

# Hanging Offense



*Cleo Dare*

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Cleo Dare

*Quest Books*

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For Chris, without whose unconditional love and support  
I would hardly exist, let alone the book

## Chapter One

MANDY BARNES ADMIRERD Jo Reynolds' strong slim hips as Jo bent over the billiard table, lining up her next shot. Jo punched her stick, and Mandy heard the satisfying hard click of the white cue ball as it collided with the solid blue number two which bounced against the felt rail of the table and rolled to a halt.

"Damn. Missed." Jo straightened up to her full five-six height and turned. "All yours, Mandy."

Mandy let out a breath and nodded. "Thanks." Her hiking boots tracked through the sawdust layered over the plank wood floor. As she bent to her shot, she was aware of the interested eyes of the two cowboys at the bar and the closeness of the grimy plywood walls. There wasn't enough room to swing the proverbial cat in Rattlesnakes, a solitary drinking spot on State Route 12 between Panguitch, Utah, and Bryce Canyon National Park, let alone sufficient space to draw back a cue stick for a proper shot.

She'd been at work at Bryce Canyon for only a week and had become hyper-aware of Jo. Jo had the same lanky limbs, freckled face, red-blond hair, and mirthful hazel eyes as Trina, the only girl Mandy'd ever tried to make friends with in junior high. While she remembered Trina with a kind of shattered longing, she hated remembering how her own father had locked her in a closet and denied her food and water for two days when he learned of Trina's friendship.

Why he thought they were lesbians was beyond Mandy's comprehension. She had merely been over the moon to have someone to giggle with on the school bus. She wished she'd been smart enough to not take Trina home for cookies and milk. But how was she supposed to know? She was only thirteen.

"Are you going to shoot or just lean on the table all day? Anyway, you should give that up. Come over here and check this one out."

Mandy straightened up and walked to where Jo stood.

"See, I think you should try this angle instead." Jo laid her stick on the table demonstrating the shot. "I bet you can slam two in with one punch if you line it up like this."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Jo grinned at her and Mandy felt a hot flare of pain at the base of her throat. Jo shouldn't grin at her. It wasn't right. But was it Jo's easygoing warmth or her long-repressed memories of Trina that were choking her up? She coughed to clear her throat and ease its ache.

"Are you all right?" Jo asked.

Mandy blinked, afraid she might start crying. "The air is kind of dry in here and all this sawdust swirling around is getting to me." Mandy hoped that worked as an explanation. She bent down and tried Jo's idea. She was rewarded with a double clack and plunk as the orange-striped number thirteen and the number fifteen dropped into a corner pocket.

"See what I mean? You should always listen to me."

"I'm too old and cautious for that," Mandy said, lining up the cue and, with a fresh thrust, sending the green-striped ball to its dark destiny.

Jo laughed. "That'll be the day."

Mandy straightened, affronted. "You hardly know me."

"You're not all that old. So how true can cautious be?"

"True. I am here with you, which doesn't indicate good sense, let alone caution. Heaven only knows what I'm doing in this," Mandy lowered her voice to a whisper, "tool shed that passes for a bar. I'm not even any good at pool."

"I invited you, remember?" Jo chalked her cue.

"Right. But why did I accept?" Mandy leaned down to take a shot at the lone remaining striped purple number twelve, and missed.

Jo strode around the table and contemplated her next shot. They were playing the simplest form of 8-Ball and Jo needed to pocket five more solids to win. The black 8-ball, which in accordance with the rules had to be pocketed last or the game was forfeited, sat serenely on the table.

"Boredom," Jo said before leaning down to line up two solids, the yellow number one and the orange number five, for a corner pocket. "You've been at the Park for a week and you've already run out of entertainment." Jo shot and the two balls filed neatly into the pocket. She straightened up and grinned triumphantly. "Besides, I know all the fun spots. Or at least the main three this blessed wilderness has to offer."

"Well, aren't we a smarty pants," Mandy retorted. "Just because you were a seasonal ranger at Bryce Canyon last year doesn't make you an expert."

"More of an expert than you."

"I've hardly run out of activities. There are miles of trails to



explore at Bryce and I haven't gone square dancing at Ruby's Inn yet." Ruby's Inn was the cozy log cabin lodge style motel and diner that edged the Park's property and acted as the social center of the community.

"You don't have any square dancing clothes."

Mandy bridled. "How do you know that?"

"I already scoped out your clothes in our closet."

"My clothes! Haven't you ever heard of privacy?"

"There isn't any privacy when you're a seasonal with the Park Service. Or hadn't you noticed? For heaven's sake, Mandy, we're sharing a government-issued rat hole with six other women. There isn't room to turn around and pee. If you wanted privacy, you bid for the wrong summer job." Jo bent to her next shot.

Mandy ground the butt of her cue stick against the floorboards. Jo was right. Taking a summer job as a low-on-the-administrative-totem-pole park aide was like going back to the indignity of slinging burgers at the Dairy Queen between her junior and senior years of high school and an especially odd choice considering her advanced age of twenty-seven and her perfectly satisfactory and decently-paid position as an adult basic education instructor at TV-I, the largest community college in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Being a park aide offered negligible pay and afforded no privacy in housing. She was sharing a ten-by-ten room with Jo into which was squeezed a single set of bunk beds and two child-sized bureaus. Room was provided as part of the package and so had to be calculated into the pay but board was her own problem.

To add to the indignity of the deal, she was the oldest park aide by a good six years. There were, of course, seasonal park rangers—such as Jo—who were her age and older. They performed the glamorous activities the general public associated with the term 'park ranger.'

The job of park aides, on the other hand, was to collect money from those same visitors: money at the entrance station; money at the Visitor's Center; money at the campgrounds. Mandy knew she had descended in career status to that of being a walking change machine.

She knew very good and well she could have taught summer sessions in adult basic education for far more money and far more satisfaction just as she had for the previous four summers. Steady by nature, she had planned to do exactly that. The school administrators, contented with her perennial availability, had expected her to do exactly that too and were stunned by her

sudden change of plans.

Skipping out hadn't been her first choice. In one fell swoop, her husband Jay had wrecked everything she had so carefully built in her life and everything they had built, or she believed they had built, together.

The knowledge that she had helped interest fellow church members in Jay's stocks and bonds still made her sick to her stomach. Even though she didn't know the investments he was promoting were out-and-out frauds, she was deeply ashamed she had ever been part of such a scam.

Thinking about Jay made the muscles of her back go rigid. She raised and lowered her shoulders to ease the tension. She had sworn not to think of him; not to taint the sanctity of her wilderness hideaway with the recollection of what she had learned about him on a March evening just three months before.

Jo missed her second shot and stepped away from the table. She waved her cue stick back and forth to get Mandy's abstracted attention. "Your shot, Mandy. Wake up, girl."

"Sorry."

"Where were you?"

"Nowhere good."

"Really?" Jo's eyebrows shot up. "You look too sweet and innocent to have much of a nasty past to dwell on."

"Well, I do." Mandy eyed the table trying to calculate the angle that would put that last blasted number twelve ball into the side pocket. She was never good at side pockets. The balls always ricocheted.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"How about over a drink? It might help to get it off your chest. I'll even buy."

"No." Mandy shook her head. "No thanks, I mean. Besides, we'd have to leave our game, drive ten miles to the package agency in Panguitch, buy the booze, bring it back here, pay these guys more money to serve it to us on top of the fee we already paid them to walk in the door, and then sit on those rickety old stools in the bar while the cowboys ogle us. No way. It's too much of a hassle." Utah's liquor laws, Mandy had already learned, were a logistical nightmare meant to discourage drinking. Which, case in point, they did.

She leaned down to take her shot but in her agitation, her elbow jerked and her flailing stick only nudged the cue ball causing it to roll a few paltry inches across the green felt.

"Damn." She straightened up and looked directly into Jo's eyes. They had lost their usual bright humor and softened to a

dark velvety green. They invited her confidence and Mandy almost broke, almost started to speak.

Then she reminded herself: I can't. I can't tell anyone.

"Your turn," she said dully and turned away, forcing herself to walk to the end of the table, away from Jo's gaze. A lump rose into her throat and she chewed at her lip to keep herself from crying.

Get it off my chest, she thought, as Jo suggested. She couldn't. There was no way she could trust again. Her friends at church had trusted Jay and look what had happened to them. She had trusted Jay and it had cost her everything. No, trust was not the way to go. Trust was exactly what had put her where she was.

JO REYNOLDS KNEW matters were going well for her, maybe almost too well, and, as a result, she felt small swells of restlessness—but nothing like a wave or a whitecap, not yet anyway—rocking the contented boat of her life.

She had been a summer seasonal employee with the Park Service, largely in the western states, since she was eighteen, starting out, as everyone did, as a park aide. Her first park had been Kings Canyon National Park in the Sierra Nevada Range in California.

She had spent many subsequent, happy, richly-alive summers in the Cascades, at Glacier in Montana, at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, and even one summer in the sweltering dry heat of Big Bend, Texas. But her favorite parks came to be concentrated in the Four Corners region of Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico. Like many people before her, she had fallen in love with the vast quirky chunk of geologic flotsam known as the Colorado Plateau.

Jo had never served at Arches or Glen Canyon although she had dog-eared copies of both *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and was desperate to experience for herself Edward Abbey's vision of these immemorial places. Unfortunately, so were hundreds of other Park employees, and Arches, to some degree a victim of its own notoriety, was no longer the spiritual emptiness that Abbey had so poignantly described.

A degree in the sciences had been crucial to her continuing a seasonal career with the Park Service. Now, Jo was twenty-eight, had been in possession of a bachelor's degree for six years, and because of her excellent employment history with the parks, had made the much-desired and highly-competitive transition to

park interpretation.

During the remainder of the year, she taught biology in a high school in San Bernardino, California which wasn't terribly far from getaways in either the mountains or the sea.

She had known she was gay since her sophomore year in college and she was a member of a lesbian activity club back home in San Bernardino. She had numerous friends: they went bowling or camping or dancing together almost every weekend.

She was in good active health and had plenty of women ready and willing to bed her. She tended to not turn down offers. She had always been—and still believed herself fundamentally to be—the kind of gal who was always ready to try something new, to roll with the punches, and to see—and quite simply enjoy—whatever curiosities the universe unfolded with each new day. Her best friends Kate and Fran back home in San B often teased that Jo was amiable. Some people just termed her loose.

But then again, aging was a strange thing, and maybe everything simply changed as one approached thirty. Jo hoped this getting older business wasn't going to squelch her usual elan and she especially hoped this second summer at Bryce didn't bore her to tears. Bryce was nice—yes, it rhymed in her head too—but it wasn't the kind of desert scenery that grabbed at her gut the way much of Utah's slickrock country did.

Bryce was kind of cute with all sorts of wacky, eroded sandstone formations and wild Disney-esque colors of flaming pink and hot orange and vermilion. But not unlike a Disney creation, its visual perkiness got tiring after a while.

Jo heard the front screen door bang and then the tread of booted footsteps. She rolled on her top bunk to look out the door of her room. It was probably Becca or Judith, the Mormon cousins from the nearby town of Tropic who had stayed with Jo in this very same house the previous summer. Becca and Judith were sharing one of the four bedrooms, and because they had reached the park first, they nabbed the largest of the rooms, a corner bedroom with windows on two sides with two separate beds.

Judith had already completed a twelve month Mormon mission in South America—she was fluent in Spanish—and was home again. She hadn't married since her return though, and so she was pretty much stuck at home until she did. Her only other option was to choose to go to Brigham Young University for an advanced degree. One or the other were the only ways out of Tropic if she wanted the blessings of her Latter Day Saints Ward to go with her.

Jo suspected the LDS Church had allotted Judith this summer breather to make up her mind. Jo also thought Judith might be gay, and that could be causing her marital hesitation—whether she had prospects or not—but there would be nothing more heretical for Jo to say, even if she voiced it only to Judith. She was almost afraid to think it, lest it pop unwillingly out of her mouth some night when they were all sitting in the common room arguing about the veracity of the events recorded in the Book of Mormon.

Becca was three years younger than Judith and had clear plans to marry a Mormon boy from Hanksville, more than 100 miles to the east, on the other side of Capitol Reef National Park. Jo had never heard her mention any plans to undertake a mission, which were optional for girls anyway and then only if they hadn't married by the ripe old age of twenty-one. She assumed Becca's beau had already completed his.

Lots of the year-round Park personnel, especially the clerical and custodial staff, were from the surrounding Mormon towns and, although Jo doubted it was written down anywhere in the Park's Human Resources policies, she suspected they got first dibs on the summer seasonal jobs as well.

It made sense, really. In the winter, after all—and winters were long and deep with snow at Bryce—there was no one but the locals to rely on, and Bryce, like many remote western parks, had to keep peace with her few and hardy neighbors. Bryce was also, if the truth be told, a sort of rich sea of coveted federal employment in a desert of hard-scrabble agricultural economics.

Much to Jo's surprise, it wasn't Becca or Judith who appeared in the doorway but Orville LaGrange. Orville was one of the Park's year-round regulars and—Jo had recognized the signs the previous year but managed to successfully evade any nasty encounters—a man who had developed a “thing” for her.

Startled, she rose to a sitting position on her bunk, knocking her head against a ceiling beam. “Ow!”

“I see you're back in our fair Bryce,” Orville drawled, leaning against the doorjamb. Orville was lanky but not tall with a long dour face, high flat cheekbones that would become sunken with age, and obsidian eyes.

While he was Anglo, his features made her suspect there was an Indian somewhere in the family woodpile. He was balding early—in the classic tonsure style—and trying hard to hide it. She had never seen him without a bill cap, cowboy hat or official Park Service hat. He kept a scrap of bushy black hair at his chin as if to prove he still had some.

“You could have knocked, Orville,” Jo said, rubbing her

thumped head. "You know it's against the rules to barge into the Women's Dorm without being invited."

"Oh, piffle. I've seen it all before. Besides, everyone in this house is over eighteen."

"I know." Jo leaped down from her bunk, her head still tender. "But one of our innocent Mormon virgins or wet-behind-the-ears Luisa might have been running around in the buff. You might have given her the fright of her life."

Orville ignored the admonition and got right to the heart of the matter. "I missed you, Jo."

"Oh, Orville, c'mon! Give me a break." She led him out toward the kitchen and away from the private areas of the house. He gave her the willies but she didn't want to say so to his face.

"Do you want an afternoon snack?" she asked.

"What have you got?"

"PB & J."

She popped open the refrigerator door and rustled for bread and the jar of peanut butter along the packed shelves. The appliance was old and had been overloaded with a mixture of foods for too many years by too many housemates. In annoyance, its motor kicked in and started a high-pitched whining.

"Soda?" Jo passed two cans of diet Coke behind her back which Orville fielded. She snagged the peanut butter and slammed the door hard, joggling the refrigerator, which dropped its whine a full octave to something more tolerable to Jo's ears.

Deftly, Jo made sandwiches, and they took them and the sodas out the back door and down the concrete steps to sit at the wooden picnic table painted Park Service brown.

The house's unfenced back yard consisted of acres of ponderosa pine forest, frequented at dawn and dusk by white-tailed mule deer that came close enough to the house to pet, although Jo always respected their essential wildness and merely watched them.

The pines ranged from young blackjacks to mature orange-barked giants, and a light afternoon breeze whistled through their topmost needles. The heady vanilla odor of their bark wafted its way up Jo's nose, and her earlier restlessness eased. Whatever she might think about the direction of her future, it was always going to include being outdoors.

Orville was munching abstractedly so Jo thought, as the host, she'd best be polite and start the conversational ball rolling. The sooner she did, the sooner she could get Orville on his way.

"So how long have you been at Bryce now, Orville?"

"Six years."

"No shit. Winter and summer?"

"Yep." He took a deep bite of his sandwich and chewed, gazing off into the distance.

"How was the winter this year?"

"Long. Quiet. Mediocre snowfall."

"Boring?"

"The usual. Accounting is accounting. It wouldn't matter if I did it in Panguitch or Cedar City or here."

"At least in Cedar City you could catch a movie once in a while."

"Ruby's Inn started a video rental. And with Superintendent Ash's four-wheel drive Land Rover, we hardly ever get snowbound for more than a day or two anymore."

"Well, hell then. You might as well be in Salt Lake. You have all the amenities. What is the Park Service coming to?"

"It's just a job, Jo. It's like any other job."

"Not to me it isn't."

"That's because you seasonals are all romantics. It's all about nature to you." He waved a dismissive arm at the surrounding beauty in which he lived twelve months out of the year.

"Nature's all we have, Orville. If it wasn't for nature we wouldn't be here...and you haven't been in California lately. It's all just damn disappearing. Acre by acre."

"It's disappearing here too, especially with the new emphasis on extracting fossil fuels. But I didn't come over here to debate environmental philosophy with you, Jo."

"All right. What did you come over for?"

"I wondered if you'd like to go out on a date." He had finished his sandwich and was licking the last drips of peanut butter off his fingers.

"Oh, jeez, Orville. I can't."

"You can't? What do you mean you can't? Do you have some guy friend in San Bernardino that you've sworn true love to? I don't see a ring or anything."

"No. It's not that. I'm just...not interested."

"Jo, summer only comes once a year for a guy like me. The rest of the time I'm stuck out here in these goddamn woods, not getting any. When I get depressed being in the woods, I go out and stand on the rim and realize there are miles of nauseatingly pink cliffs to throw myself from."

The image was so compelling, Jo followed up on it. "So, why don't you?"

"I figure the snows will melt and summer will come

eventually and so will the girls. I picked you out last year but it wasn't until the end of the summer, and we didn't have a chance to get matters started up. So I thought if I just got underway sooner this year— "

"You know, Orville, I'm thinking—not to be too critical or anything—but your approach to this problem might lack just a little bit of finesse."

"Finesse! Who gives a shit about finesse?"

"Well, girls for one." Jo's ears were starting to burn and her stomach to knot but she tried to keep her voice even and friendly. She was beginning to think Orville might be the kind of guy who might go around the bend from female rejection, and she didn't need a problem like that. Or he might have stalker tendencies.

"You know, Jo, I'm not getting any younger and I've tried everything. I've tried wine and flowers, I've tried soft music, I've tried waiting for women to seduce me. Now, I just plain out ask. I can't finesse anymore."

Despite her misgivings, Jo laughed. "I'm sorry, Orville. I can't help you. But look, there'll be plenty of women here this summer. There's bound to be someone who catches your eye."

As if on cue, the back door slammed, and they both turned their heads to see who had come out to join them. Traipsing down the steps was Jo's roommate Mandy. Jo's heart leapt into her throat as she watched Mandy glide toward them in her soft, feminine way, her cap of glistening black hair perfectly accentuating her heart-shaped face, dark eyebrows and doe-brown eyes. Mandy was a little, but not a lot, on the chunky side and curvaceous in all the places that made Jo go breathless if she thought about it too much.

Jo was a player and she could flirt with the best of them, but she wasn't sure this girl was gay. She'd caught Mandy staring a few times but she hadn't quite picked up the "vibe" from her. Still, the last thing she wanted was for Mandy to get involved with Orville.

But no matter how smitten she was with Mandy, it wasn't any of her business. The woman was almost certainly straight and might well be interested in a summer romance. Yet Jo sensed a strong undercurrent of injured vulnerability from Mandy, even though she had so far refused to talk about herself, and people who were vulnerable didn't need to be getting involved with people who were desperate. It almost always turned out badly.

At the same moment Jo was filled with these misgivings, Orville's face flashed with a victorious, almost feral, grin. "Good point, Jo," he muttered for her ears only. "I think I'll take your



advice on this one."

His smile, directed now at Mandy, changed to one of courtly bonhomie, and Jo felt her heart sink down into her stomach.

## Chapter Two

MANDY AND JO'S work schedules matched, which meant they had the same two days off in a row. As a result, Mandy found that she and Jo were spending time together, time she was enjoying and time which made small inroads into the tightly-woven fabric of despair in which she had encased herself and that had forced her to Bryce in the first place.

A few days before, when Jo took her to Rattlesnakes to play pool, she had almost broken down and started talking about Jay. But if she had felt, for a fleeting second, she could trust someone again, it still wasn't right to burden Jo with her problems. Dumping her grief and rage on Jo would be the perfect way to ruin a budding friendship and, at the moment, Mandy thought that was far too precious to risk.

Now she stood in the Park entrance station, waiting for the next German, French, or Japanese tourist to drive up in their rented shiny Land Rover or looming recreational vehicle with California plates and ask in stilted English how much it cost to come into the Park.

The end of her shift had nearly arrived, and she was looking forward to being out of the hot little windowed box placed squarely in the middle of the tarmac. She wanted to get back to the house and shower and change and make a big bowl of her simple but reliable potato salad.

Tonight was the Welcoming Party for the seasonal staff, all of whom had finally arrived in the Park, and Mandy was curious to get to know the people with whom she would be spending almost every hour of every day for the next three months.

But by the time Archie Douglas, a rangy young man with a lantern jaw, horn-rimmed glasses, and a perpetual five o'clock shadow came to relieve her for the evening shift, she felt like she'd been bathed in successive layers of sweat, eaten to near-madness by flies, and answered one too many stupid tourist questions.

She took her cash drawer inside the administration building and balanced out, handing over her receipts to the office

manager Wanda Paulson—an imperious woman with a genuine beehive hairdo—who was just as anxious as she was to get home and get ready for the party. Somewhat restored by the air-conditioning and the cold soda she gulped down, Mandy walked across the Visitor Center parking lot to her car and drove the half-mile home.

Yes, it seemed silly to drive, but the altitude at Bryce was eight thousand feet and Albuquerque—still high by Midwestern standards—was only at five thousand feet. She was still adjusting to the altitude and getting her muscles accustomed to bicycling or hiking around the campgrounds and standing for hours on end in the entrance station and the Visitor Center. She decided that until she was more buff, she'd drive her aging Toyota Corolla around the Park.

The party, which got into swing around seven p.m., was held on the concrete swath of the tennis courts which were incongruously ringed round by a gathering of stately ponderosa pines. Long, orange-tan pine needles, shed in previous years, had been swept off the courts and into piles which various employees' children—the boys—were maniacally kicking apart again or—the girls—contentedly weaving into necklaces.

Mandy carried her potato salad to a busy buffet table and set it down. She was promptly thanked by one of the ladies behind the table who introduced herself as Betty Ash. "I'm the Superintendent's wife," she said. "Have you met my husband?"

"No, I've only met Wanda Paulson, the office manager, and our boss, Rex Anderson." Rex was one of those men who came across as ex-military or ex-law enforcement and probably had been one or the other or both. He was middle-aged now but powerfully built, not terribly tall, with a hard face, glacial blue eyes and hair she suspected was blond. As he kept it in a classic buzz cut, she couldn't be certain. Since he hadn't developed a middle-aged paunch, she imagined he worked out.

"Then you must meet the Superintendent." Betty took Mandy by the arm and led her to him. Unlike Rex, the Superintendent was an enormous, gentle giant of a man, well over six feet tall with kindly china blue eyes who clearly, by his weather-beaten skin and healthy physique, preferred a life that put him outdoors as much as possible. His hair was graying and wrinkle lines were prominent around his eyes and mouth but he was one of those men who would always—no matter how much he aged—be handsome in a fatherly kind of way.

His hand was so large that Mandy's disappeared into it when they shook. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mandy," he said in a full, but not overpowering, voice. "I hope you enjoy your

summer with us. Just remember, the year-round staff are here to guide you, and if you need anything, you just let us know."

His comments, gracefully stated, sounded sincere without promising specifics. Mandy knew if she was an eighteen year old on her first job, she would have been mightily impressed that the Superintendent himself was concerned for her welfare. She thanked him even as his attention was already being called away by Rex, and went back to the buffet tables to snag a plate and get in line with her workmates.

She piled on some of her own potato salad, heaped a Roman Meal bun with barbecued shredded pork, grabbed a dripping wet can of root beer from a tub of ice, and settled down on a Park Service brown wooden bench that had been dragged over to the tennis courts for the occasion.

Moments later, petite Luisa Smith with her chocolate brown skin, dark eyes and frizzy hair, who, in Mandy's mind, could easily have won the "This is my very first job and I'm terrified" award plunked down beside her. Her plate held only a smattering of pork and beans, corn chips, and salad.

"Not on a diet, are you?" Mandy asked.

"No." Her voice was high and just a little tremulous. "I'm allergic to dairy foods and flour products."

"Bummer," someone said. Mandy looked up to see Jane Wilkins standing over them, her mullet-styled slick black hair trailing down to her mid-back. She held only a can of cola and threw her head back to drink it, gurgling as though her thirst was bigger than God's. She went by the improbable nickname of Geronimo, and when they'd been introduced previously, Mandy hadn't been impressed.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Mandy asked, mildly irritated by Geronimo's abrasive, showy style. The woman's personality, her predilections—she was rumored to be a lesbian—and her feats of bravery as a long-serving park ranger with professional law enforcement training were legendary and had preceded her to Bryce.

Weirdly, or so Mandy thought, Geronimo was paired with quiet little Luisa. Like Jo and Mandy, they were sharing one set of bunk beds in a dinky ten-by-ten bedroom on the other side of the Women's Dorm.

The Women's Dorm was designed as a utilitarian rectangle with two bedrooms and one bath on each end, with these wings divided from each other by the living room—called the Common Room—and a narrow galley kitchen. The big bedroom with the individual beds on Luisa's and Geronimo's side of the house had been snapped up by Janet Dartmore, a vivacious, self-aware, Me

First kind of a woman, and Thea Money, who was Archie Douglas's live-in girlfriend when they were back home together in Idaho.

In the eyes of the Park Service, "significant other" relationships, no matter how long-term, didn't exist, so Thea and Archie couldn't room together. In the bureaucratic mind, if you wanted access to married housing, you had to be married.

"I already ate," Geronimo said. "I was just checking on my roomie, here." Her voice was edged with a challenge directed at Mandy and, out of sheer pique, Mandy accepted the cast-down gauntlet.

"She seems to be doing just fine. Without you."

Geronimo crushed the soda can in her fist, the muscles of her forearm bulging, and snorted her displeasure. Luisa, if it was possible, shrank into an even smaller packet of physical space than her tiny four-foot-eleven frame already took up, plainly hoping that whatever contest was forthcoming, she wouldn't be required to participate in it.

Mandy felt heat rise into her face. Her muscles tensed as if she were expecting to go into some kind of ridiculous battle. *Great*, she thought, *now what?*

"Hey, girlfriend!"

At that moment, Geronimo's attention was conveniently diverted by the hardy slap of a hand across her shoulder blade, and she turned to see who was greeting her. "Jo! How's it going?"

"Awesome!" The two women bear-hugged. "We're back at it, aren't we?" Jo asked.

"You're back at it, you slug. I'm year-round now!" Geronimo gave the shorter woman a playful punch to the shoulder.

"No shit!" Jo returned the punch, her freckles dancing and red hair flying.

"Hell, yes."

"Here at Bryce?"

"No. Winter at Carlsbad Caverns, shoulder seasons in Mesa Verde, summer in Bryce. Not bad, huh?"

"Not bad at all." Jo put her arm around Geronimo and they drifted away from Luisa and Mandy, but not before Mandy saw Jo wink at her from behind the other woman's back.

So, Mandy thought, it had been a save, not a coincidence of timing. That Jo! She's a piece of work!

Mandy turned to Luisa who was shoveling pork and beans into her mouth as though she had a train to catch or she had been forcibly starved.

"She isn't making your life miserable or anything, is she?"

"Who?"

"Geronimo. Sheesh, what a moniker. But I guess it fits her well enough."

"Geronimo? No, not at all. Actually, she's been kind of protective."

"Really? How so?"

"I think she thinks she's mentoring me."

"Well, is she?" Mandy, her Southern-Baptist-reared homophobia kicking in, wondered exactly what kind of "mentoring" Luisa was talking about.

"Is she what?"

"Mentoring you."

"No, she's not mentoring me. I have no intention of joining the Park Service as a ranger or anything else. This is just a job between school semesters for me."

"Oh. So, what's your field of study?"

"Astronomy."

"Well, that's different."

"The nights are very clear out here on the Paunsaugunt Plateau and the stars are very bright. Come out some night and I'll show you."

"You have a telescope?"

"Of course."

"Of course." Mandy shrugged in agreement. It made sense. The woman was an astronomer. Of course, she'd have a telescope. "Surely you can't fit a decent telescope into that little bedroom of yours and Geronimo's!"

Luisa laughed and the sound of it was kind of like a light musical tinkle. "No. I'm storing it at Ted's house."

"Ted? Who's Ted?"

"You know. Superintendent Ash."

"You call him Ted?"

"He's an old Army buddy of my Dad's. I've known him since I was a little kid."

Will wonders never cease? Mandy thought. All of a sudden it was clear why the Park Administration had no qualms about Geronimo rooming with Luisa. The arrangement was the best possible way to keep tabs on Geronimo—not on Luisa—and to curtail the woman's legendary wildness. It also meant Luisa probably wasn't going to win the "This is my first job and I'm terrified" award. Not if she was buds with the Superintendent.

This realization was followed closely on its heels by one that made Mandy flush with embarrassment at her own denseness. Just as Mandy believed Luisa needed protection from Geronimo,

Geronimo had been equally inclined to believe Luisa needed protection from Mandy. No wonder they had been ready to tear each other's eyes out! She felt an urge to get up and apologize to Geronimo but she didn't see her or Jo anywhere on the court.

She also hadn't seen Orville LaGrange whom she had dreaded running into as he seemed to have his eye on her ever since their brief introduction outside the Women's Dorm. But either he'd come to the party earlier or hadn't bothered to show up at all.

With her plate finished, she observed the milling crowd and tried to connect names to faces. There was one married park ranger couple, Dustin and Loretta "Sparky" Henderson, whose close association was obvious by their linked hands, identical tans, and strength-trained physiques.

A nervous, almost twittering, man with nearly albino hair and skin, swished by her, and she remembered this was Edmund Altura, rumored—like Geronimo—to be gay. He shared the men's quarters with Archie, a Hispanic man named Alfonso Martinez whom she didn't know anything about, and two teenage cowpokes from Green River, Buster Cord and Phillip Markin, who made up the seasonal custodial crew. Their year-round boss, an elderly gentleman named Isaac King was not in attendance. Buster and Phillip had long since chowed down and left the party.

Betty passed by again and introduced Mandy and Luisa to Daniel Barton—the Park's lead seasonal ranger who was responsible for the summer evening educational programs—his wife Millicent, and their two children, Tom and Violet. They had a private family house within spitting distance of the Women's Dorm.

All in all, Mandy thought the evening was successful but by nine p.m. it was almost too dark to see, and her eyelids fluttered shut at idle moments. Her work shift in the campgrounds started at 7:30 the next morning, so she took her leave of Betty and Wanda, gathered her long-empty potato salad tub—the women raved over her contribution one final time—and found her way along an unlit path through shadowed pines to the Women's Dorm.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE way Geronimo carried herself tonight was allowing Jo to enjoy the other woman's company long past the moment when the two of them would normally have tired of each other and parted. Instead, Jo had accepted Geronimo's invitation to ride down to Rattlesnakes for a few

games of pool and to drink the 3.2 beer Geronimo had had the foresight to purchase in the grocery store in Panguitch earlier in the week. They still had to pay Rattlesnakes to serve them the beer but tonight it was proving worth it in Jo's estimation,

Once in the bar, Geronimo's manner became even more butch than it had been at the party at the Park. Jo had looked at Geronimo before but she'd never quite seen her, at least not as a romantic prospect. Jo was a soft butch and normally she didn't feel much attraction to other butches.

But Geronimo was on a roll, playing hard at being seductive which, Jo thought, should have been out of character for her for a whole slew of reasons which Jo ticked off in her head. First, they were housemates, and the Park Service, not dissimilar from the Church or the Army, frowned on romantic entanglements; and second, two butches were supposed to repel each other.

Geronimo stripped off her cowboy shirt, and her torso and high full breasts were clad only in a ribbed, black muscle shirt. Jo continued to shoot pool, keeping a careful watch on Geronimo as she moved, unable to stop admiring the sheer muscularity of the other woman's shoulders and back.

Hell, she finally concluded pocketing the eight ball, who cared if Geronimo was a butch? Jo had never been with someone more butch than herself, and it might be fun. Certainly different, and different was something Jo needed to ease some of that internal restlessness she couldn't seem to drive away.

Maybe she'd been playing her style too tight and kept her choices too limited for the last few years. Maybe it was time to take a risk. Of course, if she was honest with herself, Mandy was where she really wanted to take that risk, but she was certain Mandy was straight—or at the very least clueless about Jo's attraction to her—and anyway, Mandy wasn't in the offing right now. But perhaps Geronimo was.

Geronimo thumped her cue stick on the pine-board floor and eyed Jo speculatively. "Rack up another one?"

"No." Jo clicked her cue stick into the wall rack. "Let's take a drive."

Geronimo's eyebrows rose but she settled her cue stick against the wall and picked up her shirt. "How many beers have you had?"

"Two."

"I've had four. You'd better drive my truck." She dug into her jeans for her keys, and Jo's eyes followed her hand. Yes, she thought. A rush of flame ignited her loins as Geronimo's hand slid from her pocket. This was going to be good: a serious change of pace.

Once out in the cold, biting air, Jo pushed Geronimo up against the door of the Ford Ranger and slid her knee between Geronimo's legs to grind her hip against the other woman's pubic bone.

"Ho! Whoa!" While probably not surprised by the attack itself, Geronimo seemed startled by its vehemence in that languid way that an alcoholic buzz produces. "Wait a minute, woman," she drawled.

Jo didn't wait. Instead, she shut Geronimo up by thrusting her tongue into her mouth which was warm and tasted of beer. Jo liked the hard, thin, almost male feel of Geronimo's lips. She was enjoying her resistance.

After a moment though, the tide of resistance turned, and suddenly Geronimo was bearing down on Jo's mouth as though awakened by a lover's long-awaited kiss.

They both heard the bar of the door slam. "Shit!" hissed Jo, knowing some of the cowboys with whom they'd shared jokes had to be leaving for the night. They were nice enough gents, but you never knew what they would make of queers. Utah was very conservative and very patriarchal, and she didn't want to learn their views—verbal or physical—on the subject.

She shoved Geronimo aside and fumbled in the dark to slide the truck key into the door lock. Geronimo grunted, shook her head as if to clear it, and ambled around to the passenger side of the truck.

Jo opened the truck door and slid into the driver's bucket seat. In the dark, she couldn't make out anything and made several unsuccessful jabs with the key at the dashboard. "Where's the damn ignition?"

Geronimo rapped on the passenger window, and Jo leaned across the truck to open the door. "Where's the damn ignition?"

"Steering column." Geronimo climbed into her seat and buckled herself in while Jo started the truck. She reversed out of the parking lot.

"Where are we going?" Geronimo asked, her voice sounding completely sober.

"Isn't there a lake after we turn off Highway 12 onto Highway 22?"

"Pine Lake, but it's too far. The Park will be locked by the time we get back if we go all that way. There's a pullout at Tropic Reservoir/King's Creek Campground."

"Too populated," Jo said, feeling butterflies in her gut at potentially being discovered in a compromising position.

"Not at night."

"Don't you have a damn key to the main gate?"



"Only on my cruiser ring, and you know as well as I do that you have to explain coming in after curfew, and that it's a hanging offense. Rex takes a sweet revenge so that you don't pull it a second time."

"What kind of revenge?" Jo giggled.

"Legend has it he makes enforcement rangers work double-shifts for a week."

Jo laughed. "Sounds like it ensures you're too tired to break curfew for the rest of the summer."

"That's pretty much the idea. Turn off here." Geronimo pointed, and in the headlights Jo could just make out a dirt track that led off almost immediately into a tight cluster of juniper trees.

Jo plunged into it and cut the lights and the motor. "Damn," Geronimo belly-ached, "I think you scratched my Ranger good. Did you hear that tree branch screech?"

"No, I didn't and neither did you. But there is a ranger I'm about to scratch." Jo leaned across the stick shift and grabbed Geronimo's shirt. When she pulled, the snaps popped open. A moment later, she had Geronimo out of the muscle shirt and her mouth on a nipple.

"Goddess," Geronimo groaned, "if I'd known you were so quick in the sack, we could have done this last year."

"Umm," Jo moved on to the other nipple. "I wasn't this quick last year. I'm generally pretty laid back."

Geronimo laughed. She shifted adroitly in the seat and Jo found her mouth startlingly empty of nipple. The next thing Jo knew, Geronimo had maneuvered her legs onto the seat and pulled her torso down until Jo's head was resting on the driver's door armrest.

"Now you really are laid back." Geronimo grinned in the darkness. Jo felt a pulsing heat building between her legs, and she silently begged Geronimo to unzip her jeans. Geronimo willingly obliged.

## Chapter Three

A FEW NIGHTS after her unexpected tryst with Geronimo, Jo heard Mandy come in and drop down on her bunk with a tired sigh. It was late, and Jo shifted restlessly, wondering if she should speak or pretend to be asleep. She shouldn't have waited

up for Mandy but she couldn't help herself.

She knew Orville had invited Mandy on a moonlight hike of Bryce along the Fairyland Point trail, and despite attempts to distract herself, Jo had been nothing but restless since Mandy had traipsed out of the Women's Dorm to meet him at the Lodge.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Orville to behave like a gentleman—hell, he'd probably even forgotten how to seduce a woman by now—but still, she worried. Worried about the state of Mandy's mind...and heart.

Finally, nudged by thoughts that would not let her rest, she rolled over, and her voice came out of the darkness. "Did you have a good time?" She hoped her voice sounded casual, not all pent-up, like she actually felt.

"Oh," Mandy sighed again, "the moonlight on all those spires and hoodoos and pinnacles was so...so...it was indescribable."

"Was it luminescent? Milky-white? Ghostly? Glowing castles of poured sugar?"

"All right, Ms. Smarty-Pants-Expert. So you've been on the Guided Moonlight Walk before. Did you enjoy it?"

"Loved it. It's one of the most *indescribable* experiences I've ever had."

Mandy took a swipe at Jo's bunk in amused annoyance, and they both dissolved into giggles. Finally, Jo said, "I've seen lots of other parks in the moonlight. Nothing compares to Bryce. It's made for it. But that wasn't my question. What I really meant to ask was whether you had a good time with Orville?" Jo held her breath, awaiting the answer.

Mandy grunted. Jo could hear tiny scrabbling sounds in the dark she guessed meant Mandy was unbuttoning her shirt. "Oh, it was fine. Not really a date or anything."

Jo heard the shirt slide off Mandy's shoulders, and she bit her lip, forcing herself not to imagine Mandy's full-figured body. Next came the pop of a bra being unsnapped.

Jo closed her eyes tight. Don't think about it! "I mean, do you like him?" She knew she shouldn't be worrying about Mandy's feelings but she was anyway.

"I don't really have any intention of liking him, Jo. Or anybody else for that matter." She said this last remark under her breath, and again Jo wondered what or who had hurt Mandy Barnes.

"I think we should go to sleep," Mandy said.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Jo heard the rasping sound of the zipper of Mandy's jeans and then the slither of denim. Again, she tried not to think about it. "See you in the morning." Jo rolled over onto her back.

Mandy stood, clearly on her way to one of only two bathrooms—which required extraordinary strategic planning on the part of all eight members of the house to manage morning ablutions. Jo didn't dare to look but she knew if she did she would see the sensuous back of a shapely woman, naked except for the white glow of her underpants.

Mandy stopped at the door of their room. "Hey, you didn't wait up for me or anything, did you?"

Jo, afraid of the truth, didn't answer, pretending instead she had already surrendered to sleep.

IN HER DREAM, Mandy was flying, gracefully swooping among the pillars, hoodoos, and fantastical eroded shapes of Fairyland. The pinks and purples of the stone glowed vividly in the midday sun. In her exhilaration, she miscalculated her trajectory and careened into a bumpy fuchsia spire.

She tumbled harmlessly to the ground. Getting up and brushing herself off, she noticed she was dressed in a wide cotton skirt with several layers of petticoats beneath. Laced-up leather boots covered her feet.

She walked eastward along a dusty trail that led down through the eroded sandstone and out to the more prosaic valley floor. When she reached the rough-hewn wooden fence of the Park boundary, she saw an old pioneer wagon hitched to a team of horses standing in a rutted dirt track.

The track led south along the base of Bryce's colorful cliffs. How odd, she thought. She assumed the two-lane paved roadway that led to the Park continued on down the hill and passed through the Mormon towns to the east.

She stepped through the Park gate and stopped to visit the horses. They tossed their heads at her presence but sniffed her hands and accepted her pats on their wide wet noses. She checked her skirt's pockets for sweets but she didn't have any.

She walked behind them and clambered up onto the wagon. The reins were lying there and she picked them up. The horses, feeling the pull, set off and Mandy was stunned to discover she knew how to drive a wagon.

As she drove, she was enthralled by this exotic view of Bryce as she was seeing its bizarre shapes rising up from below instead of looking down on them as she usually did. But, eventually, the track turned east taking her away from Bryce.

The going got rougher and she was soon exhausted but she couldn't seem to stop the horses. Her shoulders hurt. Her back ached too, but with strange sharp pains that jangled her nerves

from time to time.

Far up ahead, she could make out another wagon. Seeing it, she was filled with an unreasoning hatred but when the wagon turned north into a deep canyon, her horses followed suit.

The slick sandstone walls of this new canyon rose up to dizzying heights, and a creek that ran along the floor was squeezed into a narrow streambed. The track she had been following vanished but her horses plunged into the streambed, plowing straight up it, splashing the wagon, and sometimes even Mandy, with the sweet fresh water.

They reached a deep green pool that lay at the base of a bowl formed by the red and tan cliffs and Mandy gasped in delight when she saw plumes of lucent water spilling over the high fluted rocks and cascading into the limpid pool.

She breathed deeply of this perfectly enclosed place. The crisp smell of the water and the sharp pungent odor of desert chamisa blended together, filling her with a heady bliss.

## Chapter Four

BY THE TIME Carlotta Roberts finished the dishes, the vacuuming, and the laundry, she was late for her shift at Ruby's Inn. Dave, who was going off shift, thrust the order slips for tables six and nine into her hand at the same time that he struggled to release the knots of his splattered apron. "It's about time," he railed. "Didn't you remember I had a date?"

"At 10:30 in the morning?" Carlotta was incredulous.

"It's with my plumber!" He was already running for the door. "He charges by the quarter hour."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry I forgot." She hung the orders on the kitchen carousel and went to check to see if tables six and nine needed refills of coffee. Table Six was occupied by four familiar Mormon ranchers who were getting a bit long in the tooth and, if the truth be told, spent far too many hours at Ruby's complaining about livestock prices and sucking up too much coffee, even if Mormon teaching prohibited the caffeinated drink.

"Hi, James...Fred...Bert...Kendall." Carlotta had served them many times.

"Hey, Carlotta," they chorused. "Now," Bert smiled, "we're gonna get some real service."

"Oh, come on now. Dave's competent." She carefully gauged

the distances to their cups as she poured the coffee.

"He's alright," Fred joined in, "but he ain't as pretty as you are."

"Now, guys. You know I'm married." She wasn't sure she wanted to be anymore but that was just the way it was. She pulled the coffee carafe back to her side.

"Hell," James spat out, "so are we." They all laughed at the harmless joke.

"Yes," Carlotta came back, "and don't you forget it." They laughed again and she moved away from the table wondering why she felt irritated by the innocent flirtation. It wasn't as if she didn't go through this same routine, with minor variations, every day with dozens of male customers. Why should it annoy her now? Maybe her hormones were off-kilter, making her edgy.

Table Nine was occupied by two women Carlotta had never seen before in the restaurant, or even in town. They were not actually like any two women she had ever seen anywhere. It wasn't what they were wearing—jeans and t-shirts—although it was that too.

It was the short cut of their hair, the vibrancy of their faces, the multiple loops of earrings edging their ears, the bra-less natural curves of their breasts perfectly visible through their shirts, the slim dynamism of their bodies.

"Yes?" The blonde woman was looking up at her inquiringly and Carlotta realized she had gone into a time warp, had been staring.

"Uh, sorry." She jerked the coffee carafe forward to cover her *faux pas*, hoping it would trumpet her intentions. "Coffee?"

"I'm drinking decaf," said the blonde, "and Jessie's drinking tea."

All of which, Carlotta realized, would have been obvious to a seasoned waitress such as herself, if she had not been so spellbound as she approached the table.

"Oh, right," she felt like there was a fog between her ears and she was sure she sounded like there was one there too. "Well, would you like a refill on those?"

"We're fine," the woman named Jessie replied, her bright green eyes flashing with something that Carlotta couldn't identify, but which seemed to be amusement, "thank you."

"Well," Carlotta mouthed automatically, wanting to crawl back to the kitchen and die, "your order ought to be right up."

"Thanks," the blonde said, her eyes also now glinting with the same amusement—and Carlotta was sure it was amusement—shown by her table mate.

Carlotta rushed back to the kitchen, her heart pounding.

What in the hell was all of that about? She put down the coffee carafe and headed toward the back of the kitchen to the refrigerator locker. She needed a slice of pecan pie to steady her nerves, especially since she'd burned up her breakfast calories long ago. The chill of the refrigerator helped immediately and she lingered inside it trying to get her thoughts in order.

What was wrong with her this morning? First, she'd argued with her husband Cody, now she was flushed with excitement for no particular reason. Cody would say it was time to see Dr. Acton again.

William Acton, the gynecologist in Cedar City, had ruled out endometriosis and cancer as the cause of her irritability and mood swings. As she was far too young to be menopausal, he had ruled that out too and, in the end, told her it was just nerves and that she should rest more. She hadn't bothered to tell him she'd always felt this way—well, at least since she hit puberty—and resting wasn't going to make a damn bit of difference.

Carlotta scooped out a slice of pie and closed the heavy door of the locker. She hid in the kitchen while she ate the pie, peeking through the counter pass-through at the two women at Table Nine. Thankfully, no new customers had wandered in expecting service while she was in the locker.

"Order up!" Martin, the cook, came up behind her and deposited two plates heaped with eggs, sausages and potatoes on the pass-through counter. "These are James' and Kendall's."

"Jeez," Carlotta lifted the plates. "I don't know why these old geezers don't keel over from cholesterol poisoning."

"Oh, don't worry." Martin dropped two more bulging plates on the pass-through. "They will someday."

"I don't want to be here when they do. I don't know CPR."

Martin guffawed and turned back to his griddle. When Carlotta returned, he had the other two orders up and Carlotta wasn't surprised by what they held. Both women had ordered buckwheat pancakes and fruit, no meat. No wonder they stayed so trim.

Head high, she marched to their table. "Can I get you anything else?" She slipped the plates in front of them and waited.

"I'd love more tea," Jessie remarked.

"Sure, more decaf," the blonde asserted. "You don't happen to have soymilk, do you?"

"Soymilk?" Carlotta had never heard of it.

"Okay," the blonde giggled, "I thought not."

"Are you two from California or something?" Carlotta could feel her anxiety rising. She felt so put-in-her-place, so country

bumpkin in front of these women.

"Nevada," Jessie answered without offense, smiling right up into Carlotta's face.

"Ohio, originally," the blonde remarked, shooting a grin at Jessie.

Carlotta's face flushed again for reasons she couldn't ascertain. "I'll get your refills."

She did her damndest not to look at either of them when she delivered the refills and again when she delivered the check. She just wanted them to go, and do that as soon as possible.

But, as if they knew of her wish and were defying it, they lingered. They continued sitting and sipping at their drinks long after the ranchers had gone and even after Carlotta had taken orders from three more tables.

At one point, while dropping orders on the pass-thru, Martin looked out and murmured sympathetically. "Campers at Number Nine?"

"Yeah, jeez," Carlotta complained. "I don't know what in the hell else they want."

"Maybe they want a room." Martin was eyeing the two women.

"What do you mean?"

"They're holding hands."

Carlotta turned and found herself staring. Martin laughed.

"What's so funny?" Carlotta demanded.

"You! You look so shocked."

"I am not! I've seen le...les...lesbi...women like that before!"

Martin laughed again. "Oh, yeah. Where?"

"I don't know!"

Martin started to count off on his pudgy fingers. "There are no lesbians in Panguitch, Carlotta. You can't say the word 'gay' in Tropic, Cannonville and Henrieville, and I'd be willing to bet that even in Cedar City, you won't come across one."

"So, what's your damn point?"

"My point is that the odds you've ever seen a real live lesbian are practically non-existent."

Carlotta didn't want to admit he was right. She grabbed the plates they'd left idling on the pass-thru. "Shut up, Martin. I have to get these orders out."

Martin made a downward gesture with his thumb as if to mark an imaginary 'one' in the air. "My score."

Carlotta glared at him. He grinned and turned back to his sizzling cooktop.

MANDY FOUND SHE liked Jo a great deal. She realized some of their camaraderie was due to the enforced closeness of their living arrangements, but the circumstances, she thought, could just as easily have resulted in her detesting the other woman. Jo was just so affable and so considerate.

She seemed to be able to second guess Mandy's needs even though she hardly knew her. Mandy doubted that Jo even knew she was doing it. But each time it happened, Mandy was startled because it was so unexpected and she had no yardstick by which to measure either Jo or their alliance.

Mandy had never had any close female friends, not even in high school. Not after how her father had punished her for getting close to Trina. She had kept to herself after that. After she graduated, she continued to live at home, evading her father as much as possible, and didn't waste a second before enrolling in community college. She wanted a degree so she could have more opportunities than what she knew were so often available to high school graduates.

Jay, with his take-charge personality, swept her off her feet in community college and before she knew it, they had married. At least the union had pushed her father out of the picture. But while she romantically expected roses and champagne, the reality was beer, Hamburger Helper, and a hard-scrabble existence while she went on to the University and struggled to finish her Bachelor's degree while holding down an entry-level secretarial job.

Jay was a traveling salesman and often on the road. When he was home, he expected her to jump to serve him. Sex happened when he wanted it and was quick and emotionless. Mandy had almost become accustomed to the way he paid zero attention to her, to her needs, and to her aspirations and dreams.

So her easy-going friendship with Jo was as big a shock to her as was Jo's ability to read her like a book, which began the moment they met on Mandy's first day in the Park.

That day had been a hot, still June afternoon and Mandy was exhausted and sweat-drenched from her long drive from Albuquerque. After Wanda, the office manager, had shown her to the last available room in the Women's Dorm, Mandy crumpled to the worn oak floorboards amidst her luggage in a kind of stunned dismay at the cramped size and absolute barrenness of her summer accommodations.

Not more than ten minutes passed—while she bit at her fingers in a state of near-tears—before she heard the tread of steps on the creaky floor of the hall and looked up to see a freckled redhead laden with gear standing over her shoulder.



The unknown female grinned and said, "Your first time, isn't it? It can be a bit overwhelming." She made no attempt to push past Mandy.

"Hellish." Mandy dropped her hands from her mouth and gripped her stomach. "I can't believe I'm here."

"What you need is some ice cream."

"Ice cream?" Mandy was taken aback. "Ice cream. My god, yes, that sounds good. Where does one get ice cream around here? Aren't we hundreds of miles from anywhere?"

"No. C'mon. There's always Ruby's Inn which you'll learn is the social center of our wilderness universe. Open early, open late, with every amenity you could possibly crave."

"Seriously?" Mandy crinkled up her nose in disbelief.

"Maybe not *every* amenity, but still, it's darn impressive."

"How do we get there?"

"We'll take my Jeep." She dropped her gear to the floor and offered Mandy a hand up.

Outside, the gunmetal blue of the Jeep's hood was still radiating waves of heat from an engine that hadn't had a chance to cool. Mandy grasped the Jeep's roll bar and swung herself up into the passenger seat. The as-yet-unnamed redhead slid the transmission into reverse and backed them out of the driveway and then, with a spurt of gravel, onto the twisting narrow strip of asphalt that led from the seasonal staff housing to Bryce's main road.

Once they got underway, Mandy had to shout to be heard in the open-air vehicle. "Where did you drive from?"

"San Bernardino. You?"

"Albuquerque."

The driver nodded. "Long way."

"Not as far as California," Mandy shouted back.

"I'm Jo Reynolds. I guess we're rooming together. You can have whichever bunk you want."

For the first time in ages, Mandy laughed out loud. Jo's casual acceptance of her and the wind whizzing past her face and the tangling of her hair blasted away loads of unacknowledged tension.

"I'm Mandy Barnes. I'll take the lower one. I think I'm too old and creaky for a top bunk."

Jo smiled and Mandy noticed she had very straight, very California-wholesome teeth. "I doubt that, but you're welcome to it."

They went to Ruby's Inn with its log cabin exterior, big stone corner fireplace, shiny red booths, and cheerful red-and-white gingham-checked tables and consumed the perfect

refreshment, an ice cream sundae which made Mandy feel like a normal person again. At the checkout counter, she ogled the tourist-y postcards on sale for a Park she hadn't even seen yet.

On the way back, without commenting or asking, Jo drove Mandy to Fairyland Point just outside the entrance station. They got out of the Jeep and walked over to the amphitheater's rim, and Mandy's breath was taken away by the sight spreading below her. The eroding sandstone spires cluttering Fairyland Canyon were an idiosyncratic jumble of shapes and colors, far too numerous to distinguish. The overall effect was one of extravagant caprice.

Mandy clapped her hands and laughed. "I see why it's called Fairyland Point."

"It's one of my favorite viewpoints at sunset," Jo said, "because it comes over all lavender and violet shades."

"Can we come back?" Mandy's voice was that of an enraptured small child.

Jo laughed. "Mandy, you're going to be here for three months. I think you'll have plenty of chances to come back."

Mandy slapped her forehead. "Duh! I forgot. I live here!"

Jo, she remembered, had laughed again—in a humored and indulgent way—and then they had gone back to the Women's Dorm and moved in.

JO'S JEEP TURNED off the roadway and roared into the parking lot of the Visitor's Center just as Mandy walked out the wide glass doors, her morning shift over.

"Hey," Jo called across the crisp bright air, "want to get some lunch at Ruby's? I'm ravenous."

"Sure." Mandy climbed in, delighted. "I thought I was going to have to drive home and make myself a tuna sandwich for lunch. This is so much better. You didn't come over here just to find me, did you?"

"Yes and no. I saw you coming out of the building and I was heading out to lunch. Figured you were off shift for at least an hour."

The Jeep reached the entrance station and they were waved through by the fashion-model look-alike Janet Dartmore, probably the only person at Bryce who could make the Park Service's olive and gray ensemble look smashing.

"She's just gorgeous, isn't she?" Jo said.

Mandy shrugged. "I guess so. Except for just now, I don't think I've even seen her since the night of the Welcoming Party."

Jo laughed. "Come to think of it, me either. I guess she leads

a wild life. Probably dating half of the Men's Dorm."

"Speaking of a wild life, I never saw you again the night of the Welcoming Party either. Where did you go?"

"Nowhere special. Geronimo and I just went down to Rattlesnakes and shot some pool."

Something about Jo's tone sounded evasive, as if she weren't telling the truth. Jo was her friend. Surely, she wasn't friends with Geronimo too? Mandy felt an inexplicable wave of jealousy wash through her. Geronimo was so...so...she didn't know, but she didn't like it. "Geronimo? She's pretty intense, isn't she?"

"Yeah."

They arrived at Ruby's, and Jo pulled the Jeep to a stop on the tarmac to let oncoming traffic pass before she crossed the roadway into the graveled parking lot.

Once inside, they were seated at one of the timber-framed booths by a waitress who looked overly bright and perky, like someone who had drunk one too many Coca-Colas.

"To drink?" she asked. The white plastic name tag the waitress wore said *Carlotta*, and she was staring at Jo.

"Water," Mandy answered. "And I'll take the Reuben."

"Seven-Up," Jo said. "No ice."

"Do you want to order your meal now, too?"

"I'll have the chicken fried steak, Carlotta," Jo answered. "No gravy."

"No ice. No gravy. It'll be right out."

The waitress scuttled off leaving Jo wondering if inviting Mandy to lunch on the spur of the moment had been such a great idea. She could hardly talk to her about Geronimo.

Why had she slept with Geronimo anyway? Where was it going to take her? She believed what she shared with Geronimo had been pure physical meltdown, pure spontaneous lust. A no-strings opportunity to conquer and be conquered. The biggest problem she could foresee was that that kind of high-octane sex could get a little addictive. Still, Jo assured herself, even if it did, she sure as hell wasn't going to let it go beyond a summer dalliance. If she and Geronimo ever got together in anything like a serious relationship, they would kill each other.

"Are you okay?" Mandy asked.

Jo came back to the present. "Sorry. Just distracted, I guess." The truth was staring her in the face. The woman she really wanted to have sex with—and maybe more than sex—was sitting across from her, but there was absolutely no reason to get her hopes up. Mandy was straight.

Carlotta returned with their drinks, managing to splash Jo's Seven-Up across the speckled gray and yellow of the Formica

tabletop. "Sorry." She pulled a towel from her waistband and wiped up the frothy spill of clear soda.

Mandy frowned after she left, and Jo laughed at her consternation.

"Didn't you ever wait tables, Mandy?"

"No. Before I started teaching, I usually worked in the secretarial end of the service industry." She shrugged. "Okay, I flipped hamburgers one summer, but I never waitressed."

"I've done it a few times. It's not fun."

"Why do you say that?"

"The people you serve can be so rude, and the management treats you like you don't exist. It's a kind of slavery."

"You mean like at the Park?"

Jo laughed again. "Yeah, I remember being a park aide, too. It's not as bad once you make ranger."

"You get more respect, right?"

"Right." Jo took a sip of her soda. "Of course, the truth is, all work is a kind of slavery."

"Yes, but what choice do we have?"

"Marry a rich guy, I guess."

Mandy twitched, and Jo realized she'd hit a sore nerve. "Sorry. That was thoughtless. I mean, I don't know anything about you. Maybe you already tried that route and it didn't pan out."

Mandy glowered at the table, one hand curled around her water glass.

"Look," Jo reached across the table and patted Mandy's hand, "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. It's me. I'm just being a little sensitive. Sorry." Mandy grasped Jo's hand and gave it a confident shake. "It's okay, really."

The waitress slid their meals onto the table, and Mandy pulled her hand back.

"Anything else?" Carlotta's voice sounded breathless.

"That's it," Mandy said.

"I'm fine," Jo said.

Carlotta headed off and then abruptly stopped and turned back. Before Jo was able to raise a bite of food to her mouth, she was standing over them.

"Yes?" Jo looked up at the young woman.

"Look," she said, her voice trembling "I...uh...I saw you holding hands and uh..."

"What's the matter?" Mandy asked, looking first at Carlotta and then at Jo. "What's wrong?"

"Are you lesbians?"

"What!" Mandy jerked back. "Lesbians! Why would you think that?"

Jo looked across at Mandy's flustered response and knew this was not going to be a pleasant moment for her roommate, but when asked point blank about her sexual orientation, she didn't lie. She raised her eyes to Carlotta's. "I'm a lesbian."

Mandy huffed and then sputtered into complete silence, her eyes fixed on Jo in horror.

But Carlotta looked as if the rock of Sisyphus had just been lifted from her shoulders. "Thank God!" she exclaimed, her eyes transfixed on Jo.

Mandy asked, "You really are a lesbian? Are you sure?"

Jo cocked her head in amusement. "Yes, I really am. I don't have my dyke card with me so I can't prove it to you, but, yes, I am."

The dyke card reference went over the heads of both members of her audience, if they'd even heard it. Jo was hoping it would lighten the moment, but it didn't.

While Mandy had a crushed look on her face, and the slump to her shoulders made it look like she might start crying at any second, Carlotta's face was aglow with the kind of holy fervor that made it clear she had just chanced upon the Holy Grail. Her eyes nearly bugged out as she said, "Can I talk to you? Please. Please."

"Uh, look, um, Carlotta," Jo shot a fretful glance at Mandy, "this isn't a good time. We're going to have to get back to the Park. Can you wrap these up to go?" She pushed up from the booth and stood.

"Yes, of course!" Carlotta whirled and grabbed two Styrofoam containers from the nearby counter and quickly shifted their meals. "There you go. And we can talk later?" Carlotta persisted, almost whining. "Later, right?"

"Sure. I'll come by some time, okay?" Jo dug into her wallet and placed a twenty-dollar bill on the table. "Just keep the change."

"Thank you, thank you." Carlotta grasped the bill to her chest. "You don't know what this means to me."

Jo knew she wasn't talking about the overly-large tip, and muttered solely to herself, "Sure I do. I know exactly what it means." Every dyke had been a baby dyke at some time in her life and dependent upon an older and wiser woman to give her the road directions. Carlotta bounced away, ecstatic.

Mandy, on the other hand, was still slumped in the booth, her eyes glued to the table.

"Mandy," Jo said, "come on. Let's go."

She reached out to help her up, but Mandy swatted her hand away without looking at Jo and pulled herself to her feet.

Jo was hurt but not at all surprised. The rejection had begun and she felt a weight, like a lead ball, expanding in her chest. She choked back feelings of anger and screamed silently at the heavy thing inside her body to go away. I don't need you, she screeched.

Mandy blindly marched toward the door and walked out of the restaurant ahead of her. It'll get better, Jo promised. It doesn't matter. She could never have loved me anyway. And, of course, I have to remember the rule: Never fall for a straight girl. It's the surest way to break your heart.

The ride back to the Park was a silent one.

## Chapter Five

MANDY DIDN'T KNOW how she felt, except confused. She had thought Jo could be her friend, and now she thought perhaps their burgeoning relationship had meant something entirely different to Jo. Jo couldn't be a lesbian. How could she be? If Jo was a lesbian, she couldn't be friends with her.

She went on sharing the same postage-stamp-sized room with Jo, but they were on far more formal terms. Mandy was careful to ensure they didn't spend any time in their room together outside of sleeping time, and other than shyly uttered 'goodnights' there wasn't any other conversation. No evening pillow talk or friendly dissection of the day as there had once been.

She resented what had happened because she believed they'd been building a friendship, something she hadn't experienced before with anyone, especially another woman. But all along, Jo had probably wanted to get into her pants. She was glad now she hadn't confided in Jo about Jay, although the urge to do so had been strong.

Why was it too much to ask to have friends? She had tried to make friends at church, and Jay had come along and destroyed any possibility of a relationship with them. Her father had done the same thing to her when she was a teenager. Now, she'd lost Jo as a friend. Apparently, she wasn't supposed to have friends.

In the weeks following the fateful lunch at Ruby's, she strove to focus on getting the rest and rejuvenation she had

promised herself that Bryce would provide her. Her original intent in taking the low-paying job had been to give herself time to think and choose a new direction. Really, it was for what she most deeply suspected she needed: time to develop the strength to demand a divorce from Jay.

Getting involved in others' drama was hardly helpful. Developing new friendships hadn't exactly been her intention either and wasn't really on the menu anyway. Her summer at Bryce was supposed to be an idyllic retreat, a change of pace, a mental breather for her.

She started hiking Bryce's trails every day at the beginning or end of her shifts depending on how her day was scheduled. The exercise strengthened her body and gave her time to reflect on her life while away from people and her duties.

It didn't hurt that the sheer beauty of Bryce overwhelmed her senses, and she took great joy in her daily constitutional. In particular, she was entranced by the almost liquid vibrancy of the colors of the rocks: the pinks, the reds, the whites, the oranges, the purples, the salmons and vermilions, and all of it arched over by the eggshell blue of the sky.

Her experience of this fascinating natural world was heightened by breathing the blended purity of the mountain-desert air. It was hard not to get naturally high at Bryce, and Mandy's regular, solitary contact with nature began to penetrate into her soul and still the emotions that had been set into turmoil by Jay's betrayal of their church.

She finally acknowledged that at the root of her anger lay a feeling of shame and personal indictment. She, after all, had helped promote Jay's stocks to her fellow congregants. She was the one who had given Jay the names of potential investors among the church members. She was the one who had introduced him to the pastor and the board and encouraged them to believe in him and his investment recommendations.

How did she know some of the investments he was promoting were out-and-out frauds? How did she know he was going to take their money and run with it?

She couldn't have known because Jay, she had since learned, was an inveterate swindler. But she was ashamed as if she were personally responsible for the church's monetary losses. Even though she was innocent she could never show her face at Trinity Chapel again or ever speak to any of those people, whether they blamed her or not.

JO SWALLOWED THE loss of their budding friendship, but

not without tears and a great deal of self-recrimination, and forced herself to move on by keeping busy and by spending the remainder of her available time—even though their schedules didn't correspond particularly well—with Geronimo.

They sat up late in the dorm's Common Room after their housemates had gone to bed, drinking beer, and shooting the breeze about the Park administration, the endless—and sometimes foolhardy—naiveté of the visitor public, and the stupidity of the world in general.

Geronimo shook her head over Mandy's homophobia and advised Jo to move on. "They never understand, girlfriend," she comforted. "They're just wired differently. You have to let it go."

Jo knew that. But even in her disappointment, she was willing to acknowledge that, at least, Mandy had not gone to the administration, outed her, and demanded different lodgings. It would not be the first time something of that ilk had happened and not a few careers had been blighted or ended over such seemingly inconsequential matters.

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, Orville LaGrange walked over to the Women's Dorm to invite Mandy to a party that evening at the Men's Dorm.

"I've already been invited," Mandy told him when he asked.

"Of course, you've been invited," Orville said, never one to mince words. "Everyone's been invited. But are you *going* with anyone?"

"Oh, I see," Mandy said, after a short pause. "You want me to go as a sort of date."

"Right. My date. Yes or no?"

Mandy shrugged. "Sure. Okay. I'm making lasagna right now. Are you taking anything?"

"Potato chips."

"Potato chips? Don't you cook?" Mandy was aghast.

"Not if I can avoid it."

Mandy giggled. "All right. Do you want to walk over or what?"

"How about if I pick you up in my car at seven? Things won't really get swinging over there until about eight."

"If we're driving, won't we be there at about 7:05? I mean, it's just on the other side of the main drag, isn't it?"

"Yep."

Mandy shook her head, bemused.



Orville shrugged. "I don't like to stay up late. Nine o'clock is kind of the witching hour for me."

"Boy, you're one party animal. Are you going to give me a ride home?"

"If you want. The moon will be out. You could always walk yourself back."

"Orville, you are just *so* romantic."

"Yeah, I know. See you at seven." He ambled away, hands in his pockets, back to his own house, which was part of a duplex in the permanent housing section and about a three minute walk through the woods from the Women's Dorm.

Mandy closed the door and returned to layering her lasagna. Geronimo drifted in and eyed the contents of the refrigerator. Mandy watched as she snagged a cherry soda, perused Mandy's hands, which were slimy with cottage cheese and chunks of black olives, looked as though she meant to say something but then thought better of it, slammed the refrigerator door and left.

Judith and Becca came in chorusing hellos and laden down with grocery bags which they dumped on the counter and then efficiently started unloading.

Mandy was always amazed at how well-organized and dedicated their lives appeared. These two cousins got up in the morning, said their prayers and read the Book of Mormon, went to work, socialized pleasantly with others, but were very careful not to flirt with any men who came within fifty feet of them and equally careful not to become overly friendly with non-Mormon women. They cooked, cleaned, went to bed early, and did all of it with a cheerful demeanor.

Privately, Mandy thought all that cheer was a bit forced for Judith, but Becca behaved like a fish swimming in water that she had never desired to question, let alone actually questioned.

"You're making lasagna for the party?" Becca asked.

Mandy thought it obvious so she didn't respond. "What are you two bringing?"

Becca said, "I'm making a macaroni and cheese casserole and Judith is making a fruit salad."

Mandy poured tomato sauce over her most recent layer of pasta and cheese. "I'm kind of surprised you two can go to this. I mean, isn't it at the Men's Dorm?"

Becca grinned. "Oh, that's okay. Bishop King will be there. We'll have to leave when he leaves, of course."

"Bishop King?"

Judith sliced a pear into quarters. "You know him, Mandy. Isaac King. He's the head of the custodial crew in the Park. He supervises Buster and Philip."

"Then why did your cousin call him Bishop King?"

"He's the Bishop of our Ward, silly," Becca asserted.

Mandy frowned. "Oh, you mean like a minister?"

"Sort of," Judith said. "But he's really the head of the whole community in Tropic, not solely responsible for church decisions."

"Huh. Okay." Mandy wasn't quite sure she got it. "You mean he's like the mayor and the pastor rolled into one?"

"In a sense."

"Is he married?"

"Of course." Both girls laughed. "All Mormons marry."

"Why is that?"

"You can't get into Heaven if you don't marry," Becca said innocently.

"That's kind of hard on gay Mormons, isn't it?" Jo had come into the kitchen, carrying boxes of orange and lime Jell-O.

"You're making Jell-O?" Becca was incredulous.

Judith had flushed dark red. "There aren't any gay Mormons."

Jo was unfazed by Judith's assertion. "What do you mean? There's an organization for gay Mormons."

"Oh, those Affirmation people!" Becca flapped her hand indulgently. "They don't have official Church sanction, you know."

Judith's head was down and she was so vigorously slicing through a pear that Mandy worried about the safety of her fingers. "There aren't any," she repeated.

"Yes, there are, Judith." Jo said. "I've even heard a rumor that Joseph Smith sealed men to men back in the 1840s."

The kitchen fell utterly silent and Judith's hands froze in place, the hand gripping her paring knife gone white. Even Mandy was shocked and stopped layering the lasagna. The Mormon church condoning homosexuality? Only the most socially and philosophically liberal of churches were doing that, even now, and the Mormon church didn't fall into that category.

The dismay on the faces of the Mormon cousins was so great that Mandy was spurred to their defense. "Damn it, Jo! You'd better take that back! This isn't funny to them."

Jo swung to face Mandy. "What kind of mean thoughtless person do you think I am? I'm not trying to hurt them!" She flung the boxes of Jell-O on the counter. "Jeezus!" she howled at Mandy, obviously unable to think of any other epitaph, and stomped from the kitchen.

## Chapter Six

THE PARTY AT the Men's Dorm was in full swing by the time Jo arrived. She knew Geronimo would only be able to drop by during her 'lunch break' at about ten p.m. so Jo had intentionally arrived late. Not to mention, she didn't want to get into it again with Mandy or the Mormon girls. As luck would have it, they had already departed the party, but she was greeted at the door by a courteous, if serious, Isaac King.

She hardly knew him except to say hello, but she did know he was the Bishop of the Tropic Ward, and that made him a very powerful man in this neck of the Utah woods, even if as far as the U.S. Government was concerned he held a fairly low grade level in the job classification system.

"Can we talk?" he asked without preamble.

Jo felt sweat break out on the back of her neck but her mouth said, "Sure, Isaac. What's up?"

He led her down the hallway toward one of the men's bedrooms and the questioning glances she got from the half-inebriated park employees lounging in the Common Room she answered with a baffled shrug and faked grin.

King led her into one of the bedrooms and settled into a battered government-issue metal chair which had probably been new in the 1950s. He gestured to Jo to sit in the other one.

"Jo Reynolds," Isaac King's full white eyebrows drew together in his handsome, if aging, face, "I don't know you well but you seem like a fine young woman. Hard-working, intelligent..." He looked at her as if daring her to contradict him.

"Thank you," Jo replied. She kicked herself for not having grabbed a beer on the way in and hoped this wasn't going to be a long session with the Bishop, although with a lead-in like that it might well prove to be.

"While I appreciate your remarks, I doubt you've called me back here to note my qualities or lack thereof, Bishop." She thought perhaps a bit of formality and recognition of his authority might soften his intended words and also let him know that she wasn't unaware that what he wanted to discuss—from his point of view—would be a religious matter. The ploy seemed to work: respect for her grew in his eyes.

"Jo, I wanted to let you know that I'm concerned. As you can

probably guess, it's hard for young LDS women to live with non-LDS women. Our beliefs and customs are very different from yours. We strongly encourage our young women to marry."

"It's a normal expectation for most young women in most cultures, sir."

"But not all."

"No, not all." Jo couldn't stand the tension. "What exactly did Becca say, Bishop?"

"It isn't Becca I'm concerned with, young lady. If it had been, I would hardly be talking with you. Becca is going to take quite easily and naturally to her life as an LDS wife and mother. It's Judith. She's already completed her mission, and since she returned she hasn't found anyone suitable to marry."

"You're worried about Judith not fitting in and realizing she has to leave the fold."

"I wouldn't go so far as that, but it's easy for young people to become confused."

"Maybe she's not confused, Bishop." Jo was desperate for that beer now. To have one in her hand would feel so comforting, so protective. "Maybe she's just looking for her own path."

"For LDS children, Jo, the Church is the path. There isn't any other."

Jo, as easy-going as she was, felt rage growing between her shoulder blades, and she struggled to repress it.

"Bishop, I can't prevent Judith's exposure to the real world. She'll have to take it as it comes." Jo stood, the only way to manage her growing agitation. "Is that all?"

Isaac King stood as well, his face calm, and his gray eyes looked into Jo's with a sincerity and certainty that rattled her. "Please don't make her life harder than it already is. That's all I'm asking."

Bafflement flooded Jo. How could she make Judith's life more difficult? She had expected an ultimatum, a fight, a philosophical argument from the Bishop, not a simple request.

For reasons she couldn't explain, tears started in her eyes. She turned abruptly and left the room, heading for the kitchen.

SMILING, ALFONSO MARTINEZ scooped out a can of real beer from the icy depths of the cooler taking up most of the floor space in the kitchen. "There you go," he said.

Jo eagerly popped the top of the beer she craved and took a slug.

Alfonso laughed. "Shit, girlfriend, you look like you've seen a ghost. I don't know if beer helps with that."

Jo took a deep breath. "Just got a little shook up, that's all." Alfonso's broad Hispanic face turned serious. "What happened?"

"Isaac King gave me a talking to."

Alfonso frowned. "About what? He's quite a few service grades below you. Did you let *las turistas* knock over a few garbage cans or something?"

"It wasn't a park-related discussion." Jo rolled the already half-empty can between her hands.

Alfonso's frown lines deepened. "You're not a Mormon, Jo, are you?"

"Far from it. I guess I broke some kind of rule, though."

Alfonso crossed his arms and leaned back against the kitchen countertop. "Okay, out with it. I want the whole story."

Jo shuffled back and forth on the balls of her heels. "I guess I said something to Judith."

"What did you say to Judith?"

"I said there were gay Mormons and..." Jo's shoulders scrunched up self-protectively around her ears.

"And what?" Alfonso looked as stern as Isaac King had earlier.

"I said Joseph Smith sealed men to men back in the beginning."

"Ah, shit, Jo." Alfonso rolled his head back in dismay. "You're lucky he didn't pull together a tribunal to pass judgment on you. The only reason he can't is because you aren't a Mormon and he can't excommunicate you."

"Hell, Alfonso!" Jo came to her own defense. "Maybe it's true!"

"Look, kid, it doesn't matter if it happened historically or not and there's no way to prove it anyway because there's no access to those records. If they exist at all, they're buried deep in the Temple. Truth for Mormons is decided by and promulgated by the First Presidency of the Church. There isn't any other truth. Not religious truth, anyway."

"That's crazy!"

"Not any crazier than those Christians who go around saying that if the Bible says it, it must be true."

"I never said I didn't think they were crazy too."

"Jo," Alfonso put his hand on her shoulder and gently guided her out of the kitchen and into the temporarily empty Common Room, "this isn't about truth."

Jo sat down in the farthest corner of the room on an old battered couch. "What's it about then?"

Alfonso grabbed a bowl of pretzels and settled down next to

her. "Let me tell you a story."

Jo rolled her eyes. "Okay, whatever."

"Many years ago, I dated a man who was a Mormon."

"This is going to be good." Jo threw a pretzel into her mouth and crunched. She had suspected Alfonso was gay but she hadn't known for sure.

Ignoring her flippancy, he went on. "I thought I knew it all, you know. I thought if I just loved him enough, he would feel okay about himself and about being gay."

"I guess he didn't."

"He tried really hard, Jo, but he couldn't let go of the beliefs he'd been taught."

"So they told him being gay is bad. So what? Lots of people are taught that."

Alfonso frowned. "It's more than that. I've dated Catholics, and I was raised as one myself, and we have trouble making peace with our sexuality too. But it's not the same. The LDS church is all-encompassing in the way it integrates families into the life of the Church and in the way it raises children."

"What do you mean?"

"Church for Mormons isn't like it is for most Catholics and Protestants. You know, going to Mass or to services on Sunday for an hour or two. For Mormons, it's a whole way of life. Every aspect of life, including marrying and having children, is incorporated into the belief system."

Jo shrugged. "So it's really hard for them to separate themselves from their church."

Alfonso grimaced. "It's not hard. It's impossible."

"I don't believe you. Nothing's impossible."

Alfonso laughed. "That statement is as linked to the positive 'go for it' beliefs you were raised with as is a Mormon's inability to be spiritually healthy and be gay at the same time. You just don't see it."

Jo rubbed her forehead. "Okay. Okay. I'm trying to understand, I really am. What happened to your Mormon boyfriend, by the way?"

Alfonso shivered. "He was excommunicated."

"Holy cow, they do take this stuff seriously, don't they?."

"Yeah, and though he flouted the Church's decision for a while and tried to pretend it didn't matter, eventually he just couldn't stand the pressure."

"So he went back."

"No. He hanged himself."

"He committed suicide?" Jo was genuinely shocked.

"He couldn't live without the Church and he couldn't live

with his homosexuality. What choice did he have?"

"Shit. Why are they so horrible? Why can't they see the truth? How could a belief system be worth somebody's life?"

Alfonso sighed. "Humans have fought and killed over belief systems for centuries, Jo. Besides, most of the established religions are in the same boat on this topic as the Mormons. Slow headway is being made but it's going to be a long time. However, for the Mormons, it's going to take an authentic revelation from the leadership for it to be acceptable to the rank and file. Until then, take the Bishop's advice and stay out of it."

"Are you serious?"

"Totally. I don't want to see you burned at the stake as a heretic in the backwoods of Utah. Besides, whether Judith is or isn't gay, you can't help her with your well-meaning, California-girl, secularist ethics. You can only hurt her."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this." Jo sat bolt upright on the couch and stared into Alfonso's normally kind face. But he was dead serious, and his eyes held a kind of deep sadness.

"Jo, I went through this already. It's packed with pain and heartbreak. Trust me, don't get involved. Stick to what you can handle."

"That's insulting. What do you mean to what I can handle?"

He nudged her shoulder and tipped his chin. She followed the direction of his eyes. Across the room stood Carlotta, the waitress from Ruby's, who, even from this distance was clearly a-jitter with excitement, her eyes locked on Jo.

"See ya, Jo." Alfonso rose to leave.

Jo didn't know whether to laugh or to curse. Apparently, she could have any woman in the neighborhood. Just not the one she really wanted.

Jo had forgotten all about Carlotta and her eagerness to learn about dyke life. The girl bounced over and said, "Hi," a soda can gripped in one hand. "I was hoping you'd be here."

"Uh, yeah," Jo leaned forward on the sofa. "I haven't had a chance to swing back past Ruby's again. Sorry about that."

She gave Carlotta the first careful once-over she had ever given the woman. Was this young, perky, evidently bright woman really a woman on the way to a respectable dyke life or was she just one of those rural, ex-rodeo queens who wanted to try something new on the side?

"So, how have things been? It's Carlotta, right?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. Just excited, I guess." Carlotta took the seat beside Jo that Alfonso had abandoned when he saw which way the wind was blowing.

Jo shifted to face Carlotta and nodded, every sense wary.

"Why excited?"

"I...uh," Carlotta's face blanched, "I'm excited to be here."

"Speaking of which, how did you get here? I mean, no disrespect, but I thought it was a Park staff-only party."

"Martin brought me. He's a friend of Rex's."

"Is Martin your husband?"

Carlotta looked chagrined. "No! He's the short order cook at Ruby's. He's a really nice guy."

"So, you're not married." Jo felt like a bloodhound on the trail of a scent.

Carlotta took a quick deep sip of her soda, as if hiding her face from Jo's probing look. "No, I'm married."

Jo felt satisfaction in her pursuit of the trail, but she suspected she knew now where it would lead and...where it would not. "Does your husband know you're here?"

"Cody? He's probably in a bar somewhere." A frown creased Carlotta's brow and darkness shadowed her eyes.

"Ah," murmured Jo, putting two and two together and still coming up with four. "So, you've been having some problems with your husband. How long have you two been married?"

"Three years." Carlotta was squeezing the can between the palms of her hands.

"You know," Jo said gently, "three years is a real big breaking point in relationships."

"Oh, yeah?" Carlotta said, looking into Jo's eyes for the first time since she'd sat down. "How do you know?"

Jo wasn't going to be suckered in to talking about herself. "I just know. Look, you should try to patch it up with him."

Carlotta looked disgusted. "You think I'm your average straight girl and I'm feeling a little on the outs with Cody and I'll just get over it, don't you?"

Jo shrugged. "That's usually what this kind of thing comes down to."

"It's not true in my case!" Carlotta was almost shouting.

Jo raised her hands. "Look, I'm sorry. For very few women, the answer is trying women, okay? Straight girls go back to men in the end, no matter what. It's just a fact. It's nothing against you or what you're going through with Cody."

"God!" Carlotta jumped to her feet. "I expected you, of all people, to understand."

"Understand what?" Jo looked up into Carlotta's slender, alert face. Too bad she wasn't a lesbian. She was awfully cute.

"That it's more than that for me. It's something...I don't know but I can feel...never mind." She gave Jo a look of wordless frustration and stomped away.



Jo sighed, leaned back against the couch, and closed her eyes. She certainly wasn't doing anyone any good tonight. It was probably time for her to "round 'em up and move 'em out."

In actuality, she fell asleep on the couch and didn't wake up until she felt the warm wet touch of lips on her forehead.

"Hey, sleepyhead." The voice belonged to Geronimo. "Wake up."

"Ah, shit," Jo's eyes flickered open. "Where am I?"

"You're still at the party. What did you do? Hit the keg too hard?"

"Hi, sweetie," Jo reached for Geronimo's hand and gave it a quick furtive squeeze. "Did you say there was a keg? I could sure use another beer."

"Like hell, you could."

"Are you on your dinner break?"

"Yeah. I was just checking in on you all to be sure you were abiding by the law; not partying too hardy. I have to head back in a few minutes though."

"Darn," Jo murmured.

Geronimo smiled.

"Do you have to?" Jo lifted her head from the couch. "You just got here."

"I got here about twenty minutes ago. You were sleeping like a baby so I left you alone."

At that moment, Luisa, with Mandy in tow, came out of the kitchen. They both clasped sodas and made their way over to stand in front of the couch.

Jo sat up straight, wary again. "Hey, Mandy," she said carefully, "I thought you and Orville were long gone."

"Actually," Mandy explained, "this is my second shift at the party. Luisa didn't want to come over alone, so I came back with her."

"Oh, pooh," Luisa said, "you wanted to come back. That Orville is such a stick in the mud."

Geronimo arched an eyebrow. "I thought Orville was desperate to get some tonight."

Jo tensed. She knew Mandy wouldn't appreciate the remark but the other woman just shrugged. "Yeah," she said, "maybe I wasn't as desperate."

Luisa and Geronimo laughed and Jo smiled. "Poor Orville, he goes through this every summer."

"He's not really that awful." Mandy sat down.

"No, of course not," Jo said, as she tucked herself into the corner of the couch. "Deep down, he's probably a confirmed bachelor who just gets a temporary romantic urge come June."

"That about sums up your prospects when you're year-round at a park, unless you're already married or partnered," Geronimo pointed out.

"True," Jo agreed.

"So," Luisa said, as she pulled up a chair, "enough about Orville. I was just talking to Carlotta and Mandy about taking a hike up to Calf Creek Falls. Could you two come along?"

"Calf Creek?" Jo asked at the same time that Geronimo asked, "Who's Carlotta?"

"Waitress at Ruby's," Jo answered quickly and then said to Luisa, "Is she still here?"

"Oh, yeah," Luisa said, "she's out on the back porch smoking with Edmund and Janet. I think Rex and Martin are out there too. So?" Luisa prodded.

"So what?" Jo asked.

"Do you and Geronimo want to hike to the Falls with us?"

"When?" Jo had hiked to the Falls the previous summer. The skinny-dipping in the deep pool at the base of the Falls was the enticement that made the trek worthwhile.

"Next weekend?" Luisa asked.

"Nobody's schedule matches," Geronimo said and there was a buzz of voices as everyone tried to sort out who had what days off.

The group concluded that Jo and Mandy could hike in together because they did have both days off together and stay overnight and Luisa and Geronimo could come up the next day. That would give them all one day together to play at the Falls, but when Geronimo quirked an eyebrow her way, Jo realized it wouldn't give her a night alone with Geronimo. Jo shrugged back. They could probably find some sandy, secluded spot for an afternoon tryst on their day together.

"What?" Luisa asked, catching the subtle by-play.

"Nothing," Jo said. Her housemates, particularly Mandy and Luisa, could have guessed by now that she and Geronimo were carrying on an affair. Still, she didn't exactly want to make it an open topic of conversation.

"So, we're all set?" Mandy asked.

"What's going on?" Carlotta had come up behind the group and was standing there sipping a beer. Jo hoped she wasn't the one who had caused Carlotta to move from soda to the harder stuff.

"We're planning the hike to Calf Creek Falls," Luisa answered.

"Cool! When are we going?"

Shoulders tightened around the group, but no one wanted to

commit an unnecessary social *faux pas*. After further discussion, the upshot was that Carlotta would hike in to the falls with Jo and Mandy and back out again with them.

"What about Cody?" Jo interjected into the middle of all this planning.

"What about him?" Carlotta sneered. "For once, he's not going to stop me from doing something I want to do. And Martin can't object. I haven't taken two days off together in a year. He'll have to say yes."

Jo shrugged, not at all comfortable with the idea of being puppy-dogged about lesbianism for a solid twenty-four hours by this wannabe dyke, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Heavy as they were, she'd pack in a few beers and, if she had to take the edge off, she'd drink them...even if she had to drink them hot and sudsy from the rocking gait of the trail.

## Chapter Seven

THE ACTUAL HIKE in to Calf Creek Falls was not particularly strenuous for Jo, as it was mostly over flat terrain on a well-worn sandy track along the edge of the creek that flowed across the floor of a deep ravine from which she knew there was only one outlet: the way they had come in.

On one side of the trail, stands of water-loving reeds and grasses thrived in the mini-clime of the stream; on the other side, a mere few yards away, water-starved chamisa, low-growing sage, and cacti rooted tenaciously to the pink and tan sand.

At the base of the Falls, the flora would be much the same but the ravine closed in, forming a bowl, with towering slickrock walls too sheer and delicate to climb.

Mandy, who said she wanted to see the trail ahead of her, led the way in, with Carlotta following and Jo bringing up the rear. They all carried backpacks laden with food, cooking gear, and sleeping bags, and Jo was having a hard time not being mesmerized by the sway of Carlotta's pack in front of her.

It wasn't Carlotta's pack, of course, but Carlotta's hips, and Jo kept trying to force her mind elsewhere. She already had a girlfriend for the summer. Carlotta was a baby dyke—if she was a dyke at all—and married to boot. Jo was certain she didn't need that kind of trouble. She'd already been in enough trouble thus far.

At least in San Bernardino, although the dyke community was small, people didn't live on top of each other. You could cut a swath through the available women in the city and still manage to avoid them for a few weeks afterward until their emotions settled back down. At Bryce, you saw nearly everyone nearly every day. She saw her beautiful and angry roommate day and night, day after day. The daily contact was like wearing the emotional equivalent of a hair shirt.

She distracted herself with the extravagant display of nature around her. The late morning air was fresh and the sky clear and beautiful, making it impossible for Jo not to feel the pure surge of pleasure that hiking in the living beauty of nature always brought her. What surrounded her—and her desire to protect it—was her pre-eminent reason for being a ranger.

Then her eyes went back, however unwillingly, to Carlotta's hips. They were the only fly in the ointment of the moment. Those hips enticed, solicited, and seemed to be promising an entirely different pleasure. To avoid falling for their seduction, Jo was going to have to keep on her toes the entire trip. Too bad Geronimo wasn't arriving until tomorrow at noon. With Geronimo to keep her busy, she would be safe from the temptations offered by Carlotta.

On the other hand, she and Geronimo hadn't made a commitment to each other. Not to mention, Geronimo wasn't going to take it amiss if Jo helped a dyke newbie find her bearings on the Great Lesbian Way.

Jo couldn't believe what she was thinking. Her thoughts were like dirty little flies, landing everywhere and polluting what should have been the pure surface of her mind. She quashed not only the thought but the throbbing it had brought to her nether parts. Keep your mind on the trail, she ordered.

Ahead, her hiking companions rounded a bend that gave them their first view of the Falls. Jo heard Mandy squeal in amazed delight and Carlotta laugh. She followed around the bend, came to a stop, and looked up. The Falls had a picture-perfect quality to them, more like something a Hollywood set designer might produce rather than something nature herself had sculpted over time with water and ice and frost, just like the spires at Bryce.

The 125-foot Falls, a three-tiered, nearly sheer sculpture of tan sandstone, splashed with crystalline water. The rock was striped with long lacy filigrees of darker mahogany-toned desert varnish. Despite the steady arrival and departure of visitors—Calf Creek was a popular spot—the green-tinted pool at the base of the Falls provided the illusion of a secret grotto or private hideaway.

But the area wasn't so private at the moment. Other hikers ranged around the area, some standing on giant rocks near the base of the waterfall, others skinny-dipping in the pool. Jo stepped off the trail to a favorite boulder, shrugged off her pack, and reminded herself that most of the people hanging about were day hikers.

She and the other women would have the spot to themselves as the afternoon wore on and twilight fell. For the moment, she was going to snack on her lunch and enjoy her ringside view of the men, women and children frolicking in the water.

Mandy dropped her pack next to Jo on the sand of the beach, her eyes wide with surprise. "It's stunning! What's really weird is it looks kind of familiar to me but I know I've never been here before. Is skinny-dipping a standard practice?"

Jo was already digging into her pack for a can of deviled ham, crackers, and a Saran-wrapped packet of cheese. "Yep."

"I had no idea." Mandy leaned over and pulled an opaque bottle of root beer out of her stores and lowered herself to settle against her pack. Jo, her lunch fixings out, sat on the ground as well.

As if in sync, but not intending it, they turned their heads at the same moment to see Carlotta kick off her boots, strip off her shirt and bra and shimmy out of her shorts and underwear. Jo's breath stopped in her throat and her heart pounded. She watched helplessly as a naked Carlotta made for the pool, running with the carefree gait of a child.

"Yippee!" She splashed into the water and threw spray in all directions. Jo gulped and Mandy handed Jo her just-opened root beer. "I think you should take a swallow. Breathing's a good idea, too."

Jo obeyed and downed a slug of the foamy refreshing liquid. Then she stared in bemusement at the bottle. "You brought bottled root beer? Are you out of your mind?"

"Just one. I'm addicted."

"They're heavy!"

Mandy shrugged. "It's only two nights and six miles. It's not like we were planning on backpacking for a month."

"You have to pack it out, you know," Jo said, handing it back.

"Of course. I think you're trying to change the subject."

Jo's eyes had strayed back to where Carlotta was swimming, the water reflecting the whiteness of her naked back. "What subject?"

Mandy swallowed a gulp of the root beer. "The subject of your libido."

"Excuse me?" Jo turned her full attention to Mandy.

"Aren't you already getting some?" Mandy gestured with her bottle in the direction of the now-submerged Carlotta. "Surely you don't need more?"

"Fuck!" Jo leapt to her feet and stared down in dismay at Mandy. "That was just plain fucking insulting! What do you think I am? Some kind of sick predator?"

Mandy shrugged. "You're the one who can't keep your eyes off of her."

"My eyes? What the hell? My eyes?" she repeated dumbly. Then her powers of speech returned, even though she sputtered with anger. "Who are you to judge, anyway? What in the hell do you know about my life?" She kicked her pack with a savage thrust of her foot. She grabbed it and scooped up her lunch things, then moved down the beach a good ten yards where, with a final glare at Mandy, she plopped down to eat.

Stunned, Mandy watched Jo's furious departure as root beer fizz threatened to force its way back up into her throat. "Shit," Mandy muttered through clenched teeth, "shit, shit, shit."

What had come over her? Jo was absolutely right: who was she to judge? She wasn't Carlotta's protector, or Luisa's either for that matter. Carlotta and Luisa were adults. Why this sudden mothering urge? Neither of the young women had asked for protection. Why had she let that righteous garbage come out of her mouth and spew at Jo anyway?

If she could have safely banged herself in the head with the root beer bottle as punishment for her stupidity, she would have done so, but she couldn't without possibly requiring medical care which would only derail their jaunt into the backwoods. So she just lay against her pack, pulled her hat down over her eyes and hoped the summer would be over soon.

ONCE MANDY AWAKENED, it was obvious to her that Jo and Carlotta had passed an exceedingly pleasant afternoon together because they were in such high spirits. Jo had built a fire in one of the deep, rock-ringed depressions and they were now, as they grilled their food, enjoying a long—and to Mandy—tedious session of flirtatious looks and remarks.

Mandy, with her limited people experience, had rarely been in the position of being a third wheel, but she was now acutely aware of both the meaning and the feelings associated with the term. Neither of the other two attempted to include her in their rather intimate, if shallow, conversation, although Jo occasionally shot Mandy a glance that she could only interpret

as pure hateful spite. Not that she blamed Jo for being enraged at her.

But she did wonder if Jo's vivacious energy and exclusive focus on Carlotta—who was soaking it up like a desiccated plant—wasn't in response to Mandy's earlier criticism. Probably Jo was playing up her seduction of Carlotta in front of Mandy as a way of flouting Mandy's old-maid-like behavior and puritanical remarks. As though Jo was getting back at her and saying, "You rejected me but you're wrong. Just watch me do my thing!"

Finally, there was only so much of it Mandy could take, and she was about to politely take her leave and head to bed when Carlotta suggested they all hit the pool for one last dip.

Mandy had not tried the waters at all. "Not me, thanks," she muttered, though she doubted they cared.

"Okay then, Mandy," Carlotta said, "why don't you stoke up the fire again because we'll need it good and hot to warm up when we get back. That water's going to be real cold now!"

She bounced away, following Jo, and Mandy jabbed viciously at the fire with a stick, now charred down into a sharp point. Who did they think she was, Cinderella?

She sure as hell felt like Cinderella. Even if Jo was milking it for all it was worth, she believed she'd brought this horrible evening on herself. Half-afraid of disobeying Carlotta and half-believing she deserved to be treated like this, she gathered more wood and stoked the fire into as high a roar as she figured was safe and legal on public lands. There might not be much timber to burn at Calf Creek Falls, but she didn't want to be responsible for destroying what little there was.

The other two women were back much more quickly than Mandy expected. Supported by a wet and naked Jo, the equally unclothed Carlotta was crying and limping as she came up out of the blackness of the night toward the fire.

"What happened?" Mandy unstopped her back from reaching for another piece of tinder.

"I hit my foot on something sharp," Carlotta sobbed, "and it cut my foot really bad."

Jo separated from Carlotta's side, grabbed a shirt to lay out on one of the logs surrounding the fire ring, and helped her to sit. Carlotta instantly reached to hold her bleeding foot, at the same time, dropping to the sand what looked like an old tin can.

"It's going to be okay, Carlotta. It's not that bad. Look, it's not even bleeding very hard now," Jo said. "I have some bandages in my pack but I don't know if I brought antiseptic."

"I have some," Mandy said, already moving to Carlotta's

side with a big towel she'd dug out of her pack. When Carlotta was dry, Mandy dressed her in a sweatshirt and shorts, then laid the damp towel over her legs. "You need to keep warm. We don't want there to be any risk of shock."

She grabbed a canteen of drinking water. "We'd better start by rinsing it out thoroughly. We don't know what kind of bacteria is in that pond water. Here, let me have a look."

Carlotta, still whimpering, held out her bare foot for Mandy's inspection. A gash ran across the sole of Carlotta's foot from just below the ball of her big toe to the midline of her foot. Mandy took her foot in both hands and squeezed.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Carlotta screeched.

"Since you didn't hit an artery and it's not life-threatening, being sure it bleeds all along the cut is good. We'll make sure all the sand is cleared out."

"She's right," Jo said. Now dressed, she appeared at Mandy's side in the flickering firelight, hands full of medical gear. "We're more likely to get any bacteria out and prevent infection. God knows what you ran into."

"That thing," Carlotta pointed to the crumpled object on the sand, her face full of distaste. Mandy rinsed the cut, causing more blood to flow. Jo wrapped Carlotta's foot in a clean t-shirt and elevated her leg on another log.

"It hurts," Carlotta said, her adrenaline obviously wearing off as the pain and trauma set in.

Carlotta cried quietly while Mandy sat on one side of her and Jo on the other. When the gash finally clotted, Jo removed the bloodied t-shirt, and Mandy coated the wound with anti-bacterial ointment. Jo wrapped a bandage round and round Carlotta's foot and gently lowered the foot to rest on one of the logs.

"You'll be right as rain in the morning," Mandy said, popping two acetaminophen tablets into Carlotta's mouth.

"I'm tired," Carlotta whined.

"It's time for bed anyway," Mandy said. "Where's your sleeping bag?"

"Over there with my pack."

Mandy looked at Jo, who dutifully went to set up Carlotta's bag in a warm, dry place on the sand. She came back to help Carlotta slip into a pair of sweats, then half-carried her to the bag. From the distance, Mandy heard Carlotta's whimpering and Jo's attempts at soothing her. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted that Jo had unrolled her own sleeping bag and was now moving it close to Carlotta's.

The fire was burning down, but before it did, Mandy picked



up the mostly flattened, mud encrusted object that had cut Carlotta. An old tin can with most of the bottom rusted out, it sported a staved in lid, but on one side she could make out the old-fashioned, fancily-scrolled letters of 'B' and 'A' and below them 'P' and 'O'. Though the paint around the letters was mostly gone and completely indistinguishable in the firelight, she assumed the letters had once formed the words 'baking' and 'powder.'

No matter how old the can was, it was garbage now. She moved to toss it away from the campsite, but heard solid clinks of metal sliding around inside the flattened section. She tried to shake out the contents, but to no avail.

Overwhelmed with curiosity, she grabbed the charred fire stick and slammed it against the twisted lid until it gave way. She turned the can upside down, and three round blackened objects fell to the sand at her feet.

Jo was at her elbow. "Uh, hey, thanks,"

"For what?"

"For being so good to Carlotta. She's going to be okay, I think."

Mandy shrugged. "Whatever. She was hurt. I was hardly going to ignore her."

"I treated you shitty all day. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Mandy's head hung low, and she didn't want to look into Jo's eyes.

"I was angry."

"I know. I'm sorry I made you angry." Mandy still didn't lift her eyes.

"Look," Jo said, her hands nestled self-consciously in the pockets of her jeans, "maybe we can talk sometime...about all this."

"All right," Mandy agreed, her breath suddenly coming shallow into her lungs. What, she wondered, was all this, exactly?

Jo pointed at the mangled tin can lying near the fire. "Is that what cut her?"

"Uh-huh."

"Shit." Jo crouched down and picked up the can. "We'll have to cut our trip short, Mandy."

"Why?"

"To get her down to the clinic at Panguitch. She needs a tetanus shot. Not to mention, we don't know how long it's going to take her to hike out of here tomorrow. She's going to be limping pretty badly, that is, if she can even manage to put any weight on her foot. We shouldn't risk staying another night."

Mandy nodded, understanding. She took the can from Jo's hand and tossed it into the fire. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Unless she needs help being carried out. In that case, we might need to wait for Geronimo."

Jo shrugged. "Maybe. Let's see how she is in the morning. But she's still going to need a shot. That can was rusted all to hell. Must be pretty old. What else did you find?" Jo asked, looking down at the sand.

"I don't know. I knocked these out of the can." Mandy crouched down.

Jo leaned over and picked up the largest of the circular objects and rubbed it. "Looks like an old coin," Jo said, and then whistled appreciatively as some of the accumulated algae and grit fell away.

Mandy picked up the two smaller, still-black coins and held them in her hand, but was even more enthralled by the expression on Jo's face. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's gold."

"Holy cow! Do you think it's worth something?"

"Probably." Jo smiled and dropped the larger coin into Mandy's palm. "Finders keepers, Mandy. I guess it's yours." She stretched. "I'm going to bed."

"Me too."

"But only after I bucket the fire out."

"Okay."

A moment later there was an exaggerated sizzle and a few pops from the doused fire and the drifting smell of cold smoke. Once Jo was satisfied the fire was out, Mandy watched her tramp across the sand to her sleeping bag.

Then she used a clean corner of the discarded bloody t-shirt to rub her three coins as clean as she could get them. She sealed them into the plastic bag that had carried her sandwich earlier in the day. Then she made her way over to the pool, washed her hands and face, and brushed her teeth. She laid out her sleeping bag a stone's throw from the other two women and slipped out of her clothes.

Driven by an urge she didn't understand but to which she succumbed anyway, she slid the plastic bag holding the coins into the breast pocket of her sleeping shirt so that they would spend the night with her. She wasn't superstitious but, after all, if they were worth something, maybe they would bring her wealth, or at the very least, luck. One never knew.

The last thing she saw before drifting into sleep was the half-moon breasting the rim of the canyon and bathing everything around her in a ghostly light.

## Chapter Eight

THE WATER OF the pool felt cool so early in the morning, but not unbearably cold. As Mandy paddled around, she looked back toward shore and could see the rock campfire ring and, curiously, two wagons. Her hobbled horses were visible too, yanking with their teeth at the low grasses growing along the edges of the canyon.

She found it refreshing to rinse off after so many days of trail dust and sweat and so sensual to be naked and completely alone in the still quiet of the morning.

She had never felt quite so free. Joy bubbled up in her body, and she let herself laugh, but she kept the sound low and quiet, below the sweet splashing sound of the waterfall, so there was no risk of waking her parents, still asleep in their wagon, the wagon that had driven ahead of her into the canyon.

She glided through the calm waters, alive to herself and the world, listening to the tweet of wrens and the rustle of small mammals awakening to the day. She heard the soft whoosh of feathers riding the air and looked up to see a red-tailed hawk sliding past.

Finally, she grew cold and turned again to the beach to retrieve her clothes. Light was filling the canyon now, but even so, she could see a bulky shadow of something hunkering on the beach. Was it a rock she had forgotten was there?

The rock shifted and she drew back, frightened.

"Polly," a male voice called out, quiet and soothing, "don't worry. It's just me, Bill."

Mandy was stunned. Who was Polly? The man was walking toward her.

"Bill?" She swam up to the beach and, to her surprise, Bill pulled her into his arms. She was shivering with cold and he pulled her close to his kneeling body, against the rough denim of his jeans and shirt. She felt his hands trailing over her naked back, stopping when he discovered a crisscross of swollen welts.

"What happened to your back?"

She had no idea. But she suddenly remembered when she had been driving her team of horses how her back had twinged with sharp pains.

"He beat you, didn't he?"

"Who?"

"Henry."

She frowned. Who was Henry? Was Henry her father sleeping in the wagon? Was that why she hated him, because he had beaten her?

"That bastard!" Bill said.

She heard a heavy creaking sound coming from the wagon and turned to look. Bill let go of her and jumped up. Henry was emerging from the rear of the wagon.

"What's going on here?" Henry stepped down to the ground and started toward them. "Who goes there?"

"Retribution," Bill answered, a light of mad intensity in his eyes. Before Mandy could grasp what was happening, Bill lifted the ax that had been propped against the rocks of the campfire ring. He raced toward Henry and with a mighty swing knocked him to the ground. Mandy didn't hear any noises from Henry, not even moaning. Maybe Bill had killed him with one stroke. Yet, Bill struck the fallen body again and again with the ax.

Her teeth chattering uncontrollably and her muscles in spasm, she scrambled for her discarded dress and pulled it over her head. Hysterical screams were coming from inside her parents' wagon. She heard the blast of a rifle, and the screaming ceased.

Mandy ran for the wagon. Inside, on the sleeping pallet, her mother was dead, blood staining the front of her woolen nightclothes. Yet, at the same time, it wasn't her mother.

Her heart was thumping in terror and the woman's open staring eyes threatened to unnerve the little rationality she possessed. With trembling fingers, Mandy pressed down on the woman's eyelids until they closed.

Was she next? Was Bill coming for her?

MANDY JERKED AWAKE from her dream in a tremble of fear. Her body felt cold. She snuggled deeper into her sleeping bag and forced herself to remember she was sleeping on the sand at Calf Creek Falls. No matter how bizarre the dream, nothing horrible was happening to her.

She looked across the tiny rippled beach at the gently lapping waters of the pool and the steady, reassuring splattering of the falls. There was no ax, no horses, no wagons, no blood. It had just been a crazy dream, probably stimulated by Carlotta cutting her foot. Mandy felt her heart rate slowing. There was no danger here, nothing to be feared.

Around her, nature was quiet. The night's half-moon was

sinking below the canyon's western rim, giving the water a final few moments of pale illumination. Mandy closed her eyes and let herself drift off to sleep again.

## Chapter Nine

THE HIKE OUT was indeed slow, with Carlotta limping heavily and Jo needing frequent breaks because she was carrying two packs. When they were halfway to the parking lot where they had left Jo's Jeep, Geronimo and Luisa came swinging down the trail toward them. Seeing them, Geronimo pulled to a startled halt, and Luisa plowed into her.

Geronimo ignored the bump. "What are you all doing out here? You're supposed to be at the Falls!"

Jo gratefully dropped the two packs to the ground for the fifth time since they'd started out.

"I cut my foot," Carlotta said. "Jo thinks I'd better get a tetanus shot."

"So we cut things short," Jo added, looking plaintively at her girlfriend. Geronimo swung her pack off her shoulders to the ground and pulled her water bottle from her belt.

Luisa had already plunked down on her pack and was looking sourly at her booted and dusty feet. "I really wanted to hike to the Falls!" She sounded exasperated. "This is my only chance."

"There's no need for everyone to go home," Geronimo pointed out after taking a swig of water. This remark raised a chorus of objections and agreements. Mandy stood by, her pack still on her back and legs spread for physical support. She silently named the conference the "Mid-Trail Summit."

Jo pointed out that Mandy hadn't even had a chance to skinny-dip yet and as Luisa was spoiling to see the Falls, why didn't Mandy just hike back in with her, and the two of them could stay another night? In the meantime, Geronimo could carry out Carlotta's pack, and Jo could support her along the trail. Once they got on the road, they could drive her to the clinic in Panguitch.

Mandy realized she didn't really want to stay another night, but Luisa's childlike pleading was too much for her so she reluctantly agreed. The Falls were beautiful, and she had found yesterday's afternoon nap quite restful. Without Jo and Carlotta

full-bore flirting right under her nose, maybe she would actually get in the water and have some fun. Of course, with Geronimo back in the picture, she figured Jo's little dalliance would die a quick death on the home front.

With the decisions made, Geronimo handed Mandy the keys to her truck so that she and Luisa would have a vehicle waiting when they hiked out the following day, and they parted company.

MANDY LAY NAKED on the beach and contemplated the beauty and serenity of Calf Creek's canyon. The sandstone walls, pinks and reds and whites, rose all around her shrouded by growths of cottonwood and chamisa, certainly a far cry from the hustle and bustle of Albuquerque or even the flurry of tourist-heavy days at the Park.

She had bravely skinny-dipped with Luisa, who was also lying on the beach, soaking up the warming rays of the sun after the cool of the water. She didn't feel any pressure around Luisa, not like she did around Jo and certainly not like she had the day before with Jo and Carlotta trying to out-do each other at being wild and free.

Luisa was just restful, not pushy or showy, not making Mandy anguish over feelings that made her uncomfortable. Luisa turned languidly on her side and interrupted her thoughts. "This is heaven, Mandy."

"I agree."

"It was really sweet of you to agree to hike back in and stay another night."

Mandy shrugged. "Worked for me. I needed another day of rest."

"Did you and Jo and Carlotta have fun yesterday?"

Mandy shrugged again, this time feeling a bit more guarded. "It was okay."

Luisa laughed. "Just okay? What did they do to annoy you? Get stoned or something?"

Mandy lay over on her side and looked into Luisa's lively dark eyes, avoiding staring at the dusky nakedness of the other woman's small, lithe body which was almost masculine in its slimness. "What makes you think they annoyed me?"

"Your tone of voice and general avoidance of the subject."

"Okay, they annoyed me."

"What did they do? Give me the dirt."

"Do you promise not to tell Geronimo? I don't want to get Jo into trouble with her."

"Oooh, this is sounding interesting already. Come on, give."

"They spent the whole day flirting. Pretty disgusting, really, and when I called Jo on it she got into a huff and said I didn't understand which only made it worse because then they really went for it. I think, just to spite me."

"You mean they made out?" Luisa's eyes were alight with prurient interest.

"No, they didn't make out. At least not as far as I know. And with Carlotta's cut foot, I don't think there was any nighttime action."

Luisa rolled over on her back and Mandy followed her body with her eyes, enjoying the new angles the change of view afforded.

"Lesbians are just different," Luisa said.

"Yeah, I guess so. Do you think Carlotta's a lesbian?"

"I don't know. Seems like she's a wannabe."

"I don't know why anyone would want to be a lesbian. It seems so—I don't know—limited or simple-minded or something. What do you think makes a person that way, anyhow?"

Luisa closed her eyes and yawned. "I don't know. Maybe it's nature, maybe it's nurture, maybe anyone's capable of it and the whole distinction's actually silly."

"I doubt that. Don't you think it's a little creepy?"

"Me?" Luisa crossed her hands over her tiny breasts and looked like she was on the verge of falling asleep. "No. I think it's fine. I've always wondered how you figure it out though 'cause there's all that pressure to *not* figure it out. And it must be even harder to find dates. It's got to be a lot more complicated than being straight."

"Really? Why do you think that?"

"It's not as automatic or expected. I mean, it's normal to walk up to a guy and give him a signal that you're interested. If you walk up to a girl and do it, she's probably going to slap your face 'cause she's insulted that you thought she was gay. I don't know how they decide."

"Decide what?"

"You know, decide who is or isn't gay, so they're not always getting rejected." Luisa was yawning in earnest now, and Mandy didn't ask any more questions but let the other woman drift into unconsciousness.

"Hmph," Mandy murmured thoughtfully, her eyes slowly traversing Luisa's body which she could do unselfconsciously now that Luisa was asleep. How *did* one figure it out? How had Jo figured it out?

Was having a visual appreciation of the female form an indication of gayness? She doubted it. What about just feeling less on guard around women than around men? Not that she'd felt very comfortable around Jo and Carlotta the day before.

And why had she picked on Jo? If it had been a man and a woman flirting would she have cared so much about their behavior? She didn't like to remember that her father had accused her of being a lesbian just because she had become friends with Trina. It wasn't true and it wasn't fair.

Besides, she hadn't rejected Jo because she was gay, she reminded herself. She had rejected her because, on learning she was gay, she realized that what Jo had wanted was more than a friendship.

This last thought bothered her for some reason, and she turned on her back and closed her eyes. But behind her eyelids pulsed an image of Luisa's naked, dark-skinned body. The seductive lure of the image and its tenacity frightened her. She wasn't gay. She knew that. But just to feel better, she sought to replace the picture with Jay's body and was startled to discover she couldn't remember what his body looked like.

She sat up and opened her eyes, her brain scrambling. How could she not remember him? Mandy felt nauseous. She got to her feet and struggled into her clothes, having the sudden need to move, to walk around and clear her mind with the hope of alleviating her weird sense of disorientation. Swinging her arms and walking along the trail helped because it brought oxygen into her blood. In a few minutes she felt calmer.

She chided herself for being silly. "Just because you can't remember Jay," she told herself aloud as she hiked along the sandy pathway, "doesn't mean you like girls! It means you hate Jay enough to wipe him out of your mind."

Unfortunately, she didn't have any sexual experience with anyone except Jay, and even that was limited, so she couldn't call up the memory of other boyfriends in order to reassure herself that all was well. This realization gnawed at her until she thrust it heartily into the back of her mind by telling herself she could easily solve that problem by making more of an effort to date this summer, to try to get back into the swing of things. She had probably been hanging out with women too much, and the environment was a little too rich in estrogens. She needed some balance.

Just because she'd fallen off one horse didn't mean she couldn't get back up on another. For instance, there was Orville, who was ripe to date her. She couldn't imagine why she'd turned him down the night of the party. Admittedly, he wasn't Prince



Charming but he was available and he was a man, and right now, clearly she needed one.

The first thing she would do when she got back to the Park was ask Orville out. Some male companionship would get her out of her funk.

That night, she fully expected to dream of sex since it was plainly on her mind but all she remembered were vague snippets that reiterated the themes of the night before: blood and a flailing ax; but this time the face on the dead man's body was Jay's; and somewhere behind her, a woman screamed and screamed.

## Chapter Ten

"WHAT ARE WE going to do with her now?" Geronimo asked.

"What do you mean?"

The two women were lounging in Jo's open-air Jeep, parked on a side street in Panguitch, sipping sodas to ease the heat of the summer afternoon and waiting for Carlotta to come out of the clinic.

"I mean she's already begged us not to tell Cody she's back in town. She clearly wants another night away from the bastard."

"Not that we know who he is anyway so we could hardly tell him anything."

"True. He could also be the sweetest piece of meat in southern Utah, for all we know."

"Sure. And real mild-mannered and wears glasses. Gives to charities. A veritable Mormon saint."

They both laughed and then Jo sobered. "Thank God Carlotta's not a Mormon. These Mormons sure do take this sexuality shit real seriously."

Geronimo snickered. "Yeah, I already heard about your little *faux pas*, Ms. Queer Recruiter. Getting dressed down by the venerable old Bishop of Tropic at a Park party! I swear, Jo, you're going to have to put that one in your scrapbook."

"Hey, how was I to know I was stepping on religious toes? Where I come from there's something known as the separation of Church and State. I didn't know that just talking to a girl in Utah could get me into so much trouble."

"Just talking to this girl," Geronimo nodded her head toward Carlotta, whom they could see had exited the clinic and was limping slowly across the wide parking lot, "is getting you into a lot of trouble, too."

"With you?" Jo felt a moment of panic.

"Hell, no. I'm happy to be along for the ride. You know my ethical standards are only so high, Jo. How else do you think I got my reputation?"

Jo laughed. "So what do you think we should do with her? Take her to the dyke bar in Panguitch?"

Geronimo giggled. "Sure, if there was one. Hell, there ain't even one in Cedar City or Kanab. I think the big problem is that she's got the hots for you."

"Nah," Jo countered, "it's really just the 'oh my god, am I a dyke? hots'. Any red-blooded lesbian is going to do."

"Maybe we should do it together then."

Jo spewed soda from her mouth, fortunately not all of it onto the steering wheel. "Are you shitting me?"

"Why not? Didn't you have plans to bed her last night anyway?"

"She cut her foot."

"Right, but you still had plans."

Jo couldn't argue with Geronimo's logic. "All right," she admitted, "I had plans."

"And you've already bedded me, so what difference does it make if we do it together?"

Jo felt uncertainty grinding in her gut. "Isn't it immoral?"

"By whose standards? Heterosexual monogamous ones? We're already violating those, Jo. Now, if she doesn't consent, then that's another matter. I wouldn't do anything against her will."

Jo sucked down some soda. "I've never done a threesome." So much for thinking Bryce would be boring this summer. She realized it was turning out to be new and exotic in quite a few ways. She had bedded a butch, fallen for a straight girl, and was considering a *ménage à trois*.

Geronimo shrugged, her eye on Carlotta, who had nearly reached the Jeep. "Me neither. Might be fun."

"Hi, guys!" Carlotta came around to the passenger side of the Jeep and Geronimo shifted closer to Jo to make room for her.

"They say I'm going to be okay," she announced, trying not to grimace as she clambered in. "Got my shot and everything."

"Anything you can't do?" Geronimo asked sweetly.

"Nope. Well, hike back to the Falls, maybe."

Geronimo raised her eyebrows suggestively at Jo and Jo

glared back at her. "Damn you," she muttered and turned the key in the ignition.

"So," Jo addressed Carlotta, "where to?"

Carlotta shrugged. "Where do you two want to go? I mean I don't want to impose on you but I really, really don't want to go home yet."

"Yeah," Geronimo agreed, "we got that impression already."

"How about we buy some beer and pick up some more grub," Jo suggested, "and drive over to Rainbow Point. I know of some scenic locations along there where we could just sit and picnic and have fun. No walking required."

"That sounds great to me," Carlotta agreed. "You guys are so good to me!"

"Honey," Geronimo breathed under the roar of the Jeep's engine for Jo's ears only, "we haven't even gotten started being good to you."

The beer was warm by the time they parked in the scenic overlook parking lot a few miles from Rainbow Point and made their way down the sandy cliffside to settle down in a shady stand of pines. They were well below the roadway but had a clear view off the cliff to the south and east. The vista was spectacular, easily a visual hundred miles to the soft blue hump of Navajo Mountain down at Four Corners.

Jo concluded it was her destiny to always drink warm beer at Bryce but she decided not to bitch about it. They had also bought crackers and cheese and peanut butter and three apples. She and Geronimo sat in the fine white sand with Carlotta between them. The three of them munched in companionable silence, shaded from the bright light and heat by the trees, transfixed by the vastness spread wide below them.

After they'd chewed for awhile, Geronimo pointed out a smudge of white smoke laying low on the distant horizon. "Four Corners Power Plant," she mouthed, biting into her apple.

"Long way away," Jo agreed, knowing she would always want to be able to see this far into the distance wherever she ended up in life. Open space, open vistas. Too much of it was going away. Could she see this far in California? Looking out to sea, she supposed.

"Look at that hawk," Carlotta raised a finger skyward, her apple gripped in her palm, pointing at a elongated speck in the sky. They all stared upward.

"Redtail," Geronimo said eventually, as the animal came closer and its shape became more distinct.

"What a way to live," Jo murmured, watching the hawk

glide along on the drafts of air.

"It's beautiful," Carlotta whispered.

"So are you," Geronimo whispered back, letting her hand slide along Carlotta's leg, her fingers brushing the skin.

Carlotta's head snapped to the right to look up into Geronimo's face. "What?"

"You're beautiful." Geronimo tossed the core of her eaten apple from her hand and Jo watched it arch through the air and slide down the tilted slope of white sandstone. Then she saw Geronimo ease the remains of Carlotta's apple from her fingers and toss it away as well. They were going to do it, she realized.

Carlotta swallowed hard. "Are you...coming on to me?"

Jo laid a hand on Carlotta's other leg, not sure if she would regret her very next words and actions or not. She had never engaged in a threesome and certainly not with a married lesbian virgin. But if she wasn't willing to take a calculated risk, what was the point of living? Her body said yes, her good sense said maybe, and her heart was curiously silent. Her mouth said, "Only if you want us to, Carlotta."

"Us?" Carlotta's face blanched. "Are you talking about both of you..."

"It's up to you," Geronimo agreed with Jo's assertion. "'No' is fine, 'yes' is fine. We just had the impression you were interested in finding out what it's all about."

"Being with a woman, she means," Jo explained.

"Goodness, gracious," Carlotta swooned backward until she was lying back on the sand, her eyes wide. "Goodness, gracious."

Jo laughed and swigged down the last of her beer. She placed the bottle carefully back in her pack. "Is 'goodness gracious' a local expression meaning 'yes' or meaning 'no'? If so, we don't know which one it means."

Geronimo laughed too and laid back on the sand like Carlotta, her arms cradled behind her head. "I could stare up at this sky forever."

Jo followed suit and was soon lost in the eggshell blue of the high dome of heaven. There was no cloud watching to speak of because the few clouds were insubstantial wisps of white feather. It was the perfect summer afternoon.

"Guys," Carlotta squeaked between them after a few minutes. "If, um, someone would just get started, I wouldn't feel so awkward..."

Geronimo grunted and lay on her side facing Carlotta. She reached for a tendril of the younger woman's hair. "Close your eyes and relax," she murmured, observing the wide-eyed stare.

"Whatever happens, we won't hurt you. Understood?"

Carlotta nodded and then shut her eyes as instructed. "And," Jo rolled onto her side as well, "we won't do anything you don't want us to do. By which we mean, we'll stop if you tell us to. Okay?"

"Okay." Carlotta's voice was tiny, but excited. Jo smiled at Geronimo over the younger woman's chest then lowered her head to Carlotta's face and nuzzled her on the cheek. Carlotta giggled, her eyes still shut. Geronimo did the same to the other cheek and Carlotta giggled again, visibly relaxing.

Geronimo sat up and taking Carlotta's arm, started stroking her skin. Carlotta murmured and Jo caught the murmur by tenderly brushing her lips over Carlotta's. Then her lips were nudging Carlotta's and Carlotta was kissing her back, her lips parting until she admitted Jo's tongue. Jo was lost in the sensation of being in the other woman's mouth. She turned off her brain and let her body follow its own natural desires.

Geronimo advanced her stroking to running her hand down Carlotta's side and then she slowly began circling the other woman's clothed breast. Delicately, she began unbuttoning Carlotta's shirt, spreading the fabric aside. Carlotta, her eyes still sealed shut, moaned. Geronimo unhooked Carlotta's bra and freed her breasts. In that moment, Jo's hand swept up Carlotta's side and grasped her nipple. Carlotta's eyes shot open. "Oh!"

Jo hesitated, her fingers still grasping Carlotta's nipple. "No," Carlotta whispered, "don't stop. I was just startled." The two women smiled and went back to work.

By the time Carlotta's shorts came off, Jo and Geronimo had stripped as well and gleefully rubbed their bodies against Carlotta's, their mouths and hands busy with sucking and licking and rubbing.

Finally, Jo's hand slid between Carlotta's naked thighs and Carlotta gasped with pleasure. Heat rose up from her and Jo gently spread the woman's legs. Geronimo's hand joined in and they alternately stroked the soft slick heat of her labia. Carlotta's breath came heavier and faster and when she climaxed, she came with an exultant cry of ecstasy, her body rising off the sand and bucking beneath their joined fingers.

When she was done moaning and crying and laughing, they laid her back down tenderly on the sand and cuddled her body against theirs, soaking up the warm wet effusion of her afterglow.

"Wow," she murmured after her head had cleared a little, "wow."

Geronimo was already reaching for Jo, pulling her over

Carlotta's body. "C'mere, baby."

Jo slid over Carlotta's body and nipped Geronimo's shoulder with a love bite and in an instant they were rolling in the sand, tussling and laughing and growling. Jo was aware of Carlotta watching them and she wasn't that much of an exhibitionist but as they'd already crossed the line by making love to Carlotta, it hardly mattered. She surrendered to Geronimo's touch and let her body and all the sensations she was experiencing meld with the wild unfettered blue of the sky arching over her head.

ON HER NEXT day off, Mandy drove down to Panguitch and searched for the public library. It didn't take long to find it amid the short, straight streets of the squarely-laid town whose homes and businesses had largely been built out of sturdy red brick in the never-going-out-of fashion Victorian style. The librarian was plump and friendly and very eager to direct Mandy's attention to books on LDS settlement history, especially in Southern Utah, but she drew a blank regarding the question of coins.

"Oh, Miss," she said in a fluster, "you'd have to be a-goin' to a bigger library than ours. We don't have any books on coins."

Mandy was frustrated because she didn't have time to "be a-goin' to a bigger library," which meant Cedar City. In the end she succumbed to pressure from the librarian and borrowed the several books on Mormon settlement.

She figured it couldn't hurt to read them. The books would, after all, give her another excuse to avoid conversation with her housemates. Since returning from the Falls, she had been careful to hike the Park's trails by herself in the evening so that she didn't have to spend time in the Women's Dorm or around Jo.

On her return from the library—after five p.m. so after quitting time for the year-round staff but not so late as for the sun to be setting—she made the short walk through the woods to Orville's house.

He was sipping a beer on his porch when she arrived, and she immediately felt uncertain. Was he a nasty drunk or a friendly drunk? Her father had been a nasty drunk. Of course, he might not be drunk yet at all, particularly if he'd just gotten off of work. Maybe he customarily had a beer in the evening.

"Hey," he said, rising awkwardly out of his chair and glancing around at the mess of tools, equipment, camping gear, and other junk littering his porch. "I wasn't expecting company."

She didn't doubt that was true. "Hi, Orville."

"Can I, um..." he raised the beer clasped in his fist, "get you one?"

"Sure," she said, trying to smile.

"Just clear a space anywhere. I'll be right back."

She pushed some auto engine parts off the torn and stained berry-colored duck cloth of a director's chair and sat. When he came back and handed her the beer, he hardly let her have a sip before he cut to the chase. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"No, actually."

"Oh, hey. Me neither."

Mandy remembered how laconic men were. She had forgotten, having lived for weeks amid the volubility of women.

"Would you, um," he was perched on the wooden rim of the porch railing, "like to go get something?"

Mandy took a swig of her beer, enjoying the sudsy cold in the back of her throat. "Like where? I'm sick of Ruby's Inn, and I just got back from Panguitch."

"Ah," Orville made a lopsided attempt at a sage look. "This is where living here comes in handy. There's actually a very fine steakhouse in that Red Rocks Motel."

"Red Rocks Motel? Where is that?"

"A couple of miles from Rattlesnakes but set back from the road on the other side. Kind of quiet. If we're polite, they'll ignore us putting a shot of whiskey or two into our Seven-Up."

"I'm allergic to whiskey," Mandy said. "Makes me sick as a dog."

"I've got rum."

"All right. I can handle rum." Mandy had no idea why she was agreeing to this damned fool plan. For one thing, she detested steakhouses and for another she wasn't all that fond of hard liquor.

But her new policy was to be as agreeable as possible with Orville so she could get some male energy back into her life and ease her fears. Not that she was going to sleep with him or anything but she wanted to reassure herself that she was just as much a red-blooded heterosexual as the next woman.

They went in Orville's fading red Toyota pickup which was even more decrepit than her Toyota Corolla.

Once they were out of the Park and had hit the two-lane that led to Panguitch, over the rattling noise of the engine she asked, "How do you keep this thing running?"

"Oh," he called out, "the winters are long at Bryce. There isn't much to do but work on my truck or rebuild my stereo."

"Sounds like you like to work with your hands."

"Yep. Fiddle around mostly."

The Red Rock Motel, consisting of twelve motel rooms and a small coffee shop, looked like thousands of similar establishments built sometime in the 1950s. But when they went in, she was pleasantly surprised by the welcoming smile of the fifty-something hostess/waitress, the general cleanliness of the dining area, and the shiny massiveness of the old-fashioned red vinyl booths. Orville directed her to a booth in the corner which would allow them to look out the old picture windows onto Route 12.

They ordered sodas. The waitress winked knowingly at Orville and returned with unopened cans of Sprite and Coca-Cola and glasses laden with ice.

"Apparently," Mandy remarked when the waitress had departed, "they know you here."

"Matilda's a nice gal."

"Helps winter pass, does she?" Mandy poured Coca-Cola into her glass.

Orville harrumphed. "Not really my type. But sure, we've gone out a few times. There aren't that many eligible women around off-season or even in-season."

"If it's so difficult, then why do you work at Bryce?"

Orville shrugged. "I don't know. I ended up here. I stayed. Eventually, you're just part of the Park family, and it's not as easy to leave as you might think."

"Inertia's a wonderful thing."

"Yep. The motive behind a lot more 'decisions' than people will admit, for sure."

Mandy thought this remark unusually philosophical for Orville, who apparently must have thought so as well because after this gem, he clammed up until their steaks arrived.

But once he had a few bites of his medium-rare T-bone, his reticence evaporated, and he let her in on some of the funnier—and sadder—stories that made up the day-to-day reality of the year-round Park personnel and the private company concessionaires who operated the Bryce Lodge on behalf of the Park Service.

She found it refreshing not to be expected to contribute to the conversation, and listening to Orville's unpretentious narrative, eating the rich red meat protein of which she'd had little in the preceding weeks, and drinking the alcohol all combined to lull her into a state of undemanding contentment.

By the time she had eaten her way through a slice of perfectly acceptable, if commercial, coconut crème pie, Orville had transformed into the sweetest, nicest guy she had ever met.



Not all the way to Prince Charming perhaps, but certainly – like the pie – a perfectly acceptable substitute.

As they watched Route 12 out the window, her ebullient mood allowed her to lavishly compliment herself on her brilliant strategizing. Male energy was exactly what she needed, and the pleasant evening had proved it. With twilight having come and gone, she could no longer see cars – few as they might be – zipping along the roadway outside the window, and headlights swung past infrequently.

Orville too seemed to sense that matters were moving along quite handily and he suggested that they ought to make a date to take in an evening of the Shakespeare Festival in Cedar City. The Festival was world-renowned, he told her, not only for its productions, but for staging the plays in a replica of the Globe Theatre which had been built on the campus of Southern Utah State College.

“Who knew?” Mandy remarked dreamily. “Which plays are they producing this year?”

“*Othello*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and...darn, I don’t remember the third. There’s also a Greenshow beforehand with Elizabethan music, entertainment and dancing.”

“Wow. That sounds delightful.”

Orville nodded. “We’ll have to pick an evening and call for tickets and hope they aren’t sold out.”

“My days off are Thursday and Friday.”

“Perfect. Perhaps next Friday then.”

“Great.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“All right.” Mandy wasn’t in the mood for worry, so when Orville kissed her outside the restaurant in the dark, surrounded by the vanilla essence of ponderosa pines and the multitudinous stars shining bright in a sky untouched by civilization’s lights, she didn’t pull back. After so long, to be in someone’s arms felt nice.

His mouth was sweet with the lingering flavors of alcohol and soda pop, and he was surprisingly good at kissing. Even when his hands moved to encircle her waist, she didn’t stop him and their kiss deepened.

She was physically needy if uncertain, but Orville was apparently determined not to allow her prudish good sense to outrun the moment. He reached into the cab of the truck and pulled out a blanket from behind the driver’s seat.

“You must be kidding,” she said.

He took her by the hand and led her away from the graveled parking area. “There’s a wonderful little spot over here, just off

this path behind the motel.”

As they walked, the wafting smell of vanilla on the still-warm breezes of the early evening only became stronger, lulling her into a kind of relaxed acquiescence.

She had never made love out-of-doors. Jay never had that much imagination. Orville didn’t lead her far, but just to the edge of a small clearing between ponderosas where the meadow grasses were deep and the stars overhead peeked through the giant needles of the trees.

He laid out the blanket, settled on it, and pulled her down to his side. Kissing advanced to stroking and stroking to increasing exploration, and eventually Orville was too aroused to stop even if she had wanted him to which, at some physical level, she didn’t.

The act itself was not compelling but the arousal and the human flesh-to-flesh contact were what she had desperately needed. Fortunately, Orville was a careful man, and she was much relieved to see him produce a condom at the appropriate moment. At least there would be no worries on that score.

They drove back to the Park in silence, and she dozed off in his truck only to fully awaken when he pulled up in front of the Women’s Dorm.

“We’re here,” he said, smiling inanely at her.

She pulled on the handle to open the door of his aging pickup and stepped out into the velvety darkness of the night.

“Goodnight,” she said, not having any idea what else one should say at such a juncture.

“Night,” he replied, and then his truck backed away, and she walked into the Women’s Dorm exactly as she might have at any other time. Thankfully, the Common Room was empty so she didn’t have to make conversation or answer questions from nosy housemates. She headed directly to the bathroom and after brushing her teeth, fell into her bunk and was sound asleep in a matter of minutes.

## Chapter Eleven

WHILE SHE HAD slept soundlessly following her impromptu date with Orville, Mandy wasn’t so lucky the following night. She had spent the day feeling alternately proud of herself for having successfully bedded someone who wasn’t

Jay; and guilty over having placed herself in the same class with humanity's long history of adulterers.

Clearly, *The Scarlet Letter* had had too profound an effect on her youthful and Southern-Baptist-reared mind. The fact that her father had locked her in her closet and called her a slut and a lesbian, even though nothing had happened between her and Trina, hadn't done much for the healthy formation of her psyche either. She flushed with heat at odd moments of the day and wondered if other people saw a big red letter "A" inscribed on her chest.

Now that it had happened, she had no idea what to make of her feelings. Did she like Orville? Had she just needed sex? Or was it that she had needed to prove her point to herself about being heterosexual? And if she had proved her point by sleeping with Orville, why didn't it *feel* like she had? If anything, she had no more idea today how she felt about sex with men than she'd possessed the day before. Her mental confusion left her restless and edgy.

She came up short on her cash drawer at the entrance station and without even thinking, she snapped at Wanda who didn't take kindly to it. Annoying Wanda was tantamount to giving yourself a black mark with management because Wanda was sure to relate the story to every supervisor in the building. By the time her next duty shift in the Visitor's Center ended at 4:30, she had the mother of all headaches.

Back at the dorm, the Common Room was awash with LDS teenager girls—most of them, except for Becca and Judith—employed by the Park concessionaire. The seven or eight lasses sitting pertly on the couch and filling all of the chairs were singing sickly sweet hymns that were unrecognizable to Mandy. Becca strummed a guitar to good effect, probably having memorized the pieces since childhood. This harmonious scene of squeaky clean living should have instantly eliminated Mandy's headache but instead only worsened it.

She passed behind the crowded couch, gripping her now nauseous stomach and made a diversion into the kitchen to avoid tripping over the crowd of beatifically-smiling, high-energy females and to grab some Tylenol. Once safely in her own room, she slammed her door, crawled into her bunk, and prayed for quiet and a surcease of pain.

Her prayers weren't answered. Instead, she was back in that strange place where she was someone else but also herself. The log cabin was musty and airless and her "room" was no bigger than her cot, screened off from her parents' cot by a hanging wool blanket.

It was the dead of night but she heard the rustle of the blanket enclosing her cot. She looked up to see Henry staring down at her. He wasn't wearing anything, not even long johns, and his erection was frighteningly evident.

Terror moved into her throat and she screamed. His hand, large and heavy, closed over her mouth and she fought for breath. She grabbed his wrist with both hands and pushed with all her might against him.

His hand didn't budge and, in desperation, she drew in air through her flaring nostrils. She felt her covers being yanked down and her nightshirt lifted. She dropped her hands to protect herself but Henry was on top of her in an instant, his weight pinning her to the cot, her hands trapped beneath his massive torso.

Her mind whirled in horror as she fought to keep breathing, as she endured the mind-bending pain of his entry. How could this happen? How could anyone do this to her?

She thought hours passed but it was probably only minutes. Finally, his hand was gone and she screamed at the top of her lungs. Her body throbbed with pain and her mind filled with blackness.

Mandy flew awake in the silent darkness of the house, not knowing if she was screaming or not. She sat upright, panting. What in the hell was that? She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms tightly around her body, trying to stop her shaking.

Had Henry raped her? No, of course not. It was just a dream and it didn't make any sense. No one had raped her. Her own father had psychologically abused her but he'd never touched her sexually.

But what if Henry had raped his daughter Polly? It would explain why Polly hated him so much but it didn't explain why she, Mandy, was dreaming about it.

Did Bill know about the rape? Or just about the beating? Why had he killed Henry and then Polly's mother in the other dream? Mandy shuddered. What was going on? Who were these people and why was she having such bad dreams about them?

Pondering, her head on her knees, she slowly became aware of how foul she smelled. She had been so sick, she had crawled into bed without changing out of her uniform. She got up and cursed the fact that she didn't have a clean uniform shirt for the next day or, she realized, what was now today. Her digital clock read 1:15. She doubted there was a twenty-four hour Laundromat within one-hundred miles of the Park. But at least her headache had subsided.

She went into the bathroom, filled the sink with warm soapy water, and dunked her gray polyester uniform shirt into it. She rubbed the fabric between her hands and hoped she would at least get out the tang of sweat. After rinsing the garment in hot water from the tap, she squeezed it dry and hung it over the shower curtain rod. The shirt would be damp and wrinkled when she wore it next but at least she wouldn't make people's noses wrinkle in disgust. She didn't bother washing her pants; she just laid them over the bureau and hoped they would appear less wrinkled in the morning.

She dressed furtively in her PJ's, not wanting to risk waking Jo. Filled with trepidation, she lay down hoping for a dreamless sleep. She wasn't that lucky, but at least, she didn't have to fight off Henry this time, she just had to outrun him. But she didn't know if he was Henry. This thick-bodied man had the facial features of a bull: wide animal nostrils, heaving jowls and tiny inhuman eyes.

Tired of running, she dragged herself into consciousness. She knew for certain this time she hadn't screamed but her head pounded and her stomach was nauseous again.

She lay still, trying to calm her breathing and listening carefully to the room around her. She heard Jo's measured breathing above her head and sighed in relief that she hadn't awakened her roommate.

God, but she felt awful! Did she have a cold? Had she caught a virus? A virus could explain a lot. Finally, eyeing the digital clock which read 4:25, she dragged herself from the bed. She might as well get up. It was so early in the morning, no one in her wing of the house was likely to begrudge her a hot bath because she would be out of the bathroom long before they had arisen, and by then, the dorm's hot water heater would have replenished itself.

A hot, scented bath helped so much that by the time she exited its encompassing care, she felt like a new person. Or, at least, not like a sick, defeated person. Mandy dressed quietly, still not waking Jo, and padded around the kitchen making a soothing and healthy breakfast of coffee, oatmeal, and cinnamon toast. After all, she'd been too sick to eat the night before.

She was wearing her pants, boots and a v-neck t-shirt, not yet willing to put on the still mildly damp uniform shirt. She knew once the sun came up, the shirt would dry out. Her first early-morning shift was in the campground, so she was going to see the sun soon enough but at eight-thousand feet, even in the summer, the morning would be cool for a while.

Much to her surprise, a sleepy-eyed Jo, still in her boxer

shorts and muscle shirt appeared in the kitchen. Mandy tried hard not to stare. She had seen Jo naked at Calf Creek Falls, but only in glimpses: her muscular shoulders rising above the blue-green waters, one shimmering breast and part of her hip as she stood behind Carlotta, supporting the injured woman. Why a semi-clothed Jo should make her throat dry now, she had no idea.

"Hi." They both said at the same time.

"I smelled coffee," Jo said. "Sorry."

"No problem," Mandy said, getting up from the table, "I'll pour you some."

Jo sat and ran her hands through her hair, tousling it further. "Nice of you. Thanks. Why are you up so early, by the way?"

Mandy placed a steaming mug of coffee in front of Jo and slid into a chair. "I have a 6:30 shift."

"Hmm," Jo slurped contentedly. "Most of us throw on our wrinkled shirts and dash out the door at 6:28. Breakfast and coffee," she lifted her cup, "are a luxury."

Mandy laughed. "True." She was cradling her own cup of coffee in her hands again. "I didn't sleep very well and woke up early. Some bad dreams."

"You sure were passed out when I got home."

"I had a migraine." The migraine, of course! That explained her bad dreams. Her subconscious mind had dramatized the unrelenting pressure in her skull and the ache in her muscles. Why she thought those other people, Polly and Henry and Bill, were real in some manner was silly. She had even given them motivations! How idiotic. She had just had a bad headache.

"Oh, sorry. Those are miserable," Jo said.

Mandy shrugged. "Not your fault. By the way, what was with the Saints' choir here last night?"

Jo giggled. "Beats me! They were gone by seven. I think there was a big Mormon do over at the Lodge. Boys and everything."

"Boys? Wow! There must have been chaperones all over the place."

"I don't doubt it!"

They laughed together, and Mandy felt her heartstrings yank in her chest. She had missed Jo's sense of humor and her friendship. But while she acknowledged the loneliness and rejection she had been feeling, she felt fear of this woman, fear she just couldn't make sense out of. Especially, as Jo sat half-naked, right in front of her. How scary could a half-naked woman be?

Mandy cancelled that thought before any kind of answer even tried to arise in her mind. She rose briskly from the table, gathering up her empty bowl and plate. "Guess I'd better wash up my dishes. You know how steamed Janet gets if I don't clean up after myself."

"True. She's a drill sergeant, that one." Jo turned in her chair to watch Mandy at the sink and Mandy was aware of the other woman's eyes on her. They felt like hot arrows piercing her back.

"Say," Jo said, "I really am sorry about the way I behaved out at the Falls. I haven't seen much of you since then and —"

"You already apologized." Mandy turned off the tap and slid the clean dishes onto the drain board. Keeping her voice steady, she said, "It's no big deal and none of my business."

"Can you sit back down?"

Mandy turned from the sink, took a deep breath and raised clenched hands. "I don't know."

"I'm not going to hurt you, I swear," Jo pleaded. "It's just that this has hurt our...friendship and I never wanted that to happen. I am really, really sorry, and I want to do whatever I can to make it up to you. To correct it."

Mandy felt tears not very far away. "I don't know what to say or do, Jo. I'm so confused. I don't know how I feel about you."

"Can we be friends?"

Mandy knew the tears were going to flood forth any second now. "I don't know."

Jo brought her elbows up onto the table and cradled her cheeks in her hands. "Man, I'm so sorry."

Mandy's face flushed bright red and she burst into tears. She saw Jo jumping up from the table but she couldn't tolerate remaining in the room. Her emotions, like her tears, were in a torrent of confusion as she rushed from the kitchen.

## Chapter Twelve

JUDITH SIPPED HERBAL tea (caffeine in any form being abjured by the Church) at Ruby's and eyed the comings and goings of the inn's breakfast hour. She wondered what to do about the mess that was her life. She should have been at church services in Tropic but there was no way, after last night's humiliations, that she could face Bishop King.

Judith always felt comforted singing the hymns she knew from early childhood, but the previous night's events, first at the Women's Dorm, and later at the Lodge, had shaken her. At the dorm she had felt comfortable, surrounded by Becca and their childhood friends from Tropic.

All of the women were so sweet and, while she was certain she wasn't gay and wasn't attracted to any of them in that kind of way, she still made furtive glances at each of them in turn just to see if there was something about them...something about women in general or maybe about a specific woman, that she needed to consider. Her scrutiny didn't give her any particular insight except to convince her that she was as confused as ever.

To add to her confusion, she was forced to realize by looking about that she not only didn't have any male prospects, but she didn't have any female confidantes either. All of the women at the dorm preparing to head over to the dance were much closer to Becca. Of course, her lonely state wasn't completely accidental.

After all, she might have made friends with one or more of the Park employees in the dorm, but she had been exceedingly careful to follow the Church's dictates about forming friendships with unbelievers. She was particularly attracted to the bouncy, self-assured Jo while at the same time greatly intimidated by the boisterous Geronimo. The fact that Jo was an out-lesbian made it all the more imperative that Judith avoid contact with her.

Of course, once Jo had stunned both her and Becca with that remark about same-sex sealings, Judith found it hard to keep her mouth from gaping whenever she thought about Jo or about the remark. While she hadn't resented Jo for saying it—instead remaining in a kind of wonder at Jo's boldness—she deeply resented that Becca told the Bishop about it.

That Becca must have done so was a reality that had only struck her the night before when Bishop King took her aside at the dance (after more than two hours of miserably playing a wallflower) and made it distinctly, if gently, clear that she needed to make a decision soon about a young man.

There were plenty of acceptable ones at the dance. Judith noticed several of them nudging each other periodically in her direction—in conscientious Mormon boy fashion—in order to save her from the embarrassment of not being one of the actively chosen dance partners.

The dejection of the dance coupled with the Bishop's warning had sent Judith to the Lodge's bathroom—furnished in extravagant Victorian period style—with hot tears coursing down her face and a lump of molten pain in her throat.



Once she was under better emotional control, she let herself into the empty, dark-paneled hall outside the ornate bathroom. Music and voices floated out from the ballroom as she escaped the Lodge by a back door. Even though it was already dark, she located the foot path she knew traversed the woods and would lead her back to the lonely quiet of the Women's Dorm.

Did she need to leave Utah? This proposition, as strange as it seemed, didn't scare her. She had, after all, spent twelve months in Bolivia, spoke fluent Spanish, had a Bachelor's Degree in Latin American Culture, and was a competent administrative secretary. She knew something about the world.

On the other hand, leaving Utah would almost certainly imply leaving the Church, and that did scare her. At some level, it didn't even matter if the problem was that she was a lesbian. If she was straight but she failed to get married, and soon, she would be on her own without the blessings of her Ward or the support of her family. Judith felt tears forming behind her eyes and her hands gripped her cooling tea cup.

"Hey," a voice above her head inquired, "can I get you something else?"

Judith looked up into the dark but happily glowing eyes of a young woman whose physical energy was palpable. For no reason she could identify, the woman's vibrancy seemed to pulse around Judith and pull her from the depressed morass of her thoughts. She felt as though she'd been shocked with an electrical charge.

The moment of psychic recognition, of energy and hope, told her she could no longer live her old life. She didn't know what her new life would consist of, but the old one was empty and gone, and she could no longer carry on with the charade of being who she had been.

"Yes," she was startled by the brisk sound of her own voice. "Coffee! With cream!" Judith had never had coffee in her life but she was desperate to try it, to experience the lift that people claimed it gave them. Besides, if she was going to flout the Church's rules, she might as well get started.

The waitress raised her eyebrows, registering the other woman's sudden excitement. "Coming right up!"

"And bring me eggs and bacon," Judith called after her, her voice stronger and happier than she had heard it in a long time. "And rye toast and jam. And after that, more coffee!"

The waitress turned around. Her name tag identified her as Carlotta. Lips quirked into a smile, she asked, "Hungry?"

"I'm going on a long journey, Carlotta," Judith said cryptically. "I need to provision myself."

Carlotta laughed. "Me too, me too. Your food's coming right up, Miss—"

"Judith." Judith stuck out a hand which Carlotta shook eagerly.

"You live in the Women's Dorm with Jo and Geronimo, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"They're awesome." Carlotta's happy expression turned starry-eyed with near hero worship. "They've done so much for me."

Judith nodded. "You know," she said softly, "I think they've done something for me, too."

"I'm going to put your order in, Judith." She gave her customer a blinding smile and whipped away. Judith smiled. Whether she left Utah today or tomorrow or next month, her real life's journey had begun today.

THE DRIVE TO Cedar City from the Park was long and Mandy grew weary before the journey was even half completed. Once she turned off U.S. Highway 89 onto State Route 14, her aged Toyota Corolla did not like the endlessly steep climb and narrow turns of the two-way blacktop taking them ever upwards to the breathtaking heights of Cedar Breaks National Park at ten thousand feet in altitude. The forest was thick for most of the journey, the pines edging right up to the roadway.

She didn't actually bother to turn off the highway and enter the park because she didn't know how long it would take to see it, and she would need to drive back to Bryce before nightfall. Tomorrow, when she and Orville came down to Cedar City for the Shakespeare play, she would let him drive. The only fly in that ointment being, of course, that his truck wasn't a whole lot better suited to the demanding drive than her car.

After topping out near Cedar Breaks, the rest of the journey was a twisting roller coaster ride down to the metropolis of Cedar City. Well, a metropolis by southern Utah standards anyway. Mandy liked it immediately, perceiving it as a pleasant, mid-sized Western American town.

The city was laid out on straight lines with a Wal-Mart, several chain grocery stores, plenty of clean motels, decent restaurants, and an old-fashioned downtown. Its claim to fame, of course, was its college—Southern Utah State—and the Adams Shakespearean Theatre, a replica of London's famous Globe Theatre, on the grounds of the college.

She found the public library by inquiring at the gas station

when she fueled up her car. According to the attendant, it was only a few blocks away. On her way there, she spotted a Wendy's and realized she was starving and hadn't eaten any fast food in months. She was hardly going to be able to do mind-intensive research without eating. She pulled into the drive-thru and ordered a cheeseburger combo and soda, parked in the fast food chain's parking lot, and ate, relishing the fun of eating a meal she hadn't had to cook herself.

Even though her sojourn in the woods of Bryce had not been long, she had forgotten the simple blandishments of civilization. Despite the impact luxuries such as fast food had on the environment, she could see why most people weren't willing to give them up. Once you had luxuries, it was hard to imagine being without them.

When she finished eating, Mandy wiped her hands on the provided yellow napkin and took a few sips of her soda. She cradled it in the car's console and then, not able to help herself, slipped the three coins out of the plastic bag stored in her breast pocket.

On the back of the large one the words "Twenty Dollars" were displayed beneath the depiction of an eagle carrying a vertically-striped shield. On the front was the head of a woman, Liberty apparently, as this was the name written across a crown worn on her head. The word "Liberty" was easy to read, and the date beneath the head read *1883*.

Figuring out the two smaller coins was much harder. Their markings were not as crisp as the gold one. She rubbed her thumb over the face of one of these coins, feeling the ridges of what looked like a stack of pancakes, the little fat circles wider at the bottom than the top of the image. A crude wing-spread eagle hovered over the stack.

As her thumb brushed past the image, a picture flashed across her mind. For an instant—clear as day—she saw a woman on horseback, a girl really, who seemed aged beyond her years, so drooped with exhaustion she looked as though she might slip from the horse. Could the woman have been Polly?

The image vanished and Mandy looked down at the coin again, then flipped it over. There were no horses on either face of the coin. How silly to think it was Polly! Probably the image had been induced by the country western outfitters store she had passed on the way to the Wendy's. She remembered an overlarge poster in their window of a girl on horseback dressed in bright western clothes and big cowboy hat.

The other side seemed to depict a lion seated in profile. She couldn't read the markings around the edge of the coin but they

looked like regular letters.

The second coin was even more worn and depicted an image that looked like a baker's hat sitting on top of an eye and a strange elliptical shape with handles on the obverse side. Again she couldn't read the inscription.

She put the coins back into the plastic bag and slipped it into her breast pocket. If all went well, she'd find a good coin book at the library that would clear up the mystery of the two smaller coins and give her some idea of the value of all three.

Within ten minutes she held just such a coin book in her hands and was astounded to learn after paging through it that her 1883 Double Eagle gold coin, as she now realized it was called, was worth something in the neighborhood of \$250 dollars. She was both delighted and a little embarrassed.

She had never in all of her born days experienced any kind of windfall, let alone anything this dramatic. The value of the find raised ethical issues for her. For instance, to whom did the coin really belong? And, if legally it belonged to her, should she share its serendipitous reward with Jo? Or even with Carlotta?

Determining the identity of the other two coins was not as simple. While poring over a third coin book, she wasn't surprised when one of the librarians approached her table. After all, the library was nearly deserted in the middle of the summer afternoon.

"Can I help you with something?"

The librarian was young and male. He looked fresh out of college with a mop of dark curly hair, over-sized eyeglasses, rather wide, almost blockish, features and a winning smile.

"Uh..." Mandy was caught unawares. "I, um, was trying to locate a specific coin."

The librarian nodded helpfully. "Is that the coin, there, in your hand?"

Mandy nodded, unwilling to hand over the coin but not knowing how she could avoid it. It was the polite thing to do. Besides, it wasn't like he was going to steal it from her. They were in a library, for goodness sake.

He took it between his fingers and turned it back and forth. "Well," he said at last, "I'm not a numismatist but it looks Mormon to me."

"Mormon?" Mandy hadn't even thought of that. "The Mormons minted coins?"

His voice was a slow drawl, "I don't know, but the design on the front is a beehive."

"A beehive?"

"Yes." He leaned in toward her and pointed at the coin. "See

this thing that looks like a pile of tires?"

"Sure. I thought it was a stack of pancakes. I didn't know it was a beehive."

The man smiled. "The beehive is the Utah state symbol. It was originally a Mormon symbol representing industry. You know, like the industriousness of bees. Have you ever heard Utah called the State of Deseret?"

"No."

"It's a Mormon term meaning honey bee."

"Oh. So what do you think?"

"I think we should find a reference work that includes Mormon coins." He handed the coin back and then was gone for a few minutes but returned with a single slim volume. "This one," he said wagging the book triumphantly, "gives a short history of the equally short history of Mormon coin minting."

"Wow! Are there pictures of the coins in there?"

"Yes, indeed."

"My name's Mandy by the way." She gave him a smile but didn't extend her hand.

"Derek." He grinned back and plopped the book on the table, one hand holding it open, as he slipped into a chair. "Look at this page here."

Mandy saw a picture of the beehive coin she held in her hand. Minted in 1860 as a five-dollar piece, according to the guide, the inscription encircling the eagle swooning over the beehive was *Deseret Assay Office Pure Gold*, and the inscription surrounding the lion on the other side of the coin said *Holiness to the Lord*.

She looked at the value shown for a piece in 'fine' condition—whatever that meant—and it took her breath away. She doubted her coin was in 'fine' condition, but still.

"Eighty-five hundred dollars?" Her voice squeaked.

"That's a pile of money," he said. "But look at these other ones, too. They minted more than one kind."

He pointed to a picture of a coin that Mandy knew rested in her pocket but which she hadn't shown Derek. It was also a five-dollar piece but had been minted much earlier, in 1849. According to the guide, the elliptical shape she could make out on the one side constituted "clasped hands" and was meant to exemplify "strength in unity." The inscription, *G.S.L.C.P.G.*, meant *Great Salt Lake City Pure Gold*. On the other side, what looked like a baker's hat was actually a bishop's miter, and the eye represented the Eye of Providence.

"That one's worth about five thousand dollars in 'fine' condition," Mandy said, not elaborating that she knew precisely

where she could lay her hands on one.

"I guess they're kind of a rare." He took the beehive coin from Mandy's hand and regarded it critically. "How did you come across it?"

"Oh." Mandy felt her face flushing, "Oh, goodness. I—I came across it in an unusual way."

Derek smirked. "Well, you didn't steal it, did you?"

"No. No, I found it." She told him about the ill-fated hiking trip and how Carlotta had brought the can to her with the coins inside.

"Coins? There's more than one?"

"Uh, just one more. A U.S. Double Eagle. Not as valuable, I guess." She had already neglected to mention the other Mormon five-dollar piece, and she was hardly going to reveal the coin's existence now. It was worth far too much money.

"Must have been a damn big can."

"Why do you think that?"

"To cut your friend's foot through tennis shoes or hiking boots?"

"Oh, she was barefoot."

"She was hiking barefoot? That's pretty dangerous around here."

Mandy laughed. "We were at Calf Creek Falls. On the beach."

"Oh!" He laughed. "Probably not just barefoot then, huh?"

Mandy colored. "I'm not going to answer that!" She rather liked the young librarian, but she wasn't sure whether she should encourage his interest. Now, no doubt, he was imagining her naked on the beach at Calf Creek Falls. Of course, she assumed men imagined women naked the moment they met them anyway so it probably wasn't terribly significant one way or the other.

He handed her back the coin. "Tell me about the can."

"I thought perhaps it was a baking powder can."

"Baking powder? Really?" His thick eyebrows rose. "Why?"

"The can was quite old, but I could still barely make out some of the letters, and I thought they might have spelled the words baking powder. It's kind of prosaic, I know, but that's the impression I got."

"What did you do with it?"

"Oh, it was just a mangled piece of trash. I tossed it into our fire circle so no one else would step on it on the beach."

"Smart thinking," Derek slapped his hands against the wood surface of the table, "but as the can probably burnt up, we'll never know what it said, will we?"

"No, I guess not." She got the impression she had disappointed him.

He rose to his feet and looked across the room. "I think I should give Deena a spell on the Reference Desk. She's looking daggers at me."

Mandy smiled. "Thanks for your help, Derek."

"You're welcome. Congratulations on your find." He shook her proffered hand, gave her a quick smile, and was gone.

## Chapter Thirteen

AS MANDY STARTED the long drive home, she realized she was desperate to tell someone about her coin discovery, but whom? She was too embarrassed to talk to Jo, particularly after her silly outburst in the kitchen. She could hardly blame Jo for having gone back to the practice of assiduously avoiding her. Looking at it from Jo's point of view, who would want to talk to a hysterical straight woman who burst into tears or flew into a judgmental rage every time you spoke to her?

So she couldn't tell Jo. She was on Geronimo's Avoid Like The Plague list too. She couldn't imagine Judith or Becca expressing anything other than polite interest as their minds were so habitually focused on "higher things." Janet Dartmore didn't deign to speak to anyone as plain and ordinary as Mandy. Thea hung out with Archie at every opportunity and was almost never around the dorm. Anyway she was as furtive as a ghost and skinnier than a skeleton, so Mandy hardly noticed her even when she was around. Carlotta didn't live at the Park, and Mandy had no idea how to get in touch with her, although she had wondered periodically how her foot was doing. That only left Luisa and Orville.

How dismal, she thought. Her choices of confidants were a disinterested teenage astronomer and a man who, now that he'd gotten into her pants, was probably solely focused on how he could do it again. The thought that she had a date with him tomorrow made her anxious instead of filling her with happy anticipation.

For one thing, the date would mean a good six to nine hours in his presence: four hours of driving back and forth to Cedar City, three to four hours for dinner and the show, and, if he got his way, at least an hour of sex. She couldn't get out of the date

now. He had already sprung for the very expensive theatre tickets and would probably pay for dinner too.

Why did the prospect make her feel so grim? She liked Shakespeare well enough, what she remembered from reading it in high school, anyway. All right, she knew that wasn't it.

Her mood wasn't being helped by her anxiety about her car. While she couldn't quite call it limping, the Toyota coughed and sputtered its way back up to the ten thousand foot altitude of Cedar Breaks like an annoyed octogenarian. Mandy occasionally had to wave more eager—as few as they might be—motorists around her when she could see far enough around curves of the narrow two-lane to allow for safe passing. Once she reached the summit, coasting down the other side was less fear-producing. Still, her car badly needed a tune up. She wondered if she should take it to a local garage. Of course, that would cost money, and her dollars were extremely limited and mostly accounted for.

But why couldn't she be happy she was stepping out with Orville? He was clearly ecstatic that he'd finally scored during the summer season. What a wonderful image, she thought. She was a "score." Welcome to the female sex.

By the time she pulled into the driveway of the Women's Dorm, she was not only exhausted and stiff from driving but disgruntled as well. Why couldn't she make her life work out? Other people seemed to manage.

She was discouraged to think that after six weeks of living cheek by jowl with a whole slew of people, she hadn't made a single actual friend. Clearly, she had a problem, and it was a much deeper problem than she'd ever realized. She dragged herself from the seat of her over-heated Toyota and tramped into the house. It was verging on five o'clock, the sun a good three hours from setting. What in the heck could she do with her evening?

There was no one else home yet from their work shifts, and the house—with its Park Service brown clapboard exterior and cheap linoleum and sheetrock interior—was silent enough to creep her out. But she didn't think it was going to stay that way either. If it was, she might adjust to it. Orville's quitting time was at five and he might well drift over for a visit. God only knew who else would show up, singing hymns, eating, dragging all their friends through the cramped interior. She was surprised to realize that she looked forward to the arrival of strangers much more than Orville.

Why, she wondered, couldn't she look forward to Orville's company? Dinner hadn't gone so badly that night and he hadn't been a complete pain in the ass since, only coming by on one



evening. Of course barely a week had passed since their tryst and her work schedule hadn't been conducive to amorous liaisons. She hadn't gotten off from work most nights until after seven.

But he knew she was off Thursdays and hadn't worked today. So he might very well show up expecting favors from her, or at the very least, closeness, intimacy, some kind of warmth and pleasure.

Damn, but she had to go somewhere! And fast! Get out of Dodge, so to speak. Where did people go in this god-forsaken empty country anyway? She couldn't drive for fifteen minutes and be at a movie theatre or a mall. If she'd been thinking ahead she would have stayed late in Cedar City to entertain herself and then driven home in the dark. But she hated driving in the dark and her car was not reliable. She didn't want to break down on an empty roadway in the dark cold woods. Just because it was Utah didn't mean *everyone* was friendly.

Come to think of it, where was Jay when she needed him? He might be scum, but he could at least fix her car. Not that it had broken yet, but it was only a matter of time. God, she knew she was in a black mood, not to mention illogical, if she was thinking kindly thoughts about Jay.

What to do? Should she hit one of the trails until dark set in and then sneak back home? Go to the Park Interpretation lecture at the campground? But she knew that wasn't scheduled to start until seven p.m.

Go back to the Red Rocks Motel and eat? Go back to Rattlesnakes? God forbid, that would mean more men leering at her, hoping to get into her pants.

Deep down, she knew she just wanted to be left alone. Which, of course, explained why she hadn't made any friends, the self-critical voice in her head pointed out. Desperate to ignore the voice and its unerring correctness, Mandy yanked an apple and a soda pop from the refrigerator and headed for her car.

She got into the driver's seat and backed out of the driveway, having absolutely no idea what she was going to do. The farther she got from the dorm, though, the calmer she felt. It became clear that she was the most terrified of Orville coming over to the dorm and her having to be charming or having to do something to entertain him or make him believe that she actually liked him, which, truthfully, she now realized she didn't.

Not, that he wasn't likeable. Not that there was something wrong with him. It was just...she didn't know exactly, but it wasn't terribly satisfying to be involved with Orville. She had

gotten mired in one of those desperate flings she had never thought would happen, and now she regretted it. She didn't exactly see any way out of tomorrow's date, but at least she didn't have to see him tonight.

On her way out of the Park, she stopped at the entrance station, which—at the end of the day—was empty of the usual influx of cars queuing up to get into the Park, and waved to Archie who was covering that duty shift.

Archie was one of those careful, organized, duty-bound, but not terribly expressive, personalities. She supposed it was an effort for him to smile. But Mandy found him more comfortable than annoying and never had the sensation he was checking her out. Of course, he had regular access to Thea to deal with whatever sexual urges he might possess.

Seeing her, he slid open the station window and leaned out. "Hey, Mandy. What's new?"

"Nothing much, Archie. I was trying to figure out something to do."

"Bored, huh?"

"Yep."

"That's Park reality. We are kind of out in the boonies. Did you want to head to the big city?"

"Just came from there."

"Yeah, it's quite a trek. I would hate to do it twice in one day."

"Me too." Mandy felt this conversation, while pleasant enough, wasn't going anywhere.

"Daniel is teaching taxidermy in the Visitor's Center tonight."

Daniel Barton was the Park's lead interpretive ranger. Mandy had no idea he knew anything about taxidermy. "How does he teach that?"

"He uses actual dead animals. You learn to stuff them by doing it hands-on. Takes about three hours to do the basics on one."

Mandy shuddered. "Ugh. I thought he was doing the campfire talk tonight."

"No. Dustin and Sparky Henderson are doing that. It's 'Native American Constellations in the Campground.' "

The Hendersons were a happily married pair who did everything—or as much as they were allowed—together. The last thing she needed right now was to spend the evening with two people so in synch with each other that they finished one another's sentences.

Archie chuckled. "I can see that idea went over like a lead

balloon. Hey, there's square dancing at Ruby's."

"Really? I thought that was only on Saturday nights."

"Usually, but they're getting ready for some big event. I guess it's an extra practice."

"Can anybody dance?"

"Sure. But there're some hard core members of the club who go to get-togethers all over the region. They can be a little hard to keep up with."

"Do I have to wear a square-dancing skirt?" Where would she get a skirt at this hour, she wondered inanely. She looked down at her lap. She was still dressed in the blue jeans, cowboy shirt, and tennis shoes, she wore to Cedar City.

Archie laughed. "Nope. You don't even have to dance if you don't want to."

"Can I eat dinner there?"

This time Archie shook his head in genuine bemusement. "Haven't you eaten at Ruby's yet?"

"Lunch. Oh, I had ice cream there one day."

"Ruby's couldn't survive if they didn't offer three squares a day, Mandy. You can get pretty much anything you hanker for there anytime of day. Breakfast at ten o'clock or steak at seven a.m."

"With you talking about it, I'm getting downright hungry."

"So," he gave her a full-fledged grin, "go for it. Anyway, I have an RV pulling up. I bet they want a camping space. What makes people think we have a camping space for them during the high season if they get here any later than ten in the morning? I swear!"

Mandy smiled, feeling the best she'd felt in hours. "We will never understand the stupidity of the general public, Archie. Take it easy."

"You, too." He slid closed the window and turned to the other side of the entrance station to greet his late-arriving customer.

As she drove, Mandy gave thought to the staggering number of daily conversations in the entrance station that related to telling campers Bryce didn't have any camping spaces left.

The spaces were as scarce as hen's teeth, and like most National Parks, the camping system was completely overburdened by the endless growth of a traveling public who somehow expected parks to behave like commercial entities and simply grow with the demand. Putting in more spaces defied the purpose of the Park System itself, which was to preserve and protect these specially set-aside areas as they existed in their natural state.

She pulled into the Ruby's Inn parking lot which was packed with RVs, truck campers, four-wheel drive pickups, and some plain old cars. Most of the spaces around the motel behind the restaurant were full as well. Ruby's was hopping, but that was hardly a surprise as there were no other commercial entities for miles.

She wandered through the busy dining area and seated herself at one of the cheerful gingham checked tables. The square dancing club was gathering, and many ladies in wide skirts with the club's insignia were chatting together at one big table. Sitting among them were Superintendent Ash's wife Betty; Wanda Paulson, the office maven; Millicent Barton, the lead seasonal park ranger's wife; and Luisa. Apparently square dancing was a pretty big deal in these parts. No doubt because it was wholesome. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

A man in a white shirt and dark slacks came to take her order and she realized she was disappointed that her server wasn't Carlotta. Probably the girl worked an earlier shift. She ordered the Mexican plate, feeling suddenly homesick for New Mexico but knowing the meal would taste nothing like the food she could buy in many a fine Mexican restaurant in Albuquerque.

She was halfway through the meal, and the club was halfway through their first square on the dance floor when someone approached and leaned tanned hands on her table. She looked up into Geronimo's shades and tried not to choke on a mouthful of food.

"What?" she demanded once she'd swallowed it down.

"Hey, take it easy," Geronimo said. "Can't you invite a friend to sit down?"

"Sure, go ahead. Sit. I hadn't noticed we were friends, but whatever. Did I park my car somewhere I'm not supposed to, Ms. Enforcement Ranger?"

Geronimo slid into the booth on the other side of the table. "We're not on Park property right now, so I couldn't arrest you even if I wanted to." She gave Mandy a cross between a leer and something resembling a squeamish look. "You're in kind of a bad mood, aren't you?"

"Yes."

The waiter appeared, and Geronimo ordered a Coca-Cola and nachos. "Lots of jalapenos, Dave" she added.

"Coming right up, Geronimo."

Geronimo removed her sunglasses and leaned back as though she planned to stay a good long while. With her head resting comfortably against the top of the booth, she said. "So

what's this bad mood all about, girlfriend?"

"I don't really think it's any of your business." Mandy was steamed at Geronimo's convivial familiarity: taking the liberty of calling her 'girlfriend', for goodness sake.

"No? Why don't you let me decide? I've heard you've been seeing our friend Orville."

"Who told you that?"

"Jeez, Mandy." Geronimo accepted the delivery of a tall iced glass of Coke from Dave. "Haven't you figured out we're living in a fishbowl?"

"Okay, so I'm seeing Orville." Mandy shoveled a forkful of frijoles, dripping with cheese, into her mouth. "What's it to you?"

"I think it's great. Is it going well? Working out for you?"

Mandy shrugged. "It's a summer romance. Probably means a lot more to Orville than it does to me. In another six weeks, I'll be out of here. He'll be here through the next thirty snowfalls."

Geronimo laughed in genuine humor, and Mandy was startled to realize she had never heard her laugh. Somehow it made Geronimo seem less intimidating.

"No question about that, Mandy. Orville's a lifer." Geronimo's nachos arrived, and she pulled at them, dragging up slivers of gooey cheese with the edges of her corn chips, getting her fingers sticky and dropping slices of jalapeno all over the tablecloth. There was no way, Mandy realized, that a person could look dignified eating nachos.

Mandy finished her meal and pushed her plate toward the edge of the table, hoping the waiter would re-appear soon and give her a refill on her decaf and maybe let her order some kind of dessert. "May I ask why you're interested?"

"Truthfully, I just want to get to know you better."

Mandy snickered. "Oh, right. Can't you come up with a better story than that?"

Geronimo smiled. "You're kind of an enigma and I'm trying to figure you out."

"I'm an enigma? I have to admit that's a new one for me. I've always been perceived as a plain, simple, hard-working, no-nonsense kind of gal. No fun, no extra-curricular activities, no risk taking—"

"Yeah," Geronimo interrupted, "I can see that. You kind of encourage that 'whitebread' view of yourself. But, honestly, you're more complex than that, aren't you? Not as simple as you like to present? I mean, for starters, what are you doing here at Bryce? It doesn't seem like a very likely job for someone like you, someone with skills, someone who's older and generally

brainier than our run-of-the-mill college kids."

"That's no mystery! I needed a summer job." Mandy fidgeted.

"Uh, huh," Geronimo went on undeterred, "no summer job in the offing in Albuquerque? It's a big town. Why drive thirteen hours to the ass end of Utah for a low-paying, no-respect job?"

"The scenery?"

"Bull."

"You people do it!" Mandy was fuming. "What's so different about me?"

"Ma'am, more decaf?" Dave was at their table with the coffee carafe.

"Please," Mandy said. They both watched as he refilled her cup. "Do you have cheesecake?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Can I have it with strawberries?"

He nodded and moved away.

Geronimo said, "Jo and I are career Park Service employees. She's seasonal and I'm full-time, but this is our field of interest and education, the job we love doing, the avocation without which we'd wither away. We can't sit behind a desk all year or be happy on an assembly line. And we get paid a damn sight better than you do so there's no comparison there. You're here for entirely some other reason, and I think I know what it is."

"You do?" Mandy blanched. Shit, what was Geronimo going to say?

Geronimo laughed. "All right, girl, that was pretty revealing. Give it up. It's escape, isn't it?"

Some of the color returned to Mandy's face. Geronimo didn't have details, just a suspicion.

"Like from what?" Two could play at this game.

"You tell me." Geronimo's voice was low and smooth, as though she were trying to coax a wild animal from its den.

"Damn you, Geronimo. It's not something I can talk about."

Geronimo eased back in her seat. "But you're clearly admitting there is something to talk about."

"I don't even know why I'm sitting here with you!" Mandy felt like screeching but forced herself to keep her voice from getting too loud. She didn't want the other diners to overhear.

"Because you're waiting for dessert for one thing, and for another, you're lonely and you're scared and you need someone to talk to. Does that sum it up or did I leave something out?"

Mandy felt tears building behind her eyes. Why did Geronimo have to be right? She vigorously shook her head to clear the tears, to put them on notice. I will not cry, she thought.

"You left out confused," she muttered in a low voice.

Geronimo giggled. "All right then, have at it."

"What do you mean?"

"Lay it on me. I'm your confessor."

"Are you kidding? If I tell you, it'll be around the Park in two days."

Geronimo tilted her head and gave Mandy a disparaging look. "C'mon, do you really think I'd do that? You're a sister, sharing our house. I would never treat a sister that way."

"No," Mandy blew out a sigh, "I guess you wouldn't. But this has to be kept strictly confidential."

Mandy's cheesecake arrived and she dug into the rich sweet creamy mess with relief. When she'd had a few bites, she raised her head. "You can't even tell Jo."

Geronimo raised both palms. "No Jo."

"I'm married, and my husband committed a crime. He defrauded our fellow church members of their money, and I'm trying to decide what I want to do about it."

Geronimo paused a moment before saying, "So this season in Bryce is to give yourself some breathing room. To think about whether you want to get back together with him or not, right?"

"Right."

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Mandy shrugged. "No, I guess not."

"Do you feel better?"

Mandy took a deep breath and let it out. "Yeah, sort of."

"Like a weight has been lifted?"

"Yeah, thanks Geronimo." Then she giggled. "I didn't expect to ever have to say that to *you*."

"So, have you made any decisions about your husband?"

"I think I'm going to ask for a divorce when I get back to Albuquerque. I can't be associated with him anymore."

"Makes sense. And you're not pledging immortal fealty to Orville, so it seems like you're giving yourself a clean slate. You can go anywhere and do anything you want, and no one can stop you."

Mandy nodded at the freeing truth of this remark, suddenly not certain why she'd been feeling so badly about herself in the first place. Had she really gone through all that angst to have it evaporate in one meaningful conversation with someone who really listened? Had her inner fears been created or, at the very least, fostered by not having someone she trusted to talk to about Jay?

She was back to that "no friends" issue. She had forced herself to keep all of her guilt and shame and fear bottled up

inside, and she wasn't even guilty of a crime. But having no friends ensured she was going to stew in her own juices.

She sat up straighter. She *was* giving herself a clean slate. She was starting anew. She hadn't realized she'd already made the divorce decision. Almost like she had kept it on the edge of her consciousness so she didn't have to pronounce its truth.

She smiled in real gratitude at Geronimo. Geronimo got the message and stood to go. "I guess my work here is done. But don't be such a stranger, Mandy. Come join us. Do things with us. We're not as scary as you think we are. And Jo misses you." She slipped on her shades. "*Adios.*"

Mandy stared after Geronimo in stupefaction and then looked down at the red and white swirled remnants of strawberries and cheesecake coating her plate.

Jo missed her?

BILL WAS SHAKING her. "Where's the gold, Polly?"

"What gold?"

"The gold Henry sold the farm for and the money he stole from me. Your mom had it stashed in a can."

"I don't know," Mandy said. Something about gold in a can was familiar but she couldn't bring to mind what it was.

She was much more concerned with whether he was going to kill her or not. Was *this* why he had killed Henry? Not the rape or the beating but for the gold he said was his? How could it be his?

"Don't you know where she buried it?"

"No."

He pulled a shovel from the wagon and handed it to her. "Get cracking."

The shovel vanished and she was astride a horse dressed in denim jeans and several layers of Henry's flannel shirts.

"We'll have to make for the San Juan Range of Colorado," Bill said. "The authorities won't track us that far. We'll turn east here."

"But that's impossible." Mandy said. To the east rose the high slick slope of the Hogsback, a stone wilderness of wildly-tilting, breast-shaped mounds of white rock. "Can't we follow this stream out instead?"

"No. It flows south and it'll eventually drain into the Colorado River."

"So?"

"How do you expect we're going to cross the Colorado, Polly?"



"Oh," Mandy said, "No bridges?"

Bill looked at her like she was crazy. "Get off your horse. You'll have to lead it."

It was dawn and Bill was kicking her awake. She rode through blackjack pines and aspens then faced a towering wall of desert rock, this one pulsating with reds, ochres, burgundies and, here and there, purple. The only way through was to follow a stream.

After the red landscape, there was stone and sand a color of white so brilliant that it blistered Mandy's senses. This barren white made way for piles of dirty yellow sand dunes that were succeeded by mounded hills of black-gray and rock formations so freakish she felt as if the merciless dark color was sucking energy from her sun-withered and horse-wearied body.

Finally, they rose up from another riverbed onto an empty lavender plateau. No hills, no mounds, no rivers, no scrub plants. She saw a desert without color, without canyons, and without water. Its very starkness frightened her. Along its far eastern flank, mountains rose up, steep and blue in the distance.

"At the base of those mountains, Polly," Bill said, "we'll find the Green River,"

"How long will it take to get there?" Mandy asked. Her body was so numb she couldn't feel it anymore.

"Probably a day of hard riding," Bill said.

"We won't have any water," Mandy protested. "We'll be away from streams."

"We'll stock up on water now and ride at night," Bill said. "Don't worry. We've gotten this far. We'll get to the Green."

## Chapter Fourteen

CARLOTTA HADN'T BEEN able to figure out a way to celebrate her new-found identity (which was the deepest darkest secret she had ever needed to keep) until one morning on break her eye was drawn to a print advertisement in one of the women's magazines that Ruby's Inn carried. The picture was of a sassy blonde model promoting shoes but just discernible above her slim white ankle were the multi-colored wings of a butterfly.

Butterflies are free, Carlotta thought and she knew exactly what she was going to do. She was certain there were no tattoo parlors in Panguitch so she dug out the Cedar City yellow pages

and found two such businesses listed there.

The following day she was off work. She would tell Cody she had an appointment with Dr. Acton in Cedar City. Since her eye-opening experience with Jo and Geronimo, she had been careful to behave as she always had around him, a bit more wary though, watching to see that she didn't say anything that might make him think she was different in some way. Or something that might make him start a fight. She only let out her joy at work where it could be mistaken for perkiness and be eaten up by the physical demands of the job.

As it was, Cody had been mad as hell when she had returned from the hike with a busted foot. Not only could she not work for a few days but he was peeved she had stayed away from home as long as she possibly could. That explosion had resulted in his pushing her while she stood at the kitchen table. She had lost her balance and fallen and he had left her to cry on the kitchen floor.

When she'd made the decision to go on the hike, she hadn't cared what Cody thought about her being away—the truth was she was trying to punish him for being hateful and controlling—but after making love with the other women, she knew she had to be careful and bide her time because she had to leave him. If, in the interim, he discovered her secret, he just might try to hurt her and that was a prospect she didn't want to face. Being shoved once was enough. She didn't want him to escalate to hitting and punching.

Of course, the sooner she left him the better, but it wasn't something she could do overnight. She needed to save up money and she needed to make plans. Where would she go? How would she get there? How would she find a job? Cody owned the car she drove to work as well as his truck. She couldn't simply drive away in the car. Besides, she would be too easy to trace that way.

But she was not one to simply dither. She had already memorized the Greyhound bus schedule and fees and in a few more months, she'd have enough money for the bus fare to Phoenix, the closest large metropolis she could disappear in, but not enough to put herself up when she got there. She had already spruced up her resume and written her resignation letter to Martin, although, of course, she hadn't given it to him yet. She had even decided which clothes to take. She would have to pack very light.

On some days, the plan sounded extreme even to her but Cody, she believed, was the kind of backwoods-thinking fellow she had to escape in the dead of night providing no clues to her whereabouts. A nice explanatory note perhaps so he didn't think

she had been abducted but nothing to encourage him to trail after her. When she was settled and could afford it, she would get a divorce lawyer to draw up papers and have them mailed to Cody. But she would wait until she was fairly sure he was over her and, hopefully, had moved on.

The tattoo, of course, was an extravagance but she needed something: something that would remind her of her new-found freedom and her new goals. The first of which—if she wanted to meet other women like herself—was to get the hell away from Cody.

MANDY AWOKE LATE on Friday morning, feeling emotionally more sane than she had in a long time, even if she had ridden a horse all night through an unimaginably bizarre stretch of Utah while in fear of being killed by a murderer.

She rolled out of her bunk and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Jo, she had noticed, was already gone from their room. The house was once again completely silent. Most everyone would be at work, except Jo, who had the same days off as she did. She wondered where the other woman had gone.

While staring in the mirror at her reflection, she remembered she had agreed to leave the Park with Orville by three for the trek to Cedar City. She would need to get dressed and coiffed (hah!) no later than two.

She didn't feel the same trepidation about the date that she had felt the day before. Geronimo had helped her realize it didn't matter if things went well or poorly with Orville. She wasn't marrying the guy, and if she didn't want to be intimate with him, all she had to do was say no.

No man could hold anything over her now. She was a free woman, as Geronimo had pointed out, and she planned to stay that way. The feeling was marvelous.

She showered and towed off while wondering what to do with her morning, those precious hours before two o'clock rolled around. She heard the tramp of feet in the hallway and the bathroom door swung open.

"Eeek," Mandy shrieked, whipping the towel around her naked form.

The intruder was Jo. "Oops," she wailed through the door she had already slammed. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Mandy stepped out into the hallway, the towel wrapped snugly around her, covering breasts to thighs. "It's no big deal, Jo. It's yours now, if you want it." She gestured the shorts-and-t-shirt-clad woman toward the narrow bathroom, its air still thick

with heat and steam.

"Thanks." Jo slipped into the bathroom, careful not to flirtatiously lift her eyebrows or otherwise convey any visible interest in the naked woman. Of course, it didn't mean said naked woman hadn't affected her.

But Jo had gone on working on a daily basis at the emotion-severing operation she needed to complete in order to not be affected by Mandy's presence. She had been partially successful, managing not to let it twang her heartstrings too much now. That didn't mean her libido didn't jump off the scale each time she encountered Mandy.

When she exited the bathroom, she made her way out into the Common Room, only to find a now-dressed Mandy sitting expectantly on the couch and looking like she had something important to share with Jo.

Jo pointed toward the dorm's front door. "I was just going out."

"Can I go with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, can I join you?"

Jo let out an exasperated sigh and dropped her hands. They slapped helplessly against her thighs.

"What's going on? I thought we weren't speaking to each other. I'm leaving you alone, remember?"

"I know. Because I'm hysterical and sensitive."

Jo held up a hand. "Wait a minute. I didn't say that."

"I know," Mandy said. "I did."

"You what?" Jo was confused and getting frustrated. She was tired of being emotionally played with by this woman.

Mandy leaned forward from her position on the couch. "Jo, I've acted stupidly. I've behaved like a homophobic asshole. I've been self-righteous and judgmental and just not very much fun."

Jo sensed this was a trap. Statements like that almost always were. She couldn't agree with Mandy, even if she knew her comments to be true. But Mandy read her mind before she could figure out what to say.

"Don't worry about replying. We both know it's the truth. I want to apologize, and I'm hoping we could try to be friends again."

"Even though I'm a lesbian?" Jo didn't want to talk about this thorny issue but she firmly believed this was the crux of Mandy's problem with her and if her sexual orientation was going to continue to freak Mandy out, there wasn't going to be any friendship.

"Yes, even though you're a lesbian." Despite every effort to

look squarely at Jo's face, her eyes still dropped at the mention of this taboo subject.

"Do you swear?"

"Yes. Cross my heart." Mandy ran her finger through the air, forming a symbolic X over her chest. Jo followed the movement of the hand that floated over the ripe swells of Mandy's chest and forced herself to quell igniting lust.

"I guess that will do for now," she retorted sarcastically, but she was secretly relieved Mandy was willing to put the issue on the shelf, at least for the time being. "So, what are your plans?"

"Orville and I are going to Cedar City tonight for *Much Ado About Nothing* but I'm certainly available for lunch."

"Then lunch it is. Did you have somewhere in mind?" Not that Jo was convinced Mandy would or could behave herself but she liked being around her so much, she was willing to chance it. No doubt massive painful rejection would once again be in the offing for her, but what the hell? She just wished she didn't like the woman as much as she did because it gave Mandy far too much power over her emotions. Why couldn't she feel this way about Geronimo or some other dyke? Why did it have to be a straight woman?

"How about somewhere in Panguitch?" Mandy said. "I haven't eaten anywhere there."

Jo glanced at her wristwatch. "I think we have enough time to get you there and back before you have to get ready for your date. There's a damn good burger place on the main drag."

"Terrific! And Jo," Mandy rose from the couch and laid a hand on Jo's arm, "thanks for being willing to take another chance on me."

"Uh, huh." Jo swallowed hard and put on a brave smile. This was all just going to lead to a lot of heartache. She could see it coming, but she couldn't stop herself.

BY URBAN STANDARDS, the Panguitch burger joint, while clean and still in operation, was stylistically long out of fashion, the kind of eatery you found only in small towns that time had passed by. Probably built sometime in the 1950s, the shop's sign outside still featured a leaning whipped custard cone, intended to lure drivers off the roadway for a rest stop in its cool interior. There was a drive-thru but Mandy and Jo went inside to order and then took their food out to the covered concrete patio. While they ate burgers bursting with lettuce, tomato, pickles and mustard, they watched cars drive up and down U.S. Highway 89 which constituted Panguitch's main drag.

Mandy was inordinately pleased with this first overture in her new friendship-making endeavor. She found it hard to keep her eyes from wandering over Jo's well-muscled body, and she would never want to admit to anyone that Jo's smile gave her butterflies in her stomach. But never again would she lack a friend to confide in. She had made this promise after talking to Geronimo at the diner, and she intended to keep this promise to herself.

"It may be the backwoods," Mandy finally commented, "but there are plenty of late-model trucks rolling up and down the street."

"Yeah, it's interesting. Rural people don't have much income and few prospects, but most of them still manage to buy a new truck every couple of years. I've never figured it out."

"It's probably all about status. It's how you show your neighbors you're prospering. Once upon a time, it would have been a new horse or a new wagon."

"I don't really care what my neighbors think."

"You must care what *somebody* thinks: Friends? Family? Geronimo?"

Jo laughed. "Geronimo and I are just buddies having fun. There's nothing serious between us. I have a group of weekend friends I go bowling or hiking with or whatever in San Bernardino, but we're all pretty independent thinkers. We try to stay out of each other's weekday lives."

"Family?"

"My mom is a college professor. Single, since my father passed away from a heart attack when I was seventeen. She's very popular, very vivacious. She travels as much as she can. I rarely see her. I told her I was gay during my sophomore year in college, and she said, 'That's nice, dear, at least you won't get pregnant before you're ready to.' She didn't think it was any more disturbing than if I'd told her I'd developed a fetish for purple underwear or something equally innocuous. My dad never knew."

Mandy wasn't sure how the conversation had turned to the issue of Jo's lesbianism, but maybe it was something she needed to or wanted to talk about.

"So, how did you know?"

"Know what?" Jo took a deep slurp of her soda.

"That you were gay."

"Oh, I'd always had crushes on girls. I liked being around girls. I was kind of a jock in high school. Seemed natural for me to fall for another redhead in my invertebrate biology lab. We had the exact same shade of hair and the same damn freckles. It

was kind of weird actually. But there were only three girls in that higher level lab anyway. When I kissed her I knew."

"So you never tried boys at all?" Mandy frowned.

"Boys? What are those?"

Mandy laughed, shaken out of her serious questioning mode. "All right, smarty," she teased. "Didn't you notice the other girls were trying the boys?"

"Sure. Of course." Jo grinned. "All lesbians notice that when they're twelve or thirteen. Doesn't mean it isn't damn mysterious to us."

Mandy playfully tapped Jo's shoulder. "You're just teasing."

"Well, yes and no. I never even *saw* the boys. They didn't exist. They were no different from the frogs—well, the living ones anyway—in biology class. Interesting enough in the way something foreign is interesting, but really, just kind of a curiosity. You acknowledge they exist and then you move past the issue and never notice them again."

"Wow. So you didn't need to try boys to prove to yourself that you weren't interested in them?"

"No, of course not. I mean, sure, there are some things you have to try in order to eliminate them from your interests, but there are lots of things you just know you're not interested in without ever trying them. I mean, you know you don't want to be a Mormon farmer in Utah, right?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Haven't tried it, have you?"

"Nope."

"On the other hand, if you've never had a tuna steak before or a Crème Brule, you wouldn't necessarily know if you'd like it or not without trying it. So you'd probably have to try it. But some things you just know."

"I agree. But it would seem to me your sexual orientation is such a big part of your life that you'd want to be sure—"

"I am sure."

"—that you made the right decision."

Jo laughed. "It wasn't a decision. That's that weirdness that the religious right puts out: that people *choose* to be gay. You don't choose to be gay. You are or you aren't. It's part of you, like having green eyes. It's not a choice."

"So," Mandy felt her heart beating faster, "you don't have to worry about it."

Jo frowned. "What do you mean 'worry about it'? I'm not worried about my sexuality."

"I mean, you don't have to make a decision about being gay or not. It's kind of decided already, in essence."

Jo's frown deepened. "Okay, sure, but I don't know what you're getting at."

Mandy felt her face flush. How could she explain her concerns to Jo when they hardly made sense to her? While it was becoming painfully clear she was much happier hanging around Jo than being with Orville, it didn't mean she was gay because if she was gay, wouldn't she know already? "I'm just saying that if you—a person, I mean, any person—were gay, they would kind of know it already. Right?"

Jo shrugged. "No, not necessarily. Lots of people don't figure it out right away. Most of what we learn growing up is intended to keep us in line. For women, that means marrying a man and having children. People who are gay discover their feelings or behaviors are not accepted, so they repress that information."

"You mean, they just forget about it?" Mandy wondered if she had just "forgotten" about it. Had her father locking her in the closet caused her to repress how she really felt about Trina? Had she felt something beyond friendship for Trina?

Jo was lecturing on. "Repression is a pretty common reaction. Add to that the fact that 'Are you gay' isn't exactly a question on a multiple choice quiz in high school so you may not even know alternate sexualities exist."

Mandy nodded. "I guess you're right about that."

"Nobody—except possibly someone else who's gay and who is concerned for you—is going to go out of their way to tell you about it. Straight people think gay people are out there 'recruiting' young people all the time but for the most part it's a load of hooley."

Mandy felt deflated. Her shaky supposition that if she was gay she would know already had been shattered by Jo. She was back to square one.

"Whoa," Jo said. "You look stricken. I'm sorry. That was quite the lecture. I guess I get that ability from my mom." She looked quizzically at Mandy. "I don't think I answered your question, though. Whatever it may have been."

Mandy flapped her hand, thinking repression wasn't such a bad strategy after all. "I don't remember what it was either." She tried for a laugh but it came out sounding high and flat. "We'd probably better head back, anyway."

"Right." Jo stood. Together, they cleaned up the mess of oily papers and napkins from their burger feast and walked back to Jo's Jeep.

"This was fun," Mandy said as they crossed the asphalt, hoping Jo would believe the outing had been a pleasant one, no



matter how much it had added to her already existing confusion.

"Yes, indeed." Jo pulled down her shades, effectively hiding her eyes, "fun."

Mandy could only wonder what Jo had made of such an awkward finish to their first real talk in ages.

## Chapter Fifteen

MANDY WAS VIBRATED nearly to death by her journey to Cedar City in Orville's decrepit truck. The high drone of the engine, the whistle of air through the busted floorboards, and his focus on the gear changing required by the manual transmission to carry them up and down the steep mountain ridges made it impossible to carry on a conversation. She considered it a blessing, even while her teeth felt like they might rattle out of their sockets, and instead mulled over her unsatisfactory discussion with Jo.

Without ever getting involved with boys, Jo had "always known" she was gay, but apparently there were other people who, while also gay, never figured it out. What a contradiction in terms. How could one person be so gay they didn't even need proof while some other person—presumably equally gay—was so dense they didn't know to raise the question?

On top of that, there wasn't any decision involved. You were either gay or you weren't. The crux of the problem seemed to be figuring it out. Which was complicated by the fact that no one was able or willing to tell you. Then Jo had made that completely mysterious remark about recruiting. What was that all about?

In some ways, the conversation harkened back to the one Mandy had had with Luisa on the beach at Calf Creek Falls, where Luisa had voiced the same view that it must be hard to figure out you were gay.

Trying to make sense of all this wasn't helping Mandy much. Combined with the spine-jarring ride and the constant whine of sound and the whirl of dirty air through the truck, all she succeeded in doing was giving herself a headache.

Finally, in an act of mercy toward herself, she fell asleep. Her next sensation was Orville's hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake. "We're at the steakhouse, Mandy. C'mon."

Mandy felt it was revoltingly early to be eating steak as it wasn't half past five, but she told the critical voice in her brain

to shut up. At the same time, she urged her body to get into gear, most essentially, to produce a reassuring smile for Orville when he reappeared at her door.

"Good nap?"

"Yes, I had a headache."

"Gone?"

"Seems to be."

"Great. Might have been all the changes of altitude." He held open the passenger door, and she climbed out. The restaurant wasn't anything fancy, just a chain buffet restaurant that offered steak in addition to soups, salads, vegetables and desserts.

When Orville had picked her up at the dorm, she had stated in no uncertain terms that she would pay for dinner as he'd paid for the play tickets. "I won't go unless you agree," she had told him. She wanted the event to be on a more equal footing—more closely approximating the old tradition of 'going Dutch'—thereby leaving her the freedom to decide if she did or didn't want to bed him again rather than his having in his mind that she owed him sexual favors in return for footing the evening's bill.

That plan was crude, she knew, but many men perceived the dating arrangement in just that manner. Women's liberation hadn't done much to change their minds. He hemmed and hawed, but finally acquiesced, accepting that she wasn't going to be swayed. His agreement that she would pay for their dinners had given her a much needed measure of self-respect.

They were seated in a comfortable booth against the window that looked out on the parking lot to the west but the afternoon sun was bright enough that the wood blinds were turned to block out the light. The buffet was grandiose, and she was hungrier than she realized. Just as had happened the previous Friday night, eating had the effect of relaxing Orville sufficiently for him to become mildly voluble.

"What did you do yesterday?" he asked. "I came by but you weren't at the Women's Dorm."

"I went to Ruby's Inn to watch the square dancing."

"Ah." He sliced at his steak. "That's a pretty serious sport in these parts. Did you try any new trails during the day?"

"No. I think I've hiked everything now except for the backcountry. I was here actually."

"Here?" He gestured around the cowboy-decorated dining room crowded with families eating an early dinner.

"Not at this restaurant, but I drove down here and went to the library."

"Oh. Yeah, it's hard to find a book in our neck of the woods but I could've loaned you something. I've got Clive Cussler and

John Grisham."

"I needed to do some research."

"What for?" He forked up another mouthful of steak.

Finally, she thought, she could tell someone about the coins. "Remember a couple of weeks ago when Jo and I and some of the other women hiked to Calf Creek Falls?"

"Sure. That waitress from Ruby's sliced her foot and you guys had to cut your trip short." He chortled. "Ha! Cut your trip short! Get it?"

Mandy smiled. Men thought they were so clever. "Yeah, I got it."

"So?"

"So, Carlotta cut her foot on an old tin can that had some coins in it. But I couldn't figure out what they were so I went down to the library in Panguitch— "

"— but they didn't have any coin books so you had to drive over to Cedar."

"Right, but the local library here had some coin books, and I looked them up."

"The coins worth anything?" He had finished his steak and now dug into a mound of peas.

Mandy felt alarm bells go off in her head. She was interested in the coins themselves but she forgot that value was the first thing everyone else would focus upon. What had made her bring up this topic? A pathetic need for attention? She stared down at her half-empty plate. "A little, I guess."

Orville laughed. "Mandy, I'm not gonna steal them from you."

She exhaled and relaxed. She was with Orville, not Jay who, if he had known about them, would have already taken the coins from her.

"That's good to know, Orville. Sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. Actually, I've been wondering more about where they might have come from than their value."

"What were they? U.S. coins, foreign coins, what?"

"One is a U.S. coin. The others are...um, they're Mormon coins."

Orville eyed her across the table and gave a low whistle. "Mormon, huh? I'd be willing to bet that's pretty rare. If the Mormons minted coins, they couldn't have done it for too long or made too many. Maybe from the 1840s to the 1870s, thereabouts."

Mandy raised both eyebrows.

"I'm right, huh?" Orville was clearly enjoying himself.

"One was minted in 1849; the other in 1860."

"They're worth something."

"Yes, I'll admit they're fairly valuable. But where did they come from, Orville?"

He shrugged. "Pioneers passing through. They fell out of a saddlebag or a pocket."

"They were in a can, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I forgot." His eyes looked thoughtfully into the distance. "How many coins did you say you found?"

"I didn't say. But three."

"Three? Huh. You'd think there'd have been more. Tell me more about the container."

"It was kind of mashed and had been in the water, so I thought maybe it corroded and the other coins—if there were other coins—fell out."

"Or someone came across it, took what they wanted and tossed the thing, leaving it for your friend to walk on."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why leave three coins behind? Why not just take the whole thing?"

Orville shrugged. "Who knows. What kind of can was it? For soup or what?"

"No, it was a baking powder can."

If Orville's hair had not receded so completely off his forehead, the startled eyebrows he now raised would have vanished beneath his hairline. As it was, they almost disappeared beneath his fancy dress cowboy hat.

"Why do you say that?"

"I could make out some of the letters."

"Holy shit," Orville said.

"What?"

"Maybe you came across one of Utah's hidden treasure caches."

"What?" Mandy shouted. When she saw heads turning at other tables, she leaned toward him and half-whispered, "What in hell are you talking about?"

One of the steakhouse's dual-purpose servers/bus-persons passed by, and Orville caught her attention. "Can we get some coffee? Cream too."

She nodded without comment and headed away to fill their request. After-dinner coffee was complimentary at the steakhouse. Orville smiled at Mandy. "Hey, how 'bout some dessert? They've got everything from carrot cake to cobbler to—"

"Orville!" Mandy hissed.

He grinned. "All right. I'll tell you about it, Mandy. Over dessert."

THE ELIZABETHAN GREENSHOW – with its dancing ladies and strolling minstrels – had been a delight, with the play even more so. After experiencing Shakespeare in the intimacy of a replicated Globe-style theatre, it was hard for Mandy to imagine enjoying it any other way.

The theatre design brought the action and the actors so close to the theatre-goers, it was as if the audience were an element of the play. *Much Ado About Nothing*, while it held its own evil jealous prince, spine-tingling moments of tension, and even captured an element of grief-filled loss, was mostly a play of elaborate put-downs, plays on words, ribald jokes, and, at last, a happy ending.

She hadn't expected to have such a good time but Orville had been a gentleman, and the entertainment had been superb. Not something, she admitted, that she'd ever actually experienced. Jay had not only been close with money, but jealous of her time. She had never, after high school, been to a play or an evening's entertainment that wasn't connected to a business function for the college or for some scheme of Jay's.

She smiled in the noisy dark of the truck. Despite a number of emotional upheavals, this summer in the woods was turning out to be quite a memorable and mind-expanding time for her. She was learning how to handle herself in the real world among other people. She was developing life experience and, most important, confidence.

But now, after a most adventuresome evening, the rattle of Orville's truck was again lulling Mandy to sleep.

When the rumbling vibrations of the old truck engine fell silent, Mandy jerked awake in the darkness. She straightened against the torn seat. "Where are we?"

"My house," Orville replied.

"Your house? Weren't you taking me home?"

"C'mon, Mandy. The night is still young."

"It's like two a.m., Orville."

"Yeah, but your shift tomorrow doesn't start until noon."

Mandy reached for the door handle, "I'm not making out with you at this hour. I'm not into necrophilia, and you shouldn't be either."

"I don't know what that is."

"Look it up in the dictionary." She had managed to push open the sticking door and put her feet on the soft earth of his driveway. The gentle earthy smells of the wooded night wafted into her nose.

"Hey," he called across the seat, "I can give you a ride home."

"Don't bother. It's just a short walk through the woods."

Orville got out. She stood, squinting and trying to get her bearings as he came around to her side of the truck. Which direction exactly was it?

"It's that way," Orville pointed, reading her mind, while at the same time grabbing her around the waist. She allowed the kiss. After all, there wasn't much she could do to stop him, and she supposed he did deserve something for providing such an entertaining evening. Finally, after what seemed an eternity to her, he released her mouth.

"Do you want me to walk you?" he asked.

"No. I can see the path, now that my eyes have adjusted."

"Not worried about bears?"

"There are no bears at Bryce."

"Once upon a time. But there are still mountain lions."

"Charming. Goodnight, Orville. It really was a lovely evening."

"Yep." He was already turning away toward his porch. *What a gallant*, she thought. But taking her cue, she started toward the lighter strip of dirt that wound through the tall ponderosa pines and up a dark, gently sloping hill. At the top of the hill, about an eighth of a mile away, was the Women's Dorm.

She had gone no more than fifty yards when, traversing a path in the deep dark of the woods as she was, she remembered the disturbing story Orville told over their dessert about one of Utah's lost treasures. The tale, known as the Baking Powder Can Cache, involved a teenage girl in the 1880s hooking up with a boyfriend and murdering her parents in an attempt to steal their store of gold.

Clearly, it wasn't the story she'd been dreaming. For one thing, Polly hadn't murdered anyone and, for another, Bill wasn't her boyfriend. Unless the historical account was skewered.

In any event, Orville told her they had not been able to locate the gold because on each night of the family's journey, the girl's mother had buried the can the treasure was stored in. That, Mandy feared, did match up. The Cache, according to local legend, had never been found, but the murders were supposed to have occurred at Calf Creek Falls. Mandy hadn't had the nerve to ask how the couple had been murdered, and even if Orville knew, he didn't mention it.

Off to her right, Mandy heard a brushing sound, like that of an animal moving through pine needles and fallen leaves. She stopped and hoped she wasn't visible to whatever it was that was shuffling about. Maybe she was wrong and there *were* bears

at Bryce. If a mountain lion was stalking her, she doubted it would make an iota of noise. In a case like that, she would be dead before she knew what had happened. Not helping any, her heart pounded a lively enough tattoo in her chest to wake the dead.

The slowly moving animal emerged from between two trees, and Mandy breathed a sigh of relief to see one of Bryce's numerous mule deer and her fawn. On sensing Mandy, the sweet-faced creature flicked her ears forward in inquiry and wrinkled her nose. The deer in the Park, while not tame animals, seemed less frightened of humans than Mandy imagined they would be in other forests. Almost as if they knew they were protected. Except from cars, of course, whose owners didn't see them and stop in time. Roadkill was always a problem.

Mandy whispered, "Sorry," at the deer and then tiptoed by the adult and her baby. Once she was past them, she stepped up her pace, and in just a few more minutes reached the back door of the dorm. She bounded up the steps, slipped her key into the lock, and let herself into the sleeping house.

MANDY LAY ON the sand in a secluded grove of willows, naked, her hair spread out around her on the ground to dry. Her skin had been cloaked with dirt from the hard riding and her hair had let loose several pounds of dust into the muddy red waters of the Green River.

Mandy heard a shout and she leapt up and peered through her wall of willows. Bill was wrestling with two other men on the river's beach. Mandy shrank back into the grove and turned to grab her clothes.

A big man—easily six feet tall—crashed through the bushes and grabbed for her. She ran but there was nowhere to go except back into the river. The man followed her in, grabbed her by her loose hair and dunked her under the swirling muddy water. She swung toward him, ripping her hair from his grasp, and punched him in the face with all her might. He reeled back and she made for deeper water.

The man, bleeding heavily from his nose, pursued her. Out in the middle, the currents were much stronger and Mandy realized she'd made a mistake. She would drown out here. Swimming with all the force she could muster, she angled back toward shore. Another man was running down the beach to intercept her. She neared the shore and the man's arms closed around her mud-slickened body and dragged her onto the beach. She sobbed and struggled for breath.

"Hey, hey," Jo's voice rang in her ear. A hand on her shoulder shook her into wakefulness. "Are you okay?"

Mandy sat up in her bunk and blinked her eyes awake. "Whoa."

"Are you breathing?"

"Yes." Mandy's skin was clammy with sweat.

"You sounded like you were choking or something." Jo was dressed only in boxer shorts and a ribbed A-line muscle shirt. Every curve of her breasts and nipples was visible beneath the inadequate shirt. Her hair was an appealing early morning tangle of red curls running riot in all directions, and she smelled sweetly of sleep.

"Sorry to wake you," Mandy said. "I was drowning...in a dream." Damn these dreams! What was going to happen next?

"Yeah," Jo shifted back and leaned against the bureau which was only inches from their bunks, "I've had that happen before too."

"You probably saved my life."

"I doubt that." Jo grinned.

"I don't. I was being swept away by the current."

"Maybe you're right. That could have gotten a little crazy. I might have had to swim out to get you!"

They both laughed. "Thanks for the gallantry," Mandy said. "It's more than I can say for Orville."

Jo quirked an eyebrow. "Didn't he treat you right last night?" She jerked a hand to her mouth as if she regretted the question the moment she said it.

Mandy pulled her knees up under the covers and wrapped her arms around her shins. "Actually, he was quite the gentleman. But I guess he thought I was going to sleep with him as a reward and he took me to his house."

Jo shook her head. "That's our Orville. Didn't he even walk you home?"

"He offered, but I refused. I got startled by something in the bushes, of course."

Jo laughed. "Of course. What was it? Not a bobcat, I hope."

"Bobcat? He mentioned mountain lions."

"Mountain lions, bobcats, cougars, pumas, catamounts. It's all the same beast with many names. *Puma concolor* to be scientifically precise."

"Nope, just a doe and her fawn. Thank God!"

They both laughed again, then Mandy tossed off her covers. "I guess I might as well get up. Since I forced you awake in order to save my drowning fool self, can I reduce my indebtedness by taking you to breakfast?"



Jo shrugged. "My shift starts at ten today, so it's possible." She looked inquisitively at Mandy. "What about your start time?"

"Noon."

"Fabulous."

## Chapter Sixteen

ONCE SETTLED IN at Ruby's, Mandy and Jo both ordered eggs, potatoes, bacon, and coffee. Mandy related the adventures of the evening before, and Jo told her of the previous year's escapades at the Shakespeare Festival when five of the park aides had gotten so plastered in Cedar City that they couldn't drive back to Bryce. Two of the party had tried to drive and promptly been booked for DWI by the Garfield County Sheriff, and the other three who stayed behind had missed the start of their duty shifts the following day.

"God only knows where they got the alcohol. Utah's practically a dry state!" Mandy grinned. This conversation was going way better than the one the day before.

"There's a state liquor store in Cedar City. The local preachers had a heyday; the evils of alcoholism vividly proven and all that. It was a pain in the ass for us, though," Jo said.

Mandy learned that while the debacle hadn't wiped out the entire Bryce Canyon park aide staff, it had certainly decimated it. Jo and the other park rangers had to collect fees in the entrance station, man the register in the Visitor Center, and empty campground money canisters for a day and intermittently thereafter. The administration had not been pleased, to say the least.

"Did anyone get fired?" Mandy asked after she stopped laughing.

"No, but the whole lot of them were grounded, their pay was docked, and they walked around with their tails between their legs for the rest of the summer. The DWIs had to go to court and then to mandatory classes and do community service. They were docked for every second they didn't work and to avoid getting fired, agreed to compensate the Park for the lost employment time by paying for a temporary park aide hire to help cover their shifts. They lost a lot of money. You can imagine they didn't get re-hired this year."

"Wow."

"I never could decide if Rex Anderson was in heaven or hell that summer. He hates disruption, but by the end of it, he almost seemed to be enjoying himself. After all, it didn't matter what he did to that crew, they couldn't complain. They were lucky to have jobs."

"What an awful tale!"

"Yeah," Jo said. "It made for a much crazier summer. This one has been tame by comparison."

"Speaking of awful tales, Jo, I was wondering if you'd ever heard this one. It's something Orville told me last night." Mandy had already finished her plate of food and was applying jam to her toast. "Have you ever heard of the Baking Powder Can Cache?"

"Sure. Daniel Barton tells a version of that treasure story at the campfire circle when he does his 'Legend & Lore of Southern Utah' campground presentation. He's got about eight local treasure trove or lost gold stories. He'll do four one night and the other four the next time he does the presentation. Why?"

"What's the version you've heard?"

"Some girl and her boyfriend kill the girl's parents and try to steal their gold but it's buried in a baking powder can which they can't find. Subsequently, tracked down by a local posse, brought to justice, and hanged. End of story. Sometime in the 1880's, if I remember correctly."

Mandy swallowed hard. Hanged? Was she going to be hanged next? "Do you remember where the parents were killed?"

"Not a clue."

"Orville said they were killed at Calf Creek Falls."

Jo shrugged. "Popular watering hole. Makes sense."

"Jo!"

"What?" She looked up startled from her plate of scrambled eggs.

"We were just at Calf Creek Falls!"

"So? It's not 1880 or anything."

"Jo, we found some coins in a can!"

"Shit." Jo pushed her plate aside as if she could no longer face the eggs. "You think we found some of the gold from the Baking Powder Can Cache? Isn't that a little unlikely?"

"Why? It isn't as if people *don't* find treasure. Besides, I went down to the library and researched the coins."

"What did you discover?" Jo took a gulp of her coffee.

"The coins are from the latter half of the 1800s. They're worth a lot of money."

Jo's eyes went wide but she didn't say anything.

"But what's really bothering me," Mandy went on, "is that I'm having horrible dreams."

"You mean like last night? You were drowning. Those people were hanged, not drowned. Well, I think they were, anyway."

"The night we found the coins, I had a dream about an ax murder happening right there on the beach. Snippets of it repeated the next night. You guys had already hiked out with Carlotta. But I've had other dreams too. It's almost as if I'm that girl from the 1880's."

"Mandy, that's creepy."

"You're telling me! Do you think I'm crazy? Do you think the dreams are linked to the coins?"

"I always think of you as level-headed. How could there be a connection? That would be really woo-woo. We're in Utah, not California!"

Mandy laughed. Jo was always finding some way to make her laugh. "All right, smarty. But maybe I should talk to Daniel Barton. Maybe he'd know more about the treasure and about what happened to the people."

"I think that's a great idea. Where's your first shift today?"

"Campgrounds."

"Perfect. I'll let him know you're looking for him."

IN THE EARLY hours of Saturday morning, Judith quietly packed her personal belongings. Fortunately, Becca wasn't at the Women's Dorm. She had gone down to Tropic after her shift on Friday to stay overnight with a girlfriend, as Saturday was a day off for her. When Judith was finished packing, she carried her single suitcase outside and locked it into the trunk of the sturdy Honda Civic she had bought for herself when she returned from her Bolivian mission.

She took a shower and dressed in her usual Park Service clothes, readying herself for her seven a.m. shift in the campground. Standing in the dorm's kitchen, she brewed a cup of the no-longer-forbidden drink—coffee—inhaling the savory odor and having a final look around. In this narrow room, Jo had, in a sense, forced her to realize there was a bigger world than the narrow one in which she had been living.

She didn't expect it would be easy emotionally to quit her job but that was what she was going to do when her last shift ended at four p.m. that afternoon. After she left Rex Anderson's office, she would get into her car and drive out of the Park and

Utah and the Church forever. California ought to be big enough for her.

"YOU CAN'T LEAVE," Rex Anderson said the moment she arrived in his office and announced she was quitting. "We're only halfway through the season. Who's going to take your shift?"

Judith hadn't thought of that, hadn't looked at it from his bureaucratic perspective. "Are you saying I can't quit?"

"Judith, we're out in the backwoods here. It isn't like we can get an overnight replacement. You know, someone trained who we can get background-checked, fitted into a uniform, and slapped into the job in thirty seconds or less." He gave her a disgusted look. "You remember what happened last year."

Judith did remember. Who didn't? The five park aides who got drunk were going to be a legend in the Park for decades to come. She also remembered how much Mr. Anderson hated any disruption to his finely-tuned and carefully-balanced personnel system.

"Superintendent Ash nearly fired me over those shenanigans."

"I'm just one person, Mr. Anderson. Losing me is hardly comparable to the situation with the Feckless Five. I wouldn't be in here if it wasn't critical."

"What it is? Boyfriend problems? Surely not something with the Church? You've always been so—"

"What? Compliant? I'm just beginning to realize that's not much of a reputation to be carrying around. Utah's killing me, Mr. Anderson. I have to get out of here. I need a life."

Rex rolled his eyes. "Look, Judith, you're just young, is all. This is going to pass. Why don't you take a few extra days off? I'll find someone to cover for you."

"Mr. Anderson, that's not it. This isn't just a passing fancy."

"What makes you so sure it isn't a passing fancy and that you aren't going to regret it later? If you do this, you're going to be throwing away a lot of what you've gained and upsetting a lot of people. If it's about getting a life, we're only talking the difference of a month here. In a month, the summer season will be over. You can go quietly about your business and no one will know you had this little crisis in the middle of things. I'm certainly not going to tell. I mean, Judith, think about this."

"I have thought about it," she said, gritting her teeth.

"Judith, look, you worked for us last season. You're capable and smart. Your cousin's here. You've got family and friends up

the wazoo in Tropic. Not to mention your Bishop. What is he going to say?" He thumped his fingers for emphasis on his government-issue gray metal desk.

"You see," Judith's hands were shaking with emotion but she was trying to hide them from the supervisor's gaze, "that's just it. My life is about everyone else. It isn't about me. It's never been about me. That's exactly why I have to leave. The Church has been running my life since I was a baby, Mr. Anderson. I know exactly what the Bishop will say. He's already given me my final warning!"

Her mouth was dry and her tongue felt clumsy in her mouth. There was a hot sensation in the back of her throat but she ordered herself not to cry. She was going to get through this without crying.

"Final warning?"

"It's get married or hit the road. I don't want to get married. I want to get a life."

"Oh, Christ." Rex leaned back in his chair and glared at the inoffensive ceiling. "So it is a Church matter after all. Look, as far as the Park Service is concerned, you're a fully-emancipated adult. We don't care if you're married or single. You can do whatever you want."

"Right, and what I want to do is quit."

With a sign of resignation, Rex got up, drew out the top drawer of the filing cabinet and yanked a file from it. "All right. If the Bishop asks, I'll tell him I did my darndest to discourage you."

"You do that," Judith said.

He sat again and opened the file folder that contained her personnel papers. He paged through it, found the document he was looking for and handed it across to her.

"Sign this."

She picked up a pen and signed, her eyes so blurry with the tears that she refused to shed she couldn't read the text. She passed back the paper.

He took it and left the small undecorated office which held only his desk, his chair, a filing cabinet, a bookcase and two visitor's chairs. She grabbed a tissue from the box on his desk, blew her nose and wiped her tears.

He was gone for such a long time, she hoped he wasn't calling out the enforcement rangers or something of that ilk. Eventually, he returned and handed her an envelope.

"Your last paycheck, Judith. I wish to hell you wouldn't do this."

She nodded, sitting stock still in the chair, afraid to speak.

He touched her shoulder and she thought it was a gesture of empathy but he tore at the National Park Service patch ironed onto her shirt until it came off with a sharp ripping sound. "I need your badge too. You can keep the name tag."

With trembling fingers, she unpinned the badge from her left front shirt pocket, closed the latch, and placed it in his open palm.

"All right," he said. "That's it. You're free to go."

She stood. "Can you do one last thing for me?"

"What is it?"

She handed him an envelope of her own. "Can you put this note in Becca's inbox? I don't want her to worry. I meant to leave it in her room this morning but I forgot."

"Okay." His lips were pursed and he gave a shake of his head. "I'm sorry you have to do this."

"Me, too." She turned to go.

"But," he said and thrust out his hand for her to shake, "good luck anyway."

"Thank you, Mr. Anderson." She grasped his hand and realized from looking in his eyes that he didn't hate her, just regretted her going.

"Rex," he said.

"Rex," she repeated. "Good bye. Thanks again."

He nodded in acknowledgement. "Drive safely. I wouldn't want you getting killed on the way to your new life."

Judith bit her lip to keep the tears from starting again and left the tiny utilitarian office.

## Chapter Seventeen

MANDY WAS CHECKING that the scraped-up pickup camper parked in Space Sixty-Two had a numbered pistachio green tab in evidence on the dusty dashboard. The tab would match a green envelope containing this camper's overnight fee which would have been dropped into the Park Service brown painted steel column cemented into the ground at the head of the campground. Of course, a tab on the dashboard didn't always mean the cash was in the column. Sometimes people cheated. She was straining to see over the camper's windshield when Daniel Barton stopped beside her.

"Hi. Did they pay?"

"I don't know. I can't see a tab anywhere." She eased off her tip-toes, exasperated.

"It's on the passenger side." Daniel pointed. He was way taller than she was. He had bright blue eyes and lips ever-quirked in a friendly smile. She wondered why she never met *this* kind of man. Why instead she seemed to get stuck with the Jays and Orvilles of the world. He was the quintessential Park Service ranger, a biologist by training and, like many seasonal rangers, a high school teacher during the remainder of the year.

"Jo said you were looking for me."

"I was. I mean, I am."

"What do you need?"

She had no idea why she was suddenly tongue-tied. "It's kind of odd, really. I want to know about the Baking Powder Can Cache. Jo said it was one of the treasure tales you tell at your campfire talks."

"I do." His eyes smiled. "What do you want to know?"

"Do we know for sure the murder happened at Calf Creek Falls?"

"Yes, it's documented in the court records. I mean, not the murders themselves, but about a week afterwards, a cattleman from Cannonville who was running his cows up to the Falls for a drink saw the turkey vultures feasting. He found the wagons and makeshift burials and captured and took possession of the wandering horses. Illegal really, but then who wants good, broken horses going to waste? The wagons were useless to him. Anyway, when he got back home a number of days later, he reported the bodies to the then-Bishop of Cannonville who rode over for a look. The Bishop was able to identify the bodies. He had talked to Henry Placer when he passed through the village and remembered telling Henry the country to the east was impassable, but Henry had been adamant about following the river's course."

"Was he crazy to go that way?"

"Damn near. Once he reached the Falls, he was boxed in. The only way out would be to return to the canyon's entry and then try to cross miles of slickrock—impossible with wagons—or go south down the Escalante River which would eventually drain into the Colorado, but would also become impassible long before that. If he hadn't gotten murdered, he would have eventually had to come back to Cannonville with his tail between his legs. It's an unforgiving country."

His description was eerily familiar to Mandy. "I feel squeamish asking this, but how was Henry murdered?"

"With an ax. His wife was shot."

Mandy shivered, recalling the graphic details in her dream.

"Sorry." Daniel patted her on the shoulder. "Their deaths are a bit gruesome."

She didn't want to tell him exactly how gruesome for her, so she changed the subject.

"What about the Cache? Is it documented?"

"The daughter reported its existence in court and the failure of herself and her boyfriend to locate it."

She wished everyone would quit saying Bill had been Polly's boyfriend. She was sure it wasn't true. She, or rather, Polly was terrified of the man. Was it an assumption on their part or was it reported that way in the court records? Was she merely dreaming her own version of the story?

"I think I may have found the Cache," she said.

Daniel Barton threw his head back and burst into laughter. "That's going to change my campfire talk considerably! What makes you think you found it?"

"I found a can at the Falls and there were some old coins in it."

"That's intriguing. Lots of coins?"

"Three."

Daniel whistled. "Impressive. Maybe the rest of them are out there too. Or maybe you stumbled across something else. You never know with treasure lore."

Mandy frowned. "Do you think there should be more than three coins?"

Daniel shrugged. "The daughter said her father had gotten paid nearly \$500 for his rich river bottom land. That's a fair number of coins, even if it's all in the \$20 dollar gold pieces of the day. Lots more if it was in small coins."

"Damn." Mandy muttered.

Daniel laughed again. "Hey, if you decide to go back out there to look for the treasure, you'd better file a mining claim with the BLM first. It's one thing to find something on the surface; it's another thing to go digging around an established recreation area. You know if it was on NPS land, we wouldn't permit it at all."

She nodded. "I understand."

His face grew serious and he laid an avuncular hand on her shoulder, "Look, Mandy, just be careful. If some nut case gets hold of this information, there could be a rush of treasure seekers at the Falls. That wouldn't be good for anyone."

BECCA DIDN'T RETURN to the Women's Dorm until midnight on Sunday. She expected to fall into bed and get a



couple of solid hours of sleep before her first-day-back work shift started in the morning. She pushed gently at the door of her and Judith's room, not wanting to awaken her cousin.

She put her bag down on the bare hardwood floor and set her guitar case in the corner where she always placed it. The singing and praying had been particularly strong today, and she'd been incredibly pleased with her masterful strumming (even if it was a sin to think of herself so grandly.)

Her only disappointment was that Judith hadn't been there. When she asked the Bishop about her absence, he had told her that Judith was taking some time away from the Tropic Ward to think about her future. He assured Becca she was attending services elsewhere.

A soft light filtered in from the un-curtained windows, not electric illumination, but the moon nearing first quarter. For some reason, in the half-light, the room looked different to her. More barren, somehow. The strangeness made her glance toward Judith's bed, and she realized it was empty.

Empty and made-up, like no one lived there at all. She stared down at the crisp line of the coverlet. Then she looked at the foot of the bed. The bag Judith carried all her stuff in wasn't there either. Becca plunked down on her own bed. For some reason, Judith hadn't come home. Where was she? Becca pulled back the cheap metal shutters covering the closet and saw that Judith's side was bare.

Shit! Becca knew never to say shit, but right at the moment, it was the best word she could muster. She flew out of the room to the door of Jo's and Mandy's tiny cubicle. It was hard to fit a fly in that room, in her view, but somehow those two managed.

She banged loudly on the door. "Hey!" She repeated the process a few times until the door was opened by a frowning, half-naked—at least in Becca's mind, who would never be caught dead in anything less than a robe—Jo and a baffled Mandy, who had only managed to open one eye so far.

"Where is Judith?"

"What?" Jo mumbled.

"Judith, my cousin. She's not in her room."

"What time is it?" Mandy asked.

"After midnight," Becca snapped, looking at her glow-in-the-dark wristwatch. "Have you seen my cousin today?"

"Wasn't it her day off?" Jo asked, squinting at this strange and heavy-set apparition filling their narrow dark hallway sounding like she'd eaten an alligator for dinner.

"No, so she should be here. Didn't you two notice she hadn't come in?"

Jo glanced at Mandy and paused to grin at her roommates's dishevelment. If anything Mandy was more beautiful and sexy all tousled like that. But this was hardly the moment to be thinking about sex. "Uh, we're not her keepers, Becca. Maybe she stayed in Tropic or something."

"I was in Tropic!" Becca roared. The noise, apparently, had been sufficient to rouse Geronimo, who tore down the hall toward them, her night stick raised over her shoulder. "What the fuck is going on?"

Jo stepped into the hallway, her arms up in a 'stop' gesture. "Becca says Judith isn't in their room, and she's asking where she is."

"How in the fuck would we know?" Geronimo apparently wasn't someone who awoke peacefully. Perhaps she had chawed down on an alligator as well. Jo didn't think she was actually going to hit Becca with the night stick, but she didn't doubt that Geronimo wanted to.

"Can you stop using that language?" Becca said.

"Can you stop waking everyone up?" Geronimo retorted.

"Where's my cousin?" Becca shouted, completely undeterred by Geronimo.

"We don't know," the other three women chorused.

"Well, I'm going to find out." Becca stomped toward the Common Room.

"What are you going to do?" Geronimo asked, trailing her, the nightstick at her side. "If you're looking for the police, that's me."

"I'm calling the Super." Becca was already dialing the phone.

"You can't call the Super at midnight!" Geronimo shouted.

"Too late," Becca snarled. "He's picking up."

"Oh, God." Geronimo bopped herself on the forehead with her nightstick. Mandy and Jo stopped behind Geronimo, almost clinging together, not quite wanting to leave the relative protection of the hallway. Jo figured Mandy wasn't even noticing the physical closeness, as sleepy-headed as she seemed to be.

"Jeezus," Geronimo muttered, "you are a nut case." Becca put down the receiver.

"What did he say?" Geronimo demanded.

"He said he'd look into it and call right back."

"Damn, he's probably paging me." Geronimo ran for her room, returning momentarily with the dormant pager in hand.

Janet and Thea followed her, trailing into the hall, bathrobes clutched around their bodies.

"What's going on?" Janet asked, tossing back her perfectly smooth mane of black hair. Jo wondered how she could look like that in the middle of the night.

"Becca's throwing a fit about Judith's whereabouts. Go back to bed. There's nothing you can do," Jo said.

Thea, her eyes wide with fright, immediately headed back to their room, and after a moment, with a shrug and fresh toss of her head, Janet followed suit.

Geronimo's pager erupted and she grabbed the Common Room phone, dialing the blinking number and then hitting the speaker phone button. "I think Becca should hear whatever it is the Super has to say to me." She dropped the receiver back into the cradle.

Jo and Mandy remained stock still in the hallway, absorbed by the tableau in the Common Room as if they had ringside seats at a circus.

The Super did not answer the phone. Instead, Rex Anderson's voice roared through the speakers without any courteous preamble. "Wilkins, what the fuck is going on down there?"

"Judith's not here, sir, and Becca's having— " she glared at the stone-faced woman, who was probably on the verge of tears and doing her best to hide it, " —um, a moment."

"Damn it! Tell her never *ever* to call the Super in the middle of the night again. Unless it's a forest fire. Otherwise, if she pulls this crap again, I'm going to fire her lily-white Mormon ass."

"I think she can hear you, sir. You're on speaker phone."

"Terrific! Becca, I'll expect you in my office first thing tomorrow."

With a wary eye on Becca, Geronimo asked, "Sir, do you know where Judith is?"

"No, I don't, and I don't give a damn where she is. However, she did quit today. I assume she left for parts unknown."

"She quit?" Geronimo's voice went up in astonishment. Becca's eyes grew wide.

"Yep. So I'm up shit creek as far as covering Judith's shift. The Superintendent is pissed about it—surprise, surprise—but expects me to magically produce a replacement."

"I'm always happy to help, sir."

"Of course, Wilkins. Thanks." His voice calmed marginally. "By the way, Judith left a note for Becca, actually. It's in her inbox down at the office."

"What did it say?" Geronimo regretted the words the moment they were out of her mouth.

"Christ, Wilkins!" He was railing again. "I have no idea! The

note was private. If you think it'll help calm the girl down, run her over there in your cruiser and pick it up. You have a key. *Comprende?*"

"*Comprendo*, sir. Will do, sir." Geronimo lifted the receiver and then dropped it to end the call.

She turned to Becca. "You heard that Judith left you a note. I'll put on some clothes and we'll go get it. For the moment, sit tight." Geronimo raced down the hall to her bedroom.

Becca nodded. Big wet tears raced down her cheeks and plopped onto her shirt, leaving dark splotches.

Jo nudged Mandy. "Let's get dressed," she whispered.

"Seriously?"

"You bet."

They were back in the Common Room in hastily pulled-on jeans and shirts before Geronimo managed to return. While Jo watched, Mandy patted Becca on the shoulder and murmured words of solace.

"Oh, no," Geronimo said, when she saw them in their clothes. "Not you two."

"C'mon," Jo said, "you need us." She gestured silently toward the other pair, making it clear that Mandy was being of some help in keeping Becca calmed down.

"All right," Geronimo said, "let's go then."

The half-mile drive to the dark and silent Park office was broken only by the sound of Becca's sobbing in the partitioned-off back seat. "I don't understand how she could do this," she kept repeating into Mandy's shoulder. "I don't understand."

Jo rode up front with Geronimo and didn't feel it appropriate to comment. She didn't know why Judith had quit, although certain suspicions raced through Jo's mind and the possibility of their truth made her stomach queasy. The last thing she wanted was another run-in with the Bishop of Tropic.

Geronimo told them to wait outside while she unlocked the door and keyed in the access code for the building alarm. As soon as she opened the door, they straggled into the flickering florescent gloom of the Visitor Center's rear hallway. Jo expected it would take a few minutes for the lights to warm up to their normal daytime glow.

With a huff, Becca disappeared into the staff room to look for her cousin's note. Geronimo bounced on the balls of her feet and Jo kept her arm slung casually around Mandy's back while they waited. To her pleased surprise, Mandy wasn't swatting her hand away.

Becca returned with a plain white envelope in her hand. She ripped it open and unfolded the contained note. Halfway

through reading it, she gasped and almost dropped the blue-lined sheet of notebook paper. She turned toward Jo, her eyes blazing red and pointed an accusing finger at Jo's face. "This is all *your* fault!"

Jo dropped her arm from Mandy's shoulder and jumped backward as if she'd been slammed by a physical blow. "What? Why?"

"You put ideas into her head!"

"No I didn't!" Jo closed the distance between herself and Becca and went for the note, shouting as she did so. "Is Judith saying I did something?" Geronimo and Mandy stood staring, their mouths agape.

Becca raised the note to halt Jo and shook it in her face. "She says she has to find a new life! *She's leaving the church!*"

Becca's appalled shout reverberated off the concrete block walls of the hallway. Mandy scrunched her shoulders and raised her hands to her ears in self-defense.

"Jeezus!" Jo shouted back with almost as much lung power as Becca. "I didn't tell her to leave the Church!"

Becca wailed and then sank toward the linoleum floor, her back sliding down the block wall. "You told her about same-sex sealings or some such utter nonsense." In a complete reversal, her voice was thick with tears and almost indistinct. Jo could not have been more astonished if she had been watching an overblown production of an Italian opera.

"Same-sex sealings?" Geronimo asked. "Is that some kind of wax mold?"

"Uh," Mandy half-whispered to her, "Mormon marriages."

"Mormon marriages? What in the fuck has that got to do with this?"

Becca seemed to have recovered and was rising from the floor. "You mark my words," she thundered when she gained her feet, "you're all going to Hell!" If ever someone had looked like an Old Testament prophet, Jo thought, this was the moment. Mandy visibly rolled her eyes. Geronimo raised both hands. "That's enough. All of you. Becca, I'm taking you back to the dorm."

"No," Becca screeched. "I can't go back there and live with these corrupted non-believing women!" Her eyes accused Jo and Mandy in turn. "You can't make me!"

Geronimo rubbed her forehead and sighed. "Becca, we can't stand here all night in the Visitor's Center hallway."

Becca wailed and sank to the floor again for good measure. "I can't. I can't go."

"All right then, where exactly do you want to go?"

Geronimo demanded.

"I need to talk to Bishop King. I need his counsel." She looked like she was close to unleashing a fresh flood of tears. Mandy reached out to touch Becca's shoulder. "Are you sure you want to wake him at this hour?"

"Yes." Becca sniffled in self-pity, waving away Mandy's hand. "I'm sure he'll see me. This is a crisis. He'll see me."

Jo watched Geronimo roll her eyes at the theatrics. "Okey dokey," she said. "I'm going to drive Becca over to Isaac King's residence."

"What about us?" Jo asked.

"You two can walk home," Geronimo replied.

"Jeez," Jo muttered, "It's cold outside."

Geronimo was unmoved. "Too bad. You wanted to come down here. Now, all of you out while I set the alarm."

Jo and Mandy made for the door with Becca trailing them. Once outside, Becca marched determinedly to Geronimo's cruiser and waited there, not looking at the other women. A few moments later, Geronimo had turned off the lights, locked the door of the building and re-joined them in the palely moonlit parking lot.

"Anyone else you think we should wake up tonight while we're at it?" Geronimo muttered as she passed Jo.

Jo didn't answer but giggled as she watched Geronimo shake her head in exasperation, go across to her cruiser, unlock the door for Becca, get inside, and start up the vehicle. Becca joined her in the darkened front seat.

Jo and Mandy watched them until Geronimo pulled out of the parking lot and listened as the sound of her engine slowly died away leaving them in the huge absolute silence of night on the Pausaugant Plateau.

"We'd better get going before we freeze to death." Jo said and they started treading their way across the parking lot.

When they reached the two-lane paved roadway which was a narrow moonlit corridor through dark looming pines, Mandy spoke. "Was that bizarre or what?"

"Grand opera, for sure."

Mandy howled. "That's exactly what I was thinking! Have you ever seen anyone go through so many melodramatic emotions in such a short time? Wow!"

"Never. She was something else."

"She's really pissed at you. The rest of us were just sort of getting the shrapnel."

"I know. What I'm not looking forward to is the next time I come across Isaac King. If he could ride me out of town on a rail,

I'm sure he would."

"Maybe he would prefer to tar and feather you?"

"Nah, too personal. I think he's a well-meaning hands-off kind of a guy. On the other hand, maybe not. Alfonso thought I might get burned at the stake for being a heretic."

"Why?"

"That business about Joseph Smith and the same-sex sealings."

Mandy nodded. "You really shook them all up with that. That's for sure."

"Who knew it was going to be such an inflammatory remark?"

Mandy grinned. "A bit of a pun there, Jo. But what a weird night. The whole thing's too weird. Why do you think Judith quit?"

"She was probably going to break somewhere along the line. I think it was only a matter of time. My involvement is strictly incidental. I'll bet they've been watching her for a while. King just didn't want me to accelerate the process. But he's not stupid. He's known for a long time Judith had a problem."

"Do you think she's a lesbian?"

Jo shrugged. "I don't know. In their system, she doesn't have to be. Just not marrying is bad enough. My guess is she needed room to breathe and that's why she's gone. Being gay may not even be her issue."

"Hmm, it's an interesting world."

"Yes, it is. I think those big institutional systems—like schools and churches and corporations—really do work for some people. But for others, they're like steel traps and they'll chew their foot off to get out."

"Have you ever had to chew your foot off?"

"No, I've been lucky. I was raised, as Alfonso accused me, with well-meaning, California-girl, secularist ethics. I think it's not a bad set of basic beliefs, as beliefs go. Kind of a 'respect me and I'll respect you and let's respect the planet while we're at it' philosophy. It's served me fairly well so far. What about you?" She glanced at her companion whose face was bathed in the pale light of the quarter moon.

"To be honest, I think I'm in the process of chewing it off right now."

Jo raised her eyebrows. "Indeed? Is there any way I can help?"

Mandy reached out her hand, not answering, and slid it into Jo's. "It's really cold now."

"I know. We weren't thinking about jackets."

Mandy laughed. "We weren't thinking your girlfriend Geronimo would abandon us in the dark in the Visitor Center parking lot!"

Jo stopped walking and turned Mandy to face her. "I would much rather *you* were my girlfriend," she whispered into Mandy's hair, knowing it was a mistake, knowing Mandy would pull away, knowing she was out of her mind to say it. Hell, when Mandy bolted like a frightened deer she'd probably have to chase her up the roadway just to stop her from hurting herself in the dark.

But Mandy wasn't moving. Instead, her body swayed closer to Jo's. Her chin lifted, and she gazed into Jo's eyes, her full lips slightly parted. Jo leaned down and brushed her lips across Mandy's, and Mandy didn't resist. Instead, her warm soft lips pressed against Jo's, and Jo tasted their sweetness.

Jo thought she was in a dream. She was probably asleep in her bunk, her unconscious having registered the fact that Judith had never come home, and now she had created this elaborately-complex fantasy of Becca throwing a massive hissy fit so that she could end it all by kissing Mandy.

God, but she wanted her, and Mandy felt so real! She raised her hands from Mandy's clasped ones and wrapped her arms around Mandy's waist, pulling her closer. Boy, her unconscious was good! Mandy's body molded to Jo's and their kiss deepened. Jo's tongue even slid ever-so-gently between her lips and tasted the inside of Mandy's mouth. Fire started in her groin and she moaned.

Suddenly, Mandy's lips weren't there. "Goodness." Mandy puffed a breath out into Jo's face. "I need to breathe."

Jo pulled back from Mandy and realized it was no dream. She and Mandy were really standing on the asphalt in the dark with the night sky arched over their heads, and Mandy had let her kiss her.

Jo was speechless, perplexed.

"I think we should head home," Mandy said. "I'm really cold."

"It's not far now," Jo replied, taking Mandy's hand and willing all of her body warmth to flow through her hand to the other woman. "Maybe I can keep you warm."

"I'm sure you say that to all the girls."

"Not *all* the girls," Jo said, her voice low. "You're not just a conquest to me, Mandy."

Mandy shivered. Jo pulled her by the hand and they half-walked, half-ran the rest of the way to the Women's Dorm.

"Hey," Mandy said when they reached the door, "let's make



some cocoa when we get in."

"Yes," Jo agreed, "with marshmallows."

"Swiss Miss?"

"Yeah, I think I have some of that stuff."

"You're on."

THE JAIL WAS small, with only four cells. Bill was placed in one and Mandy was led to another by the six-foot-tall man whom she had battered at the river.

"Now Therese," he warned Mandy's cellmate, "don't be teaching this young lady any bad habits."

"How's that, Sheriff? Isn't she in for murder? I should complain that you're making me, a mere thief, share with a murderer. And a filthy one at that." She wrinkled her nose at her smelly new companion.

"There isn't anyone for you to complain to."

"Sure as I know that, Hank. But look at you." She was grinning at his black eye and swollen nose. "Who took a piece out of you?"

"She did." He nodded at Mandy. "So be wary."

Ignoring their repartee, Mandy collapsed onto the sole bunk, delighted to have a level surface to lie on. She didn't care what the other woman thought of her or her condition.

She was happy to get off her feet, out of the blazing sun, and have her hands free. Her wrists were rubbed raw from the rope the men had bound her with for the ride to the jail.

They hadn't fed her anything but she was too exhausted to care. She ignored her empty stomach and curled herself against the wall.

Mandy was awakened by the pre-dawn light filtering in through the jail's high windows and the gentle snoring of her companion. She must have shifted in the night because Therese's arms were wrapped around her and Mandy's chin rested on the woman's large soft breasts.

At first, she was startled and almost drew away in embarrassment but then she remembered there was only one bunk in the tiny cell. They had no choice but to share it.

After a moment, she let herself relax into Therese's cuddle. The other woman's scent was a warm blend of milky sleep and sweet skin. Mandy was comforted and went back to sleep.

## Chapter Eighteen

CARLOTTA WAS STILL shaking when she got to Ruby's for her shift. Cody had discovered the tattoo, apparently a much bigger and more substantial eruption of color on her right rump than she realized. Looking over her shoulder in the mirror, she had thought of the spreading wings of her new butterfly as delicate and tender. Cody had declared it an abomination of taste, color and just plain morality.

"Where did you get the money?" was actually the first coherent question he asked her while he held her naked body against the bathroom wall, his face swollen with rage. She had just emerged from the shower and was toweling off when he noticed it for the first time.

"My...my salary."

"You don't have a salary," he yelled. "You work by the hour. You barely have enough for tampons! I pay for those damn classes you take. And weren't you supposed to be seeing Dr. Acton?"

"Sure, sure. I saw Dr. Acton." It was a lie but she doubted he'd follow up on it. "I just..." Her eyes were wide with fear. Cody was forcing both of her shoulders back, pinning her with his superior strength. She hoped he wasn't going to do any more than he was already doing. She wasn't looking forward to getting punched. *Please, God, she thought, don't let him hit me.*

"You just—what? Were walking down the street in Cedar and saw a tattoo parlor? It was a sudden notion?"

"Cody, please. Just let me go and I'll explain. Okay?"

"Christ, Carlotta. I don't know what's up with you." His hold loosened on her shoulders but he didn't let her go, his rage weakening from hurricane strength to tropical storm. Then just as suddenly, it freshened. "You have to tell me what in the hell is going on!"

"Nothing's going on. I saw a picture in a magazine. I thought it would look good. I...I wanted to try something new. I thought you'd like it."

"Hrmp." Cody let her shoulders go and Carlotta slumped weakly against the wall. Then she grabbed for her fallen towel and whisked it around her still-damp body.

"You thought I'd like it? What a fucking dumb idea was

that?" Cody had moved over to sit on the bed. "I just don't understand you anymore, Carlotta."

"There's nothing to understand, Cody. It was a whim." Carlotta had moved over to her bureau and was pulling out a pair of panties. She slid the underwear up her legs, still covered by the towel. She certainly didn't want Cody to get a fresh look at the butterfly. Next, she pulled on jeans and slipped into sandals. This wasn't her usual work garb of white short sleeve shirt and black skirt but it would have to do for the moment.

"I think something's going on. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Oh, my God. You must be kidding. In this town?"

"Up at the Park?"

"Jeezus, Cody."

"I can find out from Martin, you know."

The last thing Carlotta wanted was for Cody to talk to Martin. Martin was a good guy but he might let things slip. *Yeah, there was something different about Carlotta. Sure, she was happier. A boyfriend?* He would shrug in his laid-back way. *Haven't seen anyone around. Couldn't say, man.*

Still, even a hint that she was happier would be damning from Cody's perspective because he would know he wasn't the source of this new feeling of hers.

Carlotta put on a brave smile. "Let me get you some breakfast, Cody. Some fresh hot coffee. How does that sound?" She was bending forward and hooking her bra with the deftness of long practice. She grabbed a western-style shirt from the closet and snapped it over her chest.

Cody was staring down at his feet and hadn't replied and she didn't want to ask what he was thinking. Any further conversation at this point could only lead to more aggression.

She raced into the kitchen and started the coffee. While it perked, she pulled the eggs from the refrigerator thinking she was crazy to believe her plan could work. She had to get away sooner.

She heard the front door slam and knew Cody was gone. *Damn it, but what was he up to? What was he going to do?*

GERONIMO MADE IT back to the dorm by close to three a.m. with a much calmer Becca in tow. She walked the now almost docile woman down the hallway to her room just to be sure she went in and stayed. But Becca offered no resistance. Apparently the Bishop had a salubrious effect on his adherents.

Geronimo's Monday morning shift started at seven a.m. so she was only going to get a few hours of rest. Normally she fell

asleep easily, so she didn't anticipate trouble with that. The awakening on the other end was what usually proved to be difficult after such a short nap.

Splashing cold water on her face at 6:30 only reminded her how much she had resented being out half the night as a result of something that was essentially a scene from a bad melodrama. She hoped Becca stayed out of her sight for a while. She knew she should feel compassion for the young woman, but mostly what she felt was that she had gotten stuck with kindergarten duty the night before.

A cup of coffee before her shift would make her feel a lot better. In twenty minutes she was at Ruby's with a cup of black liquid succored between her palms. Dave, the waiter, and Martin, the cook, were the only staff around at this early hour and they were already fairly busy with local ranchers and businessmen. The tourists, except the elderly ones, tended to rise later.

When he brought her an order of toast—she was not a big breakfast eater—she asked him if Carlotta still worked in the diner. Geronimo hadn't seen her since the disastrous incident at Calf Creek Falls.

"She's late," Dave said. "It's been happening a bit lately. I don't think Martin's going to fire her, but she's probably going to get a talking to when she gets here."

Geronimo nodded. "That's too bad. Do you think she's not happy at this job anymore?"

Dave's brow furrowed in concentration. "She seems fine at work. I think it might be something else."

"Did she say something?" Geronimo wasn't merely curious. She didn't know if Carlotta was a 'kiss and tell' type. While the Park might turn a blind eye to Geronimo's carrying on with Jo as long as no one complained, if local people heard stories about Park personnel corrupting the youth of the neighborhood, Rex Anderson could turn mean-spirited.

"No. I'm just guessing she's unhappy at home."

Geronimo shrugged. That was an inevitable outcome of what Carlotta seemed to be going through, and rumor had it that the husband, while reasonable, would hardly be tolerant of his wife stepping out on him, even if Carlotta and Jo hadn't even gotten to first base. "If you see her, tell her I said hi."

"Sure," Dave said.

Carlotta herself arrived a few moments later but didn't see Geronimo, probably because she was moving too fast. She burst through the front door and sped toward the kitchen. It was a good five minutes before she re-entered the dining room with a

folded green apron swathing her waist. Geronimo watched Carlotta for a while as she took orders.

Eventually, Carlotta sighted her and came over when she had a moment to spare between taking and delivering orders. She sank into Geronimo's booth.

"What's up?" Geronimo asked, being struck for a moment by the other woman's beauty. But Carlotta's normally pleasant face was troubled.

"I'm scared," she said, "I think Cody's getting close to throwing me out. His behavior is — "

" — escalating?"

"Yes."

"What's he done now?"

"This morning he discovered I'd gotten a tattoo — "

Geronimo raised her eyebrows but forbore to comment.

" — and he pinned me up against the wall by my throat."

"Did he hit you?"

"No, but I think that's where he's headed. Especially if he finds out...well, you know." She blushed, but her eyes exuded joy, and Geronimo sensed the secret glow of pleasure the recollection of her new lesbian identity caused in the other woman. If Cody caught her with that little glow, there was going to be serious trouble.

Carlotta was still talking. "I'm trying to save some money but I don't have enough to get out on my own. I can't afford a rental deposit on a place yet. Maybe in another two weeks or so."

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"Catching a bus to Phoenix and looking for a job."

"Do you feel you have to leave the state?" An idea was germinating in Geronimo's mind.

"I have to get away from Cody! I don't want him to permanently damage my face or something."

"But you could stay in Utah?" Geronimo leaned toward the other woman.

Carlotta shrugged. "I guess so."

"Maybe you should go catch up your orders, Carlotta. I'm going to make a call."

"Okay." The other woman rose from the booth, a puzzled look on her face. Geronimo smiled and shooed her away. She pulled her walkie-talkie from her belt.

Rex Anderson picked up quickly. "What is it this time, Wilkins?"

"Sir, I think I've found a replacement for Judith."

"Oh, yeah? Who?"

"She's a waitress down here at Ruby's —"

Rex interrupted. "A waitress? We're supposed to hire qualified people, Wilkins."

"Look, sir, she's got a couple of years of work experience. I think she's got some community college under her belt." Geronimo was guessing but it sounded good.

"Does she run the cash register there?"

"Sure, of course." Geronimo had no idea but it didn't matter. She knew Rex would take the bait. He was desperate. "She's got brains, sir. She can learn the job. Martin trusts her to take money. That's all the park aides do anyway. That, and be nice to visitors. She has to do that here at Ruby's too. She understands customer service."

"All right, Wilkins. Martin doesn't let complete idiots work for him. Not for very long anyway. He's not firing her, is he?"

"No, sir. I think she's worked here for quite a while. I can ask Martin."

"Doesn't matter. When can she start?"

"If I can take some time to run down to her house in Panguitch to get her stuff, I can get her moved in to the Women's Dorm today —"

"Can't she do that?"

"Uh, there's a little problem with her car."

"Is it broken?"

"No. I think it's her husband's."

Rex Anderson laughed. "You've got a domestic violence situation there, don't you, Wilkins?" He parodied a woman's voice: "Just let me take the cruiser down to Panguitch, sir. Get the lass moved out while keeping an eye peeled for the husband." He cleared his throat. "You always act tough, Wilkins, but you're such a sucker for hard luck cases."

"Sir —"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever, Wilkins. But if she fucks up or the husband runs up here with a shotgun, you know who I'm going to blame."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll expect her in my office no later than two p.m. to do the hiring paperwork. *Capice?*"

"*Capice*, sir. Over and out."

When Carlotta next dropped by her booth, Geronimo was grinning. "I solved our little problem."

Carlotta slipped back into the booth. "How? Did you order a hit on Cody?"

"Nope. Much simpler and much less messy."

"What is it?"

"Can you come to work for the Park? Starting immediately?"

"Shit!" Carlotta's face lit up. "Are you serious? I would kill to work at the Park!"

"I don't think that will be necessary. We have an opening. You need to get out of your house. It's a marriage of convenience."

"All right!" Carlotta crowed. "What do I have to do?"

"You need to resign with Martin, and then we'll go get your stuff from your house. Are you really ready to move out?"

"I'm totally ready. I can't believe this!"

"As long as you're sure. Once we've gotten your stuff, we can head back to the Park, get your hiring paperwork signed—Rex okayed it and Wanda will draw it up—then find you a uniform and get you moved into the Women's Dorm. You'll have to share with the Mormon girl, but I don't think she'll bite you."

"Anything. Anything will be fine by me."

"Don't you even want to know what the Park pays?"

"I don't care. It includes the room, doesn't it?"

"Yep."

"That's all I need: the room. Cody can't bother me in the Park, right?"

"We can't keep him out if he wants to pay the entrance fee, but he's not allowed to go into Personnel Only areas like the staff housing. Trust me, if he harasses you in any way, I can eighty-six him."

"Fabulous! How long do I have the job?"

"There's about six weeks left to the season, so you'd be out in early September—"

"—but by then, I'll have saved up enough money and I can look for another job, and another place to live."

"Right." Geronimo liked that the woman was so focused, instead of a ditz. Clearly, she wanted out of her old life and would do what she needed to do to move into the new one. "Do you have a car?"

"Yes, but it's Cody's."

"As I suspected."

"Anyway, I want to leave it so he doesn't have a legal reason for bothering me."

"Good idea. You can walk to all your jobs in the Park. We also have bicycles for the staff to use. I'll move you as soon as you quit Martin."

Carlotta's eyebrows shot up. "You can do that?"

"Sure. I'm ensuring a new hire gets safely placed in her new job. It's Park business. And so far, I don't have any other calls."

We can do it today if you're ready."

"Wow!"

"Hey, Carlotta," Martin was calling her from the kitchen. "Order up!"

Geronimo watched as she raced over to the pass-through window and grabbed the plates sitting beneath the warmer lights, checking the table designation on the order at the same time.

"Didn't you hear the bell? I almost had Dave do it." Geronimo could hear Martin shouting through the pass-through.

"Sorry," Carlotta apologized, rushing away with the filled plates and delivering them to their table. She rushed back to the pass-through window, her body visibly bouncing with excitement.

"Martin," she shouted, "I'm quitting!"

"What?" Geronimo could see his frown from across the room.

"I'm quitting!"

"Hey, look," he stepped through the kitchen doors, wiping his hands on his stained apron, "I didn't mean to be that hard on you this morning, Carlotta. I was just a little frustrated. I'm sorry you took it that way."

"No, Martin," she flapped her hand. "It's not that. It's not you. You've been great. I've got a new job!"

"You have a new job? You didn't have a new job twenty minutes ago when I was chewing you out." He pulled his chef's hat from his head and smoothed back his hair with his big hands, his forehead creased in consternation.

"I know. But I do now!" She twisted her hands behind her back to untie her apron. She yanked the green fabric from around her waist and handed it to him. "Thanks for everything, Martin!"

Martin's mouth hung open and it took him a moment to draw it closed again. Geronimo felt sorry for him. She watched as he secured his chef's hat on his head, shrugged his shoulders, and headed back into his kitchen.

A moment later, he set a plate of scrambled eggs, potatoes and bacon on the pass-through and dinged the bell. "Dave!"

Dave, Geronimo realized, was going to have to take up the slack.

MANDY EXPECTED HER Tuesday morning shift in the Visitor's Center to be dull compared with what had transpired at the Women's Dorm over the last two days. Judith's departure



and Becca's subsequent rendition of a tragic operatic heroine had been entertaining, but then there'd been the kiss and the subsequent confusion she and Jo both seemed unable to overcome. Even cocoa hadn't helped much. Jo had blushed and stammered, and Mandy had been too tired to make much sense of either her own actions or Jo's feelings. Finally they'd tumbled back into their bunks, and Mandy tried to get what little sleep she could before the arrival of a new work day. Yet, her dream of Therese had been telling. She was having a hard time drawing the line between herself and Polly. Was Polly cradled in Therese's arms or was she?

All that had transpired was then followed on Monday evening by the appearance of Geronimo herding an ebullient Carlotta into the Women's Dorm. Mandy was amazed that Geronimo had conscripted the young woman into a park aide job faster than you could say, 'Hi, Ho, Geronimo', which Mandy most definitely refrained from saying.

Carlotta dropped her stuff into a corner of Becca's room and while you couldn't call her mousy, she was certainly trying to make herself and her gear as unobtrusive as possible so as not to upset Becca. Mandy assumed Geronimo had given her a heads-up about Becca's volatility.

Unfortunately, this careful approach had no impact upon Becca at all, who immediately entered upon Act Two of her own personal opera. While she refrained from phoning the Park Superintendent—one imagined Rex Anderson had impressed this point upon her during the intervening day—she did demand an instant house meeting.

As everyone, except Luisa, was either lounging in the Common Room or making dinner in the kitchen, the request was hard to deny. Mandy assembled with the rest, at which time Becca announced her inability to live with non-believing women who were engaged in all manner of corrupting behaviors and that something needed to be done. Immediately.

Mandy thought that accusing one's entire audience of something they had little control over and that was intensely inflammatory right at the start of potential negotiations was hardly politic and not likely to engage the higher qualities or faculties of anyone present. Still, she recognized that self-righteous individuals were sometimes clueless about the impact they had on other people.

In the aggrieved silence following this pronouncement, Mandy found her voice. "If you can't live with us, Becca, then I guess you'll have to live alone. I don't think any of us are taking up an LDS way of life."

Angry heads bobbed. "I think we should kick her out," Janet Dartmore said. "She's been a pain in the neck since day one."

Thea Money seconded her roommate's conviction with a nod, but no words. Mandy wondered if the woman ever talked; she was so gaunt Mandy didn't think she had the lung power. Carlotta sat on the couch with eyes wide, knowing she was the source of the controversy but too new to the dorm to say much of anything in her own defense.

Jo, ever the harmonizer, said "I don't think the Park Service is going to let us evict Becca. We're going to have to resolve this matter ourselves."

"I can't have anyone share a room with me," Becca said. "On top of being totally anti-Mormon, half of you are lesbians! I don't even know what perversion you're going to pull next!"

Geronimo looked ready to leap from the couch, but Jo merely rolled her eyes. "Becca, what if you had a room to yourself?"

"Precisely. That's exactly what I have right now. This Carlotta person can't live with me. Things will have to stay the way they were before she got here."

"Uhn-uh," Geronimo replied. "Carlotta is entitled to live here, so she's going to live here. You'll have to put up with it, Becca."

"Wait," Mandy said. "The real problem is space. You have the biggest room, Becca. If you move out of your room—into, say Jo's and my room—you could have a room to yourself because we could fit three people, me, Jo and Carlotta, into your room. So it's just a matter of switching."

"Makes sense," Janet Dartmore said. Other heads nodded.

"I don't want to move out," Becca said. "I've stayed in that room for two seasons already."

"Too fricking bad," Geronimo snarled. "Right now, you have the largest room in the house. It's not fair or appropriate if you're unwilling to share. So, you'll have to give it up."

Jo leaned forward on the couch. "It's a reasonable solution, Becca. You'll still have a room to yourself since you're so afraid of us big scary lesbians."

"I'm not scared of you! I just think you're despicable."

"Stop it, Becca!" Mandy snapped. "It doesn't matter what anyone's sexual orientation or religious affiliation is in this house. No one is better than anyone else because of who they are. We all have to live here, and we're not going to tolerate you defaming other people. So, just stop it!"

Geronimo and Jo shared an impressed look and a private thumbs up.

"You're all going to go to Hell," Becca screeched, rising to her feet, tears forming in her eyes.

"Oh, Christ," Geronimo said. "You told us that last night already. What you don't get is that we don't care. Now, are you going to take the bunk bed room or not?"

"I hate that crappy little bunk bed room," Becca retorted.

"It doesn't matter." Geronimo got to her feet. "This is an official house meeting. Does everyone agree to the proposed solution? Yes or no?"

"Yes," voices chorused, even Thea's.

"It's a done deal then," Mandy said, rising from the couch.

"I didn't agree," Becca sputtered.

"Sorry, Becca," Jo said, getting up, "it's a democracy, not a theocracy like your Church. Majority rules."

"Right," Geronimo said. "Let's get cracking. If we all work together, we'll have Becca moved out of that bedroom in about twenty minutes. Then, we'll move Jo's and Mandy's bunk beds into Becca's room and Carlotta will have Judith's bed. Got it?"

There were murmurs of agreement, then everyone trooped down the hall except Becca who looked daggers at each person as they passed. "I'll never forgive you people," she muttered at Mandy who was the last to go by.

"That's not very Christian," Mandy replied, but Becca had no rejoinder, and Mandy left her to stew in her own bitter juices.

Mandy thought there'd been enough drama over the past two days, and she expected relative peace in the Visitor's Center. So far, it had been an average morning with probably thirty to forty tourists drifting around the museum section of the center and a handful of people browsing through the racks of books, maps, posters and outdoor equipment featured in the gift section.

She'd made eight sales and answered at least ten questions about the Bryce Canyon and Indian Country maps. Archie, who was on shift with her, had answered the other twenty or so questions.

But matters were quiet at the cash register when she looked up to see her husband walk through the double glass doors. Her stomach clenched and then felt as if it had plunged to the bottom of her pelvic cavity. Her mouth went dry and she broke out into a sweat.

"Shit," she whispered.

Archie glanced over at her. "Are you okay?"

"No."

Archie stepped beside her. "What's wrong?" He gazed at the cash register and looked about as if to see if anything was amiss

with the room—like someone stealing a book or gift item—then looked back at her. He turned and followed the direction of her gaze.

Mandy watched as the squarely-built, not-too-tall, thirty-something man who possessed pleasant, mild-looking features strode her way. He was dressed in cargo shorts and a black t-shirt, and his empty hands swung blithely by his sides.

"Mandy? What's with this guy?" Archie said under his breath. "You look scared to death."

She didn't know how to answer him. What she really wanted to do was turn tail and run, but she stood rooted to the spot, her heart hammering.

"I'll take him," Archie whispered. He called out, "Hi, there, welcome to the Visitor's Center."

Mandy couldn't meet Jay's eyes. How could he have shown up here, of all places? How did he find her?

Smiling, Jay stopped at the glass counter. "Mandy. Wow, you look great. I had no idea gray and olive could look so good on you!"

"Excuse me," Archie interrupted, "how can I help you, sir?"

Jay waved off Archie's assistance. "I don't need any help. I'm not here to visit the Park. I'm Jay Barnes, and this here is my wife. Didn't she tell you?"

Archie mumbled, "Uh, no." He glanced quickly at Mandy. "Sorry to interrupt...uh, your reunion."

"And that it is," Jay replied. His eyes glittered, and Mandy was reminded of a snake, a hissing, dangerous rattler.

Archie shifted away and moved over to the other cash register. But she could feel Archie's eyes on her, and she was embarrassed to think he'd hear her conversation with Jay.

"Hey, Mandy, girl," Jay said, "loosen up. You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Jay," Mandy said, recovering her voice. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

"Hell? Since when did you start saying hell?"

"Since I started experiencing it after what you put me through at church!"

"Hey, hey," he put his hands out, palms forward. "It was all a misunderstanding, babe. Now that you've had your fun out in the wilderness and all, I think you need to forgive me and come back home."

Mandy ignored the implied insult and honed in on the injury instead. "Forgive you?" She wasn't shouting because it was the Visitor's Center, but she guessed she needed to be because not shouting was making her head spin.

"Look," Jay said smoothly, "I can explain everything." He leaned down, elbows on the glass case and smiled like he had so many times before, times when he'd lied and cheated and expected her to believe the most inexplicable stories.

Mandy's mouth gaped open in disbelief. "You can explain everything? There's nothing to explain. You ripped off our friends!"

"Honey, sometimes an investment goes sour. That's all it was. If our friends weren't grown up enough to understand that, then —"

"*Excuse-moi.*" A French tourist in short-shorts and a torn t-shirt stood behind Jay with a handful of postcards.

"Jay," Mandy muttered, "I can't talk to you right now. I'm working and I have customers."

"Can I help you?" Archie motioned the Frenchman over to his section of the counter.

Jay pushed away from the glass case. He obviously hadn't gotten the response he expected from her, and his voice turned petulant. "What in the hell am I going to do with the rest of the damn day?"

She had to get rid of him. She stilled her frayed nerves and asked, "Where are you staying?"

"Tropic Reservoir Campground."

"Fine. I'll meet you at the diner at Ruby's Inn tomorrow night at seven. I have a late shift tonight so I don't have time until then."

"I guess I'll drive around the Park for two days, then. Bunch of damn colored rocks. Not that I've seen anything except pine trees so far."

"You can tune up my car. It's running rough."

"Where is it?"

"In the parking lot. Surely you remember it." She pulled the keys from her slacks and tossed them to him.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay." He gave her a disgusted look and left, twirling the keys on his finger.

## Chapter Nineteen

GERONIMO PULLED HER cruiser to a halt behind a car with its hood open, blocking it into the parking space. The sun was midday bright so she pulled on her dark reflective sun

shades before she got out and walked around to the front of the car. A short, but well-muscled, man gripping a greasy rag in one hand, leaned over the engine, listening to it run.

When he saw her, he twisted his head up to look at her but wasn't bothered enough to stop tinkering with the butterfly valve of the carburetor. "It's running a little rough," he said. "Altitude's too high here. If I adjust the carb, it'll smooth out. Plugs are bad, too."

Geronimo was much taller than he was but she kept one hand resting securely on the baton attached to her belt. "The Visitor Center parking lot isn't a repair garage, sir," she said. "Are you broken down?"

"Oh, heck no. It's not even my car. I drive that white van over there." He pointed but she didn't turn to look. It was an old, if tried and true, distraction ploy. Something about this smarmy little guy made Geronimo want to keep an eye on him.

"So what are you doing to someone else's car?" she asked.

"I just told you! Adjusting the carburetor. It's running rough."

"Were you asked to adjust the carburetor?"

"Sure. How do you think I got the keys?"

"I didn't know you had the keys. I thought maybe you hot-wired it. Maybe you thought you'd take it for a little joyride in the Park."

"Is that why you blocked me in?"

"Yep."

"Look, lady, it's my wife's car. I'm not trying to steal it."

"I'm not a 'lady', sir. I'm a police officer."

The man shrugged. "Whatever."

Geronimo saw movement, and glanced to her right.

"Hey, Wilkins," Orville said, coming around to the front of the car, "I'd like to head home for lunch, and your cruiser is in the way. Oh, sorry to interrupt. What's going on?"

"This man here says he's fixing his wife's car."

"His wife's?" Orville frowned and gave Geronimo a puzzled look. "But this is Mandy's car."

"Shit, I hadn't realized." Geronimo ran her palm across her forehead. "Of course. I've seen it a million times."

Orville stared at the man. "Did you say you're Mandy's husband?"

"Yep. Sure as heck. Name's Jay Barnes." He wiped his grease-blackened hand on the rag and extended his palm but Orville declined to shake it. Geronimo was glad she had her sun shades on so Orville wouldn't see in her eyes she knew about the affair he'd been carrying on with Mandy.

But Orville wasn't paying her any mind at all. "I didn't know," his words left his mouth with great slowness, "that she had a husband."

"Didn't mention me, huh?"

Orville turned his attention to Geronimo. "Did you know?"

She nodded, her teeth gritted. "Just found out a few days ago, Orville. Look, I'm sure she would have told you —"

The man claiming to be Mandy's husband tossed down the dirty rag and swung around to face Orville. "What in the hell's going on here, man? Are you messing with my wife, buddy? And who in the hell are you anyway?"

"Hey," Geronimo snapped, "cool it. Let's not let this thing get out of hand here, gentlemen."

"Shit!" Orville said. "Why in goddamn creation do these things happen to me? What did she think she was doing?"

"I think I've heard enough!" Much to Geronimo's surprise, Jay's fist came flying through the air and landed squarely against Orville's jaw, thrusting him back against the front fender of his parked truck. His knees buckled and he fell to the pavement, head wobbling from side to side. With a grunt of pain, he grasped his battered jaw in both hands. But Jay wasn't done. He leapt forward, looking like he was going to beat Orville into the ground.

With a vicious swing, Geronimo applied the full weight of her baton against Jay's shoulder.

"Fuck!" He toppled to his knees and grabbed his arm in pain, pulling it across his torso.

"Stay down!" Geronimo ordered. "Don't move unless I tell you to."

Jay crouched on the pavement like a frozen statue. "Shit. Okay, lady, okay."

"It's Officer Wilkins to you, Mr. Barnes."

"Okay. Officer Wilkins. Jeezus." He whimpered, cradling his elbow.

She fumbled for the handcuffs on her service belt. "Hands behind your back, Mr. Barnes."

"Aw, shit. It's just a misunderstanding, ma'am. Don't cuff me."

"Hands behind your back," Geronimo commanded, her voice thick with authority. She wasn't sure if Orville's jaw was cracked or merely going to bruise but it didn't much matter. Assault was assault.

"Christ." Jay swung his good hand behind his back and moved the injured arm gingerly around. "You know, I can charge you with brutality. I don't even know if my arm's broken or not."

"Uh, huh. Sure, you can." She circled his wrists with the cuffs and carefully locked them closed. "You can tell the sheriff in Panguitch all about it. But first, you're going to stand up, and then you're going to walk over to my car and get in the backseat. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, I understand."

"All right, then. Stand up."

Geronimo walked him over to her car and helped him into the backseat. "Sit forward in the seat," she said. "Don't lean back on the cuffs."

"Yeah, duh."

"Done this before, have you?"

"I'm not saying nothing."

"No problem. I'll look up your record anyway." She shut the door and went back over to Orville. He was still sprawled against the fender of his truck, his right hand pressed against his jaw.

She crouched down in front of him. "Orville?"

His closed eyes opened at the sound of her voice.

"Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

"Nah. I'll be all right, Geronimo. I think my pride's more injured than anything else. Although this jaw is sure as hell going to swell up something awful. I'll go home and ice it. Take the afternoon off."

"What about the rest of you, your back? You bounced pretty hard against your truck."

"Probably just gonna bruise. It's not that big of a deal. You don't really have to arrest the guy. I think he was just freaked. We were both freaked."

"Yeah, but he can't go around decking people. It's not going to hurt him to cool off in my cruiser for a little while and fret about his future."

"Are you going to take him down to Panguitch?"

"I'm definitely going to call the sheriff. If you don't want to press charges, that's fine. But I'd like the incident on record. It'll make it easier to shut him down fast if something else happens."

"Shit. You don't think—"

"I don't know how he's treated Mandy in the past, but if he's that quick to throw a punch, I think we should keep our eyes open."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"Tell her what? That I arrested her husband? Or that he found out about your affair and punched you out?"

"I had no idea. Believe me, if I'd had, I would never—"

"Sure. I understand. She was real closed-mouthed about



him. I had to drag it out of her myself."

"Why didn't she tell us?"

"Maybe you should ask her that yourself. But I can guarantee you she had her reasons."

"That makes me feel better at least."

"Right. Do you want to try standing up?"

"Sure." Orville let go of his jaw and pushed himself off the ground. He wobbled slightly but straightened up with no other ill effects. "Nothing broken," he announced.

"Can you drive home?"

"I think so. Will you tell the Super where I've gone?"

"Sure."

He climbed into his truck while Geronimo closed the hood of Mandy's car, switched off the engine, and retrieved the keys from the ignition. She slid into the front seat of her cruiser and drove it forward so Orville could back out, then drove the cruiser to a parking space beneath the shade of a stately ponderosa pine.

She got out of the car and opened the rear car door.

"Now what?" Her prisoner asked.

"I need your ID."

"Back pocket." He twisted his head toward the left rear pocket of his pants. Geronimo slid out his wallet and found his Driver's License. She dropped his wallet on the seat next to him and moved to the front where she called in Jay's information to the local dispatcher.

"Are you going to run me in or not?" Jay asked.

"Depends," she answered.

"On what?"

"Depends on a lot of things." Before she could say anything more, the dispatcher was cackling back at her. Jay had prior convictions but they were all of the white collar and misdemeanor variety: passing bad checks, shoplifting, purse snatching, petty larceny, possession of less than an ounce of marijuana.

No assault charges and no domestic violence reports. No warrants for his arrest and no probation violations. His last probation had expired more than three years previously. Either he'd been behaving himself in the interim, or he'd learned how to not get caught.

She wondered briefly if Mandy knew anything about her husband's prior record and immediately doubted it. Jay was the slick, con man type. He could probably conjure rabbits out of a hat for the right, unsuspecting, kind of audience.

"So?" he said.

"So, I'm writing my report," Geronimo replied.

After twenty minutes of silence interrupted only by the scratching of the pen on her report pad, Geronimo got out of the front seat and came around to the back of the car. For one moment, Jay had the grace to look terrified. She found his expression of fear satisfying, though taboo. She knew she shouldn't enjoy it. She replaced his ID in his wallet and said, "Get out of the car, Mr. Barnes."

Jay swung his legs out onto the pavement and stood. Geronimo took off her shades and looked Jay straight in the eye. "I want you to understand something, Mr. Barnes."

"What?"

"I am eighty-sixing you from this Park. That means you're going to get in your van and you're going to drive out those gates over there, and you are not ever coming back. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But if I do?"

"I'll arrest you for trespassing and assault and anything else I can think of at the time."

"Okay."

"Further, while Mandy Barnes may be your wife, I can guarantee that if you lay a hand on her inside or outside of the Park, you're going to regret it. Is that clear?"

"I've never hurt Mandy in my life, Officer Wilkins."

Except emotionally, of course, Geronimo thought. But men almost never considered that a form of injury.

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Barnes. But she's probably never disappointed you before either."

"True," Jay admitted. "But whatever you may think of me, Officer, I'm not a wife beater."

"Good. Let's keep it that way. Are you clear about our arrangement?" She slid her sunglasses back over her eyes.

Jay nodded again. "Absolutely clear, Officer."

"All right. Turn around then."

Geronimo tucked his wallet into his pants pocket and unlocked the handcuffs. Jay rubbed his wrists and without a backward glance walked across the parking lot and got into his van. He started the engine and drove off. Geronimo watched him until he passed by the entrance station and was lost to sight behind the merging pine trees.

She locked her cruiser and headed for the Visitor's Center, steeling herself for the upcoming, bound-to-be-unpleasant, but essential conversation with Mandy.

LEARNING ABOUT JAY'S record made Mandy sick to her stomach but she was only more set on her course of meeting him after what Geronimo told her about his prior convictions. She had no idea he had ever been arrested, much less convicted. As far as she knew, he had stayed out of trouble while she was married to him. Or so she had believed.

But then, she'd been a starry-eyed innocent. She remembered more than a few times when he'd called to say he'd been summoned unexpectedly to a job in another town and would be gone for a few days or even weeks. He could have been in jail, and friends could have bailed him out. Without a police officer showing up at her door with a warrant, she wouldn't have necessarily known he'd had any of the offenses on his record.

Geronimo made it crystal clear that if Mandy kept her date with Jay, she was going to hang around in case he got rowdy or threatening.

"Look," Geronimo said, "I'm not going to sit in the same booth with you two, but I'll be keeping my eye out. Okay?"

Eyes down, Mandy nodded in agreement. She was mortified. How had she ever gotten herself mixed up with such a scam artist?

"If he threatens you, just get up and walk away or give me the high sign. I'll handle him. He's already shit-scared of me anyway."

Mandy felt tears starting in her eyes, and she tried to hold them back but she wasn't able to. A big gulp erupted from her mouth and then her cheeks were stained with moisture. The next thing she knew, Geronimo had wrapped her arms around her and held her against her chest.

"Don't worry, Mandy," she said softly, "it's going to be okay."

Who would have ever thought Geronimo could be so caring? Just a few weeks before, they were at each other's throats, and now suddenly the older ranger felt like the closest thing to a real friend Mandy had ever had.

"I'm so stupid," Mandy wailed.

"You're not stupid." Geronimo brought her hand up to stroke Mandy's hair. "He's a con man. You couldn't have known. That's what con men do. They con you."

Mandy could not believe how comforting it was to rest against Geronimo's body and have her hair stroked. She hadn't felt this way since she was a child and her aunt had held her while she cried after she'd fallen out of a tree. Her father would never have offered such comfort.

She wanted to stay in Geronimo's arms forever, but they were standing in the middle of the staff break room. She forced herself to pull away. "What about poor old Orville?" she asked. "I've completely led him astray."

Geronimo cracked up. "He'll get over it. He knows it was a summer romance, Mandy. Though this year, it got a little more complicated for him than usual."

Seeing Geronimo laugh made Mandy relax. She smiled through her tears and then wiped them from her cheeks. She felt suddenly very weary. "Oh, God, Geronimo."

Geronimo was still grinning. "We'll get through it."

Mandy shook her head. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't worry about that. And don't worry about Orville. He's a big boy. What you need is to get Jay out of your life."

Mandy sighed and looked up into Geronimo's eyes. "Yes." She paused. "I think what I really need is a woman *in* my life." The moment she said it, she felt a wave of shock travel from her brain down to her toes. Her eyes widened and her hand came up to cover her mouth. "Oh, no. I'm so sorry, Geronimo. Don't think—"

"I don't think I'm your gal exactly." Geronimo laughed again. "But maybe you should give some thought to your feelings. Maybe there's more there than you realize."

Mandy looked down at her boots. "I guess I'm pretty confused right now."

Geronimo drew her back into her arms and Mandy didn't resist. "There's mental confusion and there's gut knowledge," Geronimo said softly. "When the air clears a little, you're going to be able to sort it out."

Mandy breathed against Geronimo's chest, feeling a peace she hadn't felt in years, if ever. My God, but she wanted to stay here forever. Perhaps Geronimo was right. What was so wrong with letting her gut tell her what was true for her? At the moment, her gut was leaping with something new: Excitement? Joy?

An instant later, Geronimo's lips fluttered against her forehead, and Mandy experienced the other woman's touch as a blessing. She was being blessed and awakened by some far greater force than Geronimo herself.

In her mind's eye, the heavy stone sealing the tomb of her life rolled away and the cool bright rush of dawn flowed into the previously dark space. Knowledge had come.

MANDY HELD THE ace of diamonds, queen of hearts, and two of spades fanwise in her palm. The cards were badly-scarred

and the deck was incomplete. Therese sat across from her on the floor of the cell, giggling. None of the games Therese made up worked out.

The jail's gaslights faded to black and Mandy crossed to their bunk and turned her face to the wall. Therese spooned behind her, settling her arm over Mandy's shoulder.

"Do you think I'm going to hang?" Mandy asked.

"I don't know," Therese mumbled. "Did you do anything?"

"No."

"So just say so." Therese was stroking Mandy's back.

"What if they don't believe me?"

Therese shrugged. "Then there's nothing you can do."

"Do you like me?" Mandy asked.

Therese giggled. "Didn't we have fun today?"

"For a couple of locked up girls, I would say so."

Therese lifted Mandy's shirt away from her jeans and stroked Mandy's bare skin. Mandy turned in Therese's arms and Therese lowered her head to kiss her.

## Chapter Twenty

MANDY WAS JITTERY by the time she pulled her Toyota into a parking space at Ruby's the next evening. The day had been long and anxious and she hadn't been able to stop herself from fretting about her meeting with Jay. Her shift hadn't ended until six and she had been responsible for closing the Visitor's Center, so she hadn't had time to go home and change out of her uniform.

She turned off the ignition and tried to quiet her fears. She knew Jay wouldn't be able to do more than yell at her in the diner, but that would be bad enough. Once upon a time she had trusted the man to guide her, care for her, and love her, and she was still deeply injured by the breaking of her trust.

Of course, she was hardly in a position to point fingers about morality, but she knew in her soul that her adventures at Bryce had been opportunities to become an adult, opportunities she now realized would have occurred at some point in her life anyway because the truth, fair or foul, eventually broke through whatever lies a person chose to use to insulate herself.

Jay had unwittingly precipitated her growth by destroying any hope for their relationship. He had lied, cheated and stolen.

She had only committed adultery. She had also kissed a woman, and although her father would clearly count that as sinful, she didn't.

With the dinner hour in full swing, Ruby's was bustling with customers. Mandy chose a table by the front windows so she could keep her eye out for Jay's van and, she hoped, Geronimo's cruiser. After the new waitress—Carlotta's replacement, she assumed—took her order for iced tea, Mandy spotted Jo's Jeep pulling into the parking lot. Out of it spilled Jo, Geronimo and Carlotta.

Mandy breathed a deep sigh of relief, not even realizing she had been holding her breath. The women looked so good laughing and smiling in the copper light of the setting sun that she wanted to rush from the restaurant and gather them all up into one huge bear hug.

Why had she fought this truth for so long, that she loved women? It was so obvious now. Her earlier homophobia possessed only the reality of a chimera.

"Hey, babe." Jay slid into the chair opposite hers and gave her a brilliant, self-assured smile. Mandy had been so absorbed in the scene outside she hadn't seen Jay drive up or come into the building.

"Hey." She looked closely at the man she had lived with for so many years and walked up the aisle for, her heart full of hopes and dreams. How could she have been so wrong about him?

"So," he said, "you been having fun this summer?"

Mandy didn't have a chance to answer. The new waitress thumped Mandy's iced tea onto the table and looked expectantly at her seat mate.

Jay said, "I'll have coffee and a slice of apple pie."

"Ice cream?"

Jay shook his head.

"What? No dinner?" Mandy asked. She mentally kicked herself. Why was she bothering? It was no concern of hers what Jay ate, and the less he ordered, the sooner he'd be gone.

"And for you, ma'am?"

"I'll have the hamburger steak with mashed potatoes and gravy." If there was anything she needed right now, it was comfort food.

"Is this together?" the waitress asked.

"No," Mandy said.

"Yes," Jay said.

The waitress pulled the menus from the table and looked to Jay—because he was the man, Mandy realized—and gave him a

nod. Mandy was annoyed. Not just because of the implied sexism but because she knew it was Jay's way of forcing closeness upon her. His way of saying there was nothing wrong in their relationship. Also, if she knew Jay, he didn't have any money, and she'd end up paying the bill. Maybe that was why he had only ordered coffee and pie.

"So," he tried again, "your summer?"

She took a sip of tea. "It's been a good summer. Change of scene and all that." She didn't want to say how big a change of scene.

He gave her another slick grin. "So, I'm going to head back. I've had enough of Utah."

"Good," she said.

"You?"

"My job runs for another month, Jay."

"So quit."

"I'm not quitting." She put the tea glass down on the table. "Jay, we're getting a divorce."

His hands slammed down on the table with force. "Are you fucking crazy?"

She looked at him, her jaw set. This was the real Jay: the angry, selfish inner person; not the slick, buddy-buddy persona.

"My mind is made up, Jay."

"What! Surely you're not in love with that guy! He's way too old for you, and he's a fucking wuss. He hit the ground with one good pop to the jaw. Jeez!"

"Aside from my not appreciating you beating up Orville —"

"Did that loser say something to you?"

"No. I haven't spoken to him. Word gets around, you know."

"What in the fuck were you doing fucking around up here? Have you been fucking around our whole marriage? I didn't think you were the type."

Mandy felt steam rising off her collar, but she vowed to stay calm. "I don't think there's a type, Jay. But if I had been 'fucking around' as you put it, that would certainly be a good reason for divorce, wouldn't it?"

Jay sputtered. "You're not making any sense. If you're not crazy about this other guy and you don't usually sleep around, what's the problem? We don't need no fuckin' divorce!"

"Jay! Keep your voice down. I'm done, and it's time for a divorce. It'll be easy and will cost you next to nothing. We don't have any property, we own our vehicles separately and we won't have any alimony issues. It'll all be on paper. No muss, no fuss."

She strove to keep her voice calm and persuasive, but he

didn't look like he was being persuaded. She knew Jay liked the status of being married. She knew a wedding ring made him feel like he'd accomplished something and gave him something to show others, an easy way to convince them he was trustworthy and solid. Married men didn't scam people. Now she suspected he also used his wedding ring as a way to run off vociferous females when he wasn't in the mood or if they were too lowbrow even for him to engage in a quickie with.

"Look," he said, turning on the charm again. "I'm sorry I yelled. I was shocked. I feel badly about what happened at the church. It was a misunderstanding —"

"Jay," she interrupted. "It wasn't a misunderstanding. You broke my trust and the trust of our friends."

He shrugged. "So what are you saying? You can't forgive me? I make one mistake and you can't forgive?"

He watched her closely, his eyes glittering, and Mandy realized she'd been in this situation with him countless times before and that Jay knew this line usually worked on her. He had used it with success before but she was no longer the naïve trusting little dork she used to be. Harkening back to her strict religious upbringing always confused her so much that in the past, she ended up giving in. But instead, today she would shock him down to his toes.

"What bullshit, Jay! There's nothing to forgive. You committed an egregious act, and it's not the first time. I don't want to be with someone who scams people. That's why I'm divorcing you."

"It-it-it wasn't a scam!" He sat for a moment with his mouth open. She didn't think he expected this new, more confrontational person, and to hear him stutter almost made her laugh. There was nothing he could say to convince her he was on the up and up? How stunned he must be that she had slipped through the usual noose. A feeling of elation swept through her. She had him pinned, and perhaps the match was won. She pressed her advantage. "Now, you're lying about it too. I don't want to live with a liar."

He sat back, looking slightly deflated. "Okay, okay, maybe it was a bit of a scam. I did a bad thing. I'm sorry. It was a one-time deal. Okay?"

"A one-time deal? Jay, I found out yesterday that you have an arrest record. You've been scamming and stealing for years and lying about it!"

"Fuck!" Jay's fist slammed the table. "Did that lying bitch park ranger tell you that?"

"She's not a lying bitch and don't try to drag her into your



mess. Arrests are a matter of public record. I can call the Albuquerque District Attorney's office and ask them if I feel I need more proof. You can go on lying about it all you want, but the park ranger doesn't have any reason to lie."

"Shit," Jay put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. "I can't believe she told you that shit."

The waitress slipped a slice of pie and a cup of black coffee between his spread elbows and set Mandy's plate on her side of the table.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"No," Mandy said. "I think we're good for now."

Mandy dug into her mound of gravy-covered mashed potatoes and sighed ecstatically. It was one of those times when the food on her tongue seemed to melt directly into her pores and revive her even though she hadn't digested it yet.

Jay stabbed at his pie. He took a few bites and slugged down some coffee, then asked, "Why are you so damn happy?"

"I'm not happy, Jay. I'm just hungry. I needed to eat."

"Fine, then. Eat. What do you want me to do, Mandy? Are you going to make me plain out-and-out beg?"

Mandy slurped down another mouthful of the divine mashed potatoes. "What do you mean?"

"What can I do to make this up to you? How can we start over?"

"There's nothing you can do or say. I'm filing for divorce."

"I can contest it."

"Of course you can. Then we'll have to go to court and spend a lot of money to get it settled. But it isn't going to change anything. I'm not going to live with you anymore. You'll have to face it. There's nothing you can say to make me change my mind."

"I can hunt you down and kill you."

"Oh," Mandy sliced at her hamburger steak and put a chunk in her mouth, "that's a convincing 'let's get back together' line. How come you don't seem to be hearing me?"

"Shit. I don't know. Maybe it's all just happening too fast. I screwed up, you got pissed at me and left for the summer. I thought—"

"You thought I'd get over it. Sure, I understand that. But it's not about 'something to get over.' It's about choices, and I don't choose to live my life with a crook."

"I could change."

"Oh, right. Sure. There's no way to prove that in advance of it happening. Besides, by the time you managed it—if you did—we would both have moved on anyway. Don't bother, Jay. It isn't

going to work for me. If you want to change for yourself or to impress some future girlfriend, I applaud you. In fact, I hope you do it. But don't bother on my account."

"God, Mandy. I had no idea you could be so cold."

Mandy, to be honest, had no idea either. She had never behaved like this before: with such sureness, with such immovability. Normally she swayed in the wind, affected by every passing suggestion. She could only draw one conclusion: knowing who you were and knowing you had friends watching over you changed the whole picture, provided a whole new emotional landscape to work within.

"Sorry," she said for the first time in the entire conversation.

"These people up here have ruined you, Mandy. They did something to you, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Nobody's done anything to me, Jay." It wasn't strictly the truth but Jay didn't need to know that. "I've had time to think here. Time to evaluate my life and decide what I want."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to live my life. Live it my own way."

"And that doesn't include me."

"Nope." She almost said 'sorry' again but stopped herself. She didn't need Jay trying to make her feel sorry for him as his next strategy.

Jay turned his coffee cup back and forth between his hands. "I'm out of money, Mandy. It was a big expense coming up here."

The truth was finally out. "I don't doubt it."

"Can you loan me something?"

"I'm budgeted until the next payday."

"I guess I'll have to hang out until payday then. I just need enough to drive back to Albuquerque, you know. Then enough for a week or so to look for a new job. If you want, just give me your bank data. I could pull out enough cash just to get by, and leave you the rest."

Sure, right, she thought. Mandy didn't regret that he didn't have access to her bank account, the one where automatic payments got dumped by TV-I. She had set up that account long before she'd met him and had never added his name to it. Though she didn't keep a lot of money in there, she knew she always had enough for emergencies, in case there was a death in the family or her car died. She didn't think he'd ever paid attention to its existence, but obviously he had.

She set down her fork and examined his face. In some way, he was trying to look desperate, but she could see his happy alligator smile fighting to rise to the surface.

"I really need the help," he said, fighting off a smirk. "I came all this way to see you. I thought, you know, it would be good. I never expected this. To go home...without you."

Mandy took a sip of her iced tea and thought about how much she wanted Jay to leave Utah and leave her alone. It was another seven days until payday. He would wear her down between now and then. Not that she would lose her resolve, but she'd be emotionally exhausted. Even if Geronimo managed to keep him out of the Park, she would worry for the entire week. A sudden inspiration struck her.

"I don't have any cash, Jay. But maybe I do have something that would help."

"Like what?" Jay waved over a wandering waitress to refill his coffee. Mandy shifted back, dug down into her pocket, and carefully unrolled the plastic bag riding there. Her hands hidden beneath the table, she slid her fingers around inside the bag until she felt the larger \$20 gold piece. She pushed the bag and the other two coins deep into her pocket again and straightened up.

"I stumbled across a coin the other day. Someone must have dropped it." She knew the coin would entrance him. He didn't need to know about the other, far more valuable, coins. She hated to part with it, but it would be worthwhile to see the back of him.

She held out the coin and saw his eyes glitter with gold lust. The reaction, while true to form, made her sad. How could someone be made so happy by possessing things but never realizing how much else they were missing in life?

He took the coin between his fingers. "This is an antique. Where did you find it?"

"I was walking home one night from Orville's quarters along the pathway that leads to the Women's Dorm and saw a glint in the moonlight. I bent down to look and there it was. Must have fallen out of someone's pocket."

Jay's face twisted on hearing the reference to Orville. "That's quite a find. Maybe there's more."

Mandy shrugged. "I doubt it. It's probably valuable, though. Been lying around in the dirt for a while."

"Yeah," he agreed. "It's old. Do you think it's gold?"

"I have no idea," Mandy lied.

Jay pocketed the coin. "Thanks."

He sat back, looking relaxed, and Mandy felt a surge of alarm. Now that he knew she wasn't coming home with him he ought to be leaving. Instead, his eyes looked calculating, as if he were wondering if there was more where that had come from and if he could weasel it out of her.

Mandy had never been a good liar and she knew that he knew her well enough that he could tell if she was lying. Did he think she had a whole stash of twenty dollar gold pieces somewhere? Would he be breaking into the Women's Dorm to look for them?

Before she could try to turn his attention elsewhere, Jay slid from the table and stood. "I guess I should be going now. I'm sorry this has happened and that's your final word, but I'm glad we got it all worked out."

Feeling a rising sense of wariness and alarm, Mandy said, "We haven't gotten anything worked out."

"Sure we have." He shrugged. "I'll look for the divorce papers in the mail."

"You're not going to contest it?"

"What's the point? You're right. It'll just cost us more money. Have you picked an attorney?"

"No. Not yet."

"Go ahead. If it looks good, I'll sign it and Bob's your uncle." He thrust out his hand for her to shake. "Goodbye, Mandy."

Stunned, she grasped his hand. "Goodbye, Jay."

He turned and walked away. She sipped her tea for a full minute before she realized he had not only stiffed her for the coffee and pie but for the attorney's fees as well. She slapped her forehead with one hand. The man was a scam artist to the end.

"SO?" GERONIMO DEMANDED, pulling out a chair. Jo and Carlotta tumbled into the other seats, everyone eager to hear her news.

"So, as long as I pay for everything, he'll sign the divorce papers. True to form."

"Divorce papers?" Jo and Carlotta chimed in together.

"That was my husband Jay. You didn't tell them, Geronimo?"

Geronimo shrugged. "It wasn't my place. Besides, you forbade me, remember?"

Mandy nodded, pleased that Geronimo's word really had been her bond.

Jo's face was ashen. "I didn't know you were married, Mandy. I'm so sorry I wasn't more supportive of you."

Mandy patted Jo on the shoulder. "You've been great, Jo. I was very secretive about it. I was just so angry that I didn't want to talk about him."

"What happens now?" Carlotta asked.

"I've eighty-sixed him from the Park," Geronimo said, "so he'd better stay outside the boundary. We should all keep our eyes peeled though to be sure he doesn't bother Mandy."

"Or Orville." Carlotta giggled.

"Poor Orville," Mandy agreed. "I guess I should go by and see him."

Geronimo shook her head. "He'd probably be happier if you waited until the bruises fade. Men are pretty sensitive about that sort of thing, you know."

Everyone laughed. The new waitress stopped at their table to swoop up Mandy's dishes.

"Did you guys eat?" Mandy asked.

"No," the other women chorused.

"We were keeping too close of an eye on you," Geronimo said.

"I'll have a sundae," Mandy said to the waitress. "I deserve it. And whatever else everyone wants, I'll pay for it."

Gleefully, they placed their orders, and Mandy settled back in her chair, letting herself relax in the glowing warmth of these amazing caring friends.

Without even thinking about it, her hand strayed to hold Jo's. The other woman jerked in surprise when Mandy's fingers first grazed her skin but she didn't resist, so Mandy's hand remained where it was, lightly clasping Jo's. At first, Mandy felt some residual trepidation about taking the initiative in touching Jo, but then she felt joy bouncing around inside her chest and lighting up different parts of her anatomy like a ball striking the pins in a pinball machine. After a few minutes, she couldn't contain the flashing neon of a grin that rose to her face.

Geronimo caught it, cocked an eyebrow, and smiled back.

THE WOMAN'S BODY was round, rounder than Mandy's own. She had large breasts and extravagant hips; hips you could get lost in and never find your way back from. Were they Therese's hips?

The dark curled hair of the woman's pubis drew Mandy's eyes until it transformed from something warm, fleshy, and human into a flat black triangle, and she realized she was sitting in a narrow wood-paneled room staring at a star design composed of triangles that was affixed to the wooden bench in front of her. The only windows in the room were small and high, and the air held the hot stillness of late afternoon.

She sensed rather than saw that there were people sitting behind her. Off to her right clustered a group of men, their

attention focused on the front of the room. She didn't know their faces or their names. A judge sat behind a high bench. She knew he was a judge even though he didn't look like a judge to her. He wore a dark robe of sorts, but a worn cowboy hat rested within easy grab of his right hand.

"...to be hanged by the neck until dead," was all she heard him say, and she had no idea who he was talking about. There were shuffling motions off to her right, and the group of men walked away through a side door that had miraculously appeared in the wall.

A stern, unsmiling woman touched her elbow and helped her up from her seat. With the woman accompanying her, she followed the men out the door. When she looked to the right, there was no crowd of people as she had expected, just a wall of blackness. The woman walked with her toward a wood platform. The afternoon was hot and bright, and Mandy raised her hands to shield her eyes.

The men from the courtroom were nowhere in sight, but suddenly she was standing on the platform, and a noose was cinched around her neck. She hadn't seen it coming and grabbed for it. The rope felt thick and cool in her hands as she struggled to lift the heavy coil over her head. She pushed and pushed to no avail, and the effort made her sob. The bright day went black and the heavy sobs lodged in her throat.

Suddenly, Mandy's eyes were open, and she saw the wood slats of Jo's bunk over her head. She took a deep choking breath and sat up, then leaned back again, resting her head on the bunk rail.

So Polly really had hanged. How awful. She hadn't done anything. It was so heart-rending. And what about Therese? What would she feel? They had been falling in love. Mandy started to cry. Why did life have to be so hard?

## Chapter Twenty-One

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Geronimo was sitting in Rex Anderson's office when her walkie-talkie squawked. Geronimo could make out Thea's voice but not Thea's words because the park aide's voice was so shrill.

"Where are you?" Geronimo inquired. The answer was nearly unintelligible but Geronimo guessed her housemate had

said entrance station.

"Gotta go, Rex."

He waved her away without a word, his head bent over a file. Geronimo stepped out of the building and crossed the street toward the entrance station. A pickup truck was parked at the sliding window.

She stepped into the tiny guard station using the Employees Only door and leaned across Thea's skinny body to slide shut the customer service window. "What's going on, Thea?"

"This guy is saying he's Carlotta's husband, and he refuses to pay the entrance fee."

"I'll handle it." She slid open the window.

"What I can I do for you, Cody?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the man said, his face puffed up with anger.

"I'm Officer Wilkins. Are you here to visit the Park or visit Carlotta?" She didn't see any point in pretending Carlotta wasn't in the Park.

"She's my wife, damn it. I don't have to pay money to see her."

"What if she doesn't want to see you?"

"Why in the hell wouldn't she want to see me?"

"Cody, look. I can arrange for you to see her, but someone is going to be there with you."

"What in the hell do you mean by that?"

"According to Carlotta, the last time she saw you, you were holding her by the throat. That sounds pretty threatening to me."

"So what are you saying? The damn U.S. government is interfering in our private life? The mighty NPS has jumped in to save her worthless tattooed ass?"

Geronimo didn't like the invective and felt an immediate urge to haul Cody from the truck and whip *his* worthless ass but she held her tongue.

"No. I'm saying she's employed here. She's on her shift, so she can't see you right now. She's an adult. She's entitled to make her own employment and housing decisions."

"I don't understand the fucking woman! But she is my wife and I'm going to see her! You can't stop me."

Geronimo raised her eyebrows and sighed. There was little point in arguing with the man. Maybe if he and Carlotta got this meeting out of the way, there would be less likelihood of future trouble from him. She decided to concede.

"All right, Cody. Drive your truck over to that parking lot, and I'll find you an office where you can wait for her. I'll have to

find out what assignment she's on. Under no circumstances do you go looking for her yourself. Understood?"

"Fine!" He gunned the truck and it sailed across the street and into the lot. Geronimo dialed the Administration office.

"Hey, Wanda. Jane here. What is Carlotta working today?"

There was a moment of paper shuffling. "Visitor Center," came back the efficient reply.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

Geronimo called the Visitor's Center. Carlotta picked up and said in a happy sing-song voice, "Bryce Canyon National Park. How can I help you?"

Geronimo cut right to the chase and said, "I have bad news."

"Oh, no." The tone of Carlotta's voice descended like a stone. "What is it?"

"Cody's in the parking lot. I can't prevent him from meeting with you, but I can be in the meeting with you, if you want."

"Damn it!"

"What do you want to do?"

"I guess I can take a break for a few minutes and meet with him in the staff lounge. If he knows people are around, he probably won't do anything to me. He probably won't even yell."

"It's up to you. But that's probably better than potential fisticuffs in the parking lot in front of visitors." Geronimo felt a strange sense of *déjà vu*.

"Right. I'll wait for him in the staff lounge."

"Fine. I'll escort him in. Do you want me in the meeting?"

"No."

"I'll just wait outside in the hallway. If you run into trouble, shout for help."

"Okay."

The 'meeting' went peaceably enough, at least for all that Geronimo could hear of it. There wasn't shouting, as Carlotta had predicted. The only overt evidence of tension was the flame red color of Cody's ears as he exited the lounge and made his way down the hallway. He also muttered the word 'bitch' under his breath, but Geronimo couldn't tell if the epitaph was meant for her or for Carlotta.

She went into the lounge. Carlotta sat at the table, her head braced on her hands. She was crying, the tears dripping unheeded onto the slick veneered tabletop. Geronimo grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser and put her arm around the younger woman's shoulders.

Carlotta blew her nose on the thick paper Geronimo offered,



crumpled it, and shot it across the table into the wastebasket.

"Oh, well," she sighed. "I guess that's over."

"Over is good," Geronimo said.

"Yep. He wants to wait a year on a divorce in case I change my mind." She giggled. "Little does he know."

"Probably better not to tell him."

"I would never tell him. He'll never find out either because I won't be in Utah anymore. What's today?"

"The third of August."

"On this day next year, I'll be sending him divorce paperwork from wherever I am at the time."

Geronimo patted Carlotta on the back. "You're pretty tough."

"It's the right thing to do. Even if it's painful. I don't think he'll ever come back up here to the Park to bother me again. He was too embarrassed this time. I think he just had to know where I was and what was going on."

"I wonder how he found out you were here?"

"Probably asked around at Ruby's. Martin and Dave wouldn't have known it was a secret."

"Are you okay?"

"I think I can go back to work now."

"Good. Wouldn't want Rex to get on our case."

BUT REX GOT on Geronimo's case anyway. "What is it with you, Wilkins?" he bellowed at her later in his office while pacing the handful of squares of carpet in front of his desk that weren't occupied by furniture or equipment. "Orville just informed me Mandy's husband—and we didn't even know she had one—punched him out in the parking lot two days ago, and now today you have Carlotta's husband up here throwing a fit! Then there was Judith, who lit out of here like there was a fire on her tail because she *didn't* have a husband. Are you collecting female trophies this year or what?"

"Sir!"

"Seriously, Wilkins, it's one thing to have you and Jo going at it, but getting into the pants of the local yokels can only get us into very deep shit. This isn't a lesbian recruitment camp. It's a National Park, damn it!"

"Sir, are you accusing me of something specific?"

"No! I'm just blowing off steam. You should know me better than that." He paced back to his desk chair and slammed his body down into it. "But it doesn't make my job any easier to have the Bishop of Tropic sitting here in my office intimidating

he's afraid for the virtue of his virginal female wards because I'm permitting a bunch of degenerate lesbians to rule the roost at the Women's Dorm!"

"Sir, it isn't as if being a lesbian is a hanging offense, even in Utah. Besides, Becca was pretty over the top. I took her to see the Bishop to calm her down. But I think it's hard to say lesbianism was Judith's real problem. I mean none of us know. I don't think *she* knows."

"Becca is a pain in the ass. But I repeat myself. Christ, Wilkins. I don't care personally what you all do over there, but I don't want us getting a reputation for corrupting young women. That would be worse than last year's drunken park aide fiasco."

Geronimo wanted to grin but controlled herself. "We did give Becca her own room so she wouldn't have to rub shoulders with our filthy disrespecting selves, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. I don't need any further trouble on that score." Rex's voice was calmer, and Geronimo finally felt it might be safe to sit down. She settled into the steel chair. "Sir, it's just luck of the draw, anyway. We can't actually, uh, recruit people, you know. At least, not successfully."

"Sure, I know. I'm not your usual ignorant homophobic asshole." He put his head in his hands then it snapped up again. "I just don't want any more trouble with husbands or Isaac King. Is that understood?"

"Yes, of course. I don't think Cody's coming back, and I eighty-sixed Jay Barnes—"

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Rex roared.

Orville poked his head in, with a commercial checkbook in hand. "I just needed your signature on some checks, Rex."

"Fine, how many?"

"Seven."

Rex took the checkbook, laid it open on the desk, and started signing.

"Speaking of Jay Barnes..." Orville paused and eyed her. "Weren't you?"

Geronimo acknowledged the truth with a nod of her head. Had Orville been listening at the door? If so, how much had he heard of her and Rex's private and rather incriminating conversation?

"Barnes was here," Orville said.

"Today?" Geronimo almost bolted out of her chair. So much for her glib reassurance to her boss.

"No. Last night. He was nosing around the dorms."

"Was he trying to get to Mandy?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. He was digging for buried

treasure." Orville laughed, which made his face look lopsided due to his swollen bruised jaw. "I ran him off."

Geronimo frowned good and deep. "What do you mean 'digging for buried treasure'?"

"He had a shovel and that's what he said he was doing. Looking for some coins that Mandy said she'd found on the path between the dorms."

Rex too was frowning. "Coins? Why would Mandy tell him that? What coins?"

"To throw him off, I suspect."

His dumbfounded audience simply stared at him.

"You don't know about the coins?"

"No! Christ, Orville, we don't know anything about any coins!" Rex's steam was building up again.

"Look, you two. I can't believe you don't know this—especially you, Geronimo—but Mandy really did find some old coins out at Calf Creek Falls. She must have told Jay about it for some reason, but lied about the location. I re-directed him."

"To Calf Creek Falls?" Geronimo asked.

"Yep." Orville eased the checkbook out of Rex's hands. "We sure as hell don't want him in the Park." He turned his back on them and went out the door.

"Coins?" Rex turned his attention back to his enforcement ranger.

She sighed. "I'll look into it, sir."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

"I DON'T KNOW how," Mandy whined.

"There's nothing to it," Jo assured her. They were sitting side-by-side on Jo's bunk bed which sat against one wall of the new, much larger room they had taken from Becca. Carlotta's single bed occupied the other wall. Carlotta wasn't home yet from her shift, and neither were any of the other women. Jo and Mandy were alone in the house.

"Look, it's pretty simple. Just think, the rabbit goes over the burrow, the rabbit goes under the burrow, comes around and—"

Mandy slapped at Jo's hand.

"Hey," Jo grabbed her hand. "How am I going to take you climbing if I can't teach you some basic knots?"

"We can't climb in Bryce. All the rocks would just fall apart."

Besides, it's illegal."

"True, but there are some rocks we could climb in Red Canyon. Now, try again."

The room was still light, a light that would soon go golden with sunset. Both of their shifts had ended at five p.m. and they had agreed to go to Ruby's for dinner just to have a chance to talk. 'To discuss certain issues' as Mandy had put it. Mandy had changed out of her uniform into jeans and a Western-cut plaid shirt. Jo had changed into jeans and a t-shirt, and they went to the diner where Mandy had haltingly talked to Jo about the realizations she had come to in recent days. By the time they finished dinner and went back to their room, Mandy was feeling both relieved and nervous.

Waiting for Jo to come out of the bathroom, Mandy had played with the rope lying on the dresser. Jo used it routinely to practice knots. "It calms me down," Jo had told her, "and it's a good skill to know. I go climbing with the girls in San Bernardino and we sail too." Mandy remembered at the time she had been inordinately jealous of the "girls in San Bernardino" but didn't know why. Now she wondered if she would someday *be* one of the "girls in San Bernardino." The thought wasn't awful anymore. Instead, rather a welcome one.

Mandy took the short length of rope Jo was using to show her knot tying and looped it over Jo's head and shoulders so that it encircled her.

"Hey!" Jo exclaimed.

Gently, Mandy tugged on the rope, pulling Jo closer to her. Jo smiled and looked into Mandy's eyes. "Are you sure about this?"

"I don't know but I want to try it." Mandy didn't know what made her say that but suddenly she couldn't sit beside Jo anymore without knowing what she really wanted to know.

Jo leaned toward Mandy and brushed her lips across Mandy's. Mandy closed her eyes and moaned. Jo's lips were so soft and so sweet; sweeter even than they had been the first time.

Then her lips were pressing a little more firmly, and Mandy responded to the warm, easy pressure. She felt excitement run up and down her spine and then lodge somewhere deep in her abdomen. With a tiny flick of Jo's tongue against her lips, the excitement got moving again, spiraling around deep in her belly, circling her belly button.

Her lips opened, and she felt Jo's hands grasping the sides of her face, stroking her cheeks. Slowly, still kissing her, Jo eased her back until she was lying on the narrow bunk with Jo's clothed breasts against her own as Jo settled down on top of her.

It was like having soft, yet full, firm, pillows resting against her, and she realized it was the most sensuous feeling she had ever experienced.

"Oh, Jo," she said when Jo's tender ministrations on her mouth slowed for a moment.

Jo lifted her head. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, it's almost too much."

"Do you want me to stop?" Jo rolled off Mandy and rested by her side, her hand stroking Mandy's hair. Her fingers traced delicate lines around Mandy's eyes and under her cheekbones.

"We'll only do as much as you want, Mandy." Jo leaned in to kiss her again, and Mandy was swept away in sensation, yet the only point of contact between their bodies was their mouths. She had never felt like this: so supported, so treasured, so like she was floating on soft clouds.

She lay on her bed, this beautiful, vibrant woman beside her, and all that mattered were Jo's hands and Jo's mouth and whatever they were going to touch.

Jo's fingers brushed down her neck and slid around to the underside of her clothed breast. Her hand cupped Mandy's breast, which brought a surprised 'oh' from Mandy, and strong fingers surrounded her nipple and gently tugged through the cloth, which brought the nipple to an instant thick erection.

She suddenly wanted Jo's body everywhere at once. She wanted her tongue inside her mouth and her hand sliding between her thighs. She wanted her weight holding her down and her hips pressing against her own.

"Jo," she murmured, opening her eyes and seeing the warm gold of sunset washing the room. "Don't think, just do."

Jo grinned. "Your wish is my command." Almost before the words had left her lips, Jo's tongue was in Mandy's mouth, deeply searching, and Mandy was pierced with excitement. She returned tongue thrust for tongue thrust, and the two rocked from side to side on the bunk.

Jo's hands reached for the pearl snaps on Mandy's shirt and yanked them open. Mandy wasn't wearing a bra and the sudden flow of cool air against her naked skin made her nipples stand tall. She was delighted by the sensuous exposure.

She had no idea she would feel so proud to be naked with a lover but that's what she felt. Jo's hands were on her breasts, cupping and kneading, and Mandy moaned with excitement.

Suddenly, Jo was no longer on top of her, and Mandy opened her eyes. Jo had bounded across the room to lock the door. As she walked back to the bed, she pulled her shirt from her pants and tugged it over her head. She dispensed with her

bra just as rapidly, and while Mandy watched, undid each button of her Levi 501 jeans.

Mandy went breathless thinking about what lay beneath that stiff fabric, and when Jo returned to lay on top of her, she felt electrically charged by the touch of naked skin on hers. Her breasts were so perfect, so lush and so soft.

Such ecstasy was indescribable. All Mandy could think was: why had she resisted this joy, this pleasure, this sensuality all of her life? There was nothing like it in all of her prior experience.

When people talked about the pleasures of sex, she now knew this is what they were referring to. She had spent six years of married life with Jay and had never had an inkling of what was possible.

Jo was leaving a trail of kisses down Mandy's neck. She cupped each of Mandy's breasts in her hands, and brought her mouth down to Mandy's right nipple. Mandy thought she was going to cry with the sensation of tonguing that lifted and teased her nipple. Then Jo let the erect tower fall from the warm cave of her mouth, and the contrasting cool of the surrounding air brought it to an almost painful tingling fresh height of arousal. Mandy's breast pulsed as if it were communicating a crazy desire to be back inside Jo's inventive mouth.

Mandy wasn't sure what to do with her hands. She had only gotten brave enough to bring them up to rest lightly against Jo's sides. She didn't yet have the guts to bring them down to her lover's behind or even to stroke her back. She was so focused on what Jo was doing to her, she couldn't do anything in return. Jo's left hand was inching its way down Mandy's naked belly toward her zipped jeans.

The thought of where Jo's hand was going made Mandy gush with a volume of wetness she had never thought possible. She knew her underwear was drenched, and she didn't know whether to be pleased or embarrassed. Was that okay? Did lesbians get wet?

She had always made Jay use lube and a condom when they had intercourse as she had never experienced much natural lubrication. She had always assumed that was the way her body behaved. But her body was behaving nothing like that now.

Before she could think about it further, Jo undid her top snap and unzipped her jeans. Her mouth abandoned Mandy's nipple, and Jo got off the bunk to pull Mandy's jeans from her legs.

Mandy's hands went automatically, self-protectively, to cover her damp underwear.

Jo smiled and slid off her own jeans and underwear. "It's all

right," she murmured.

Mandy stared at the naked vision before her. Jo's pubic hair was almost gold, a lighter shade of red than the more exuberant hair of her head. Jo's legs, while lithe, were muscular and her hips held a surprisingly full curve that was masked by the straight cut of her jeans.

The light in the room was softening from orange to pink. Jo climbed back onto the bed and went back to kissing Mandy's mouth until she relaxed again. Then Jo slid her hand beneath Mandy's panties.

Mandy gasped in astonishment as Jo's fingers slid between the wet folds of her labia. The sensation was exquisite. Jo smiled at Mandy's surprise. "You are very, very wet," Jo murmured, her eyes expressing her delight.

"Is that normal?" Mandy asked, anxiety edging her voice.

Jo laughed. "It means you're really turned on. Have you never been this wet before?"

Mandy shook her head. The light was dusky with a blue twilight now and it was getting hard to see.

"Welcome to a whole new world of pleasure, Mandy. Do you want to see how turned on I am? Would that make you feel less strange?"

"I don't know."

Jo took Mandy's hand and gently guided it to her own pussy. When Mandy's fingers slid unresisting down the warm wet length of Jo's labia, she felt she had been blessed with an entirely new revelation in an afternoon of revelations. Jo's was just as slick and wet as her own.

Jo whispered in Mandy's ear: "Making love with you, Mandy, is turning me on. This is what it's all about. It's about love making, not baby making."

"Wow," Mandy said. The room was murky with shadow and they were now in a world of uninhibited touch. Mandy closed her eyes and let her fingers roam over Jo's pussy. At the same time, Jo slid Mandy's panties from her hips and allowed her fingers to explore Mandy's rounder, wider pussy.

Mandy panted from the attention, particularly as Jo so knowledgeably stroked her clitoris, running her fingers gently from the base up to the tip, over and over. Eventually, all of Mandy's attention was focused on an intense sensation in her labia that built and built and built until it exploded in her belly and rushed through her limbs, leaving tendrils of tingling in her fingers and toes.

Jo, too, was satisfied a few moments later by the touch of Mandy's hand. Not much was required and Mandy was

inordinately pleased by her new-found skill and by the joy of knowing she had brought Jo to such a swift and fierce expression of pleasure.

AFTERWARD, THEY PILED into Jo's Jeep for a drive to Ruby's. They had shared silent drives before but this one was different: warm, companionable, no words necessary. It was still too early after the experience for doubts or concerns to crowd Mandy's mind. Instead, she felt like a newborn, empty of the usual everyday worries, sensitive to the heady vanilla scent of the pine trees and the hum of the tires on the dark roadway.

Ruby's was lit up and wearing her usual party clothes, a bright neon spot in the immense empty darkness of the Paunsaugunt Plateau. They went in and seated themselves at a booth. The crowd wasn't big, but to Mandy, the diners seemed more festive, the staff more friendly. It was as if everything around her glittered with light and she could see it clearly for the first time.

"Coffee?" Dave asked.

"Sure," Jo replied.

Mandy shook her head. "Hot tea." She gave Dave a radiant smile which caused him to raise a questioning eyebrow.

"I'll have half a tuna sandwich and the chicken soup," Jo said. "Mandy?"

"Waffles, strawberries and whipped cream."

Dave's other eyebrow went up, but he wrote down the order and walked away, shaking his head.

"You feel a little crazy, don't you?" Jo reached her hands across the table to grasp Mandy's.

Mandy shrugged her shoulders up to her ears. "I feel warm and snugly and happy. I'm not sure I've ever felt this happy."

"Get over it, girl, 'cause here comes trouble." Geronimo, still in her park uniform, loomed over the booth, and with one quick motion dropped her body next to Jo's.

"What's up?" Jo smiled. She liked Geronimo, had had a lot of fun with her, but Mandy was The One.

"Rex Anderson is chewing my ass as usual. I've been looking for you two. Where have you been?"

"In our room." Mandy giggled.

Geronimo's jaw dropped and she looked for quick confirmation to Jo. Jo tilted her head and grinned.

"You devil!" Geronimo punched Jo's shoulder. She high-fived Mandy. "Welcome to the team!"

Jo interrupted their mutual admiration moment. "Now, wait



just a cotton-pickin' minute, did you know Mandy, uh, had plans, uh, had decided—"

Geronimo nudged Jo's shoulder. "Just shut up, girlfriend, and be happy. A woman's entitled to have a confidant. Just remember, I'm the one getting the short end of the stick here, so to speak."

Jo pursed her lips in a thoughtful line, but Mandy laughed out loud. "I don't know about that, Geronimo. The way I feel right now, I think I could do half the female population."

"Ah," rhapsodized Geronimo, "to be a baby dyke again! The energy, the enthusiasm, the unbridled sluttiness, the belt notching, the name and number crunching. Do you remember it, Jo?" She punched her best friend in the shoulder.

"How can one forget it? It's one of the best parts of being inducted into dykehood." Jo punched Geronimo back to make up for all the punches she was getting. If Geronimo kept this up, her shoulder was going to be damn sore.

Mandy pouted and said, "You're teasing me."

"You bet I am," Geronimo replied, "but I mean well. Don't think you're the first ever newly-christened lesbian who has felt like she should go out and screw as many women as possible." She leaned forward. "The important thing, Mandy, is not to hold back. Go after it. Do what feels right."

Jo felt a temporary shadow pass over her happiness. What if Mandy took Geronimo seriously? She knew Mandy was The One, but Mandy was just discovering her new lesbian sexuality. For all Jo knew, Mandy was going to have to cut a few swaths of her own before she even started thinking about The One. And even then, Jo might not prove to be that one. Just because she'd set Mandy's feet on the path didn't mean they were going to be life partners.

And when in the heck had Jo started thinking about life partners, for crissake, instead of just bed partners? Damn! Why did life have to be so hard?

Their food was placed on the table and while Jo and Mandy got started with their meals, Geronimo ordered a cheeseburger. Once it came and she'd eaten half of it, she put it down and wiped her mouth with her napkin.

"So what's this about coins?" Geronimo asked. "Are you two holding out on me, or what?"

Jo almost spit soup out of her mouth, and Mandy struggled to swallow a half-chewed strawberry.

Geronimo lowered her napkin. "You *are* holding out on me!"

"We weren't holding out on you," Mandy said. "The topic

just never came up."

"I looked a real idiot today in front of Rex and Orville because I didn't know something everyone else already knows—me being enforcement and all—and supposedly having my ear to the ground."

"Sorry, babe," Jo said. "It wasn't intentional. It never came up. I guess it just never got discussed when you were around."

Geronimo sighed. "Fair enough. But now I need to know. Rex is expecting a full report."

Mandy put down her fork. "Remember when Carlotta cut her foot?"

"Sure, I remember." Geronimo resumed eating her cheeseburger.

"There were some coins in the can. Jo wasn't interested in them so I did some research and found out they're rare and rather valuable. I was mystified by how they got to Calf Creek Falls so I mentioned them to Orville, and he thought they might belong to one of Utah's famous treasure troves, so I talked to Daniel—"

"Daniel, the lead interpretation ranger?"

"Yeah. He thought it was possible they came from the Baking Powder Can Cache."

Geronimo whistled. "Wow. No wonder everybody's riled up."

"What do you mean? Did Daniel say something? I was sure he'd keep it real quiet. He told *me* to keep it quiet."

"Daniel didn't say anything, but apparently, you also told your husband Jay."

"No!" Mandy's eyes went wide. "I didn't! I mean I gave him a coin to get him off my back. He was asking for money, but I didn't tell him about the Cache or the discovery or anything. I just said I saw it on the ground and picked it up."

"Orville caught him wielding a shovel on the path between our houses last night," Geronimo explained.

"Shit! He's such an idiot!"

Jo spoke up. "Didn't you eighty-six him?"

"He walked in from the west, from Red Canyon. Crossed the barbed wire fence on foot. I don't exactly have x-ray vision or TV cameras covering every inch of the boundary. I can't catch that kind of thing. Orville told him to get out and not come back."

"Thank God," Mandy said.

"We're not out of the woods on this, Mandy. Either literally or figuratively."

"Why do you say that?"

"Orville told him exactly where you found the coins."

"Damn," Jo slammed the table with her fist. "If he goes out there and tears up Calf Creek Falls—"

"He'll be arrested," Geronimo assured her.

"Not necessarily," Jo said. "It's BLM."

"You still have to file a mining claim," Geronimo countered, "which I doubt our Jay either knows about or cares. However, now that I have the whole story, I can alert my pal Andrew over at the Bureau of Land Management office. Tell him to keep his eyes peeled. Just as a courtesy, of course."

"Of course," Jo repeated.

"You know," Mandy said, "we tossed that mashed can into the fire ring. There weren't any other coins in it. I seriously doubt there are any more coins out there."

"Why?"

Mandy shrugged, flushing with embarrassment. "It's just a feeling."

Geronimo frowned. "But Daniel tells that story like there's a lot of cash involved—"

Jo interrupted. "Ever since Mandy found the coins, she's been having dreams."

"Dreams?"

"They seem to be about the bad things that happened to the people who originally owned the coins," Mandy said.

"Oh," Geronimo said, "that's creepy." She had finished her burger and was plowing her way through her French fries, dipping them in a big mound of ketchup she had poured on her plate.

"Creepy," Jo repeated. "That's exactly what I said."

"Look, it's not my fault," Mandy pointed out. "I don't have any control over it. I don't know where the dreams are coming from but I'm really worried."

"Why?"

"Because I had a dream where I was about to be hanged."

Jo shuddered. "You didn't tell me about that one." She turned to Geronimo. "The last dream I pulled her out of, she was drowning."

"Shit."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

AFTER MUCH DISCUSSION, Mandy and Jo decided to go to Calf Creek Falls to assure themselves that Jay was not only long

gone but that he hadn't decimated the recreation area. They had to wait two more days for their weekend to begin.

Those two days were magic for Mandy. She had a lover, she had friends, and Jo, Geronimo, and Carlotta hung out with her as much as possible. As a foursome, they went out to eat and stayed up late talking. Jo and Geronimo had an endless supply of dyke tales to share which entertained, and sometimes shocked, her and Carlotta as well. The two more experienced lesbians seemed to take it as an unparalleled opportunity to mentor the two 'baby dykes' in lesbian herstory, lifestyles, and mores. By the end of it, Mandy felt she'd had a head-spinning crash course in lesbian life.

Carlotta was developing her own style. It was plain she wanted to get out of the backwoods, head to the big city, and immerse herself in dyke culture. Mandy saw more tattoos in Carlotta's future. As for herself, she doubted her 'style' would change much. She suspected she would always be rather ordinary and duty-bound; just happier. She also saw herself as more empowered, more confident, and more able to make decisions for herself. She would probably get involved in women's activities—like art, culture and music—when she got back to Albuquerque. Or was she going to San Bernardino?

She didn't know where she and Jo stood and found it difficult to separate the mind-bending excitement of her discovery and the uniqueness of the time and place from the person of Jo. Was she in love with Jo or Jo in love with her? Or was Bryce just so heady, the summer so special—like a single moment of time trapped in amber for eternity—her emotions so high, that it didn't mean personal love of the live-together kind? Had destiny intervened in her life and set her on a new path? Whether Jo wanted to share that path or she wanted to share it with Jo, she had no idea.

After all, Jo had made love to another woman in Bryce before Mandy's arrival on the available-girl scene. For all she knew, that was normal for Jo, and Jo's fling with her was just another opportunity to introduce someone ripe and willing to the Great Lesbian Way.

The morning of the third day dawned, and she and Jo got up early to make the hour long drive to Calf Creek Falls. When they reached the parking lot, Mandy's body grew cold. Jay's decrepit white Econoline van was there along with two other vehicles, one a Ford F-150 pickup and the other a Volkswagen bus nearly as ancient as Jay's van.

"Damn!" Mandy slammed her fist against the dashboard of Jo's Jeep.

Jo shrugged. "Don't worry about him. He can't do anything to us."

"Yeah, and we can't do anything to him either. We don't have the manpower or the firepower or, frankly, any power."

Jo laughed and jumped out of the driver's seat. "If we spot anything, we'll report it to Geronimo, and she can let the BLM know. If he's digging holes and knocking down trees, we'll get the big boys to deal with him."

They gathered their backpacks and camping equipment, sleeping bags, and water bottles. They planned to stay overnight. As before, Geronimo would come up and join them the next morning once her weekend shift started.

They headed up the trail and this time, Mandy had the pleasure of watching Jo's hips swaying in front of her as she strode along. How could she have been so blind, she wondered? There was nothing more alluring or graceful, and it wasn't as if she hadn't seen it before, she just hadn't *seen* it before.

She was sweating, little rivulets of moisture running down her neck and sticking her shirt to her skin under the weight of the pack. She imagined the sandy beach at Calf Creek and saw an image of herself stripping off her clothes and running naked across the beach to dip her over-heated body into the pool at the base of the Falls.

Unfortunately, this picture was followed by an image of her outraged, soon-to-be-ex-husband catching her doing it and being less than pleased. Somehow, she didn't think he'd understand the natural and fun pleasure of the whole thing. Nor would she have done so, in the past. Her summer at Bryce had completely changed her perspective.

Twenty minutes later, they came upon the beach, quiet and empty, as she had imagined. If Jay was there, he certainly wasn't on the beach. She imagined him deep in the trees along the sides of the canyon, madly digging for a treasure that didn't exist and cursing her with every shovel thrust.

She did see a stack of gear, though, off to one side of the beach, near the fire pit they had used on the previous outing. Its presence was a way of marking someone else's camping area. Probably, she guessed, whoever owned the F-150 they had seen in the lot.

Jo stopped about twenty yards from the stacked gear and slid her pack off her shoulders and let it fall to the sand. "This oughta be okay." She stood looking at the pool.

"Great," Mandy said, happy to let go of her pack. She plopped down next to it on the sand. "That was quite a pace, Jo. I'm pooped." She leaned against her pack.

"Drink some water." Jo pulled a bottle from the gear belt on her waist. "It'll perk you right back up. You're probably dehydrating."

Mandy did feel parched. She guzzled down the offered water.

Jo crouched down. "Don't drink it so fast. It's bad for the stomach."

"Gurgle, gurgle," Mandy quipped.

Jo snatched the bottle from her. "You're a greenhorn, Ms. Barnes." She leaned in toward Mandy's face, clearly ready to steal a kiss. "I'm gonna have to learn ya—"

But Mandy's face wasn't there anymore. She was dragged upward and back by hands around her throat that had come out of nowhere. Mandy gurgled in earnest as she struggled against this unknown attacker.

Jo shot up from her crouch and dove for the man. She tried to pull his hands from Mandy's throat. "What in the fuck do you think you're doing?" Jo screamed at the top of her lungs.

Mandy kicked her feet and struggled to keep some kind of purchase on the sand. A man's voice shouted, and as soon as she heard it, she knew who it was.

"Now, listen here!" Jay wrapped an arm around Mandy's throat, and she saw his meaty arm fling out over her shoulder as he tried to fend off Jo at the same time.

"Let the fuck go of her!" Jo shouted.

Mandy felt like a rag doll, and her lungs burned. Her eyes hurt so much, she thought they must be bulging from her face.

Jo slammed her fist into Jay's jaw with all the fury of pure adrenaline, causing him to drop Mandy. Mandy fell on her knees to the ground, her hands gripping her bruised neck. She glanced to the side to see Jay on his back and Jo pummeling him. His face was a mixture of consternation and surprise. A complete stranger—a male—knelt beside them. He was waving his arms at Jo and yelling, "Stop, stop."

The moment Jo was distracted enough to look at him, the stranger yanked Jo off Jay's body, flipped Jay onto his stomach and pinned his hands high up his back. Jay spat out sand but lay still.

"If you want to help," the man said to the wild-eyed Jo, "find some rope while he's a little dazed."

Jo was back in a moment with the bungee cords she and Mandy used to mount their sleeping bags to their packs. It was clear the stranger didn't think it the best possible choice of tying mediums but with Jo's help he made quick work of the four stretchy strands of nylon, looping the metal hooks many times

around Jay's wrists and ankles, locking them to each other behind his back.

Mandy was horrified by the visage of her trussed-up husband, but at the same time she was relieved beyond words that Jo and this stranger had come to her rescue. She wasn't certain Jay had meant to choke her to death, but what had transpired had been terrifying enough.

Finally, satisfied with the security of the bonds, the man sat back on his haunches. For the first time, Mandy looked closely at him.

"Derek?" she croaked.

"Hey," he swung his head to look at her, "good memory."

"What," she whispered, her throat too hoarse to speak out loud, "are you doing out here?"

"The question isn't, 'what am I doing out here'," Derek answered. "The question is 'what is *he* doing out here?'" He pointed at Jay, who was thrashing and making growling noises in the sand.

Jo said, "He's Mandy's ex. Are you sure he can't squirrel out of the bungee cords?"

Derek said, "Three against one. He won't dare. Besides," he took a wicked-looking hunting knife from a sheath on his belt, "if he tries anything, I'll slice him stem to stern."

On hearing that, Jay settled back on the sand, his face pale.

"Thanks for the assist," Jo said, "and don't think me ungrateful, but who the hell are you?"

"You can call me a Good Samaritan," the man said.

Jo came over to examine Mandy's throat. "The skin's bruised. Are you breathing okay?" She looked at Mandy with concern, and when she got closer, Mandy realized Jo was shaking with fear. Jo wasn't one to panic easily, but it was clear she was terrified.

"Yes, I'm breathing okay." Mandy whispered. "It's just sore. Swallowing hurts."

"Do you think you need to go to the hospital?"

Mandy shook her head. "I think I'm okay. Just shook up."

"I'll get you some lemon-lime soda. It'll help with the shock, too."

"That sounds good," Mandy whispered back. Jo went over to their packs and brought back three canned sodas.

"Did you just happen along, or have you been watching this asshole?" Jo asked the stranger, squatting down next to Mandy who was sitting cross-legged on the sand.

"He's been tramping around in here all day, digging holes," Derek replied. "I've been tracking him. When he saw her," he

nodded his head in Mandy's direction, "he went ballistic. If I hadn't been following him, I wouldn't have gotten here fast enough."

"Thank you," Jo said. "He might have killed Mandy if you hadn't stepped in. I don't know if I could have gotten him off of her."

He took a sip of his soda. "What's he got against her?"

"He's her husband," Jo said.

"Ah," Derek murmured, as if that explained everything. Apparently it did, Mandy realized.

"My name's Jo," Jo said, offering her hand to him.

"Derek," he answered, returning her handshake and giving her a grin.

"How do you know Mandy?" Jo asked, her arm protectively around Mandy's shoulders.

"We met at the library in Cedar City."

Mandy said, still whispering, "Derek is a librarian." She leaned toward him and whispered. "I think I've put it all together. When I told you where I'd found the coins, you knew immediately I'd stumbled across the Baking Powder Can Cache. Didn't you?"

"Well, I am, after all, a research librarian and a native of southeastern Utah. Of course I know all the old stories. It's my job."

"You pretended to be disinterested."

"My only interest in the Cache, Mandy, is its historical significance. I don't want fellows like this," he pointed at Jay, "coming out here and digging up public land for their own personal profit. Sorry, I realize he's your husband and all, but—"

"Soon-to-be-ex-husband," she interrupted, wanting to shout, but feeling that even whispering was straining her bruised throat.

"Derek, I don't care at all about the damn treasure! It's caused nothing but trouble. I mean, look at what happened to the people who tried to steal it in the first place and then the horrible dreams I've been having about them and their awful fate! Then Jay behaving this way and everybody riled up at the Park. I hate these damn coins!"

"Okay, then," he said soothingly. "Just calm down." He paused for about three seconds then gave her a speculative look. "Dreams, huh?"

"Nightmares, really. Well, not all of them, but still."

"Sorry to hear that. Weird effect. I'll have to look that up. That's not poltergeist phenomenon, I don't think. Maybe it's—"

"Derek—" Mandy rasped out.



"Okay, okay." He waved his hand in dismissal. "But what about the husband?"

"An unfortunate complication," Mandy admitted. "But I didn't tell him where I found the coins. Someone else did."

"And you?" He looked at Jo.

"Once we heard Jay knew about the source of the coins, we thought we'd better come out here to see if he was making a mess. If he was, we planned to contact the BLM."

"What he's doing—digging—is illegal. No question about that. Jumping you," he glanced at Mandy's blue-toned throat, "that's assault, for sure. I think we've got plenty to call the BLM on. Not to mention, we're going to need some help to handle him."

"Preferably big guys with guns," Jo retorted.

"Yep," Derek agreed.

"Wait, a second," Mandy said. "Aren't you out here digging, Mr. Pure As the Driven Snow?"

"Indeed, I am," Derek admitted. "But you see, I have a validly-filed mining claim." He grinned and Mandy felt an urge to whoop out a huge belly laugh. She would have too, except her throat hurt too much. Instead, she whispered, "You're a piece of work, Derek. How soon did you file the claim?"

"Oh, let's see," he rolled his eyes skyward, "you were probably still in the parking lot of the library when I was on the phone with the BLM requesting the forms."

"Uh, huh. And I thought you were giving overworked little Deena a break."

Derek looked hurt. "I did give her a break. It was just a little later, that's all. When did you figure out you had stumbled on to the Baking Powder Can Cache?"

"From this guy I was dating at the Park—"

Derek's eyebrows went up. "You're dating someone? Aren't you supposed to be married to this guy?"

Mandy blushed. "I guess I'm not very good at this sort of thing. Picking men, I mean."

Jo grinned, but Derek didn't get the reference. He frowned at the two women. "Whatever. We're going to have to decide what to do about your husband."

"I know."

Jay rolled over on his side and spit sand out of his mouth. "I'm not deaf, you know. Even if you did slam me in the head, you bitch." He glared at Jo.

"Name's Jo," she said.

"You know, Jay," Mandy croaked, "you're not exactly making friends this way. Why in the hell did you grab me like that?"

"I was just trying to get your attention, Mandy. You seem so screwed up all of a sudden. These people have fucked with you. They've changed you."

Jo rolled her eyes. Derek pursed his lips, and Mandy sputtered, but she forced herself to be in control. Not that she could shout anyway. Being calm was made strangely easier by the fact that Jay was temporarily physically restrained.

"We've already had this discussion, Jay. We had it a few nights ago at Ruby's. How I've changed or not changed is off limits. We're not talking about it."

"Yeah, well now I'm hearing there's some big treasure cache out here. You lied to me at Ruby's."

"Uh, huh. Like you've never lied to me."

"Honey, I only lied to save you pain or—"

"Or rip off our friends and, god knows, how many other people."

It was Jay's turn to roll his eyes in exasperation. Not that he could exactly move other body parts. "The deal here is, you guys are the ones who're going to be arrested. Tying me up like this is against the law. False imprisonment or something. You guys aren't law enforcement. You can't legally restrain me."

"You didn't give us a choice," Derek said. "You were out of control, and you assaulted your wife."

"Yeah," Jay spat out, "that'll really fly in Utah. Aren't you *supposed* to discipline your wife out here?"

"That's uncalled for," Jo retorted. "As far as I know, there's no more domestic violence in Utah than anywhere else in the good old U.S.A. That's an insult to good Mormons, even if there are some nasty fundamentalist ones out here. The Church doesn't exactly endorse them."

"Thank you, Ms. Political-Know-It-All," Jay said. "What are you people going to do? It's getting dark, and my joints are stiff. You can't just leave me here like this all night. I'll tell you what though: I'll let you off easy with law enforcement when I report this as long as you guys have some mercy now."

Mandy shook her head. "Ever the con man."

"I accept the charge. But, come on, when have I ever physically harmed anyone?"

"Today," she answered. "The other day when you punched out Orville"

He looked her in the eye. "Okay, I admit it. I've been acting a little crazy since I got here. That you were going to divorce me was a pretty big shock."

"You punched out Orville before you knew about that."

"True, but that was the shock of finding out you were

sleeping with him. I never expected this kind of behavior from you."

Jo looked sidelong at Mandy, a funny expression on her face, and Mandy couldn't help but think it was a good thing Jay didn't know about her true predilections. She was hardly going to be the one to inform him and hoped to hell he never found out at all.

Mandy stared at her bound husband in the fading light. It was only about three o'clock in the afternoon but the canyon was narrow and they would, as he had pointed out, soon be without light.

"He's right," Mandy said, "we have to make some decisions, and soon."

IN THE END, all three of them packed up and walked Jay, with his hands bound behind his back, the nearly three miles to the parking lot where his Econoline van sat. After they unbound him, Jay climbed into the driver's seat of the van, and Derek reminded him for the umpteenth time that he was still going to report the illegal digging to the BLM. He told him if he ever came back to Calf Creek Falls and Derek caught him, he'd be taking his life into his own hands.

Jay nodded his silent understanding, coaxed the engine of his van into a sputter-y kind of life and shifted the van into reverse. He leaned his head out the open window, threw Derek a finger, and spat at Mandy. "Slut," he shouted.

His spittle fell short of hitting her or anyone else, but this final insult threw Mandy into a paroxysm of crying that her sore throat could ill afford. She was in pain and exhausted. The events of the afternoon had all been too much. Jo simply stood in the parking lot and held her against her body while she sobbed, stroking her hands through Mandy's hair to help calm her.

Derek gave them an awkward look, then loaded his gear into his pickup truck and their gear into Jo's open Jeep. When he was done, he came over to the huddled women. "What now?" he asked.

"Dinner at Ruby's," Jo replied. "She's going to need some nutrition, even if it's just a bowl of soup. Care to join us?"

"Sure. Can you manage the drive back?"

"Yeah," Jo said. "Go on ahead and get us a table." She saw the nervous look in his eye. "Don't worry," she said, "he's not coming back. He's too humiliated."

Derek laughed. "I hope that'll work. He sure as hell wasn't scared of me."

Jo smiled. "Maybe more than you think."

"I'll still feel better if you're ahead of me on the road."

"You're quite a gentleman. Okay, Mandy." She lifted Mandy's head and looked into her tear-streaked face, "Can you make it into the Jeep?"

Mandy nodded, her throat too tight and painful to speak. Jo escorted her to the Jeep and helped her into the passenger side. There was no conversation riding back to the Park, just the comfort of Derek's big truck close behind them on the narrow, twisting two-lane that took them back through the Mormon hamlets of Henrieville, Cannonville and Tropic.

They were at Ruby's by six, the height of the dinner rush hour. Jo ordered for the speechless Mandy as well as for herself. While they all ate, Jo and Derek kept the conversational ball in the air, with casual and easy talk about roads and trails they had been down in Utah's slickrock country.

Finally, after two mugs of honey-laced tea, a cup of chicken soup, and a serving of cherry Jell-O, Mandy's face showed a return to normal color instead of the drawn and exhausted white that had afflicted her for the last few hours. She audibly sighed and the other two stopped talking and gave her their full attention.

Jo grasped her hand, a worried expression creasing her face. "Are you okay?"

Mandy smiled. "I'm much better," she whispered. "Just tired, now, I think. It'll probably take a while to get my voice back."

"That's okay," Jo said, "I'll just tell Rex you got laryngitis."

"Of course," Derek put in, "you'll probably have to wear a turtleneck for a few days, too."

Mandy nodded. "I was so scared there for a moment." She stopped and her face looked stricken.

"Don't tell us, Mandy, if it bothers you," Jo interrupted, squeezing her hand.

"It made me think of Polly," Mandy whispered, gently grasping her throat, "how she hanged."

"Polly?" Derek asked.

"You know," Jo said on Mandy's behalf, "that girl—the daughter—who conspired with the outlaw to steal the Cache."

Derek looked startled for a moment. "Polly Placer?"

"Was that her full name?" Mandy whispered.

"Yes. But Polly Placer never hanged. Bill Williams—the one who axed Henry Placer and shot Courtney Placer—hanged.

"So what became of Polly?" Mandy asked, feeling her heart lighten.

Derek shrugged. "Who knows? She probably went off and married someone, started her life over. I mean, why shouldn't she? She could never be tried for the crime again."

"I'm so happy to hear that," Mandy said. "I hope she was happy. I hope she found true love and lived to be a very old woman."

Jo laughed. "Well, why ever not?" She looked at Mandy who looked to be on the verge of tears again. "Mandy?"

"It's okay," Mandy waved off her help, "these are tears of joy. I'm so relieved about Polly. I've been so worried about her. It's so silly. She isn't even alive anymore." She sniffled away a sob that threatened to wreck her composure again.

Jo nodded sagely. "I think her spirit touched you, Mandy, through the coins. You were sensitive to her."

"The first time I dreamt of her, we hadn't even come across the coins. It was Bryce, something about Bryce, that linked me to her. Maybe I was her in a past life."

"Maybe," Jo agreed.

Mandy leaned her head on Jo's shoulder. "I have the feeling her spirit is at peace again now. I don't think I'll dream any more scary dreams about her."

"That's marvelous," Jo whispered into Mandy's ear.

Derek, across the table, shook his head. "Women are so emotional," he muttered, mostly to himself.

"Hey," Jo kicked his shin under the table, "you haven't been through what she has."

"Ow," he grunted, reaching down to rub his shin, "that's true. I apologize."

Mandy smiled at him. "What are you going to do when you find the rest of the Cache?"

"I still have to research that issue. But if I do find any of it, I think it belongs in a Utah museum as a state historical treasure. I'll have to find out who has the resources to properly conserve it."

"That's great," Mandy said.

Derek grinned. "Maybe there's more to your dreams than you think, Mandy. Maybe Polly wants her story told. Finding the treasure and displaying it permanently in a museum is a great way to do that."

Mandy smiled. She doubted the entire story would ever be told.

THAT NIGHT, POLLY appeared in Mandy's dream as herself, as an independent figure, and Mandy admired her

beauty and strength. Had Mandy been this woman in the past? If so, she was proud of it. Polly had come through so much and yet survived.

In the dream, Polly was posing for a photograph. Therese stood behind her, her hands resting lightly on Polly's shoulders. They were dressed in Gibson Girl period clothes and hats.

Despite their proper Victorian stances and womanly expressions, their self-aware eyes and smiling lips hinted at a secret knowledge, and Mandy knew exactly what that knowledge was.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

A WEEK LATER, after an early evening dessert run to Ruby's Inn, Jo turned on impulse into the Fairyland Point turnoff and roared up the tarmac.

"Where are we going?" Mandy asked, taking another deep, satisfied lick of her pistachio ice cream cone. Jo, busy with the wheel and balancing her own ice cream cone, didn't answer but the thought in her mind was: *I was wondering the same thing...about us.*

After passing through a sunset-tinged stand of aspens, she pulled the Jeep into a space overlooking the point and turned off the ignition. The angled light of evening was playing its usual tricks with the squashed, misshapen spires and pinnacles below the rim of the Pausaugant Plateau.

"Wow," Mandy said, "I haven't been back to Fairlyand all season. I still remember that first day you brought me here."

"Yeah," Jo turned off the ignition. "You were so silly. Asking me if you could come back here."

Mandy giggled. "I was in shock. I didn't quite comprehend that I would actually be here for the next three months!"

"Speaking of time," Jo said, "we need to talk, Mandy. There are only two weeks left to the season. In two weeks, I have to be back in San Bernardino, getting ready for the school year."

"Me too. I have a teaching job too, you know."

"Damn." Jo was taking vigorous bites of her chocolate almond cone. "It's just that I love you and I want to be with you."

There. The words were out. She hadn't expected to say them so bluntly, had expected to work up to the statement. Had

expected to surround her words with kisses and stroking and womanly finesse. But her feelings had just popped out. Popped out while she had chocolate on her mouth and on her hands and probably on her shirt as well.

Mandy shifted in her bucket seat to look at her. In a soft voice, she said, "Jo, did you say what I think you said?"

"Yes, I did." With her tongue, she attempted to remove the dripping chocolate on her lips. Mandy took a long loving lick of her pistachio cone, and then turned forward again to stare out at the funky shapes of sandstone, turning lavender and maroon with the deepening sunset. She sighed, and Jo felt her heart plummet into her feet. Maybe her feelings weren't returned.

"Jo," Mandy said, "I don't know what to do or say. Everything in my life has been changed by this summer. I mean literally everything. I committed adultery, I'm divorcing my husband, I fell in love with a woman—"

Jo jumped on that last sentence. "Are you saying—"

"I'm saying I don't know which way is up or down. My life is more topsy-turvy than those crazy Fairyland pinnacles out there."

"I understand, but—"

"Jo, you know what being a lesbian is all about. You know who you are as a lesbian. You know what your life is like in San Bernardino. You know who your friends are, what your habits are, what you do in the day-to-day real world. All I know is Bryce with you, and Bryce is like being in a Fairyland."

"You think our relationship wouldn't work outside?"

"I don't know that. That's the whole point. I don't know anything. This summer has been like some kind of suspended magical escapade, a place of enchantment, a place where stone looks like ice cream. I don't know what happens in the real world. I don't know what being a lesbian is like in the real world. I don't know who I am anymore because I'm not the same person I was when I arrived, and I don't know who you are in the real world either."

"I think I understand. I mean I'm the same person everywhere, but I think I get your point."

Mandy turned, her voice taking on a pleading note. "Jo, it isn't that I don't love you, but I don't have enough experience to be sure if our love and our relationship will melt down like sugar candy, like these misshapen Fairyland hoodoos, when we leave this place."

Jo finished her ice cream and now bit her way around the edges of the sugar cone.

Mandy smiled. "You munch down your cone in exactly the same way I do."

"It's the True Lesbian Way." She let out a sigh. "You're right, of course. About your life, I mean. You need time, Mandy. You need time to sort everything out, to learn who you are, to create a new life for yourself. I'm just being selfish."

Mandy giggled. "The last thing you are, Jo Reynolds, is selfish."

Jo leaned over, her green eyes like deep watery pools. "I love you, Mandy Barnes. Wherever life takes you and whatever you decide, I love you."

"I love you too, Jo." Mandy slurped down the very last of her pistachio ice cream. "Who would have ever thought I'd be sitting here in Fairyland on the edge of the cliff, my lips all green, crazy about a woman. Who'da thunk it?"

Jo's insides bounced around in crazy joy, but she calmly reached out a chocolate-sticky hand and grasped Mandy's. "Let's make a deal. I'll go home. You go home. I won't call you for at least three months so you can get your bearings. But you can call me anytime."

Mandy grinned. "For dyke advice?"

"Right. For dyke advice or any other kind of advice."

"It's a deal." Mandy solemnly shook her lover's hand. Then Jo pulled Mandy tight, and the kiss they shared was all the sweeter for the sticky milky sugar ringing both their mouths.

THE SUMMER, LIKE all things existing in time, came to an end. Jo packed her Jeep and prepared to drive home. Mandy did likewise. There was a show of bravado when Jo departed, but also a wetness in her eyes that was impossible for Mandy or the others to miss.

Geronimo set out for Mesa Verde, her next National Park post. Carlotta, having saved the bus fare, caught the Greyhound to San Francisco. Becca made the eleven mile drive down the hill back to her family's home in Tropic.

Orville, who wasn't going anywhere, waved each of them off, one by one. When it came Mandy's turn, he handed her a package wrapped in newspaper.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Open it."

Inside the rather battered red plastic box was a set of loopy black jumper cables.

"In case your Toyota breaks down," he said, his face coloring.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Orville, you're some woman's dream."



"Yeah, I know. I just wish she'd show up here already."

Mandy laughed, tossed the jumper cables in the trunk, and then settled into the cracked vinyl driver's seat. She turned over the ignition. Fortunately, her battery didn't yet require the assistance of Orville's thoughtful gift.

She leaned out the car window. "I'll come back in a few years and visit you."

"Uh, huh. Sure. They all say that."

Mandy laughed and backed out of a driveway she knew she wouldn't see for a very long time, if ever.

After three hours of driving, she stopped overnight in Page, Arizona, in easy view of the pink rock walls of Glen Canyon. Late the next afternoon, after driving her way past many more hours of red rock, endless multi-colored desert visages, and towering mountains, she pulled into the driveway of the apartment in Albuquerque.

She was tired and hungry and the sight that greeted her eyes was a shocking one. Not at all the cozy, quiet, reassuring one she had anticipated for the prior thirteen hours.

The apartment she had shared with Jay had been stripped to the walls. No furniture, no decorations, no housewares. Her jewelry, her checkbook, and even her clothes were gone. Every personal effect she had ever owned had vanished. There wasn't even toothpaste in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

Jay, she thought, you asshole! Several moments passed while her rapidly beating heart slammed in her chest. She made an effort to breathe deeply and calm herself.

The only things he hadn't managed to steal from her were the two Mormon coins which rested in her pocket and the last of her summer pay, which rode as cash in her wallet. The coins were her economic fallback but she wasn't going to liquidate them unless she was desperate. Fortunately, she hadn't deposited any of her summer's pay into her Albuquerque checking account. She had no doubt he had been able to convince the bank to empty that account. After all, they were married, and he could be charming. She was thankful they had possessed no joint credit cards.

She stood breathing the stale air of the empty living room, and wondered why he had bothered to be so thorough about ravaging the apartment. Surely, even at the flea market, nobody was going to make an offer on a tube of used toothpaste. She supposed it was the only way he could take his revenge. The only way he could express his rage.

She looked at the naked walls and bit into her lower lip in an attempt to stop the tears that wanted to start. "No," she said out

loud, vigorously shaking her head. "I refuse to let him get to me this way."

She took one last look around the room. Once she believed she had been happy here, but now she knew otherwise.

"I am a new person," she said aloud, refusing to let the dismal barrenness sink into her soul. The walls didn't counter her statement, which she thought was just as well since her affirmation was a little shaky. She walked out of the rented space, guessing she owed the landlord for the current month's rent since she hadn't given notice. She knew in her bones that Jay hadn't paid it

Back in her car, she drove through the streets, realizing that the town appeared dulled, like she was seeing it through opaque glass, like the buildings were sprinkled with gray ashes. Apparently she had been mistaken. Albuquerque was not where her future lay. Literally, there was no one to call and no one to say goodbye to in Albuquerque.

She stopped on the main drag, the old Route 66, across from the University at The Frontier, Albuquerque's famous 24/7 college hangout that served everything from breakfast to green chile burgers. She ordered coffee and an enchilada, holed up in a patched vinyl booth, and mulled over her options. The matter that nagged at her the most was her job at TV-I. She would miss her classes and her students, and it was hardly fair to give the administration a mere week's notice. Not that she doubted there would be plenty of takers for her plum job. They'd probably be able to fill her position practically overnight.

It was just that she had never flaked out on a responsibility. Well, there was a first time for everything. If she hadn't learned anything else from the summer, at least she had learned that. Eventually, she bought some of the Frontier's famous cinnamon rolls and hit the road.

By two a.m., she reached Flagstaff, Arizona, which felt silly since she'd just passed through it on her way home from Bryce. She checked into a motel. Exhausted, she slept most of the following day, ate a pleasant dinner in a charming Mexican restaurant and headed out again the next morning. If she kept to a steady driving pace, she would be in San Bernardino by late afternoon.

But what would she do then? She couldn't hit up Jo for help. She needed to prove her independence first. No, she needed to find a place and a job—even if it was slinging burgers—so she could get back on her feet again. She wanted to be with Jo but she wanted to have something to offer the relationship. She never wanted to be dependent again no matter how much she

loved someone.

And she did love Jo. She loved being in her arms, loved laughing with her, loved talking with her, loved eating ice cream with her. She saw them sharing their lives through many, many years and many, many changes. She didn't doubt there would be sorrow, but there would be much joy too.

She spent the rest of the long day zipping through empty desert landscapes and rocky desert mountains even more barren and certainly less colorful than the ones en route to Bryce. Around three p.m., she dropped down through the San Gabriel Mountains which delineated the blankness of the desert from the lushness of the coast and made a rapid descent into the beauty for which California was so justly famous.

She stopped at a gas station to refuel and look up Jo's address in her notebook. The helpful station clerk helped her get her bearings by describing the grid of main streets that would get her closest to Jo's residential neighborhood. She was a little stunned to discover that in less than twenty minutes she was on Jo's quiet tree-lined street. She pulled to a stop outside her lover's house.

Her heart thundered. Jo's Jeep sat in the driveway, looking just as rakish as Mandy remembered it. For one brief frightened second, she thought about driving on, but then she turned off the car's engine and sat, gathering her courage.

What if Jo didn't want her? But it was now or never. If Jo wanted her, Mandy would know the moment she opened the door. With trembling legs, she walked up the concrete path. The house was a small, one-story white clapboard frame structure, like millions of other California homes, with a small lawn in front and an overarching shade tree. The overall effect was of a pleasant and well-cared-for property.

Mandy anxiously pushed the doorbell. The tan door swung open. Jo, looking her usual lanky and bright self, with her red hair falling around her head, stood in the opening.

But she was only there for a brief instant. In the next, she was so close to Mandy, Mandy couldn't see her anymore. Instead, Mandy was surrounded by Jo's arms and unexpectedly sobbing on Jo's shoulder.

Bawling, really. She couldn't stop. She tried to talk, tried to explain why she was there, how she would take care of herself, how Jo didn't need to do anything, but it all came out as a torrent of meaningless words.

Jo stroked her hair and murmured, "Shh, shh. It's okay." When they finally separated, Jo's eyes were shiny with tears too. Mandy's heart leapt with joy. Jo wanted her in her life, not just

in her summer.

"I'm so glad you're here, Mandy," Jo whispered, her fingers in Mandy's hair. "I missed you terribly. Are you here to stay?"

"Oh, yes. If you'll have me."

"I will. I will indeed." Jo smiled. "Come on in. You're home now."

Mandy grabbed Jo's hands. "I love you, Jo."

"I love you too, Mandy. I've been calculating the cost of gasoline to Albuquerque for days now. You saved me making the trip. I'm glad one of us was smart enough to take action."

Mandy laughed heartily but the sound of it was swallowed up in Jo's very big, very deep kiss.

### Historical Note

This "contemporary" story is actually set in the early 1980's when Utah's liquor laws were much stricter than they are today; when cell phones, the Internet, and satellite TV did not exist in the lives of everyday people; and before the cozy Ruby's Inn described burned to the ground. After its destruction in 1984, it was rebuilt into the sprawling resort it is today.

Information about the faith struggles of GLBT Mormons may be found in many texts but the assertion that Joseph Smith sealed men to men in his lifetime can be found in *Out of the Bishop's Closet, Second Edition*, by Antonio A. Feliz, published by Alamo Square Press in 1992.

The historical characters in this story, while entirely fictitious, were inspired by real people and events. The Baking Powder Can Cache is one of Utah's buried treasure legends. Old-timers still believe the Cache is hidden somewhere along the base of the Shinarump Cliffs, southwest of Adairville 1, which is approximately 60 miles to the south, as the crow flies, from where I have set the imaginary murders of the Placers at Calf Creek Falls.

The historical events associated with the Baking Powder Can Cache as told in *Some Dreams Die: Utah's Ghost Towns & Lost Treasures* by George A. Thompson (Dream Garden Press, Salt Lake City, 1982) are as follows: In the spring of 1886, the Clevenger family—Sam, Mollie, and teenage adopted daughter Jessie—sold their farm and set out with two hired hands, John Johnson and Frank Wilson, enroute to Washington state with a

herd of horses.

Lusting after the gold coins from the sale of the farm that Mollie Clevenger stowed in a baking powder can and buried each night for safety, Johnson killed Sam Clevenger with an axe early on the morning of May 20th, 1886. Both men then tried to get Mollie to tell them where she had stashed the gold. Resistant, Mollie too was killed with the axe. Johnson, Wilson and Jessie, unable to locate the Cache, departed the scene and drove the horses west through Kanab, Utah.

The following January, cowboys from Kanab came across the bodies of the Clevengers and a search started for the three individuals who had been remembered driving the horse herd through the town. Johnson was captured at Duckwater, Nevada. Wilson and Jessie were found to be living as man and wife in Oakley, Idaho.

All three were taken to Prescott Arizona to await trial. Wilson was hanged on September 23rd, 1887. Johnson was sentenced to life imprisonment at the Yuma Territorial Prison. Jessie was not charged and never served time for the crimes. While she eventually returned to the scene and searched for the gold, the Cache was never found.

### About the Author

Cleo Dare is the author of the romantic suspense novels *Brushstrokes* and *Melting Point*. Her erotic short stories have appeared in anthologies published by Bella Books, Pretty Things Press, and Alyson. Under the pseudonym R.C. Brojim, she authored *Cognate: Book One in the Minority Fleet Space Adventure Series*. Please visit [www.cleodare.com](http://www.cleodare.com).

## FORTHCOMING TITLES FROM CLEO DARE

### *Cognate* (2nd Edition)

What happens when everything goes wrong? Captain Dani Forrest believes the tough get going but that doesn't help when she and most of her starship crew are succumbing to a mysterious illness, her First Officer has been captured by renegade miners, a wet-behind-the-ears cultural attaché is running amok on her ship, Khrars are on her tail, and an assassin has been sent to kill her. Then there are the aliens...who seem to be human...but then again, how could they be? To top it off, the alien captain has an allure all her own but Dani can't focus her disease-addled brain long enough to decide if the other woman is friend or foe. The future for Dani's starship doesn't look too bright. Will a fleet of revenge-seeking Khrar warships blow the U.C.S.S. Boedicea to smithereens or will she be left to float among the stars as a ghost ship while her crew dies off one-by-one?

\*\*This is a revised edition of this title. The first edition was published under the pseudonym R. C. Brojim.

Available January 2010

### *Faultless*

How can enforced R&R turn so quickly into disaster? No sooner does Captain Dani Forrest try to relax at a desert resort than a murder takes place and reports are received that an entire village has been wiped out. Buxom, blonde and alluring mythologist Lindie Davis tries to keep matters in perspective for Dani through the telling of ancient hero tales but Dani's guilt over the recent suicide of her friend and fellow Minority Fleet Captain Sherri Wilmstead only escalates. Meanwhile, an entire rift valley is shaken by more than a natural earthquake and Dani must find out, before it is too late, who is at fault.

Available July 2010

Another Quest title you might enjoy:

*Tunnel Vision*  
by Brenda Adcock

Royce Brodie, a 50-year-old homicide detective in the quiet town of Cedar Springs, a bedroom community 30 miles from Austin, Texas, has spent the last seven years coming to grips with the incident that took the life of her partner and narrowly missed taking her own. The peace and quiet she had been enjoying is shattered by two seemingly unrelated murders in the same week: the first, a John Doe, and the second, a janitor at the local university.

While Brodie and her partner, Curtis Nicholls, begin their investigation, the assignment of a new trainee disrupts Brodie's life. Not only is Maggie Weston Brodie's former lover, but her father had been Brodie's commander at the Austin Police Department and nearly destroyed her career.

As the three detectives try to piece together the scattered evidence to solve the two murders, they become convinced the two murders are related. The discovery of a similar murder committed five years earlier at a small university in upstate New York creates a sense of urgency as they realize they are possibly chasing a serial killer.

The already difficult case becomes even more so when a third victim is found. But the case becomes personal for Brodie when Maggie becomes the killer's next target. Unless Brodie finds a way to save Maggie, she could face losing everything a second time.

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