he put blue on one eye and brown on the other. The whole time he was messing up your makeup, he was winking at me. I tried hard not to laugh. When you looked in the mirror and saw what he did you threatened to kill him."

Lana grinned when she thought about the incident. "Yeah, if I could have caught him—he would have died that night. And if you remember right, because of his shenanigans, I needed to redo all my makeup, which made me late. He met my date at the door and acted as though he had a facial twitch."

Sharon rolled her head back with laughter. "He told Carl the twitch ran in the family."

"No, he didn't? He never told me about that. I could tell Carl wanted the date to end, and now I know why."

"Believe it or not, James felt guilty about lying, and maybe that was the reason he never told you. James also said Carl was not the right one for you, especially if he could be driven off so easily."

"He *should* have felt guilty."

With a little twinkle in her eyes, Sharon added, "You know, every time James ran into Carl; he suddenly developed another twitch."

"Now I know why every time I saw Carl; he asked me about my health. I'm surprised I could catch a husband at all because of the way

James acted."

Some guests were leaving, so Sharon excused herself to talk with them. James had made the right decision by choosing her. She could take a joke better than most, and he constantly pulled something on her. No matter how many pranks he pulled, he never showed any maliciousness. She would laugh and go about her business, and sometimes she would get even. With all sincerity, she felt sorry for Sharon. While she got to go home to her routine, Sharon had to go to bed alone.

~Chapter 4~

Lana thought putting the funeral behind her would help her disposition, but instead her depression and weariness lingered. She did not answer the phone or door. She barely ate and slept; her eyes were sunken, and she had developed dark circles under them. With all her heart, she missed James terribly, and she didn't know how to get over this feeling of dread.

Her kids knew the difficult time their mom had the past few weeks, and they were worried about her. They thought the best thing for her was to get away, so they begged her to visit them in Colorado for a few weeks. The kids were right; she needed to get away. She loved them dearly, but she needed to be alone in a foreign place, not with her children. Being with family proved to be too difficult.

After days of thinking, she made a decision to go to the beach. She would go north and rent a beach house. Being off-season, finding a rental shouldn't be a problem. Getting away should help her to rejuvenate herself and escape the memories.

She decided on the Cape Cod area in Massachusetts. Plymouth sounded like a great place. The pilgrims landed there to make a fresh start, and she could make a fresh start, too. Her family went there for a vacation when she was a child, and she remembered loving the beach and playing with her sisters.

She would fly into Boston and take a slow drive down Highway 3 along the coast through the little old towns. She could shop along the way and brush up on some history. Happiness filled her heart just thinking about getting away to new surroundings and being alone.

~Chapter 5~

Day 1

Today was Lana's flight to Boston, and she sat waiting for her plane while drinking her second cup of coffee. Normally, she didn't like the hustle and bustle of the busy airports, but today it kept her mind busy and off her woes. The people at the airport moved around without a care in the world except to catch their plane and get to their destination. Kids played, cell phones buzzed, couples held hands, and everyone was filled with life.

Two aisles over, a newly married couple discussed where they wanted to visit when they got to Boston. The young bride mentioned she wanted to visit the eerily haunted lighthouses—emphasizing the word *eerily*. She also wanted to see the Boston Common, where hangings took place. The girl read aloud, "Many events happened at the Boston Common, but the most notable were the hangings. In 1660, Mary Dyer, along with three other Quakers, were hung. Still today, many people see Mary Dyer standing by the hanging noose wearing a black dress."

The young groom, on the other hand, talked about relaxing in the hotel room. Lana smiled because she knew what that meant. They were adorable and full of love, holding hands and smooching every five seconds. She knew they would work it out between them.

Life goes on. A man interrupted her thoughts. "Is this seat taken?"

"Oh, no, please sit down," Lana answered, trying to be polite, but she honestly didn't want to chitchat. She moved her belongings from the chair and felt inconsiderate given the packed airport.

"Are you on your way to Boston for business or pleasure? By the way, my name is Peter." He reached his hand out to shake hers, and she obliged.

"I'm going to Plymouth for a vacation, and my name is Lana. Are you on your way home?" she asked to be cordial, even though she didn't care.

"My home is New Jersey, but I have some business in Boston. If you're interested in getting out, there are many sights to see. You can visit the Museum of Fine Arts, The Prudential Skywalk, and Paul Revere House, for starters."

"Thanks, I might consider that, but I'm staying at a beach house outside of Boston. I'm not sure if I'll have to time before I leave." She noticed when he said museum that he said it oddly. He said 'mooseum', like calling a cow. For some reason his voice sounded familiar.

"There are plenty of lighthouses, and nowadays you can even stay the night in some of them."

"I'm sure Plymouth has many sights and lighthouses."

"I think they have some of the oldest lighthouses in the nation. There are Wings Neck, Sandy Neck, Nobska Point, Race Point, Highland Light, Wood End, and Long Point Light."

"Oh my, you do know your lighthouses." Her eyes widened as he rattled them off his tongue without thinking about it.

"My wife and I tour lighthouses a few times a year. We enjoy the history of all of them. Sometimes, we even go ghost hunting in them."

Their conversation was interrupted. "Lana Andrews, please report to Gate 14."

"I hear my name being called. It was nice talking to you. Have a safe trip."

"You have a safe trip, too."

When making reservations, she had mentioned she wanted to sit alone. The attendant informed her of an empty seat at the back of the plane with no one near her.

Lana took it.

The rear of the plane must have been the working area. There were many men in their William Fioravanti, Milan's Caraceni, and Polo Ralph Lauren suits. They were getting out their laptops, and their Android phones were buzzing. Obviously, the men had flown many times because their belongings were organized in their small, tight space. The last few minutes they hurriedly talked to their wives and offices, planning supper and making deals. One man even talked about giving one hundred thousand dollars to the Heart Association, and considering what happened with James; Lana was elated. She got out her small HP laptop, not as fancy as theirs, but she was in the business section and needed to look busy. She even put her glasses on to look important.

Once in the air, her heart lightened. In just a few short hours, she would be strolling along the beach and walking through her little quaint beach house. She might even sit for a while and watch the Gurnet lighthouse across the cove.

Tennessee's weather was warm, and she anticipated the brisk, fall weather of Cape Cod and a blazing fire to keep her warm at night. *Is the fireplace wood burning or gas?* Lana racked her brain trying to remember. Deep down, she'd hoped it would be wood burning because she liked the sound of the crackling wood. Either way, it's a fresh start for her to gather her feelings.

She noticed Peter near the front of the plane. Although he seemed like a personable guy, she truly hoped he didn't come to the back. Since the flight would last three hours, she wanted to catch a couple hours of sleep. She pulled out her iPod and decided to listen to the Carpenters, her workout cool-down music. The softness of the music might help her get the sleep she desperately needed.

When she started to doze, she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Peter. She pulled out an earplug.

"Hi, Lana, I was on my way to the bathroom when I noticed you were sitting alone. I didn't want to pass you by without speaking."

"Hi, Peter."

"Do you mind if I sit for a while?" he asked while trying to sit without an invitation.

She didn't bother to move her stuff out of the empty seat. "Peter, if you don't mind, I just want to be alone right now. But thanks for the chitchat earlier."

She could tell he wasn't happy; he reluctantly nodded and walked off with a scowl on his face. She guessed he had already gone to the bathroom.

There was a long line at Enterprise car rental. The attendant seemed frustrated when she surveyed at least twenty people waiting. Lana was aggravated to have nine people in front of her. Children were anxious and running around as their parents tried to corral them. An upset couple yelled at the attendant because their reserved car had been rented to someone else. The young lady offered an upgrade free of charge, but they wouldn't hear of it.

All she could think about was relaxing on the back porch and listening to the waves and wind. Some people think going on vacation to a

sunny place would be more cheerful, but not for her. Fall was her favorite season, so the north was the best alternative. Today was a dreary day, just the way she liked it. She didn't even mind some rain, as long as it didn't rain the entire vacation.

Knowing she would be in line for a while, she needed to call Mike Ramsey, the beach house owner. She dreaded the call because he always acted as though she annoyed him.

He picked up the phone on the third ring. "Hello," he answered in his husky voice.

"Hi, Mike, this is Lana. I wanted to let you know the plane was late because of bad weather, and there's a long line at Enterprise. How do you want me to pick up the keys?" She scrunched her face, dreading the answer. He never said anything to reassure her.

As expected, his answer was quick and to the point. "I'll meet you at the house. What time do you think you'll get there?"

Lana attempted to balance everything in her hands while trying to look at the time on her cell phone. "About two . . . maybe three . . . hours, do you want to hide the key for me?"

"No, I'll meet you at the house."

"Thanks. I . . .," she was interrupted.

"You're welcome. I'll see you then." He hung up.

Well, at least he said you're welcome—that's a good start.

When she finally got her little gas-saver Ford Focus, she continued her journey to Plymouth. She noticed the overcast sky had darkened, and all the leaves had fallen. The leaves conjured happy memories of childhood when she and James raked them in a pile and jumped in the middle. She had tried hard to get James to do the raking, so she could do the jumping, but he wouldn't hear of it. No matter how many scratches they got from the rough, dry leaves and twigs, they jumped repeatedly in the pile. When they were about ten, they piled the leaves almost as tall as the house and dived into them from the roof. It was a miracle they didn't break their necks.

Lana would have never found the beach house if it wasn't for GPS. It was a beautiful drive. The sunset glowed, leaving remnants of orange and

purple lingering in the sky. The ocean roared to her left, and she cracked the window so she could smell the salt in the air.

As she turned onto the cul-de-sac, she saw fire coming from the chimney. It *was* a wood-burning fireplace. As she drove closer to the house, she couldn't believe the breathtaking view. Talk about a Thomas Kincaid setting. The house sat at the end of a cul-de-sac and behind it was the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. The anvil clouds allowed the deep-setting sun to peek through just a little. Flickers of orange bounced over the waves as they capped, making the ocean look like a dream. Lights illuminated through the windows causing a faint glow. The hint of fog in the air made it look like Heaven, or at least how she imagined Heaven. Just the sweet look of the house made her feel content.

Next to the house sat an old, white 1982 Dodge pickup. She knew it was Mike's truck, and although she never met the man, she imagined he looked like a ship's captain—a gruff-looking man who was short, chubby, and grumpy. She imagined he had a long, white beard with a pipe. She knew he had a short temper with a get-to-the-point personality, and he'd be annoyed with her for being so late. Now that she saw his truck, she thought her initial description of him would be spot-on.

As she got out of the car she felt the crisp, salt air sting her face, and it felt good. The air was refreshing and for the first time in weeks, she felt at peace. However, that peace turned to nervousness when the front door opened, and Mike walked out to the front porch. She knew he would fuss at her but instead, she heard him say in his incredibly deep voice, 'Welcome to Massachusetts! I hope you had a good trip. I have started a warm fire for you.'

His kindness surprised her, and she thought that gesture was a change for the better. Lana graciously responded, not quite paying attention to him. She preferred looking at the amazing scenery. "Hi, Mike. At first, I was going to say *again* how sorry I am that I'm late, but now I'm not. A few minutes later or earlier, I might have missed all this beauty. What a beautiful home you have, especially at sunset. This is far more awesome than I ever expected. I did time this perfectly I must say."

She finally looked up and took a good look at him. She was shocked by his height; he was every bit of six-foot-four with salt and pepper hair, mostly pepper, piercing sky-blue eyes, and a smile that would brighten any gloomy day. He was in excellent shape with no chubby tummy on

him. His five-o'clock shadow showed he'd had a long day. He wore jeans and a blue oxford button-up shirt with a black jacket. The shirt certainly brought out his blue eyes, even at dusk. She noticed his crisp, white T-shirt under his oxford and thought it looked refreshing.

His rugged good looks caught her off-guard, and she was at a loss for words. She fumbled with her keys and finally found the one for the trunk. Awkwardly, she managed to walk to the back to get her two bags. In just a few quick steps, he moved in close behind her, reaching for the suitcases. His strong arm brushed hers and just for a few seconds, their eyes met. Lana turned away knowing her face turned bright red. She happily noticed his did as well. He easily managed the heavy bags; it was like lifting a feather. She remembered how she struggled to put them in the trunk.

"Let me get those for you. As little as you are, I'm surprised you could lift them at all."

"I managed, and thank you for helping."

She scampered in the house and noticed how warm and inviting it was. At the front door was a small entrance with the living room straight ahead, and it had a glowing fireplace to the right. On the left was the elegant kitchen with an island that had a bar. Next to the bar sat a small but quaint dinette set. Off that room was the guest bedroom. To the right of the den was the master bedroom.

She loved the kitchen. The cabinets were made of old driftwood. All the appliances were stainless. This gorgeous kitchen would be one only seen in magazines, definitely a kitchen she could picture Mike building . . . or at least the captain she first visualized.

He had placed some Bella Casara cheese and crackers on the bar, along with a bottle of Pinot Noir wine.

He interrupted her thoughts. "I knew you probably didn't have time to shop, so I bought a few things to get you through tomorrow. The wine is for you to enjoy this evening and relax."

She glanced up at him to thank him, and his eyes stared squarely into hers before she embarrassingly looked down and said, "Thank you." Her face flushed, and her stomach flip-flopped as he walked past her. She thought he mumbled the words you're welcome.

When he reached the door, he told her where he hung the keys put his phone numbers. This time when she looked up, he didn't pay her any mind. Then he left without a proper good-bye, but she was too tired to

care.

As she stepped onto the back porch, the darkness didn't allow her to catch a glimpse of the ocean, but she could hear it. The waves rolled in with a deafening roar. She closed her eyes and pictured them slamming the beach then disappearing into oblivion. She remembered as a child lying in bed and listening to the ocean talk to her. She hoped that same feeling relaxed her tonight. It was funny how she distinctly remembered the sound even though it was decades ago.

When she opened her eyes, her memory fast-forwarded to today and the reason she was here—to mourn. Then, an overwhelming sorrow plagued her heart, and her eyes filled with tears. Lana wiped them away and told herself no more tears today. Instead, she got busy checking out the fridge. She found some smoked turkey breast and fixed a sandwich with a glass of milk. She looked at the bottle of wine and decided to save it for the last night. Once the kitchen was clean, she sat in front of the fire and watched the flames. The fire relaxed her soul, leaving her with a much-needed feeling of contentment.

Exhaustion had overridden her sadness—a blessed alternative. She lay on the couch, and a smile crossed her face as she thought about how Mike didn't fuss at her. Then darkness fell.

~Chapter 6~

Day 2

Lana woke up to rain lightly falling, making a pitter-patter sound. It sounded like a symphony orchestra softly playing Beethoven's *Fur Elise*. As much as she enjoyed her personal concert, she had to get moving. She stretched and realized how cold it was in the house. She wrapped a brown patchwork quilt around her shoulders and hunted for the thermostat. The fire had died out, but a few small embers glowed beneath the ash. She stirred them, trying to coax them back to life before adding more logs.

She rummaged through the cabinet and found Folgers. Mike did a good job supplying her with her desperately needed morning java. Milk tasted good in the coffee, but she would have to remember to get some French vanilla cream. The fridge did have some raspberry pastries, so she nuked one. She snuggled in the quilt and watched the news.

The weather report stated the bone-chilling cold was predicted to stay

around for a couple more days; then the temperature might drop another twenty degrees when the cold front came down from Canada. That was a sign to get stocked up on groceries.

Thirty minutes had passed since she turned up the heat, and the temperature in the house still lingered at forty-eight degrees. She rechecked the thermostat and the lever pointed to heat. Maybe the pilot light had blown out, or at least that's what she hoped because that was a minor fix. She quickly took a hot shower and got ready to go shopping and grab some lunch, but first she needed to call Mike and let him know about the heater.

Sam's Grocery looked like a little mom-and-pop place. The parking lot had only twenty parking slots. On the far-right side, close to the parking lot were two gas pumps. As she pulled in, she looked over at them and noticed the top of one of the pumps said Ethel. It was barely legible because of all the muck in the glass window. *You just don't see an old-time pump like that anymore.* She giggled to herself while wondering how much those old pumps would sell on EBay. Two men stood outside the door fussing about something, and they waved to her when she drove into the parking slot. As she walked past the men, she said, "Hi." They nodded their heads but didn't say a word. People up north were not friendly at all.

As she walked into the grocery, a clerk was sweeping up a bag of sugar that had burst on the floor. An overweight lady who sat at the cash register gave her opinion on how to clean it, but didn't offer any assistance. Maybe she did help a little—she pointed to the dustpan.

Lana noticed there wasn't much of a food selection. She grabbed a few canned goods and some lunchmeat at the deli. The fresh vegetables were sparse, so she chose only a few which passed a visual inspection. Later, she would go to a bigger grocery store to grab some more wholesome-looking veggies. They did have a meat department with fresh meat, so she bought some steak, bacon, and chicken. The steak would be for the last night. She made sure she had enough steak for Mike—just to say thank you. She also grabbed two large potatoes for baking.

The drive home was as beautiful as the drive last night. She took her time and enjoyed the scenery. The morning fog had lifted, and she could

see the ocean better. The view looked amazing, and she could see for miles in all directions. There's an endless view of lighthouses on their own little peninsulas. In the distance, there were all sorts of ships, yachts, and sailboats. To her surprise and delight, she saw the sailboat *Maltese Falcon*. What a treat—she couldn't believe her luck. For years, she had seen pictures of this beauty, and now she had the privilege of seeing it in person. She giggled and decided she now liked the beach.

She turned on Shadow Lane. All four of the houses on the cul-de-sac were on the beach side, facing the woods. Mike's house sat at the end facing the road. The houses were cookie-cutter homes with small front porches and large back porches to view the beautiful ocean. Gray seemed to be the popular exterior color, and all of them were trimmed in white. None of the houses had garages, but they all had designated gravel parking slots. Each driveway had enough space for two vehicles.

Azalea bushes were the only greenery that surrounded the houses other than some dune grass splattered around the sand. Lana didn't mind the lack of grass because beaches shouldn't look like the suburbs.

Driving into her designated slot, she noticed the old truck and wondered how long he had been working. She hoped not long. She hooked all the plastic bags on her arms and toted them into the house expecting to see him. To her surprise, he didn't greet her at the door. After hearing a few loud noises, she realized he was in the attic busy working on the furnace.

She noticed the fire had caught hold, so she tossed in a couple of logs. Once the room warmed up, she took off her jacket to tackle the salad. But first, she took a swig of chamomile tea. She had bought several kinds, but that was the best. She loved to try many different kinds of tea. Most people love wine tasting, but Lana preferred tea. Sometimes, she mixed her own concoctions: lemon rind, honey, milk, and fresh or frozen fruit. 'Consummating the flavors' is what she called it.

The attic pull-down stairs squeaked as Mike stomped down them, mumbling and cussing about the heater under his breath. He walked in with a dirty face and grungy hands, carrying a section of round, metal tube.

With one eyebrow cocked, he said, "It's the starter to the furnace, and I'll have to replace it." He glanced over, noticed the fire and commented on it. "Wow, you started a fire; not too many women can do that—I'm

impressed." He wanted to start a conversation with her, and the fire was the first thought which popped into his mind.

"Well . . . I'm not a typical woman, and I guess I've been single for so long I only have myself to depend on," she answered without glancing into his eyes. She didn't know what it was about his baby-blues, but it sure was difficult to look into them. She took a deep breath and added, "Besides, if you get cold enough you can get a rip-roaring fire started—its called survival." Wow, she just couldn't get over how pretty his eyes were, and he even had dimples when he smiled. Her stomach fluttered, and her heart skipped beats under his constant gaze. It's a good thing she didn't make a living predicting what people looked like. In Mike's case, she would have gone hungry. He looked opposite of her initial description.

Taking his time, he gathered up the part and headed for the door. Under normal circumstances, he would find an excuse to stay or start a conversation, but his mind went blank. He couldn't talk to her about the part, but she might be bored. Maybe he could talk to her about her trip, but that seemed desperate. He could revert to college days and ask her about her sign. He laughed to himself about how stupid that was back then, and it's still stupid. Then his eureka moment happened. He would ask her to lunch—that's what he'd ask her. He stopped dead in his tracks.

With her mind still dwelling on his baby blues, she was trying to decide if she should invite him to lunch.

Boom! She ran smack into his back and tumbled to the ground. When she slammed into him, she felt as though she had run into a brick wall.

He quickly turned around and grabbed for her and almost slipped and fell himself.

They both laughed hysterically, and then he lent a hand to help her stand. "Are you all right?"

"I only have a bruised ego and maybe a bruised bottom. I didn't expect you to stop so quickly," she said as she rubbed her butt. Their laugh broke the ice. She noticed he held her hand just a few seconds longer than he had to, and she let him.

"It's lunch time, and since I knocked you down, the least I can do is buy you lunch. That is if you want to come with me. Do you . . . want to come with me?"

She could tell he hoped she would join him. He acted like a schoolboy asking the cute girl to the homecoming, shuffling his feet and waiting for

an answer. He looked tall standing there, anticipating a response. She wondered if she should make him wait for an answer—watch him squirm. "I have a better idea; I have everything for a chef salad. How about you join me?"

"I would love to, but only if one day this week you allow me to drive you around and show you our historic town," he said without thinking about it. He was anxious to get to know this woman. In the back of his mind, all he could think about was how soft her hand felt.

"Sure." She guessed they had a date. For the past six years, since her divorce, she had decided not to date, or at least not much. Her friends had introduced her to a few men, but they had never connected emotionally. Because of her horrible marriage, she didn't want to get seriously involved with anyone. Right now, she was happy with her life. She had a terrific family, children, friends, and work. James always wanted her to meet someone worthy of her love. He joked around with her and told her that whomever she dated had to pass his approval. She wondered if he would like Mike. Somehow, she knew he would. Yep, she relished the idea of spending the day with this handsome man.

She got the vegetables and spread them on the bar. "Tell me what kind of veggies you want or don't want in the salad."

He looked them over and began to separate them. He placed the lettuce to the right, cheese to the right, salad peppers to the right, smoked turkey to the right, onions to the left, mushrooms to the right, and finally bacon bits to the right. "I want everything to the right in the salad and everything else, nil."

"You don't like onions?" She loved onions.

"I love them, but you never know—I might have to kiss someone today."

Panic ran through her body. *Was he hinting he had a girlfriend?*

"Okay, no onions!"

Surprisingly, Mike helped in the kitchen, and that impressed her. He got out the dishes and set the table then put the few dishes away that were in the dishwasher. He noticed there were no paper towels, so he ran out to his truck and brought a in a roll and put on the rack.

When they sat down to eat, she tried to make small talk. "How long have you owned this beach house? I would be here every single day."

He stopped eating and looked around the house, reminiscing. "My

wife and I lived here for years, but she passed away several years ago. I couldn't stay here without her, but I couldn't sell the house, either. So . . . I decided to put it on the market to rent, and let others enjoy it. Anyway, to answer your question, I've owned this house over twenty years." It had been a long time since he had mentioned his wife.

She could tell he had deeply loved her. Later, she would ask him about the details—when they felt more comfortable with each other. She didn't want to tell him about her own sorrowful dilemmas because it was too soon to talk about intimate feelings of grief. Besides, she didn't want to sound like a miserable person.

After an hour of talking, she finally stood up and so did Mike. He picked up his plate and stacked hers on top while she got the two glasses and the walnut raspberry salad dressing. He helped clean the kitchen, and she thought that maybe he was trying to find an excuse to stay. All she could think about was how much her heart raced every time he walked past her. She wondered if he felt the same way; she desperately hoped he did.

With everything cleaned and the small talk over, Mike put on his coat to go to town. He politely asked her again, "Do you want to change your mind about heading to town with me?"

"I have been here almost twenty-four hours, and I still haven't run my toes through the sand."

He laughed and nodded his head in agreement.

She walked him to the door and noticed she didn't even reach the top of his shoulders. Not only was he tall, but his shoulders were broad—close to three feet wide. She found herself wanting to touch him but refrained. She noticed he lingered, and she hoped he didn't want to leave. *Mike, if you turn around and take me in your arms and kiss me, I will go to town with you.*

He winked at her and walked out the door. "I'll see you in a little while."

"If I'm not in the house, I'll be on the beach."

"Enjoy."

She smiled and took a deep breath as she watched him drive away.

Excitement filled her heart as she stood next to the fire to get warm. She tried to get the adrenaline pumping to help with the cold. An exhilarating walk on the beach excited her so much she couldn't stand still. She grabbed an old Indian-designed blanket to fight against the bitter cold. Earlier in the day, she had noticed a striped lounge chair on the beach and decided it would be perfect for her to sit and enjoy the view. She fixed a mug of hot raspberry tea, added some honey, grabbed her cozy blanket, and then walked the short distance.

The sky looked overcast, but the deep-blue ocean was a lovely sight. The fierceness of the winds seemed to ask the water questions, and the waves answered with rambunctiousness as they rolled in and smacked the beach with full force. Then the salt water rolled out leaving lines of white foam reaching for her toes. She just stood there in awe. Then she wondered how many people stood in this very spot over the last three hundred years looking at the same scene.

All around were piles of small sand dunes, some still had a few discolored weeds sticking out. She noticed old driftwood lying around the beach, far from the shoreline. Some boards were pointed, and some were gray, but all of them were aged with many holes. She imagined it was wood from ships, which were lost at sea, and at one time those ships carried treasures. The wood wanted to be found, to tell its story.

In the far distance, one could see the hungry sea gulls sweep down to the beach to grab their fish dinner. It was easy pickings for the gulls since most of their competition had flown south for the winter. The fish must have been swept in by the roiling waters. That's Mother Nature's way of offering a meal to the birds, survival of the fittest at work.

Her imagination led her to visualize families sitting under beach umbrellas as they watched their children building sandcastles, throwing Frisbees, and playing ball. Young couples took long, strolling walks along the beach and snatched a kiss every so often. She pondered the many people who had viewed the ocean for the first time in their lives, absorbing the feeling of euphoria as they looked at the vastness of the Atlantic. She took a deep breath just as if they might have, remembering this incredible sight, storing it to memory.

She cleaned off the chair and made herself at home then took a sip of her now-warm tea. She watched the old lighthouse turning its light, just like turning the pages in a book. This was one story she would have loved

to read.

The Gurnet lighthouse was built over two hundred years ago. She wondered if it's the oldest lighthouse in Plymouth. The Coast Guard currently ran most lighthouses, but years ago they hired caretakers. She wondered how many caretakers this lighthouse had seen, how many ships of immigrants it had guided, how many families got excited when they saw the light knowing they would have a new start in America.

She thought this was the life, sitting and listening to the waves, watching the gulls, and looking at the lighthouse. This trip certainly brought her heart happiness. Meeting this great-looking man just added pleasure to her soul. She never thought that in a million years she would have met such a terrific guy on vacation. That only happened in the movies, and she liked being in this movie.

After several weeks of dwelling on her sorrows, she now found comfort in her surroundings. It was astonishing how a death could change your feeling of well-being. She had felt somewhat scattered and sad the past several weeks, but today was the first day she hadn't felt that sadness overtaking her life. It wasn't the focal point anymore. When family told her she needed a change of scenery to mend a broken heart, they were right. A smile crossed her face as she snuggled in the blanket and drifted off to sleep.

~Chapter 7~

Boom . . . swish . . . splash . . . gurgle; the deafening sounds woke her. She raised straight up from the chair, startled. The cold shocked her, a beautiful and content type of cold. It was a good feeling, like going to a football game in freezing weather, with your face cold and numb, but you don't care because the home team has won the game. Fans are so excited about the win, they forget about the weather. They don't even care about their runny nose.

Lana took one final deep breath before heading to the house. Glancing back, she wanted one last look at the most incredible sight—the Atlantic Ocean.

As she shut the back door, she could hear Mike working on the furnace. Wood had been added to the fire, and she thought that was a thoughtful gesture. She could hear him putting tools in the toolbox and

wondered if he had finished. In the kitchen, she put the kettle on and searched for food, preferably something warm and hearty. Grilled cheese and chicken noodle soup sounded like the best alternative.

Mike walked in the room just as she poured herself a cup of tea. He pulled a paper towel off the rack and wiped the oily grunge from his hands. Then he washed them, using lots of soap and scrubbing them under the hot water. "I have good news and bad news; which do you want to hear first?"

While frowning, she said, "Neither."

He laughed and told her anyway. "This part is not stocked, and it won't be in until tomorrow or maybe the next day. They had a part which I thought might fit, but it didn't work."

"What's the good news?" She held up a mug to ask if he would like some tea, and he nodded.

"There is plenty of wood in the bin."

"I'm supposed to get up in the middle of the night and add wood to the fire?" She noticed he didn't look at her face as she walked by him. He stared at her tight sweater.

He cocked his left eyebrow and answered, "I'll bring some wood in and sit it near the fireplace. All you have to do is throw it on the rack." He went through the motions as if he was throwing wood in the fireplace, but the movement looked as though he was shoveling coal. With his boyish grin, he added, "I'll come put it on for you if you want me to."

Surely, he wasn't serious, but she rather hoped he was. *Please stay and hold me all night and keep me warm.* In her heart, she wanted him to stay and talk, but she also needed to listen to her brain. How should she word this? "You are more than welcome to stay for supper; I plan to make grilled cheese and soup. What I'm trying to say is . . . I don't want you to think you are obligated to stay and put wood on the fire; I was teasing you about that. I don't mind keeping the fire going throughout the night." Why is it that every time she opened her mouth, a foot was inserted?

He didn't answer right away, and she could tell he was in deep thought. Maybe he didn't like soup or grilled cheese, or maybe she had overstepped her boundaries.

After thirty long seconds, he finally spoke. "I feel guilty that you fixed lunch, and now you're offering me supper. I know you wanted to get away to be alone."

Maybe he didn't want to stay, and he didn't know how to tell her. Panic knotted her throat, and her body stiffened. Rarely did she make such offers, especially to a man she hardly knew. When she glanced up to meet his eyes, he looked as though he was trying to find the right words. She decided if he wanted to stay, she had offered. If he didn't want to stay, he could move on . . . um . . . no big deal.

He turned away from her and picked up his tools.

Suddenly, she felt vulnerable and foolish. She fought the tears and turned away from him but her weak legs wouldn't allow her to move, and she grabbed hold of the edge of the countertop. She was hurt and mad at herself because she totally misjudged him.

He walked out the door.

She felt bewildered and embarrassed.

Within a few seconds, he walked back in and went over to the TV cabinet to grab the Scrabble game. He then spun on his heels and said, "I'll stay if you play a game of Scrabble with me, or maybe two or three. But I forewarn you, I am *the best* in New England."

Sudden relief inundated her, and she reciprocated his enthusiasm by throwing her hands on her hips and said, "Well, *I'm the best* in South, so this could be a long and challenging game."

A beautiful, bright smile crossed his face as he set up the game.

She went to the kitchen to start supper. Within a few minutes, he joined her and started to help as they chattered up a storm. In a million years, she never would have dreamed she could talk so freely about everything and nothing with a virtual stranger.

They took their time as they cleaned the kitchen and Lana enjoyed every minute. While she did the dishes, he walked past her every chance he got. There wasn't much room between the bar and sink, and she noticed he took the long way around to the refrigerator. He did this so he would have to squeeze by her. She also noticed he put everything away—one item at a time.

Finally, Mike laid down the kitchen towel, put his arm around her waist, and asked, "Are you ready to lose?"

"You sound confident," she coyly answered. But her heart fluttered, and her mind dwelled on how inviting his arm felt around her waist. Every touch sent shivers through her body and with each passing minute, it seemed to intensify. If he stayed very long this evening, she didn't know

how her heart would survive.

After he had finished putting a few more logs on the fire, he sat on the couch. She sat on the floor across from him, near the fire. The Scrabble game was in the middle on the coffee table. They drew their tile letters. "Ladies first," he said with a grin. He looked squarely into her eyes, and that showed he radiated confidence.

She panicked. "No, I insist you go first." She didn't have the best letters, if the truth be told, she hoped she could play on his word. Plus, she needed more time to think.

"If you insist," he answered with one eyebrow cocked. Without delay, he played the word *nastier* vertically on the board. She couldn't believe it. The first word and he played all seven tiles.

Her stress level shot out the roof. She already could tell this game was going to be the most challenging Scrabble game she had ever played. No one ever used all seven letters the first play. She looked at her tiles, and she arranged them, then rearranged them, and then came her eureka moment. She played the word *diamond* off the 'T' in *nastier*. She looked over at him and he stared right at her, grinning. "Take that, Mr. Ramsey."

He wasn't going to be outdone! He pulled another word from his hat. Off the 'r' in the word *nastier*, he played *report*.

They toggled back and forth for hours, and he was right: he was good. During the ardent games, she noticed him glance her way several times. When she caught him looking at her, she blushed. She thought she turned red more in the past two days than she had the past twenty years.

"What's the score?" Mike asked after the third game. He hoped she wanted to play another round. He wanted to stay, no doubt about that. He wanted to watch this enticing and beautiful woman. Every time she looked at him, his heart turned cartwheels. He didn't play as well as he normally played; she distracted him.

"I'm winning. Do you honestly want me to tell you the score and make you feel embarrassed?" She held the paper with the score behind her back.

"Do you truly want to go that direction?" That move made him happy. It was an excuse to get close to her, to wrap his arms around her.

"Go where?"

Mike walked over to her, and it was not a challenge for his long monkey arms to reach behind her. He didn't even have to stretch to get the

paper. He looked at the paper and raised his left eyebrow. "There is not one word written down."

Her eyes danced with excitement as she teased him. "I forgot?"

He laughed hysterically. "You nut."

Taking a deep breath, she wrapped a lightweight afghan around her shoulders and stood near the fire. She needed a warmer blanket, but she didn't want to leave, to lose the moment.

The wind howled letting them know it would be a cold night, and it sounded creepy, but it didn't bother Mike. He went outside, brought in a bunch of wood, and laid it on the fireplace hearth. "Do you think this is enough wood? I have some at the side of the house I'm going to bring to the bin. I don't want you to have to go outside during the night."

"I think that's more than enough."

He walked over and stood in front of the fire next to her. Electricity was evident between them, but neither said a word. She wondered what was on his mind. They shyly glanced at each other like two elementary schools kids with crushes, not knowing what to say.

He walked behind her and deliberately rubbed her arms rapidly as though to warm her. His strong hands rubbed a little too hard, but she didn't say anything. She didn't want him to let go.

Without seeing her face, he asked, "Do you . . ." he paused and swallowed. ". . . think this is enough wood for the night?" He chickened out asking, *do you want me to stay?*

She whispered with a cracked voice. "I slept on the couch last night and I slept just fine, so I'll be all right tonight."

"Yes, but tonight will be much colder." God, he didn't want to leave her; he wanted to take her in his arms and keep her warm.

She could feel his breath on her hair and she closed her eyes, picturing him behind her. It was as though his emotions transferred from his heart to hers through his fingertips. She licked her lips because they seemed dry all of a sudden. She knew he could feel her shaking, or maybe it was him. Should she lean back onto his chest? Oh, God, she wanted to; she wanted to melt into him.

Finally, he let go but then stood in the same spot for a few more seconds. He took a deep breath then walked outside and brought in more wood, piling it high on the hearth.

The pile was so high, she knew she had to be careful taking wood off

or it might fall on her foot. She walked over and gave him a hug as a goodwill gesture, to thank him for being thoughtful. He held her for a few seconds, but it wasn't long enough. Every ounce of her body seemed to melt.

He backed up and longingly looked down at her. "I hate to leave you without a heater," he whispered.

Maybe he was trying to find an excuse not to leave at all. She broke their stare by saying the most stupid remark. "Our ancestors managed just fine without a furnace, and I don't think one night without a heater will kill me."

He gently took hold of her shoulders and looked down into her green eyes. "If you get cold or you think you need me, you have to promise to call." Never did he look away from her gaze, wanting an answer from her. He hoped the answer might be an invitation to stay.

Nervousness prevented her from giving him an honest answer *I want you to stay*. She couldn't deny the spark of chemistry between them. Surely he felt the same way, or he wouldn't be so concerned about a total stranger. Maybe he just felt obligated to take care of her. She tried to be light-hearted about it. "Now, Mike, you are the only person I know here, so you know I would call you."

"In that case I'll head on home. I brought in a lot of firewood, so you should have enough until morning." He picked up his coat and took his time walking to the door. "I'll be back in the morning with breakfast, but not before eight. Is eight okay with you?"

"Absolutely, and I will take you up on breakfast." After all this bantering, he still didn't stay, nor did she get a kiss.

He gave her a long hug and then left.

She stood in front of the fire and sort of laughed at herself. She came to Plymouth to heal and at that very moment, she was sad. Not sad because her cousin died, but because she realized she had met the love of her life, and he just walked out the door.

It was late and she was tired, and she would have to pull a Scarlett O'Hara: *I'll just have to worry about that tomorrow*. Oh, James, she wished he were here so she could call him; he always talked sense to her. She knew he looked down from Heaven, laughing at her and wishing her the best.

Mike coaxed his Dodge to start. He knew how cold natured she was, so he let her sit for a few minutes to cough out the cold. She sputtered just a little; soon, she would be ready to take the familiar journey to Boston. As *Ole Bessie*, as he called his Dodge, choked, so did his heart. What just happened in there? Even with the cold outside, he didn't feel it; his heart raced with excitement. Just the thought of Lana made him happier than he had been for years. That green-eyed blonde captured his heart, and there wasn't anything he could do about it—nor did he want to.

Yesterday, the moment he saw her—that was it! He knew this voluptuous blonde was the woman for him. He knew the second she got out of the car. The blonde hair is what he noticed first. Then he noticed her size: short and tiny. She almost looked like a child standing there, obviously energetic and bubbly. Once she came in the house and took off her coat, he noticed her large chest and tiny waist. It was obvious at this point she was not a little girl, but a desirable woman. Her blonde, straight hair flowed down her back, and she had a pointed nose and small square jaw line. He towered over her, so he knew she couldn't be more than five-foot-four. Her tight sweater showed every curve including her round butt. But what he noticed the most were those beautiful green eyes. He thought back and couldn't remember ever dating a girl with green eyes.

He knew in his heart that he would pursue this gal. Lana was the first person since his wife, Kathy, who made him feel virile. He liked that feeling. Since his wife, he didn't want to find anyone. He took a deep breath when he thought about having sex with the beauty. It would be more than sex. There would be caring and love. The better term would be *making love*. Yes, he knew it would be significant and loving. Making love to her would not be emotionless as it had been with other women. It would be better, much better. The rest of the drive to Boston his heart ached for her.

When you're smitten nothing else matters, and that's the way it should be. He was majorly smitten!

~Chapter 8~

A bumping noise woke Lana from a restful sleep. She crawled out of bed,

thinking the noise came from the back porch. It was windy, but she didn't think it was windy enough to cause such a racket. It sounded like someone practicing in a batting cage.

Without pulling the drapes back, she stood near the back door and listened but heard nothing. She walked through the house and peeked out the windows and doors—nothing.

About that time, her cell phone rang, and it made her nearly jump out of her skin. She glanced at her phone, wanting to know who could be calling this early in the morning. When she looked, she realized it was only the alarm. She laughed and thought, *I need to stop acting like such a scaredy-cat all the time*. But she did peek out the curtain one last time. The only odd thing she noticed was a piece of wood lying on the ground near the back door. It had fallen about five feet from the bin. She decided Mike had set it there to bring in, had forgotten about it, and the wind had knocked it over.

Standing there bewildered and trying to decide if she wanted some tea, suddenly there was a tap on the front door. Her heart skipped beats thinking Mike had come back for some reason. Although she didn't hear the usual sound of the truck driving on the gravel, she hoped. She ran to the front of the house and peeked out the window—nothing. Again, she looked out all the windows, and nobody was there. She decided she had lost her mind. Before crawling back into bed, she threw a few logs onto the fire. She watched the fire for a while and dozed off thinking, *I don't remember setting my alarm for four-forty*.

~Chapter 9~

Day 3

Today began as one of the most incredible days of her life, and she wanted to look the part. After scanning the closet, however, she realized the clothes she brought were not suitable for dating. Now she could kick herself for not bringing a better wardrobe. A shopping trip was in order, but for now, the red top would have to do.

The clock said seven-fifty and Lana felt like a schoolgirl as she heard his truck driving down the gravel road. When he knocked, she ran to the door, unable to control her enthusiasm. As she opened the door, nervousness overtook her body, but one glance at him and all the anxiety

vanished.

My God, he looks good. He had on tan cargo pants that showed off his thick, muscular legs, and he wore a navy-blue sweater with long johns under it. The sweater was tight on his arms, showing off the outline of his triceps and biceps through both layers of shirts. The cutest part of him was the furry camouflage hat he wore, thoroughly covering his head and ears. He was certainly dressed for cold weather--or in his case, a cold attic.

My God, she looks good. He noticed how cute she was with only a little makeup; she didn't need much. What little light came through the front door made her eyes look a brighter green, and they melted his heart. Her curves made him take a deep breath. In all honesty, he hadn't dated too many women with large chests, but she made up for his loss.

"The coffee is brewed . . . what did you bring me?"

"Hold on to your britches; it's a surprise." he teasingly answered while taking off his hat. His hair stood on end from static electricity. He pushed it down and couldn't have cared less how his hair looked.

She laughed and knew immediately nothing had changed from last night. She also knew last night's *caught in the moment* just changed to *caught in a lifetime*.

He handed her both bags, and she set them on the bar. She closed her eyes with anticipation when she saw the pastries, and they smelled scrumptious. She immediately opened the brown and found a metal tube. Sadness filled her heart because she knew he might be finished with the furnace in a few short hours. But those emotions would not be addressed today. Instead, she decided to tease him a little. "Talk about iron in your diet." They both laughed. "I see you got the part." Admittedly, she was disappointed.

"Yesterday, Hardin Hardware went to Boston and picked it up for me. You should have heat in a few hours."

She rummaged through the cabinets for paper plates, but there were none. Oh, well, she guessed she would have to do the dishes. She dug out plates, mugs, and French vanilla creamer.

He walked outside to his truck to get his toolbox. She intently watched him through the kitchen window. While organizing his tools, he whistled loudly. Although all the doors and windows were closed, she

could hear the tune: Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison Blues*.

Since she loved Johnny Cash, she couldn't resist giving him a hard time. When she opened the front door, he stopped whistling long enough to look up. "Where did you learn to whistle that song?"

"In prison," he answered without blinking an eye. As she shut the door, he winked and smiled that gorgeous smile.

She took a deep breath.

The door slammed as he walked in the kitchen, his nose red from the cold. She reached for a mug and asked, "How do you like your coffee, jailbird?"

Stopping in his tracks, he scanned the items on the counter, saw the creamer, and answered with a grin, "I am a true man; I like mine black. I don't use that sissy stuff."

Were her ears deceiving her? His personality didn't change a bit from last night, actually quite the contrary. "So . . . you're calling me a sissy?"

He walked over to pour his coffee and never looked at her. "If the shoe fits—in your case, if the tiny shoe fits."

Her eyes widened as she walked over to him and put her hands on her hips. "Remember, I own a Dodge truck, and you don't mess with girls who own a Dodge."

"Shall I pull up a chair so you can tell me that, eye to eye?" He looked into her eyes and his happy, feisty expression changed. Her piercing gaze turned his dancing eyes solemn, driving all the jolly from this soul. At that exact second, he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. Her eyes mesmerized him, made him want to hold her and never let go. *My God, I want to be with her so much, I hurt, and I hurt desperately.* He licked his lips, ready to kiss hers.

As he moved closer, she could see the veins in his neck throbbing. His eyes never left hers.

Just then, his cell phone rang.

She thought *that damn phone*.

He glanced down at his phone, and a look of seriousness crossed his face. "I'm sorry. I have to take this call." He walked outside for privacy.

Maybe he had a girlfriend, or a wife. For a moment, jealousy filled her heart. Quickly, she wiped that thought from her mind. She did peek outside, and his conversation appeared serious enough as he continued to stare at the ground while walking in circles. Every few seconds, she

peeked out the window. Patience was a virtue she usually took pride in practicing, but she had none this morning.

He stood outside at least ten minutes. As he opened the door, a car pulled up; Mike turned to the driver and raised one finger to let him know he needed a minute. Her heart sank when she knew he might be leaving.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" she asked him as he closed the door.

"I'll explain everything later. I'm going to leave my truck. I don't know when I'll be back, and it might not be today. You have my cell number if you need me. If I don't make it back, I'll send my brother Lance to fix the furnace. I'll give you a call later, but I just don't know when."

Wow, this was a shocker. "Don't worry about the furnace. I guess I'll see you later."

He reached down and kissed her on the forehead then left.

Not the kiss she had in mind, even though his lips were soft.

Did this have something to do with his work? Did this have something to do with his family? Whatever happened, Mike's demeanor totally changed after *that* phone call. This day was not starting as she had hoped.

≈Chapter 10≈

Lana dreaded the idea of going outside, but Mike said something about firewood on the side of the house. What was in the bin might get her through one day, but no longer than that.

As she stepped outside, the wind and cold chilled her to the bone. It blew strong and the sleet and sand stung her face, piercing her skin like broken glass. The only building on the side was a pump house, but it was locked. She decided to give up, bring in all the wood from the bin, and hope it would last until Mike came back.

Walking back to the front of the house, she felt an overwhelming eerie feeling come over her. It was an uneasy feeling of being watched. She looked over at the empty house next door. The small bushes next to the house scraped the side as the wind blew; it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. She quickened her step to the front of the house. As she rounded the corner, her peripheral vision caught sight of someone next door. Hairs stood up on the back of her neck when she saw a man, staring

right at her. She pulled her windblown hair aside to get a better look. Nobody was there. She disregarded the sight as the wind moving the clouds and causing a reflection off the window. She ran the rest of the way to the front door, constantly looking behind her.

She stood in front of the fire, trying to gather her bearings and calm down. The morning started out terrible and got worse, and this incident played havoc on her raw emotions. All that just added worry to what had already happened.

The morning seemed so ambiguous with the incident with Mike. She racked her brain trying to figure out what made him leave. Surely, he would have told her if there were a family emergency. Then an uneasy thought crossed her mind. Maybe he was a drug dealer. Oh, God, she hoped not. She wished she wouldn't have thought of that because now she'd worry about it all day long. If he were a dealer, he certainly would have people coming after him. She needed to give him a chance to explain.

While reading her book *The Count of Monte Cristo*, her cell phone rang. "Hello."

"Hi, stranger, how's your morning so far?" Mike asked.

"My morning has been relaxing, and yours?" Her heart started to beat fast. She turned the corner down in the book and sat it on the coffee table.

"Busy, and I wanted to tell you how sorry I am I ran out on you."

"That's okay; I could tell it was important." She wanted to know the reason, but she figured he would tell her in due time.

"We'll talk about it later tonight. How about I leave work early, and we go out to dinner?"

She could hear a door shut; she knew that was a sign he was in an office. Unless of course, they were making drugs in the warehouse, and he shut the door so she couldn't hear what was happening. She rolled her eyes at herself for being so ridiculous. She didn't bring the right clothes to go out to dinner with anyone, especially at a fancy place. "If you don't mind, why don't we have dinner here? That way, if you're running late you won't feel guilty standing me up. How does that sound?"

"You do have a point. I have a better idea. If I get done early, how

about I order a pizza and pick up some beer? There's a place called Franco's and they make a fantastic pizza."

"Beer and pizza sounds great."

"You are sweet. I *did* want to tell you I've been thinking about you today, and I enjoyed last night."

She could tell he seemed as breathless as she did. Although their conversation was over the phone, she could hear between the lines. "I've been looking at the fire and thinking about you, too. I also enjoyed yesterday. Do you miss me?" Her heart was caught up in the moment. Normally she didn't ask men that question—usually she didn't care.

"Yes, I miss you more than I ever thought possible, and what does the fire have to do with us?" Tonight, he intended to show her how much he missed her. He planned to kiss her. The thought of kissing her in front of the fire made him blush.

"That's what my grandmother always told me. She was Native American, and when her ancestors looked into the fire, the flicker of the flames told them about their future." She walked around the room cleaning, picking up the pillows, fluffing them before putting them back on the couch. She walked into the kitchen and emptied the dishwasher, then rearranged the toiletries in the bathroom as she continued to talk.

"What did the fire tell you about me?"

"That's an old Indian secret. I *could* tell you, but then it might not come true." She stood by the fire and stared at the flame, hoping some kind of prophecy from her ancestors would enlighten her.

"I certainly want every wish to come true. See what you do to me; you make me miss you even more. To be honest, I have done nothing but think about you today. You linger in my mind when I'm getting coffee, walking down the hall, or sitting at my desk. I have a ton of stuff to keep me busy here, but I'm having a hard time concentrating. I just wanted you to know I miss you, and I'm thinking of you," he whispered.

"Is someone with you?"

"No."

"Why are you whispering?"

"You're taking my breath away." Mike couldn't believe he said those words to this woman he hardly knew. He'd never said those words to any woman, but he didn't believe in playing games. He believed in spitting out whatever crossed his mind. "Thinking of you makes me breathless."

She wasn't quite ready to call him baby because that was her intimate word. It's a silly thing for her to think, but she had that special word she withheld until that special moment. Her word happened to be *baby*. She chose another word, a fitting word. "Sweetie, you are needed there, and that's hard for me to say because I'd love for you to be here. But your priority needs to be work. I'll be here when you get home. And don't forget, we have nine more days together." Two weeks ago, she never dreamed she would say those words to a man, much less someone she had just met.

He liked it when she said *home*, and he liked the nine days, but knew it would be longer if he had any say in the matter. He liked the way she said it; it sounded as though it was permanent. With her, he wanted it to be forever. "Well, I just want you to know I want to be with you right now," he said softly.

"I want to be with you, too," she whispered. She didn't want to hang up, and she could tell he didn't want to, either.

Because the conversation seemed to be getting heavy, he decided to lighten the mood. "So, what do you want to do this evening besides eat pizza?" he asked.

Make love to you, were the words she wanted to scream out, but she couldn't be that bold—at least not yet. But she was bold enough to say, "The only thing I want is for you to hold me."

After a long pause, she could hear Mike take a deep breath. "That, my sweet lady, I'd be more than glad to do. How about I hold you while we lie in front of the fire, and maybe the fire will tell us what's in our future."

It was her turn to take a deep breath. "I would like that very much, and I might even throw in a back rub." Truth be told, she wanted to see him without a shirt.

There was another pause with a deep breath. "It's a date. How could I turn down that offer?" He closed his eyes and imagined Lana touching his bare skin. His body quivered with the thought of her soft hands. It would drive him crazy, and he knew that without hesitation.

"You can't, and I think you deserve a back rub after a hard day's work." Actually, she wanted to give him more than a back rub.

She heard a knock on the door at Mike's end, and he covered the phone, but she still heard him answering something about times and dates.

"I'm sorry, babe; that was one of the guys. As much as I hate to end

our conversation, they need me in the other room."

"I understand. You hurry and do your job, and I'll be here when you get done."

"Okay . . ." he paused, and he wanted to say *I love you* but didn't. ". . . I'll call when I can."

"Bye."

"Bye."

She danced her happy dance in front of the fire. *Oh, my God, what just happened with that phone call? I met this guy two days ago, and I'm already calling him words of endearment.*

Then sudden nervousness enveloped Lana; she still didn't know what he did for a living.

When she set the teakettle on the stove, she stood at the kitchen window and looked down the road. The neighborhood looked desolate and eerie, and the woods looked barren. There were some visible houses in the distance, through the woods. A person could see for at least a half a mile since all the leaves had fallen.

She put her face over the cup with the tea bag as she poured the hot water in it. She loved the smell of tea when the hot water first hit it. Steam rose through the air as she raised and lowered the tea bag. She watched out the window while waiting. After a few minutes, something caught her eye in the distance. Through the woods way far off, she saw a red jacket moving at a house on another street. She guessed he was the owner hauling firewood to the back porch. She watched the red jacket move back and forth from the back yard to the front yard two or three times.

Who knows, maybe he wanted to wrap his water pipes. A cold front was expected, and he needed to prepare for it. Anyway, it wasn't any of her business, but she would mention it to Mike later. She glanced down at her tea; it looked strong enough. As she looked up, she jumped back when she saw the man intently staring her way. She knew he couldn't see her, but it startled her. *Lana, calm down; he sees smoke coming out of the chimney and the lights on.* After all, it was the neighborly thing to do to watch out for the neighbors. She took a deep breath and laughed at herself for getting so spooked all the time. She hadn't been here but a few days,

and she had been skittish a lot. This reaction was not like her, but she excused herself for being scared.

Bored and checking the clock every five minutes, she decided to watch the news or catch a movie. Swigging on her tea and watching TV, she wrapped in a blanket before pointing the remote toward the Sony and surfing the channels. She stopped when she got to a special report. *Today's update: Early this morning, a local U.S. Marshal in Boston, Marshal Frank Belamy was shot while serving a felony warrant. The spokesperson for the U.S. Marshal's office, Stacey Farmer, said the house and occupants had been under investigation for several months for drug trafficking. The shooter was captured and is in custody at this time. Frank Belamy is in critical condition at Massachusetts General; more details on the 5:00 news.*

How sad, I hope he's okay, she thought. She surfed through more channels and stopped on the movie, *Gone with the Wind*, on TNT. She couldn't resist one of her favorite oldies.

~Chapter 11~

It was ten-thirty, and Lana sat on the couch and watched TV with the volume on mute. The TV was the only light in the house. Some war movie was on, and the shot soldiers dragged themselves to safety. The movie didn't interest her. Her heart ached with disappointment. Sadness engulfed her because Mike didn't call her to let her know he wouldn't be coming. *You need to get over yourself—you came to the beach for some solitude, and now that you have it, you're sulking like a two-year-old.*

Sadness turned to excitement when she heard a car coming down the road. She didn't turn on a light as she peeked out the window. If it wasn't Mike, she wouldn't answer the door. If it happened to be him, he may want to go home; she anguished over that thought.

It was Mike, and she saw him get out of the SUV and talk a few seconds with the driver.

He looked so handsome all dressed up in black slacks with a white button-up shirt. His tie was loosened and the top button undone. The excitement that overwhelmed her was almost unbearable, and she wanted

to run out and hug him.

After he had made a goodbye gesture to the driver, she saw him look at the house. He walked to the truck and put a briefcase behind the front seat. Then he toggled his glances from the house back at the truck, and she knew he contemplated going home. He chose to get in his truck and leave. She was heartbroken—more than heartbroken. She ran back to the couch, crawled under the covers and wept.

She wallowed in self-pity when she thought she heard a slight tap on the door. Could she be mistaken? Was it her imagination like last night? She peeked through the window and could see the shadow of a man, then his truck. She opened the door and he stood in the doorway, tall and handsome. "Please, come in. How about a cup of tea?"

"That sounds good. I would like that very much." He leaned against the kitchen bar and crossed his arms.

Whenever Lana walked past him, he looked at her chest. The thin gown showed every outline of her curvaceous figure. Normally, a man staring encouraged her to change or get embarrassed, but not with Mike. She wanted him to see every curve, so she went about her business in the kitchen and didn't close her robe.

God, she's beautiful. Every curve was appealing and sensual. If anyone could take away his despair, it would be Lana. He wanted desperately to take her in his arms and hold her.

There was a definite lack of humor compared to that morning; it was obvious something bothered him. Not knowing how to handle the situation, she finished making the tea. She wanted to walk over to him, put her arms around him, and hold him. "Do you want to talk about it?" She took a sip of tea.

He took his first sip and nodded his approval. "I want to apologize for not making it in tonight for pizza. Something came up at work that needed my attention."

"Go on. That is if you want to tell me. My brain was thinking horrible thoughts this morning. I imagined you were a drug dealer. Isn't that ridiculous?" She blurted it aloud, and she couldn't believe she had just said those words.

He rolled his head back, laughing. "You *could* say I'm a drug dealer."

Her eyes widened with shock at his confession.

"I'm a federal agent with the U.S. Marshals, and I arrest drug dealers. So I guess you could call me a drug dealer." He saw the shocked look on her face, so he pulled her close and whispered, "Come here, squirt."

One hand covered her entire head as he pulled her to his chest. Every nerve in her body was tingling with anticipation. As she took a deep breath, she could smell his cologne, and it smelled good. She wanted to tell him, but she didn't want to lose the moment.

He continued. "Last night, a drug deal went bad, and one of my men got shot. He's in the hospital now. That's where I've been all day; going over everything that happened and writing police reports. We don't know if he's going to make it through the night."

"I heard about it on the news today, but of course I didn't know it had anything to do with you. I'm so sorry; what can I do to help?"

"Mmm . . . you're doing it now. Just being here with me is enough, and holding you is more than enough. I thought about you all day, and I couldn't wait to get here to talk to you. I almost went to Boston because I thought you might be asleep." *Her body feels so good in my arms.*

Tears welled up in Lana's eyes because that's exactly how she felt. *God, please don't let this moment end.* They held each other for several minutes, and he gently stroked her back through her robe. Then he slowly pulled away from her and put his hand under her chin, making her look at him. She trembled. This was a feeling she had never felt before and would never feel again, no matter how many men traveled through her life.

He kissed her gently.

His lips were soft, and she tasted his sweetness.

As he pulled away, a look of disappointment and confusion distorted her face, she didn't want him to stop. But to her surprise and delight, his strong arms picked her up and sat her on the bar. He then fully opened her robe and wrapped his massive arms around her small waist, pulling her close. Without closing his eyes, gazing at her, he gave her a long, gentle kiss that turned sensual. The only thing between his hands and her bare skin was a thin piece of silk. Every touch sent lightning through her body. If two people could become one because of love, it would be them; she felt it in every ounce of her being.

After several minutes of deep, wanting kisses, he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. She had no doubt what she wanted, and she

thought he wanted the same thing.

No words were said, but everything was spoken.

He laid her on the bed, then left. He came back with all the covers from the living room and piled them on the bed. Although it was dark, she could tell he was undressing. Within a few minutes, he crawled in bed and pulled her close.

Lying next to her beautiful body was unbearable, but he didn't want her to think sex was all he wanted. Although that thought was his top priority, he wanted their first time to be special. Tonight, he planned to snuggle, only snuggle. He pulled her close and whispered, "If it's okay, I want to hold you all night. I don't expect anything *yet*, but I want to be near you and reach over and touch you during the night. I need your closeness right now. If you want me to go I will, but I hope you don't want me to leave."

She caressed every inch of his rugged, unshaven face. "I would love for you to hold me all night and many nights. I'll be here as long as you need me. You can touch me all night as long as I can also snuggle and touch you." Every inch of his face felt beautiful, and the desire for him would not be a question any more. It seemed like a little piece of Heaven when he gently rubbed her back. "Baby, if you do that often you will have me forever."

"Then that's what I plan to do. Come here, squirt, and snuggle next to me. I promise that tomorrow we will have a long talk and many kisses. Good night, baby."

He seemed discernibly tired and emotionally drained. She snuggled in to get as close as she physically could. Within a few minutes, she could tell he was sound asleep by his shallow breathing. His breath barely crossed her skin, and the sweetness put a smile on her face.

Amazingly, she wasn't tired after all that had happened. She was more aroused than tired, and she knew that would not be an issue in the future. He would satisfy her. Her heart pounded with anticipation.

She held him close and whispered, "Goodnight, baby." She snuggled next to his hard body, thinking about him being a great kisser—no question about that. Neither was his job a question anymore.

Trying to sleep was an impossible task now because she felt intoxicated by this man. His muscular body and sweet breath lay only a few inches away. Her body wanted to wake him up to make love, but her

heart knew he needed rest. However, scientific evidence showed people sleep better after sex. Her mind and heart wrestled with waking him or not. The mind won. She acted out the next best alternative: snuggling.

~Chapter 12~

The phone rang, she thought. A phone ringing in the middle of the night couldn't be good news. She realized it was his cell phone. "Mike . . . phone," she said as she tried to wake him. She shook him, but he was dead to the world. "Please wake up; your phone is ringing."

He stirred and finally reached for his cell phone. "Hello . . . When? . . . I'm at the beach house . . . I can be ready in fifteen minutes . . . Yeah . . . You can pick me up in twenty minutes . . . No, I'll tell them . . . Bye." He hung up and just held his cell phone. He sat on the edge of the bed and didn't say a word. "As much as I would like to stay, I have to go," he said as he took a deep breath.

"I know, and I am so sorry this happened. I wish I could help in some way." Her heart hurt for him, because she knew what he needed to do and how hard it would be for him.

Without saying a word, he got up and took a shower.

She went to the kitchen to make coffee. Mike walked in just as it finished. As she reached for the mugs, he walked over and put his arms around her. They both needed that. She needed it for her loss of James, and he needed it for his lost agent. "I didn't want our first morning together to be like this. I hope you will forgive me, but I do have to go."

"There is nothing to forgive, and I certainly understand. We'll have other mornings. Here's some coffee. I couldn't find a travel mug."

"That's okay; I'll drink some until Colby gets here. Frank passed away a couple of hours ago, and our team is meeting at his house. I will have to spend some time in the office, and I don't know how long that will be." He hated to say anything to her. She didn't need to be burdened with his problems.

"I understand. I'll be here for as long as you need me."

About that time, his ride drove up. He held her for a few more seconds, and she gave him a hug to let him know she understood. He kissed her on the forehead, set down his mug on the bar, and out the door he went.

She stood at the window and watched him drive down the road and turn the corner.

~Chapter 13~

Day 4

Lana awoke from her nap to heavy sleet. She peeked outside and saw dark clouds ushering in the cold northerner.

When she glanced at the remaining wood, she knew she needed to order some more or call someone to fix the furnace. After making several calls, she found Johnson Tree Service who could deliver a half-cord that afternoon. She felt better knowing she would have enough wood for a couple of days, and that certainly lifted a burden off her shoulders.

Once she completed her morning rituals—showering, breakfast, makeup, and cleaning up the kitchen—she relaxed, snuggled in her favorite patchwork quilt and watched the news, hoping to find any information about the deceased agent. She flipped through several of the local channels and settled on CBS. The morning show called *Today's Headlines* seemed to have the best coverage. The news covered the snowfall, the sluggish economy, dishonest politicians, and a dog that gave birth to fourteen puppies. Not one word was mentioned about the shot deputy. It was sad that a dishonest politician captured news time, and the deceased federal agent wasn't even mentioned.

About the time she had given up surfing the channels, NBC interrupted the program with a special report. She turned up the volume so she could hear every word. Mike stood on the steps of a courthouse with several microphones stuck in his face saying, "Today, tragically, we lost a comrade, Deputy Frank Bellamy, who lost the battle for his life after being shot in the line of duty. He's from Denver, Colorado, and he'll be laid to rest there." She noticed how he emphasized the word *deputy*. He wanted the reporters to remember him as an officer of the law.

A female reporter asked, "It's been reported he was shot serving a felony warrant. Is this true?" The reporters shoved each other as they tried to stick their microphones in Mike's face.

"Yes." He looked straight ahead and didn't focus on any one reporter. He looked solemn and in command.

A male reporter asked, "Can you elaborate on that, Deputy Ramsey?"

"He went in as the point man, and he was struck in the head by a bullet." Through the years, he knew the more he said, the more the media could twist his words. All the deputies knew not to say a word at all, even if the media asked them specific questions. That was not a policy of the marshals, only Mike's rule. He didn't want to clean up anything misconstrued by what his men said.

The second reporter asked another question. "What caliber was the bullet, and did he wear protective head gear?" he asked the question as though the agents were idiots and Mr. Ramsey would say, *No, we did not have on protective headgear or armored suits. We went in wearing tutus.* Without a doubt to anyone watching, that question annoyed everyone. Eyes were rolling.

Mike raised his left eyebrow, and Lana thought *uh-oh*. "Yes, we had on protective gear, and I will not disclose the caliber of the bullet." He sounded annoyed.

The first female reporter added to the question. "Did you arrest the shooter?" His eyes softened as he looked at her. Lana noticed he liked that question.

"Yes, a suspect has been arrested and charged with capital murder. The rest is up to the prosecutor."

The second male reporter rudely asked another question; he didn't seem to have any couth. "So, you're throwing your hands up at the rest of the investigation, and you're finished with the case? This suspect isn't going to get a fair investigation because he killed one of your men?"

Mike's lips tightened, and he glanced down in aggravation as he spoke. He leaned in just a little as if to get in the reporter's face as if to say 'back off', and he meant it. "No, we are not finished with the case, by any stretch of *your* imagination. The district attorney's office will investigate the case; that's protocol."

The reporter did not give an inch. "Isn't it protocol that you typically investigate *all* other cases when there is a shooting, so why not this one?"

"When an officer is shot, it is our policy that another agency investigates."

All the other reporters were getting aggravated at this idiot who obviously hadn't a clue about what kind of questions to ask. His only goal was to make the marshals look stupid and incompetent. But he wouldn't stop being obnoxious. "So, you're saying you can't be impartial to the

investigation?"

"That will be all the questions for now. Any other questions can be directed to our public relations department. They will be releasing a statement in the next twenty-four hours. We expect the media to respect the grieving family of Deputy Frank Bellamy and keep them in your prayers. Thank you."

As Mike walked off, the man tried to get in his face with a microphone, but the other deputies stepped between them as the other reporters shook their heads in disgust. Reporters like him made all the others look like vultures. The deputies just walked off; apparently, they were used to these kinds of idiots.

She was so proud of Mike for not losing his temper, another admirable quality she could add to the list.

~Chapter 14~

A loud knock at the door woke Lana from a fretful nap. She jumped up and peeked out the window, seeing it was Mr. Johnson delivering the wood. She grabbed her coat and put it on while opening the door. A blast of cold air hit her, and she immediately buttoned it. The wood came at a great time; she could see dark clouds in the distance, coming from the northwest. That meant the cold Northerner had arrived, the first strong cold front of the season.

"Hi, I'm Lana. Thank you so much for the wood, especially with such short notice. Do you mind putting it on the back porch?" She extended her hand to shake his.

He ignored her extended hand. "Sure, miss. Does the load look like a fair amount?" he asked while looking at his truck.

She glanced at his white, beat-up 1972 Ford truck with a lot of rust and dents. It looked as though it had been bombed in Beirut. His Johnson Tree Service sign was a magnet stuck to the driver's door, hanging lopsided. The wood was thrown all around in the truck, and a lot of wood was piled up in the middle. She wondered why it didn't fall through the rusted-out sides. It wasn't obvious how much wood lay in the bed of the truck, but she didn't care as long as it would last a couple of days. She nodded her head, indicating it looked okay. Since he didn't look at her, she had to say it aloud. "It looks like enough."

Without looking directly at her, he tried to peek inside the house, bobbing his head around hers. It made her feel uncomfortable. She stepped outside and closed the door. "If you don't mind, you can put it all on the back porch. I'll be glad to show you where it goes."

As they walked toward the back of the house, she noticed someone on the passenger side of the truck, digging around in the glove box. There was an obvious nervousness between the two of them, so she rambled. "I do appreciate that you brought me some wood at the last minute. I'm sure you have more important things to do than get out in this miserable weather. I bet you stay busy this time of the year."

The older man had a gray beard, and she couldn't tell if he had hair on his head because he wore a furry hat that covered his head and ears. The hat was dirty and mildewed. She also noticed a lot of gray hair sticking out of his nose. When he smiled, his teeth were brown and nasty. His eyelids were so wrinkled they lapped over his eyelashes like a blanket covering his eyes. From what she could tell, his eyes were blue, but he kept looking down toward the ground and wouldn't look her in the eyes but a couple of times. Worst of all, he smelled like a men's locker room. The smell almost gagged her—he probably had not taken a bath in weeks.

As they walked past Mike's truck, Mr. Johnson casually asked, "Hey . . . is that Dodge truck for sale? I saw it when I drove up and wondered if you might be willing to sell it?"

She didn't blame him for liking the truck. It was a classic, and he kept it in mint condition. The inside had plaid seats and dark-gray carpeting with a dark-gray bed liner. "Actually it's not mine, but I'll let the owner know you're interested. I don't think it's for sale, but I'll give him your message."

A gust of wind nearly knocked Lana over, and she was glad for the protection of the back porch to shield her. She quickly showed him the woodbin while pulling her windblown hair away from her eyes.

He nodded. All the while, he was trying to peek in the back window. "Are you alone out here? I notice nobody's at the other houses. A pretty young thing like you don't need to be left alone."

"I'm not alone. I'm here with my family and they're walking on the beach looking for sea shells." It was the quickest thing she could think of spur of the moment. "If you don't have any questions, I have to get back to cooking because my family will be back any minute. I'll have my husband

help you when he gets here."

"That's okay; my son is in the truck, and he'll help. That's how he earns extra money, and we'll be done in no time. Ma'am, we get paid up-front."

"Of course, I'll get you the cash." Thank God she had to walk around the house rather than go in the back door. This gave her a chance to get away, yet she kept looking over her shoulder. She quickly ran in, got the cash, and ran outside to hand the money to the old man.

His son looked like a character from *Friday the 13th*. He was already out of the truck as she quickly walked to the front of the house. Once she was safely inside, she made sure she locked the door. Mr. Johnson backed his truck close to the back porch. She guessed he didn't pull all the way back because he might get stuck in the sand. She prayed that wouldn't happen because then she'd feel obligated to invite them in.

As time went on, she got worried. Thirty minutes passed and they still had not left, but the truck bed looked empty and the back porch bin overflowed with wood. Her heart raced with worry. She decided if they didn't leave in a couple of minutes, she would call 911. She continued looking out the window and still no sign of anyone. When she walked to get her phone, she heard a car coming down the road. Thank God Mike came home. Relief overwhelmed her.

When she looked outside, she was disappointed it wasn't Mike, but happy with whom she saw. Talk about a cop being at the right place at the right time. A patrol car drove up next to both trucks containing two cops, and both got out of the car. They looked in and around both trucks on their way to the front door. She opened the door to greet them, relieved to see the men.

They both immediately saw how white her face looked. "Hi, ma'am. I hope we didn't startle you," one officer said, tipping his hat as the other did the same. "My name is Kevin, and this is David, and we are here to see Mike. I see his truck is here." Both men had on starched, navy-blue uniforms, with hats that reminded her of Canadian Mounties.

"I'm sorry you missed him, but could you please step in for a moment?"

They looked at each other with confusion.

As they walked in, she was wringing her hands. "I am so glad you're here. Earlier today, I called to have wood delivered, and this man and his

son brought some by. It looks as though they emptied their truck, but I don't see them and they've been here over an hour. Could you check it out for me?"

"Sure we can, and where was the last place you saw them?" Officer Kevin immediately started to look around the house. He never removed his hat, and Lana thought that maybe he wanted to mask his height. He might be five-seven with short, light-brown hair and hazel eyes. He probably didn't weight more than one-hundred-forty pounds, with a small frame. But his deep voice made up for his size; he sounded like Lou Rawls. David was opposite, tall and thin, and he had short, light-brown hair. His voice was much softer than Kevin's. His eyes were puppy-dog brown.

"I saw them on the back porch because that's where they put the wood, but now I can't see them at all," she said with a trembling voice.

Neither officer would leave without relieving her fear. They knew Mike would have their heads if they didn't take care of his tenant. Moreover, they had their suspicions that the agent had a thing for this lady. Kevin decided if Mike didn't have a thing for this pretty woman he needed his head examined. "I'll be back in a minute. David will search the house, and ma'am, you stay with David."

"Thank you so much."

Officer David walked around inside the house, turned on every light, and checked the closets, rooms, and back porch. Everything looked undisturbed. Kevin was gone a long time when they finally saw him come up the path from the beach.

They met him at the front door. "I found the dad walking along the beach. He said he saw an old friend walking his dog, so they walked over to his house for a beer. They were sorry they scared you."

She didn't believe it but felt like a fool being afraid. It seemed odd they would just leave their truck. Not only that, no one lingered around except the guy in the red coat, and he lived the opposite direction from the beach. While the officers were still there, they heard the old Ford truck leave. Officer David stuck his head outside and made the peace sign to Kevin. She knew what he meant—two left in the truck.

She was a little agitated they just wrote it off as though she was a scaredy-cat, so she reverted to their reason for coming. "Mike's not here and I don't know when I'll see him again. I'm just renting this place for a

few days. Would you like me to give him a message?"

"We came by to give him our condolences. Here's my card. Could you have him call when he comes by or when you hear from him?" Kevin answered. They didn't want to dismiss her concerns, but they couldn't do anything else except beef up their patrol.

"I sure will and that's so nice of you."

"Meantime, we'll come by often. If you need me, my cell number is on the back. Please, don't hesitate to call."

That did make her feel better knowing they would watch over her.

"Have a good evening." They tipped their hats and left.

Darkness set in, and Lana double-checked all the doors and windows. She brought in enough firewood, so she didn't have to go outside during the night. As the wind blew, it's howling sounded spooky—like wolves scratching. Sleet mixed with sand tapped on the window every time there was a strong gust of wind, and the darkness made it sound scarier.

This was a sign for her to leave. She packed a change of clothes and left a light on in the kitchen. After what happened earlier and now Mother Nature's warning, she decided to stay in town. She didn't know if the men with the wood had criminal intentions, but she didn't want to stay around to find out. She grabbed the key to the house and literally ran to the car. She remembered a hotel across the bridge and didn't imagine there would be a problem with a vacancy.

She pulled up at the well-lit Hilton hotel. The main lobby was empty and over to the right, behind the courtesy desk, a short hall led to the bar. She could hear glasses clanking and a couple of men talking; the noise echoed in the empty lobby. The three of them were probably the only customers in the hotel, given the looks of the near-empty parking lot. This hotel had five stories, so she thought she might have a magnificent view of the ocean from the top. The attendant handed her the keycard and said, "Room 503, and Ms. Andrews, the kitchen closes at eight o'clock. Is there anything else you need? Do you want a porter?"

"No, thank you."

The room was decorated in a cheerful blue with a large, king-sized bed. The wallpaper had a two-toned blue stripe with a solid, light-blue

bedspread trimmed in dark blue. The best part of the room was the warmth. She smiled and wondered if she should be mad at Mike for not fixing the furnace or more mad for not calling. She would have to sleep on that one.

~Chapter 15~

A noise woke her. She first thought it was a television show, but when she turned it off, she realized it came from the hallway. Aggravated, she rolled over and covered her head with a pillow to try to go back to sleep. Within a few minutes, the phone rang. She answered it, frustrated. "Hello."

"Hi, baby," Mike said.

Rubbing her eyes and trying to wake up she remembered all that transpired the last few hours. "How did you know I was here?"

"Don't forget I'm a federal agent, and all I have to do is make a couple of phone calls. Would you like some company? I'm down in the lobby."

"Sure, come on up. I'll be waiting." She ran to the bathroom to brush her teeth and make sure she looked presentable. When she opened the door, he swept her off her feet and gave her a playful kiss. He was utterly out of breath. "Why are you breathing so hard?"

"I ran up the stairs. I didn't want to wait for the elevator."

"You ran up five floors?"

"Two and a half. I took two stairs at a time." He raised his left eyebrow, "I was worried sick about you. You could have left me a note." He couldn't stay mad because she looked too beautiful and sleepy. The oversized jersey looked adorable on her. The Dallas Cowboy jersey had the number eight on it, and he didn't like Troy Aikman. He didn't like the Cowboys at all—he happened to be a Giants fan—but he would forgive her this time. Besides, she looked better in it than Troy.

"It's a long story, and I'm sure you don't have time to listen." She gave it right back, but she knew she couldn't stay mad at him. He looked so good with his black Christian Dior sweater, turtleneck, and khaki Dockers.

He sat on the bed and pulled her down on his lap so she would be eye-to-eye with him, but she wouldn't look in his eyes. If she did she might melt, and she had to be strong right now.

"Okay, squirt. I know you're safe, and that's all that matters. I sent my driver home. Do you want to stay here or go back to the beach house? I

will leave that decision up to you."

"It doesn't matter either way, but I am surprised you were concerned because I didn't get one call from you today. Something happened that scared me, and that's why I came here."

"Are you talking about the two guys who delivered wood?"

Her eyes widened. "How did you know? That happened only a few hours ago." She was shocked he knew about the guys; there was no way for him to know unless the two officers told him. "What's the deal? It's scary that you can know how my life played out today."

"First of all, I *did* call several times today, and the calls went straight to voicemail. I left several messages, and I texted. My phone finally died. I sent officers out to check on you, and they told me about the scare you had with the wood incident. That's all that happened. I knew you were scared, so I came home, and you were gone. I called a few hotels, and they said you were registered here. When was the last time you checked your messages, little lady?"

"I didn't turn it off until late tonight." She didn't think he was lying, but she didn't think he called as many times as he thought. She could prove it. She dug out her phone and turned it on. "Let's see if there are any messages from you." After it had been turned on, nothing happened.

Mike looked bewildered. "I know I called you several times and left you several messages. I don't understand. Do you mind if I look at your phone?" She handed it to him, and he played with it. "Babe you have it on airplane mode; no wonder you didn't get my messages. Your phone must not work at all when it's on airplane mode."

"I didn't put it on . . . I don't know how that happened." She was totally confused. She knew she was slow at technology, but she thought she had a grip on how to use her phone.

"There must be some kind of button to push, and you must have pushed it." He tried not to grin. He didn't want to embarrass her or make her feel stupid. It was an honest mistake, and he knew that.

"My daughter did call me today, and I guess I accidentally pushed a button when I hung up the phone. I'm sorry. I don't know how that happened. That makes me feel much better. I hear some beeping, does that mean there are messages?" She felt like an idiot.

"Yes, you have fourteen missed calls, and it looks like eight texts and six voicemails. I bet all are from me. Do you mind if I look?" She didn't

care if he looked or not, she had nothing to hide.

On second thought . . . "No! My boyfriend might have called, and you could spoil the fun."

He laughed and looked at the messages anyway. He certainly knew what to do. He quickly pushed buttons, and within seconds, he had all the information. "It looks as though you have two texts from Sharon, four from an unknown number, and the rest of the texts are from me. I think you owe me an apology." He pulled her close.

"How can I make it up to you? I'm sorry I missed your calls, but I *did* see you on TV today." She tried to change the subject. The whole time she tried to apologize, he pulled her closer. She enjoyed his attention and his happier frame of mind.

"Lana, do not change the subject." He was playing with her hair, twisting and curling it. The softness felt good as her hair freely flowed through his fingers.

"No, I'm not trying to change the subject at all. But I *did* see you on TV today, and you looked handsome. You know you look so handsome I want to kiss you, I want to hug you, and I want to touch you." She performed her Sandra Bullock impersonation from *Ms. Congeniality*.

Laughter filled the room, and they both rolled back on the bed. "Honey, you are adorable. I could kiss you all day and all night. You have no idea how much I needed you today. My God, you are gorgeous." All her facial features were dainty and small. Her lips were full and soft.

"How much did you miss me?"

"Bunches. Let's go back to the beach house and just listen to the waves. There's nothing more romantic than the sound of the waves and the crackling of a fire," he said while patting her on the butt.

"I agree."

"How about I check you out while you get ready?"

"That's a deal."

They chatted on the way back to the beach house while holding hands and smooching at red lights. The dark eeriness of the night gave Lana goose bumps. The roads he turned on were dark with no moonlight to guide them. She commented, "This is spooky. I'm so glad you know your

way because I'm lost. Everything looks so different at night. I'm glad you're here to protect me."

He squeezed her hand then kissed it. "Honey, I will always protect you." Then he added, "When my family first moved out here years ago, I would miss the turn-off to our road many times. Now, when I rent out the house and the renters don't have a GPS, I try to furnish them one. They know why I do when they drive at night."

They were about five blocks from the house when on a road to the right Lana saw a familiar truck. She couldn't miss that white, old beat-up Ford truck. She looked at Mike in total shock and fear. "That's the truck that delivered the wood. I just saw it on that road. Why would the truck be out here in the middle of nowhere this late at night?" The anxiety came out in her voice.

He also thought it was strange and not coincidental. He instinctively turned off the lights to the car, and they slowly pulled over a few blocks from the house. Immediately, he got on the phone and called 911. "This is Agent Mike Ramsey, and my badge number is 442. We need assistance at 2612 Shadow Lane. Officers were dispatched to this house earlier, and they questioned a person who delivered wood named John Johnson. We just saw his truck a few blocks from the house. I'm requesting backup."

"10-4, backup in route," said the dispatcher.

He pulled out his gun, turned on the car lights and slowly pulled up in the arranged parking slot, saying, "Get low so no one can see you." Mike also lowered himself.

"You're not going in the house, are you?"

"I've got to go inside, that's my job. I know what I'm doing." He had to concentrate on what he needed to do. The adrenaline pumped through his veins. His heart raced with excitement, and he had to take deep breaths to control his rapid breathing.

"Oh, please wait for the police. What if they have guns or knives? Please, please wait; I'm terrified for you," she pled as she grabbed his arm, trying to hold him in the car.

He handed her a gun he pulled out of his briefcase and told her, "Shoot if they come towards you." With a quick glance, he added, "But don't shoot the cops. When the cops get here, I want you put the gun in the glove box. I love you." Then he left.

She was terrified; she had never been this scared. Her heart felt as

though it would pound out of her chest. Never in her life had she faced such danger. She constantly looked around for help, but no one was around; they were on their own. Frightening images flew through her mind: Mike being shot, the man sneaking up on her, police shooting her by accident, or being raped. It felt as though her heart was lodged in her throat.

She watched him intently as her body shivered from fear. Her hands shook so much she put the gun down on the console between the front seats. She knew if she didn't put it down it might go off, and that would be horrible. A little relief flooded her when way off in the distance she could see police lights. Way off, and maybe too far. They needed to go faster. *Please hurry*, she thought; she was terrified.

Oh, God, she could hear yelling, and she could tell one of the voices was Mike. She could see at least two police cars coming fast on the road. She jumped out and ran with her arms flailing; she could see it was David and Kevin. "Mike's inside; please go help him! The truck is a couple of blocks over on a back road. It's the same truck you saw today," she said as she pointed towards the direction. David motioned for her to go back to the other police car. She did with shaking legs, partly from being scared and partly from the cold.

Some officers ran to the back, and some ran to the front of the house. They were everywhere, and more cops raced down the road. She could hear yelling, and this time she heard them cursing. An officer who stood by her told her everything that had happened inside. He first said, "There is someone in the house."

"I know that; is Mike okay?" She sat and waited. She bit her nails down to the quick, and she shook uncontrollably. More cops arrived, and relief flooded her emotions.

"Miss, they have the prowlers in custody, and they will bring them out in a minute."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Them? How is Mike? Please tell me he's okay."

"He is just fine. He's held them until we got here, and he'll be out in a minute. If it makes you feel better, I could hear him laughing."

"Laughing? Why in the hell would he be laughing?"

"I don't know." The officer walked over to some of the other cops telling them they needed to process the old truck.

She didn't pay him any mind, and she ran over to the house, stood outside, and waited. When he came out, she gave him a hug. "I was so scared." She shook uncontrollably and started to cry. "I can't believe you did that. Why were they here?"

He wrapped his arms around her and guided her to the car. "Honey, I'll talk to you in a little bit. Just sit in the car and some officers will come over and get a statement from you. Let the car run for a while to help you get warm. The police will have to investigate inside, and then we can go inside." He had an adrenaline high and couldn't sit still. He gave her a quick kiss and went back inside.

She became aggravated because it seemed as though he always said, *I'll talk to you later.*

After thirty minutes passed and the police didn't show, she crawled in the back seat and closed her eyes for a few minutes. That's the last she remembered.

~Chapter 16~

Day 5

Lana woke up exhausted and drained, and her mind couldn't comprehend her surroundings. At first, her thoughts were blurry. She hadn't slept this late in a long time. It reminded her of the good old college days of binge drinking and not getting up until noon. It took a few seconds to gain her bearings. When her mind lost its fuzzy feeling, overwhelming fear gripped her. *Where's Mike?*

As she peeked into the bedroom, she discovered him sound asleep. He only had the sheet covering him, and he was curled up in a fetal position. It saddened her to think how much he had sacrificed for her. He had laid her on the couch next to the fire, gave her all the covers. Her eyes watered as she saw how handsome he looked. Quickly, she grabbed the blankets from the couch and covered him.

She couldn't resist snuggling in beside him to warm him. She adored watching him sleep; the way his face twitched as though he was dreaming and how his eyes moved under his eyelids. The crackling fire synchronized with his snoring. He rolled over and stirred a little, just enough that the sheet slid off his left shoulder. His face tilted toward her. She adjusted and propped herself up on one elbow. It was just enough for

her to get a proper look at one of his most handsome features, his gorgeous lips. For the first time, she noticed how full they were. She ran her fingers along the outline of them without touching him. Any woman would love to own those lips. She smiled wondering if his daughter ever put lipstick on them as most little girls did with their daddy.

His five-o'clock shadow had quite a bit of gray in it, far more than on his head. Most men were like that, but she didn't know why—maybe there was a scientific reason for it. His eyebrows, thin and with a perfect arch, had no gray. He had small ears, and they were flat to his head. His chest and face were tanned. She imagined him as a child running around in the summer and getting as dark as a little Indian. His hair felt silky and thick; balding as he aged would not be an issue for him. She wanted to remember everything about him.

All of a sudden, her stomach let out a loud growl from hunger. She snuck out of bed and went to the fridge to dig out Pillsbury cinnamon rolls. She made the coffee stronger than normal; they both needed that extra boost of stimulant. She made a smiley face with the frosting on the cinnamon rolls and grabbed two mugs of piping-hot, freshly brewed coffee. One cup had cream and the other black, just like they both liked it. A smile crossed her face as she remembered how Mike ribbed her mercilessly their first morning together.

She balanced the plate and mugs as she walked to the bedroom in a slow, scooting motion. The snail's pace was well worth it—not one drop of coffee spilled. As she entered the room, the first thing she noticed was a wiggle under the cover. The blankets were piled so high she couldn't see his face at first but as she rounded the end of the bed, he was facing her. He peeked through one eye and smiled up at her. It made her day when she saw his baby-blues shine through those incredible black eyelashes.

He moaned, still half-asleep. "I think I smell some coffee and cinnamon rolls." His arm reached out from under the covers to help her.

She sat the rolls and coffee on the nightstand and took a flying leap into the middle of the bed.

He reached over and blew air on her neck, making a farting noise.

She giggled while crawling under the cover. "When I was growing up, we called blowing air on the neck a squeegy."

"Squeegy, I like that. I think that's a word you need to get used to or should I say reacquainted."

"I waited until my stomach started to growl before I got out of bed. I wanted you to sleep as long as you needed. I thought I should get you stirring because it's nearly lunchtime. I thought we could drive into town and grab an early lunch. Whatcha' say, Mr. Federal Agent?"

She laughed as he tickled her until she saw the cuts and bruises on his arms and face. Then her face turned solemn, and she looked away because it hurt her to see them. She noticed a small scratch on the left side of his chin near his dimple. It looked like one of the guys threw a strong right hook. Then she noticed a deeper cut below the right ear that still looked a little bloody.

He did acknowledge her concerns about the cuts in a nonchalant way. He began eating a cinnamon roll and said, "These cuts mean nothing; you should see the other guys. These are still warm, and the coffee is delicious. You make good food, baby." It was obvious he was more hungry than concerned about the cuts, which made her feel less disconcerted. She remembered seeing worse cuts on her son after football practice.

"I thought it might be nice to wake up to something to eat." *Enough sweet talk; it's time to get down to business.* She took a deep breath and nervously playing with his fingers, and asked, "Okay . . . I need to know what happened last night. Curiosity has gotten the best of me." She sat in the middle of the bed facing him with her legs crisscrossed, intently listening.

He put some thought in how he wanted to approach the details. "When I couldn't get hold of you yesterday, I got worried. I called the police department to see who was on duty, and David had just started his shift. I asked dispatch to have him call me. When I expressed my concern about you, he said he would be glad to come by for a welfare check."

There was a little bit of icing on his lip. She couldn't resist, so she licked it from his upper lip. He grinned at her, wanting more than a lick.

He squeezed her leg and continued. "He called me back and told me about the incident with the guy delivering the wood and your concerns about him. He found the guy and ran a check on the truck, but everything checked out. I found it odd they just strolled down the beach and didn't take their truck to their friend's house. The reason for my concern was the rentals nearby are empty. Why would they walk a great distance and then walk all the way back to their truck? Plus, with the frigid cold weather, they wouldn't want to walk very far. I still had a lot of paperwork to do,

but this kept bearing on my mind, and I became too worried to stay at work. So I decided to come home."

"This is one time I'm glad you're a cop. Only a cop could know when something didn't appear right."

"You're right. When I got here, you were gone and so was your car. I knew you might come back since you left the light on in the kitchen. I waited for a little while, charged my phone, and tried to call several times, but no answer. Your clothes were still in the closet, so I knew you didn't go home. The next logical explanation was you got scared and went to a hotel. You were at the second one I called. By the way, that was smart of you to listen to your instincts."

"What if I wouldn't have been at a hotel when you called?"

He didn't want to tell her how scared that thought made him. He also knew if he would have walked in and they were hurting her, he would have killed them—no doubt in his mind. "I thought of that, and I would have every cop in the state looking for you. But that didn't happen, so I don't want you to think about it again."

"That's pretty good detective work, copper." He tapped the bed for her to lie down next to him. She didn't have to be asked twice, and she snuggled in close. "Continue, honey; I want to hear more."

"You know the rest from when we left the hotel and saw the truck and got here, and we saw the flashlight through the window. I can't even imagine what it would have been like if you had not seen the truck. That was when I shifted into cop-mode." To show his cop pose, he raised his arm to make a curl with his biceps, and he did look like Mr. Universe. His arm had to be at least twenty inches around. When she patted his muscle, it felt as hard as a rock.

He continued. "Turning off the headlights gave me an advantage." He rubbed her arm trying to console her. "What I have to say next might bother you, but I want you to know I'm here for you and I promise to keep you safe."

A little anxiety started to flicker in the pit of her stomach. "Okay," she said as she swallowed hard.

"When I walked up to the door, I could hear talking in the house. I stood there and listened for a little bit, and they were whispering about where they would hide so they could surprise you. I decided to take keys and jiggle them as though I was you. I heard them scurrying around, and I

knew they were hiding. Once they finished, I thought I could get the upper hand. I walked in and acted as though I was headed for the bedroom, not saying a word. I figured they were in a closet, so as I walked by the pantry I quietly put chairs in front of each door so they couldn't open them. Right as I walked in the bedroom . . ."

He pointed to where it all happened.

". . . The one guy who hid in the pantry started squawking when he couldn't open the door. When that guy yelled the other one, who was hiding in the bedroom closet, jumped out to help his partner. He assumed he had you, but he was in for a surprise when I had my gun pointed at his head. He tried to run, but I grabbed him and we fought. Fortunately, he was in such bad shape I took him down with ease. I took him to the kitchen and held the pantry door closed until the police came. That's when I got these cuts and bruises. I think you need to kiss my boobos and make them better," he said with a devilish grin.

"They were after me? I told them I had a family, and they were on the beach. They had to know they would be taking a chance . . . right?"

Mike laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"It was funny to see them in shock—they screamed like girls for each other to help."

"That's too funny." Now she knew the reason for the laughter.

"Well, it all boils down to everything worked in your . . . our . . . favor. There *is* one thing I can say about my work."

"What's that?"

"Criminals are stupid. And that should answer your question. Criminals take stupid chances, and they took a chance that you were not married, but they didn't anticipate me."

She took a deep breath and said, "I'm glad about that. What were their names?"

"The older man's name is Sam Couried, and his son is Charles Couried."

"So their last name was not Johnson?"

"No."

"So where is John Johnson?"

"We don't know. They're looking for him now." When Mike's mind snapped back to reality, he rolled over frantically. "What time is it?"

She glanced at the clock next to her, "It's ten-ten, why?"

"Oh . . . we have plenty of time." He played around as though he was going to eat the last cinnamon roll. He swirled it under her nose, tempting her.

She took a bite, and then he fed her the rest.

"What are you talking about, time for what?" She took a swig of coffee and frowned, not realizing it had gotten cold.

"Later this afternoon, we have a memorial service for Frank. I need to be there, but I'm not going to leave you, especially after yesterday." He wasn't going to worry Lana, but until they got to the bottom of everything, he would stay with her.

"You need to be there, and that's final. You will not miss this memorial," she said with forcefulness. She noticed he never mentioned anything about her going. She concluded he thought it was too soon for his friends to see them together and ask questions. Admittedly, it did hurt her feelings he didn't want to show her off to his friends. Maybe he was a player, and he didn't take the women he dated to any business functions. She looked away because she didn't want him to see her hurt feelings.

He propped himself on his elbow, ran his hands around the outline of her breasts then raised her shirt to see her tanned tummy. "I thought . . . hoped you might go with me."

Relief inundated her as her heart instantly changed from sad to happy. *I'm such a girl, worrying about silly things.* "Mr. Ramsey, I thought you would never ask."

"Hey, I'm a red-blooded, all-American male with a beautiful lady lying right next to me. You have me thinking about other things. Need I say more?" he asked as he started to rub her stomach.

Lana saw love in his eyes, not just lust. Every time he looked at her, his eyes softened more and more. They didn't do that when they first met. He always had a serious, intense look in his eyes, but a soft look of love replaced the hard gaze. She couldn't imagine being a criminal receiving that mean stare.

"What time is the memorial?"

"Two o'clock."

Lana jumped out of bed. "I have to buy a dress and shoes and all that stuff, and I have to shower and put on my makeup before we have lunch. What were you thinking not letting me know before now?"

He laughed hysterically.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Your t-shirt goes below your knees. You look so cute with your hair all messed up and unkempt. You look like my beautiful little lady." *Damn, she looks gorgeous.* He hoped that tonight they would make love. Wanting women for sex was part of his past. Yes, he did use women for sex, but he knew it was mutual. He always informed them that he was not interested in a long-term relationship. Most women agreed, or at least that's what they said. Maybe they hoped for more, but he didn't want to give anymore, until now, with this woman. With Lana, he wanted to give it all, every ounce of his being—heart and soul.

She was happy he said that, but she knew she had a lot to do. Frustrated, she asked, "You have a couple of hours to get ready. Do we need to run to your house to get a suit?"

"Oh, crap, I forgot about that." He jumped up and they both quickly made the bed. She took a quick shower then he showered and shaved. With pen and paper in hand, she sat on the bed and took a quick look through her things to determine what she needed to buy at the store: dress, hose, shoes, coat, and earrings.

When Mike finished shaving, he sat next to her with only a towel wrapped around him. "What is the paper for . . . taking notes?" he asked while taking a swig of coffee.

"I'm making a shopping list, so I don't forget anything." When he first sat down, she got a faint whiff of his Clive Christian cologne. She loved the clean scent and inhaled, enjoying the fragrance. It had been a long time since she sat next to a man fresh from the shower, and it was a temptation to her heart and body. For the first time, she noticed he had an eagle tattoo on his right arm near the shoulder. When she looked closer, she saw the names Kathy, Brianna, and Kyle in the wings of the eagle, and she decided those names must be his wife and kids. He also had 442 tattooed in the claw. She remembered it was his badge number. She wondered if he ever would get a tattoo with her name in it. "You better hurry up and get dressed before I take the towel off you," she muttered while licking her dry lips. Going to the funeral was more important than what she had in mind—at least for now.

"You will not get an argument out of me on that." He winked and went back in the bathroom, whistling.

She was so lucky to have such a gorgeous man to love, and to love her. She took a deep breath and sighed. In the back of her mind, she wondered if he remembered telling her he loved her.

On their way into town, they discussed what kind of food they liked. "I think I need to forewarn you that I don't like seafood."

"What? Are you kidding? You're visiting Massachusetts and you don't like seafood?" He couldn't believe his ears; he thought everyone loved seafood. He couldn't imagine otherwise.

"Is that a deal breaker?" She knew he would say yes just to tease her.

"I'll have to think on that one." He was so crazy about this girl, he couldn't care less if she liked seafood or not. All he had to do was change his eating habits and find restaurants that served chicken or whatever her heart desired.

"We can have seafood as long as they offer steak or chicken, as well." She regretted telling him about her dislikes; she was afraid he might go someplace different just for her. She didn't want to deprive him of something he loved so much.

"I think we can find a place that has chicken." He glanced over at his sweetheart and thought how beautiful she looked. Depriving her of anything was a task he would never allow himself to do—ever.

She looked out the window and knew it was a sad day. She also knew the memorial would rekindle the dread and anguish she felt a few short weeks ago. A wave of sorrow overwhelmed her; she never dreamed she would be attending another funeral so soon.

He noticed she was quiet and distracted. "What's the matter?" He squeezed her hand.

"I guess I'm sad about the memorial, that's all."

"If going to the memorial bothers you, we don't have to go. Everyone certainly would understand considering what happened last night."

"No, we're going. I'm just a little tired, that's all." She wasn't lying about that. She hasn't slept well since she'd been at the beach house.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Within seconds, they pulled into the parking lot of the Pelican Restaurant. Thank goodness the snow slowed down to just a few

flakes. Under normal circumstances, they could have a snowball fight. The freshly fallen snow appeared light and fluffy. However, the last thing she should be thinking about was a snowball fight; Mike had to work. Suddenly, she felt guilty. "If you want me to, I can go back to Tennessee so you can get your work done. With all that's happened, it's important for you to be with your men. I feel as though you're missing out by babysitting me, and I don't want you to do that."

For the first time since Lana arrived, he felt panic, and it forced his stomach to form knots. Could it be she had second thoughts about him? He decided to lay out his feelings. "Are you serious? No, I don't want you to go back to Tennessee, and if it were up to me, I would have you move here right now. When my wife Kathy died several years ago, I never thought I would find someone to love. Then you waltzed into my life. Last night, when everything was over, I realized you could have been alone in the house. That angered me, knowing they could have hurt you. Also, it made me realize how much I care for you. The cop in me knows you never take your loved ones for granted. You have to tell them you love them every day when you go to work because you don't know if you'll come home or not. That was why I told you I loved you."

He pulled her close and took her face in his hands, kissing the top of her nose. "It was important to me that you know I love you before I entered the house. Lana, I love you with all my heart. Immediately I had a physical attraction to you, and when I heard you speak with a southern accent, I was hooked. I fell in love the minute you talked, the minute you walked, the minute you took your coat off, and the minute you touched me. I never believed in falling in love at first sight, until now. So please, baby, don't talk about flying back to Tennessee, okay?" Feeling this vulnerable was not something he was used to, or liked. Never had he allowed himself to feel this way. Lana changed that. He wanted to protect her, love her, live with her, live through her. He wanted her to see the vulnerability in him, see what she had done to him. Holding his feelings back for her was not an option, not ever.

His eyes never left hers, and she knew he meant it. She cried.

"Please, baby, don't cry. I can't stand it, and I don't want you to feel bad or feel you're not safe. I'm off the rest of the time you are here. The only obstacle we have today is the memorial, and you're going with me. But if we don't hurry up and eat, we won't have time for me to get my suit

and your dress." Time was of the essence, but he also wanted to change the subject.

"Let's go; I'm starving," she said. She wiped the tears away, and was mad at herself for being such a whiney woman. Mike had enough to worry about without her acting like a baby.

As they walked in, the hostess greeted them. "Hi, Mr. Ramsey, how is my favorite officer today?"

"I'm doing great. We want to sit at the back table . . . okay?"

"Go right ahead. I'll send a waitress right over," she answered while still counting change to a customer. There were several tables scattered around in the three dining rooms surrounding the kitchen. The tables were so close together it took some maneuvering around chairs to get to their table. They were seated where he could see the door—typical cop thing.

Their server handed them the menu and spoke in a soft voice. She seemed sad and never lifted her eyes from the ticket book. "Would you like to hear our specials today?"

Lana could tell she didn't want to go over them again.

In a way, Lana didn't blame her. How many times did she say *specials today*? It would be much easier to paper clip them on the menu. Lana's heart felt sad for this weary waitress. She was an old lady whose face looked tired and worn. She had bags under her eyes and looked fatigued. She had her thin gray hair pulled back in a bun, and she had a small hump back, probably caused from this hard work and age. Lana would make sure she got a sizable tip, at least a ten.

Lana politely said, "That's okay; we'll just look at the menu."

Mike pushed his menu to the side, knowing what he wanted.

"What do you recommend for me to eat? Besides seafood, I think chicken might be appropriate for me—especially after last night," she chuckled.

He raised his left eyebrow. "We won't even touch that subject, little lady. I know it's been a tough couple of days, but I'm off work, and I want to spend every minute with you. You're safe, I'm safe, and there was a tragedy. Let's not bring up last night and just enjoy getting to know one another. Is it a deal?"

How could she say no? "It's a deal on one condition, when we get home you have to tend to the fire."

"Now *that* sounds like a deal. Better yet, I'll fix the furnace." They

both laughed because it was supposed to have been fixed two days ago.

"Yeah, I'll believe that when I see it," she said with sarcasm.

Immediately, she wished she could take that statement back. It was inappropriate of her to utter any words of negativity.

"You are grumpy—I need to feed you." He overlooked her statement.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you. That didn't come out the way I wanted."

"Honey, I didn't take it that way, and it's okay. I know you're tired, and I appreciate your sacrifice going with me to the memorial. You could have stayed at the house and taken a nap."

He chose just the right words to make her feel better. "Mike?"

"Yes?" he answered, not paying attention while he played with her hands, trying to warm them.

"Please look at me."

"What?" He focused on her.

"I love you, too!"

He looked in her eyes, hoping he saw the truth, and he did. His heart leaped with joy and he got choked up, saying, "Oh, baby, I love you so much!"

"There's one more thing."

"What?"

"Earlier you talked about telling me you loved me before you go to work, just in case you don't come home."

"Yes."

"I wanted to tell you I know you love your job, and I would never change that. But, I want you to remember as you go to work; I'd rather have three wonderful years with you than a lifetime without you. I guess what I'm trying to say is let's live every day as though it's our last," she said, getting all choked up again.

About that time, the waitress walked up to take their order. "I think I will try the southwest chicken."

Mike ordered shrimp and fries.

They chatted about Cape Cod beauty, especially during the summer. The memories made him smile. "Some of the cute things of the summer are the children running across the sand when it's hot. They jump and holler trying to get to the water where it's cool. They look like Mexican jumping beans. It's nice to see an old person fall asleep on the beach on a sunny, cool day. On the other hand, the winters can be brutal. I live in

Boston, and some winters it can snow for several days straight." His face glowed just talking about living in the area.

She glanced out the window where everything looked white. "We might want to consider heading to your house. It looks as though it's snowing harder."

Mike's eyes pivoted to the window, and he noticed the road looked like a sheet of white. The sky was noticeably darker, making the street lights come on. "What did you think about the food?" He pulled out his wallet and dug out his credit card.

Lana pulled out a ten. She held it in her lap to put on the table. It was obvious the server needed a little extra money. Lana's mom had curvature of the spine, and she knew how her mom suffered. Maybe this little bit of extra money could help this elderly waitress. "I loved it, but I loved being with you more," she said with all honesty.

"Once we get through this memorial, we will have a great evening. I have a surprise for you."

"I love surprises." Just anticipating a surprise made her clap her hands, just like a child.

~Chapter 17~

Boston was considered one of the most beautiful cities on the eastern coast. It was surprising how cities look different all over the country. Boston buildings were in the old craftsman style. Atlanta had a contemporary, modern look. San Francisco had an old-world charm and Houston had a straight-line, geometric look. You certainly could tell what part of the country you were in just by the skyscrapers.

His house was in an older part of the city, not too far from the John Joseph Moakley Courthouse where he worked. They turned into the Revere Estates subdivision where the homes looked as though they were about one-hundred years old. The neighborhood appeared well maintained with giant oak trees in the front yards. Some of them had pictures of family in the military nailed to them. He drove around several streets before turning on Cedar Cove.

When they pulled in the driveway, Lana admired the brown craftsman house with white trim. The white front porch wrapped around most of the front of the house with several square, wooden columns supporting the

roof. Chains swung between the columns making a clunking sound, and Lana imagined how Boston ferns hung from them during the summer months.

"Welcome to my Boston home," he said, grinning. He couldn't wait to show off his masterpiece.

"Your home is beautiful. How old is this house?"

"It was built in the 1940s by newlyweds. They lived in it until 1992 when they moved into a convalescent home. Their children rented it out until they died in 1997. Then they sold it to me. It was in horrible shape when I bought it, so I tried to restore it to its original state. This house is a labor of love."

"That's an understatement. I can certainly see why you fell in love with it."

"Please, come in and let me show you around my masterpiece." They walked along the rock path to the front porch that held several rockers to the left. There were planters all over—some wicker, some iron.

He unlocked the door and turned off the alarm. There was a small entrance with a living room to the left and a formal dining room to the right. Lana noticed the five-inch Bella wood flooring throughout the three rooms. "Did you install the floor yourself?"

"Yes. It took me a month, only a few hours a day, but well worth it. The old flooring I couldn't salvage. The renters had a water leak and didn't tell the owner, and it ruined the floor." All his hard work showed, and he seemed proud of his accomplishment.

"I certainly agree with that. I've never been crazy about leather furniture, but I have to admit this is perfect in this room." The couch was dark-brown leather with a deep burgundy, tan, and black rug under it. Blinds covered the windows in the living room, but in the dining room had drapes.

He gave her a sweet hug, and she could tell he liked her enthusiasm and approval. "Thank you honey, but we're not finished."

He led her into the kitchen, and her heart turned flip-flops. Custom mahogany craftsman cabinets filled the kitchen. In the center was an island with a small sink and gas cook top. The countertops were rich brown, tan, and black granite. Another larger sink under the double window faced the back. "Are these the original cabinets?"

"Yes, I just replaced the doors. I'm going to change into my suit so

walk around, and check out my home."

Lana walked around outside for a few seconds and saw a beautiful dark-stained deck, as well as an iron table and chairs. Knowing they would have to leave soon, she went upstairs to check out the bedrooms and ran into Mike at the top. "Baby, you look so nice." He looked ten feet tall with his Hart Schaffner & Marx black pinstripe, herringbone classic suit. She thought if he held out his arm, she could walk under without touching the bottom of it. Compared to him, she looked like a dwarf.

"Thank you," he said while giving her a hug. "Come on, it's your turn to grab a dress. Is Penney's okay? It's only a few blocks from the church."

"That's great, and I can wear the dress out of the store. By the way, you have a beautiful home. I didn't get to the bedrooms, but I will next time."

"I'm hoping it will be your home one day," he commented after kissing her hand.

"I would be very proud to share this home with you." She envisioned cooking Thanksgiving dinner in that kitchen.

After looking at several dresses, she picked out a knit Ralph Lauren casual dress that went to her knees. It fit tighter than she would have wanted, but she could blame that on her large bust. She bought a black jacket to wear with the cowl-neck dress, since she couldn't walk into church wearing a blue-jean jacket.

Within minutes, she was fully dressed. When she walked out of the dressing room, Mike whistled. He thought she looked breathtaking. He knew with her on his arm, many men would be turning their heads. Her waist couldn't be over twenty-two inches, and that made her bust look even larger. He raised his eyebrows, whistling again. "I think you are a show-stopper."

"Thanks, honey." She didn't think she had ever been this happy, even with the sadness of the memorial. Obviously, he was proud of the way she looked, and for the first time in a long time, it mattered what a man thought of her.

They pulled up at the First Methodist Church, and many cars were parked along the road; most of them were police cars. There was a reserved spot in front of the church. Once he pulled in, he took a deep breath.

As they walked in the church, everyone stared at them, trying to figure out who was holding onto Mike's arm. They knew Mike had not been dating anyone, so they wondered about this stranger. She enjoyed their uncertain looks, enjoyed being the mystery woman. "Where do you want me to sit?" Lana asked.

"I want you to sit with me."

"Do you mind if I sit a few rows back? I think you need to sit with your guys."

"That's fine. I understand it would make you feel more comfortable."

He found her a seat three rows behind him.

He sat down with some big men. Mike said something to them, and they all turned around and looked at the Lana.

She smiled, but she was disconcerted. Later she would Mike what he said. She took a deep breath, no doubt now that his men knew about her. That thought made her heart happy—a milestone in their relationship.

Out of nowhere, Lana could hear a conversation between two women behind her. "Who is that good-looking guy who keeps turning around looking our way?"

The other lady said, "His name is Mike Ramsey, and he was Frank's boss."

Then Lana could hear them whisper. She couldn't understand what they were saying, but she knew they were talking about her.

The memorial lasted about thirty minutes. She knew many people would leave, but some would want to stay and talk. Since they were not in a hurry, she wanted Mike to stay as long as he wanted. Watching Mike proved to be mesmerizing. It surprised her that he was cordial to people; he certainly didn't act that way when they first talked on the phone. His actions surprised her; she expected him to be quiet, but he acted quite the contrary.

The lady behind Lana tapped her on the shoulder. She looked behind her and, of course, she didn't know the woman. Wanting to be polite, Lana made a friendly comment. "Don't you think it was a touching memorial?"

The woman let her know right away that she had no interest in the

memorial. "How do you know Mike Ramsey? I think he's cute. Plus, he has a great body."

Lana didn't know how to answer her. Should she tell her he was her boyfriend? To tell her that seemed presumptuous since she'd only known him a few days. So, she took the safe answer. "We're good friends."

She was a pretty brunette, tall and thin. She had on bright-red lipstick—as though she wouldn't stand out in the black low-cut dress. Her mascara was thick, and her eyelashes were matted together, a poor job of compensating her short lashes. "So, you're not boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Why do you ask?" This woman was too cute. Lana decided she wouldn't discuss *anyone* with this woman.

"I have an interest in him, and I just want to make sure he's not taken."

"Do you know him?" Lana asked.

"No, or I should say I don't know him intimately, but I've had an interest in him for a while. However, I *will* know him better after today. If you're not about to marry him, I'm telling you to move over, honey; he's going to be mine."

This hussy was blatantly bold with her interests, and she hoped Mike saw through it. She would never ask a woman anything like that. She wasn't sure how to answer, so she just smiled and turned away. Deep down, Lana was torn up about the whole ordeal. Then she thought to herself, *you have to trust*. That one thought, along with a deep breath, made her feel better.

The woman didn't waste time walking up to Mike and giving him a hug. Lana couldn't hear their words, but she thought she was giving him her condolences. He just smiled, and she could tell he was thanking her. It bothered her that he didn't try to get away, nor did he glance her way. Her mind raced with jealousy. *Lana, calm down. You know you have no reason to be jealous, so give him a break.*

Within a few minutes, he took the girl by the elbow and brought her over to Lana. When they first started walking the hussy grinned like a possum, but that grin turned to a grimace when they walked over to Lana.

Lana just stayed seated in the pew; she wasn't going to stand up for this heifer.

"Honey, I want you to meet Elizabeth, Frank's cousin," he said, grinning.

Lana reached up to shake her hand. "It's nice to meet you. I'm so sorry for your loss."

Elizabeth wrapped her coat around her shoulders and said, "Thanks." Without another word, she stormed out the door.

Lana gave him a shame-on-you look.

He responded with a wink and returned to the guys.

She waited until he had a moment alone. "Mike, I'm going to walk around the church for a little while and maybe find the chapel. You take your time. I have my cell phone turned on; call me when you are ready to go."

"I don't mind heading out if you're ready to leave." He really wanted to stay a while longer, but he knew she didn't have much rest, and he didn't want to push the issue.

"Please stay; your place is here right now. Call me when you're ready to go." He reached down and kissed her on the cheek. That was an opportunity to whisper in his ear, "We will discuss Elizabeth later."

"Okay," he grinned.

She walked off, and she couldn't help but turn around to see if Mike happened to be watching her. To her surprise, all the men were watching her walk away. Her face turned bright red and she walked faster without looking back again.

Lana's phone rang just as she finished a cup of coffee. She had been visiting with some people who were also hanging out in the kitchen. "Hey, sweetie."

"Are you ready to go?"

"Only if you are, and your call was perfect timing, I just finished a cup of coffee."

"Stay there and I'll come get you."

"Okay." She was thankful for that because her feet hurt. New shoes and a lot of walking do not go together.

There were only a few people left in the kitchen, and Mike spoke to a couple of them and introduced Lana. It was so comforting to have his arm to hold on to—she felt protected and loved. He took her hand, and they walked out the side door. He helped her in the truck and as he walked to

the other side, he waved and said something to some guys leaving the church.

"Who were those guys?" She asked while glancing back.

"A bunch of the guys and their families have decided to meet for pizza. They wanted to know if we wanted to go with them." The truck sputtered and coughed while Mike tried to coax her to run.

"We can go if you want to; I would love to meet your team."

"I don't want to go. I want to spend my evening with you—alone." She couldn't help herself. "What about Elizabeth?"

He rolled his head back with laughter. "You don't have to worry about that girl."

"She likes you, she told me so." Just the thought of that hussy upset her stomach.

He laughed even harder. "Honey, she has liked me ever since I met her at a BBQ a few years ago. She stayed with Frank's wife Robin when she was pregnant with their second child. Robin had morning sickness and needed help with their oldest. Frank invited the team over for a BBQ dinner on the Fourth of July, Elizabeth was there, and she has liked me since that day. But . . .," he said as he looked at her with his devilish grin, ". . . it won't be a problem anymore. I told her you were my fiancé."

"Are you serious?" She was so thrilled. Instantly, she wasn't mad at Elizabeth anymore.

"Yep."

When she looked into his eyes, they danced with mischief and love. She also saw some question in them. She knew he wondered if he might be a little pretentious. To show him he wasn't, she unbuckled her seat belt and moved to the seat right next to him. She buckled the middle seatbelt and held on to his arm.

They both sat quietly as they absorbed their feelings for each other. This small move let him know she cared deeply for him.

He finally broke the silence as 'ole Bessie' chugalugged down the road. "How about pizza for dinner? I'm hungry. When the guys mentioned it, I thought it sounded good. Besides, I want you to try Franco's."

"Yep," she answered. They both laughed, and he squeezed her knee and slowly ran his hand up and down her thigh and calf. His touch let her know he anticipated the night, and she couldn't wait either. Her insides got warm just dreaming about his touch.

≈Chapter 18≈

They stopped at Franco's for the best pizza ever, or at least that's what Mike swears. After they ordered and got in the truck, Mike noticed how Lana's legs shivered from the cold. "Baby, I'm sorry, I didn't realize how cold you'd be with only a dress and thin pantyhose to keep you warm." He removed his overcoat and laid it across her lap then abrasively rubbed her legs. The coat was so warm it only took a few minutes for her legs to stop shaking. "Is that better? You have to let me know when you get cold. The winter in Boston can chill you to the bone. I can't stand it when you're cold."

"I will from now on. You have to remember it's been years since I've had anyone care for me."

"You had better get used to me. I'm going to be around for the rest of your life."

On the way home, his strong arm felt good in her hands. As he steered, his muscles flexed, and it was tantalizing. She watched his face and noticed how intently he followed the snow-covered road. Later she hoped that intensity would be in his eyes when they made love.

When they reached the house, Mike opened his truck door. The cold air was rejuvenating for him. He scooted out and reached over Lana for the pizza. Temptation took over, and he blew on a squeegee on her neck.

He's such a guy. She took a deep breath and wondered if he would do that the rest of their lives. She hoped so. As soon as they entered the house, she wanted to shed some clothes. "I'm going to change clothes and put on your T-shirt. Would you unzip me please?" She turned around and pulled her hair to the front.

"It will cost you ten kisses."

"When do I have to pay you?" She could feel his hot breath on the back of her neck, and she knew he would blow a squeegee. But he didn't; instead, his lips brushed her shoulder. The warmth of his breath and the softness of his lips made her legs weak. She closed her eyes and imagined this feeling for the rest of her life.

"Tonight," he whispered breathlessly.

Knowing Mike had to start the fire, she left for the bedroom without looking back. If she turned around and looked into his eyes, she would never leave.

Mike had practically inhaled two slices of pizza by the time she got to the kitchen. He mumbled with food in his mouth, "I was hungry."

"I see the pizza tastes good. Did you save me any?" she teased while reaching over and pinching off a piece of dough. The herb flavor was delicious. It was official—Franco's had terrific pizza, especially the crust.

"I'll fix your plate. I wanted to wait until you got here so your pizza wouldn't get cold."

The minute he opened the box the aroma of sweet dough, onions and pepperoni filled the air. She took a quick bite before moving her plate to the bar. The onions were perfect—sliced thin and a little burned on the edges.

Mike excused himself to change his clothes.

Lana thought the pizza tasted incredible. If she lived here, she would get fat—between the pastries and pizza, she would be doomed.

Mike came back wearing only boxers and a tight T-shirt. She almost choked on her pizza when she saw how good he looked. The sight of him stirred every female emotion possible.

They both grabbed their plates and headed for the living room, sitting in front of the warm fire as they ate. For some reason, she seemed a little worried. She wasn't sure if her fear came from them being alone in the middle of nowhere, or because the wind was howling outside. "What would you do if someone tried to break into the house?"

He finished chewing his pizza before answering. "You know I can shoot a little bit. I'll just point my gun, shut my eyes, and hope I hit them." He grinned at her innocence.

"You butt, you know what I mean." She laughed at her remark, especially after he nabbed two men last night. "I guess that was a stupid question. I'm tired, and I'm not thinking straight, so if you don't mind, I think I'll go to bed."

He stood up and kissed her forehead, saying, "Go ahead, I'll be right behind you. I'll double-check the door and windows and put the pizza in the fridge."

The more he walked around, the more turned on she got. Suddenly, she realized she was not quite as sleepy anymore. Her body ached for him.

He brushed his teeth, walked over to her, and sat on the edge of the bed grinning like a possum. She smiled back, not knowing what he had planned.

Sexually aroused, Lana adjusted herself on the bed to get a better look at him. He obliged by turning toward her and spreading his legs just a little, unknowingly giving her what she wanted most—a peek. She wanted to make love to him, but her shyness overwhelmed her and she decided to let him lead the way. She hadn't been with a man since her husband and she wasn't sure of his experience, but she was sure he had more than she did. There was no way he could convince her that he had been practicing abstinence—not with his body.

He had different thoughts. To her surprise, he went to the closet and got out a guitar. He played romantic songs from several decades. Mike had an incredible voice. Her favorite song was *Feels So Right*. He also played some songs made famous by Sam Cooke (*You Send Me*) and Percy Sledge (*When a Man Loves a Woman*.)

She could have listened to him all night, but she had other plans for him tonight. She was fully awake anticipating the rest of the evening.

He laid his guitar against the wall, plugged her iPod into the radio. He tuned it to some soft, romantic blues. Lana enjoyed listening to the blues while cooking and drinking a glass of wine.

"How did you know I had the blues on my iPod?"

"I looked through it when you took a bath. I like the blues, too. You have Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, Etta James, and Muddy Waters. I haven't heard these particular tracks, but I thought it might be appropriate for tonight." He turned off the light and focused solely on his sweetheart. He reached down and kissed her so intimately and tenderly it took her breath away. "Baby, I want you more than I have ever wanted anyone."

"Oh, Mike," were the only words she could muster.

When they finished making love he stayed on top for a couple of minutes, just caressing her face and kissing her gently, showing her love.

They both relished every second of the moment. Life couldn't be better, and all their romance came with the sound of the fierce ocean and soft blues music. She never wanted to forget what just happened.

He rolled over and pulled her to his chest. "Lana, I love you so much."

"I love you, too." And she meant those words from the very depth of her soul. She felt utterly fulfilled and exhausted.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to spend every second with you," he said as he kissed her softly on the lips. "Goodnight, my love."

"Goodnight." She had never told anyone those words since her husband. This week had been momentous.

~Chapter 19~

Day 6

Lana forgot where she was for a few minutes. With a quick glance at the clock, she saw it was four-ten in the morning. She pulled her arms from under the blankets and realized how cold it was outside the covers. She smiled when she thought about how life looked so grand in the morning after a good night's sleep and incredible sex. She smiled thinking about the unequivocal pleasures of last night. Lazily, she rolled over to ogle Mike. To her surprise, he happened to be staring right at her and she jumped, startled. "Honey, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Watching you sleep. And the answer to your next question, I've been watching you for about twenty minutes. You're pretty cute when you sleep, with a little drool running down your chin."

"Why didn't you wake me? We could have snuggled sooner." She got aggravated at him.

"Babe, we have a lifetime for that, and you looked so cute sleeping. Plus, you needed the rest." Even with all that had happened, he knew she would sleep soundly with him there to protect her. By watching her this morning, he knew he was right.

She wrapped her arms around him and snuggled in close.

"You know what?" he asked while caressing her beautiful face.

"What?" she answered closing her eyes, and enjoying his touch.

"I know it's cold outside, but the ocean is so beautiful at sunrise. Let's get up and go for a walk. I'm not talking a long walk, maybe just the length of a football field. The sun coming up in the morning is incredible, and I want to share that with you. Do you remember the beautiful sunset when you drove up the other night? The sunrise is just as beautiful."

"Yes, I was in awe. I would love to go for a walk with you, but only if you get a fire going and fix the heater. That way, we'll walk into a warm

house."

He pulled her close and kissed her. "That's a deal. But first, let's create our own heat."

She finished getting ready for their invigorating walk by piling on layers of clothing. Mike looked at her and laughed. "You look like a blue Pillsbury Doughboy." Everything on her was bundled up except the middle of her face.

"I feel like him, too. We better hope I don't fall, I may never get up," she giggled. She didn't have any gloves, so she had to keep her hands in her pockets. Walking outside was a cold shock, especially once they left the protection of the porch. Neither one of them could see much. In the distance, they saw an orange sliver of a line. Obviously, it was the sun, but it wasn't going to help them see—not yet. The sun woke up and crept into the new day, an inch at a time. As it rose, it looked like it peeked over the ends of the Earth, yawning. The tip of the sun looked so close it seemed if they stretched their fingers, they could touch it. The many clouds in the sky played peek-a-boo with it, but the sun rose so majestically, it didn't pay any attention to them. "This is beautiful," Lana said with a sigh.

He gave her a sweet hug and put her hands in his jacket pockets. He couldn't stand her being cold. "I told you . . . it's worth bearing the elements, don't you think?"

"Yes, can we just stand here for a few more minutes to imprint this vision in my mind?" As the size of the sun grew, she imagined how it would look on a hot summer morning. The steam off the water would make the sun look like a mirage.

They walked several feet down the beach to some chairs arranged to face the beauty. Mike pulled the two chairs together, and they sat down to watch the breathtaking view. "You should see this in the summer; the sun looks enormous."

"I will this coming summer, and I'm going to make you sit out here with me every morning." She noticed when the waves capped it looked like ships in the distance against the orange sky. She thought about how many women had mistaken the waves for ships bringing their husbands home—bringing with them stories of their travels and bearing gifts from

foreign lands. Lana reached over and gave him a passionate kiss, saying, "I've missed you so much. Please tell me about your travels and what did you bring me?"

"What?" He looked at her as though she had lost her mind.

In her English accent, she asked again. "Sire, what did you bring for me while traveling yonder foreign lands? Warm thyself by the fire and speak of your travels."

Mike took off one of his gloves and dug in his pocket, pulling out a quarter. "Milady, I bring you treasures from a land called England. This token I will give to your father in return for your hand in marriage."

"Thank you, Sire." She took the quarter and put it in her pants pocket to keep forever. She never wanted to forget this moment. "This is the best sunrise I think I've ever seen." A few hundred yards down the beach, Lana saw a cement wall with boulders all around it. "Let's walk to the wall."

"I love to sit on that wall and watch the rain in the distance. You can see for miles, and it's amazing to see the lightning shoot across the sky. It's better than Fourth of July fireworks."

"I can imagine." She was preoccupied with something she saw on the beach. It was some sort of colorful fabric. As they got closer, she thought it was a beach ball sticking out of the sand.

Mike stopped when Lana let go of his hand. She walked over and pulled it out. It was a small piece of vinyl that, many years ago, had many bright colors: white, red, green, yellow, and blue. It was only an eight-inch-square, worn piece of vinyl. Memories flooded her mind as she picked it up and examined it. "What do you think this is?"

He examined it for a minute. "It's an old umbrella which probably got torn up during a storm. Usually people bring in the beach furniture at the end of summer. Who knows what happened with this. Maybe someone cut it up to make a flag for a sandcastle. Why?"

Uncontrollable tears rolled down Lana's face. She just sat down on the sand and bawled like a baby. "I'm sorry I'm crying, but I just couldn't help myself." She cried every time she looked at the piece of vinyl, reminiscing.

He sat on the sand next to her and held her close, just letting her cry. But he was bewildered why she was upset. "Honey, just cry all you want, but tell me what's hurting you."

"Years ago, when I was a little girl, my family came to the Cape Cod

area for a vacation. That was the first time I had ever seen the ocean, and we had an incredible time playing on the beach, eating seafood and just enjoying life. My daddy was Irish, and his skin couldn't handle the sun, so he would walk around toting an umbrella. Mike, it looked just like this one with many colors on it. Everyone laughed so hard at him because he toted it everywhere on the beach. He was the only person who carried an enormous cover." She choked up remembering that one precious moment. "What I remember the most about that umbrella is my mom and dad would kiss under it."

He held her close. "Oh, baby! Take it back to your dad and he'll be proud you found such a treasure."

Once he stood, he extended his hand to help her stand.

"He died two weeks after our vacation. He died at work. He worked on machinery. One day, he slipped and fell into the machine and it crushed his head. They couldn't turn off the machine fast enough to save him. Coming here, to Cape Cod, was our last vacation."

All he could do was hold her and try to take her burden away. His heart hurt for her. "I'm sorry. What can I do for you?" He knew how death played havoc on a person's emotions, and she had been through a lot the last few days.

"I thought I resolved this sad memory years ago. But when I looked at this little piece of cloth, it brought them all back." She didn't want to spoil their happy moment, so she put the piece of vinyl in her pocket with the quarter. "Mike, I'm beginning to look like a homeless person, collecting things which don't mean anything."

"They do to you." Her innocent emotions were the part of her personality he was attracted to most. She never had a problem showing how she felt, and he liked that much better than bottling every emotion.

"Honey, put your arms around this Pillsbury Doughboy. I need a hug," she said.

"Come here, chubby." He held her for a long time, and they just watched the sun come up and hide behind the clouds.

While he held her, she slipped her hands under his jacket to touch his tummy, and he felt warm. He didn't seem to mind, nor did he yelp when she touched him with her freezing hands. He truly was an incredible man with a six-pack tummy. "Do you think we can catch the wall on a warm day in the future? It's so cold, and I'm ready to get warm. Besides, I'm

getting hungry."

"We sure can."

When Mike opened the back door, the heat felt invigorating. "Mr. Ramsey, how would you like some breakfast?"

"Breakfast sounds wonderful. I'm hungry. What do you want to eat?"

"Anything sounds good to me. I'm starving. That walk in the fresh air gave me an appetite," she answered while shedding her coats.

Before she walked off, he gently raised her chin to look at him. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I just had a déjà vu moment." She rummaged through the fridge. An omelet sounded good, and she had everything for that. When she saw the steak, it reminded her of dinner. She stuck her head in the living room. "What do you think about steak for dinner? I can mix a marinade if that sounds good to you."

"That sounds great, do you have steak?"

"Yes, I picked one up at the store a couple days ago. I'll start the marinade and get the steak soaking in it. Do you mind if I use some of your wine?" Wine in the marinade was a must, but she wanted to have enough for dinner.

"Not at all, and we can get some more wine later if we need it. Just whatever you want, it's your day." Then he added with a wink and grin, "But it's my night."

She sighed and worked away making breakfast.

She just finished putting on her makeup when Mike popped his head in the bathroom. "I'm going to put my tools in the truck and look around outside, so take your time. We'll go when you're ready."

"I'll be ready in a few minutes." He was already gone. She wondered where they'd go today—where their adventure would lead them. In their near future, they would be visiting museums and lighthouses.

When she finished putting away her makeup, she lingered, looking at his shaving cream and razor sitting on the bathroom counter. She had to touch them because he had touched them just a few minutes ago. The sink had been washed out, but there were still a few hairs in it. The toothpaste cap wasn't put back on the tube tight. All his toiletries were haphazardly

thrown all over the counter, and the towel had been left on the floor. She smiled when she looked up at hers properly hung over the bar by the toilet. His clothes were tossed on the floor next to the sink. She wanted to remember this moment so she would never fuss at him for not picking up his stuff. She had learned there are more serious issues than a few toiletries out of place.

She took one last look around and made a quick check to make sure that the bathroom window was locked tight. She guessed she would have to follow Mike, and close and lock all windows. Being a cop with his massive stature allowed him to have the freedom of security. Being a woman and not a cop, she tended to be a little more cautious.

She walked into the living room where he was relaxed in the recliner watching the weather. "Wow, you look pretty. Are you ready to eat? I'm starved."

"I'm starved, too. I'm sorry I didn't a proper wardrobe, but I didn't plan on going to town. I feel like a hobo."

He got up, helped her with her coat, and then blew a squeegee on her neck.

"Mike!"

"Come on, homeless woman."

She giggled.

"I'm so hungry, I could eat you," he said as he started eating her fingers. "I hope you like the place I picked out, and yes, they have chicken just for you." He played with the radio, pushing buttons and not finding what he wanted. She thought maybe he wanted seventies music, so she dug out her iPod and connected it to the stereo. The iPod happened to be set on rock-n-roll from the sixties and seventies. Mike nodded and said, "I like that. If you don't mind, just leave it on that section. You have quite a variety of music on your iPod. I'm impressed."

"Thank you, kind sir."

"So what are you hungry for, or should I guess—chicken?"

Her mind wandered over the many alternatives available. "Well, we're going to have steak tonight, so I guess someplace with seafood. On second thought, I'd like a place with soup. It's so cold—soup sounds really

good after our walk this morning, but definitely a light lunch."

"Today, milady, I'll be taking you to a restaurant called the Fireplace Inn. I've never been there, but I hear they have great food."

"That sounds good to me. Maybe they'll have potato soup."

There weren't many cars in the restaurant parking lot, and their spot had an incredible view of the Atlantic Ocean. The restaurant was nonconforming with two smoke stacks that made it look like a miniature Titanic. There were decks you could walk out on to look at the ocean. If they served food out there, it wasn't evident, or at least not this time of the year.

They walked from the truck holding hands with such excitement in the air. The old, rickety gangplank wobbled and squeaked as they walked up, and she realized the restaurant was a ship. "I love this place; it's a boat, did you know that?"

"Yes, I thought you might like a romantic lunch."

"Oh, honey, you are so thoughtful. And this is a wonderful surprise, just like you promised." She pulled on his coat so he could bend down to get a kiss. "So, tell me about this place. I want to hear all about it."

"This place was built around the turn of the century, and it was dry-docked in the sixties. Then someone bought it in the eighties and opened it as a restaurant. I imagine there have been many proposals here."

"Are you trying to tell me something? Or should I say ask me something?"

"Actually, I read that in the newspaper. It said this is the number one place where proposals happen in this area." He knew he wanted to propose to her soon. How he would do it was the question. Since this would be his last marriage, he wanted it to be memorable. Thoughts ran through Mike's mind about how he would propose: airplane banner, hot air balloon, TV, or skydiving. The possibilities were endless, and he would make it memorable. His heart raced just thinking about being married to Lana. At that moment, he decided he would bring her to this place every October 25th, the day they met.

When they walked in the entrance, it looked just like a boat from the turn of the century, and they had done a fantastic job restoring it. The entrance had wooden benches curving around the front. Above the archway and along the walls were all kinds of nets, life preservers, a captain's wheel, pictures, and seashells. There was a majestic staircase

shaped just like the staircase on the Titanic. It wasn't quite as luxurious, but beautiful nonetheless.

When the hostess seated them in a booth, Lana noticed all the tables and booths were bolted to the floor. The table clothes were made of white linen with matching napkins. Right across from the tables stood a beautiful stone fireplace decorated in a nautical theme. All around the walls were many old pictures of sailors, ships, and captains with their crews and families. After looking at the incredible, massive fireplace, she could certainly see where they got the name *Fireplace Inn*.

Even the music coming through the speakers was soft and romantic. It was from the thirties and forties, the Big Band Era. They threw in some blues along with the big band. One familiar voice was Billie Holiday. It sounded so authentic with the static from the speakers. If Lana closed her eyes, she could visualize her singing on this ship. "I love it, and I'll like it even better if they have potato soup."

"You know, I think you talked me into soup, as well, but I think I'll add a sandwich." He winked at her and added, "It's a guy thing."

"And I can vouch you are truly a wonderful guy." He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss. She held his hand, and his warmed hers quickly. Men always seemed to have warmer hands than women; she wondered if there happened to be a scientific reason for that.

"Excuse me, here are some menus and water," said the perky waitress, giggling. "I didn't mean to interrupt," then she giggled again. Lana thought, *what an adorable young lady*. The waitress's hair was tied back with a clasp, but a few hairs were straggling along the girl's back. Her eyes were a bright hazel, and they would squint when she smiled. Her makeup was perfect, not too much of anything. Her fair complexion looked like a china doll, but many people were like that in the north. She was a little overweight, but her five-foot-seven height helped hide it along with her clean, white apron. But what Lana noticed most was the soft, pink lip-gloss she had on, just enough to brighten her smile.

Mike asked, "What do you recommend today?"

Giggle, giggle. "I like the smoked salmon, and the soup of the day is oyster stew."

They couldn't help smiling at her. "Do you, by any chance, have potato soup?" Lana asked.

Giggle. "Umm, I don't know, but I can ask."

"Please do, I'm in the mood for that today. In the meantime, I'll look at the menu," Lana said.

Giggle. "Okay."

He squeezed her leg under the table trying not to *giggle*. He snickered when she went back to the kitchen.

Lana whispered, "I forgot to tell her to bring us some sweet tea—all because you were playing with my leg under the table."

He nibbled on her ear. "Babe, I have just started playing."

"You are so bad," she said as she raised her sleeve so he could see the goose bumps he caused.

Then he sang the song, *Bad to the Bone*.

"I love the way you sing," she said as she snuggled close to him. She took a deep breath, remembering him serenading her last night.

While they waited, they looked out across the ocean. Several boats leisurely floated by, and Mike knew the make and model of all of them and how much they cost. "See that first yacht with the pointed bow? It's a seventy-two footer called Grand Banks Aleutian RP, and it cost well over two million dollars."

"How do you know this?" she asked.

"I stayed at a Holiday Inn Express."

Lana rolled her head back with laughter.

He raised his left eyebrow as if to say, *don't interrupt me*. "I've always wanted a yacht to sail when I retire, but this one is out of my league." Another yacht motored in, entering the port smoothly. "This next beauty is a seventy-eight footer called Ferretti 780 and it's probably valued at about three million dollars."

"Well . . . I think we should go buy one today."

"I wish I could buy a boat today. Maybe one day I can afford the row boat that goes with these yachts."

"Surely there should be one you can afford—one a little bigger than a row boat."

"I'll keep looking, and one day the perfect boat will come along."

"Do you want to live on one?" Lana asked while taking a drink of her water.

"Not literally, but I'd like to sail for months at a time. Would you go with me?"

"Yes, I would love to go. I've never been anywhere on such a big

boat, but I'd give it a try."

She was the first woman he dated who ever considered sailing with him. All the other women always complained about leaving friends, family, and work. Lana didn't even hesitate.

The waitress came back and said, "The chef said if you have a little time, he would be glad to make you some potato soup."

Lana could not have been happier. "That's what I'll have, and tell your chef thanks so much, he made my day."

Mike added, "I'll have the same thing, and I'll add a Philly steak sandwich with mine."

"What do you want on your sandwich?"

"I want everything on it. I'll trust the chef. Oh, and we both want sweet tea."

She picked up the menus and said, "I'll bring you some bread and sweet tea." And off she went with a giggle.

She couldn't help herself as she moved her hand up Mike's thigh, leaned close to his ear, and said, "Giggle, giggle."

As they left the restaurant, they were both rubbing their bellies, full to the brim. The potato soup was the best they ever had—even better than Lana's own recipe and the waitress was their entertainment.

Mike started the truck and took her hands to warm them, deciding that keeping her hands warm would be his life mission. Several pairs of gloves would be one of the first Christmas gifts he purchased for her.

"Where are we heading next? I can't wait," she asked with a quick kiss.

"How about the Pilgrim Hall Museum? It has a bunch of stuff about the pilgrims which dates back to 1620."

"That sounds like fun. What kind of *stuff* do they have there?"

"They have William Bradford's Bible, Myles Standish's sword, the only portrait of a Pilgrim named Edward Winslow, the cradle of New England's first-born Peregrine White, the grand chair of William Brewster, and I think they have a lot of stuff from that era."

"Let's go there. Have you ever been to this museum?"

"Nope."

"Do you want to do something else?"

"Nope."

"Since you live in this area, why haven't you visited this museum

before today?" She was determined to get more than one word answers.

"When Kathy and I first moved here we had little kids, and I traveled eighty percent of the time with my job, so she was mom and dad to them. Later, she got sick and . . ." He choked up and had to regain his composure before he could finish. He wasn't ready to talk about her death. ". . . I just don't like to go to these places alone."

"I didn't mean to bring up past memories; I just want to make new ones with you."

"I like to remember the past. It makes me appreciate every moment I have now, and I appreciate you." He looked down as if he were thinking of something.

"Honey, please don't be sad," she said.

He looked in her eyes, and his face turned pale. "I thought about what it would be like to lose you. I don't want to think about it, it would kill me if that happened. Honey, I don't want to lose you, ever."

"You're stuck with me forever . . . or at least thirty years."

"That's not good enough. I want at least fifty years."

"You've got it." She scooted close and wrapped her freezing hands around the arm of his wool jacket.

Every nook and cranny of the quaint museum was filled with incredible history. They held hands and walked through the several rooms, reading everything on the walls and in the glass cases.

They read about a desk and chair and how they were used when signing in laws. The chair showed signs of wear, and she imagined how the forefathers talked of treaties, laws, women, and Indians while sitting in it. On the desk sat an ink well. Lana daydreamed about how many quill pens were dipped in it. Maybe a young girl wrote her fiancé who lived in Europe and told him about their hardships in America.

The pilgrims had a difficult life and might have starved had it not been for the Indians. Then the pilgrims got greedy and wanted what the Indians had. "You know the Indians led a very simple life, and then the white man came and took everything they had." Lana said.

"Yeah, and it's sad."

"It would be interesting to see how history might have changed if

Christopher Columbus never found America."

"All I know is we might not have met."

"That is so true," she agreed.

The artifacts were impressive. She called Mike over and whispered, "I didn't know Myles Standish was involved with the massacre of Indians. That bothers me. Why can't we just all get along?"

"You know, I think Myles's wife coined that phrase."

Lana stopped in her tracks and laughed. "You are so feisty, but that's okay as long as you're this feisty when it comes to my back rub tonight."

"I think I can handle that request," he said as he reached over and held her hand. He noticed they were cold. He walked behind her and put her hands in his pockets along with his. "Is this better?"

"Yes, but how will we walk around like this?"

"We'll manage." Then he kissed her on top of her head. Thinking of Lana being cold bothered him to the core. Keeping her warm and safe was his job. The idea of keeping her near him and protected warmed his heart. Since the death of Kathy, never had he thought about taking care of any woman. Not that he wanted anything to happen to them, and he cared about their safety, but somehow it was different when love was involved.

They spent several hours looking at all the chairs, desks, writing tools, paintings, and artifacts. They didn't miss one thing in the small museum. When everything was examined, they decided to head home.

As they walked outside Lana bumped into a man, hard. He almost fell over, but she grabbed him before he could fall, then she apologized. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I must have been daydreaming."

Mike stepped between them. He was more than ready to intervene if he had to, but since the guy appeared to be nice about the incident, Mike relaxed.

"That's okay, ma'am. By the way, is this ramp the entrance to the pilgrims' museum?"

Huh? He said museum so funny—as though he was saying mooseum. "Yes, sir, this is the entrance," she answered, but something kept nagging at her.

When they drove up to the house, Lana noticed a light on in the

kitchen. "Did we leave the light on?"

"I don't remember, but we could have."

Her nerves started that familiar flicker of anxiety. She wished he had never said a word. Normally when she saw a light on, she would walk in and turn it off. Considering what happened the last couple of days, her normal routine was not normal anymore.

"You wait here, and I'll check out the house." He pulled a gun from his jacket and cautiously walked into the house. She nervously waited and decided as long as there wasn't any yelling everything would be okay. Within a few minutes, he returned and said, "Everything looks fine. I probably turned the light on when we left."

"I'm sure you did."

Once they took off their coats, Mike started stacking the wood like a Boy Scout would.

"I see you have the fire under control and don't need me to supervise anymore. So I'm going to put the potatoes on or they will never get to eat," she said as she patted his butt while walking past him.

"Don't start something you can't stop. I might have to help you in the kitchen—in more ways than cooking."

"Come on, big boy; I'm sure I can handle you." She washed the potatoes, stabbed them with a fork, wrapped them in foil, and popped them in the heating oven.

He stood in front of the fire, staring at what lay within it as his eyes sparkled against the glow of the flames. With a poker in one hand and his shoulder against the mantle, he was a sight to see. Now and then he would poke a little at the fire, and a few sparks would fly around in a circle then fizzle out, screaming a hissing sound as they went. He seemed to be mesmerized.

Watching him, she couldn't resist putting her arms around him and giving him a sweet hug.

He reciprocated the gesture with a kiss.

She noticed how gentle he always seemed to be with her. Once he got used to her, she hoped he would get a little feistier. Even when he held her hand, he tried to be gentle.

After a few seconds of kissing, he asked, "How long do we have before the potatoes are done?"

"About two hours," she answered, knowing why he asked. The same

idea grew in her own mind and body.

Mike walked over to the stereo and played some soft music. He easily moved the heavy coffee table to the side. He smiled at her, held out his hand and asked, "Would you like to dance?"

"Oh, yes!" She found his spontaneity a turn-on, better than foreplay. It couldn't get any better than this.

They swayed back and forth, interlocking their fingers. Along with the songs came kissing, and with the kissing came the loss of clothes. After several songs, Mike picked her up and carried her to the bedroom.

He finished undressing her to the rhythm of the music. He never lost eye contact as they swayed to the music, flesh touching flesh.

In each other's arms, they lay content and drained.

Mike drifted off to sleep.

Lana wanted to sleep, but she had to cook dinner. She wished they had ordered pizza or grabbed chicken. She lay in bed as long as possible. Quietly, she crept out of bed, went to the bathroom, and put on one of Mike's T-shirts. It seemed extremely cold, and she looked around to find the source. The window was cracked, maybe an inch. She gasped! Fear rose in her beyond anything she knew before and she could hardly breathe. Was someone in the house with them? Oh, God! She could feel her heart pounding in her throat. She was terrified. She tried to focus. She tried to think. *Get Mike; he'll know what to do.* She ran and jumped on the bed, breathing sporadically. "Mike, get up, someone's in the house!"

He rubbed his eyes, groggy from sleeping. "Babe, calm down. What makes you think someone is in the house?" He sat up in bed trying to focus.

"The bathroom window is unlocked and cracked. Go look for yourself. I noticed how cold it was in there, and I saw it open," she said with a trembling voice.

When he heard her fear, he knew the severity of it all. He felt the panic through her voice. He tried to console her. "I left it open after my shower this morning. I always open the window when I shave."

"I closed and locked it before we left, and that was after you were finished in the bathroom. Please, get your gun and look through the

house," she begged.

Her shaking body and the throbbing veins in her throat told him her fear was real. He quickly put on boxers.

"Think about it, the light was on in the kitchen. Do you think that was a coincidence?"

"No, I don't." He got his gun from its holster and walked to the back door. It was unlocked and ajar. In the patches of snow, he could see footprints. What he saw in the snow was unbelievable. He knew he had locked the back door before they left the house and again when he walked through the house after they got home. How did someone get in? His face turned white. "Come on. Let's get dressed—we're getting out of here." Mike grabbed his phone and immediately called the police.

While he was on the phone, Lana motioned she would take out the potatoes. He nodded his head.

As she turned on the light, she screamed.

He ran in the kitchen holding his gun down to his side. "What's the matter?"

Lana pointed at the counter with a trembling hand. "Look," she said with a weak voice, barely audible.

The steak lay on the counter with a knife stuck through it.

He couldn't believe his eyes. Someone was in this house when he made love to his Lana. He wanted to kill him. He wanted to go outside and find him, make him pay, but he couldn't leave her, not when she was so terrified. "Honey, let's get dressed and wait for the police. I'm going to search every inch of this house. I want you to stay behind me."

"Okay."

Mike checked every nook and cranny. She felt relieved when she saw the police lights coming down the road. She was so relieved the adrenaline crash made her weak, and she had to sit down on the couch.

Police cars rushed to the house, skidding on the gravel as they came to an abrupt stop. There were several cars and the lights lit up the entire street. Detective Paul Quentin was the lead detective and a good friend.

Mike met him at the door. As she grabbed her coat to join them, Mike motioned for her to remain in the house. "Hey, Quent, thanks for coming out. I appreciate how quickly you got here."

Staying in was a relief. Her body shook uncontrollably, so she stood in front of the fire trying to calm her nerves. Reflecting back on the last

twenty minutes, she couldn't remember everything. She always heard about people being in traumatic situations and not recalling any details, and now it was happening to her. The last thought she vividly remembered was the cold feeling—after that, she only recalled seeing white spots. Fear consumed her. When James died she could recollect everything, but that was sorrow, not fear. One thought that kept her fearful, what if Mike wouldn't have been there. That thought made her shake even more.

Police were everywhere, outside and inside, dusting for prints. She didn't know what to do with herself, so she packed a suitcase. While she was in the bedroom, she heard some men talking outside the window. She peeked out, and Detective Quentin pointed to something on the wall. CSI was everywhere, and she noticed they had cast the footprints in the snow.

After twenty minutes passed, Mike stuck his head in the living room. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, I'm more than ready."

He reached for the suitcase and waved to a few of the officers as they walked to his truck. He put the suitcase in the passenger's seat, and Lana slid in the middle.

Nothing was said for a couple miles. "What were you doing on the wall outside the bedroom?"

At first, he didn't want to tell her. He told Quent it could wait until they left, but Quent insisted the evidence had to be processed immediately. They had no way of knowing if it would rain or snow, so collecting evidence as quickly as possible was imperative. He took a deep breath before answering. "The man who came to the house masturbated on the wall outside the bedroom window."

A wave of panic swept through her. "That's disgusting! Does that mean he watched . . ." she paused to swallow. ". . . and listened?"

"I don't know, but I'm assuming he did."

"Oh, God, what the hell is going on around here? I need you to be honest with me. Do you think the men who delivered the wood had anything to do with this mess? Surely this can't be a coincidence."

"Here's the honest answer, I know it doesn't have anything to do with them. They're in jail. There were several footprints in the snow, and since

it snowed today, it has to be someone else. For now, we'll let the police do their investigation. Hopefully, they will have answers soon."

She stared ahead.

~Chapter 20~

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I called a friend. We're going to Marshfield, to his beach house rental. His name is Raymond Smith, and I work with him. He offered his house tonight so we'll have a safe place to stay."

She couldn't get the vision out of her mind. "Some man stood outside the house and watched us make love. I feel violated and embarrassed. Doesn't this ordeal bother you?" She suddenly felt desperately sick to her stomach. "Please pull over, I need to throw up."

By her reaction, he knew he had to hurry. He slammed on his brakes, and the truck slid to a stop just in time. She jumped out of the truck and didn't make it ten feet before she heaved. The pain in her head only heightened every time she vomited.

"What can I do for you?"

She cried and threw up at the same time, letting her emotions get the best of her. "Nothing. I'm sorry I got sick." Tears flowed uncontrollably. She knew none of this was Mike's fault. The whole thing seemed unbelievable to her. She led an ordinary life at home, and all this was more than she bargained for.

"We'll stop someplace and get something in your stomach. How does that sound?"

She stood up and took a deep breath. "How far do we have to go to get to Marshfield? Maybe we can get something to eat there." She could tell they were near the water because she could hear the ocean nearby.

"It's at the tip of a peninsula—about twenty minutes away."

"Tell me your thoughts, about the prowler."

"He was probably a vagrant wandering around the rentals, needing a place to sleep. Three years ago, I rented my beach house to a couple while they waited to close on their new home. One evening they called to mention a person next door. When we close for the winter the owners cut off trash services, and if I rent a house, I'll pick up the trash. Anyway, they noticed a lot of trash piled on the porch. The sad part was my tenants

could smell it. When I called the owners, they informed me that they had not rented the house. I went next door and arrested the man. It's a possibility that's what happened this time. I'm having Quent check the other houses, just to be safe."

"Whatever happened to the other guy who delivered the wood?"

"What do you mean the other guy?" He tried not to act shocked by the statement. His cop interrogation mode kicked in, but he would be extremely gentle with Lana.

"One of the guys you arrested was not one of the two who delivered the wood. The police officer said it was the old man's son. So, I just thought he must have two sons," she explained.

"Did you tell the police?"

"No, because they never came to talk to me. I fell asleep in the car."

"That might be who was at the house tonight."

The hurt in her stomach started acting up again when she remembered him and his demeanor. "I'd be a little shocked if it were him." She remembered how he acted timid. He nodded as she'd walked by then had looked down toward the ground. Nothing about him gave her the impression he would harm her.

"I'm going to stop at that diner to get something to eat." He pointed to the diner down the road. "Then we are going to talk about this."

They sat in a booth at the farthest corner. She felt better when she smelled food cooking and heard plates clattering. There were many people in the restaurant, including some truck drivers who sat at the counter and watched the news on the TV. The server walked over holding menus, but Lana ordered without looking at it. "I would like a small cheeseburger, well done, with a side of onion rings."

He ordered crab cakes with slaw. She guessed every place on the coast must have crab cakes and slaw. The waitress asked what they wanted to drink, and they both ordered tea. She wrote down their order and left while never looking up from her pad.

"I want to make sure I have this straight." Mike questioned, "The two men who delivered the wood are not the same two men arrested at the house?"

"That is correct."

"Also, the older man who delivered the wood told you the man in the truck was his son?"

"That is correct."

"Well, the older man who delivered the wood, according to detective Quentin, only has one son, and he's the one who was arrested at the house." When he saw the look on her face, he stood up, walked around the booth, and sat next to her. Then he talked softly because he didn't want anyone to overhear. "Baby, this is very important. What did the guy in the truck look like? Do you remember?" Mike waved over a waiter and asked for some paper.

"He had filthy hair a little below the ears, but not quite to the shoulders, and he had brown eyes. His hair was about the color of Kevin's . . . the police officer. He's about 5'11" and average build, not muscular and not fat. He had a small scar on his chin and a mole by his eyebrow . . . um . . . the left one. I noticed it because the hair in the mole was black. I guess it could be a birthmark, but I'm not sure. He was missing a front tooth, third from the left, or there was a gap. He had a tattoo on his hand that said 'Satan lives here', or something about Satan. I think he might have been missing a pinky fingernail, but I'm not sure—I didn't want to stare. I want you to know I am terrible about remembering names, but I never forget a face." She paused, trying to think of something she might have missed.

Mike's mouth dropped open in shock. "How did you get all that information from looking at him in a truck on a gloomy wet, snowy day?"

"When I brought the money to pay for the delivery, he had started unloading the truck."

"Baby, you should have told me. He could have been the guy who was there tonight. He could have come back to hurt you. If I had not been there, God only knows what might have happened to you."

Tears welled up in Lana's eyes.

He gave her a hug. "I've got to call Quent." As he grabbed his phone, the server brought their food, so he stood up and walked to a corner to talk in private.

When Mike sat down, Lana asked, "Do you think you will get him?" She played with her food. The onion rings weren't done enough for her; she liked them almost burned.

"I know we will, so don't worry your pretty little head about that. Besides, the description you gave and all those little details should cause something to pop up on the computer. I'm starved. Your burger looks

great, and it smells delicious."

She could tell he tried his best to reassure her. "I'm hungry, too; so much for the steak."

They looked at each other and grinned.

It amazed her how quickly he could put tragedy on the top shelf. She guessed that was the cop in him.

They pulled up to the rental house. The air was much colder on the peninsula. When they arrived, Raymond was inside cleaning up, turning everything on, and making the bed. Lana noticed he had a new brown Dodge Journey--so new it didn't have a license plate yet. She wondered if all the team liked Dodge vehicles.

Raymond greeted them at the door when he heard the truck.

"Hey, Raymond. I do appreciate you letting us use the house. I would like you to meet my girlfriend, Lana. Lana, this is a very good friend and colleague, Raymond Smith."

"Hi, it's nice to meet you. Thank you so much for allowing us to stay here." Lana noticed he seemed a little younger than Mike. He had hazel eyes and was about six feet tall with sandy-blond hair. His frame was small but well built.

Raymond looked bewildered about the girlfriend statement, but he didn't say anything. He knew when to ask questions, and now wasn't the time. "It's nice to meet you, too. I'm sorry to hear about your troubles." He glanced at his boss. He knew he could see in his eyes if there might be a problem, and the look told him the answer—yes. He would call later to get the scoop. "I'm going to head home if you don't think you'll need anything else. My wife sent some coffee, sugar and cream for morning."

"I don't think we need anything else. Thank you so much for giving us a place to stay," Mike said.

"No problem, and if you need anything else just call. Good night and it's nice to meet you, Lana."

"Same here, and tell your wife thanks for the goodies."

He nodded and left.

She noticed the house was smaller than the beach house. The colors were bright and vibrant, and she wondered if Raymond's wife had

decorated it.

Exhausted, Mike turned on the TV, she snuggled in next to him, and within a few minutes, they both fell asleep.

~Chapter 21~

Day 7

"So, what's the game plan for today?" Lana wanted to leave because all her things were at Mike's.

"We're waiting to hear back from Quent, and get the scoop about the third guy. I think we should stay put until we hear something. I could whip you again in a game of Scrabble."

Not paying attention to his invitation, her mind was preoccupied with more detrimental thoughts. "Mike, what type of women do you usually date?"

Wow, *that* question came out of left field. These types of questions always preceded something disastrous. His piercing look let her know he didn't want to go that direction, but he answered anyway. "Well . . ." he took a deep breath, "I usually dated tall, thin, and athletic women. Why do you ask?"

"I was curious, that's all. Are you saying you're not attracted to me?" She was heartbroken. This description didn't fit her at all, but she *did* ask, so she had to accept to the answer.

He rolled his eyes knowing her reaction was inevitable. "I'm just being honest. I told you I fell head over heels for you the minute I saw you. I don't think it has anything to do with the way you look; it's just a feeling. And maybe I've been dating the wrong type. It doesn't matter anymore because I have you, and I love you very much. Besides, I'm beginning to like the voluptuous type."

She shrugged. "I was just curious." The weird thing—she had pictured him dating women like that. He was tall, dark, and athletic himself, so why wouldn't he date that type?

"What did you like in me?" He couldn't resist asking. He had imagined her dating attorney types with suits and briefcases—someone who might wine and dine her, give her the best of everything. Visions that swept his mind were men around six feet tall, medium build, educated, wealthy, and into physical fitness. Definitely not cops—more the office

types.

"I don't know, I guess the same answer you gave. It's a feeling you get. I always said I would never date a cop or anyone who lived over fifty miles from my home. Look at me now, I have broken every rule I ever made. To answer your question, I've never been attracted to any particular type. Most of the time, I'm more interested in their personalities. With you, it was a combination of looks and personality. My heart skipped beats from the second I saw you. I think we have something called pheromones."

"What are pheromones?" Mike backed up and looked at her as if she had just made up a word.

"It's some kind of chemical our bodies release to attract the opposite sex. Don't look at me as if I'm crazy. It's a scientific fact. I read all about it."

"If you say so, but I think you're pulling my leg." He stared into her eyes trying to determine if she might be teasing him.

"I'm telling you the truth," she said as she sprawled out across his lap so he could hold her. She decided she wanted to smooch on this handsome man. Their kissing led to more passionate kissing and then his phone rang. *That damn phone.*

He grinned at her as if to say it happens every time. "Hello . . . Hey, Quent . . . Yeah . . . They finally told you? . . . Great . . . Pick him up . . . We'll be there . . . Let's hope this is the guy . . . Thanks, and we'll see you at 2:00." Mike looked at her as he pushed the end-call button. "Guess what? You got a reprieve. Quent thinks they have the other man who helped deliver the wood. They want you to come to the police department and look at a line-up. They need you to identify him."

"How does it work, me identifying him?"

"You will enter a room which has a tinted-glass window, and you will fill out a form with the number of the person you saw. That's all."

"He can't see me, right?"

"Not at all. Quent will be there the entire time, and I will be down the hall in another room."

"Will there be any other people in the room?"

"I don't know. When it's us, we don't allow anyone in the room but the detective and the witness. We are afraid of contamination and intimidation." Mike remembered one incident where a mother of the

suspect got into the identification room. When the victim pointed out her son, the mother ran over and attacked her. She called her a liar, pulled her hair, and hit on the poor girl. After that, the marshals changed their policy. He got angry just thinking about Lana in the room in case something happened. He would have a long talk with Quent when Lana wasn't around to hear.

"That doesn't sound so bad, but I do have one concern."

"What?"

"Do the police know what we were doing when this pervert was masturbating? I don't want them laughing at us. And if it *is* him, do you think he's talked about what he saw?" Her face turned red just thinking about it. She started twisting her hair out of nervousness.

"Honey, I would not think twice about what he saw. And yes, the police know. I'm sorry, but they had to know the truth about everything. There will not be any comments or snickering, but if there are—I will handle it."

"A man masturbates outside a window while two people are making love, and the police know. It really bothers me that they know." Hopefully they had enough respect for Mike they wouldn't ask any questions. But worst of all, what if she had to talk about it in court? The thought of that made her head start aching.

"Trust me when I say this is nothing compared to what the police have heard in the past."

"I'm sure they have, but that doesn't make me feel better."

"How about we go get some lunch, head back to Plymouth and enjoy the drive today." Mike wanted to get her mind off the police.

He opened the truck door for her to slide to the usual spot.

"I can't wait to eat; I'm getting a migraine," Lana said as she rubbed her temples.

"You don't look as though you feel well. Do you want me to call Quent and cancel our meeting?" He could see in her eyes that she wasn't up to par. Guilt filled his heart for fussing at her last night. He didn't realize the stress she had been under, and he should have been more considerate.

"No, I want to get all this mess behind me. If this is the guy, I will feel better when it's all over and we get back home."

Mike pulled into a diner. There were many cars parked there—a dead

giveaway the food must be good. When they walked in, the place was overflowing with people. Mike noticed a buffet through some double doors. His height allowed him to see over everyone. He leaned down where she could hear. "I'm going to check out the buffet. I might just get that if it looks fresh."

"I'll join you. I might get that, too." She didn't see a buffet at first, then her eyes widened when she saw it had four rows of food.

As they walked closer, many people were filling their plates, and the waiters were bringing out more food. The buffet was loaded with shrimp, crab, fried and baked chicken, meatloaf, pot roast, and just about every veggie you could think of. The other side of the room was a dessert and salad bar. The food looked delicious.

Mike leaned down to her ear and said, "I'm getting the buffet."

"Me, too."

They both piled their plates with food. They looked at each other's plate and laughed. His was piled with seafood, shrimp, crab cakes, salad, and coleslaw, while hers had pot roast, mashed potatoes and brown gravy, carrots, and salad. They were so opposite when it came to food. The only similarity was a salad. She didn't think he would survive in the south.

They didn't talk much during the meal; the place was loud and they were too busy feeding their faces. "I'm going to get some dessert, would you like some?" Mike asked while stacking his two plates of scraps.

"No, thanks, but you enjoy. I'm sure when you stand all the food will drop to your hollow legs."

"Then I'll be ready for the second round of dinner," he replied with a wink.

He left, and she knew it would take him a little while because the line was long. She was full, so she didn't care. All she wanted was to relax a few minutes and watch the people. She could tell the locals from the visitors. The locals were dressed in warm clothing, bundled head to toe, while the visitors were all dressed similar to how they dress in the south with unpractical clothing for the frigid weather. She noticed that with Mike, as well. He certainly dressed warmer than she did. Watching the people made her realize she needed to go shopping for a heavier coat.

Glancing over at the buffet, for a split second she thought she saw someone she knew. He had just grabbed his plate and started waiting in line. A loud crash distracted her and when she glanced back, he had

vanished. She searched all around the restaurant, but she didn't see him anywhere. Not remembering where she saw him would drive her crazy. Where did she know his face? He looked right at her, staring. For some reason, he looked mad at her.

Mike walked back with about four different desserts: brownies, ice cream, chocolate pudding, and blackberry cobbler. "What's the matter?" he asked as he looked around, trying to see what had caught her eye.

"I just saw someone I've seen before, but I can't remember where I saw him."

He acted concerned because she shouldn't know anyone from around there. "Did you know him from around Plymouth? Or do you know him from someplace else?"

"I'm not sure. I just can't put my finger on it. Maybe I'll remember later, and when I do, you'll be the first to know. The oddest thing is he had just picked up his plate for the buffet, but then walked out before filling it."

"What did he look like, maybe I can spot him?"

"Short, about five-eleven with salt-and-pepper hair and balding on the top, stocky, barrel-chested, and he had on a plaid shirt with blue jeans. Maybe I saw him around the Plymouth area."

"If you see him again, let me know right away," he said while looking at his watch. "We need to be heading to the police department."

"I agree." She took the last bite of his blackberry cobbler before standing.

They sat in silence while waiting in the holding room at the police department. Waiting for Quent made her nervous, and it made her headache worse. To pass the time, she looked at all the pictures of past police chiefs hanging on the wall. One picture showed a car which was shot up, and it looked as though it was old. It reminded her of Bonnie and Clyde's car. She knew it wasn't theirs, but it sure did look like it.

Lana's headache got worse by the minute, and she was more than ready to get out of there. She closed her eyes and rested her head on the table. The coolness felt good on her cheek.

Mike looked at his watch, and as time ticked away, he got more

anxious. He worried about Lana because her eyes didn't look good at all. Without a doubt, she didn't feel well. He had decided if Quent didn't come within fifteen minutes he would take her home.

They both jumped when Quent flung the door open. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Are you ready?" he asked with clipboard in hand, smiling.

"As ready as I'll ever be." She took a deep breath and took one last look at Mike.

Mike gave her a quick kiss to reassure her. "I'll be here waiting, and Quent will be with you every minute. I love you. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"I love you, too."

When Detective Quentin opened the door to the observation room, several people stood in the back. She couldn't see any faces because her eyes had not adjusted to the dark. Nobody said a word, but there were many stares—some seemed friendly, and some didn't. That exasperated her even more. Lana always introduced herself to strangers, so this silence unnerved her.

Detective Quentin explained the process. "Ms. Andrews, several people will walk out holding numbers in front of them. You need to write down the number of the person you saw unloading the truck on October 23rd. Are you ready?"

She took a deep breath and answered with a squeaky voice, "Yes."

He got on the intercom and said, "Send them out, please."

Several men filed out, and she carefully looked at each one as they walked past her. They all stood facing her, and after a few minutes, they were told to turn sideways. Then they turned to the front again. She looked closely at each one, and unequivocally knew number three was the right man. She wrote it down, and said, "He is number three."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Thank you, Ms. Andrews. I'll take you back."

Wow, that's it. That wasn't bad. She walked out without looking back at any of the people. Picking the right man relieved the tension in her shoulders. She couldn't wait to get back to tell him he was right, she didn't have to worry. Picking him out had been a walk in the park, a piece of cake. The minute she saw Mike, she started bawling.

Mike tightened his lips and held her. "What happened?" Then he looked at Quent for answers. He was ready to attack if needed.

Quent shrugged his shoulders and nodded. His gesture let Mike know she picked him, and he didn't know why she seemed upset.

"I'm just glad it's over. I have a terrible headache." She wanted to go home.

As they walked out of the waiting room, an officer walked up and whispered to Detective Quentin. Quent turned to them and said, "You're big news with the break-in and Frank's murder. Somehow, the reporters found out you're here, and now they're camped out front. Do you want us to drive you back to where you're staying?"

"We don't want anyone to know where we're staying, but thanks anyway. How about you drive my truck to the back, and we'll leave that way."

"They're also in the back. You know the media always cover every exit." Quent thought a minute and came up with an alternative. "We can go through the jail, but I'll have to make sure the inmates are out of sight."

"Let's do it." Mike had his fill with reporters. If he didn't see another reporter for the next five years, he would be happy.

Quent sent an officer to clear a path through the jail.

They exited through a barred door. Everyone was quiet except the jailer. He pushed buttons letting guards through the sally ports. One gate had to be closed before another opened, and the process took about twenty seconds. Mike looked at Lana and noticed she looked extremely pale, and her pupils were dilated. "Baby, are you okay?"

She didn't answer. What he said was unintelligible to her.

The two men looked at each other.

"Can you hear me?" Mike asked with noticeable concern.

Lana looked at them, but her eyes couldn't focus. "I need to sit down . . ." She fainted. She fell and hit her head on the edge of the desk with a hard thud. Mike managed to catch her before she hit the ground.

"Quent, call an ambulance!"

He didn't have to, the jailer had already asked for help through his police radio.

She woke up on a gurney in the police department with many officers standing around gawking, hoping something exciting would happen. When it was obvious she would be okay, they went back to work.

She didn't feel a thing, in fact, she felt fantastic. Her body could be lifted with a feather.

"Welcome back. I was worried about you," said Mike, trying to act cheery, but his face showed worry. In his job, he had worried about many things, but worrying about Lana topped them all.

"What happened?" she asked even though she didn't care.

"You fainted," answered Mike while holding her hand.

"What's today?" For some reason, she had lost track of time. "I have to catch my plane home." Panic showed in her voice.

"You don't have to catch your plane for several days." Her incoherency worried him even more. He looked at the medic for answers.

"Her losing track of time is normal. It's the medicine. When she leaves, make sure she drinks lots of water to flush her system. Let her get lots of fresh air to clear her mind. Other than her head hurting, she will be fine in a few hours. Keep in mind she might say some crazy things."

Mike smiled when he asked the next question. "Is the medicine like a truth serum?" He knew he could tease Lana later with this bit of information. And maybe he could find out her true feelings for him.

"Maybe, it depends on what's on her mind." He finished putting everything away in his medical bag.

"Hey, you, medical man," Lana waved to the medic.

Mike laughed. *Now I know what the medic meant.*

"Yes, ma'am?" He couldn't help but grin at her.

"What did you give me? *I feel good.* You know, that's a James Brown song. I bet you didn't think I knew that."

"Yes, ma'am, I figured you did. The doctor gave you Valium."

Mike was glad to see her in good spirits, even if it was medically induced. "Honey, the young man has to go back to work and help someone else."

"Yep, you don't want to get fired," she said yawning.

Detective Quent tried to act jolly. "Well, I think you found your way out. Cody, give Mike your jacket and walk him out to his truck then follow him to the CVS Pharmacy on Southern Artery." Quent turned to the medic. "John, can you follow them there and move Lana to Mike's

truck? We're trying to avoid the media."

"Sure. It would be my pleasure."

Mike reached down and kissed her, hating to leave her side. He lingered, holding her hand for a few seconds. "I'll see you in a few minutes. I love you."

She said to the medic, "Hey, medicine man. He loves me, did you hear him?"

The medic grinned. "Yes, I did."

They made their way out, and she could see the media videotaping and taking pictures. The police stayed in front of them all the way across the street. She could hear questions asking whether she had been stabbed or shot. All the reporters talked and asked questions at the same time. As she glanced over at them, she saw someone she knew. Her mind seemed fuzzy, and she couldn't figure out how she knew him. He stared right at her as though he might be mad at her, then his snarled mouth turned to a grin.

They pulled up at CVS and Mike ran to her side. "Thanks, Cody, for helping. Baby, do you feel okay? Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine, I don't feel a thing," she truthfully answered.

When they got in the truck, Mike buckled her in the middle. He knew he could lean her head against his shoulder. That position seemed to be the most comfortable for her, so he propped her head slightly behind his shoulder. It was uncomfortable for him, but he knew it kept her head and neck secure. Within a few seconds, Lana fell sound asleep. He had to smile at her when he noticed her mouth wide open. Although tempted to take her picture, he didn't. He decided he would never embarrass her like that—at least not until he got to know her a little better.

An abrupt stop woke her up, and she realized they were at Mike's beach house. She was surprised. "Why did we come back here?"

"Since we have the bad guy behind bars, there's no reason not to come home. Do you want to go back to Marshfield? If you feel safer there, I don't mind going back at all." He didn't want to take her. He did worry about the bump on her head because it was the size of a golf ball. If they went back to Raymond's beach house, it would take longer to get her to the hospital.

"No, I like your bed, and this is fine with me. Right now, I just want to sleep. I don't know what they gave me, but all I want to do is sleep."

They walked in, and she noticed the steak had been removed and the house had been cleaned. She went straight to the bedroom, changed into her T-shirt and drank two tall glasses of water before going to bed.

Mike wanted her to drink all the water she could hold down. He sat a full glass on the nightstand.

With one last glance at his baby, he quietly shut the bedroom door.

Mike heard a knock on the door, and it was his brother Lance. As he opened it, both men were grinning from ear to ear. Although their faces were mirror images, Mike was eight inches taller than his older brother.

"It's good to see you. Thanks for coming over here and cleaning up after CSI finished," Mike said as he gave his brother a hug.

"You're welcome. How is Lana?" He could tell how much his brother had fallen for this lady. Love was written all over his face.

"She's great. She's sleeping right now. Do you want to see what an angel she is?"

"No, I'll meet her later when she's ready to meet the family. Maybe we can all get together before she goes home. You're smitten, aren't you?"

"Lance, since Kathy, I have never loved anyone as much as I love this woman. As I told you, she is not the typical woman I date, but there is not one hair on that girl's head I would change. She's intelligent, beautiful, outgoing and man, can she cook. Also, she can keep up with me in Scrabble." He laughed as he looked at the Scrabble game on the coffee table. "You know me and Scrabble—I always said I would marry the first woman who could beat me at my favorite game. And she is good." His heart raced just talking about her. He couldn't stop grinning.

"I can't wait to meet her," said Lance.

"I can't, either. You'll meet her soon."

"What caused her to faint?"

"We think it's the stress of everything. She's been through a lot the last couple of days, and she hasn't been sleeping the best. It finally all caught up with her. She's sleeping now, and I'm going to encourage her to rest the last few days here. It's over until she has to testify."

"I don't blame you—you have to protect her from all of this. This is your everyday life, but not hers. I think you're doing the right thing by not

exposing her to any more of this than necessary. I'm so proud you found her; she sounds like a terrific gal."

"Yeah, she is," said Mike as his phone rang, and he held up a finger to tell his brother just a minute. "Hey, Quent . . . What? . . . Are you sure? . . . I'll call Raymond now . . . Thanks for letting me know." Mike's face turned white as he flipped his phone shut.

"What's wrong?" Lance asked.

"The blood type of Greg Poll, the guy Lana identified today, is not the same as the sperm found on the window."

"What does that mean?"

"The blood type doesn't match any of the men in jail. We don't know who was in the house."

Lance put his hand on his brother's shoulder and said, "I know you will figure this out, you always do. You know you both are welcome to stay with us. We live in a gated community."

"Thanks, but I don't want to put her through the stress of all this *and* meeting my family. Besides, you know our policy with the marshals, stay away from populated areas if possible. I do appreciate the offer, though."

Lance stood, gave his brother a much-needed hug, and said, "Good luck. You know where I am if you need me."

"Thanks. I'll call you when I know more."

Mike watched Lance drive off while pulling out his phone to call his team together.

~Chapter 22~

Lana stirred, trying to wake up. She heard men talking in the other room and thought it might be the TV. Their words prodded her to listen closer. She heard something about masturbating and blood typing. She turned in the bed and leaned her ear toward the door to listen better.

What time was it? She glanced at the clock, and it read seven-thirty. The bathroom light was on, and she figured Mike had turned it on for her. She saw the glass of water on the nightstand and drank every drop. Everything seemed like a dream. She sat up in bed for a moment, trying to remember her day. The last thing she could recall was when they were leaving the jail.

She crawled out of bed and splashed some water on her face, shocked

by her reflection in the mirror. A black and blue goose egg covered the right side of her forehead. For the first time since she met Mike, she was embarrassed by her appearance. Regardless of how she looked, she wanted to know who had come to visit. She peeked out and saw several men with guns. *What the heck?* She took a deep breath and walked in the living room.

One of the men called for Mike.

"Hi, babe. You should be in bed resting." Looking at her made him worry because she looked pale and frail.

"I'm better. Can we talk?" She didn't know why all these men were standing around in the living room. They had to be football players, linebackers—they were giants. None of them looked at Lana. She thought it was because of the bump on her head, and they didn't know what to say.

"Sure, let's go in the bedroom. Excuse us; I'll be back in a few minutes." Mike placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her.

"Why are all these men here?" she asked while sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Well . . . we have a little problem. The blood type on the window doesn't match any of the men in jail."

Although she was groggy, the news hit her like a ton of bricks. "Umm . . . so there's another guy?"

"Yes."

Here again, he only gave short answers, and she didn't want short answers. "Is that why there are gun-packing men out there?"

"Yes, these are the men who work for me, and they're here to help find this other guy. All this is just a precaution until we find out who broke into my house. We decided it was best to use the beach house as our headquarters. This allows you to rest."

"Maybe I'm stupid, but I don't get it. Who in the world would do something like this?"

"Honey, I don't know. That's why I've called my team to investigate, and we've already started."

"This whole situation is crazy. I don't know what to say. I can't imagine the sperm wasn't from one of those three guys." She looked in Mike's eyes for answers. "Do you think it has anything to do with you?"

"Sometimes the bad guys *do* come after law enforcement, but it doesn't happen often." From years of questions from families, he knew not

to give any more information than necessary.

"If they were after you, why didn't they kill us while we were making love? Who would go through all this trouble?" Her mind was fuzzy as she tried to comprehend all this new information.

"You can't predict what goes through their minds. It's a possibility they wanted to scare us, or it could even be a fluke, random crime."

"If they were trying to scare me, they've done a good job."

"Until we see if we can match the blood type, we have to work every angle. Honey, I told you I wouldn't lie—we even have to work the angle that someone might be after you."

"*Me?* I don't know why anyone would be after me?" Deep down, she knew no one was after her. She also knew it was Mike's job to check that angle anyway. She leaned her head on his shoulder, needing some reassurance.

He didn't need any coaxing to put his arm around her. Worry devoured his rational thinking . . . was someone after Lana? "Tonight, I want you to rest since you already fainted once, and you don't need to do that again. When you're feeling better, why don't you come out and meet the team? I know they would love to meet you."

"I would love to meet them, too."

Mike looked at the big bump on her head. "That is a huge goose egg. Does it hurt?"

"Yeah, but I think I feel worse from the drugs. One thing for sure about this medicine, it makes me hungry. I'm starving. Maybe it made my metabolism off-balance. I feel like I haven't eaten in a week."

"We ordered pizza if you're in the mood, but if you want something else I'll send one of the guys to get it for you. I'm glad you have an appetite."

"Pizza sounds great. I'll walk out with you." She couldn't wait to meet the men. They were a crucial part of Mike's life, so they would be important to her.

All the men had left but two, and the ones left were busy setting up computers and printers. When she walked in the living room, both men turned to her and nodded. One was Raymond whom she had already met, and she walked over and shook his hand. The other man was younger, buff and had a friendly smile. She walked over and introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Lana Andrews, and you are . . .?"

"Joe Badger, ma'am. I've heard a lot of nice things about you."

"Oh, really? Well, I'll have to talk to you later and find out what you've heard." She looked at Mike and winked. Immediately, she knew she would like Joe. He was about six-foot-three with dimples, brown hair and brown eyes . . . about twenty-eight years old. His hair was longer than some of the older agents and slicked back like a gangster, making him stand out above the other officers. His personality was different from the other men as well. He seemed more kindhearted than the rest of the deputies.

"Uh-oh," he said while looking at Mike.

Mike grinned and winked at Joe as if to say, *give her a hard time*. But when Joe saw the giant goose egg on her forehead, he didn't have the heart.

On the kitchen counter, there were two boxes of pizza with only five slices left. She took the last slice of pepperoni, poured some diet Pepsi and sat down at the bar. The pizza was warm, and she was glad she didn't have to wait for it to cool.

Mike sat on the barstool next to her. "Is that all you're going to eat?"

"Yep, that's a lot for me. This is a large slice of pizza."

"I think I ate an entire box."

She took a bite of pizza and pointed at the boxes that were empty, about twenty. "How many men were here?"

"Six."

Her eyes widened. "Six of you ate all that pizza?"

"Joe ate three boxes by himself."

"Are you pulling my leg?" She could tell by his bright eyes and grin that he was giving her a hard time.

"Yep, I'm teasing you. I think we had fifteen men here. They were coming and going all evening, bringing computers and tables, so I just ordered a bunch. Do you want some medicine?" Her eyes looked lethargic.

"The medicine *would* make me feel better but when I take it, I feel sleepy and hungry. Would you still love me if I gained weight?"

"Honey, you could gain a few pounds. Besides, I would love you no matter what. If you need some medicine, don't worry about sleeping. Since we're going to be up most of the night anyway, you might as well sleep."

She leaned over and asked softly, "If I *do* take some medicine, will I be in the way if I stay in the living room and talk with you all for a little

while?"

"I'd love that. You can come in the living room any time you want, or you can go to bed and watch TV. You can also watch Netflix in the bedroom. You go wherever makes you feel comfortable."

About that time, Raymond walked in and poured himself some coffee. He was quiet, so she spoke first. "I bet you all go through a lot of coffee during your cases."

"Yes, ma'am. Folgers loves us when we have an investigation going strong. In that sense, we're the true stereotypical cops. We even like donuts," he said while grinning.

Mike added, "We order a lot of pizzas, as well."

Lana laughed as she looked at the stack of pizza boxes and nodded in agreement. "I see that. How many do you all order?"

The men looked at each other.

Raymond stared at the ceiling, trying to remember. "I think it was the Costella case when we ordered over three hundred boxes of pizza, and we only had four people working."

Lana toggled glances between the two. "You're kidding, right?"

Mike raised his eyebrows and answered, "He's right. Pizza was the only decent food for miles. It was in a town called Matamoros, Texas. We were there about six weeks, and we ate pizza for lunch and supper. I hated pizza for a long time after that job." He glanced at Raymond. "I don't think we ordered pizza for several months after that case."

"At least seven months." Raymond cringed at the thought of how much pizza they consumed. He rummaged through the empty box of donuts.

She suddenly realized he wanted something sweet, and she did, too. "How about I make a batch of chocolate chip cookies? Would you guys like some homemade cookies?"

"Yes, ma'am, that sounds delicious," Joe answered from the living room.

"Let's see what we can do about that." She didn't think she had everything she needed for the cookies, but she could make some brownies. When she opened the cabinets and fridge, they were empty. *What the hell?* She looked bewildered.

Mike and Raymond looked at each other, Mike answered, "We had all the food sent to the crime lab—everything in the cabinet and the

refrigerator."

"Why?"

"Since we know someone was in the house, we don't know if they did anything to the food. But if you want something sweet, Joe can go to the store. Besides, I don't want you to have to do a thing. Doctor's orders, you need to rest."

"Mike, you don't understand—cooking relaxes me. I do understand about the food, and I would be devastated if something happened. I sure could eat something sweet, though. Do you mind if we run to the store and get something to cook and more coffee and creamer? Besides, I could use some fresh air."

He could tell by the look in her eyes she was determined, and the store was only a few miles up the road. "I don't mind taking you. Joe and Raymond can stay and watch the house." He remembered the medic telling him she needed fresh air. Getting away from the house would relax her.

Joe smiled and said, "I don't mind at all."

She could tell Mike didn't want her to go, but they did need groceries. His look did not deter her, and she picked up her coat. "Are you ready?" She quickly made a mental note of everything she needed for cookies and breakfast. Sam's Grocery was the closest, and she knew they had the basic ingredients.

"Yes, ma'am," he said while grabbing her hand.

It felt good to get out of the house. The cold air woke her up and cleared her lungs, so she took long, deep breaths.

Mike knew every breath she took helped clear her head. Immediately he saw a change in her eyes, they were coming back to life.

Joe walked them out and stood on the porch as they drove away.

They got maybe a tenth of a mile when Mike's phone talked to him.

Joe called him on his walkie-talkie. "Hey, Mike, you may want to do a 311. A 412 is in progress."

Mike turned off his lights, slammed on his brakes and backed in between trees. The SUV was dark and would be well hidden.

"What is a 311 and a 412?" She asked.

"That's a code we use with our team. We are the only ones who know it, so if anyone listens in on our frequency, they don't know our plan. A 311 is a car left with their lights off, and they are following us. The 412

means Joe is on his way to us as we speak. Raymond will stay at the house," he explained while watching the road.

"Joe stood outside listening?"

"Yes, we always listen when an agent leaves in case someone is following. That's one of the reasons we try to stay at isolated places, so we can hear and see what goes on around us."

"That's smart."

"Lana, I want you to take a close look at this car as it drives by to see if you know this person." Mike pulled his Glock from his side and held it just in case he needed it.

Concern and guilt overwhelmed her. What if there were several people in the car, and they got out and shot at them? "Okay. What do you want me to do if someone starts shooting?"

"Duck, and if you have to run, run toward Joe. He'll protect you."

The Explorer crept by, but the windows were too foggy to see anything. Mike instantly turned on his lights and darted out of their hiding place, chasing the SUV. "If you need a gun, there's one in the glove box." If Lana wouldn't have been with him, he would have rammed the SUV or at least pulled out in front of it so he could stop them. He should have listened to his instincts and left her at home.

"Are you kidding me? What do you mean *if I need a gun*? You're going after him?" *Oh, God, not again!* She held on for dear life, praying.

"Yep, we always want the upper hand." He knew she wouldn't understand the danger of it all. Like a firefighter running into a burning building when everyone else runs the opposite direction, cops chase the dangerous guys when other people run away from them.

"If you need me to do something, let me know," muttered Lana.

"Shoot out his tires." Mike grinned, waiting for the shocked look she was about to give him.

"I thought I would shoot the gas tank and blow it to smithereens."

"Grab your gun, Annie Oakley."

The man saw them chasing him, and he drove faster and faster. "Lana, get your cell phone and text the license plate to me." He had his phone and was talking to Joe. "Joe, Lana is texting me the plate number. We are in pursuit of a green Ford Explorer, maybe a 2001. Looks like only one person, but the windows are foggy."

Joe responded, "I'm right behind you and I see your taillights not far

ahead. Be careful, the road is slick."

Mike put both hands on the wheel as they slid side to side. He focused on his driving, when all of a sudden they spun out of control and hit a guardrail on a bridge, bounced off, then landed in the ditch.

"Are you okay?" He tried to drive out of their predicament, but they were stuck.

"Yes," she said.

"Hey, Joe, I ditched the SUV. You need to hurry up and get here."

"I'm right here."

Mike and Lana got in Joe's SUV and started their pursuit of the Explorer, but it was long gone. They stopped, and Mike got out. He was pissed. "We should have had him."

Joe knew exactly what to say. "We have a license plate, make, and model. We'll get him. The police will be here in a few minutes. Meanwhile, let's call in the license plate." Mike immediately looked up his text and Joe called dispatch.

She walked back to Joe's SUV and sat down.

When Mike calmed down, he walked over to her. "Are you okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm okay. I thought that was kind of fun, but I wouldn't want to do it again."

Joe interrupted. "The license plate came back registered to Eddie and Donna Borders. They live out here just a few blocks from you off Wabash Road. My guess is he stole the Explorer. Let's hope they're not home."

"We should head over there and call our crime scene investigators, just in case. We'll grab a few things at the convenience store then head over to the Borders' house," said Mike.

Joe called Detective Quent and told him about the incident and the Borders.

"Don't worry about me; I'll grab what they have. I know you need to work to catch this bastard," said Lana. Joe drove them to the store, and they grabbed some snacks, coffee, milk, and water.

They were heading to Wabash Road when Mike got a call from Quent. "Mike, we can't get hold of the Borders, and we found your Explorer. No one was found around it, and it's being processed as we speak. We'll be there in about fifteen minutes. If you get there first, call me before you do anything—he might go back to the house."

"We'll be there in a couple minutes. I'll let you know what we find."

Wabash Road was dark, and it didn't look like anyone was home at any of the houses. That was a relief for Lana. She had hoped the Explorer had been a vacation vehicle.

When they pulled up, Joe tried to position the SUV so the lights would shine on the house. The angle of the house was higher than the road, which caused the headlights to reflect off the snow. "Lana, I want you to lock the doors, and if you see or hear anything, honk. Joe and I will be here in just a few seconds. Okay?"

"Yes, please be careful." She locked the doors and noticed they were careful not to step on the snow that had prints.

Joe knocked on the door, and they had their guns drawn. When no one answered the door, Mike motioned for Joe to go around to the back of the house. He had been gone a long time, but after several minutes, she could see his flashlight before she saw him. Joe pointed to the back left side of the house. Mike shook his head side to side. Then he got out his phone and made a call. If she happened to be right about the body language, Joe found them dead.

To her right, she could see police lights coming. Mike saw them as well and knew he would be busy when they arrived. He quickly walked back to the SUV. "Baby, we'll be here for a while, so Raymond is coming to get you. He'll take you back to the beach house and stay with you."

"How long do you think you'll be?"

"I think it'll be at least a couple of hours."

She hated to ask, but she had to know. "Are they dead?"

He looked in her eyes. "Yes." He had hoped she wouldn't ask. He stayed with her until Raymond arrived, which was only a few seconds. Mike opened the door for her and hugged her for a long time. Raymond just sat in his SUV, not saying a word. They walked around to the passenger door, and Mike kissed her then set the bags of groceries in on the floorboard. "Take good care of her. I'll be home in a couple of hours."

"Yes, sir."

Within seconds, they were at Mike's beach house. When they turned the corner, Lana could see all the police lights.

"Wait here while I make sure everything checks out okay." He stepped out of the truck and thoroughly checked the house. His demeanor was totally different from Mike. Mike would give instructions on what to

do if anything happened, but Raymond didn't say one word during their short ride to the house. It was obvious to her that he was the serious, quiet deputy. He waived her in.

While Lana made fresh coffee, she wanted to break the silence. "I see you guys work well together."

"Yes, ma'am. Joe is the youngest of all of us, but he's caught on fast."

"I have to say I admire you guys and all the work you do. It amazes me how you all work as if this is everyday stuff. I'm stressed enough for ten people. Does your wife get stressed?"

"Sometimes she does, especially if we are in the field and she doesn't hear from me for a couple of days. Not long ago we were serving a felony warrant in New Mexico. The guy we were staking out was literally in the middle of the desert. We had no phone service, so I couldn't call her. We were not allowed to break radio silence, so she worried a lot on that one."

Lana thought about how awful that would be not talking to Mike for two days. She missed him after two hours. "How does she handle it?"

"Prayer."

"I'm glad to hear that. I want to say I'm sorry you have to be here now and not with your family."

"My wife and I look at it like this, every minute I'm away from her, I'm keeping her and other Americans safe."

"Wow, that's a great way to look at the situation." She would have to remember that for the future. "Raymond, why did you use the word Americans instead of citizens or people?"

"Our team is an anti-terrorism team, and we serve warrants. We were formed after September 11. It was a word our team decided to use as part of our terminology."

"So, why are you working this case?"

"Because of Mike. We normally don't work jobs which don't have anything to do with terrorism, but this is an exception."

"If you're on the anti-terrorism team, then why was Frank killed on a drug bust?"

"Well, we only tell the media what we want them to tell the public."

"That makes sense. Do you have many terrorists who are female?" She didn't know why she thought of that, and she expected him to say no.

"Not many, but the numbers keep rising. That makes it hard on us because we can't be gentle on them. People sometimes don't understand

why we get rough with a woman, but they can tote a bomb just as easily as a man. And they can fly planes, as well."

"I guess I never thought about it that way, but you're right. In your business, you can't trust anyone."

She felt so proud to have men like Raymond and Mike protecting her. She now knew how the wives of the soldiers in Iraq felt. "I want to thank you for taking care of me."

"You are welcome," he softly said.

"Thank you for your honesty. If you don't mind, I'm going to go to bed."

"Absolutely, just call me if you need anything."

"I will, and you do the same."

~Chapter 23~

Day 8

It wasn't even daylight when one of the agents knocked on the bedroom door.

"What do you need?" Mike asked without moving one muscle. He was exhausted after only a couple of hours of sleep.

His mouth was near her ear, and his voice seemed louder than normal.

"I don't want to get up," he whispered.

Joe stood outside the door. "Sorry to bother you, sir. I just wanted to let you know Detective Quentin is here to see you."

"I'll be out in a minute." Mike pulled Lana closer and kissed her on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir," Joe answered.

"As much as I want to snuggle, I've got to get busy. But you sleep in and come out whenever you want." He sat on the edge of the bed for a few seconds then gathered enough energy to walk to the bathroom. He didn't turn on any lights until he shut the door.

She rolled over to where Mike had been sleeping and tried to doze off while snuggling with his pillow. She could smell the faint hint of his cologne.

Quent was hanging his coat in the front closet as Mike walked in the living room. "Hey, Mike, I'm sorry to bother you so early, but I thought you would want to know what we found at the Borders' house and in the

Explorer." Quent noticed Mike looked tired with dark circles under his bloodshot eyes. He always looked professional, but today he had on workout pants and a T-shirt. He wasn't going to the office, so he might as well be comfortable. He thought the stress was getting to Mike a little bit.

He scanned the room and saw all the boards set up with posted pictures, timelines, and a blank spot for blood types and DNA. In the far-left corner, a computer was set up with a printer. The marshals were always prepared and ready to go.

"I hope you have good news." Mike extended his arm to persuade Quent to move to the living room to sit.

Quent reached in his shirt pocket and grabbed the notebook where he had written his notes. He also grabbed a couple of Tums. When he stayed up all night, his stomach produced excess acid and he had to sit up to sleep. Six antacid tablets every morning did the trick. "We did find some hair evidence in the Explorer and at the Borders's home. We know Mrs. Borders bit the perp. The coroner found blood around her mouth and couldn't find any other source of the blood. He also said they have been dead about three days. The crime scene investigators left the house a few minutes ago. Hopefully we'll know all the blood types within the hour."

"Lana has been here a few days; do you think that's a coincidence?" Mike asked.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. We need to check everyone's blood type, to rule them out or make them a suspect. And Mike, I have to be honest, the three clowns' alibis are panning out, at least so far. They were not even in this part of the state earlier this week. They have family in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and their phone records and gas receipts prove they were there. All we're waiting for is the video from some of the gas stations they say they stopped at. I know this is not what you want to hear, but I don't think they killed Johnson, either. He's been dead at least three days, and I think they were truthful when they said they stole the truck and cell phone. The cell phone number is the one that is on the internet. The only crimes they are guilty of so far are burglary, attempted rape, and grand theft auto. I can assure you, the DA will not charge them on the attempted rape because Lana never entered the house. Although they admitted they were there to rape her, they never laid a hand on her."

"That doesn't surprise me, and you found Johnson?" Mike stayed busy writing notes.

"Yes, we found his body just down the road, and it looks like he leaned against a tree and died. His body is at the medical examiner now. I'll let you know the results. We know he died after or about the same time as the Borders because his daughter last talked to him four days ago."

"Do you think he died of natural causes?"

"Any other time I would say yes, but with everything else going on, I think he was murdered. But I hope I'm wrong."

"It does seem too coincidental. I guess the next step is to turn the case over to the Feds." Mike was ready to hit this case head-on because there were high stakes in this crime. However, he wanted Quent to ask for help. That's the courteous way to handle it. He had a strong working relationship with him and didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that.

"Mike, I can't tie the three suspects to any of these crimes, but I'll have the lab keep working on it. Give me through the morning and I'll be glad to hand it to you. I have to make sure everything is in order for my captain."

"I understand how the chain of command works. When do you think the blood type results will be finished?"

"I'm hoping within the hour or so. They've been running samples all night. I told them not to call me until they have all the samples checked. We had over two hundred, so it will take a little while. I don't want them to come in bits and pieces."

"Thanks for doing that. I guess we'll wait for those. How about I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"You're on, and then I'm heading home—it's been a long night. Maybe the results of the blood types will be in before I leave."

Mike patted Quent on the shoulder, and they walked into the kitchen. Quent would have made a top-notch federal agent. He always thought three steps ahead. Most importantly, he was an honest man. Many cops would have thrown the book at these three clowns and been done with it, but Quent always wanted the truth. His looks did fit the typical cop stereotype. He was extremely overweight—some might say obese. He had the military haircut that was so short it looked like he was bald on the top of his head. Some women might find him attractive, but most probably would not. Mike commented to Quent many times he married one of the nicest women in the county. She stood by her husband when he almost died from a staph infection a few years ago. For years, she had been

strongly involved in all the police functions and fundraisers like ‘crime stoppers’. Between the two of them, they had seven children, two each from previous marriages and three together. What Mike liked best about Quent was his honesty. Mike would have been proud to have this fine cop on his team. "So, Quent, how do you like your coffee?" Mike reached in the cabinet and pulled out two mugs.

"Black," answered Quent.

"That's how I like it, too." He poured two mugs of steaming-hot coffee and put the plate of pastries on the bar so they both could reach them.

Quent eyed the several varieties and picked the raspberry, he reckoned it was the sweetest. "I see you guys started your investigation," he said between sips of hot coffee and bites of donut.

Mike noticed powdered sugar around his mouth and handed him a paper towel; Quent took the hint and wiped his mouth. "Well, after getting your news this morning, we will be starting from scratch. We were leaning toward the three guys but after your information, we'll have to develop more theories." Mike reached in the fridge for some French vanilla cream. It was pretty good stuff, and he wanted something sweet besides a pastry.

While blowing on his coffee, Quent said, "You are not starting from scratch. You know these three aren't suspects anymore, so there will be no need to waste your time on these petty criminals."

"Eliminating them does help us, and we can thank you for that." Mike didn't want to tell this to Quent, but he would have their lab double-check all the results. It wasn't a federal law enforcement policy to do that—it was Mike's policy. The state had made errors in past cases, so the Feds insisted on double-checking the lab work, especially when there were three murders involved.

"That's my job, and you've helped me out plenty of times on past cases. Remember that little girl rape case several years back? You had your lab process the work three times faster than ours, and you helped save another girl from being raped."

He knew he would never forget that case. A pedophile with a life sentence escaped a mental hospital in Portland, Oregon. DNA was fairly new, and the state lab required several weeks for the results to come back. Mike pulled favors at the FBI and got the results in several days. Then the FBI ran the results through the database and got a hit in a matter of

minutes. They were shocked the man got all the way to Plymouth without being detected. They ran a check and found three other little girls had been raped on his route across the country. They literally captured him seconds before he abducted another child. "I was more than glad to help. I just wish all local and federal levels worked together as well as you and me."

Their conversation was interrupted by Quent's phone. He reached into his pocket for his pen and pad so he could take notes. "It's the lab; maybe it's the results. Quent speaking . . . yeah . . . great job . . . thanks for putting a rush on this. I know Mike will appreciate it . . . keep me informed." He wrote down the information before continuing. "Well, we've got good news and bad news."

"I'm ready. What did they find?" Mike listened intently.

"The blood on Ms. Borders's mouth is male B-, and that's the good news: we've got a blood type. The lab wasn't sure they could get anything since it was a small sample and the killer poured bleach on her mouth."

Mike turned pale but didn't have to ask.

Quent answered Mike's questioning face. "She was already dead when he poured the bleach." They both had been in law enforcement long enough to hope the victims suffered as little abuse as possible.

Mike let out a sigh. These people were not just victims; they were his neighbors. "I think I already know the bad. It doesn't match any of the three suspects."

"That's not the only bad news."

Raymond walked in to get some coffee and knew he should listen.

Then Quent continued, glancing back and forth between the two. "The sperm found on the outside wall is AB+, and all the suspects in jail are O+."

Raymond stopped in his tracks and looked at both Mike and Quent. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" For the moment, Raymond put off getting coffee. This information was far more important than a cup of coffee, even at this early hour.

Quent looked at both Mike and Raymond. "Yep, there are two different unknown suspects. And the lab eliminated the husband. I'm guessing there were two involved with the Borders murder. If I were a betting man, I would bet the killers saw someone over here, and I'm thinking they did all this to scare you. I think you need to check out the Borders. My hunch is the killers knew them."

Mike was shocked and relieved at the same time. Maybe Quent was right and this had nothing to do with him or Lana.

Quent added, "I just can't imagine the Borders killing had anything to do with Lana, but in this job anything was possible. I'm going to head out. I'll think about it later, once my brain gets some sleep. Good luck, guys. Let me know if I can help in any way." He left the number of the lab in case they needed it. He also tore off the page where he wrote down the blood types as he walked out the door.

"Raymond."

"Yes, sir."

"We're not going to wait for the captain's approval. Let's quietly start the investigation. Did we send samples of the blood and sperm to Sara?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, have her start processing everything."

"Yes, sir."

~Chapter 24~

Lana turned on the TV when Mike left just so she would have some noise other than the men talking in the other room. Two women were talking about a facial cream that helped dark spots disappear. It must be a real miracle cream because the women's before and after photos made them look thirty years younger. The program kept being interrupted by the howling wind. Occasionally, she could hear sleet hit the window, and it made her feel fretful for some reason. She turned up the volume on the TV to drown out the sounds. It seemed she couldn't fully wake up nor go back into a deep sleep.

The door opened and peeking through one eye, she noticed Mike shut the door with one foot. That let Lana know his hands were full.

First thing Mike noticed was her T-shirt raised above her waist, exposing her flat tummy. He sighed when he saw her curvy body.

Half-awake, she mumbled, "Morning."

"I have a surprise for you."

"I think I smell butter, so I bet its donuts."

He grinned. "You can't surprise a cook with food." He sat the plate on the nightstand next to the steaming mugs of coffee. The pillow was curled up under her head, and a lock of hair was tossed across her nose. He

remembered last night as he snuggled next to her and her hair tickled his nose. He loved that. His wife kept her hair short once their kids were born, but every once in a while she would let it grow long to make her hubby happy. He loved long hair. Lana could keep her hair as long as she wanted—the longer the better.

When she picked up her coffee, she noticed creamer was in it. She looked at Mike in surprise. "I thought we couldn't eat or drink anything in the kitchen?"

"I sent one of the agents to get you some."

"That was so sweet of you. I sure need it." She sipped her delicious coffee. She propped some of the pillows against the headboard so she could lean on them and get comfortable. "Have you accomplished much on the case?" she asked while reaching for a chocolate-covered donut.

"It's progressing, but it does take time. As all the blood types come in, we should be able to piece everything together. Speaking of the case, I wanted to ask you if you noticed anything unusual the past week."

"What do you mean?" She was confused by his question.

"The Borders were killed a few days ago, and we don't think it's a coincidence or random. You have been here several days, and I want to know if you remember seeing or hearing anything out of the ordinary."

"Other than three men trying to kill me and your agent being killed, and I nearly died on the road last night, and I fainted at the police department, and people died next door. Yes, I would say a few things happened out of the ordinary." She was teary-eyed by now. How could he ask her such a ridiculous question?

Mike just looked at her, not knowing what to say. He realized how stupid that question was. Maybe he should have reworded it.

Before she could fuss at him anymore, she remembered something. "Wait a minute. Remember at the restaurant, I saw a familiar face?"

"Yes."

"I saw that same face at the police department when they loaded me in the ambulance."

"Where did you see him?"

"He was standing with the news people, and he had that same mad look. But the oddest thing I noticed was he changed his expression to a smirk, almost smiling. Another thing, as they loaded me in the ambulance, I saw he looked up as if he noticed something. And Mike, what I'm about

to tell you may sound stupid."

"What?"

"He had the same face, but his hair was different somehow. Maybe he dyed it or combed it to one side, but it was noticeably changed. I never forget a face, but I couldn't tell you anything about hair, clothing, guns, shoes, or coats. My best friend can tell you everything designer someone is wearing, but she won't even know her sister as she passes by her. Is that weird?"

"No, that's not weird at all, but honey, I wish you would have mentioned this earlier."

"I just thought of it. Remember, I was a little out of it."

"I want you to think real hard where you remember that face. That might be the key to catch this person. Can you do that for me?" He got up and went to the bedroom door. "Raymond."

"Yes, sir."

"Lana saw a guy she recognized with the media crew at the police department. Get some more deputies here and block the road. Put deputies watching the rental houses down the road. No one—and I mean no one—gets past the road at the end of the cul-de-sac. Don't let them give you any crap about their rights on the beach. If they get past the barrier, arrest them for impeding an investigation."

"Yes, sir, and I'll get the footage of the news crew at the police department." Raymond knew Mike would give him all the details when they were alone.

"Thanks." Mike shut the door behind him then walked back and sat on the edge of the bed. "Go ahead, honey."

"I was just saying, when I remember where I saw this guy I'll tell you."

"Maybe retrace your steps from the minute you decided to come here. Sometimes that helps jog the memory. "I've got to get busy making calls, so come out if you're ready. As you heard, Raymond is getting the footage from the media, and then I want you to look through it." He kissed her and went to the other room, digging out his cell phone.

"Mike?" She couldn't look him in the eye knowing she had withheld something else.

He gave her his undivided attention. "Yes?"

"Umm . . . I saw someone over at the Borders house a couple of days

ago."

Mike tried not to look shocked or aggravated but asked, "What did you see?"

"I saw someone with a red or bright-orange coat in the back yard. I thought maybe he was getting wood or wrapping pipes, so I didn't think anything about it."

"Tell me exactly what you saw."

"I was just standing there, dipping my tea bag and looking out the window when I saw the coat. The person moved from the front of the house to the back. I think he did that twice."

"Keep going."

"That's all, except once it looked like he stopped and glanced at this house."

Mike was somewhat aggravated because she had withheld critical information. "If I sent an agent to the house, do you think you could remember all he did? We could have an agent retrace the movements of the person you saw."

"Yes, I think I can, but why?"

"The Borders were already dead, and the person you saw was probably the killer. If you can see it all happen again, maybe we can figure out his height, weight, and hair color."

"I *can* tell you he had on a black ski hat."

"How could you tell what he was wearing at this distance?" He was amazed by her uncanny ability to notice the tiniest details. She would have made an exceptional cop.

"When he turned to look at this house, his face was so pale it looked white next to the black. I remember thinking his face needed a tan, and that he looked like a ghost. Then he pulled the mask over his face."

He reached down, kissed her, and said, "Get up and get dressed. I need you to help me with some detective work."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. You are the only witness to a killer, and the more detail we can pull from your memory the better chance of catching him."

"Okay, give me a few minutes." Since she didn't pay that close attention, she hoped she could help at least a little bit. First, she needed her morning cup of java. Second, she needed to try and remember where she saw that face. She needed quiet to think.

~Chapter 25~

"Hey Sara, how is my favorite crime scene tech this bright and cheerful day? Do you have any news on the sperm blood type?"

She ignored Mike's flattering comment. Sara Potter was all business, and the guys knew that. Because she was so serious, they loved to give her a hard time. "We are processing it right now, and with our new software we can have final results in six to seven days on the DNA. Since the specimen is older, my guess is it'll be closer to the seven days. Then it might take several hours to match the perp to our database. I'm sorry, but that's the best I can do."

"What do you mean 'old sperm'?"

"The sperm sent to me was at least a week old, minimum."

"It couldn't have been. We found it immediately and saw the footprints in the snow. That verifies what we saw. The footprints were imprinted in the fresh snow right under the window."

"I'm sorry Mike, but I'm telling you it's around a week old." Sara always got aggravated when they questioned her expertise. Never had she given them an answer until she was one-hundred-percent positive.

Mike sat there, trying to think and comprehend what she'd just said. "Do you have the blood type of the sperm?"

"Yes, hold on a minute." She left to get the chart, came back, and picked up the phone. "The male blood type is AB+, and the female blood type is A+."

"What do you mean by female?" Mike's didn't expect that answer at all. The state police missed the female blood type. He was glad he had Sara double-check their results.

"The sperm collected has two distinctive blood types, male and female." Sara was busy, and she got annoyed when Mike questioned her work. If he kept this up, it would be a long day.

"Sara, have you gotten the samples from the Border home?"

"Yes, I think we did get some," she answered while shuffling papers on her desk. "I don't have them in front of me. Let me call you back in a few minutes."

"If you don't mind, I'll wait."

She paused and thought a few minutes wouldn't be detrimental.

Pushing the red hold button, she scoured through several offices before she found them. She picked up the phone and reconnected with Mike. "I have them in front of me, fresh off the press. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know the blood type of Mrs. Borders." He didn't know what answer he would get, but he had a hunch.

"Her blood type is A+."

"What was the blood type around her mouth?"

"Um, that is B-."

"So, according to your records, the sperm is AB+, the blood around her mouth is B-, Mrs. Borders's blood type is A+, and the female blood type with the sperm is A+?" Maybe Quent was right and there *were* two perps.

"I see where you're going with this. I'll run as many cross-references as I can. Great work, Mike."

"I have one more blood type for you to run, and maybe her DNA."

"Who?"

"Lana. Can you send someone to collect it?"

"I'll call and see if anyone is at the Borders's house and have someone get a swab."

"Thanks, Sara. One more thing, could you find out if Mrs. Borders was raped? There might be two perps."

"I'll find out for you and notify you when I get any news."

"I'll be expecting your call," he answered while writing down all the information she gave him.

When Lana walked in the living room, Mike was on the phone. Raymond and Joe were in the kitchen looking out the window toward the Borders house. They were debating on who got to play the villain. Under normal circumstances, both would want to go, but it was cold outside, so neither volunteered. They decided to flip a coin. When Raymond lost, he pulled rank and sent Joe anyway.

Joe whined that the coin toss wasn't fair. Then he commented, "I can't wait until we get a new guy so I can pull rank."

All the men laughed.

Lana interrupted. "Morning guys, would you all like some breakfast?"

They looked at each other and said at the same time, "Yes, ma'am."

She wondered how they stayed in such good shape eating out all the time. "I will cook you a feast if one of you guys will drive me to the

grocery store."

Mike got off the phone and answered Lana from the living room, "I want French toast."

The other two agreed, and they added bacon, ham, and eggs.

"Which one of you will take me to the store?"

Mike raised his hand. He felt much better about the situation since the killings seemed to be someone after the Borders.

She walked over to him, put her arm through his, and said, "Okay, tin man, let's follow the yellow brick road."

"We'll be back in about an hour or so." They were shocked Mike let her out of the house. But if anyone could handle any situation in the field, it would be him.

Raymond got on his walkie. "Hey, guys, I just wanted to let you know there's going to be a 204 in 1015."

Lana knew they had codes, and she asked Mike, "What's a 204 and a 1015?"

Mike winked. "Well, I *could* tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

"And what would be the code for that?" she asked as she raised her left eyebrow at Mike.

"That would be code 007," said Mike. The men laughed hysterically.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I'll tell you on the way." She looked at the guys and shrugged.

They laughed harder.

He helped her with her coat and when she glanced over at them, they laughed even harder. "You better tell me, or you're not getting any breakfast."

The men laughed even harder.

They got in the car, and she noticed Mike looked all around to see if he could see anyone.

"Okay, Mike, what are the codes?" Curiosity got the best of her, and by that point, she was aggravated and didn't care about her surroundings.

He rolled his head back with laughter. "Code 007 means hot girl who's dangerous. Code 204 means we are traveling with two or more, and a 1015 means they will be coming within fifteen minutes. They were laughing because you are hot but not dangerous. Sometimes, if we see a girl who looks hot, we'll get on the walkie and say 007 and then give our location."

"Oh . . . really? Well, you just wait until I bake you guys some brownies with ex-lax. Then my code will be number two. We'll see how dangerous I can be."

"Oh, no, please don't do that! I only have two bathrooms. We're getting close to the media, please duck down." As they drove by a house that had a few TV vans, no one was outside, but she dropped low so they couldn't see her. She stayed low for about half a mile.

Stop Rite grocery store was much bigger than Sam's Grocery and much newer. This store was in a strip mall with about ten other small shops. The biggest stores were Best Buy, a liquor store, a shoe store, and a tobacco store.

They held hands as they walked in and acted as though they didn't have a care in the world. "What would you like besides French toast?" she asked.

"Um, I'm thinking ham and eggs, or maybe an omelet? I loved the omelet you cooked the other day." He didn't want to overexert her considering what happened yesterday.

"You can have an omelet if you want one. We just have to go to the vegetable aisle." The vegetable area did impress her. It was fixed up like a large Hawaiian hut with a handwritten sign that read *veggie stand*.

While they walked around and checked out the vegetables, Mike asked, "Do you think we could have shrimp tonight or tomorrow? I know you don't like it, but the guys do."

"You are on your own if you want shrimp. I don't even like to cook it." Once she gave it some thought she changed her mind. "Okay, I'll grill it if you do the prep work. I know the guys would like grilled shrimp. I'll marinade it in Italian dressing a couple of hours."

"That's a deal." He ran like a little kid to the fish counter to buy jumbo shrimp. His mouth started watering just thinking about it. Life with Lana would be so different compared to life with Kathy. Kathy didn't like to cook, and when they first married, they didn't have the money to eat out much, so all they ate were hamburgers and chips. Kathy worked at a fast food restaurant, and her burgers were delicious, but that was the only thing she knew how to cook. Later, when they had a little more money, he made

it a point to grab something on the way home. He smiled thinking back about his kids calling him at work and asking, "Daddy, what will you bring home for dinner tonight?" Yep, life would a lot different with Lana, a difference he liked.

They bought stuff for lasagna, shrimp, and chili. She looked at all the food, both carts full. "Mike, do you realize I get on a plane in a few days? I'm not sure I can cook all this in less than a week."

"Nope, you're not leaving. I have handcuffs."

A lady at the end of the counter turned around and looked at them as though they were crazy. Then she waddled away with her cart while looking over her shoulder at them.

He kissed her on her forehead and said, "Honey, this is only enough food for a couple of days. Remember, there will be several men in and out of the house. We'll probably have half the marshals' office here when they find out we're cooking shrimp."

"I'm in such a good mood, I could cook all day. I feel great."

"I'm sure glad you feel better . . . it shows in your eyes."

"My noggin hurts. I'm okay as long as I don't bend over. That's when it hurts the most, when the blood rushes to my head."

Mike put on his John Wayne impression, putting his hands on his hips and walking like the actor. "Well, little lady, if you need to bend over, just call me . . . and I'll watch."

She smacked his arm and said, "You butt."

They acted silly going to the car. Both pushed overloaded baskets, and he jokingly played bumper carts with her. He rolled his head back with laughter watching her. She grunted trying to push and pull her cart. The entire time, her tongue stuck out as if that would help. He easily moved his with one arm. Every few feet he made a point to bump her cart, pushing it back to where she started.

She whined, "Mike, that's not fair. I have heavier groceries than you. I think we should trade carts."

"Do you really think that would help?" But he did take her cart and pull it.

They loaded the groceries in the back of the SUV, laughing, when all of a sudden she started sneezing. Between sneezes, she noticed someone sitting in a car. There he was—the mystery man—staring right at her, three rows over on her right. She screamed. "Mike, there's the man, and

he's in that black car." She pointed.

The man took off immediately. He drove like a mad man and almost ran into several people and cars. Mike ran after him, but the man got away. He ran several lanes over but couldn't catch him. "That was totally unexpected. Are you okay?"

"Of course I am. Did you get a look at him, and did you get a license plate?"

"I only saw him for a second, and honey, he didn't look like anything you described. How in the hell did he know we were here? I worked every maneuver I was trained to do to detect anyone following me . . ." He paused and thought for a minute. ". . . He must have some kind of tracking device planted on one of us." He made a phone call to Raymond. "Lana and I will be there in about fifteen minutes. I want you to call the tech department and have someone come to the beach house to run a sweep. We just saw the guy at the grocery store, and there is no way he would know we'd be there unless he was tracking us. Also, call Stop & Shop to see if they have any roof cameras." Mike's face changed from happy-go-lucky to cop mode—his eyes hardened.

Raymond wrote down all the orders Mike gave him. "I'll have them come right away. One more thing, I called all the TV stations to get their coverage of the police department. They won't give it to us unless we grant them an exclusive. I checked with the police department, and no cameras faced the media or the far side of the street. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Copy that." Now, the most urgent task for Mike was to get Lana back to the beach house. Mike knew his guys would know what to do to protect her. From that point on, his only concern was to take care of Lana.

"Mike, do you mind if I start breakfast?"

"Of course, I can't wait." He reached over to kiss her and instead blew a squeegee on her neck.

All the men held their noses. "What's that smell?" Her face turned red, and she didn't know why. Having the guys around was like having younger brothers always tormenting her.

She got busy mixing the batter for the French toast and sautéing the

mushrooms, onions, peppers, and ham for the omelets. She put the bacon in the oven to cook. The coffee and sweet tea were made. A dozen eggs were whipped and seasoned for scrambling. The onions were sautéed for hash browns. Then she poured herself some coffee with cream and savored those few minutes.

The guys walked in the kitchen sniffing the aroma, making excuses to help. Joe's excuse was to catch Lana if she fainted. Mike's excuse was to cut up the veggies. Raymond's excuse was to get some coffee.

Everyone got quiet when the crew came in to run the sweep. In a short five minutes, she heard a beep, and she didn't have to be told what that meant. To find out what all the commotion was about, she peeked in the bedroom. They had found a little chip in her purse. "Did you find the tracking device?" she asked as she looked at the men.

"Yes." Mike's face turned angry. He glanced at Raymond and Joe. They had no doubt now—he was after Lana. Everyone's heart sank. They were trained to handle problems, Lana wasn't.

"He knows every place we've been?" She saw the looks the guys gave each other, and she saw Mike's eyes harden. Worry was written all over their faces.

"I'm assuming he knows everywhere we've been. Honey, I want you to think real hard and try to remember how you know this guy. Think about anyone who might have made you feel uncomfortable in the last week or so. Was there anyone who got close to your purse?"

She thought for a minute, wringing her hands. "Mike, I don't remember. I've bumped into many people the past several days, and I don't remember where I saw his face. I just don't remember!"

Mike motioned the team to leave. "Okay, guys, keep sweeping in the living room and let me know if you find anything else." Mike waited for them to leave. "Baby, I know you're upset, but it's important to remember where you know this man. Do you know him from home or here?"

"I don't remember. I wish I could remember." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Let's get some food in your stomach, and we'll go from there—how does that sound?"

"It sure won't hurt." She was totally confused why anyone would want to follow her.

"This food is so good, Ms. Andrews." They loved breakfast.

"I'm glad you like it," she answered, not concentrating. For some reason, she felt overwhelmed, so she excused herself and walked into the bedroom. Tears flowed uncontrollably. She was mad at herself because she couldn't remember.

After a few minutes, when Lana didn't return, Mike left to check on her. Once they found the tracking device, he noticed how her demeanor had changed. He slowly opened the door and saw her crying. It broke his heart. "Babe, are you okay?"

Immediately, she gave him a hug and sobbed in his shoulder.

"Just let it all out."

Her entire body was drained, and it shook uncontrollably; she didn't think she had an ounce of anything left.

He just held her and rubbed her back, trying to soothe her.

Never in her life had she felt this vulnerable. "Mike, I need to tell you something," she said while looking into his eyes, still crying. "I never told you the reason I had to get away. Why I left Tennessee."

He didn't know what was coming, but he didn't want to act surprised, either. His gut told him she was about to tell him about an old boyfriend who had been stalking her for years. "Why did you leave?"

"A few weeks ago, my cousin died of a massive heart attack. We were very close; our entire family is close. His death was devastating to us all. His wife Sharon had his breathing machine turned off, and I held his hand while his heart stopped. I could feel his last heartbeat through my fingers. All this happened less than four weeks ago." The tears kept flowing.

Quietly, he sat there and listened. Her words cut his heart like a knife. He had held his wife's hand when she died.

She took a deep breath and kept going, "His name was James. All his life he wanted a sports car, and we decided to look at one the next Saturday. On that Tuesday, I stopped by a few places and got some brochures on sports cars, to surprise him. I thought I would drop them off at his house. When I rang the doorbell, there was no answer. Although I saw his car in the drive, I put the brochures in the mailbox. Mike, he was lying in the living room—dying. If I would have used my key and gone inside, he might be alive today." She couldn't help herself; she just let her confession roll off her tongue. "After the funeral, I was so depressed I

couldn't function. I felt such guilt. I thought the best thing for me was to get away and clear my mind, and that's why I'm here. So . . . you can see how everything has overwhelmed me. My emotions were already fragile when I got here."

Mike held her close. "I'm here for you, and I'll carry that burden for you. I know what it's like to lose family. What happened to your cousin has absolutely nothing to do with you, and it isn't your fault. I can assure you that James would have felt the same way as I do."

"I can't help but feel some guilt."

"You shouldn't. It was a horrible incident, and it wasn't your fault." Her story filled his mind with his own memories of helplessness and guilt with his wife. He watched his wife die of breast cancer, and he always wondered what he could have done differently. What if he stayed home more? He knew exactly how Lana felt.

"Once I decided to take a vacation, I mentally told myself from the moment I stepped on the airplane I planned to relax and write down all my feelings. Then my last night here I planned to burn my journal in the fireplace, and that would be a whole new start for me."

Mike got up to get some Kleenex. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes then continued. "As a matter of fact, I started writing on my laptop while I sat on the plane—OH, MIKE—the plane."

"What are you talking about, what plane?"

"That's where I saw that guy, on the plane! He walked up and sat with me at the gate, umm . . . gate 14. Then he wanted to sit with me on the plane, and I said no. I can't believe I didn't remember that. He had every opportunity to touch my purse."

"Did he ever tell you his name?"

"I think so . . . umm . . . I think . . . oh, Mike, I can't remember." She tried to think real hard, but she couldn't remember. It had been several days, and a lot had happened since then.

"That's okay; we have it narrowed down to your flight." Mike squeezed her hand and got busy doing what he did best, being a great cop. He made one last glance over his shoulder and said to her, "Babe, you are doing great." He had to smile at her. "We have an advantage he doesn't know about."

"What's that?"

"Your uncanny ability to remember faces."

"Mike."

"What?"

"He sat toward the front, the first few rows. I don't know if that helps you any."

"It helps a lot." He went out to the kitchen and told the guys about their conversation. All the people in Boston heard them whooping and hollering as Mike told them the good news. Then Mike gave orders and everyone got busy. Raymond was told to get a passenger list, Joe headed to the airport to get video, and Mike got on the phone to Sara to see if she got any fingerprints from the beach house and the Borders house.

Mike walked back in the bedroom. "I'm sorry I left so abruptly, but I had to get the ball rolling. Are you feeling better?" Although he was giving orders, his heart was with her.

"Some, yes. And I want you to know I'm not normally a cry-baby, but it has been a stressful couple of days."

"You don't have to explain. I think you are doing great. I have to say how impressed I am with your memory of faces. I've been in this business for years, and never has anyone had a memory like yours. When Joe gets back, we'll send him over to the Borders house to get an idea of how tall the killer is. So, in a little while I'll need your help again."

"You got it, just let me know when." She was proud of herself for remembering. Relief flooded her. She couldn't believe how much weight was lifted off her shoulders. She felt like a new woman.

As Mike walked out, he glanced back and asked, "By the way, what is your blood type?"

She was confused by the question, but answered, "A+. Why?"

"I wanted to make a mental note just in case someone asks."

"Oh . . . okay," she said, confused.

Mike joined Raymond who was sitting at their makeshift desk, working on the computer. "Whatcha' got?" Raymond asked without looking up from the screen.

"Lana's blood type is A+," Mike whispered.

Mike had his full attention with that statement. "Do you think it's her blood type on the wall?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I'm going to have to ask her if she is missing any dirty underwear. She's in the bedroom crying."

"Why?"

"She thinks she's put us in danger."

"Did you tell her we live like this every day? We thrive on danger."

"I will, but when she started crying, I just let her talk."

"Good move. Keep in mind that Mrs. Borders's blood type is A+."

"I know. In your opinion, who do you think the blood type belongs to?" Mike asked.

"I think it belongs to Mrs. Borders. Think about it. There was enough for Sara to find, and I don't think she could get that much just from worn underwear. And Mike, I don't want to get personal, but I think your blood type would have shown up along with Lana's."

"True, unless he got the underwear before we were intimate."

"Did she ever mention anyone being around before the wood was delivered?" Raymond asked while taking notes.

"She did mention she had the creeps several times since she's been here. She said it wasn't like her to get so scared all the time."

"Being out here with no one around can give anyone the creeps. Have you been listening to the wind today? It's giving me the heebie-jeebies."

"I can tell you this much, she's not leaving this house until we catch this guy. I'm so afraid he'll follow her home."

"I agree, but I don't want you to worry. We'll catch him or them." He put his hand on Mike's shoulder and gave him a pat.

Crying out her feelings made her feel better. She washed her face and sat on the bed for a little while. When she felt somewhat better, she decided to get busy and clean the kitchen, anything to keep her mind off the problem at hand. Everything was quiet when she walked out of the bedroom. She rolled up her sleeves on the way to the kitchen, but to her surprise, the kitchen was spotless. At that moment, she decided to adopt the team. They were gun-toting house cleaners, and it didn't get any better than that.

Quietly, she turned on the TV and sat down on the couch with the remote, surfing the channels. Since Mike was on the phone, she muted the volume.

When he hung up, he kissed her on the neck and ran his hand down her leg. He could tell she had cried a lot, and that broke his heart. Other

women crying never bothered him. Several months ago, he had dated a girl named Brenda for about three months. He knew it wasn't going anywhere, so he decided to end their relationship. He didn't know how to end it, so he invited her over for grilled burgers. They ate, and then he told her it was over between them. She cried, but he didn't care—he just wanted her to go home. If he had to do it all over, he would have gone to her house, told her, and left. All the women in his past always cried, but it didn't bother him. He cared for them and hated they were upset, but once the door shut—it was all over, or at least it was in his mind. If Lana walked out, he would be the one crying. Deep down, he knew Lana was his for life. He asked her, "How are you holding up, honey?"

"I'm better." She was deep in thought about all that was going on in her life. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"How do you work this kind of stuff all the time? I'm stressed beyond belief; you and the guys act as though this is everyday stuff, or am I just imagining it?"

"As a U.S. Marshall, we deal with crime every day. We are adrenaline junkies and the more bizarre and dangerous it is, the better we like it. I will admit not all cases fall into place as well as this one. Think about it, we've had a couple of different crimes happen to us in the last several days. You can see how we're putting it all together. We love the stress and action of it all. My team is great, and we know how to get results. That's part of police work, you may have ten suspects and it dwindles down to one or two, or sometimes we have to start all over from the beginning."

"Do you deal with the witness protection area? I might need it."

"Now why would you think you might need witness protection?"

"If you don't catch this guy—he might kill me unless I vanish."

Those words hurt Mike to the core. He hated the idea that Lana had to think of taking such drastic measures. "Squirt, don't you worry because we *will* catch him. I've worked on the fugitive investigative strike team. This is what I used to do, so I know exactly what I'm doing," he reassured her.

The room got loud as several agents entered the front door, all talking about the case. Mike was right; they were adrenaline junkies. Excitement

filled the air every time they put a piece of the puzzle together. Her favorite agent was Joe. Every time something happened, his eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. She also noticed he was more kindhearted than the other agents. Raymond was undeniably Mike's right-hand man. Raymond seemed to be about ten years younger, and his personality seemed more like Mike. Both were quiet and to the point. Raymond was the only one married, or at least the only one wearing a wedding band.

Everyone got quiet when she walked in the kitchen, and she was embarrassed that she interrupted their serious conversation. "You all don't have to be quiet on my account, unless you're talking shop talk."

Mike answered with authority and professionalism, "Actually, we *are* talking about something very important."

"I'm sorry I interrupted. I'll go to the bedroom and watch TV. I don't want to bother you," she said with all sincerity.

The guys laughed. "Honey, we're talking about what we're going to have for lunch."

"That was mean, but that's fine. I got the stuff to make lasagna, salad and a cheesecake. But since you want to hurt my feelings, I'll just go be by myself," she said, winking at Joe.

Joe caught on quick. "I think lasagna sounds fantastic. You guys need to leave her alone and quit teasing her. Lana, I would never tease you."

She thought that was the first time he had ever used her first name.

Raymond snarled at Joe, "Teacher's pet!"

Everyone laughed. "Okay, guys. Scoot and I'll make some lunch."

Mike scooped her up in his arms, swung her around in a circle, and said, "You are the best. I'm starving, and I know these jokers are too. I cannot wait to try your lasagna. What do you want me to do?"

"How about chopping onions? I need five cups."

"I can definitely do that."

After he had washed their hands, she handed him everything he needed, and he started chopping away. She browned the meat and added the onion as Mike finished. Then she added the wine and spices, and the house started to smell good. She quickly whipped up two cheesecakes and put them in the fridge. When she cooked, she was at her best. She felt as though she was contributing to the investigation. It kept her busy and it kept the men fed, and that made them all happy and productive.

"Can I talk to you in the bedroom?" Mike asked with a serious face.

"Sure." She didn't know what he was about to say, but it had her worried a little bit. Her heart pounded from nervousness. Without a doubt, the news would be heart-rending.

He closed the door behind them. He picked her up and kissed her deeply.

Her heart raced with excitement, and she pulled him close. "Oh baby, I think that is by far the best kiss I've ever had, ever. It was a wonderful, unexpected kiss." She didn't want to stop.

"I've wanted to do that all morning, but I wanted you to rest, especially after getting that bump on your head. I had to find time to be alone with you. Are you feeling better?"

"Now I am." She kissed him again.

He stopped her and said, "A problem has come up and I can't go back into the room just yet. We may have to continue this later."

She knew what he meant. About that time, his phone rang. *That damn phone. I'm going to toss it out when this is all over.*

It looked as though Mike would be on the phone for a while, so she decided to check on the meat sauce. When she walked in the kitchen, Joe was busy stirring it. "Is it good?" she asked. The sauce appeared to have thickened perfectly.

"Can we taste it? It smells delicious," Joe asked with a spoon in his hand.

"Of course you can taste it, and you can tell me if it needs anything." She reached for her own spoon. It looked too scrumptious to pass up a taste.

Joe rolled his head back, showing their approval.

That was her cue—she stacked all the layers of lasagna, covered it with foil, and let Joe pop the heavy pan in the oven. Then she made the salad and put it in the fridge before preparing the garlic cheese bread. In the meantime, she made a gallon of sweet tea. As she walked into the living room Mike's phone rang again, and she just shook her head in disbelief.

"Hello, Sara; what do you have for me?"

"I have the manifest from the flight, and I'm sending it as we speak. Michael, you will owe me lunch after this case. At first, the airline told me I would need a court order."

"What did you tell them?" Everyone knew how feisty she could be.

"I told them, fine. I'll get the court order, but if the victim dies I will testify you were uncooperative, especially knowing a life was at stake."

All the men were covering their mouths laughing at how tough she was acting. "You go get 'em, Sara Jane. You scared me. Did your tough act work, or did you have to get a court order?" It was a cute game Sara and Mike played; she would call him Michael, and he would call her Sara Jane.

The men couldn't hold it in any longer, and they burst out laughing.

"To answer your question, my tough act worked. Mike?"

"Yes?"

"I've picked Outback Steak House for lunch."

"You've got it, sweetheart. Buying you lunch is the least I can do."

"Later."

"Bye." He hung up and looked at Raymond at the computer. "Did you get the passenger list?"

"Yes, it was delivered about two minutes ago. That's what I'm looking at now." He paused while scanning down the list. "There are a lot of men's names."

Mike motioned Lana to sit next to him on the couch. "Raymond, I want you to say every name out loud so she can hear the names in a man's voice. That might help her remember better."

Raymond started saying the names on the list, and then she answered:

Charles Schmidt Nope

Robert Jamison Nope

David Durham No

Paul Crocker No

Lawrence Wicker No

Peter Waters Yes

"That's it. His name is Peter, but I don't think he ever mentioned his last name. Are there any other Peters on the list?" She was so excited she remembered.

Raymond looked down the list. "Nope, there are no other Peters, and he sat in seat 4A. He sat right where Lana said he would be sitting."

Mike grinned. "Gotcha. Raymond, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir, I do." He walked out to the SUV and pulled up all the information he could find on Peter Waters.

"Mike, I was wondering, why did Raymond go outside to use the computer?" Lana asked.

"It's a special computer which looks up everything about a person including their picture, driver's license, passport, and commercial licenses. Cops have the same system in their cars, except our computer is far more advanced. We have one in our office, but we don't have one here."

"Am I in that computer?"

"Yes, you are," Mike answered swallowing hard, dreading her next question.

"Have you looked me up on that computer?"

"Yes, I have."

"Why did you look me up, or should I ask?" She could have heard a pin drop. The men wanted to hear what Mike had to say. He obviously had no reason to look her up.

"When all this started—I looked you up to make sure someone didn't follow you here."

She looked around and saw the men smiling. "Mike, you're teasing me? Did you look me up before that?"

He leaned in and whispered, "I looked you up to make sure you were not married." He gave her a truthful answer.

"That's not fair because I have to take your word for it." He gave her a hug and a quick kiss on the lips . . . as if that would make her feel better.

It did.

Within five minutes, Raymond walked in with Peter Waters' driver license photo. He handed it to Mike to look at first. When Mike finished, he handed it to Lana. He smiled that *we got him* smile. "Lana, look at the picture and tell me if this is Peter."

All the men grinned. They knew this was *the moment* they had been waiting for.

She stared down at the picture and studied it for a few minutes. She met Mike's eyes with a look of disappointment. "Mike, it's not him."

"It's got to be, look again." He couldn't believe his ears.

"Mike, it's not him. I'm telling you this is not the man I met at the airport, or the one I saw at the restaurant, or at the police department, or at the grocery store."

Mike threw the papers in the air. "I can't believe this."

Raymond took charge. "That's okay. Everyone find this Peter Waters and see if he's okay. There might be another murder or identity theft in all this. Let me know what you find."

"Yes, sir." Everyone started scurrying around, making phone calls and getting on the computers in their cars.

Mike retreated to the bedroom.

The bedroom door was cracked open when Raymond tapped on it. "Sir, I hate to bother you, but I got hold of Peter Waters' family. It's not good news, they haven't heard from him in over a week, and the police are searching for him. They have filed a missing person's report. I have a call into the detectives so we can cross notes, and I'm sending a deputy to interview his family and the police. Also, I have notified all federal law enforcement agencies of a possible serial killer, and the BAU has sent a team. Stop & Shop called back, and they don't have a camera on the parking lot. Is there anything else you would like me to do?"

"No, we're doing all we can. Thanks, Raymond." Mike was deep in thought on his next move. He got aggravated because he kept eliminating suspects but couldn't find the killer.

Mike called a meeting.

The men anxiously sat in the living room anticipating their orders. "We are at the point where we have to decide where to go from here. Do you think she's safe here, or should we consider sending her to one of our safe houses?"

Raymond spoke first. "I think she is safe here because we are eighty percent surrounded by water. We can see clearly through the woods because it's winter, and the snow allows us to track any footsteps. There is only one road, and we're at the end of a cul-de-sac. Not only that, if we move, he'll know we found his tracking device."

Mike said, "He knows we'll eventually find the device, and that goes without saying. If we move her, he'll know for sure we found something. I agree with Raymond; we should stay here, and that might buy us a couple

of days."

"Keep in mind he doesn't know Lana remembers him from the airport. That will give us another advantage. I say let's wait until the footage comes in from the airport. Let Lana look at it, and maybe he'll pop up in the FBI database," said Raymond.

Mike thought a minute. "I agree. That's the quickest fix right now. The DNA won't be back for a few days, and his picture might work much quicker. Joe, is the video on the way?"

"They had already filed it away and are in the process of moving from one storage building to another. Everything was in disarray. But they have several people looking, and I left Colby there to help find it."

"So, you finally got to pull rank," teased Raymond.

Joe smiled. "No, there was a 007 there."

The men laughed and so did Lana. It was funny now that she knew what the code meant.

Mike said, "Okay, we wait for the video and go from there. Also, we stay here for the time being."

The men nodded in agreement.

The guys had just started reviewing the case when Raymond's phone rang. He covered the speaker and tapped the table to get everyone's attention. "Mike, it's Ken Summers from the BAU."

"Thanks, Raymond. Please put him on speaker phone."

"Ken, I'm going to put you on speaker so the team can hear what you have to say," said Raymond.

"Good afternoon, deputies. This is Agent Ken Summers, how can I help you?"

Mike spoke first. "I'm assuming you are on your way here."

"Yes, we are. I do have another urgent stop to make, but we will be there when we're finished."

"Tell me what you need from us so we can predict his next move," Mike asked.

When Lana walked in, Mike motioned for her to sit next to him on the couch. Many papers were spread out on the coffee table, and all the men had pad and paper in their hands. Since she wasn't as prepared, she just sat

there quietly.

"Raymond told me your victim had seen and talked with the suspect, is this correct?" Ken asked.

"Yes, he has approached her twice, once at the airport and then again on the plane. He planted a tracking device in her purse. He followed us to the grocery store, and I assume everywhere we've gone."

Ken took a deep breath then continued. "Here is my preliminary assessment. He's between the ages of forty-five and fifty. Maybe he's been in some hospitals or prisons in the past ten years, or at least treated for a mental illness. As you know, there are several different kinds of stalkers, and I categorized this guy as an intimacy-seeking stalker. He's delusional about Lana's feelings for him. The stalker is usually an isolated and shy person. He lives alone or with someone who is never home. He cannot have a sexual or emotional relationship. The only way he can have sexual gratification is to masturbate to her picture or watch her from afar."

Everyone's ears perked up because of the masturbating on the wall outside the window. Ken didn't know about that.

All the men in the room could hear Ken shuffling papers. "He could have several mental disorders, but the most prominent is sociopath. If he can't have her, he will give up and kill her. Since he has no conscience, he would walk out the door and not think twice about what he had done. In his mind, the killing is justified."

Mike asked, "Should we keep her here and let him come to her, or should we take her to a safe house?"

"If you move her, I assure you he will go after her, eventually. Therefore, I would suggest you do something now, or she will be looking over her shoulder until he's caught or she's dead. My guess is he has probably been stalking her for a while, and she didn't know it. His type of stalker is *methodical* about his hunt, and he plans every move. I'm thinking he knew she would be at the airport, and he planned every word said to her."

Raymond asked him, "Why has he killed other people?"

"They got in the way, or they saw him. I'm guessing the only reason Mike isn't dead is because he's a cop."

It was obvious Mike was a little confused. "How would he know I was a cop? I haven't worn my gun until lately."

"Mike, you will have to trust me when I tell you he knows everything

about you. From the minute she made plans to vacation there, he researched everything about the beach house. Do you want to know the *one* glitch he wasn't expecting, and it's probably saved your life?"

Mike leaned forward on the couch, listening. "What's the glitch?"

"He didn't expect the two of you to fall in love. Falling in love saved both of your lives. Stalkers who are as methodical as this guy don't like bumps in the road. Your love caused a bump. But I guarantee he's working on a plan as we speak."

Mike and Lana looked at each other, and all Mike could say was, "Wow."

After reviewing eight pages of notes, Raymond asked, "Why would he work with a partner? We found two different blood types."

"I'll have to think on that one because they usually work alone. Where were the specimens found?"

"One specimen was on Ms. Borders's mouth, and the other was found under the bedroom window, where he masturbated."

"I hate to get personal, but what were Lana and Mike doing?"

She looked around, and not one agent glanced her way or Mike's. *Oh, God, how will Mike answer that question?* She didn't want the men to know about their private moments. Softness in his eyes reassured her.

Mike answered, "We were being intimate." He couldn't have said it better. He never mentioned details.

She leaned in to Mike and whispered, "Thank you."

"I'll be honest; I'm a little confused about the partner. That part does not fit the profile. Let me do some research and I'll get back to you on that. Most intimacy-seeking stalkers masturbate, and they can't help themselves. Even if he sees or hears Lana and Mike, he can't help himself because he visualizes it is *him* instead of Mike. Unless Lana's blood type is . . . um . . ." He flipped through papers to find the answer. ". . . A+, I don't get it. I'm thinking he probably got some of her underwear and masturbated while holding the underwear and listening."

Now she knew why Mike asked about her blood type.

Joe was methodically taking many pages of notes. He turned several pages and asked, "Why didn't he kill Mike with the knife while . . ." He paused for a minute while looking at his boss; he wanted to ask this delicately. ". . . while they were intimate?"

"Hi, Joe, it's nice to hear from you again. The last time I talked with

you were at the academy. Mike, you got yourself a great cadet, and Joe, you got on a talented team with Mike. I don't know if you all know this, but Mike has the most felony arrests in U.S. Marshal history."

All the agents looked at Mike because they didn't know their boss held that record. Joe responded, "No sir, we didn't know that, nor are we surprised."

Ken paused to think. "To answer your question, he didn't attack Mike and Lana because the attack will happen on his terms. He might confront them both, but he will attack when *he* is ready. The knife in the steak was to let Mike know he was there, and this is what will happen to him. He was letting them know he knew what they were doing, and he didn't like it. That might have been a sign that he lost control. He's very angry with Mike and maybe with Lana. There is one more thing."

"What's that?" Mike asked.

"Is Lana listening?"

"Yes, she is sitting right here," Mike answered while tapping her knee.

"What I'm about to say goes for all of you. If confronted by the stalker, and if there is no way out—play his game. Act as though you're on his side. Show him kindness and understanding. That's the only thing that will save your life." Ken appeared to be shuffling papers. "I think that's all the information I have right now. Do you have any more questions?"

Mike answered, "Not now. We hope to have the DNA results when you get here and maybe we'll have some more information for you. Thanks for your help, and we'll see you later."

"I look forward to it. Be safe."

Everyone looked at each other and then at Lana.

How did this happen? She just didn't understand how this could happen to her. She glanced around the room and saw all the guys looking at her with pity. That pissed her off so much she stomped her foot with anger. "No more crying, and no more crap. Let's do what it takes to get this mad man. I want a gun or someone take to me to buy one. I am not going down without a fight. By the way, I grew up with guns, and I'm not afraid to use one. Do you have any questions? Good. I'm ready to rock and roll."

All the agent's mouths flew open in shock.

Now she was really pissed. "By the way, I know you all don't know

me, but I'm half-Indian and half-Irish, and that's a lethal combination. Is there any cheesecake left? I'm hungry."

Joe was the first to say anything. "I ate the last piece."

All the agents laughed, and she even had to smile as she walked into the kitchen. She didn't think she had ever been that angry. There was a point in her life she had to take a stand. As a woman, she had to defend herself and her family. She wasn't going to cry or hide from this freak anymore. No more tears for him.

Mike followed her into the kitchen, put his hand on her shoulders, and said, "Remind me never to piss you off. I'll take you out to shoot, and I will make sure you know how to use my Glock."

"Mike, I promise I know how to use a gun. The only thing I ask of you is can you send deputies to protect my children in case he goes after them. That may not be a bad idea for you, too. Remember that he's methodical. And he hates you for taking me away from him, so he might try to get even."

"I will do that."

"Mike, there's one more thing. I *will* kill him. Killing him might be a legal and ethical issue for you. The only way you can stop me is to kill me."

"What?" His mouth dropped open with shock. Nobody ever confessed to planning a murder.

"You heard me. I have no ethical dilemma about killing the son-of-a-bitch. You heard Ken, he's probably killed many, and we know he killed several people. You may not be able to shoot him, but I can. The only way you can stop me is to shoot me. If you have a problem with that, maybe one of us should leave. Leave me a gun and maybe you all should leave, and I'll wait for him." She didn't think she had ever been this mad. Nor could she believe she allowed herself to store up so much anger.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"More than I've ever been in my entire life."

Raymond walked in and told Mike, "The footage is in from the airport."

Mike looked at her with a smile. "Are you ready to use that anger to find this guy at the airport?"

She took Mike's arm and answered, "I'm sorry for being so angry, but a girl can only take so much. I know I physically can't fight him, but I can

sure shoot him."

Mike hugged her and kissed the booboo on her forehead. "You can let off steam anytime you want. The guys do it all the time. At the office, we have a punching bag to hit. But please don't hit me, not with your temper. You might knock me out with one hit."

She gave him a hug and answered, "Set up the video. I'll make a pot of coffee and be there in a few minutes."

Mike sat down on the bar stool so they would be at eye level. "Are we good?"

"Yes," she answered. When he walked out of the kitchen, she took a deep breath and waited a moment for her hands to stop shaking.

"Honey, I want you to sit where you have a good view."

"Okay." She grabbed her mug of coffee and sat in the middle of the floor, the best view with no glare on the TV.

Mike came over and sat down beside her. Joe and Raymond sat on the floor next to them with their pens and pads on the coffee table ready to take notes.

"You guys don't have to sit on the floor."

Joe sat right next to Lana and said, "I'm here for you to protect me. I bet you have a killer right hook."

They all laughed.

They watched for about an hour, and then she saw him. "There he is. See, he's walking up to me, and he sat next to me. There, did you see it? He touched my purse. I don't remember him having on a hat. Wait a minute—I don't talk to him. Look, he sits two chairs over from me. That's when he plants the tracking device. Keep watching, he comes back and has on different clothes."

All the agents glanced at each other in disbelief. It amazed them how she recognized him when they didn't. But they also knew this was part of the profile, methodical. Sure enough, it happened. He walked up in different clothes and no hat. He looked right at the camera. "Bingo, we gotcha," said Mike, grinning.

All the men were whooping and hollering again. She knew how they felt.

"Joe, it's your turn up to bat. Work your Picasso and let's send his picture to all law enforcement. Also, run it through the database. You know how to work your miracles."

"Yes, sir, with pleasure."

Mike put his arms around his sweetheart. "You did a great job. I will never doubt your memory." He leaned over and whispered, "James would be proud of you, and so am I."

Mike stood and helped her up, and she put her arms around him. "Thanks."

~Chapter 26~

"Hey, Sara, I hope you're calling with good news," Mike asked. He quickly searched the desk for his pad and pencil.

"I have great news. I found a match to the female part of the sperm, and I'm sending the information to you."

"What? How did you get her DNA so fast?"

"I didn't. I ran a special blood test, and she is a carrier of hemophilia. There was a trace of blood in the sperm, and that little bit gave me enough to run tests. Unless Lana is a carrier, she is excluded."

"Sara, you are a genius."

"I have more good news. I'm running the sperm's blood type through our database, and so far we have about forty hits in the United States. The blood type is so rare I thought I would give it a try. But this will only work if he has a record with his blood type on file. I'm also running the blood type around Ms. Borders's mouth, and there are a lot more to compare. So far, there are over six hundred in the US. I'm going to try to narrow it down to one."

"You amaze me. When you get the list, will you send it to the BAU and to me?"

"I sure will, and I will let you know of any new updates."

"Thanks, Sara"

"It's my pleasure to help."

Mike walked over to the computer and watched Joe work his miracles. Joe downloaded the picture and played around with it, trying to

make it clear. When he finished, he handed it to Mike for approval.

Mike nodded. "You did a great job. Go ahead and process it to all the agencies and run it through the FBI database."

The first day he started working with Mike and the team, he found out he would be the tech guru. When it came to technology, none of the men were savvy, nor did they want to learn. Every time they had a case, Mike always gave instructions, but Joe knew what to do. They worked so harmoniously together, sometimes they didn't have to speak; they just did what needed to be done. When Joe finished processing everything, he leaned back in his chair happy with himself.

After Mike had looked at the picture for a few seconds, he spun it around to Lana and asked, "Is this the man you saw at the airport, restaurant, and grocery store?"

After staring at the photo for a few minutes, she grinned. "Yes, this is the man I saw. You know, he kind of looks like that Peter guy."

"Yes, he does, and we've sent all law enforcement the information on the real Peter Waters."

"Why Peter Waters?"

"Remember, Lana, he doesn't know *we* know the name he's using. He doesn't even know you remember him from the airport."

Joe added, "Let's hope he gets stopped, and he uses Peter's ID."

"In the meantime, we're processing his airport photo through the FBI facial recognition database. That might give us another name, his real name," said Mike.

"How long does it take to get a match?"

"On the positive side, it could be minutes, and sometimes we don't get a match at all," Joe answered.

You could tell Mike was in a good mood, and she knew exactly how he felt. He massaged her shoulders, and it felt so relaxing. "You know Joe, we're going to make an investigator out of Lana yet."

"Yes, sir," he said with a grin.

Mike stopped massaging, and she pulled his hands back. He started again with a quick little kiss on the neck. "I can tell the way you and Joe are looking at each other, you already processed the photos through the database, right?"

Without missing a beat on massaging, Mike said, "Yep."

She motioned Mike to follow her to the chair and continue the

massage. She could feel the stress leaving her body, but that feeling didn't last long as Mike's phone rang. *That damn phone!*

Mike pushed some buttons and answered while still rubbing one side of her neck. "Hey Sara, what do you have for me."

She was breathless with excitement. "Mike, I have great news."

"Yes?"

"I would say the luck of the Irish is on your side."

"Why is that?"

"Both the male blood types are uncommon."

"Okay."

"Well, I ran the sperm blood type in the national database with a starting point on the East Coast."

"Okay."

"I then narrowed the search to Massachusetts and got seven close matches. Then I searched Plymouth and got two. I then ran a mitochondrial DNA comparison and his sperm matched eighty percent of the pointers. This type of testing doesn't take as long to find a match. After all this, I got a match with a guy named Tony Mitter out of Hull. He has a record, and I'm sending it to you as we speak."

"Sara, I love you. Send a copy to Quent and the BAU."

"I already have."

Lana had never seen so much whooping and hollering in her life. It was as though they had won the Super Bowl. All the men jumped up, and Mike said, "Okay, team, we know our role, so let's get ready."

All the men ran outside and brought in tons of body armor. She didn't realize they were a SWAT team. They were geared up in a matter of five minutes, and she just sat there in shock. She did notice Mike and Joe didn't get out their SWAT uniforms. "Aren't you going?"

"No, Joe and I will stay with you. Raymond can lead the team."

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

"We can't, we have to move faster than the suspect."

She looked at Joe, and asked, "Do you think this guy is the one who killed the Borders?"

"Let's hope so, and let's hope they find him." Deep down, Joe had a concern about the blood around Mrs. Borders's mouth, but maybe this guy would have some answers. Telling anything to Lana would be Mike's job.

Excitement overwhelmed her, and she knew how they felt. "Joe, are

you disappointed you don't get to go?"

"Maybe a little bit. It *is* exciting when we break down doors and go in as a badass. It's especially nice when you get to handcuff the bad guy."

"I can certainly understand that."

Mike walked over by the fire to get warm.

She couldn't help but run over to him and give him a hug. She cried tears of relief.

Mike held her close.

When Joe saw the tears, he got up and walked outside, partly to get information on Tony and partly to give them time alone.

"Babe, I love you so much," he said as he raised her head so he could look into her eyes. "What happened to that badass who was here a little while ago?"

"Shut up. I thought about telling you I love you and thanking you for taking care of me, but now I'm not."

He rolled his head back, laughing at his cutie pie. "I love to tease you."

She just buried her head in his chest with contentment. She certainly understood why they loved their job so much.

Joe walked back in with all the information about Tony Mitter. "He is a thirty-eight-year-old truck driver, married with two children, and he lives in Hull. He is six feet tall, brown hair and hazel eyes. He has a receding hairline, and six known tattoos. He has been arrested for several different crimes, but nothing major—mostly drunk and disorderly, DWI, resisting arrest, and open container. It sounds as though this guy has an alcohol problem. I'm surprised he keeps his job as a truck driver."

After Mike stared at the information for ten minutes, he asked, "What do you think?"

"I don't think he's the guy," he said with confidence.

"I don't either. But one fact we do know, his sperm was on the wall outside my house. Also, Mrs. Borders's blood type was with that sperm. So the million dollar question is how did his sperm get with the dead Mrs. Borders's?"

Joe put a pencil in his mouth, as though that would help him think. "Maybe he had a pair of her underwear and he jacked-off using them?"

"There has to be another explanation," answered Mike.

"Maybe he had sex with her before he killed her. Then he took his

sperm out of her and put it on the wall," said Joe.

Although it was disgusting, it made sense, and Mike added to that thought. "Okay, let's say he did that. Why? What would be the point of taking the sperm out of her and putting it on the wall—*my* wall?"

Joe pulled the pencil from his mouth and held it like a cigarette. "Maybe after he killed the Borders he realized someone rented this house, and he was afraid they saw him."

"Let me think a minute. You said he was a truck driver?"

"Yes, sir."

"See if you can find his route and where he's been this past week."

Joe knew where Mike was going with this, and he jumped up and went to the computer. After several minutes, he found the information. "Mike, he was gone all last week, and he got back into town with his rig late last night. Yesterday, he filled his truck with gas in Boston, or at least someone using his credit card did. Also, two days ago he got a speeding ticket in Ohio."

"Do you show the state logs on his rig?"

"Yes, sir, and he signed off on all the logs for the past week. He went cross-country to California and every state between here and there."

"So, he wasn't here the night the sperm was put on the wall or the steak was stabbed?"

"No sir, he wasn't."

"That still doesn't answer the question of how his sperm got out of him and on my wall."

Lana intently listened and came up with her own theory. "Maybe Mrs. Borders had an affair with Tony? Maybe her husband found out about their affair. Then he killed her, took the sperm out of her, and put it on the wall. He would know no one would find the sperm, so he put the knife in the steak. Then he went back home and killed himself, thinking all the evidence would point to Tony."

Joe thought a minute. "Mike, that's a good theory."

"Joe, call the medical examiner and ask how and the time Mr. Borders died."

"Yes, sir."

Mike asked his sweetheart, "Are you hungry?"

"Maybe a little—what did you have in mind?"

They walked into the kitchen and rummaged through the pantry and

fridge. "You know it's nearly suppertime, and I don't mind cooking."

"Nope, I'm going to send Joe into town to get some chicken."

"I hate to admit this, but that does sound good. Can I at least make the baked beans and coleslaw?"

"That's a deal," he answered.

Joe walked into the kitchen and looked at his notes again. "Well, Lana's theory is wrong. It sure was a great theory, but Mr. Borders was shot in the back of the head, and whoever shot him used a silencer. He died about the same time as Mrs. Borders."

She looked at both of them. "How do you know he used a silencer?"

"Forensics. The crime lab usually knows when they get a clean bullet from a victim. They can tell by the marks on the bullet that a silencer was used. It's not common," answered Mike.

"Is that why I didn't hear anything?"

"That's right; we would have definitely heard a gunshot."

"Is it common for a stalker to use a silencer?"

Mike promised not to lie for any reason, but he felt he should be particular about what he did say and how he said it. "Most of the time a stalker does not use a silencer, but it's not unheard of."

"Why do you think he used one this time."

This question was an easy and truthful one to answer. "He didn't want you to hear the shots."

"I'm glad I didn't hear any. I would have been scared, and I would have dialed 911."

Mike and Joe laughed.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"It just seems funny that you have a house full of cops at your disposal, all of us are packing, and you would call 911."

"Remember the killing was last week, and you guys were not here."

Joe said, "Touché."

~Chapter 27~

The Hull city police and Sergeant Quentin pulled up at Tony Mitter's home with a warrant in hand. The police were concerned about the presence of children. Their policy was to send undercover cops to feel out the situation. In this case, the two cops were Aaron Wakefield and Calvin

Drake, both familiar with the area and Tony Mitter's record. Before they walked up to the house, they splashed whiskey on their faces to play their roles. They climbed the twenty or so steps to the porch and knocked loudly. The U.S. Marshal's SWAT team waited one house over on Angier Street.

Raymond anxiously waited on code word *Cooper* to move in.

Tony's wife, Judy, opened the door and asked, "May I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Zack, and this is Arti. I live a few houses down the road, and we wondered if your husband might be home?" They staggered around and made sure they breathed on her.

"Yes, but he's asleep. What do you need to talk to him about? Is it about a woman?" She suspected they were some thugs who wanted the money he owed them. Her demeanor changed to rudeness because she didn't have time for this hogwash.

"We're interested in finding out where your husband works because we want to drive a rig. When would be a good time to come back?"

"Two hours?" She slammed the door in their faces.

"Sounds great, we'll come back." Wakefield whispered in his microphone. "Cooper."

The SWAT team was in their home within twenty seconds. They found Tony sleeping and they handcuffed him. The whole fifty feet to the car he screamed at his wife for letting the police break down the door.

Raymond walked up to the police car and opened the back door. He had one of the guys bring over a blanket since Tony only had on boxers. "Mr. Mitter, just to satisfy my curiosity, can you tell me where you've been this past week?"

He was angry they woke him up from his drunken stupor. "I've been on the road, and if you don't believe me call my boss, you cop wannabe." He couldn't believe he was in this situation. Thinking back over the last few months, he couldn't think of anything illegal he had done.

"This cop wannabe wants to know how you know Donna Borders."

"I've never heard of her."

"Maybe I need to ask your wife if *she's* ever heard of her."

Tony didn't want his wife involved; they already had trouble over other women. "I think I done some work for her and her husband a long time ago," he finally admitted. He spit on the ground trying to look tough, and in the process the blanket fell to the ground. "Hey, asshole, cover me

up, it can't be over twenty degrees out here."

"Fine. If you don't want to be honest, I'll ask your wife." Raymond started up the dirt path to Tony's house.

He heard Tony screaming from the car. "I'll tell you what you want to know! My wife don't need to be involved."

While putting his hands on his hips, showing aggravation, he asked again, "I am losing my patience with you—this is your last chance."

"Donna and I are close friends."

"How close of friends are you?"

"Real close."

"Keep going."

"We've been screwing for almost a year. Are you happy now? Are you getting your jollies?"

"When was the last time you screwed her?"

"I don't know what she's told you, but I never promised I would leave my wife, and she never said she would leave her husband. Our only relationship is screwing, I swear."

"I'm only going to ask this one more time. When was the last time you screwed her?"

Tony was thinking back and started counting, using his fingers. That immediately told Raymond it was more than a few days. "I think seven or eight days ago. Why do you care? Do you want to screw her, too?"

"We found your sperm in her, and I'm just wondering how it got there."

"I don't know what she told you, but it was consensual. She wanted me as much as I wanted her."

"Yeah, that's what every rapist says—it's consensual."

Raymond shut the car door. "Take him in and hold him. I'll let you know if there will be any charges. I didn't see any, but check to see if he has any bite marks under his boxers."

"You got it. Let me know if we need to book him."

"I will."

"Mike, I need to head over to the Borders before it gets too dark," said Joe as he opened the closet door.

"I agree. Head over and call me when you get there. Lana and I will stay in the house and compare you to the killer."

"That's affirmative." Joe drove to the Borders home.

Mike took advantage of his time alone with Lana. He took her hand and led her to the kitchen, pulling out a bar stool for her to sit next to him. Not one word came out of Mike's mouth the entire time. He walked behind her, pulled her hair away from her neck, and gave her a sweet kiss.

That kiss gave her goose bumps all the way down to her toes.

He whispered in her ear while playing with her blouse. "Baby, you are so smart, adorable, lovable, and you have a nice chest," he commented while peeking down her blouse.

"Wait a minute, big boy. I can't believe you have time to think about my chest, especially with all that has happened. Joe will be calling any minute."

"How can I not? Any normal, red-blooded American male would notice that. And the nice thing about it is the girls are all mine."

"Mike, *you* have a large chest," she answered, enjoying every touch.

"Yeah, but mine is from working out, yours comes naturally."

"Honey, I promise you when we get through this, you can play with my chest all you want."

"That is a promise I will make you keep," he said as he kissed her neck some more. "I can't help myself. We just don't get any alone time, and I want to take advantage of that every chance we get. I've been wanting you all day."

She let him kiss and touch her anywhere he wanted. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Mike, when this is all over can we go someplace—just the two of us, with no phones or interruptions? Maybe work on a bucket list."

"Honey, I have already thought of that. I thought about Hawaii, what do you think?"

"Any place would be paradise with you, but Hawaii sounds great," she answered with a sweet kiss.

Joe calling interrupted their moment, "I'm ready. Are you both in place?"

"Yes we are, and we see you as we speak. Walk from the front to the back, then all the way around the back."

Joe did as he was told.

Lana watched intently. "Joe is way too tall. The guy was almost a foot shorter, and the guy is a lot smaller than Joe."

"Joe, go the same route and squat about ten inches."

"Will do, boss."

"That is perfect," said Lana. The reenactment *did* help her remember, maybe more than she wanted to.

Mike got back on the walkie-talkie and told Joe, "Go to the spot."

"Yes, sir."

She looked at Mike with confusion. "What spot?"

"Just look."

She looked toward the Borders and there was that white gaze staring at her. Again, she jumped back. "That's the look I saw when he looked over here. How did you know?"

"We found where he stood." He got back on his walkie and called Joe. "Okay Joe, we're finished, but before you come back please go to KFC and get five buckets of chicken. Lana plans on cooking baked bean and coleslaw."

"Absolutely, I'll be back in about thirty minutes."

She grabbed Mike's hand and asked, "How long do we have?"

He answered with a grin. "Maybe thirty minutes."

They were completely undressed by the time they got to the bedroom. Nothing was wrong with a passionate afternoon quickie.

~Chapter 28~

Lana quickly dressed and put her hair up with a clasp when her cell phone rang. She glanced down and saw Sharon's name on the phone. "Hi, Sharon, how's my favorite cousin?"

"Hey, baby girl, I miss you and was wondering when you will be heading back?"

"Well, I might not be coming home any time soon. I planned to call you when I made a decision." She couldn't help but sound excited.

Sharon could tell by Lana's voice that something was going on. "So, tell me the scoop."

"I've met someone." She could visualize Sharon dusting as she talked on the phone. She always did that. Sharon loved to talk on the phone, and that was why her house was always so clean; she cleaned while she

chatted.

"Are you kidding? Who is he, and how did you meet him? I am so excited for you. You know James would give him the third degree."

"I know, but I am so serious about this guy I'm thinking about moving here. Sharon, I have never cared for anyone as much as I care for him. He's the owner of the house I'm renting. I can't wait for you to meet him," Lana sighed.

"I'm so glad you have met someone. I know the last several weeks have been difficult for you—for all of us. You have that tone in your voice that wasn't there a week ago." She paused. "I called to check on you and ask you when you're coming back."

"If it were up to Mike, I would never come back. Any particular reason you might need me to come sooner?" She didn't want to tell her about all her problems there, she knew Sharon had enough on her plate without adding to it.

"Well, it's just we got the will out of the safety deposit box, and the attorney wanted to read it, but I wanted to wait until you got here," she answered while acting a little nervous.

"I don't want a thing from James, so I don't know why I need to be there. I will sign everything over to you. You were the one married to him. I know he loved me and wanted to leave me something, but I don't want anything," she answered truthfully.

Both of them were quiet. "Are you serious? I don't know what James would think about that."

"He'd tell me to do with it what I want, and I want to give it to you. The way I look at it, you have two choices—keep the money, or we can put it in trust for kids or grandkids. That's what James would say." She just now remembered how James called her squirt and so did Mike. No wonder she loved the sound of Mike calling her that.

There was a pause. "How about we put half in trust and the other half I put toward paying off the house?"

Lana could tell she seemed nervous. But hey, if it helped pay off the house, that was less worry for Sharon. "That sounds great to me, and if you need me to sign the papers, you can overnight them to me. I'll get them signed and overnight them back. How does that sound?"

"Oh, Lana, that sounds great, and you don't know how much this will help. James' sick leave at work was only thirty days, and after that, I only

have what's in checking. This will tide me over until I can see what cash I have and what I'll need."

"What about his life insurance?"

"He let that lapse. When James turned fifty, he let it go. It got too expensive. So right now, all I have is what is in checking and savings. And you know my brother was so sick, James put all our money toward paying the hospital and helping his family. We were slowly building back up but just haven't quite made it."

"Well, you get those papers sent to me, and I'll make sure they get sent back."

"God bless you, and where do I send the papers?"

"I don't know the address, but I'll get it and email it to you."

"That sounds great. Baby girl, you take care, and I'll see you and Mike soon," she said.

"Bye, and don't worry. Everything will be okay. I'll make sure of that."

"Thanks, love you, and call when you can."

"I will, and I love you, too. Kiss the kids for me." Lana hung up the phone and ran to the kitchen. She was late getting dinner started.

She washed her hands and started mixing the beans. Mike had already pulled items out of the pantry and fridge. "I started by opening the cans. I hope these are the right ones."

She glanced over and said, "You did good, I use pork-n-beans. How many cans did you open?"

Mike counted. "Five."

"How many men will be here?"

"Um, I think there will be about seven."

"The five cans should be enough." She grabbed the onions, and chopped away. She added brown sugar, BBQ sauce, onions, and bell pepper then popped the dish in the oven. Quickly she made her sauce for the coleslaw. It was her grandmother's recipe, and it was simple but delicious. She used this same recipe in her carrot and raisin salad. She would mix the sauce and cabbage at the last minute. Finally, she poured herself a glass of tea and joined Mike in the living room.

Mike got off the phone. "Raymond will be here in a few minutes, and he has talked to Tony."

Joe and Lana looked at Mike, wanting him to finish.

"What did he say?" Joe asked with anticipation.

"Tony admitted having an affair with Mrs. Borders, but he has no clue about anything else. He also admitted he had sex with her before he left on his trip."

Joe was excited and wanted to know the scoop, but he wanted to hear it from Raymond.

She walked over to the fireplace and poked at the wood, hoping to get a strong flame going. She watched as the little flickers tried to reach the highest log. The stone fireplace was beautiful with a mantle she could tell Mike made, carved with the initials of his family. The carving of Kyle was sloppy, so she imagined his little boy helping his daddy. Now she knew why Mike could never get rid of this place, it had too many fond memories.

"A penny for your thoughts," Mike asked while wrapping his arms around her.

She leaned into his chest and enjoyed the moment before responding. "You don't have to pay anything for my thoughts. I happen to be thinking about how efficient you and your team are. Just a few short days ago, this case was in disarray, and now all the puzzle pieces are starting to fit together. I am in awe of you guys." She didn't want to tell him what was truly on her mind. For some reason, it seemed too private.

"I told you this is what we do, and many times it *is* a bunch of jigsaw puzzle pieces. And all we do is find the right pieces and then put it all together. Sometimes the pieces don't fit, but eventually we figure it out—piece by piece. I wouldn't change my job for anything."

"One other thing I noticed about your team."

"What's that?"

"Sara. Oh my, she is wonderful and so insightful."

"She *is* incredible. She sounds young on the phone, but she's about forty." Mike turned to Joe. "How old do you think Sara is?"

"I would say about forty."

"Parrot." Mike just looked at Joe and raised his left eyebrow, then continued. "She has premature gray hair. She is completely gray and short like you. I think she has a Master's degree, married with one child who

just started college. Her husband is an engineer at one of the airlines in Boston. We all love her immensely and couldn't do our job as well without her."

The heater kicked on, pulling all the air throughout the house. The wonderful smell of baked beans lingered. "I've got to check on supper." Immediately, Joe and Mike followed her. "Do you guys want a taste?"

They nodded before she finished the question.

Mike lifted the heavy beans from the oven. They smelled so good she got a spoon for both of them and let them taste. "These are the best beans I have ever tasted."

Joe agreed by nodding again.

Raymond and the gang pulled up, and the two men found other things to preoccupy their minds—the story about Tony.

The guys bantered back and forth about busting down the door. There were at least three different conversations going on at one time. Raymond talked about how they were vultures, waiting on their prey. They told the story of crouching in the bushes waiting for their cue *Cooper*.

Who in the hell uses the word *Cooper* as a raid word? She rather liked the word shazam or pickle juice . . . but *Cooper*! That boggled her mind. Later she would ask Mike how they choose their raid words.

As Raymond told the story, Joe listened with delight. His eyes sparkled as he took in every word. She could tell he had wanted to be a cop since he was a child; he lived and breathed this business.

Raymond told the story of Tony in the back of the cop car. "He called me a cop wannabe."

"Did Tony know you were a deputy?" Joe asked.

"I told him but he was so mad and drunk, I don't think it registered."

Mike took many notes during all this discussion. He downloaded Tony's driving schedule, then compared it to the time lines. Items such as receipts, dates, and timelines were entered on their makeshift boards. "Guys, we need to look over the timeline for Tony, and tell me your thoughts."

Raymond began. "We know he had sex with Mrs. Borders at least seven days ago."

Mike corrected the time. "It was eight days because he left out at four in the morning. The Medical Examiner's preliminary findings say they were dead between three and seven days. So it's a possibility Tony killed

them—slim, but still a possibility."

"We know he didn't put the steak on the counter because he was out of town. And we know he didn't kill John Johnson because John was seen after Tony left. The only connection with this case is the sperm, and he admitted he had sex with Mrs. Borders," said Joe, pinning some timelines on the board.

"I'm going to put Tony at the ten percent chance that he had anything to do with the killings."

Both Joe and Raymond agreed.

Joe asked, "What about the three clowns in jail?"

"I think they are opportunists, and that's all. I know you all don't know this, but Quent gave them a lie detector and all three passed. I'm going to put them in the ten percent category, as well."

Raymond asked, "Who does that leave?"

Mike pulled a picture from his pile of papers, the man at the airport. "Somehow all this is tied to this guy. This picture is being searched through the FBI database. In the meantime, we have hair and blood from the Borders house, and we think his blood type is B-. We have had less. We've put this picture with every police department and every federal agency. I want this guy caught."

"Dinner is ready," Lana interrupted.

The guys headed to the kitchen, grabbed plates, and filled them to the brim. She even surprised them with a triple-layer chocolate cake. While they were in the kitchen, she walked in the living room and joined Mike as he organized all the papers.

"You better fix yourself a plate or the guys will eat it all," said Lana.

"That's okay if they do, they've earned it."

"True. Are you okay?"

"No, not really."

"What's wrong?"

"I can see the picture of this man who talked to you on the plane, came into my neck of the woods, and killed three people. Furthermore, I have to wait days before I can get DNA. Then, I might have to be disappointed if he doesn't have any DNA on record."

"Babe, he *will* make a mistake. They always do, right? I also know one of the reasons you are upset is because it involves me . . . right?"

"Absolutely that's true." Mike finished organizing all his papers so he

could easily get to them. "How about we get something to eat?"

"Sounds good to me."

He took her hand as they walked into the kitchen, and Mike grabbed plates for both of them. They scanned the leftovers, and it was sparse: six pieces of chicken, two cups of beans and no coleslaw. Lana quickly grabbed some dressing from the fridge and whipped up a little more.

"You know, Lana, you keep cooking like this, and these guys will never catch this man," Mike said.

As they fed their faces, they nodded and mumbled that they would catch him.

She honestly felt like a little kid among these strong, pistol-packing tall men. "Good grief, guys. I thought they made them big in Texas, but you all take the cake. What did your moms feed you guys?"

They just laughed and kept on eating. They grabbed all their goodies and went into the living room. Mike looked in the bucket of chicken and whispered, "I bet you're a breast woman."

"No, you are. Or at least you were earlier."

"What would give you that idea?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Can we talk since we're all alone?" Lana looked around to make sure no one could hear. The guys were great, but she needed their conversation to be private.

"Sure." Mike was all.

"Why do you think this guy is after me? I know after seeing that video he probably is, or why else would he be at the airport and go to all this trouble." She played with her food.

"I don't know why. As soon as we figure out his name, we'll be able to determine more."

"I think I understand about the stalker and how he had his eye on me before the airport. I don't understand why he'd go through this much trouble when I live alone. He could wait until I get home."

"We can't imagine what goes through their crazy minds. For him, it might be the chase. Another stalker might watch for months or years and never bother the person they stalk. Some stalkers escalate, some stalkers just go away, and some shoot presidents."

"Are there any other alternatives besides stalking?"

"We know it's not an old boyfriend because you would know. We

checked your spouse to see if he possibly hired a hit man. We also check close family members to see if there is anything abnormal in their lives."

She was shocked by that statement. "Like what?"

"This would not pertain to you, but it might be someone involved with drug dealing, or someone on drugs. I will assure you that while we sit here and I look at you and adore you, we continue to investigate. We have people in the office who are running checks on people close to you."

"Are you serious?"

"Don't get upset, we've saved many lives by doing this. Most people don't even know we're checking them out, and you would have never known about me checking on you if I wouldn't have told you."

"I don't believe anyone I know, and especially love, could have anything to do with someone trying to kill me."

"I agree, but look at the bright side, they'll be eliminated. They won't even know we looked at them."

"Promise?"

Mike pushed his plate to the side, and looked her in the eyes.

"Promise. I told you I would tell you everything, and I am. I told you I would protect you, and I am. I told you I would never leave you, and I haven't . . ." He took a deep breath. ". . . And I told you I love you very much, and I do forever."

"I love you to infinity."

About that time, the men brought their plates into the kitchen one by one, and then cleaned the kitchen. She was so impressed with them. Literally, within five minutes the room was spotless.

All the men ate some cake and excused themselves to go home. Joe told Mike he needed to get some shut-eye and left for the guest bedroom.

~Chapter 29~

Day 9

The loud snoring woke Lana. After years of growing up listening to her dad snore, it still reminded her of a train. Her family picked travel destinations and imagined their dad's snoring took them to exotic places. She smiled while remembering how her mom tricked the kids into learning the world map. It was her mom's way of teaching her girls the different countries. Today, she picked Italy as their travel destination.

Mike's snoring got them to there in no time. Going to Rome with him would be a dream come true. Maybe they could go there for a honeymoon. She felt sorry for Kathy. If he slept that hard when the babies were little, she was the only one who heard them cry.

Even with a little nudging, his snoring wasn't going to stop. No one seemed to be stirring in the house. Lana thought about making a pot of coffee and enjoying the quiet.

The house was dark, so she crept around the kitchen, trying not to wake anyone. Joe walked in the kitchen while Lana was waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. "Hey, Joe. I made coffee, and I'm starving. I'm trying to find something to munch on, would you like to join me?" To her surprise, he was dressed nice. All the while she thought he was sleeping, he must have been showering. *Jiminy crickets, these guys are early birds.* She wondered if they ever slept.

"I thought about running to the donut shop and buying some pastries. Everyone will be here shortly, and when they get here, they'll eat everything in sight. If I get some now, we can enjoy them. Any particular kind you want?"

"It doesn't matter to me."

Lana noticed him shuffling his feet and lingering. "I can tell something is on your mind. Do you want to talk about it?"

"I have something to ask you on a more personal note," he said while his face turned red.

"What's that?"

"It's about a girl I'm dating."

"What about her?"

"I want an opinion from a woman's perspective."

"I'm all ears." She wanted to give Joe her undivided attention, so she raised her finger to say hold on a minute. She poured them a cup of coffee, and they both sat down on bar stools.

He trusted Lana would tell him the truth, and that's what he needed. "I met this girl a few months ago, and I was attracted to her from the minute we met."

"Where did you meet her?"

"A party. A friend from college had a Fourth of July BBQ, and she was there. I noticed her right away."

"Do you think she noticed *you* right away?" Being raised with sisters

and having many male cousins, she knew those first glances were a pivotal moment. Then her heart fluttered as she remembered her first time seeing Mike. She was undeniably right about that first glance.

"I don't think so. It was about an hour into the party and I kept looking at her, but I never noticed her looking at me. I *did* notice her friends glance my way, and they whispered to her. They probably told her I had been watching her, so she knew I was interested."

"How did you meet her?"

"I asked my friend to introduce us. We seemed to hit it off, so I asked her for her number, and she put it in my cell phone. I called her, and then we started to date. But lately, she hasn't been returning my calls right away, and it seems she makes excuses not to go out with me."

"Have you discussed this with her?"

"Yes."

"And what did she say?"

"She told me she was really busy, and she wants to continue to date me, but I need to give her some space."

"What do you feel in your heart?"

"I don't think she wants to date me."

"So why do you keep calling her?"

"Because when I'm with her, I feel alive and happy. It's like you and Mike. When you two look at each other, you can see so much love and happiness. I want what you have."

"Do you see the love and happiness as mutual between Mike and me?"

"Yes, there was no doubt in my mind. When Mike first mentioned you, I could tell he was smitten. In all honesty, I was worried. He'd never fallen for anyone before. I've been with the team five years, and you are the only one he ever showed an interest in. I was afraid you didn't feel the same way. But when I see the two of you together—there is so much love, I don't worry about it anymore."

"So what are you asking me?" She could see he cared for this girl, and it's so hard to deal with that first love, especially if it's one-sided.

"She told me she wanted to continue to see me, but her actions say the opposite, at least in my mind. From a woman's perspective, what do you recommend I do?"

"Joe, I think you have already answered that yourself. Since you want

my opinion, I think you should move on and find another girl, one who appreciates you. If Mike calls me, I answer right away, or return the call immediately. He wouldn't have to wait two or three days. Are you willing to live like this for a lifetime? She's not going to change."

"I know," he muttered, almost whispering. He was whipped.

"I will give you some advice from my life's experience, and you can take this to the bank. A one-sided relationship will not work. Only one party would be working on the relationship. If she cared for you as much as you care for her, she would act more like you. She would feel alive and happy when she sees you at the end of the day, or when she sees your number pop up on her phone, or when she hears your voice. That's how a relationship should be for both people. One other thing I want to promise you, and I mean this from the bottom of my heart—no matter how much it hurts you now, you will meet someone who has that mutual feeling. It may be in five years, five months or five days, but it will happen. If you never talk to this girl again, it may hurt now, but later you will be glad."

"You're right."

She could tell that wasn't the answer he had hoped for, but she wanted to be honest. "Who's to say? If you give her *space*, she might give you a call later when she realizes what a terrific guy you are. I hope by then you meet Miss Right." She wanted him to have a little hope.

"Me, too. I guess I just had to hear from someone I trusted to be honest."

"I bet if you told the men about this they would tell you to get in her britches and move on to the next girl."

He laughed so hard while rolling his head back. "You're right, that's what they said."

"Joe, it is okay to back off and reflect on the situation. I think if you spend time away from her, you will look at everything differently. Now . . . back to the problem at hand. I think chocolate-covered donuts for the guys, and I want cream cheese." Seeing his face so sad reminded her of a beaten puppy.

"Mike likes cream cheese too," Joe said.

"See, another thing we have in common."

Joe teased her, "Height is definitely not something you have in common."

"Hey, now," she said while smiling at him.

Out the door he went, laughing.

Joe was a sweet young man, and she was right about her initial judgment of him. He was kind-hearted, and he didn't hesitate to show it.

~Chapter 30~

Mike crossed his arms and appeared to be deep in thought while scanning their suspect board. "Joe."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's think about removing the three guys in jail and Tony from the board. Before we take them off, have Sara crosscheck them one more time. Also, run a check on family and friends to see if any piece of paper connects them to Lana or our suspect."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't think they will find anything, but I would rather be safe than sorry. One more person I want Sara to check: Peter Waters. I want everyone and every account checked on him. Maybe he knew who stole his identity."

"You got it."

Mike's phone rang, and he immediately pushed the green button. "Hi Sara, what do you have for me?" Every time he glanced at his phone and it was Sara, it did his heart good. When she called, it was always with information. There was never a time she called just to chitchat. Their professional relationship was like an economics class—supply and demand. He demanded information, and she supplied it.

"I have tons of stuff. Mike, you are working me to death."

"Hopefully your hard work paid off," he answered while digging out his pen and pad to take notes.

"As far as Tony, I cross-referenced everything I could find including every man, woman and their pets. I found nothing out of the ordinary. I looked to see if any family or friends used credit cards or cell phones other than Boston. They haven't. I checked the other men, and they're clear. All cell phone records confirm their whereabouts. In fact, all this information helped them more than hurt them. I hope this helps you."

"What about Peter Waters?"

"That's a little harder. He was a salesman, so he used his phone a lot, and it will take a while. Most of his calls were to strangers, but I'll let you

know as soon as we've checked out every caller."

"Thanks, Sara. As usual, you are the best."

"I know."

"Do you have any news on the DNA?"

"Nope," she replied, almost mad at them. They knew that information wouldn't be in for a couple more days.

"Then I take back the compliment."

The guys laughed.

"I hear you," she teased.

"Keep me informed," Mike said.

"I sure will."

Mike looked at Joe and Raymond. "What do you think?"

Raymond spoke first. "I don't think these guys committed murder. The only crime they committed was being stupid."

Joe nodded in agreement.

"I think we need to put them in the 'not guilty' file."

Everyone agreed.

~Chapter 31~

Lana could tell Mike was getting anxious to solve this case. Sometimes he would stand back and look at the boards; sometimes he would get up close and stare at it for thirty minutes at a time. Right now, he sat in the chair, leaning back and staring at it with his arms crossed with his eyes fixated on the board, and she could see his mind cranking. Lana massaged his shoulders.

"Was that your cousin-in-law on the phone yesterday?" Mike asked without taking his eyes off the board.

"Yes, she wanted me to meet with the family about James' will. Why do you ask?"

"What did you tell her?"

She could tell he was a little nervous, but she didn't know why. "I told her I didn't want anything from James, and I would sign papers to give her everything. Then I told her to overnight the papers to me. I need an address to email her. I forgot to ask you about that yesterday."

"How about we mail the papers to the Boston office, and I'll make sure it gets to you. I'll write down the address and leave it by the computer

for you."

"That sounds great." She understood why she couldn't receive papers at the beach house; Mike didn't want anyone at this end of the road. Later, she would email her the address. "Mike, how did you know I talked with Sharon yesterday?"

"ESP . . . I'm just kidding. I opened the bedroom door and heard you say 'Sharon'. I didn't want to interrupt, so I just shut the door quietly. I know you didn't get to talk to your family much considering our hectic week."

"Honey, you could have interrupted. You wanted to know about how many cans of beans to open, didn't you?"

He smiled and answered, "How did you know?"

"ESP," she said with a giggle. "I know because I would have done the exact same thing. That's another thing we have in common—ESP."

He couldn't help smiling at her. He leaned his head back to give her a quick kiss, and she obliged. "Honey, you are so funny."

"What are you doing? When I walked up, you were intensely looking at the board."

"I'm trying to put everything together for Ken so we can figure out the next step or at least what's going on in the killer's mind." The board was covered with people's pictures, names, and dates.

"I'll leave you alone and watch some TV."

"You don't have to leave me alone." He pulled up a chair next to him. "You sit right there so I can sneak a kiss now and then." He didn't want her to be across the room watching TV; he wanted to be able to reach over and feel her warmth and see her smile. Mike had never felt love like this since Kathy, and he liked it. Everything about their love was perfect. They had so much common ground. Neither smoked, both were educated, both had a son and a daughter, and they both owned a Dodge truck. But most importantly, they shared values, beliefs, spirituality, and love. Lana's love went a step further; she loved everyone. Maybe that was because she taught school, or maybe it was because of her upbringing. Either way, he loved that part of her. He also noted they were opposite in some ways. She was outgoing and liked to meet new people, and he didn't. She took everyone and everything at face value, he didn't trust enough for that. She was extremely sensitive, and he was not, except with Lana and his children. For the first time in his professional career, he thought about

retiring. The past several years since his wife's death he had poured his life into his job. He didn't want to do that anymore. His life now belonged to Lana.

"Okay, I'll help if you want me to, but I'm not sure if I can do much." She sat down crossing her legs.

Mike thought she was adorable. "I will certainly ask when I need some help, and you will be the first one on the list. I just have to think about all that is happening and try to get a jump on him."

"I agree." She sat there and watched Mike work. He was diligent, organized, and efficient.

After a few minutes, he said to Raymond, "Would you go to the store and buy the biggest cork board you can find and grab some pins? When Ken gets here, it will make it easier for us to back up and look at the situation. This board is full."

"I'm on my way—back in an hour."

When Lana heard a car come down the road, she peeked out. It was Joe with an armload of food, so she ran out to help him.

Within just a few seconds, Mike stood at her side. "Lana, if you go out, let me know. I would like to come out with you," he said as he reached for dinner bags.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know I had to ask permission."

"We are all trained to look for suspicious behavior and you're not. We just want to keep you safe, isn't that right, Joe?"

"Absolutely. Who else can make lasagna like you?" he answered with a smile and a wink.

"Okay guys, quit ganging up on me. You win. The next time I head outside, I'll ask your permission. I'm starving, so let's go in and eat. Joe, I made you some sweet tea."

Mike asked, "You didn't make any for me?"

"I'll think about it," she said while tilting her nose in the air. As if to say, *don't talk to me*.

"You know, Mike, Lana likes me better. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

Mike raised his eyebrow at her. "Is that true?"

"What can I say? Joe is adorable."

They were debating her affection when Raymond drove up and got out of the SUV with a corkboard. "I see I made it in time for dinner. I'm starved. Hey, Lana, you shouldn't come outside until we patrol."

The three of them laughed, and Raymond looked at them bewildered.

The men fixed their plates and sat down at the kitchen table. All the men got spicy Chinese, and Lana got sweet and sour chicken.

Mike looked over at her dish. "I see you got the sissy dish."

The men tried not to laugh. "Well, I *am* a girl, so I guess it's okay if you call me a sissy. I know this is an inside joke, but I don't get it. What is it with this sissy stuff? Mike thinks I'm a sissy because I drink cream in my coffee."

"We noticed Mike has started to use cream, too," said Raymond, grinning. It wasn't very often when he got to tease his boss.

Mike ignored them and answered her. "To relieve tension, sometimes we order Chinese and get the hottest food we can stand. If one of the agents gets sweet-n-sour anything, it's considered the sissy dish. And babe, we *will* make you an honorary agent."

"Well, I'm not going to be the one with a stomach ache tonight. And I'll pass on being the honorary agent if it means I have to drink my coffee black or get extra-spicy anything. You all are so mean." Thank goodness a car pulling in the drive rescued her.

Mike was the first one who stood. "You all finish, I know it's Ken. I'll get the door." He pushed his chair in and answered the front door. "Hey, Ken. I'm glad you made it safe. How was your trip?"

"Bumpy, but I made it in one piece. Where do you want me to set up my computer?" He grunted as he was lifting his heavy suitcase.

Mike picked it up with no effort and sat it on the coffee table. "Right over here. We have a table set up and a corkboard we bought for you. I thought we could set it up together and hash over the case. In the meantime, I'll make a pot of coffee."

"Sounds great, we'll need that for sure. While you do that, I'll get everything out of the car."

Joe heard him and immediately jumped up to offer his assistance.

She could see Mike smiling. He was proud of Joe.

That was also her cue. "I'll make the coffee." She walked over to Ken and introduced herself. "Hi Ken, I'm Lana. It's so nice of you to help."

He extended his hand and smiled. He was shocked at how beautiful and friendly she appeared. "It is a pleasure to meet you. Many times when I get called in on a case, I don't get to meet the victims. So this is a rare treat to be able to confer with you about the situation and be able to hear firsthand how all this unfolded. Besides, it's nice to meet the pretty lady who captured Mike's heart. Mike didn't tell me how beautiful you are."

"That hurts my feelings." Lana puckered her lips in a pout.

Mike was not going to let that statement pass him by without a rebuttal. "I haven't had the time to discuss Lana. But you're right, she is beautiful." He couldn't help but reach over to give her a hug.

"How did you know about me and Mike?"

"I can just tell. It's written all over Mike's face and in his voice. I've known Mike for many years. I knew him when his wife died, and I've even introduced him to a few ladies. I must admit he has great taste, and I'm glad he found someone so nice."

She gave him a hug and whispered, "Thanks."

About that time, Joe walked in toting a suitcase, and that was Lana's cue. "I need to get busy and make you guys some coffee."

The clock read midnight, and the men had finished setting up their boards and were discussing many different angles.

Exhaustion had set in, and she knew she wouldn't be any help. She walked into the living room and watched them work for a few minutes. "Mike, if you all don't think you need me, I'm going to bed. It's been a long day."

Ken spoke first. "I think we have everything under control. But if you don't mind, we might wake you up if we have an epiphany. Sometimes the answer can come only from you."

"You can wake me up any time. I'm not as hard to wake up as Mike. Maybe in the morning you will have all the answers." She waved good night to everyone.

Mike followed her into the bedroom. He looked over his shoulder and said, "Let's take a few minutes." Mike shut the bedroom door behind him.

"I guess I'm never going to get that back rub," she said.

"Yes, you will, and you will get a lifetime of back rubs. I sure wish I

could crawl in bed with you."

"Me, too. It will be lonely tonight."

"We can only work so long, so in a few hours we'll call it a night, and I'll come snuggle with you."

"Mike, have you ever not solved a case?"

He thought about it for a few minutes. "Off the top of my head I can't think of any, but maybe a few. Why do you ask?"

"I just hope this is added to your solved cases. But what if you don't solve it? Will I have to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life?" She looked down, thinking about how horrible that would be. That was no life at all.

"We are putting extra effort into this case, and we *will* solve it. We've already made a lot of headway in the other room, and by morning we will have accomplished a lot. Not only that, Ken brought his *special* computer. He will be up all night entering data. After that, we wait for the miracle."

"I sure hope so, because that would be great." She hated to say it, but it didn't surprise her that Ken had a *special* computer; he seemed like the nerdy computer type. He was a smaller man, about five-eight. He wore glasses, and she noticed he would squint his nose trying to hold his glasses in place. His ears stuck out a lot, and he was going bald.

Mike took her head with both hands and kissed her. "I'll see you in a little while."

"Okay, I love you."

Before he opened the door, he whispered, "I love you to infinity." Then he stepped into the living room and closed the door behind him.

Lana lay in the dark, and for some reason she was extremely nervous—not so much nervous, but more of a feeling of weariness. Her granny always told her Indians had a sixth sense. She hoped her feeling went away by morning. She brushed it off as being tired, snuggled up to Mike's pillow and fell asleep.

~Chapter 32~

Day 10

Finally, a day that was clear and sunny. Lana peeked outside, and the bright light nearly blinded her. The ocean and lighthouse were clear and beautiful. Other than a few gulls squawking and flying, everything was

calm and surreal. The brightness made it look warm outside, and that excited her. She looked at Mike with exuberance. "Do you realize this is the first day since I've been here that it's been sunny?"

"You're right, but it's still cold," he needed to remind her.

"Who cares about the cold? I'm getting cabin fever. I want to sit on the back porch and look at the ocean. The guys could use the fresh air, too. Please! Will you go outside and sit with me?" She leaned over and sweetly asked by whispering in his ear, "Mike, I haven't been outside since the grocery store. I need the fresh air and so do the men. Come on, baby."

"Yes, we could use the fresh air. You'll stay on the back porch?"

Under normal circumstances, he did not allow anyone under protective custody to go anywhere without securing the place. Although she wasn't officially under his custody, she emotionally was under his care. Her safety was his greatest concern. He could send the guys out to check out everything. He thought she would be safe if she stayed on the porch. The house was surrounded by water, and it would be difficult to maneuver around it without being seen by an agent. Mike knew the routine of the marshals like the back of his hand, but his gut instinct knew not to let her out of his sight.

"Of course I'll stay on the porch, and there's only ocean around me so I'd feel safe." She didn't *want* to stay on the porch, but she would do whatever it took to obtain freedom.

All the men had gathered in the kitchen drinking coffee and were talking about their day. "Okay, guys, who wants to go outside with me?" she asked while bundling up.

None of them had to be asked twice.

She walked out on the back porch. Joe stayed on the porch with her and the rest of the men walked around the beach. They took in deep breaths and blew out steam. Mike was right; the cold froze her to the bone. The temperature gauge hooked on a nail hovered around five degrees. It was so cold her first breath burned her lungs.

The lighthouse across the cove stood bold against the clear, blue sky. It had its own peninsula with a private road. "Hey, Mike, can we go through the lighthouse?"

"I believe so. It might be open during certain hours of the day. I've seen people picnic over there during the summer. Do you want to take a tour?"

"I would like to go through all the lighthouses around here, even the haunted ones."

"I think that can be arranged," he said while watching the bay for boats or people on the water. Mike scanned the lighthouse and viewed the only door. He noticed it had a heavy padlock on it, and it looked isolated. There wasn't a soul around for miles.

Next to Mike were a couple of agents who were carrying guns. They were dressed in camouflage right down to their hats covering their faces.

Joe walked around on the porch and finally leaned on the post closest to Lana. He looked around and didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, and Lana sat right next to him where he could get to her in a flash. Her back leaned against the wall, and she was only a few feet from the door. That would give him plenty of time to rush her back into the house if he needed to move her. He was quick and could respond accordingly.

The men who stood a distance away smiled at Lana's coat. She had decided to wear Mike's, and it was a little big, making her look like the little brother in the movie *A Christmas Story*. They couldn't help smiling a little when she attempted to sit in the rocking chair; she could hardly bend at the waist.

Joe certainly understood what Mike saw in her—she was a breath of fresh air, so full of energy and fun. "Lana, what brings you to this part of the country?"

"My cousin died a few weeks ago, and I needed to get away for a while." She was amazed she didn't get upset and cry when she mentioned James. That was a first for her. It's funny how she cried on that very porch her first night there. That seemed like years ago.

"I'm sorry to hear that, has the trip helped?"

Lana loved Joe, but she did wish he would move to the other side of the post because he blocked her view of the ocean. "The trip has helped tremendously, and Mike has helped most of all. Don't tell him this, but when I first talked with him; I pictured him as a short, squatty fellow. When I first met him, I was shocked by his appearance. Most of all, I got irritated that he would answer my questions with one or two words."

They both laughed. "Yeah, Mike is a *to-the-point* kind of guy. I have to admit, we have seen an enormous change in him this last week. You've made a big difference."

Joe couldn't look her in the eye, and she knew he was keeping a

secret. If he played cards, he would undoubtedly lose—he did not have a poker face. "Okay, you have to tell me the scoop. What did Mike say about me?" A woman always likes to hear what her man thinks of her.

"You know he'll have my head if I talk about him, but I will tell you some things he said. The first day after you arrived, he mentioned you."

"What did he say?" She had to know.

"Well . . . he commented that he had rented his beach house to a lady he thought was attractive. Of course, we all asked your name, and he told us. We joked with him about how you probably gave him a fake one. We teased him and told him you were probably the black widow, and you've had seven husbands, and you've killed them all by cutting off their heads."

"What did he do?"

"At first he got embarrassed then teased back."

"Go on."

"We looked you up on the computer to make sure you didn't have a criminal record, and you were as clean as a whistle. I also think Mike looked you up to see if you were married. I *can* tell you when he found out you were married only once, his demeanor changed. He seemed so happy."

"Shame on you all," she said as she slowly, and with difficulty, moved forward in her seat. "Then what happened?"

"We were shocked Mike had met someone. He never talked about any women at work. We always asked him, but he always changed the subject or told us it was none of our business. If we knew he had a date, we asked him how it went. He wouldn't talk about it—until you."

James told her one day the right man would come along, and he was right, he had. And at that very moment, she was staring right at him. Love filled her heart and passion filled her soul. Never did she think she could love so much that happiness oozed from her being. Everyone around them noticed, and they could tell her happiness by listening to her voice on the phone. That's the way love should be. It may have taken her nearly fifty years to find it, but this love was worth the wait.

Suddenly, she was distracted. In the distance, the corner of her eye caught something shiny, or a glare. Maybe it came from the lighthouse, but she wasn't sure. She stood up and squinted her eyes, trying to focus toward the glare. Then she realized it was a window opening at the top of the lighthouse as the sun reflected off it. She saw something sticking out

of the window, something long and black. Oh, my God! A gun! "Run, Joe!" She immediately pushed Joe to the side a split second before the shot was fired. Joe tumbled to the porch floor. Everything happened so fast.

The bullet hit her in the left kidney. The force knocked her back into the rocking chair, and she slid down onto the porch floor. The pain was unbearable. She wanted to stand. Instinctively she thought if she could stand up she would be all right, but she couldn't. Blood gushed everywhere, all over her hands and in her eyes. She could hardly see, and she tried to blink it away. The gray siding had streaks of blood running down it. She closed her eyes; she didn't want to see. Why couldn't she breathe? *If I catch my breath, I can get up. Please, God . . . help me with the pain . . . help me breathe . . . help me stand.*

Joe rushed to her side first, and he was covered in her blood. She could hear Mike yelling something as he ran up to her. *Come help me, Mike. Help me stand; help me breathe.* Thoughts raced through Lana's mind as she moaned.

She reached her hand to him, and she knew he could help. He would know what to do. He would take care of her. "Joe?" she asked as she pointed to him. *He's hurt, help Joe.* She could stand if they would help her. She would feel better if she could stand. Splotches of blood sprayed everywhere— all over her, all over the porch, all over Joe. *Mike, help me breathe. Someone, please help me.* They didn't listen. Didn't they hear her?

Mike yelled, "Someone get an ambulance! Baby, Joe is fine." As he put pressure on her kidney, the pain was horrible, excruciating. Mike pushing on her side felt like being underneath the blade of a lawn mower, and every turning of the blade caused more throbbing pain.

She moaned in agony.

Oh, God! Help me help her, Mike thought. He worked feverishly to get all the jackets off her, but blood gushed out every opening of the coat, making the task slippery. He knew if he didn't stop the bleeding, she would bleed out, so he worked frantically. When he couldn't get them off fast enough, he just started ripping everything off as quickly as he could tug. "Damn it, Joe, help me get this shit off her."

Joe ripped at her coat and tried to lift her sweater.

She was unknowingly squirming because of the pain, and it made the blood flow more volatile. Mike and Joe tried to keep her still while they worked.

"Lighthouse," she said, turning her head from side to side, whispering the word a second time.

Mike took a quick glance toward the lighthouse but saw nothing. She kept coughing and sputtering blood. Mike went into a panic because he knew it didn't look good for her.

Through the blood and tears, she looked at Mike and saw fear. He never looked like this before. What was wrong with her baby? Coherence left her body, and she was oblivious to everyone and everything.

He knew she wouldn't make it; she couldn't breathe without difficulty. As the clothes came off, Mike saw the gaping hole. Blood spurted out like a water fountain.

Joe helped, doing everything Mike told him to do. His face turned white. Mike knew she would die from loss of blood, so he did the only thing he knew to do.

He stuck his finger in the hole where the bullet went in, right through the kidney. He knew it would help stop the blood loss.

The pain was more than she could endure, and she lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Thank God she passed out; I can't stand her to be in such pain," Mike said while still trying to stop the flow of blood. "Joe, put pressure on her back. Stop her from bleeding out, hurry."

Joe gagged as he put pressure on it, and he yelled for an ambulance this time, screaming at the top of his lungs. "Someone get a fucking ambulance over here!" Blood caused her to gag and sputter. Joe helped tilt her up so she wouldn't drown. They couldn't figure out where the blood in the mouth was coming from because the hole showed it had been clean shot. It was too low for the lung to be hit.

Raymond ran up, saw the horrifying scene, and knew she probably wouldn't make it. Her face showed that. At first glance, there was blood and kidney splattered all over the wall, chair and windows. He could hear her gurgling. "The bullet probably shattered, and a piece went into her lung. Let's apply pressure and lift her up so the blood will go down instead of into her airway."

"Thank you, Raymond. I just can't lose her. How could this happen?" Mike was frantic.

For the first time in fifteen years, Raymond saw Mike totally lose his composure. Raymond didn't have time to deal with Mike or Joe, his focus

was to save Lana's life.

In the distance, he could hear the ambulance and police coming. Mike knew if they didn't hurry, she would die. Oh, God, he didn't want to think about that. Her breathing was shallow, and her skin had turned ashen. Mike knew death's look. He looked at Raymond and asked, "What else can we do?"

"Nothing, just keep doing what we're doing now."

The agents showed the medics to the porch at the back of the house. The medic took over for Mike. "Let go sir, we have everything under control." Mike had to trust him.

The second Mike pulled his finger out of the wound—blood spurted everywhere. "Help her! Can't you see she's bleeding to death?" yelled Mike to the medics.

Raymond pulled him to the side and said, "Let them do their job, Mike. They're trained for this."

One of the medics asked, "Does anyone happen to know her blood type?"

Mike and Raymond answered simultaneously, "A+"

Since Mike was not in the right mental state, Raymond stepped into high gear and took over the investigation. The police were dispatched to the lighthouse immediately, and Raymond had to follow up in hopes of catching someone. He walked over to Mike. "Why don't you and Joe go with Lana to the hospital, and I'll take over here."

"I will," Mike said, standing as close to Lana as he could get. He wanted to make sure they didn't neglect her. When he noticed they were rough with her to stop the bleeding, his heart sank. He was always so gentle with her. His heart rose to his throat. If this happened under different circumstances, he would deck them.

Joe left for the beach, heaving his guts up when Raymond walked up to him and put his hand on his back. "Hey, bud, why don't you go with Mike to the hospital? We need two to go, and I figured you would want to."

"Raymond, she saved my life. How do I live with that? I'm supposed to protect *her*, and instead she saved *my* life." He paused to take deep breaths. "My God, her kidney was hanging out her back by a piece of skin!" He heaved again.

Raymond tried to console him, but he didn't have time for it. "She just

reacted when she saw the shooter. That's just the way she is, you know that. But right now, she needs you to be strong. Mike needs you to be strong. Get ready to go, because they will load her on the gurney in a few seconds."

They picked her up and quickly carried her to the ambulance because of the rough terrain. Within a few seconds, the lights and sirens were blaring, and they were on their way to the hospital. Mike sat in the back of the ambulance near the door. The medic worked frantically to save her life.

The medic called in her stats. "Blood pressure is 70/50 and dropping, and she has lost lots of blood. We are unable to stop the bleeding, and we are prepping her for surgery."

The doctor on the other end of the radio asked, "Give me information on the entrance and exit of the bullet."

"The entrance is about one-half inch in diameter and the exit took most of her left kidney. The exit hole is about one inch in diameter." The tech took a deep breath and added, "This is the biggest gunshot hole I've ever seen, and the caliber has to be at least a fifty. She's lucky."

A fifty caliber, my God, how did she even survive that? Mike knew that size bullet could blow up a watermelon. How her small body survived was a miracle. The distance slowed the bullet, and that might have saved her life. Mike got sick just thinking about his baby going through so much pain. It was so difficult to sit there and have no control over the situation.

"We are calling in the surgeon and preparing an operating room. Try to keep her stable," said the doctor on the other end of the radio.

"Our ETA is one minute." The medics didn't think Lana would make it. The loss of the kidney and blood was too much, and from their professional experience, they thought there was only a ten percent chance of survival—maybe less.

Mike sat in the back watching them work on her. He couldn't look when they plugged the hole. They wrapped something around her waist, like an Ace bandage with tubes sticking out of her side. When they finished plugging the hole, they stuck a needle in her lungs to pull out blood, which helped her breathe a little better. It didn't look good, and he felt helpless. "Do you think she will live?" He wasn't sure he wanted an answer. Everything was rerunning through his head. How did they miss the shooter? He did this for a living, finding killers, terrorists, and bad

people. How could he have let this happen?

"Believe it or not, I've seen worse. You would be surprised how much a body can endure." As they drove up, a team of doctors and nurses waited at the emergency room entrance. The doctors gave orders to the nurses while they assessed the gunshot wound. Blood pumped out of Lana's body as fast as they could put it in. All Mike wanted to do was be at her side and never leave. For the first time in his professional life, he didn't know what to do.

Mike followed her as far as they would let him. Now it was a waiting game. Mike knew all too well how to wait.

During all the commotion, U.S. Marshal Sniper, Colby Franklin, and his spotter were locked in on the lighthouse waiting for any movement. They were trained to drop, set their sights, and be ready to shoot. They had dropped within seconds after the shot was fired. Nothing moved at the lighthouse. They never saw him leave, and they had a clear view of the only door. The only explanation was that he exited through a window on the far side and had a jet ski or some kind of small motor boat waiting. The reefs were high enough he could slip out on the other side and ride off to safety.

~Chapter 33~

People in the waiting room avoided Mike and Joe as they walked in circles. The patients were frightened because they were covered in blood. Joe tried to coax Mike to leave, to wait in another part of the hospital, but he refused. Finally, a kind nurse approached them and offered them an empty room to wait. They accepted.

"Will they know where to find me and let me know what's going on with Lana?" Mike asked.

"Yes, sir, they will, I'll make sure of it." The nurse had already heard what happened, and her heart went out to them.

"Thank you," Mike said as he sat down on the vinyl chair.

Joe couldn't sit still, so he paced the room. He looked at the blood all over his clothes and didn't want to be reminded of what he'd just witnessed. "Mike, I'm going home to shower and change, and I'll bring

you a change of clothes if you want. I would be glad to stay if you would like to go home first."

"I'm not leaving her side. Joe, what will I do if anything happens to her?" His heart broke in two. He felt sick, but he needed to man up. He deserved to be sick; he didn't protect her. "Joe, do you think she's going to be okay?"

"No news is good news. She's been in surgery for over an hour, so I hope that's a good sign."

"She wanted to go outside, and I knew better. How many times have we protected people and made sure they didn't go outside for any reason?" Mike remembered in LA, several years ago, they had a witness in protective custody. He wanted to go outside, so the team checked out the surroundings. They posted several deputies outside, and against his better judgment, he let him go out on the balcony. Pretty much like Lana, he was shot within five minutes and died immediately. Those were the only two incidents Mike had a gut feeling not to let them go out, and both times proved to be a mistake on his part.

"We slipped up by not checking the lighthouse," said Joe, feeling guilty.

"That mistake may have killed her."

Deep down, Joe was sick, too, and he felt guilty having his back to the lighthouse. If he had been watching, he might have saved her life. He was trained to fall on the person he was protecting. Lana didn't have any training, and she pushed him out of the way rather than fall on him. "Mike, I should have been watching the lighthouse. If I had been doing my job, she would be okay."

Mike snapped at him. "It's not your fault. I'm the one who let her go outside, not you." Mike took a deep breath to calm his voice. "Why don't you bring me a change of clothes and something to eat?" He was going to take full blame.

"I can do that. Anything in particular you want?"

Mike didn't care. He didn't even want to change clothes; he just wanted to keep Joe busy. This was her blood on him, and he wanted to remember. "Whatever sounds good to you is fine for me."

Joe left with tears in his eyes. He hoped and prayed when he returned there wouldn't be grim news. Mike was all alone. He got out his phone and called Raymond. "I wanted to let you know I'm going home to shower and

get Mike a change of clothes and food. You might want to send an agent here just in case Lana passes. I don't want Mike to be alone."

"I will and be careful, that bullet might have been for you."

Raymond's phone rang. "Hi, Sara, what do you have?"

"First of all, I'm sorry to hear about Lana, I know Mike is devastated. Everyone here is talking about the shooting and working like beavers, doing anything to help. Ken called me a few times to look up some information, so he's working hard at your end. But I do have some good news."

"What is it? I sure could use some." He stopped walking for a few minutes, plugging one ear with his finger so he could hear.

"The DNA came back, or at least partially, and we're going to try to run it through the database. Fortunately, it was the DNA from around Ms. Borders's mouth. I'm running it as we speak. The bleach hurt the sample, so it will take a while."

"Sara, that's the best news I have heard all day. I'll let everyone know. How did you get it so fast?"

"FBI has a new chemical which speeds up the process, and since I had enough of a sample I had them overnight the chemical to me and bingo. I'm running one the old-fashioned way and one with the new chemical. This is a good way to test the new technique." She knew not to tell them the specific details of her job. It was much faster to use layman terms.

"You're the best."

"Please, Raymond, keep me updated on all that's happening there."

"I will, and let me know the second you hear."

"I promise, and I won't leave here until I do. Tell Mike my prayers are with him and Lana." She hadn't met Lana, but she could tell the guys liked her. It was so sad that Mike finally met someone who captured his heart, and now she might die. That would be two deaths for Mike—poor guy.

Raymond stayed at the beach house, diligently working with the crime scene investigators. He wanted to make sure everything was done correctly. He was taking notes when he heard Ken hollering for him.

Ken ran around the front of the house where there was no police tape, searching for Raymond. "Raymond, I've been looking for you. I have some information," said Ken with his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

"What did you find?"

"Come inside and let me show you," he said while waving his hands, gesturing for Raymond to hurry up and follow him. They both walked quickly through the front door. Ken was so excited he could hardly continue. "I put everything from the cork board into the computer. As you know, I've been entering data all night. Well . . . the computer analyzed all that input, and it cross-referenced it with all the other data entered from cases from the past several years. Once all the information was entered into our software, it came up with an answer."

"What are you talking about—software and answers?" Raymond had no idea what the hell he was saying, and he didn't have time for geek-babble.

Ken was so familiar with this new software he forgot to slow down to explain thoroughly. "The FBI tech department developed a new and unique software called MAD— mental assessment developer. All the known cases from past serial killers, regular killers, and hit men from all over the world were entered in the computer by agents and tech personnel. We have entered data for thousands of cases. It's like meteorologists predicting hurricanes. They use past hurricanes with all the lows, high, temperature of water, and time of the year. The computer will predict where future hurricanes will go by using all the past data entered into the computer. This program does the same thing except it analyzes who's the killer, his MO, type of victim, a psychological profile, and a geographical makeup. For example, it would analyze Ted Bundy was a stranger killer who is not geographically centralized. Also, John Wayne Gacy liked to rape and kill young men. Albert DeSalvo liked to rape and kill older women close to home, and he preferred strangling the old women. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Absolutely, so what did your program say about this case?"

He pointed to the computer and Raymond saw the words.

"Raymond, Lana doesn't have a stalker. Someone has hired a hit man to kill her. I started running the results this morning before Lana was shot. It took a few hours to run, and it gave me this information. Now I'll have

to enter the gunshot, and then it will update the information. I hope once it updates, the computer will give me a name. But I thought it was important to give you this information now."

"How accurate is this?"

"I have only used it for five other cases, but so far it's one hundred percent on target. Since it's still in the infancy stage, I can only say it's ninety percent."

"Oh shit, we aren't even looking in the right direction. We thought he was just a sick, perverted man stalking her. I never dreamed someone paid a hit man." He reached over and kissed Ken on the forehead. He picked up his phone and called Sara. "Sara, I need you to run everything you can find on Lana, her family and every friend she has ever known, and see if you can find anything illegal, any jealousy or trouble with the law. Check phone records for anything unusual. Also, find out if she has a will and who's in that will."

"You got it. It will take several hours, but I'll work hard on it. Do you want this to take top priority?"

"Yes, and I want you to work on this personally. Since this is a delicate situation, I would like for you to call me and not Mike."

"I understand, and I will."

~Chapter 34~

After several of hours of surgery, the doctors came out and talked with Mike. Many of the team members were waiting at his side.

"Mr. Ramsey?" said Dr. Orsburn as he walked into the room.

"Yes sir, I'm Mike Ramsey. How is she?" Mike was so anxious; his breathing was labored. He had never been this scared since his wife died.

"She's one tough lady. Living after taking a shot like that is remarkable. We had to remove her left kidney and spleen. Her lung was punctured by part of the bullet, but it was in a place where we could remove it. Internally, she's banged up pretty bad, and the next day or two we'll know more. She has lost a tremendous amount of blood, and that doesn't help. One thing that did help her was the freezing weather; it slowed down the flow of blood. But I think she'll pull through just fine. Keep in mind, she won't be ready to run marathons any time soon, but I think she'll be up to par in a couple of months."

Mike walked over, shook the doctor's hand, and thanked him. "I need to get to her immediately, she's in protective custody." *Thank you, God! She's alive, and it looks as though she'll pull thru.* This is nothing short of a miracle. The next step was to protect her.

"She's in room 200, but we have her listed as 314 on the books. It's an empty room, and it's in a part of the hospital that is quiet, so you may want to place a guard at that room."

Thank God Dr. Orsburn was on duty, no other doctor would have thought about changing room numbers. "I appreciate all you've done for Lana."

"I hope you catch the son-of-a-bitch who shot her," the doctor said with anger for the shooter.

Immediately, Mike headed to room 200. There laid his precious Lana with tubes running out her side. He laid his head down next to her and cried his heart out while holding her hand.

Joe put his hand on his shoulder, and he also had tears running down his cheeks. "Mike, why don't you go in the bathroom and shower? I brought you a clean change of clothes. I'll watch her. A hot shower will make you feel better."

"Sure, I would be glad to do that. Ask Dane to sit at room 314 and have someone get him a doctor's uniform. Also, put men at every entrance and make sure someone monitors all the cameras. Get someone to sit outside this room. Nobody, and I mean *nobody*, gets through without the hospital administrator's approval. Give him a call to get photos of all nurses and doctors who will be attending to Lana." Mike's cop-mode set in, giving orders—it was second nature to him.

"Consider it done. I brought you some food and coffee," said Joe.

"I'm not hungry, but the coffee sounds good." Mike looked at the black coffee, and he noticed Joe brought French vanilla cream. Seeing the cream choked him up, it reminded him of Lana and their first morning together. After all these years of drinking black coffee, this precious girl had changed him.

"I'll get busy setting everything up in the hospital. I'll let you know when everything is in place." Joe wrote down all that needed to be done. Before he left, he walked over to the bed and held Lana's hand. "Mike, she really is a special lady. It could have been me. Mike, I would be at the morgue right now. She saved my life."

"What do you mean she saved your life?" Mike asked while looking confused.

"Right before the gunshot, she pushed me out of the way. She must have seen something." It was difficult for him to look at the bloody tubes.

"Yeah, she's a remarkable lady, and she did what any loving person would do. That's the mom in her—that protective instinct. Joe, I don't want you to feel guilty; nor would Lana. She thinks the world of you." Mike knew Joe would feel guilty the rest of his life, and he hoped if Lana died Joe could come to terms with his feelings.

"Raymond told me the same thing, but it doesn't make me feel better."

Colby, a senior agent and long-range weapons expert, called Raymond to the side and said, "I've been measuring the distance of the shot, and it's almost a mile to that lighthouse. That's not an easy shot, and I think we need to start researching who could shoot that far. Also, we've had agents outside for several days, and they didn't notice anyone lingering near the lighthouse. If someone had been after an agent, he had many opportunities to shoot one of us. My guess, he was after one person. That leaves you, Mike, Joe, or Lana. Anyway, that's my theory."

Raymond thought a minute. "Keep in mind, it's been cloudy and windy the last several days. The investigator in me would agree, except Ken says the shooter was after Lana. But we need to keep all options open until we find evidence. Let's go to the lighthouse and double-check forensics. Find us a car equipped with forensics materials. I don't think they missed anything, but we are the experts and if we're lucky we might find a clue."

"Yes, sir."

Raymond and Colby were both on the Marshals terrorist sharpshooter team and experts in long-range weapons. They drove to the lighthouse and quickly ran up the steps two at a time. They could see fingerprint dust on the center of the double windows. "Colby, I want you to see if you can find any tripod marks. I don't think anyone could make that shot without that extra support."

Colby got down on his knees far from the window so he wouldn't

contaminate the marks on the floor. He grinned at Raymond. "I see marks of a tripod. Two marks by the window are clear, but this other has footprints on it."

Raymond got on the floor and looked. He also saw three spots.

Colby took several pictures of the untarnished marks. He scratched his head while thinking. "If you don't mind, Raymond, I'm going to have forensics check the outside to find anything like wrappers, cigarette butts or anything like that. Also, I'm going to have them check the building for marks and break-ins."

"Good idea. Maybe we'll get lucky, and he threw out some chewing gum," Raymond answered.

Colby walked around and looked at the position where he would make that shot. "I'm guessing he stood right here because there was no wind this morning. Remember we were talking about how perfect the water would be for water skiing, because it looked like glass. So he wouldn't have to consider wind, only the velocity for dropping."

Raymond was thinking a mile a minute, and he said, "I'm going to try out a theory. I want you to act out this killer's movements from start to finish. Pretend you're using the Remington R700 with a Millet TR1 scope. Show me how you would shoot. Please, go through each step from the moment you walk into the room." Raymond carefully shut the windows without touching the glass. Looking across the cove reminded him of the incident. He also saw the glare, but everything happened so fast he didn't have time to react.

Colby went through all the motions: setting up the tripod, putting the gun together, and loading the bullets. Then he pretended to sit in a chair and wait for Lana to make her appearance on the porch. Once she was in place, he shot. The killer did do one thing that was extremely important; it was the same thing Colby did—he took off his gloves to pull the trigger. Many shooters get used to shooting without a glove, and he hoped this shooter did the same thing. Colby used his right hand to pretend to push the window open. Colby pushed it from the hinge side instead of opening the window from the middle. Colby grinned.

"Did you touch the window?" Raymond asked.

"No, sir, I did not."

"Let's get forensics here."

When forensics arrived, they dusted the other side of the window, the

hinged side. It appeared as though they got three fresh and clear fingerprints, and Raymond got excited. "Process these immediately. And before you leave, I want you to scour the grounds for anything: gum wrappers, cigarettes, candy wrappers, etc. And you need to check down the side of the far window for rope marks or anything unusual." Raymond stood there for a few minutes and looked at Colby. "Colby, I just had a thought."

"So share it." Colby packed up what few cases they got out of the car.

"How could he possibly know Lana would sit on the porch?"

Colby thought for a minute. "If the marshals allowed someone under protective custody to go outside, they only allowed them to walk around in the least-vulnerable place. In this case, it's the porch."

"I agree, so don't you think it's someone who knows the routines and policies of the marshals? How could this hit man know what we would do?"

"Oh shit, Raymond, you don't think a marshal or law enforcement had anything to do with this?"

"Think about it. When we move someone in protective custody, we will go miles out of our way if we think it's the best and safest route. How would this guy know if Lana would come out and then sit on the porch? The whole time, it looked like he pointed it to the porch," said Raymond.

"You're right, that tripod was locked in on the porch. And to add to the theory, the beach chairs are all at the opposite end of the house. Most people would think if she went outside, she would be sitting on one of the chairs, basking in the sun. But the tripod was set directly at the porch and not at the beach chairs. Who do you think is involved?" Colby asked intently, listening. If the culprit were a marshal, he wanted the first punch.

"I'm not sure anyone is, but I'm sure whoever shot Lana has knowledge about the marshals. Colby, don't let me forget to tell Ken so he can add that to his computer."

"I won't."

The forensic people were driving off as Colby and Raymond headed back to the house.

≈Chapter 35≈

The room was quiet with the exception of a few machines running and

making a humming sound. It was amazing how all the machines could keep someone alive or at least make their quality of life better. He was thankful they were there to help her breath.

It seemed strange how the little girl laying there was nonexistent in his life two weeks ago, and now he couldn't imagine life without her. He couldn't wait for her to open her eyes. He needed to hear her sweet voice again. "Hey, baby, I hope you can hear me. I want you to get better so we can go on our trip to Hawaii. I thought about us going there for a honeymoon, and staying through next year's winter months. What do you think about that? I was thinking that maybe we could get married on the beach. We could fly our family to the islands for a week. You like the beach, and I bet the warm sand sounds pretty good right now. Honey, there is so much about you that I don't know, and I want to know everything: your favorite color, your favorite baseball team, your favorite food, and your favorite movie. Please wake up and tell me these things."

As he gently rubbed her arm, he noticed a little blood on her fingers. He went to the bathroom, got a towel, and cleaned around her arms, neck, and face. He couldn't bear to see the gunshot wound, that would be too much. While cleaning the neck area, Mike saw the bruise from the shot went all the way up to her chest. The pain Lana was enduring shot waves of guilt through his heart. "One more thing, I want to thank you for saving Joe's life. That's the most selfless, heroic act anyone has ever done. Joe is torn up about it, but Raymond told him that's just how you are. He told him that's the mother instinct in you. I think it's your love for mankind, and your love for Joe."

Mike paced around the room about fifty times waiting and hoping. The doctor came in during his evening rounds, and Mike asked, "How is she doing?"

The doctor checked the chart and gave Lana an examination, and then he smiled while answering, "I think she is doing better than expected. All her vitals are great, and her heart is strong. There doesn't seem to be any internal bleeding, and she seems to be doing better than I had hoped."

"So why is she still in a coma?"

"It is probably caused from trauma and lack of blood. If all goes well, she should come out of that in a few days, if not sooner. To be honest, I don't think I have ever seen someone fight so hard to live. Do you have any other questions?"

This next question wasn't important to him, but he wanted to know so he would be able to answer questions for Lana. "How will her quality of life be after this?"

"The same," the doctor said as he wrote in her chart.

The doctor didn't understand how critical that question was for Lana. Lana loved life, and he didn't know how she would cope with debilitating news. It didn't matter to him, and he already reconciled with himself that he would take her any way he could have her, whole or not. "That's such good news. I know Lana will be happy to hear that."

"She will have to take it easy for a while, but then she can resume life like normal. We had to remove the kidney, but she will function just fine with one. She won't feel comfortable wearing a bikini, but that's minor."

Mike grinned and shook the doctor's hand. "I don't think that will bother her in the least. Thank you so much."

"You are welcome, and just let the nurses know if you need anything. I'll see you in the morning, and maybe our sleeping beauty will be awake."

"I hope so. Have a good evening."

Mike walked over to the bed and told Lana the good news.

~Chapter 36~

Raymond was on his way back to the house, and his phone rang. "Hey, Ken, what else did you find?" Raymond liked Ken's calls because every time he called he had intriguing news, especially if it had something to do with the new software. This software would change the way all law enforcement tracked killers.

"When will you get back?" Ken asked.

"In about twenty minutes, what do you need?"

"I will have to show you, hurry."

He looked at Colby and said, "Hurry, Ken has something he wants to show us."

Colby pulled up so quickly that when he slammed on the brakes, the SUV fishtailed. The normal time from the lighthouse to the beach house was about eleven minutes, and Colby made it in seven.

"What's so important you have to show me now? I was nearly killed getting here," said Raymond.

Ken glanced at Raymond and Colby, and Colby just smiled. Ken

turned the laptop around for Raymond to read about the news for himself.

He glanced around the screen trying to figure out what he was supposed to be reading. After looking all over the screen, he finally found what Ken wanted to show him, and he read, *after careful analysis of the data input, one suspect found in files: Angelino Marquit*. "How in the hell do you know that?" asked Raymond, excited they finally got a break.

"As I told you, agents have been entering information about cases from the past ten years. Then, I entered the shooting, the sperm, the airport, and everything else. Angelino Marquit is the only name that popped up. The computer looks at anyone who can shoot that distance and Angelino Marquit is the only person who can. At least the only one who can shoot that distance and fit all other data entered. Raymond, we are really lucky, sometimes there are several names, or none." He was proud of his software, and he was beaming. While grinning, he asked, "Do you want to know more?"

"Hell yes."

"This guy is called Mission Impossible."

"Why?" asked Raymond. He thought that was an extremely odd nickname.

"He changes his face and accents, he enjoys tormenting his victims, and he likes to stalk them and toy with them before killing them. And Raymond, because of his cunningness, he has in the past been able to sway law enforcement to other suspects. He has even been known to dress up like a woman. One more thing: for some reason, his record is blocked."

"What do you mean?"

"My guess is it's a special team on this case, and for some reason I don't have access to his records."

"What would be the reasons?"

"There are several. One, there are some highly classified undercover agents involved. Two, there might be a leak and an agent is being investigated. Three, there are some big criminals involved."

"Wow, can you break in and get the information?" Raymond's ears perked up when Ken listed the reasons. He had just talked to Colby about the same thing. "I'm working on that now."

"That's amazing and thanks. And Ken, I have one more favor."

"What's that?"

"Can you look into your crystal ball and tell me a way to catch this

guy."

"You mean predict his future?"

"Yes."

"I'll do my best." He grinned from ear to ear. This was the best part of investigating—finding results. There were times when the computer didn't help, but when it did, it was an amazing feeling. It took five years to finish the work, but it was worth the wait. He had to fight, from the beginning to get the approval and funds, and now it was paying off. Since they had started using his new software, they had put three criminals behind bars.

"Thanks, I've got to call Sara." Raymond was in awe of this program, and he intended to have a talk with Ken about it later when he had more time.

Sara answered on the first ring. "Talk to me, because I don't have anything for you."

"I have something amazing for you, and you are to drop everything to find this guy. First, I want you to put someone you trust to find information on Lana."

"Who do you want me to look up?" She first thought Raymond was teasing, but then she dismissed it because of the severity of the case.

"His name is Angelino Marquit."

"How did you get a name before me?" She would have to have a long talk with Ken when they both had the time.

"I'll explain later, and send me everything you have."

"I will, and I'll have someone continue on Lana's stuff."

Colby heard the name and had headed out to the SUV to research everything they had on him. He brought it in to Raymond.

Raymond looked at the picture. "Who the hell is this guy, and why haven't we heard about him before now?" They all looked at his picture and were amazed he didn't look anything like the one from the airport. Now he knew why the FBI facial recognition database didn't pick him out, and why they called him Mission Impossible.

Slowly, Lana tried opening her eyes, but they were caked shut. She forced them open, and she could see some light, which was bright. Everything looked like a blur, and she blinked the fog away.

She had difficulty breathing, and the pain was excruciating in her lower-left chest area. The beeping noise drove her crazy, and she wished someone would turn off the machine. Mike sat in the chair next to her, sleeping. When she glanced around, she realized she was in a hospital. The room was white and sanitary. Thank God. She wasn't dying, or she would be put in the pretty room, the death room, a room like James'.

Her mouth seemed so dry she couldn't say anything. She looked around for something to drink, but nothing was close. She mustered up every ounce of energy to get Mike's attention. With only a whisper, she said, "Mike."

He didn't hear her, so she tried again. "Mike."

He didn't stir. She tried to move a little bit, and she couldn't because the pain was too excruciating. Tubes and needles were poking out from several areas of her body. She could see some bloody tubes coming out of her side. *What happened to me?* She sure wished she could move because she could feel sweat under her body, and it was uncomfortable.

About that time, Mike's phone rang, and he stirred. He pulled the phone out of his pocket to see who was calling.

She managed a few words. "That damn phone." Her voice sounded weak, barely audible.

Mike jumped up and ran to her. "Baby; you're awake." He immediately called for a nurse. "I'm so glad to see your beautiful green eyes. Do you feel okay? Do you need anything?"

The nurse walked in grinning. She checked her vitals and replaced the IV. "Welcome back! You scared us a few times, young lady." The entire time she was working on her, Mike never let go of her hand. The nurse checked her blood pressure and noted it had risen. She asked Lana, "Are you in pain?"

Her mouth was so dry she couldn't answer, so she nodded instead. Lana saw tears in his eyes, and she didn't know why. Why would her baby be crying?

The nurse said, "We can fix that for you. It's good you're feeling pain." She pulled a vial from her tray and put some medicine in her IV.

That's easy for you to say, thought Lana.

The nurse noticed Lana trying to lick her lips. "Would you like some ice chips?"

Lana nodded yes.

When the nurse finished what she was doing, she brought Lana some ice chips and told Mike, "Give her only a little bit at first, we don't need her to get sick and rip open her stitches. We'll check on her in a little bit, but call if you need us."

"Thank you and I will."

He laid his head on the bed next to her and cried like a baby.

Lana's hand reached over and touched his hair, and she was confused why he would be crying. Then the pain medicine kicked in and the darkness took her.

Mike watched the evening news, and they talked about the two shootings and the prowler. They commented about the woman staying at the house, saying she had been under Marshal protective custody for months. The newscaster said a marshal was a suspect and Lana was a witness. Mike just shook his head. He thought they would say anything for a story.

Raymond walked in the room and glanced at the TV but ignored it. "Hey Mike, how is Lana?"

"She's doing much better. They just gave her a shot so she'll be out for a few hours. Hopefully you have some good news?"

"I have some great news."

"What?"

"We have the name of the killer."

Mike just looked at Raymond in shock—total disbelief. A few hours ago they didn't even have DNA results. "What's his name?" Anger immediately rushed through his body.

"Angelino Marquit, aka Mission Impossible and he's a hit man."

Mike was stunned. "Who is he hired to kill?"

Raymond turned his back towards Lana and whispered, "Lana."

"I've never heard of him. Who the hell is this guy, and why is he called Mission Impossible? But most importantly, why is he after Lana?"

"He's called that because he can disguise himself, and he likes to toy with his victims before killing them. Sound familiar? Mike, he can even dress up and pass as a woman, so be extremely careful—for Lana's sake. You said yourself this guy liked toying with us."

"How did you find out his name?"

"Ken. They have a new software program which can find and predict killers, called MAD—mental assessment development."

"Are you kidding me? So his computer *is* exceptional."

"Yes, it is."

Mike looked at Raymond as though this was a sci-fi show, and this was all part of the script. "So, how long have they had this program?"

"We're their sixth case. It's still in the infancy stage, and Ken had to get permission to use it. I'm having Sara and Ken looking for more information on this guy, but it gets worse."

"How?"

"For some reason, his records with the FBI are blocked. I'm having Sara work her miracles, so let's hope she can find something. However, I do have good news."

"Thank God because we can sure use it."

"Colby and I went to the lighthouse and reenacted the shooting, and we found a few prints. We are running them as we speak, and hopefully that will give us some more information on him."

"You're doing a good job. Keep me informed and get me a picture as soon as you have one."

"I brought one with me, and I will give a copy to all the men and the hospital staff. Mike, when you look at this picture next to the one from the airport, they don't look anything alike."

Mike looked at the picture, and Raymond was right, they didn't even look like the same person. He wished Lana could look at it, because he was sure she could pick out the similarities. When he looked at the man's picture, he felt so much anger. *This man shot Lana*. He stared at the picture a few seconds longer then sat it on the table. "Thanks, and make sure Joe gets one. Right now, I'm so worried about Lana I can't think straight. I'm going to take a nap, and maybe then I can think with a level head."

Raymond thought about the sacrifice she made to save Joe. "Mike, she is a special lady to knock Joe out of the way. She acted quicker than some of our agents would have."

"Yea, she acted selflessly, that's for sure." Mike knew she would never regret what she did. "She woke up a few hours ago. It was only for a few minutes, but she knew me. The blessing in all this is she doesn't

remember being shot. She was looking around as though she didn't know why she was in a hospital."

"That's great, and I hope she doesn't remember."

"I agree, and I hate this for her sake."

"Mike, there *is* one more thing."

Mike didn't want to hear anymore. "What?"

"We think the shooter knows how the marshals work. He set the tripod facing *only* the porch. He knew if Lana walked outside we would want her to stay on the porch, and he sat there and waited on her."

"How many people know about this?"

"You, me, Colby, and that's all."

"Be sure to tell Joe, and we'll get together with the four of us in the next few hours to discuss this. Nobody is to know about our meeting."

"I'll keep you informed," said Raymond.

~Chapter 37~

Day 11

When she woke up, the sky looked gloomy and overcast, and she noticed she had moved to a different room—this one had color. *Oh, my God, I'm dying.* No one was around, and she thought, *I'm going to die all alone.*

There were flowers everywhere, at least twenty arrangements.

She looked at her body and noticed the tubes in her side were gone, and they were replaced with bandages. There were black and blue marks that ran all the way up to her shoulder. What could have made marks like that? Was she in a car wreck? She was too scared to look under the bandage.

The nurse's button was next to her hand, and she pushed it. Within a few minutes, a nurse entered the room, smiling. "I'm glad you're awake. You look much better, do you feel better?"

She could barely talk. "Hi," she forced out.

"Let me get you some water to wet your whistle." She went to the bathroom for some, and then poured it in the glass. Realizing she didn't have a straw, she went to the nurses' station to get one.

Lana wouldn't wait; she drank the entire glass before stopping. It tasted so good, the nurse poured her some more. "The medicines you're taking make you thirsty. You've had many visitors, and they brought you

flowers. All the nurses were wondering whom these good-looking guys are, the ones carrying guns."

"I don't know," she mustered a barely-audible answer.

"Every time the cops come, they bring you flowers. You couldn't have flowers in intensive care, but since you've been out, the guys come by at least twice a day with a fresh bouquet. You are a lucky girl to be loved so much."

Lana had no clue what she was talking about.

"Are you some kind of cop? There have been many cops coming by to check on you, and there's one outside keeping an eye on you. Do you want me to get him?"

She nodded yes.

Joe walked in and sat next to her, and gently squeezed her hand.

"How are you feeling?"

All she could do was shrug.

"I texted Mike to let him know you're awake and he's on his way. He's getting a coffee in the cafeteria. You know you are one tough lady."

A few words she could whisper. "You just noticed?" She smiled; she sure loved Joe.

He rolled his head back in laughter, and said, "I've got to go back outside, but Mike will be here in a few minutes." He reached down, kissed her on the forehead, and walked out to sit in the chair.

The pain was unbearable, so she buzzed the nurse to bring her bag of tricks. Within seconds, she was out.

Even running to the room, he didn't make it before she fell asleep. The next best thing was to stare at her, and he could spend hours doing that. If she moved only an inch, he jumped up and checked on her. He didn't want her to be in any pain. If she needed moving, he moved her. Since he was much stronger than the nurses, he could move her gently. He couldn't stand for her to be cold, so he had her favorite patchwork quilt brought from home. Whatever made her life easier, he did it.

He saw her open one eye, and he walked over and cupped her head with his hands, saying, "Hi, baby. I've missed you and I'm glad you're back. Do you need anything?" There was no doubt Mike would have

gotten her the moon. He kissed the corner of her mouth, and he thought her face felt warm. Maybe the blanket was too much. He pulled it off her. A quiver of panic enveloped him.

"Just some water," she managed in a whisper.

He noticed her eyes didn't look well. He started to worry. "You got it!" He left and brought some water, then he went to the nurse's station to get her a straw and ice chips.

He put the straw to her lips, and she drank several cups. When she drank the water, it hurt as it went down her windpipe. She told Mike, "I thought I died."

He wasn't expecting that statement at all. "Why would you think that?"

"All the flowers."

"Oh, baby, all the flowers are because we love you. You are so cute." He pulled the chair up to the bed and held her hand while rubbing it against his cheek. He had to be touching her.

"Mike, that hurts. You have whiskers."

"I just love you so much. I'm so glad you're doing better," he said. The nurse came, took all her vitals, and told Mike he needed to leave. She told him her blood pressure was up, and she was running a fever. The nurse immediately paged the doctor.

His heart sank because he knew that was not good news. He kissed her on the forehead and reluctantly left. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

She nodded, not wanting to let go of his hand. She didn't know why, but she didn't want to let go. She felt as though it might be the last time she would touch him. She mouthed the words *I love you*.

He blew her a kiss. That was all he could do, because his lips were quivering. What hurt him the most was she didn't want him to leave, he could tell. She squeezed his hand as if to say *don't leave me*. He prayed. "Please, God, give her the strength to get through this. She needs you more now than she ever has before."

Mike watched as the doctor examined her frail little body. The nurse took blood as the doctor ordered tests. Mike noticed the doctor shook his head, which was not a promising sight to watch. The doctors and nurses

always smiled when they walked out of her room—not now. Mike didn't want to interrupt the doctor until he wrote all the details in the chart. Mike paced in the hallway waiting, dreading to hear the grim news. When the doctor finished, Mike couldn't wait another minute and walked in. "How is she?" Three words he hoped he would never have to say again. Mike's heart nearly beat out of his chest. He wanted to crawl on that bed and hold her . . . make her pain go away . . . make her better.

"Not good. She's running a high fever, and her organs have started to shut down one by one. We are treating her with antibiotics, and all we can do is hope for the best. Her body has been through so much." Dr. Orsburn wished he had better news.

"Are you telling me she's dying?" Mike choked up and couldn't bear that thought. His entire body hurt.

"I hope not, so let's hope the antibiotics work, and her fight for life will prevail." Dr. Orsburn knew anything was possible. People died when they were not as sick as Lana. But many in worse shape recuperated. It was in God's hands now.

"Do you think the antibiotics will help?" This gave him a glimmer of hope. Mike trusted Dr. Orsburn's opinion.

"I hope so," the doctor answered honestly.

"Do you know where the infection is?" Mike was worried someone came in and gave her the flu or some kind of virus.

"I think the infection is in her lung. Because of it, her heart has enlarged, and she's having trouble breathing. We are giving her oxygen. If she can get through the next few days, she should be home free." He couldn't help himself but to put his hand on Mike's shoulder. Most of the time he tried not to get too close to the families, but he knew Mike was in such despair.

"Is there anything I can do?" Mike asked.

"Pray if you're a praying man."

His parents raised him Catholic, and he knew there was a God who could heal her. "Thank you, doctor."

The doctor shook Mike's hand, and then he was gone.

Mike paced around Lana's room. Other than her face looking flushed, she appeared to be sleeping peacefully. He stopped his pacing and stood by her bed. He took her hand and softly talked to her, encouraging her.

"Baby, fight this infection, please. I need you beside me, with me, all our

lives. You promised me fifty years. God, I love you so much." He choked up and wept next to her.

Raymond and Joe had been standing in the doorway when they heard the dreadful news. They knew how Mike would react to another death. At least with Kathy, Mike had time to prepare his heart. With Lana, he had no time. Guilt filled all their hearts. There were many *what ifs* going through their minds, especially Joe.

Raymond was the first to say something as he walked in Lana's room. "Mike, we know who did this, and as Lana gets better we will hunt him down like a dog. But right now, we have to be strong for her. She will want to see your smile when she wakes up, and I want you to focus on that. In the meantime, Joe and I can work on the investigation."

Mike knew he would not let the shooter get by with this, even if he had to quit the marshals and hunt him down on his own. "Raymond, we have to find him or he'll come back and finish the job." From his experience as a cop, he knew this asshole would not quit now. If Ken was right, and he was paid to kill, he wouldn't be paid unless she was dead.

"I know he will, but we'll get him before he can get to Lana." Raymond was a little concerned about what Mike might do. This guy could walk in the hospital, and they wouldn't even know it was him. There was only one person who would know him—Lana.

Mike could see the doctor at the end of the hall, and he had to talk to him one more time. "Doctor, may I talk to you in private?"

"Sure, let's step into this empty room."

Raymond waited in the hall for Mike to return when Sara called.

"Raymond, I have some good news."

"I need to hear good news right now."

"I looked up everything on your guy, Angelino Marquit, and I couldn't find much. So, I had to get help from the Director's office to get permission to access his files."

"Why?"

"Apparently he is wanted all over the world, and the FBI has a special team to catch him."

"That's not unheard of, especially when a serial killer is involved." Ken said the same thing him.

"He is a highly-paid killer—getting \$100,000 per bullet. He works with the Italian mafia and many of the gambling bosses. Apparently, they

are the only ones who can hire him, and the only ones who can find him. Nobody is sure where he lives or where he was born, or they aren't telling. But you know me, after pulling a few strings in the bureau I found out they lost him in Birmingham, Alabama. He pulled one of his disguises. And guess where Peter Waters was last seen?"

"Birmingham?"

"You got it, and coincidently, Peter had a connecting flight from Birmingham to Charlotte to Boston."

"That's no coincidence," said Raymond.

"This guy is good."

"Does the FBI know where he is now?"

"They aren't telling, or at least they aren't telling *me*, and you know I would find out if any way possible. This is a first for me," said Sara.

"This is a first for me, too. I'll call Director Craven to get some releases. Keep plugging away, and let me know what you find."

"You know I will. Please tell Mike how sorry I am about Lana."

"I will, and keep her in your prayers."

"I already am, and I'll call you with more news later," said Sara.

"Bye." Raymond hung up and snapped his phone shut.

~Chapter 38~

It was a cold and cloudy day when Lana left this Earth. Just the kind of weather she liked. All the men came in to say goodbye, except Joe. He couldn't come in; his heart was breaking.

Mike asked the nurse to leave him alone because he had to talk to her one last time. "Oh, God, give me strength," he said aloud. His eyes filled with tears as he looked at her lifeless face. "Lana, I know you can't hear me, and I'm not going to say goodbye. I just met you, and I'm not ready for goodbye. I love you so much. I'm not quite sure how I'm going to go back to the beach house and see your stuff there and remember you in every room. Looking at the jersey you wore, and listening to the songs we shared as we held each other. All along, I knew you were scared, and I wasn't there for you. I let you go outside against my better judgment."

He reached over to touch her cold face, and he couldn't stand her being cold. There were several blankets on the bed, so he pulled them all up and tucked her in tight. "Honey, please forgive Joe for not coming in to

say goodbye. He can't right now; he is heartbroken. All of us have grown to love you." He reached down, kissed her cheek and went back to the chair to sit down, sobbing uncontrollably.

Joe sat outside the room hearing Mike's goodbye to Lana.

After several minutes, Mike sat on the bed next to his beloved Lana and whispered, "I can't leave you—I just can't. My entire soul is hurting, and I want you back so badly. Several doctors and nurses came by and told me I needed to leave, but I can't. Someone has to stay with you until we bury you, and I will be the one." He paused and took a deep breath. "Baby, the doctor let me hold your hand at the end. And I'm glad I was there for you because I couldn't imagine you dying alone. I didn't want you to leave without me at your side. Oh, honey, I miss you already," he said, sobbing like a baby.

Holding her hand, he remembered Lana telling him about the guilt she felt for her cousin. She told him how she hurt when he died. He told her he would carry that burden for her, and now he wondered who would help him carry his burden—he hoped that might be Lana. He didn't understand how God could send her to him, let him fall in love and then let her die. When Lana and Mike discussed his work and the possibility of him dying, she said, "I would rather have a few wonderful years with you than fifty years of nothing." Neither one had dreamed it would be only a few days.

As Mike sat there holding her hand and crying, a nurse walked in—a little, short nurse who waddled when she walked. She had on scrubs, and they were rolled up at the ankle. Her hair was combed perfectly in the front, short with bangs, while the back looked like a rats' nest. She tried to fix only the hair she could see. "I'm looking for a Mike Ramsey?"

"I'm Mike Ramsey."

"Ms. Andrews wanted me to give this to you if she passed away." And just like that, she handed it to him and walked off, waddling.

When he first looked at it, he smelled it, and he could smell Lana on the envelope. He could imagine her little hand folding the paper. He didn't want to open it, but he knew he needed to see what last words she wrote to him. His hands were shaking terribly, and he sat next to her body. He could picture her lying there writing this.

My Dearest Mike,

I'm watching you sleep in the chair next to me, and it brings tears to

my eyes to know when you get this note I'll be gone. You are the most incredible man who wandered into my life, just when I needed you most. I fell in love with you the minute I saw you. I too wanted to kiss you and touch you at that moment. You make my heart and soul smile. I wish I had many years with you, but we don't get that choice. If I can, I will look down on you, and I will smile with the fondest of memories. The first night you made love to me was one of the most precious memories I ever had. Your touch broke so many barriers to my heart. You made me feel again. Please, my friend, lover, and companion; remember me. Remember the feelings we had, and I want you to have that feeling again. I want you to live a fulfilled life, and tell Joe there is a perfect woman for him. And tell him true love is out there because we found it.

I love you to infinity,

Lana

Oh, God, help me, he thought as he held her letter next to his heart. This one piece of paper he would never part with, ever. His heart hurt so much he thought he might have a heart attack. If it weren't for catching Angelino Marquit, he would welcome one. In his mind, he said Marquit's name over and over again. He knew he would kill him and say Lana's name as he died. Hate for Angelino Marquit filled Mike's heart and his goal was to catch him and kill him. However, Mike's thoughts were interrupted.

"I'm sorry; I was told Lana Andrews is in this room." The funeral home attendant looked down at his paper; he wanted to make sure he had the right room.

"This is her room, and I'm Mike Ramsey. I'll be escorting the body and staying with her through the funeral."

"What?" The kid looked at him dumbfounded. He wasn't expecting this at all.

Mike pulled out his badge and showed it to the attendant. He had his hand on his gun to show he meant business. This kid appeared to be the right height for the killer, and he didn't want to take any chances. "I need to see your driver's license."

The attendant reached for his wallet, showed Mike his ID then he asked, "What's going on?"

"She was under protective custody, and now my final assignment is to

stay with her until she is buried."

"Okay, no problem." This was a first for him, but heck, he didn't care; he just had to deliver the body to the funeral home.

Mike was going to take the sheet off, but the attendant stopped him and said, "We can take the sheet and keep her covered."

"She would appreciate that, thanks."

Mike gently picked Lana up, put her in the black bag, and zipped it up, while the attendant put his earplug in his ears to listen to music. It was obvious he had done this before, like a second nature to him. They walked out the room without saying a word.

Joe sat outside the room crying as the gurney rolled past him. Mike put his hand on his shoulder. "You can go home, Joe; I'll take over from here."

Joe touched the black bag and sobbed. "Goodbye, Lana." He walked off so heartbroken he couldn't stand it. His shoulders shook as he sobbed.

As Mike walked down the hall of the hospital, all his men were lined up with their badge numbers covered with black tape. They put their hands across their hearts as she rolled past them.

As he promised, Mike stayed with Lana until the moment she was buried in the ground.

~Chapter 39~

Day 16

The team waited in Mike's office anticipating the case to chase Angelino Marquit. They did not want time to grieve over Lana; they wanted their pent-up emotions to guide them. Raymond and Joe knew if Mike couldn't get this case, he would quit the marshals. Dread filled their emotions, and they hoped Mike got his wish. The team knew if Mike quit, the marshals would lose an incredible investigator.

When Mike entered Deputy Director Craven's office, he was on the phone. He motioned Mike to sit down in the chair across from him. Mike didn't want to sit, but he did anyway. The director got off the phone within a few minutes. Mike solemnly sat there, waiting.

The director sat in his overstuffed leather chair and took a deep breath. "Mike, I'm so sorry about Lana. She sacrificed her life for Joe, and we will be eternally grateful." He paused long enough to write down a phone number on a piece of paper.

"Thank you, sir. Do you know why I'm here?" Mike decided if the director didn't give him this case, he was prepared to forfeit his badge and Glock. Mike usually took whatever assignments were given to him, and many times he wanted certain assignments the director didn't give him. This one he wanted or he would quit.

"Raymond mentioned something about it."

Mike knew perfectly well Raymond did more than mention this case. "I would like my team to hunt down Angelino Marquit." Just saying his name added fuel to the fire which Mike felt deep down in his belly. He knew he would hunt Marquit like a dog. He remembered Lana telling him she wanted to kill him. *I'll get him for you, and I promise I'll kill him.* Just thinking about Marquit made his face turn red-hot.

The director looked in Mike's eyes; he wanted to see if there were any telltale signs that Mike should or should not get this case. Mike had a poker face, and he couldn't tell the level of anger in his heart. "You are too emotionally involved," he finally said.

"That makes me more determined, and besides it's not only me—it's also my team." Every word in that statement was as true as it gets. He knew Joe and Raymond would work overtime to catch this guy.

"I knew you would come ask me for this case, so I've talked to the FBI Director, and we came to a conclusion."

"What's that, sir?" Mike's jaw tightened because he knew he would be asked to take a backseat to the FBI investigation.

"Since the FBI started on a new serial killer case, they need all the men they can get. Normally, they wouldn't be pulling men from this case but since you are so determined to catch him, they're willing to turn the case over to you."

The news couldn't have been any better. Catching Marquit would take top priority, and he wouldn't work any other cases until he was caught. Excitement filled every ounce of his body when he knew he would be in charge of finding this killer, and nothing pleased him more. "I hear a 'but' in this agreement."

"Yes, you do. You can only take three men besides yourself and one

tech investigator. I recommend Gopher. He's the best at hacking, and he's a deputy. Sara will have orders that assisting you will take top priority. By the way, she asked me for this assignment. She loves you, and I don't understand why with the way you all tease her. There's another catch, you have no more than thirty days to find him, or the case goes back to the FBI."

"Yes, sir. What about Ken Summers? Is there any way I can have him on the team?" Mike knew between Gopher's hacking and Ken's profiling they would be an unstoppable team.

Director Craven already heard about Ken and his computer, and both were out of his jurisdiction. "I'll have to talk to the FBI director, but I doubt he will give him up, or his computer. But maybe I could get all the help you need, even if it's long distance. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"One more thing." Craven paused and checked the date on his watch.

"Yes, sir."

"See those boxes over there?" Director Craven pointed to the boxes in the far-left corner of his office.

Mike looked at the boxes and nodded.

"Those boxes are all the case files, and your thirty days starts at midnight. I know you won't need that long; you never do. Good luck, Mike, and again my condolences." The director handed Mike a piece of paper with all the FBI agents who had been working on the case. "I've been told you can have one FBI agent to help. You may want to talk it over with your team before you decide. Anyway, you have the list. They know more about Marquit than anyone else."

"Thank you, sir." Mike glanced over the list of names trying to see if he recognized any of them, and any he could trust; there were a couple.

Mike picked up two of the ten boxes and walked into his office where Raymond and Joe were waiting. He sat the boxes on his desk.

Raymond asked, "Well?" Through their years of working together, he knew the answer before Mike spoke. He could read his face. Mike didn't have a poker face with Raymond.

"The three of us, along with Gopher, get the case and all ten boxes are in the director's office. These are the first two. I also get one more person to help, and I thought of someone, but I wanted to ask you both first. Her name is Jacque Real, and she is an FBI agent. She has been following this

guy for a while. I know we probably won't need her, but she might prove to be valuable. What do you guys think?"

Raymond and Joe looked at each other, and Raymond shook his head no. "You know we have worked with the FBI before, and it's hard to cross paths. There are too many alpha males, or in Jacque's case—moody females. I say no."

"Since I have never worked with the FBI, I'm going to remain neutral."

"Well, how about we give her a week and if it doesn't work, we send her packing." Both men nodded yes. "Good, so let's go get the boxes," said Mike.

Raymond grinned and said, "Let's go get 'em."

Before they left the room, Mike paused. "One more thing, I want everything to be set up at the beach house," Mike said as he looked at the guys, trying to gauge their reaction.

Joe looked confused; he thought Mike would never want to go back to the house.

Raymond couldn't tell if Mike wanted to go back to stir hatred, or to heal.

Mike answered their doubting glares. "I think the reminder of Lana will help us work harder and help us remember why we need to solve this case. Raymond?"

Both Raymond and Joe asked simultaneously. "What?"

"We only have thirty days to solve this case, or it goes back to the FBI."

They all three smiled and Raymond said, "That's twenty days longer than we need."

Mike's phone rang. "Hey Sara, what do you have for us?"

She was so upset could she hardly talk. "Mike it's not good news. Not good at all."

... to be continued.... Thirty Days: The Hunt for Angelino Marquit -- KEEP IN MIND, things may not be what they seem. Here is the link to Thirty Days: the Hunt for Angelino Marquit:

https://www.amazon.com/Thirty-Days-Angelino-Marquit-Trilogy-ebook/dp/B00D610Y6A/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=lora+lindy&qid=1570874633&sr=8-1