

Living life to the extreme...

Basin *Springs* Elizabeth Delayne



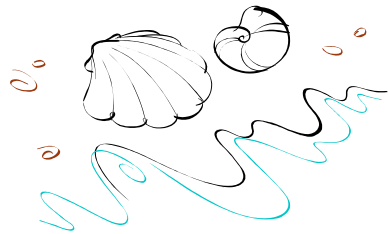
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Chapter 1

The Pacific Ocean was a line between the bright blue sky and wet sand. Tourists and locals alike scurried and splashed in the early morning waves. Their laughter mingled with the rolling of the ocean, the sound of surf sliding over sand.

Still in her truck, Amy Carpenter watched as people entered the station house. Some were lifeguards, but most weren't dressed for the beach, but in suits ... a mark that things were changing. She recognized city council men and women, noted the brass from the department, and knew that some were reporters.

The station house was a simple building, aged wood, once painted yellow—now faded from the sun.

Cars spilled over into the parking lot next door. Years ago, it had claimed the name *The Springs*, stolen from the legacy of the Basin and Upper Springs communities. But now it was just part of the local. It

catered to those with the whim for luxury at night and, because it really had no choice, to the beach crowd during the day.

Locals waded past the long lines and went for takeout.

The parking lot had grown still, in contrast to the beach beyond. All the principal characters were inside. It was time for the meeting to start. She reluctantly got out of her truck and headed inside.

The small front room was inundated with chatter and the creak of the old metal chairs as people sat. Photos from a half century of patrol lined the walls. The aged industrial tile had been freshly buffed.

The decor mattered little. What one saw when they came into the old station house was the ocean. Through the glass wall and doors, beyond the deck, waves crashed against the shore. Surfers who had been out since dawn were being joined by others that came simply for relaxation. Families mingled, children played.

Amy Carpenter itched to get outside, feel the waves slide drowsily across her feet.

Instead she took the empty seat that had been saved for her. Andrea Lyons looked like the epitome of grace and femininity, her legs crossed as she studied the room. She wore designer clothes and real silver and gold jewelry. Her blond hair was cut at her shoulders and highlighted by a high profile salon.

She worked as a lifeguard part time during the summer, balancing the time with her real job as a therapist at Springs Rehab Center for the Disabled.

A place paid for because it was also frequented by the stars.

In contrast, wore a plain attire of khaki shorts and a sleeveless blue polo. Her light brown hair, streaked with golden blond by the sun, was pulled back into a quick ponytail. She wore makeup with S.P.F., because she'd learned that it made her feel better—the makeup. SPF was mandatory and had always been part of her life.

When Andrea looked at Amy her eyes were sympathetic. It had been that way from the beginning—so much so, Amy sometimes wondered if Andrea had access to her see into her heart.

"I didn't think you were going to get here."

"Chloe borrowed my truck last night, then I couldn't get her to wake up to tell me where she put my keys, then she couldn't find my keys—"

She stopped as the chief of police took the podium. Reluctantly she straightened her shoulders. The man, after all, was her boss.

"I'd like to start off by thanking all of you for coming in early this morning. Many of you have spent most of the last several weeks balancing your free time to be at the hospital with Ham. It's been tough for all of us. He's been a faithful captain and leader, an ally and friend... I never thought I would be the one that would have to see to the replacement ... and many of us know, he won't ever really be replaced."

The chief went on, repeating the same accolades with the fervor of a man running for election. She didn't disagree, but she wondered if Ham would appreciate whom the words came from.

"I talked with Ham a few moments ago in regards this meeting. He wanted me to tell all of you that he is grateful for you and that health wise, he plans to be around for a long time. The doctors are planning to move him to rehab by the end of this week..."

"That's better than Ham hoped yesterday," Andrea leaned over and whispered.

Amy forced a smile, but she had noticed the stranger sitting in the corner of the room, dressed in a cop's formal uniform, young enough for Amy's stomach to clench. If this one stayed—and why wouldn't he—it would be a long time before he retired.

If only Ham could have waited a little longer. He was her protector, her mentor, and in many ways her father.

And now he was giving up what was so much of that role.

How many hours had she spent in Ham's office, talking to him, learning from him, laughing with him?

Who would understand, without words, what she needed most?

I don't know how to handle this . . . God, I don't know how.

She glanced over again at the stranger. He was young, so much younger than she would have expected. He had short brown hair, recently cut, most likely for the interview. She could tell by his hair and tan that he was used to the outdoors, probably used to the beach or boardwalk patrol. If it wasn't for the captain's rank displayed on his uniform, she wouldn't have guessed the rank.

His eyes were dark and observant. As he glanced around, he seemed to be studying, calculating, and taking everything in. Including, Amy remembered, the fact that she had slipped in at the last minute.

"We've had several applicants apply for this position over the past few weeks. And I'm proud to say we were able to narrow it down."

Amy folded her hands in her lap and bit her upper lip. Other people seemed to shift uncomfortably in their seats. Everyone had known that was what this meeting was about. *Replacing Ham.*

And no one, Amy was sure, was prepared for the change.

"Our applicant graduated with a criminal justice degree from Stanford University and has spent the last seven years as an officer for the Willis County Police Department, assigned to and recommended because of his exemplarity work on beach patrol. He is a certified lifeguard and has been since he was 17."

"Willis County," Amy whispered to Andrea. "That's where that huge mess boiled over last year."

"What mess?"

"We talked about it in my Criminal Justice classes. Bribery, drug possession, unethical behavior. It was major."

Andrea frowned over the information, but said only, "I would guess he wanted to get out."

"I would like for you to welcome, Derek Johnson."

Fifteen lifeguards, six city councilmen, and a handful of policemen clapped—albeit weakly. The job was Ham's. Over the last few weeks, everyone had been talking, as people do ... and no one could imagine the beach without Ham there to watch and protect.

Andrea reached over and placed her hand on top of Amy's, and slowly she opened the fist she had unconsciously made. She was a long way away from the girl she had been when Ham brought her on as a junior lifeguard.

When the meeting ended, people flocked to introduce themselves to new captain, but she couldn't do it. Not yet. Not when she could so easily picture Ham in the hospital.

Her heart ached. She was not ready for this change.

"Do you want to go get a soda or something?"

Amy looked over at Andrea and shook her head, "I want to go by and check on Ham before my class."

"Amy-" Andrea made sure she had Amy's eyes. Years of grief and friendship wrapped a comforting arm around them. "You call me if you need me."

Amy nodded. She felt the hand squeezing her neck and turned to find Mitch standing behind her. He was not much taller than her 5'7, with wide shoulders and long blond hair pulled back with his usual leather strap. "You okay?"

"I'll be okay."

"Ham's going to be fine," his blue eyed gaze so steady and sure. "I've met the new guy. I think he's a good choice."

"He's not Ham. I'm not ready for this, Mitch."

"None of us are."

They made plans to hit the surf as they always did, then Amy escaped. She headed out into the bright California sunshine she loved, blindly moving for her truck—before another person could stop her.

Before another person reminded her that her dreams had just went down the drain.

She climbed into her truck and backed out, looking over her shoulder. When the yellow jeep whipped around the corner, it didn't see her and rammed right into her tail light.



Derek walked into his office and shut the door. He couldn't believe his first day. Not only had the city council and the chief of police been there to see him fumble through a traffic citation, but he'd had a lifeguard with a panic attack over a busted tail light. He'd fumbled because she panicked—and he admitted—because he had felt a fist around his gut since she walked into the room.

Amy Carpenter.

He walked over to the file cabinet and opened two of the drawers before he found the personnel files. He pulled hers and settled at his desk, opening the manila folder to flip through the evaluations. She'd worked at the station for six years, since 17, had exemplarity evaluations—good, but not perfect. She had been cited early on for her temper, and for waiting too long to call in help. There were a few notations about her classes at the local university and a handful of names and phone numbers. Her training marks were high, but maybe he needed a re-evaluation just in case.

It wouldn't hurt to re-evaluate everyone.

He found no application, no past medical or psychological profile, nothing that would give him an inclination about where the panic attack had come from.

He glanced up at the knock on his door and waved his second-in-command in, trying to place the name. They had met over lunch with other city officers the day before.

"Mitch Davis."

Derek stood and shook his hand across the desk.

"I thought, maybe, you'd like a little insight into what happened out there."

"Sit down," he said, as he did so himself. "Amy Carpenter?"

"Is one of the best lifeguards you have on staff here."

"That doesn't explain what happened out there."

"That has nothing to do with her job and very little with who she is now," Mitch leaned forward. "You'd be better off asking Ham. If he had been here today she would have turned to him, she would have leaned on him—not having him here probably added to it all. Ham won't see it as weakness if you go to him. He'll see it as wisdom."

Derek glanced over at a pad where he had already listed a dozen or more questions. His questions would have to wait—at least a little while. The man was in the hospital.

"Why don't you give me your perceptions?"

Mitch hesitated, his eyes going to the window behind Derek. "Amy comes from what was, at one time, a very prominent family in this city. Her father is a pro-baseball player and when he retired he was already a known financial consultant. He writes books and has his own radio show, syndicated across the West Coast."

"Lance Carpenter," Derek muttered, placing the name easily.

Mitch nodded. "Amy ... got into some trouble when she was in high school. A lot of people in town turned on her, blamed her for more than was her due."

"Ham helped pull her through, helped her find a purpose, but she had—has a probation officer from you know where and a town, including many in the department, who have yet to forget or forgive."

Derek glanced at the folder and noted the application was missing. Ham would have brought her in, would have given her a chance. He didn't fault the man for it.

Mitch leaned forward. "Amy's lost her biggest ally in the job she loves—a job that gave her a real purpose when she needed it. Ham wasn't easy on her, but he did understand her."



Willis County was different than Southern California. The beaches were still crowded, the surfers still out, but the pace was slower and the volume softer. People stopped in to introduce themselves, and when Derek arrived at the rehab center, the nurses immediately recognized that he was new to the uniform.

At the turn of the 19th Century, what was now Basin Springs had been a train depot and a few shacks for the sea-worthy. When hot springs had been discovered in the mountains to the east, people started to arrive in the area. The ill came to recuperate, the healthy to camp out in the mountains and jump into the surf. Track had been laid from the depot to the hot springs, then further up the mountains to a small mining town now called Upper Springs.

Thanks to the surfing and a growing beach scene, Basin Springs was becoming a place widely known among surfers and vacationers ...

Or so said the team that had interviewed and hired him.

The position he'd taken was a prominent one in the city, if only because he was stationary over the hot spot in town—several miles of California coastline. He met with the press, fielded questions, and handled flashbulbs.

He was already fond of this job anyway. Here he had a chance to breathe ... to watch the waves ... to not just meet people, but to build relationships. It was a place where he could see growth at a pace that he could handle.

Derek stood outside the rehab room and looked in. He saw vases of flowers and potted plants. There was a string draped across the room, weighed down from end to end by cards and clothespins. He heard the T.V. and the mutterings of a man used to being in the sun and in control.

He reached out and knocked.

"Open."

Derek imagined that line had been not just been a familiar line, but a policy for his staff. People loved Ham.

"Captain Ham—"

"You must be my replacement," he held out a hand. His grip was firm. "I've been hearing about you, wondered if you would stop by. Wanted to see for myself if you had your wits about you. I find it odd that the city council managed to agree on and approve anything so quickly."

"Derek Johnson," he said as he shook the older man's hand. "I had a few questions, if you think you're up to it."

"Give me something to occupy my mind with. Have a seat," Ham said, indicating the chair beside him, "Tell me, how is Amy?"

"Actually, she was one of my questions."

"I thought so," Ham turned and looked toward the window, his eyebrows drawn together. "She hasn't been by in a few days. Not since your first day."

He glanced back at Derek. "She's not causing you problems?"

"Not problems ... just questions," Derek leaned forward, measuring the man's stamina as he related the traffic accident. "Andrea pulled her aside, forced her head down between her legs. I don't know what she said to her, but it got to her—brought some of her color back.."

Ham nodded, "How did you handle the citation?"

"Gave the kid a ticket for reckless driving. There was nothing for Amy to worry about besides inconvenience with her vehicle. The kid's parents are handling the damages."

"And that's partly where the problem lay," Ham pushed himself up in the bed. "You understand that what I'm about to tell you is unofficial and goes no where outside this room. Not even to Amy herself."

"Yes, sir."

"I only tell you myself so she'll have someone to watch over her as I did. I never married, never had children outside of my staff. Amy's very special to me, as was her family."

"When Amy was 14 her mother and brother died in a car accident while visiting colleges. The scouts were after him--just like they were after Lance, her father, in a different time. Her brother was the light of her life, her mother her support system. In short, Amy broke down—got into a good bit of trouble; fell from the graces of the town. And the town knew her. She was her father's daughter, and Lance, the town's champion from high school into the major leagues. He played pro baseball, you know."

"I've heard. Who doesn't recognize the name of Lance Carpenter?"

And thinking back, he remembered that Lance Carpenter's family had been tragically killed in an automobile accident, save his daughter. The media had flashed the news and the grief on screen. After all, Lance had just recently retired from baseball, was playing with a business, and had co-anchored a few high profile games.

"Her voice was heard on the radio with her dad through his radio show, her swimming accomplishments covered by the newspaper. She was headed straight to the Olympics."

"And then everything came to a stop for Amy. Her father lost control of her, of himself. It had been her mother who drove her to swimming practice and when she died . . . Amy's dreams just slipped away. He didn't know how to encourage her, or didn't ... and the doctors were of no help back then. Amy had her share of panic attacks before the doctors put a name with them. At times, for a time until he got himself

together, he was abusive—physically, emotionally. He didn't come from a good home, and without Mallory ... He didn't know what to do with Amy, or with himself. She had no where to go."

"Then the kid went nuts—drinking, reckless behavior. The police would chide her a bit, talk to her father, but little punishment. Then that night—some kids were out drag racing—out on the Back Bend. It's the old road, winding and dangerous, that leads up to the springs. It's been closed off since the highway was built."

"There was a crash. Everyone else ran, she stayed to help out. She was the one caught, the one whose name was on television, the one who people hated. She had her day in court and was punished for more than her sins."

"I was good friends with her parents. I was the one that represented her in court, took her in my custody until the hearings. I gave her a job, set boundaries and regulations and did a lot of dealing with the grief she still doesn't know how to deal with. I gave her a shoulder to weep on."

"What happened the other day is on two levels. Car accidents are hard on her. It's the sounds, I think ... the scent of them. We once watched a training video ... well, more than the rest, it sets off the attacks. There was a lot of fear, confusion that night on the Back Bend, and I think she relates it to what her mom and Ryan went through."

Ham sighed. "On another level, there is her father. They've had a rudimentary relationship the past few years. She depends on him to get her through college ... and there are other things. She's toed the line, tried to find a balance to her mistakes and her future ... but all she's ever wanted, I think, was to have her father look at her the way he looked at her before her mom died. She won't say it. I haven't been able to get her to say it, but it's there. That need."

Derek leaned back and listed the facts in his head. Ham had filled in pieces so that she saw a picture—slightly blurry, but there.

Ham leaned back, "You got some other questions?"

"Nothing that won't wait until later."

"You ask them now, if you don't mind. I need something to think about other than this place," his arm swept the room. "And you tell that girl of mine you saw me and that I'm expecting her."



Andrea walked into the station eating an apple from a hand that sported two gem stone rings and a wrist circled in a 24 karat gold bracelet. She spotted Mitch at his beat-up metal desk, meandering his way through a pile of paperwork. The station was back in groove. Mitch was catching up, a rock song was blasting from the radio on one side of the room and the police radio was scratching out messages from its position beside Mitch.

She tossed her bag on the floor in front of the desk and dropped down in the metal chair. Her long legs extended from a tailored pair of designer shorts and a tank top with a price tag that would have made most of her friends put it back on the rack.

But Andrea was comfortable in her wealth. She just as easily could be seen in discount store rags if the look fit her mood.

"Where's Amy?"

"Cooling down in the weight room."

"Bad day."

"Just a lot piled up on her right now." Mitch glanced up. "Carl Winters came in, broke her stride even before she went out and took the day head on."

The mention of Amy's probation officer made Andrea sit up. "Do you know what he said to her?"

"He took her license." Mitch bit back on whatever else he was going to say about the man. "It distracted her. She lost sight of a kid who went under. It took her and John to find him. She brought him in, got him breathing. She just ... I think it just rattled her a bit."

"What did the new captain say?"

"Not enough, maybe. He read the report and accepted it. I don't think she was expecting Ham, but she wanted him."

Andrea tossed the core of her apple in the trash and leaned down to grab her bag, "I'll go talk to her."

"Watch yourself."



Lying on the bench, Amy looked straight up at the bar, lifting it slowly, then bringing it down.

God, she prayed, I'm so angry. Take it from me. It's like a knot of bitterness in my stomach. I don't want to turn it toward You. Why now? Why, when it seemed like everything was coming together?

Her father had controlled his anger last night. She was grateful for that. There would have been a time when she would have had bruises. He was better. He was getting better. She needed to be grateful.

Yet, she hadn't understood his full anger until she'd dropped her truck off for Joey to look over. He was a family friend and a master with car repairs—especially since he had connections in the car world. Those connections were why she knew her dad and his best friend were looking to sell her mom's 1968 Firebird convertible.

It made her ache inside. He'd promised it to her when she graduated from college if she completed her probation without trouble. The car was a sleek beauty, completely restored, painted cherry red. The first time her dad had spotted her mom, she'd been in the car driving too fast down a narrow stretch of road.

It was her mom's car. It was part of Amy's heart.

She lowered the bar slowly and thought of the boy she'd helped save instead. He was so young, at the beach without permission, surfing against his parent's wishes with older friends that should have known better. She understood the desire to be with people you viewed like idols that treated you like family.

She pressed the bar up, slowly, as Ham would have cautioned. But family wasn't always there for you.

She understood the consequences. She would go see him tomorrow, before he was discharged.

Then she needed to face Ham.

The hands that grabbed the bar startled her. She looked up to see her captain—a frustrated captain—standing over her. "Where's your spotter?"

"There wasn't one around."

"Then there are other things you could do."

"I can take care of myself."

"There are policies," he pointed to the sign that hung on the wall, one that Ham had taped up before she'd joined on. "I know things are tough right now, Amy, but you can't ... you need to hold on to what you know."

Amy glared up at him, feeling a sudden disadvantage, lying on the bench. In truth, Ham had always been with her to spot. Ham wasn't here. She knew better, but she hadn't thought.

The tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to let him see them. Amy slid from under the bar and moved to a high bar, aware that Derek still watched her. She reached up, pulled herself into a lift, her chin rising above the bar. It wasn't a move most girls could do. She wanted him to see it.

Dropping to the floor, she turned to look at him. He stood on the other side of the room, studying her, his eyebrows drawn together.

"I need you to see something from my point of view for a minute," he walked forward until he was standing on the outer edge of her personal space. "You have a panic attack for a traffic citation. You come in the weight room to work off an upset without taking regulated precautions."

Because Ham wasn't here, she thought, then said, "I'm a good life guard."

"So I've heard, and that's what I believe, but that's not what I've seen. I went to see Ham."

"Why?" she took a step back.

"Because I didn't like what I was seeing. I was advised to talk to him."

"He didn't need to know. He's healing."

"Do you think by not going to see him you're making it any easier on him? He knew something was wrong. He was waiting for you to come to him. Look, Amy—we both need to trust each other. I have the responsibility to put you on suspension if I think your personal life will interfere with your job. You're here to save lives."

Amy lifted her chin, her jaw tight. "You won't have to do that."

"I don't think I will."



Amy's refuge was the warm sand that ran in front of the station. At so many of the other places she would have easily run into her old friends. Few of them would dare cross the path of the station.

It was a place she could come to talk to Ham, a place where she could sit in the quiet and process her thoughts. A place, she thought, where she had learned to pray and to understand that in the silence she could find peace.

"I thought I'd find you here." Andrea dropped down on sand beside her. She set her sandals beside her and buried her feet in the warm sand. She had just run across Derek, doing a few reps with the free weights, working off his own frustrations.

"I'm not too hard to figure out."

"You weren't at fault. There's no reason for Carl to turn this on you."

Amy shrugged and Andrea frowned. Amy was too used to taking it on the chin. "Mom and dad can look into it, file an appeal or something."

"Carl is just looking for a reason to extend my probation."

"And he has in a way, by not filing your early release—you never fight back."

"And I should?"

"It's not a cross to bear, Amy. If this was about serving your time, straightening your life out, it would be one thing, but it's not. Carl would like nothing more than to see you break your probation. To see you in jail."

"So I won't play his way."

"You're playing by his rules." Andrea reached out and ran a hand down Amy's hair, not surprised to feel the flinch.

Amy shook her head. "Who are you to tell me about digging my feet in the sand. You left Boston pretty quickly. What happened to the love of your life you left behind?"

"He wasn't the love of my life—" Andrea stopped herself. Amy knew she was only tossing random stones, but she hoped she was close—not just to prove her point, but because they were friends. They'd never really talked about it, not even in the months she'd been seeing him. "And I didn't run away. I graduated."

"And he didn't follow you here because ..." Amy rolled her eyes. "It's a good thing you didn't love him since you left him behind. Look, Andrea, until you face him, don't talk to me about changing things in my life."

Amy focused far away on the fading light of the sunset. They were back to the beginning—her dreams and desires feeling so far removed from who she was and what she wanted in life.

God, please give her strength and discernment.



Derek glanced up from reading the evening police dispatches to see Andrea standing in the doorway. "Amy said you talked to Ham."

"She wasn't too happy with me."

"It's a bad time for her. Please understand that. Ever since she was put on probation, she's had Ham."

"How much longer?"

"Early January if everything goes right," Andrea hesitated. "Look, Derek. I know you're not Ham, but in some ways you need to be."

Derek leaned forward in his chair, "Like what?"

"Her probation officer suspended her license today because of the accident. It was a big moment when she earned it back two years ago; she'd turned her life around, moved on."

Derek thought of the defeated look he'd seen in Amy's eyes. He'd had heard others warn him, had known it was like some P. O.'s to do so, but had hoped he'd left that behind. "Amy wasn't at fault. He had no cause."

"Try telling him that."

"You know his name?"

"Carl Winters. Ham's got his phone number in Amy's file. It won't be the first time someone's needed to rein him in."

"There are ways to deal with men like him."

He picked up a phone and dialed a number by heart. Maybe his time in Willis County had prepared him for something after all.



Chapter 2

The heat of summer raged under the California sun, even as a dark cloud gathered far in the distance. It lifted the waves, bringing out the surfers, the daredevils. Derek stood on the deck of the station and watched.

His new uniform consisted of khaki shorts and a white polo embroidered with the station's insignia, tennis shoes and sun screen. His gun was strapped to his belt, but he hadn't felt the old tension from knowing he would need to use it eventually. It was a different life then the one he'd left behind.

Though he watched the crowded beach, it was not his primary reason for standing in the sun. He had taken a break from the paper work and phone calls. Mitch had told him he would be out surfing.

Amy would be with him.

"You should see her, man. She can handle the waves. And it looks to be quite a ride with the storms moving in."

Derek had looked up from the paper work that never seemed to clear from his desk. "Is there anything she can't do?"

Mitch laughed. "Get out of college."

"She's moving on to what? Twenty-four? There must be a reason."

"She has no clue what she wants. She's majoring in finance and business, to please her dad, even when she says she doesn't want to please him, and she's majoring in criminal justice to please Ham. She's taken education and psychology courses, music classes and a lot of physical ed. When it's all said and done, she'll probably open up a surf shop on the beach front. She'll set her own hours and surf whenever she wants. She's always had money, and she hates it."

Many lifeguards surfed—Derek included—neither as much as he wanted nor as much as he had in the past. There was no better way to understand the ocean than to ride it, to feel the power of the ocean under you.

Amy was, he'd discovered during his own evaluations the last month, a phenomenal swimmer, handling the water as if she'd learned to walk in it.

Headed for the Olympics—Ham had said.

During the first few weeks knowing her, Derek had assumed a great deal. She seemed neither to like authority nor help from other people; goal oriented—like a robot with a single route.

Lifeless.

He had been wrong. There was a passion in her, he had learned, which thrived wherever she went. It wasn't just confidence. While she was strong and committed, while at times overconfident, she was also uncertain—and the passion made both a little slippery.

He had begun to see the more passionate side of Amy when he started attending Mitch's church, now his own. It was also Amy's.

Around the people at church, who nurtured and loved her so easily, she returned the affection. She loved life. She threw herself into worship. No one questioned her right to be there, worshiping, growing. She held up no defenses.

Unless, he thought, she knew he was nearby.

He saw the flash of red, a slim board with *Ephesians 3:18* printed in bold gold letters. Mitch had said it would be easy to spot. The lifeguards had pitched in to get it for Amy.

"Captain Johnson."

Derek turned, alert, at the use of his formal name. Few on the lifeguard staff used it. He accepted the phone from the on-staff police officer, a rookie, who dressed in a starched city uniform. His job was patrol and dispatch.

He placed the phone to his ear and scanned the crowded beach. Amy had moved into the water.

"This is Johnson."



Derek climbed out of the red patrol vehicle, equipped with emergency lights, towing equipment and emergency rescue rafts with portable motors. He looked around, aware that eyes from the gathered crowd were on him. He waded through the crowd of onlookers.

The police tape was easy to spot. The pier was empty, unusual even for this time of the morning, the people held back with crime scene caution tape. A handful of fishermen and vendors normally lined the edge. Within an hour it would be crowded, a popular hangout for people of all ages.

"Lieutenant Johnson."

The woman who addressed him was wearing a light summer suit of plain gray. Her hair was pulled back severely, her face unpainted, her eyes sharp.

She held out her hand, her shake firm, "Detective Miller. Detective Gillespy is in there."

She nodded toward the center of the crime scene and he spotted the balding man stooped over the covered body.

When she turned to move in, Derek fell into step beside her. She pulled out a small notepad and flipped it open.

"Victim was found under the pier, tied or tangled in rope—we are unsure as of yet. The call came from a fisherman, a regular—your lifeguards knew him. Vester Lee. Cause of death—blow to the head, drowning. Marks are located in different areas of the body. We'll know more after an autopsy."

Detective Miller lifted the yellow police tape and dipped under. Derek followed.

"We are currently treating this as a homicide, but it is likely she fell off the pier, hit her head and the waves did the rest."

Derek looked down the pier, deserted except for the police. Waves crashed against the stocks. A lone sea gull waddled across the edges before teetering into flight.

It would have been this lonely in the night. Dark.

A woman had lost her life here last night.

"Do we have an I.D. on the victim?" Derek asked.

"Maureen Childs. Know her?"

"No."

Detective Miller only nodded. "You haven't been around long. She was a good woman—aggressive, confident, and ... a steamroller in the business world. But good. We all knew her."

She looked around, drew in a deep breath and let it out quickly. "We'll have divers down within the hour. I need information on the tide patterns."

Derek nodded. "I'll tell you what I know, but should can tag Mitch Davis. He's down by the station."



"You okay?" Amy called out as she splashed, coming out of the water to the shore. Like so many others they had been surfing for a good part of the morning, taking advantage of the waves.

Mitch was holding his arm so he could take a look at the gash on his elbow. "Just banged it up a little. Stings though—quit laughing."

Amy brushed at the cut with her wet hands and looked at it. "You may need a Band-Aid. Nothing serious," she laughed again. "That was awesome. Olympic caliber backward somersault off the surfboard."

"Where's your board?"

"Aleena's got it. I wanted to make sure you were okay." She reached up, stretched out her arms and laughed. She felt good, the sun on her back, her muscles good and sore. There was nothing like the waves that came from a good storm.

Besides, she had spent a good part of the morning with Ham, losing several games of chess to him. He was defiantly getting better.

"Are we done for the day?"

"I am. I don't think I could do anything more then get out there and go down hill from where I just landed, but if you want a few more runs, I'll go in, wash this off and come back for you."

"I'd like to go check next week's schedule anyway," Amy said, taking her board when Aleena brought it up to her.

"Afraid you've been assigned to the Junior Lifeguards again?"

Amy laughed. "Andrea promised she took me off the list this time."

"You know those kids idolize you," Mitch said as they gathered their gear.

Amy slung her bag over her shoulder. "They shouldn't. I told Andrea to make me out to be a sloth and to encourage them to beat my records."

"You could encourage them to beat the odds," Mitch pointed out, then let it drop. "You going to make it to Kuzkos tonight?"

"I had planned on it," Amy said, lifting her board as Mitch matched her pace, carrying his own golden board toward the station. Kuzkos was the local hangout for the locals, lifeguards and college kids.

"Good. I think I haven't seen as much of you lately as you would like."

"Me? You see more of me then I see of anyone. We're both here everyday."

"Yeah, but you've hung out a little less. Lately."

"I'm here now. We're together."

"Mmm."

Amy hurried up the wooden steps to the deck after him. "Stop it with the *mmmm* stuff. Just say it."

"You're giving the new Captain bad vibes. I'm not sure if it's just him you're afraid of or what happened with Carl you're ashamed of."

"Why would that matter? It's been over a month."

"I don't know. You tell me."

"I made some first impression," Amy stopped, frowned as her mind immediately went back to that night. She would never forget it. Even though so much of it was just light and sound, a kaleidoscope of images, she would never forget the horror of seeing three people die—being there, being part of it, made her just as guilty.

And a town, her town, did not want to forgive.

She thought of Jenny and of Andrea. She thought of Matt and of Mitch. She thought of her dad.

"You don't have to be ashamed anymore. Christ redeemed you from that."

"But it's still there."

"And God can use it—you should let Him. You know He walked through the fire with you. You know Him now," Mitch promised and opened the door.

"Amy—"

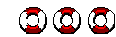
"What?" she turned around and he smiled.

"You don't have to be afraid of Derek watching out for you."

She did, she thought, when watching out for her meant he was learning about her. People were still willing, more than willing, to talk, to be vicious....

In any case, Derek knew too much about her already, no matter what other people would tell him. It was so lopsided. Which was why, Amy thought as she headed back into the locker room herself, she was afraid of him.

Reaching the locker room, she shoved the door open and went inside.



Derek was walking in the door from the garage when Amy came back out, feeling calmer after a cool shower and a half hour in prayer. He was with Detective Miller of homicide—Anna, one of her dad's on again off again *friends*. She'd known her mom, had grown up in the same rough neighborhood as her dad. Amy feared few in the department as much as she did Anna.

Anna had the eyes of a cop, with knowledge of the streets and determination to beat the odds. One might think she would blend in to the crowds because of the drab clothes she habitually wore, but her wardrobe only made her stand out as a harsh and cold.

"Where's Mitch?" Derek asked. He seemed distant—a street cop instead of beach patrol.

"He headed toward the locker room when we came in. That was," she glanced across the room at the clock over Mitch's desk, "about thirty minutes ago."

Derek walked passed and left Amy with the Detective. Amy took a step back.

"Staying out of trouble?"

Amy stopped and met Anna's gaze—still as hard and punishing as ever. "I haven't done anything illegal since the last time you checked in."

"How's school?"

It's not high school—the words trembled to get out, but Amy bit them back. "Fine."

Anna nodded, slipping her hands in her pockets, toying with her keys, "Your dad?"

The question wasn't asked naturally. Amy studied the detective, remembered the years of being in her presence, of hiding from her presence, of disappointing her ... and knowing that Anna could have told her about her mom, when she was ready. Anna could have told her a lot of things.

She thought of her mom, felt the surge of grief, then thought of her dad and felt the anger.

"My father's fine," she said simply, pushing the memories and questions away.

"Good," Anna said, her lips pressed in a thin line. "I heard you were in a traffic accident."

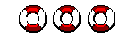
"I wasn't at fault," Amy said on a surge of panic. "And I'm not a suspect for you to question at random."

"I was inquiring—"

"Amy's record is clear."

Both women turned and looked at Captain Johnson flanked by Mitch. Right now was not the time for verbal sparring with the homicide cop. Mitch was no longer a lifeguard on his day off.

A chill skulked down her arms.



Kuzcos was the hangout for young; the skaters, the surfers, and in the winter, the snowboarders who were ready to head into the mountains. It was a place for those who grew up with the passion to be the cops and the lifeguards.

A place with an edge ... but with a safe place, as it's owner had walked on the darkest side and chosen a better life.

The aged oak doors were rarely opened by tourists. Years ago it had been a Chinese restaurant and the oriental carved doors remained. It was kept dark, save a few bright lava lamps and the colored lights that beamed from corners. Showers of beads rained in archways and loud rock music—mostly live—thumping against the walls. The tables were different geometric shapes and sizes, painted in bright reds and golds and blues.

Amy walked in, the beads she parted trickled together. Andrea and Chloe were seated at a red rhombus-like table, each with a Kuzcos specialty. Chloe had the Dancing Mahoney—a sandwich piled with cheese, peppers and a spicy tomato sauce, while Andrea had a simple and healthy tuna club.

"You're late," Andrea said as Amy stole a pickle.

"What happened to your lip?"

"Boy, you two know how to great each other," Chloe said as she reached for her drink. There was strain around her eyes that worried Amy, but she pushed it aside. Rarely did Chloe hide anything from her.

They had been through the fire and heat before.

Amy dropped down beside her, signaling to the cashier who knew what she would eat without taking an order—a monster sandwich, piled with vegetables and cheese and grilled to a warm toast.

"You don't want to know anyway," Chloe said. "It has to do with the Junior Lifeguards."

Amy looked at Andrea, eyebrows lifted. "The Junior Lifeguards busted your lip? Did they gang up on you and throw you into the ocean this year?"

They had never ganged up on Andrea. The Junior Lifeguards, like subjects who trusted their beloved princess, adored Andrea. She was good with the kids, teaching water safety and conditioning, preparing them for the stalwart competitions. Amy had been a Junior Lifeguard herself, and knowing as much preferred to leave the job to the more patient of her coworkers.

"They were practicing with the fins this morning. One of the boys was having trouble and I—well, to shorten the story, I took the heel of his foot to my lip," she ran a manicured finger over it gingerly. How she kept her hands manicured, Amy did not know. "Where have you been?"

"Mitch got detained at the station. He went into Johnson's office and they talked forever, then he came out and handed me his keys," she held up the set that dangled from a leather band. "He let me drive Buster."

Chloe snorted. "Buster's a lemon. No wonder you were late."

The olive green convertible was Mitch's dream—well, would be when he finally finished it. He tinkered endlessly on the engine, used beach towels to cover the upholstery, and usually drove his motorcycle when he was going to work so that he was on time.

And, if she ignored the springs sticking to her from the seats, or the rust on the exterior, she could close her eyes and pretend she was driving her mom's car.

"Buster's cool—and will someday look fresh as a baby. Besides—that's not the point. Johnson and Detective Miller asked Mitch to stay. The chief came in right as I was leaving. Something big happened last night. There's police tape at the pier."

"A woman was found this morning," at Amy's look, Chloe shrugged. "Some of us watch T.V. instead of living at the beach."

"I have yet to see how you can watch T.V. on a 10 inch television that doesn't have a horizontal hold."

"I crashed this afternoon at Stephen's. He has better air-conditioning."

"Chloe—" Amy shook her head. "I thought you broke up with Stephen because he was cheating on you."

"He has superior television, okay? I didn't say we were dating again, I just said that I borrowed his TV."

Amy only rolled her eyes. It took work not to bear down on Chloe—even today when she looked tired. She was a new Christian, coming from years of moving in circles Amy had left behind long ago. "What did they say? The news, not cartoons."

"Hardy-har-har-har," Chloe wrinkled her nose. "From all accounts they think someone went for a late night swim, diving off the pier like they are in some movie. Probably a tourist without an ounce of sense."

"They'd have to be," Andrea put in after taking a sip from her soda. "The pier isn't well lit. It's not a place you go at night."

"Unless you don't have a choice."

An image flashed, dark and gritty and she was out on the back road and Jenny was there, pale and lifeless.

Jenny.

Andrea grabbed onto her hand and drew Amy's eyes back up to hers. There was the connection, the love, and still the forgiveness.

"On other news, you should see the two hunks who moved in across the hall from us today," Chloe said casually.

"I thought you swore off men for five years," Amy asked.

"Not completely. Just some. And looking is not buying. I'm going to go see if I can bribe Danny out of another bowl of pretzels."

"Get me a water," Andrea called and held a hand slightly off the table until Chloe disappeared into the crowd.

"She crashed at Steven's because she was hiding," Andrea said.

Amy leaned closer, "From whom?"

It would be just like Chloe to hide from friend as her foe. Sometimes she just got tired of people. Amy understood that. She also knew the reasons.

"She saw Benny."

"She went to the jail?"

"No. He's out. Mom told me this morning. Warned me. She said Chloe was real tense about it."

Amy closed her eyes. She'd been so caught up in herself that she had not noticed. "How long has she known?"

"The parole hearing was last week. So before that someone had called her. The only reason she went in to talk to mom is because mom called her."

Amy glanced across the sparks of color and blasts of music. Chloe was smiling. There had been a time in her life when that smile was lost.



There was a storm brewing over the ocean. Lightening flashed over the ocean and rain poured, moving toward land.

Derek watched the tide come in, the waves crashing against the shore until Mitch turned the borrowed cruiser off of Beach Front Avenue. Derek had run into work today, and Mitch had given his car to Amy.

Derek closed his eyes and let Mitch drive. He pressed a hand to where a headache was forming between his brows.

"You mind if we stop for a minute? From the looks of it Amy's still here."

Derek opened his eyes at Mitch's tone—quiet, serious. He glanced over and looked at the bright orange letters of Kuzcos. Despite the rain that would soon be on top of them and the noise he knew to be inside, he thought of the food and made a decision.

"Why not? We might as well get something to eat."

Mitch parked next to his car. Derek took a moment to look it over, shaking his head.

"What?" Mitch asked when he came around the hood.

"You've got work to do."

"You know the saying. The harder you work for it, the more you'll appreciate it. Grab me a Overload, will you?" he said and tossed Derek his wallet. The Overload was a pound of cheeseburger, fully loaded, almost as thick as a head of lettuce.

The rock music pumped through the building as Mitch swung open the front oak doors. Derek worked to balance the headache with the music. He nodded toward the takeout line, not trusting his voice to be heard over the guitar rift, and watched Mitch go to Amy.

The colored lights played across her face as she sat at the rhombus shaped table with her elbows on top, holding a drink cup loosely in her hands. Half of a Monster sandwich, her favorite, sat on the paper plate in front of her. She never seemed to finish anything in one sitting.

She laughed at something her roommate said—more open than she ever was when she was aware of his presence. She resented him, he knew, and prayed God would open up the door she kept so tightly closed.

He had started attending church with Mitch, where she was active, and he knew she felt as if he was invading her space. She spent little time in the lobby at work with her friends, never stepped in the office to talk, and sat in staff meetings never meeting his eyes—unless it was hard, straight on, unwavering.

She listened though. She walked on eggshells to make sure she did everything the way he wanted it. Not because she wanted to please him, he was sure, but most likely because she didn't want to have to talk to him.

He looked at Chloe, her sly, witty roommate, with dark brown hair, blue eyes, and dimples. It was impossible not to notice her. Chloe saw Mitch first and invited him to sit down with an animated gesture.

Mitch shook his head. Instead, he put a hand to Amy's back and leaned down to whisper in her ear. Without question—so much trust—she pushed away from the table and followed him to the dark corner.

Derek gave his order and turned to lean against the counter as he waited. He could barely see them now, hidden in the shadows. Moments later she walked back to the table, grabbed Mitch's keys and left.

Mitch stopped by and talked to Andrea and Chloe. Whatever he said made them want to go after her, but they stayed, casting worried glances to the door. Mitch grabbed Andrea's hand, gave it a squeeze, and met Chloe's gaze across the table. He lingered there, assuring, searching—Derek wasn't sure.

By the time Mitch caught up with Derek he was paying for the food.

"Bad news?" he asked.

Mitch looked toward the door and waited until they were alone. "The woman who was killed—Maureen Childs. She was close to Amy's dad."

"A suspect?"

"No—at least—no," he said firmly. "They dated for a couple of years and have remained friends for the last few, but she's dated around more seriously since. I didn't want Amy to find out after the fact. She will want to be with her dad."

"Should I say something about privileged information?" Derek asked, handing Mitch his wallet as they headed out the door with the takeout sacks.

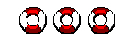
Stepping outside, Mitch met Derek's eyes, his look unrepentant. "My guess is that her dad already knows. Anna would have called him. And it will be out soon anyway. Amy keeps a promise. She's loyal."

"You just have to earn it," Derek muttered under his breath.

Mitch smiled. "Yeah, but you know the saying. The harder you work for it—"

"The more you'll appreciate it," Derek finished as he opened the door to the police cruiser.

Mitch only shrugged and dropped into the driver's seat. "She'll come around."



Amy sat on the edge of the pool and watched the porch light glisten over the pool. It was beginning to sprinkle, causing a cascade of tiny ripples across the pool. Soon, the storm would be right on top of them.

But for now it was eerily quiet.

Her dad sat behind her, smoking a Cuban cigar, grieving in silence that seemed as hard as granite. He'd been doing nothing more when she'd arrived. He sat so still, his breath even, his eyes unmoving. He had barely acknowledged her presence.

God, help me reach him.

But she had no comfort; no peace and no words came to mind. Her father would not accept her own love or sorrow. He had slipped so far from the man she had known. He used and cast women aside. He'd used her friends.

Some things were harder to forgive, she thought, wondering if he ever wondered if he needed forgiveness. Ham thought he might.

So she sat and prayed.

It had been like this when her mother and Ryan died, except she had not sat with him. Sometimes he had watched clips of his old games, over and over, sitting in his easy chair with all the lights off. She had never understood why—it was not a place he would relive his time with her mother or Ryan.

She'd found her own comfort then in ... behavior ... fast cars and the boys that noticed her.

He would make sure she attended school, check on her grades, and state a curfew for the nights. He never checked to make sure she was abiding by it. She rarely had.

He noticed her when she went to jail.

God please, reach him. Help me reach him.

Finally her father stood and pushed the cigar in the ashtray to the side of his chair.

"Dad—" Amy said as he started to turn away. He stopped and looked at her, his face blank.

"I'm sorry."



Chapter 3

My father is not a murderer," Amy pushed up from the chair in Captain Johnson's office and spun around to face him. He leaned beside the door, his arms crossed. His eyes were on her, but he said nothing.

The aged brown blinds on the windows to the office and deck were closed. The old air conditioner churned. No one could see in, but people knew she was in here. With Detective Miller, with Captain Johnson. It wasn't a normal meeting.

And she knew people wanted her in official meetings, involved with the law, on the other side of a set of bars.

Amy swallowed and glanced at the door then at Captain Johnson.

"Amy," Anna said, her voice steady. She had said the interview was unofficial, but there had been an open notebook on Derek's desk.

Amy turned back to look at her, emotions broiling. She took a deep, steady breath, and then another one, and paced passed the desk, passed Anna, to the window. She parted the blinds. Outside was a blur of summer activity; surfing, swimming, splashing. It was the same scene anyone might see on any beach, nearly anywhere in the world. Tons of people and—if you were outside—waves of noise.

It was quiet inside, except for the air conditioner. Amy focused on that sound, wondering if it would, if it could, hide the anxiety in her voice.

She couldn't look at Anna right now. Too many times Anna had been on the other side of the line from her—not just when they stood on opposite sides of the law, but later, when she was just not on her side.

"Talk to Carl. You always valued his opinion on the situation before."

"This has nothing to do with your past, Amy—and I am aware now that your P. O. has been less than straight with you and the department. That's being taken care of."

Amy turned and looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"All those times you were written up for violation—" Anna shook her head. "They weren't accurate. Carl has personal problems with your father. I didn't know, remember that. I didn't really know Carl in high school. Part of the problem is that your father really didn't know him either. You should have come to me, told me."

"Would you have believed me?"

"Maybe—" but her gaze slipped and she sighed, "no—I don't know. I guess I wish you could have come to me. That's as much fault mine as it is . . . other things."

Amy turned back toward the window and focused on a group of kids enjoying the last few days of summer splashing in the water. There had been a time when she had been that carefree . . . and her mother had sat on the beach watching her. Ryan—strong, handsome Ryan—might

have come up behind her, picked her up and run her, screaming, into the surf.

The memory flashed away, as quickly as it came. And with it came grief, and responsibility.

"If it wasn't Carl it would have been someone else who had personal grievances with my father. We went through two judges, remember?" Her father's reputation had proceeded her into the court room. "More than one counselor . . . dad got tired of it—I got tired of it. I wasn't looking for an easy route out of my punishment, but that's the way it looked to everyone. That's the way it was starting to look to my own father."

There had been protestors, threats. How many nights had she lain awake at night afraid for her life? How many nights had she hated herself so much that she wanted the people with their threats to follow through?

And in the middle of all that, she'd made the daily, painful return to high school.

If it hadn't of been for Ham—or Andrea and her faith in Christ, her ability to love and forgive—she wasn't sure she would have made it through.

Behind her, Anna sighed. "Amy, I just need a few details—not for investigation, but for . . . assurance."

"You know him—you dated him."

"Yes, but this isn't about me. I can't . . . use what I know."

"Why are you asking me? You know my father and I . . . we're not . . . estranged, but we . . . he doesn't talk to me," she said at last, hugging herself with her arms. She closed her eyes, remembering. "He hasn't exactly been a great father, but that doesn't make him a murderer."

"No—but he does have a violent history with you."

"I was violent at the time. He's hasn't . . . not recently and not often . . . only—" she stopped herself from looping back into the cycle of abuse

that could have started if Ham, the Lyons and her court appointed counselor had not intervened. There was no only. Her father had lashed out physically—part punishment, part frustration.

She glanced out at the beach and watched a group of boys playing football in the sand and water. How she longed to be out there with them. "I never reported it—not officially."

"It's common knowledge in the precinct, Amy."

"It's not on record, it can't be used."

"Then you would deny it? You would lie, Amy—haven't you come further than that?"

Amy spun from the window, her hands clenched at her sides, but something in Anna's eyes reached her. She took another deep breath and sighed. Her fingers slowly went slack.

"No."

Behind Anna, she saw Captain Johnson's slight nod of approval.

She speared Anna with a glance, "What are you doing? If this isn't official, what is it?"

Anna picked up her notebook from Captain Johnson's desk and shut it. She glanced at him and he stepped to open the door. When he shut it, he turned back to Amy.

"The assurance she spoke of—it wasn't for her, but for you," he told her, his eyes studying her.

"Why?"

"She was preparing you."

"Preparing me for what?"

"For the fact that it is very likely that your father is going to be questioned more thoroughly," Captain Johnson said and came back toward his desk. He leaned against it, facing her. His look softened a degree and for a moment she forgot everything else.

For a moment the air prickled. It had never been easy between them. She didn't want it to be—but it led to this awareness ...

Finally, he cleared his throat and awkwardly shifted through a few papers.

"There were things she wanted to say that she could not say—not if she wants to stay on this investigation. Amy, you may be questioned officially—have your lawyer present. Say only what you are asked and nothing more—or have your lawyer say it for you. Don't hide the truth."

"I thought we were passed this," she said and turned away. After her mom's death she and her father had fought bitterly, but in both their mistakes, she was the one who knew what it was like to watch someone die.

Her father couldn't be capable of that. He wasn't.

She felt Derek come up behind her, felt his hands on her arms and his breath on her hair. She closed her eyes and for a moment focused on the strength that he offered—if only for the moment it was greater than the fear she felt when around him.

"Hold on to what you know, Amy. You've got God in your life. Don't forget that."

"The press are going to become interested again."

"If and when it happens, we'll work through it. You've got friends who will stand beside you," he squeezed her arms, then released her. "Do you have a good lawyer?"

Amy nodded. "They're really good—more than you know."

"Then give them a call."



"Did she listen?"

"She listened," Derek said, leaning back in his chair. Anna had come back in after Amy left. She was wearing another shapeless gray suit. "What is your relationship with her?"

Anna studied him for a moment, then with a sigh, rounded a chair and sat down. "A long time ago, before my high school days, I was friends with her father. We grew up in the same rough neighborhood, kind

of followed each other through elementary school, junior high, high school. By the time he married Mallory, we were only distant friends, acquaintances really through his parents, but Mallory and I got on very well. And the friendship transferred."

"When Mallory and Ryan died, Lance pushed everyone away ... and I didn't know how to approach him—until, we just fell into dating, maybe a little too soon. Maybe I blamed myself a little when Amy started to get into trouble. Maybe I overreacted. I didn't know how to reach her."

"She's hard to reach."

Anna nodded and then smiled. "Yeah—but her tolerance level has increased toward you, I noticed."

"What scale are you using?"

"My own—from a lifetime of knowing Amy and her father. She didn't walk out today. I couldn't have kept her here. She had to know that you didn't have to keep her here, not without a lawyer—and her lawyers would do anything for her. She could and would have walked out—unless she trusted one of us. I'm inclined to think it was you."

Derek nodded, felt the stab of relief, and set it aside to think on later. Right now, he had a job to do—which included looking after said employee.

"If you're so close to her family—to her father—why stay on the case? Wouldn't the public be screaming conflict of interest?"

"With Lance Carpenter, three time National league MVP? Popular financial advisor—with broadcasts across the U.S.? You've got to be kidding. His success is a web for catching people who don't like him, some with valid reasons. Part of Amy's problem has always been that as many people in this town that love her father, there are as many who hate him."

"Including Carl Winters."

"Apparently so. The same goes for the police force—and my own captain understands that. He's seen the evidence and knows that Lance

shouldn't be high on the suspect list—but others could and would lose their focus. Carl isn't the only one who would love to hurt the Carpenters. Amy was right. Five years ago the investigation of that accident turned away from the kids who were driving the cars and turned on Amy—the one who stayed, the one who called the police, the one with the blood of the dead on her hands. She blamed herself, her father blamed her and the town blamed her."

"Two detectives got pulled from the investigation—and it never got the proper investigation. Jenny Lyons, Matt Barker—they never got the justice they deserved. If I leave this case—someone else will take over who has just as much history with Lance or Mallory or Ryan. At least I know he's innocent—at least I have that on his side."

"Jenny Lyons," Derek repeated, putting the information together. "She was one of the teens that died that night."

"Yes—and Matt Barker was a star senior quarterback. Colleges were fighting to get him. He had national press."

Derek held up a hand and pressed. "Lyons? Any relation to Andrea?"

"Jenny was her sister," Anna smiled. "And Andrea befriended Amy when no one else would. When you see those two together, you're looking at a miracle."



Amy dove into the waves, graceful and smooth as she parted the water. The waves rushed to meet her, the warmth of the water nearly as familiar to her as her own skin. She swam out to the buoy and turned back toward shore, her muscles aching.

It reminded of summers gone by—every summer. Racing, swimming, surfing, relaxing—making memories, and finding time to do so; letting go of every thought for so you could feel your heart race, your adrenaline churn.

For a moment, she could escape.

Her feet met the sand and she came up, showering the water around her, then raced for her towel. She plopped down on it just as Andrea came out of the water laughing. Cupping the water with her hands, Andrea jogged forward, flinging it in Amy's direction.

Amy did not flinch. A handful of water drops would dry in moments.

"Why do you always compete when we're in the water?"

"Because the last time we went in to swim for fun, you told everyone afterwards that you beat me," Amy said, and lay back, letting the sun dry her off. She watched as Andrea pulled out her sun screen and dribbled it over her skin.

Down the beach a group of guys paused in their game of volleyball and watched. Amy stuck her tongue out at them.

"You're getting attention," Amy warned.

Andrea barely glanced at the guys, "Why do you always assume that they're looking at me?"

"Because they know who we are. I'm the bad evil chick, and you're the rich, beautiful lady of their dreams."

"I am not," Andrea said, rolling her eyes.

"You always are. One of those guys comes over here—he won't even look at me."

"If you don't stop looking at them, one of them is going to come over here and then we're going to have to make conversation or something," Andrea shut the cap to her sun block and handed it across to Amy, her look pointed. "I need my beauty rest. Saturday is a big day."

"Which reminds me—one of the guys from Laufman County called this morning and left a message on the machine at the station. Mitch played it back for me. Basically, it says they're going to whoop our tails."

"They are certainly welcome to come and pay their entry fee to try. I think we have our best relay team we've had in years. And Mitch as

been working with Steve Hammond. You should see that kid move in the water."

"Isn't Steve Hammond one of the ones I pulled out of the water earlier this summer?"

"As I said, Mitch is working with him."

"He's probably a better swimmer for it."

"Quite possibly a better teenager because of it," Andrea pointed out, slipping her sunglasses on before laying back on her towel. "He reminds me of someone."

Amy snorted, "I was never that bad a swimmer."

"You better not be on Saturday," Andrea pointed out.

The adult lifeguards had their own races, endurance challenges against the other counties. The games were spirited, passed down by surfing and lifeguard legends. The preparation for the end of summer events kept them in top shape.

"I have to be. Did I tell you Ham was going to be here?"

"Only about twenty times," Andrea responded. Ham had been released from the rehab center and was currently at home, checked on daily by a nurse and any lifeguard that dropped by. "Mitch told me Derek's picking him up."

"Mmm."

"Then I guess you knew," Amy felt Andrea's eyes on her, but kept her own closed. "Amy, you should be glad they're friends and that Derek's working with Ham. It certainly must be hard on Ham to have to let go of everything so quickly."

"What do you want me to feel?" Amy asked, thinking about the meeting in his office that morning. For once he'd nearly been the calm in her inner storm, his touch on her arms holding her steady. "I certainly don't know. I respect him, he's my boss. I follow directions."

"But you don't accept him."

"Accept him as what?"

Andrea growled. "As family. We're all part of the same family."

Amy stared at Andrea for a moment and tried to process the words. Across the sand the group of guys had started a volleyball game. Beyond them was a lifeguard hut, it's construction simple, coated in whitewash.

The lifeguard stood as a silhouette against the sun.

It was John, a nine year lifeguard, a graduate of the police academy and expecting father. John was family.

Captain Johnson was ... maybe the problem was, she didn't know. She didn't want to know.

Amy lay on the sand and closed her eyes, enjoying the heat of the sun on her skin, listening to the sounds of summer around her: the surf lapping the sand, the shrieks of children. Apparently, the group of guys had resumed their volleyball game, because she could hear their shouts.

The numbers on the beach had peaked and would slowly fade away. Once kids were back in school the vacationers would level off. The life guarded beaches would be narrowed down. Soon the faded white washed signs with a fresh coating of "No Life Guard On duty" would be posted. Only a few lifeguards would stay on.

Amy was one of them.

Soon winter would approach. They were north enough along the coast to get cold winds and a rare light snow during the winter. The water would be freezing. Only a few surfers would strike out to catch a wave.

Amy was also one of them.

The almost panicked giggle drew Amy's head around and she watched as Andrea struggled to push herself to a standing position. Amy glanced at her watch and was on her feet in one smooth move.

Andrea had already gained attention.

"Get down," she said, nearly pushing her friend back to the ground. Andrea shrieked then pressed a hand to her head.

"Amy—" her voice shook.

"I know," Amy said, already digging in Andrea's bag. Across the sand, the group of guys had stopped to watch. Turn away, she wanted to yell at them, pulling out a sugar packet. She tore it open and knelt beside Andrea.

Andrea shifted away—confused, disoriented. She flailed her arms and cried out. Her eyes were wide open, panicked.

"It's all right," Amy said as a woman came over. "She's hypoglycemic. I know what to do."

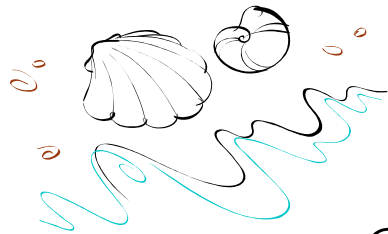
Amy reached out again, caught Andrea, and gently urged her friend to open her mouth. The group of guys were watching, as were others, and it wrenched Amy's heart. Andrea would feel the shame of it—as loving as she was—Andrea would beat herself up over it.

She poured the sugar on Andrea's tongue, keeping a firm hand on her jaw to make sure she didn't spit it out.

Andrea's eyes slowly slid closed as the sugar entered her system. She gently shook her head. Amy let go and watched as Andrea lay back on the towel, wallowing in humiliation.

"Is everything okay?"

Amy looked up at John and nodded. "Help me get her to the car."



Chapter 4

Amy and Chloe lived in an older apartment community. The residents consisted mainly of senior citizens and homegrown college students. It was away from the bustle of the beach scene.

Mitch parked Buster outside and jogged up the iron stairs to the second floor apartments.

Chloe answered the door. Her hair was twisted loosely and clipped to the back of her head. She wore light blue and white polka dotted boxers over tanned legs and a yellow tank top.

She followed his gaze and shrugged. "We're studying."

"Are you?"

"I study," she snapped. When he only lifted a brow, she shrugged, and stepped back so he could come in. "Senior level courses. Both of us are floundering."

"How are your classes?"

She shrugged again, but the look in her eyes was distant and hard to read. "Fine. As you say, Amy's the one who should be buried in her books."

"That's not what I said."

Chloe only looked at him. "Maybe. You want anything else?"

"I was wondering if I could borrow her for a minute."

She raised her chin and shrugged again. "If she can find her way out of that pit she's buried herself in. Amy—" she called and turned to go into the kitchen. "Mitch is here."

Mitch looked around the small apartment. They had a worn love seat by the wall and an old television propped up by cinder blocks. The tiny dining area was a storage place for surf boards, bogie boards, lawn chairs, and all their other assorted beach equipment. The art on the walls consisted of aged beach advertisements scavenged from re-sale stores. They shared a bedroom with two twin beds and kept their clothes divided between storage crates and the small closet.

Chloe opened the door to the refrigerator, and stood silently studying the contents. She had been a Christian for such a short time. She came to church services, blooming with energy and delight.

She'd stepped away from the old Chloe that had been looking for love in the wrong places.

She'd had a crush on him, he knew, and he was careful to stay several steps back. Right now what was important was her faith. Her new life.

He wasn't about to complicate it. No matter how much her energy and new light attracted her to him.

But then, he wasn't sure he'd ever understood her.

She'd been standing at the refrigerator for too long, he thought. He stepped forward to say something, anything.

"Hey—" Amy came out of the bedroom dressed in cutoffs and a red sleeveless shirt.

"Hey. Heard you and Andrea were over at Ham's this morning, helping him get settled back into his house."

"Did you go over there?"

"I stopped by. Had dinner with him. He looks good. It feels good for him to be back at home."

"I know," she folded her arms across her chest and thought about it for a moment. "It's a little hard to see him like that. Unsteady on his feet. He's still so thin."

Mitch nodded. "He's getting better, though. We can praise God for that. You want to step outside with me for a minute?"

"Sure—Chloe—"

Chloe picked up a jug of chocolate milk and closed the refrigerator door. "You'll be right outside. I know."

She held up the bottle and saluted them with it, the look in her eyes oddly hard.

They settled on the concrete and iron stairs outside the apartment. It was a warm evening even for late September.

"Something's wrong," Amy said, studying him in the dying summer light. A breeze lifted the edges of her hair.

"Not wrong—just, not what you would like."

Amy looked out over the parking lot. "What is it?"

"You know how you were upset when they offered Derek the Captaincy instead of me?"

"Yeah. I wanted you to have it so you would have a better chance at moving to Upper Springs."

"You wanted me to have it so you could have it when—if—I moved to Upper Springs."

She shrugged. "Well, either way."

"They offered the job here to me. I turned it down."

"What?"

Her voice was as sharp as the look in her eyes, and cautiously quiet. He looked down at his hands and rubbed an old scar that ran along his thumb—rock climbing, senior year of high school. It reminded him, as did many things, that he had grown up just as much in the mountains as on the beach.

"Joe Fisher gave me a call right after Ham had his stroke. He said he was thinking of retiring. That if Ham made it, he was moving down here so they could buy a boat and sail around for their retirement years—they had it all planned out. If Ham didn't make it—he would do it alone. He wasn't going to wait and waste the rest of his life."

"We've always known they had those plans. For you to take Joe's job, for me to get through school, get some experience under my uniform—and then take Ham's."

"We've also known there was only a small chance things would work out that way."

"A chance was still a chance."

Mitch nodded. Ham had given Amy's those dreams ... and maybe those allusions. He'd given her something to plan on when the Olympics were out. It had been Ham's belief that she wouldn't need to be a captain to be over the beach station. Ham had not been for the longest time.

But the chief of police had wanted a captain—had wanted to give Derek expanded authority that Ham had never had. The area was growing.

And Ham had been short sighted in his command. He had never understood the changes that were coming.

"You're going to the mountains..." Amy sighed.

Mitch let the words settle between them. "When Joe called, he told me not to take the job here. The people in Upper Springs would have been reluctant to give me a job if I had just taken on new responsibilities here. They want me in the position before the end of October."

"I didn't think you would go this soon."

"Not yet. I'll finish the season. Train my replacement."

"I still have two semester left in school-minimum."

"I know."

She leaned forward, stared at him, frowned over what she saw. "You don't think they would have given it to me anyway. Five, ten years from now."

He hesitated, but he wouldn't lie to her. "Can you tell me that being captain of Beach Patrol was something that *you* really wanted?"

She looked away, stared hard toward the horizon. "I don't know ... but I would have liked to have a chance to try."

"You don't have to prove yourself to anyone."

She lay her head on Mitch's shoulder. He slipped his arm around her. He felt her long sigh.

"It's not official yet—decided, yes, just not public. I didn't want you to find out from somewhere else."

"You going to tell Chloe?"

"I thought maybe you could do that," he said, remembering the way she had stood, her back to him, looking for nothing in the refrigerator.

"Mitch—" Amy leaned away from him.

"Look—there's one more thing I need to say to you. I don't like leaving you like this, with things messed up with your dad, with your probation nearly over, with things between you and Derek still so unsettled. I just wanted you to know, that I'm still here for you. You need to get away, you need a job, I'll find you one up there. Just promise me one thing."

"Is this about Derek?" she asked and rolled her eyes. "You and Andrea both want Derek to be Ham, to be my best friend. He's my boss."

Mitch shook his head. "I was your boss. My replacement will be your boss. Derek will just be there to oversee your work. We're lifeguards, Amy. Teamwork has to come first. On an extended search, in an emergency, everything has to come naturally. You don't speak up

when he asks for information. You depend on me to give him information he needs about this area. No one has worked as much or as closely with myself and Ham the last five years besides you. Not one lifeguard on this beach with more experience has as much experience as you. Ham was grooming you. Ham depended on you. Have faith in what Ham was giving you. Don't let him down."



The parking lot at the station was crowded with cars; life guards, not competing, already on duty, junior Olympians and their parents, and community volunteers setting up for the competitions. Amy had to park her truck in the *The Springs* parking lot and walk across.

Andrea had just arrived, her sleek green sports car parked illegally in front of the station.

"Need some help?" Amy jogged over to Andrea's car. Her bag bounced against her hip. Andrea looked rested and recovered, classy even in khaki shorts and the bright orange top given to volunteers. Her designer sunglasses were perched on top of her head.

Ignoring the pointed look Andrea sent her, Amy leaned into the trunk and lifted a box of trophies and medallions.

Andrea glared at her. "Shouldn't you be conserving your energy?"

"Just stretching. I can't go into the water unprepared."

"I don't need to be babied, Amy."

"Fine," Amy sat the box in Andrea's arms and lifted the lighter beach bag from the trunk before shutting it. Then she turned, rested her hand on the trunk, and stared at her. "What would I usually do—what would anyone usually do when they see a friend getting things out of their car?"

Andrea sighed. "You haven't been around mom and dad the last two days."

"Sure I have. When I went to talk to your dad yesterday, as my legal representative, he told me he was worried about you."

"They're always worried about me. And if either one of them come today, I'm going to run off screaming." She smiled a bit. "That would leave you in charge."

"Ha-ha. Why would they come when they know you're going to be surrounded by dozens of trained lifeguards and a number of your best friends?"

It bothered her that Andrea resisted help. That, even though their friendship had formed in a dark, bleak time, two things seemed to form a large, gaping hole between them. She'd gone away to college for a few years, nearly cutting herself off from Amy. There had been a guy, Amy had deciphered. Then she'd come home without the guy, without ever mentioning the guy.

She never talked about it, though she kept a framed photograph in the drawer beside her bed. Amy had only caught a glimpse of it once.

Did she see it as a weakness, Amy wondered, as she saw her diabetes?

Amy opened the door for her, then turned and met her gaze evenly before she could step through. "Andrea, being a diabetic is nothing to be ashamed of."

"No—" Andrea closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, then forced a smile as she looked at Amy again, "but you can get embarrassed easily. Where's Chloe? I thought she was coming with you."

"She decided she wanted to stay home today and study."

"Chloe?"

"She's a little mad at Mitch." Amy had told Andrea about Mitch's plans the night before during a long phone call—and yes, she had been checking up on her. "Maybe just a little upset with me for being in the middle."

"He should have told her himself."

"Yeah, well—he's not going to have to worry about that for awhile. She's decided she's giving him up—that she has to get over him. I don't think he realizes what he's losing."

Andrea set the box down on the front desk. "Of course he doesn't. Mitch wants to grow up and be just like Ham and Joe and your uncle Pete. Bachelor's to the end. Of course, that's not necessarily a *male* pattern."

"Oh, thank you, *Miss. Concerned*. And when was the last time you went on a date?" Andrea's eyes flashed. "Besides, Mitch dates."

"Get real. Mitch?"

"Sure he does."

"Never seriously. He laughs, smiles, hangs out with girls—he cares about them, but date? Like, in a serious relationship?" Andrea shrugged. "I'm going to move my car. Would you take this box out to the deck?"

Amy took the box and went outside. She left it with her bag against the side of the building and went to stand at the railing. She looked out over the beach. Some memories could never be forgotten, especially when the sounds and the smells and the pump of adrenaline made the day magical.

Like it had been, everyday, with her mom.



The blinds to the ocean were open, so Derek was aware the moment Amy stepped out on the deck. She stood at the railing, so obviously remembering.

Across the table, Ham and Mitch were studying the emergency management layout they had prepared—altered only slightly from the previous year. They'd spent most of the morning reminiscing, thinking over more than twenty years on the job. Derek took the comments in stride.

For as much as he wanted Ham's experience, he was also confident in his own—as well as his staff's—abilities.

They had placed ambulances and emergency teams closer to the venues. The uniformed officers remained a constant presence.

"We asked community volunteers to wear orange tee-shirts. They will be briefed on where first aid and other emergency help can be found."

"You'll catch some flack from the mayor's office. They expect for the lifeguards to be seen."

"Everyone is on duty—except for those competing in multiple events. However, unless called to their various stations, they have been given more flexibility to attend different events."

How could he expect more from his team when he hoped to find some time to watch a few of the events himself? He wanted to see Amy in competition. She was, by nature, a competitor. It wasn't that he was interested in her—not in a romantic way. He just wanted to get a handle on her.

He glanced out the window, studied her profile. The facts he knew about her clicked into place. She had been a junior Olympian. On days like today, her mother would have brought her, encouraged her, rooted her on.

And if assumptions could be trusted, Amy had later competed for her father's approval as well. Lance Carpenter, MVP, star of the town. He would have been traveling during the summers with his team, playing ball across the country. How many events had he missed? How many had he attended?

She had never really promised that she would compete today, Derek thought. She had never signed up, and if asked, she would never commit herself. From what he understood, it was more of a running joke, and had been for years, to ask her. The one time he mentioned the tournaments himself, she'd responded only by pointing out what the other lifeguards could do for them.

But no one had ever doubted that she would show, and do what she needed to do to support the team. She was a home town girl, and had been raised by a hometown girl.

Derek pushed away from his desk. "I'll be right back."

He was aware the former captain and his own lieutenant watched him go to Amy. He was not ready to question why he wanted to be there.

There was little he could ask, or say. She wouldn't be here if she wasn't ready. She needed the time to relax, prepare herself.

And she didn't relax around him.

Still, he refused to cave into her need to stay away from him.

"Looks like we're getting a big crowd."

Amy blinked, and came out of her trance.

"The Junior Olympics has always been a big deal."

"Doesn't look like a lot of kids."

She hesitated, seemed to fumble around for a response. Or a reason *not* to respond.

"It's one of the last weekends of the summer. A big part of your crowd will be teenagers out here for a place to hangout."

"Better here than other places."

Something flashed in her eyes, but she only nodded.

"You never came, gave me your perceptions on problems."

"I'm not the one you need to ask. I've been competing for most of my life. You don't notice much where you're in the zone."

"No, I don't guess you do."

"You compete much in anything?"

"I was on the football team in high school. Surfing a bit. I have the record in Willis County for marksmanship—a competition between county departments."

"You any good?"

He shrugged, "A little."

"Ham's horrible with a gun. I don't think he kept bullets in it. He depended on Mitch a little too much in that area. He hates the things."

"Was there ever a moment he needed it?"

"I don't know. Mitch has drawn his a couple of times. He's fairly accurate. I don't think he's ever used it in a confrontation though. You don't deal with most people around here that way."

"I don't suppose you would need to. Where I grew up the police had to know how to use their weapon to survive."

"And if anyone had realized Ham wouldn't have used his gun, we wouldn't have had the reputation we had."

She glanced down toward the pier, so obviously thinking about Maureen Childs. Even a month into the investigation, her name was still a hot topic in the news.

"If your mom was alive, what would you be doing right now?"

She glanced up at him, surprised. "Why?"

"I'm assuming that's what you were thinking about before I broke your concentration."

He doubted she was share. By the look in her eyes, she didn't want to.

So he was surprised when she did. She turned, looked out over the ocean, remembering.

"I was thinking that I've always been here for this part of the competition. Even after mom was gone and I didn't want to come, I was still here, still early. Sometimes I would look for her. You can pretend to spot anyone in the crowds."

"Is that what you remember most?"

"No—I remember who she was—her smile, her heart," she answered quickly. "She would have gotten a kick out of the orange shirts you're passing out. I ... I guess I just remember. I remember a lot of things on days like today ... when I went to bed last night, I didn't think I would come this year. I didn't think I could do it. And yet I came. Every

year I do." She closed her eyes. "My mom used to kiss me on my forehead and whisper that she loved me, that she was proud of me, that she wanted me to go into the water to play. The words were like right there against my forehead so I could feel her breath on my skin. She would tell me, 'don't think about what your father would do. Think about how good it feels to be alive.'"

She sighed, then took a deep breath back in. "It was always my mom and Ryan, just them here on those days. It was so hard to compete without that. Dad had baseball—which, for my life, was just as much a part of summer as swimming and the beach. I—"

She opened her eyes, blinked and turned to Derek. She was guarded now, disappointed, maybe, that she had revealed so much of herself.

"I think I'll go find Ham."

"Last I saw him, he was in my office."

Derek stood with his back to the ocean, to his responsibilities, and watched Amy disappear into the station house.

And he wondered why it bothered him so that she ran from him.



"Chloe—you're here. You—"

"Did you think I'd miss this? It's absolutely fantastic," she said, a little too brightly. She had spread her towel out next to Amy's bag. She was stretched out on it, her skin gleaming with sun screen, her eyes hidden by sunglasses.

"What—"

"How did you do on your race? You were close, but I couldn't tell."

"Chloe, what did you do to your hair?" Amy asked, lowering herself next to Chloe onto the sand.

"Oh, this?" she held up a strand as if casually twirling it around her finger. "Well, I got to thinking about it and it's ridiculous for me to sit

home alone and miss all this sunshine. So, I decided to just do something different."

"That's more than different. You're . . . almost a blond," Amy stared at her friend, her hair edging toward a light brown with golden streaks instead of the rich brunette that framed her face and highlighted her eyes. "It's just kind of sudden."

"I've been thinking about it, and it's not just any color. Put a little water on it and tangle it up a bit, and it looks like yours. We can get our pictures taken together and pretend we're twins. It might work, if we sit down."

Amy ran a hand through her damp hair. "Chloe—"

"I needed to not worry about what he thinks of me."

"So you make your hair look like mine?" She reached forward and pushed Chloe's sunglasses up off her face and onto her hair. It frustrated her that she could not read her friend's gaze. "Chloe, Mitch has never looked at me like that."

"No, but he looks at you," she held up her hands. "It's not about the hair. It's about getting through the next few weeks until he leaves. It's about allowing myself to be me and to do something just a little over the top so I can. At least now I can pretend to be just a little out of my mind."

"You're making absolutely no sense. Why am I comforted by that?"

Chloe smiled and slipped an arm around Amy's shoulders. "Because that's what always happens. Besides, if Mitch is leaving soon, I'd rather him not remember me at all instead of remembering me hard and cold as I was thinking of being. Are you going to tell me how you did on your first race?"

"You're not going to be invisible, Chloe. You're too bright of a light for that."

"The race?" Chloe prompted again.

Amy sighed. "Second place."

"Second place? What's wrong with you?"

"My time was good—hers was better. She was a little younger, right out of high school competitions. I'm getting old, Chloe. I'm losing my edge."

"Never."

"Yeah, well. Hand me my water bottle?" Amy took it, still trying to take in Chloe's sudden new look. A group of kids, showing off their junior Olympian medals, ran past.

"Hey Amy—" Andrea jogged up, apple in hand and stopped, sand scattering at her feet as she focused on Chloe. "What did you do to your hair?"

"Something different. You don't have to tell me what you think. In a couple of weeks, maybe I'll be a red head."

Andrea rolled her eyes. Amy tilted her head back and squeezed water into her mouth.

Chloe shook her head. "No . . . you don't have to say anything, give me any sort of opinion what so ever. I know what you're thinking—at least enough to know I don't want to hear it."

Amy coughed twice and shook her bottle, surprised at the bitter taste in her mouth, "You got any water?" she asked Chloe. "I don't think this was cleaned out completely."

"I have a diet coke."

"I can't swim on that. The carbonation will kill my lungs," she shook the bottle a few more times, and lifted it to her lips. The second time around was no better.

"I'll go get you something from the stand," Chloe volunteered.

"Thanks," Amy said as Chloe grabbed the bottle and ran toward one of the food huts. "We need to run some bleach through the dishwasher or something."

"Amy, looked to your left, down toward the hut."

Amy looked and she froze. "He's standing right there, where Chloe could have seen him."

"And as long as Benny's right there where we can see him, we know he's not following Chloe."

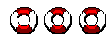
"What is he thinking?"

"I don't think he ever did. Not one moment," Andrea sighed. "And neither did Mitch think of her. No wonder she's hurt."

Andrea rested a hand on Amy's leg. "I'll send Chloe off to the competition with you, then I'll find John or Mitch. They can make sure he's escorted off."

Amy turned and glanced to the row of concession stands lined up behind her. Looking for Chloe—hoping that she didn't see Benny.

Not today, God. She doesn't need another stab in her heart.



"This is Amy's event, isn't it?" Derek asked when he spotted Mitch. They were both standing in front of the crowd, overlooking the ocean. The left and right stations floated across the water. The lifeguards would run from down the beach, past where Derek and Mitch stood, dive into the water, retrieve the buoy from the platforms and swim back to dunk the bucket. Then they would run back to their team to tag the next runner.

Each team had five lifeguards participating in the relay—two girls, three guys— and one on each platform to hand out the buoy. This was the race that made the counties competitive.

"Where's Ham?"

"He was getting a little tired. I had John take him on home. The first race was Amy's forte. This is a relay. She's a decent runner, and she holds her own. She'll run second, keep the pace, but the guys pull in the last laps."

The announcer began an enthusiastic countdown. Derek and Mitch stepped back, out of the way.

Down the beach the horn sounded. The first runners were off.

It was fast paced, a scattering of sand. The first runners, all males, quickly covered the distance and dove into the water at different times. The crowd behind them was shouting. He felt his own blood pumping.

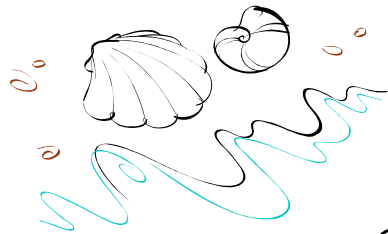
He'd known part of his own reputation with other counties depended on this race. He'd fielded two calls from two different captains who wanted to trade barbs.

The balls flew into the buckets—all but one—and that lifeguard stumbled back to the bucket and tossed it in, taking off after the other guys. Then the others were headed their way—all girls, except one.

Amy was running, nearly to where Derek and Mitch stood. She stumbled, falling forward into the sand. And pulled herself up just as quickly.

"Something's wrong," Mitch muttered as they watched her run past. Her eyes seemed unfocused. She dove in behind the others. He watched her appear, watched her move into a smooth stroke—and then she stopped.

And disappeared.



Chapter 5

She's fine—resting. I wanted you to know that before I tell you the rest."

Holding his cell phone, Derek paced behind the competition area where the volunteers were disassembling the setup. Vendors behind him were packing up. People had moved in long the sand to enjoy the last few rays of the day.

Ruling out what had happened with Amy, the day had been a success. There had been no fights to break up, little complaints from the vendors, and only minor need of his staff and their first aid skills.

But *he* would never forget watching her go under.

He'd brought her out of the ocean himself, her arms weakly clinging to him. She was disoriented, shaky. She'd coughed up the water she'd swallowed when she'd panicked in the water, then wretched up the rest.

Despite the signs, he didn't believe that Amy had been using. She wouldn't have turned to drugs, not when she lived her life to prove to everyone otherwise.

Unless the pressure was too much.

He dismissed the thought again as soon as it formed.

He needed answers. His roll was here, at the beach. It had been Andrea and Chloe who left with Amy in the ambulance. He'd sent Mitch and another officer on behind them to see what answers they could get.

And he was here, at his post, unable to follow one of his own to the hospital.

He still remembered the way she'd clung to him when her hands weren't quite steady ...

And the fear he'd seen in her eyes when she'd looked up him.

"What do you have?"

"We were right when we said she was showing signs of overdose. The doctor thinks she's got traces of major prescription drugs in her system. Heavy—duty. Sleeping pills, some form of acetometiphen most likely. The doc doesn't think she was taking them. If she had not of been running off of adrenaline, and when she hit the water cramped up, those drugs would have settled into her system, moved through to her brain."

Derek sat down on one of his team's coolers and stared out into the oceans. It fit his suspicions, but he didn't have the answers to the questions knowing so opened. *Who - why - how.* "So where did the pills come from?"

"Amy said that some water she drank after her first heat had a bitter taste to it. Chloe tossed it in the trash at one of the vendors ... Mikes Dogs and Chips."

Derek glanced over his shoulder at the crowds walking along the now uncluttered boardwalk. The bottle would have been the only thing that they could have tried to scavenge fingerprints from. "The vendors have pretty much gone home."

"Who knows? Maybe Mike still has his garbage or knows where the bag is, what it looks like. I don't know. She said she went into the trailer—knew him pretty well. Amy has enough in her system for a blood check, but the bottle's the only thing that can give us a trace of evidence."

"Her roommate wouldn't have gotten rid of the bottle because she knew what was in it?"

"No—not from Chloe."

"You sure?"

"Positive, but I'll follow through."

"Any other ideas? If it was drugs—who would have done this?"

"It could have been anyone. A competitor, maybe, though this isn't that kind of race. More likely someone from the town. This stuff has happened before."

"This serious?"

"Someone once tried to burn down her dad's house ... nearly got to her mom's convertible. Amy was still living there. She was home alone. No one could figure out if it was because of her or one of her dad's crazy fans."

"Other than that ... she was roughed up by Matt's friends one time ... and some of Jenny's friends played vicious pranks on her. Girl pranks. That was back when she was in high school."

"Nothing recently?"

"No-or not that she's said."

Derek frowned.

"Mitch, we have a mountain of circumstance to consider here. If Amy was hurt because of her father, then that raises the likely hood that Maureen Childs died because of Lance Carpenter. I don't like those odds."

"Have you talked to Anna?"

"She has it noted in that notebook she carries." His hand tightened around his phone. "If those drugs remained in Amy's system, or

if she had taken in more, it would have killed her. It doesn't matter whether whoever it was intended that to happen or not. I'm not going to play around with it, or put off to her past."

"No—but she'll want you to."

"And if the person has gotten away with it before, they might have been careless this time. I'll see what I can do to find that bottle."

"And I'll see what I can find out on this end."



Mitch found Chloe as she came out of Amy's room.

She looked tired, he thought, insecure. He was used to an almost eternal optimism, not fear.

"How's Amy?" he asked and fought back the primal urge to reach out and comfort, to protect.

Her eyes shifted, obviously uncomfortable. "She's sleeping—again. She looks all right when she's asleep. Whatever's inside of her just keeps knocking her out. Andrea and I were just laughing because she just slipped off in the middle of a sentence. The doctor—she wants to keep Amy overnight."

She didn't look like she'd been laughing, he thought.

"I'm sure it's just precautionary," he felt the inward switch slide from friend to officer. Chloe was not just uncomfortable. There was a trace of panic in her eyes.

Something was wrong. He narrowed his eyes when he noticed her hair. She had colored it, from a rich brown, to a brownish blond, now much more like Amy's. It was shorter, but still deliberately, he thought, like Amy's. When he had questioned her before, he acknowledged now, he had not moved away from friendship.

He swallowed back a surge of questions, and nodded toward the waiting room. "How 'bout we sit down for a minute, calm down."

She shifted, folding her arms across her chest, and allowed him to lead her into the small coven area. He resisted putting a hand to her

back, unsure if his touch would have gentled with comfort, or hardened with determination.

He refused to think such things of Chloe, even as the idea formed in his mind.

Her roommate wouldn't have gotten rid of the bottle because she knew what was in it?

"You colored your hair," he said mildly as he chose a seat next to her.

She reached up and absently touched her hair. "I needed a change. Something different."

The answer was flippant, but unsteady. Her eyes shifted from his. Why, he wondered, did he feel like Chloe was lying to him?

"It's like Amy's," he murmured, watching her face.

She looked at him, then looked away. "I've always liked it. And guys go for the blonds. My hair was too dark to shoot for something like Andrea's."

"I thought you were giving up guys?"

"Not giving up, just ... taking my time to learn about me. And waiting for something better to come along." She looked away again, her lips drawn in a hard slash. "I tend to pick the biggest losers."

He leaned back in the chair, tired of watching her. It was difficult to know that she was uncomfortable around him. Even more difficult, he realized, to know she was lying to him.

"Did Amy make her bottled water up this morning?"

"I don't think so. She usually pulls one from the freezer."

"Are there any others?"

"I suppose so. We usually keep the freezer full in the summer. Come on Mitch, you've been there. You know," she rubbed her fingers against her temples. "I'm trying to remember which type of water bottle it was, but neither one of us are that picky. Maybe even a soda bottle. We just refill whatever bottles we use and throw them in the freezer."

"How long had you been with her stuff before she came back?"

"I don't know—she was competing. I saw Andrea first, and she told me where Amy had spread out, so I found her bag, dropped off my own, then tried to watch, but—" she broke off and looked at him, then down and away. "I couldn't see, so I settled in."

She was still lying to him, he thought.

"I thought you and Amy were allies, comrades."

"And you don't now because I didn't watch the race? I hadn't planned to come today, but I was bored and restless and I colored my hair—and then I was afraid that I had really messed up ... maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but—" she turned and studied him, then slowly stood. Her face, already pale, lost all color. "You think I could have done it."

"I don't—"

"It's not just that you think I might have, but you think I could have. Amy's my closest friend. She's helped me—and she's loved me, more than anyone in my entire life. I know I can survive because I know she does, but I—you can't think—I can't believe I was so wrong—about you."

She turned in flight, but Mitch was up in a flash. He grabbed for her arm. She spun around to face him, jerking her arm away.

"Don't touch me. I don't want anyone to touch me."

Her eyes were panicked now. Working on the force, he'd come across that look before—distrust, anger, fear, shock—and it slowly dawned on Mitch why Chloe was uncomfortable. Amy had never said exactly why Chloe had been in the hospital the last time, months before she was saved, but he'd known in his gut. Once loud and flirtatious, then shy and quiet and afraid.

Eventually, she'd settled in, settled down, and opened back up. He'd forgotten how he'd once seen her.

Chloe had been raped.

I tend to pick the biggest losers. And apparently, Mitch realized, he fell into that category. Now the fear was turned on him.

Because of him.

"Chloe—"

"Don't," she stepped back, again, away from his hand, her face pale. He closed it into a fist and let it fall to his side. Her voice jerked, broken with ragged breaths, as she spoke.

"I was stupid—so out of my head stupid. I colored my hair because you just—I wanted ... and you didn't even want to say goodbye to me. You didn't even want—"

She turned and fled. Mitch let her go, not knowing how to go to her, not knowing how to reach her.

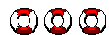
He had not trusted her, he realized, and that fact in itself had violated the trust she had in him. He had never, really, understood what her belief in him, what her trust in him meant.

Now he had quite possibly destroyed the fragile gift that had waited between them.

You didn't even want to say goodbye to me.

He wouldn't let her be alone. She needed someone. He wanted it to be himself. For the first time he admitted ... he *really* wanted to be the one to comfort Chloe.

Knowing he alone had spoiled things, he went to Amy's room to find Andrea.



"Where is she?" Amy said as she fought against the weariness, afraid that if she slept again she would leave her friends in the middle of a greater crisis.

Andrea opened her mouth to speak, but turned when the door opened.

It was Vince Jamison, a friend of Amy's father. He was a dashing man, she thought, more than handsome—women were crazy about him.

And he was as crazy about himself.

"Hey girl--how you feeling?"

She tried not to bristle. In his doctor mode, he was much more open and friendly than he had ever been beyond the walls of the hospital. But that was Vince.

"How do I look?"

He chuckled and stepped to her side, checked her pulse against the second hand on his watch. "I saw your dad while I was doing my rounds. He said to tell you he's going home to grab a few things so he can come back for the night. He's worried about his girl."

"He's always worried about his girl—"

Just not enough to care. Tonight, Lance Carpenter might make plans to have dinner with her tomorrow—but he would call in an excuse. He always did.

Amy looked toward Andrea, thinking more about Chloe than her father.

"Tired?" Vince asked.

Andrea rolled her eyes. "She can't be anything but."

Vince tapped Amy's nose. "I'll be around. You rest."

Amy attempted a smile at his attempt of humor. "I'll try."

When he was gone, Amy looked at Andrea—and put the visit with Vince out of her mind. "Chloe?"

"I found a room for her. An office of one of the therapists that we work with. I had her lay down." Andrea pushed back her hair with a steady hand. Amy was grateful that someone seemed to have things under control. "I'm taking her home. To my place. She's not handling the hospital well."

"She shouldn't be here. Where's Mitch?"

"Off beating himself up. He deserves it—every ounce of anger and remorse he's turned on himself—but it's still hard to watch him. He didn't think. Hasn't thought since he started falling for her."

"You're really confident on his feelings for her."

"If you could see him now, you would know."

"He'll fix things," Amy reached to flip the edge of the bed down.

"You go take Chloe home. I'll go find Mitch."

"Amy—you're not getting out of bed."

"What would you be doing? Just because I'm at the hospital doesn't mean I'm out," she lowered her feet to the floor and closed her eyes to steady herself as she wrapped her hand around the cool pole that held her I.V. "Hand me that thing they call a robe."

"Mitch just left."

Amy jerked her head up and fumbled back, against the bed. Derek stood, a silhouette in the doorway. He had changed into worn jeans and t-shirt. "I passed him on his way in."

"Speaking of which ... it's time I find my way out," she looked at Amy and attempted to smile. She reached out, ran a hand over Amy's hair. "It's been a long day."

"Tell Chloe—" she darted a look at Derek, then shook her head. "Just take care of her."

As Andrea left, Amy lifted herself back onto the bed, then fumbled with the covers.

"I got it—" Derek stepped forward, "don't move."

"I can handle it."

He tugged the sheet from her hand. "What else is new. Let me do it. I'm still dealing with the fact that I pulled you out of the ocean today."

Because she understood the grip a rescue could have on you, Amy leaned back, and took the time to watch him. Maybe she hadn't done it enough.

She studied him as he settled the sheet and blanket around her. It was the end of a very long day. She could see it in his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Derek straightened the cord to the I.V. bag and said. "Checking on you. How are you feeling?"

"Tired. It's been a bad day all around."

"Why, because you came in second place?" he said and Amy appreciated his attempt at humor.

Amy smiled and slid her hands under the covers, grateful for the warmth. Whatever was inside of her was keeping her cold. "That too. My dad was here for a bit. That's always a little unpleasant."

"He was worried about you."

"These days he's always worried about me—it's a little late for that. There was a time when he should have and didn't ... so it's a little hard to take now. He said you called."

"If that's an accusation, I had a responsibility to call your closest relative," Derek sat down in the chair that had already been pulled close.

"It's not..." she closed her eyes for a moment and tried to deal with the weariness. "It *shouldn't be*. I'm glad he was here. That he came to check on me. It's a step."

She just new better then to get used to it.

"He's a good dad ... he used to be the *best* dad. Now ..." her fingers worried the blanket, her brows knitted together. She couldn't help either. "I know ... you've heard things, but it's ... just complicated. It's hard for us to deal with each other at times."

"Well, it's obviously not *you* that's hard to deal with."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then shook her head. "I'll let that pass. I guess I haven't been fair to you either."

"If that's true, is there a reason?"

She shook her head. "No ... I don't know. I'm really tired," she said, and let her eyes close.

"I'll go then."

"No—" she said, then turned her head and opened her eyes to look at him. "Don't. I didn't mean..."

It was so quiet, she thought, and in the dim lighting of the room, he seemed ... strong. So big and strong.

And someone, in some way, had tried to ... no, not to kill her. She wouldn't think that.

"I've been out so much, I can't sleep. Not yet."

His gaze sharpened and he reached out to take her hand. "How afraid are you right now?"

"You're perceptive."

"And you don't usually ask for things. You going to answer my question?"

"I'm shaken. Very shaken," she let her eyes slide closed again. It just took too much to hold them open. "So is my dad. I want to go home."

"You would."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"With room service here and such great decorations. You would just have to be difficult enough to have things your own way."

"Derek—"

"The answer is no in any case."

"I'm 23 years old. I can check myself out, *in any case*," she held up a hand to ward off further argument. "I'm sorry. I'm irritating myself. I've already been round with my dad about it. It's hard to see him worried about me."

"Well, for the record we all are."

She smiled slightly. "Then I have the best on my side." She stared at him for a few minutes, remembering the first time she had seen him, sitting across the room. She still didn't know if he was what she had expected.

"You're very young for a captain."

"Where did that come from?"

"I've got all this stuff in me ... but I've wondered," she felt his fingers rub her knuckles. He still held her hand.

"If it's a reason you've been suspicious of me, well ... I guess I would be too."

"But you're here and you're a captain."

"Yes. It's not a secret, and for the record the police commissioner is aware of the issue. I was honest when I interviewed. There was a big scandal back in Willis County—that, among the other things was a question of concern not only for the team here that hired me, but for the other places I interviewed in as well. A lot of police officers were fired."

"Willis County. I remember," Amy put in. "My professor had a round table discussion over it when it made the news last year."

Derek nodded. He seemed ... relieved, maybe, instead of embarrassed. How much of it was still eating at him, deep inside? Had he been able to talk about it, with people who didn't judge him ... and why didn't she, now?

Whatever the case, it wasn't *couldn't be* her responsibility.

"It was big. Drug possession. Bribery. Some major cover—ups. Sloppy work."

"Several captains and other high ranking police officers were let go. Some are doing prison time. I had just been promoted and I thought it would be several years before I reached Captain. I would have rather put in my time."

"They wanted someone whom they could control, someone who might feel indebted to them—instead of bringing in fresh blood. I wasn't the only one they promoted. I don't think any of us were happy with it, though some took it better than I did. I saw it as another problem with the system. Something that needed to be changed before things could really be fixed."

"But you took the promotion."

"I wasn't given a choice," Derek said and frowned over the obvious bitterness in his own voice. "So I put in some time and I got out. Found a job that had the level of responsibility I thought I was ready for—"

and something I could grow in to. I guess my only regret is that I stepped on your toes in the process."

"I've been thinking that ... maybe my toes were in the wrong place," Amy admitted as she yawned. "I don't know. I don't know what I want. Ham talked about it a lot ... and it was safe—something my dad didn't want for me. If I can't follow in Ham's footsteps, I can always follow in his."

"Professional baseball player?"

She smiled sleepily. "Financial advisor."



Amy finally fell asleep, but it took much longer than Derek would have expected. She became giddy toward the end, almost happy to have him there with her. He had no doubt that if she remembered the conversation in the morning, she would regret it. He just hoped she would not retaliate by strengthening the walls she seemed bent on keeping between them.

It was such a cliché, but he liked her when her defenses were down.

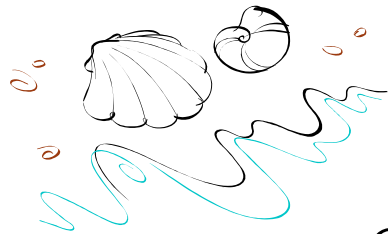
So he sat and watched her sleep, lifting up the fear, frustration, and feelings that were mixing together in his gut. He was not sure about what to do with any of it.

What would she say if she knew his feelings for her were growing beyond that which he'd felt before ... when he'd nearly been engaged. More had fallen to pieces in the last year besides his precinct.

Finally, he stood, acknowledging the part of himself that wanted to stay and watch over Amy. It was not his time, and it might never be. Tonight he would leave the chair open for her father, and he would pray that more than physical healing would take place overnight.

He stopped at the door and looked back. She looked at peace, without the worry line that always seemed to plague her between her brows.

It was time for him to move on; in more ways than one.



Chapter 6

The days passed, uselessly, Derek thought. He'd had a murder and an attempted murder on his beach during his first summer in charge. It did not settle well with him, especially since Amy had moved out of her father's house and back in with Chloe.

He looked at her, sitting across from his desk from him. She'd come in after her shift and asked to be updated—as he'd updated Mitch. As he'd updated her father.

She wore the official red shorts over her official swimsuit, and a light jacket—also official. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, which could also be deemed as her unofficial uniform. He rarely saw her with her hair down outside of church and the few times he'd run across her at Kuzkos.

She was wearing makeup—not unusual, but still in place after a long shift. Few ventured into the water without wetsuits, even at this time of year. The water cycled in from the north. Her job was easier.

It suited him fine. Neither he nor her doctor was willing to offer her a clean bill of health until they were sure that there were no long-lasting effects from the drugs. She would go through intense physical evaluations before the summer season hit again.

But to ask her not to lifeguard would be asking her not to breath.

He opened the manila folder and flipped through his own notes, separating them into two uneven stacks. He picked up a piece of paper, glanced at it, and on a deep breath, handed it to her.

"What do you know of this woman?"

Amy glanced at the paper and handed it back to him with little consideration.

"Lorraine Thompson."

"You know her?"

"My mom used to say she knew my dad was famous when he got himself his very own stalker."

"She was a friend of the family's before she became his ... stalker."

Amy shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know how close she was. I was young. She was a friend before they won the World Series. Something snapped. That Christmas she had a painting commissioned from a photograph that was taken of the team with my dad at the focal point. Mom said she didn't have the money for that type of gift. She had dad autograph it and they auctioned it off, part for charity and part to pay for both the cost of the painting and Lorraine's medical bills."

"Have you ever felt afraid of her?"

"I don't think I exist in her eyes. She's normally not a problem. Hasn't been, in a long time."

"Your father reported her for breaking her restraining order a few months ago."

Though he could see the surprise in her eyes, she didn't flinch. "I didn't, wouldn't know. You know how my dad is ... before she would find reasons to come around, give gifts, that sort of thing. Nothing big."

"A restraining order isn't filed because gifts are given."

Amy sighed. "I was a kid." And obviously uncomfortable with the subject, as she shifted again in her chair. "I know she left a few notes in the mailbox insinuating that my dad was having an affair with her. I got the mail one day and ... I guess you could say it was upsetting. When mom found out she called dad home from wherever he was. We had a family day at Disney Land. Then, I guess, they went to court."

"That doesn't exactly sound harmless."

"She has a husband and a family that makes sure she stays on her medication and that she stays away from my dad. They would have an alibi for her, because she really is a good woman."

"When she's medicated."

"Yes-and even when she's not, she's still the same person. She just gets priorities messed up."

"You seem to understand her."

"You get old enough, you ask questions," Amy answered. "My mom never said a bad thing about her ... at least, not that I heard. She felt ... compassion. She pointed out that Lorraine was sick. That she needed help."

"Still..."

"Derek, even if she was the one who did it, where would she get the pills she needed to do that? And why? I'm not a threat to her."

"You know I have to follow all the leads."

"But-"

"She's a lead," He wasn't sure it would do any good to tell Amy that Lorraine's last lapse and contact with her father had happened within

the period of Maureen Child's murder. The restraining order had been re-evaluated and enforced.

But connecting a mentally-imbalanced woman to a murder and an attempted murder wasn't the same thing as solving the crime. "Anna thought the same thing when she handed the information over-which is probably why no one has brought it up before, but there's got to be something."

"Obviously."

"I don't think we have anything that you don't know."

"I'd like for you to give me the rest of your observations, then I'll give you back some of my own," she crossed her legs and waited.

"We're still working through two possibilities. You could be right and this was another prank. It's possible that whoever instigated this had no prior knowledge of the medications that were placed in your water, that they only intended you discomfort and possible failure of your drug test—which would have been jail time for you. They could have assumed that the drugs would have acted as a performance enhancer."

"However unlikely."

"So you agree."

"No—not necessarily, but I know what you're thinking," Amy said. "You are balancing that against the other possibility. That someone wanted me dead."

"Yes."

"I won't argue with that... There was a time when I wanted ... it myself. It just seems so unlikely that someone would hold on to such rage for nearly seven years and then do such a bad job at it. If they were waiting—why take a chance that the drugs would not work?"

Derek underlined the note on his page that asked the same question. "If it was calculated—then it could have been much worse. If you were meant to die from drowning and not from the drugs."

"There's too many ifs," Amy said and stood to pace to the window. Her brow was furrowed. "And what if ... what if it wasn't about me at all?"

"About your father."

"No. About Chloe."

Derek frowned and went to stand beside her. She had not been sleeping well, either from the after effects of the drugs, from the fear, or from living with her father again. He had a feeling it was all of the above.

And still, he reminded himself, none of his business.

"You've been thinking about this," he said at last.

"It needs to be considered. Chloe dropped her stuff off on top of mine before she went looking for me. If we consider that the drugs were added before I took my bag out to the beach, then it could have happened at the station, in the crowd, or anywhere ... if it happened after, then whoever it was might have meant it for Chloe."

"You believe there's a possibility that someone would want to hurt her."

"She was raped, Derek, and the person that did it spent an uncomfortable year in jail. It was too little time. That and the fact that it was kept quiet were bargained in exchange for a confession. She was healing and moving on, so she let the DA's office make a deal. He's out now. And he hates Chloe."

"Has he threatened her?"

"Not like you're thinking. He used to do it by *just being*. Chloe's changed. Knowing he's out hasn't threatened her, maybe more because she pushes it back and out of the present tense. She saw him on campus one day in the middle of the summer. I saw him one day when I went in to meet with my probation officer."

"You share the same probation officer."

"Unfortunately. And possibly because of his connection with me, and my connection with Chloe, Carl's not as strict with Benny as he should be."

"Benny was at the beach that day," she turned and faced Derek. "Chloe found out about it from Andrea and she thought of it—I saw it in her eyes that day at the hospital. She was scared because of it. Then things blew up between her and Mitch and she never said anything about it."

Derek muttered something under his breath and went back to his folder. He placed a hand on either side of it and looked down at the notes, his lips in a firm line.

"I don't know that Benny would be capable of it. The reasons he did what he did, in his mind, weren't to harm Chloe—though he did and he can't understand that. He believes he loves her," Amy shuddered. "His father has some money and owns a few stores downtown—one of which is a hometown drug store. Watson's on 5th."

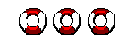
Derek pondered her words then jotted down a few notes on a legal pad. He underlined it, obviously frustrated, with the investigation, with Carl, with the system. Then he tore it off and set it above the two other stacks, as if to start another.

Finally, he looked at her, "It wouldn't be a stretch to say that if this Benny couldn't have Chloe, he didn't want anyone else to."

"It's a weak link."

"But it's another one."

Amy solemnly met his eyes. Derek would follow up on the information she'd given him, if only to make sure Chloe stayed safe. "And another if."



Amy left the beach station, and checking her watch, swung by the radio station to see her dad. When she walked in, she lifted a hand to the receptionist.

She found him in his office, three computer screens turned on, a cell phone to his ear and his eyes reading the captions on the muted television. She stopped in the doorway and watched him. He had been

shaving his hair since he was in the pros, as he was loosing his hair more from wearing a cap then to genetics. It made him a formidable, distinguished man. He wore tailored pants, shirt and tie, a little more dressed up then usual.

He concentrated on the morning's financial news as he had baseball. He saw little else until he hung up the phone and the station switched to commercial.

He glanced at her before striking down a few notes on a legal pad, "I got a few minutes. What do you need?"

You would have thought she came into his office every day, she thought and sat down in the chair across from his desk. Maybe she had started dropping by more in the last year, but it hadn't been more than a hand full of times.

She held her set of keys in both hands. It wasn't easy to talk to her father. "I heard this morning that Lorraine came back around this summer."

"Not recently," he murmured without glancing up from his paperwork. "It's not something you should be worried about."

"It's not? Dad, you don't tell me things."

"You don't need to know everything."

"You expect me to be open and honest with you, but you never extend that courtesy with me. She sought to hurt this family before."

He looked up, his gaze hard. There was grief suddenly in his eyes and for a moment he only looked at her. It stabbed into her heart. They weren't a family, she thought. They hadn't been a family since her mother and brother's deaths.

And the look in his eyes only confirmed that he wanted it that way.

"I've got a lineup of things to deal with right now. It's not the time for one of your family problem sessions. We'll talk about it at home."

Amy nodded and stood, wishing she knew how to care less. "I'll—see you later, then."

"Amy—" she stopped, looked at him, and watched him as he planned his words out. "When Lorraine dropped by, it wasn't a big deal. I just ... made the call. If nothing else, it keeps her on her medication. Keeps things steady at her own house. Her husband thanked me ... he really loves her. He always has."

Amy nodded and wished for her mom.



As the fall semester at the college was in full swing, Kuzkos was packed and loud. Amy, Andrea and Chloe had claimed an oval table in the back, celebrating their freedom.

Chloe held up her glass of kiwi-lemonade in a mock toast. "I love you Andrea, but if I had to take another day in your neat apartment I might have thrown something. I'm glad when I go home tonight, it's to my own, sweet pad, decorated with a surfboard and lawn chairs."

Andrea grimaced. "I say we toast to the fact that we didn't kill each other over time. To the survivors."

Amy raised her coke. "Amen to that. May I never have to spend another night in my father's house."

It had been test and trial, one she'd nearly walked away from a half dozen times. Her father had paraded a slew of women around him since her mother's death. They were in the house, constantly. They stayed the night, for weekends and for months. Half the time they giggled.

This time it had not been the many women that dropped by over time, but the one. She never spent the night. Her conversations were not spent under candlelight or late at night. They were calm, remembrances of the past.

And hardly ever about the investigation.

Detective Anna Miller did not wear the stark suits when she visited Lance Carpenter at his home, but dressed casually and in style. Her voice was not harsh or commanding.

Amy could not decide what bothered her more; Anna moving in on her father, or her father talking about the past with Anna when he never would with Amy.

And of course, her father had started playing overtime father. He would check up on Amy now, call Vince for progress reports on her health. He knew her class schedule and expected her to join him for dinner during the week.

Dinners they would eat in silence, unless Anna was there. For he told her nothing and she said nothing.

She wished he had demanded such things when she was in high school, when she'd wanted it—instead of waiting until she was a twenty-three year old adult.

"Ask me later to tell you about the boy that's been calling Andrea," Chloe said, drawing Amy back into the present, into Kuzcos, in time to see the color drain out of Andrea's face.

"Chloe—" Andrea snapped. "You said you wouldn't say anything."

"Like I wouldn't tell Amy when we were alone. It seemed more fair to say something with you here," Chloe rolled her eyes. "Anyway, I never committed to *not* telling—just not to tell that night."

"So who's the guy?" Amy interrupted

"Some lawyer her parents hired on. He's cute," Chloe said and winked.

"And when did you see him?" Andrea asked.

"He came by this afternoon. He was in jeans and he looked really good. You weren't home yet."

"Wait a minute. He took a job with Lyons and Lyons so he's a lawyer?" Amy interrupted. Seeing the look on Andrea's face, panicked and annoyed, Amy guessed. "Eric? They hired Eric?"

"Yes they hired Eric. Knowing how I feel about him, when he applied mom must have jumped on it."

"Why *wouldn't* they hire Eric knowing how you feel about him? And what do you *feel* about him? If you would only admit what you feel to yourself—"

"Whatever we had was over," Andrea pushed away from the table and grabbed her water that was still half full. "Excuse me."

Amy waited until Andrea had walked away, then turned to Chloe, "Why haven't you told me about this before?"

"Because she asked me not to say anything when I saw you that night and I couldn't, but it's not that night anymore."

"Chloe."

"Yeah, well. This must be the guy you nag her about often—the one she won't tell you about. She's almost ice to him—and that's not Andrea. I figured if anyone could help her see reason it would be you."

"Has he come by, has she seen him?"

"I think she ran into him at her parent's office. He's sent about three dozen flowers—not roses, but purple lily-like things and daisies and a plant ... a plant! Right before we came tonight she shattered the vase of daisies against the wall. I thought it was time I said something."

"Has she *said* anything?"

Chloe shrugged, "She mutters a lot and she refuses to answer the phone. He has a nice voice to him. Deep, kind of odd, northern sounding."

"They met while she was at Harvard. What did he say?"

"He just asked to speak to her and I told him the truth—that she did not want to speak to him, under any circumstances—you know the bit. And he just laughed and thanked me. Told me to tell her he would be by again." Chloe sat back in her seat and took a long swallow of her kiwi lemonade. "If you want my opinion, it sounds like he's been plotting."

"Good. Andrea needs someone to plan around her," Amy said. Andrea was a planner. She liked the details and she liked everything in a neat and tidy row. She was calm and patient but she didn't deal with

things well when plans changed around her. It was one of the reasons that being hypoglycemic turned her life upside down.

Maybe Eric understood that.

Or maybe Andrea was right. Maybe what they had truly needed to be over.

It seemed she would need to stop by Lyons and Lyons in the morning.

"Look, here comes Andrea," Chloe said and pushed away from the table. "I think I need to give her some space, so ... I'm going to go home and hit the books. See you back at our place."

"You're going home to hit the books."

Chloe shrugged. "Why does everyone have so little faith that I study? I've got to get out of college sometime. You're the one that's planning to make a career of it."

Amy smiled and waited for Andrea to sit down. "So he followed you here."

"I guess so."

"Why now? Why not when you graduated last year?"

"He was in law school," Andrea set her glass down and rubbed her eyes. "And I haven't asked. Look, can we talk about something else?"

"After you tell me why you didn't tell me in the first place. You had to know that I would find out from Chloe, so I don't think it's fair for you to be mad at her for long."

"How can anyone be mad at Chloe for long?" Andrea asked, then lowered her hands. "I was going to tell you—when I understood what I was feeling myself. I never expected—"

As she spoke, her eyes pooled with tears. Amy reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "Then when you're ready to talk, when you need to talk, or when it's troubling you so bad that you can't take it anymore, I'll be here."

It was an echo of words that took them back to high school, when Amy couldn't explain what she was feeling about Jenny, to Jenny's sister.

"I talked to Derek about Chloe today."

"What did he say?"

"It's a possibility. And if Carl isn't going to rough him up about going near Chloe, he's going to do it."

"It's a possibility," Andrea agreed, "but Chloe had dyed her hair that day. She was looking more like you than herself."

"But Benny recognized her. Enough that his gaze followed her."

Andrea nodded and took a sip from her water. "It's going to be interesting to see what Derek does when he's had enough of Carl."

"What could he do? Ham couldn't do anything."

"Ham didn't, probably because he couldn't," Andrea pointed out. "Derek's not from here. He's from a rougher section of California. And he has some connections. Ham grew up here, was trained and raised here. To be honest, I don't think he had the kind of pull that changed things."

"I don't guess he wanted it," Amy agreed.



Mitch was packed and ready to go, the last of his belongings in the back of the second hand jeep he'd bought for the move. He had been driving back and forth into the mountains over the last month, laying the foundations for his new job. He met with John, his replacement at the beach station, one last time, going over a few more details that had arisen during the shift that day.

Now his life in Basin Springs, the beach side community where he had spent most of his life, was over. He couldn't help but feel a little sad, especially while he held the keys to Buster in his hand—a car that would never be practical on the mountains roads.

He had come here, to Kuzcos, to say one last goodbye, have one last plate of cheese fries, and give Amy the keys to watch over his

beloved car until he could work out his heart enough to sell it. He would have to sell it. Eventually.

He opened the heavy oriental doors as the glass doors on the inside opened. Suddenly he was enclosed in a little room with Chloe.

The air swirled around them as her eyes, startled and hurt, momentarily met his; then the emotion was gone and he was shut out. The bass-beat from the band on the inside throbbed against the walls, as Mitch's own heart quietly shattered.

She looked so beautiful and so distant. The eyes that had once looked at him in such trust, now stared at him blank and empty.

He wished he would have appreciated the trust she'd once given him.

He took a deep breath, surprised when it felt shallow and swallowed over the block in his throat.

"Chloe, I—"

She lifted her chin as if preparing to take a fist. Her jaw trembled and the emotion returned.

"I'm sorry."

A tear slipped out and she pushed passed him and out the heavy doors.

Mitch stood alone in between the two doors, frozen. The words he'd thrown at her that night in the hospital echoed. He could still see the shock and the grief in Chloe's eyes. It was still there, he realized and nearly turned to go after her.

The glass doors opened, bringing through the hard rock sounds of the band, and a group of people came through, laughing and talking. They flowed around him until the last stumbled into him.

"Sorry," the girl said as she was righted by the guy who had pushed against her.

Mitch went on in, ordered the cheese fries and found Amy and Andrea sitting in the back.

"Mitch!" Amy said with surprise. "I thought you were gone."

Unlike Chloe, she jumped up to greet him. He reached around her to hug her in return, a natural action, but his arms felt empty. He saw the look in Chloe's eyes. He heard the break in her voice.

He stepped back, shook himself to clear his vision. *Why had he come?*, he wondered. "I ... had a few things to take care of."

Andrea cast a sidelong glance at Amy, "I don't know Mitch. I get the feeling you don't really want to go. What do you think, Amy?"

"I've been questioning his sanity. He can't cruise the waves on a random morning when he's nearly four hours from the ocean."

"There's more to life than surfing. It's just been a struggle to get everything lined up. One thing after another—you know how it goes."

He sat down, carefully, the music an annoyance, the keys heavy in his hand. He looked at them. He was going to give them to Amy because he trusted her, because he knew she would take care of Buster for him.

And he wished Chloe could believe he felt that way about her.

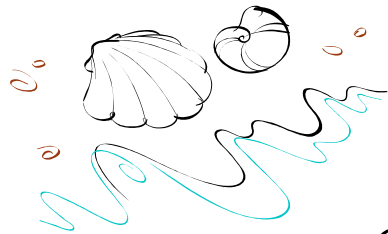
"Mitch—" Across the table Amy glanced at Andrea. "What's wrong?"

He closed his hand around the keys. He could still see Chloe's eyes, not bright and shimmering with life, but dull and weary of him, pooled with tears he'd caused.

He stood, took his billfold out and dropped some money on the table. "Enjoy my last cheese fries. I forgot ... I have something I have to do."

"Chloe said she was going home," Amy said without question, "but if she's not and it's still light outside, she'll be at the park by the station. She likes to think there."

In her eyes Mitch saw friendship and understanding and promise. It gave him hope, somehow, that there were words he could give to Chloe. He could only pray that he could give her the right ones.



Chapter 7

Chloe sat on a swing and let the soft breeze comfort. Her hands loosely gripped the steel chains that held her in suspension. She looked down at her feet and shuffled the warm sand with her toes. The sun that was slowly dipping toward the ocean still warmed her already tanned legs.

A family picnicked near the beach. Children were running around, sand dancing at their feet. The merry-go-round creaked as it spun round and around.

Her heart ached.

She had promised herself that she would take time off from guys. Maybe she dated, but she didn't let them close. If they flirted a little, and she flirted back, maybe she would get to see a little cable T.V. once in awhile.

But she'd distanced herself from the girl she used to be ... or so she'd hoped.

She didn't need a boyfriend. She didn't need someone to be seen with. She had a good group of friends. She had a Savior.

God it hurts so bad, she prayed as the hurt swelled in her heart. *Help me to let him and the hurt and the pain go. Just go.*

When the car door shut, she glanced up and saw Mitch. He stood beside his jeep, male and strong, more than any other guy she'd ever wanted. More of a man than she had known existed.

She remembered the first time she'd really noticed him. He had been on stage at church, playing his guitar and leading in the music as he did so often. There had been a fire in his eyes, but it had nothing to do with the crowd. There had been a strength in his voice, and it had everything to do with the words in the song.

You are my light, you are my fire, you are my everything. When the morning comes, You are there, when the shadows fall, You draw close, and when night falls, You give me peace and rest.

She'd recognized the crush, the feelings and had tried to hold them back. She'd been broken. She wanted the words to heal her.

But in the end, she'd still given him power over her, despite what she'd learned--there was always someone better than Chloe. Guys, men--including her father--had always trusted other women before they'd trusted her. She was a moment, a flash, but she wasn't someone who was seen as solid.

So for a long time she'd lived up to that expectation.

When Mitch started to walk her way, the present slammed into her. He was coming now, she thought. She nearly kicked herself. She'd let him see too much at Kuzcos. She'd been determined to hide those feelings from him. She had, or at least hoped she had, for days.

Now he was coming to fix things. Mitch just loved to fix things.

Well, he should be ready for a fight. She refused to be another goodbye, another problem to be dealt with. She would take a stand, she would fight. She would be solid.

"Go away."

The biting tone seemed to surprise him, but it did not stop him.

"Chloe—I need to talk to you," Mitch said and knelt down in front of her. "And I need for you to listen to me for a minute."

"Now?" she nearly laughed. "Your timing's a little off. You're supposed to be in your new life by now."

Without me.

"I'd be a better surfer if I had better timing. Ask Amy. Chloe—" when he started to touch her she pushed the swing back with her feet and leaned out of his reach. He sighed and let his hand drop. "I'm not good at this. I'm not good with you. Just give me a minute to try to ... just hear me out."

Here he was—Mitch the calm and collected; Mitch who liked his life calm, his waves smooth. She turned her head away and looked at the ocean, blinking back the tears that blurred her vision. The ocean wasn't calm, she wanted to tell him. Neither was life.

The crashing waves had always been a comfort to her. Now, by breaking into her private solitude, Mitch was probably going to take that away from her as well.

"That day in the hospital, when Amy was so ill, I wasn't thinking clearly. I panicked."

"You thought I might have tried to ... harm Amy."

"I didn't think, Chloe. I never ... believed it. Our emotions, the different parts of them, crossed. You were already mad at me and hurting and I didn't know how to help you. You were distancing yourself from me. I didn't know what to do about that either."

She turned to look at him, her his image blurred by the tears. "Jump the girl you have feelings for. Lets try to put her in prison."

"Chloe, I can't take it back. I don't even know that I can explain it now," he reached up, used his thumb to brush a tear away with his thumb. The action touched her. She turned her head and looked back out at the ocean.

Mitch sighed. "I was hoping we could move forward."

She swallowed and tried to ignore his tenderness. He was just fixing things, she reminded herself, he wasn't really meaning to be tender with her. Men weren't that way when it counted.

"I want you to go. I want you out of my life."

"I am," he said, his voice strong and sure, oddly as if to reassure her that he would leave her again. "I'll go, but I don't want to go with things like this between us. I thought maybe you could take care of Buster for me."

Chloe turned to face him, "You think I'm going to take that bribe now? I was sitting at the door, Mitch, when you told Amy that you were leaving. You didn't want to tell me. You didn't want anything to do with me."

"That's not true."

"Then what is?"

"Do you know how beautiful you are to me—" the words slashed out of him, "how hard it was to stay away before you found Christ? How much harder it was to stay away when you found Him? Your relationship with God did not need to be complicated by a relationship with me."

This was not a Mitch she'd seen before. His eyes were a little wild. It scared her a little bit—not the emotion, but the fact that it was real and it was felt toward her.

She blinked back the tears that blurred her vision again. This time she wanted to see him, to see the look in his eyes. "Do you know how much you hurt me?"

He sighed, "Probably not ... but I know you don't trust me anymore. I know that if I've lost that ... if I've lost you, then I've lost something precious."

Chloe reached out a hand, to touch, to take, she wasn't sure. Her hand just stopped in midair.

Mitch reached up and took her hand with his own.

"Take a walk with me?" he asked.

She nodded.

He leaned back, scooped her flip-flops with two fingers and gently drew her from the swing. When she stood in front of him, she attempted a smile, then leaned forward to rest her head on her shoulder.

The children were laughing, splashing in the roll of the waves. Someone had a CD player playing a crazy beach song. Her feet were in the warm sand.

Mitch reached up his arm that held her flip-flops and drew her close. For just a moment she closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel. She was weary, but she felt safe. So very safe.



Amy quietly shut the door to the bedroom she shared with Chloe. She settled on the floor under a soft light and spread her Bible and journal open in front of her. It was a habit she was hoping to forge. Her journal was full of her fears, her hopes, and her past. Her collection of journals traced her faith as it bloomed, dampened and regenerated.

The moments before the dawn were the moments that helped her move on, find peace, and accept.

She pressed her fingers to her tired eyes. She had been worried about her friends last night, so she'd only dozed until Chloe had slipped in at close to three in the morning.

She started with prayer.

God, I need you right now. I need your peace, your guidance

She had no idea how to deal with what was going on in her life right now. She'd planned a new start for herself and she'd found that those, even undecided, plans weren't enough. She wanted something else.

Mitch was leaving, Ham was ... not the same. Her closest friends, Chloe and Andrea, were struggling, hurting, angry.

There was murder, attempted murder, revenge or just ... craziness attacking her life ... on a beach, in a place where she'd thought she'd found safety.

And in the middle of it all, there was Derek. She had no idea what to do about him.

God knew the big picture. God knew what her strengths were even when she did not. She comforted in that. She would never find comfort in the death of her mother or brother ... she would never gain her teenage years and choices back ... and Jenny Lyons and Matt Barker were gone ... it was part of her life.

She picked up her Bible and opened it to the place she had marked yesterday and picked up with Paul's struggle and words to Timothy.

*If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him,
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
if we are faithless
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.*

She picked up her journal and copied the words into a fresh page, then wrote:

You will not leave me alone. Even though I feel that you have left me, you have not. Even when You should have forgotten me, you won't. I don't have the words like David, but I know that You are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me ... and I will dwell in your house forever. This I know.

Amy turned when the bedroom door opened, surprised as Chloe came out, dressed up in pressed khaki shorts and a blue sleeveless sweater, holding a pair of sandals in her hand.

"Hey—" Amy said. "You came in late last night. Things turn out okay?"

"I was trying not to disturb you. I—" Chloe gave up and dropped down in front of Amy, "Things turned out ... perfect."

"Perfect?"

"I don't think they could have been better after the mess he made to begin with," she beamed. "We walked on the beach, under the moonlight. He carried our shoes, all the romantic stuff. We splashed in the waves and when I got cold we walked in the warm sand."

"You and Mitch?" Amy prodded.

"Yes—you must have told him where I was. I'm not going to be mad at you for that. He begged me not to be," she said and filled Amy in on all the little details of what Mitch had said, done, and the look in his eyes as her own sparkled. Chloe was calm and all but glowing and yet, during the walk on the beach just a few hours ago, she'd shared with Mitch some of the most difficult parts of her life.

Amy glanced down at her journal, at the words she had just written and underlined them before closing it and setting it aside.

"We sat on the steps leading up to the station house and watched the waves. He told me about his grandfather, the minister, about learning

to surf, meeting you. Then he told me he wanted to walk the beach with me again, to play in the waves. He said that he wanted to find out what made my eyes sparkle."

"Are you going to cry?" Amy reached out to take Chloe's hands in her own.

"I did," Chloe said and gave Amy's hands a squeeze. "And I probably will again. He decided not to leave until he'd had some sleep, so he asked me to eat breakfast with him before he goes."

"You got in at what three and you're up—" Amy glanced at the clock, "before seven? You don't normally eat breakfast."

"And I've never taken a moonlight walk on the beach with a guy that didn't have the intention of kissing me at some point—or for that matter more than that. He didn't have to kiss me. He didn't even have to hold my hand"

"Though he did," Amy surmised. "Chloe, you've got it so bad for him. You okay with him leaving?"

Chloe nodded. "I'm okay ... I feel like I—like everything's fine. Just *fine*. It's so simple to just say it. My whole life, Amy, I've felt like I had to have someone. In every relationship I've rushed into it with both feet out, my eyes closed, thinking if I didn't that it obviously wasn't worth having."

She reached up and ran a hand through her hair that still looked so much like Amy's, "Even the day I went and did this, I just wanted to be like that again. I was so angry and hurt and afraid that no body would ever see me for who I could be ... even though I knew that who I could be was so much better than what I was."

"You're right, you know."

Chloe grinned, "I know. For the first time I know. I like who I am now more than I ever liked myself before. I don't feel rushed ... I feel giddy. I feel safe."

For a moment Amy felt almost like a mother; protective, loving. The past was suddenly covered in the warm glow of Chloe's delight. She had come so far and had grown into such a beautiful person.

"With Mitch you can forget those guys in the past."

"Pray for me?"

It was such a simple request, but it brought back so much. They had sat on the floor so many times as Amy, young in her own faith, prayed for Chloe who was hurting and healing. Amy squeezed her hands as she said a simple prayer.

When Chloe was gone, and she'd said one last farewell to Mitch, Amy picked up her journal once more.

So much recently I've been angry about the changes. Change isn't always bad. I need to remember that. Change also makes life an adventure, and I like that.

Change also brings joy.



Having one friend happy increased Amy's desire to at least check on the other one.

But first she called her, partly to tell her the news about Chloe and partly to see when it would be safe to put her own plans into motion. She felt a little guilty—until she remembered that Andrea usually involved herself in Amy's own problems. Just because Andrea didn't like for others to be involved in her own

Amy made a phone call and scheduled an unofficial appointment through the receptionist, went to a class, and sat around the student union building with a group of her classmates. She timed herself just right and shut the door to her truck just as Eric Bridgewater turned his sleek black BMW into the parking lot.

Eric the Red—Amy thought when he got out of his car—noting his chestnut hair that was sleek and nearly to his shoulders. He flipped through a leather portfolio as he walked. He had a thin beard, more of a

goatee. And he dressed with style in a tailored tan suit and vest. Andrea would have admittedly fallen for his style, and secretly for the rogue hair and face.

Like Andrea, he could have walked from the pages of a style magazine.

She stepped from the side of her truck and into his path, crossing her arms. "Eric Bridgewater?"

He stopped, as he'd nearly moved passed her. Then his lips parted in a wide smile. He reached out a hand. "Amy—you've got to be Amy."

"I am, but how would you—"

"Are you kidding? Andrea talked about you all the time. 'Amy and I...' 'Amy would...' 'I bet Amy...' She had a few pictures in her apartment. You were what she missed most about Basin Springs."

She wanted to believe him, Amy realized, but she needed to trust him first. It was going to take some convincing for him to gain that—Andrea came first in this case.

Chloe had described his voice accurately. It did sound like Boston, but only at the edges. "You just get in from lunch?"

"A lunch meeting, yes," he held up the folder, "you caught me on my way in to another appointment."

"No," Amy said and released his hand. "I'm your next appointment. You'd be surprised at how much clout I have around here."

"You love Andrea," he said simply as his eyes warmed. He held open the door for her. "Her parents would know that."

"Her parents and the staff and half the town," Amy pointed out, then followed him up the front stairs. She smiled when he opened the door to his closet sized office. It held a desk that faced the wall and two chairs with little room for anything else. He had to know that there were other offices, places that he could have been offered.

And there were other places he could have worked.

Amy slipped in and sat down, eyeing him.

"I don't think you came to see what kind of office arrangements I had earned."

Earned, Amy noticed, and nodded. "No ... I came because when Andrea graduated and came back home, pale and tired, I didn't push to get any information about what happened. It had not been easy for me when she was away at grad school ... I was just glad she was back. I might should have ... prodded ... even when she refused. She would have pushed me ... if ... well, she would have pushed me."

"You want to know what happened," he said and stood, stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned to pace only to find himself against the black door. "And maybe you think I shouldn't tell you."

"I think I shouldn't ask," Amy corrected. "I don't do as well thinking for others as Andrea."

"Can you tell me about your friendship first?" he asked and turned to face her. "You've been friends for what? Seven years? Andrea doesn't have long term friendships with many. Why are you two close?"

"That's easy. She was the one who came after me," Amy answered. "I heard a saying once that said something like 'the greatest love is forged in the fires of grief and anger and hurt ... forgiveness and love.' For a long time I leaned on her and that was it. She always seemed so strong and valiant. I didn't think that she would have problems outside those I put in her life."

"It took me a long time to realize that I didn't know her as well as I should. She was shy . . . which seemed so uncharacteristic because she forced herself into my life, made me accept her."

"She needed you," Eric said softly and sat.

"She needed to forgive. She needed to move on," Amy corrected and adjusted to the fact that Andrea had taken her with her when she'd gone away for her masters. "I guess we needed each other. I was there

the night her sister died. On another night I could have been the one who killed her. We were out drag racing. It wasn't my night to race."

"So she came to you."

"Her heart was—*is*—bigger than mine, so you have to understand that I love her very much. I didn't come to you necessarily to help you. I came because she's my friend, and in certain ways, my hero."

"Before she knew me, she prayed for me like a warrior. She attacked my defenses when she dropped her tray down across from mine in the school cafeteria. Everyday, she was there ... this popular, rich, smart girl a year ahead of me in school. The one all the teachers adored, who followed all the rules and expectations. Well, all the expectations they had except me. She would sit there and talk to me even when I pretended not to listen. Even when others mocked her because of it."

It made him smile. "Did she?"

"Others didn't understand. She can be stubborn in her own way." He laughed and rolled his head side to side. "Tell me about it."

"She shattered your vase of daisies."

"Probably," he sighed. "She's angry."

"At you or because of you?"

"No ... I don't know that it has anything to do with me. She does have a side that's shy, that's afraid, and she rebels from it. She hates it. It bothers me that she hates it so much. It was the side I ... was attracted to first," he shook his head as if shaking off a fog. He focused his eyes on Amy. "She's upset that I followed her, that I refuse to forget what she so obviously wants to."

"Forget what?"

"I think what we had. It was beautiful. She was beautiful," he stood, turned to the door, his body tense and needing the space to pace. He was used to big rooms, Amy thought, and he could probably have one of those offices anywhere but here. The Lyons probably knew that as well.

As did Andrea.

"When I first saw her ... it was like ... *pow*. You know? I couldn't stop looking. Then she looked down, away, shy, as you said, and took my breath away with her. Her heart was so big and open toward others."

"She sees so much beauty in other people," Amy filled in for him and he turned to look at her. He nodded.

"More than she would ever see in herself. I didn't understand until—I should have. I should have tried ... " he sighed. "We'd been dating months, since before Christmas and I took her to this reception in town. It was a big deal. A place to be seen, be noticed ... what you might consider a job fair at Harvard. It was a week before graduation. She was stressed, not eating right. I was used to girls not eating. I should have thought more about it."

Amy saw his face and knew. "She had an attack—her hyperglycemia. She was embarrassed. She always gets so ridiculously embarrassed."

He nodded and lowered himself into his chair, "She'd never told me. I got her out of the room as fast as I could and held onto her. I was shaking. Scared out of my mind. I was thinking of marrying her and I thought I would lose her. They called an ambulance. Carried her off. She cried the whole way there."

"She never told me either," Amy said and he turned his dark brown eyes on her. "Understand that. It goes back to when she was a not more than a baby and she was always in the hospital. Then after Jenny died, her body nearly shut down. She doesn't talk about it."

"I had suspicions before I knew, but I was a lifeguard and I'd had training as a junior lifeguard since I was a child. Her parents trusted me with her. I knew what to look for and how to handle it and I don't get as embarrassed as easily."

Eric let out a breath and rubbed his hands over his face. "She wouldn't see me after. When her parents came, she went home without

going through the graduation ceremony. When I called, she refused to come to the phone. Her mom was the one who encouraged me not to come, to give her time."

"So she offered you a job."

"She offered me a chance," Eric sighed. "One risky chance, but she wasn't easy about it. I had to make a score on the bar and find references that would have gotten me the best of jobs in New York. I made sure I had those. Andrea hasn't talked to her mother in a week, but her mom finds that encouraging. Her father nearly refuses to speak to me."

"Andrea's stubborn. Much like her father. If you learn to deal with him, you'll learn to deal with her better," Amy said and looked around the office one last time.

She stood and smiled as he followed suit. "Well, Eric the Red—man of war. You have your battle cut out for you."

He laughed and took the hand she offered him, shaking it with a firm grip. "My nickname was the Plunderer on the soccer team at Harvard. The Warrior on the debate team and Viking to the guys in my study group."

"Eric—" she said when he reached for the door. He turned back to her, his hand on the knob. "Nothing hurt her more than losing her sister, but she's put that ... in not in the past, then in a place she can handle. Andrea would have forgotten you if she'd wanted to."

Amy stepped out into the hall just as Mrs. Lyons came around the corner. Andrea was so much like her in her styled, beautiful way that Amy nearly ducked back into the office. Her hair was pinned into a neat twist. Her suit tailored and pressed, even at the middle of the day.

When she spotted Amy, with Eric at her back, she stopped and laughed, tossing her head back with merriment.

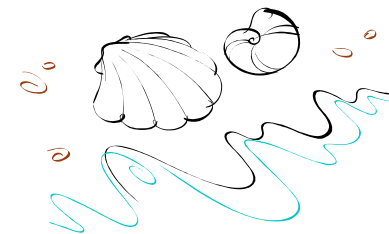
"Amy, you don't know how good it is to see you with Eric. Andrea doesn't have a chance. All these alliances. Secret prayer meetings and

negotiations," she pointed a pen at Eric. "Amy—don't let my husband see you with this scoundrel. He swears he's on Andrea's side and he's not ready to like the man who wants to marry his baby."

"Going to—" Eric corrected and leaned forward to kiss his hopeful future mother-in-law on the cheek. "I'll just keep praying. I'll be patient."

"Great strengths for a hero," Mrs. Lyons murmured when he was gone. She took Amy's hand in her strong, manicured one and gave it a hard squeeze.

"Amy, I want to be right. I want him to be the one God has for Andrea ... Eric understands her better than she could ever hope. He always has."



Chapter 8

Kuzcos was pumping with energy. People skirted between crowded tables, balancing trays and colas. Lights from the stage flashed colors, choreographed with music from the mix of songs while the band took a break.

As Amy knew the lead guitarist, she chatted with him until he went up for a set. Having little to do besides hang for a while, she settled at one of the back tables with a group she knew from church and the half-pipe down from the station. Their skateboards were propped against or tucked under the table, as much a part of their style and look as their clothing choices.

Baggy jeans, cargo shorts, ragged long sleeved tees and plaid shirts open over t-shirts. The beanies, thin, knitted caps, screen printed with mad faces were still on their heads, tucked into their pockets, or on the table near their hands and were just as much a part of their wardrobe

as hemp necklaces and earrings. When the weather cooled, the cargo shorts became cargo pants and they donned somewhat similar fleece hooded pullovers.

"You heard from Mitch?" Joe asked. He was not just a friend, but he'd known her brother. No one would guess that he was an advertising exec by day, but his faith was something he carried with him, something he rode, as vital to him as his custom-built skateboard. On the top, the deck of the board, were the words "To live is Christ." For Joe, they were more than a Bible verse or decoration.

"Last night," Amy admitted, though their conversation had been brief before she'd passed the phone to Chloe. Their conversation had not been brief, or public.

It was neither a fact Joe needed to know, nor something Mitch would appreciate him knowing at this point. "You know Mitch. It's a challenge, so he's thriving."

"Not to mention he'll get to snow board more than I will this season."

"And I bet you're going to join him."

"As soon as the season starts."

He knew her Uncle Pete, the one who owned a ski resort near Upper Springs. They talked generally of going, making vague plans, both knowing they would follow through at some point over the winter. They had lived in the Springs area their entire life. It was part of their being.

Amy glance up as Chloe stepped through the doors, which surprised her for once as her roommate had taken to her classes and books more seriously. It was as if she had been living day by day before.

Their eyes locked and Amy understood.

"I've got to go, guys."

"See you Sunday, Amy," Joe said and their hands slid palm to finger, then knocked fist against fist in a casual goodbye.

The music changed into a driving, thriving beat. People were up at the pit, shouting lyrics word for word. Amy made her way across the room to Chloe. "What's up?"

"Andrea dropped by."

Amy winced. The look on Chloe's face was telling. Andrea rarely got angry, but when she did it was almost as if she had gained some supernatural force. She had grown up with parents who were exceptional lawyers. She was blessed with patience. She knew how to hold onto her anger and when to let it out. She respected the power of silence.

"How did she find out?"

"She didn't say. She's a little ticked at me for bringing it up in the first place. I only suggested we come find you together because she was prowling the apartment. If we had anything to throw she might have done it."

"All right," Amy said and gave Chloe's arm a squeeze. "I did nothing wrong but play the game using Andrea's rules. She's just going to have to deal with that."

"She's waiting for us at the station. I'll drive. You think."

It did not surprise Amy that Chloe drove Buster, and it helped to have the wind in her face and the sky overhead. She did more than think. She prayed, and recognized that she had stepped over the line.

But she's my best friend, Amy thought. She refused to feel guilty for defending that friendship.

Andrea waited for her in front of the station house, the lights illuminating the place she stood, her arms crossed as she faced the ocean. She wore jeans and the type of designer shirt that was just Andrea. Her hair pulled, back into a ponytail, lifted under the breeze. She looked alone and steady. Though thin, sometimes frightfully so, Andrea rarely seemed weak.

Amy carried her flip-flops in her hand, the familiar feeling of warm sand in between her toes as she walked. It comforted. Chloe stayed

behind and Amy sensed the peace that her words in prayer were bringing to her.

"You're angry with me," Amy said, and stopped several feet behind her. "I'm sorry you're angry."

"But you're not sorry you invaded my business. It's my personal life."

"No I'm not sorry for that—" Amy stated, "because you would have done the same thing. You *have* done the same thing."

"I've never stepped in and negotiated your love life, or your lack of one. Besides, you get angry at anyone who tries to do something for you."

"Oh, so for me it's an invasion of your precious private love life, but when you do it for me it's something to be done. Andrea, I didn't go to Eric because I wanted to be nosey, or interfere in your so called love life, which is just as lacking as mine. You get involved because you care-and I point out that you went to Derek months ago for the same reason."

"I went to Derek because you wouldn't protect your own back."

"And I went to Eric to protect your back myself. Same thing."

Andrea turned around, her eyes wet from prior tears, but currently sparking fire. "In what way?"

"Because if he was here to hurt you I would be the first person to stand in front of you. I wanted to make the first offensive move just in case."

She looked away, toward the ocean, the waves passive, but strong as they rolled onto the coast. Even so, it didn't sooth.

"From the time you came back, you refused to say anything about Eric. Now you're panicking. You would not panic if he was not an important part of your past."

Amy took a deep breath and said her own prayer. *Maybe it was time.*

"The year you went away to get your masters was the hardest year of my rehab. I wanted to drink, I wanted to do everything that had gotten me into trouble in the first place. I nearly broke my probation and went out to the Back Bends to get it all out of my system, driving the curves. Not because I was lonely, but because I knew when you went away that you did so with the intention of starting a new life. Maybe not without me, but I wasn't in it."

"I never broke off our friendship," Andrea murmured.

"No, not intentionally," Amy murmured. "You were distant the few times you came back. Your phone calls were short, your e-mails sporadic and usually in response to mine, but for awhile there you were as lonely as I was ... so you stayed in touch."

"I was wrong," she was no longer angry, Amy thought, but just as distant.

"Not necessarily—I thought you needed a new life. I wanted you to have it. Maybe we both needed to get apart so we could work through things. I don't know. But maybe it's time we talked about it."

Andrea turned her head and looked at her without saying anything. Her eyes were sad, but not in denial.

"Something changed that last year when you met Eric. It became easy for you to pull away. I knew he was someone special in your life, but you wouldn't tell me. Your tone changed. Then you came home, sick."

Andrea chuckled with out humor. "I make it a habit, don't I, around finals?"

"Maybe you have," Amy agreed, much more willing to laugh it off. "I knew you had been in the hospital. I wanted to believe it was the only reason you were pale and sad, and that's my fault. I didn't want him to be part of your future because I had almost lost you to him before. It was selfish of me. As your friend I should have pushed you. I should have forced you to face up to what you're feeling."

"Everyone thinks that they know what I've feeling. You, my mom, my dad, Eric. I didn't need to face up to anything."

"Maybe not, but I understand more now that Eric explained things. He cared, Andrea—and he wouldn't have said anything if he didn't know I cared about you first. Don't get angry about it, because this is more important to me then it could ever be to you."

"You see, what I didn't know about that time for you in Boston was that you didn't leave our friendship behind. I always thought you did," Amy stopped and swallowed past the emotion in her throat. "I know now I was wrong. Eric wouldn't understand our friendship if it hadn't been important to you. So I know you took it with you. I always thought it was easy for you to walk away. My dad did."

Andrea looked up in surprise, "I didn't want to leave your friendship behind."

"No, you wanted to leave your life behind, and now I think I understand. It wasn't like I thought. It wasn't because of Jenny. It was because in this life you've been sick. In this one, the diabetes has controlled a part of who you are. Even when Jenny died, people were focused on you. You hated it. They needed it. They needed somewhere to turn their grief."

"You are God's child, Andrea, not just a diabetic. He has blessed you with the most amazing heart, with love, with patience. You understand what it is to be sick, and you support those in need, those who are sick. You understand what it is to be thrust unwillingly and shamefully into the limelight, then you step right in so they don't have to stand alone. If you had not of been a diabetic, severely, you may not have been able to understand."

The tears had pooled in Andrea's eyes and suddenly released. Amy took a step forward and hugged her friend, her sister.

Andrea laughed, the sound rough with emotion, "Those lines sound familiar. Aren't they mine?"

"They're more yours than mine. I'm sure I borrowed a few from you," Amy said and laughed as she stepped back. Other words could be said, but some things were for Eric and Eric alone. "Chloe probably wondered inside by now. We should find her and let her know we're okay."

Andrea winced. "She was reading a textbook when I got to your place. It nearly knocked the anger right out of me. Then Mitch called and she cut the conversation short."

"They'll talk again."



Inside, Chloe was the center of attention as usual. Someone had given her a red lifeguard jacket, as she was usually cold in any room with air conditioning. She had a diet cola at her disposal. Amy and Andrea shook their heads as they walked over. Two-on duty officers Paul and Laura were watching the computer screen with her as she laughed.

Chloe's eyes sparkled when she spotted Amy, "It's Mitch. We're Messaging."

"Does he know this conversation's not private?" Andrea asked when Laura laughed at something he sent.

"Yes."

"And isn't this a police line?"

"It's an open line to the Internet," Amy muttered and leaned over Chloe to type in her own message. "Besides, what else are you going to do on the night shift in Basin Springs?"

It's Amy.

She typed.

Saw Joe at Kuzcos. Hope you plan on having a roommate all winter.

She laughed as Mitch responded back.

No worries. Joe doesn't stay any place long. Miss Kuzcos. Kuzcos? As much as me and your surf board?

Nearly as much as I miss Chloe.

You're such a sap. And you only said it because you know she's sitting right here.

Andrea okay?

Andrea's fine. And you were right about something else. I'll tell you later.

Amy leaned back, giving Chloe room to resume her conversation.

"You think this shift was boring? You guys obviously haven't seen the evening news. If you had been here two hours ago, you would have known why the night shift sucks," Laura said and stood to go refill her cup of coffee. "A fight broke out near the b-ball courts at dusk. It took five officers to settle things down enough to cart several kids off to jail. We've been spending most of our duty filling out the paperwork."

"Who's we?" Paul asked Laura. "She's been downtown for most of the night—"

"Filing reports. Dealing with the media."

"There were cameras next door interviewing this guy about his record collection or something when they heard someone scream. They were out the door, cameras rolling. Someone finally thought to call the police. One of the guys had gotten stupid with a knife—"

He broke off and glanced at Chloe. Her fingers faltered on the keyboard.

"The action carried over from the fight into the condos. Derek and Laura were downtown for most of the evening."

"He's still there," Laura said and glanced at her watch. "The reporters followed us. By the time he got in to the station to see how things were going, he'd given an impromptu press conference. He's had a long day."

Amy looked at her own watch. It was nearly nine o'clock. Derek had been on shift since before six in the morning.

Andrea sat down at the computer and typed in her own message. The group was still laughing a few minutes later when Derek walked in. Paul and Laura jumped up, moved into work mode. He stopped, glanced at the computer, at Chloe, lost in his own thoughts.

She looked up, her eyes dancing again and she gave him a smile. Not a smile of laughter, but a smile something like gratitude and relief. She would appreciate the stand he took. He smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes.

He looked tired, Amy thought, and her hands itched to reach for him, to sooth the frown in his brow. She was not sure how to deal with the knowledge that she wanted to comfort, to be the one to comfort.

When he was past Chloe, near his office, he rubbed his hands over his face.

Amy stopped him. She folded her hands in front of her, then stuck them in her pockets, "You okay?"

He glanced at her, and for a moment his eyes remained unfocused, "Yeah."

"No you're not," she moved to the double glass doors that opened onto the deck, "this time, step into my office."

He glanced at her surprised, weary, then nodded.

Out on the deck, in the shadows, Derek leaned against the railing and lowered his head. His arms were ridged, the muscles defined and tense. The stress was there on his face, unmasked.

"You catch him?"

"Hmm?"

"The guy with a knife. Paul said it was on the news."

"He was too high to know any different, didn't care that there was a news crew and it was on camera. He went after the girl's father and one of the technicians when they stepped in to stop it," he looked up, met her eyes. His were dark and serious. "I had to step back, turn the questioning over. I started to see Chloe in the girl's place."

It warmed her that Chloe was more than a face, more than a girlfriend of his friend.

He stared out into the ocean, his thoughts deep and dark. "There were nights like this on the patrol in Willis. Many more nights. Kids stabbed by other kids. Gunshot wounds. Gangs that had at one time killed themselves out. Night after night, screaming, weeping. Four guys in homicide had heart attacks in one year."

Amy nodded and waited in the silence.

"My first two days as Captain I was called upon to have a press conference on a fight that took place behind the school, near the cemetery. Three kids were missing. Three of them. Everybody wanted a story—to make a story. There were three lives turned into pictures on tv. Innocence, turned into questions."

"We found the bodies. The kids ... we'd always known, but how can you say it? Murdered by kids who were their classmates. Children."

He took a deep breath and then another. "Why are you guys here anyway? Everything all right?"

Amy nodded, watching him, "Everything's fine. Andrea and I had an issue to work out. If you want to come to the beach at night, out of the crowds, you come here. It's safe."

He looked out toward the ocean, into the dark, "It's supposed to be. We broke up a fight tonight—earlier. It was a group of mean kids. Just kids. It was the guy that got away, the guy they thought was cool, that did the most damage."

"Derek, they need someone to remind them that there are lines," Amy reminded him. She reached out and touched his arm. It was hard, tight, and the strain was still on his face, but he didn't pull away.

Why did she expect that? She asked herself as she moved closer and stroked his arm in comfort. Only her father would have done so. Had she ever needed to comfort Mitch in such a way?

Had she ever seen Ham with so much weight on him?

Maybe not.

"I was one of them Derek. Before you get discouraged, before the voices of *wannabe* reporters get you down, remember that. Remember it was a man like you, awfully like you, that helped me find my way out. The media doesn't always care about that."

Derek turned toward her and studied her. She met his look, giving him something she had never completely given over before. Her trust, her respect. More had happened tonight than he could say, more than he could deal with right now.

He reached out to touch her, his hands tracing down her forearms, to her wrists, as if needing to feel the soft skin there.

"Amy..." his voice was rough and edgy. For a moment, the roaring sound of the ocean faded away.

She met his gaze, drawn by a part of herself she wanted to deny, but she did not look away. Not until his lips, rough with need met hers.

Colors shot into her mind. Beautiful, bright colors of summer—yellows, orange, red—like a sunset. She slid into the kiss, offered comfort. It was soft, sweet; a simple meeting of lips, everything the rest of his day had not been for him.

It was more.

His arms slid around her, her hands reached up and viced on his shoulders. The world seemed to tilt.

Then it all changed.

Amy stepped back. Her eyes were wide with terror, frightened by the emotion, the intensity. She was breathing hard, a rush of air against the sound of the ocean. She put her hand to her stomach.

"I'm shouldn't have—I didn't mean—"

He was her boss, she reminded herself, even when she wanted to meet his eyes, to lean into him, to find the comfort again.

It confused her. The comfort had been meant for him, not for her. Why did she want to lean back into the comfort, his comfort ... as if he had

offered her that and more. She wanted to run, far away, into the mountains. Into the safety of the mountains.

"Amy—"

The sound of the ocean spiraled her back. She looked at him, forced her eyes to meet his. The look of concern in his eyes did not help.

Derek reached out. She had backed away. It surprised her that she had stepped so far from him. She stopped, but warded off his hand.

"I'm not that kind of girl."

"What kind of girl?" Derek asked, then held out an arm to block her way past.

"The kind of a girl that kisses a guy just to be kissed. It's not me. It will never be me."

He blocked her way a second time, this time stepping in front of her. They stood facing, her eyes blazing moving toward anger.

"I'm not your father, Amy."

"No...but I don't know who you are."

"Are you going to tell me what happened out there?" Chloe asked as she drove Amy back toward Kuzcos so she could get her truck.

Amy shrugged, her arms crossed. The wind blew against her skin and she closed her eyes finding comfort in knowing the sky was overhead.

I messed up, God. Not just my life, but Derek's. He doesn't need someone like me...

"Nothing happened," she told Chloe. "I'm just tired."

"You should know ... You weren't completely in the shadows."

So Chloe knew, maybe Paul and Laura. Derek would receive their grief, if it was bestowed, but others would know, would find out.

"It was just a kiss. It was just-he had no right to kiss me."

"So you're angry at him for kissing you? Did you kiss him back?"

"I shouldn't be angry with him. But I am."

"That's no surprise. You've been angry with Derek since he moved to Basin Springs. Do you think instead of what you feel being anger, maybe it's fear. Maybe it's desire?"

"Derek Johnson is more or less my boss."

"He's not Ham."

"Of course he's not."

"So he's not old enough to be your father."

Amy sighed, "No ... look I can't explain it to you when I can't explain it to myself. It was just wrong."

Chloe pulled into the parking lot and turned to idle Mitch's rag-tag convertible behind Amy's truck. "And maybe I can understand. Trust is a big deal to me. It takes time for people who aren't used to feeling it. You were just starting to trust him. Maybe he broke that trust. Maybe you did, with yourself. Don't feel bad for feeling an emotion that's protecting your heart."

Amy looked at Chloe for several moments, then nodded before climbing out and getting into her own truck. She took her time winding her way home, thinking about Derek, about the kiss.

She would have to keep her distance, that was for sure. Her dates were casual, but she did not date casually. She went places with guys who were more friends than anything more than that. She liked to be in a group of people she trusted. Mitch, Andrea and Chloe, those from college, her surfing and skater friends. If she was somewhere it was usually with a group of people.

Is the opposite of fear trust, she wondered, or courage? If she didn't trust Derek ... why? Why not? He was certainly cute ... a California boy ... and yet straight laced and duty bound. Was she courage she lacked or

She turned into her apartment complex and followed the drive around back without much thought. She pushed Derek from her mind and

looked out the window, tired, unwilling to concentrate on the cycle of thoughts that scattered through her mind.

In the shadows she saw the struggle and slammed on her breaks, laying on her horn as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Chloe—"

Chloe, still wearing the red lifeguard jacket, struggled with the figure in the shadows. He was tall, thin. Not Buddy. Defiantly not Buddy. At the sound he looked up, his face dark, covered.

He slammed Chloe into the next car, even as Amy jumped from her truck.

"Chloe!"

Chloe cried out and crumpled to the ground.

Amy rushed to her friend. The car window was cracked where Chloe had hit. There were gashes on her face. Her eyes were squeezed shut. She struggled to breath.

"Don't touch me—" the words were sobbed out. She curled up into a ball, shivering. She pulled the sleeves of the jacket down her arms, around herself. Gone was the laughter and delight. Gone was the freedom. Her eyes looked glassed over. She was in shock.

"I need a blanket," Amy cried out and realized that she cried out alone. The complex was quiet.



Chapter 9

For a Saturday morning, it was quiet, broken only by the faint clink of weights coming from the weight room. Andrea caped the brush onto the bottle of fingernail polish and glanced down as she wiggled her toes, her toenails now a dark pink.

"Somehow I don't think Amy would be doing that if she was on duty."

Andrea glanced up and glared at John. No, Amy would be outside. They both knew it. And since she was there to fill in for Amy, she knew it was where she needed to be.

"If you would let me go out and do Amy's patrol instead of sit in here listening to the police radio—"

"Sweetheart, you're not even on the payroll right now. If I let you walk out that door on an assignment and something were to happen, I don't think even your parents could get us out of legal trouble."

She did not like it, but she understood his reasoning. "Fine—your loss."

"Sure is. I'd like the opportunity to paint my nails a pretty pink."

"Next time then."

John picked up his body board and backed toward the door. "Derek's in his office if you need something—just leave him alone otherwise. He's not in the best of temperaments after that media fiasco last night."

"Does he know about Chloe?"

"Yeah. I don't think he's slept. He's been on the phone with Anna part of the morning."

"Anna?"

"She's looking into it—friend of the family, that kind of thing. Stay awake," he called in parting as he pushed out of the doors and left by way of the deck.

Time past slowly in the quiet. The phone refused to ring. The police radio squawked a few times, but otherwise remained silent. Curled in the chair, her barefoot feet propped on the white laminate desk, Andrea stared out the glass toward the ocean, the foaming surf deserted of conquerors.

It was tranquil enough that she fought the weariness remaining from the late night madness. She'd managed a round with Amy before Amy had elected to stay over at her place with Chloe. Laying in her own bed, wide awake, Andrea had listened to Amy pacing the floor in the living room. If Andrea had been alone, she would have paced the floor herself.

But then Amy would have worried over her and shut down her own emotions. It happened every time. Everyone's goal in their own personal crisis seemed to be to protect Andrea.

Well, Andrea could take care of herself.

She was tired tension and the madness of it all.

But her friends were not supposed to be catalysts for investigations. They weren't supposed to be in danger.

She pressed her fingertips against her tired eyes and sighed.

"Your mom thought you might want this."

She dropped her hands from her eyes just as the bag hit the desk. It was from a downtown coffee house that she visited often, sometimes with her mother as it was near the office

The implications dawned on her as she looked up, and up again, into Eric's eyes. His hair, normally a frame around his face was pushed back with a pair of sunglasses. His eyes, a rich green, were uncovered. He was worried about her.

Irked enough, and tired already, she sat up, dropping her feet to the floor. She'd known she looked tired and was well aware that John had given her the easy job. She did not want the same treatment from Eric. He'd never had to do that before.

"What are you doing here? You're not dressed for work," she muttered, eyeing his jeans and designer shirt angrily. He should not look so good, stirring up the feelings again, when she felt so terrible and desperately needed sleep.

"Just doing some research. Your mom called and said that she'd heard you'd been forced to skip breakfast."

"Chloe wanted to get the whole thing over with. I wasn't hungry anyway."

"You need to keep up your ... strength."

"So I've been told," Andrea muttered, and stood finally, tired of looking so far up at him. "Thanks."

But she did not touch the bag. She had a vague idea that Eric would have picked up their traditional breakfast. They'd shared it enough, down at a small coffee shop near the university, before classes, before going into the office for their separate internships. She couldn't deal with those memories, with those emotions. Not now. Not right now.

"You going to eat," he said and gestured to the bag, "or do I have to call reinforcements?"

Andrea frowned and took a moment to study the cascade of the ocean. He was trying to lighten the mood. He wouldn't know, didn't know, that she had grown up with people ganging up on her—she had not told him, had not wanted him to know.

Knowing didn't help the anger that surged. She didn't want him to be one of those people. She had loved that she had been free around him.

"That's what you came here to do, isn't it?" The bitterness in her voice surprised even her. *Go away*, she wanted to say as the tension spiraled. She could feel her arms shake. She understood the weakness and knew the dangerous line she stood on. *I'll eat. I promise. Go away so I can eat in peace.*

"Excuse me?"

She turned, her hands coiling into tight fists. The panic blossomed.

"You came here and start pulling together allies. My own mom. My best friends. You waltz in to this town, my town, and turn the people closest to me against me."

"You left fast. You didn't explain—"

"Yes I did," she spat the words out. "I left. I didn't need to explain. I was sick and I was sick and tired of being vulnerable to being sick. I came home to heal. I followed my heart."

"And that made it okay for you to leave me out there, wondering, fearing that ... fearing I don't know what. You left and..."

"And that's what this is about. I left and that irked you a little, didn't it?"

"What?"

"That I was the one to leave you hanging. You weren't the one to break up with me. You weren't the one calling the shots—it wasn't your

town, your career, your job. Now you're here. You want me back, you want me to eat. You drop a sack of food down and expect me to grapple into it like a monkey. You want me to do what you want me to do."

"And you're saying I'm unreasonable?" Eric murmured, the fire lit in his eyes. "I didn't ask you to light my fire in my heart, Andrea. At this point, that's moot. I brought you some breakfast—just breakfast because people who love you know you need it. Some people would call that a favor."

"Fine. Thank you," she turned and pressed her hands flat to the cool glass window and fought tears. "You can go."

"I can go," he repeated bitterly. "Thanks, princess. You give orders well."

Relieved when he moved to leave, she closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to the glass. He would have left anyway, she reminded herself. His career had been on the fast track. She wouldn't have been able to handle it. She'd wanted to—but her body, her imperfect body—had reminded her where she belonged.

She thought of the calm, cultivated grounds of the Springs rehab center, of Kuzcos, her friends. Her mom, dad, her brother. She took a breath and slowly let it out.

"There is one thing," he muttered and she jerked back, not wanting him to see the weakness. She slowly lowered her hands to her sides and curled her fingers into fists, reaching inside of her for control.

"I came back, looking for the girl that I knew in Boston. You left a hole in my heart when you left. I wanted to find it. I thought we could ... I thought that you might be hurting as I hurt. That you ran from the fear I felt."

"But you're not who I thought you were. To my surprise, I see that underneath that smooth image you like to show the world, you're a snob. A plain snob without the fancy trimmings. You look down on your illness with hatred. And it's surprising because of how you choose to make a

living. I don't even know how you do your job, not when you go to work with people who have problems, worse than your own. Does it help you to see people worse off than you?"

Her lip trembled as she fought for a breath, to take in air, leaving her in stunned silence as the pain sliced through her.

The anger, quick and fierce diffused quickly from his eyes. Suddenly there was sorrow and regret.

But her anger shot up, like fire set to fuel. She slapped out against the hand that reached for her.

"How dare you!" she scathed, trembling in an attempt to fight for air. "How dare you walk in here when my friends have been attacked, when I haven't slept and turn my own emotions around on me. I haven't eaten, Eric. It does blind me to rationality. How dare you come in here, acting like you care about me—when you don't even know me. When you never—you couldn't have—and say—those things—"

"Andrea."

She spun and slapped back at the hands that grabbed her from behind. It was Derek, she thought. Just Derek, shocked and worried. She'd been screaming; hatefully screaming.

She closed her eyes and let the revulsion roll as tears pricked her eyes. She, who hated public scenes more than anything, had given one grand performance.

"I'm sorry," she murmured through dry lips. She opened her eyes slowly and forced herself to meet Derek's worried gaze. If she could have melted, she would have slid into the floor, out the door, to be washed away by the waves. "I just ... it's been a long ... I've got to ... I'm sorry. Tell John I'm sorry"

Knowing Eric was watching her, and unable look at him, she dipped down and gathered her flip flops, her purse, and grabbed the sack of breakfast. She needed to go, to get out before the sob rising in her throat broke free.

Derek dropped the hand he put to Eric to hold him back. He had read Andrea's file, had talked to her friends, and understood the signs. Andrea would need time, he knew, and in the quiet, feeling the guilt, she would probably dig out whatever food had been in the sack and eat. It was hard to watch her break down. She was normally serene compared to Amy.

"I'm sorry," Eric said, rubbing his face with his hands, "I shouldn't have said ... I didn't mean ... those things have been inside since ... since she left. A defense."

"Derek Johnson," Derek introduced himself and motioned toward his office.

"Eric Bridgewater."

"Give yourself time to calm down. She's too ashamed to see you right now. She needs time to settle, get some fuel in her system. What you just saw was more from fatigue and the diabetes than from the Andrea we all know and love. And we all love her."

It was a warning just as much as it was a reminder.

Eric wondered into the office and dropped down on a chair, burying his face in his hands. "Her mom warned me she would be upset. I shouldn't have ... I can't lose her like this."

"Andrea's got a big heart—she knows how to listen. In the end she'll get over it," Derek noted and sat down behind his desk. Picking up a pen, he simply gave Eric time. He knew what it was like to feel agony. He hated to admit he was thankful Amy had been unable to come into work this morning. He wasn't sure he was ready to see her.

Even when he wanted to see her.

Anna had called him to inform him of the situation just as he collapsed into his own bed. He had not gone in to the station, knowing Amy needed time, but it had hurt to stand back. The attack had been

against Chloe, but someone had gone after Amy before. It was too soon to forget.

He'd climbed out of bed and worked out the frustration on his punching bag as he said round after round of prayer. He feared for her safety, and all he could do was turn that over to God. He regretted the kiss, the timing, the moment. He wanted more. She took life on with both hands ready to fight.

Eric let out a breath and leaned back in the chair, his eyes unfocused, lost. "I've screwed this up from the beginning. What I said, I didn't mean it. I don't want her to think I did."

Derek nodded. "You want my advice?"

"You got something good?"

"It's Saturday, so she'll be up at the Springs Rehab this afternoon. Go up and see her, see where she works, take her something that doesn't have anything to do with her health."

Eric met Derek's gaze and smiled, "You know her well."

He thought of Amy and sighed. "Not Andrea so much as one of her friends."



They had bought themselves a sail boat, Amy thought as she stood on the pier and studied the sturdy structure that was badly in need of a paint job. There were stacks of boxes on the deck, supplies for their new life.

She took a deep breath and let it out.

"Amy—" Ham stepped onto the deck and spotted her as she jumped aboard. He looked, she thought, just a little guilty as she knew he'd feel.

"You um, you must have seen Mitch. He stopped by when he couldn't find Chloe."

"He found her," she stepped forward and took the box from him. Ham was regaining his deep tan color, though he was thinner, looking a

little older. His hair was white against his scalp, the tee-shirt he wore the least bit too large for his smaller frame.

She narrowed her look and he met her glance eye for eye. He wasn't one to run from confrontation—even if he had hid from it.

"Were you going to tell me, Ham?"

"Of course I was going to tell you. Things have been happening kind of fast, Amy. We were going to tell everyone—when we were sure. Joe!" he called out, and turned to put space between them. "We got company."

Amy rolled her eyes and expelled a breath. Her stomach pitched and rolled and it had nothing to do with being on a boat.

Even a boat that looked to be on its last voyage.

The aged retired police chief from the Upper Springs climbed out and stepped up beside Ham. "So we do," he said, nervously stuffing his hands in the pocket of his shorts. "How you doing, Amy?"

"I'm fine," she said.

"Give us a minute, Joe?" Ham asked.

"Sure. Have to go to the store anyway."

Amy watched him, still nimble and quick, as he jumped off the boat and headed down the extended deck. She swallowed against the lump in her throat and faced her surrogate father.

"Mitch said you two were getting ready to leave."

Ham nodded, motioning for her to proceed him down the steps. "We should have everything ready by Monday."

"Monday? That's two days away."

She concentrated on the boat and took in each detail of the below decks. It was older, but the wood shined beneath polish.

She trusted Ham with a boat. He had worked with the Coast Guard. He knew more about boats than any other soul she knew. And she knew he had the money.

But it was just such a big step ... one *she* was going to have to take.

There were no trinkets set out—nothing except a map stretched across the dining table and propped open with silverware. She sat the box down on the counter.

"Ham, you've just gotten out of rehab. What did your therapist say?"

"To wear good deck shoes and to watch myself. I've been out for months. Joe and I—we want to get started. See the world, the Pacific, whatever we can while we're still healthy enough to jump into a boat. I've got me my own space back there and Joe's got the starboard end. We stacked up what books we've been saying we were going to read for thirty years. And we put down our course," he stopped at the small table across from the stove and put his finger down on the map that was stretched across. "One day we'll get here."

One day, Amy thought as she studied the absent place where Ham's finger touched in the middle of the Pacific ocean. "It's just sudden."

"No—maybe I didn't let on that Joe and I were serious. Maybe I didn't know I was, but it's been a lifetime of planning, talking, praying. Got some kids to rent out the house and Derek's promised to look over it for me. They're ready to move in tomorrow and then Joe and me, we'd be living on the boat anyway."

"You've known Ham—you just didn't want to tell me."

"I've been telling you for years, you just weren't listening," he sighed. "And maybe I didn't because I made it my job to watch after you—I don't need to do that anymore."

"Who says?"

He only shook his head, "The only thing that's sudden is that I suddenly stood up on my own two feet," he reached out and patted her cheek, then sighed and left his hand there, still firm and strong, to rest

along her jaw. "You're a good kid, Amy. You've come a long way. Your mother would be proud. You're going to be all right."

It was a pep talk that seemed like a cliché. Was she—something old and done with? Now Ham was leaving, not to be around at all.

"What am I going to do without you?" she asked and her voice cracked. She'd had a lifetime of those eyes, a lifetime of that assurance, but it wasn't nearly long enough. She needed him to say things would be okay.

"You're going to find your own dreams," Ham meandered over to the sofa past the galley and wearily sat down on the cushions. "I've been thinking Amy. Sitting in a hospital bed gives you time. You were like a daughter to me, and maybe I held on too tight. I allowed you to live my dreams for too long and I never encouraged you to find your own."

Seeing the sorrow in his eyes, Amy dropped down on the sofa beside him and settled into the crook of his arm. "I wanted to follow you. I wanted to be just like you."

"As you wanted to follow your mother. As you've tried to follow your dad. You don't have your own course planned. None of that was wrong, but you've got to discover your own dreams. You can't sail off without direction."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Some advice from you."

"For thirty years I did what I loved most—almost. I worked the beaches. I watched my kids, you guys, grow into beautiful adults. I earned the check, I paid the prices. I'm where I want to be because I made the plans to do it."

She closed her eyes and settled so she could listen to his heart. And what were her dreams? She would never hold Ham's job as captain of the beach station. She wondered if she would have ever really loved the job as he had. She'd simply loved him.

She knew she wouldn't have gone after it with Derek's commitment. Or his leadership.

And thinking of it, she thought of Derek and sighed.

"We're going to have a party, Joe and I. Tonight ... tomorrow, after services. Thought we'd invite you kids over. Let you see how our baby cuts through the water. You'll come?"

"I'll be here and I'll call everyone."

"Amy," he ran a hand over her hair. "You've come a long way. You're going to be fine. I promise."



Chapter 10

The Springs Rehabilitation Center had been around long before the extreme sports that set the coastal tone. Located not quite an hour from the coast, it had received visitors looking for healing since 1900. They'd come in droves. Shacks had sprung up quickly, littering the area around the hot springs, offering minimal shelter. Minors came from the mountains beyond, from the area that became Upper Springs and grew into a resort area for skiers; others from boats that brought them to shore.

Train track had been laid before there was a direct road that connected Basin Springs with the community beyond at Upper Springs. The highway was a dream for those who loved extreme sports; snow capped rugged peaks, the flash of summer on the coast. Before the highway was laid, the only road available was what was now called the Back Bend; it's curves and cut into ravines offering a hazardous edge for those interested in drag racing. Though it was more of a direct route to

the hot springs and the old entrance to the rehab center, the ravines and rocky landscape proved costly to cut through.

The Back Bend was now closed off, and those trespassing could suffer serious fines. Jenny Lyons had died on that road one night along with two others, but they were not alone. Over the years it had claimed more than a dozen lives.

The hot springs rehab center was famous for its sometimes radical physical therapy programs for sports medicine and the disabled. Celebrities, professional athletes and Olympians came from around the world. They paid top dollar and beyond for the services, which allowed the center to sponsor programs and research.

The grounds were meticulous, green and prized. There was a garden of flowers, a greenhouse, and a carousel donated by an eccentric millionaire. There were up to date facilities, doctors and physical therapists, many with ivy-league degrees like Andrea's. Buildings had been built for the healthy to live in peace and the sick to recover. There were research centers and specialists.

Birds could be heard chirping, dogs were seen chasing sticks and balls, cats curled up on the edges of the small porches lined with rocking chairs.

Eric pulled up in his sleek, black BMW and climbed out, trying to see the grounds through Andrea's eyes. It had been in Andrea's heart, her home, before him. It was at the core of who she was—and what he had sliced earlier.

He stepped up onto the sidewalk and looked around just as Andrea turned down a lane in a golf cart. Her blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Over jeans and a light green designer t-shirt she wore a starched white lab coat.

She looked weary, he thought with regret.

She pulled to the curb, set the brake and pushed herself out.

Then she turned and spotted him.

He held out the bouquet of lilies and watched the tears sparkle in her eyes.

"Go away Eric," she said and turned to grab her bag in the back. He was surprised to see its bulk—more than half her size.

He closed his hands into fists and resisted reaching for the bag. When they'd been together in college, this was what he'd seen of her—the strength, the determination, the dedication. It had changed that night of the party when he'd nearly lost her. She was right—his view was now colored by her illness—and it shouldn't be.

"Just give me a minute—a minute, Andrea—please," he said and stepped into her path. He took a deep breath, focusing. If he wanted her back, he would have to show her that he understood that it was her strength that made her who she was, not her weakness.

"I have some things to say, and I'd like for you to listen."

"Clever to pick a place like this where it will look bad for me to sling this bag of equipment over your head. You being a lawyer and all would know the ramifications."

"That's unlikely," he said and lifted a brow when she looked passed him. "From what I've found out in the hour I've been running around this place trying to find you, people would more likely come after me than you. They think the world of you."

"Most people do."

"Andrea," when she tried to veer around him, he moved again. "I know. I can't tell you how sorry I am for what I said. I spoke out of ... frustration."

"Fine, I understand. You can go."

Before her princess tone had rankled him. Now he saw it for what it was—a shield. If he was getting too close to her emotions she was just going to have to deal with it.

"I'd like a chance to make it up to you. Flowers, dinner"

"It's over and done with."

"No, it's not," he held the flowers out to keep the distance between them. "I know what I said hurt the core of who you are. The people here love you because you love them. You chose this line of work because you know what it's like. You empathize—"

She shifted and so did he. He was quicker.

"You empathize—therefore you put your heart into it. You love people easily. You loved Amy because you couldn't hate her. I know that. I've always known."

She turned away and blinked back tears—tears he'd caused, "You don't know who I am."

"I thought I did—I loved the woman I thought I knew."

"Eric—"

"But even when I told myself I loved you, I never wanted to see what this place—the town and this center, the people in both places—what they meant to you. I was going to take you to Boston, to start a practice. I didn't want to see what was in your heart."

"How could you see when I couldn't? Look, Eric ..." she shrugged her shoulders, "I don't want to get into this. Not with you. I left Boston for a reason—my reasons.... I know I ended it horribly," she turned, looked at him, and he was glad to see sorrow mixed into the determination. "I'm sorry for that, but ..."

"But?"

"But ... I never expected you to come here—to Basin Springs. It was over—I know you think that I made that decision, but don't you see? For me it was. The life I wanted with you—it wasn't reality. It didn't involve me being weak and needy."

"You're not weak and needy. Look at you, Andrea. You comfort your friends, offer them a place to stay, take their hours for them at work before you go in to your own job—and look at you. You're still going. You're still moving. That's not weak."

"The people out here call you their angel—they love you. It takes strength to capture that kind of devotion. That kind of love."

"Eric—" she closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. "The life I had with you was always separate. I don't know how to connect them, if I want to connect them."

"Why do you think those things have to connect?"

She lifted her chin and for the first time since he'd come to Basin Springs, she looked at him, really looked at him with those startling green eyes, "Isn't that why you're here?"

"Not exactly. That night we both discovered we were different people then what we thought we wanted to be. It scared me. It made me realize that maybe the fast paced career I wanted in Boston wasn't really what I wanted. Maybe there was something more important that could change things. It seems that we're both starting on new ground now, new focuses being at the center. Can we start by being friends?"

She shrugged. "I don't know," but she shrugged the bag off and handed it to him as she attempted to smile, "but since you're here"

He took the bag as she headed around the building to the side entrance. "You're going to let me tag along?"

"Just don't give me a chance to change my mind. I ah-tonight I have a ... thing. My old boss at the beach is giving himself a surprise send off party. The surprise," she said as she reached the side entrance and slid her id card passed the scanner—it beeped and the door slid smoothly open, "is on us. Dinner is ... it's a nice offer, but I've got plans."

"You don't sound happy about it."

"I'm not unhappy," she said as the door closed behind them and clicked, "but Amy is."

She stopped at a door labeled *employees* and paused, card in hand, her mind lost in thought. He watched her worry over it more than a little, thinking of her friend, then sigh before sliding her card passed another scanner.

"Andrea-" he studied the clear green eyes that looked at him, "there are other nights for other dinners."



"I don't know what's wrong with me," Chloe said as she wiped away tears and looked toward the door Mitch had just walked out of on his way to Ham's. "Mitch won't hurt me. I know that."

Amy studied her friend curled into a ball on Andrea's sofa. She had not slept more than an handful of restless hours since her attack the night before.

"No, I do know. And I hate it. I hate it."

She took the pillow she was holding and threw it across the room. It didn't even reach the wall.

"It would probably be more satisfying if you threw Andrea's vase," Amy murmured and tipped her head toward the end table. "She would probably forgive you, considering."

"Considering that I'm driving myself crazy?" Chloe asked, though she did smile. They both knew how many times Amy had nearly knocked the vase over. "I chase away Mitch—he loves me right? I mean, it's like he does, like he may say it. And I chase him away."

"So you needed some rest? You don't need to worry about it. He's way gone over you. He always has been," Amy handed Chloe the pillow on the other end of the sofa, sat down and curled her feet underneath her. "And he's trained for this—for dealing with stuff like this—as a police officer. It's different, because it's you, but all in all he's steady. And he will be steady. Give yourself a couple of days to deal with this before you start blaming yourself."

"He'll be gone in a couple of days, Amy. He can't stay down here and pat my hand forever. He's got a town looking to him to be steady."

"A town that's only a couple of hours away. A phone call. An e-mail. Your relationship wasn't built on a physical foundation, Chloe. It hasn't been about how close the two of you can get physically. It's about

the warmth between the two of you. Just last night you and Mitch heated up the station lobby just talking about nothing over an official police server. That's not going to change."

Remembering, Chloe smiled, "While you and Derek heated up the outside deck."

Amy blanched. "We're not talking about that."

"Sure we are. It's much better. Did you see him today at the station?"

"By the time I got there he had already left. Between that mess he was dealing with last night when he—when I—"

"When you two kissed."

"Whatever. Between that and the other stuff, John said he hadn't slept."

"You're worried about him."

"No. Not worried," Amy said and promised herself it was true. "He's old enough to handle himself. Anyway, let's go back to you. We got that thing on Ham's boat tonight. Mitch said he'd tried to talk you into it. You should go."

"No—" Chloe said and hugged the pillow. "All those people. I don't want to be around people tonight."

"People you trust. Who besides you and me, Andrea and Mitch? If Mitch goes, he'll worry about you. I'll worry about you. We don't have to stay the whole night, but we could if you wanted. Or we'll come back so you won't have to be alone tonight."

Chloe closed her eyes and turned her cheek into the pillow. "No—it's your only night to be on Ham's boat. You need to be there."

"Chloe, I'm not asking you to do something you're not ready to do. It's easier if you go with us, and if you think you're ready, then it will be good for you. But if you are not ready—"

"I nearly died after what Benny did to me—" Chloe said and slowly lifted her head. "I wanted to curl up into a ball and just die."

She looked at her legs and slowly stretched them out. "It really scares me that someone wants to do that right now. But then, I realized, that Benny was still hurting me even though he was behind bars. He was killing me. Remember?"

"I remember."

"I told everyone that I was fine. I dealt with it. I let the DA's office handle it. But I wasn't fine. I was so scared ... and so alone. You drug me out of the house. Made me go down to the beach. You made me deal with a crowd."

"That was weeks after, Chloe, and only after you said I needed to do it. You should take the time you need."

Chloe stood. "No—you were right. I need my friends. I need Mitch. I need for him to know I'm okay, so that he can do the job he has to do when he goes home. I'm scared, Amy. I'm so scared that I won't be able to do that."

She nearly crumpled, but forced herself to stand. "Tonight I'll go. Right now I need to be by myself. I'll be afraid, but I won't be held back. If I don't go—Benny and that man from last night—they've got control."

"Chloe—"

"Besides, I know you're upset with Ham, just a little. I know that there is a chance Derek's going to be there because Ham probably invited him. You can't hide behind me to escape your own problems."

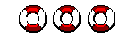
Amy blanched, because she hadn't known, hadn't thought that he would be there as well. He was friends with Ham, friends with Mitch. Why shouldn't he be invited? "I'm not doing that."

"Good. Then prove it to me. Ham won't mind if I come?"

There was just enough uncertainty that Amy swallowed her objections. Maybe she was using Chloe as a shield for her own problems, and she wasn't positive that Chloe was wrong.

Besides, there would be no safer place than that ship tonight. So it would be the safest place for Chloe. And Amy needed Mitch there as much as Chloe needed him with her.

"Ham won't mind if you come."



Andrea placed her hand on her patient's knee to slow his movements on the leg press. Her 3:45 was a fifteen year old boy, Logan, who had been out drinking with friends late at night when their car had run off the road leaving him with two broken legs. She saw many more kids like him. They passed in and out of her care. Some she could help, some didn't want help.

Logan seemed to. He was gaining strength. He hoped he could play soccer again. He dreamt of it and fed off that dream.

She watched him work the leg press slowly, still unable to walk or hold himself up. His friends dropped by sometimes and helped him through his exercises, but it was his mom and dad that kept him going. He was blessed, as she'd been. Not all of her patients were blessed.

She was aware that Eric watched her as she worked. Today he talked and carried on varied conversations with all the people around her world. He used his charm, his wit, his knowledge of anything and everything.

He was a lawyer, she reminded herself. He knew how to win a position—top position—in a mental king of the mountain battle.

She would have to be careful not to let him undermine her own decision ... until she made up her mind—if she was going to change her mind about him, about them in the first place.

Boy—was she losing her mind.

"Looks like Andrea's got your attention beat, kid. She'd concentrating harder than you."

"But not on me," Logan muttered. "I've long passed my 12 reps."

"No you haven't. Two more," Andrea responded with a smile.

He grumbled, but only half-heartedly. Andrea looked up and across Logan and found her eyes caught in Eric's. She smiled and shared the moment with him.

Her next patient was Portia and she was not nearly as cooperative. She was rude to both her attendant, to Andrea and Eric. For once, even his charm had little effect. Andrea was starting to feel the strain from the night before. She grabbed an apple and nibbled on it while she sat back and watched Portia complain and fight against her disability as she worked with simple hand weights.

When Portia dropped the weights and they hit against the top of her foot Andrea swallowed the scream, her fist clenched around the apple.

"Every wonder why your therapist comes here every day to put up with your sorry complaints?" Eric broke in at last. Andrea glanced up, surprised, and shot him a hard stare. It wasn't uncommon for patients to be antagonistic. Normally, she was quicker on her feet.

"Portia, two more," she bit off, then took a slow calming breath. "Just two more and you can go back to your room."

"I can't even do one."

"Then you can stay here for the rest of the night."

She stood back and watched Portia struggle through one, then she stop, close her eyes.

"Why do you?"

"Excuse me?" Andrea asked.

"Why do you come here every day? That man the other day spit at you."

Andrea opened her mouth to deny it, then looked at Eric. "It was an accident. And I come here every day because I was here myself. And I wasn't a fighter either—not for myself. People have every right to fight against this. It's not always the most natural thing to do when you just want to curl up and die."

She tossed her apple into the waste basket not far away, then looked at Portia—really looked at her. She was an angry teen, whose friends had walked away from her, whose family had little to do with her. She'd been living with her boyfriend when he'd beat her senseless and left her in this state. She blamed everyone verbally for her accident, but inside she blamed herself.

Portia frowned and put down the weight. Her dark eyes stared at Andrea, shock or awed, or something in between. "Why?"

"Why was I here?" she looked around, fully aware that Eric was there with her. She was normally open to sharing her own story when her patients were ready to listen, but she was more than a little irked at him for forcing the issue, and aware that she had never shared it with him.

"Not here—but down in the children's wing. I had fallen into a coma one summer. Diabetic thing I have to deal with," she said to Portia, trying to make light of it. "When I woke up, I didn't have the use of my bodily functions. I lived here for nearly a year. Did my school work here, when I was able."

"A year?"

"I was sick and I gave up. I was young and my friends were out at the ocean, playing in the waves. It's easy to give up, you know that and so do I. There's so much more out there to see and do," she went into a few of the details about how she had not been able to hold herself up on her legs, how she had to teach her arms to cooperate with her brain.

"Was your therapist mean and pushy?"

"She got me to do what I needed to do. I'm still alive and kicking, aren't I?"

"How old were you?" Portia asked.

"That time I was seven."

"Seven?" Portia repeated.

"That time," Eric murmured and she looked at him. He turned away from her before she could read his face and paced to the window. She put a hand to her stomach where the guilt rested.

"You had more than one coma?"

"No ..." she said and turned back to Portia, "not like that first one. I wasn't always here because I was sick. When I was old enough, I started to volunteer out here. Then when I was in high school, my sister died. In the middle of that I wouldn't eat and ... someone would hand me the wrong thing and I started having some problems. I had to come out here for therapy. For awhile after that, it was hard to come back. And very hard to deal with," she said carefully, more for Eric's benefit.

"But you're here now," Portia pointed out.

"Because it's like home. Why not work here, when it feels like home? You finished for today?"

"I've got one more," she reminded Andrea.

"And we can add it to the work you have for Monday."

Portia looked at the weights and moved her hand slowly over them, as if to pick them up. She wouldn't be able to at this point, Andrea knew, as her muscles had relaxed, but she was considering it. It was a small step.

Andrea signaled an attendant who came and helped Portia into her wheel chair to take her back to her room. This time, Portia didn't fight against the help. She would again, Andrea knew, and she would eventually get stronger and walk out of the center on her own.

Left alone with Eric, her appointments finished for the day, she turned to face him. He was still standing alone by the window. She could be angry with him for firing up at Portia, or she could deal with his own angry emotions.

Sometimes, retreat was the best.

There were other therapists in the room with their patients, so she gathered her bag together and signaled for him to follow. When they were

in the privacy of her office, she took a seat behind her desk, expecting the questions.

Instead he looked around, taking in the details of the photographs scattered on the walls and bookcases, the old antique rocking horse she'd found at an antique road show, the globe that had been her grandfather's, her diplomas and the photo from college she'd had cropped to take him out of the picture. What would he say if he knew she'd kept the original and all the pictures she'd had of him?

Finally, he sat down, and leaned back against the seat. He studied the items on her desk. A paper weight that had been given in recognition of her work with another center and the mug she kept on her desk to hold her pens. It was a familiar mug, from a familiar coffee house they both knew very well in Boston.

She linked her fingers together in her lap under her desk to keep from reaching for the mug. She often held it, turning it in her hands, thinking of him. That wasn't something she was ready for him to know either.

"As a lawyer," he said at last as he studied the items on her desk, "you run across people who do what they need to do to survive. They lie, they cheat, they hide from the law and in denial from the truth. They curl up in bed and hide under the covers. I'm trying to come to terms with that being part of who you were in Boston, and therefore being part of who we were. I meant what I said earlier. I want to know who you are, for real this time."

He finally looked at her and she dug at the courage within to hold his gaze. His eyes were always the strongest part of him. He seemed to see more in a person when he looked at them ... more in the printed page, more when he read the word of God. Did he know she'd left before because she could not face looking him in the eyes? She'd been afraid of what he would see, what he would find, when the truest parts of herself were open to him.

"I can't promise, Eric, that I will always tell you or anyone else the worst of things. Even with my friends and parents I have a hard time. I recoil from the response that comes with it."

"What happened when Jenny died? What happened that sent you away from this place?"

She shrugged. "Just ... I couldn't be her. And no one expected that of me, but maybe I wanted to be Everybody liked her. She was like a burst of life. She was always strong and healthy and happy. When I was ... after she died I shut down for awhile. Not mentally, just physically. I hated it. All the attention was suddenly focused on me and I hated it. You can't know what that's like."

She blinked back the tears. "I didn't want to be someone my mom and dad had to grieve and worry over. They never had to worry about Jenny, but they worried they *should* have. I didn't want to be someone my mom had to worry over when she ... when we were all dealing with Jenny's death. The therapy here was more ... to keep things going. To keep the physical part of who I am in line with the mental part. I knew I couldn't shut down, but I nearly did."

"So you ran from that."

"Eventually. It was a conscious decision to go to Amy that day in high school when she was looking so miserable. I knew what it was like to hate oneself," Andrea lifted her hands and folded them together on top of her desk this time and leaned forward. "Look, I can't promise I will tell you the worst of things, but I will promise not to run from that anymore. If you are here to see who I am, then that's what will happen."

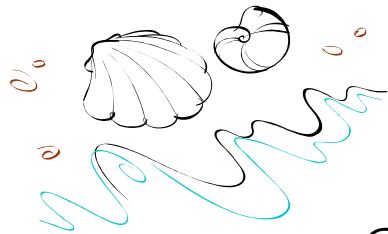
"And you think that's going to send me back to Boston?"

"This isn't a competition, Eric."

"No? Then think of it as a war—"

"Between us?"

"No—" he said and smiled, the look familiar and knowing, "but we'll hold our plans close, Andrea, until we both know what we're fighting for and what we're fighting."



Chapter 11

You've always been married to the water," Amy murmured as she stood on deck with Ham, the night dark and quiet. Above them stars were more plentiful and bright, away from the bright lights of civilization. The waves lapped against the edge of the boat, soft music to soften the volatile emotions she was feeling. She had prepared herself to deal with this, but it wasn't with the bitterness she had expected—not when he seemed more alive than he had in years.

She'd brought him a stack of books, an assortment of bestsellers from the last 100 years. He would read them all.

They were alone, looking out into the blackness of the ocean.

"My father once told me that sailors can only share vows with the woman that sends them on, her arms of mercy the waves that speed him from port to port."

There was a wistfulness to his voice that surprised Amy. "You don't ever talk about your father."

"Not much to tell. He was married to the sea," he smiled and slipped an arm around his shoulders. "And I have to thank him for giving me a love for it. It might have been the only gift he could give. It's produced my children, for me, hasn't it?"

Amy smiled softly and leaned into him. Mitch, John, and so many others ... they were all tied to the sea. They all thrived in the surf. It was always changing, but never gone.

"I remember when I first saw you with your mamma outside my station. Your dad was away with his team. You must have been two, maybe. She was trying to distract you with sand castles and keep an eye on your brother who was playing in the surf ... but you were always called to the water. So she was constantly bringing you back to dry ground."

"She was frustrated," Amy remembered, not from her own memories, but from having heard the story many times before. Ham had told her, and long ago, her mom had told her.

"Not with you, rarely with you. She was tired of being alone, with not being able to share the moments she had with you and Ryan with your father. Summer's an important time around here—an important time for baseball. Then he would come home and you were a family again, and she would forgive him for being away."

"I walked down and picked you up and said, 'this is Lance's little girl. She's such a beautiful thing. Got her mamma's chin and her father's eyes. Determination and vision. It will take her to far places.'"

"The vision's a little blurry right now. The feet still stuck."

He chuckled. It was odd, Amy thought, that he had always chuckled when she'd seemed the most uncertain ... not in a mean way, but he'd always seemed to know that everything would be okay. It was so easy to lean on him knowing that he knew everything would be okay.

And she'd depended on him for that.

"I've been thinking that I might have kept you from really figuring it all out."

"You gave me dreams—"

"Dreams mean nothing until you've got the boat under your feet and the sail primed for a tour of the world," he looked over his boat, gave her a hard squeeze. "Adventures are out there for you, Amy. You've got to find your own boat and sail into your own waters."

He tipped his head toward the ocean and Amy looked out into the dark night and thought of the adventures she couldn't see.

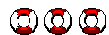
She stepped forward and put her hands on the rail, looking out into the ocean, thinking of Ham. He would be out here, in the dark, at night, she thought. *He's really going away.*

And he's leaving me. To what? To this?

Ham stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "You can't always know where your boat is going to sail. I always tried to get you to guess, or to think, but you can't always know."

She closed her eyes and listened to his voice. It would be this she missed in the months to come.

"You've got to find your own way, your own dreams. You're made of good, strong stock, and you've got a good foundation under you with God. Faith isn't blind, Amy. When you walk with your heavenly Father, you are in the light."



Amy followed Andrea's gaze as it wandered away from their pastor one more time. It seemed Eric had become friends with Derek as they sat next to each other on the other side of the church. Could the man stay out of anything? Amy wondered, thinking of Derek.

She tried to accept his presence. She couldn't fault him for finding a home within the family of her church. It was made up of people who worshiped freely and loved easily. It was informal, a place for the

skaters and beach crowd that found their way to Christ. Her church family was a group of people that had given her safety, and for the most part, accepted her.

From the beginning Derek had done the same.

She sighed and turned back to the pastor, trying to focus.

When the sermon ended, Mitch took his place on stage with the other band members. This morning he played with the new band members. The song they invited the congregation to sing was a beautiful, soft melody.

It was good to see Mitch back—to know that he wasn't completely gone. He had led the music for ... well, since before she had become a Christian, more than seven years.

Amy looked at Chloe. She stood beside Amy, worshiping, her eyes closed, not on the stage or Mitch. But she was happy, also, to have him back—if only for this one worship service. The next few months would be hard on her.

When the music ended, people began to move out of the building. When Amy turned to Andrea, she found her friend following Eric's path across the room. He was coming toward her. Thankfully, Derek had disappeared.

Amy opened her mouth to break the trance Andrea seemed to have fallen into, but was stopped when Mitch said her name.

She turned and noted that Chloe was holding his hand. Their fingers were linked loosely with ease and familiarity.

"Chloe and I are going to go get something to eat. You want to go?"

Amy looked at Chloe. She had dressed in a simple light blue shirt with three-quarter length sleeves and a denim knee length skirt that was complimented by Andrea's silver necklace and earrings. On Andrea it looked elegant; on Chloe, it just made her seem more radiant. She was

happy, still tired, and not quite relaxed, but at ease with Mitch. She didn't even need to ask if Chloe was okay. It was in her friend's eyes.

And Chloe needed Mitch more.

"No—I have other plans."

Like, she noted as she turned around, figuring out what was going on between Andrea and Eric.

"You want to make a run for it?" Amy asked.

"What?"

"You don't seem so upset that Eric's coming this way."

"I don't carry a grudge like you."

"Sure you do."

"Andrea, Amy," Eric slipped in between the row in front of them and leaned on the back of one of the chairs. "You two ladies are looking fine this morning."

Andrea pushed her hair over her shoulder, her hand not quite steady. "Thank you. I saw you and Derek came together."

"We saw each other coming in this morning."

"You guys want to go grab some lunch?" he asked, and looked at Amy. "I'd love to see what local restaurants you guys like."

Andrea dropped her hand and fingered the bracelet on her other wrist. "I, ah"

"Actually," Amy jumped in slipping a hand through Andrea's arm, "we're going to have lunch together. Andrea and I. Girl talk. It's been a busy weekend."

Eric nodded and looked at Andrea, "Then I'll see you later?"

Andrea nodded as he left and dropped down gracefully to grab her Bible and purse from the floor.

"Ordinarily, I would thank you for being so quick," she said as they made their way out the back, "but you didn't have to save me this time."

"Of course I did—" Amy said, then stopped and turned fully to face her friend; feet apart, and hand on her hip. "Or didn't I? What are you not telling me?"

"Just—" Andrea shrugged and moved out of the way to allow other people by. "We talked."

"When? About what?"

"Yesterday—and Amy, don't look like that. It's not ... it's not what you think."

"And what *am* I thinking?"

Andrea shook her head and grabbed Amy's arm to tug her toward her car. As they'd come from her apartment that morning, Andrea had driven the three of them to church.

"Look, I was going to say *no* to his lunch invitation on my own, so it's not like I've changed my mind, it's just that he ... that I—"

"That you..." Amy prodded.

Andrea closed her eyes and sighed. "I'll tell you all about it later—when we're not in the middle of the church parking lot. Where do you want to go for lunch?"

"Let's grab something and head back to my place."

Andrea sighed and looked over the roof of her car at Amy. "Do we have to?"

"Chloe will head back when Mitch leaves. I don't want her to be alone," Amy opened the passenger's side door to Andrea's car. "Besides, one of the three of us has to study."

Andrea rolled her eyes dramatically and started her car, "That would be you."



A seagull cried out and swooped toward the ocean. Mitch stopped, his hand loosely holding Chloe's, and watched the bird's descent.

He took in a long, deep breath and savored the ocean smell. He felt sand under his feet, the ocean in his view, and Chloe by his side.

"Do you miss it?"

"Not like I thought I would," he said. "But I was just thinking that I do miss being able to share this with you. Walks on the beach ... the sunset, like that first night."

"It's beautiful in the mountains," Chloe prompted.

"Yeah. I want to share that with you, too. Have you ever been to the Upper Springs?"

"I lived there for a few years."

When Mitch looked at her in surprise, she shrugged. "More than a few. It's not a time in my life I like to remember. All that stuff I told you about my dad happened when we lived there. My dad had a job at the mine, and when he lost it, we stayed for a few more years. Then one day my mom got tired of living ... how we were living, and she left him. He came down here, they reconciled for a few months, then she sent him packing and hasn't looked back since. He'd moved back ... the last I heard."

She let go of his hand and started walking, dragging her feet slowly in the sand. "I've worried a little, thinking that my dad might still be living up there. I didn't want you to know. I didn't want you to worry about arresting him when he needs to be arrested. If he's still alive, and he's not in prison, then he's still getting into trouble."

"Chloe Jones. Is your father a Jones?"

"Yes ... Tom—Thomas Jones," she fumbled a bit, the name sounding odd on her tongue. "Have you ... had problems?"

He shrugged. "No—but I would like to know just in case. I can ask around if you want. I can see if people know what happened to him."

"You're going to do it whether I ask you to or not." Chloe sighed and turned away, but Mitch stopped her, putting his hands on her forearms and turning her to face him.

"It doesn't change how I feel about you."

"I know."

"Is this going to keep you from coming to visit? Will it be a problem?"

"Before you it was. I've never been back. Not to see my dad, not to go with Amy to her uncle's. I've never gone back to see my friends or walk the trails in the mountain paths I knew by heart. You could escape into the mountains from the arguing and the fighting."

"And when you came here," Mitch added, "you found the waves and the sand and the half pipe."

"The smooth sound of the wheels of a skateboard rolling underneath," Chloe said with a smile. "I learned in Upper Springs. Street surfing. Someone rides a bike with a rope tied to the back and you hold on--until you let go or they run you into a tree."

"I had a few knocks like that in my childhood."

"I don't know how either of us made it through childhood. Knowing you're up there has made me pray about it for the first time," Chloe slid her arms around Mitch and closed her eyes. "I've chosen not to see my dad, and maybe he's chosen not to see me. My mom won't talk to me. Neither of my parents knows about my relationship with Christ. I don't know that I'm ready to see them, but there is a part of me that wants them to know, that thinks that maybe if they did know and they could receive Him as well ... maybe the past could be forgotten."



After changing into shorts and tees, Andrea and Amy settled on the small balcony with their hamburgers and propped their legs up on the rusted railing. Amy had her criminal justice book in her lap and alternately ate while she read. Andrea had grabbed a magazine and a spare set of clothes from the trunk of her car.

"I was thinking," Amy said at length. "Remember that Christmas you went up with me to my Uncle Pete's?"

"Mmm."

It was common for Amy to join her Uncle Pete at Christmas, but not with her friends. But Andrea's family had been in need of something new ... and her Uncle Pete had been very perceptive.

To their needs and to hers ...

"You were thinking about doing it this year?" Andrea asked.

"Just thinking. How did you know?"

"Because Mitch is there and Chloe is here. And Chloe wants to be with Mitch. It's neat to see them together."

"Maybe it would be good for her to get away from here. Besides, don't you think the two of them should be close around Christmas?"

Andrea smiled as she thumbed through a few pages of her magazine. "Mitch is certainly not going to get the time off. He and Ham have always worked the Christmas shift at the station."

"We could have a big celebration. Your parents could come. The cabin's big enough."

"My brother's baby's due around Christmas. I know mom and dad had planned to work around the inlaw thing. But maybe ... maybe it would be good to give Brian time with them—Speaking of that ... with everything that's happened recently, what if you and Chloe and I found a place and moved in together?"

Amy looked down at her book, turned a page, and sighed. "The rent you pay on your place is more than twice what we pay here. And that's with two of us."

"Is that it?" Andrea asked, setting her magazine aside and dropping her feet to the ground. "I know why you didn't move in with my parents when things went so wrong with you and your dad. I know why you didn't want to room together when I came back from Harvard. Come on, Amy—we have to be passed that now."

"Andrea, it's just—"

"No—I'm going to get this out because it's always stood between us. I know it's not really about the money. You put Jenny between us. I hate that. I hate that you throw her into my face and prefer to live here with nothing in your apartment then to move in and share what I have. I hate coming here. Every time it reminds me that she's not here."

She stood and looked over the balcony. "It was an accident. You were out with your friends, doing the wrong thing, and Jenny was out with Matthew Brooks doing the wrong thing. Everyone knows why they were going out to Back Bend, Amy. And it wasn't just to talk."

"I'm sorry," Amy murmured. She set her own book aside and stood next to Andrea. They faced another group of apartments on the other side. A thin strip of concrete divided to two buildings. "If you've thought it was about Jenny, I'm sorry. Maybe it is. Part of me just wants to know I can make it on my own."

"Amy, if one of us was to get married, we wouldn't have the chance to move in together and have that time."

"Are you thinking of getting married?"

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"But it's been on your mind," Amy noted and looked at Andrea. "You're blushing. You are thinking it! I can't believe it. What did happen between you and Eric?"

"Nothing—it's not that. I just Can we finish one conversation before we move onto something else? One doesn't have anything to do with the other."

"I'm not so sure of that, but you keep telling yourself," Amy said as she sat back down, propped her feet up and tried to deal with the anxiety. Ham and Joe were leaving in the morning. She didn't want to think about Andrea's idea. Not yet.

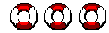
Moving meant change. She was so tired of change.

"I'll pray about it," she said at last. "That's more than I've ever done before. And I'll talk to Chloe."

"That's good enough for me."

"You're hopeless."

"Nope, just paying you back."



Derek noted Amy's truck parked outside the beach station. He closed his door, locked it, checked the handle and detoured around the station on the sandy sidewalk.

The beach was empty except for two spots of color where towels were dropped. He recognized Amy's bag, an aged nylon beach patrol duffel. He walked forward until his feet hit the wet sand, knowing she would have to walk past him. He stood alone, felt the slight chill in the air and stuck his hands in the pockets of his wind breaker. He'd never been one to surf winter waves. They could be powerful, as winter storms dropped in from the north.

But the current was also cold.

In the waves he spotted two figures waiting to catch a wave. The first wore blue, was male, and rode in on a blue and white board. His delivery was decent, but the waves were poor. He dropped into the water before the wave reached the shore and brushed the water from his blond hair.

"How's it going?" Derek called out, recognizing Cage as one of their regulars.

"We had hopes," he said, looking back out to sea. "An hour ago the waves were raged. Now look. She'll be lucky if she doesn't have to paddle in."

Cage walked over to his towel, braced his board in the sand, and toweled off.

"You know Amy—right?" he asked.

Derek turned, faced him, and nodded.

"See if you can get what's out of her. I think she needed passion today—from the waves. It didn't happen."

Passion. Derek thought, was one thing that got him into trouble.

He watched her sit out in the ocean. The waves rolled in, but the morning seemed soothing, calm and peaceful—grating, he knew, on her turbulent emotions.

She would have to come in sometime.

Amy knew Derek waited for her, but she sat astride her board and watched the waves roll toward shore, slowly pushing her forward. Turning her head, she watched the water boil. It's energy, life, was dozing ... it was how her brother had termed it. A surfer wanted the ocean awake, alive, even angry. She figured she had one more chance to catch something. Anything.

It had been hard to say goodbye. She'd gone to the dock, stood with John, and watched as Joe and Ham cast off. They were excited, joking and laughing and singing old songs of the sea. Songs, Amy imagined, Ham's father had taught him.

And she thought about what he said.

There's adventures out there for you, Amy. You've got to find your own boat and sail into your own waters.

Part of her simply wanted to lower her head to her board, close her eyes and slowly sink into the water ... let it rock her into a deep, deep sleep. It wasn't the answer ... nor was it an option she had ever deemed right.

She measured the position of the sun, coming up over the horizon. She had time to go in, shower off the salt water before pounding everything out in the gym.

But first she would have to get through Derek. She was ready for a good fight and she was sorry she wanted one with him—but if he kept standing between where she was and where she needed to go, he was going to be in her way.

When the next wave came, she took it, wishing for the rush of the waves that barely carried her toward shore. The water rushed, but it was unstable.

Finally she dropped into the water and swam a few long strokes of the distance.

When she came out of the water, Derek was still waiting.

She brushed water from her face and walked passed him.

"I really don't want to see you."

"You okay?"

"No—" she said and braced her board in the sand. She grabbed her towel from the top of her bag, rubbed it over her face. She was tired, weary. She wanted him to go away. She wanted someone to lean on.

Ham and Joe were out on the open ocean. Somewhere.

Andrea wanted her to move in with her.

Chloe. Someone had attacked Chloe.

Her probation wasn't even over. The probation that loomed over her because of the accident that night on the Back Bend. The accident that had taken Jenny.

She wasn't ready.

And yet, she needed to be ready. Andrea was thinking about getting married ... even if it was in the far recess of her mind. Chloe ... Mitch would ask her eventually. It was so obvious.

The words, the grief and the fear, wanted to spill out on their own. She would have to talk to someone.

It wouldn't, she promised herself as she studied the station, be Derek.

"Look, I've had a horrible morning," she said and cast a glance at Derek. He stood solid, strong. She knew what his arms felt like, what they would feel like around her. She knew she could turn to him, turn into him and he would hold on.

She just didn't know if she could back up from that. She wasn't ready for what that part of her needed.

"If you don't get out of my way, it's going to get worse."

"Amy—"

"You're not Ham," she shouted and jerked when she felt him step closer. "So go away."

"I'm not," he murmured, "I know you're hurting."

"You can't know."

"Maybe not. Amy—I'm sorry if what happened broke your trust in me. I can step back, give you time, but I can't step away."

"Won't."

"You don't know that, either."

"It's just been a horrible weekend, Derek and that ... what happened, was just in the middle of it. I'm not ready for what you're offering..."

She dropped down to her bag and noticed the folded note on top. She'd stuck it in last night before tossing the bag in the back of her truck, knowing she would be heading out this morning and knowing she would need it. It was a note Mitch had sent her through Chloe. She knew the verse even before she reached for it.

It was the verse on her board. Mitch had known, waves permitting, that she would go out. God's love, His protection, were greater than the ocean. More powerful than the force that drove the tides.

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:18.

But the bold red words on the note surprised her—bold harsh words written across Mitch's fine print.

It was supposed to be you.

She froze, swallowed and tried to take in a breath. Someone had hurt Chloe. Someone had gone for her, messed up, and hurt Chloe.

And someone had been around last night, this morning, had taken her note, had taken the time to write the message in red.

Someone wanted her to know.



Chapter 12

Her fingers tightened on the note.
It was supposed to be you.

"Amy."

Amy felt, rather than heard, Derek move behind her. She swallowed against the fear and dropped back down to her bag, placing the note carefully in the side pocket, careful of her fingerprints.

"Just a note ... from Mitch," she evaded, drawing the strap over her shoulder and standing in one smooth motion.

Her heart was pounding. *Go away!*

Someone had hurt Chloe.

Walk—she ordered herself, when she wanted to flee. She drew in a deep breath, looked around. The beach was nearly empty. The station house was almost bleak with inactivity. A few cars dotted the parking lot and down the beach she saw a lone runner coming toward her.

Amy stopped, felt the rise of panic, and reminded herself that it would have been more odd to see no one running on the beach. It was a public place. People blurred together, moving back and forth.

She drew in a deep breath, blinked and concentrated on the warm sand that curled around her toes. She would not, she promised herself, have a panic attack. There were other chances for someone to do something. Easier, then on an open beach in front of a police station.

It hadn't happened here.

She'd left her bag in her truck overnight. It could have happened before she got to the beach. Someone could have stood outside her apartment as she slept.

As Chloe slept.

Why give it to her? Why put her on her guard? Just to scare her? Or were they taking the attention off of Chloe?

Amy hurried up the steps to the deck and yanked open the glass doors. She heard the sound of an oscillating fan and the murmur of the police radio. Her bare feet hit the cool tile. It was odd to feel normality when her heart beat double time.

She was moving toward Ham's old office before she realized what she was doing. Ham was gone. The emotion caught her breath. She stopped mid-step. Ham wasn't here anymore.

"Derek's not in yet."

Amy glanced over at John who sat at his desk, much as Mitch used to do. His feet were propped on the desk, a clipboard in his lap as he filled out reports.

"I know—I just...wasn't thinking," Amy said and forced a laugh. "I was looking for Ham."

"Amy—" John stood, placed the clipboard down and walked over to her. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I just-It just really wanted Ham."

Someone had gone after her and hurt one of her friends. She looked at John, thought of their days together patrolling the beach. He had a family. Two little girls. She felt the words, the fear, lodge in her throat.

"I'll be all right," she promised and forced a smile. "I have to be all right."

Someone had hurt Chloe.

John wasn't the only police officer she knew.



"Mom, why did you put Eric in a closet?"

Susan Lyons looked up and found her daughter standing in the doorway of her office. She closed the legal brief, set it aside, and leaned back in her chair.

The offices at Lyons and Lyons were all roomy, with mahogany molding and grey carpet. The furnishings were sleek, the chairs comfortable. When someone had an appointment, they were put at ease, made to feel like they were at home.

"What would you have said if we gave him John Delucas's old office?"

Andrea thought of the large open office with the view of the beach that ran along the horizon. The picture window was only half the size of those in either her mother and father's, but it still let in the California sunlight.

"He's in a closet. His legs don't even fit in there."

Susan smiled. "He is a tall one, isn't he? A month ago, you wouldn't have wanted him in this building at all. Your father and I gave him temporary space, just in case he wanted out quickly. Has something changed?"

Andrea shrugged. "Maybe. We have an understanding, now."

She wasn't as comfortable analyzing why Eric was suddenly in her life as simply accepting that he was back. "He came out to the center

on Saturday. We spent the day together. I guess you could say we're friends again. Our friendship was always important. I told him I'd take him to lunch—somewhere local."

Susan checked her watch. "It's kind of early for lunch."

"I'm a little early. And he has a date at the courthouse just after noon."

"That's right. He's working with your father on the Jeremiah case." Susan ran a pen through her fingers. "We have not made it easy on him, but he's taken it. He hasn't run. Andrea, that should tell you why he wants to be here."

"We're both figuring that out."

Susan nodded and opened her long drawer and pulled out a key ring. "Then how about you show him to his new office? He should be back from his appointment soon."

Andrea stepped to her mother's desk and looked at the family photo her mom kept beside her phone. It was a shot of her parents, her brother and his wife, and herself at her brother's graduation. Soon, there would be grandchildren in the picture.

She held out her hand and took the keys.

Eric had taken a long road to her, following the convoluted instructions her parents had given him, without complaint. It was time, she thought, that she gave Eric something back.

"By the way, where are you taking him for Lunch? San Padro?"

Andrea shook her head and smiled. "Kuzcos."

Susan laughed. "You're not making it any easier on him either."

Andrea nodded and started to walk out, then stopped, turned and looked at the photo that sat on her mother's desk. "You never pushed me to talk about him before," she said and met her mother's gaze. "How long have you been talking to him?"

"He met us at the door of the waiting room when we arrived, carefully relayed what the nurse had told him—even though he was still struggling with the surprise of it all. He waited outside with your father and he was on his knees in the chapel when he needed to get away, be alone, and deal with the fact that you refused to see him. I never was able to turn him away."



Anna was not at the police station or her home. Amy parked in front of the small white house with the black trim, not knowing what else to do, where else to go. She stared at the house, tried to think. The house was black and white—the way Anna saw everything. The yard was bare, the grass cut short. The windows were dark, without life.

Amy looked at the bag in the passenger's seat. She needed to talk to someone.

Derek had been with her when she found the note. She could have turned, looked at him, and he would have taken the note out of her hands, taken her to safety.

But she couldn't face him, now. If she'd told him, she wouldn't have been able to resist his support, his protection. It would have been too easy to remember what she felt when he'd kissed her ... when she'd kissed him back. If they ... whoever they were ... watched her, they watched him. If she had turned into his comfort. If she had turned to him

She sighed and looked back at Anna's house, pushing thoughts and feelings about Derek away. She couldn't deal with that now. If Anna wasn't at home, it was very likely that she was relaxing. Somewhere.

She shifted gears and minutes later drove through the gates of her father's home. She frowned at the cars that lined the circular drive, but it gave her hope that maybe Anna was with her dad.

"Dad?" she called out as she opened the heavy front door.

Vince Jamison stepped into the entry way stirring a drink. He was dressed for the pool in designer trunks, and because he was Vince, a matching t-shirt. Amy rolled her eyes. *Did anyone work on a Monday morning?*

"He's out by the pool. Everything okay?"

"Fine."

She walked through the house, stiff from her dry wetsuit and pushed her now tangled hair away from her face. She saw, even before she pulled back the French doors, that the blond buxomly woman in the pool was not Anna. She pulled back on the irritation before she remembered all the buxomly women her father had drawn since her mother's death—and not all of them blond.

Her father sat at a pool side table with his laptop. A towel was tossed to the side, but the stone around him was dry, a tale-tale sign that he had been back at work for some time. His perfectly shaved head glistened under the sun ... it was a look that suited him, and had, her entire life.

When her feet hit the hot concrete, she remembered she was barefoot. She glanced toward the pool, then back at her father.

"Daddy, where's Anna?"

He didn't even acknowledge her presence, keeping his eyes trained on his work. "At work, I imagine."

"It's her day off."

"It's not my job to keep up with her."

Amy frowned and fought back the rising irritation as she glanced back at the blond. She spotted another dark haired beauty sunning herself across the pool; Lily, Vince's long time girl friend.

Amy walked forward until her feet touched the concrete shaded by the table's umbrella. "You and Anna broke up again?"

"Adults don't break up, honey. Just move on."

"Yeah—but their hearts break."

Lance Carpenter looked up at his daughter for the first time. "Amy, we've discussed this before. My relationships are none of your—"

"None of my business, I know," Amy felt the desperation and hurt rise. How did one tell their father that they were afraid?

Daddy, I need to talk to you. Daddy, someone's been watching me. I don't know what to do. Please help me.

But she didn't have the relationship with her father that would lead her to turn to him, or him to her, when trouble came along. She didn't know how to tell him.

She was afraid he wouldn't care.

Her father dropped his gaze and went back to work. "Was there something you needed?"

"I was looking for Anna."

She turned and swallowed against the rising hurt as Vince held the door open for her on his way into the back. She walked through the house, her bare feet slapping against the hardwood flooring. It echoed in the empty space. She missed Ham. He'd been her father when she'd needed one to turn to.

Amy jumped in her truck, nearly peeled out of the long drive and through the iron gate, then took a deep breath and focused. Her hands tightened around the wheel. Her palms were damp with moisture.

"Help me."

The words came out, a whisper. A prayer. She could drive around, but eventually she would be out of gas. She would have to stop. She would have to go into a gas station. Alone.

Someone had been coming around.

She pulled to stop at a red light and took a deep breath, focusing on the light. She needed someone. She had to tell someone.



Eric walked up the wide front stairs and turned the corner to go into his office. He stopped when he found the door open. The stack of

papers he'd left on the top that morning was gone. The frame that held both a photo of his parents and one of himself and Andrea was missing.

"Looking for something?"

He turned at her voice. She was standing in the hallway, looking fresh and pretty in a pair of rose pants and a tank of white with matching roses. The straps were made of lace, pleated. She held up her hand, like a model, and on her finger dangled a set of keys.

"What's going on?"

She laughed and the sound shot straight to his heart. He hadn't heard that free laugh in years. Grabbing his hand, she tugged. "Come on."

Then she led him up another flight of stairs and down the hall into an open office. The blinds were raised, showing Basin Springs all the way to the beach.

"I had Margie call to tell me you were back. What do you think?"

Eric turned around. She was smiling at him as she waited for his response. Smiling ... it was hard to think beyond the surprise. "What's going on?"

"It was silly for you to be in a closet, Eric, when there was a free office." Andrea stepped forward, held out the keys. "It was my decision. I think it's always been my decision. Even if you and I aren't meant to be as a couple, it's your choice now if you remain a permanent fixture around here."

Eric reached up and took the keys, capturing her hand in his. He looked down into her eyes. The fear was gone, he thought. She was a little nervous. She was accepting.

Both encouraged him.

He took the keys and dropped his hand, turning slowly to take in his new office. He had a real desk chair that would support his height and a desk that was larger than the closet he was leaving behind. She'd put

his frame on his desk and his books sporadically on his shelves. He would have to bring the rest from his apartment.

"You've been hard at work."

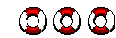
"I've had time. You were supposed to be back here an hour ago."

Eric turned around and looked at her. "I have an appointment this afternoon, so I had planned to take an early lunch. Can I take you out, say thanks?"

"Are you still up for experiencing some of the local scene?"

"If the local scene will take a lawyer in a suit."

"We won't give them a choice."



Amy pushed the doorbell and stepped back, taking in Anna's house. She'd been to the police station, then around town, before finally getting the call that Anna had signed off after spending the last week on a case. Family argument turned ugly, Amy thought, remembering the talk around the beach station.

Anna answered the door. She still wore her grey slacks from her suit, her button down shirt was untucked.

She looked a little surprised. Amy didn't blame her. She was still a little shocked that she was standing on Anna's front stoop in the first place.

"Amy—sorry, I just got home."

"I'm kind of glad I didn't wake you."

"You've been at the beach?"

Amy looked down and realized she was still in her wet suit. She tightened her hand on her bag. "Yeah. Anna, Ham's gone and I don't know who else to go to."

Anna stepped back and held open the door. "Come in. Why don't you go on in the bathroom and change? Get the sand out of your hair. Whatever's wrong, it'll help, I promise."

She soothed, and calmed and prodded until she showed Amy to the bathroom. Amy shut the door and turned to look at herself in the mirror. No wonder Anna had been so kind. The person Amy saw was more reminiscent of the girl from her late teens than the woman of the present.

It wasn't until she climbed out of the shower and tugged on a fresh pair of jeans and a t-shirt from her bag, that she noticed the sleek and feminine side to Anna's tastes. The bathroom walls were a gentle blue. A set of sage candles, at varying heights and sizes sat to the side of the counter. Taking a deep breath, she recognized an underlying scent of lavender she never would have attributed with Anna. The hand soap was shaped like long, thin leaves.

Amy drew a comb through her hair to work through the tangles as she dealt with the fear that had logged itself in her stomach. How odd it was to feel so alone.

But she wasn't, she reminded herself. She was no longer the lost girl who had no one to turn to since her mother and brother were gone.

I should have told Derek, she admitted, not to herself, but to God. You placed him there, in my time of need, and I turned away. I'm so scared. God—what's going on?

Anna was sitting at her kitchen table reading the newspaper, when Amy walked in. Anna had changed into a loose pair of blue and white capris, a simple white tee, her feet bare.

Amy set her bag on the table and sat in the chair beside Anna. She placed the note on the table in front of Anna.

"This was in my bag when I finished surfing this morning. Mitch wrote the verse. The rest—"

She shrugged her shoulders. Anna dropped her eyes, then almost immediately looked back up at Amy.

"Was there anyone else around?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't know. It was just me and Cage."

Anna shook her head. "Real name?"

"Daniel Morey." Amy shook her head again and tried to clear it. "We were both in the water ... then Derek was there."

"Did he see this?"

She shook her head. "No—I didn't tell him. I didn't think—I know I should have—"

And it occurred to herself for the first time that Derek had been there by her bag. Had he known? "All of this started after he came to town."

"Mmm," was all Anna said. She stood and went to grab her phone. She dialed in a few numbers and looked back at Amy. "Gut reactions shouldn't be discounted. Unless they're yours. You were at a station. You could have started the investigation—"

Anna broke off, turned back to the phone as someone responded. Amy folded her hands on the table, looked down and studied them. Her hands were beginning to shake.

"All right." Anna said and sat back down, placing a pad and pen on the table in front of Amy. "Let's start over and I'll stop being the judgmental cop. I called in a favor. An officer will drop by and get this note in a little while. It's going to be analyzed. If there are fingerprints, we'll get them. For now, I want you to tell me what you're thinking."

Amy thought back to the summer, remembered being in the hospital. "Someone put something in my water. Someone attacked Chloe. She was wearing an orange lifeguard jacket and her hair—she'd colored her hair to look like mine. Blond. In the dark, someone wouldn't have known the difference."

Amy looked back at the note. *It was supposed to be you.*

With the antenna of her cordless phone Anna pushed the note away. "Stay here with me, Amy, and let's work this out."



If Eric had expected a quiet dining experience, Andrea knew he was surprised. A quiet restaurant was more her style, but it was also the type of place they would have gone together as a couple. Kuzcos was dark and the music turned up. She led him over to a triangular table and handed him a paper menu.

He looked up, around, taking in the decor that was partly left over from its days as a Chinese food establishment and partly a nod to the beach, to surfers, to skateboarding. The stage was empty, the music a popular CD common on the college campus.

The lunch crowd was sedate. Students had books between them as they studied, others sat alone reading. A group in the corner played a game of cards around their drinks and food, skateboards tucked beneath their chairs. Someone at the counter shouted across the room.

"So this is typical Basin Springs," he said and looked at her. "You told me about this place once."

"I'm sure I did. Amy and I used to come here a lot before I left for grad school. I would say it's more her style, but it's really just part of living in the 'Springs. Being a hometown girl. That kind of thing."

Eric looked at the menu and lifted his eyebrows. "So, do I get a Hula LuAnna or a Monster Sandwich?"

Andrea laughed. "It'll take a little while to explain what these mean. How bout I order? You trust me?"

"What do I have to lose?" He grabbed her hand as she got up from the table. "Remember, I'm buying."

"Try and stop me," she challenged and skirted around the table.

"Who's the new guy?" The cashier asked when Andrea approached. Her name was Julie, Andrea remembered. She'd been a friend of Jenny's in middle school.

"He works with my parents."

"He yours?"

Andrea looked behind her, caught his smile.

"Never mind," Julie said with a laugh. "I have eyes in my own head."

Andrea opened her mouth to argue, then held her tongue. Even if she wasn't certain that a relationship would work out with Eric, the last thing she wanted to do was set him up with someone else.



Awakened gradually from a deep sleep, Amy blinked at the sunlight and looked at the old quilt that covered the bed in Anna's guest room. It was a beautiful heirloom pieced together with many different, faded fabrics. She traced the old quilting with a finger. It wasn't something she would have pictured in Anna's house.

Amy vaguely remembered Anna suggesting she drop off for awhile and offering her a bed in her guest room. She felt numb, tired. Anna had asked if she wanted to stay for a few days. Had she accepted? For once, Amy was too tired to resist.

Deep down, she was scared.

She needed to call Andrea and Chloe. How was she supposed to tell Chloe? She needed her things. Something to wear, her books.

She had not gone to her classes today.

Sitting up, Amy shifted so her legs fell over the side of the bed and she rubbed her hands over her face. She was tired. She missed Ham.

Adventures are out there for you, Amy. You've got to find your own boat and sail into your own waters.

"I don't think this is quite what Ham meant," she said a bit irritably to the empty room. Adventure or not, she still felt alone, her legs quaking as she tried to stand in her own boat.

When a phone rang somewhere else in the house, she stood, took a moment to glance into the mirror, and frowned. She used her

fingers to brush through her hair and straightened her t-shirt. Then she opened the door and followed Anna's voice.

Amy could see her in the living room, at her desk. Amy stopped in the doorway, leaned against the arch. It only took a moment for Amy to realize that Anna was speaking to her father.

"... Lance—I'm not getting into that. Amy's here, she's fine—don't.... Look, don't. Amy's taking a nap. I'll have her call you when she wakes Well, you know what? I'm sure she can tell you what she thinks of you as a father and that has nothing to do with me. Call me back when you can remember I that I'm not one of your employees you can order around."

Wearily, closing her eyes, Anna disconnected. She closed her eyes and set the phone on her desk.

"I'm sorry that you and dad ... broke up."

Anna looked up, smiled weakly. "Maybe we skirt around the edges, but he knows I can't ... love him as he wants when he hates what I believe in. I'm sorry you heard that."

"I'm sorry I always saw you as another one of his women. You were never in that category."

"Let's hope not," Anna said with a smile. "You get a good rest?"

Amy nodded. "I've got to go back to my place. I've got to get some things, my books, some clothes. I need to tell Andrea, Chloe. I don't know what to tell them."

"They're your friends. You'll work it out together."

"I don't want to go alone. I hate to admit that to myself, but I really don't want to go over there by myself."

"Then I'll go."

Amy jumped and spun around.

Derek.

She hadn't seen him in the kitchen, but he had been there, able to watch her, able to see the fear and the grief.

And looking into his eyes, she saw his own pent up frustration.



Chapter 13

Amy edged passed Derek and walked out of Anna's house ahead of him. He shut the door with a snap and followed her as she headed toward his SUV. She said nothing, so neither did he.

It was his own fault—the anger, the hurt. He was letting the emotions over rule simple facts.

Amy was not his problem. Hadn't she made that clear? He was nothing more to Amy than a disturbance to her life.

Derek pulled to a stop at the first intersection. "Are you going to give me directions?"

"What?"

"I don't know where you live, Amy."

"That's surprising," she muttered.

The anger boiled fast and furious. He did his best to tamp the heat down and curled his fingers around the steering wheel. "If you're insinuating that I'm the one stalking you again—"

"I'm not insinuating anything," she said and held up a hand. "I'm just tired."

The light changed to green and Derek looked over at her and waited. She sighed. "Straight. Turn right at Fordham and head toward the beach."

He pressed the gas and he could all but feel Amy fume.

His ex-girlfriend had not been able to tell him she was miserable. He'd been shocked when she walked away. Derek had to give Amy points for being able to show her feelings. Explaining them, he thought—now that could take a dozen psychiatrist. Sharing them?

She would, he hoped, when she was ready.

He glanced over at her. The walls were still up and reinforced.

The view of the ocean at the horizon only made him remember that she had not told him. When he wanted to yell, he tightened his jaw. His own anger grew so that when she gave the next direction, he ignored it and pulled into the closest parking lot.

Derek got out and slammed the door to his SUV. Needing air, he stalked down the beach. He was ready for a fight, ready to throw the words, the emotions right at her. Amy knew what it was like for a man to control her with his anger. He didn't want to be that kind of man.

So he walked. And he let the anger roll through him.

Few people were on the beach as the breeze blew in a cool November wind. The cry of the gulls, the sound of the surf, soothed at the edge of his anger.

What am I supposed to do? he asked in prayer.

Serve and protect. The order was in his blood—but that wasn't the answer, that was just his own desire.

He'd never forget the first time he'd seen her walk through the doors at the station. Ham was in the hospital. She was worried. She was nervous.

And she was just beginning to realize that her dreams would have to change.

She'd hated him on the spot.

Guilt nagged him at times. The job over the station had never been exclusively a police position. Amy came out of the problems, out of defeat, set her goals and moved toward where she wanted to go. Ham had given her hope, faith, vision.

But she had more in her than a stationary captain. Derek wished that he had the words to tell her what he saw in her. He wished they had a relationship so that when she listened she would know where the words came from and why. She might disagree, otherwise, with his prognosis.

Amy was a people person, though she fought it. She had an edge, one she'd earned. She knew the tough side of bad decisions.

She knew how to climb back out.

He knew what it was like for the world to topple around him. When the investigations started through the police department he left, the media immediately railed him. Protestors rallied outside the doors of the city hall and he'd been forced to face them when he went to work each morning.

Could he help but admire her grit and perseverance?

Derek also remembered seeing Amy disappear into the ocean. He could still feel the tremble in his own hands as he'd pulled her out saw the shock and panic in her eyes.

Someone had hurt her then. Someone was trying to hurt her, scare her, now.

Serve and protect.

He laughed bitterly at himself.

Derek turned and headed back to his SUV.

She was only leaning against his SUV, frowning, his keys dangled from her fingertips, her arms crossed. He wouldn't have been surprised if Amy had driven off with it as he'd left his keys in the ignition.

As Amy rarely smiled in his presence, he thought little of it.

"Get off your snit?" she asked, tossing him the keys.

He caught them and walked passed her, unlocking the doors with a push of the button. "Don't start."

"You're angry with me."

His fingers clenched on the door handle. "Is that what you think?"

"I wanted Ham."

He shut the door he had opened and turned to face her. "I know, and I know that you resent that I'm in his place. I've never tried to be Ham for you—I couldn't anyway. I understand. Believe me."

When he started to open the door again, she put her hand to it and kept it closed. "Can we have this out now?"

"Can we?" He turned on her. "You're the one who holds back from me. You're the one that lies to me."

"I didn't lie to you. I just didn't tell you. You're my boss. I don't have to line up and jump three times because you say so—not in my personal life."

"So you've said."

"I'm angry as well. Every time I turn around you're into what's mine. I didn't ask you to become part of this investigation. I'm tired." She rubbed a hand over her face. "I'm just so tired of all this."

"All right, Amy—fine." If it had been weariness in her voice he could have backed down, but the resentment hammered at his gut. "I'm out, you're in. Let's get what you need at your apartment and I'll take you back to Anna's."



"It's time we make plans."

Amy set down her glass and leaned back in her chair before she looked across the rectangular table. Andrea and Chloe had rescued her for the night, but it was an effort to concentrate. She'd been drowning in the silence since moving in with Anna, and the silence forced her to think and to worry.

Lights from the stage behind her flashed across Andrea's face. It had been three weeks since the fight with Derek on the beach and she still couldn't shake the finality in his eyes.

"What kind of plans?"

"Thanksgiving is next week."

"You'll be with your family." Amy muttered, twirling her straw as she watched the way the ice clinked against the glass. "The Lyons yearly bash."

"And where will you be?"

Amy looked around the crowded restaurant and watched as the singer in tonight's band made his way across the room. "I've found a way to occupy myself for the last few years. Thanks, though."

"Chloe?"

On the other side of the table, Chloe looked up from the textbook she was reading and followed Andrea's easy lead. "You should spend it with Andrea."

Amy frowned. For the last two years she and Chloe had enjoyed deli-sliced turkey sandwiches on Thanksgiving. "And what are you going to do?"

"Joe and a couple of the guys are heading to the mountains. I'm going to catch a ride," their food arrived by way of two teenage boys so Chloe shifted to the right, then moved her books over so that their food could be placed on the table. "You're Uncle Pete's going to put me up."

Amy frowned and ignored the plates. "The family cabin is usually taken on Thanksgiving."

"He said he had a place."

"When did you talk to my Uncle Pete?"

"I didn't. Mitch did. We're both invited to the town feast your Uncle puts on. If you're not going to spend it with Andrea, you could come up."

Amy shrugged and thought of Anna and the arrangements. She would have to schedule the trip with her probation officer—and anything with Carl was never easy. Her father was already grumbling about her Christmas plans. Derek would have a few of his own choice words to say she was sure—if would say anything to her at all.

He did not even look in her direction when they passed each other in the station house. His instructions came through John. She would have thought it petty of him had she wanted it any other way.

But he was playing things her way, she thought, the air between them was cold as ice.

Not comfortable as she had hoped.

"I'll take a shift at the station."

"With Derek?" Chloe asked with a raised eyebrow as she held her monster sandwich with both hands.

"We're dealing with each other."

"You're not dealing with each other when you're not talking."

Amy shrugged and wrinkled her nose as she turned toward Andrea. "Look, the Lyons always have a big family gathering. I understand that, but it's not the way things are for us."

Her father wouldn't be alone on Thanksgiving. He was rarely alone. He just didn't choose to be with his daughter.

"Not the way they have to be."

"Have you asked Eric what he's doing for Thanksgiving?" When Andrea looked away, Amy shrugged before turning to Chloe. "You're leaving on Wednesday?"

"Tuesday afternoon after my class."

"Not wasting any time, are you?"

Chloe only smiled so that her dimple popped out. "Joe's already waiting on me. He has to be back for services on Sunday, so he'll only be able to get in so much time on the slopes."

"And you're going up to spend time with Joe?" Amy teased.

"Amy—" Andrea broke in and leaned across the table. "You shouldn't spend Thanksgiving alone. This last year has been horrible on you. Chloe and I are just worried."

"I haven't been alone. Thanksgiving is just a day some people put a great deal of importance on. I choose to focus on the days I have with you guys, out at the beach, in front of my hut, soaking up the sun. I find that no less important than you find a holiday meal around the table with your family."

"Besides, I haven't spent a day alone the last three days. Anna's got friends picking me up from school and work. John has me chained to the desk. My feet are experiencing a withdrawal from sand. And I'm tired of being around people who don't talk to me—which is not the same thing as being alone."

"Look—I didn't mean to argue. I just wanted you to know you're welcome—if you decide you want to come."

"Thanks." Amy said and reached for her plate and drew it toward the edge of the table. "Now what about Eric? You two have been a regular couple for a couple of weeks now."

"We're not a regular couple."

"Fine—*irregular*—emphasis still on couple. You're spending so much time trying to make plans for me, you might want to make some of your own."

With that, Amy popped a cucumber slice into her mouth and found herself enjoying life for the first time in weeks.



Eric sat at his desk, his coat tossed over a chair, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He scrolled down the screen, his fingers lightly

touching his mouse, as he skimmed another legal brief. Tapping his pen against his lips he turned to add a note to an already extensive list.

"Congratulations."

He looked over and felt the immediate smile when he saw Andrea leaning against the door frame. She wore her golden hair down so that it fell over her shoulders.

"Mom said you won today."

"It should pay the rent."

She smiled. "You busy?"

"Just catching up on recent cases cross country."

"I thought you had that look in your eyes. The studious tiger on the prowl."

He smiled, having heard the description before.

"Are you sure you're not busy?" she asked, and he thought that he saw a moment of uncertainty in her eyes. It pleased him. "You've been occupied a great deal."

He shrugged. "Not too."

"You haven't called."

"Giving you space. I don't want to crowd you."

"Sure." She sat down in the chair across from him. "You came all the way across country so you wouldn't crowd me."

The chair she sat in was one she'd helped him pick out on one of their several shopping sprees. In the weeks since her parents turned the office over to him, Andrea had added her own simple touches.

Very straight, clean lined, furniture. She'd added sleek black picture frames around the masculine prints. The second hand armoire they'd discovered was in excellent shape, the doorknobs replaced with simple iron rod-like knobs.

Eric smiled. "I came across country so you wouldn't forget me. I don't think you've forgotten."

She took a breath, then leaned back. Her move was a retreat, but calculated. He smiled, recognizing strategy. He didn't want her running from him.

"Speaking of cross country—are you going back to Boston for Thanksgiving?"

"You know my family doesn't play that way."

"Mine does. My brother and his wife won't be coming cross country—as they're soon to be parents, so there's an extra place at the table. You're welcome, if you're free."

He smiled and for a moment just looked at her. She fit California, he thought, much more than she had ever fit New England. He skin was such a healthy brown, her hair growing out natural summer highlights.

She was more confident, he thought, and dealt with the familiar tug of panic that came from knowing she was still out of his reach.

"Thanks," he said at last. "I'll be there."

"I'm sure mom will have the details," Andrea said as she stood. "It's her day to orchestrate things the way she likes them."

She stood and walked to the door. His eyes followed. When she turned around, he softened his look.

"Eric—if we're friends, I don't need so much space."

And then, as if she'd scared herself, she dashed away.

Eric leaned back in his chair and smiled.



Chapter 14

Hands in his pockets, Derek sauntered down the wharf keeping an eye out for the several sidewalk surfers he'd already sent off. People milled around, outside of stores dressed in short sleeved shirts and shorts—a middle California Christmas atmosphere.

He thanked God he was out of the city. It was crowded, but it was not crazy. Noise surrounded the groups of people, but no one was screaming.

Shopping rage—for too long it had been part of his Christmas.

A pelican swooped down and landed smoothly on the a stack of planks. He stumbled back in his aristocratic way and stopped for a minute as if rethinking his route. "Don't worry—you're in Basin Springs, old pal," Derek thought and turned to look down the row of old buildings.

The shops running along the Wharf were refashioned during the Christmas Season. The walks of the shops were lined with a cotton-like

substance and the windows sprayed with white to simulate snow that rarely ever came to Basin Springs. Both contrasted with the wise old pelican that seemed to stand back and watch with disgust.

From what Derek had learned, this was a tradition that went back thirty years. Every Thanksgiving morning a crowd gathered as the high school's jazz band played renditions of Christmas songs to officially open the holiday season. The old shops were open all day and people without families were encouraged to eat the traditional Thanksgiving meal with the city.

Despite the leisurely pace, Derek knew where he was headed. Amy was monitoring the sand sculpture competition—always a sport at any Basin Springs festival. She wasn't wondering through crowds, the area was sectioned off, and all of the competitors were local folks that knew Amy.

He'd pulled her out of the ocean at another crowded event. The moment flashed, seeing her disappear into the ocean waves. He frowned over it—then pushed back the feelings before they could surge over him. If he was going to seek her out the last thing he needed to feel was fear.

When he passed her earlier that morning, she'd been busy sectioning off the competition area with the large bright orange blockades. She hadn't offered a greeting, but then neither had he. They hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to each other over the last few weeks.

He spotted her kneeling near a large boat-shaped sand sculpture as one of the competitors, a young guy, took a handful of sand out of the bucket she held in her hands. She was wearing shorts and the red event shirt, her legs and arms stilled tanned, but not as dark. She'd been spending more time in doors, he thought, following orders other people set over her.

He missed the Amy that had taken on the ocean with a surf board under her feet. He missed the verbal sparring, life that radiated in

confusing waves from her spirit. There was a vibrancy missing and weariness, a sadness that had set in.

"I see you've found a way to stay busy."

She jumped, and that made him frown.

"Everything's clear," she told him without looking at him and set the bucket of sand down, brushing her hands off on her shorts as she stood.

"I didn't mean that as a complaint."

"No?" she shrugged it off and walked passed him.

Derek let out a breath and followed as she walked to the edge of the water where the wet sand was marred with evidence of the competition behind them. She crossed her arms across her chest and started out at the ocean.

"You've had a hard couple of weeks," he said at last. "You don't like to be tied down. Maybe I haven't given you the credit you deserve for taking the safety factor in consideration."

"I'm so weary of this," she pressed her fingers to her eyes. "I can't go anywhere without someone wanting to go with me, question me, protect me. It's too close to what it was like when I was first put on probation. Do you know what it's like for everyone to want to know your every move?"

"No," but he could see the haunting emotion whirling in her eyes as she dropped her hands to her sides.

"I can't get away from it. There's nothing I can do about it but play by their rules, your rules, my father's rules—and he's off somewhere with Vince in Vail. Even the Lyons have guidelines for me, legal ones ..." she closed her eyes. "I don't want you to be angry with me anymore. I don't want to be angry with you anymore."

"Amy," he reached out and slowly turned her to face him. The trouble in her eyes contrasted with the freedom of the ocean beside them, with the soft breeze that lifted her hair. It had been too long since he had

been able to simply stand like this and look at her. "I'm not angry with you anymore."

"You have a good way of showing it. As do I, I imagine."

"It's never been about anger anyway. I want you to trust me."

"I do trust you," she muttered, not seeming at all happy about it, and turned back to study the waves.

In the silence, Derek watched her. He was almost sure he'd never met a more complicated person.

But God didn't make people uncomplicated. She was meeting the changes in her life head on. Her probation would be up in the next few months. Remembering this, he made a mental note to check on Carl—sure Ham would have done the same thing.

"I guess I need to get on down the beach."

Amy glanced over at him and for a moment her gaze caught his and held.

What do you want from me? he wanted to ask her. *What are you looking for?*

Her eyes held so much, deep fathoms of emotions. He wanted to reach out, brush away the strand of hair that the wind had lifted against her cheek. He wanted to watch her turn her cheek into his palm, wanted trust ...

And who was he kidding? He looked at her and there was part of him that feared he would never be able to look away. If he let himself, he would ask a great deal more of her.

She was simply beautiful, highlighted by the sun and the spirit of the California coast. She radiated life—and he hated, absolutely hated that he had pulled part of that from her eyes in the last few weeks. Hated that he was forced to by some unseen bully.

Murderer.

"If things get crazy here, I don't mind coming back, dropping by."

"I know."

"Okay." That was all he could ask of her.

"Derek—" she said, without looking at him. "I told Anna I would meet her at the city feast. She's hoping to be able to get away from a case she's working by one thirty. You could join us if there's nothing else ..."

He smiled and accepted the offer for what it was—a step in the right direction for them both.



Eric drove his sleek BMW through the exclusive neighborhood toward the Lyon's home. He had the top to his convertible down on Thanksgiving. He wasn't driving through snow or watching for black ice patches in the road. The wind was streaking through his hair; the sun was warm on his skin.

And the fact that it was snowing right now in Boston made him laugh.

He hoped that he could talk Andrea into taking a ride with him. They could slip on down the coast a bit to watch the sunset. Or drive to the wharf. He'd been hearing tales from the people down at the office that it was quite an experience. A nice romantic stroll at sunset would end the day quite nicely, might push Andrea one more step in the direction he wanted them to go.

He pulled up to the front of the Lyon's home and cut the engine. It was a large brick home, two stories—with a large attic on the third. For a minute he sat back and studied it. Despite the relationship he'd had with Andrea, and the plans he'd been making with her mom over the last few years, he had never been to their home—not to the one she'd grown up in, or this one that they'd moved into when Andrea was in college.

The front door opened as Eric climbed out of his car and John Lyons stepped out carrying a bag of trash. He was dressed casual, Eric was sure, though the pleated khaki pants and the blue oxford were daily work attire for most people in Basin Springs.

Eric reached across into the small back seat and picked up the flowers—red roses for Andrea and pristine white lilies for her mom. As he didn't cook, he thought it was a good trade off for what he hoped would be the first of many Thanksgivings he shared with Andrea in the Lyon's home.

Andrea's dad tossed the garbage in the bin and nodded toward the flowers. "Good choice. Rachel and Andrea both have a soft heart for flowers."

They'd sat side by side in court together, finding a rhythm that Eric thought worked perfectly. They had visited homes, gone to crime scenes, and stopped for brief lunches during cases.

But today, he wasn't John Lyons, attorney at law. He was Andrea's dad.

"Glad you could make it. Rachel's been on the phone with our son half the morning. He's nervous—baby should be coming by Christmas." They walked up the stone path. "We'll be going out of town to see them for Christmas. New baby and all. You have a brother don't you?"

"Younger ... it's going to be a long time before he settles down."

"We thought the same thing for Brad, but he's surprised us well enough. Picked up a good girl. Wanted a family. Rachel's dying to get out there and see them, but it's time for the girl to be with her mom. They're good in-laws and have told us to come on out, but that's how Rachel sees it. So we're waiting until ... well, just until."

He stopped Eric with a held out hand as they reached the door. "All this that's been going on with Amy, it worries me. You'll look out for them both while we're out of town."

Eric met John's eyes and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I worry about them. Andrea's my daughter. I don't want ... and I have a special interest in Amy. I want to see that probation lifted. The court date's coming up soon. I want to make sure she reaches it and gets through it. There are people in this town that still remember—and have no

business bringing it up—but there are people that would like to see her not make it."

Eric nodded again.

"If people find out we're out of town, they might make a move. It happened once, a few years ago. Some people pressed charges on her when I took my family to Europe. When I got back I had a mountain of red tape to deal with and the lawyer Lance hired in my absence to straighten out. If something happens her file and detailed notes are in my desk drawer at the office. Bottom left. Under family."



"I didn't think you were going to make it," Anna said as she shifted her plate out of the way so Derek would have a place to sit across from her. The tables and chairs that had been set up at the end of the wharf were packed with city workers.

Derek ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Ran into the chief. He wanted to talk shop."

Anna rolled her eyes. "And on a holiday, no less."

"Has Amy already gone?"

"She just ran up to get us some more to drink." Anna glanced down at her wrist and turned the bracelet she wore around. "She was a little disappointed because she thought you weren't coming, but if you tell her I told you..."

"Disappointed?" Derek nearly laughed.

Anna looked back at him, her gaze dark. "Don't let her fool you. There's more going on inside of her than anger."

"I think I've figured that part out."

"She asked you, Derek. That's a big step for her. I missed that cue several times in the last few years and in doing so, I only scared her off. Do you know how many times she's asked her father for something since her mom died?"

"If I were to take a guess it would be not much."

Anna sighed. "Whatever the number, it's almost never now. She asks, he disappoints, her heart grows a little bit harder toward him"

"And everyone else."

"There is a part of her heart that retracts. He pulled another one of his moves on her today. It broke her heart."

Derek thought about the look of sadness he'd seen in her eyes. It hadn't been because of him, but because she was disappointed. How many cues had he missed over the last few months?

"It's my fault, really. I talked her into inviting her father over for a traditional dinner tonight. So she called, and left a message, and I think she really believed ... Lance had made noises about it and I thought—" she sighed. "I should have realized he was only rolling off what he felt when he saw her in the hospital, but I ... I really wanted to believe he had changed."

"He backed out?"

"He never even called to confirm, he just waited until this morning to have Vince call and say they were taking off for Vail. He never intended to come in the first place."



After dinner, it didn't take long to figure out that Andrea would stay close to home after the feast. It wasn't something she told him, or something her mother warned him about, but it was something he sensed in the way she settled in. She was a little worried about her blood sugar.

He didn't mind so much. He just simply adjusted the plans he had made in his head.

And it pleased him that she suggested a walk.

Hand-in-hand they strolled down the quiet street. She pointed out a few houses that belonged to the local elite. Her parents had moved into the quiet neighborhood once her brother had moved out of the house, and they'd sold the large family home, with the swing set and fort, to young family that had kids that would grow into the house.

"I heard dad telling mom that he talked to you about Amy's case."

Eric nodded, reluctant to dive into the client confidentiality, even if it was what John Lyons had considered a family issue.

"You don't have to tell me, I just wanted you to know it eases my mind."

"I think it's good that Amy's part of the family."

"Mmm." Andrea pulled his arm around her and leaned against his side as they leisurely strolled on. "If she would accept it, fully, it would be better. Maybe she has. She doesn't deal with family very well."

"How long has her mom been gone?"

"Almost ten years now." Andrea shook her head. "How time really flies."

"Did you know her?"

"I knew of her. Mom and dad didn't have the practice then that they have today and their circles were a little less limited, but to be fair to the Carpenters, they really didn't circulate in the high society areas either—they were just the best at what they did and people liked to talk about them."

"Really?"

"Well, her dad was a professional baseball player. We used to have big celebrations in this town when the season started, when they would go to the playoffs ... just about anytime, really. I remember those times, going to the restaurants, my brother wearing a jersey with his name on it. And her mom ... man, she was a princess, beautiful, talented, nice. She was always in the paper. Her brother, Ryan ... he was the star of the baseball team. People were always watching him, comparing him to his father. And everyone thought he was better—that he would go farther—and what a feat that would have been. I don't know any girl in the high school who didn't have a crush on him. He was a good guy. Talented. Gorgeous. I was a freshman in high school when they were killed. It shocked us all."

"I still remember my mom and dad talking about it at the breakfast table. Jenny and Brad and I came down, ready for school. Mom wanted to talk to me. She wanted me to know before I went to school. I won't forget that—feeling numb, people didn't really talk that day—or maybe they did. Maybe it just feels like a sea of faces."

"Amy was in the junior Olympics. People were watching her. She should have been—she should have gone. Her dad should have made sure she never missed a lesson. People in this town should have gotten her to those meets. It wasn't just her father that let her down."

"She used to visit Jenny's grave—after Jenny died. I saw her sitting there, at the foot of the grave one day when I went there after school. She doesn't know I know, but I saw her there that day and several days after that—walking the small paths in the cemetery. Jenny's grave is not far from her mom's and brother's. She spent so much time in the cemetery. It broke my heart."

"So you befriended her."

"When I worked up the courage to do so. It didn't seem right to approach her there ... I didn't think she would accept it. Then one day I was sitting, eating my lunch my mom packed for me ... and she was sitting there at a table in the far back of the cafeteria. She was alone. I heard some girls talking about her—and I ... I used my brother's lunch pass to get a meal. I didn't want her to feel like I was so different ... and I sat down across from her. It took days to get her to talk to me. Weeks to get her to really look at me."

"She's come a long way."

"Yeah. And she's almost home free. Those people that were talking about her in the cafeteria that day, people like them, would rather be right about her then admit they had said and done the wrong things back then. They would love for her to fail."



The sun was setting when Derek made it back to the sand sculpture competition. The judges were finishing their marks. A few handfuls of people were standing around the edges of the area waiting for the winner to be announced. Not a big deal, but a sport and a tradition, none the less.

Amy was standing to the side, near one of the orange barricades. Too close to the edge, was all he could think as he scanned the area around her.

Then he realized she was alert and on guard herself.

By the time he reached her side, his heart had settled.

"Are you scheduled for take down?"

Amy glanced at him, then shook her head. "I could stay around. I'm sure the volunteers would appreciate by help, but I'm officially off duty."

"Then how about joining me out on the water? I need to take on of the boats out, check on some yachts that we've received some reports on."

"I suppose."

"We could ride off into the sunset, be a little bit like Ham and Joe. Chase a couple of waves across the Pacific ocean."

He couldn't have called it a smile for most people, but one side of her lips did lift. "I suppose we could do that to. How long do I have to pack?"

"About 5 minutes."

"Even I need longer than that to pack. Can I borrow your phone?"

"Calling in reinforcements?"

"A chaperone," she said and laughed when his eyes lifted. She took the phone he handed her. "I just want to call Anna. Let her know I'll be home late."

"So you're saying yes."

"I miss the water." Amy told him as she dialed the number.

"Invite Anna to come. She may want to relax after today."

Derek noted she didn't ask. He smiled a little as he listened to her talking to Anna. They were at ease with each other. He still remembered how tense Amy had been that day in his office when Anna had talked to her about Maureen's death.

Murder, he thought again.

Anna had not been at ease either.

"I was just kidding about the chaperone," Amy said as she handed the phone back to him. "And I was serious this morning. I do trust you."

"Amy," he said and stopped her. He didn't know what to say to her, he didn't know how to reach her, but he had been praying all day for her, for the right words. "Maybe I should have really taken the time to say I'm sorry before today. I overreacted. You've only known me, what, six months? We've met in a town that has been your life. Your whole life."

"Six months," she repeated, her brow crinkling in the center as she thought about it. "It feels like so much longer."

"I know."

Standing on the beach, with the sun slowly setting behind her, she put a hand to his chest. Her eyes looked up at his, searching, wishing—he thought. He wished that he knew for sure. "It could be so much more between us. I'm afraid of that. Not of you, just of what I may or may not have to deal with if there is a future. I'm not ready for that. I'm not ready to deal with that."

"I don't want to push you."

"You do, sometimes, when you look at me," she turned, closing her eyes and focusing on a long, deep breath. When she started walking again, her brow was furrowed. "It's not your fault, really. Maybe I just see it and want it—and I wonder if you can really see me. If what you see is what I really am. I wonder if you get close enough ... if it will be the same."

Then I see you looking at me and it's like ... I don't know, like I just want to walk forward with you. I'm scared to death."

"You've had a busy year," he commented. He slipped his hands into his pockets to keep from touching her. "You have a right to put the sails down and wait out the storm. Amy, I'm not looking to rush you. If there's a course in our future, then we'll get to it when time is right. We're not out on the seas alone. The storms aren't pushing us in random directions. God's in control."

He reached out with both hands and stopped her, turning her to face him with both hands on her arms. "I don't want to rush you, I don't want to scare you, but I want you to know that you can come to me, you can turn to me, and my arms are going to be right here. I'm not moving from you."

She closed her eyes as if the words stabbed into her heart. Slowly she shook her head. "Derek—I ... this is so much."

"Just a step. A small one. Just take one step with me. It's not about trust, Amy. It's about remembering. Remember that the night on the deck, when we were both dealing with our own storms, our own worries, remember, it wasn't about what we wanted from each other. It was about what we found in each other."

Her eyes were on his now, so open and blue. He could see her weakening. He could tell that if he pushed her, just the least bit more, she would cave in ... at least for a while. The prospect of the temporary didn't satisfy him.

"Derek—"

He took a step back, reigned himself in. "That step doesn't have to be taken today. Take a ride with me onto the ocean. Share the sunset with me as a friend. We'll leave this whole discussion right here in the sand."

She stared into his eyes as the tension seemed to slowly fade from her body.

"But you'll let me drive the boat."

He smiled—and knew he would without a doubt allow her that freedom. He was ready to see that look in her eyes again.

"We'll see."



Chapter 15

Everything okay?"

Derek turned from where he stood at the window to find Amy leaning against the door frame. The paperback textbook she'd been reading during her break dangled from her fingertips as she tapped it against her leg.

She was limited to paperwork and answering phones—a job she'd been limited to when Ham first brought her in. She'd been seventeen then, untrained and underage.

He understood her frustration, but he still wanted to laugh at the brewing look in her eyes. While she'd been lounging on the deck with the phone at her side and a book in her hand, he'd been out on patrol, pulling a teen out of the frigid December water.

He'd come in wet and cold, miserable for a half hour before he could change, and she was battling the resentment that it hadn't been her call, her duty.

"You know, if you wanted to go in water—"

He lunged for her, and grabbing her at the waist tossed her over his shoulder. Her reaction was instant. She squealed right in his ear, twisted and starting pounding with her fists.

Laughing, Derek set her back down quickly and rubbed his stomach where she'd nailed him with a kick. She place a hand against his chest to hold him back, but he kept his hands on her arms, supposedly to protect himself. She had a nasty jab.

For a moment, he just looked at her, surprised to find the dazzling array of tones in her brown eyes. This close he could almost forget who she was and why he needed to take a step back.

But he did step back and swallowed the regret. "You've had practice."

"I grew up out there—" she stepped out of his reach herself and tilted her head to the long window, "with an older brother and his friends. You learn a few things."

But she was laughing, he thought. *Finally.*

"I bet. Your brother also taught you to fight dirty."

"Some things a big brother teaches you, some things you learn on your own out of desperation." She smiled coyly. "My mom once said that I was his favorite tag-along toy."

"Tag along?" Derek asked and leaned back against his desk, crossing his arms as he watched her.

"I chose to go with him—I could have stayed at her side. I put myself in his clutches, and his friends' clutches, at times. Until he became serious about baseball, and heeded my dad's advise to focus on one thing, we spent much of the year out at the beach, in the early mornings. Then, since summer is the season for baseball, the last two years all we

had was the winter—for the most part. You can't keep a true California boy out of the water." She walked over to the window and stared at the waves that tumbled in. "He had a couple of friends that would try anything."

"Cage was out there this morning."

"Cage is always out there in the morning," she glanced over at him. "How'd you know he was a friend of my brother's?"

Derek shrugged. "We've talked some. It's what I do."

She laughed. "I suppose so. Cage looks a lot like Ryan looked in what my dad called his winter attire. Scraggly, unshaven. They surfed, boarded, did everything together. Neither one of them had a problem with me hanging out—well, not that they said."

She sighed and turned from the window. She dipped to pick up her book she'd dropped when he'd tossed her over his shoulder. "So, you didn't answer my question. How's the kid?"

"Cold—and a little scared. The hospital cleared him."

"That's what happens when you try to go swim in forty degree water."

"It's what happens when you skip school and fall into a dare."

Amy shook her head. "You're telling me."

She knew about getting in trouble, but he left it alone. "New kid in school—trying a little too hard to look cool. He'd been bragging that he'd gone swimming as late as this before without a wetsuit, so he was challenged to do it, to prove it. It's a lot warmer south of here."

Derek picked up a pen and twirled it as he watched her. They'd fallen into an uneasy friendship since Thanksgiving. She accepted his presence, attempted communication, but he saw, and understood, the resentment.

Boss and protector—both came before friend. He couldn't separate the three. He wasn't sure where one left off, where one was more intense, where one trusted the other.

He felt something for her, but he was also very aware that the something was tied to his duty to serve and protect.

In Ham's place.

They'd both received postcards from Ham over the last few weeks. From here or there as they reached Hawaii, met with old friends, and made plans to move on. He didn't seem to be worried about their course or anything beyond the weather, unless you understood the implications of the last sentence.

Take care of Amy.

The file was on Derek's desk, under a couple of other miscellaneous cases. It wasn't an official one, but papers he'd worked out, time lines, lists, informal interviews and notes, possibilities and issues. Amy didn't know how far he'd checked.

But he'd begun to reconstruct a thorough file, down to the whereabouts of the other teens with her that night, family and friends of Matthew West and the Lyons, as well as a few associates he'd noted from her father's side.

So ... he waited out the storm.

"You got plans for tonight?" he asked. It was a normal question. They'd been going out, checking ports and known travel areas for the past couple of weeks.

"Chloe and I are going shopping ... looking," Amy shrugged and glanced down at the book she held in her hand. "Chloe thought we could take a break from studying."

"You've been working a lot. Studying."

She snorted. "Not as much as I should."

"You need to talk through cases or something..."

"Anna talks it through with me."

"Still—"

"I trust you," she said with a laugh, "but have to get some work done—if it would be called work what I do. Anna and I talk shop, as it's called, over dinner."

"You guys are getting pretty tight."

"She's different then I thought." Amy dropped into a seat. "She's giving me a place to stay. Steps in and handles my dad. She doesn't like Vince, I don't like Vince. What's not to like?"

"You feel like your freedom has been taken away."

"It's not her fault."

"No." He tapped the pen on his desk blotter. "It's building up though. Inside of you."

"Have you ever been on probation?"

"No."

"Had someone try to kill you? Stalking you?"

"Not that I know of. Are you looking for sympathy?"

"No." She set the book in her lap and rubbed her hands over her face. "Derek, it's hard not to just sink, you know? I feel so lost. Andrea and Chloe are living in this complete circle. They are moving on, their lives wrapping together so easily ... and I'm stuck, wrapping myself back to what it was before ... it's all coming back."

"The way it was? Completely? Amy," he walked over and stooped in front of her, waited until her eye connected with his. "Don't fool yourself into thinking that the circumstances are going to turn you into the person you were. I didn't know you then. I know you now."

For a minute she studied him, her eyes searching his. She had questions, he could tell. *What do you know? What can you see?*

He prayed she would ask them when she was ready.

Amy leaned back and looked toward the ceiling, releasing a long, weary breath. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be. Just remember who you are. Remember that the girl you were made things tense between you and Anna. Things are different now. Why? Pinpoint that—focus on that instead."

Amy frowned over it a minute, her fingers worrying over the pages of her book. "I guess I always saw her as my dad's ally."

Derek nodded, prodded her to go on.

"She was—for most of my life. Two adults, trying to help out a messed up kid. He would call her when I was in trouble, she would stop me, warn me, question me on the beach in front of my friends. It wasn't cool then ... it's not so hot now."

She laughed and shook her head. "Not that I wasn't hiding something then, but now she's mine, I guess, as much as I'm hers. My dad plays the same games with her. She's in—she's out. He moves back and forth. He doesn't want to see who she is, what she stands for ... on any level. Anna and I have that in common—my dad sees what he wants."

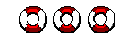
Amy winced at the bitterness in her voice and glanced out the window. "It doesn't matter."

"Have you talked to him?"

"We talk—but we don't communicate. He talks to Anna—when he wants. They fight, she walks away. She doesn't allow him to control her. I think he cares for her some, but he likes his bachelor life playing the field with Vince at his side. I know she cares for him, wishes ... I don't know what keeps them apart, besides ... well, besides the fact that our faith holds him back. I don't think he can accept ... what wasn't part of my mom."

The phone rang and Amy waved away his hand when he reached to answer it. "I'll get it. I might as well do something."

Derek watched her leave, then tugged the file from its place and made an addition to his list of questions. Tapping his pen on the paper, he frowned over the list of unanswered questions.



"I thought you were finished shopping," Amy complained good-naturedly. Chloe only had one pay check left before they left for the mountains, so she's shopped early, dragging Amy out with her the day after Thanksgiving for a last round of small purchases.

"I was," Chloe said and walked passed the door Amy held open for her and into the designer store. Christmas music cascaded lightly from the store's central speakers. The Christmas decorations shimmered. "Mitch is getting a dog. Some lady saw on the news how dogs were being used to help find missing people in the snow and she's paying for the dog and the training and ... well, whatever, I suppose."

"What kind of training?"

"The dogs help find missing people in avalanches, skiers lost, that kind of thing. Like Mitch is all that good with his nose. He can't even tell the difference between my bath spray and perfume."

Amy smiled, picturing Mitch trudging through the snow with a dog at his side. She reached the rack Chloe had chosen and started shifting hangers. The clothes were fashionably winter, but too thin to actually do any good in the mountains.

"So you have to get his new dog a gift?"

"I think it's a girl. And of course I have to get her a gift. She's part of the family—or will be—if I am. He's in Colorado this week training with her."

"So, whether he wants a dog or not, he's got one."

Chloe laughed as she turned to look at another rack. "I think he volunteered himself. Oh—he made it sound like he was reasoning it out. The dog's a German Shepherd, the deputy has kids, blah, blah, blah. He wanted a dog. He says he didn't, something about a dog he used to have—but he wanted one. He just needed the excuse."

"Of course he wanted one. You didn't know Mitch when he had Mad-dog, his old dog. He used to go running on the beach with him, bring

him out while he was surfing. The two were alike in so many ways. Goofy—not mad. I have a picture of both of them shaking the ocean water off. Two different photos—we never could get them to do it at the same time."

"What happened to him?"

"Old age. A lot of excitement." She pulled out a long sleeved shirt, running her ringers over the soft fabric. "They'd been together a long time. Mitch wrote a song about him. Something like 'he'd splash in the waves and make you feel like the world was okay, run at your side, happy and full of life.' You should ask him about it. He might be ready to sing it again."

"Amy?"

Amy turned, holding onto a green sweater she'd just pulled off the rack. She blinked in surprise. "Mrs. Thompson."

"You look so much like your father. So much like him."



"You're going to have to tell someone."

Amy opened a cabinet methodically and pulled out a box of wheat pasta. Chloe sat on a stool on the other side of the wood isle, trying, as she had for the last hour, to reason with her. Amy battled the irritation with the sudden need to be with her friend. No one should have been able to rock the foundation she had with Chloe and Andrea.

And yet she evaded the question—and the desire to dodge her friend. "Why?"

"There's too much going on in your life, Amy, for you to keep this a secret. Ignoring it is not going to bring things to a close."

Amy felt the waves of desperation crash over her and struggled.

"Can't you just let it out?"

"What?"

"The anger, the rage? Whatever's been brewing inside of you for the past hour? The past couple of months?"

"For what reason? I can get angry—furious, rage and scream and I'm still going to be twirling around in this nightmare!" Taking the pasta between both hands she snapped it in half, then opened her hands and slowly let it slide into the boiling water. "I don't know that I feel anything anymore."

"And what was that?"

"Frustration? You know what makes me the angriest?" Amy asked as she lifted a spoon to stir. "That—for just one moment I wasn't thinking about everything--and then she comes along and ruins it. We're going to start the whole process all over again. Anna will call my dad, he's going to fuss and fight and tell me to move home. They will fight. And someone's still going to be out there looking to ... do whatever they're planning to do with me."

"Maybe it was Loraine Thompson all along. Maybe it will all be over if they can talk to her, check her out."

"Don't you think they have? That she was one of the first? Derek had a ton of questions about her a few months ago." Amy shook her head. "Besides, it wasn't—it couldn't be. Once upon a time she had a crush on my dad. She never tried to hurt any of us. Tried to break apart a marriage maybe, but not hurt us physically."

"Time change. Mental problems ... they can worsen, can't they?"

"But why would she hurt me?"

"Maybe because she thinks you hurt your dad. I don't know. I'm not a physiologist. I'm just your friend. I'm worried about you."

They'd left the mall when Lorraine excused herself, the air around them strained. Despite that, Amy refused to call Anna or Derek—or her father.

"This whole thing is messing things up for us. This is our last chance to be roommates. Our last moment of freedom. And we can't even enjoy it."

"You could move in with us. We could change things."

Amy remembered the night Chloe had been attacked—the way she'd looked on the sofa the next day trying to balance her fear so she could except the love Mitch had for her.

"And put you both in danger? Eric and Mitch would both have something to say. Not to mention Andrea's parents."

"You know that's not true. Eric and Mitch care about you. They like you. We could work something out. Just because—" Chloe broke off when the front door opened. "You have to tell her."

Amy reached back and turned off the burner. She stared at the bubbling water that held the pasta, felt the steam against her face. "I know."

Somehow Amy managed to tell Anna everything over dinner. The words just spilled out. How Lorraine had approached them in the mall, how she'd rambled on and on about hearing how things had happened, the murder of Maureen, Amy's stay in the hospital, asking about Amy's father.

"She was nice." Chloe jumped in as Amy fumbled for words. "It was just odd, you know. You could tell she was strained. She kept twisting the strap of her purse in her hands, then she would look down at it as if she didn't know what she was holding and back up at us—and for a moment, it was like she had forgotten who we were and why she was talking to us. Odd to seem so out of shape."

"She was served with a restraining order." Anna looked at Amy. "She's not supposed to talk to you. She knows that. She broke it."

"It's been 20 years, nearly. And I was a child."

"She was only reminded a few months ago. The language was clear—there are details I can't divulge dealing with the terms for receiving assistance on her part, but she has never been allowed to forget. She's not supposed to be in contact with your father, or any member of his family, ever."

"You seem to know it fairly well."

"You know there have been reasons, recently. It is your legal right as your father's daughter to know. Lorraine was ordered to take medication. It may just be she needs to fix the dosage—or that something's off. The last time I spoke with her, months ago, she seemed stable. I'll check into it."

Amy's hand squeezed around her fork. She glanced down at the clean lines of Anna's simple plate and realized she'd eaten most of her dinner without realizing it.

"I don't want her drugged, Anna." *I don't want her to feel as I feel*—locked in, trapped—she wanted to say. "She didn't do anything wrong."

"She did, according to the courts. And someone has in the past—someone with access to drugs."

"She'd almost 60. If she had been moving around our stuff the day things happened, I would have noticed. Someone would have noticed ... right?"

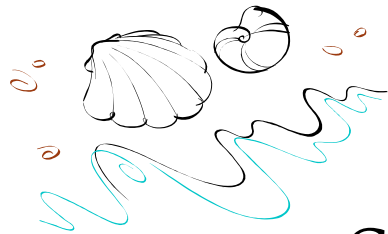
"Her whereabouts for the day in question are elusive. She was at the beach, somewhere."

Amy thought of the sympathy her mother had felt for the woman, how pitiful Lorraine had seemed—then, today. Amy pushed away from the table, then looked at Chloe. "I told you we shouldn't say anything. Drugging her is just as containing for her as this whole thing is for me—except it must be worse. My mind's not being contained."

"Amy—"

"Just—" Desperate, Amy escaped.

There was only one place she could find solace and safety. Only one place she could go.



Chapter 16

Amy stood at the edge of the ocean, the waves sliding over her feet, her toes curling in the wet sand. Back slid the waves, then rushed forward. The water felt smooth, like silk, the sound calming.

The sky blazed with color as the sun dipped into the ocean.

And her heart quivered still.

How she missed her mom—who saw life and goodness in everyone, everything. The moment her dad had told her, the moment she'd learned of her mom's death, it was like life rushed out of her, left her empty and cold.

She wasn't empty, she'd learned, nor was she cold.

It was just that sometimes she felt as if everything she touched turned to coal, instead of the coal into gold as the fables told.

She watched the clouds simmer over the dying sun and thought back over the last few months. First her own life, then Chloe's. She'd

watched her father shatter, or close himself off all over again, after Maureen's death. Lorraine ... people wanted to blame the poor woman for the darkness that surrounded Amy.

And Andrea—she'd cost Andrea her sister a lifetime ago, and she'd taken to her, from her, in need of friendship. In the beginning their relationship had strained Andrea's relationship with virtually everyone, had strained her health.

There was someone else to care for Andrea now. Someone who loved her, who would seek to be her friend, to know her, to know what she needed.

Chloe was stronger—stronger than Amy had ever known her to be. She would be moving soon. She would have the mountains and Mitch, and someone to help her deal with her past.

Amy wrapped her arms around herself as the warmth slid away with the sun. Her probation would be over after January. She could leave then—find another place to be, another life to choose. The world would be wide open to her.

Maybe one day she would get her degree—a degree, some degree. Maybe one day she would settle down on the coast of some desert island and she could surf by morning ... and do whatever by evening.

She could run away ... she could leave it all behind. Touch no one, hurt no one. Whoever was after her would have to find her, would have to leave Basin Springs ... the town she could remember her mother, her brother. The town she'd been part of a family. The town her friends had made her part of a family.

She shivered as sun completely slid behind the ocean.

Andrea and Chloe ... they would be safe to start their own lives.

Why should she wait to pack her bags and go? Forget the last month of her sentence. Forget saying goodbye. She could just leave,

move on, make a fresh start. Uncle Pete would give her a job, and if not that, a recommendation.

Her friends would be safe.

She tried not to look at the rolling waves, or breath in the smell of the ocean she had loved all her life. Neither would she be able to drive through the streets of Basin Springs with her eyes open. Nearly every building, every curb, had a memory.

Why do you think you must give it all up?

"Because I bring darkness."

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Amy closed her eyes and focused on the verse. Why should she give up the life, the friends she had? It was true the life had gone out of her when her mom died, but she'd been given new life, new heart, a new purpose, when she'd found Jesus—or when He'd found her.

So why should she walk away from it?

Because everything she touched turned to coal. Wasn't that the point of this whole wearying argument?

But it wasn't true. Even she knew that. Her life had once been, had once felt, as dark as coal, her veins as cold as ice.

But not anymore. She knew there was gold inside of her now. She knew she wasn't empty. Not anymore.

Why should she deny herself the life before her because of the darkness that waited behind her?

She opened her eyes and turned her back on the ocean, on the pitch black of the world, and looked up at the station house. The light in Derek's office was on. He wasn't on duty. She knew because she knew his schedule so well by now. He was there—no doubt staying to watch over her.

And knowing so only made her feel ... *more* for the first time in a long time. It was as if the light had burst inside her heart.

Smiling, her heart pumping with life, she rushed for the wooden stairs.



Derek glanced up from the papers on his desk when he heard the feet running up to the deck leading to the deck. He was at the door when the glass doors opened, and Amy rushed in.

"Amy—"

"Every thing's fine," she told him, her eyes bright with intensity. "Just fine."

She reached him then, took his hands and twined her fingers between them, holding them up as if he was giving in. She looked up at him, her eyes dancing. His heart tripped over itself as he fought to catch up. Not minutes ago he'd been heading out the door to go home when he'd spotted her down at the beach, staring into the ocean, watching the sunset.

He'd given her time—this time—to assimilate whatever was going through her head. He'd hoped she'd come to him on her own for once.

But even in hoping, he hadn't expected this ... excitement, this glow.

"Tell me what you see when you look at me."

He cleared his throat for it was suddenly dry. How could he when what he was looking at, the woman he was looking at, was so bright, so vivid ... so out of character—at least around him. This was the woman who competed, who hung out with her friends. Her hands were trembling with his.

"Now? What I think of you at this moment?"

"No—no, not now. I know what you see now. A woman on the brink of lunacy. A woman who finally wants to go after what she wants. A woman who was about to throw it all into the ocean and run away—but she couldn't because it finally, *finally* occurred to her that there was something she really wanted."

"And you want to *go after* me?" he asked, and stepped back. Her fingers stayed twined within his, though, palm to palm. He held out his arms to hold her back.

He'd seen this side of Amy around others, when she was busy breathing, living, going, but not around him. He'd never seen, so fully, her in full swing. For him.

Suddenly.

His knees were suddenly weak. He wondered if he was going to have to sit down.

She laughed then, but it was a little giddy. Full of power, delight. "You're afraid of me."

"No—" he murmured, and tried to mentally catch up with her, "not afraid. Just ... behind. Terribly behind."

"Then catch up. I stood out there on the sand and realized I was holding back from you. I didn't think I was ready, but I am. I really am. Why should I hold that back? I'm in love with you, Derek. I think we should get married. You can protect me full time then. It's that simple."

"Simple," he muttered, and stared at her. She loved him. And she wanted to marry him. *Marriage*. Even he hadn't gotten that far. "And you want *me* to catch up?"

When she stepped forward, he stepped back. And he watched the first shutter fall. He hated that he had to put it back into place.

She tugged her hands from his and took a step back. He let her, for he needed the space.

"I'm sorry." She walked toward the windows and looked out on the dark ocean and then down at the sand. The place where she had been standing was already washed away by the waves. She seemed to shiver. He grabbed his jacket off a hook on the other side of his office and brought it to her, draping it over her shoulders. "I should go."

"Why don't you stay, so we can talk this out?"

"Run or stay. Funny—I just thought I made this choice." She ran her finger over the glass in front of her. "I just thought ... that you were waiting, for me ... to ..."

"Maybe I thought I was. I just wasn't prepared for it to be this sudden."

She glanced back at him. "Then you ..."

He held up a hand. "Let's not say the words again ... *yet*. Why don't we start with why this comes up now?"

"We've been spending a lot of time together recently. I thought that you—" she started, knowing it wasn't completely the truth. So she told him about running from Anna's, about Lorraine and what she knew her mom would have wanted.

And that she'd blindly come looking for Ham, only to remember he wasn't there.

"I'm not Ham—I can't be Ham for you."

"I'm not asking you to be. I didn't come to you when I realized Ham wasn't here. I went out to the beach, to see the ocean, the waves. Considered just diving in, going for ... nothing. Or packing it all up, running away. A little like Ham, but more like myself. My friends would be safe then. They could move on with their lives."

"Then I realized that I didn't want that—I need them. The darkness that's around me, that tries to press into me, it's not what's intended for me. I've got a light inside me that needs to shine." She held her hand to her heart. "If I run from here, from the problems, I also run from that. Not completely, but from part of it. From the person I am now. You told me I wasn't that person anymore."

"Yes I did."

"Can I ask you now what you see in me? Really see? As a man waiting for me?"

Derek moved to lean against the window and reached up to cup her face between both of his hands. For a moment he just looked at her,

took the time to look at her. Her hair fell around her face, framing the uncertainty in her brown eyes. The florescent lights subdued the natural blond highlights. Her skin was a little peachy from the excitement, paling under the uncertainty.

"I see a woman that her mother would be proud of, a beautiful, loving woman." He let the words linger, let them sink in. "I see the bravest person I know. And I've known cops in the tough beats, known mother's who've gone to the line for their children."

"Derek..." she searched his eyes and he wondered what secrets she'd found, for now she was the one stepping back, slightly shaken.

He dropped his hands and slid them into his pockets. So she loved him, or said she did—knowing that the thought had crossed her mind was just enough, for now, to hold back.

"Second thoughts?" Derek asked.

"Maybe a little sanity." She closed her eyes and lifted her own hands to cover her face. "I feel like such a fool. I can't believe I just rushed up here and thought ... I didn't think. I wasn't thinking."

"You don't have to take the words back," he murmured and watched her peek through her fingers to look at him. He mentally slid them into a compartment and shut the door. One day, he would pull them out, guide her to say them again.

But for now ...

He reached out, took her hands from her face, and looked at her. "How about we take a few steps back from where we tried to go when you came through the door?"

"To where?"

"To a place we've never gone before." When she frowned, he squeezed her hands. "A date."

"A date?" she seemed to consider the possibilities. "Haven't we been out before?"

"On a boat, out with friends ... but if you tell me now that you considered those dates then, we'll, we both know you didn't think of them as dates."

She chuckled. "All right ... *date*. Where do you think we should go?"

"I've found a little crab shack down past the pier. Bob's Hut On the Pier."

She smiled and linked her fingers with his. They were steadier now, he thought. Maybe because his own hand was steady now.

"I've been there, but I know a better one." For a moment, her eyes found his—thanking him. "It was a favorite of my mom's."



"You'll send me pictures as soon as possible, right?" Andrea asked her mother over the phone as she set her suitcase down by the door before flipping the lock to open it. She'd seen Eric's convertible pull up from her bedroom window, so she knew who it was.

Her brother was a father now—of a bouncing baby boy, eight pounds, 3 and a half ounces.

And he didn't know how to send a photo over the Internet if people's lives counted on it. Well, he did, but he hadn't. Crazy, crazy boy—didn't he know people were waiting? Her mom and dad were on their way to join her brother for Christmas, but she was heading off with Amy, and eventually, Eric would join them.

"Come in—grab something," she said to Eric, motioning toward a stack of luggage and boxes.

"Has Eric gotten there already?" Her mother asked.

"Sorry. He just got here. It's past seven. We're leaving at seven thirty."

"You girls must be growing up. I remember when I couldn't get you out of the door before noon."

Andrea rolled her eyes. "Chloe wants to have lunch with Mitch. I want to have lunch with the mountain view instead of that old diner that sits in between."

Her mother chuckled and Andrea headed back into her room to grab her laptop. Her mother would e-mail her the photos, but she wouldn't be there.

"I wish I could come with you guys."

"And you wish you could stay. Is it Amy you're staying for or Eric, I wonder?"

Andrea rolled her eyes again and sat down on her bed with a plop. "Mom—does it matter?"

"I don't know. Does it?"

Andrea groaned. "I don't need this right now. I like how things are."

"You liked how things were six months ago and look where you are today."

"On my way with my friends to spend Christmas in the mountains."

Quite possibly for the last time.

"I got to go mom."

"Be safe."

"You, too."

She hung up the phone and sighed, looking around the room that was her own. She had her canopy bed she'd picked out herself when she'd moved in. It made her feel like a princess. It was decorated in cool blues and soft fabrics. The walls were decorated with photos of her friends on several French Memo boards. It was how she wanted it.

And on her night stand was a photo of Eric with her that Amy had taken out at the beach three weeks ago. How many nights had she lay entranced by the photo, thinking that she could see them there, together, on the beach, for the rest of their lives? Just the two of them.

And maybe more.

The idea of making a family with him made her feel both warm and cold. A family ... was she strong enough? Healthy enough?

What if she wasn't? Could he handle that?

She opened the drawer to her night stand and pulled out a frame that held another photo, taken years ago. In the silence, she studied the two. In both photos she was happy—or looked happy. The looked impeccable together, suave, even. The first had been taken in formal clothes befitting an event, the second, the casual clothes of an evening out on the beach.

But in the new photo, one might think she was more relaxed, that Eric was more relaxed ... maybe even, that they were relaxed with each other. Not because of their clothes ... but because there was something different, something more, between them.

Shaking herself, set the framed photo on her night stand and shut the drawer. Maybe it was time to stop hiding from herself. She opened the side pocket of her laptop case and slid the newer photo inside. If she would miss him now, then it would be her little secret. She wasn't sure she was ready for him to know.

The apartment was empty, so she shut off the lights and locked the door behind her. Her suitcase, her bags of wrapped gifts, and the boxes of Christmas decorations had already been taken.

She was outside before she caught up with Chloe and Eric.

Eric leaned against the side of Amy's truck, watching Amy and Chloe. She'd barely looked at him moments ago. He was dressed in a suit, ready for a day in court. He looked, she thought with a twinge of longing, so ... perfect. How could one man, especially with his long red hair and a hint of a goatee, look so perfect? If she hadn't met him at Harvard, if they hadn't been in that atmosphere, would she have fallen for him?

"Why can't we take Andrea's car?"

"Uncle Pete's resort isn't located on the main roads. It's been snowing up there."

Chloe sighed as she handed Amy her small suitcase. "Yeah, but it's at least a four hour drive."

"Now that you and Andrea have been living together, you would think you wouldn't worry."

"It's not Andrea I'm worried about. It's my legs. I always have to sit in the middle all scrunched up."

Amy chuckled. "Mitch will appreciate them just as much. Besides, if you have any trouble walking, you can just hold tighter to him."

"What about me?"

Amy looked over her shoulder at Andrea and took the bag Eric handed her. "There will be plenty of men for you to hold on to."

"Maybe you should take my car." Eric offered.

"I second that," Andrea and Chloe said together.

Amy rolled her eyes as she went around to the other side to tuck the tarp in over their belongings. "We'll call you then when your pretty little convertible ends up at the bottom of the mountain."

Eric couldn't contain the grimace.

"Besides, it's all in the aesthetics. You can't go driving up to Uncle Pete's place in a Mercedes."

"Says you."

"Of course. He's my uncle. Ready?"

"If we have to," Chloe muttered without heat and slid her legs around and to the middle where she always sat.

"In a minute," Eric said and drew Andrea away. For a moment he just held onto both of her hands and studied her face.

"What?"

"Miss me a little."

Andrea struggled to hold back her smile. She liked having him look at her. She liked the way he looked at her. And it no longer upset her that she was becoming used to it.

"Why?"

"I'm going to miss you. More than a little. I've gotten used to you being around. Admit it. You're starting to want me to stay around."

"You'll see me in a week. Less than a week." She said, avoiding his point. They had spent nearly every evening together, cooking dinner for themselves and Chloe, walking the beach, eating out ... They talked over books, sermons, music, went to concerts, the theater ... dealing with each other, discovering each other.

She swallowed, wondering how long she would last before she picked up her cell phone and called him. "I'll be busy, you know. I've got to play chaperone to the two misfits."

They both looked over at the truck and laughed as Amy pushed at Chloe's hand as it went back to the radio.

"You just want to make it hard on me."

"We'll see," Andrea muttered, and stood on her tiptoes to give him a quick kiss.

She settled back on her heels with a plop and sighed. "I guess you won. I've already started to miss you a little."

He grinned. "You don't sound as sad about it as you used to. You just might be getting a little resigned to it."

"You're imaging things. Don't forget to come on up. I know how your lawyer types are. I've had a lifetime dealing with them."

"Eric," Amy called out, "we've got to get on the road, please."

He chuckled and drew Andrea close. "Put some effort into it this time."



Unable to concentrate on the paperwork in front of him, Derek leaned back in his chair and stared out the window. The night before

they'd walked down the pier and watched the sunset over the ocean. She'd rested her head on his shoulder. They hadn't talked, but enjoyed the silence.

Then she'd walked him down to an ocean side ice cream parlor and laughed and joked around.

It was a side of her he wanted to see again.

Kids were out for vacation, trying out the waves in the early mornings. For the first time in ages, he could have used Amy's expertise in the proverbial trenches.

And he would have had to keep her inside, safe.

He could only pray that she was safe now.

He stood, suddenly antsy. He was used to Amy being around. He was used to looking after her, looking at her. It wasn't just her safety he desired, but more. Something more. Something they were on the edge of discovering.

He reached for the phone. Mitch was aware of things. He just needed to call, make sure, one more time.

"I've got some news."

Anna stood in the doorway, tapping a manila folder against her leg.

"Lorraine Thompson handed over her medication without question. Her husband has already taken her to the doctor because of erratic behavior."

Derek nodded, absorbing the information even as he reprimanded himself for overreacting. Amy wasn't his responsibility, not alone.

He couldn't loose focus on what was his charge. "How long?"

"He says it has only started in the last month, since her doctor prescribed a change in her medication."

She tossed the manila file folder she held on the desk. "You know I'm not officially working this case. I'm just keeping up with the work Lorraine's court appointed officers are doing. There is still a weak link

between Lorraine's last medication malfunction and Maureen Child's murder—"

"But you think it's a weak link."

"If I thought I had a strong link, she would be behind bars," Anna said. "We ran it as a standard check to talk with her husband. Amy was right--there's no reason to jump to conclusions on a woman that has followed the rules until now. Still, I made a few phone calls and rushed Lorraine's medication through the lab. The pills aren't what was prescribed--aren't what the bottle proclaimed them to be. Blood pressure pills."

"That explains Lorraine's behavior in the last month."

"And gives her a strong ally for the past."

"But she was told to change her medication."

"Not because she was having mental problems, according to her husband. The doctor felt that because of her age the new medication would fit her better—as she has been a little sporadic in the last year. Laurie Corrilla, the officer that did the standard check, left me a message this afternoon. According to her, that advice was questioned by the tech at the lab."

"So what did the doctor say?"

"I haven't had a chance to talk with Laurie yet, but according to her message, the doctor is on vacation for the next week. I could call in a favor, get the name, talk to the doctor myself, but as Amy's gone for the next week, and it is Christmas.... In cases like Lorraine's the doctors pretty much volunteer their time anyway."

"Amy's out of town for a few days. We've got some time to deal with these questions."



Sporadically singing along with the songs on the radio, Amy watched the narrow road ahead and smiled at the piles of snow that had

been pushed to the side with a snow plow. She could already feel the change in the feel of the air. Only a few more miles.

Beside her Chloe slept, leaning on Andrea's shoulder. Andrea looked out the window, her thoughts far away.

With Eric, Amy mused, and thought of Derek. She understood now that she had been trying to control the situation, to control him, but it had taken a long sleepless night to admit to the need. She'd wanted to make the first move and grasp onto something that would hold onto her. She'd wanted control of something—desperate for something steady.

When she'd admitted as much to Derek—apologized for it—he'd drawn her close and promised her that he was holding onto her anyway.

He hadn't questioned her words, nor had he given her his own.

And for now, that felt just right.

No more trying to run to or from. She could just be still and enjoy the warmth that she felt—warmth, that in a way, had been missing for ten long years.

He wasn't her mother ... but he *appreciated* her mother, and that said a great deal to her.

As she pulled into town, slowed down to the creeping speed, she smiled. It felt familiar, *right*, as well. Cars lined the parking spaces in front of the local shops. She lifted a hand and waved to a group of local women that would recognize both her and her truck.

She turned off just outside of town, heading down the mountain slightly from the resort. The family cabin was on the other side of a grouping of trees from the resort, its entrance private.

Mitch's jeep, accessorized with police lights, was parked in front of the cabin. Christmas lights twinkled from the cabin's outline, a gift from her uncle. Smoke lifted from the chimney, a tell-tell sign that Mitch was getting the place ready for them.

Chloe awoke quickly when Amy nudged her. By the time Amy had stepped from the cab to allow Chloe to get out, Mitch had slipped

from the cabin. Chloe ran to him, his arms enfolded her, lifted her off her feet as he spun her around. Chloe laughed.

"I suppose your practical side says we have to unpack before we go to lunch?"

Amy looked over her shoulder as Andrea came around the hood of the truck. "If we do, then we get help," she said and nodded toward Mitch.

"Then let's get started. I can just taste you're Uncle's potato soup."

Amy rolled her eyes and turned to loosen the tarp.

She felt the hair on her neck prickle and reached back automatically. It was as if someone spoke her name. She turned around slowly and looked around.

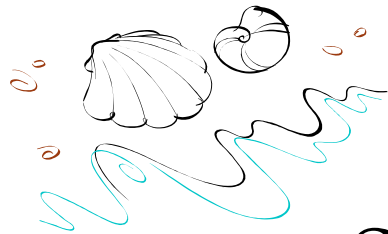
And saw nothing but the picture of a forest in winter; bushes, and limbs iced with snow. The sky was turning grey above them. More snow was on the way. It was quiet. She wasn't used to the quiet, was all she could think. The relaxing roll of the ocean, the calming cry of seagulls, both were different from this ... stillness.

"Amy? You okay?"

She blinked, looked back at Andrea. "Yeah—just hungry, I think."

Andrea rolled her eyes and pulled the first bag from under the tarp. "Then let's move a little faster, please."

"Chop-chop."



Chapter 17

It looks like you can take the girls from the beach, but not the beach from the girls."

Amy smiled and opened her eyes to look up at her uncle. She was lounging on plush chaise lounge on the glass-enclosed back porch. In the center was a stone fireplace, the flames licking jubilantly at the wooden logs. Through the long windows was a view of the snow capped mountains and lush green trees, their arms frosted with snow and ice.

At first she had been talking with Andrea and Chloe, enjoying the view of the mountains, but eventually she'd slipped into sleep with the sun streaming through the windows. Across the room Andrea was lounging herself, a book in hand. Chloe must have already slipped off to join Mitch.

The room as lightly decorated in natural wreathes and garlands, depending mostly on the mountains for ascetics. It had snowed the night before, a white curtain that looked so picturesque that she and Chloe and

Andrea had stayed up half the night with the floodlights on so they could watch out of the big picture window.

"I could get used to it—the peace, the quiet, the view," she told him as she gazed out the window at the snow topped peaks that underlined the blue sky. "It's been a long semester."

"So I heard."

"From Mitch."

"From your dad."

Amy turned and stared at him as he sat down on the ottoman at her side. Her uncle was older, with a full head of grey hair that contrasted sharply with her father's shiny bald top. One wouldn't notice the family resemblance unless they looked close. It was as if their nose fit the same way between their eyes. And their smiles, when they smiled in the sneakiest way.

And for two so drastically different now, they had shared a deep bond, long, long ago. Nearly before Amy could remember.

"Did he call you?"

"We've traded calls," Uncle Pete reached over and tousled her hair as he had done years ago when she was just a kid. "I've been worried about you. He's been worried about you. We've got something in common."

She rolled her eyes. "Everyone is worried about me."

"And are you worried about yourself?"

She thought of the tickling fear she'd felt at the base of her neck since coming to the mountains. "More than is probably necessary."

"You could move up here. I'll always have a job for you, a place for you."

She thought of the beach, the sand under her feet, the waves rolling on the beach. She thought of her friends, and the last few months they had together before things really changed. She thought of walking side by side with Derek as the sun set out beyond the horizon.

No—she couldn't leave. Not now. Not when she was so close to something. Surely she was finally close to something solid.

"At this rate, Uncle Pete, I'm barely on a track to finish college. I can't quit now."

She wasn't ready to mention Derek. Funny, a few weeks before she'd asked him to marry her, but now she couldn't even tell her uncle about him.

Her feelings were suddenly so new.

"What is it now? Business or criminal justice or psychology? Or something new this time?" There was no doubt or derision in his voice. Her uncle probably understood her lack of sure plans better than anyone. It was her father that was the planner, the goal keeper, the financial strategist.

"A little of it all."

"There are Internet classes and some distance learning classes down the mountain." He held up his hands. "I know. You've got enough determination to stay. You would have already run to safety if you were going to do it."

"Who's to say it wouldn't happen up here?"

"Fewer people around, easier to spot trouble, in my way of thinking."

"Fewer places to go, fewer people to hang out with."

"Still the same old arguments," he murmured with a smile. He had asked her to join him before. "You wouldn't be a Carpenter if you left your place by the shore."

"Come on, you're a Carpenter and you're in the mountains."

"Holding my own ground. Staging my own battles."

"Against what?"

"Business, ruthlessness, neglect," he waved a hand to point to the mountains outside. "Nothing's better for the soul than having a place to slow down and look for God."

"I wish you could get my dad up here. I wish you would come see him."

Her uncle shrugged. "We all have our own battles, sweetheart. Not all of them are mine—at least, not at the moment."

He stood, stretched his arms out just as her father would. And she smiled. For two men who spoke as little to each other as her father and his brother, they were sure alike.



Being in Upper Springs wasn't like coming home or returning to her roots, but Chloe was learning to accept them better. The old shops looked more appealing then they had in her youth. Rustic and charming, under a soft blanket of snow, instead of dilapidated buildings to snicker at.

Of course, Amy's Uncle Pete and his thriving resort had funded a great deal of rehab across the small community. Life was not booming by any means, but it was sweet.

And still quiet.

As she had at Thanksgiving, Chloe reveled in the quiet. It gave her time to appreciate life, time to wish and pray. For so long she hadn't wished, not those secret heartfelt little girl plans. Now, in the quiet, she could turn each and every one of them over to God.

The police station now housed three or four deputies on staff, where before, when she had lived there, it had been just Joe and a handful of volunteers. Today Mitch was at the head of a team.

She pulled open the glass front door of the station and smiled when she heard Hope's bark. The giant German Shepherd charged over and stopped expectantly at Chloe's feet. She was still enough a puppy to wiggle with glee while waiting for the attention to be bestowed.

Chloe stooped down and hugged the young dog, laughing when she received a wet kiss of hello.

"You're such a good girl," Chloe purred as she curled her fingers in Hope's thick coat of fur. They had taken to each other almost immediately, much to Mitch's chagrin.

"*You're supposed to make her keep her commands,*" Mitch had reprimanded without heat.

"Chloe!"

"Hey, Nancy." Chloe stood and brushed off her jeans. Hope pressed to her side.

"If you're looking for Mitch, you just missed him. I think he just went over to the resort to fetch you."

"Fetch," Chloe murmured and looked down at Hope. "This dog lingo's going over the top, don't you think?"

Nancy laughed. "He left a bit ago, so he should have figured it out by now and be on his way back."

"Thanks."

"Listen, I was sorry to hear about your dad. I didn't realize the connection when you were here last," Nancy murmured, flipping through her files. Her back was turned or she might have seen the sudden shock in Chloe's eyes. "It's a shame. He was starting to get his life back together and then the accident. Joe was so sure ... and then ..."

Chloe stared at the woman's back, as the words slowly assimilated in her mind. "Yeah."

Her hands were shaking she thought and looked down at them, willed them to stop. She spotted Hope staring up at her, watching as if she knew Chloe had just been dealt a blow.

Her father ... whom she had just begun to think about, to pray for, to *wish* for ...

An accident. Did that mean her father was dead? Did that mean that Mitch knew?

Of course he did. Nancy had said that Joe had been aware of his situation.

Then why hadn't Mitch told her? Why had he waited?

She suddenly wanted to issue an attack command—not for Hope, but to herself. To attack something, someone, but there was nothing, nothing but the sudden shock.

No one ... no longer her father to deal with.

And why hadn't her mother told her? Surely she would have been notified. Surely her mother knew...

"I'll see if I ... can catch him."

And she turned, escaped, before Nancy could turn around. Behind her, behind the glass, she heard Hope's warning bark.

As if the dog knew she was intentionally heading the wrong way.



Mitch followed Amy out the front doors as he pulled on his gloves. It was starting to snow, a light drift. Nothing that had brought on the white blanket that already covered the ground.

He looked up at the dark clouds. They were in for another round of snowfall tonight. It would be another reason to be on call, another reason to be away from Chloe.

He'd really been looking forward to a quiet lunch with her.

"She's probably waiting for me back at the station."

Again, Mitch thought and sighed. He'd been there and come back, not having passed her on the way. He didn't think much normally about the short trek from the resort, but this was Chloe he was thinking about ... and with all that had happened in the last few months ... all that this town meant to her ...

He didn't like it. Not one bit.

Still, it wasn't Basin Springs and there were a few shops Chloe had discovered to be to her liking during her Thanksgiving stay.

"I'll have her call you if she comes back."

"If I don't see her on the way. Tell her to go ahead and eat—I've run out of lunch time."

"I'll—" Amy stopped and stared. He turned and felt the relief fall through him.

Then he saw the look—the grief—on her face.

"Chloe—"

"Just don't talk to me—" she spat, her eyes red-rimmed from tears. "Don't say a word to me. You knew he was dead. He was *my* father. I had the right, the duty to know. You *knew* and you didn't tell me."

"I—"

She'd found out about her father, he realized. It didn't matter how.

She slapped at his hand as he reached to touch her. "Don't—I'm not a weakling. I don't need to be shielded. I thought you would have understood that. Just leave me alone."

There was a ragged fear in her voice that Mitch didn't understand. She stomped past and headed down the hill toward the family cabin instead of into the resort. Stricken, Mitch turned to follow.

"She's not ready for you right now," Amy told him and held a hand to him. "She's going to have to work through some of the shock. What was that all about?"

"Her father," he murmured, watching Chloe disappear into the woods. "He died last year. It took some tracing down to find out for sure. I was going to tell her ..."

"She knows." Amy started toward the trail, then turned back toward Mitch. "It's not you she's mad at, Mitch. It's not you she feels betrayed by. It's herself. Let me talk to her."

"Amy—" Mitch called as she started down the trail. "Be careful."



It wasn't far from the resort to the family cabin. The trail was a little steep, narrow, and not necessarily quicker going down than up. Ice patches tended to take one unawares.

Amy caught up with Chloe halfway down the trail. Chloe was walking at a brisk pace, a sure sign of angst. Amy fell in line just behind her and stuck her hands in the pockets of her leather coat.

"I don't need you to shield me either," Chloe muttered without looking around.

"Good—because that's the last thing I would do. I've had enough of it myself," Amy reminded her. "I'm just here as your friend."

"Are you?" Chloe stopped and spun to face Amy in a brisk, angry move. "Or are you here on Mitch's behalf?"

"You're both my friends. I can't divide myself from that. You're the one that's more upset."

"He should have told me."

"He would have."

"But he hadn't."

"How long had he known?" Amy asked. "We were out, talking, de-stressing from finals last night. Would that have been a good time for him to pull you aside and tell you? This morning, before he went to work should he have just stopped by and taken you aside?"

"There are phones. I've had the same number for weeks."

"And you know Mitch. *I know* Mitch. He's not going to let you go through something that will upset you, put you in the position to be upset, without being there for you. He didn't tell me. He's been waiting on you to get here."

Chloe sighed. "I know. I just thought ... I wanted ..."

She buried her face in her hands and let out a groan. "I don't even know what I thought, what I wanted. My dad was already dead to me. I had only just begun to dream, to think of him. Letting Mitch into my life opened a door for me to deal with that. And he was already gone. Already dead. None of my prayers made a difference."

"How do you know?" Amy asked. "Maybe they made a difference in you. Or will."

"It's too late."

"You don't know that. God isn't limited by time, Chloe. You know Joe and Ryan were friends."

"Yeah."

"Joe came to me a few years ago, without even knowing that I was struggling with the same thing—or close to what you're dealing with now. He and Ryan had begun surfing together by way of Cage, had fallen into some pretty heavy conversations about life. It's odd that even though I never saw my brother sitting out on the beach talking about deep things, serious things, it's so easy for me to see, to understand what it would have been like for him."

"Maybe because it was much the way Mitch talked with me. How Joe later talked with me. He told me that Ryan had begun to question him, to talk to him, with him about God. He can't say that Ryan ever accepted. He couldn't say that Ryan ever believed. However, God's bigger than either Joe or I. It's possible that in all the car rides my mom and Ryan had together they talked about it as well. They were together so often on long car trips that summer. It's possible. I won't know until I get to heaven."

A tear slid down Chloe's cheeks. "I just wanted to see him. I don't know what else I wanted. I can't see him again. He's my dad and I haven't seen him in a long time. I've only recently started to pray for him. And he's gone. None of it mattered."

Amy reached out, wiped the tear from Chloe's cheek. "Now who would you rather have had wipe your tears away? Me or Mitch?"

Chloe smiled and rolled her watery eyes. Amy laughed.

"That's what I thought. Next time, don't run from him. It rips his heart out when he doesn't know how to reach you."

"It was all just boiling inside me. It was silly—I know. Most of what's upsetting me is I have so many questions and no answers. I ran away from him because he has the answers."

"And you're not sure if you want to know."

"Maybe. Amy you don't know how lucky you are. You've got your dad to pray for, to see, to hope for."

"I know. From now on I'll consider it a blessing," she laughed. "Or try. You know, sometimes I go out to our old house, the one we lived in with my mom. Sometimes I just sit there and stare at the windows and remember and dream. Sometimes I can feel close to him, remembering him as he was, our family as it was. Maybe we could get Mitch to go with us tomorrow so we could see your old house."

"I don't know if I want to remember who he was—I want to know who he became. Nancy said he was turning his life around again."

"Then we'll find out as much as we can. We'll—"

Suddenly, she heard the quiet. She looked around, stared through the depths of the trees and into the woods—into the dark hidden spaces. She felt the hair prickle on the back of her neck.

"What is it?"

Amy shook her head. All she could see was the woods around her, the snow coating the branches in a thin layer. "Nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing. You lost all your color."

"You didn't hear anything, feel anything?"

"No."

Amy shook her head, now more upset that she had put fear back in Chloe's eyes. "I don't know. I'm just not used to the ... quiet."

"You have reason to be." Chloe looked around, shivered. "I don't like this. Let's go."

Amy nodded and they started down the trail together. They were both girls that had spent a good deal of time alone, out in nature. Both had spent plenty of time in the mountains. It was a shame that someone out there, somewhere, could so easily take away their peace.



Anna stopped in the doorway leading in from her kitchen and studied the man who sat on her sofa. His face was lit only by the twinkle of lights from the Christmas tree. Here he was, alone, lonely, all over again. At her house. How often over the last few years had he come to her in this way, seeking her out when he was down?

When Vince was out of town without him. She rolled her eyes. One would think a man his age could deal with being without his best friend.

Yet he had a choice of all the women in the area. He still chose her. It perplexed her.

He'd gone home after work, obviously, and changed from his immaculate suit into jeans and a T-shirt. He looked a little disheveled, which to her opinion, only made him more appealing.

And that only made him more dangerous.

"You know, you could go up, join Amy, your brother. You have family, Lance, if you would just accept them."

Lance didn't say anything. She sighed and sat down beside him.

He glanced over, set aside his soda. "How come you're that far over there?"

She lifted an eyebrow and ignored the flirtatious tone. "You know why Lance. In a week, this is where you'll push me all over again. I'm not coming back toward you until you give me a reason to stay."

"You're the one who walked away the last time."

"If you're here to get into an argument with me in my house you might as well leave now. You're not doing this to me again."

He stared at her for a moment, then turned his head, his eyes focused on nothing.

"I don't know what to do with you."

"Yet you want me to hold on?"

"I don't know. I can't be like you."

She smiled gently and curled her fingers around her glass instead of reaching over to comfort as she wanted to do, as she had done before—too many times. "You don't have to be like me. You just have to accept me."

"And accept what you believe."

"That all depends on you. I will always be your friend—you'll never have to question that. Your friendship, Lance, means something to me. It has since we were kids."

"But it's not enough for marriage?"

"You know its not."

He turned and looked at her, looked her over, his eyes sad and lost and ... searching. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. For so many things. For disappointing you, for disappointing Amy. For relying on Vince more than I rely on myself. I'd forgotten ... *I have forgotten* how to reach out from my own heart. With you, sometimes, I've been able to do that."

"And with Amy?"

"Sometimes. Not enough. I know its not enough."

Anna moved then and leaned her head against his shoulder, leaned against him, into him.

"I miss her. I miss her so much."

He wasn't talking about Amy anymore, but Mallory. "I know."

"When I'm with you, it's like I miss her more."

She closed her eyes and silently grieved over his words.

"I don't know how to open myself up to you ... to Amy, to anyone without missing her."

"You open yourself up with Vince."

"I'm not sure I have. In all this time, I don't know if I have. It's easy with him, too easy. He made plans at Thanksgiving, I went along. He thought calling to decline Amy's offer was what I wanted."

"Was it not?"

"No. I haven't been a good father to her in a long time. I don't know what to do, Anna. Amy hates me."

"No, you haven't ... but she's unwilling to settle for a father who won't open up to her." Anna sat up, turned around and faced him. For once, her eyes met his and were steady. "Neither will I."



Chapter 18

With tinsel in her hair, Andrea twirled around, then plopped down on a the sofa. The lights were dim and the fire place crackled. They'd turned the heat up and were down to their short sleeves and bare feet. Christmas music played from the high tech stereo system in the corner.

Feeling blissfully tired from spending an afternoon snow-boarding with Joe, Amy sat curled up in the oversized easy chair and watched her friends. They were both glowing. Happy and in love, with dreams stretching before them.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell them about Derek. She was used to them knowing or guessing what she was thinking and feeling. She'd rarely been able to hide anything from them, not since Chloe moved in with her. Now that Amy was living with Anna, and her two best friends were sharing an apartment, that had changed.

So much had changed.

But the silence of her secret felt like a cozy blanket. For once, her friends could enjoy being the center of attention.

She looked over at Chloe and winked. "Did you give Andrea her message?"

"The one from Eric?" Chloe chimed in without prompting. "He called and said they were extending the trial and he wouldn't be able to get up here before Christmas."

Andrea only rolled her eyes that shimmered with happiness even more than the tinsel in her hair. "When did he call?"

"This afternoon, while you were out shopping."

"Funny. I talked to him right before we went up for dinner. He said he would see me in the morning."

"Well, you know those lawyer types."

Andrea smiled up at the ceiling and toyed with the tinsel in her hair. "Don't I ever."

Chloe snickered. "She knows them so well she's going to give birth to a whole firm. It's going to be in the blood."

"Should I remind you that neither my brother nor I are lawyers."

"But you're marrying one," Chloe pointed out.

"I'm not marrying anyone."

"Yet."

Andrea shrugged. "Yet."

Though Amy was sure that Eric would pop the question soon, she let the conversation drop. She, for one, wasn't ready to give anyone a hard time about marriage—less they find out about her own recent venture in that direction.

She wasn't someone who believed that love was some magical power that brought two people together. It was, she was sure, part passion, part hope, and a huge amount of trust. Her own parent's marriage had been about all of that plus work and commitment—so much

work with his schedule. It wasn't something that could just be lost and found.

Love was patient, kind ... punctuated by the idea of growing old together, of struggle and winning the race, of celebrating. Of promise and hopes and future.

And that was something her dad had lost. She understood that now. Maybe in understanding that, she understood him. He'd lost his heart, his secure future—not just with someone who put up with him, but who loved him. Someone who was patient and kind and beautiful.

Could she really blame him for breaking a part? They'd both lost the greatest love in their lives. Not just her mother, but their family. The bright hope, the bright idea of the future. Everything that seemed patient and kind in their lives. The money didn't really matter, but he pushed himself to make it.

Maybe, she thought, it was the only secure future he thought he could have.

Amy glanced at the fire and thought of Derek. He was, she thought, a soft warm glow in her heart. She knew she felt safe with him. She felt more. Even though she missed him, she didn't really picture this as their Christmas. They would never be able to have that picturesque ideal holiday, snuggling by the fire on Christmas Eve. He would probably always take the holiday shift. That was part of him, a part of him she couldn't help but cherish. He was a lot like Ham.

They could and would make their own traditions, find their own *ideal*. That was something she could give him, a way she could steady him.

If.

With her friends slipping into sleepiness, Amy let the music roll over her with bright words of cheer and pushed the rest of the thoughts away. It was something, as Derek had said, that would keep for another day. She watched the shadows pop on the wall as the fire crackled and

burned. When the light rolled across the window signaling someone was turning into the drive, she only curled deeper into the cushions.

At the knock on the door, she sighed, but didn't move.

"Who could it be?" Chloe murmured, half asleep. "Mitch won't be off for another hour, at least."

"It's Amy's family cabin," Andrea pointed out. "She should get the door."

"The only person who's up here to see us is Mitch."

"He wouldn't knock."

"Someone's going to have to get the door."

"Maybe they'll go away and come back in the morning."

Amy lay back in the chair and watched as the door knob turned and the door pushed open. She smiled at the man with the dark auburn hair.

"Hey! Are you girls going to leave me standing out here?"

Andrea rolled off the sofa and stumbled toward the door in a flash. She flung her arms around Eric and pulled him inside.

"I was just wishing for you," she told him, standing on her tip toes.

"Were you, now?" he asked, and Amy thought he looked wickedly delighted; surprised some, but defiantly pleased.

"Well, I—You're here early."

"The other attorneys brought forth a postponement until after the holidays," he set down his luggage and had his arms around her. Somehow they managed to get the front door shut.

"But I talked to you just two hours ago—"

"On my cell phone. I told you I would see you soon."

"You said you would see me in the morning."

"And I will—won't I? We can still have a late breakfast together. After this week I, for one, want to sleep in." He picked at the tinsel in her hair. "What's this?"

"We were decorating the tree earlier."

Eric closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Andrea's, as if he was savoring her, Amy thought.

Across the room, Chloe sighed. "This is better than the Christmas movies we've been watching."

"Comedy at it's best," Amy teased when Eric looked over at her. "I'd offer for you to come in, sit down and warm yourself by the fire, but you warm enough to me."

Eric laughed. "The last thing I want to do is sit down after that drive."

Andrea took his hand. "We were supposed to meet Mitch up at the lodge for the evening activities. You want to go ahead and head up there?"

"Does it involve riding in a car?"

Andrea laughed then. "Not if you can manage an uphill climb."



Derek watched the surf roll in. The beach was empty, the night was quiet. He could remember a time when the holidays weren't a time to relax. The shifts had been understaffed, the cells full from DUI and drug trafficking.

Not in Basin Springs. The night was quiet. Even the life away from the beach, over the police radio, was relatively calm. The patrols were for the most part uneventful. He'd brought someone in himself—but one, walking barefoot in the sand and singing off key was nothing compared to the back allies and the potential to see a gun.

He was prepared. He just hadn't had to use it.

Yet.

Basin Springs was changing. Who could only guess what it would be like in a few years. He didn't know where he'd be in a few years. Who he'd be ... who he'd be with.

He watched the surf surge and let his mind wonder.

The buzz of his cell phone startled him. "Johnson."

"Carpenter."

He smiled. He could hear the strains of Christmas music over the line, the mumbled chatter of a crowded room, but it was her voice he centered on. He'd missed Amy—missed her going out on the patrol boat with him, missed their easy banter at the station house.

And most of all, he'd missed the easy companionship that their dates had become.

"How are the mountains?"

"Beautiful, peaceful ... how is the beach?"

"Beautiful, peaceful."

She laughed and the sound trickled over the line right into his heart. "Are you on duty?"

He looked out into the blackness of the ocean, heard the soothing sound of the surf. "Officially I am. Are you at a party?"

"We just came up to the lodge." She must have moved away as the sounds of voices dimmed and suddenly it was only her voice he heard on the line. "My uncle offered me a job."

Amy had told him he would and that she always turned him down. Still, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck twitch. "Are you going to take it?"

"No—I've found something in the lower Springs I like more."

"A new restaurant?"

She laughed and if he hadn't of known her better he might have thought it was a giggle. His Amy—*giggling?*

His Amy?

"No."

"Oh—because we would definitely have to try it. We're running out of new places to go."

"Are we settling into a grove now?"

"I don't know. Will you stick around if we do?"

Her retort didn't come quickly—which satisfied him. There was part of him that still feared that she'd turned to him because the moment had called for it. He glanced back through the glass to the inside of the station, then turned and headed down to the sand.

"I think I've always wanted to be in a grove," she said at last as he stepped out onto the sand. "As long as we find our own, make it our own."

When we're married.

He thought it, but he didn't say it. Neither of them did—or had since the night she'd proposed to him.

"You'll always have to work Christmas."

"Probably."

"Maybe I will, too ..."

Derek stepped up to where the wave hit it's furthest point. He was standing in the place she'd wanted—Ham's place. "Doing what?"

"I don't know."

"Has there ever been anything you've ever wanted to do? For you? Not just a job, but a plan or a goal?"

"Sure ... all girls have dreams, right?"

"Some, I suppose—but I'm only interested in yours."

"The first, the biggest ... I wanted to go to the Olympics ... I think that was my earliest dream. No ... the *first* dream I had was to go to the World Series-but Ryan told me I couldn't. I wanted to be just like my dad, but I was too young to join a real baseball team."

He could almost picture her in pigtails, watching her dad with those big brown eyes ... full of trust ... a bat in hand and a baseball cap on backwards.

"My mom would take me swimming-it was easy to pretend in the water ... and pretending led me to try harder. She used to say she gave birth to me in the water. Then she died ..." She let out a breath, as if the

words had been hard to say, and he could almost see her—her eyes serious, her fingers restless.

"I think, for a time ... I wanted to do something with her name on it. I haven't really thought about that in years, but there was a time ... right after I became friends with Mitch, that I used to lie awake at night and think about it."

"About what?"

"Oh—a center—for teens to go, for me to go, with a half pipe—for *me* to use, close enough to the beach to include surfing and swimming, again—"

"For you."

"For me. It was ... not very practical."

"Why not?" He could see it—had thought about it. He saw enough on the beach to know there was a need.

"For one ... it's a big issue for the town council. They would never agree ... not for me to front it anyway. And the logical thing for me to do would be to ask my father for advice. Financial planning, getting a loan."

"You're dad would help."

"Probably. And we would argue and fight through the entire process. I didn't use to have the energy or the desire. Lately—things have been better, so maybe it would be easier now. There's too many other problems, anyway.

"Like?"

"Location," she said as if he should have known. "A place in Basin Springs next to the beach? In the center of the strip? It's just a dream."

"You'd have a lot to offer a bunch of troubled teens ..." They'd talked about it before, so he knew it was something she was coming to grasp.

"*Maybe.*"

She feared failure, not the setbacks themselves, but the all out end of it all. He knew that about her. She'd tasted it, in the worst of ways. She lived in a town that had seen her fall.

And he thought he understood that she wouldn't want to fail again with something that had her mother's name and memory attached.

"For someone with degrees in criminal justice and management, tooling around with psychology—"

"That someone knows how near impossible it would be for me. And I don't have any degree yet."

"You will. One might say you've been moving toward this all your life. You could have a big sign with your mom's name on it."

She sighed. "That's not fair. Don't use it against me, Derek. I've never told anyone."

"Then when you come home, we'll dream some big dreams together. All our own."

"I miss you," she told him. "You've opened up big things inside of me. I don't know if I'm ready for that."

He didn't worry. She'd thought she was ready for him a few weeks ago. It might have been an impulse, but the stirring was still there. She would be ready for more eventually.



Amy turned off her cell phone and jumped when she realized that Chloe and Andrea were standing at the end of the sofa. They sat down on either side of her.

"So," Andrea began, "who were you talking to?"

"Ah—don't you both have men to entertain?"

"They're entertaining themselves."

"Do you trust those two together?" Amy diverted. "What kind of secrets can Mitch tell Eric?"

"There's nothing he could tell him that would matter. And that has nothing whatsoever to do with your conversation."

"She said she missed him—or whoever it was," Chloe pointed out.

"And that he ... or *whoever it was* opened up big things inside of her."

Amy grimaced and curled her hands into the throw she'd pulled over her lap while she talked to Derek. "You heard that?"

"Honey, you've been in your own world." Andrea lifted an eyebrow. "And you've been keeping secrets."

"It's not a secret, really. I—" Amy slumped back into the cushions. "Derek and I have been seeing each other."

Andrea glanced across at Chloe. "For how long?"

"A couple of weeks."

"I knew it!" Chloe crowed. "I should have bet you."

"You just said that you thought they would date, not that they were dating. And I agreed with you."

"I asked him to marry me," Amy blurted and felt herself relax even as the emotions whirled around in her mind. This was Andrea and Chloe, after all.

They stared at her, then at each other.

"He said no—" Amy said quickly, "or to ask again later. We hadn't even been on a date yet—not a real one. Out, kind of, doing stuff, but not a date. And only that one kiss—though I don't suppose that matters."

"You asked him to marry you?"

"Derek?" Chloe asked. "Our Derek?"

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time," Amy muttered. She told them about the night, how she had gone to the ocean, then run to Derek. "It was like he was the one steady point."

"He's not Ham, Amy," Andrea pointed out.

"He said the same thing. And I know he's not. Ham wanted me to be steady. He did his best and gave his best, but he only knew one way for me. His way. Derek ..." she thought of their conversation, of the

knot she still felt in her stomach. She glanced across the room, toward the popping fireplace and remembered her own thoughts from that afternoon. "He wants me to do more ... and I can do more for him."

"You haven't said you love him."

"I'm attracted. I miss him. I feel safe when I'm with him and when I talk to him. I trust him." She watched the fire flicker, concentrated on it's warmth. "I feel like he's someone I could be patient with, someone who could inspire me to be kind, to see the best in myself and other people. He thinks he sees the best in me—and I know he's seen the worst. Or knows the worst."

Chloe squeezed her hand. "If that's not a definition of love, I don't know what it is I have with Mitch."

"I think I do ... love him—I don't guess I'm ready to say it again. Yet."

"So you have said it before?"

Amy shrugged, feeling sheepish under Andrea's direct gaze. "I asked him to marry me. It just came out."

"And Derek?" Chloe asked.

"I think he feels the same way." Again she looked to the fire and curled her hands into the blanket, searching, she thought, for Derek's hand. "I think he's giving me time to accept ... to understand what I feel for him first."

"How did we miss this?" Andrea wondered. "You're head over your surfboard about him."

"Off her surfboard. Caught in a riptide."

"Going under—"

Rolling her eyes, Amy waved Eric in when he paused in the doorway. "Pardon the continuance of a bad analogy, but you've had your own waves to catch."

"We'll talk about this later," Andrea muttered and Amy smiled. She felt better now. Somehow.

"I'm sure we will."



Amy parked her truck outside Mitch's house the next morning and jumped from the cab as Mitch came outside. A light snow was falling and the temperature was dropping. Chloe curled deeper into her coat as the cold air entered through the open door.

She was cold and she was dreading what they were about to do. They were going to the place her father had lived.

What she didn't tell him, what she couldn't find the words to tell him, was that she'd seen the house before. Her mother had never shielded her or her sister from her father's alcoholism. In fact she'd used them to try and draw him back to her.

Not to the family—not to keep them together as a family.

Just to remind him who he owed.

Chloe looked through his front window and focused on his Christmas tree. She'd helped him decorate it while she was up for Thanksgiving. It was the first tree—real tree—that she had decorated since she was a little girl. There was a wreath on the door that she had trimmed for him one of those days while he was at the station. In his garage she saw his skis, snowshoes and his surf board propped up casually against the back wall. She smiled. That was Mitch.

His SUV sat in his garage. He glanced back at it and frowned, then pulled a stocking cap over his blond hair.

"Morning all," Mitch said as he settled in on the driver's side, making adjustments to the seat and mirrors.

"Do you know who did it?" Amy asked as she climbed in on the passenger's side.

As they drove away from the curb, Chloe glanced at his truck, noted the odd tilt, the slashed tires.

"I have my guess. I hauled in a couple of guys for roughhousing the other night. They threatened to do something like this."

"If it's not a good time, Mitch, we can do this later."

Mitch pulled to a stop at the stop sign and turned to Chloe. He used his knuckle to trace a line on her cheek. "There's nothing I can do about it right now. The station's sending someone out to tow it back, then they're going to check it for fingerprints, evidence. Besides," he added as he made the turn down the mountain, "it's my day off and my girl's in town. Nothing more serious to me than that."

"I'll remind you of that in twenty years."

He smiled, but kept his eyes on the road. "You do that, sweetness."

"You could drop me back at the lodge and you guys could do this yourself," Amy suggested.

"We could—" Chloe agreed, then turned in her seat to face Amy—Amy who would understand what she felt as well as, if not better than Mitch. "But I want you there too."

They drove for a few minutes in silence. If she'd hated the mountains, it was because of their tilt, because of the downward tilt, the turning, rolling roads. Because of these back roads, that traversed through forest, that led to that cabin.

The years between merged and for a moment she was huddled in the back seat of her mother's car, huddled with her sister, sick to her stomach ... wishing, praying, that her mother would turn the car around, go back to town.

But she wasn't with her mother anymore. She couldn't be. She was older now and her father was gone.

She took a deep breath and leaned slightly against Mitch. He was warm and solid, she reminded herself as he drove down and turned on the familiar roads. The essence of time slowly faded and she let herself bask in the joy that Mitch was with her. She concentrated on the trees, on the light falling snow, and eventually on the pristine white of the old dirt road covered in a layer of snow.

It was a steep drive, rocky. Almost immediately, they dropped—hitting a deep pothole that had been covered in snow.

And then it was as if the truck picked up speed. The truck bounced over rocks, dangerously slid over the snow and ice.

"Mitch?"

His knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. He muttered a prayer and slowly pushed down the emergency break. The truck went into a skid, even as he turned into it.

"We've lost the breaks."

Chloe gripped Amy's hand. *Oh, God. Please.*

The truck crashed, rear-end first then whirled.

Chloe felt her heart skip a beat. The impact propelled the truck again, spinning it. The edge of the forest came in quick. The truck crashed again, into a tree.

This time on Mitch's side.

Seconds later, the truck stopped. The thud against the third tree sounded odd and distant.



Chapter 19

It was oddly silent except for the odd hiss coming from the radiator. The air bags slowly deflated. An eerie white smoke fell from the air vents. Amy coughed and struggled against the shock. She fought against the urge to curl up into herself, concentrated on the hiss instead of the fresh memory of metal crunching. She slowly opened each of her hands, forcing submission into the muscles of her fingers.

You can do it, a voice reminded her, overpowering the echoes of the past. She had handled emergencies before. She was trained.

Amy's hands trembled as she unbuckled her seat belt. "Chloe?"

Her voice sounded shockingly hoarse.

"What?"

Her friend's blue eyes were wide with panic, her hands ice cold. She ran a hand over Chloe's legs, her arms, checking for breaks. "Chloe. Are you hurt?"

"I—I don't know. Mitch—"

Amy ventured a look passed and felt her heart stop. His eyes were closed, he had a deep cut along his temple. The glass peppered his hair. She reached across Chloe, felt a pulse and the shudder of a labored breath. Both were weak, but strong.

And alive.

She glanced down, winced when she saw the metal and the odd angle of his leg. *Broken.*

"He's alive," she told Chloe. "Get his cell. Call 911. Tell them we've been in an accident. Tell them where. You have an idea, don't you? Tell them we have an unconscious victim. Tell them it's Mitch, otherwise, they're going to be buzzing him down. Give them as much information as you can."

Amy climbed out of the truck and into the snowfall on shaking legs. The sound of truck slamming against tree, the horror, all melded into one. Leaning against the truck, she fought off the queasy feel of panic—panic that had risen early in summer—the day she met Derek. She had lost it then.

She couldn't afford to lose it now.

She stumbled around, her hands shaking as she pulled at the driver's side door. It was jammed. The metal was bent in, crushed. The snow made it hard to have a firm grip on the truck's handle.

"Chloe?" she called out as she levered herself up and over, into the back of her truck. She tossed out her first aid kit, then opened the tool box. On top was a mirage of swimming gear, towels, floats. She pulled out the towels, then shoved the rest aside and found her crow bar.

The metal felt cold and heavy in her hands.

"Amy—there's no reception. It won't go through."

Amy swung down from the truck and looked through the broken glass. "Chloe—listen. One of us is going to have to go for help. I want

you to get out of the truck carefully. Check your weight. Don't move if you feel any pain. Slowly now. Try and get out."

Amy positioned the bar in the door of the truck and pushed. The metal creaked, but didn't budge.

She let out a breath, looked around, braced herself against a tree. The crushing sound of metal echoed in her head.

A lifetime ago, she'd watched someone die in a car accident. She hadn't known what to do, how to respond.

Now she did. She wasn't losing Mitch.

Please God.

Her hands were sweating, mixing with the moisture of snow that melted on her hands. She wiped them off on her jeans, tried again.

"Amy—" Chloe called. "It's okay. I'm okay."

"Head up to the main road," Amy ordered as she used her weight against the bar. "Go up, see if you can get anything. Anyone."

Please God, she prayed again and pushed.

The truck door crashed open. Amy stumbled, found herself in the snow, and scrambled up. Her hands were shaking as she searched for Mitch's pulse.

Relief almost brought out a smile as he groaned and jerked against the snow on her hands. "Mitch—"

"Amy—"

"We've been in a wreck," she told him as she knelt down and unzipped her first aid kit. "We're okay. You're banged up."

"No kidding." He pressed a hand to his forehead. She pushed it aside, checked his eyes for shock. "Chloe?"

"She headed uphill—tried to call for help. We're not getting through."

She reached up, brushed at the tiny fragments of glass, and began to clean the cut.

Mitch winced. "We won't get it—not here. Not out here. The breaks."

"They went out."

"Yeah—my leg," he took in a labored breath. "It hurts."

"I know. I know it has to," she dealt with the cut on his head, then quickly checked the other cuts on his face. His hands were trembling. It was cold. Her own hands, warmed by the first rush of adrenaline, were beginning to feel the effects of the temperature.

Then Chloe was there. She climbed into the other side of the truck. Mitch turned his head, winced, and gave her a brave smile even as he reached out a hand. "You okay?"

She nodded and swallowed as she took his hand within both of hers.

"You're cold," she murmured.

"Yeah—until fever sets in. Amy—"

"I know."

They had worked together long enough that neither of them needed words. She looked across at Chloe. "You didn't get anything."

She shook her head. "No—it's been snowing, but it doesn't look like anyone's traveled on the road above. There aren't any other tracks in the snow."

"It's not a well traveled road. Most of what's to the west of us is a preserve."

Amy frowned and thought of the long, winding, downhill road they had taken. "Someone's going to have to head back. One of us will have to stay here with Mitch."

"You know what to do. I want you to stay with him."

"Can you make it?" Amy levered her gaze on Chloe's. "Timing's critical. It's cold out here and it's snowing. We need help fast."

"And Mitch needs you here. I don't know how to help him. I know my way. I know these mountains, Amy."

She looked at Mitch, held his hand to her lips. "I can do it."

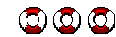
He nodded, swallowed. "There are some homes, a few ... closer to town. Most of them have been ... empty. I don't know that anyone ... came up, this year. Power, phones will be off."

He gasped and stretched as if pushing at the pain in his leg. Chloe brought his hand to her lips. "I better go."

Mitch took in a breath and opened his eyes. For a minute, he seemed to concentrate on focusing. "Take my gloves."

She squeezed his hand and pressed her lips to it once more. "Okay."

Amy looked over at Chloe, met her eyes, and acknowledged the task.



Derek stretched out on his boat and watched as the grey clouds passed over, bringing a soft drizzle of rain. Underneath him, the ocean rolled gently. He'd gone out early the morning to watch the sunrise and he'd enjoyed a leisurely cruise before the rain came in.

Just beyond the rain, were blue skies. A warm Christmas, at least for those in Basin Springs. They would have surfers out at the beach tomorrow. The early forecast predicted large waves as another storm built up off the coast.

Amy would have loved it.

He ran a hand over the arm of his chair—restless. He just couldn't stop thinking about her. Maybe it was their conversation from the night before. He'd let it follow him into his sleep—and he'd watch part of her dreams unfold, seen her, and all of the possibilities.

Derek wanted Amy to believe in possibilities.

He stood, paced to the edge of the boat and looked out over the ocean. The waves began to sparkle as the sun peaked from behind the clouds and began to warm his skin. Some distance away, a yacht floated leisurely by.

Soon, her probation would be over. Soon, he hoped, she could turn her focus from the past to the future.

He sighed and sat back down as the sun began to warm his skin. He stretched out, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the lapping of the ocean against the boat.

She was right. Once they were married-*if* they were married-they would have to create their own Christmas traditions. This could be one of them. Sleeping beneath the sun, soaking in the warm rays, listen only to the quiet demand of the waves and feel the slow rocking of the boat. They could go in, make it back in time for an early candlelight service. They could enjoy the beach under the stars, much as he had last night.

As the voice crackled over his VHF radio, he nearly turned it out ...

... until he heard he recognized the name of his boat. The *High Tide*—named by it's last owner.

"... calling *High Tide*. *High Tide* come in. Over." The air waves crackled as he dipped down below into the galley and reached for the receiver. "*High Tide* this is Lieutenant Miller. Do you read me? Over."

He lifted the receiver and pressed down the button. "This is *High Tide*. Anna? Over."

"We have a situation you may want to be aware of. What is your position?"

"Five miles west of Belvier Island. I'm heading in. Over."

"I'll meet you at the docks. Over. Anna out."

"*High Tide* out."

Setting the receiver in it's cradle, Derek frowned as he headed up. If it had been anyone else he would have been upset at losing his few hours off. But there was only one reason Anna would have contacted him.

Amy.



"It's too cold to stay out here," Amy said as she watched Chloe disappear around the turn at the top of the hill. The slide down hill had seemed so long, and yet the hill wasn't so large. Still, Chloe seemed so small as she rounded the turn.

God, take care of her.

Amy looked back at Mitch. The truck wasn't even attempting to start. With no heat, they were beginning to feel the effects of the frigid air. The falling snow was melting and absorbing into their clothes. Even if Chloe could get help within the hour, the exposure would prove dangerous.

Mitch's leg would was still bleeding. Unable to take the time to find the words to deal with everything—Chloe, Mitch, the cold—she trusted her heart to petition on her behalf for all the things she couldn't ask for and just prayed.

"How far is that cabin?"

Mitch winced as he studied the road. "Not far. It's not ... far off ...the road we turned off. Around that bend."

She nodded, reached for his hand. It was ice cold, colder than her own. "I don't have blankets, Mitch. You always told me I needed winter gear when I come up here."

"And how ... often is that?"

Amy shrugged and let out a breath she'd been holding. She watched her breath turn white from the cold and frowned before looking at him again. His eyes were closed. He was in pain.

"I need to set this leg. Then maybe we need to try to get to that cabin. If it's not far, we will be better off."

"You know what to do, Amy."

He wasn't just telling her, he was commanding her. He turned his head so that she could see his eyes. He trusted her, and that trust made her heart break. She was about to hurt him.

"You learned from the best."

Her eyes welled up and her hands shook, not from the cold. "I know."

"I'll ... do what I *can*."

She hated the sound of pain in his voice. "I know."

"Do it."



Anna was waiting at the docks, dressed in one of her somber suits. She was on the clock. Her hair was down and lifted in the ocean breeze, but he could still see the worry. As he pulled up along side, she moved down without a word to help him secure the boat. He tossed her one rope and jumped out, bringing the other with him.

"What's up?"

Kneeling, Anna efficiently tightened her end. He wouldn't have pictured her on a boat, but she showed an ease that denoted experience.

She stood and brushed off her hands. "It finally came through who's been treating Loraine. It might not be anything, or he might know something. It's Vince Jamison. I'd thought you'd want to know."

"Sounds familiar," he said as he secured his own end.

"It should. He's Amy's father's third leg," Anna walked over and waited for Derek to finish. "The two of them are rarely apart. Vince isn't a father, shows no desire to be a father, and tends to lead Lance away from Amy."

"How?"

"How shall I count the ways?" she asked, with no small supply of sarcasm. "Most recently he made plans for Lance to go off with him at Thanksgiving. He assumed that Lance would prefer it—told Amy just as much. Amy didn't tell you?"

"She said something about it." Derek let it process, remembered that a doctor, a friend of her father's, had stopped by to see her during her stay at the hospital. He tried to picture that man doctoring medications. For what reasons?

"Loraine verbally attacked and tried to manipulate the Carpenter marriage. Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"One would think." Seeming agitated, she pushed her hair out of her eyes and shrugged. "But it could just as easily have been Mallory. There's a reason people remember her as being royalty around here. She had a lot of influence."

"So Amy said."

"She would have wanted to get Loraine the best help. I know she recommended a top psychologist and paid for counseling. She might have considered Vince a good choice. He's been a family friend for a long time. He has one of the best reps in Basin Springs."

"That doesn't explain the change in medication."

"I don't know, Derek. It could be that she didn't see Vince or maybe the husband's covering for her. Vince may have some of the answers. He is not only Lance's friend, but he's a good doctor, and he's really concerned about his reputation. I don't see him doing it. She might have seen any number of doctors if he wasn't around."

"Still—"

It had been someone with access to drugs that had tried to poison Amy. Anna must have thought the same thing, or she wouldn't have alerted him to come in.

"I'd like to talk to him," he said when he realized his hands were clenched. "We're not going to get any of our questions answered if we don't."

"I thought you might want to talk to him," Anna led the way down the dock. "I don't know if he's in town. It is Christmas Eve, but since Lance stayed around, Vince might be somewhere too."



"You okay?"

He had stretched out as far as possible in the truck to allow her room to work. She'd used her towels, ripped into long shreds and pieces

of an old board. Beads of sweat dotted his reddened forehead. His eyes closed, he nodded.

She wiped her hands off on an old beach towel and looked up to the sky overhead. The snow had stopped falling momentarily. "I'm going to walk on ahead, see what the road looks like."

"No."

"What?"

He opened his eyes and swallowed. His eyes were dark, unreadable. "You're not going anywhere alone."

"Mitch? You're talking crazy." She walked around the truck, leaned in the open door. She reached up, pressed her chilled hand against his forehead. She didn't think fever had set in. *Yet.*

"We're both getting cold. It's getting colder."

"Then we both should be getting started." He struggled to pull himself out. "Help me."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"The faster we get started, the faster we both get there."

He reached in his coat, pulled out his gun.

"Mitch." Her breath came out with a sudden punch of fear as he turned it, checked the safety. "What are you doing?"

He looked up, his eyes serious and dark. "This wasn't an accident."

"What?"

"Someone wanted you out here. Someone doesn't want you to come back."

"You're scaring me."

"Think about it, Amy. You never come on the road without getting your truck personally looked over by Joe Moore. He feels he owes you, he knows you. He checks your car over with deliberate care. Do you really believe the breaks cut out on their own? You think that one pothole at the top of this hill really did that much damage?"

Joe did take care of her and her car. He was two years older, but he'd been there that night with her seven years before, watched the accident, watched his friends die--and he'd been one of the ones who'd run. Afterwards, he'd been stunned and shunned himself, and he'd tried to take on some of the blame. No one paid much attention to him.

So Mitch was right. Or could be right. The fact settled in the pit of her stomach.

"Come on, Amy. Help me out."

He was weak, and the movement caused him pain. When he was finally standing beside the truck, his energy seemed spent. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Give him strength. Warm him.

"For a minute there—" she heard herself laugh. "I'd thought you'd snapped."

"I'm not the one laughing."

"No, but you are the one holding a gun on a deserted road."

He opened his eyes and frowned at her. "You wouldn't think I would—"

"No, but you don't normally have that look in you eyes. It's slightly insane."

He smiled a little and he was back to being the Mitch she knew. *"I am in pain."*

"Of course you are. And if you can be grumpy at me, then I think you're going to be okay."

He tried to smile, but it didn't break through the pain in his eyes. "We're taking this walk together."

"All right," she stepped in close to accept his weight. At least they were close in height. "But if you fall, I might not be able to get you up. Then you're going to have to lie in the cold."

He laughed, dropping his gun arm down along his right side. "Just be careful how you walk."

"I walk fine."

"You could be a little taller."

"If you're going to complain, I'll remind you that you could be leaning on Chloe."

"She's softer."

"That's only going to help you if you fall." Amy retorted as they made it around the turn. The cabin was indeed not far away. "Think we can get in?"

His breathing was labored, his weight pressing onto her. "I have a key."

"But not a phone connection."

"No one's lived here in years. There's no phone."

"Who owns it, then?"

"I can't—" He shook her off and stopped for a moment. For a moment he drew in a few, steady deep breaths, dealing with the agony.

She'd seen Mitch hurt, but never like this. Never in such pain. She glanced down, checked the wrapping. He was already losing precious strength.

"Come on," she said, and prayed that he would make it. She could have pulled him through the water, but she wouldn't be able to manage on dry land. They dropped the banter and concentrated only on taking each step, one at a time. The pressure on her shoulders and back was nearly unbearable.

She felt him weakening, felt his grip slide from her shoulder. She stopped, gave him another moment of rest.

In the silence, she began to think about what Mitch had said. Was it not an accident—something more deliberate? Something that could have proved deadly on these mountain roads?

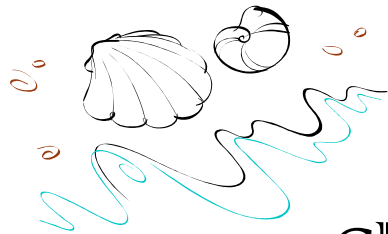
She felt the prickling discomfort from silence. The forest seemed shrouded and empty.

Like it had yesterday, when she'd suggested to Chloe that they go.

Someone had slashed Mitch's tires.

It was possible that someone had tinkered with her breaks. She eyed the pocket where Mitch's hand rested and acknowledged the simple facts.

Mitch had his gun ready. They might not be alone.



Chapter 20

Vince lived in a pricy beach front property that rested on a cliff that overlooked the ocean. He lived a life of fast cars, fast women ... and all of the things in between. A high school boys fantasy, Anna thought, and grimaced as she recognized the old bitterness.

The house blended into the earth and was formed into simple, clean lines; from the framing of the house, to the long, lean windows that lined up like piano keys across the front. His grounds were kept modest, better to appreciate the view beyond.

The only color came from the vibrant red of Vince's vintage Camero. It echoed in a mirror image reflected across the columns of windows. Red, hot, loud—and seemingly out of place in the sedate yard. He had his other cars for work, for prestige. This one was his baby, all flash and heat. While he had other people to take care of the lawns and the cleaning, he let no one under the hood of his car. He tooled it with the

same care he took with him into the operating room, knew every detail, every part inside and out.

Anna parked behind Vince's car and looked over at Derek. He seemed harder now, with an edge to him. Like he'd been once before, when they'd dealt with Maureen Child's murder last summer.

He'd come from Willis county, she remembered ... had been raised on those rough streets. He knew how to be a hard cop.

It was Basin Springs that had softened him. And maybe what he had found here.

But he still had his instinct. Even though he was an administrator of justice now, his instinct was fresh. She would have taken him with her as her partner any day.

"Let's go," she said and got out of the car, aware that she'd put her own face on, and walked to the front door with Derek at her side.

She pressed the doorbell beside the oversized heavy oak doors, then stepped back, stoic in her stance. She could hear the ocean, the steady roll of the waves. The air was fresh and smelled of the sea. It foiled with the turmoil that vibrated inside of her. Her eyes were dark and set, her lips a thin, firm line.

Vince took his time, she thought, not at all surprised. When the door finally opened she forced the derision from her smile and opted for a serious tone.

"Anna--" he looked first at Anna, then toward Derek, "what do I owe this surprise?"

"We're here in an official capacity, Vince," she said, needlessly flashing her badge. "This is Derek Johnson from the Beach station. We have a couple of questions."

"Now? It's Christmas Eve," he glanced briefly over his shoulder. "And I've got company."

"It won't take long."

He didn't seem willing to agree, but finally shrugged and stepped back, leaving the door open for them.

"He doesn't seem happy to see us," Derek murmured.

Anna nodded as she stepped inside and shut the door. "Official or not, Vince doesn't usually look happy to see me. I'm not his type."

"And what type would that be?"

Anna flashed Derek a look as she headed toward the front room, but refrained from commenting.

Vince walked down the hall passed the living room, calling out for someone named Lily. The tall, leggy brunette stepped out and wrapped her arms around him. That—she wanted to tell Derek—was more Vince's type. *Clingy. Controllable.* He leaned close and whispered a few words to her, then she sauntered off, casting a scornful glance back toward Anna.

She looked around. His home was much like Lance's ... rich woods, streamlined, modern paintings. The leather sofas were designed for comfort, the large, flat screen TV an homage to everything that is male.

"So," Vince said as he led them into the living room and dropped gracefully into the deep cushions of his sofa. He was suddenly the playboy, carefree and careless.

"What can I do for you?"

"Loraine Thompson," Anna said without preamble. She pulled out a notebook, more for show, and sat down with Derek across from him.

Vince looked from Derek to Anna, "And?"

"You're her physician."

"Yes, I am," the easy going look vanished and he was suddenly doctor, suddenly serious. He stood, paced over to the mini bar and pulled out a bottle of water from the small fridge. "There is something called patient confidentiality. As a lieutenant for our fine police force, you should have heard of it."

"You're not going to make me get a court order?"

"I am," Vince said, he unscrewed the cap from the bottle and stood a long, generous swallow. "It's the law. It's a law that's placed there to protect the patient. Whether she's guilty or not, I won't talk about it."

"Guilty of what?"

"Whatever you were going to ask about her."

"What if I was going to ask about you?" Anna asked. If she'd expected a reaction, she was firmly disappointed. He simply lifted an eyebrow. "Someone came upon some meds awhile back. Those meds somehow ended up in the wrong hands."

"This is about Amy? That was months ago."

"The case is still open."

"Are you accusing me? Is that what this is about?" Vince fumed and slapped the water bottle down on the bar. "Amy's Lance's daughter, Anna. I wouldn't harm her."

"But you choose to forget it at times."

"You're making this personal. Maybe I should bring in my lawyer and slap a little back."

"Maybe." She switched gears. She could slap back at another time. Right now she needed some answers. "Back to Loraine. Are you aware, as her doctor, or for any other reason, that she's been taking a faulty prescription?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"As her doctor you weren't alerted?"

"Again, patient—"

"I know. Your warrant." She leaned forward, narrowed her eyes. "Come on Vince. This is Amy we're talking about. It will be easier even the day after Christmas to get the warrant through if you could give me some indication that there's something in your testimony."

Vince only stared at her, his jaw set.

She sighed and sat up straight, taking a moment to focus. "When was the last time you saw Loraine Thompson?"

"I don't know. I would have to look it up. Not recently."

"A month, two months?"

"I don't know. More than that, I would suppose. I'll have to look. I'll have my office manager call you—"

"I know. After Christmas."

"It is the holidays. We're closed today. You're being a scrooge Anna."

She refused to be baited again. "Is there a reason you didn't come to us before? She approached Amy, not a month ago. Surely Lance told you."

"Loraine Thompson's my patient. I'm not her father, nor Amy's father. And no—I didn't know. Some things are your job. You get me that warrant I will talk to you," he said, and leaned close. "I will talk—if you ask the right questions. Maybe we can figure it out together."

Anna nodded. "Fine then. We'll get your warrant."

"Good, anything else?"

"Why? Why Loraine ... after all she did?"

"Your the one that always preaches forgiveness."

"Still."

Vince shrugged. "One could never say no to Mallory."

Anna looked at Derek. "I guess not."



Amy sat on the floor beside Mitch. The firelight flickered over them both, and was finally beginning to warm her skin. There had been a few logs by the fireplace and a small, old stash out by the back door. After settling Mitch and lighting the fire, she'd gone back out to her truck, brought in her emergency kit and the remaining towels. The snow she'd packed around his leg was quickly melting.

She cast a quick look up at the stone chimney. She wasn't quite sure the chimney was safe. She didn't have that much experience with fire places, but she knew that plenty of house fires started because of them. The cabin itself gave her little confidence. The walls were cracked, the roof slightly slanted. There were several broken windows, so the cold air blew freely inside.

And when she'd opened the door, something ... several *somethings* had scattered. She could handle a broken leg, but she wasn't sure she could handle rodents.

It wouldn't, Amy thought, bring Chloe much comfort.

She kept her eyes peeled, well aware that those ... *somethings* ... were not far away.

Mitch stirred. Amy reached over and placed a hand to his brow. "Shh," she murmured, and prayed he would stay asleep. It was the only thing that would bring him comfort.

"Chloe?"

"She's fine," Amy told him and gently ran a hand down his arm as he settled back into sleep. She'd covered him with her coat and wished for something more to warm him.

She looked to the window where snow was falling freely now. She didn't tell him about it. She didn't tell him that Chloe was out finding her way in a storm.

When Chloe got to someone, how long would it take for emergency crews to get here? How bad were the roads? How much time had passed? It felt like days, but it couldn't have been more than a couple of hours.

On Christmas Eve. How long would it take them to get help on Christmas Eve?

The sound of metal crunch echoed in her head. She dropped her head into her hands, drew in a deep breath. Then another. She couldn't think of it. She wouldn't.

She wanted the beach ... the sand. She wanted to escape, to be in the waves, paddling the board further and further away from the beach, to now stop ... until. Just to not stop.

What had she been thinking, asking Derek to marry her? Starting a relationship with him when she was just starting to ... do what? Her probation would be over in two weeks. She would be able to leave, go anywhere ... be anything. She could get out of the Springs, be who she was meant to be.

And there would be no one to stop her.

She heard the sound again, cars crashing together, people screaming. Was it from today, or long ago? Who was screaming in her mind? She felt her stomach lurch.

She drew in a deep breath, tried to push the memories back. She'd had plans, hadn't she? To go to Hawaii, to finally make it back to Hawaii, and surf those waters. She had a few pals, a few connections who lived on Kauai. She could pressure her dad, get him to buy her a little shack by the ocean. She could ...

She could go to New York, she thought, slowly rocking back and forth. She could get a flat there, start over, get lost in the city.

She'd had plans before ... she'd been so set of staying at the beach, taking over Ham's job when the time came ... but before, before she'd had that dream, there had been others.

Long before Derek ... *Derek.*

What had she done?

"Amy?"

She turned, found Mitch watching her. His eyes revealed his pain, but were clear. *Too clear.*

"You look pale."

Did she? She pressed her hands to her face, found her palms clammy, her skin cool. She drew in a deep breath, sought for something calm.

And said a prayer.

Finally, she felt her spirit calm ... marginally.

"I'm okay."

"Bad morning," his eyes were seeking. She knew what he saw. He'd seen it before, but it had been so long since she'd felt like this ... like she was going over the edge.

"Yeah, well," she found a smile, "anyone would start to loose their mind in here. We're not alone. Rodents—"

A smile slashed across his face and she knew he was remembering the time they'd had a family of mice living in the walls of the station house. She hadn't been the only one unsettled.

"What time is it?"

She put a hand to her stomach as it grumbled. "Around lunch time. I told Andrea to eat without us if we didn't make it back."

"So she wouldn't ... be looking for us."

"No. What about your people at the station?"

"They know about my jeep ... I don't have my radio with me. If something happens they'll have to come looking for me."

Amy looked out the window and watched the snow fall. How much happened in Upper Springs that would send people out in a snow storm to find their chief of police?

On Christmas Eve ... when his girlfriend was in town.

"Convenient that my jeep was out of commission," Mitch said after awhile. "I'd like to get a look under your truck."

"You'll have to wait until after the doctor sees you," she reminded him dryly.

"Where's my gun?"

"Mitch—"

"Where is it?"

She lifted it from where she'd set it by her side. "I haven't forgotten."



Andrea glanced at her watch as she entered the lodge's lobby. The fire places were blazing, the Christmas trees sparkling. In the corner, a man dressed in a brightly colored sweater played Christmas music on the stand-up piano. He was a local boy, Andrea remembered, who came in each Christmas to play for Uncle Pete.

She'd watched him years before, fascinated by those strong agile hands, as she sat here in the lobby with her father. She'd just wanted to drift. Life had seemed so complicated then.

Andrea dropped her shopping bag down on an end table and tugged out her cell phone and tried Amy. When it came up unavailable, she punched in the speed dial for Mitch's cell. She lifted a hand as Eric came through the lobby doors, flushed from his morning runs on the slopes and sprinkled with snow.

He pulled off his gloves as he walked over to her, then his cap and ran a hand through his auburn hair.

Even mused, she found him irresistible.

It seemed life was complicated once more ... or was it? What was she looking for, hoping for, this time around?

She got Mitch's voicemail almost immediately. As she listened, she watched Eric, who dropped down on the plush sofa, stretched his long legs out, and watched her back.

The beep, that signaled the end of the greeting, surprised her. She looked away and fumbled with the message. "Mitch, it's ... Andrea--I guess you got tied up. We're going to head into the dinning room to eat. We'll meet you inside if you guys make it."

Andrea closed her phone and drew in a deep breath before she turned back to face Eric. He was still sitting there, waiting. Where Amy or Chloe would have dug into her bag while waiting for her to get off the phone, he simply lifted it up by and finger and handed it over.

"How was the skiing?"

"Amazing," he slid an arm around her and walked with her into the dining room. "This seems to be the secret of California. I keep my ear to the ground on skiing and had never heard of it before."

"Well, you wouldn't get it from Uncle Pete—unless he knows you. He likes to keep it quiet. His place quiet."

"You wouldn't tell by the people he keeps around."

Andrea's smile was quick. The pricy rooms were usually packed with return visitors and locals from the lower springs, but he had other, simple rooms packed with bunk beds. "That's Uncle Pete. He has his own mission ... he won a few surfing awards. Can still handle a skateboard. The Extreme Sports crowd—they love him."

"I wouldn't have thought."

"You have to get around him when they're here ... or so Amy says. It's when he's in his element."

They fell into their familiar pattern, their familiar ease, there own element. He had always been easy to be with in Boston. It had been easy to be herself.

Or be the person she thought she wanted to be.

As they sat down at the table, Eric pointed toward the garland decorated skis across the room. "I've been trying to get a handle on seeing your mom up here at Christmas. After spending Thanksgiving with her, I'm surprised she traded in the home decorating to come up to a place like this for Christmas."

Andrea laughed. "You just don't understand the decorative appeal of antique ski equipment."

"I don't remember seeing it at your parents' house."

"No," Andrea agreed. "It wasn't an ordinary Christmas that we spent up here. It was the first Christmas after Jenny died. It was meant to be different. We wanted something different."

It had seemed so reassuring compared to the grief they experienced at home. Amy's uncle had offered the lodging humbly, as a

simple gift for all he thought they'd done for his niece, and her parents had accepted because somehow it hadn't seemed like they'd done enough.

They'd missed Jenny and they'd remembered her, as a family, sitting in the lobby with the piano player tooling around with Christmas carols. Andrea had curled into her father's side, soaking in his warmth. They hadn't gone their separate ways that Christmas even though they were at a ski resort. She hadn't escaped with her mother into a spa, her father and brother hadn't spent all of their time on the slopes.

Jenny would have been somewhere in between. They'd known it, and they'd remembered her.

After ordering their lunch, she told Eric of that first Christmas, of Brian teaching her to ski, of walking up from the family cabin with her parents. Of her sister, and what she'd missed most. It had been quiet, peaceful, and painful ... but so much different then what they'd left behind in Basin Springs.

"I remember the worst part for me. I was in town and there was this group protesting outside city hall. It wasn't that many, maybe not more than three ... but they carried these posters ... one with Jenny's image, the other with Amy's. I was scared to death Amy would see it ... scared to death my mom and dad would see it. They had, of course, but I didn't want them to."

She looked up as Eric took her hands in his own. He pulled hers apart, rubbed his thumbs over her palms. Until that moment she hadn't realized she'd grown agitated.

"I guess it still bothers me," she said ruefully. "Half the town grew up surfing or skating, but there were a few groups who began to protest. By Christmas it was ... terrible. The town was falling into ruin, they said. The beach scene was a Sodom and Gomorrah ... the whole thing was blown out of proportion. Amy and Jenny were at the center—neither of them deserved the roll of saint or sinner."

She thought about how much Amy had grown, opened up, in the last year. It had take a long time, Andrea thought, and wondered how much it had to do with Derek.

"I suppose some people really wanted to discuss some legitimate problems," Andrea continued after their food was set before them, "there is no organized teen center in town, nothing but the beach. Once the court cases, the suits, brought against Amy and her father were dismissed, the voices died down ..."

"Once they didn't have Amy to generate the publicity they needed."

"They didn't care about her. That's what bothered me the most. She was one of the ones that needed the help, that needed an organized center. She had it, with Ham, but without Ham ... she would have been back where she started, or worse. She was still in high school. Things were really bad with her father ... he's leveled now, but there was a time when ..."

Resting her elbows on the table, Andrea folded her hands together and pressed her knuckles against her lips. There had been a time when she'd had to tell her mother and father Amy's secrets, but she wouldn't do it now.

"It was a difficult time for all of us. Amy's Uncle Pete called. I think he just called to see if my dad, acting as her lawyer, could work it out for Amy to come live with him. We ended up staying for a week in the family cabin. It was the best thing that could have happened to us, as a family."

She looked around, found herself gazing out the picturesque window that circled the lodge. She watched the snow fall, peaceful and light. She could remember that Christmas, more vividly than any other. "It's a special place."

Eric smiled and reached across the table to take her hand. "It is."

"I think you're biased."

"I'm pretty choosy when I'm picking a place to ski," he said, and winked. "You'd have to be there."

"Just keep in mind, I don't ski."

"You've kept yourself occupied, I think," he reminded her, gesturing toward the bag.

She smiled and curled her fingers around his. "Speaking of ... did you know Amy and Derek have been seeing each other?"

"As in seriously dating?" he shrugged. "I thought they might be moving toward it."

Andrea's eyes widened in disbelief. "You did know something!"

"Only what I suspected."

"And you didn't say anything?"

He rolled his eyes. "I only saw the same things you did. Why didn't you draw the same conclusions? I thought you had."

"I did ... I just wasn't sure until last night," she thought back over the conversation. "They were talking, all serious—which is what surprised me... she was talking about what she wanted to do with her life. I couldn't imagine. I've never been able to get her to sit still long enough to have that conversation."

Eric laughed. "Then it must be serious."

Andrea ignored him, suddenly somber. He reached over, lifted her chin with his finger. "What is it?"

"I don't know ... I've been thinking today about all this. About that first Christmas here. I don't guess it's something I can avoid ... and in the middle of it all, I realized that Amy's on the verge of something I ... something I've prayed for, hoped for. She has so much she can give to people, so much life she can share. I was walking around today, thinking about it, and I realized that I've spent half my life judging her by what she hasn't done. Judging some people in town for what they haven't done."

"My family didn't do anything either. We could have done something in Jenny's memory. We talked about it ... I remember that we talked about it. Wished for it."

"Time passed—you wanted to move on," Eric supplied, taking her hands back in his. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"Maybe not, and maybe it wasn't our place or our time. I don't know. Amy and her friends weren't the only ones out there on Back Bend road that night. They weren't the only ones who needed a bit of direction." She frowned a little. "*I wasn't* out there, but it took finding Amy, becoming a lifeguard, to see past my problems."

"So you took over the junior lifeguards."

"Maybe—because Amy wouldn't. And maybe because it was something I could do, something I could do for myself."

"You did do something," he turned his hand so that his knuckle skimmed her cheek. "You weren't complacent. Don't be so hard on yourself."

"You sound like me talking to Amy."

"Maybe you should start listening to yourself."

"Maybe." She released his hand and turned her wrist, checking the time, then looked to the window and watched the snow fall. "I wonder what's taking them so long? Amy said they were running down to Chloe's father's old place—and that was hours ago."



He was angry, Derek thought, as Anna drove them back to the marina. Vince and Lance, friends since high school. On the baseball team, star players. It's no wonder they'd been paired together, he thought.

Still, what had Lance done for Amy? Why did he put Vince before his daughter, time and time again?

And this friend ... had taken on Loraine Thomson's case. And continued it, despite Mallory Carpenter's death.

Who was Mallory Carpenter?

Anna pulled up at the marina and looked ruefully over at Derek. "Sorry for taking you away from the ocean for that. I don't know what I was thinking."

He pushed back the anger, or tried to. "Circumstantial evidence is still evidence."

"But it's so like Mallory," she shook her head and stared out over the boats that were parked at the dock. Derek followed her line of vision. A line of garland decorated with red bows was wrapped around the railing of the ship.

"I wanted him to be guilty. I made it personal."

He looked back over at her, found her gaze distant. "It's another piece to the puzzle."

"Not just the case."

"He's part of Amy's life. Has been part of Amy's life. All along?"

"I don't know. I wasn't in the inner circle once Lance and Mallory were married ... but I had thought their friendship revived after her death. Two single men, both successful ... both, in many ways, hurting. Vince didn't have an easy life ... I don't know if he would have thought the ... things that happened between Lance and Amy weren't normal. They'd happened to him. Ten fold. His father was an alcoholic. His mother was killed ... I guess we were juniors in high school. Lance saw him through it."

"How did she die? Vince's mother?"

"Car crash. Drunk driving. I don't remember exactly."

Derek pushed back on the rage, felt it back off, if not dissipate. He remembered seeing Vince the night Amy was in the hospital. He'd stopped in, engaged Amy in a little idle chatter and moved on.

He rubbed his face with both hands.

"He puts a great deal of effort into his practice. I've often thought that ... he finds his peace there, helping people that couldn't, wouldn't help his mom."

"He just can't handle the personal stuff."

"I'm sure it's textbook."

"Probably," Derek studied the Christmas decorations again. The rage was still there. It wasn't, he thought, pointed at Vince ... he was just angry.

He wanted Amy to be free and clear ...

To do what? To choose him? To choose a career?

Could he ask her to choose?

Anna's phone buzzed, reminding Derek that he was sitting in Anna's car. Brooding. Was it anything else but brooding? He didn't, couldn't, have answers to his questions. Not yet.

He reached for the door handle, but Anna put a hand on his arm. He looked back at her, saw the startled look in her eyes, tuned in on the conversation.

"What happened?" Anna asked, her eyes locked on Derek's, her hand curled into his arm. "Is that all he said?"

Whatever the answer was, Anna frowned over it. Something was wrong, he thought. The palm of her hand was suddenly clammy.

"It's all right, Lance. He's right here—" she looked over at Derek. "We're on our way."

"What is it?" Derek asked as she flipped her phone closed.

"Lance got a call from his brother. There was an accident on the mountain," Anna shifted her hand, found his. "Amy's fine ... but Mitch, was air-vaced to the hospital down here. Lance knows enough to know that she's seeing someone at least. He wanted you to come."

The laugh escaped her and she shook her head, pushing her hair away from her face. "He thought I could get in touch with you. He doesn't seem to think she's handling it well."

"There's more," Derek noted.

"The brakes on Amy's truck failed," she shifted her gear shift into drive and pressed her foot to the gas. "I'm sick of coincidences."



Chapter 21

Derek had his windows rolled down, letting in the ocean air as he drove toward the station. The streets were still, not empty, but placid, as most people were celebrating Christmas Eve.

Beside him, Amy remained quiet. They'd left Mitch in surgery. Because the risk of infection was high, the doctors were putting in an external device that would hold the bone together until a rod could be inserted. It was an apparatus that, when screwed in, held the bone together from the outside.

It wasn't considered a risky procedure, but he wouldn't have thought Amy would leave her friends.

Even if he had been the one to suggest it.

Cars from The Springs restaurant spilled over into the station's parking lot. The soft strains of holiday carols could be heard, hiding the normally prevailing sound of the ocean.

Derek maneuvered to his marked spot and cut the engine. Beside him, Amy stared forward, still pale, still fighting against the remainder of what had been another fierce panic attack. She'd lashed out against him, against her father, against the nurses who had finally stepped in to calm her. He could still see her, holding her hands against her ears, weeping; unable to breathe, not wanting anyone to touch her.

Panic. No one could really describe it's core.

He thought back to his first day meeting her, the panic attack she'd had over what he'd thought was a simple traffic violation.

But it wasn't the ticket. He thought of the way she'd pressed her hands to her ears, blocking out sounds that were only in her mind.

He opened his door, went around and opened hers. She didn't move.

"Come on."

She shook her head. "I don't you around right now."

"You're not going to be alone."

"I won't be alone," but she unbuckled her seat belt and got out, still bitterly restless. "No one ever leaves me alone."

He shut the door and let out a breath. The antagonism in the first few months of their acquaintance was nothing in comparison to tonight. He followed her to the sand, watched as she stopped and stared down at her boots as if she didn't quite remember why she had them on.

He started to kneel down before her, but she stepped back. "Stop. Just ... stop."

He watched as she knelt, fumbled with the laces. She'd held up, seen Mitch into surgery, and stayed with Chloe until Andrea got there. Then she slipped away. Or tried to. Maybe the hospital walls had closed in on her. Maybe the silence had been too much.

She'd nearly shattered.

She stumbled out of her boots, tugged off her socks, and started to walk. She was stiff, walking as if she were being led down the long

narrow hall of a block of cells instead of into the wide open wonder of the beach.

She wasn't free. She wouldn't be until the past was resolved.

Until her tormentor left her in peace.

Derek followed her at a distance.

"Don't."

She stopped, curled her fingers into her palms. He watched her struggle, watched her take a deep breath. The sun, sinking into the ocean, left her in the midst of a rich, golden glow.

"Don't what?"

She spun around, stopped what she was going to say—whatever she was going to say. Instead, she stared at him, weary and wanting. Whatever she needed, he would have given her, if he could. He just didn't believe that he could.

Not any more.

He slowly closed the distance between them. Her eyes were dark, prepared for a confrontation he neither wanted nor needed.

But she did. Or seemed to.

"You're crowding me. I need some space."

He glanced at the distance between them, at her footsteps in the sand over the five or six feet that separated them.

"You have as much space as you need." He wondered why he sounded so calm, even as he stepped closer.

"Not with you following me around."

"I hate to repeat myself," he reached out, touched her arm, but dropped it when she stared numbly down at it. "But you're not going to be alone."

He looked passed her, out into the ocean, and tried to give her room she desired without leaving. It had only been a couple of weeks ago that she'd stared out into the ocean debating whether to let it take her, and she'd turned to him. Asked him to marry her.

The ocean was still there, as large and as dark as ever.
How much more troubled she was tonight.

Ask again, he wanted to say, and I'll take you away from all of this.

But he couldn't. He didn't have the ability. Maybe it wasn't even his job, his right.

He bowed his head and lifted up a prayer.

Frustrated, angry, broiling with emotions ... Amy turned and looked toward the ocean, but went no further. When he glanced over, her eyes were fastened on the sky. It was her way to pray ... her way to live ... taking the highest wave, believing, trusting in its power to lift her up, help her fly.

A few couples were mingling in front of The Springs restaurant, standing hand in hand, near the water.

He could hear their laughter. Their happiness. He prayed they would stay away. They didn't, they headed down, walked passed them, too oblivious in their joy to note the strain that seemed to pulse between him and Amy.

Finally Amy lowered her chin and stared out over the ocean where the sun was nearing it's final hour. It's color radiated across the rippling waves. He could see the evidence of tears glistening on her cheeks, reflecting the light from the sun.

"It makes me ill ..." the words came out slow, trembled on her tongue, "to feel ... to remember ... my mom ... Ryan, Jenny ... and Matt ... that no matter how much terror I feel, they felt it, they heard those sounds, knew that ..."

"I could have lost two friends today ... all because someone wanted ..." she hugged her arms around herself, "wants ... retribution, destruction? I don't know."

"You're only doing yourself more harm by blaming yourself. You're only giving whoever it is more power over you."

"And I let it all out on you. I'm sorry," she said and slowly turned back to face him. She reached out with a trembling hand and gently touched his side. "I hurt you. I'm so very sorry I hurt you. I feel so ... sick. So sick that—I still don't know how to handle it."

"It's all right."

"No it's not. It's not all right." She pivoted back and watched the ocean.

He reached out for her, to put his arms around her from behind, but she stepped away.

"Don't," she turned to face him, her eyes full of turbulent emotion. "Can't you feel it? There's so much, pressing in. You and me, the past the future ... and there's someone, out there ..."

Who'd hurt her, her friends.

"I can't do this right now."

"What?" he asked carefully.

"See a *me and you*. I couldn't even let my dad hold me tonight. Do you realize how long I've wanted the chance ... and I couldn't take it. I couldn't even accept it from him. I have to learn to accept it from him. My mom would have wanted me to accept it from him."

"You don't have to do everything tonight ..."

"I know ... but I can't. Not yet."

"All right."

"It's too much." She dropped her eyes, worried over it.

He stepped close, put a hand to her chin, lifted in so she could see his eyes. "What we feel or don't feel for each other ... if it's strong, it will last. When you're ready ..."

Could she feel his hand tremble, he wondered? Did she know how his heart trembled at his own words?

He dropped it, took a step back. The last few weeks with her had been magical. They'd taken a break from the trouble surrounding them.

Like a rented boat, it didn't belong to either of them. The before and the after took precedence.

Hadn't he been feeling this since she'd headed for the mountains? How could she make the decisions she needed to make about her future with him putting pressure on her?

He thought of the words that had popped into his head earlier that had driven him to prayer. *Maybe it wasn't even his job, his right.*

He had to give her room.

"I want to go home," she sought his eyes, his understanding. "To my dad's. I want to ... spend Christmas with my dad."

He glanced at his watch, nodded. "Let me ask John to stay on a little longer. We'll do whatever you need to do."

"Derek, I'm sorry. I've done a lot to hurt you tonight. I didn't want to. I don't want to."

"Amy ..." he swallowed back the regret. "When you're ready."



The hospital waiting room was quiet, so Andrea heard when Eric returned. She opened her eyes and smiled wearily. Though he stripped down to a t-shirt, he still wore his ski pants. "Where'd you go?"

"Needed some air." He looked around the room, noted Mitch's father sitting the corner, his head propped against the wall as he dozed. "Where's Chloe?"

"She went with Mitch's mom and step-dad to the cafeteria."

"Then you think you could come with me?"

She glanced around, worried over the fact that Amy might come back ... that Amy might need ... but she was with Derek, Andrea reminded herself. And now Derek was taking on the role of protector in her life.

Had she done that? Had she tried to be Amy's protector ... as she hadn't protected Jenny? It was something to think on; as it was something she would have to release. It was quite likely Derek's turn now, and if not, she had always been God's.

Take care of her.

She stood, took Eric hand. "What did you have in mind?"

"The one place I could think of in a hospital. It *is* Christmas Eve."

"Still?" Andrea glanced down at her watch, surprised to find that it was barely dinnertime. "I suppose we could go over to the candlelight service at church ... I'd like to see Mitch first, though."

"We'll go if you want, but I want to give you your present first."

Her stomach fluttered, but it wasn't completely with unease. She knew why Eric had moved to California. She knew what he ultimately wanted for Christmas, whether or not he would ask her tonight.

And because she'd been almost sure what her present from him would be, she thought of her own she'd planned to give in response. Well, one of her own. She wouldn't have settled for just a t-shirt when it was their first Christmas together in California.

It had been Amy's idea, anyway. Amy... they had been friends for too long, they had been through too much, for her heart not to be divided. She lifted up a prayer for her, then one for Mitch. She pressed her free hand to her head. It was still spinning with the way everything had turned so badly so quickly ...

"My gifts are still in Upper Springs."

"We'll go get them."

Andrea smiled at the ease in which he said it and let him pull her onto the elevator. They didn't speak again until he was leading her along the first floor hallway. "You can put in a few more days of skiing."

"Probably. I have to be back in court the day after Christmas."

"There always next weekend."

"And the next. I'm sure I could get used to the nearly four hour drive it takes to get there."

"You spent almost that much time a day on the road in traffic in Boston."

"*Almost*," he stopped before the chapel door. "Will you join me?"

"I think I will," she stepped inside.

The only light in the room came from behind a stained glass window. Eric reached over, turned on the dimmer lights, just enough to highlight the two rows of pews.

"It's beautiful."

Hand in hand they walked to the front of the chapel. The artificial light from the window shimmered color.

It was like being inside a rainbow.

At the alter he turned, took both her hands. She looked up at him, into his eyes. One day soon they would stand like this before their family and friends. Her stomach quivered, but she didn't feel weak. He wouldn't let her feel as if she was weak.

"Every Christmas you were gone, the one thing I wanted was you." He released her hands and turned, picking up his wrapped gift from the pew behind him.

Not one gift, but two. She stared at the small box, obviously the size that would hold a ring box; the other, an ordinary department store dress shirt box.

"I couldn't wait to ask," he said, and held up the gifts to her, one in each of his hands, "but I can wait for your answer. Take my gift, one or the other."



Sitting beside Derek as he drove, Amy could not help but look at him. She didn't know how to say what she wanted to say. She didn't know how to fill the awful silence that crawled between them.

Would she ever be able to accept what he offered what he wanted to offer to her?

Love she swallowed against the lump in her throat. Why was his love so hard to endure?

"I need to get some things from Anna's..." her voice sounded hollow and her brow furrowed as she tried to think. "I need some ... clothes. Something of everything. I have a gift for my dad there."

Derek turned on his blinker and glanced into the next lane before moving over.

It had been so easy to talk to him, so easy to be with him over the last few weeks. She ran a hand over the goose bumps that had risen on her arm.

"I need to..."

He reached down and picked up his cell phone from where he'd tossed it in the cup holder.

She smiled ruefully, and dialed Andrea's cell. It rang, but almost immediately switched the voice messaging. She was in the hospital, so it was likely off.

She flipped the phone closed and frowned as she stared out the window. He turned down the street that led to Anna's house. The other homes on the street were familiar, had become part of her life the last few months, but she didn't feel as if she was returning home ... not even as Derek turned into the drive.

She got out of the car, walked around and met him at the front. She looked up at him. "I just need..."

The words wouldn't come. She felt caught, unable to step forward, unable to go back. She'd asked to go to her dad's, but she should have asked to go back to the hospital. She needed to see Mitch, see Chloe, who should have had her friends around.

She needed to curl up into a ball and surrender to sleep.

Instead, she was caught at an impasse, between fear ... and need.

Derek sighed. "Come here."

When he reached for her this time, she went limply into his arms. She couldn't think, she couldn't feel, she only knew that she couldn't fight

anymore. Her arms hung limply at her side as he held her. She didn't have the strength to hold on.

To grasp what she wanted...what she thought she wanted.

She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of his heartbeat. A single tear escaped and rolled slowly down, tracing a shimmering path down her cheek.

"We'll get the number for the hospital, call from here," Derek gently massaged her scalp, his fingers interwoven in her hair, "but he's probably fine. He's probably not out of surgery yet. And Chloe's with his family. But if you think you need to go back, I'll take you."



The light from the stain glass window cast a warm mirage of colors over her skin as Andrea slowly reached out and closed her hand over the smaller box. Her fingers trembled as she unwrapped the shiny silver foil that covered the jeweler's box.

When she lifted the lid, it was empty, but Eric had knelt down before her. He looked up at her and held the ring between them. "What was in the box is more than a ring ... it's my hopes and dreams, my love—parts of myself that I didn't know where alive until I met you. I haven't hidden what I feel, so you know what I want for Christmas. The choice is still yours. Will you marry me?"

She blinked past the tears and reached out, not for the ring, but for him. She gently ran her fingers through his auburn hair, pushing it back from his face. She traced his jaw line, the gentle stubble of his styled beard. She remembered the day she'd seen him coming down the stairs at her parents' office. She'd stared up at him, desperate to believe him to be real, so very afraid that he was....

She'd come to find that he was so much more—genuine, so much more alive, then he had been in Boston.

She ran a finger over his lips.

"Oh, Eric," she murmured softly. "I'm glad you came after me...I'm sorry I ran, sorry I left you without a word, but I'm not sorry for what I've found with you in the last few months. There's no fear, not anymore. My answer's yes."

Andrea laughed as he stood and scooped her up in one smooth move, the softened light from the stained glass window dancing around them as he spun her around.

Here was her man, her long time love. Here was someone who had believed in her, enough to follow her across an entire continent; a man who loved her. He slowly lowered her to her feet and she smiled with contentment as she rested her head against his neck, as she breathed him in.

"I love you."

He grinned as he lifted her hand, slid on the ring. She noticed it for the first time; the magnificent marquis cut. It glimmered in the colored light. How perfectly beautiful, she thought, as she held it up to the light.

She caught his eyes. *How absolutely perfect*, she thought again, this time thinking of Eric.

He caught his hand and brought it to his lips. "I love you too, you know."

"What would you have done if I had chosen the other box?"

He let out a short laugh. "I was fairly confident ... But I was afraid you needed that choice ... you needed the chance to wait. I had already sprung my presence on you in the last year. I didn't want you to feel pressured."

"Do I get to see what's in the other box?"

"What box?" he laughed and grabbed it from where he'd dropped it on the pew. He handed it to her.

"This is a good deal," she said as she sat down and tugged off the wrapping. She folded back the tissue paper and picked up the digital camera and the thin travel agency folder.

"Do you remember the time we went up and met my mother in New York?"

She looked up from the tickets. There were three of them.

"You must have said a dozen times that you wished the Amy could see this or that. You wanted a picture with her in the middle of Times Square. One with me wasn't enough," he slid his arm around her, along the pew. "It's for the day after Amy signs her probation papers, a few days before classes start back. She'll be free to go anywhere. I figured she'd be more likely to take it if it came from me ... especially if there were tickets for you and Chloe to go with her."

Andrea blinked back the tears and nearly smothered the delighted laugh. "How could you possibly understand her so quickly?"

"How could I not? She's a sister of your heart." He drew her close and pressed a kiss to her temple. "She's part of you."



Lance had been unusually silent since they'd left the hospital. They had gone in his car, as Derek had taken hers to exchange for his own. He hadn't offered to drop her by her place. He hadn't asked her inside, but she'd gone.

Anna shut his front door behind her and watched as he walked across the living room to turn on the light. He stood in the center and stared, wearily, at nothing in particular. The room was decorated in cool creams and browns, clean lines, void of personal artifacts save the lone painting of Mallory in her wedding dress that hung on the wall above his chair.

It was hard to talk to him in this room for so many reasons.

When he dropped down on the leather sofa, buried his face in his hands, she walked over, ran a hand over his smooth scalp. He had his own demons, just as Amy had hers. For too long Anna had tried to help him chase them away. She couldn't.

She looked up and faced the painting of Mallory. Anna didn't know how to help him—nor did she know how Mallory would have responded, if she would have needed to do anything at all. Lance and Mallory had been so in tune with each other, so absolutely perfect for each other. They'd had each other to lean on, and had trusted in the rock their marriage created.

And was why it had been so devastating that Loraine Thompson tried to push that rock out from under them.

"Lance?"

"I wanted Amy to come home tonight. I wanted to spend Christmas with her. Selfish of me—I stopped letting her celebrate when she needed to. Now she doesn't come home."

"It's not too late, Lance."

He looked up at her as she ran her hand over his head again, seeking to comfort. She pulled her hand back slightly. "You have tomorrow morning ... and then the rest of your lives—still a good fifty years, I'd say."

He stared at her, as if he couldn't believe, couldn't understand. Then he stood, his eyes never leaving hers. He gently caressed her cheek, so softly, so fleetingly, then let his hand slowly fall down her arm, gently caressing on the way down.

He was mixing things up, taking the easy path as he always did. Anna swallowed and forced herself to step back, to wall herself up against him, against his vulnerability before—before she gave in to him again. Before she opened her heart further to him. Tonight, she couldn't take his attention from Amy.

"We could--or *you could* fix Christmas dinner over here," she slowly backed away, putting as much distance between them as she could. His eyes, though weary, watched knowingly. "Surely you have enough in your kitchen to put *something* together."

She stopped when she felt the window to her back. Her fingers grasped onto the sill as she stared at him. It had been that lost ... that needy look that had done her in the first time. Amy had been picked up by the cops—his love for Amy, his grief for Mallory, a kaleidoscope of color. He'd looked at her—just looked at her, and she'd succumbed.

How could I not love you?

"You can't leave it all for me to do alone," he started across the living room toward her. Her palms started to sweat. She wasn't sure she had the strength to deal with him. He was too venerable. That made her too weak.

"I'm sure you'll do fine."

Her voice shook.

"But it's a family dinner," he reached around her, caught her hands, brought them between them. "And you're family."

"Lance ..."

"You're part of the Carpenter family, Anna, whether you let me give you my name or not."

"And be part of your harem? I don't think so," she pushed at him. He held on. "Lance ... don't loose focus. You have your daughter to worry about. It's *Amy* you should be thinking of."

He didn't like to be turned down. He'd never liked for her to turn him down. He was used to winning the game, used to his suave and cool skill being able to wash over whatever the play. He could have just about any woman he wanted ... and he'd proved it to her, time and again.

As the anger lit his eyes, she pushed him away. This time he went. "You're supposed to be thinking of Amy." She turned, stared out the window, and watched him in the glass. "And picking a fight with me isn't going to make you feel any better."

"Is that what you think this is about?"

"It's the way it is, Lance."

"Anna ..."

"Some things never change."

Anna turned, watched Vince come in from the back, and watched the irritation cross Lance's face. Crisis averted, she thought. He would slide into the familiar steps with Vince and forget all about fixing things with his daughter.

"Vince," Lance rattled the change in his pocket, briefly glanced at her. "When did you get in?"

Vince looked at Anna. "Before lunchtime. I was home in time for a convenient visit by our fine police department."

Lance looked at Anna—surprise, distrust—both crossed his features. Both stabbed into her heart. "What?"

Anna glared at Vince. She should have known he would have pulled this, that he would twist it, use it as ammunition between her and Lance. She should have enlightened him sooner.

She should have made the interview official; pulled Vince into the station by his slimy doctor's ethics and questioned him—and would have, if she'd been sure of herself.

But she didn't like Vince on a personal level. And the law wasn't built on personal feuds.

She crossed her arms, firmed up her defenses, and made eye contact with Vince. "Derek and I paid Vince a visit, this afternoon. We had some questions about one of his patients."

"Can you guess, who Lance?" His laugh was barely perceptible, dripping in hate; a hatred so deep, so ... dark. "I guess not ... You should have. You should have been paying closer attention. I've been waiting for this. Waiting a long time."

Anna stared at the handgun, compact—something that looked more like it had come from a James Bond catalogue than anything she had ever dealt with. It was, she thought, a sleek weapon, but not the gun of choice for someone with experience. Still any weapon, especially at short range, could have deadly impact.

She slowly shifted her hand. If only she could get into her pocket, reach her cell phone.

Vince turned the gun on her. "Stop right there Anna. Let's just keep your hands visible. You have tricky fingers. You wouldn't have been able to keep your hands on Lance otherwise."



Chapter 22

What's going on, Vince?"

"What's going on?" he mocked. "Anna, you want to tell him?"

Details began to click in her mind, like gears rolling and locking together inside an old safe. She watched as he trained the gun on her, spoke slowly, to buy them time. "He's Loraine Thompson's doctor. Has been her doctor for some time—I'd say, around twenty years."

"That's impossible—"

"Is it?" Vince lifted his eyebrows, his tone mocking. "You're little woman didn't think so, nor did Mallory. Yes, Lance, that's right—don't look so surprised. She knew. She had some interesting words to say to me when she found out; but she didn't tell you. That's always been interesting. Things weren't so straightforward in your ideal world, were they?"

"You're lying."

"Why would I lie? Mallory didn't like it. She told me so, threatened to report me to a number of councilmen, the like. As usual, she played it down, preferred to keep it quiet. Little did she know it would eventually work to my advantage."

He frowned, and for a moment seemed to lose focus. Anna tried again to reach for her cell phone, but stopped the moment he seemed to come back and focused in on her.

"Fate took its turn again when Anna came to visit me this afternoon. She had some interesting questions. She would have figured it out eventually. That got me thinking," Vince waved the gun in a sweeping gesture. "It's never been hard. Loraine's fairly easy to manipulate. She's always been unstable, dependant on her medication—especially back then. I changed the dosage; put a poster of you in my office. Talked her through some easy steps."

"You set her on Mallory."

"I set her on *you*. You didn't deserve Mallory. She wasn't for you."

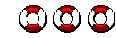
He raised the gun, his hand trembling in anger.

"You're not going to get away with this, Vince," Anna watched as he turned his steely eyes on her. "Derek knows. And so does my captain."

He lowered the gun slowly. "You really believe that it matters? My alibi's tight, detective. Lily's in the car, sleeping—heavily medicated. She thinks we're heading down toward San Hosea. When she wakes in the morning, that's where we'll be, all curled in a warm bed. At precisely seven o'clock tonight, a man will enter the condo; put a code into the security system as he has all week. A few drugs, a few dollars and he's on his way across country. No one will look for him. No one will know."

"The department is not going to be fooled by a simple code."

"Don't you think so?" His tone rolled with arrogance. "It worked with Maureen, though no one even looked twice at me—see, detective, you don't know everything. You will now. You both will ... before you die."



"Are you sure this is everything you need?" Amy asked Chloe as they stood in the hallway outside the waiting room. She'd gone by Andrea and Chloe's apartment, picked up a few things Chloe would need. It was the least she could do—and she needed to do something. Inside, Derek was talking to Mitch's parents—she knew he was waiting on her, knew that they were already running on borrowed time.

"I'm fine. Mitch's fine." Chloe said, and though she looked exhausted, her eyes were clear and hopeful. "I'm sorry you had to be here earlier. I know ... with everything, it was rough on you."

Amy looked toward the waiting room, thought of all the words that stood between her and Derek tonight. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Chloe ..." her name tumbled off her lips. "I broke up with Derek tonight ... sort of."

"What?"

"I just ... it seemed like the right thing to do," she closed her eyes and pressed her hand to her stomach, "it still feels like the right thing. I think. I'm almost sure."

"Amy," Chloe reached out and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well ... until things are resolved ... until I can talk to my dad, I just don't think ... There's something psychological there—how I deal with my dad, how I handle relationships ... and it's spiritual as well. I've let things go with him for too long. I was using Derek to make myself feel stable. I can't do that."

"I'll pray," she squeezed Amy's hand and then pulled her into a hug. How the two of them had become friends, how the two of them had

begun to depend on each other, and to turn their troubles into faith ... it gave Amy hope.

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

Amy nodded. "Bright and early," she tried to smile as she leaned back; instead, she felt like weeping. It seemed, despite Andrea's plans, that they wouldn't have their last Christmas together after all.

"Merry Christmas, Chloe."



"Maureen?" The shock on Lance's face was palatable. "Why?"

"Because she called me crazy, because she wanted out of our deal. We had a deal, you see. She was good at the talk, good at the planning, but she couldn't implement. You were right in not backing her venture. She doesn't have the guts to follow through."

"You killed Maureen."

"Don't sound so shocked, Lance. She hated you," the words rolled vile off his tongue. "You didn't even know, did you, that she hated you? You used her, time and time again—and it was easy to manipulate you into doing it. That's right. I've been able to play you against your women—Maureen, to Anna to Amy. You've always been easy. Poor Lance, poor, poor lamenting Lance. He's all broken up. A sorry excuse for the man everybody thinks he is."

"No one even looked at me. No one knew we were meeting out of town, having our own little secret dialogues, planning your demise while we both continued to play you. We were going to ruin you, expose you, with the truth and a few well placed fabrications. It was going to be the greatest deal of her career," Vince got restless, began to pace back and forth.

Anna caught Lance's eye. They would have to move, have to find a way.

Help me, she prayed—but not to Lance. She knew whom to pray to.

"Then she sobered up—chickened out, came to me, said it had all been a game, something to relieve the stress. She would never do it, had never planned to do it—had never thought I was serious. She called me crazy. Said I was out of line. That she would report me to the medical board. I couldn't let her do it. I couldn't let her stop me."

"Why?" Lance asked. "What was so important ..."

"You didn't love Mallory enough to have her ... and in the end you destroyed her."



"You okay?"

Amy shot Derek a look across the top of the car before she opened the back door and picked up her packages. "No—but it's early yet."

Derek came around, took her overnight case from her.

"I'm got it."

"Humor me."

"You're not acting like I've hurt you so much."

Though he didn't feel like it, he laughed. "You seem to be carrying enough torment for the both of us."

Her gaze flicked to her father's house, to the front door. "This isn't where I grew up. This isn't home. I've never really been welcome here—invited, ordered in, yes ... but never welcomed. He might not want me here."

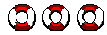
Derek thought of the way Lance had looked at the hospital. He couldn't, wouldn't speak for the man. "He might surprise you."

"It would be a surprise."

"That's the spirit."

At the front door, she stopped. "Derek..."

The look in her eyes spun into him, stabbed into his heart. "It can wait," he promised, and prayed that it would. She smiled and was smiling when she stepped through the door.



"Well, well," Vince gestured with the gun, "everyone's here."

"Amy—"

Lance moved and Vince turned, fired. Lance staggered, pressed a hand to the wound at his side.

Momentarily stunned, Amy stood there ... watched in horror as her father held out his hand, covered in his own blood.

"Come on in, join the party."

She flicked her gaze, stared at Vince ... felt her hands shake.

"Daddy—"

She rushed passed; ignored Vince.

He gestured to Derek, the gun steady. "Shut the door. It's a little crowded, but I guess all the players are here now. I couldn't have planned it better if I'd handled it myself. It seems your God, Anna, does know best. The truth is going to come out while all the players can benefit."

Amy looked up at him from where she had dropped to her father's side. Beside him, Anna pressed an arm covering to the wound to stop the bleeding.

"What are you doing?"

"Pulling the strings to close a very weary game," he looked across at Derek, gestured the gun at Amy. "Why don't you move away from that door? Have a seat."

"It's not going to work, Vince," Anna tried again. "You're thinking about killing four people. That kind of murder is hard to hide."

"I have the alibi. And who would look at me, Lance's best friend, best pal. We go way back, don't we?"

Lance looked up from where he still knelt on the floor.

"To high school. Two players on the same high school baseball team. One sliding catch, a collision between two All-American players, and Lance is a hero, scooped up by the scouts, lauded by the elite. And I was out for the season with a bum injury that refused to heal; I lost my

scholarship and had to struggle through the first few years of community college."

"Is that what this is about?" Lance asked as Anna helped him to shift up, to sit on the sofa. She glanced across, met Derek's eyes.

"Hardly. I was thankful, finally thankful. You were gone. I had what I'd always wanted," Vince trembled. "Mallory was mine ... until you came back. You kept coming back. It wasn't enough that you had the scholarship, the praise, that you were going to have a great career, but you took all I had. You took my gold."

Lance reached over, found Amy's hand with his own. "That's not quite how it happened."

"You wanted her, you pursued her. It didn't matter that she was mine."

"You weren't together at the time."

"I wanted her," Vince all but shouted. "And you knew it. You knew I wanted her."

Amy held onto her father's hand, felt it tremble. He was growing pale.

"And what did you do with your ransom? You wasted it. Does your daughter know? Have you told Amy how you destroyed Mallory? How you screwed up her happiness? How you screwed up everything?"

Lance turned, sought Amy's eyes. She saw the pain, the fear ... the shame. And she knew.

"It was a long time ago—before you and Ryan were born."

"You cheated on her," Vince shouted. "You threw away the gift, over and over again."

"We fixed it," Lance returned with heat. "We worked it through. I was wrong—" he looked at Amy, and his voice softened. "I was wrong."

"I don't understand," Amy murmured. Did Vince really think that mattered? Maybe it would have, maybe it could have, but now ... in the face of losing him?

"All of this, for what? So I would know that before I was born ..."

"It's not about you," beads of sweat had gathered on his forehead. His normally healthily tan had taken on a red tint. He looked wild. "This is between me and your father."

"Then let her go."

"You'll suffer because she suffers."

"You're behind all of this," Amy muttered.

"Behind it? I've been here throughout it all—all those nights of torment, you running away night after night. Do you remember who first told you the story, of who told you about the races? Of where to go, of how to get in? The Back Bend's been around a long time."

Had it been him? She couldn't remember.

"You put the drugs in my water, threatened Chloe ... you were watching us in the mountains. You've been watching ... the truck. You caused the accident. How did you cause the accident? What do you know about cars?"

Her father's hand trembled within her own.

"He worked in an auto mechanic shop to put his way through college," Lance said slowly—pulling his hand from Amy's. He stood, his gaze dark ... his eyes ... Amy had never seen his eyes so void of life. "He liked to play around with cars. Liked to race them, change them."

"After all these years," Vince murmured, "you finally catch on."

"You did it. You were behind it."

"It was supposed to be you. It was for you," Vince's voice quivered. "She wasn't supposed to *die*. She wasn't supposed to be in your car. She was supposed to be safe and away from here."

"My mother?" Amy understood; she saw it clearly. "You killed my mother?"

"She wasn't supposed to be in his car—" he sobbed. "She wasn't supposed to die."

Lance pounced, but Derek was faster. He grabbed Vince, shoved his arm. Anna pushed at Amy, shoved her down.

"Stop—!" Amy shouted. She heard the struggle—twisted around. She pushed at the coffee table, at Anna. She needed to see, to get to him.

To fight for him.

Anna held her down. "Stop—don't you get it? Vince will go for you—to hurt your—"

The shot rang out. Amy screamed. She looked over. Her father had dropped to one knee. His breathing labored.

Vince's arm was twisted back. Derek held him down.

There was blood. So much blood.

"We need to call an ambulance," Amy struggled to her knees. Her legs didn't cooperate; she couldn't stand. She crawled across, reached for her father.

Lance opened his arms, drew her in and she leaned against him. For the first time in forever, she leaned against him and sought out his heartbeat. He was alive, so very much alive. They sat on the floor as she began to tremble, as the hurt washed over her. She felt his lips on her hair.

"Daddy."

"It's all right, baby."

"He killed mama," she leaned back as far as he would let her, watched Anna rip at his shirt, deal with the wound. It felt lovely to have his arms around her, to know even though he was weak, he was strong enough to hold on. "He tried to kill you. He was in love with her ... all this time."

"He thought he was."

Derek watched as Amy climbed in the back of the ambulance with her father. They were headed back to the hospital, but Derek had to believe she could handle it better this time ... at least they would have each other—he could only pray that they could hold onto that.

He could still see them, huddled on the floor, rocking each other. He could still see Vince trying to aim the gun, going for Amy.

Derek lifted up another prayer and concentrated instead on the jumble of information.

From Vince's mother's death ...

His obsession for Mallory ...

Lorraine Thompson's illness ...

Mallory and Ryan's death ... the deception and murder of Maureen Childs.

From what Derek had pieced together from the interviews inside, Lance had run into Vince after Mallory and Ryan died. Vince was a doctor, Lance thought, he knew what it was like to lose a mother. The panic attacks were fierce back then, and not medically documented or understood. Lance had hoped Vince could help.

Instead, Vince had been using the relationship to twist together as much damage as possible. He no longer had to break into Lance's home, he was given his own key.

Anna stepped out on the front stoop beside him, slid her arm around his waist and leaned against him—whether to offer strength or because she needed it, Derek didn't know. They stood there in silence as the ambulance pulled away. While they both wanted to follow, they had not been cleared from the scene.

It was still Christmas Eve ... the longest one of his life.

"There's something I don't understand," he watched the rotating lights that flashed from police cruisers that sat dormant in the lawn. "How did Vince cause Mallory's death?"

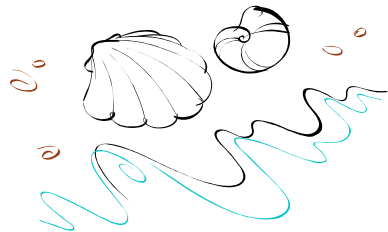
"Ryan was in the middle of visiting colleges ... Mallory was known for her cherry red restored convertible—she loved it, refused to drive anything but it. But Lance had just gotten a new Lexus. Ryan begged him to let him take his car. CD systems were fairly expensive back then and Lance had it tricked out with the best of everything ... Ryan didn't have the same appreciation for a classic T-Bird convertible that I'm guessing Amy will have."

"Vince doctored Lance's Lexus ..."

"And at the last minute, Lance gave Ryan the keys. He was known to be a dotting father ... for so long that's how people around here saw him. When he was home, his family was everything ... and he had just retired from baseball. He was enjoying being a father." Anna crossed her arms across her chest, rubbed her arms as if to get warm, "he's always held onto that guilt ... if he hadn't of given the keys to Ryan ... He's always blamed himself. I hope he can finally transfer some of the blame to where it belongs."

"He held onto Amy tonight—when they couldn't hold each other earlier, at the hospital." Derek thought of Amy's words, of her desire. She'd called it off with him, because she'd need to put her father first. Maybe he needed to be moved out of the way so she'd be free to turn to her father.

"It's a good start," Anna agreed. "They're going to take the T-bird in. I have a feeling when it's checked out they will find that he tampered with it as well—in the same way Amy's truck was reworked. Lance promised it to Amy, but has always refused to let her have it ... has toyed around with selling it because he couldn't face turning over the keys. He could never forget the day he put the keys in Ryan's hand. It was the last day he saw his son alive." She shivered. "It could have happened to Amy. It could have happened again."



Epilogue

Andrea and Eric's wedding was everything that they were; styled, elegant, classic, and held at the church—their church. Their reception was everything that their friends were. Spilling out from the Spring's restaurant and onto the beach, the music was loud, the food overflowing.

Derek wore a suit, because it was Andrea's wedding, after all. But he stood barefoot in the sand, his jacket and tie discarded. He looked around, studied the groups of people that waited ... Lance and Ham, Mitch and Joe, John and his entire family. His girls were out near the waves, splashing around with some of the older children that had changed for the reception into something more beach friendly.

Other guests ranged from Eric's father, who stood separate and aloof, serious; a little perplexed by the reception itself, and his mother and sister who mingled with a wide berth between them. There were the Lyons and their friends, a few of

the town elite, some clients, coworkers, and more than enough family.

They crowded the large open deck of the restaurant and into the sand beyond.

The rest were her friends—their friends—unafraid to get their feet in the sand. Even he was surprised by the people that turned out. A few were junior lifeguards, former junior lifeguards, some were regulars at Kuzcos and the half pipe. Many of them were members of their church, but not all.

How her life must have changed by knowing Amy, by becoming a lifeguard and stepping out of that quiet shell ... by putting her tray down across from the one person everyone thought she should hate.

Here she was, the life of a party, and she, along with most of the wedding party, hadn't even arrived yet.

He bided his time until he saw the flash of soft blue slip through the restaurant doors. Amy went straight to Mrs. Lyons, handling whatever duties were hers as maid of honor. The dress was elegant, some soft, filmy material that brushed over her toes. Her hair was pulled up with soft curls cascading in the back.

Andrea and Eric entered with flash and laughter, and for a few moments she was caught up in the flurry.

But as she stopped, seemed to take a breath, he went to her side.

"You look beautiful."

She looked up at him, turned to him, and smiled. "Thanks ... I feel beautiful today ... and weepy. I can't believe the last six months went so fast."

"You wouldn't have said that two weeks ago."

Sharing an apartment with Andrea and Chloe, in the middle of planning for the wedding ... in the wake of national attention from Vince's arrest and the fallout from all of the revelations ... it hadn't been without the petty arguments of roommates, that sometimes spilled over into the station. Still, they'd gone to New York, driven up and down the California coast in Amy's T-Bird convertible ... cooked dinner, watched girly movies ... tried to pile as much into the six month period as they could stand.

"Andrea was right. We needed it, arguments and all," she smiled ruefully. "In five weeks, Chloe will be gone. Not just married, but gone ..."

Derek followed her gaze as she located her friend in the crowd. Chloe stood with Mitch and his family. She wore a dress identical to Amy's, with the added decoration of a ring on her finger. Mitch stood beside her, his hand locked in hers. The therapy had been hard, and not without complications, but he wanted to be able to dance with Chloe on their wedding day. It looked like he would get to dance with her today ... maybe with a slight limp, but dance all the same.

A familiar look crossed over Amy's eyes, and she frowned, obviously worrying over it, over the past. Derek slid his arm around her, drew her against him. She rested her head against his side and slowly relaxed.

This was where she wanted to be, Amy thought ... surrounded by her friends, by the people important to them, by the town.

It was all important to her.

Her father stood with Anna. They weren't *together*, not as a couple, at least, not yet ... but for the first time on an extended basis, they seemed comfortable as friends.

As Andrea and Eric were called to the center of the deck, the crowd parted. They slid into their first dance as husband and wife; their steps seemed so in-sync, as if they'd been practicing their whole life. Andrea was radiant, her blond hair cascading down her back. She looked up at Eric as if ... as if he was all she had ever waited for, as if together they could conquer the world.

For Amy it was a beginning ... the pang of sadness was there, but so was the anticipation. For the first time in so long she felt as if she was where she was supposed to be, where she wanted to be. She had plans. They were still ideas really, and hinged on so much.

The Mallory Carpenter Center for Teens.

It made her smile. She thought it would have made her mother happy as well.

Vince was in jail, his bail denied. His lawyers were pressing mental insanity, but Amy decided not to worry about it. He wasn't a free man.

And with her father's status that drew the national press, everyone in the country knew about it.

Vince wasn't just facing criminal charges, but several civil malpractice suits as well. His big estate on the cliffs had been put on the market—which was opening up a prized piece of property. Her father was working for the owners of the Spring's restaurant, via a third party to purchase it ... and *if* the restaurant were to move to the cliffs, allowing it to focus on its more exclusive clientele ... then with her father's help, she could purchase their current facility from them ...

A prime location, right next door to the beach station house.

It was years down the road, but it was still a possibility. *Finally, a possibility.*

The wedding party was called to join the newlyweds on the dance floor. Amy slipped off her strappy sandals, tied the same blue as her dress, then held out her hand out to Derek.

"Captain Johnson, would you care for a dance?"

He slid his hand into hers.

They danced on the edges, closer to the ocean than the center of attention. Amy closed her eyes and listened to the ocean, absorbed it.

This was right. This ... was so right.

"I wonder what it's like to live in a place where you can't hear the ocean."

"Are you itching to find out?"

"No ..." she closed her eyes, listened to his heartbeat.

"No, I don't want to be any other place than right here."

"Right here, as in Basin Springs, or right here as in," he tightened his grip, spun her out and around, then back into his arms, "right here, with me?"

She laughed, looked up at him. "I couldn't choose."

"Then are you thinking about asking me to marry you again? Because if you are, I accept."

Her heart tumbled over, but she managed to look him in the eye and she saw acceptance, trust, and patience. "We haven't been dating for months."

"When have we *not* been dating? If our kids ask us one day what we did on our first date, I'm going to say that I handed out a traffic citation in your honor."

Amy felt the laugh spill out of her and tightened her hand in his. "Maybe you should ask this time ..."

"If I have to ask you, then that means I have to ask your dad first."

She looked over at her dad, where he stood talking to Ham. "If you're wanting to ask my father ... you'll have to ask them both. Ham will get a kick out of it ... and my dad would ... it might make him uncomfortable, but I'd think he'd secretly want you to. Of course, you'll probably need to come have dinner with us first ... at least a few times. It will probably be a bit easier if you two knew each other a little better."

"You think he'll say yes?"

Amy shrugged. "You know my dad ..."

"You're not making it easy on me."

"If you want things easy you'll have to find someone else."

He laughed, and she could see in his eyes that he'd thought the same thing many times over the last year. She didn't blame him.

"Derek ..." his name trembled on her lips. He looked down at her, concerned. "If you were asking ... it might be awhile before I could ... before we could. With the planning for the center ... and the trial. And I don't have my degree, or know exactly how to finish it. Nothing's set yet and I ... I don't know when or how ... or what has to come first."

"Amy, haven't I told you before? If it's strong, it will last. When the time's right, we'll be ready."

"I do love you," the words flowed simply from her heart. "Don't say anything yet ... I just wanted to remember saying it, here at Andrea's wedding. The possibilities seem so wide open and endless."

His hand squeezed hers, his eyes full of emotions. The love she hadn't let him voice was there, so clear and beautiful,

along with so many other things ... trust, belief ... things she hadn't felt void of for a long time.

"Then let's finish our dance."

The floor cleared again when it was time for Andrea to dance with her father. Lance came over for Amy when other fathers and daughter pairs were asked to join. Derek watched as a single tear escaped, but she walked to the dance floor with him. Lance said something that made her laugh, then smile... and she rested her head next to his heart, where she could hear his heartbeat.

They were beautiful, so much more so because they were healing. Derek blinked back his own tears and looked around to find that he wasn't the only one watching them. For a moment, many people forgot about Andrea ... and watched as a miracle danced.

It would take fifteen months and six days, but Derek would finally get Amy down the isle. For their honeymoon, they got into the driver's seat of her T-Bird convertible and drove up the coast ... passing into two more states and finally into Canada.

If their honeymoon could have lasted forever, they would have kept going ... and talked about doing so.

For Amy, there was an entire world to explore.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

~Ephesians 3:17b-19