

# Chapter 1

## Blazes!

The overhead lights sprang to life and the wailing sound of fire station fifty-one's toner erupted into the still night air. Eight groggy Firefighters rolled out from under their still warming sheets, quickly donning pants, shirts and shoes. Logan Keohane threw his uniform shirt across his broad shoulders, searching in vain for its left sleeve as the report of a house fire was being broadcast over the loudspeaker. If there was one thing Logan and his fellow firefighters were good at, it was dressing on the run, since departmental policy dictated leaving the station in less than one minute from the alarm.

Logan was the last one out of the swinging dormitory doors, finally getting his arm correctly inserted into the obstinate shirt. There was only time to fasten two quick buttons, slip into his fire boots, slide their attached bunker pants up to his waist and pull the tight, damp suspenders over his shoulders.

The driver of the pumper truck cranked the noisy diesel engine and began his noisy exit from the firehouse. Logan quickly jumped onto the moving step leading to the driver's side jumpseat of the huge engine. "What a night," he lamented drowsily into the darkness. The shriek of the siren cut coldly into the inky cool darkness, rattling his still waking brain into a semblance of coherency. Shaking his head to clear the last of the cobwebs from his vision, Logan caught a glimpse of the Hook and Ladder Truck lumbering slowly out of the station behind them. Its massive red form was silhouetted against the glare of the open bay doors like a pulsing red whale, screaming its ire at such a rude awakening.

Logan slipped his arms through the sleeves of his bunker coat and caught a brief shiver from the cold dampness lurking there. He closed the fasteners and paused long

enough to feel the bulk and heavy weight of the protective firefighter's coat, still dripping wet from a stubborn blaze they had fought just hours ago. The sluggish firefighter shivered involuntarily and sat heavily into the tiny, open-aired jumpseat as the brisk early morning breeze whistled around his ears and found its way down the back of his suddenly chilled neck.

Groping in the darkness, he found the thick, webbed straps of his airpark and wiggled into the tight harness until they were pulled snugly over his shoulders. The way the pack was recessed deeply into the back of the jumpseat didn't afford someone of Logan's stature much room to maneuver and don the contraption. The apparatus was held tightly in place by two steel claws clamped firmly around the heavy air cylinder. Attached to the cylinder was a small metal frame and three webbed straps which held the piece of equipment onto the shoulders and around the waist of the wearer. Logan struggled briefly against the feeling of restriction created by the tightly secured pack. Roughly, he jammed down the release lever on his left side, freeing the pack from its securing clamps. The fireman quickly stood up, feeling the full weight of the heavy appliance across his shoulders. Being a bodybuilder had some advantages in strength and conditioning, yet getting into an airpack wasn't made any easier.

Just then, the huge truck made an unexpected left turn that threw Logan brusquely against the warm engine cowling. He grasped for the railing attached to the back of the fire engine's cab, pulling himself upright. Always an adventure, he thought, buckling the third strap of the airpack tightly around his waist.

"Keohane, we got another burner!" Jake Garcia, his new partner, screamed out to him above the din of the siren and the loud diesel engine. "Second one tonight!"

Logan looked up to see Jake pointing excitedly across the top of the fire engine's cab to a bright glow against the starry horizon. A dim column of smoke was rising skyward, illuminated softly by the light of the half moon. They were only about a half mile from the fire he reckoned. Hurriedly, the suddenly invigorated fireman finished donning the rest of his equipment and made a quick self-survey of its proper positioning.

"Rookies!" Logan grumbled to himself, watching the animated excitement of his young cohort. As they pulled up to the fire scene, he noticed that they were the first engine company on location.

Logan made a hasty visual scan of the scene while rolling to an abrupt, squeaking stop. On the opposite side of the pumper truck was a large one story house with the back half totally engulfed in flame. Fire roared out of its rear windows, licking the sky twenty feet above the roof. Smoke spewed fiendishly upward into a thick, black boiling column that disappeared into the early morning sky.

"My God, it's cookin'!" Jake screamed, jumping off the parked truck. Logan ran around the rear of the pumper truck, almost colliding with his captain who had just jumped out of the cab.

"Pull an inch and a half line around to the right side. I'll take the rookie with another line through the front! We'll push the fire out the back!" the captain commanded. The authority of a seasoned battlefield officer emanated from the leader's very word.

Logan reached into the side hose rack of the fire engine, pulling mightily on one of the one and one-half inch fire hoses until he had it lying in an organized pile on the ground in front of him. He fumbled momentarily in the semi-darkness for the elusive fire nozzle that was buried somewhere in the pile of hose at his feet. Getting a grip on the appliance at last, the excited firefighter picked it up and ran with the still dry hose line as fast as it and his heavy gear would allow.

Breathlessly stationing himself a dozen feet from the right side of the burning building, Keohane ran his hand through his reddish-blond hair, slipped on the airpack's facemask that had been dangling around his neck and turned the air on. A sudden burst of forced air blasted up his nostrils, taking the remainder of his breath away. On cue, the firehose he held began writhing to hissing life.

Logan replaced his helmet and felt a hand tightly grasp his shoulder. He peered through the scratched plastic lens of the mask to see John Grissom taking up a position to back him up on the heavy hose line. Normally, the ladder truck crew was not available to help the pumper crew, but, thankfully, tonight they had somehow come up with an extra crew member.

"Are you ready?" Logan screamed against the muffling effect of the facemask.

"Let's jam!" was John's mask-dulled reply.

The two companions stepped forward as one unit toward a blackened window at the edge of the fire's progress. Even from that distance the heat from the blaze was so intense that it was felt through his protective gear. Beads of sweat welled up on Logan's forehead, mercilessly rolling into his sore eyes as they plodded closer to the abyss of hellfire. Slowly, he opened the nozzle, still approaching the burning building. A stream of water cascaded against the tongues of flame that lapped out, licking hungrily for the underside of the roof. The water hissed a deafening scream as his torrent played across the flaming portal, instantly changing to steam while vaporously extinguishing the burning eaves and fascia.

The hose stream then descended to the window opening, shattering what little glass remained in the blackened frames. Reaching the opening, Logan leaned his weight against the charred, wet sill and adjusted the nozzle into a "fog" pattern. The water suddenly turned into a hissing fan of liquid, making an umbrella-like pattern that fanned out in all directions right in front of him.

"Help me in," the breathless fireman bellowed to John, his left foot swinging roughly over the dripping window sill.

John's stout body pushed solidly against Logan's. He made use of its planted firmness as a propulsion device to slip into the pitch dark opening. Keohane's sight was restricted by the scratched up facemask before entering the building, but now, the thick, dark smoke obliterated everything. The only thing left before his eyes was a totally engulfing darkness. Slowly sliding his feet back and forth on the slick, wet floor, the blinded rescuer shuffled into the waiting void, looking for the telltale amber glow of live flame. The intense buildup of heat inside the burning building created a steaming effect that was almost unbearable. The overwhelming swelter along with the agonizing sweat that now poured freely into his raw eyes sapped Logan's strength with each slippery step he took. Intent on his mission, the fireman valiantly put all thought of discomfort aside, sliding along, not quite sure of his destination.

Logan scanned the darkness, seeing no hint of fire in his view. Slowly, he shut down the stream of water to ease his progress into other parts of the structure. He slid his way carefully forward into the inundating blackness, until once again feeling John's reassuring grip upon his shoulder. Bumping into a small piece of furniture, the tiring fireman moved it roughly out of his way with a quick flick of his foot. Finally, his outstretched right hand touched the firmness of a crossing wall. Which way should he turn? Left or right? The intense blackness covered all hints of direction. He could hardly discern the way he had just come. The darkness and heat worked together to take the edge off of his quick judgement, leaving him in an indecisive quandary.

"Logan, you all right?"

"Yeah," he screamed in return, turning to his right without further contemplation.

Inching along with his left hand against the wall, he began seeing the faint glimmers of an active flame. He decided to get a little closer before reopening the water flow. Cautiously, Logan shuffled his way along the invisible length of the wall until it ended abruptly into thin air. At that same moment, the toe of his boot caught something heavy on the floor, blocking his path and holding him as if the invisible hand of a demon wanted to thwart his progress.

The captive fireman tried to move the obstruction to free his foot. It wouldn't budge nor let him go! Kneeling down to free himself with his hand, Logan recoiled in terror at touching the object. He could recognize the feel of a human body even through his heavy glove. It was an experience that he had felt once before, long ago. Even though it had been five years since he had stumbled across another human body in the darkness of a fire scene, a second time around didn't ease the sickening feeling that crept up from deep in the pit of his gut. Could this be somebody's parent? Or maybe somebody's grandparent? Oh, I don't even want to think about it, his brain screamed at his thoughts. The horror of that previous episode had haunted his dreams for months. God don't make me go through that again! Just let me forget this experience!

He had somehow slid his foot under the armpit of this one, tangling his boot into the invisible being's clothing! Logan wanted to cry out, drop his hose and run, but somehow managed to summon all of his strength and turn to his partner.

"We've got someone in here!" The anguished fireman screamed to John, almost choking on his words.

"What? I can't understand you,"

"I said, we've got someone in here. Right here . . . on the floor." He automatically pointed through the darkness to the floor at his feet.

"Oh, shit!" John groaned.

"Grab them and get 'em out!" Logan ordered, "Flame's comin' fast!" The worried fireman looked up to see the telling glow beginning to surround them. With John moving around him, the reeling firefighter leaned against the door jamb with his left shoulder, aiming the nozzle through the inky-dark opening. Turning on the stream, he readjusted it to "semi-fog" and excitedly waved it across the brightening ceiling in front of him. The fireman was desperately trying to turn back the sudden vicious onslaught of frenzied flame.

When Logan felt John pass behind him, he reached out with his right foot to see if the path had been cleared. He felt nothing. Breathing a sigh of relief, he readjusted the nozzle pattern to "full fog." Cautiously, the fireman slid his way into the new room. Side to side, the spray slowly fanned against the now receding flames. He shuffled his way another ten feet until his hoseline pulled taut. I should have more hose than this! Must be tangled, he surmised with another jerk of the line. "I've got to keep moving! I don't have time for this shit!" It seemed as if he could still feel the presence of a frightened, dying entity grappling at his shoulders, filling his mind with the horror of impending death. Worst of all, it felt so damned physically real that he had to get away from it! "Damn it! Come loose, won't you!" he screamed, giving the hose a final jerk.

Logan grudgingly gave up his plight, showering the room until there was no evidence of fire around him. He eased off the water flow, laying the hose and nozzle stiffly on the dark, wet floor beside him. Sliding his hand down the rough, wet fire hose, the frustrated firefighter crawled forward on his hands and knees to find the catch in the line. The weight of the heavy airpack, coupled with that of his soaked fire gear, felt as if he was a beast of burden for some thankless rider. Logan inched along in the absolute darkness, searching for the elusive block to his flow of life maintaining water.

A bright flicker of light on his right side was the last thing that Logan wanted to see at that instant. Even through the dense, dark smoke, the flickering shone brightly enough to reflect off his facemask. Logan knew that to be that bright, the flame had to be right on top of him! He had no nozzle to protect himself with! All of his fire training told him that leaving his water supply unattended in an active fire situation was tantamount to

suicide. He grabbed the hose line with both hands, sat back on his haunches and tugged with all of his might, trying desperately to dislodge the restriction. The tangle held tightly. With one last mighty tug Logan pummeled backward on top of his airpack as the hose pulled free.

The rough landing on the bulky pack knocked the breath from him. Logan gasped at the slow airflow in the mask, sucking in a deep, choppy breath of warm bottled air. A salty bead of hot sweat rolled tauntingly into his left eye, stinging the already overly sensitive organ, adding greatly to his general discomfort. His gloved hand jerked automatically against the plastic lens of his mask in an attempt to rub the irritation from his sight. "Ugh!" he moaned into the tight mask in a combination of pain and frustration. Logan gasped again, desperately trying to regulate his breathing against the limited air supply and his impending exhaustion. The tormented fireman drew another deep drought of bottled breath, releasing it slowly as the bright flicker of the nearby flare-up caught his attention once again.

Logan rolled over onto his knees. He took a quick, giddy look around him, suddenly, finding himself very disoriented. His head spun wildly, making it hard to stay upright on all fours. Which direction led him back to the safety of his nozzle? He couldn't think, much less see. Impenetrable blackness engulfed him, broken only by several growing flickers of flame. Got to move now! The warning screamed through his groggy brain. Where should he turn? The flickering glow was surrounding him!

Sweat rolled down Logan's prickling face, tickling his skin under the steamy mask. With an explosive bolt of energy, the bewildered fireman plunged aimlessly into the darkness on all fours. "I'll get somewhere," he reassured himself. His knees revolted in agony, joining his many other afflictions as they began to ache under the stress of his quick movements.

Relief flooded his senses as his hand touched the familiar hard bulkiness of the fire nozzle. He would know that feel anywhere! Picking up the heavy appliance, Keohane opened the water flow, showering the room around him. Satisfied that he had curtailed the growing flame, he tugged exhaustedly on the freed fire hose, forcing himself sluggishly forward to scout out more flame.

Deeply seated fatigue set into Logan's already tired muscles. The continuous, solitary stress and strain had sapped every store of energy that he could find. His breathing was ragged and shallow. Movement, especially the act of pulling the heavy fire hose by himself, had become an absolute effort. His body began to feel as if it were going into complete revolt under the stressful burden, sometimes disobeying the direct orders of his brain. "Melt down eminent, core breach in thirty seconds," he kidded himself, trying to overcome his sudden weakness. That little trick usually worked for him, distracting his body functions enough to keep him moving. His body was so tired now, however, that it just went numb.

Fear began creeping into him like the icy fingers of death, clawing at his boiling hot gut. His senses chilled, completely fogging in his already muddled brain. Panic slowly covered him like a wet blanket, effectively sealing out all sight and sound. He had to rest! Everything else seemed impossible at that moment. Exhaustion overcame him, melting him onto the dark, wet floor. The spent redhead dropped the heavy line across his lap in case of a sudden need for its protection.

"If anyone could see me like this they'd probably laugh themselves silly," he chided himself, in an attempt to overcome his fright. His energy stores had never so completely bottomed out. Sure, it was pretty commonplace for him, or any fireman, to become slightly overheated and fatigued in the middle of an active fire. Whenever this had happened to him before, he would just hand the nozzle to a partner or pull it outside with him for a short break. This energy crash happened so suddenly that he didn't have the strength to find his way out. A mixture of fear and exhaustion completely overwhelmed him.

"What's wrong with me!" Logan pleaded to whatever god would hear him. His breathing quickened, becoming very erratic. Bright globes of light pulsed on and off, dancing before his frightened eyes. The weakening fireman couldn't tell if they were spots of flame or if his sight was going haywire. "I don't know why tonight is any different than before." A quick chill shuddered up his spine. "Slow down, Logan," he desperately tried to calm himself. He could recognize the symptoms of hyperventilation and heat exhaustion beginning in him. "I'll sit here for a couple more minutes, then everything will be fine."

The swelter surrounding Logan was intense. Sweat generously poured down his stinging face, burning his eyes and nose. He sucked up large droplets with every rapid breath. His extremities tingled. The sparkles of light intensified, continuously flashing coldly before his eyes. "I've got to get out of this heat!" The clanging low air alarm on his airpack suddenly erupted into the quiet darkness, turning fright into desperation. Logan searched the darkness around him, trying to judge the quickest way out through the opaque veil of super-heated smoke. His breathing was frantic, sucking in much more air than normal. His arms lost feeling and his legs felt like so much mush. His condition had gone far beyond his control.

"Where is everyone?" Logan croaked hysterically. Where was his back-up? He should have back-up! "Help!" he attempted to yell, his voice catching in his throat, coming out almost as a whisper. "I need some help here!" His strength was so sapped he could hardly hear his own cries. He looked around himself again in horror at the unmistakable glow of growing flame which was beginning to surround him. By an act of sheer will, he forced open the nozzle that lay upon his lap. The sudden burst of torrid water pressure tore the nozzle from his limp arms, shooting the hose across the dark floor like a monstrous, hissing snake, escaping into the ebony void.

Logan screamed, falling after the wild line with all of his remaining strength. His attempt was futile. He hit the hard floor with a painful thud. Completely disoriented, the

frantic firefighter stretched out across the floor, feeling for the errant fire hose that he could hear beating wildly out of control. He clawed into the darkness, listening to the hose flailing erratically toward him over the scream of his airpack's tocsin.

The ringing alarm went suddenly silent as the bottle spewed out the last of its contents. Logan was caught mid-breath. The mask sucked tightly against his face as every molecule of the precious gas was drawn into his demanding lungs. He clawed the tight mask off of his sweaty face, laying his head tightly against the hot, wet floor covering. Where could he get another breath? His lungs screamed in agony for more air. If there was any breathable air at all, he knew that it would be right against the floor. His years of fire training had deeply instilled that fact in him. He intentionally drew in rapid, shallow breaths, each one burning his nose and sinuses like he was inhaling the flame itself. Forcing each muscle in his body to move, the spent young man dragged himself across the floor on his belly through the superheated darkness. His survival instincts were strong, tempered with rigorous training, determination and self discipline. Still, the fire's oxygen demands had overburdened the limited supply. His breaths only polluted his system with toxic fumes and dense smoke. He gagged and coughed weakly. Unable to pull himself any farther, Logan lay defeated, surrounded by rapidly growing flickers of ominous flame.

Looking up, the relieved young man reveled in the rays of a soft cool light above him, shining invitingly into his eyes. Logan felt his entire body relax as an odd peacefulness flooded his mind, like a cool breeze blowing away the terrible heat of the fire. He knew it, he was saved! A dim smile crossed his exhausted face. This wasn't the dim amber glow of fire light, but rather a clear, inviting, silvery pulse of pure light, like that of a star that had dropped from the sky. His body felt light, almost as if he were floating in mid-air. "I made it," he sighed, reveling in the stillness and comfort.

Images began passing before his clearing eyes, vague at first, then hauntingly desirable. Faces he recognized smiled at him, some calling his name. "Logan," the smiling redhead heard tenderly, "Welcome home." It seemed to be a voice originating from somewhere deep inside himself. Other images floated through his memory, taking him to his childhood.

Oh, Ireland, he thought lovingly, emotion gripping his very soul. A vision of the Irish countryside, where he had spent much of his childhood, passed before him, teasingly beckoning his return. Logan wanted to cry with longing, but for some strange reason he didn't know how. Instead, the reminiscent Irishman let himself revel in the comfort of the damp, gentle breeze of a fragrant Irish hillside. The sweet smells of snapdragons and wild azaleas brought a bright smile to his sun-washed face. Is all this real or just a dream? God, let it be real! Please let it be real! This is where I really want to be! Don't take away my vision.

Suddenly the scene changed. He could still recognize many familiar Irish landmarks, however, they seemed somehow different, fresher, newer. The faces had also changed. He should somehow know these people, he just couldn't put names on them.



People in strange dress, armor, swords, horses, a castle keep, all slipped through his awareness as long forgotten memories. Logan was fascinated, desperately wanting to join his old comrades. A woman's face caught his attention, her raven black hair flowing about her thin, leather girded waist. Insatiably, he had to be with her, touch her, feel her wondrous softness in his longing arms. A new face appeared on the lithe body, a face he again recognized, from somewhere. Morgan, is that you Morgan? Could this somehow be the woman he loved? The original face reappeared. Both faces were different, yet somehow the same. The desperate lad had to reach her, pull her body to him! However, for all of his effort, he just couldn't break free of whatever was holding him back. "Let me go!" a desperate voice yelled through his mind. "Please, let me go!"

"Logan," another, seemingly feminine, voice floated softly through his awareness. This one seemed to be coming from a great distance, somewhere out of time. He looked up once again to see the same peacefully beckoning glow above him. It seemed to be the origin of the voice. "It's not yet time, Logan. We'll be together soon enough." The longing sojourner in him wanted to get to that light! In it was freedom.

His apparition abruptly disappeared as darkness covered his vision. "No, I don't want to be back there!" the desperate fireman cried, remembering his tormented body. All sense of awareness gradually vanished into the dark void.

## Chapter 2

### Course of Action

"Hey, I need some help here! Now!" John Grissom yelled through the broken out window as he pulled the mask off of his grimy face. "Hurry! I've got a fireman down over here! I don't think he's breathing!"

The two paramedics that were dispatched to the fire scene heard John's call, rushing head-long from their post at the side of their ambulance to his aid. John laid the limp fireman across the window sill as the two paramedics grabbed the still form, helping pull Logan clear of the smothering house. "Get his pack off! Now!" Andy Cornell, one of the paramedics ordered the other. They roughly pulled the appliance off the limp body. "Go grab a backboard and the oxygen!" Andy again ordered. Watching Davey, his partner, turn for the ambulance, the paramedic began quickly unbuckling Logan's drenched bunker coat. "It's Keohane! How long's he been down?" Andy yelled worriedly at John.

"I don't know, I just found him a minute ago. I left him to bring out the old lady and was going back in to give him a hand. I tripped over him just inside the window!" John squawked breathlessly.

"He's not breathing and I can't get a pulse," Andy informed John, keeping as cool as possible. He felt for the carotid artery on Logan's neck. "We've got to get CPR going now! You breathe, I'll do compressions!" They ripped off the rest of Logan's wet gear. Stripping open his shirt, the two firefighters immediately began the resuscitation procedure.

Davey returned with his assigned equipment, set it down and quickly turned back toward the ambulance for more. "I'll get the Ambu-bag and paddles!" the second medic responded at the sight of the two firemen performing CPR.

John and Andy continued working on Logan's limp body until the rest of the equipment arrived and was set up. "Get him on the backboard, I'll get the paddles ready!" Davey ordered frantically as he hurriedly placed everything beside Logan's lifeless body. "Here's the Ambu-bag, give him a couple more shots of air!" Andy took the breathing apparatus, fitted the plastic mask over Logan's nose and mouth, squeezing two quick bursts of fresh air into his limp body.

Opening the hard, black case of the electrical cardiac stimulator, Davey flicked the power switch on. The paramedic then jerked out the two flat electrical paddles, smearing a dab of goopy, clear gel between them. The high-pitched whine of the machine announced its readiness. "Clear!" he shouted, placing the flat electrodes against Logan's broad, bare chest. The body jumped in response to the sudden jolt of current pumped through it.

"Nothing yet!" Andy announced worriedly, feeling Logan's neck once more for a carotid pulse. "Let me give him another breath, then hit him again!" He replaced the clear mask, squeezing two more shots of fresh air into Logan's lungs.

"Okay, clear!" Davey ordered again, placing the paddles on his patient's chest. "Come on, baby, get ticking," he mumbled. The paramedic pushed the button on the side of the right paddle's handle, sending another bolt of current through Logan's body.

"Hey, that's it! He's got a rhythm!" Andy shouted jubilantly. "Get him on a monitor and oxygen then let's load him up and ride! We need to get this puppy to the ER, now!"

Logan opened his eyes and blinked weakly several times, trying to clear the haziness from his vision. Everything felt like an effort to him, even breathing. His nose, sinuses and chest all felt as if they were still on fire with every breath that he drew into his raw lungs. Fearing that he might get stuck in some awkward position, he simply refused to

move. "Where am I?" his brain rattled. His disoriented mind wanted to roll over to find out. However, it was physically impossible for him to move a muscle. Hell, even focusing his eyes seemed to demand more energy than he was capable of generating.

After repeated attempts, the Logan finally focused, finding himself lying in a soft bed with some sort of semi-clear plastic draped over him. The air around him felt cool and damp against his face, but his searing pulmonary system screamed with each inhalation. Memories of his recent ordeal flooded his mind, pulling at his sanity, recreating his fright until he moaned involuntarily. Logan began to tremble uncontrollably causing every inch of his body to ache unmercifully.

"Logan?" a familiar voice called to him, easing his shaking. A warm, soft hand gently enveloped his in a loving grasp. "I'm here with you, Logan. You're going to be all right, the doctor said you just need lots of rest and time to recuperate."

The exhausted fireman looked blearily toward the voice to see the face of Morgan O'Malley, his girlfriend, smiling down at him. She looked radiant, more so than he could ever remember. Angelic was the word that passed through his weary mind. Her fiery red hair seemed to glow through the translucent plastic. But, where was he now? Back in Ireland? No, that was some other dream.

A new-found spark of life and a washing of unexpected pride suddenly flowed into his tired mind, recharging him with visions of new life. Though his body felt very foggy and distant, his essence recognized a new chance at life. Joyously, Logan chose to live. Heaven, for now, was holding his hand!

He tried to answer her, but the sound failed to form in his tortured throat. The weary patient quickly ceased his attempt. "Shhh, hush," the angel softly whispered to him, "We'll have plenty of time to talk later. Right now just close your eyes and rest. The doctors gave you some medication to ease your sleep. So, relax, I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere and neither are you."

The bond that he felt with Morgan at that moment far belied the short five and a half months that he had known her. The music of her voice was like a ray of sunshine on a spring morning, rekindling his soul, bringing him back from the edge of darkness. Her touch caressed him, reaching a part of him that had somehow just been reawakened. Logan suddenly felt as if he were lying in a sea of down, almost too soft to feel, warm and hugging of his sore body. Must be the medication, he thought, drifting into a restful sleep.

Logan sat up curtly in his bed, propping himself up comfortably with several pillows. "Hi, Morgan! Jeez, you're looking hot today," he smiled as his girlfriend glided

into his hospital room. "Have you heard the news? I'm getting out of here this afternoon! Pretty amazing, huh?"

"What?" Morgan questioned him, a bit surprised, "The docs said you'd probably be in here for at least ten days, this is only your sixth! Are you sure that you heard right?" The spry redhead gently placed two thick books on Logan's rolling hospital tray.

"Yeah, the doctor said it was pretty astonishing. My respiratory tract has responded fantastically to the treatments. I'm so rested that I'm about to go nuts."

"Wonderful, Hon'! It'll be fabulous to be with you again outside of a hospital room where we won't be watched all of the time. Know what I mean?" she teased him with a wink.

"Do I ever!" He looked up at her with a wry smile. "It'll be a couple more weeks before I can hit the weights again, but there's no reason why I can't get a little workout. I'm sure a little heavy breathing will be good pulmonary exercise! Logan blushed slightly at the insinuation, looking quickly away from Morgan's pert gaze. "Oh, and the doctor said it'll probably be at least a month before I can go back to work and that's a good thing. That'll give me plenty of time to catch up on my reading. Kinda' strange, you know, this weird fascination I have with ancient Irish religion and mythology and stuff. I've always loved Ireland and Irish culture, being Irish and all, but, for some reason I just can't seem to get enough of the ancient stuff. You know, gods and goddesses, heroes and castles, swords and battles, those kinds of things. Thank you for finding more for me to read."

Morgan moved to his bedside and gave him a warm kiss on his lips. "You're welcome, hon'." She smiled lovingly down at him. "I kind of looked through a couple of those books myself. I figured I might as well know what you are talking about. Some of the stuff is pretty interesting. Especially the differences in how in the way men and women interacted in those days. There was a lot more equality and independence in those so called pagan cultures."

Logan's eyes lit up brightly. Finally, a woman after his own heart, interested in something he found fascinating. God, please make this relationship thing work with her!

Logan's mood suddenly became more sullen. He looked up at her more seriously, motioning for her to join him on the bed. "The doctor said that when they pulled me out of that house I didn't have a heartbeat and I wasn't breathing. They didn't know how long I had been like that, only that they found me and brought me back to life. Did they say anything to you about that?"

"Yeah," Morgan answered quietly, looking at her hands as she turned them back and forth; palm up and palm down. "It really scared me. When I first got here and saw you, I was afraid. I . . . I really don't want to think about it. There's never been anyone close to me who died." She looked over at Logan with a strange expression on her face. "What

was really strange was, I remember suddenly waking up and looking at the clock at the same time that they said they pulled you out of there. She stopped, drew a slow breath and cleared her throat. "I thought you were. . . felt you were. . . in the room with me. I even called your name, expecting you to answer me. But, you weren't there!" Morgan shivered, pulling tightly up against him. "I don't know what it is or how to explain it, but, it's like I've known you forever. I don't want to lose you Logan."

Logan smiled warmly at her, "My only memory after going unconscious at that fire was waking up and seeing you next to my bed. I thought you were an angel, literally. And I had the same feeling of knowing you for an eternity."

She squirmed and giggled, the dark clouds suddenly clearing from her face.

They both fell silent, holding each other closely. "I love you, Logan," Morgan said quietly and sweetly.

She had never said that to him before and frankly, it sort of frightened him. Logan had already been through a short marriage and another failed engagement. He had been single again for four years. Long-term relationships weren't his forté. He had acknowledged that fact to himself years ago. Since then, his fear of falling into a new permanent commitment far outweighed his deep longing for a lasting love with a woman that he adored. He just couldn't figure out how to do it long term.

His fearful resolve hadn't counted on Morgan showing up. She had touched his soul, the deepest essence of himself where most people dare not venture. No one else had ever even tried to come that close to him. He felt wonderfully comfortable with her. Logan loved sharing his thoughts and his soul with her. The only problem was, his dread of emotional pain still frightened him. The stumbling Irishman tried to voice his love back to her, however, "Me too," was all that would come out of his dry mouth.

"You want to stay with me for a while?" she asked him suddenly in a much perkier voice. "At least until you're getting around better. I still have to go to work during the day, but I'll be home at night." She looked at him lovingly, patting his thigh through the white hospital sheet. "No commitments, I promise," she added with a knowing smile.

"I'll think about it," was all that Logan could answer truthfully. His mind wandered momentarily into the possibilities. "Maybe it'd be better if you stayed at my place. I think I'd be more comfortable there. It's not much, still it's home. You know?" He smiled and kissed her rosy cheek. "And what about your parents? Won't they just shit bricks if they know you're sleeping with me? They might come and drag you into a church and try to exorcize you or something! I can tell they don't like me much anyway, good 'ole Catholic raised Irishman that I am! At least at my place you could avoid the phone calls!" Logan chuckled, thinking of the ramifications.

"Oh, Logan, you silly boy!" Morgan slapped him playfully across the arm. "If I was worried about my parents I wouldn't have invited you in the first place! You know I

hardly even see them anymore. Every time I go over there I'm preached to, told what a sinner I am! No, you can stay at my place anytime! Being with you is much more important to me than what they think of how I live. Besides, I really don't get into their religious beliefs anymore at all!"

Logan playfully tickled her ribs. "Okay, Miss Sinner, could you get me some more ice water? The doctor says I should take it easy and rest," he teased, glancing over at her out of the corner of his eyes.

Morgan stood up, picked up his empty Styrofoam pitcher and walked across the room toward the exit. Logan almost got chill bumps just watching her. The lithe redhead was stunningly beautiful. Her five feet, two inch frame was gracefully curved, filled out perfectly at all of the right places. Flowing red hair draped her smooth shoulders like the rising sun, highlighting the glow of her radiant face. Gentleness and grace exuded from her, permeating any space that she occupied. Heads turned everywhere that Morgan walked. Even more intoxicating was the way her soft, graceful demeanor captured the hearts of men and women alike. The captivating lass had a natural sweetness, caring and generosity that flowed to everyone regardless of sex, race or other perceived difference. My God, I'm in love with an angel, Logan beamed as the vibrant redhead swept out of his room, "So, why am I so afraid of her?"

Morgan peeked playfully around his door, "Fear not! For I shall return to your side, my love," his sweetheart stated boldly as if she had heard his very thoughts. She giggled and disappeared once more.

Logan heard the deadbolt on his apartment door squeak open as he lifted his heavy eyelids from a restful nap. Morgan slipped briskly through the door and spied him prone on the tweed couch in his small living room. "Aren't you ready yet?" Morgan prodded, looking almost panicked. "You knew we had dinner reservations at seven o'clock. Hurry up and get your clothes on!"

Logan sat up disconcertedly from his prone position on the comfortable couch. "Oh Morgan, it's you!" he started sluggishly, "God, Morgan, you won't believe the dream I just had!"

Morgan looked impatiently at her boyfriend, prompting him to come a little quicker to coherency. "Come on Logan, get up and get changed! We're meeting my friend Sue and her husband for dinner! I don't want to keep them waiting. You agreed last week that we would do this, now hurry up and get up and get dressed!"

"Okay, Okay!" Logan groaned, stretching deeply. "This was just such a strange dream, and so vivid! I just felt I needed to tell you about it. Everything seemed so real, so . . . so alive. Almost like a memory instead of a dream. I don't know how else to

describe it." Logan slowly slid his legs off the couch, forcing himself into a sitting position. He stretched again, yawning widely before forcing himself into a standing position.

Impatiently, Morgan stood in front of Logan, reaching out her hand to aid him in his escape from the ensnaring sofa. "Come on Logan, it's getting late and we still have a thirty minute drive to the restaurant. You can tell me about it while you're getting dressed," she acquiesced.

Logan stood up slowly, stretched once again, and headed to the bedroom to change clothes followed closely by Morgan. "Yeah, you've got to hear this one!" he reiterated blankly with an odd tinge to his voice. "It knocked my socks off. Everything that happened seemed so real. I mean, I can even still smell the flowers and stuff there!"

"Okay, I know you're going to tell me anyway, so, what did you dream?" Morgan cajoled.

Logan looked back at the redhead as he passed through the bedroom door. "I dreamt that you and I were driving somewhere out in the country. It was a beautiful little lane, lined with trees and fields and mossy stone fences. The sun was shining and the day was just gorgeous. We were laughing and just having a great time. Then, all the sudden, everything changed."

"Like what?" Morgan responded, suddenly more interested.

"Everything," Logan responded, pulling off his old faded jeans, slipping them roughly over his muscular hips. "The sky suddenly got dark and stormy and I looked over at you to find you had changed. You were still you, but not you. Understand?"

"You had a face that I didn't recognize, and black hair. It stunned me at first, but then it seemed like everything was just as it was supposed to be. Logan slipped his t-shirt over his head and stood in the deepening twilight looking into another world that still seemed somehow so real to him. He wouldn't know how else to describe it. This thing seemed much more than a mere play on his imagination.

Bits and pieces of Logan's dream resurfaced, beginning to once again overwhelm him. He wanted to relay every detail to Morgan. Logan began speaking again, slowly at first, recanting as the memories sparked in his mind. Suddenly, as if a deluge of consciousness engulfed him, he couldn't speak quickly enough to express his vision. "Then the car disappeared. We were sitting in the middle of a beautiful meadow. A light rain was falling, streaking your hair down into your face. God, you seemed so beautiful to me right then." Logan paused, blushing slightly. "I mean, you are always beautiful to me, but, I just meant that at that time I . . . uh, oh well, you know!"

Morgan just smiled lovingly and shook her head knowingly.

The fireman felt as if electrical currents were coursing his body. His extremities tingled and his head was beginning to swim. How could a dream make him feel this way, kind of giddy, almost lost in time or something?

Logan took a long breath and continued, "Everything seemed so familiar, but it was all so different. There were just a few stone buildings on the edge of the meadow with a couple of people in ancient looking clothes moving around." Logan reminisced longingly. "You pulled me closer to you. Lying back into the damp grass, you kissed me so wonderfully. I felt I was in Heaven! I couldn't let you go. I wanted to touch so much more than your body. I longed to touch your soul."

Morgan was transfixed. She didn't know what to think. This wasn't like the Logan she knew. He didn't think like this. He didn't talk like this. What on earth, or beyond, could possess him to have a dream like this? Dinner could wait for a few minutes. "Okay, tell me more," she prodded, keeping her voice in check so that she didn't seem too excited.

Logan looked through the deepening shadows at his girlfriend, "I'm not boring you am I?" he asked, grabbing for the slacks that were set out across the bed.

"No honey, not at all. This is intriguing. Keep going, just keep getting dressed while you talk!"

"Okay, let's see," Logan began once again in a low voice. He slowly slipped his right leg into his trousers, sinking down onto the edge of the mattress. "I felt so wonderful lying there holding you. We kissed again and I rolled onto my back, pulling you on top of me." Logan became silent, staring into the distance.

"Suddenly you cried out," he began slowly. "I heard horses hooves galloping toward us. I pushed you aside, rolling over to protect you. I reached for a sword that was laying in the grass beside us. Then, everything suddenly went black. I didn't know where I was. I didn't know where you were. God, everything felt so strange. Then you woke me up." Logan shivered slightly. "I still feel a little strange."

Logan pulled his slacks mindlessly over his left foot, still staring into the deepening gloom. Morgan watched and listened intently, still not quite sure what to say. "What could it mean? Do you think my mind was just entertaining itself?"

Morgan stared down at her beloved, still in shock at what she had just heard. "Wow," she finally responded. "I can almost feel what it was like to be in your dream. I could see every scene as you told it to me. Sometimes I even knew what was coming next." The stunned redhead moved to the bed beside Logan. Reaching out gently, she stroked his rusty colored hair. "I don't know what it could mean, but it sure seems intense. Wow."



The fireman stood once again, pulling his pants over his firm hips. "Oh well, it was just a dream I guess. Probably doesn't mean anything."

Reaching around Logan's waist, Morgan hugged her boyfriend tightly. "Stay with me, Logan," she whispered. "I don't know why I feel I need to say it, just don't leave me again."

Logan quivered slightly. "I'm right here with you, Lass." he responded softly. "Right here by your side."

## Chapter 3

### Ceremony

"Hi, honey," Morgan's voice answered, finally easing Logan of the excruciating pain of the elevator music piped over the phone lines while holding.

"Jesus Christ, Morgan, why don't you tell the people you work for to get some decent music on their phone system? If we have to hold for a half hour we should at least be somewhat entertained, not tortured!" he answered hysterically.

Morgan broke into a full laugh. "Oh, Logan, chill out. Not everyone thinks Led Zeppelin is soothing music. What's up?"

"Sorry, it just felt like I was waiting on the phone for an hour." Logan paused, continuing in a different frame of mind. "I had an idea." he began again, this time more excitedly. "Since this is my last full weekend before I go back to work, I wanted to do something special. Something. . . uh, something different."

Morgan's attention was suddenly piqued. "Like what?" she prodded.

Logan was silent for a few seconds. "You'll see," he finally responded with a chuckle. "Just bring yourself home on time tonight. And, oh, if you don't mind, stop somewhere and get a bottle of good red wine. It's got to be red, not rosé or White Zinfandel or anything like that. It has to be a dark red." He chuckled again, drawing even more of Morgan's curiosity. Logan could almost feel his girlfriend's attention suck through the phone lines. Boy, was she going to be in for a surprise!

"I feel like I'm being hopelessly coerced," Morgan responded, trying desperately to coax an answer from Logan.

"Aye, but 'tis such a sweet coercion," the blarney Irishman answered in his best Irish brogue. Logan laughed to himself. He kissed Morgan through the phone, hanging up with a sweet "hurry home!"

Something lately must have opened some part of his imagination to the point where new ideas flowed through him like wind through the trees. He also felt an odd self confidence, giving him the courage to proceed with his newly-inspired plan. This was something he'd never attempted before. Hell, he'd never even thought of a plan like this before. The idea seemed to spring out of the wind itself and felt just so perfect. Logan had somehow found a new part of himself, a part that had been begging to be heard but never listened to. A true essence of a deeper self, romantically linked to the adventurer that he lived everyday. The young man had to share this experience with Morgan, it would be a travesty of his own humanity if he didn't!

"Morgan might think I'm a loon, but, damn the torpedoes, I'm going all the way," the determined Irishman thought as the last vestiges of fear and doubt about his undertaking surfaced briefly after hanging up the telephone. A squeaky little voice in the back of his head kept telling him that he was a whack-o, Morgan would think he had flipped and never want to see him again. After all, she was raised in a strict, fundamental Christian household. How would she react to performing some ancient rite from an obscure Pagan religion? Even if she had read books about it!

"What the hell! This will be so much fun that she'll at least have to enjoy herself this evening. Tomorrow will take care of tomorrow. Tonight we find a different world!"

"Oh, shit, candles," Logan reminded himself aloud. "I need more candles and something special to wear. Damn it, I've got to dash!"

The apartment was growing dim as the last vestiges of sunlight faded into the evening. The fireman grabbed his jacket, rushing out of his door. "Good thing there's a mall around the corner," he told himself, running to his vehicle.

I don't think I should tell the guys at the fire station about this, he thought with a smile, driving away from his apartment complex. I'd never hear the end of it. He laughed hardily at the thought of his new-found freedom.

Logan heard keys rattling in the lock of his door, prompting him to look at his watch, "Is it that time already?" he asked himself. "Just a minute, don't come in yet! Give me just two more minutes."

"Jesus Christ, Logan, what are you doing in there? I don't want to stand out here all night, it's cold and I'm dying of curiosity. Hurry up!" Morgan whined through the door.

He finished lighting the last few candles, quickly making his way to the door. "Close your eyes," Logan instructed Morgan, opening the door just enough to peek through and see the exasperated look on her face. He wore a smile that just wouldn't disappear.

"What?" the exasperated Morgan responded, losing a little patience with him now.

"Come on, just close your eyes until you get inside. I'll help you in."

Morgan decided to play his game, doing as he instructed. Logan took her by the hand, leading her carefully through the doorway into his small living room. "Okay, you can open them now."

Morgan opened her eyes and gasped. His living room had been transformed. The sparse furniture was all moved tightly against the walls or out of the room altogether, being replaced by a glowing ring of white candles spaced evenly, just inches apart, in a large, careful circle on the floor. The glow of the many candles gave the room a golden hue, washing the walls in a fiery light that danced in brightness and shadow with a mysterious awe.

In the center of the shining circle he had placed two woolen fleeces, one on each side of a small, low bench that had several articles placed on it; three more unlit candles, a tall red one in the center of two shorter white ones, two small bowls, a silver goblet and a red velvet ribbon carefully folded and placed on the far end of the bench. The perimeter of the circle had four objects placed in opposing unison in the quadrants; nearest them was a small, black cast iron pot on three stubby legs, a large stone to their left, a standing sword across the circle from them and a tall staff of dark polished wood on their right. Lying at their feet were two small folded piles of dark green cloth.

"What is all of this?" the enticed woman asked breathlessly. "I've never seen anything like it. It's. . . it's beautiful. But what's it for?"

The candlelight flickering on Morgan's face was intoxicating to Logan. The entranced young man stared into her mesmerizing emerald eyes, unable to answer, feeling his passion well up from deep within him. She sparkled like a newborn star. The golden light showering his lover's cascading red hair highlighted her glowing cheeks like a goddess from the wellspring of eternity. Logan's heart leapt as he softly touched the cheek of his enchantress with a quivering hand. He wanted to feast on the passion that poured from those eyes and drown in the love that radiated from her wondrous face. He had never felt more alive.

Slowly, Logan took the bottle of wine from Morgan's tight grasp, setting it on the floor at their feet. "What do you think?" he asked with joyous eyes twinkling full of pride and anticipation.

"I'm stunned," Morgan answered truthfully. "This is one thing I never expected. Everything feels so romantic. No one has ever done anything like this for me before."

Logan smiled shyly, taking Morgan's hand in his. "I've never done anything like this before. I just hope you don't think I'm crazy when I explain the ritual we're about to do." A small lump of concern rose into his throat as the tiny, doubting voice in the back of his head said, 'hey, stupid, she's really going to think you're weird. There's still time to back out of this gracefully and tell her the candles are just for a romantic mood and the rest of the stuff you just wanted to show her. Get real, this whole idea is just a waste of time and energy.'

Silently, the Irishman struggled for several minutes. Unable to form the words that he wanted to say, he just looked at Morgan, gently brushing his hand through her thick hair. He could swear that sparkles of starlight ran between the strands of her beautiful tresses.

Morgan seemed to sense his struggle and spoke to comfort him, "Logan, thank you for setting all this up for me. I'm really excited, tell me what all the candles and stuff mean and what they are for. You know, I feel a really deep connection between us, I have from the beginning. I want to know everything about you, experience you like no one else ever has." Her eyes glowed with a passion that tugged at Logan's heart, giving him the courage to open up to her.

Encouraged, words began to flow smoothly from his relaxing throat. "I want to create a ceremony with you. It's just another way of exploring ourselves and bonding our relationship to a deeper level. You know I've been fascinated with ancient religious rites and ideas, especially old Celtic rites and rituals. Well, I want to share that experience with you," he stated shakily, taking a defensive stance for the space he had just opened. "Would you like to join me? You don't have to if you feel uncomfortable. His stomach was feeling queasy and that annoying little voice was now yelling at him.

Morgan looked lovingly into Logan's eyes and smiled. "Honey, this is the sweetest, most loving thing anyone has ever done for me," she kissed him gently on the cheek. "I wouldn't miss the opportunity to share this with you if life itself was coming to an end. I've not had the time as of yet to read much about this kind of stuff, so you'll have to lead me through the steps. Okay?"

"I don't mind at all, honey. The ceremony is all pretty simple and individualistic. I'm sure you'll quickly get the hang of it and follow along however feels right to you." Logan was starting to feel his confidence returning. He was even getting a hold on the little nuisance of a voice that had been plaguing him. "I was worried that you'd think I was out of my gourd," Logan admitted sheepishly. "Or that we would be struck down by lightning for doing witchcraft or something."

"I think you're wonderful!" Morgan smiled coyly.

"Then let's get started," he answered, taking a deep, relieved breath. "An old Irish religion, called Witta, involved lots of ceremony and tradition. I've kind of taken liberty with one of the traditions called Handfasting, adapting the specifics to something you and I can use to bond our relationship to a higher degree." Logan was still hesitant to commit himself completely to her, even though his feelings were more natural and ran deeper than any he had ever felt before. The depth of connection that bonded his heart to her still confounded him. However, a small remnant of fear lingered in his mind, cautioning him to hold his ground, take a step, not a leap. After all, don't the cautious live to tell about their adventures? But, do they ever reach the stars, he suddenly wondered?

"Handfasting," Logan continued in a more serious vein, "In the traditional form was when a man and a woman formally committed themselves to each other, before their village, for a period of nine years. Of course, like I said, I've kind of modified it so that we don't have to make a nine year commitment tonight." Logan squirmed a little, feeling a bit uncomfortable about what he was saying. Morgan looked at him compassionately, sensing the uneasiness in his voice.

"Anyway," he continued after a short pause, "that's what I'd like to do if you're game."

Morgan smiled brightly, "I'm looking forward to playing with you in every realm, Logan Keohane, even ancient ones. I will commit myself to you. You are for me! Am I for you? I already sense a connection with you like nothing I've ever felt before. I just want you to know this because I love you and I want to share this experience with you."

Logan was stunned. Where did he go now? His mouth opened, yet, nothing came out. In a second attempt his voice cracked, stammering, "You," and fell silent, able only to take Morgan tenderly into his arms. Looking deeply into her eyes he found the same feelings that had been experienced in the hospital the night of his accident. It was time to speak from his soul, not his intellect. "You are for me, Morgan O'Malley, and I am for you! I love you and I will commit to you tonight with the gods as my witness!" Some distant part of him screamed in his head, causing a sudden chill down his spine. With a brief shiver, his fear passed, freeing him from a weight that seemed to lift off of his shoulders. Logan kissed Morgan tenderly. "I really mean it."

"I know you do!" She could feel his love as long pent-up emotions poured freely from Logan's opening heart. Looking softly into his eyes, Morgan repeated, "I know you do."

Logan closed his eyes momentarily, took another deep breath then continued from where he had left off. "Okay, there's one more thing to know about this. The ancient Celts believed in reincarnation, in a little different sense than we generally have heard of it. They believed not only that the soul of a deceased person would be reborn, but that it would return into the same family that it had left. Also they believed that the genetic memory of their whole lineage would be passed on through their children, generation after generation, and could be accessed through certain rituals and processes. I don't

know if that's all really true, but, if you have any strange experiences you may be just accessing ancient collected genetic memories. Like I said, I've never done this before, I've just read about it." A last remnant of fear streaked through his consciousness, scolding him, she was going to think he was completely off his rocker!

Unafraid and with complete trust, Morgan smiled up at him with eyes like a green fire. It didn't take a psychic to see the passion burning in her face and feel the anticipation flowing in her veins, leaving traces of sparkling currents of electrical ecstasy in the deep, flaming emerald pools. "I'm ready," his trusting lover prompted. "I'm excited! What do we do first?"

Logan felt a wave of relief flood through him with her eagerness to continue. "Slip into this robe," he directed, picking up one of the piles of cloth from the floor and handing it to her. "This will be more fun if we are in ceremonial clothing. Take off everything but the robe.

The anticipatory lad felt a bit apprehensive at first, but soon was pulling off his clothes, tossing them carelessly onto the floor wherever they landed. His odd feeling at disrobing in full sight of Morgan faded, being replaced with carefree, confident passion. Removing his underwear, he pulled the dark green robe over his head, tying it snugly around his waist. Butterflies formed once more in his stomach and his head began to spin. This was going to be some kind of experience. But, what if he forgot something?

He watched intently as Morgan slipped out of her tight jeans and dark sweater. The gorgeous redhead looked up at him with just a hint of cute shyness, tossing them absently to the side. She slipped her bra from her delicately tanned shoulders, exposing her firm breasts. With a glance away from him, his partner slipped the lace panties over her round hips, allowing them to drop to her feet. Gracefully, Morgan slid the flowing robe over her head, kicking the panties aside. Logan stood silently, admiring her exquisite form, while the folds of soft, green cloth slid silkily over her full, bare hips. He burned to feel her against him. His heart shuddered and his knees grew weak.

"Are you ready?" Logan asked quietly.

"I can hardly wait!"

Logan took Morgan by the hand, stepping carefully through the little opening that he had left between the glowing candles. Guiding his partner to one side of the little bench, he prompted her to kneel onto the fleece spread out before it. Logan left her side, closed the gap in the candles and took a position in front of the shining sword at the edge of the circle. He picked up the blade, directing the tip toward the base of the candles, extending his arms to make a parallel line between him and the handle.

"I'm striking a circle of protection," he explained to Morgan, "to separate us from any negative or subversive energies. Once the circle has been stricken, you mustn't cross the line until the circle has been reopened, Okay?"

Morgan's eyes flamed as she looked up at Logan. "Okay," she answered, still under his spell.

Logan continued his ritual, walking to each of the four quadrants, asking blessings of the Spirits of each direction. His strength and confidence grew with each step and action. The ritual now felt like a quintessential part of life to him. All of his anxiety had vanished, leaving behind a confidence bred of total conviction and fed on the strength of passion. Energy streamed through his veins with a fire possessed of generations of warriors, yet tempered by the light of love. He completed his circle and replaced the sword to its position on the edge of the ring.

The room glowed golden in the light of the flaming shafts as Logan sat before Morgan on the opposite side of the altar. The Irishman looked into his lover's eyes with a passion that flowed directly from his heart. His eyes glittered brightly in the heat of circumstance while his rusty hair was ringed with a halo of timeless light. "Before us is the new life," Logan spoke with a confident, richly deep voice unfamiliar to Morgan. "Symbols of the old and the new come together to form a pattern interwoven with two lives." He struck a match and lit the white candle on his right, prompting Morgan to do the same.

"Together we light the fire of eternity." Logan intoned, motioning Morgan to pick up the candle that she had lit. Together, the enjoining lovers ignited the central red candle. "Together we create the bond of future generations. Passing the flame from past to present to future. The lives we live and the lives we create shall, from this day forward, know of the passion shared on this night to commit the abundance of love toward a common goal." The impassioned Irishman took a small pinch of salt from one of the small bowls on the altar, sprinkling it lightly into the flickering candle's flame. "As the elements combine to form one new substance, so shall two souls combine to form one new spirit. Breath of love breathe through us on this glorious night in the shadow of silver fire with the spirits of the heavens and Earth in attendance." He lifted his head and hands toward the heavens, his voice becoming even deeper. "Bless this union in the spirit of eternity under the endless stars with silver Brigid smiling warmly upon us. Cosmic union that binds two souls to form one new spirit and fly hand in hand to the edges of eternity. Fly with me, share my soul. Take me into your loving womb to share a love, impassioned and true."

Logan looked deeply into the eyes of Morgan, so deeply that he felt the soul beyond her physical body. "Follow your instincts," the rusty haired lad instructed simply. "Let your soul rise to the surface. It will guide you to places never before imagined. Don't fear the unknown, just allow the deepest part of yourself to speak freely."

Morgan was transfixed. She had never known Logan to be this way, never known him to be so poetically astute or romantically passionate. The deep urges that bubbled forth from the very core of her being completely overcame the amazed young woman. The wisdom of a hundred lifetimes arose, directing her like a shining light in the desert. "Together we light the fire of eternity," she repeated after Logan. "For tonight we fly

freely with souls intertwined, to a place far beyond the stars into the evermore. Blissfully, love, we'll climb the night, taking with us the stars of heaven. Together we are one spirit, endless in the fabric of consciousness, blessed by the spirits of Heaven and Earth." The astonished lass was stunned at what just came from her mouth and the passion that bubbled up generously from deep inside of her being. Morgan felt as if some unknown spirit, lying dormant deep inside her soul had just awakened, taking over her actions. Could this be a part of the 'something strange' that Logan had mentioned earlier?

Logan took a pinch of salt from the bowl, sprinkling it gently, a few grains at a time, into the second vial of water. He stirred the liquid carefully, holding the swirling vessel over the central candle. "Earth, water, fire and air formed, each separate, but as one.

Breathe in the newness. Anáil as saol, breath of life, to fly into heaven on the wings of the soul." Logan took a deep breath of the vapor and handed it tenderly to Morgan. She took the little cauldron, also breathing deeply of the vapors with her eyes closed and mind relaxed. She handed the vessel back to Logan.

Picking up the silver goblet, Logan poured it half full with the deep red wine that Morgan had provided them. With slow, deliberate ease he raised the chalice between them, to a level just above their heads. "Blood of the union," he continued softly, "symbol of the mother, Brigid, to share her fruitfulness in the joining of life. Smile upon us, Mother. Bless this fusion of hearts and souls as we begin life anew in the womb of eternity!" Logan took a slow sip of the wine with his eyes closed and then offered the cup to Morgan.

The mists of antiquity ran fluidly through her being, directing her every action. The ancient part of herself instinctively took the vessel from him, raised the cup before him and took a drink of the dark liquid. "Mother Brigid," Morgan addressed the ancient goddess, following Logan's lead, "tonight we stand in eternity, calling on your endless wisdom and love. Bind us before your sight in the union of lovers to stand hand in hand in the steadfastness of everlasting bliss." She reverently handed the goblet back to him.

Her lover then held out his left hand to her. She grasped it with her fingers interwoven with his. With his right hand Logan took the crimson ribbon, slowly winding the supple fabric around both of their wrists and hands. "Thus bound, in the eyes of all eternity, we enter into a new phase of life, committed to a common goal with a passion that lights our way and feeds the hungry heart. Time stands still this moment, becoming at once past, present and future. We live in eternity, my love. We are one as we have chosen to be!" Suddenly, the words the intense Irishman was speaking were of a language that she could somehow grasp a broad meaning, but couldn't interpret. They were at the same time strange and familiar, old and new. She could not translate them, yet instinctively she knew exactly what they said. "Tá grá agam duit, a Mhorgan, a chroi!" his soft deep voice exclaimed. "Cad tá I ndán dom? Tusa, a ghrá mo chroi, tusa! Mar sin, ná bíodh ionadh ort, óir thugamar féin an ghrá linn!" Logan lifted his hands to the sky once again proclaiming, "Mura ndénann sé dóchar dein duinne, biobh sé!"



Morgan answered him, her words again originating from a level of herself far beyond her physical consciousness. "I love you also, my love. Our destinies do lie together. We are one, flying freely on the winds of eternity!"

Logan heard her voice, reveling in its sound. It was musical, like a chime playing sweetly on the breeze of a warm spring morning. Chills of awareness coursed through him, up his spine and erupted through his head. The world around him faded, being replaced by a scene familiar to a hidden part of himself. He was surrounded by friendly walls of familiar stone, cool and damp with the smell of antiquity. Morgan was still kneeling before him, but somehow different. Her face had changed once again, but was still as beautiful as ever. His lover's hair now flowed in raven black folds, tossed across her linen clad shoulders, highlighting her flaxen complexion like a frame around a masterpiece. He loved this woman like no other.

The impassioned lad shoved aside the table that sat between them, taking his desirous mate heatedly into his waiting arms. Kissing her passionately, he gently slipped the gown from Morgan's trembling shoulders. The material silently flowed to the floor around her feet, leaving her body uncovered. Logan looked at her unabashedly, marveling at the gracious curves of the finely hewn beauty standing before him. He drank her in like fine wine.

Morgan then loosed the tie around his waist, pulling the supple robe over his head. Logan stood nude before her, engulfed by his paramour's impassioned gaze. She reached out and touched his chest, stroking him gently, watching the sparks fire where her fingers touched his skin. Pulling her to him, Logan felt the softness of her skin press softly against his. His senses were alive with excitement. He could feel every part of her body at once, touching him like the breath of an angel. He reveled in the delights of her love.

Logan could feel the room around him. Everything was a part of him. He couldn't tell where his being stopped and his lover began. They just were. The enflamed lad stroked her back with the gentleness of a feather on a cool breeze, feeling every inch of her with a sensitivity unimagined. Kissing down the side of her neck, Morgan trembled. He knew her excitement. Morgan's breasts heaved as her lover proceeded with the gentleness of a lamb, but the passion of a lion. He kissed them firmly and wetly, softly kissing the darkened edges.

Morgan gasped as he gently stroked her silky hair and stared deeply into her eyes. Again she shivered and her breathing quickened as Logan tenderly brushed her cheek and kissed her mouth deeply once again. He slowly slid his fingertips sensuously down the side of the woman's neck and between her heaving breasts. The ecstatic woman opened herself to him without shame or regret as Logan slipped his hand tenderly between her thighs and stroked her dewy blossom.

Morgan sighed with pleasure at each gentle stroke of her lover's touch. "I want to feel you inside me," the lass whispered, dropping her hand down his rippled stomach

until she reached his manhood, softly caressing and pleasuring him until his knees felt too weak to stand.

"God, I want you," he said, positioning himself on the woolen rug on the hard stone floor. Morgan moved herself on top of him, directing his body with a naturalness that only familiar lovers share. She writhed sensuously on his erectness, stirred with passion like a flame engulfing a dried twig. Logan's senses erupted, he was everywhere. Nothing was apart from him as he celebrated the heat of impassioned love. His senses expanded, allowing him to feel being a part of everything, all at once. All creation burned as one consuming fire, fueled by the very core of existence.

He exploded in sensual ecstasy. Light flowed like water across his sight. Colors swirled in rainbows as the sounds of passion caressed his ears. Morgan was moaning with joy and fulfillment as her body convulsed time and again around him. The world stopped, allowing him a glimpse of eternity. Life was forever changed.

Morgan laid herself tenderly across his body as he still pulsed deeply inside of her. He could hear his love's ragged breathing, feel her heart pounding in her chest. Both of their bodies ran with sweat. The smell of their love was heavy in his nostrils. He was alive, like never before. His senses were keener than he ever thought possible. Logan was so weak his eyes wouldn't open, yet, so strong that the world was in his hand. With his eyes still closed, he seemed to feel the damp coolness of ancient stone walls once again surrounding him, lulling him into an existence long forgotten but completely real.

Morgan stirred on top of him, trying to get even closer. "Promise me you'll stay with me forever!," she whimpered softly. "Please tell me you'll always love me and be here with me."

"I shan't ever leave you, lass," the fulfilled Irishman answered her in a voice that flowed from the ages. "I'll be with you throughout eternity!"

Shocked at their last conversation, Logan opened his eyes, looking around him. They were in his apartment lying on the fleece, surrounded by a ring of half burned candles. "My God," he sighed breathlessly.

Morgan just smiled knowingly, taking a slow, deep breath.

## Chapter 4

### On Second Thought

A sudden queasiness erupted from the pit of Logan's stomach as he closed his truck door and took a step toward the dark rear entrance to the fire station. If only he hadn't rushed off so quickly from his apartment, hardly waking Morgan while dressing for his first day back to work. "Get present," the wavering fireman commanded himself. Most of him was still back home with his lover, lying next to her soft warm body. A faint sweet scent of perfume drifted up his nose, carrying him back to last night's pleasure. The fire station faded, becoming instead, a shining ring of candles, inhabited by two green-robed figures.

"Oh God!" he huffed quietly, shaking his head brusquely to refocus himself. "Stay present!"

Logan looked around him once again, then gazed upward into the still starry sky. Blowing a thin cloud of warm condensation into the chill air, he refocused on the station house door, prompting the sickening feeling even stronger. "Got to fight the urge. . . ." the determined fireman mouthed, deeply wanting to return to his truck and just drive away. His head began to spin with nervous fear. "Uuuggghh!" he mumbled out of pure anguish. "I. . . I can't. . . do this!" He spun on his left heel, reaching for the truck's door handle.

The whish and squeal of car tires turning slowly into the smooth concrete parking lot behind him distracted his attention. Logan turned to see who was coming in. The bright glare of headlights temporarily blinded him. He rubbed his eyes, listening as the car pulled to a stop and the engine fell silent. The car door clicked open as a familiar voice rang out. "Logan, buddy! Great to see you back!" John Grissom, slamming his car door and almost ran to Logan. His friend grabbed his hand, shaking it so hard that Logan thought his eyes were going to pop out. "I can't believe you're back so soon!"

Me neither, he thought truthfully. "Yeah, you know how it goes! The public just can't live without us. It's pretty boring lying around the house anyway." Logan looked at his friend then turned toward the elusive station door once again.

The sound of another car caught Logan's ear. "So what's been going on around here?" he asked John, prolonging his entry for as long as possible. He would just have to make his way into the fire station a step at a time. That's the trick, first step was to get comfortable on the parking lot. Second step was to see his comrades, get back into the swing of being with them. Actually entering into the fire station was a little further down the line.

The second car pulled into a space next to Logan. Captain Riley slid out of the driver's seat, closed his door and sauntered toward Logan. "Hey, guy," the Captain called out to Logan, smiling warmly. "It's great to have you back! You're looking great! Ain't he Grissom?" John shook his head agreeably. "You bring the donuts?" He scowled

playfully at Logan. "You know you always bring donuts when coming back from a vacation!"

"Va. . ." Logan started, shifting at once to a smirk. "Shit! I knew I forgot something! I guess I'd better go back and get them!" He mockingly turned toward his truck door.

"No, no, not really. I was just bull shitting you! You're not going to get away from us so easily again!" Captain Riley laughed, poking him boyishly on his left shoulder. "Come on in when you're ready. Take your time, we're not going anywhere. Not for a while at least, I hope," the captain added gently, a sparkle of knowingness in his eyes. He turned abruptly, sauntering off into the direction of the door.

Two more cars pulled into the lot, taking their places as the rest of his pals began their arrival. Step one complete, getting on with step two, Logan thought.

"Hey, you hear we got a new rookie?" John quizzed him enthusiastically.

"Besides Jake?"

"Yep, a woman! She's assigned to the ambulance with Cornell and Johnson. This will be her third day. That's her now."

Logan turned to see an attractive young woman with short blond hair getting out of her car, heading directly into the station. She took no notice of the two of them standing there. "Seems to be a real friendly sort," the calming fireman commented snidely. "Kinda' cute though."

"She's a bitch." John was the last person that Logan thought would make a comment like that. He usually got along with everyone, a real station house peacemaker at times. Everyone liked John and he liked everybody. This girl must really have an attitude.

"What's her name?"

"Lisa. Lisa Gowen. God's gift to humanity."

Andy Cornell strolled up to the two firemen. "Mornin', guys! You're lookin' mighty chipper there, Mister Keohane. Last time I saw you, you looked like shit!" the paramedic laughed, tousling Logan's short red hair. "So, you ready to get back out there and eat some more smoke?"

"Yeah, uh, well, no! Not like the last time I had smoke for a midnight snack! The last fire I worked was enough action for any one lifetime. Besides, I plan to stay warm and dry for a while longer, I'm temporarily assigned to strict ambulance duty. Hey, I hear you've got a new partner!" Logan commented smoothly, watching as Andy shifted his weight and smirked. "Are you in love yet? You told me once that you'd probably fall in

love if you ever got a female partner!" Logan winked slyly at John. Andy had always been quite a lover. The paramedic had never been married, moving from one 'true love' to another. Logan could recall at least six women who were 'the one'.

"Get outta' here, you turd!" Andy laughed, tousling Logan's hair once more. "I'd better get to work." He turned, walked to the door across the brightening lot and disappeared inside.

"I'd better go relieve my man, too," John responded. He followed Andy into the station. Several more cars pulled into the lot in one big wave. One by one the firemen exited their vehicles, immediately greeting Logan with cheery salutation. Absently, surrounded by a group of fellow firefighters, Logan walked through the entry to the living area of the firehouse. He was so engrossed in conversation, catching up on all the new departmental news and gossip, that there had been no conscious realization of his location, until finding himself pouring a cup of hot coffee from the station coffee pot. I guess steps two and three are complete, Logan chided himself, chuckling under his breath.

"I see you're still talking to yourself," Captain Pierce, the senior station officer prodded him laughingly. His dark blue eyes always seemed to be smiling under his closely cropped grey hair. This was a man that Logan truly liked and respected. He had known lots of firemen during his career, including plenty of captains and quadrant Chiefs, but if he were choosing to work under one command, this would be the person. The class of the department was the only way Logan knew how to put it.

Captain Pierce was the finest, fairest man that Logan had ever known. This man was one of very few who knew how to let a man be a man, accept responsibility for his own actions and praise for his own deeds. If there was a dispute among the troops, the Captain usually knew how to handle the situation equitably. The greatest thing about him, though, was the way he was a real, down-to-earth person himself. He didn't put on airs or assert his authority. Everyone liked and respected his command. The men's faith in him told them that this man would never intentionally send them anywhere that was inordinately dangerous.

Of all of Logan's friends and peers in the department, Captain Pierce had visited him most while he was hospitalized. He must have come to see him three or four times that Logan knew of. Yeah, this was a good friend, selfless, fair, honest and self-secure.

"It's great to have you back, Logan," the captain addressed him honestly. "You've been missed. Take it easy for a while, get your legs under you again. I really think it's too early for you to be back here, given the circumstances. But, we all know departmental policy. You have to live by the rules of the Rulers!" he smirked, shaking his head. "How about a cup of that coffee?"

Logan poured his captain a cup of the steaming liquid. "Thanks, I guess it's good to be back. I really do appreciate everything you and the guys have done for me while I was

out. Now I just need to get settled back into the routine. I have one question, though. I see we've gotten a new rookie assigned to the ambulance. That already makes three other people on board. There's no more room for me. I was told I would be strictly on ambulance duty until further notice. Is there an odd man out or something?" Logan looked quizzically at the captain.

"No, Johnson has just started his vacation. He'll be gone about a month. Deer hunting, I was told." Captain Pierce looked longingly out of the room's only exterior window. "Then he goes on special assignment. He'll be teaching some new special course to the cadets at the Fire Academy. You'll have plenty of room on 'the box'."

"Well, I can't say I'm rearing to go, but, here I am. It would be awfully nice to get a nice slow start today.

"Yeah it would. I wouldn't mind that a bit myself. Come on, let's go see if anyone's cooking breakfast this morning!" The captain patted his shoulder, turning toward the kitchen with a sniff of the air. "I think I smell bacon right now."

Step three seems to be in full progress. I've almost reached my goal, Logan mused, fairly amazed at the turn of events. It all flowed so naturally, much easier than he would have imagined.

Logan sopped up the last drops of syrup from his plate with his final bite of pancake. He swallowed, beginning to feel somewhat at ease. Picking up his plate, the fireman moved to the sink, setting the sticky dish on the white plastic counter top.

"Leave it there," a voice called from behind him. "I'll clean up today." Jake Garcia wasn't a bad guy really, for a rookie. He definitely did his share of the work load around the station. The guy was just so confounded rambunctious, someone who just needed to learn to slow down a little. It's easy to see the resisted parts of yourself in someone else, Logan thought sympathetically.

"Thanks Jake, I appreciate it."

"No problem! Get outta' here." Jake smiled warmly at Logan, waving him away from the sink. "You know us rookies, it's always our turn to do everything!" the young man chuckled easily.

"Where's the new rookie?"

"Oh, she doesn't come out of her quarters much. Fortunately!"

"Come on Keohane, leave the rookie to his housework. We've got an ambulance to check." Andy sat his plate beside the sink on top of the others. The paramedic grabbed Logan by the arm, dragging him through the single swinging door leading to the apparatus room. "The last shift said they only made a couple of runs yesterday but they think the oxygen is getting low. If you'll climb in and check the gauge, I'll get a mop to clean out the inside."

It was Logan's first glimpse of the fire equipment. A brief shudder ran up his tightening spine. Whoa, I guess step four just crept up on me! He stopped dead in his tracks about ten feet from the rear of the ambulance. His feet were leaden, melted into the slick concrete floor of the large, open room. The scent of old, musty soot filled his senses. There's nothing quite like the smell of damp ash ground into flame retardant fire gear to bring you into the stark reality of being inside a fire station. It's a smell that, once experienced, leaves an indelible mark on your sinuses. Mixed with a slight hint of diesel fuel the odoriferous concoction can be overpowering.

Logan closed his eyes momentarily. Andy turned to retrieve a wet mop from the rack just outside the rear bay door of the room. The stymied firefighter listened as his partner's footsteps pattered away, leaving him in silence with the ghosts of his near past. He couldn't let anyone see him like this, trembling involuntarily like a scared bunny. "Get a grip," Logan whispered to himself. Footsteps approached from the direction opposite the way Andy had left. Oh, Jesus, just get me through these next few minutes. Forcibly, the weak-kneed fireman moved his right foot toward the rear of the ambulance. Step one complete, now for step two. He slid his left foot forward, planting it firmly only six feet from the rear of the apparatus.

"Reminiscing?" a high pitched feminine voice called out from behind him, echoing off of the exposed girders high overhead.

Logan turned to see the new rookie, Lisa, approaching him. The young woman never cracked a smile, just brushed past him en route to the cab of the ambulance. Opening the white, pickup truck style door, she reached in, retrieving the records of the previous crew's emergency calls. Lisa whisked past again without even looking in his direction. "Hi, how are you. Wonderful to meet you, too." Logan responded cynically upon hearing the swipe of the swinging doors that led into the ambulance personnel's dormitory.

Andy slipped through the rear glass exterior door of the firehouse, carrying a dripping mop, still steaming from the hot water. "Open the door, Keohane. Get the stretcher out and let's get this show on the road."

Logan gritted his teeth, crossed the rest of the distance to the ambulance door, swinging it open wide. The smell of alcohol and hydrogen peroxide mixed with various other medicinal aromas took his breath. The stunned fireman reeled once again, taking a step backward, bumping roughly into Andy. Again, he just wanted to scream, turn and

run out of the door. Logan never imagined that getting back into his job would be this difficult! My God, what will I feel like on an emergency run?

"Are you alright, man?" Andy stammered, bewilderment all over his face. "Here, sit down. You want some oxygen?"

"Naw," Logan managed, hoarsely. He spun around, plopping roughly onto the rear step bumper of the large white vehicle. Taking in a large breath of natural air, his body quaked with a final chilled shudder. He released the breath slowly, allowing his body to deflate and relax. "Guess I'm just having withdrawal from being off work," the nervous redhead returned, still a bit breathless. "I'll be okay in a few minutes." He took another deep breath, releasing it slowly with a huge sigh.

Logan's breathing slowed slightly. He gazed around the large room trying to get his mind off the situation and onto some practical matters. The tan block walls of the apparatus room on his right came into view, God they needed some cleaning. Weren't they supposed to be white? Look at that hose rack over there, the railings are so dusty that it's unimaginable how the contraption ever passed inspection. He usually kept that rack clean himself. How could anyone let it go like that? His view shifted to the tail end of the pumper on his left with the ladder truck parked one space over. They actually looked halfway clean. They must not have had any calls last night. Above him the mellowing fireman took notice of the open, once white girders and metal pan roof. Smudges of black soot from the diesel exhaust had greyed the entire ceiling. How would they clean that? Shhh, if I don't say anything maybe they won't notice. I know I don't want to get up there and scrub.

The fireman took another long breath, closed his eyes and forced himself to his feet. "I'm alright now," Logan sighed to Andy who had been kneeling on one knee in front of him. "Just needed to catch my breath." Relief slowly flowed through the squeamish lad's mid-section. His heart slowed to a reasonable rate and his muddled brain cleared.

The station lights suddenly clicked on, the toner sounded, followed by a voice blaring over the loudspeaker. Logan's heart jumped, beginning to beat erratically once again. An involuntary low whine caught in his throat. "Oh, God!" he whispered as he finally heard the voice on the loudspeaker announce, ". . . the time is now eight o'clock." Logan closed his eyes and sighed heavily. Eight o'clock toner, he thought, relieved, allowing his thoughts and emotions to once again come under his control.

"Keohane, you got a call on line one!" a loud voice announced over the station P.A. speaker. Logan pulled himself quickly off of his bunk, making his way into the living area to the nearest phones.



"Hello," he answered spryly.

"Hi, honey!" Morgan's cheery voice brought a smile to Logan's face. "How's everything going?"

"Oh, alright so far. There were a few touchy minutes earlier, though. I don't know, honey, I've pretty much begun wondering what I'm doing here."

"But you love your job, Logan. You've told me several times just how important it was to you. You're probably just having some temporary reaction to being back in the grind."

"Yeah, that's true to a point. I had a couple of pretty horrific reactions earlier. Shit, I almost turned around and walked off a couple of times this morning. I've gotten over the initial shock now, but, for some reason I just feel totally out of place. It's like some part of me is ready to move on to something else. I just don't know how to explain this deep longing.

"Yeah, I've been feeling some strange longings myself. I just can't put a finger on what they are."

Logan began once again contemplatively. "I just feel like I need some time to get away, to think some things through. Somewhere away from the fire station, away from Houston, away from everything, you know? But it's a bit too late for that right now, I'm afraid. I think everyone around here would kind of frown on me if I just up and told them I needed some vacation time to get my head on straight, see if I really wanted to be a fireman any more."

"I can't really say I know what you're going through, honey. But you know I am here to help you in any way that I can. You know can always talk to me about anything. Just let me know if I can help you in any way, hon'." Morgan's tender voice pulled new-found emotion from deep inside of him. Logan's eyes began to sting as tears formed lightly in them, blurring his vision.

"I will," he answered with a muffled sniff. A small tear streaked out of his left eye. Hurriedly, the fireman wiped away the wet trail. "Oh, I didn't tell you. We've got a new rookie!" He had to change the subject. This one was getting too deep. "She's a girl, assigned to the ambulance."

"Really? How is she? How are the guys doing with her there?" Morgan knew that this fire station was male oriented to a pretty hefty degree. A woman, especially a rookie, might not fit in too well with some of the members.

"I don't think most of the guys have a problem with the fact that she's female, but honestly, she's about the biggest bitch that I've ever seen. She won't talk to anyone. She doesn't socialize at all. All she does is hang out by herself in the ambulance dorm. Even

John doesn't like her and you know John, he likes everyone!"

"Sounds like the girl has had some pretty rough times to me. She's new and maybe doesn't feel very comfortable with the guys around there yet. I mean, if she's anything like me there are probably some things about hanging around as the only woman that she just doesn't like. She surely isn't going to put herself in the intimate view of a bunch of male egos. That would be kind of like stripping naked in the middle of Main Street! Do you think she socializes with a bunch of rough and tumble firemen off duty? Especially with some of the guys at your fire station! Some of them can be pretty crude. If you remember, that Delaney fellow made some pretty risqué insinuations to me with you standing right there!"

"Yeah, I guess I can feel compassion for her. But, I don't have to force myself to get along with the woman. I can just deal with her."

"Yeah, I don't think we have to become an intimate part of everyone's life. There are some people who have completely different philosophical views on life than us. We don't have to hang around them or make them wrong." Morgan stopped speaking, leaving an unbroken silence on the line. "Then again," she then continued, "It seems to me like respecting someone's ideas and beliefs sometimes just means leaving them the Hell alone! God knows there are some people here in my office that are like that."

Logan smiled gratefully. The astounded fireman was becoming more amazed everyday at the similarities he shared with Morgan. Sometimes it seemed they even shared the same thoughts. "Well, what is your suggestion on handling this situation?" the pondering lad asked seriously.

"I don't know. I guess, just give her the space to be who she is. Sometimes that can be the greatest form of love. People will be who they want to be whether we like it or not. Trying to force them to like us is what creates feuds and animosity."

"True enough, Miss Plato," he laughed. "No, really, thank you. I hadn't really looked at the situation like that. I'll just let her be who she is. If she wants to be friendly the door will always be open, if not. . . ."

"Good for you! So, Mister Fireman, have you had any calls today?"

"You know, we have made one call. I thought I was going to pass out as the alarm sounded and information came over the loudspeaker. It actually took my breath away. But, after the initial shock I was fine. It still just seems that everything I thought I wanted not long ago isn't that important anymore."

"Yeah, I know what you mean! A lot of my feelings and goals have changed, too. My grand desires of having a huge house in the rich part of town with all of the frills, like my mom and dad always wanted, somehow seems pretty trivial right now. I also need some time to re-evaluate my own goals. You know, I went to college to get my Master's

Degree in business completely for the approval of my dad. Lotta' good that did! I really don't want to be around him right now! I guess, I'm really not sure what I want to do as an occupation for the rest of my life! My whole mind's kind of at a blank at the moment."

"I understand very well! Honey, I'm going to let you go and get back to work. You've just helped me clear up some things and stirred up a lot more questions at the same time."

"Bye, hon'. I'll see you in the morning. Be careful, won't you! I do want to see you in our bedroom in the morning!" Morgan's voice quivered momentarily. Logan could sense a feeling of apprehension in her words. She almost seemed afraid of something.

"I'll be careful, I promise. I'm not going anywhere. I'm just on the ambulance, I don't even have to go near a fire."

"I know I must sound silly, but last night I felt something unexplainable. Something that has kind of stuck as a fearful feeling way back in the back of my brain. I can't even really tell you what it is."

"Don't worry, hon', I'll see you in the morning. Everything's going to be just fine! Bye now, have a wonderful night. If you need anything call me back later."

"I will. I love you!"

"Me, too."

Logan hung up the phone with Morgan still occupying all of his attention. Something did feel kind of strange. He couldn't quite put his finger on what was troubling him either. The feeling was something that he had encountered before, locked away deep inside of him. The fireman stood, slowly walking through the large room to return to the dorm. He would have all day tomorrow to think about that, since it would be an off day. Maybe when he returned to work on Sunday he would have a grip on what was troubling him.

## Chapter 5

### The Good Samaritan Maneuver

The buzz of his alarm clock woke Logan with a start. He reached for the night table behind him to roughly tap the off button. Then, repositioning himself to his right side, the sleepy lad snuggled tightly against the back of the soft, bare body of Morgan. A sudden passion overwhelmed him. His senses knew nothing but the warm woman lying beside him. He relished in touching every inch of her body with his as she lay on her right side with her back against him. Logan softly and slowly stroked the length of her body with his left hand. Starting with her left knee, he gently followed the contour of his lover's smooth, sexy thigh, continued across the side of her firm and shapely hip, then plunged down the side of her narrow curvaceous waist, all the way up to her magnificent shoulder. She gave a sexy little squirm and took his hand with hers, placing it on her full, firm left breast. "What a wondrous woman," was all Logan could think.

"Start my day out right and make love to me," the sensuous redhead whispered with a voice that couldn't be refused. She rolled onto her back, pulled him tightly against her and kissed him passionately.

Logan's senses became totally alive, exploding beyond the reaches of conscious awareness. The separation of their two beings evaporated, melding their bodies into some sort of cosmic unison where he couldn't tell where she stopped and he started. Inextricably linked, they were one, sharing the sensual vestiges of an unseen realm.

Softly touching his lover again, he could almost see a current of energy dancing between their impassioned bodies. His whole being then came alive with a feel, where sight was no longer important. Inexplicably, Logan just knew everything at once. The immense pleasure of the sensation was indescribable, unimaginable. There was no separation between him and Morgan, between him and the room; hell, between him and the whole world! Once again they stood on the brink of eternity.

Morgan shifted her body slightly beneath him and whispered tantalizingly into his ear, "I want you now." It was a command far beyond mere mortal refusal.

Logan was electric. Taking Morgan's head into his hands the impassioned lover kissed her again, deeply, passionately. He stopped only long enough to whisper, "I love you. God, I love you."

Smoothly and tenderly, Logan slipped between Morgan's soft, strong thighs and entered her. Rivers of current coursed up his spine. He couldn't think. All that the enraptured man could do is feel, feel the passion, the energy, the sublime exquisiteness of Divine Unison. Their bodies moved as one, sparkling, lighting up the room with the power of sheer ecstasy.

They climaxed together in an explosion of rapturous delight. His body was on fire in the throes of ecstasy. Logan fought for breath as he relaxed his body fully against hers. If he had his way, they would stay for a week in that very embrace.

Slowly and reluctantly, her lover slid onto his right side, still holding Morgan firmly in his arms. His sensation of total connectedness would only keep growing, dazzling his heart with the fires of heaven. Logan wanted to ask her if she felt the same way, the words just wouldn't form in his mouth. Somehow he could feel she did.

"My God," Morgan finally exclaimed weakly after several minutes of total silence. Those simple words said it all to Logan. She brought Logan to her lips, kissing her true love like there was no tomorrow. "I love you," she whispered, "Remember, we'll always be together!"

"I promise you, love," Logan replied softly, his body still shaking slightly as an after effect of the sheer pleasure he'd just experienced. "The gods themselves couldn't keep me from you now!"

Another ten minutes of total silence passed before Logan could gain enough composure to kiss Morgan gently on her cheek and slide out of the warm bed. His legs could barely support his walk to the shower. It felt as if a part of him stretched out all the way to the bed and still lay against his mesmerized lover. It was one of the strangest feelings the stupefied lad had ever experienced.

The shower helped him to regain his senses. Although, Logan wasn't really sure he wanted to regain them. However, the peacefulness and fulfillment felt right then, he knew, would continue with him forever. His soul had been joined with another at a level of existence far beyond the limits of time and place. Looking out of the bathroom door, the loving lad smiled at Morgan, gently sleeping with an angelic glow about her face. Yeah, he could love this woman forever. After discovering the bond that they had just experienced, Logan was certain of it. After all, she was beautiful, sweet, kind and all of those good things. He just wished for a better record at keeping relationships. Then again, he had never known anyone even close to Morgan before. With his newly-found view of love, a change must be in the making.

Logan finished getting dressed and quietly slipped out of the bedroom, into the kitchen. He found a pad of paper and quickly jotted down a note to Morgan:

Wow, what can I say! I've fallen madly in love with you. You are wonderful and beautiful to boot. And making love to you is like shaking the world. I'll call you later.

Love,  
Logan

P.S. I'll see you again soon!

Well, the fireman wasn't a poet and he was still a little shaky about Morgan moving her stuff in right away. But, that was something he was sure would come in time. After all, Dublin wasn't built in a day.

A sudden pensive feeling sent Logan reeling. Death takes a person from the things he loves, a tiny, unexpected voice whispered in the back of his mind. An ominous gloom crept over him momentarily, leaving a smell of musty stone in his nostrils. Whoa, what was that? The confused Irishman shuttered involuntarily, intentionally shifting his thoughts back onto the things at hand. This wasn't any way to leave his lover for his second day at work.

Silently easing his way back into the bedroom, Logan gently sat on the edge of the bed beside Morgan. His sweetheart rustled lightly under the covers and brought out a hand to pull him to her. Softly she kissed him with a warmth that could melt the heart of an iceberg. He felt waves of radiant warmth rush all the way to his toes, washing away the final remnants of gloom.

"Call in sick today," the loving temptress pleaded sleepily. "We can lie right here in bed all day, maybe even all week.

"Honey, I would love to but this is only my second day back to work after being off for over a month. I think the department would frown on me if I didn't show up."

"But, I . . . I really want you," she tantalized. "It's an emergency. And I guess I'm still feeling a little afraid of something, I'm just not sure what it is. I just don't want you to go!"

"You don't know how hard it is to leave right now," the hesitant firefighter responded truthfully, relating with her desires and fears. "Stay here as long as you like. I'll call you after while. I'd better get going or I'll be late."

"Okay. I love you," she answered, dragging him to her for one last passionate kiss. "Please be careful."

"I promise. I'm still just going to be on ambulance duty. I won't be going into any fires. I'll talk to you later," Logan responded giddily as he tore himself away, slowly walking to the door of the bedroom.

His mind was a whirl of thoughts, sensations and colors as he locked his apartment and walked briskly toward the parking lot. He could still feel the heat of that last impassioned kiss on his lips, stepping up into his truck. Absently, the fireman closed the door with a slam. The quickness that this relationship was progressing was going to take some thinking. He had never felt this way before; at once rapturous and lost, serene and turbulent, assured and completely mixed up. Logan was afraid he was losing his mind. The chill of the early autumn morning sent a shiver through him, bringing him back into present reality, refocusing his actions. He turned the rubber-coated key, cranking the vehicle and drove slowly out of the parking lot.

Logan was oblivious to his surroundings. Speeding seventy miles per hour down the freeway, he didn't even notice that there were almost no cars on the road with him. Suddenly, his consciousness snapped into coherency and realized what he was doing.

"This is Sunday!" he scolded himself loudly. "Jesus H. Christ! I'm in such a hurry and I'll be at work in fifteen minutes! I could still be at home with Morgan." Logan looked down at his watch, slowly shaking his head; twenty minutes until six. He had forgotten to reset his alarm for weekend travel. His usual weekday trip to the station took him forty-five minutes because of the heavy traffic. The weekends, especially Sundays, were totally different. The fireman could sail into work in about fifteen minutes. Normally he arrived at work at six-fifteen or so. Relief time for shift change wasn't officially until six-thirty, however, what goes around comes around! Getting off that extra few minutes was nice. It had saved him several times from being sent on a call that wouldn't get him back to the station until late.

Logan slowed to the speed limit and smiled at the rarity of being the only car on the road. The astonished driver looked around reveling in the sight. It was an almost impossible one on a Houston freeway. "Not many people with a place to go at five thirty on a Sunday morning," he chuckled, looking over the lights of the still city.

Logan switched on his radio and searched in vain for a station that was playing his favorite music, rock and roll. Maybe it would help him take his mind off of the ever present nervousness of returning to work. "I wonder why all radio stations have talk shows on Sunday mornings?" he queried himself to refocus his thoughts. "I want to hear some tunes this morning."

It was an uncommon practice for him to drive in silence. His first rule of driving was: the radio comes on when the engine comes on and at a volume where you can feel the music! "I must be a holdover from the seventies," he laughed, chiding himself loudly.

"Find some tunes to clear my mind," Logan mimicked loudly in his 'Wolfman Jack' voice. He reached for his box of CDs. "I need one of those multi-disk CD players. Next on the shopping list." The driver switched on the overhead light of his Explorer, looking through his musical stash.

He searched the titles for one that seemed fitting. "Yeah," he assured himself, making his selection. "And whatever happened to the Wolfman anyway?"

Just as he was inserting the disk, Logan caught sight of a figure standing in the middle of the roadway. A hundred yards ahead was a man waving his arms over his head, obviously trying to catch his attention. His strained eyesight still couldn't make out many details under the yellowish glow of the streetlights, but he did see a van parked on the inside shoulder of the road against the guardrail.

"Hell of a time to be broken down." He changed to the lane next to the van. Logan looked at his watch again, only five minutes from work and it was still early. "What the

heck, I'm a public servant sworn to save lives and property," the firefighter teased himself, pulling to a stop in front of the van.

Logan rolled down the window of his truck and watched as a grizzled looking fellow hurried over to him. "Looks like you could use a hand," he offered. "What can I do for you?"

The man looked into the window and took a quick step backwards. "A cop are ya?" the old man asked in a heavy Cajun accent.

"No, I'm a firefighter. You caught me on my way to work."

"Ah, dat's good," the fellow answered, again stepping to the side of Logan's truck. "I gots me a real emergency. I gots a flat tire an' no spare ta' fix it with."

Logan could hardly understand what the man was saying. He thought for a second, finally getting the gist of the words and offered his best solution. "I think I have a can of fix-a-flat in back. Let me check, I'll give it to you." The helpful firefighter opened his door, stepping out of the vehicle. "By yourself are you?" He hadn't noticed anyone else in the van behind him.

"Almos'," the stranger stated rather belligerently.

The answer struck Logan as being a little odd. "Must have a dog or something," he surmised. The rear hatch of his truck popped open at the quick twist of his key and he stuck his head inside.

"Ya' just crawl yer way on in there an' keep it quiet, ya hear!" the raspy, accented voice ordered. Logan suddenly felt a hard, round object being poked into his ribs, under his jacket. Even though he had never felt one before, it didn't take much of an imagination to recognize the barrel of a handgun being pressed against him. "Make it good an' slow an' don't ya' dare take a peek back here."

The surprised captive followed his orders to the letter. Slowly sliding his way into the back entrance of the truck, Logan suddenly felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. 'That's it, now I'm dead,' was the last thing he remembered thinking before losing consciousness.

Groggily, Logan came back to his senses. He couldn't move. It scared the daylight out of him at first. Had he been shot and paralyzed? Eventually enough feeling returned for him to recognize that his hands were bound behind him and somehow attached to the bindings on his feet.

Logan was in a fetal position in the back of his truck. Lying there on his right side, he felt like his nose was pressed against the rear seat. His mouth was gagged, bound and something was over his head, like a bag or a hood. A blanket or some other covering was



thrown completely over him with something heavy piled on top of that. He was totally immobilized and restricted. He hated it. Behind and pressing against him was another bundle. It felt warm against his back. Logan twisted in his bindings enough to grab the bundle, it tried to jerk away. Quickly he released it. He had company. Logan felt the truck surge forward. He must not have been unconscious very long since they were just getting underway. All at once a rush of anxiety fell over him. The desperate fireman struggled against his bindings to no avail. He couldn't move an inch and his head felt as if it was about to explode.

"Here, here. Yo' be settlin' yourself down back there now. We jus' takin' a little ride in the country," the distant voice of the stranger sneered. Yo' might as well get yourself comfortable. Dis ride'll be takin' a spell."

Frustrated, Logan settled down, relaxing the best he could. It didn't help that his head was lying directly on something hard that vibrated with every crack in the road. Especially since his skull was already pounding. He felt the bundle behind him try to inch away. Logan wanted to tell the person to just chill out. He wasn't in much of a position to try anything at all.

Logan decided to try and feel each turn that was made. Maybe when they stopped he'd have some idea of where they were. At least it gave him something to do besides worry about getting murdered. He figured that they must already be past the fire station and he tried to envision which roads and exits would be coming up. Unfortunately, they never seemed to make a turn. All he could feel was the vibration of the truck, accentuated by the potholes in the road. Occasionally the fireman felt the bundle behind him shift slightly. Logan, too, tried to reposition himself, especially when he started losing the feeling in his arms and legs. "Aren't we ever going to stop?" the forlorn captive wondered.

He was starting to feel desperation again and tears began welling up in his eyes. "No one's going to let me live after this," he reasoned. "I'm probably being taken out into the country to be shot and left in the forest for the animals to eat." The idea of being ungraciously devoured suddenly, completely revolted him. The bulky fireman struggled again with all his might against the bindings. The bundle next to him squirmed and he could hear a very muffled scream come from it. It definitely sounded female.

Don't get your panties all in a knot, Logan screamed a thought at her. I'm not trying to molest you. My God, I've got to get out of here! His mind raced with every horrifying scenario he could come up with and his body felt like one big tense knot. Then a vision, clearer than the rest, exploded into his mind. The horrified Irishman could almost see himself being run through with a spear. Logan could feel the splintering wooden handle ripping through his abdomen. The fearful realization that he was dying and would never see his lover again consumed him. He wanted to vomit, but wasn't in much of a position to do that. Managing to keep it down, Logan allowed the vision to play itself out. A little voice in the back of his head whispered through the din, "I'm still alive! And I intend to stay that way!"

Still they kept driving. He felt like they'd been cooped up for days. Sooner or later we'll have to stop for gas, Logan thought. Oh God, he had just filled both fuel tanks on his way home the night before. We can go a long way on that, he groaned to himself. I know we can go at least seven hundred miles before we have to get fuel again.

Morgan woke with a start to the sound of the ringing telephone. Should she answer it? Yeah, Logan might be calling to say good morning.

"Hello," she answered sleepily.

"Hi, uh, can I speak to Logan Keohane please?" an unrecognized man's voice responded.

"I'm sorry but he left for work already. You can probably reach him at the fire station."

"This is Captain Riley, Logan's station Captain. He hasn't made it in to work yet. We just wanted to make sure that he was awake. I know he's probably still adjusting to having to come to work, so I wanted to be sure he didn't forget that he was supposed to be here today. Can you tell me about what time he left? We can't let his relief man off until he shows up."

"Jeez, he should have been there a long time ago," the suddenly worried lass informed the Captain. She sat up in the bed. "Logan left here a little after five thirty. I hope he's all right."

"Five thirty, huh? How far away do you live from here?"

"I don't live. . . I mean we only live twenty or thirty minutes away. What time is it?" she quickly glanced at the clock. "It's almost seven. He should've been there long ago." She pulled her knees up to her chest and felt all of the muscles in her body go tense.

"Maybe he just had car trouble or something. What route does he normally take to work?"

"Ah. . . I think he. . . I think he just comes straight down I-10 east to the exit where the station is." Morgan's mind was suddenly rampant with possibilities.

"I'll do some checking around to see if we can find him. He's probably just stalled out or something. Thanks for the information. I'm sorry I had to wake you so early on Sunday morning."

"Captain, please have him call me as soon as you hear from him. Please. It's not like him to. . ." she cut herself short.

"Don't worry, I'll have him call."

"Bye," Morgan answered worriedly, hanging up the phone. She stared blankly around the brightening room. Suddenly, an intriguing idea crossed her mind, "Maybe he sat down in the living room and fell asleep on the couch."

Morgan slipped out of the warm bed, quickly pulling the T-shirt over her head that Logan had given her to sleep in. A slight hope of finding him asleep on the couch kindled inside her. She'd sneak in and attack him. Maybe even tease him about falling asleep on his way to work.

But, what if he wasn't? The uneasy redhead hesitated before walking through the bedroom door. Mustering all her courage, she stepped through the dimly lit opening.

Holding her breath, Morgan walked into the living room. Disappointment swept through her like a cold wind. What little hope she had held on to felt like it ran out of her toes into the sparsely furnished room. Her knees weakened and she sank to the floor. A dark panic set in, numbing her senses. The grief stricken woman rocked back and forth with her knees to her chest, wishing her tears would come. They would help wash away her heartache. Instead she felt an empty, almost indescribable, shock.

Regaining her composure, Morgan tried to reassure herself that nothing was really amiss. "Logan just had car trouble," she kept telling herself. "This is all silly. I'm just a needless worry wart," the hopeful lass forced a hollow laugh that stuck in her throat. Scanning the small living room, she looked over the odd pieces of furniture scattered throughout the room. A measure of warmth returned to her as images of love and beauty that were once played out in that very space crossed her memory. A sacred bond created by the ritual event they had performed there left unmistakable traces of love and beauty permeating everything. "Come back to me, Logan."

After several minutes, she stood up and made her way into the kitchen. The aroma of brewed coffee drifted through the small apartment. "Logan must have made it for me before he left," she whispered to herself. "When he left. . ." her eyes moistened involuntarily.

Morgan reached for a coffee cup through misty eyes. Her actions were pretty much on automatic, pouring herself a cup of the hot brew. When she replaced the pot in the machine, there was a little slip of paper sitting on the counter beside it. Trembling, the anticipatory girl opened Logan's note. Her tears began flowing freely.

She sank to the kitchen floor, holding the note up to her breast like her last spark of life. Thinking wasn't even possible right now. Everything was feeling, total emotion. "He'll be back for me," the lass repeated over and over.

Morgan was really learning what love was about. It wasn't a fixation on someone, needing to spend every second in their presence. Neither was it an insatiable desire to be another's whole life, asking that either of them give up friends, family or dreams as a proof of their devotion. Love was simply a knowing of what was right and good for her. An assuredness that the partner she had chosen was in alignment with her hopes and dreams, as she was with his. Together they could live life, committed and true to each other. True love is a purity of feeling, needing no explanation nor the approval of anyone. Real love defied logic. She knew Logan far exceeded this description. They would be together for a lifetime. There was no room for doubt. He would always be back for her.

Morgan's tears ceased, bringing about a calmness she didn't completely understand. Inexplicably, the faithful redhead just knew that everything would be all right. No matter what the situation looked like at this moment, all was well. Logan would be back, he wouldn't leave her love. His devotion was a feeling that she could rely on. One that could brighten up even the darkest of moments. Carefully Morgan folded the note, picked up the cup of coffee and moved to the small couch in the living room. Nothing could take her love away, a small voice echoed deep in the calming young woman's mind. She began to feel at peace, a smile tracing softly across her tear stained face.

Logan was once again entrenched in deep despair. He envisioned all kinds of horrible ways of dying alone. The worst was still having his body left to be eaten by the wild animals of the forest. He could almost feel the rodents gnawing on his rotting bones.

God, I'm morbid, the fireman chastised himself. I've got to think positive thoughts. He forced the memory of his recent life with Morgan. Now she was someone to live for! He could overcome unthinkable odds to return to the side of his love.

Slowly his mind progressed through the events of the day bringing to mind the miracles of the past two weeks. All the way from the most wondrous experience of my life to the most horrid in a matter of hours, he thought sullenly. A vivid vision of the note he had left for Morgan filled his vision, flooding his memory with his solemn commitment and promise- I won't ever leave you, Morgan. I'm coming back for you, Morgan. I swear, somehow I'll be back at your side. I really do love you. Nothing will keep us apart, erupted through his whole being with a faith that felt as true in that moment as anything ever had.

He could almost hear Morgan whisper in his ear; "I love you, Logan. I know you'll be back for me!" Peace filled his senses. Irrational peace. His mind followed by his entire body relaxed to the point where his numb extremities eased their torture. The spinning captive found comfort in the fact of still being alive and breathing. He drifted into a quiet slumber.

Morgan rubbed her eyes and stretched. Gingerly, she reopened the note that had been sitting on the arm of the couch next to her. It was rapidly becoming her most treasured gift. The warmth and passion of her early morning love making with Logan played wantonly through her mind. She could somehow still feel the closeness, the sensation of being totally alive and one with him. It was something totally new to her. Morgan had felt connection with other men in the past but never even close to the oneness, the integration of spirits that she had with Logan.

"That's what's possible every day," the self-assured woman reminded herself. "That's the way life should be. Now I have someone to share my life and soul with."

Absently, she stroked the tweed covering of the couch as if pulling the very feel of Logan from the place he normally sat. Her hand moved slowly to the T-shirt that Logan had given her to wear. Morgan set the letter on the couch beside her and hugged the shirt as if he were the one inside it. Suddenly another wave of sadness swept over her.

"Oh, Logan. You will come back to me, won't you?" Doubts again began to intrude upon her serenity. Her active mind was serving up fantasies of unpleasant scenarios. Was she going crazy? She had felt so assured of the situation only moments before.

Morgan's mind played every scene possible, from Logan's truck being broken down, to him lying bloodied, mangled and dead somewhere on the side of the road. Suddenly the landscape changed. To her surprise and loathing, the same terrible vision that had surfaced at the end of their Hand fasting ritual streaked across her memory. Logan's face was again somehow changed, yet she knew that it was him. The outcome was the same, he was lying beside her, holding her. Men on horses charged them. Her lover fought bravely to protect her from their assailants, only to die in battle. She was left alone and heartbroken in the clutches of fear. She gasped for breath, feeling like a freight train had just run over her. Logan's face became superimposed on the dead bleeding body in her vision, leaving her in writhing agony.

If this was really a memory of Logan showing itself from some other existence, playing itself out once more at a different place in time, how could she avoid the inevitable? Did this mean he had to die again? Did all events like this have to play themselves out with the same results? Was her only course of action to make peace with his inevitable demise, to move on in life without regret or heartbreak? She couldn't even begin to believe that. Or, was this just another play on her imagination, an unconscious representation of a hidden fear being characterized in fairy tale symbolism? Whatever it was, it was true for her at that moment.

The determined redhead, however, was strong in her faith that he was coming back to her alive and well. Morgan could still feel the warmth of her lover's kiss, taste the love

in it. She could smell the sweetness of flowers surrounding them. "Whatever is real about all of this," she told him aloud, "the outcome is still to be created. The choice is now mine to await your return, Logan Keohane! I take you at your word, you will not leave me here alone!" The heaviness of her doubt lifted, leaving her still a bit confused, but somehow rekindling a sense of peacefulness and reassurance.

A smile crossed her face and again she knew, inexplicably certain, that he was all right. She could feel it, Logan would be back for her. Morgan smiled again, remembering something she had heard once said by a wise old man: "We, as individuals, are only one small link in an eternal chain. When one can become enough aware of this possibility, overcome the self-doubt of human nature, expanding their awareness in large enough scale, they can learn to feel the entire chain as a part of themselves. From that expanded awareness, each link of the chain is accessible, adding the feel and the knowledge of it's individuality to the whole. If we connect, at a deep enough level, with another being, we can feel their presence in the chain, no matter where they are."

Logan and she had touched souls, linking themselves together at a level far beyond mere physical human touch. Morgan could feel his desire for her until the last moment they were together. His presence still seemed to linger in her mind as a permanent beacon of Logan's love and commitment. Peacefully, she stood up to get another cup of coffee.

The telephone rang as she started toward the kitchen. There he is, she thought. Hurriedly, the brightening redhead made her way into the small room, snatching up the receiver. She was expecting to hear Logan's voice apologizing for not calling her sooner and was getting prepared to pretend she was mad at him. Then she would lavish him with loving words. "Hello," she panted briskly. "Logan?"

"No, I'm sorry, this is Scott, Scott Turnbull, down at the fire station. I work with Logan. We wanted to call to see if you had heard from him yet."

It took Morgan several seconds to regroup. She felt as if her breath had just been sucked out of her once more. Her heart raced with a sudden shot of adrenaline. Slowly, she inhaled fully and deeply. "No...uh, no I still haven't heard anything from him either. Would you let me know as soon as you find out anything?"

"Yes ma'am. Soon as we hear something I'll call you right back," he informed her in a very serious voice.

"Thanks," Morgan hung up the phone despondently, feeling only her heartbeat returning to normal. After pouring herself another cup of hot coffee, she returned to the friendly couch.

# Chapter 6

## Swamp Thing

The force of the rapidly slowing truck woke Logan, pushing him roughly against the seat back. The difference in the road surface was very apparent. It seemed the truck was pulling onto a gravel or dirt road. The shaken fireman could hear the sound of an occasional rock hit the underside of the vehicle while feeling the jostling effect of the numerous potholes.

Suddenly the truck hit an uncommonly large hole. Logan, his companion behind him, along with all of the stuff on top of and around them were ungraciously tossed into the air. They all landed together with a thud. He saw stars as his head landed hard on the metal part of the floor. A long muffled groan issued from his unknown partner.

The ride didn't get any smoother from there. The road gradually roughened to feel as if he were riding a roller coaster, or worse. Judging by sound and feel, they were driving the ragged roadway pretty fast. The rough and tumble ride continued for about fifteen minutes before the truck began to slow noticeably. For another five minutes the truck rocked back and forth down the back road, taking the group more slowly to God knows where. Finally they came to a slow, tousled stop. Oh my God, here it is, judgment day! The thought screamed through his brain so loudly that he just knew everyone around him could hear.

Logan felt totally electric. Not a livening, flowing kind of current but the high amperage, heart pounding kind of electricity that rivets a person to his seat. His body shivered uncontrollably. A cold sweat broke out all over him. There wasn't a time that he could recall when he felt such sheer terror. Many times he'd been frightened in uncontrolled emergency situations, never had he even come close to this, not even in his

encounter with death. Maybe it wasn't death that frightened him. Now he had someone to live for, and a promise to fulfill! He just couldn't leave Morgan.

He felt so helpless at that moment, so vulnerable to outside forces. Being a firefighter, had accustomed him to the constant presence of danger. Still, he at least had a delusional sense of being in control of his own fate, of being immortal, of being able to cheat death. This was different, he was at the whim of who knows what kind of madman! Logan felt no control over the actions of another being. Recklessly, the desperate captive began struggling against his bindings. The person behind him screamed once again through her gag. His bruised body ached everywhere with every struggling movement.

The sound of the rear hatch being opened almost stopped his heart. With all of his energy spent, Logan became resigned to his fate. The muted fireman just lay blindly, listening to the whistling of the strong wind that blew through the opened doorway. He was afraid that he was going to die for the entertainment of a madman. Voracious fear swallowed him up like a demon sucking out his very soul. Just as he hit the depths of his despair, a memory of Morgan floated into Logan's mind like a ray of sunlight through a dark storm cloud. He could almost hear her saying, "I love you, Logan. Come back to me, please! You promised!"

It was enough to give him all the determination that he needed to stay alive. He would do anything in his power to be with Morgan again, kiss her lips, feel her warm, loving embrace.

"Ya'll better hush back here now, you hear," the madman raged belligerently back to them. "I'll be takin' ya'll out one by one and ya'll better stay put where I put ya'. There be some hungry gators just ten feet away from ya'. And I might not get as good a' price for ya'll if ya'll come up missin' a leg or somethin'. And you, mister fireman, you be too heavy for little ole' me to be packin' around so ya' betta follow my directions perfectly if ya' wants to keep breathin'."

Logan's head began to spin. He felt like he had just gotten a reprieve from the firing squad. His whole body went suddenly limp

A muffled moan in unison with the grunt of his captor gently rocked the back of the truck. Soft footsteps slowly disappeared from the hatch. Did he just hear someone being lifted and carried away? That was odd, his companion was still lying close behind him.

"There must be two others, or maybe even more." Logan reasoned. The footsteps returned and he could feel the jostling of the body behind him. A long stifled, moan followed by a muted sob tapered off with the sound of footsteps into the crying wind.

"All right mister," his antagonist's scratchy voice grated against his very bones, "be your turn now. I'm cuttin' your bindin' between yo' hands and feets and yo' gonna' hop over to the way I tells ya'." The Cajun cut the binding that kept him scrunched up in a



bundle. Immediately, Logan rolled onto his back for some relief. The howling breeze felt cool against him after being wrapped in the steamy blanket for hours.

"I'm a tellin' ya', I ain't puttin up wit' no shit now! I'll slides ya' to the' back of the truck here an' ya' gonna stand up and hop yo' way over to the place I tells ya'. Okay?"

Did he really expect an answer, Logan wondered. The captive firefighter felt a vise-like hand grasp his ankles, roughly spinning his body toward the rear hatch. With an unceremonious tug he felt himself slid to the edge of the exit, feet first. His captor stood him shakily up behind the vehicle. He immediately fell to the ground. His legs were so numb that they wouldn't support him. Hop! Like hell. I can't even stand up, let alone hop for God knows how far, he desperately wanted to tell the nitwit.

"If ya' don't get up off yo' backside I'll be shootin' ya' right here an' lettin' the gators take care of ya'."

Logan suddenly found an untapped store of strength. The determined young man slowly stood up by himself, waiting for his directions. His abductor took him by the arm, guiding him a short distance over some very spongy ground.

"Stop," the old man ordered firmly, "now, turn around an sit down."

That maneuver was a really strange sensation. Logan didn't know how far to sit or what he was sitting onto. The blind action just felt extremely strange. If he could just get this hood off of his head following directions would be much simplified.

Logan reached his seat with a thud. The structure was some kind of a backless bench that rocked slightly when he first sat on it. A sort of railing dug into the tender, tingling skin behind his knees. Suddenly, his feet were grasped, spinning him into place facing a different direction.

"Ya'll just stays right here now and don't ya' even move."

The kidnapper plodded away only to return to place several packages of some kind behind him. Where were the other captives?

"Ya'll better hold on tight now and don't ya' be movin' around none too, ya' hear."

Logan almost fell over backward as his seat lunged forward with a jerk. Something or someone fell roughly into his lap and began wiggling to try to get up. I guess that answers that question, he thought. The fallen captive squirmed its way upright, screaming a muffled cry of exasperation to the taunting laughter of their abductor.

With one more sliding whoosh, the sound of water surrounded him. They were obviously in a small boat. It sounded like the only propulsion was a paddle or maybe a push pole.

Either we are in some really out of the way place or this guy is pretty stupid, paddling an open boat with several people tied up in it, Logan decided.

The motion of the boat was very steady. They must be in some very sheltered waters. Listening through the opaque hood, all he could hear was the sound of a slight breeze in the trees, the chirping of a few birds and a few distant unidentified splashing. Occasionally the croaking of bullfrogs dominated his hearing, muffling everything but the steady swish of the oar or pole being dipped into the water and removed.

"Yeah, I think ya'll will like ya'll's new home away from home if only ya'll could see it," remarked the Cajun, breaking the silence after about fifteen minutes in the boat. "Believe me, ya'll will have plenty of company if ya' try to get outside the place we goin'."

Their howling captor cackled to himself in a raspy, throaty sort of way for several minutes. "Plenty a' gators around there. Ya' know, we feeds 'em, kinda makes 'em pets, if ya' knows what I mean. Except these pets likes to eat anything in the water. Not yo' favorite swimmin' hole." He chuckled at his own brand of wit for several minutes, repeating several phrases under his breath.

Yeah, what a comedian, thought Logan sarcastically. The raspiness of the laughter reminded him of sandpaper against rusty iron. A minute of it was all that was needed to get his skin crawling. The fireman then heard a rumbling sound, guessing that it was distant thunder. "Great just what we could use right now, a thunderstorm," he mused sarcastically to himself as a second clap of thunder sounded much closer.

"Shit," the kidnapper squealed, going off into some unintelligible dialect that Logan had no idea how to interpret. The boat began picking up speed, moving a little faster as the already low light was getting even dimmer inside his hood.

Logan felt something drop onto the right shoulder of his department issued jacket, then another drop and another until a large drop of wetness hit his hand. Suddenly, a steady downpour pummeled him, followed by a clap of thunder that sounded as if it were right over their heads. At least it was a lot warmer here than it had been in Houston. He was actually getting hot in his heavy clothes, even in the rain.

The Cajun was blithering incessantly now in some unknown gibberish. The words sounded sharp and angry, muttered mostly under his breath. Logan assumed he was vocalizing his disapproval at the rain. The only thing he could understand was an occasional profanity spit out in English.

Suddenly this Bayou Comedian roared out in hysterical laughter. It wasn't just a chuckle this time, but a full gut-busting guffaw that pealed out over the sound of the pouring rain. This guy's got to be insane, Logan surmised, I mean totally whacked out. Their abductor began to sing.

At ten o'clock Morgan decided to get into the shower. No one had heard from Logan as of yet and she was beginning to get really worried again. The wavering lass seemed to jump back and forth between extraordinary faith in her lover's return and outright hysteria at his apparent demise. She sometimes even felt split into two completely different people at the same time. One part had all the assurance it needed of her boyfriend's eminent return. The other was in deep shock, just wanting to scream out. That fearful part wanted to get into a car and drive all over the city in search of him, but she knew that it would do no good.

Her reasoning felt tugged back and forth, up and down. The sensation was so real that it felt physical. The feeling was almost like she could take a small step to her right and speak completely from one identity. Then step back to her left and be in the other. Which one is really me? Why can't I just be one person? I can't keep the same idea going for a half hour! "I'd do anything if I could just choose which side I stood on and stick with it," the tortured young woman agonized through her clenched teeth.

With a stifled scream, Morgan slipped out of the T-shirt, forcing herself to neatly and carefully fold the treasured garment. The torn young woman deliberately set the clothing carefully on the bed. Next to the shirt was the unfolded note. They were two valued treasures to keep her company during Logan's absence. A single tear slipped down her right cheek.

The warm shower ran strongly over her firm body. Morgan was suddenly overcome by a wave of deep sadness. No thoughts really prompted the overwhelming feeling, she just felt as if the sky was crashing down upon her shoulders. Resting against the rear wall of the shower, Morgan let her body slide down the slick tile all the way to the smooth floor. The warm, rushing water washed her flowing tears down the drain.

"Oh my God, oh my God," was all that the lamenting redhead could repeat, rocking back and forth with her knees pressed tightly against her chest. A hollow, helpless feeling permeated her senses, a loneliness driven by hopeless despair. There was nothing that she could do or say, nothing but sit by the phone, nothing but keep up the hope of getting word as to the whereabouts of Logan. A slow feeling of release eased from the torrents of despair. Welcomed relief radiated through the sobbing lass like a warm wave, starting in her feet. The calming sensation rose gently up through Morgan's body, into her head. Her soul was slowly returning.

"I'm not giving up, Logan Keohane. You'd better just make up your mind to get back here as soon as you can! I love you. Do you hear me, I said I love you! More than I've ever loved anyone. You will be back with me. I know it." The echo of the woman's voice filled up the small glass shower.

Morgan gathered herself with a deep, slow breath, deliberately focusing on the warm shower cascading over her body. Amazingly, she was feeling pretty peaceful again. Still, was she losing her mind?

"There it is, there it is!" the Cajun exclaimed in the tapering rain. He sounded just like a kid looking for his favorite toy. "Here we is boys and girls. Home sweet home. Don't it feel just perfect? I mean, ain't this just the most beautiful place yo' ever seen? Of course ya' can't see it! Silly ole' me!" Logan just shook his hooded head in disbelief. How could anyone this whacked out still be walking the streets?

The disgusted captive tried to focus on something else. Maybe he could figure out where they could possibly be. He had, however, completely lost his sense of time. Logan couldn't even imagine how long the boat ride had been, let alone the trip to the shores of this God-forsaken chunk of the world. It seemed like a week since he'd left for work. If he could just put together a timetable, it might aid them when they got an opportunity to escape. The spinning young man couldn't even begin to guess the present time of day.

Hell, first of all, he didn't even know what part of the country they were in. His first guess was deep east Texas or Louisiana. It was the only place where alligators lived. They couldn't have come farther east than Louisiana, could they?

Their singing abductor was again serenading them with some tune in, what Logan guessed was, French. At least the whacko sounded happy at this point. Perhaps he wouldn't feed them to the alligators anytime soon, the nervous captive prayed.

"Hold on to yo' panties, kids. End of the line."

Logan braced himself with his legs as the boat slid up to a soggy stop onto solid ground. One last surge of forward motion left them marooned on the shore. What now? he wondered.

"Grand Central Station, boys and girls. This be our stop. Home appliances on the first floor, ladies underwear upstairs. Ya'll be good childrens now, ya'll hear? You first, sweetness," he instructed with mock politeness. "And don't ya' be worryin' about us 'cause I'll be right back for ya'll."

The boat shook and rocked a bit as their kidnapper assisted the first captive ashore. Logan heard another low grunt as the wiry Cajun obviously picked up the captive and carried her away. Listening intently, the fireman could hear nothing except the distant twittering of birds. Suddenly, he heard a large swirl and splash of water just behind him and to his left. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as a chill ran down his back.

All that talk about alligators had left him a little panicky. He could envision a large gator turning over their boat and taking a bite of his leg. His heart began racing and his breathing quickened. Logan thought he heard and felt something brush against the side of the boat.

"Hey, get outta' there," the raspy voice of the Bayou Pavarotti yelled, clapping his hands loudly. The kidnapper approached the vessel with a squishy gait announcing, "Okay sweet-tater, yo' turn." Another grunt and shake of the boat left Logan alone with whatever beastie habituated the water next to him.

Logan was all ears. He didn't know what to do if attacked. "At least let me know it's coming," the frightened fireman moaned through his tight gag. Another swish of water and a hiss came from farther away. His whole body again turned into one big electrified knot.

The squish of footsteps returning came as a welcomed sound. Even though this grizzled fellow could be a threat to his life, Logan was anxious for his return. He actually began to relax a little.

"Alright big boy. Be yo' turn last. We gonna do like ya' done before and hop over to the house. Then we got some stairs for ya' to hop yo' way up 'til we gets inside. Okay, let's go."

Logan felt his feet being picked up and his body turned in the same direction that he had entered the craft. With the mad Cajun's hand under his arm for a boost, he slid over the gunwale, ending up ankle deep in ooze. This should be real fun, he thought, trying his first hop. If it hadn't been for the helping hand, the mired strongman would have been face down in the muck. The sticky mud sucked at his feet. What if he lost his shoes? What would he do then? Each leaden hop required all the power that he could muster.

Slowly, hop by hop, the ground firmed. The prisoner's movement became much easier, but the slimy residue left in his shoes felt terrible. The stench of the mire was also beginning to overcome him. Logan counted each hop as a reference, seventeen hops since leaving the boat. How much farther had he left to go?

Almost immediately he was instructed, "Now, one more hop and we be at the first step. Ya' gots to hop up pretty high or ya' gonna' fall down and break your nose on d'ese here steps."

Logan concentrated on each individual step, making sure that each one was judged correctly. "One more step," the grizzly old Cajun cackled. Out of breath, the restrained fireman reached the top. "Now that weren't so bad now was it?" The kidnapper burst into another fit of contemptuous laughter. "I be gonna' call you kangaroo from now on!"

Logan desperately wanted to breathe from his mouth, but the gag made it impossible. He could feel himself passing through a doorway into an enclosed space.

Maybe it was just a deeper shade of darkness or the hollow sound of his shoes on the wooden floor, somehow he sensed entering a structure. At this point, being inside of a building actually made him feel a little more safe and comfortable.

"Okay, that's far enough. Turn a bit to your right and had a seat." Logan followed his instructions and sat comfortably into a small padded chair with a high back. "One second there son. Stand back on your feet."

"Now what?" Logan puzzled. He felt his arms being lifted as far as they would go behind him and the chair back being slipped through. The kidnapped man sat back down, actually allowing himself to relax his aching back and legs. His comforting position didn't last very long, however, as another binding slipped around his feet then connected tightly once again to his wrists. At least there was something to lean against. The grizzled fellow noisily left the house, returning several times, obviously unpacking the boat. Their gear was tossed in various locations around the room.

"I hates to leave such good company, but I gots an appointment wit' a couple million dollars. And I got to fetch my partner out here 'cause he doesn't know exactly where we is. And don't ya' be tryin' anything 'cause between the hungry 'gators, the cottonmouth's, the quicksand, an the neighbors, who shoot first and don't ask no questions, ya'll won't be alive and kickin' more than a hundred yards or so," the cheerful sounding Cajun informed them. "Yeah, I can't wait 'til ya' meets ole' DuBose! He be quite some character! We goes way back, maybe twenty years or so. Hmmm, how many stick-ups have we pulled? Must be seven. . . no, eight! Yeah, he's my best buddy. Too bad his momma is ailin' and he couldn't be wit' me to get you two pretty little things. But, that's just the way ole' DuBose is, thoughtful! He takes care of his own. Even went to see his old mammy and missed out on all the fun! Humph, I swear!" Without further adieu the man quickly shuffled to the door and made his way down the steps.

# Chapter 7

## The Accident

Morgan was getting restless. She had been sitting in Logan's apartment all morning waiting for word on his whereabouts. The vexed young woman had been struggling all morning with her consciousness, trying to overcome the depression that clouded her soul. Now, something physical seemed to be more needed to occupy her. Being a normally very active person, Morgan found herself constantly pacing. A few minutes in the living room, then a walk to the bedroom to touch the shirt and read the note over to herself again. Restlessly, the redhead made her way outside, smelling the cool October breeze, laced with the scent of light rain and autumn pine.

Morgan gripped the damp iron railing of the patio, trying to make peace with her dilemma. She stared blankly through the limbs of an ancient pine tree that towered above the balcony where she stood. "Maybe some higher power has decided to play a cruel joke. Just put me together with Logan then snatch him away mercilessly. Maybe God is punishing me." She hung her head dejectedly.

Total consternation filled the fiery lass' heart. "No, Logan and I will be together in life no matter what. I just have to allow all of my doubts and fears to come and go and have real faith that Logan will return," Morgan determined, staring up into the billowing sky. Another little voice in her head kept saying, "Yeah, right," in an almost audible sarcastic tone. "You know how all of your other relationships ended, with a broken heart. You might as well ditch this one right now before you find out something awful has happened and get stuck again."

"My God, I can't believe I'm sitting here thinking this shit!" she reprimanded herself.

"That's it, I'm just going to get my heart broken! It's just going to be ripped out and stomped on!" Morgan chided herself aloud as a small smile started on her face. "Go ahead and shoot me now, 'cause I'm already done for anyway. Just rip me open and dig the heart out of my chest." Her smile became a light chuckle while mocking the action of ripping her chest open to the world.

Wow, she couldn't believe how much better she felt! Yeah, she would become the master. No, she would be the creator of the fear, then it would be in her control. Morgan's whole demeanor felt lighter, almost breezy, if that's any way to describe a physical sensation. The brightening woman smiled, leaning against the railing of the second story balcony to take a deep breath of the cool, moist air. Retaking control made her begin to feel alive and confident again.

Morgan heard the telephone ring and stepped inside to answer it, "Hello," she calmly addressed the caller.

"Miss O'Malley, this is John Grissom at the firestation. I just wanted to let you know that there's still no word from Logan. We're still trying to locate him. We've just called fire headquarters to get some help from down there, so now the whole department has been notified of the situation. The police have been brought in, too, so we have lots of people doing an area wide search for him and his vehicle. It would help a lot if you could tell us the details of his truck. We know the make, model and color but we don't know his license plate number or anything. Do you happen to know any of that information?" the firefighter queried sullenly.

"No, I sure don't. Sorry, but I've never been one to notice details like that. If I can find that information I'll be sure and let you know. By the way, has anyone called his parents or anyone?" Morgan asked solemnly.

"No, you're the only one we've spoken to. I guess they really should be called though," he responded.

"I'll call them," she volunteered, "I've met them a couple of times and they're really wonderful people."

"Thanks, it'll probably be best coming from someone they know. We'll call you back in a couple of hours or sooner if we get any word. Let's see, it's about noon now. I'll call back at three if there's no more information before then."

"Great. I'll probably be leaving here soon to go to my place. I want to give you my cell number so you can reach me."

Morgan somehow had to find the courage to call Logan's parents. It wasn't going to be easy. How do you tell someone that their son is missing and you were the last person to see him? Should she tell them that they had been sleeping together? Her parents had almost gone nuts with that knowledge. Should she tell them she was madly in love with him? That she would like to be a part of their family when he got back? Should she. . . . The fumbling lass decided to go personally to their house and let the right words come when she got there.

Morgan recognized the muffled sound off her cell phone as it began to ring inside her purse. Her heart leapt. Jesus H. Christ, what now? Rushing across the living room to her purse, the distracted redhead pulled out the small black phone. A well recognized number appeared in the info window. "My God, what do my parent's want now? Okay, might as well get it over with."

Mustering the courage to answer the call, Morgan felt a twinge of disgust rising from her chest. I'm definitely not in the mood for a sermon right now! "Okay, Morgan, get this over as quickly as possible."



"Oh, hi, Dad? This is Morgan. Did you need something?"

The gruff voice of Patrick O'Malley responded instantly. "Hi, Sweetheart, I'm glad I caught you. Your brother is coming in from the Seminary this evening and we wanted to invite you over to see him. We're just going to have a few people over from the church for dinner and thought it'd be wonderful if you'd stop by for a while. After all, it's been a month since we've seen you! Don't you love us anymore?"

Why did it have to be now? It always seems that when something goes wrong, all the shit hits the fan! Morgan couldn't think of a thing she'd less like to do. Except maybe, spend the evening not knowing where Logan was or how he was doing. Perhaps she could just slip in for a few minutes then slip right out unnoticed.

"Daddy, it's not really a good time. Logan. . . well, is missing. Everyone's trying to find him right now and I need to stay accessible."

"But Morgan, you know your brother doesn't come in but every three or four months. He's getting really close to graduating and will have a church of his own to take care of soon. And he probably won't be able to stay here in Houston. You should visit with him while you can. That boyfriend of yours can take care of himself. You know we really don't approve of you seeing him anyway. You shouldn't be mixing your denominational affiliations, it's just not right. You should know by now that it's a sin to pray to anyone other than Jesus Christ! All those people who pray to Blessed Virgins, statues and false Prophets will end up in a place we don't like to think about! You should come back here with us. There are some really nice young men in the singles group where we go to church. I'm sure we can arrange. . . ."

"Daddy," his ired daughter broke in, "we've been through this before. I love Logan and I plan to stay with him. Okay, I'll stop by for a few minutes and say hi to Jeff. But, if I hear from Logan. . . ."

Silence permeated the phone line. "Okay, honey. You know we're just trying to look out for your best interests. We just believe you should stay in the church, that's all."

"I know, daddy, but I don't believe the same way you do anymore. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but that's the way I feel. I'd better go now, I have to go see Logan's parents and let them know what's going on."

"Why? What's happened?" the girl's father asked seriously.

"I told you earlier, Logan's missing. Never mind, I'll see you tonight. Bye."

Morgan hung up the call with a low growl. Why did she have to subject herself to this? Wasn't she entitled to her own beliefs? Why did the writers of some ancient middle eastern country have to dictate her life? God is God, it doesn't matter what name you give. Arrrgggh, fire and retribution on you if you don't believe exactly as I do! Hey,

hasn't that started most of the wars of mankind? Haven't more people died for that restrictive dogma than any other? The young woman stepped outside once again. "Breathe," she told herself. "Just breathe from the diaphragm and feel the feeling kicking you in the teeth! Then let it go out. . . ."

Using his push pole like a master, the wiry Cajun kidnapper picked his way through the murky swamp. The dense overhead canopy of ominous looking cypress trees continually held the light to a minimum. On this day, the dimness was even more exaggerated by the dark, heavy thunder clouds rolling in from the nearby Gulf of Mexico. One could almost swear that it was late twilight under the dense foliage.

The cypress trees spaced themselves about ten to twelve feet apart on average with a distance rarely over twenty feet between the huge trunks. Spanish moss hung so thickly from the heavy limbs that at times it reminded one of the stage curtain of some macabre theater or maybe the hanging tendrils of a huge insidious spider web. Occasionally, the boatman would have to change the use of his push pole to that of a curtain hook to move aside the columns of ghastly growth, just to allow his passage.

The Cajun had chosen the river route when his captives were in the boat. It was somewhat longer but he didn't have the hassle of clearing a path for them to duck under. Now, this was his world. He reveled in the deepness of the dense swamp's atmosphere.

This man was definitely the king of these swamps. The confident Cajun had grown up there, knew every inch by sight, sound and feel. To him this was Heaven. The backwater man couldn't understand how anyone didn't just fall completely in love with this country. It was so alive! There were things that flew, things that swam, things that crawled and things that floated. Hell, there are probably things there that even he didn't know about. And all that life flourished under one continuous living roof.

This bayou king would sometimes tell people who didn't agree with him in his own Creole way, "Every man has his Heaven and every man has his Hell. They is never the exact same for two different peoples. Some peoples loves they cities or deserts or mountains. I'd give away a whole world of those things for one little acre of this swamp. It is Home!"

The ruddy man zig-zagged through the last couple of trees and spotted the green Ford Explorer where he had left it. He was glad to have bought these four acres of land on the shore of this paradise. It was the perfect place to park his vehicles and boats. It was turning out to be one of his best investments. Not that investing was of dire importance to him.

He ran the small flat-bottomed boat ashore, climbed onto the dry land and pulled the skiff completely out of the water. Just for safe keeping, the cautious fellow threw a

camouflaged net over the craft. He didn't need any mistakes at this point. So far everything was coming along just perfectly. The only loose end he had to tie up was what to do with the captured fireman.

Even that might have been a blessing. After all, the police were sure to be looking for the girls and the van the kidnapper had stolen by now. This Explorer, however, was a vehicle that he could use for a while. The owner was all tied up and locked away. There was no chance that the fellow could call the cops to report this vehicle missing! This truck was as good as his, at least for a while! He pulled out an unfamiliar wallet and dug through its contents, stopping at the gas cards and fire department issued I.D. card. "Yeah, I could use some of these things, too," the contented old fellow cackled to himself. Taking a couple more seconds, he thumbed through the money stashed in a separate pocket of the wallet. The raspy Cajun smiled crookedly, nodding his approval and stuffed the wallet into the front of his belt.

He made it out of the swamp just in time. As soon as he cranked up the truck the drizzle suddenly became a deluge. The rain fell so hard that the squinting Cajun could hardly see out of the windshield with the wipers on high speed.

Craning his neck and straining his eyes, the ruddy man slowly began his journey toward the sodden highway. With each slip of his tires, each mud hole that slowed his progress, he cursed the rain again in a mixture of Cajun French and English. Normally he could tolerate rain. Hell, a lot of the time he even enjoyed it. But right now there were more important things that demanded his attention. The attentive kidnapper wasn't too fond of anything getting in his way.

His greatest worry was getting stuck on the makeshift dirt road that came from the interstate. There were several miles of treacherously muddy back roads ahead. And would he be able to get back in? He'd worry about that when the time came. It took the better part of an hour for the persistent Cajun to finally make it to the highway. Twice he had gotten stuck and had to work his way out of the mire. The worst part was that the rain was now a constant downpour. He could hardly see out of the windshield and was sliding back and forth all over the road. To make matters worse, the constant drumming of the heavy raindrops on the roof was grating at his nerves.

As the impatient old guy sat on the shoulder of the interstate, he watched the passing automobiles slowly parade by with windshield wipers flapping at high speed and headlights shining on the puddled roadway. He cursed the oncoming traffic until, finally spotting an opening and slipping into the splashing traffic flow.

"Shit," he responded loudly to himself, looking down at his watch. "I'm supposed to be in Baton Rouge right now and it's at least another hour and a half away, drivin' in this rain. Hell, ole' DuBose gonna be pissed at me. He don't know no where we be keepin' these prisoners. He shouldn't be a givin' me all the dirty works to do if he didn't wants me to take care of it. Besides, with this rain, his airplane probably be late anyways." The

driver chuckled to himself again and changed lanes, speeding up to pass the car in front of him.

Oblivious to the rain, the old fellow sped the truck up much faster than the surrounding traffic. Weaving in and out between the other vehicles, he was continuously having lights flashed at him for terrorizing the freeway. Occasionally a horn would sound, reflecting the disapproval of a disdainful motorist.

An hour later he peeked at his watch once more, smiling his approval at the time that was being made up. "Yeah, I'm not that far away now. I'll be there directly. Then we be countin' our money all the way to the bank." He began to laugh. "I think I needs some drivin' music for the rest of the trip. Let's see if we can find some good ole' Zydeco to get my feets a tappin'."

Fumbling with the face of the radio, the Cajun found the on-off button to a blare of hissing static. Quickly, he found the scan button and listened to several stations come on and off, searching for his favorite music. At last the sound of a familiar bayou tune blasted over the speakers.

"That's it," he shouted, "that's the one!" Suddenly the radio switched stations again and the reeling fellow went irate. "Shit, how the Hell do I gets my station back here? I wants to hear dat song." He desperately starting punching every button on the face of the gadget.

Then the unexpected. Hitting a low spot in the rain-soaked road, the truck began to hydroplane. The fumbling Cajun quickly took his foot off the accelerator, trying to regain control of the errant vehicle. The puddle, however, was a large one and the truck began slowly turning it's nose to the left. He tried to counteract the spin by quickly turning the wheels to the right it didn't do any good.

Just as the vehicle was at about a forty five degree angle to the left lane, the puddle ended. The tires suddenly caught traction and wildly spun the wide-eyed driver back to the right. All that he could do was watch the rainy scenery go by at a fast spin.

The driver of a nearby tanker truck saw the spinning Explorer quickly approaching in an out of control whirl. The truck driver tried desperately on the rain- slickened road to avoid the wayward vehicle, but his own truck began to jackknife, spilling over onto it's side. The Liquefied Petroleum Gas that he was transporting burst out of the ruptured trailer, splashing high into the sodden air.

The careening Explorer slammed into the side of the overturned, ruptured tanker, sparking the volatile liquid into a horrendous explosion, rivaling the very pits of hell. Fire filled the atmosphere. Several of the following automobiles were blown off of the roadway into the swollen ditches lining the sides of the interstate. Most of the motorists had seen the Explorer lose control and had applied brakes much earlier, avoiding the severest part of the accident. The force of the collision and resulting blast propelled the

small truck through the broken trailer. It flipped end over end, rolling down the blazing highway like an errant fireball. Fifty yards later it came to rest on its top with a smoking trail of incineration between it and the inferno of the tanker.

Thick black smoke columned upward to filter into the low clouds and driving rain. Traffic flow was completely halted for miles in both directions. Some people even got out of their cars in the middle of the driving rainstorm to witness the immenseness of the spiraling inferno with an unobstructed view. Fortunately, for those corralled closest to the accident, there were no subsequent explosions. Otherwise, the loss of life would have been tremendous as other vehicles would surely have been ignited by another blast.

The rain continued so intensely that it cooled the flames and extinguished them before fire crews could make their way through the weather and stationary traffic. When the rescue team finally arrived, all that remained was a charred rubble of metal where a gasoline tanker had once been and the twisted and charred skeleton of the Explorer lying nearby on the remnants of its roof. The metal was still hot and it sizzled loudly in the gradually diminishing rain.

Rescue workers saw little need to check the occupants of the two totally incinerated trucks, knowing that there was no chance of survivors in either case. Instead they pried open the vehicles that were blown off of the road by the explosion and now lay mostly underwater in the overfilled ditches. The number of accidents, both serious and small, seemed endless in the continual rain. The scene was total pandemonium. Between the flood waters, the emergency crews and the overwhelming number of vehicles involved in accidents, the scene looked like a set of an overdone, over-budget movie.

Eventually, the crews pried open the two vehicles causing the accident. They found one badly incinerated body in each. Neither of the drivers could be identified by sight. The cab of the tanker was so consumed that none of its contents could be recognized at all. Nothing remained that could be obviously identified, vehicle nor driver.

The driver of the Explorer, likewise, was so incinerated by the blast that the contents of the charred vehicle was nothing but ash and melted slag. The investigating Louisiana Highway Patrolman kicked the rear license plate of the Explorer, knocking it off its charred perch.

"Think you can get enough numbers off of this thing to run a make?" he asked his fellow trooper.

"Yeah, the outline of four of the numbers is still there. That, along with the vehicle's description should give us the driver's name and stuff."

"Excuse me, officers," a voice addressed them, "I'm John Scott of CNN. We just arrived here at the scene by helicopter and are live now on the air. I understand from my Police scanner that you have several fatalities. Can you tell us more about what happened here and how many casualties there are?"

"Well, we haven't really had time to investigate the causes yet or notify the families of the victims, this all just happened about forty-five minutes ago, you know. We'll get back with you shortly when we have more information."

"Can you answer just one..." the newsman was cut off by the officer.

"I'm sorry, but we're too busy for questions right now. We've still got to get this road cleared so that traffic can get moving again." He turned and walked away from the camera. "I hear tell that traffic's stopped for nearly twelve miles in both directions now. It's going to be a long, wet afternoon," he complained to his partner as they walked away.

## Chapter 8

### The Accident

Logan felt like one huge cramp. Every muscle in his body ached, except for the ones that were so numb that he could no longer feel them at all. Everything from his lower back downward on the backside of his body had lost feeling long ago.

The bound fireman had attempted to stand several times, but was so tightly fastened to his seat that it was impossible. He had even thought about tipping his chair over sideways to get a little relief. However, there were several problems with that idea. First, his arm was stationed on the outside of the seat back and a fall of that sort would surely bruise the appendage severely, if the unbuffered impact didn't break the bone against the hard floor. Next, after he got down there, there was no way of getting back up. He had no idea how much time might elapse before someone returned. If the kidnappers returned and thought he was trying to escape, there might be serious trouble. So, the aching young man sat there in misery, listening to the steadily pounding rain on the tin roof above his head.

That steady drone was enough in itself to drive him insane. He was also getting really hungry. What time was it, anyway? At least two meals must be overdue!

Fortunately, he wasn't yet in desperate need of a bathroom. That was a predicament that probably wouldn't be too far in the future, however.

Shaking his head, the miserable lad had to laugh at himself. Whine and complain. Complain and whine, he teased himself, trying to ease his tension. All I want to do is bitch and moan.

Sounds like the words to a country-western song. My baby up and left me and I'm sittin' here all alone, whinin' and complainin,' waitin' by the phone. I called her one big bitch. She said all I do is moan. Now my Bessie's left me and I don't know where she's gone. . . . Yeah, this tune could be a smash. He'd do anything to give himself a little peace and comfort, even make up stupid songs! Is this the first signal of insanity?

A movement across the room caught his attention. The noise didn't sound like it came from the same direction that the kidnapper had left. One of the other hostages must be moving around. Logan heard a low muffled scream. Oh my God, was there something in the room with them, biting or clawing another captive? Whatever it was might come after him next!

Logan could envision some huge mutated swamp rat attacking his toes and eating its way up his leg until. . . . He had to stop that thought, the sensation was seeming too real. The skin began to crawl on his mostly numb lower legs. The muffled screaming continued, gradually changing in vehemence and tone. Thank God, now the commotion sounded more like frustration than terror. He felt somewhat relieved. The adrenaline rush did help displace some of the tension in his muscles making him even feel a bit invigorated.

Using the little rush of adrenaline, Logan twisted his hands behind his back, testing the strength of the cords that bound him. The rough material cut into his wrists, burning his skin unmercifully. His fingers began to tingle as the blood flow was returned to them, then they began to ache under the strain of his struggle. How could he get out of these bindings? Did he really want to? What if he was halfway loose and the kidnappers returned? That would probably mean a bullet in his head. The captive settled back into his seat. Maybe it would be better to wait for their return. At least he wouldn't be lunch for a hungry alligator right away.

The commotion across the room ceased abruptly. Even the sound of the rain was diminishing. Soon all that he could hear was the occasional roll of distant thunder and the runoff dripping from the roof and trees into the standing pools below. The silence was soon as deafening as the beating rain.

Jeez, he wanted to at least see some indication of whether the time was still daylight through his dark hood. The blinding cowl was made of really thick material allowing almost no light at all through. Logan felt locked away in a dark cave or stranded at a fire scene. The fireman shivered. A burst of memory from his accident exploded into view. No, not something I want to deal with right now, he cautioned himself. The present is

much more important than the past. I kind of have my hands full at the moment without going back into all that! He allowed the scene to wind down. Unfortunately, the worry was immediately replaced by another thought, then another! Mental images passed by so fast they seemed to tumble over each other.

A calm mind is always attentive to every possibility, ready to act at a second's notice, Logan could hear his Fire Academy Instructor's voice reverberate through his skull. When the mind is completely preoccupied with itself, a thousand situations could pass you by without even being noticed. Still your mind, focus on the task at hand! That's the way to stay alive at a fire scene. Boy, did that ever save his skin a time or two while at a fire! An idea sprang to mind.

Beginning with his toes, Logan focused onto different parts of his body, instructing each one, individually, to relax. That should keep his mind occupied for a while. The inundated fireman was really getting uncomfortable having his thoughts prance, dance and tumble through his brain like a three ring circus. Hell, at some points he could almost pick out the elephants. His racing mind gradually began to slow somewhat. Got to get some rest, I want to have all of my strength at the first available opportunity for escape!

Logan turned his attention to his hearing. He listened for every detail, every creak of a distant tree limb, every splat of rain on the metal roof. The fireman had always heard that if you lose one sense your others would compensate, becoming keenly acute. After what seemed an eternity of intense listening his awareness began to pique. Continuing for a few more minutes made him feel as if he could almost see through the dark hood. Logan could at least get a visual image of his surroundings in his imagination. Maybe this is what people mean about using their third eye! Even though his physical eyes were blind at the moment, his senses were keen to everything around him. The astounded lad could get an idea of how large the room was, where the doors and windows were. He could even sense where his co-captives were. It was a strange sensation, very similar to the earlier occurrences in his bonding with Morgan, just without the fun. It was still a really great feeling. Bonding with the Universe, he thought, naming the feeling to remember it for future use. This could come in handy at a fire scene!

Unfortunately, the more Logan thought about what he was experiencing, the more the sensation faded from his consciousness. I guess thinking isn't necessary for pure experiencing. Intellectual reasoning actually seems to get in the way of being fully in an experience! Okay, mind, relax! He allowed his senses to drift out of himself once more, returning to a peaceful, quiet state. Logan drifted off into a light slumber.

Through the haziness engulfing his mind Logan thought he heard a woman's voice. The sound was low and far away. Must be a dream, he told himself. Then he heard the quiet voice again. The curious captive was suddenly more coherent, realizing that the sound was physically there in the room with him.



He became all ears once again. The sound was little more than a whisper, being overpowered by the sound of the light rain that had returned. Logan put all of his attention into his hearing, focusing the sound into auditory perception.

"Stop struggling, Mandy, you're only making the ropes tighter. Shit, stop it! I can't untie you with you moving around," the determined voice demanded. He surmised that one of the captives must have gotten herself free. "There, now, let me get this gag off." A muted scream. "Oh, shut up. I know it hurts. That old fart put duct tape all in our hair. We'll never get all of the sticky shit out," she complained. "Okay, one more piece. There."

He heard a ripping sound followed by a loud "Ow!" then lower, "Jesus H. Christ! I think you took half of my lip off on that tape."

"Oh, shut up or I'll put it back on," the first speaker responded shakily. "Gosh, I'm so glad you're all right. I was really beginning to worry about you. Hey, sis, did he do anything, I mean anything bad to you?"

"No. But he was damned rough when he tied me up. Probably how he gets his jollies, beating up on women. Who's that?" the second responded.

"I don't know. The old guy said something about a fireman or something. Must be who that is."

"Why don't you go untie him while I get my feet loose."

"Should we? I mean is it safe?"

"I don't think he's with the kidnappers dressed like that! Go untie him. We're going to need all the help we can get."

Yes! thought Logan, Thanks, sis! Thank you, God, for your little miracles! He heard light footsteps coming toward him.

Logan felt a body whisk around him and begin fumbling with the cords that were binding his hands. "Damn it," she said, "that's it! I think I've broken every nail I have on these stupid ropes. Look at them, they're awful."

Come on, just get me untied, the impatient fireman thought. There'll be time to look beautiful later.

His rescuer returned to her work on the bindings. Soon Logan felt the connection between his hands and feet slip. He stretched his legs as far out in front of him as they would go, in blessed alleviation. What a relief, the cramped captive sighed through the gag. Next he felt the tightness around his wrists relax. His hands slipped free of their

restriction, with another stretch. Logan moving them stiffly in front of him, shaking the weariness from his limbs. He reached up, jerking off the blinding hood.

The firefighter grasped for the gag without even looking around. He immediately stood up, searching for the end of the duct tape covering his mouth. Standing wasn't the easiest thing to do right then, he could only manage it for a minute or so.

Finding the end of the tape, Logan sat back down, unraveling it from around his head. She was right. . . . The kidnapper must have wound a whole roll of sticky duct tape around his head. He felt as if he were pulling himself bald. Probably great for the complexion, he thought cynically.

"Ah," he sighed as the last bit of tape came off of his mouth. The relieved prisoner took a deep breath through his mouth. "My God, that feels good." He finally looked around him. The two girls were standing side by side, staring at him, looking confused and dazed by their harrowing experience. Both were wide-eyed, huddling close together, visibly fearful.

They were cute girls, not raving beauties, but definitely attractive, although, both looked miserably haggard at the moment. They each seemed early twenty-ish in age, thin but shapely, with brunette hair. Both girls looked enough alike that he could tell they were sisters. The younger one attempted a weak smile at him.

A wave of compassion overtook Logan. He had been in lots of dangerous situations, this was obviously their first. How would he be feeling right now in their place? Logan determined right then to do everything in his power to help them get through this, physically and emotionally.

"Hi, I'm Logan, Logan Keohane. Thanks for getting me out of there, I thought I never was going to be able to stretch again," he offered lightly, attempting to calm the girls a little.

"Hi, I'm Amanda Krause. And this is my sister Liz. Uh, Elizabeth," the older girl corrected herself, looking toward her younger sister. "Can't say I'm glad to meet you. At least not under these conditions," she continued bluntly, her face drawn tight.

"Hi," Liz responded simply. "You can call me Liz if you want." She attempted another small smile then looked down at the floor.

"Enough for formalities. What are we going to do when the kidnappers come back? I don't think they're going to be real happy about us being loose around here." Amanda looked worried and stood up. Taking a few quick steps, she stopped in front of the nearest window. Leaning tiredly against the sill, she gazed intently out into the pouring rain.

Logan stood up, testing his own strength. He took a few wobbly steps around the chair, holding onto the high back. "You're right. The Cajun guy's not going to be very pleased that we're up walking around. Remember, he said that we'd better not try anything. And he did say that he was bringing a partner back with him. The new guy might be worst yet."

"We've got to have a plan. We've got to decide if we're going to take these guys out or what." Amanda paused shifting slightly between her feet. "I don't know about you guys, but I've got to find a restroom right now," she stated matter of factly. The jittery young woman moved across the small room exploring through the first of the three doorways that were there. "Here it is. Shit, there's no door. Don't look, I can't wait any longer."

Logan didn't bother telling the silly girl that watching her pee was about the farthest thing from his mind right then. "I think that we're going to have a while to plan our strategy," he said loudly enough for her to hear. "It's been raining really hard, still is, and it felt like we drove a long way down a dirt road to get to the boat. He might not be able to get back down that road for a while," he reasoned.

A timid voice streamed quietly from the bathroom, "Hey, this toilet won't flush! Nothing happens when I push the lever." Amanda walked out of the dark room, still zipping her tight blue jeans. "I think the toilet is broken, it won't flush." The thin girl volunteered, shivering violently. "My God, I wish I had some dry clothes to put on, I'm about frozen solid in this dampness. Hey, what time is it, anyway?" she asked unexpectedly.

Logan looked at his watch and announced, "A little after three thirty." He slipped off his heavy coat and gladly offered it to the shivering woman.

"Jeez, I thought it was a lot later than that," Amanda replied as she took the offering and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Thanks."

"Let's look around and see what we've got here," the concerned fireman directed, looking around the dingy room. "If we can find any weapons at all we'll be a lot better off. I mean, I, at least, would feel a lot better with something in my hands. And we need to check out this house, see if we have food or anything. Then we need to see if there's any way out of this place, wherever we are. In a few minutes I'll go outside to see if there's any way out of here."

"Good idea, I'm frozen and starved. I haven't eaten since dinner last night and I'm drenched!" Liz responded with a shiver. The younger sister got up and started toward the kitchen area against the rear wall of the small room.

Logan walked a little more solidly across the dim room, pulled a dingy Afghan off of the musty couch and carried it to Elizabeth, wrapping it gently around her trembling shoulders. "Am I the only one in here that's hot?" he asked as he turned toward the three

doors at the other end of the room. Gazing around the dim chamber, the exploring captive guessed the dimensions to be about fifteen feet wide by thirty feet long. All of the walls, including the ceiling were covered with an old, half rotted wallpaper of the most god-awful pattern. The kitchen seemed to be at one end of the house, while the rest of the rooms lay behind the three doors at the other end, now directly in front of him. A fine coat of a silty substance seemed to cover almost everything. The only thing he could figure it to be was dust that had gotten damp in the extreme humidity and solidified. Great, that would make for pleasant sleeping, he thought snidely.

The two women looked at him puzzledly. "Hot?" Elizabeth asked with a shiver.

Logan noted two large windows on either side of him as well as a smaller one over the sink in the kitchen. He made his way to the window on his right, obviously the back side of the house, peering out as far as he could see. Nothing on this side but a dense growth of trees surrounded by a continuous body of water. The only land in his view was a small strip that ran from directly under the house for about thirty feet to the waterline. Part of that was taken up by an extension of the cabin that extended another ten feet or so from the rear. This extension must be part of the room behind the third door. The torrential rain made it difficult to see out, however, after careful investigation, all that was in sight were trees, water, thick, bushy undergrowth and a large silver container, probably a propane cylinder. "Shit," the young man mumbled under his breath, "no help here."

Spinning abruptly, Logan strode to the window on the opposite side of the room. He leaned against the sill, checking out the country surrounding that side of the house. It looked no different. It did seem to be the front of the place, since the only stairway descended from the door on his immediate right. His heart sank. We've got to be on an island, he surmised. Maybe there's a boat under the house.

"I'm going out for a minute," the beleaguered fireman announced. "I've got to see if there's anything under this house. I'm not enamored with spending any more time here than necessary!"

The girls just looked at him. Amanda picked up an old blanket that was covering the lone, overstuffed chair and tossed it to Logan. He draped it over his head, stepping toward the door. A gust of wind whipped the cloth almost out of his hands as he stepped through the exit. The rain was so hard in the driving wind that it seemed to be coming down in sheets, sideways. The apprehensive lad ran down the slick stairs, being careful not to fall and hurt himself. The ground at the bottom of the steps was so muddy that he sank halfway to his ankle as he stepped off. Not good, he thought. Instead, Logan made a quick visual scan of the underside of the house from the bottom step. There was very little area that he couldn't see.

His initial assessment was correct, they were on an island in God knows where, obviously in the middle of a dense swamp. That must have been why the kidnapper

wasn't worried about having them tied up in the boat, no one in their right mind would be in this God-awful place to see any captives!

There wasn't much under the house, just a few dark corners that he'd come back to explore later. There was, however, nothing like a boat. "Shit on this rain!" he responded again loudly. Enough is enough, the wet explorer ran back up the stairs through the driving storm. A bright streak of lightening crackled over his head.

Slamming the rickety door behind him, Logan announced, "I'm afraid we're on an island, stuck some-the-hell-where in the middle of a miserable swamp! There ain't a boat in sight! I don't know what we're going to do! When the rain lets up I'll go down again and see if there's anything we can use down there." The soggy fireman shook his rain-soaked head, tossing water all around him. "My God, it's raining hard! Right now I've got to go, then I'll see if I can find any kind of weapon in here." He headed stiffly toward the dark bathroom.

When Logan finished relieving himself, the ragged bathroom cabinets caught his eye. Of the three small doors on the front, one was half off its hinges, remaining permanently ajar. He cocked that door open first, a fine layer of the solidified dust falling to the floor. There wasn't a lot there. But, there was a pretty good supply of toilet paper, he noted, and a medicine chest with a couple of bottles of pain reliever along with some bandages. There was also a pretty good sized emergency first aid kit behind the second door, next to several thinning towels and washcloths. At the end of the little cabinet was a small drawer full of personal hygiene supplies: toothbrushes, toothpaste, that sort of thing. However, that was it, nothing that could be used as a weapon, unless, of course, he wanted to tie up his assailants with dental floss.

Logan walked out of the small room toward the next doorway. Glancing back across the living room, he spotted Amanda sitting in one of the faded looking overstuffed chairs that adorned the small living room. "Are you going to help us?" the surprised lad questioned her.

"Seems like you've got everything fully under control. I don't think it takes a full search party to explore this mansion," she responded snidely. "Besides, I don't take orders from anyone."

"My, but aren't we testy today? Must be PMS," Liz countered peering over the top of the small kitchen bar. Amanda gave her the best 'go to hell' look that she could muster and slouched a little deeper into her seat. "Hey, Logan, what is this thing?" The puzzled girl pointed to an ancient looking mechanism overhanging the grimy kitchen sink. "There isn't a faucet or anything, only this pipe with a long wooden handle!"

Logan smirked, "I'm afraid we have, what you would call, the classic hand pump for our water supply. You've just got to pump like hell to get the water flow started then keep pumping." The astonished fireman instructed, looking unbelievably at the

contraption. I've never really seen a pump like this, but I've heard all about them from my dad. He grew up with something like this, way out away from the city."

Logan turned away from Liz, thinking about the last interchange between the sisters. People respond to crises in all different ways, I suppose, Logan thought, slipping through the partially ajar second doorway. It opened into a bedroom almost the size of the living room. In there were two full sized beds, a ragged loveseat and a large Armoire/chest- of-drawers combination, all looking pretty old and weather beaten. At the foot of each bed was a storage chest. A rickety nightstand stood between the headboards. The walls and ceiling, like the other rooms, were covered with dingy, cracking, old wallpaper with huge pink and green flowery designs. "Definitely not a fashion conscious bunch here," he mused aloud.

Then, leaning against the far corner of the room, the searching captive spotted a baseball bat. A broad smile broke onto his face. At least we have some protection! The satisfied bodybuilder hefted the club in his hands. He laid the bat across his shoulder, looking out the window to check the view from there. All he could see was trees and water.

Amanda quietly walked into the room, taking a quick look around to locate him. "Hey, Conan, come back in here. I think we found something," she responded shaking her head and turning back toward the door.

Logan started at the unexpected voice behind him. His fright embarrassed him. He could feel the heat of his face reddening. He slowly followed her back into the living room to see what they had found. "So what's the great find?" he asked curtly.

"This," responded Liz as she held up a .45 caliber automatic handgun. "Problem is, we can't find any bullets."

"Where'd you find it?" he asked, suddenly changing his tone as he walked toward her.

"Here, in this duffel bag. I've looked all around, but I can't find the bullet part of it."

"The clip," the fireman corrected her.

"Whatever. Anyway, it's not going to do us a whole lot of good without something to shoot in it." Liz began digging through the bag again. "Come on, there are four more bags here. The thingy might be in one of them."

"Clip," Logan reminded her, picking out another bag to search. The sound of the rain suddenly grew louder, almost deafening. Logan stopped looking through the bag long enough to peer out of the window into a waterfall of rainwater pouring off of the roof. "Nope, I don't think we're going to be bothered for at least a couple of days," he told the others suddenly. They looked at him questioningly. "This rain should keep the

kidnappers away for at least a day or two. That should give us some time to get ourselves prepared."

"Well, I don't trust that idea. They probably have several ways to get in here. I'd rather stay prepared. I think we should take turns watching for them to return. One of us should probably be watching right now," answered Amanda very matter-of-factly. "Boy, this guy's going to love us for this. He goes and kidnaps us, I'm sure just to get a few bucks, and now he won't even be able to collect on his ransom! Shit, he's really going to be pissed!"

"Bullshit! He could just leave us out here to die in this swamp and still get daddy to fork over the dough he wants!" Elizabeth returned despondently. "As long as we're out of sight and out of mind he probably doesn't give a flip about our well being."

"Yeah he does," the older sister countered. "This guy's not smart enough to figure out we're expendable goods! He needs us. They'll be back alright, and none too pleased that we're up and around!"

"Is she always this. . . this calculating?" Logan asked Liz, amazed at Amanda's conclusion.

"Yep, that's my sis. And you're a lot nicer about it than I am." she answered with an impish look in her darkly shadowed eyes.

Amanda just shot her sister another evil glance. "You don't know what you're talking about. I'm just practical. I plan my moves. I don't let anyone get to me," she informed them sincerely. "If I hadn't let Elizabeth talk me into going to that party last night, I wouldn't be here!"

"Calculating," he reiterated as his hand hit a cold heavy piece of metal in the bottom of the bag that he was searching. "I think I found it. Yeah, here is the clip. Cool, now we're prepared. Happy now?"

"Ecstatically," Amanda responded coolly. "Probably about as happy as good ole' Pop! He's going to have to fork out a bunch of bucks for two daughters that he never even sees! At least he'll be glad we're out of his hair for a while."

"That's not fair, sis. You know he's just always busy. He's trying to give us all of the best things that he can in life! He can't help it if that takes a lot of his time."

"Yeah, right. And frogs have wings and sail through the air! He just wants us out of his way, and now he's got it," the eldest girl lamented dejectedly. "Hell will be an ice cube when that man really cares what happens to us."

Logan looked between the girls in disbelief. Now this was something he had never experienced. His parents were always warm and loving, at least around him. How would

he feel if. . . ."

Morgan pulled to a stop in front of Logan's parents' house. She had been there a couple of times before but it had always been at night. Somehow the house looked different in the daylight. It seemed more. . . regular, down to earth. . . uh, real. Maybe she had just been so giddy at her first meetings that everything seemed too perfect. Under the bright sunlight visible defects were obvious, such as the paint was beginning to flake in places and the lawn that seemed so pristine in the moonlight was in need of a good gardener.

The nervous young woman switched off her car engine and slowly opened her door. Morgan struggled with a very pronounced desire to leave, just crank the motor and speed away. For a five full minutes she sat in her car with the door partially open "Ok, Morgan, get a grip! But my God, I don't want to go in there. I don't want to go in there. I'd rather suck worms than go in there," she kept repeating aloud to herself.

Finally, the tension eased to a bearable level. The tenuous redhead slowly slipped first one foot then the other out of the car door until she found herself standing on the pavement, locking her car. With eyes fixed on the entry door, she started up the short sidewalk.

Morgan stopped just short of the translucent, stained glass door and tried to peek inside to see if Logan's parents were at home. Seeing no movement, she reached for the doorbell. No one answered so she rang the bell one more time. If there was no answer this time she'd leave and call the Keohanes later.

The relieved lass turned her back to the door and looked out across the yellowing lawn. A voice broke the silence of the moment. Morgan started, snapping her attention toward the unexpected sound.

"Can I help you? Oh, Morgan, it's you. Hi, it's good to see you. Can I help you with something?" Yancy Keohane, Logan's father, asked, stepping stiffly off the narrow driveway onto the soggy turf. He still had a soft Irish accent which Morgan adored. It reminded her of her grandfather who had immigrated from Ireland as a young man. The sound of his voice put her more at ease.

"Oh, hi! I'm sorry to bother you, Mister Keohane, but I have some news about Logan that you need to hear," she answered thoughtfully, her voice quivering slightly.

Looking suddenly very worried, Yancy Keohane shuffled Morgan into his house, calling out his wife's name as they stepped through the entry door.



# Chapter 9

## The First Days

"What are we going to do for light?" Elizabeth quizzed Logan curiously. "It's starting to get really dark and there's no electricity in here. That's kind of funny too, there are light bulbs in every room. But none of them work."

"Yeah, I noticed that. The owners must bring a portable generator with them, I looked around for a power supply earlier, but it wasn't to be found," the fireman answered. "Did you see any candles or lanterns or anything in the cabinets?"

"I saw a couple of candles in a drawer in there, but I didn't see any matches. Hey, there was a cigarette lighter in one of the bags over there." Elizabeth slipped out of the dingy overstuffed armchair that she was cradled in and ambled toward the front entry door where the duffle bags still lay on the floor.

She rummaged intently through one of the bags and, with a disgusted look on her face, finally said "The hell with it," and dumped the contents onto the worn wooden floor. "Shit! Like looking for a needle in a haystack," the girl replied emphatically to herself. "I know damned good and well it's in this bag. Scattering the bits of clothing and personal effects farther and farther from her, she diligently picked up each item, looked it over and tossed it irreverently aside into another yet unoccupied spot. "Here it is!" she exclaimed at last and held the lighter up for Logan to see in the dim light.

Elizabeth sparked the lighter several times with her thumb before it leapt up into a bright yellow flicker. "Yeah," she stated, holding the flaming piece of plastic up as if it were an Olympic torch. She released the button, letting the flame die into the deepening

gloom. Quickly, the excited girl made her way into the small kitchen area to retrieve the candles that were spotted earlier.

Logan heard the slight squeak of a drawer closing and saw a brightening glow as Elizabeth lit the candles that she had found. "Should we be using any lights?" Amanda asked worriedly. "Those guys can probably see a light through these windows a long way off! They would know we are out of our bindings and would be ready to capture us again. Or worse!"

"It's still pouring rain outside, I don't think they'll be back any time soon. We'll just use a couple of candles for a little while. I'm exhausted, I'm going to have to get some sleep soon anyway," Logan answered her honestly. "Just those two candles, Liz." He settled back into his seat. A memory of Morgan shot unexpectedly through his mind like an arrow through his heart.

Suddenly, the pining captive felt all alone and hollow. Loneliness settled around him like a cold wind. Logan desperately wanted to be with Morgan. Or, at least hear her loving voice. Everyone back home must be really worried by now. He had promised Morgan that he would call that morning. "God, it seems like an eternity since this morning," he whispered to himself, dejectedly shaking his head.

"What?" Amanda asked from her window perch.

"Oh, nothing," Logan answered. "Just thinking about today and how it seems like weeks have gone by since all this happened. I left my girlfriend this morning and promised that I'd call her as soon as I thought she was awake. She must be worried sick by now. I already miss her a lot. Guess I'm just madly in love with the woman or something."

"Just like a man," Amanda answered weakly. "Sleep with you then not call you back like they promised. I mean, they'll use anything for an excuse. Even going and getting themselves kidnapped. Really!" She forced a slight smile, trying to ease the tension of the moment, never turning from her perch. It was the first smile that Logan had ever seen from her. "Well, that's three things that I know about you. You're a fireman, you're Logan and you've got a girlfriend. Any other mysteries that we should know? Like, do you murder people in their sleep? Or do you rape and abuse helpless women? Or, worst of all, do you snore?"

Logan chuckled softly. It was another of those times that he would do just about anything to shift attention off of his plight. "I don't think so," he replied lightly, attempting to stay in the spirit of easing the tenseness. "Except for maybe the snoring part. Funny thing though, it doesn't ever bother me. My girlfriend, Morgan, hasn't complained either, not yet anyway." A little light heartedness at the right moment, even if it were forced, could always help pull them all out of the gutter. Fear and depression is nothing but a hindrance, he reminded himself. Come on, Logan, me boy, get on top of this feeling. Being overwhelmed by an experience doesn't help matters in the least bit!

Elizabeth walked slowly out of the kitchen with a burning candle in each hand. "Now, where am I supposed to put them?" she questioned, looking for a likely spot. "Where are the candelabras? I've got to put them somewhere. Shit!" the girl responded as one of the candles melted wax onto her hand. She carefully softened the butt end of one of the candles with the other's flame and stuck it to the worn end table. "It's not going to catch fire is it?" she asked, looking to Logan for a fireman's opinion.

"I hope not," was all he could answer. "Just blow the candle out before it completely reaches the bottom."

"You know, Amanda was right. We don't know anything about you and you don't know anything about us," Elizabeth commented, placing the second candle on the same table. "We know each other's names and that's about it. I, at least, would like to know who I'm kidnapped with. Maybe we can find something that will help us get out of here. At least it might make the waiting a little more bearable."

"Okay, you know I'm Logan Keohane. You know I'm a firefighter, obviously from the uniform. Now you know that I have a girlfriend, named Morgan, whom I'm madly in love with. What else do you want to know?" the fireman asked sincerely. He watched as Elizabeth sat on the end of the musty couch, wrapping herself tightly in the old Afghan.

"Why were you kidnapped with us? I mean, it's pretty obvious why we're here, but why are you?" Amanda questioned, momentarily shifting her gaze from her diligent watch onto Logan.

"I guess that I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Or at least my truck was," he responded with a shake of his head. "I was on my way to work when I saw this van broken down on side of the road. . . ." the storyteller related his adventure up to this point. "Now what about you. Why were you brought here?"

"You mean you can't figure that one out? It doesn't take an Einstein to figure out that this guy's out for money. Our father is very well off and this guy just wanted to get what he could out of him. We both go to Texas A&M University. We were on our way home from a frat party when this guy pulls up in a raggedy ass van, pulls out a gun and orders us to get in. I thought we were goners, but this jerk obviously just wants his bucks," Amanda related.

"Oh, that explains why he picked us up and moved us. That old van obviously broke down just then and he had just gotten hold of your truck," Elizabeth added. "He definitely isn't the most tender, sensitive guy that I know. He banged me around pretty good."

"Anyway, our father is Roland Krause. You've probably heard of him. He owns an oil company, a TV station, a couple of car dealerships, you know, that sort of thing," Amanda broke in and continued. "He'll probably pay the guy a million bucks or so and get us back in a couple of days. That is, if this infernal rain will ever stop." She stopped

and listened to the sound of the softly falling rain on the roof, then continued with a deep sigh. "Now we'll never hear the end of it, how daddy had to give up some of his precious money for his wayward daughters! I mean since mom died I bet we haven't seen the guy ten times! And we live in the same House! Maybe that's why he bought a place with thirty seven rooms, then shipped us both off to college! He wouldn't have to deal with us."

"Oh, Amanda, he's not that bad. Daddy spends as much time as he can with us. I know he loves both of us, it's just hard for him to say so. I'm sure he's in hysterics right now trying to figure out where we are and if we're alright. And I know I will get home alive and tell him I love him!" Elizabeth groaned, suddenly on the verge of tears. "Then you'll see! Our father loves us and will do anything for us! Right now, though, I'm scared to death! What's going to happen to us when these guys get back and find us free? I really do want to get home. I know I always call Amanda a worry wart but this kidnapper guy really scares me. I don't want anything to happen to me. I've still got too much I want to do with my life." A tear streamed down the right side of the shaking girl's face, followed by a second on the left. "I've been trying hard to stay together. You know, be strong, be. . . I've about reached my limit!"

Silence enveloped them like a cold mist on a foggy morning. The dashed hopes and prevalent fears of all three of them suddenly hit home at once. Logan watched Elizabeth staring into the flame of the candles, letting the tears run freely down her face to fall onto the musty floor. Logan wished he could cry, it would probably be a huge relief. Being a firefighter had taught him to stay detached, unemotional, apart from what was happening. It took an alert, responsive mind to act without hesitation in an emergency situation. Making those kinds of decisions didn't allow for emotional entanglement. They only hindered reaction time, causing dangerous situations needlessly. Problem was, the lad no longer knew how to release the emotions that were held back. The feelings built up and packed in until, at times, Logan felt he could just explode from the psychic strain on the walls surrounding him.

Amanda just stared out of the blank, darkened window. Her breathing was erratic and forced, Logan noted, followed by several heavy sighs. Occasionally, the older sister would discretely wipe away the trail of an errant tear from her cheek. Hmm, the strong, silent, do it myself type, he reasoned, trying to shift his focus off of himself and onto something outside. The problem was, the pained young man was just feeling too crushed and alone. His thoughts overcame him before the reeling lad could stop them.

An idea suddenly developed in Logan's thoughts, kind of a download of information from some Cosmic awareness. There are no accidents. Was he placed in this situation by some higher power to actually help these girls survive? He really doubted that they could manage very well on their own. Wow, just what he wanted to be, some kind of a savior, he chided himself mentally. Yeah, I'm a true public servant alright. Problem is I'm kind of going above and beyond the call of duty on this one!

A smile actually came to Logan's face. He felt kind of silly smiling like the Cheshire cat with everyone else in such a depressed state.

"Hey, what's so funny over there, Bozo? You want to let us in on you're little secret?" Amanda accosted him belligerently.

"Oh, nothing. I just had a funny thought is all." Logan answered pensively.

"Well, don't you know how to share?" the elder sister retorted.

"It's nothing really. Just a personal joke to myself."

Amanda just glared at Logan contemptuously. She eventually looked toward her younger sister who just stared into the deepening evening. "Hey sis, you okay?"

"Yeah, just wonderful. Elizabeth answered softly. "Funny thing is I was just thinking that if we were back at school right now I'd probably be doing the exact same thing I'm doing right here." The girl forced a solemn smile.

"I'm pretty zonked right now and I think I'm going to find a place to crash for a while," Logan interjected exhaustedly, slowly standing up. "Goodnight."

"Hey, Conan, are you going to stand your turn at watch? We don't want anyone sneaking up on us in the middle of the night," Amanda questioned him sternly.

"No one is going to be back here tonight," he retorted flippantly. "There's no way that they could get through this swamp in the dark even if they did make it down that muddy road. Wake me up later if you feel you need to. Right now I'm going to sleep." Logan turned, making his way into the smaller of the two bedrooms. He sat heavily down on the edge of the double sized bed. Liz's voice floated in from the living room, telling Amanda goodnight. Her footsteps plodded nearer. The glow of a single candle shone brightly through the doorway preceding the heartened young woman's entrance.

"Mind if I come in for a minute?" she asked sweetly.

"No, please do."

"I just wanted to thank you for helping us out today. I really do appreciate it." Elizabeth sat next to him on the springy bed, putting her arms around his shoulders. Pulling him up close to her, she hugged him tightly, then gave him a little smooch on his lips. "Amanda means well but she just come through a little harsh sometimes. Thanks again. Good night." She stood up, gave Logan another little kiss on his forehead and walked out of the room.

That little exchange made him feel better. Helping people really was what he liked to do. That's why he was a firefighter. Somehow, this could even become more special.

The weary captive looked down at the crusted bed. Even though it looked pretty uninviting, he slipped between the cool sheets, still fully clothed as a modicum of protection against the filth. Logan pulled the thin blanket over him, his exhausted, sore muscles, still feeling the effects of the trip. Regardless of the day's excitement and concerns, the fading firefighter was fast asleep in a matter of seconds. A loving vision of Morgan the last thing he remembered. Good night, Love, he thought to her.

Amanda watched the light rain hit golden against the candlelit glass. The weather sure fit her disposition. "Once upon a midnight dreary," she said quietly to herself. She stared out the window wishing the rain would end so she could go home.

Morgan gracefully sat herself into the soft, middle aged, tweed couch, absently stroking the rough cushion with the palm of her right hand. Suddenly, awareness flooded her thoughts of the similarities of the Keohanes' furnishings and those of Logan's. "Funny, I never noticed that before," she marveled. "Same pattern, same texture, only the colors were changed to protect the innocent." She smiled at her own nervous joke. At least lightening the mood calmed her down a bit while she waited for Yancy to return with Anne Keohane.

"Morgan, Anne will be here in a second. Can I get you something to drink? A soda or some water or something? I think I even have a Guinness or two in there, if you'd like," Yancy Keohane addressed her softly, a noticeable glint of nervousness in his eyes.

"No, thank you," she answered, now in a bit calmer state of mind. "I was just noticing how similar your furniture is to Logan's. The taste must run in the family."

"Maybe so, but actually there's a little less romantic reason for the similarity. When Logan got divorced he left everything with his ex-wife. We gave him a few pieces of furniture, like that old couch. I mean, we had an extra one anyway. I don't think he really liked it much but the pieces are functional and it helped him to get back on his feet again."

"Well, I like how the furniture fits Logan's apartment and he must too because he's had it for a while now. It's really nice to see people get along with their parents. I wish I got along better with mine."

"I'll be there in a second," a woman's voice called from down the hallway that connected the living room to the other parts of the house.

Morgan looked at Yancy and noted how worried he looked. The Irishman sat on the edge of the matching armchair with his hands clasped, resting on his knees. He stared hollowly down at the floor, breathing slowly and deeply. "Mister Keohane. . . ."

"Please, call me Yancy," he interrupted. "You're more like family now, I think we can dispense with the formalities."

"Yancy," she adjusted her presentation, "I really don't want to alarm you. There's just something that I think you need to be kept apprised of."

"Let's wait until Anne gets here. She'll be out momentarily," Logan's father responded tenderly.

"He's certainly got patience," she noticed to herself. "I'd have been all over someone who told me that there was something important that I needed to know about someone. Especially someone I loved."

Anne Keohane made her entry into the cozy living room. She was a petite, middle-aged woman with graying strawberry blond hair. She was very healthy and active looking with the brightest, clearest blue eyes of anyone that Morgan could ever remember, at least personally. "God, I just hope that I look like that when I get to be that age," she remembered telling Logan after their first meeting.

Morgan stood up and held out her small hand to the chipper woman. As they shook hands, Anne responded, "It's really good to see you, Morgan. I hear you've got some news for us. Everything's alright I hope. I mean, you and Logan still getting along okay and all?"

"It's good to see you too, Missus Keohane. And yes, Logan and I are getting along wonderfully. You guys have a wonderful son. I really care about him a whole lot. But, there is a little bit of a problem right now and I don't quite know how to begin." Morgan began getting nervous again. How was she going to approach this? It was a pretty delicate issue. Hell, she didn't even want to face the possibilities herself. Morgan could only imagine being a parent with a missing child.

"You see, Logan was scheduled to work today." Pretty inauspicious beginning, the young woman thought, fishing for the words with which to continue. "Well, he left his apartment to go to work this morning but he didn't ever make it there. No one has seen or heard from him all day." Nothing quite like being subtle in the approach to bad news, she sarcastically scolded herself. All of this planning and thinking just to blurt it out with no tact or grace.

Morgan looked up to see both of Logan's parents staring at her. "I know this is a shock, it was for me, too. I've talked to his Captain and some of the other guys at the firestation and they have lots of people out looking for him. All of the other firestations

have his description and his vehicle's registration information. All of the police departments in the area have been put on alert, also."

"There's been no news at all?" Yancy asked with a very worried look clouding his face. "No one has seen his truck or anything?"

"No, but as soon as they find out anything they are going to call me and I'll let you know," the nervous lass promised.

Yancy slowly sank back into his chair and stared blankly toward the ceiling. Anne walked slowly over to the couch, sat beside Morgan and put her hand on the girl's knee. "Is there anything that we can do? For the search or for you?" she asked sincerely.

Tears slowly ebbed up in Morgan's eyes, "No, but I wished there were. I'm in love with Logan, Missus Keohane, I couldn't stand to have anything happen to him. I've never known anyone like him before. I want to spend my life with him."

"I know, dear. I could feel that the first time I met you. You and he were made for each other. Logan's made a couple of pretty rash choices in the past but I'm glad he's finally met someone like you. Please, honey, call me Anne." There was a world of kindness and compassion glowing in those eyes. Even though presented with a good reason to be inundated with pain and fear, this courageous lady exuded a compassion that tugged at Morgan's heart. Tears ran one after another down the younger woman's cheeks as Anne Keohane reached out to hold her. The warmth and safety that the pining lass felt in those arms was like nothing that she'd experienced in a very long time. She definitely knew where Logan's tenderness was from. "That's okay, honey, just feel the sorrow, don't try to keep it in. Everything will be alright. Logan will be back with us soon." Anne stroked Morgan's thick red hair as the first tears slipped across her own cheek, dripping onto the girl's shoulder.

"I feel scared sometimes, but I always get the most assured feeling that he'll be back. I just know he's alright and he'll be back soon," Morgan said firmly, backing up and looking Anne directly in the eyes. "Nothing can keep us apart."

"Just keep the faith, Morgan, and God's will be done. We're here for you and I know that you'll be here for us if we need it. I think you'll be a wonderful part of our family and we'll be fortunate to have someone like you join us," Anne reassured her.

Suddenly the cell phone in Morgan's purse began ringing. She reached for her purse and shuffled through the contents until she found the appliance. "That's the number for the firestation, maybe they have some news," she said hurriedly. "Of course you can."

Morgan opened the phone and breathlessly answered. "Hi, this is Morgan O'Malley. Do you have news about Logan?"



"Yes, hold on Miss O'Malley, I'll get the captain for you." Morgan heard the receiver go quiet as she was put on hold. Then another voice answered, "Miss O'Malley, this is Captain Griffin. We've received some news about Logan. I'm afraid it's not good news, however." Morgan's heart sank. She felt tenseness in every part of her body. A thousand questions ran through her mind in a split second. "The authorities have found Logan's truck. It seems that it was involved in an accident on the highway near Baton Rouge, Louisiana."

"And. . . . Is he alright? Is he coming home soon?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but the accident caused a massive fire that burned the vehicle and the lone occupant beyond recognition. They could still read the license plates and were able to trace down the owner. The Houston Police Department got the news and relayed it to us. I'm really sorry."

Morgan felt like she had just been hit by a tornado. No, a tornado was too calm. It was more like a pure, sheer bolt of terror. Her mind and body were numb. The overwhelmed woman couldn't think or react to the news. Finally she uttered, "Louisiana? Why was he in Louisiana? He was on his way to work. Are they sure that it was Logan?"

"No one is sure why he was in Louisiana. And like I said the driver was burned beyond recognition. But, the vehicle was definitely Logan's truck. The only way that they'll be able to make positive identification is through dental records. And from what I understand that may not even be conclusive as badly as he was burned.

"If there's anything that I can do please let me know, okay? Miss O'Malley, are you still there? Are you alright? Do you need assistance?"

"No. . . uh, no I'm fine," Morgan answered, still in total shock at the gruesome description that the Captain had just offered. "Would you do one thing for me? I'm at Logan's parent's house would you break the news to them? I. . . I can't do it."

Morgan held out the phone toward Anne without waiting for a reply. She felt dizzy and sick at her stomach. The reeling lass was so disoriented that she wasn't sure where she was or what to do. "They want to speak to you," she finally stated, losing all sensation of her body. Everything suddenly went black.

# Chapter 10

## The Watch

Logan awoke with the sun in his eyes. It was a bright sun, with a radiance that cut the fog and shone into his ragged thoughts like a laser beam. The intense light seemed to illuminate and punctuate all of the dingy spider webs left by the jumbled dreams of his troubled sleep. The groggy fireman's head ached and his neck was so stiff that he could hardly move it. Slowly turning his head, the young man dropped his right arm roughly over his sore eyes. Dark clouds continued roiling through his mind, snippets of dreams, fleeting feelings of anguish and gloom. Logan wanted to just go back to sleep, reawaken, and find that the events of the preceding day were nothing but a confusing dream, like those that had plagued him over the past month.

He suddenly startled upright with the conscious realization that the sun was shining, the rain had stopped, and there was a good chance that the kidnappers could be on the way back to claim their prize. Carefully, the apprehensive captive listened for any tell-tale sound. However, the only sounds brought to his attention were birds chirping their morning songs and bullfrogs croaking in the distance.

Logan slipped his feet out of the bed, adjusting his bed-wrinkled pants. He walked through the bedroom door, buttoning the tight uniform shirt over his broad chest. Looking around the room, he spotted Amanda slumped into an overstuffed chair, fast asleep. Watching the young woman, Logan easily sensed the uneasiness of her own troubled sleep. She was jerking slightly, her eyes moving back and forth under closed lids. Suddenly, the sleeping girl let out a stifled moan of fear, jerking violently. The horrifying wail cut into the still room.

"Amanda," Logan called to her softly, quickly crossing the floor toward her. "Amanda, wake up. You're having a bad dream."

Her eyes opened wide, visibly shaken. The terrified girl's whole body shuddered uncontrollably, immense fear echoing in her distant eyes. Logan sat on the arm of the chair next to her. Amanda stared at him, seemingly not knowing who he was. "You were having a bad dream," he tenderly consoled her again. "But, it's all right, you're awake now."

Amanda reached out and clutched at him, pulling him to her. She buried her face deeply into his chest. Sobbing openly, she trembled violently in his arms. "I'm so afraid. God, I'm so afraid," was all that she could mutter. Logan slid off the arm of the chair, into the seat beside her. Gently but tightly, he held her against him. The compassionate fireman had seen lots of people in life and death situations, some even staring death directly in the face, but he couldn't recall ever seeing someone as totally terrified as she seemed to be.

He didn't know what to say to her. It would be ridiculous to tell her simply that he was frightened too, no matter how true that was, or that everything was going to be just fine because that would probably be a lie. So Logan just sat and held the shaking young girl. Slowly, her uncontrolled trembling sobs tapered off, becoming only a snuffle and an occasional tear. Still, her arms held him firmly with her head pressed tightly against his chest.

"God, I'm so sorry," Amanda whispered softly. "I must seem like a real baby to you." She shifted slightly, moving her head up against his left shoulder. The calming captive then put her right leg over his knees, halfway sitting in his lap. "It was such an awful dream. And so damned real."

"No, you don't seem like a baby at all," Logan comforted her. "We all get scared. I had some pretty funky dreams myself last night. And I woke up this morning completely disoriented. So, I know how you feel." He gently stroked her hair with his right hand.

Elizabeth strolled out of the other bedroom rubbing her eyes. "Is everything okay? Sis, are you alright?" she asked, spying the two in armlock. The younger woman walked to her sobbing sister, placing her hand on the sniffling girl's shoulder. "Well, we're still alive," she comforted her the best way she knew how. "What do we do for a toilet? The one up here doesn't work. I've got to go like crazy!"

"I think I saw an outhouse downstairs," the fireman informed the shuffling girl. "Or use the toilet and hand pump some water to pour down it to flush with."

"You've got to be kidding!" Elizabeth glared at Logan. "I've got to sit on something that's at least clean."

"Well, that's about your only choices unless you'd rather just squat outside!"

"I think I'll take my chances in the outhouse, thank you." The girl moved hurriedly toward the exit, opening the door slightly and peeking through. "What if the kidnappers come back while I'm down there?"

Logan just looked at her. "It's your choice."

"Can you pump me some water?" the young lass begged Logan, heading toward the broken toilet. "God, it stinks in here!"

Logan slipped out of Amanda's grasp and walked slowly toward the kitchen. "We've got to formulate a plan of action," the fireman gently informed Amanda over his shoulder. "Those guys will probably be coming back today. I'd really like to go downstairs again to have a better look around to see if we can find a way out of here. There seemed to be some kind of storage area or something down there. The only problem is, I sure as hell don't want to get caught down there when the kidnappers get back, that would be suicide!"

"Yeah, I know what you mean, I don't think they'd be real impressed with us being up and around, that's for sure! But what if you take the gun with you? I think you should be the one to keep it, anyway. I have no idea how to shoot a pistol and neither does Liz. I just wished we knew how many friends the old fart was bringing back with him. It would make the planning a little easier."

"Maybe we'd be better off to just stay up here and wait for them, it'd be easier to ambush them here in the house than outside in the open," the calculating firefighter decided contemplatively. He stepped around the kitchen cabinet, opening several of the rickety doors until finding a large metal pot for the water pump.

Amanda slowly sat upright, looking at him. Her eyes were fiercely red and her face streaked with makeup. "In that case, I think we should each take a window on opposite sides of the house for now and keep a lookout. At the first sight of them we can signal and you can bring the gun in. If they all come up together you can hold them at gunpoint while we tie them up. Then we can use their boat to get back to the road."

Logan set the pot under the pump spout and began pumping the short wooden handle as hard as he could, nothing happened. Elizabeth sauntered out of the bathroom toward them. "Sis, are you alright now?" she asked, looking at Amanda. "My God, I didn't think you knew how to cry like that. You're always Ms. Cool-calm-and-collected. I can't believe you are the one crying here."

Amanda gave her a sardonic look, stood up and walked into the bathroom. "We have got to put something across this door if we end up being here much longer. Logan can you get that water for me? It really does smell bad in here," she informed the others, stepping inside.

The pump belched, spitting out a spattering of rusty colored water. Great, Logan thought, continuing his project, I hope we don't have to drink this shit! "I'll go ahead and take the window here at the front of the house, since this is where they are going to come in." the fireman called after Amanda, still pumping the handle. "Elizabeth, we've decided to each take a lookout from a window on opposite sides of the house. I will keep the gun and you can signal me if they come from your direction. Be sure and pay attention to what direction they come from so that we will have an idea which way to head back to," he continued.

"Wow, I'm glad that I got to take part in the planning. I'll find a window as soon as I find something to eat, I'm starved," the younger girl answered belligerently, brushing past Logan to search through the dingy cabinets..

A few minutes later, Amanda reappeared from the bathroom, volunteering, "I'll take this window over here." The eldest sister pointed to the large window on the opposite side of the living room from Logan. "Elizabeth, will you take the window in the bedroom?"

"What is this, order Elizabeth day?" she asked snidely, looking up from her search through the cabinets.

"Look, I just want to stay alive. If you have a better plan just let us know! We'll be happy to use it. Right now we need you to keep a lookout on that end of the house," Amanda scolded.

"Why don't you sit in the bedroom by yourself. I'll stay in here with lover boy since you are the one who always likes to be alone so much."

"Fine!" Amanda answered curtly, stomping out of the room. "You can dump the water down the toilet yourself! That is, if Mister Macho over there ever gets any."

Logan didn't know what was going to be worse, facing the kidnappers or being in the middle of a sibling rivalry. Lots of times he had wished for brothers and sisters, but at times like these it seemed he was kind of glad he had been a lone child. The confused young man decided to just mind his own business and keep watch. He looked down to see the water finally running clear out of the pump's spout. Whew, the relieved lad thought, maybe this stuff will be fit to drink after all. The cautious fireman put his hand under the running stream, bringing a small handful to his mouth to taste. Not bad, the water tasted pretty sweet actually.

"Shit, the only thing that I can find to eat is a couple of cans of chili, beans, and fruit cocktail. Hell with it, I'll have the fruit and save the chili for lunch. Want to join me?" she finally asked Logan.

"No thanks. Not right now at least." Logan felt his stomach growling but couldn't bring himself to eat. He just kept his attention focused on filling his pot with liquid. "Here's your water," the lad informed Elizabeth. "You might as well get it over with. Just pour this whole pot down the commode as quickly as you can. That should flush it and get rid of most of the smell." The young man sauntered to his place beside the large window and peered out. Even in the bright, sun-lit daylight the dense canopy of living growth obscured the biggest portion of light. Occasional beams of sunlight filtered through, however, creating maddening plays of strobe-like shafts, blown about on the light, damp breeze.

The weather was still warm for late October. Obviously, with all of the temperate life in the swamp, it never stayed very cold for long. Logan's mind played back to the early morning, wondering how the sunlight had gotten through to awaken him. Slowly, he drifted into thoughts of Morgan. The lonely young man could almost feel her touch, smell her skin and sense the love that she so easily exuded from every pore of her being. He remembered the special connection that was felt while at her side. There was no question she loved him. That was a fact beyond doubt. Love radiated from her like warmth from a bonfire.

"God, I don't know who you are or what you look like, but I know you're going to bring me back to Morgan. You wouldn't have given me the opportunities that I've had to live and to love her if you were just going to take her away," he prayed under his breath. "And Morgan, just wait for me. I'll be back with you soon, I promise. I couldn't leave you right now if I tried. I'll soon be back at your side." Logan could feel love spring up all around him. He felt so warm and contented that it was almost as if he were holding Morgan in his arms. A small tear trickled down his left cheek followed by a second one on his right. He felt inexplicably peaceful and calm again. Yeah, maybe Morgan was thinking about him, too.

A metallic rattle behind him brought him back into the room. "Ahhh, wonderful breakfast," Liz commented, dropping her spoon into the empty fruit can. "What are we going to do for food after this runs out?" she asked no one in particular.

"Huh?" Logan responded, still half out of his body.

"I said what are we going to do for food after this stuff runs out?"

"Hopefully we won't have to find out. I plan to be off this island soon. I think I'd go stark raving mad if I were cooped up here very long," he answered truthfully. "If nothing else, I'd be bored witless. I guess I'm just a city guy now, I've kinda' lost touch with the country style of life."

"Hopefully you're right. I'm not much of one to hang out in isolation either. I'm afraid we'd go mad together."

Logan again started feeling very alone. He wished that Liz hadn't brought him out of his trance. He always had a very good imagination and could find himself easily in some other realm of existence. Sometimes the adventurer in him wanted to find someone to ask; is that dream realm as real as this physical one? He quickly decided that question would best be left to philosophers and theologians.

Amanda slowly walked back into the room and spoke to him. "I've got to find something to eat. I am totally starving. Will you keep an eye out in my direction for just a few minutes? Elizabeth, did you say that you found some fruit cocktail? I want some of it. Where is it?" Amanda asked of her sister.

"Lower right-hand cabinet. Near the rear." Liz answered curtly, still a bit irritated.

"Oh, yeah, here it is. Thanks."

Logan tried not to pay them much attention. He had enough anxiety without a simmering feud between these women. He diligently returned his attention to guard duty.

Morgan woke up lying on the Keohane's couch. "How did I get here?" she wondered briefly. Then everything began flooding into her memory once again. The distraught young woman laid there dazed, until the shock of the news of Logan returned. She looked up to see Anne sitting on the edge of the couch next to her and noticed the trail of a tear across the woman's cheek. "Oh, Missus Keohane, I'm so sorry. What are we going to do? That couldn't have been Logan. He had no reason to be in Louisiana. He's got to still be alive, somewhere. We've just got to find him."

"I would love to believe that too, dear, but everything is just happening so fast right now," Anne answered with a large tear rolling down her right cheek. "Lot's of times I've stayed up late, worrying deep into the night when Logan was at work, afraid that he would be injured or worse at a fire, and now this." Her tears began to flow steadily, dripping quietly into her lap.

Morgan sat up beside Anne, wrapping her arms around the loving lady's trembling shoulders. They sat that way for several minutes before Morgan found the courage to speak. "Logan will be back to us safe and sound. Just wait and see. I'm sure he knows I'll be waiting for him. He won't let me down. Missus Keohane, I have every intention of marrying your son and this may postpone things a bit but it isn't going to alter my plans."

"I wish that I had your faith, Morgan," she answered after a few moments of silence. "All that I can see are visions of horrible things happening to my only son. What am I supposed to do now? It's not supposed to be this way. I feel so helpless. . . so. . . uh. . . ." Anne began weeping in earnest. Yancy sat down beside them, putting his arms around both of them.

Morgan felt closer to these people at that moment than she had ever felt with her own family. Maybe it was the idea that they could show that they were really human. These were real people who laughed and cried, felt joy and sadness, strength and despair. Yeah, these people were strong enough to let others see who they really were. Tears filled her eyes, but not really tears of grief. The suddenly lonely young woman felt a sadness and longing at Logan's absence, but that still wasn't the source of her weeping. Somehow, she was sure that he was alive and well and would be back to her. Her tears stemmed more from a sense of finding something that she had always looked for, a sense of connectedness, a rich feeling of being part of some bigger scheme. Morgan was family here and she felt it.

The three mourners sat locked for almost an hour. Darkness slowly crept into the room as they sat together in quiet communion. There was no place Morgan would rather be at that moment than right there, feeling that total outpouring of love, no matter the circumstances of its creation.

Yancy Keohane was the first to break the spell of quiet contemplation. "Logan, me lad, I'm lookin' for your return. I'll be awaitin' for ya'. I know everyone includin' the wee folk are watchin' over ya'," the pining Irishman lamented into the darkness in a light Irish brogue.

"Let me know if there's anything that I can do. I mean, anything at all. I'll help in any way that I can," Morgan offered sincerely.

"We know you will, dear, and we appreciate it. If there's anything that we can use a hand at we'll be sure to let you know," Anne answered her sincerely. "You're very welcome to stay the night here if you'd like. We have plenty of room and would enjoy your company."

"Thank you very much. I'll take you up on it sometime soon. Right now, though, I've already committed myself to go to my parent's. My brother is in from school for a week, so they're having a dinner party for him. I'll call tomorrow to see how things are going. If I get any further word I'll let you know." Morgan stood slowly, smiling softly at the Keohanes, who sat hand in hand on the couch. "I'll let myself out. Goodnight."

Morgan closed the door behind her and strolled toward her car. Every fiber of her being was screaming out in revulsion to going to her parent's house. Please, oh please let me get out of this! Why does it seem that everything bad always happens at one time? The spinning redhead desperately wanted to just go to Logan's apartment. At least there she could get a feel of him. One little sniff of his aftershave or seeing one of his blue uniforms would at least give her a bit of comfort. Also, she needed the tee-shirt that he had given her as a night shirt. It would keep her company until her lover returned.

The woman sat hollowly into her car, immediately feeling for the note that had so gently been placed into her purse earlier. Touching the cool, crisp paper, she could almost sense Logan's presence filling the void surrounding her soul. That epistle of love began graciously to exude a message far beyond the mere words inscribed onto its surface. The feel of the note seemed to propel her to a secret place, deep into another sense of time and space, where her fingers intertwined with those of her paramour, reveling in the love that he felt for her. Morgan languished in the light of love, allowing the whole essence of her broader self to immerse into a dimension of existence reserved only for lovers wishing to bridge any restriction that stands in their way. Slowly, looking up into the heavens, her heart flew into the immenseness of the firmament. My, how the stars look just like flickering candles, playing on the mysterious face of Mother Earth, she fancied, expanding her awareness into the infinite. For a while, her spirit soared with the stars themselves, loosing all sense of time and dimension. Then, ruefully bringing herself back into the present, she cranked her engine and slowly headed for her childhood home.



"Oh, hi honey!" Lorraine O'Malley greeted her only daughter at the front door. "Come on in, we were afraid you weren't going to make it."

"Sorry I'm late, mom. I just left Logan's parents' house. I had to go over to let them know about his disappearance." Morgan stepped slowly through the doorway into the long entry hall.

Lorraine wrapped her arms around the girl's neck with a quick, tight hug, kissing her daughter on the cheek. "Yeah, your father said something about him being missing or something."

A large lump formed in Morgan's throat. Tears began to sting her eyes, however, she wasn't about to break down here in front of her parents. "Yeah, he never got to work today. And we just got word a while ago that his truck was found wrecked in Louisiana. Someone was killed in the accident, but I don't think it was Logan. He had no reason to be in Louisiana."

"My goodness, in Louisiana? Honey, I'm so sorry to hear that. I really hate to hear when someone gets hurt like that. But, you know the Good Lord always looks after his own. Maybe he was just trying to protect you from getting involved in something that you'd later regret. You know mixing religions and all never works out. You need to just find yourself a nice Christian boy and get back to serving the Lord like you should," Lorraine commented in her sickly sweet voice, smiling at the girl.

Morgan wanted to scream. The suddenly outraged redhead could feel the tension building in her back, standing the hair on back of her neck on end. She shuffled her stance uneasily. "Mother, can't I even get in the door before you lay-in on me? The one thing I don't need right now is a sermon! I love Logan and plan to see him again! Sometime soon, I even plan to marry him. I don't believe that is against the 'will of God!'" Arrrgh! The young woman's mind exploded. If this wasn't my mother I'd tell her right now just where to get off!

"I'm sorry dear, you know I was just trying to help!" The older woman lowered her face toward the floor, lifting her hazel eyes to look at her daughter. Graying hair swept over the mother's forehead, blocking her vision before she turned down the hallway. "Come on, the others are waiting. Ben, your sister is here!" Lorraine called into the buzzing room ahead of them.

"Hi, sis!" the thin dark-headed young man greeted his sister. "It's been a while since I've seen you! How've you been?"

"Not so wonderful, Ben, I can think of better moments in my life."

Morgan looked at her watch, it was just eight forty-five. She had only been there for a little over an hour and yet it seemed like an eternity. Absently, the young woman reached into her purse, pulling out silenced cell phone to check for any new messages that she might have missed. Nothing. Come on Logan, where are you?

"Hey, everyone! Guess what Ben brought us back from school. It's a cassette of one of his sermons! He was preaching at one of the local churches as a guest pastor and had the whole service recorded! Would anyone like to hear it?" Patrick O'Malley announced to the small crowd of his visiting church mates. "I'm really proud of you son!" The father lifted the cassette high above his head like a trophy, smiling enormously at the boy.

"Yeah, let's hear it." replied the Reverend Cornell, her parent's pastor, heartily. "But first, my son, tell us what you're preaching about."

Oh, great! My parents can't get me in church so they bring the church to me! Jesus H. Christ, I've got to get out of here now! Okay, Morgan, chill out. Settle down, these people obviously enjoy doing all of this, they aren't just trying to torture you! A quiet voice exploded through the struggling woman's mind; What other people believe is just as real to them as your beliefs are to you. The only way we will ever survive and prosper as a species is by learning to accept and respect the beliefs and traditions of others, even if they are contrary to our own!

Morgan felt a heavy weight ease slightly off her shoulders. Some beliefs just seem so much easier to accept than others. I guess the ones I have the most trouble with are the ones who promote themselves as 'the only way', she deduced. How many people have died in the name of 'the true and only religion' so the world wouldn't die and go to hell? Probably half the population of the globe! Okay, Morgan, condemnation only puts you right there in the middle of them. Tolerance, remember? Just learn to respect the beliefs and accomplishments of your family and brother.

"Yes, Brother Cornell, in the sermon I was speaking on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Specifically, how Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt as she looked back at the destruction with longing in her heart for the sin and degradation that was left behind. I cross referenced it with the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt and several other passages about mankind's eminent destruction unless he turns from a life of wickedness and sin!"

I guess it wasn't wickedness and sin that drove those same Children of Israel to swarm into a foreign land, killing every innocent man, woman and child so that they could have a promised land? Oh, no, those deaths were probably justly imposed upon a

people filled with wickedness and sin, so very much deserving of their destruction, Morgan judged hotly to herself.

Suddenly, a strong flow of compassion filled the woman. Oh my gosh, these people are so afraid of themselves that it is necessary to give all power and self control to an external form of God in order to cope with their own divine power. Instead of judging them, how could I show the rest of the world not to fear the power that the Creator has given each and every person? That's it! That has got to be my mission in life! For once I'm on the right path to begin my journey! I've got to find a way of presenting a higher level of possibility to those seeking it! Okay, Morgan, that idea is what you were here for this evening. It's time to go home now. Thank you mom and dad for things you didn't even know you contributed to me! Without all the events of this evening I might have never gotten the message that I'm really desiring to find a way to teach others to see their own highest potential. I want to show others how to really live and enjoy every minute of their lives! "Quiet now everyone, I'm turning on the tape player!" Patrick announced proudly.

Morgan settled back into her seat as the tape of her brother began. The soft music of a church organ lulled her into a semi-trance, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. Quietly, the young woman turned to her father, "It's time for me to go home, daddy. I'm really exhausted. Goodnight everyone, it's been pleasant. Congratulations, Ben, I'm really happy and proud for you! Thanks mom and dad for inviting me. I've gotten more from tonight than you'll ever know!" Morgan stood up without waiting for an answer and walked briskly for the exit. "Goodnight!" she called once more over her shoulder, leaving the crowded room.

## Chapter 11

### Comes Evening

"Yum, nothing like cold, canned chili for lunch and dinner," Amanda commented sarcastically, plunging her spoon into the opened can for her second bite. "This really

does wonders for the digestive system as well. You'll have to excuse me if some of my bodily functions overwhelm my Victorian manners." She smirked under her breath.

Logan had the same feelings about their fare, peering through the deepening gloom of the window, watching for any sign of their captors. "Beans, beans, the magic fruit. . ." he started, then felt embarrassed to continue. "It's pretty funny how ashamed we can become of our bodily functions, you know," he lamented. "And our physical anatomy."

"I'm surprised we haven't heard from the kidnappers yet," Amanda quickly interjected to change the subject. "Do you think they can get through the swamps at night?"

"I don't know but I'm kind of afraid to light the candles tonight. The light would tip us off immediately if they did get through. We're better off staying in the dark. Besides, we can see outside more clearly if it's dark in here." Logan took another bite of his chili, forcing a swallow.

"How are we going to keep watch through the night?" Amanda asked him seriously. "I mean, one of us can't watch in all directions and we all need to get some sleep somehow."

"Actually, I think as long as one of us watches the front during the night we'll be safe. As far as I can remember, it seemed like we came ashore not far from the steps here in front of the house. As long as we have a couple of minutes to prepare before they come up the stairs we'll be all right," he answered.

"O.K., I've done my time in solitary confinement," Liz called whiningly from the bedroom. "It's time to change watching posts now. It's your turn in here Logan."

"Come on in here, Elizabeth. We're just going to watch from the front windows at night." Amanda answered her sister loudly enough to be heard in the next county.

Logan held his ears, shaking his head in exaggerated discomfort at her volume. "Jeez, I don't want you mad at me," the fireman teased. "My eardrums would never be the same."

Elizabeth walked into the room with a scowl on her face. "Was this another command decision made by the leadership team?" she asked sarcastically. "Do you think it would be possible to include me in some of these decision-making processes? I mean, so I'll at least know what's going on." The youngest girl folded her arms, flopping into the armchair like a pouting ten year old.

"Oh, chill out," Amanda retorted. "We're not trying to leave you out. You were just in the other room when the subject came up."

Elizabeth just sat and glared at her sister while burying herself deeper into the chair. The air in the room suddenly felt sullen and heavy. Logan noticed his breathing was even becoming difficult. The energy between the two sisters was so thick that it was almost tangible. It felt like opposite poles of two giant magnets pushing away from each other. He expected to see sparks erupt into the air between them.

The lad watched the girls, amazed at the day and night interaction between the two. Amanda suddenly stood up and brushed past him en route to the bedroom. A strange energy that felt like static electricity splashed over him as she brushed past, making his hair stand on end. He looked back at Elizabeth, who now sat with her knees at her chest, staring vacantly through one of the darkened windows.

"I can't believe her, she always does that to me," Liz whined in a low, hollow voice to no one in particular.

Amanda walked brusquely out of the bedroom toward the bags of clothes piled by the door. She opened the first one, rummaging through the contents blindly in the semi-darkness. Apparently finding what she was looking for, she stood up and held a pair of trousers against her waist. Satisfied, she returned to her search until finding an agreeable shirt. The young woman headed again toward the bedroom door. "God, I wish I could take a shower," she whined, "I can't stand feeling this grungy anymore. Isn't there any way that I can get clean?" she complained once more.

"You can pump some water into the sink over there," the fireman offered as gently as he could manage.

Amanda just glowered at him over her shoulder, whisking away instead into the dark bedroom. A thick feeling of maddened ire seemed to follow the hostile girl through the darkened doorway. The energy felt totally different around Elizabeth. Around her was like a black hole sucking up everything in her vicinity. The darkness even seemed thicker surrounding her.

Logan heard Amanda blithering in the other room. "Damn it," the incensed woman screamed, "all I want is some hot water!" Suddenly, a loud thump came from the bedroom followed by a loud, "Shit! Ow, shit that hurts."

"Are you all right?" Logan asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah, I'm O.K. I just banged the hell outta' my knee. It's so dark in here I can't see a damned thing," Amanda answered vehemently.

Elizabeth never uttered a word or moved a muscle. Boy, she's pissed, the fireman thought. It all seemed such a trivial matter to him. "Are you alright, Liz?" he finally asked.

"Wonderful," the irate girl answered sarcastically. "She always treats me like a . . . a . . . little sister."

Logan couldn't see her face, but he was sure that she was profoundly serious. Maybe he just couldn't really understand this sibling rivalry thing, and it seemed so pronounced between these two girls. He had read a lot about the competition that gets generated between two siblings who think they are vying for the love of a parent, however, he'd never gotten to experience it for himself. This particular case seemed to be pretty extreme. The young man found it very difficult not to have judgment on Elizabeth for being so childish, or on Amanda for being so demanding. For the first time, he was really beginning to understand how each person, living in their own little universe, could experience a completely different reality. Each one, in their own mind, was completely justified in their feelings.

Suddenly Elizabeth broke the silence. "Since mom died, Amanda has kind of taken over the responsibility of being a mother to me. Our father is a very busy man, sometimes working for days at a time, keeping everything going. You know, I think he just misses mom. My sister was really close to him, they did things together all the time, I guess I was more of a momma's girl. Anyway, since she died, about five years ago, dad has spent more and more time at work and sis has taken his absence pretty hard. I guess she feels like she's lost two parents instead of one or something. I know daddy loves us very much and is probably going crazy right now, not knowing what's happened to us, but I really don't know if Amanda can see that. I really think she feels he has abandoned her and doesn't like her anymore. So now, she's my mom and feels she is the only one here to look after me. God, I sometimes feel awful for despising her for just loving me! But, you know, it really gets me sometimes, just bugs the shit out of me."

Amanda walked out of the bedroom combing through her oily hair just as Elizabeth reached that admission. "What are you guys doing?" she asked in a cheerier tone.

"Oh, nothin' really," Elizabeth answered through the darkness in a distinctly friendlier voice. "Sis, I'm sorry that I got mad at you. I know that you're just looking after my own good but, you know, I'm growing up, too. I just want to be a part of things and not a tag along. That's really important to me right now, okay?"

Amanda stood in silence for several seconds, which began to bring out a little tension in Logan once again. He began wonder what was about to happen. Tensions were high enough right now with everything else that was going on. All that he needed was to have the only other two people in his immediate universe at each others throats.

"Liz, you know, you're right. I apologize. I've tried to look after you since Mom died because I promised her that I would. I guess that I just started feeling more like a mother than a sister. I'll try to always remember that you are an adult, too. I can't promise that I'll always be successful, it's pretty ingrained, you know."

Amanda walked over to Elizabeth and sat beside her. "Pals?" she asked.

"Pals," Liz responded.

"Now, if I could just have a long hot bath and some clean clothes that fit, everything would be fine. Well, not really," Amanda corrected herself. "I just hope these pants don't fall off while I'm walking around. At least not in the daylight." The two sisters looked thoughtfully at one another.

"I think I'm going to find some different clothes myself," Elizabeth broke the silence. "Maybe that'll make me feel a little cleaner." She laughed, walking toward the bags. "Let's see, sporting, casual or evening attire?"

Morgan unlocked the door to Logan's apartment and stepped tentatively through. The darkness of the deepening evening had utterly engulfed the small room, as it had her heart. At least she had already prepared herself to be alone this evening while Logan was at work. She could pretend everything was normal for a while. Standing just inside the still open door, the spinning lass took several slow, deep breaths, trying to clear her mind.

Slowly, she closed the front door and made her way into the tiny kitchen. Morgan set her purse and a small bag of groceries on the counter. "Get a grip," the young woman scolded herself, a tear rolling down her right cheek. "Okay, Logan, I miss you already. I want you to come back to me, you hear? I know you're alive and can somehow feel me thinking about you. I just need to keep my time occupied until you get back."

Still in the predominant darkness, the redhead sauntered into the bedroom, took off her clothes and slipped, once again, into the night shirt that had been left upon the bed. Softly, she caressed the material as if it was Logan himself wrapped around her. Then very deliberately, she ambled into the living room, stopped, peering longingly through the sliding glass door. Lightening flashed in the distance. Could Logan see it too?

Memories roiled through her mind like a VCR on fast forward. She could hardly keep up with the spinning scenes as they went speeding past. Memories of when she first met Logan, their first date, their second date and almost every minute that they had spent together over the previous month flashed through her mind. She found herself completely engrossed in the memories of those happy times and began enjoying each and every one as it paraded by. The reminiscing young woman even found herself laughing aloud at some of the funnier ones. She and Logan hadn't been together very long but Morgan was amazed at all of the wonderful times that they had already created together. Some of the best memories of her life had been in the past few months. "I love you Logan Keohane," she called aloud. "You will be my husband for the rest of my life."

Amazing, this feeling of love, Morgan thought, turning from the door, shuffling into the kitchen to prepare her dinner. She switched on the kitchen light and began unpacking the food. Suddenly, pausing in her work, the brightening lass walked through the small

apartment, room by room, and switched on every light that she could find.

## Chapter 12

### Exploration

"What time is it?" Logan asked Elizabeth.

"Almost noon," the girl responded sullenly. "Do you think these guys are ever coming back? I mean, what would have happened if one of us couldn't have gotten free? We'd be in some pretty deep shit right about now. Literally."

"I don't know. I thought that they'd be back for us as soon as the rain stopped. But it's been cleared off for two days now. I can't imagine what could have happened to them. If it was up to me, they would never come back. I'm sure we could find some way out of here if we didn't have to worry about them."

"Well, we're going to have to do something pretty quickly because we're out of food. Our wonderful breakfast this morning was the last of it. And I'm already getting hungry again."

"You're right. We've got to do something, even if it means taking a chance on getting caught," the fireman admitted. "Would you mind asking Amanda to come in here so we can make a new plan. I'm tired of sitting here waiting."

"You go get her," Liz answered hastily, turning back toward the window. "I've got a watch to keep."

Logan was caught by surprise. Elizabeth had been a little belligerent with her sister on occasion, but she had always been very cooperative with him. Without another word, he stood up and walked into the bedroom where Amanda was peering out of the window. "Amanda, will you come into the living room for a few minutes. We need to make a new plan. I don't know what's going on, but those guys should have been back by now. I think it's about time that we change strategies and start looking for our own way off of this God-forsaken island."

"Funny, I was just thinking that same thing. We must be psychically linked from eating all of that cold chili and fruit cocktail," she agreed with a warm smile.



The two captives walked out of the bedroom and sat down facing Liz. "Anyone have any suggestions?" Amanda asked, looking directly at her sister. There's got to be an answer here somewhere."

"You guys figure it out yourselves. I'm on watch," Elizabeth answered her sister without turning from the window. Amanda and Logan looked at each other quizzically for a few seconds until a small smile brightened Amanda's face.

"That time of the month again, huh?" she asked in a compassionate voice.

After a minute of silence, Elizabeth turned to her sister and answered with soggy eyes, "Yeah, and I don't know what to do about it. There's nothing around here to take care of the situation. . . and I've looked everywhere."

"Yeah, that can pose a problem. One I'm going to have myself pretty soon," the older girl returned with understanding. "That's something you and I will have to figure out. Especially since I only have one pair of underwear to my name." Amanda and Elizabeth smiled knowingly at each other.

"The joys of womanhood," Elizabeth retorted.

Logan felt pretty helpless in this conversation, and pretty out of place. "You know, in ancient Celtic traditions a woman who was menstruating during a holy festival was considered very special and was looked upon to walk through the fields and bless the crops with her menstrual blood. It was a sign of fertility and looked upon with honor."

"Gee, thanks, that really makes me feel better knowing that. I'll just walk around this island and maybe it'll produce a boat for us. Or do we need to wait for a holy feast day," Elizabeth quipped, looking at him with steely eyes.

Logan felt extremely embarrassed. His face turned bright red. The young man could feel it burning like he was on fire. "I just wanted to. . . ."

"Chill out, Logan, we know you were just trying to help, but it's just not a guy thing, you know. This is one we'll handle by ourselves, okay?" Amanda answered calmly.

"Believe me, it's all yours," Logan answered, still feeling the embarrassment. "Now, can we get back to the other business?" he responded quickly to switch subject matter. "If you guys will stay here and keep a lookout, I'll go back down stairs to see if there's a boat or something in the room under the house. We might be sitting here for absolutely no reason."

"Oh shit, that's true! There's a possibility that another boat could be down there. But damned if I'm going to stay up here. I'm going with you, whether you like it or not," Amanda responded, getting excited. "Hell, what are we waiting for?"

Both she and Logan got up quickly, both heading excitedly toward the door. "How about you Liz?" Amanda added.

"No, I'll stay here and watch," Elizabeth answered grumpily.

"Okay, let us know immediately if you spot something. I don't want to get caught outside by surprise," Logan chimed in.

"Go for it," Liz answered again rhetorically.

Logan made his way to the front door, slowly pulling it open. He slipped his head through the narrow opening, followed discretely by the rest of his body. "What the hell are you waiting for?" Amanda snapped impatiently. "There's no one out there, go on."

Swinging the door open wide, the fireman bolted for the stairs and descended, two steps at a time. Amanda followed closely at his heels. Almost immediately, they were engulfed by a cloud of mosquitos. "My God," Logan agonized, flailing his arms through the air around his head. "I can't even see!"

"I've never seen bugs this bad!" Amanda joined in with exasperation. "How could anyone live in this?"

It took several minutes before Logan could stop swatting at the insects long enough to look around him. At first nothing really stood out. He then turned his attention to the enclosure built between the pilings under the structure. It was a fairly large room, almost half the size of the house itself. The double doors that led into the storeroom were locked with a padlock and hasp. Like the rest of the exterior of the house, the dingy green paint was cracking and peeling to the point of being almost bare wood.

Scanning between the floor joists of the raised house, he noted a stock of cane fishing poles tied to the floor joists. There was also a stockpile of miscellaneous boards and timbers pulled up tightly, out of the weather.

"Not much here so far," Amanda commented, deflated.

"If there's anything down here that we can really use it'll probably be in that storage room," Logan answered, swatting a mosquito on his forehead. "Let's see if we can get in."

The exploring captive looked around him, searching for something that might be used to pry the lock open. He found nothing, prompting him to quickly give up on the idea. Instead, he made his way to the secured door to investigate the rickety looking hinges and hasp that were holding the door shut. "If I could pull these screws out or break one of these hinges we could get through this door."

He yanked as hard as possible on the rust covered door handles, pulling at the slabs with a whoosh and a creak. The doors moved as far as the slack in the locking assembly would allow, but it wasn't nearly enough to allow their entrance or get leverage to break the hardware. "Shit," Logan screamed, slapping at several more mosquitoes on his arms and shoulders. "Can't do anything for these cotton-pickin' mosquitoes!" He tugged at the door again.

Amanda was in constant motion. She whacked at one insect after another. Logan stopped his attempts at opening the door to watch the beleaguered woman briefly. He almost had to laugh. Amanda looked like she was performing some comical dance, mixed with an accompanying melody of deep guttural sounds, made just under her breath.

"That's enough," the agonizing girl screamed, "I've had it! I can't stand any more of this!" Immediately, the tormented lass bolted for the house with a single, long cry of frustration. Logan could hear her footsteps running up the stairs followed by the slamming of the door. "I sure hope no one is within a couple of miles of here with all of that noise," he said amusedly to himself, chuckling. "Must be the new Guinness dance." That thought brought up pleasant, sentimental remembrances of his last trip to Ireland, making his current predicament even more frustrating.

The fireman begrudgingly put his attention back onto the task at hand. There had to be a way to open that door. Again he searched the area around the underside of the house for a tool that could be used as a pry bar. Slowly and cautiously, Logan made his way around the rear corner of the structure to explore the area behind the house. The first thing that he noticed was a propane tank setting a few feet from the wall of the house. Curiously, he walked toward it to check for possible contents. "Wonderful!" he exclaimed aloud, seeing that the large tank was completely full. "At least we can have a working stove, now I just need to find something to cook."

Logan scanned the tubing that ran from the top of the large cylinder for a valve that would turn the gas on to the house. Wading through rough, knee high grass, he circled the vessel, carefully following the copper line. A sudden movement close to his right foot caught his attention. A chill flashed through him as the surprised lad spotted a dark colored, seven foot long snake weaving its way through the high growth toward the edge of the island. The quick fright froze him in his tracks, leaving him unable to move a muscle. The fireman unwittingly flashed back to the memory of his fire scene experience only a month before. At least this time he had the training to overcome his fear. One thing he really hadn't thought about previously was dangerous wild creatures lurking in the dense undergrowth. Now he was aware of that possibility and more equipped to deal with any further contacts, maybe.

The serpent quickly reached the water's edge, slithering smoothly into the placid muck. Logan's attention remained transfixed, a coldness grasping at his spine, feeling to him like the hands of death playing at his vertebrae. Normally, he wasn't afraid of snakes and such, but this one had caught him so totally by surprise that there had been no time to

prepare for the initial shock. A bright ray of sunshine exploded through the thick canopy above him, landing right at his feet. Slowly, he took a deep breath, looked thoroughly around him, then very cautiously proceeded with his search. Relief flooded his senses when he found the elusive valve and turned it to the on position. The low hiss of channeled gas sent another involuntary chill up his spine.

What would they do, Logan wondered, if one of them were bitten by a snake or something? They had no medical supplies to tend to any such disaster. The fireman shuddered at the thought.

Hell, if something was going to happen to me it would have happened last month. I'm not going to die on some little island out in the middle of nowhere. I've come way too far for that to be the prescribed outcome of my life. I'm going to find a way back home! The explorative captive moved determinately away from the gas valve. Continuously on the lookout for a tool that he could use, Logan was ever mindful of any other creatures that might be in his path. "There has to be something that I can use as a pry bar," he reasoned aloud to himself, attempting to refocus his thoughts. "Anything strong enough to. . . ."

Deep in the stringy grass a spot of darker, tube-shaped color caught Logan's eye. At first it worried him, afraid that it might be another snake. Then, focusing all of his attention on the object, the details became apparent. The device was a thin, dark grey and rusty red colored, cylindrical object. The thing didn't move at his approach, so it must either inanimate or asleep. Hopefully the former. Slowly, the cautious fireman inched up to the still motionless item until it was just in front of his feet. From the closer perspective it looked metallic in composition.

Logan knelt down, brushing the thick grass aside enough to make out the outline of a tire bar. "Wow, how did this get here?" he wondered. "Anyway, it's just what the doctor ordered."

Grasping the lug wrench end of the tool, the young bodybuilder ripped it out of the tough grass, examining it from end to end. "Yeah, this will work just fine," he informed himself, again out loud.

Thoughts of snakes and other creatures quickly faded from his mind as he swiftly returned to the locked passageway. Calmly standing in front of the portal, Logan resembled a mountain climber sizing up the peak that he was about to scale. Then, slowly and deliberately, the strongman wedged the iron between the hasp and the wooden door. His work was done with focused intent. Every move was one trained to extricate something from a locked interior, no wasted motion, no rushed action. In a matter of seconds the screws pulled clear of the old door slab and swung free, hanging only on the still locked padlock.

Excitement then overtook him. "Boat, there's got to be a boat in here," the fireman surmised aloud into the dimly lit room. Logan stepped inside, letting his eyes adjust to

the new dimness of the lighting. Adjusting enough to make out the entire room, he spotted rows of musty, web-covered shelves lining every wall, filled with various contents. Walking to the closest shelf, the searcher picked up a can of Spam luncheon meat. He set the cool, rectangular container back onto the shelf, browsing through, what looked to be, more than a hundred various canned goods. At least we'll be able to eat now, he thought, a modicum of relief coursing through him. Following the shelves around the wall, he spied two cases of insect repellent. The discovery brought a smile to his ruddy face, thinking about the episode with Amanda only a few minutes earlier. "I wonder if they have any shaving supplies in here?" he questioned, stroking the stubby growth growing around his cheeks and chin.

The rear corner of the room was deeply shadowed by a large cabinet built into the center. The light was much too dim for him to see most of what was stored on those shelves. All that he could make out was a large first aid kit sitting on the very front edge of one of the open ledges.

"Logan," he heard a distant, hushed voice call. "Hey, Logan!"

The startled fireman's heart skipped a beat, then began to race. His ears began to ring from the sudden tension. Oh my God, this must be it, the kidnappers must be back, Logan thought, rushing toward the open door. He stopped at the exit just long enough to make a quick survey of the swamp that was in his view. There was nothing in sight. The tentative young man made a mad lunge toward the stairway. Halfway up, he caught his toe on the edge of a weather worn step, falling roughly against the wooden risers. "Shit!" he mumbled, scampering up the rest of the steps on all fours.

Logan broke through the doorway to the living room of the house, finding both girls sitting and staring at him. Oh no, I'm too late, he thought, quickly looking around the room.

"What's wrong with you?" Amanda asked curiously. "Are they back?" She suddenly sprang to her feet. Elizabeth immediately followed her and bolted toward the bathroom.

"What?" Logan answered in total surprise. "Oh, Jeez. I thought you guys were calling me up here to tell me the same thing. You scared me to death!" His wide eyes narrowed considerably. Slowly, the calming lad's heart rate decreased and his breathing returned to a manageable level. All that he could do at that point was laugh, at himself and at the reaction of the two women upon his arrival. "A lot of good Elizabeth would have done," Logan teased as the youngest girl slowly walked past him, returning to her sitting place. "She looked like a rabbit running from a hound dog!" He couldn't help but laugh aloud.

"Well, you should have seen yourself, busting through that door with an expression on your face like you had just been abducted by a flying saucer or something," Elizabeth

responded rather belligerently. "You don't have any room to talk." She plopped down harshly into the large chair, giving him a large, fake, toothy grin.

Amanda still stood in place, looking between the two. "You were both a riot!" she finally announced with a slight chuckle. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right and see if you had found anything."

"Why yes, thank you, I'm just wonderful. And yes, I got into the storage room and found a couple things of interest, like some food and stuff. Not that either of you would be interested in that. But, I didn't have time to finish searching," Logan responded sarcastically. "Oh, and Miss Ballerina, I found you some bug spray. I thought maybe that'd make you happy."

"Great," Amanda answered sincerely with her face brightening up. "If you'll go back downstairs and bring me up a can, I'll go help you finish looking around."

"Right," Logan answered with a smirk. "You can come down and get a can of your own and spray yourself outside."

"But, I've already lost half of my blood. If I go back out there those little vampires will suck me dry before I reach the bottom of the stairs," she replied in her best whiny voice.

"Suffer," was all that Logan would reply, crossing the room toward the exit. The young man left the little house and floated down the stairs without even thinking of kidnappers. The only thing on his mind right then was the further exploration of the supply room. Reaching the ajar doorway, a sudden thought occurred to him, It is exploration that really fascinates me. Discovery only opens the door to more exploration. Logan realized at that moment, exploring every facet of existence that he could think of; the physical universe, spiritual enlightenment, emotional peace and intellectual acuity, all hold their own specific excitements. Wow, one thing I've always wanted to do is to have the time to explore all the different facets of life. Well, I guess I've created my time! He stood at the doorway of the little room, looking into the dark recesses that awaited him

"What a way to live life!" he chuckled to himself, swatting a buzzing mosquito and entering the gloom. Logan shuffled quickly through the darkened room, heading directly for the shelf of insect repellent.

Morgan awoke suddenly from a deep slumber to find herself completely disoriented. Where was she? Was this real or was she dreaming? What time and what day was it? She felt totally lost. The room was still in darkness so it must be night, but that was all that she could fathom immediately.

She had just been with Logan, holding his hand, kissing him passionately and laughing with him, finding everything amusing. It was such a wonderful time. But, where was he now? She looked around the darkened room and felt the empty bed beside her. The sensation was extremely strange because he was just there, she could even sense the faint odor of his cologne. It was as if she was sharing two different worlds at once. Problem was, one she wanted and one she didn't.

Slowly, recognitions began washing through her mind, clearing the haze of the dream state that she had been experiencing. She remembered spending the night at Logan's apartment, it was Wednesday and looking at the lighted red digital clock, it was about four-thirty in the morning. Yep, she much preferred the other world. She was much happier there.

Leaning back comfortably against the soft pillow, Morgan again let her mind wander wherever it chose, to playgrounds where her body could not follow. The slumbering redhead completely turned the control of her thoughts over to another part of herself, a deeper, more spiritual part. The feeling of her physical being ebbed into blackness, leaving her languishing in bright sunshine, soaring only a few feet from the tops of the trees in a state of unequivocal freedom. At first a small fear of falling out of the sky skittered through her thoughts, but it soon vanished.

The only thing that she could feel was rapture, total abandon into an unknown world. The slumbering girl was invincible, unstoppable, as light and joyous as a spring mist on the first rays of a bright morning sun. The world was hers to have as she would.

In the beginning, all of Morgan's movements seemed dictated by an outside presence, somehow choreographed by an unseen hand, taking her into lands that were unfamiliar. The more the struggling lass tried, the more her mind learned to control her direction. However, a subtle turn here, a small course modification there was all that the dreamer could accomplish. The head-strong woman soon began getting annoyed by her lack of total control.

More and more she struggled against the unseen hand that guided her flight. More and more Morgan resisted someone else having the control of her direction and destination. All that she could think about was wanting to explore this wondrous new world, but not being allow to. Her unlimited spirit wanted to just veer off to the right and dive into a grove of beautiful trees that she had seen. Perhaps, then soar skyward, experiencing the dizzying heights that waited above her head. It would even be great to just pick a spot in one of the lush, fertile meadows and engulf herself in the glorious peace that seemed to pervade the whole landscape. Morgan's struggle intensified, becoming more aware of the many possibilities showing up just narrowly out of her reach. The total frustration generated by her restriction compounded, making her reluctantly give in. The exasperated woman then discovered that the more her spirit resisted the guidance, the less control she actually had.

With that realization, Morgan lessened her struggles, concentrating instead on just one specific move at a time, taking her where she desired to go. The more focused her attention on a single desired movement, the easier that act was to perform. Any resistance only misdirected her focus, robbing her of the energy needed to maneuver freely. Concentration, her mind reiterated, is the key. Deliberate attention and full action, Morgan concluded are the necessary components of navigating in the other world. The lass soared to a dizzying height, only to return and alight softly, in a sitting position, amidst a beautiful field of snapdragons and clover.

Morgan was all at once at peace. Now, she really felt in control of every action. However, for some reason, she now missed the guidance of the unseen hand. Loneliness crept into her heart, diminishing her peacefulness. There was only one way to have completion. The searching redhead gently rose into the air, deliberately inviting the guidance that had once controlled her every move. This time, however, things were different. The soaring woman knew that any deliberately chosen action was in her control. If something pulled at her attention, she could explore it. If Morgan wanted to thrill herself by zooming high into the clouds, that was possibly, too. However, for the moment, the explorative lass was content to seek out where she was being led.

Her enraptured spirit soared over lakes and rivers, mountains and valleys and across beautiful glens and down a sandy beach, feeling she was seeing a miracle. Something softly touched her hand. Startled, the girl turned to see Logan, flying beside her and reaching for her hand. "Just let me hold his hand," Morgan begged. "Logan, come to me Logan!"

"I am with you, my love," her partner responded sweetly. "Remember, no matter what happens, I'll be with you for eternity. Just think of me, keep me in your heart and you can feel my presence right there with you! After all, I'm only another part of you! I love you Morgan. Yet, I can only love you as much as you love yourself!"

Suddenly, a loud ringing noise echoed through her head. "Oh my God," she cried as the dream world began to quickly fade. Distances blurred by until the awakened lass found herself sitting on her knees in the middle of Logan's bed, a tear coursing down her left cheek.

"Concentrated attention," the distraught young woman reminded herself aloud in a voice that even she didn't recognize. "Intent and focus."

Morgan reached over and slammed the alarm clock button to silence it. "Oh my God, Logan, where are you?" The spinning lass regained her senses, reflecting back to reaching for her lover. Realizing his presence to be part of a dream, she let her mind play slowly through each individual scene, searching through the details as if picking for a missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. "Wow, is this symbolic or what? I've got to write this sucker down right now!" She wiped a tear from her face and reached hurriedly into the nightstand for a pad and pencil.



Morgan slipped off the soft bed, shaking her head, pondering the mass of unconscious symbolism that had just been presented her. "Come on, Morgan, time to get in the shower."

## Chapter 13

### Focus

Logan, now doused liberally with bug spray, picked up his search of the storage room where he had earlier left off. Sheesh, this is going to be a great smell to go to sleep with tonight, the fumigated lad thought. Positioning himself in front of the same musty, unpainted plywood shelf that had been so quickly abandoned only a few minutes earlier, he was greeted with a familiar female voice quietly calling out from just outside the open doorway.

"Jesus Christ!" Amanda exclaimed, swatting at the insects that covered her arms and legs. "Logan, where are you? And where the hell is that bug spray? Logan, you in here?" She peered through the dank gloom awaiting an answer.

"Yeah, I'm right here," Logan answered slowly, not wishing to divert further attention from his search. "Come on in and help me check this place out. The insect repellent is on the third shelf on your left, not far from the door. I'm back here in the far corner."

"There aren't any beasties or goulies around are there?" the cautious woman responded with a grimace.

"No, all I've seen are a couple of little pookas," Logan smirked, discontinuing his search and returning to the entry.

"Pookas?" Amanda asked herself, stepping into the damp dreariness. "What the hell is a pooka?" she finally asked Logan.

"Never mind, it was just a joke," he laughingly answered, meeting Amanda with a can of insect repellent just inside the dark room.

"Gosh, it smells like a cave in here," the young woman complained, wriggling up her nose. She held out her right arm toward Logan in a gesture of desired rescue.

Logan took Amanda's hand and began liberally applying the odiferous aerosol. By the time he completed spraying her upper body, she could no longer endure the noxious smell. She bolted, gasping and wheezing, out of the dank, cramped room and into the open air. "Jeez," the agonizing girl cried, waving her hand in front of her nose, "I think the idea is to kill the bugs, not me!"

Logan couldn't help but chuckle at the face she was making.

"Come on, it's not funny!" Amanda responded seriously.

"What the hell did they put in this stuff?" the fireman asked, pretending to read the label on the can. The two captives sat tentatively at the entrance of the lower room, allowing their sinuses to clear. "Well, at least I don't see any mosquitoes now," the fireman chuckled to the scolding eye of his cohort.

Logan returned cautiously to the still dankness of the storeroom. Amanda followed closely behind, poking here and there through the musty shelves, attempting to find anything that could be of service to them. "What a wonderful combination of mildew and bug spray," the snuffling woman commented, sneezing several times in succession. "Eau de Milde-bug," she commented in a stuffy voice.

Logan smiled, diligently continuing his exploration. Yeah, he could like this person. The searching lad made his way to a double closet with large double plywood doors, held together by a hook and eye lock. Quickly he flipped the hook and swung the doors wide against the shelves on either side. Even though his eyes were well accustomed to the dimness, the young man couldn't penetrate the gloom of the tight closet. He squinted his eyes and could almost define subtle shapes lurking in the background of the dark chamber. Afraid of what creatures might be making the dark, damp hole their home, he hesitated to blindly plunge into its contents. "Amanda, don't we have a flashlight upstairs?" the cautious captive asked, still peering into the shadows.

"Yeah, there was a flashlight in one of the duffle bags," she answered weakly, then snuffled and sneezed. "Hold on, I'll get it. I need to blow my nose anyway."

Logan heard the young woman shuffle out of the storeroom and up the stairs. "Shit!" she cried from a distance, sneezing rapidly several times on her ascent. The impatient fireman could wait no longer and was just about to delve into the dark recesses of the closet when he heard footsteps quickly returning down the stairs. Amanda trotted through the open external doors, shining the bright halogen light in front of her. "Here it is," she announced, shining the beam directly into Logan's eyes.

"I see," he responded gruffly, shielding his sight against the suddenly bright glare.

"At least I could a minute ago."

"Oh, sorry." Amanda refocused the piercing ray of light into the waiting darkness of the closet. "I didn't mean to blind. . . hey, what's this?" she slipped into the cramped space and began tugging on something large and heavy.

"I don't know. I can't see right now," he commented snidely. Several seconds passed before Logan's eyes would readjust to the level of light in the storage room. Gradually, the blinded captive began making out the outline of the object that Amanda was tugging on. It was a large, square, rubberized canvas looking package about four feet tall and two feet wide. Its dark green exterior had some faded lettering across it, but, most of it was obscured by Amanda's straining body. "What is that?" Logan asked.

"A life raft, or so it says," Amanda said straining. "It's. . . too. . . heavy for. . ."

"Look out, let me get it." Logan responded excitedly. "This is it. This is what we were looking for!" He let Amanda slip quickly by him. Repositioning himself in the spot that Amanda had just vacated, he stood sternly in front of the heavy package. "Jeez, this thing is heavy," he replied with a grunt.

Half carrying and half sliding his cargo, the bodybuilder pulled it roughly out of the tight closet. He weaved through the narrow aisles, between the full shelves, through the storeroom doors, and out into the diffused light. Amanda tagged along behind, skipping and jumping, poking on the back of his shoulder.

"Is it going to work?" the excited lass kept asking. "Can we get out of here on this?"

"You sound just like a kid with a new bike," Logan laughed. "Yes, if we can get this thing inflated, we can get out of here! We'll just have to figure out which way to go."

Unbuckling the nylon webbed straps that held the package together, the firefighter slipped the large raft out of its case. It was an exciting moment. Neither of them could contain their excitement. Amanda danced around as Logan struggled to unroll and layout the heavy canvas bundle. "Yeah!" he whooped, getting it all situated and surveying the results. "Yeah!"

"Will it work?" she asked again. "Come on, fill it up!"

Finding the compressed gas cylinders that automatically filled the raft, Logan carefully read the instructions and inspected the seal around each filler tube. Everything seemed in order. He then listened closely, shaking the metal cylinders, in turn, to check their contents.

"Hurry up," Amanda prodded.

"I want to make sure this thing is going to work before I do anything rash," he responded, continuing his inspection of the small vessel. "Seems like everything is ok."

Logan stood and visually scanned a pathway to the edge of the small island. He looked in several directions before settling on a route that ended where he figured they had originally landed. "We need to move the raft to the edge of the water," the young man instructed her. "It'll be a lot easier to move now than it will when it's all filled."

Amanda moved around the side of the deflated boat and positioned herself between it and the water's edge. Bending over, she took hold of the smooth, thick rope that was laced around the perimeter of the small craft and tugged on it, testing its weight. "You really expect me to move this thing?" the frail girl asked with an expression of complete exasperation.

"I can handle most of the weight. I would just like a little help to make sure that nothing happens to it, is all," Logan returned. "First, we need to look over the path really carefully to get rid of any sticks or anything that might puncture the raft as we drag it over here."

The focused lad turned, beginning to slowly inspect the path to the launch site. Occasionally, he would stoop to pick a small branch or other piece of rigid material out of the shin high, coarse grass and whisk it aside. Soon, Amanda was walking along beside him, kicking at clumps of weeds and digging at bits of debris.

The two were within twelve feet of the water's edge when a loud, chilling hiss stopped them in their tracks. "Don't move," Logan instructed quietly. He scanned the area ahead of them, following the sound that had stood his hair on end. Spying a head high stand of thick, stalky growth just at the water's edge on his left, he concentrated his efforts to ascertain the origin of the noise. Suddenly the thick growth of weeds parted violently and a large alligator charged through like a narrow, toothy Sherman tank. The reptile stopped with half of its body still embedded in the heavy growth, opened its jagged, gaping jaw and again hissed like a demon at the two of them.

Amanda, who was positioned between the vicious beast and Logan, jumped backwards into him, almost knocking the large man to the ground. Logan grabbed her, "Don't move," he reminded the panic stricken girl, whispering forcefully and wrapping her up in his thick arms. "If you don't move he probably won't attack. We can't out run him."

The huge gator suddenly made another three step charge at them, hissing more vehemently than ever. It was all Logan could manage to keep himself and Amanda in place with the creature now only two and a half yards from their feet.

The two captives could smell the sickening odor of rotting flesh on the breath of the monster. That, in itself, was almost enough to overwhelm them. Logan could feel Amanda shivering uncontrollably in his tight grasp. His own knees felt weak and his

mind was deluged with ideas to figure a way out of their situation. He had never confronted a hostile threat from a wild beast before. His mind was feeding up everything that he had ever heard, read or seen about alligators. None of it was too pleasing or promising.

The scaly creature slowly moved one paw forward, continuing a steady glare at them with malevolent, beady eyes. In a move of animalistic contempt, it settled itself, belly down, on the wet spongy ground. The weight of the gator was so heavy that Logan could hear an audible sucking squish as its mass imbued onto the saturated soil. Small jets of water arose around its scaly belly like a football player stepping on a soaked sponge.

"Don't move," Logan quietly reminded the shaking woman. "He's bound to lose interest in a few minutes."

The now reclining lizard gradually reduced its stare, its big green eyelids drooping over their black protruding eyeballs. When the creature's eyes became half closed Logan whispered into Amanda's ear, "Back up real slow with me. Don't make any sudden moves or noises. We'll back out of here, straight to the stairs." Amanda could only nod her approval.

Logan slowly and deliberately slid his right foot one step backward, then leaned his weight softly onto the squishy ground, pulling Amanda gingerly along with him. Next, his left foot inched toward the waiting safety of the stair. Right, then left, right, then left. The couple slowly put another five feet of distance between them and the lethargic reptile.

On the next step, Logan caught his heel on a thick, high clump of the coarse grass that covered the tiny island. He made a quick half step to catch his balance, pulling Amanda roughly against him. The suddenly added weight was more than the stout fireman could compensate for. The two tenuous escapees pummeled tenuously onto the soggy ground.

Instantly, the great beast rose to full attention. It stood high on its short, thick legs, looking more like a Paleolithic transcendent than a dweller of current time. Visions of being eaten by a wild beast revisited Logan's thoughts. He could almost feel the jagged jaws of the huge creature grinding on his legs, pulling him to a watery, drowning death before being devoured by who knows how many vermin. Or worse yet, images flashed by of Amanda being snatched, screaming, from his grasp and dragged roughly into the waiting darkness of the swamp water. All he would be able to do is stand uselessly by, witnessing the horror of the helpless victim's impending death. His inundated thoughts danced with macabre possibilities.

The gator quickly recovered the several feet of open area that they had gained with one maddening rush. Logan could feel Amanda suck in a deep lung full of air, then release it in one long, low cry of utter terror. The charging reptile stopped dead in its tracks, right at Amanda's feet. It was so close that she could have kicked its knotty green

snout. The malevolent beast stared up at them with dark, malicious eyes, hissing a blood curdling, smelly rasp of a sound that Logan was sure he would never forget.

All of Amanda's muscles were tight as a mass of gnarled oak tree in Logan's grasp. The fireman finally gave into the fear that accosted him, forgetting all sense of planning and sensibility. He pushed his heels deeply into the soft turf, dragging Amanda along with him, crawling backwards toward the landing of the stair. The terror of the moment clouded all of Logan's senses. Thoughts ran by so quickly that he could no longer control them. The terrorized young man just wanted to run and scream.

A sudden noise above the horror-stricken couple brought Logan partially back to his wits. He couldn't make out its source until a voice rang out into the thickening air. "Hey, what are you guys do. . . . Liz began quizzically then stopped abruptly with a scream of total recognition.

"G. . . gun. . . get gun," was all that the stammering fireman could manage in reply. He heard the screen door slam, followed by running footsteps and Elizabeth's screaming voice threatening everything from the beast to Heaven itself. A sudden loud pop filled the air as she shot wildly into space, running down the steep stairway. The surprising young woman charged down the stairs like a madwoman in the bloodlust of battle. Invincibly, she attacked the creature with all her thoughts and might.

The huge reptile shifted its attention toward the new attacker, then made a sudden lunge away from her, toward the murky swamp. It reached the water's edge at an unbelievable speed with the screaming Elizabeth closing in on its slime covered tail. The scaly beast disappeared almost instantly into the dark, muddy water. Elizabeth continued her charge all the way to the spot where it was last seen, discharging two more rounds into the dingy swamp.

Logan and Amanda lay frozen to the soggy ground, unable to do anything but quiver in terror of the event that had just taken place. Elizabeth gazed into the waiting swamp and screamed a primal scream into the still air, then collapsed onto the ground at the water's edge. Tears suddenly filled her eyes. The spent woman dropped the handgun into the muck beside her.

Amanda began a slow, intense sob which turned into a loud wail, filling the tree infested area around them like a Banshee in the depths of mourning. She curled into a ball in Logan's arms, pressing her face tightly as possible into his heaving chest. "Oh my God. Oh my God!" the quivering girl repeated over and over under her breath. The fireman held her tightly as heavy tears coursed freely down his own cheeks.

Rubbing Amanda's shoulder, Logan reassured her, "It's okay. It's okay." However, he was still unsure of their safety, himself. His mind fought for some kind of control, some kind of reassurance that he could regain command of their situation. It was an elusive goal. All that the overwhelmed young man could take comfort in was the fact that the immediate danger was gone. They were at least safe for the moment.

Logan slowly gained his feet, pulling Amanda gently to his body. He held her tightly, feeling her warm, quaking body very alive in his arms. His tears ran freely for the first time in recent history. The sobbing firefighter didn't try to speak, he didn't know what to say. Just being alive with Amanda's unharmed body in his arms was plenty at that moment.

Elizabeth soon joined the others in a huddle of compassion. Not a word was spoken, but all knew they shared a common feeling of gratitude, relief and appreciation of life itself. A cool wind rattled the leaves above the trio. The sound of distant thunder rolled heavily through the breeze.

Morgan pulled into the Keohane's driveway and looked at her watch. Five forty three, yeah, she was here in plenty of time. Why had she agreed to attend Logan's wake? He was still alive and she had every intention of waiting for him! Opening the door of her car, the struggling redhead slid out of the seat and stood on the hardness of the cement driveway. She gently closed the door, making her way to the front door of the cozy house.

The sun, nearing the western horizon, cast a golden glow over the yellowing lawn. For some odd reason, Morgan's mind slipped into a story she had gleaned from one of her books of Irish myth about Tír-na-nOg, the ancient Irish place of eternal youth. The young Irishwoman looked into the huge orange disk of the lowering sun, following an instinctive desire to recite a prayer to an ancient deity.

"Brigid, bring him back to me. In your journey through the other world, just bring him back to me." Morgan slowly made her way to the entry steps, watching the sun slowly set into the unknown. "Soon, Logan Keohane, soon." She entered the front door of the house.

## Chapter 14

### Recovery

Amanda brushed against the back of Logan's hair, taking a seat beside him on the faded wooden porch at the head of the entry stairs. The night sounds of the swamp were

just beginning as the last vestiges of daylight faded into the grayness of late evening. Above them, one single star winked through a small opening in the dense canopy of growth, peeping between the building clouds that floated rapidly by.

Logan's gaze was intent on that little spot of light. Even Amanda's presence and the soft touch of her arm across his muscled shoulders didn't distract his fixed attention. Intently, the young man stared toward Heaven.

"Do you believe in God?" Amanda eventually asked resolutely.

"Yes, I do," he answered quietly, still staring at the peeping little star. "I don't guess you could call me religious. . . hell, you better not call me a religious anything, but I do have a strong belief in a divine being of some kind. I don't quite know how to describe it. I don't think of God as male or as female. I don't even think of God as having a physical form. To me, God just is. All that is."

"Funny you should say that." The young woman smiled, slowly shaking her head. "I was taught to believe that God was this old man living in a place called Heaven that was inaccessible to all but a few. In fact, a very select few. All he did all day was sit around watching for us to do something wrong and zap us." She snickered again and added, "I guess that's the way the leaders of the church keep us in alignment with their beliefs and under their control. They teach 'God is love' as a concept but really press the idea of vengeance and retribution." The animated girl slapped her hand across her leg with a loud pop, startling Logan. She then scraped a smashed mosquito carcass off the palm of her hand. "For a while it kind of turned me against the idea of there really even being a God, but the more I think about it, the more I'm like you. I believe in something, something divine, just not the mass market concept of God, know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I've heard the same stuff myself," the young man continued, recovering from his start. "It seems as if people have done a really good job of turning a concept of love and grace into a religion of fear and punishment. I guess the idea I have now is that we're all part of God and God is a part of us. You know, maybe we're all part of a greater collective consciousness or something. I guess, if you think of it in a more physical way, we could each be a quantum particle that combines with others to make up an atom. That atom, that we call our Solar System, is a part of a larger cell, called the Universe. In turn, that cell is a small part of whatever comprises the whole body of God. We are all associated in an overall purpose, fully independently functional, yet, each an integral part of a much more elaborate whole.

Logan returned his eyes skyward, thoughts of the infinite space that lay behind the dark, rolling clouds above him gave the awed lad a slight shiver. "Wow, from that idea, look at how much power we all have to create anything. I can feel pretty insignificant to think of myself as only a small part of one little atom. But, it's just as conversely awe inspiring to think of the possibilities and the power that I can have as part of the whole," Logan philosophized, surprising himself with the words and ideas that had flowed from his own lips. The young man found words as though he had pondered them for decades.



Actually, he had never really given the matter that much serious thought until tonight. Thinking back over the unexpected ideas Logan marveled at the way he felt. It's good to get in a really quiet place sometimes and let the real self, the one that is truly wise, maybe even ancient, surface and really listen to what it has to say, he surmised.

"Jesus," Amanda responded wide eyed, then put her hand to her lips, snickering at the colloquialism. "I guess I never really thought about being a real physical part of God. That's almost a scary thought."

"Or exciting," he added with a wry grin. The two fellow captives sat in silence for a several moments. Logan turned his attention inward, losing all contact with physical presence. The wandering fireman, instead, began to explore across the vast recesses of his active mind. What was it that he really wanted for his life? To be with Morgan, first of all. But, where? How? I really don't think it is Houston anymore, but where else would I go?

Amanda's voice quickly brought him back to reality, interrupting his thoughts just as an answer seemed within reach. "The only thing I'm not sure about in all that, is why God lets all of these bad things happen in the world. I mean, I know you're a fireman and you must have seen some pretty nasty situations. How could God let them happen if he is really a loving being?" she returned quizzically.

"I really don't know," Logan responded somberly, forgetting his dilemma and shifting his eyes back to the bright star in the now inky dark sky. "I guess I really have come to not believe in the concepts of true good and evil. I mean, we really can't see the 'big picture' of any situation. I've seen some things that seemed just totally horrid when they happened. But, in the end, the good things that came out of those situations far outweighed the bad. So, was what happened really bad? Or, did some event just happen and good things came from it?" The fireman shifted slightly, turning his gaze to the shadowed girl beside him. "I guess the whole trick is to really get people to understand at least a premise of a much larger concept of life, then take responsibility for their own actions in that concept."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. The old "ignorance is bliss theory" is shot right down the tubes with that idea. If people could understand that not every little action has to make sense to us as it happens then we could look for the good in every situation. Kind of puts a damper on the Devil theory, too, doesn't it? Awesome." Amanda silently stared out into the darkened swamp with a feel of reverence exuding from every pore in her body. "Wow," was all she could mutter after several minutes of silence. "I've never really thought about this kind of stuff before. I've always considered myself a true realist, if I couldn't see it, touch it, feel it and/or hear it, then it didn't exist. All of that esoteric mumbo-jumbo was for the space cadets. I don't know why I've so suddenly shifted my ideas so much."

Logan cocked his head to hear the pulsing heartbeat of life that flowed so thickly from the dark swamp. Little splashes echoed through the heavy trees and frogs sang into

the darkness, creating a continuous symphony of nature. The fireman returned his attention to Amanda and answered, "You know, maybe those questions were there all along, but you were just afraid to look at them. Maybe just settling down and getting into a quiet place lets your true feelings come up. Feelings that were hidden even from yourself. I've kind of found that glimpsing the hand of death can also change a person's perspective of a lot of things. We had a pretty close glimpse of that possibility earlier. You know, I don't believe in accidents, I think everything has a creative beginning.

Amanda squirmed. "That's a really wild thought," she answered uncomfortably. "But, what if none of this is real or true?" she asked with a funny look in her eye.

"Then I guess that is part of the game, too. Reality might be so different that we can't even comprehend what it is. But, for right now that satisfies me. It's fun believing that, so I think I will, for a while at least. Maybe I'll change my mind tomorrow. I have the power of God to do that," Logan added, smiling into the warm night. "Or not."

Elizabeth stepped through the screen door, sitting between Amanda and Logan. The group was so tight that their shoulders touched. Elizabeth began absently rubbing the backs of the other two, then draped her arms around each of their shoulders. "Wow, feels serious out here," she replied quietly. "Hey guys, I think we should celebrate. I mean, I snatched you both from the jaws of death today and that's a great excuse. You could both be 'gator bait right now. So now it's time to celebrate victory!"

She stood up, whisking by them into the cabin, returning promptly with three small Mason jars and a large bottle of red wine. Setting them on the porch behind her sister and Logan, the scurrying girl reentered the small house and returned with a lit candle. "We don't have to be constantly depressed and morbid. Just as long as we keep our wits, I don't see why we shouldn't enjoy a moment together in peace. No matter the surrounding circumstances."

Logan smiled at the younger sister, "I have to agree with you there. One of the major things I've been dealing with lately is my habit of taking things too seriously, never being able to enjoy the celebration of a victory. Well, lasses, that's coming to a halt right now. Prisoner or no prisoner, kidnappers or no kidnappers, I'm going to enjoy the peace and company of this evening!" The fireman took the wine bottle, unscrewing the metal cap. Pouring three glasses of the ruby liquid, he raised the glass to the women. "Sláinte agus fad saol agat!" the Irishman toasted then took a sip of the wine.

"What's that?" Elizabeth asked Logan curiously.

"It's an Irish toast. Roughly, 'good health and a long life to you'. It's one of the few things I can remember my Grandfather teaching me. Of course, he used a pint of Guinness!"

"Are you Irish, then?" the younger girl asked again curiously.

"Very," he responded proudly.

"Have you ever been there? Ireland, I mean?" Amanda chimed in.

"Yeah, I've spent quite a bit of time there, especially in my childhood. I still have a lot of family there, I'm first generation American."

"What part of the country are your relatives from?" Amanda asked again.

"Oh, several areas, but primarily County Cork."

"I've heard it's a beautiful place and the people are really friendly." Elizabeth rejoined. "I'd like to visit there one day myself."

"Yeah, the country is beautiful. And the people pride themselves on their country, even though Ireland has its problems, too. You know? Funny, I used to relish being in Ireland, I never wanted to leave to come home. I was in love with everything about the country, the people, the language, the whole lifestyle. Life there is so much simpler, straight forward and intimate. Then, I got older, got involved with the 'in crowd' around school and decided that the country life was way too backward for me. I began craving action. It seemed the only excitement worth pursuing was in a city, so I began considering myself a city lad, far too refined and action loving for a small town, especially for country life," Logan responded, a longing in his heart that hadn't been felt for a long time. This is it, the answer that had eluded his thoughts only a short time before! Of course! A warm feeling of recognition flowed through the young Irishman's body. "Funny, but now, I suddenly feel so much different. If I could choose anywhere in the world to lay my head right now it would be back in Ireland, sitting with Morgan next to me in front of a smoking peat fire in a warm cottage. It felt so much like home back then. The lifestyle isn't even remotely similar to American big-city life." The young man paused, reflecting again on the words that were coming from his heart and not his head.

Logan shifted his body once more to face both girls more directly. "It's just that," the reminiscing fireman continued, "I recently had an experience that, at first, didn't seem to have a whole lot of lasting effect on me. As time goes by, though, I can feel an impact at such a deep level that I'm really beginning to question all of my ideas and desires of everything. The stuff that happened today just reinforced the whole feeling and power of that experience. Life suddenly seems so tenuous now. You see, I died about a month ago, at a fire scene,"

Logan took another sip from his glass, staring across its dark rim into the rich liquid below and felt a lump form in his throat. "Obviously they brought me back to life, but I don't know how long I was out. I mean, I can't really remember the details like some people say they can, you know, the white lights and tunnels and everything, it's just the after effects have been building up pretty steadily for some time now." The fireman moved uncomfortably, shifting his eyes out into the darkness of the swamp.

Buzzing insects began surrounding the candle sounding like a squadron of dive bombers flying past his ears. An owl hooted hauntingly in the distance, followed by a second hoot, in answer, creating a deep sense of loneliness and isolation in Logan. "I guess I need some time to sort all my feelings out. I'm definitely not afraid of death anymore, but now I feel that I have so much life to live! I don't want to miss a minute of it! I want to live life fully; physically, spiritually, emotionally, every way that I can! I want to really live life, you know? I mean, I've found someone now that I really think I can share the rest of my life with. Morgan's like no one else I've ever known and I want to experience her love every minute of every day whether we're physically together or not! Maybe that's what this is all about," the pondering young man continued seriously, looking around him, "really experiencing life! And as far as Ireland goes, I'd be back there in a heartbeat, just as long as Morgan would go with me" he added, almost under his breath.

Both women stared at him in utter amazement, "But, I thought you were on your way to work when you were kidnapped?" Elizabeth quizzed him quietly.

"I had only been back to work for a couple of days and I really didn't want to go that day," Logan answered somberly, thinking back on the morning of their abduction. "Morgan even tried to coax me into calling in sick, but good ole' dependable me, I had a responsibility to the public. It was a matter of honor to uphold that duty. On top of that, I couldn't afford to lose my job, physically or emotionally. It has been one of the most important things in my life for a long time. I even, once upon a time, had aspirations of being Fire Chief. Now I don't know why I wanted that. I guess it was the only fulfillment that I could find for a long period in my life. It also satisfied my excitement lust.

"Now, here I am with nothing but time on my hands and confusion in my brain. Everyone back home probably thinks I'm dead, so, who knows what will be waiting when we get back. If only I'd listened to my intuition I might not. . . ."

"You wouldn't be here," Amanda finished his sentence, "And you might have never learned the things that you have. Neither would we!"

"So, if you've changed your whole idea of life, why don't you just go back to Ireland? You've got family there. I know it would be a pretty hefty step, but why not, if that's what you really want?" Elizabeth chimed in, questioning his real intention.

Logan stared vacantly into the night with familiar, beloved scenes of Cork, Kerry, Conor Pass and other Irish sights taking over his imagination. "Money," the fireman answered hollowly. "Jobs in Ireland aren't the most plentiful in the world and I'm definitely not a rich man." Logan took another long drink from his glass and turned to face the two girls. "Also, I don't know that Morgan would want to live in Ireland."

The night sounds of the swamp began coming alive in the still darkness. The frogs croaked and night birds called into the night. Nocturnal insects gathered around the

flickering candle, perishing one by one in the golden flame. Silently the trio sipped their wine and dreamed, each of their own Heaven. Logan again looked up at the small patch of sky that was visible above him. Two bright stars now peeked through the mixed canopy of trees and clouds. He felt a deep longing to see Morgan, to touch her firm, warm body. The homesick young man could almost feel his lover next to him, taste the sweetness of her kiss on his lips.

Then, the half dreaming lad thought of Ireland, his new-old dream of having a life there. Slowly at first, the two dreams combined. Logan could feel the cool freshness of the Irish countryside, smell the brisk, fragrant air and see the green hills and blue rivers. Next to him, Morgan's hand tightly joined his, delighting in their new surroundings. His sweetheart could share his excitement and love for this country. They could share this dream.

"You know," Amanda interrupted his vision, "If everything we were talking about earlier were true, nothing could stop you, at anything. You could find a way to be where you wanted to be and do what you really wanted to do. The means would show up somehow. If those ideas were all true, the only thing stopping you is you, and a limited perspective of possibilities."

For a moment Logan was taken aback. He was stunned at the directness, yet, the wisdom of that statement, especially coming from Amanda. Quickly exploring that idea somehow made his dream seem more real and attainable, yet, at the same time, brought a deep feeling of remorse to him. "God, I wish I knew how to do that. Getting ideas are easier than putting them into practice. I can sit here all day long and say I know that I am the only one stopping me, but it doesn't really get me one step closer to Ireland."

"What are you guys talking about now?" Elizabeth questioned, looking back and forth between them. "I must have missed something. . . profound." Her eyes sparkled in the darkness. Logan could swear that they actually lit up with physically apparent light.

"We were talking about God and being a part of God. How we can create anything if we are really part of the everything that is God. Nothing is impossible and nothing accidental," Amanda responded unexpectedly.

"Wow sis, you were talking about that? I thought you despised that kind of stuff. I'm shocked!" Elizabeth retorted, grabbing at her chest, pretending she was having a heart attack.

"I don't know, after all that happened today, I feel different. Maybe I feel a little more vulnerable, or mortal, you know what I mean? Maybe everything that I thought was important, or even real, was just an illusion. Maybe things are a little less black and white than I once believed."

Elizabeth stared at her sister with mouth open. The stunned girl didn't quite know how to take what she was hearing. The turn around was about as sudden as anything Liz

had ever seen. She wanted to speak, but didn't know what to say. "You always laughed at me, calling me a dreamer and all when I talked about this kind of stuff," she finally uttered, amazed. "Remember, mom used to call you her little realist, even when we were children! Oh God, once when she took us to church, all the way home you were asking why we couldn't see God and if God couldn't come right out and talk to us why should people pray to him!" Liz paused, smiling at Amanda. "Oh, and what about the time you and she spent two days arguing. . . uh, excuse me, discussing how there could be no such thing as radio waves. You swore that the picture on the TV had to be coming from the electrical cord, not out of thin air! You almost drove mom nuts with that one!" She snickered, searching for more examples of her sister's practicality. "And there's that time when. . ."

Amanda cut her off suddenly, "All right! We get the point! So, I'm changing my mind! I read somewhere that true love is really the willingness to allow something to change, will you let me now? Change, I mean."

"Sis, I support your change in any way you want. You just kind of caught me off guard."

"Well, since we're talking about kid stuff, I can remember you driving dad crazy with spending all of your money as soon as you got it, and never cleaning your room until he had to come sit in there and forcible make you!" Amanda smiled warmly at the girl, "I will allow you to change, too! I can now see you as a very responsible adult, a very good friend of mine, not my kid sister or my nagging child!"

"Thanks, sis. That means more to me that you'll probably ever know. I love you and I'm really glad you're my sister." The grateful girl reached out, wrapped her arms around Amanda's neck and hugged her tightly. The two sisters sat back down, arm in arm, allowing the quiet of the evening to encapsulate the small group.

The swamp noises suddenly seemed louder in the artificial stillness. The evening grew deeper, yet dawn was just breaking on some other level of consciousness. The pair of owls hooted to each other again in the distance, adding to the surrealism of the moment. Logan had feelings and memories resurfacing that he didn't even know he had. He stared into the darkness with his life passing before his eyes. Everything from childhood memories to the latest experience at being kidnapped intertwined through his consciousness in no particular order.

"Logan, oh Logan. Are you still with us?" Elizabeth prodded, bringing him back into the reality of the moment.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Did I miss anything?" Logan answered, still partially in a daze.

"Depends on where you've been. We've been talking to you for the last five minutes. Do you have some kind of medical condition that we should know about?" Amanda asked seriously.

"No. Sorry, I don't know quite how to explain it. I just kind of sailed off into the ozone."

"I'm exhausted and it's time for bed. Will you take the first watch tonight, Logan? Goodnight," Amanda announced not allowing time for interruption. The surprising woman then stood and disappeared into the cabin without awaiting an answer.

Elizabeth broke the silence after Amanda departed. "I've been thinking. I'd kind of like to explore a little of the wildlife and stuff around here. There's a lot of pretty neat stuff crawling around this island. If you have some time I'd like you to explore a little with me."

"Okay, if we get a little time," Logan answered absently. "The main thing I want to concentrate on right now is getting back to civilization. I've got a lot of things to do to get us ready to get off this island."

"Okay, well, I think I'm ready to turn in, too." Elizabeth answered quietly. She drained her glass and stood to her feet. Leaning against the porch railing, she asked Logan seriously, "Do you think I'm pretty?"

The question took him aback. "Ya. . . Yeah, I think you're very attractive."

"No, I didn't say attractive. That sounds like the ole' 'good personality' thing. I asked, am I pretty?"

He was now a little more prepared to answer. "Yes, I think you are a very pretty woman. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason. Just curious I guess." Without another word she picked up the flickering candle and glided into the dark house, leaving Logan to his own thoughts.

Morgan's image overcame him again. The beautiful woman's image flooded his senses so fully that she was almost there in physical form. My God, Morgan, I miss you so much. I wish that I was with you tonight. I'll be back to you soon, I promise. Then we'll go to Ireland, just you and me. Who knows, maybe we'll even end up there permanently. I just know that from now on, wherever I am, I want you with me. Logan lowered his head as a small tear slipped from his right eye, flowing down his cheek.

The sounds of the night seemed to close in on him, sitting alone in the darkness. A dim flash of light lit up the night sky. Followed soon by another, slightly brighter. "Shit, it can't rain again," he commented to himself.

Morgan stood with the Keohanes as the last of the mourners filed out of the sullen house. Anne Keohane sniffled and blew her nose into the overused tissue in her hand. "That was lovely of all our friends to come by with their sympathies. Maybe we should go ahead and set up his memorial, after all they'll be bringing his body back to Houston tomorrow. I still can't believe that he's gone. Oh Lord, did someone give him last rights? Oh, surely they did! Maybe we should call Father O'Dooley just in case." She turned and walked toward the couch, dropping her weight as if completely deflated. "Where do I go now?"

Yancy ambled tiredly across the living room to join his wife. "Now there, lass," he comforted her, putting a strong arm across the sniffing woman's shoulder. "Logan would be wantin' us to remember him as we loved him, not in sympathy. Why, I bet if the lad could speak to us right now he'd be a'smilin' and tellin' you how much he wanted some of your grilled Salmon in dill sauce. That was always his favorite, you know. When we'd go to Ireland that's the first thing he'd tell his grandma, 'Please, granny, make me some of your lovely salmon!' Even before he said hi to his Grandfather!" The older man forced a smile, trying to hide his agony.

Morgan stood by the doorway empathizing with the mourning parents. She was trying hard not to get caught up in their emotions. "I really had better be going," Morgan addressed them somberly. The reeling lass wanted to tell them that she knew that Logan was still alive and would be back soon. Even the autopsy report couldn't positively identify the man's body as Logan. Inconclusive identity, the official report said. There was still room for hope! However, that possibility seemed to be meaningless to the parents at that moment. They didn't seem to have a reality of anything other than Logan's apparent death, never to be seen again. His parents' minds were set on the reality before their eyes, not on giving credence to any possibilities that existed in other possible realms. Morgan found the ability to feel deep compassion for the Keohanes without sharing intimately in their feelings. "Call me if you need anything or if I can help in any way," the young woman concluded, stepping toward the door.

A chilled breeze met Morgan at the door, her breath steaming under the yellow porch light. Briskly, she shuffled to her car, still spinning from the day's activities. The shivering redhead clawed through her deep purse for the car keys, noticing for the first time the crisp brightness of the full harvest moon. She stopped searching and scanned the area around her in amazement of the details that were enhanced by the silvery glow. "I wonder what the moon looks like in Ireland?" the entranced Irishwoman wondered aloud. "Logan, you and I are going to explore Ireland when you get back." Why did she have that desire so strongly now? She had always liked to travel and explore, Ireland being one destination she wanted to see. Never, though, had she a desire so strongly as this, to just to pick up and be somewhere else, having totally new experiences with a single, intimate partner.

Morgan got into her car and backed out of the Keohanes driveway. The anxious redhead wanted to be somewhere, just not home or anywhere indoors. She longed to be



outdoors, under the soft, silvery light of the full moon, feeling the magic of the moonbeams touch her, setting her senses alive.

Morgan found herself automatically driving to Logan's apartment complex. Yeah, that would be a good place. There's a little landscaped duck pond in the central courtyard with a fountain and all. It would be perfect. It was even late enough that she would probably have the whole place to myself. Except maybe an occasional strolling security guard. The young woman knew everything would be just fine if she stayed in alignment with the greater part of herself, allowing a higher sense of consciousness to guide her decisions. Nothing was greater than her spirit.

Morgan reached the complex, locked her car and strolled toward the little lake. Here, the moon seemed even brighter against the starry sky. The mystified lass gazed into the inky heavens, feeling the immenseness of the Universe around her. Funny word, she thought, Universe; One verse, one song. A symphony of all matter playing in one accord toward an aligned ending. The lass shivered, more at the thought of the grand infinity around her than the coldness of the chilled air.

Pulling the tight leather jacket a little closer around her, Morgan peered amazedly into the fathomless twinkling sky. Slowly, she ambled across a small wooden bridge, eyes Heavenward rather than on where she was walking. A large boulder, standing directly in front of the wandering girl, caught her mystified attention, she had never noticed it before. The stone stood on its end, about four feet high. Very dolmenish it seemed in the silvered light; mystical, almost magical. Beyond, lay a small body of placid water, reflecting the moonbeams, catching them on its surface and casting them in odd directions as if playing some sort of cosmic game. Good, the fountain wasn't working.

Seating herself at the base of the large stone, Morgan rested her back against it, staring across the glistening pool. She felt both huge and small, witnessing the immenseness of the surrounding creation. Everything seemed so close to her, yet everything seemed so far. Morgan allowed her mind to relax, her thoughts becoming much less frequent. Eventually she was no longer thinking. "Oh, Logan, that isn't you they're bringing back tomorrow, is it? It just can't be! You wouldn't just run off and leave me like that. Someone else had to have stolen your truck and wrecked it. But, where are YOU? Come back, Logan. Please come back to me alive."

The tree frogs singing around Morgan croaked in unison and the night birds called into the stillness with their distant chirps. "We have so much more of life to live." the lass whispered, closing her eyes and relaxing against the large stone.

"Good evening, miss," an unexpected voice startled her. "Is everything okay?"

Morgan looked around to see a friendly security guard patrolling the grounds. "Wonderful," the smiling lass responded. "Lovely evening isn't it?"

# Chapter 15

## Passion Play

A bright flash of light and a loud rumbling woke Logan with a start. Instantly and instinctively, the slumbering fireman rolled out of his bed, reaching for his pants. "Where are they?" he wondered, groping in the darkness for the feel of cotton cloth. Another flash lit up the room with a dazzling electric glow, followed immediately by a resounding roll of thunder. Logan abandoned his search, realizing he wasn't at the firestation awaiting an emergency call.

"My God, I'm so conditioned that I didn't even notice that the room was still dark," he scolded himself. That thought kind of concerned him. Still in a state of semi-consciousness, the sleepy young man allowed his mind to wander.

Muffled raindrops drummed overhead as another flash of lightning lit up the dark night. The thunder grew louder and more frequent as the rain droned onto the tin roof above Logan, hypnotizing the sleepy fireman into a deep slumber. "I don't want to wake up again until morning," he instructed his sluggish brain, leaving the waking world.

Next thing Logan remembered was slowly regaining consciousness to the continuous droning of a pouring rain. He laboriously cut through the cobwebs coating his awareness until finding himself enjoying the warm bed and friendly darkness surrounding him. The sound of soft footsteps startled the fireman wide awake. Oh shit, had the kidnappers come back at night against his expectation? Was there an animal in the room that would soon attack him? He lay still in the impenetrable darkness, afraid to move lest he be discovered by the intruder.

"Logan, you awake?" a familiar whispering voice soothed the young man's panic. "Logan, can I come in for a minute?"

"Amanda, is that you? Uh, okay. Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, I'm just feeling a little afraid and lonely. Can I come in here with you for a while?" the girl asked quietly, sitting gently onto the edge of the dark bed. A bright flash of lightening lit the room with a dazzling brightness, illuminating Amanda's white nightshirt like a specter, then left them once again in total darkness. An instant rumble of thunder rattled the windows and bed for several seconds. "Oh, Logan, I'm so scared. Please hold me for a while."

The surprised firefighter hesitantly put his arm out to the young woman. Amanda slid silently under the musty sheets and blanket, snuggling tightly against Logan. She shivered slightly. The falling rain hummed endlessly on the tin roof as another flash of lightening lit the small room, followed in a few seconds by a more distant roll of thunder. I'm glad I found this pair of sweats to sleep in, he thought shyly, holding his companion loosely in his arms. Logan was feeling more than a little awkward at the moment.

"Can I kiss you, Logan?" Amanda asked, nuzzling closely up to his ear. Without awaiting a reply, the young girl kissed the Irishman softly on the lips. She drew back, "Won't you kiss me back? Just kiss me, Logan."

"Amanda, I . . . I can't. I'm too much in love with Morgan. I couldn't do that to her. I'm really sorry."

Silence answered him. The dark figure remained motionless against a bright flash of lightening, then rapidly slipped from his side to sit at the edge of the bed.

"Boy, that makes me feel just wonderful," Amanda finally answered at a whisper. "I get left on a deserted island with the only committed man on earth. I'm sorry I'm not Morgan, I just thought that. . . ." She stood bruskiy to the side of the bed, cloaked in darkness. "I'm sorry I'm not good enough to. . . ." The dejected girl sniffled deeply. Logan could sense her shame through the deepness of the night.

"Amanda, it's not at all that you're not good enough. You're a wonderful woman. It's just that I've committed myself to Morgan. She feels like the other half of my soul," the struggling lad answered seriously.

The tapering rain beat a soft melody through the darkness as Logan reached out across the bed toward the standing woman. "I really do like you Amanda, a lot. Under different circumstances I would enjoy being here with you very much. But, I really am in love with Morgan and I keep my promises."

Without another word, to flash of brilliant lightening, Amanda slipped through the dark doorway. A loud clap of thunder coordinated perfectly with Logan's head flopping onto his pillow.

The dazed fireman stared into the dark ceiling full of wondering thoughts. His head spun, questioning everything. Why did this happen? Did he do the right thing? "Well, at

least I feel desired," he consoled himself, slowly drifting back into the dream world. Erotic fantasies spun through his dreams like vultures picking the bones of a fresh kill. Animal lusts haunted him, taking turns tempting and scolding the lad. Logan once again awoke with a start, dreaming his mother spotted him in the throes of passion with a strange woman.

"Whoa, boy! Nothing like startling yourself out of a deep sleep!

An unexpected chill had filled the room in the grey morning light as a soft rain continued to patter on the metal roof. Logan shivered, pulling the thin blanket tighter around his neck. He couldn't believe how cold it had suddenly become. The thin, threadbare covering didn't offer much protection against the damp chill of a wintery swamp. He would have to locate more blankets today.

"Good morning," a shadowed face peeked through the dim doorway. "Gosh, I'm freezing, do you know where any more blankets are?" Elizabeth pleaded through chattering teeth. One thin blanket was draped loosely around her shoulders, providing little protection against the frigid air. The young girl shook visibly in the dim light.

No, I'm sorry. I was just thinking about finding more, myself. You can look around in here, if you like, and see if you can find another.

Elizabeth slipped into the room, making her way to his bedside. She sat gently on the edge of the bed and turned to him, "Do you have a candle or anything in here? It's still not quite light enough to see very well," the young woman asked quietly.

"No, I sure don't. I didn't bring any candles in last night."

The young woman's eyes deflected to the brightening floor, spotting another blanket laying carelessly at her feet. The curious girl stooped, tenuously picking up the pile of material. "I thought you didn't know where another blanket was," she responded harshly. "Trying to save this one for yourself? Wait a minute, isn't this the blanket that was on Amanda's bed last night? I'd recognize this ugly thing anywhere!" Elizabeth sprang off the bed, "Was my sister in here with you last night? What were you guys doing, a little hanky-panky to while away the hours or just plain trying to take advantage of a vulnerable woman?" Liz trounced out of the room.

"Neither," the fireman called after her, "nothing happened." His voice trailed off to a whisper to be drowned out by the increasing rain. Logan decided to brave the cold and get out of bed. Slipping the heavy coat over his shoulders, the shivering young man thanked the powers that be for at least having it with him.

Ambling into the dimly lit living room, Logan spotted Elizabeth curled into a ball, lying on the dingy sofa, wrapped in her blanket and the one pick up from the bedroom floor. He scurried into the small kitchen to light the burners on the propane stove. The chilled lad had to do something to warm the drafty cabin. He then walked to the couch, sitting at Elizabeth's head. The silent girl pretended to pay him no attention, shivering severely under the ancient blankets.

"Liz, nothing happened between your sister and me. I'm telling you the truth. She came into my room for a while, but nothing went on," Logan tried desperately to explain.

"Yeah, right. And her blanket magically appeared from her own bed," the younger girl responded snidely, snuggling tighter into the covers.

"Really, nothing happened. It could have, but it didn't. It's a long story but we didn't. . . you know," Logan attempted to explain tactfully.

"You mean, you turned her down, too?" Elizabeth asked almost comically, peeking out from under the cover. "Oh my God, refused again," she suddenly brightened. "This is always happening to her. Amanda makes a play and gets turned right off. Usually by a guy who has a steady girlfriend or a wife or something. Once there was even this gay guy who. . ." she trailed off contemplatively, leaving the rest to the imagination.

Logan felt awkward. Or really, he didn't know what to feel. The astonished lad suddenly realized that he had been the perfect player in a perfect plot. His part had been played completely unconsciously.

Elizabeth moved herself onto his lap, putting her arms snugly around his waist. "I'm freezing," she chattered, "I'm not trying to make a move. Not a good time for that anyway."

Amanda strolled into the room and headed directly for the glowing burners of the propane stove. She opened the blanket that was wrapped tightly around her shoulders, to the fires, attempting to capture some radiated heat. Without a word, the frowning woman glowered at the sight of her sister curled up in Logan's arms.

"Hey, sis, where did you find that blanket? See, I got the one you left in Logan's room," Elizabeth taunted, waving a corner of the blanket for her sister to see.

Amanda made a startled yelp and ran from the living room into the dark bathroom. Logan closed his eyes in shock at the action. He could just imagine an all out war between the three captives on the tiny island. He couldn't let that happen, the consequences would be too great.

"Ooops," Elizabeth responded, releasing the corner of the blanket. "Maybe that was a little too bold." She spun around, sitting up on the edge of the crusty sofa. Sobs began bellowing from the curtained off bathroom. "I had best go apologize."

Logan agreed, wishing he knew a good way to be a peacemaker. Elizabeth slipped through the dingy curtain that was roughly installed across the bathroom doorway, the blankets billowing behind her like the train of a threadbare princess. The sobs became even more intense, reaching a howling wail. The concerned firefighter wondered if Elizabeth was doing something to make the situation worse. Gradually, the crying lessened, eventually ceasing all together.

Elizabeth emerged from the tiny room with her sister following directly behind. She scurried across the warming room into the kitchen and rubbed her hands over one of the flaming burners. "She'll live," the younger sister mouthed silently to Logan as Amanda disappeared wistfully into their bedroom. "Hey, let's have some breakfast! This would be a perfect day for some of that pancake mix you found down in the store room. If you'll go get it, I'll cook."

Logan's stomach was tied into knots. How could this woman even think about food right now? Begrudgingly, he rose from the couch, pulled his warm jacket more tightly about his shoulders and headed toward the exit. A chilled gust of air met him upon opening the door and stepping outside. The frigid fireman slowly made his way down the rain slickened stairs to the puddled landing. The wind blew fiercely around his head, chilling his ears and tossing a tuft of oily hair into his eyes. The dim, misty atmosphere cast deep shadows in the swamp around him. Are alligators active in weather like this, he wondered, taking a careful look around.

Logan's eyes brushed across the small boat that was left lying out just a day ago. It looked more like a child's toy swimming pool now than a life raft. The events of the previous few days began swimming through his memory, washing away his consciousness like a flash flood of emotion. What should he do now? What could he do now? They all still needed to concentrate on leaving the island, but all of the other events that had happened made that fact seem secondary.

Still staring at the little boat, the tumultuous lad sat onto the lowest wet step of the stairway. Feelings of grief flooded his attention. His thoughts wandered onto Morgan and Amanda, contemplating his actions and feelings toward the two. Guilty feelings began creeping through his mind. She shouldn't have ever put him into that situation last night! That was totally out of line! Somehow blaming the woman didn't seem to help ease his mind any.

The turmoil just seemed to grow. What if Morgan really did think he was dead? What if she found someone else and became involved while he was absent? Could he blame her? "Oh, Morgan, I'm alive! I'll be back with you shortly, I swear." A tear slid down Logan's cheek as feelings of loneliness and remorse overcame him. The dimness seemed to grow deeper, sitting there in confusion and despair. The pining man felt totally overwhelmed with emotion, not even knowing where to start feeling. Or where to end it. He couldn't tell if the deepening gloom was internal or the clouds were really getting darker. His ears, as cold as they were, began feeling heated with the emotion of

the moment. The damp, biting wind even seemed to just disappear. A light rain began anew, at first a fine, soaking sprinkle, then quickly turning into a softly pelting shower.

Raindrops beaded off of his vinyl jacket, rolling onto the undersized pants that he had dug out of the kidnapper's duffle bag earlier. Begrudgingly, the fireman lifted himself from his seat and splashed through the still ajar storage room door. What had he come down here for? It was a real effort to shift his thoughts from his situation, back onto the task at hand.

Logan finally recalled the purpose of his endeavor, to find pancake mix. Searching through the rough shelves, the captive soon found his attention returning to his dilemma. He couldn't even recall which shelves had been searched and which ones hadn't. Pancake mix was about as far from his thoughts as was the moon. Obliviously picking up a box to look behind it, the unfocused fireman searched the gloom for his elusive quarry. "Oh, shit," he exclaimed finally looking at the box of pancake mix that he held in his hand. "Guess it's a good thing it wasn't a snake!"

With the box of powder in his right hand, Logan turned through the dim opening toward the stair. The drizzle had gotten heavier once more, seeming to cling to him like a clammy, weighted blanket that sucked the warmth from his bones.

"Just fabulous," the doused captive commented to himself, "Winter in the swamp. What a lovely dream vacation."

Logan's eyes wandered back onto the still uninflated boat. A surprising burst of energy seemed to course through his heart. "Soon as this rain lets up, I'm coming down here to get this thing inflated!" the fireman ordered himself sternly. Shifting his gaze from the boat, Logan took his first step back up the steep, narrow stairway.

Above him, the door of the cabin squeaked open. Amanda, bundled in who knows how many borrowed clothes, stepped through the opening onto the small veranda. Logan took another step up the squeaky steps, attracting the shrinking woman's attention toward him. Quickly, she turned her head, scurrying away around the corner of the porch until completely out of sight. Logan reached the summit of his climb and stepped into the dark cabin.

"It's about time," Elizabeth greeted him, "I was beginning to think that alligator had found you again. I'm starved, give me the stuff and I'll make breakfast."

The fireman skipped across the rough floor into the warming kitchen. Elizabeth took the box, read the instructions on the back and dumped a quantity of the powder into a bowl that she had dug out of a cabinet. "There, that should be about right," the girl decided, eyeing the bowl and weighing it with her outstretched arm. Taking the vessel to the hand pump, Liz jacked on the contraption until a spurt of rusty-colored water squirted onto the grimy sink. "Damn, I hate when it does that! Are you sure this water is safe to drink? But I guess it's too late to be worrying about that now," the squeamish girl

answered herself, "since we've all been drinking it for days! She continued pumping the rough wooden handle until the water ran clear, then splashed a small amount into the bowl of powered mix. "You know, maybe we should have boiled this first."

Logan smiled at her, answering, "this water comes from a well down in the ground, it's not like we're drinking directly out of the swamp or something. If you don't feel comfortable with it, go ahead and boil it first, that will kill any germs."

"Hmfff, stuck out here in the middle of nowhere forced to drink unprocessed water! Really!" she reiterated jokingly.

"You know, mankind lived for thousands of years drinking wild water. Do you really think drinking it now is going to kill you?"

"Well, maybe not kill me, just jostle me a bit."

"Where did your sister go?" Logan asked curiously

"My sister wanted to be outside for a while," she answered, emphasizing the word 'sister'. "I think she's better off by herself for the moment."

Logan stood up, walked to the front door of the cabin and peeked through the small window. He saw Amanda sitting about halfway up the stair, looking downward and saying something animatedly to herself. She stared off into the dismal swamp, spoke again and began beating on the handrail vehemently. Suddenly the woman spun to look toward the cabin door. Logan shifted his view, spying out of one tiny corner of the glass. Logan, watching the struggling girl intently, beginning to feel an overwhelming sense of compassion toward her. Jesus Christ, look at the stuff she's going through right now. And to think, I was blaming her for almost ruining my life just a few minutes ago, he prodded himself.

Amanda's shoulders suddenly relaxed. She seemed to hug herself silently. Logan could hear her begin to chuckle, softly at first, then becoming a full laugh. Soon, she was looking up into the still softly falling rain, laughing into the damp sky.

"Look at her out there," he prompted Elizabeth, "she's having a ball! And out in the middle of this cold rain! What the hell is she doing?"

Elizabeth moved over to the window beside him. The curious girl looked out and chuckled, "I don't know! She just said she wanted to be with her thoughts for a while. Amanda doesn't show her feelings very often, she's 'too mature'. In fact she can be a bit of a loner." The younger sister put quote marks around the phrase with her fingers.

Logan smiled. "Wow, that was quite a mood change," he responded. "Are you sure she will be okay? I mean, she's not going to have some psychotic break or something, is she?"



"Naw, this is pretty normal for Amanda. She usually gets stuck in something for days or weeks. Hell, some things she gets stuck in for years! Then all the sudden her whole perspective will shift like this. This time is just incredibly quick. It looks like she's having a blast."

Amanda quickly stood to her feet and spun in place, arms outstretched over her soggy head. She vaulted up the stairs, bursting through the front door so fast that Logan and Elizabeth almost didn't have time to move out of her way. "Jeez, give a girl some room!" she laughed racing through the doorway.

"Sis, you OK?" Elizabeth questioned, stunned at her response.

Suddenly, the excited lass stopped and looked over at Logan, turning bright red. "Oh, Logan I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have put you on the spot last night and I really shouldn't have gotten mad at you about it. Well, really, I never got mad at you, I was mad at myself and feeling pretty stupid. Thanks for being honest and strong."

Logan was taken aback. He didn't know how to respond. "You're welcome," he finally returned weakly.

Amanda sauntered to Elizabeth's side, putting an arm around the girl's shoulder and escorted her younger sister into the bedroom, speaking in hushed tones before they both disappeared through the doorway. Liz's hysterical laugh was the next sound that Logan heard, followed by a long, loud roll of thunder. "Women," the fireman commented to himself, returning to the kitchen to finish the pancakes that had been abandoned.

Morgan closed and locked her apartment door, then started down the spiraled second floor stairway toward the parking lot. She glimpsed at her watch, descending through the first rays of dawn that peeked through the wrought iron spindles and handrails along each side. The cool early November breeze gusted through her hair, carrying the scent of fresh pine and the crisping leaves of fall. It was still only seven- fifteen, the lass wasn't required to be at work until eight thirty. She'd be at work almost an hour early.

Since Logan's departure, the pining redhead had noticed a tendency to leave for work a little earlier each morning and stay a little later each evening. "Keep busy," she would instruct herself, "Just keep yourself busy and let time slip by until Logan gets back."

Her anticipation had become somewhat like that of an anxious lover awaiting the return of an absent mate. Consciously, Morgan would remind herself that he was coming back, no matter what evidence was produced to the contrary. It was just the waiting that was clawing at her now. That and a certain amount of fear on occasion still tore at her

soul. Fear that Logan might feel differently about her after his return. What would be worse, her lover never returning or having him return only to reject her for someone else?

Whenever the fearful thoughts would start, Morgan would scold herself. "No, no I can't think thoughts like that! It just won't do! I've got to think positively." However, it seemed the more she resisted the dark thoughts, the more they stayed in place, unfazed by her positive thinking. So, now it was just easier to focus on something all together different.

Maybe she could fit a morning routine at the gym into her schedule. After all, it opened at six o'clock. Or, maybe do some volunteer work somewhere. That should keep her busy. Heck, maybe she should just go get a second job somewhere to occupy time in a constructive sort of way.

The only problem was, no matter how hard Morgan tried, there was no eliminating this deep, crushing pain that constantly surrounded her heart. It would ease now and again, allowing her breathing to become a little less laborious. Yet, anytime she was still and quiet for any period of time, the pressure returned to an almost crushing level. At times, the struggling young woman felt as if someone was literally standing on her chest, stifling all movement and breathing. The pain occasionally became so intense that the lass was afraid she had developed a serious physical malady.

"One day at a time," she told herself, reaching for the car door. Morgan had heard that phrase in so many different venues that she was almost sick of it. "Do whatever it takes to survive. Now I'm really getting disgusting!" The redhead stuck a finger in her mouth, pretending to gag herself. She was beginning to sound like all of those spiritual hokey-pokeys.

Morgan started the car and pulled out of the parking space. Some unknown entity sprang upon her from the blue, blanketing the spiraling lass with a dark, heavy emotion. From deep inside the young woman it welled up, gushing upward, to leak as a small tear out of her right eye, flowing down her cheek.

"Where the hell is all of this coming from?" Morgan wondered aloud, her tears beginning in earnest. "I wasn't even thinking about anything sad. Why the hell am I feeling all of this now?"

The mystery surrounding her emotional state was the only thing keeping the sobbing lass driving toward her job. Morgan's anguish was so intense that it became a physical feeling that had started in her chest and clawed its way up into her throat.

Somehow, the astounded woman got the mental image of a thick, hairy growth being stuffed into her chest and throat. Comical visions of being possessed by some kind of an alien being skittered through Morgan's imagination, easing the heaviness of her emotional state. Pulling onto the freeway, Morgan struggled to keep her eyes on the traffic conditions.

The cars around Morgan slowed considerably, sometimes stopping altogether. This slow pace suited her state of mind just fine. The driver didn't have to put complete attention into driving, she could keep some attention on easing her emotional state.

At times, she became so caught up in her feelings that Morgan forgot about driving, only to slam on the brakes as the traffic in front of her slowed to a stop. Old memories and ideas began ebbing through her consciousness. Memories, forgotten and half forgotten, skipped over various times in her life, recalling periods that hadn't been prompted in years.

It seemed that the memory of every old boyfriend, every best friend, every beloved pet who had ever left, flashed through Morgan's thoughts. One by one, they stuck up their forgotten heads and announced their, once sleeping, presence. Suddenly, a vivid portrayal of her grandfather sprang into the stunned young woman's awareness. She had not thought of him since being ten years old. This memory generated an intensesness unlike any of the rest. It commanded attention like a bagpipe and drum brigade marching through her mind. The girl's grandfather had died when she was only six years old, yet, she had missed him and awaited his return until turning ten. Deciding the old man must no longer like her, the lonely lass had put all memories of him completely out of her mind.

Morgan recalled her fond last memories of bouncing on the old man's knee while he promised to take her to the zoo the following weekend. She could recall his fiery blue eyes and grey hair like it was just yesterday. Then, her agony and confusion resurfaced, reviving the moment the crying girl was told she couldn't go to the zoo, because Grandad had gone up to Heaven instead.

Her heart pounded and breathing became ragged, reliving those moments of pain and disbelief. Next, the vivid memories of seeing him lying in his casket cascaded through the horrified young woman's memory. The bewildered lass couldn't understand why her grandpa wouldn't answer when she called. The feelings became overwhelming, her emotions demanding to be felt.

A car horn honked behind Morgan, bringing her back into the present moment. She looked up to see the cars ahead rapidly leaving her behind. Tears began flowing freely once again, blurring the woman's vision so badly that she could no longer see the roadway clearly. All she could do was pull onto the shoulder of the road and let the traffic go around. Horns honked and people stared as the line of cars drove slowly by, like an overdue funeral procession.

Morgan wrapped her arms across the top of the steering wheel, laying her head heavily against them sobbing. The stricken lass allowed her mind to slip back once more to her grandfather's funeral. Confusion flooded the girl's mind. Why did the man she loved most go away, leaving her behind? After all, he had promised to take her to the zoo! Grief flooded the reeling lass's awareness, the painful realization that she would

never again see her grandpa setting in. The event was so clear, so vivid, as if the tormented young woman were really experiencing it again.

The sights and scents of the flower arrangements, the sounds of the people, including her mother, sobbing and sniffing, while quiet organ music played in the background seemed so real that the freeway just vanished into an ethereal haze. Morgan looked into the still, ghostly specter of her grandfather's face, seeing for the first time the peace and serenity that enveloped him. In some curious manner that sense of peace disturbed her even more. How could this man be so much at peace, leaving her and all the rest of these people behind in such agony? That was pretty selfish on his part!

"Wow, what am I thinking?" Morgan chastised herself, still imagining standing by the side of the casket. A sudden compassion flooded her like a wave of warm spirits. Had she been harboring those feelings ever since her childhood? The realization of never forgiving the man sat heavily upon her. The little girl had blamed him for leaving throughout her life, eventually removing the painful memory entirely from her tortured consciousness. Wow, what a vicious cycle, she thought, still looking into the serene face of the peaceful old man.

"Grandfather, forgive me for being so selfish! I know you didn't abandon me on purpose. I know that you would still be here if you could," Morgan apologized aloud. "I love you very much and I know that I will see you again someday! Rest in peace, grandpa, my memories of you will forever be fond." Morgan imagined reaching into the casket, touching the face of her loved one. His skin was unexpectedly warm and soft.

The old man's eyes slowly opened, at first startling Morgan. Her grandpa turned to her and smiled. "I've missed you, pumpkin," he responded lovingly. "You know, I'll live on as long as you let me. My only request is that you forgive yourself. You did what you felt necessary to deal with your loss, but now you've far outgrown that path. Live, Morgan, for now, while your time is right! I'll see you again sometime, when that time is right. For now, pumpkin. . . no, for now, Morgan, my beautiful lass, goodbye. I live on in your memory!"

The loving specter closed his eyes and the memory began to fade. Like a foggy day breaking into the sunlight, Morgan's mind began to clear, returning to the present. Suddenly, a knock on the car window startled her into full consciousness. She turned to see a dark haired gentleman with a very concerned look on his face tapping on the glass.

"Are ya' alright, lass?" the concerned gentleman asked with a very thick Irish brogue. "Is there anyt'ing I can do for ya'?"

Morgan uneasily rolled down the glass. "No, thank you. I'm just feeling a little sad right now. I'll be fine soon, I just need some time. I do appreciate your concern, though."

"Ah, yes lass. Feeling a wee bit o'grief at the appropriate time can be a marvelously freein' thing. My name is Jim, Jim Mullins. My wife and I are here on holiday and to do

a bit o' business. Here's my card with the number where we'll be stayin' for now. If there's anything we can do for ya', even if ya' just need someone to talk to, please give us a call. I really mean that." Jim handed the tearful lass a business card and turned briskly toward his car.

"Wait," Morgan called after the fellow. He returned to the window. "I'm Morgan, Morgan O'Malley. I really do appreciate your concern, it's just so rare around here. Thank you very much."

"'Tis a shame, people I mean. It can be the same anywhere in the world. If we all had a little more compassion maybe we could all get along a bit better. Have a gorgeous day Morgan O'Malley! May your grief be the beginning of a grand new era." Jim turned once again, walking quickly to his car and drove off. His wife waved smilingly as they slowly drove by. The recovering young woman courteously returned the wave, feeling a small smile cross her face.

Morgan shifted the rearview mirror downward to view her face. A feeling of embarrassment struck her. Dark streaks of mascara stretched down both cheeks, surrounded by lighter areas where the blush had washed off. The disconcerted girl quickly rummaged through her purse for a tissue. "Jeez, I can't go to work looking like this," she commented aloud, snickering. "I'm going home. I'll call in to work and take a mental health day off and go enjoy myself somewhere!"

Morgan dappled the tissue across her face, cleaning off the worst smears. With a dappled face and a clear mind, the young redhead headed back toward her apartment. She felt a lightness and freedom that hadn't been felt in a very long time. Morgan wanted to live, not hide behind an old memory or run away from some feeling that couldn't be explained! It was time to experience life and whatever it had to bring. "So this is how freedom feels," the smiling young woman commented to the world.

## Chapter 16

### Amazing Grace

"Amazing," Amanda commented through a mouthful of pancake. "Amazing! You know, every relationship that I've ever been involved in has been with someone who isn't really available for me in a permanent way. He's always either already got a girlfriend or a wife or he just isn't interested in a real commitment. There have even been times that my partner had some issues that definitely wouldn't work out for me, like he's gay or

something. It's funny that I seem to find the same kinds of guys every time. I mean, they all seem different at first, at least to me, but some part of me must be able to see through the disguise and find the same traits in each one." She squirmed slightly.

Logan and Elizabeth stared at the introspective woman with stunned looks on their faces. "You know what I find amazing, sis?" Elizabeth asked in return. "That you just said that. You usually blame the guys for everything, from leading you on, to total rejection of who you are. I think I've just seen a miracle!"

"Oh, come on. Give me a little credit. At least I'll admit when I've made a mistake. I reserve the right to change my mind any time I want. Even if I change it just for fun!" Amanda took another large bite of pancake, dripping with syrup. "Jeez, these pancakes are good. Great idea, Logan."

"Hey, the pancakes were my idea, Elizabeth countered. "I just let Logan finish them." Logan didn't bother explaining the situation to Amanda.

"Yeah, and what I find amazing is that you're eating them, wild water and all!" Logan commented wryly to Elizabeth. "And doing that very well."

Amanda looked between them with a questioning expression. "What?" she asked, still chewing her bite.

"Nothing, it's not important," Elizabeth answered, glowering at the fireman.

"Anyway, as I was saying, I seemed to have formulated an opinion at some point in time that being physical with a man was the only way to get his attention. I mean, looking back through my life, I seem to have aligned with the notion that daddy didn't like me anymore when he didn't spend much time with me any more after mom died. You know I was always a daddy's girl, I'll admit it! But, he all the sudden distanced himself from us, for what ever reason, and I took it personally. Since we never had a physical relationship, as in intimately physical, and I saw all my girlfriends around me having sexual relations with their boyfriends, I formulated an idea that it was the only way to show your affections to a man." The young woman took a sip from her glass of water and continued, shaking her fork at Liz like a pointer. "Get it? No physical touch, no daddy; be physical, get guy! Problem was, all I seemed to get were guys who wanted to be physical! No one wanted to invest their emotional intimacies on me! Pretty wild, huh?" Amanda speared another square of pancake with her fork, shoveling it into her mouth.

Elizabeth stared at her sister in amazement and compassion. "Wow, sis, did the real you leave and now someone else is using that body of yours? I can't believe. . . I mean, I'm really happy that you found that realization. I guess all those Psychology courses have gotten through a little, huh?" Elizabeth exclaimed a little tenuously. "But really, you know I always want you to be happy and have the best of everything! And daddy

really does love us and is doing the best he knows how. I think we just remind him so much of mom that his heart breaks again every time he is around us for very long."

"I know, at least now I do, and I plan to spend some time seeing if we can repair some of the rift that has opened between him and us. I really do love him, too. Even if I have said some pretty rotten things about him in the past." Amanda's eyes lowered sadly to her plate as the three sat in the stillness for several moments. "Logan, I really do apologize again for last night," the struggling girl continued without lifting her eyes. "I guess, I could really sense the love you feel for your girlfriend and just wanted to share a little of it. That's the way I want someone to feel for me. Now I know that it really is possible to first create the love and respect I want from someone and then allow the physical expression of that love to come into being. Thank you."

Logan blushed brightly, "I really do care for you Amanda. I hope we are friends for a very long time. I know you will find just the right man to share your life with, just like I've found Morgan. Who knows, maybe I'll introduce you to him!"

Amanda smiled warmly, looking the Irishman in the eyes. "I'm your friend forever. If you know anyone else like you I'd love to meet him! And I really want to meet Morgan, too. She sounds like a wonderful woman."

"She is," the smiling lad answered, Morgan is wonderful and I love her very much. I just can't wait to get back home and see her!" Logan slid his chair from under the table, rising to take his dishes to the sink. "It looks like the rain has stopped, so I'm going to try getting the raft down to the water's edge and inflate it. I'm ready to get off of this island now. Not many shopping days left until Christmas and I can think of better places to celebrate." The excited captive turned eagerly toward the exit door.

A chilled gust of air greeted him as he stepped out of the squeaky door. Logan pulled the rickety slab of wood closed and peeked around the veranda roof to catch a glimpse of the clearing sky through the dense foliage. "Damn, it's still brisk out here!" he commented with a shiver, starting down the steps toward the waiting raft.

The howling wind ripped through the trees with a vengeance, shaking their limbs in a wild fury. The noise almost deafened the sensitive young man after being used to relative silence for so long. Logan stopped halfway down the flight of stairs to look across the brightening swamp. He marveled at the chaos of movement. Everywhere, everything was in motion. The trees bowed, the water rippled maddeningly, even the thinning clouds above billowed through the arbor. Standing and watching the fray, he could almost feel the motion within his own body. His sensual awareness became so keen he could feel the swaying of the limbs as if he, himself, were growing out the side of a tree. The rustling leaves felt as if his own fingers were being tossed to and fro. The rippling water even felt like his own skin, rippling across fluid muscles. A tiny voice eased into his head, "I am this, a part of all creation!" it whispered. "Know this and find the joy of living life completely! Nothing is beyond your power when connected to the enormity of the Universe! Trust yourself Logan, creation comes from no one but you!"

Stunned at the prospective just offered, Logan reluctantly returned his senses to his own body. The astonished fireman found himself sitting precariously on the rough cabin steps. Although he could now feel all of his normal sensual awareness, the same sensation of movement in the world around him remained, only slightly diminished. Suddenly, an unusual movement caught his attention. Peering intently through the trees into the dim light, Logan could just make out the figure of a person pushing a small boat through the murky swamp. Shading his eyes and squinting against the gathering light, the startled young man allowed his senses to permeate the darkness until becoming quite sure of what he saw. Just as he thought, a man wearing blue jeans and a red jacket, was slowly pushing a small boat through the thick growth.

Logan was stunned. He didn't know whether to get up, wave his arms and scream for help or run for cover. A million scenarios scrambled through his mind at once. Were the kidnappers finally returning or could the fellow be an errant resident of the swamp who could save them? Perhaps it was one of the neighbors who would shoot on sight! Remaining frozen to his seat, the struggling fireman watched the specter slip from view through the tangled trees and moss, like a ghost through the curtain of night.

Slowly, he stood up, cautiously proceeding to the little boat. Different possibilities still seared his mind, burning through the hardcore reality of the aloneness of unwanted island life. Now, Logan was really motivated to get this contraption inflated and on the water. Visions of home and family began playing in his memory, bringing a tear to his eye. The cold wind blew with a lonely moan, stinging his eyes and whipping tufts of rusty hair into his face. Unexpectedly, a thin sunbeam shone through the thick, green ceiling and cloud cover to fall directly into the center of the boat. The desperate lad took it as a sign to seriously begin his pursuit of launching the craft.

Slowly, re-examining the exterior of the raft, Logan poked and prodded at various locations to test their strength. After several minutes, he took up a position to the side of the boat, reached down and securely grasped the rope running around the perimeter and hefted it upside down to drain the trapped rain water. The feat was a bit of a struggle, even for the strength of Logan. He could feel the raspy groan that emitted involuntarily from deep within his throat. When the boat was completely overturned, the exhausted bodybuilder stopped, taking a deep breath before up righting it once again. A strange feeling of not being alone suddenly lifted the hairs on the back of his neck.

Logan snapped around in place to look eye to eye with Amanda, who never flinched so much as an eyelash. "Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me!" he exclaimed with a sigh of relief.

"Were you expecting, uh, an alligator perhaps," the coy young woman responded with a wry grin.

"No, I just saw someone out there earlier." Logan pointed out into the swamp, still shaken.



"What?" she asked a little more seriously. "Where? Who was it?"

"How should I know? He was way out there in the swamp, I couldn't make out many details of the figure through the trees. I really don't think he was one of my buddies, though."

"Could it have been the kidnappers?" she asked seriously, her eyes narrowing with an intent gaze into the gloomy swamp.

"I really don't think so. The fellow didn't seem to have any attention this way. He was probably just one of the locals passing through, which really doesn't comfort me either. I've heard these swamp people can be a little rugged whenever they care to be."

"Come on, let's get this thing fixed and in the water. I'm ready to find a way out of here," Amanda responded emphatically, reaching for one end of the little raft. She glanced over her shoulder, looking toward the place they had earlier chosen as a landing spot. "We're not going to find any more surprises this time are we?" the worried girl asked with a sheepish look on her face. "I think alligators hibernate in the cold. After all, they are cold-blooded reptiles." Logan, himself, glanced toward the water's edge, still a little apprehensive. He looked up at Amanda, standing in front of him dressed like a rag-a-muffin. The woman wore any loose article of clothing that would fit onto her thin frame, trying to keep warm. The lad had to snicker at the sight of the wind whipping through the layers of material and hair, billowing them both behind her like some spectral image that haunted the swamp.

"What are you laughing about?" she asked, looking a bit embarrassed. "I just don't want to be eaten by anything, man or reptile. You can laugh if you want to. . . ."

"No, I'm not laughing at you. Well, sort of. It's just that, you just look like a Banshee standing there in the wind." Suddenly, a stray sunbeam burst through the parting clouds and overgrowth, shining directly onto her face, increasing the effect of the vision. Logan snickered again.

She smiled sarcastically, turned bright red and reached for the boat. "Come on, we've got work to do. We don't have time for this foolishness," she responded, overcoming her embarrassment.

Reaching the side of the boat, Logan took another hold of the rope and instructed Amanda to do the same. "Let's turn this thing upright and get it to the water." Pulling the raft onto its bottom was much easier with the water drained out and another person helping. "We've got to get the path cleared again, too. The wind has blown all kinds of shit back in our way."

The two captives gathered themselves, slowly ambling to the water's edge, picking up debris and tossing it out of their way. "Hey, we made it this time!" Amanda stated excitedly, staring out at the brightening swamp. "Let's get the boat down here!"

Logan could feel her enthusiasm, a residual effect of his earlier experience, he supposed. "Let's do it!" He was feeling his own excitement as well. They spun simultaneously and almost ran back to the craft. Reaching down, each took a two handed hold of the perimeter rope, roughly dragging the contraption behind them. It was a bit of a struggle, plodding through the wet muck of the morning's rain. They found themselves huffing and puffing by the time they reached the water with the boat in tow.

"Yes!" Amanda shouted through her ragged breathing. "Get this thing blown up and let's see if it floats." She was so excited that Logan had to laugh.

"Where is that sister of yours? Don't you think she should be here to witness the big event?"

"Yeah, I'll go get her!" Amanda answered, bolting toward the stairs.

"Elizabeth!" Amanda called, bursting through the cabin doorway, slamming it behind her. Logan continued his final probe of the boat, shaking the cylinders once more to verify the contents for their propellant. Satisfied, the investigative fireman ended his testing and peered out through the trees.

The pleased lad was actually beginning to find some appreciation for the beauty that surrounded him. The green, sighing trees, skittering birds and sounds of unseen life, all seemed to fit into place, forming some sort of cosmic reverence for a place forgotten by time as he knew it. In some ways, this swamp reminded him of his beloved Ireland. Maybe it was the wild, ancient feel or the lush greenery that captivated his attention. Immediately, Logan could again feel the entire swamp as one intricate, living being. Primarily, however, the similarity must be the peacefulness, he thought as a memory of a still, secluded mountain lake on the top of Conor Pass slipped through his memory. "I want to be there, soon," the Irishman responded aloud, to his own surprise.

"Okay, hit it," Amanda exclaimed, returning at a trot. Her eyes were wide and bright, her movement, quick and sure. Logan felt a compassion and liking for the two young women that really surprised him, watching their excited return. Elizabeth followed her sister, looking calm and cool. Logan found the two girls an amazing contrast, exact opposites of whom he had expected them to be earlier.

Returning his attention to the task at hand, the fireman knelt beside the raft with his hand resting on the first of the two inflation cylinders. "Amanda, you want to get the other cylinder?" he asked excitedly. She skipped excitedly to the opposite side of the boat.

"Yeah," the girl responded, her face lighting up even more with the opportunity. "What should I do?"

"Just pull the pin on top of the cylinder. We'll go on three. Ready? One, two, three, pull!" Both captives pulled their pins simultaneously, stepping back to watch the craft begin to respond.

At first, a hissing sound was the only evidence of anything working. The fabric then began to spring to life, slowly growing, gaining speed as the boat inflated. The small life raft began taking shape before their eyes. Amanda began to jump up and down, prancing around it, clapping her hands. Elizabeth just watched, holding her breath. Logan shouted, "Yeah! Alright!" as he hopped around the vessel with Amanda. "Hey guys, we're going home!" the fireman continued excitedly.

The hissing subsided as the raft tightened, reaching full size. It was larger than they had expected. Logan judged it to be an eight man raft, maybe a bit larger. Anyway, it was very much large enough for their escape.

"Push it in!" Amanda requested excitedly. "Get it into the water!" She skipped to the rear of the vessel and began shoving it toward the direction of the swamp water.

"Wait! Wait!" cried Elizabeth. "This is too unceremonious! Wait for me, I have an idea." She turned and bounded toward the house with the grace of a gazelle. Up the stairs and through the door the lithe girl disappeared, returning after a few seconds, carrying a bottle of cheap white wine in her right hand.

"Champagne," the younger sister announced jokingly, approaching the two awaiting participants. "Or at least as close as we have! We'll give her a royal send-off."

"Yeah," Amanda agreed heartily, "But we need a name. Any suggestions?"

All three pondered for a moment before Logan spoke up. "Banbha," he answered with a smile.

"What?" the girls asked simultaneously.

"Banbha!" the Irishman repeated.

"What the hell is that?" Elizabeth asked with a puzzled expression.

"Banbha was an ancient Irish goddess of protection. She protected the island from invaders. Maybe she'll protect us by showing us the way out of here," he answered coolly. "After all, we're going to need all the help we can get!"

The girls looked at each other and shrugged. "Banbha," Amanda repeated with an affirmative nod. "Sounds good to me."

Elizabeth agreed with a small smile, then quizzically looked at the rear of the craft. "There's no place to break the bottle," the baffled girl announced, seriously. "How can we christen our ship without breaking the bottle?"

"Here," Logan replied, "We just need to be innovative." He took the bottle from Elizabeth, unscrewing the metal cap. The smiling lad poured the smelly, cheap liquid all over the rear of the little boat. "I christen you Banbha!" the Irishman shouted, liquid flowing across her stern.

"Banbha!" Amanda and Elizabeth chorused, dancing around the craft. "Let's float her!"

The three captives grasped the raft, shoving it onto the cold, murky water. She floated shallow on top of the mire, hardly making a wave or sound. Stopping at the edge of the dark swamp water, Logan held the raft, instructing one of the girls to get a length of rope from the storeroom to secure it. Amanda trotted off wordlessly on the errand while Logan and Elizabeth stayed behind to hold the craft in place.

"You know, it may sound silly, but I've kind of grown used this place," Elizabeth commented unexpectedly. "It's so quiet and peaceful here. I've never been anywhere like it. Everywhere I've gone before has either been city or touristy, with lots of people around. I really thought I'd hate it, but the quiet kind of grows on you. I mean, you can really find out who you are and what you want out here!"

"I know what you mean. Some of the things I thought very necessary, can easily be done without. Funny, but somehow, I think that'll just help me to use everything more appreciatively, to their full advantage," Logan answered contemplatively. "Now I've got to completely rethink what I want for the rest of my life!"

"Yeah, me too. But first, I'm going to have to readjust to plain ole' everyday modern life." Elizabeth seemed very somber with the last statement. The contemplative young man knew exactly how she felt. He was ready for a change himself. This peacefulness had seriously infected his consciousness. A modern city felt more like a disease than a way of life at that moment.

Amanda returned with a long spool of heavy rope draped over her left shoulder. "Aye, aye, captain," she mocked with a salute. "I'll be your first mate and we'll let Elizabeth swab the deck!"

Elizabeth gave her sister a scowl and grasped the raft a little tighter while Logan tied the end of the rope to it. "Are we going to try to get out of here today?" she asked quizzically.

"I'm willing if both of you are," Logan answered with an air of anticipation. "It's only about ten a.m. now and, if I remember right, it only took us an hour or so to get here from the road."

"Yeah, but the kidnapper knew exactly where he was going," Amanda reminded them. "It's pretty dark out here at night and gets that way pretty early."

"Well, if we are going, I'm as ready as I'll ever be to get out of this place and get started with my life again," Elizabeth chimed in. "If we can find our way through the swamps before nightfall, I'm ready to go."

"Boy, I never expected to see a need to even discuss being rescued," Amanda responded. "I'm ready to get out of here, but I don't care to spend the night with all of the toothy and wiggly things in the middle of the swamp, either. Do you think we can get out before dark?"

"I think so," Logan expressed seriously. "We'll just choose a direction that feels right and remember the landmarks we pass. That way, if we find nothing in that direction, we can come back here to the cabin and choose another way." His mind, prompted by the thought of returning home, flashed to Morgan, God I miss you, honey. I'll be seeing you very soon!

The mood grew quiet as the three captives peered into the swamp, watching the thin, brief rays of sunlight dance across the rippling water. The gusty wind was beginning to calm and the temperature was quickly climbing to a comfortable level. The movement of the trees pulled them all, like a lullaby, into a sedate trance, dreaming of life past and life to come, each in their own individual way, coursing their next steps, creating a new dream out of their new found importances.

Peacefulness overshadowed Logan's thoughts until a vision of Morgan inched into his awareness. The lonely young Irishman felt the desire to hold her once again, but somehow, in a different way.

A softness surrounded the vision, his fingers running through long, thick flaming hair, moving to touch the soft, rosy cheeks of his lover. Logan noticed the absence of any feelings of loneliness or grief, feeling instead, a cushiony warmth and calm anticipation for his return to her arms.

"So, what are we standing around here for? Let's get some stuff together real quick and get this show in the road!" Logan blurted out, prompting the small group to action.

"I'll grab a couple of cans of food," Amanda volunteered brightly.

"And I'll find something to carry some water in," Elizabeth continued, heading toward the house.

"I want to get the raft out of the water and back onto solid ground until everything is together. I just want to make sure that this sucker doesn't go anywhere," Logan responded.

Amanda looked between Elizabeth, who proceeded toward the house, and Logan. "Here, I'll help you," she relinquished, grasping a handful of the rope. Together, the two pulled the craft out of the water, tying it securely between two trees that grew at the water's edge.

"There, that should do it," Logan confirmed with a grunt, pulling on the final knot. "She'll be ready for us when everything else is together. Now we just need to find a push pole or something to move this baby." Amanda and Logan set off to find a means of propulsion. "There are cane poles tied between the rafters in front of the store room," he informed Amanda. "Give me a hand to reach them and I'll hand them down to you. One or two poles are surely strong enough to push a raft. It shouldn't take much."

Making their way under the little house, Logan pointed upwards, toward the bundle of poles tied together between the dark rafters. He searched until finding a bucket to stand on. The stretching fireman's tenuous step put him just within reach of the poles. Carefully, with his fingertips, he slid the bundle to an open area where they could be wedged out between the two by six joists. He stepped off the bucket and moved it a short distance where they could be pulled from one end. "Jeez, if I was just another four inches taller," the reaching fireman commented, more to himself than anyone else. Logan strained to reach the poles again. Amanda watched with anticipation, moving and twisting her own body in an unconscious attempt to aid him in his plight.

His new step was a couple of inches shorter, putting the lad just out of reach of the cluster of poles. Poising himself precariously on his tip toes Logan made a leaping lunge at the elusive cane. With his right hand grasping the poles, his feet landed on the edge of the large pail which promptly tipped over, spilling the bungling bodybuilder in a pile of flailing arms, legs and cane poles, directly into the now up righted can.

Amanda burst out into hysterical laughter at the sight of his butt landing precisely and indelicately into the bucket. The cane poles, unbound by their forceful removal, lay scattered across and all around him. The surprise written across Logan's face told the whole story.

Such an undignified position to be in, especially for a fireman that is athletically coordinated and whose body was in top shape. After the initial shock of the fall, all the embarrassed firefighter could do was break out laughing right along with Amanda, even though his rear was beginning to feel the effects of the sudden compression into a too tight space.

The two surprised captives laughed together for several seconds before Amanda could speak. "Oh, that was grand!" were her first words. "God, I would have given a thousand bucks to have had a camera to get a picture of your face, and your butt stuck square into a bucket. What a trip!" The taunting young woman burst into another fit of laughter.

Logan calmed enough to request Amanda's aid out of the predicament, "Okay, now that the fun is over, how about helping me up. I'm in a bit of a bind here. To say nothing of my wounded pride!"

Amanda stepped in front of the fireman and took his outstretched hands. With all of her strength and weight she pulled until the lad was in a standing position in front of her. "Owww," the young man howled, the bucket slipping off his backside, "I think I'm going to have a permanent ring around my butt. Mmm, it really hurts now." Logan, suddenly serious, took a step forward and felt a streak of excruciating pain begin in his left hip and shoot through his whole left side, from ankle to chest. "Something's wrong," he stated, shifting all of his weight to his right leg.

A sudden look of concern crossed Amanda's face, stepping to his side to help. "Are you alright?" the concerned lass asked with genuine concern in her voice and eyes. "Can I help somehow?"

"I need to sit down," Logan instructed. "There's a lawn chair in the storage room. Will you get it for me? Quickly!"

Amanda rushed into the dimly lit room, suddenly in somewhat of a panic, to find a chair for him to sit on. Quickly, the girl rummaged through and behind several places, unable to locate what she was searching for. Poking into both of the near corners, the rushing young woman fumbled in the duskiness with no success.

"Logan, I can't find it!" she called out to him, becoming even more panicked. "I've looked everywhere. Tell me where you saw it before."

"There were a couple of chairs just inside the door. You probably walked right past them," the hurting young man answered through clenched teeth. "Hurry, I'm about to fall down! I need it now!" Logan took one hop toward the storeroom door and had to muffle the scream that welled up in his throat. The pain was becoming excruciating and constant. Tears formed involuntarily in his eyes as Logan fought the urge to just fall onto the ground in agony.

Amanda ceased her search momentarily, took a deep breath and looked toward the entrance. Sure enough, several chairs sat against the wall in plain sight. She had almost tripped over them coming into the room. Her next actions were almost instinctual, the lass grabbed a chair and set it up for Logan so quickly that she almost didn't remember doing it. Grasping the struggling fireman by his right arm, Amanda helped him ease onto the nylon webbing with a grimace.

"Oh, Jeez, that hurts!" The aching lad was in misery. "I hope I didn't break something," he replied, a bit of worry in his voice.

"Me too," Amanda agreed. "Tell me what to do. I have no idea."

Logan shifted slightly in his chair and winced, stifling a yell. "I think it's starting to swell. Help me get these pants down so I can at least see what the problem is." The fireman unbuckled his belt and lifted himself with his right leg. Amanda grabbed the sides of the tight trousers and pulled. He had to cry aloud. "Please! Not so hard. Pull them slowly!"

The tentative girl took another grip on the pants and slowly began pulling them off his hips. "Wait!" Logan cried again, "A little at a time!"

Elizabeth turned the corner just as he spoke. "What the . . ." the surprised younger sister asked puzzledly. "I thought we were. . . ."

"Oh, be quiet and give me a hand," Amanda scolded breathlessly. "Logan fell and has hurt himself pretty badly. We've got to get his trousers down so he can see what's wrong."

"Yeah, right!" Elizabeth smirked, stepping toward them.

"I'm not kidding! I need some help!" The sheepish look on her sister's face immediately convinced Elizabeth that it was the truth. Like a shot, she was at Amanda's side.

"Tell me what to do," Liz replied, looking between Logan and her sister. Seeing the pain on his face made the queasy young girl turn away and look only at Amanda. "What, sis?"

"You take the right side and I'll get the left. We need to pull down slowly and easily. On three. One. Two. Three." Together the struggling girls inched the material over his hips and down to his knees.

Logan forced himself to turn and look at the wound. There was a nasty circular scrape overlapping a large red patch of swollen skin on his left hip. The worst part, however, was the grating feeling that came with any movement of his left leg. The implications of that gritty feeling, the fireman knew, weren't good. He tried several times to straighten the leg smoothly, with no success. Each time, the searing pain announced its definite disapproval. The agonizing lad eased gingerly into a more reclining position in the webbed chair, carefully extending his left leg in front of him.

"What can I do?" Amanda asked sincerely, "What do you need?"

"I need some ice," Logan responded with a groan. "But I don't know where we'll get it."

"The water is pretty cold, what if I get a towel with cold water on it?" Elizabeth suggested.



"I guess it'll have to do," the pained young man acquiesced with a scowl.

"I'll get it!" Amanda announced, shooting off toward the stairway. "Be back in a flash!"

Amanda returned in a rush with a dripping wet towel, cold from wetness and the ambient chill of the air. "You're going to have to turn over somehow," she ordered. "This sucker covers your whole left side. Wait, I think I saw a lounge in the storeroom. I'll be right back!" The young woman rushed into the storeroom once more, returning immediately with a larger chair for him to lie down on.

Elizabeth, seeing the extent of Logan's injury, turned squeamishly away, wandering slowly out of sight upon her sister's return. Logan looked after her, wondering what the girl was feeling at that moment, trying to keep his mind off of the pain. "Is Liz okay?" the fireman asked Amanda quietly, getting no answer in return.

With Amanda's assistance, Logan painfully struggled out of his chair and lay face down onto the recliner. She gently slid the underwear over his left hip, stopping just below his cheek. This could be an embarrassing position, he thought, chuckling under his breath to keep his mind off the wound. "What?" Amanda responded to his unexpected humor.

"Oh, nothing, just thinking what an odd situation this is. Here I am lying with my bare butt up in the air and two young women running around. Not a very endearing position, know what I mean?" Logan attempted another laugh, but the movement caused a grimace instead. "This is kind of like a bad dream, stuck in public with no clothes on!"

Amanda, herself, had to chuckle at the situation, thinking of the situation in that light. Logan felt the tender woman gingerly clean the scrape with the wet towel, then place the cold cloth gently over the wound. The sudden chill almost took his breath, making him gasp. "Jeez, that's cold!" the chilled young man snapped, gasping again. "I'm going to have frozen buns!" Amanda chuckled once more.

Elizabeth slipped around the corner, still hesitant to be in personal contact with the injury. "How is he?" she asked sheepishly.

"I don't think it's terminal," Amanda responded, lifting the towel for her.

"My God, that's got to hurt," the younger girl commented, turning away quickly. "I'm sorry, I'm just not very good at these things."

"Would you do me a favor and bring me another wet towel?" Amanda asked gently. "I want to keep this chilled to reduce the swelling. Then we can see what has happened."

Elizabeth gathered herself and swept off on the errand. "Poor Liz," Amanda sighed, "never was much of one to be around any kind of injury. I don't know what she'll do if she ever has kids. Make them call Auntie Amanda, I guess."

Logan attempted to shift position. The bolt of pain stopped him in mid- movement. An involuntary moan issued hoarsely from the young man's throat, prompting another worried look on Amanda's face. "I really hope you haven't broken something," she responded. "I have no idea what to do to help that. Way out here in the middle of nowhere, I don't think we're going to find a doctor or anything. You did say you are a Paramedic, didn't you?"

"No, just an EMT, and I've never had to work on myself before," the firefighter answered truthfully. "You know, I've only been injured once to a point of being incapacitated. That was the accident I told you about. I had no chance to work on myself in that situation! Other than that, a few nicks and scrapes here and there, otherwise, no major injuries. Pretty amazing, huh, in my profession?" He was still trying any means possible to keep his mind off the pain.

Elizabeth returned promptly with another dripping towel. She held it out to her sister while looking in the other direction. Logan peeked up at the girl wondering if she was looking away solely out of fear of seeing the injury or if maybe a little shyness was there, too, being ashamed to look at his bare backside. Amazingly, he wasn't feeling his normal timidity. Maybe the pain was just dulling his senses or something.

"Here, now re-wet this one, if you will," Amanda requested confidently. "The swelling is already decreasing. See?"

Elizabeth just nodded affirmatively without looking at him. She took the towel and slipped off once more. The sudden shock of the fresh, cold towel took his breath again. "Man, I don't know what's worse, the pain or the damned cold water you're putting on my butt," Logan responded breathlessly. Amanda smiled again. "How is it looking?" he asked seriously.

"You got it pretty good," the willing nurse answered honestly. "But, I don't know how to tell if the hip's broken or anything."

"Just do as I tell you," the fireman ordered gently. "I'll show you how to check for a break. Start at my waist and feel down both sides of my hips at the same time. Press gently and feel for any deformities or anything that doesn't match from one side to the other. If anything is broken it's probably my hip, so look at my symmetry, too, see if one side of my waist looks higher than the other. Ow, shit! Press gently!" Logan begged as Amanda began her survey.

"I feel some kind of a lump in your left side," she responded. "It's just so swollen that I can't feel anything much but the puffiness."

"Whenever I move and it hurts like hell," the young man reported. "Just keep the cold water on the swollen area for a while and we'll see what happens. My main problem right now is that my butt is frozen. It's so cold it hurts almost as much as the injury!"

"What if we try to get you upstairs?" Amanda asked as Elizabeth rounded the corner with another wet towel.

"Yeah, let's give it a try," he agreed tenuously. "Just go slowly."

Amanda slipped the band of his undershorts back up to the young man's waist, looking at the trousers that were still pulled down around his knees. "Your pants are either going to have to come off or go back on. They're not going to work around your knees like that."

"Pull them off," Logan requested. "Carefully!"

Amanda directed Elizabeth to his right side, instructing her to pull one leg of the pants while she pulled off the other. Liz still avoided looking at Logan, and Amanda scolded her for pulling out of sync, hurting him. Reluctantly, Elizabeth returned her attention and gaze onto the task until it was completed, immediately turning away. With further instruction from the older sister, Elizabeth moved to Logan's side, helping roll him over onto his back. Slowly the aching lad moved, grimacing and moaning all the way. He uttered a deep sigh of relief, relaxing onto his back. "We need to immobilize my leg somehow before I try to move very far. Someone go upstairs and get a couple of bed sheets," the fireman directed, laying back with his eyes closed. "Jeez, my legs are cold."

Elizabeth stood up and started off. "I'll get them," she announced, quickly turning away. The spry girl bolted up the stairs, shaking the whole building with her steps.

"What's with her?" Logan asked, still trying to keep his mind off the pain. "She won't even look towards me. The scrape isn't that bad, is it?"

Amanda chuckled, "I don't think it's just the scrape she's avoiding seeing. Liz talks a good game but she's never played. And she's pretty shy about it. She's not much like me."

"Yeah, I kind of gathered that," the young man agreed, answering for several different meanings at once. The pain in his hip was beginning to reach a critical point again as Elizabeth returned with two folded bed sheets that had been stored in one of the trunks. His leg was beginning to throb with every heartbeat. "Just cover me up with the sheets for a while and give me a few minutes alone," he requested earnestly.

The two girls obeyed with Elizabeth leaving immediately. Amanda hesitated, not wanting to leave the injured man alone. "I think we should go ahead and get you upstairs," she suggested sincerely.

"Just give me a few minutes. I want to try and let the pain subside first. I just need a little quiet right now. I'll call you when I'm ready." Reluctantly, the worried nurse turned and walked away.

Logan heard Amanda walk around the corner and sit down on one of the steps of the stairway. He chuckled a little through the pain, Mother hen, the honored lad thought. Then, putting his attention into his own body, Logan first focused on relaxing himself all over. It wasn't an easy task under the circumstances, but the determined fireman began to feel a modicum of result.

Logan reached for the affected area, gently prodding the skin with his fingertips. He could feel the heat of wounded flesh on his hind. "Oh, Brigid, don't let this happen." he moaned mentally to the ancient feminine deity. "We've come this far, please help us off this island and back to our homes. Morgan is waiting for me, I know it! Please let me get back to her."

Pain once again began to distract the fireman's attention. A voice trickled through his sullen awareness, reminding him of his infinite capacity. "You are much more than you can even imagine, Logan, remember that. Your time was not yet come to join fully with the infinite. All you need do is call upon the power waiting within your grasp, do not be afraid to be limitless in your endeavors. As it harms no other, Logan Keohane, the power of Heaven and Earth awaits your command, for you are not separate! Fear not, for all things are possible for he who believes! You are the creator and the created, the seeker and the finder, the beginning and the end, you are all that is and all that is, is you!"

Silence and reverence flooded Logan as his consciousness expanded beyond the portals of time and space, connecting with a life force so bright and profound that he felt as if he touched the very soul of God! I'm going home, he thought, fully expecting to arrive in some place determined to be Heaven. Gradually, Logan returned to present consciousness. He could feel Amanda peek around the corner, turn and again disappear, shaking her head in disgust.

Suddenly, the lad felt overwhelmingly exhausted. It was all he could do to mentally check once again on his dully aching wound. Logan lightly touched his left hip with his hand, drifting immediately off into a deep slumber. Thank you, Brigid! was his last recollection, leaving consciousness.

"Hey, Logan, wake up!" the groggy fireman heard a voice call softly, a hand jostling him gently. "Are you all right? It's getting dark out here and we need to get you upstairs somehow before night sets in."

Logan groggily looked up to see Amanda's worried face staring down at him. Suddenly, springing to wakefulness, the fireman looked surprisingly around the

deepening twilight. He quickly sat up on the side of the recliner. Several thin blankets that the girls had obviously covered him with, slipped onto the dark ground. "What time is it?" the puzzled lad asked, quickly standing to face the concerned woman.

Amanda's jaw dropped, an expression of complete amazement engulfing her. "Log. . . I, uh. . . what happened? Your hip, is it okay?" the startled lass could hardly speak with surprise.

Logan reached down, touching his hip and realized that his pants weren't on. A quick flash of memory reminded him of the accident, prompting a more thorough inspection of the previously injured area. The surprised firefighter found his muscle pretty stiff and sore, but no acute pain anywhere. A feeling of bewilderment flushed through him, draining all of the color from Logan's face and strength from his knees. "Oh, my God!" the astonished young man whispered. "I had the strangest dream. Or maybe it wasn't a dream!" He sat heavily back onto the webbed chair. "I don't know quite what happened, but now I feel fine. Maybe I just bruised myself a little and now it's gone away," he surmised, trying to make sense of the occurrence. "Anything else is too strange!" A chill suddenly jolted him. "Come on, let's get upstairs!"

Logan took Amanda's hand, wrapped one of the blankets around his waist and started toward the stairway. All that she could do is stare at him as if looking at a ghost. "Elizabeth's not going to believe this!" the unbelieving girl finally uttered, shaking her head and taking the first step up to the cabin.

## Chapter 17

### Lost but not Forgotten

Morgan held up the business card that was given to her by the gentleman on the freeway. The squinting redhead turned the card into the light trying to read the subtle inscription on it more readily. "Jim Mullins, Questioner of Truth," was all that it said,

along with a strange, eight digit phone number and a Galway, Ireland address. She turned the card over to find a hand written phone number on the unprinted rear with an area code that she recognized as Houston's.

Again the curious lass flipped the card to its face, "Questioner of truth," she read again, "What a strange thing to put on a business card. I guess if you want to catch someone's attention this will do it with a minimum amount of words," the young woman snickered. "I wonder what it means and what he does for a living?"

The relaxing woman set the card aside, leaning comfortably back against the cushioned softness of her couch. Taking the day off seemed to be the best thing that Morgan could possibly do for herself. Funny, she thought, just this morning I was looking for more ways to keep myself busy!

Morgan's body was relaxed, feeling as if a garbage truck had just been removed from its resting spot on top of her chest. A heavy sigh issued involuntarily from her throat. "What should I do today?" the redhead asked herself, not really caring at that moment what the answer was. Suddenly a thought gained momentum in her awareness, This would be a fabulous time to check out the trails that I just heard about in Memorial Park! Spending a day alone in nature, with only the trees and the wind as company seemed to be a small taste of Heaven right then. No phones, no bosses, nothing but me and the Earth. The longing girl closed her eyes, reveling in the imagined sound of only nature surrounding her.

The lass felt still and relaxed as at any time she could remember. A small smile crossed her face, thinking about the sheer amazement of just living. God, I love life! Morgan thought with no comprehensible prompting. Her only yearning was to be outdoors, away from the hustle and bustle of city life, enjoying the beauty and solitude of a natural surrounding.

Her mind tailed off to the events of the earlier morning. "What an experience," Morgan exclaimed, shaking her head and chuckling aloud. "What a morning!" the reflecting lass chuckled once more.

Standing suddenly to her feet, the business card that Morgan had casually laid in her lap dropped to the carpeted floor. The still chuckling girl looked down and saw, "Questioner of Truth," staring up at her and sat back down on the sofa to retrieve it. I have got to call this guy right now, Morgan thought, picking up the card from the floor.

Sliding to the end of the couch, the tickled lass picked up the telephone and dialed the number written on the back of the card. "Life Specialties, may I help you," a female voice answered.

"Uh, yes, may I speak to Jim Mullins please," Morgan asked politely.

"I'm sorry, but he isn't in yet. May I take your name and number? I'll have him call you when he arrives."

Morgan sat silently for a moment, then answered, "Yeah, I'm probably going to be away from my phone for a while but if you can have him call my cell and leave a voicemail at 662. . . ."

"Oh, excuse me, but Mister Mullins has just walked in. May I tell him who's calling?"

"My name is Morgan, Morgan O'Malley. I met him just this morning and he asked me to call him, sort of."

"Could you hold for a minute while I give him the message?" Without Morgan's answer the line went silent.

"Hi, Miss O'Malley?" was the next thing she heard, in a male voice. "'Tis so grand to hear from you! How can I be of service?"

Morgan hesitated at the sound of the voice then answered, "Hi, uh, Mister Mullins. I'm sorry to bother you, but I was just looking at your business card and it fascinated me so much that I just had to call you. The thing about questioner of truth really got me going. I can't even begin to explain what that means to me right now."

"Believe me, lass, ya' don't even have ta' try. I have this way of findin' just the right people at just the right time. You seemed a bit shook when I saw ya' last, is everything alright? Are you all right?" Jim answered sincerely.

"Oh yeah, everything's better now than it was. I appreciate you stopping to check on me so much. Unfortunately, it's not like most people around here. I guess that I just called because I wanted to find out more about your card, it intrigues me. Can you tell me a little about it?" Morgan buried herself deeper into the soft couch, settling in for a long explanation.

"Well, it's not really my usual business card, 'tis a wee bit more personal, only for special people. I'd love to tell ya' more about it, but I've got a meeting that I'm supposed to be in right now. Could Patricia and I meet you for dinner somewhere or something? We'd love to really meet ya'. Just name a time and a place and we'll be there."

"Yeah, that'd be great!" Morgan answered excitedly. "How about seven o'clock at The Adobe Restaurant on Westheimer Road?"

"Aye lass, that'll be gorgeous. We'll see you then!"

"You know where it is? The restaurant, I mean."

"Oh yes, lass, I'm only two blocks from there right now. See ya' tonight. Have a brilliant day!" the cheery man responded with so much joy and enthusiasm in his voice that Morgan couldn't help but smile.

"What a trip," she admitted to herself, picking up her car keys and heading toward the door. I've got until seven o'clock, plenty of time to explore something new!"

"I don't believe you've met my wife," Jim prompted Morgan as they were being led to their assigned table. "Morgan, my beautiful wife Patricia. Patricia, Morgan. Now that we've all been formally introduced. . . ."

Morgan, Jim and Patricia arrived at their table, seating themselves casually around its small circumference. "I didn't ask, but, I hope you guys like Mexican food," Morgan asked apologetically.

"Oh, yes," Patricia answered quickly, "We've got a Tex-Mex restaurant in Limerick, you know. We've been there several times. Somehow though, it's not quite the same as this food, I guess it loses a bit in translation," she laughed casually.

"Tell us what's good here," Jim responded, prompting further conversation. "We're still kind of new to the delicacies of the local culinary arts."

Morgan explained the menu to the two, creating the courage to ask them more about their card. "What does it mean on your card, questioner of truth?" she finally asked, taking a sip of her iced tea.

Jim and Patricia both laughed, "Got you, too, eh? We get lots of response from that one. Patricia and I just enjoy helping people. I do that mostly in my profession, but, sometimes people like you come along that seem to be asking for a new perspective on life. That's kind of where the line comes from. You know, truth is relative, always open to a different viewpoint."

"Yeah, and it takes a special person to question everything that they've been taught all their lives as unquestionable," Patricia chimed in, inserting herself into the conversation. "But enough of the deep conversation, tell us about yourself. How did you come to be on the side of the carriageway for us to meet you?"

Morgan was mystified. She sat in front of the couple wide-eyed, unable to answer for several seconds. "I guess that it's a really long story. I'm sorry, I'm just stunned. I just think the timing's incredible that we've met, and under the strangest of circumstances. I really don't know how to take all of this, it's almost too weird for human feasibility," again she answered disjointedly, staring between Jim and his lovely wife. "My boyfriend, Logan, has been missing for a while now. Almost everyone thinks he's



dead. They have plenty of proof, too. But, I think. . . no, I know he's still alive. Just, no one else will believe me!"

"Tell us about Logan. That is, if you care to. I surely don't want to pry and if I cross any boundaries just let me know. You just said he was missing, how did that come about?" Jim answered compassionately.

Morgan stared down into her open palms, feeling a wave of loneliness rush through her. The lass began to recant the story of Logan's disappearance, starting with their final evening's ritual, continuing through the finding of his truck and the burned body, finishing with the inconclusive autopsy report. She then went on to describe Logan's parents reactions and surety of his demise.

"Well lass, I dare say you've been through quite a wringer lately. But I think you've got the right intention and attitude. I would love to be your friend while we're here and even when we go back to Ireland. You did say your name was O'Malley, that's a good Irish name, maybe you'd like to come and visit with us on a holiday to Ireland sometime," Patricia suggested. "We'd love to have the company! Jim and I own several Bed and Breakfasts around the countryside."

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Morgan responded, lightening up at the thought of an extended visit to her roots. "I would love that so much! Funny, I've had such a longing to go to Ireland lately and I couldn't figure out why. I've heard lots about the country from my family and all, but since Logan's and my ceremony, I've had a really deep desire to go there. Something happened that night that seemed to reawaken an old sleeping part of myself! And now you guys come along! I'm telling you, all these events seem to add up to be much more than sheer coincidence!" She smiled largely, shaking her head in disbelief. "Jim, you said you were here on business. What are you doing?"

The waitress arrived with their meal, interrupting the conversation as their plates were set before them. "Mmm, smells wonderful!" Jim began as his plate was set in front of him. "'Tis a bit different than the 'Mexican food' in Ireland. But then again, the Irish food in America is a bit different also. And the Guinness here. . . ." he pinched his nose in mock disgust. "I don't know what they do to the brew here, but the stuff certainly doesn't travel very well!"

Morgan giggled at the faces Jim made. "Guess I'll have to come to Ireland just to try the Guinness, huh?"

"Yeah, you know what they say in Ireland, 'Guinness is good for you, lots of vitamins!'" Jim laughed aloud as Patricia playfully poked him in the ribs. "Okay, what I'm doing here," the playful Irishman began again, still chuckling. "I own a business that supplies companies with fire fighting equipment and trains people to use it. I have a friend who lives here who was going to help us, but he was offered a position at the last minute with the company that he already works for. His new position was such an over the top opportunity for him that he just couldn't turn it down. 'Tis lovely for him, but it

leaves us in a bit of a pickle. We're looking for someone with some pretty specific skills that we can train for the position."

"What is it, the position I mean. What kind of skills are you looking for?" Morgan inquired interestedly.

"As I was sayin' earlier, we teach a company's personnel to use our equipment, everything to from fire extinguishers to fire coats and helmets. Mostly, we train at our facility in Galway and need someone who can help us manage the numbers of students who are coming to us from all over Ireland and the UK. We are even beginning to have people from Europe and America inquire about our services. We travel occasionally, mostly in Ireland but sometimes to other places in the UK. Have anyone in mind?"

"Oh Jeez, this really is too weird now. I didn't tell you that Logan is a professional firefighter. He was even talking about changing his career path just before he disappeared."

This is just so amazing! Oh, I wish Logan were here right now! Logan has even talked a lot about Ireland and is proud to be Irish himself, but he has told me lots of times how he's just a big city boy and living any place smaller than Houston would probably drive him crazy."

"So he's an Irishman too, eh? Would you think he'd be interested at all if the lad comes back in time for us to meet him?"

"I don't know, like I said, Logan has been pretty adamant about city life. But yes, he is surely an Irishman. Keohane is his name, Logan Patrick Keohane." She laughed slightly, having never before stated his whole name at once. "His father is Yancy and his mother is Anne."

"Keohane?" Patricia perked up. "I know some Keohanes down in County Cork, Robert and his wife Megan. Wouldn't it be just lovely if. . . ."

Morgan whacked her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Logan has talked about his uncle Robert who lives somewhere in County Cork, Banty or Brantree or something with a Ban."

"Bantry!" Patricia blurted out excitedly. "Yes, that's Robert! Got to be the same, I haven't heard of any more Robert Keohanes around there! We've just got to get this Logan of your's home so we can talk to him! Wouldn't it be grand to have you around for more than just a holiday. I think you'd really love Ireland."

Morgan was stunned once more at the suddenness of creation. Now if only I can get the last few pieces to fall in place.

"Oh, and Morgan, we desperately need someone to oversee the business affairs of our bed and Breakfasts. We own seven B and Bs in southwestern Ireland and need someone of your spunk and intelligence to manage the lot of them." Patricia smiled warmly at her. "I'm very good at seeing the possibilities in people and you, I think, have a very bright future before you!"

Morgan's heart leapt! The prospect of a move to a different country into a career that she was fascinated with almost took her breath away with excitement. "Oh, Patricia, you don't know how much that prospect excites me! We've got to get Logan back here at once and at least present him with the idea. Look, I've got goose bumps!" Morgan held out her arm to show Patricia and Jim.

"I think it's settled, for a time anyway; we're going to hold off our search for an assistant for at least two weeks or until Logan returns. I'm not in that big of a rush! Everything except the prime player seems to be falling right into place. If there's one thing I've learned, it is to go with the creative flow, no matter how strange the events may seem at the time! There are greater forces at work than just you and me, Morgan O'Malley!"

Morgan just couldn't sit still. She wanted so much to just run outside and scream into the Universe, "Logan, hurry and get back here! The most amazing things are happening and you're a part of them, hurry home!"

"But I still don't understand," Elizabeth commented as the three captives sat at the small table to eat their dinner. "You were hurt so badly that I couldn't even stand to look at you! Now you say your hip just fine for travel? I . . . I can't believe it!"

"You might as well believe it, here I'll show you!" Logan responded, standing up, grappling for the catch holding his pants.

"No, no, at least not at the dinner table!" Elizabeth objected to his pending bare buns. "I've seen enough already!"

Amanda laughed so hard at her sister that she almost rolled off the chair. "Don't worry sis, I'll make sure he keeps his drawers on now!" She pounded her fist on the table from laughing so hard.

Logan turned red, realizing he was just about to just drop his pants in front of these two young women without even a thought, especially at the dinner table. Jeez, a month ago I felt strange undressing in front of Morgan, now I was just about to bare all in front of two relatively new female friends without a thought, the young man scolded himself. I guess I've loosened up a bit after all. He sat back down, intentionally putting his

attention on dinner and refusing to look up at the girls. Being openly unconscious of his body just wasn't like him.

"Hey, moon man!" Amanda teased him, "Are you going to be able to get us out of this swamp tomorrow? We've got the poles down, I guess we just need to pick out one that'll work for us."

"Yeah," Logan replied, not lifting his eyes from his plate, "I'm fine and yes I can find something to use to move the boat. I'd like to get an early start tomorrow, so why don't you guys get the stuff together tonight that you want to take with us. We'll need the same stuff we talked about today."

"What, you think we're going to a picnic or something? Moon man!" Amanda knew that she could get him going by prying into the subject. "Come here, I want to see your bruise!"

Logan shot the tormenting girl a quick glance, picking up a large red bean from his plate and tossing it at her. "I'll show you my bruise," he prodded with a fake angry voice, "Then you'll have to kiss it!" The fireman laughed, tossing another bean at her.

Amanda raked the mushy legume from her hair and tossed it back at Logan, hitting him between his eyes. "God, I can't wait to get home and have a hamburger!" she commented bluntly. "I'm so tired of canned beans, canned meat and canned fruit that I don't want to see another can for a year! I feel like I've been canned!"

"Me, too," Logan agreed. "But, I want some good Salmon. My grandma used to make the best grilled Salmon in the world, fresh out of the river in Ireland! Then she made this dill sauce that. . . Jeez, I can't even think about it. The thought makes my mouth water so much that I could just go crazy!"

"Mmmm, I like Salmon, too," Liz interjected, laying her fork roughly on the table beside the half eaten plate. "But, I guess we should really be thankful that we've had any food at all. We could have starved to death in this piece of shit shanty!"

"That's true, but it doesn't make Salmon sound any less inviting!" the salivating lad responded. "I think I'm ready to chill out for a while. I'm really tired but not sleepy. I think I'll just sit in the study for a while," he teased. Logan's emotions began bubbling from deep inside of him once again. What was it that he really wanted? The homesick lad was ready to get home and see Morgan, but the thought of going back on duty at the fire station, or being in a large city at all, set sourly on his stomach. His dreams returned to his beloved Ireland, playing in the green fields and listening to the waves on the Dingle shore, walking hand in hand with his wife, Morgan. "I wish I knew if she would be at all interested in going to Ireland," he wondered aloud to himself.

"Hey, Logan, off on some strange planet again?" Amanda prodded.

"Oh, sorry, just thinking about Morgan and Ireland. I wish I knew if she'd even consider moving there. I really want to live there, but being with Morgan is about the most important thing in my life." Logan slid his chair away from the table and walked into the small kitchen. Digging through the closest rickety drawer, the fireman found several small sheets of paper and sat down with them and a pencil, scribbling down notes.

"What are you doing?" Amanda asked curiously.

"Oh, nothing," Logan responded, not looking up from the paper that he was now diligently writing on.

"Oh come on, what are you doing?" she asked him again, a little more emphatically.

"I got this idea to write down several different areas of my life to see if I can understand why I decided to do whatever it was. Like, why I'm a firefighter, why I got married, and divorced. You know, maybe then I can decide if it is something that I still want to do with myself."

"Why are you a firefighter?" Amanda asked again, stopping him in mid sentence. "I'd like to know because I want to know what direction I really want to pursue in my life. Somehow, being a chemical engineer doesn't work for me anymore."

"Well, my ideas started with things like, my work is a secure job working for a governmental agency, and I chose something with security. But, that wasn't really the reason, so I went a little deeper. My father was in the navy during the Korean War and was a deck board firefighter on an aircraft carrier, some of the reason is that I chose to be like him. That still wasn't quite all of the reason. Then, I remembered reading books upon books about knights in shining armor, fighting fire breathing dragons and rescuing damsels in distress throughout my childhood and teens. I wanted so much to be a knight, questing after the Holy Grail, living an adventurous, exciting life that I guess I chose the occupation most like the job description. Believe me, I've lived some adventures, fought some fiery dragons and at least tried to rescue some damsels in distress. That last part got me into more trouble than any of the rest. Yet, that description is a pretty good way of summing up my past relationships. You know, I just thought, the relationship I have with Morgan is different, she doesn't need rescuing like the others. Maybe that's why I sometimes feel so strangely around her. She's gotten herself pretty much together, doesn't need anyone. Still, I can feel her pure love more than anyone I've ever been with. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Lucky girl," Amanda responded quietly, then she perked up again. "Knight in shining armor, huh? Must be a guy thing. I'd rather be Rapunzel, rescued by my Prince from my ivory tower!" she laughed and faked a swoon with the back of her left hand against her forehead.

"Right now I'm wondering how I got here, on this island." Logan continued lightheartedly. I had plenty of opportunity not to be here. I was really early for work,

Morgan begged me to stay home, just call in sick, and I refused her. But, probably the biggest thing is, I didn't have to stop for the guy on the side of the freeway! Those were all events that could have easily been avoided, any one changing the outcome that I'm experiencing right now." Logan paused, contemplating silently for several seconds. "I'm really beginning to find more proof that there is some higher form of consciousness that I call God that can work far beyond conventional thinking. I've wanted, for some time, to have the opportunity to really have the time to find me, to really see what I wanted in the greater scope of my life. Somehow, I feel that I'll get the answer when we get home. But, I needed this time of quiet and change to open me up for some calling other than what I would have even dreamed of in the 'reality' of my life not long ago." Logan sat his pencil and paper on the couch beside him, pondering a feeling of deep connectedness to his lover.

"Something is waiting for me at home, I can feel it in my bones." the excited fireman continued. "A change so wondrous and so drastic that I can't even comprehend it right now. I just know that whatever occurs involves Morgan in a very direct way. You know, from this point, I can't regret a second of this whole experience."

"Pretty deep," Amanda responded reverently, looking mistily into space. "Is there any more of that paper around here? I would like to try some of that myself."

Logan handed her several pieces of his stack of paper and smiled up at her. "I think you're a brave lass," he commented, smiling warmly again, admiring her courage and willingness to try something different. Her most profound quality the admiring lad figured was Amanda's dedication to herself and her willingness to change. "It's going to be a lucky guy who finds you now!" he told the smiling girl warmly and tenderly.

"What are you guys doing?" Elizabeth asked, entering the room.

## Chapter 18

### Where to go?

"Good night," Morgan called, waving to her new friends and drove away from the restaurant. "What a wonderful couple," she commented to herself, spinning with tales of

the Emerald Isle and envisioning the dazzling descriptions of an ancient land. The young woman could almost feel a country and people old as all antiquity yet fresh as the first rays of a spring morning, newly visited by a warm, cleansing shower. Why did she have such a longing for a land she'd never actually seen? Morgan normally didn't fly off the handle at pipe dreams. She typically worked with planning, diligence and practicality.

"What will mother say?" she wondered, "When I tell her that I'm moving to Ireland? Hell, what will everyone say? Probably that I've lost my head, grieving for my lost love. But, when he comes back. . . ." the Morgan chuckled, envisioning the looks on different peoples faces when she breaks the news to them. Some will be happy and excited, others will be shocked and dismayed. She pictured her mother in the last group.

"And why would you want to do some fool hearty thing like run off to a foreign country and leave your family behind? It's just not. . . not loving!" Morgan could already hear the woman say.

The invigorated young woman was feeling so enlivened that she couldn't force herself to go home. Even though the hour was getting late and the early November breeze was blowing frigidly from the north, she wanted to be outdoors, soaking up the silvery moonbeams pouring from the clear, inky sky.

Morgan drove decided to return to Logan's apartment complex once again, the location had served her purposes well previously. Slowly, she pulled into the parking lot and sat silently inside of her car for several minutes. The peaceful lass opened the car door and slid off the seat into the silvery moonshine. She could almost feel the warmth of the glow flowing gently over her shoulders, dripping onto the chilly ground and creating a soft shadow at her feet.

Immediately the enraptured redhead felt the creation of the Universe, the vastness of its reaches as well as the power of Universal immensity. Awe filled her senses, generating a feeling of love and appreciation for everything ever imagined. All in its own wondrous place, the awestricken young woman thought, smiling into the heavens. Logan, you and I are soon going to Ireland. We'll see Mother Brigid from the perspective of our heritage!

Morgan glided effortlessly to the base of the same large stone that she had visited once before. She sat gently down, with dancing moon shadows playing across the small pond and into the distant tree line. How wondrous a creation, the young woman thought, gazing into the luminescence of the glowing pond. Her thoughts turned slowly inward, building on Jim and Patricia's descriptions of the Irish countryside. She could see herself and Logan strolling hand in hand down the sandy strand of an Irish coastline. "The time for creation has come," a voice that she didn't recognize flowed through her head. Morgan agreed and was glad.

Morning was just breaking when Logan woke up from a restless sleep. The sleepy fireman peeked groggily out of the window beside his bed and rolled easily out from under the warm covers. No time to linger this morning, he thought, smiling. Well, here is the big day! A rush of anticipation flowed through him, sending a chill up the center of his spine. He shivered involuntarily with a burst of raw energy.

Stark wakefulness streamed through his body, prompting Logan to dress quickly as possible and wake the girls. The invigorated fireman practically ran through his door, knocking once on the girls bedroom door and noisily entering their room. "Hey, sleepy heads, get up! It's morning. I'd like to get out of here as soon as possible! Come on!" He clapped his hands loudly and kicked the end of both beds with his knee.

Amanda sat up in bed rubbing her eyes and stretching hugely. "Are our clothes dry?" she asked immediately, swinging her legs out from under the covers. The young woman's T-shirt ended at waist level, revealing a pair of men's jockey shorts that she had confiscated from the duffle bags. "Do you mind?" she addressed Logan, covering herself hurriedly with the bed sheet.

"Oh, look at Miss Modest," Elizabeth snickered sleepily, peeking out from under her covers. Amanda just returned a scowl in her direction.

"Since you're just going to stand there will you at least hand me my pants?" she continued to Logan. The fireman picked up a pair of trousers from the end of the bed, tossing them lightly to the shy girl. "Why don't you leave so I can at least get out of bed in peace. And go comb your hair, you've got a terrible case of bed-head!" Amanda laughed, pulling the slacks over her feet.

Logan turned and headed toward the door. "Come on Elizabeth, I want to get going," he prompted impatiently again, limping slightly out of the brightening room.

Amanda followed closely behind, tying a piece of cord tightly around the waist of the trousers to keep them up. She headed directly to the kitchen, where the two girls had hand washed and hung their own clothes the night before. "Yeah, they're dry enough," the satisfied girl stated to no one in particular. Quickly picking up both sets of clothes, she returned to the bedroom. "Here," Logan heard Amanda give Elizabeth's clothes to the younger girl.

Logan stood looking out of the front window that faced their docking site and smiled, peering at the little boat, just as they had left it. Yeah, I'm ready to go now, the eager Irishman thought, collecting himself. Amanda stepped out of the bedroom, now fully dressed.

"My God, I want to get home and get into a nice long, hot shower!" the young woman commented. "I think I'll need to stay in the shower for about three hours trying to get this place washed off me!"



"Me, too," Elizabeth announced, with wide yawn, following her sister into the living room. "The next place I go visit will at least have the resources to wash my hair!"

Logan just shook his head and pulled a comb from his back pocket. "Soon as we get the food and water downstairs, I'll load the raft and we'd best be going. It's still pretty cold outside, so the reptiles shouldn't be out. But, if the weather warms up a little later I don't know if they'll wake up or not."

"I'm going to get us something for breakfast real quick, then I'll be ready to go," Amanda responded excitedly. "Anyone want to join me?"

"Yeah, probably not a bad idea. It will be best to grab a quick bite here before we get moving. I don't know how long it'll take us to find our way out of this swamp," the fireman answered, walking into the tiny kitchen.

"What do you suppose happened to the kidnappers?" Elizabeth asked suddenly, almost as an afterthought

"Who knows? Maybe one of his alligators got him or something. Or maybe his partner shot him, or one of his friendly neighbors got him!" Logan returned casually. All seemed to be fairly unsettling thoughts, however, since the captives were going to try and follow the kidnapper's path out of the swamp. "If we're lucky, we'll find my truck parked somewhere and we can just drive away in it. I have a key hidden under the body for emergency use," he responded, disquieted. "I'm going to put the stuff in the raft and find a pole to use, then we can eat quickly and get out of here!"

"Sounds like a plan, Stan," Amanda toyed, playfully.

"I'll give you a hand," Elizabeth offered. "By the way, how's your hip and leg?"

Logan instinctively grabbed his left hip with his hand and rubbed it brusly. "Still a wee bit sore, but that accident just seems like an old bad dream now. I don't think it'll be any hindrance at all." Logan casually tested the leg out.

"Jeez, that almost qualified for a miracle!" Amanda chimed in. "I want to know what you did to heal yourself while we're paddling around out there, for my own information. . . in detail!"

"Here we go!" Logan remarked with steaming breath. He shoved the little boat away from the shoreline. The struggling firefighter quickly jumped into the receding craft. "We're off! Onward Banbha, take us home!"

Both girls smiled ear to ear, sliding across the murky water. They both looked like little Eskimoes, bundled up against the cold in every spare article of warmth that they could find. Fortunately, the wind was calm and the sun beamed through numerous small open patches in the arbor above, revealing a bright blue, clear sky. There was almost no sound around them, creating a surrealistic effect of silence, parted solely by the dipping of Logan's thick cane pole into and out of the water for propulsion.

Elizabeth slowly turned, looking at the disappearing shanty, almost tearfully. "Goodbye," she called to the receding structure quietly. "In some ways I'm going to miss that place. I might even try to find it again sometime, just for old times sake."

Amanda and Logan followed her lead and turned to watch the remnants of the little cabin slip out of view behind the huge cypress trees. "Yeah, me too," Logan admitted, "But I really don't think I'll ever come back here, at least not purposefully."

"I'm just glad to get out of there," Amanda responded truthfully. "I might miss the companionship that I've felt, but I can have that anywhere. This place I won't miss! I'm ready to get on with my life, soon as I figure out how I want to do that."

The three travelers pondered silently as Logan pushed them through the deepening swamp. He was gathering more confidence in his poling ability with each stroke. Although the sun was shining brightly overhead, the gloom was rapidly deepening, the huge cypress trees, heavy with Spanish moss, growing closer and closer together. Logan soon found himself moving tendrils of hanging moss from their pathway before they could proceed.

"I don't think this is right," Amanda broke the stifling silence. "We couldn't have come this way before. We would have felt this stuff hitting us as we came through." She pulled a streamer of grey-green growth from her hair and tossed it carelessly into the water beside her. "I think we need to turn around and go back that way." The suddenly concerned young woman pointed behind them.

"Why that way?" Logan quizzed.

"Just call it woman's intuition. Or, this way sure the hell isn't getting us anywhere. The swamp is getting thicker by the foot. Soon we won't even be able to get through all of this shit!" Amanda pulled another tangle of moss from her head.

Logan stopped pushing the boat and looked around in all directions. "I wish I could see the sun so I could at least get an idea of which direction we're going." the confused lad responded exasperatedly. "I can find my way around a fire scene in total darkness, but, I at least have a hose that I can follow if I need to get back out quickly. Truthfully, at the moment, I have no idea where we are."

"Did you know where we were before we left the cabin?" Elizabeth chimed in, sounding a bit frightened. "Let's do something! We're not doing any good just sitting here!"

Logan pushed off from a nearby tree with his stout pole, turning the raft into the reverse direction. He sat a course, roughly returning in the direction they had come. "I don't even know how to get us back to the cabin right now," the worried young man informed both girls soberly.

"I don't want to go back to the cabin, I want to get out of here!" Amanda expressed emphatically. "Okay, while you're pushing us around, tell me what you did with your rear. I mean, how you fixed it. Let's just keep our minds occupied and keep moving. This worry isn't helping anything!"

"You're right, let's change the subject. Let's see, I really can't give you the details because I hardly remember them. I'll tell you all I do remember, then you'll have to figure out the rest yourself. Hopefully, not in the same way that I did!" Logan began recanting his experience to the best of his recollection. The story seemed to ease all of their uneasiness as well as break the monotonous silence.

Scouring the area around them, Logan wished he could recognize some of the country that they were traveling through, but, how do you distinguish one group of trees from another? He was completely turned around, proceeding more blindly in the light of day than he had in the absolute darkness of a fire scene. Finishing his story, the worries that had been playing in the background of young man's thoughts made themselves more acute.

The concerned firefighter tried to combat his fears, forcefully push them aside and think of the grand things to come. But, soon as one thought diminished, another gladly took its place, making him feel as if he had a popcorn popper going at full speed in his consciousness. Logan's disorientation became even more pronounced upon entering a broad clearing in the trees. A large hole opened in the canopy above them, allowing sunlight to stream brightly through. "I didn't see this before, did either of you?" he asked, unable to disguise his anxiety.

Both girls shook their heads negatively, staying silent. A bird flittered overhead, startling Logan, followed by several more flying creatures dashing through the curtain of sunlight in an array of bright colors and frantic movement. Suddenly, a small splash, quite a distance away on his right, caught the nervous young man's attention. His head snapped to identify the cause.

"You getting nervous, too?" Amanda asked uneasily.

"Yeah," Logan had to admit. "I just wish I knew where we were. I don't care to be stuck out here tonight."

"Me neither, I wouldn't consider it a pleasant camping experience!" Elizabeth answered, her voice beginning to tremble with concern.

Got to get my mind off of the fear, the lad thought worriedly. Logan thought back into the past, remembering Morgan's sweet touch and the smell of her hair deep in the night. Soon, the calming young man was more at ease with his surroundings. Logan turned to Amanda and Elizabeth. He could see the concern in their tight grasp of the side ropes and tenseness of their backs.

"Hey guys," the lad called to them lightly, "what's the first thing you are going to do when you get back home?" he asked to take their mind from the present situation. Logan kept pushing the raft through the maze of tree trunks with the stout pole, almost unconsciously.

"Get a cheese burger!" Elizabeth declared, snapping her head toward a nearby splash on their left side. "Right after I have a long, long shower."

"Yeah, the shower thing is all I can think of right now," Amanda retorted.

Logan suddenly felt a strong draw to return to the shack for something. He almost felt as if he had left something very important behind. "We need to find our way back to the cabin," he instructed the girls suddenly. "I don't know why, I just feel like we left something that we really need."

"Funny, I was just thinking that myself!" Elizabeth chorused, looking befuddled.

"I guess I'm agreeable right about now, but, how do we get there?" Amanda answered.

"Just keep going, I guess, and keep a lookout. We can't be very far from it now," Logan returned, not knowing what else they could do. "With everything I've seen happen lately. . . ."

"No, the cabin can't be very far," Amanda agreed.

"Look, I remember that tree! It looks like there's a face on it. I noticed it on our way out!" Elizabeth announced excitedly. "Turn a little to your right." Logan complied.

"Yeah, and I remember that stand of cypress knees over there," Amanda chimed in. "They reminded me of a pipe organ I saw at a Cathedral our family visited in Rome! Turn the boat a little more that way." Separated from their fear, the trio began recognizing landmarks toward their destination.

"There is the cabin!" Amanda exclaimed, standing up on the small boat's unwieldy bottom, pointing almost directly ahead of them.

Logan shook his head and smiled. The astonished young man was almost beginning to expect the unexpected. He laughed aloud.

Both girls joined in his laughter for no apparent reason. The joyous sounds warmed Logan. Laughter, the medicine of the gods, the smiling lad thought, laughing again. He pushed them toward the house, noticing how differently the little place looked, and felt, coming upon it like this. The place even had some strange appeal to him.

"Hold on guys," the Logan instructed, "I'm going to beach us." Logan pushed harder with each stroke of his pole, gaining speed for their landing. The nose of the craft slid onto the boggy bank and Amanda jumped forward, out of the raft. She grabbed a firm hold on the perimeter rope, pulling them a little farther onto dry land. "That's the best I can do guys. You'll just have to come out the front." the struggling girl announced.

Elizabeth slipped over the bow of the raft, landing with a squish on the little island. "If I were going to name this place I think I'd call it 'Little Mucky'" she said, laughing.

Logan followed closely behind, pulling the boat farther out of the water. "Let's go upstairs and see if we can figure out what we left here," the baffled lad stated, heading toward the all too familiar stairway. "Besides, it's lunchtime and now would be a great time to eat."

Oh my God! Morgan thought, writing out the rent payment check for her apartment, I'm sure Logan's rent is due right now, too. I really don't know what to do about it. I guess I should call his parents and ask their opinion, but, I know what their answer will be, they still believe he's dead! Well, at least we could get his stuff moved out and into storage somewhere, no use letting the place stay empty while paying rent. When Logan gets back, he can stay with me for a while, or longer if he wants.

Morgan picked up the phone, dialing the Keohanes number. "Hello, Yancy? This is Morgan. You know, I was just paying my rent and thought; Logan's apartment rent is due, also. I guess it'd probably be best to go ahead and move his stuff into storage somewhere. He doesn't have a whole lot of big furniture so it shouldn't take much. In fact, I think I'll call one of those apartment moving places and get them to load his stuff up. The whole move won't take but a couple of hours that way. No, I don't mind getting everything together, it shouldn't cost much. I just need to know where to take his stuff. Are you sure you have room in your garage? Okay, that'll be great. I'll see you in a while, bye!"

Morgan searched through the phone book, looking for a moving company. The thorough redhead quickly arranged a pick up, amazingly that same afternoon, then called her work to inform them of her emergency. Fortunately, she worked with a very understanding group of people. "I'd best get over to Logan's apartment and start getting

things ready for the movers."

Morgan opened Logan's apartment door, stepped inside and quietly closed it behind her. The struggling lass brought in as many empty boxes as she could carry. Setting the boxes on the floor, the reminiscing young woman walked directly into the small living room thinking of their ritual, remembering the love she had felt, holding her lover so close that wondrous evening. She could still feel the energy they had shared during that loving interchange of bodies and spirits. The love seemed to be permeated into the walls, the floor, the carpet and especially the ritual regalia that was still placed in various spots around the room. Morgan walked into the center of the room where Logan had fashioned the glowing circle of silent candles and sat cross legged on the floor. Closing her eyes, the lonely redhead let her mind wander back across time to the beauty and fullness of their ceremony, smelling the rich smell of candles, incense and wine, seeing the golden glow of the flickering shafts.

The sentimental woman slowly stood, walking around the small room, touching or picking up every ceremonial tool that she saw. Each carried its own reminder of Logan in a special way. The girl stopped before the broadsword leaning in a far corner, reaching out to touch the leather wrapped handle. Funny, she thought, I didn't know he had a sword until that evening. Gently, Morgan picked up the heavy blade, stroking down the bright double edged steel with a passion that even she didn't recognize. She longingly turned the blade, pommel up, holding the sword tightly against her breast. The full feeling returned of that special evening, how she seemed to have slipped through time into a memory that had startled her. The cold steel pulled the young woman into her imagination where her lost love was returned to her, cold and lifeless, wounded through the heart by an instrument of death similar to what she held. Visions of taking his sword, the last cherished vestment of their undying love. The vision continued with the young woman holding the blade tightly to her bosom, her lover being carried away to return to the Great Mother from whence he had come.

"Logan, I cherish you and I don't want to be left with only your sword as a legacy. Come back to me Logan, come back to me quickly so we can go to Ireland and raise our children in the ways of love and peace! I'm for you Logan Keohane, and I always will be!"

Morgan sat to the floor, laying the cool blade across her lap with a snuffle. This stuff I'm keeping with me, she thought, looking lovingly around her once more through tear glazed eyes. "Well, I guess I'd better pack up and get ready for the movers."

# Chapter 19

## Many Happy Returns

"What's that noise?" Logan asked, perking up to listen intently to an odd sound that suddenly came within earshot.

"I don't know, but it sounds like a motor of some kind!" Elizabeth answered, the three captives jumping up simultaneously, rushing to the window to find what was generating the sound. They were all fixated, seeing a small boat powered by a tiny outboard engine being beached next to their raft.

"Who is it?" Amanda asked breathlessly. "Do you think it's one of the kidnapers come back? God, why did he have to come back now? Why didn't we just keep going while we had the chance? How could we be so stupid?"

"I . . . I don't know. This person doesn't look at all like the guy who captured me!" Logan replied quietly. "This guy looks pretty refined, actually. Unless he's the unseen partner, this is not a kidnapper." Logan peered intently at the figure beaching the tiny, motorized craft

"Oh, shit! We left the gun in the raft!" Elizabeth suddenly realized. "Logan, what are we going to do?"

"Get me that baseball bat from the bedroom. There's only one of him and I think I'm bigger than he is, so maybe we have the advantage!"

Elizabeth ran quietly to the bedroom, Amanda and Logan stared down at the man getting out of his boat. The fellow was a refined looking man, actually gentlemanly, in a fashionable tweed jacket and khakis, wearing a tweed beret and high black boots. His short, well groomed beard was graying noticeably, as was the closely cropped hair that was visible below his flat hat. Elizabeth returned hurriedly with the baseball bat. The frightened trio watched in suspense as the gentleman stepped curtly around their raft, inspecting its contents.

Suddenly, the man turned, looked up at the house and yelled, "Hallo! Hallo! Is there somebody here? Hallo!" He stepped cautiously toward the landing of the stair and called up again, "Hallo! Is there anybody up there?"

"I don't think this guy is part of the kidnapping thing," Logan judged. "In fact, this may be our way off of this island. Our something missing!" The relieved fireman laughed, walking toward the exit door. He sat the baseball bat carelessly beside the door

jamb on his way out. "Hi," Logan responded to the man's summons, stepping gingerly out the opening and raising his right hand in greeting.

"Logan, be careful!" Amanda warned quietly to the exposed lad's back.

"Oh, hallo!" the gentleman answered cheerfully in return. "I wasn't expecting to see anyone here. This place isn't used much anymore and I know most of the professors who come here, but, welcome anyway!" The man glanced casually at the jimmied storage room door.

"Hi!" Logan responded again, "I'm Logan Keohane and we're not teachers or anything like that. Actually, we've been stranded here for a several days and just found your supplies and took advantage of them. We'll gladly pay you back if you'll help us get out of here. Sorry about your door there."

"Oh, no need for that," the courteous gentleman answered, smiling. "This is all LSU property, not mine. They supply all of the food and things for everyone doing research out here in the swamp lands. I'm sure you didn't find any gourmet meals in there! Stranded, huh? How did you come to be stranded way out here?" the curious fellow queried, a quizzical look on his face. "I'd be happy to help you get to where you are going. You said we, are there more of you?"

"Yeah, Amanda, Elizabeth," Logan called over his shoulder to the two girls. "There are three of us. When can we go?"

"Oh my, you are in a hurry! There's only one little problem, my little boat will hardly carry you and I, two more will be impossible. But, I bet I can tow you in your raft!" the cheerful professor answered resoundingly after a short deliberation. "We can go whenever you're ready. I just came to get a few supplies. However, I can come back later and get them on my return to the research station. I'd love to hear how you came to be out here in the middle of nowhere! I haven't had much human interaction for weeks."

"Wonderful!" Logan exclaimed excitedly. "How long does it take to get out? And where the hell are we? Come on guys, let's go!" Logan motioned for the girls to hurry down the stairs and join him.

"We are almost dead center of the Atchafalaya Swamp. The trip usually takes me about forty five minutes or so to get to the highway, but pulling you along with me, I don't know, maybe an hour." the helpful gentleman responded sincerely, looking even more puzzled at the last question.

"You hear that? An hour to freedom!" Amanda repeated excitedly. "Let's go!"



"By the way, my name is Gene, Gene Thibedeaux. Nice to meet you," the friendly stranger offered his hand to Logan. The two men shook hands and exchanged quick pleasantries.

"I hate to be brief, but I'm really ready to go. Everyone back home probably thinks I'm dead. Boy are they going to be surprised!"

Gene's eyes suddenly widened and twinkled noticeably. "You know, seeing your uniform, I'll bet you are that fireman that was supposed to have been burned to ashes in that God-awful wreck a couple of weeks ago. If so, yeah, you are pronounced dead alright. Without enough of you left to bury!" The astonished fellow's face brightened even more with recognition. "And I'll bet you two are the young Co-eds that were kidnapped off the Texas A&M Campus! The Police and your father have been all over the radio and newspapers trying to find you! My only communication with the outside world is a little transistor radio that I get to listen to every night and all I hear about is you two! Boy, is your family going to be glad to hear from you!"

"Jesus H. Christ, my parents and Morgan. . . . At least that explains why the kidnapers never returned. My poor truck must be ash too, huh?" Logan quizzed the fellow dejectedly.

"See Amanda, I told you that daddy would be worried sick over us!" Elizabeth exclaimed, poking her sister in the ribs. "And you thought he didn't care! Oh, daddy, we'll be home soon!"

A tear trickled down Amanda's cheek. "I really didn't think he didn't care about us, I just. . . . Daddy, I really didn't mean it. I know you love us!"

"Believe me, missy, with all the fuss you're Pop's making over your disappearance I'd bet my boots that he misses both of you very much!" the rescuer answered sincerely to the girls. "And if that that fellow was driving your truck, I'm afraid it's just so much slag right now," Gene replied compassionately, looking at Logan.

The parties each boarded their respective boats and Logan shoved the raft forcefully into the water. Gene pulled the starter rope on the little outboard several times before the engine fired up. "Here," the fellow called to Logan, "Tie this rope to the front of your raft and I'll tow you right on in. My car is parked at the highway, so I'll drive you to the nearest Police Station. I'll bet they'll gladly get you home!"

Logan did as instructed, listening to the tiny engine begin to whine at the heavy load. Slowly, the freed captives began their trek homeward, almost ninety degrees from the direction taken earlier. "This is the longest way to the highway, but it's the easiest on this little engine," Gene called back to them over the noise of the outboard. "The other way goes through some pretty thick, dangerous swamp." He pointed forty five degrees from their current direction, roughly where the three had been earlier that morning. "If you go that way," the knowledgeable professor pointed directly where they had gone

earlier, "Good luck! That's some wild and woolly country. I wouldn't go back there myself, and I know this swamp pretty well. Too many bad stories and missing people have tried going that way!"

Logan looked at the girls and saw Elizabeth shiver at the news. The quivering young woman looked up at him and smiled. "Now I'm really ready to be out of here!" Liz responded meekly.

Gene boldly opened the faded wooden door with a rattle of dirty glass and casually stepped into the local Sheriff's Office. He presented his companions to the rotund, half-kempt man lounging behind the nearest antiquated desk. "Sheriff, this is Logan Keohane, Elizabeth and Amanda Krause. They seemed to have gotten themselves kidnapped and left in the swamp for a while. You know that fellow who was all burned up in that wreck a while back during the hellacious floods? Well, that was their kidnapper. Now, this is the missing fireman that everyone thought was all burned to cinders in that truck and these two young ladies are the two co-eds that were abducted from Texas A&M University Campus that are all over the news. I believe these guys are ready to get home!"

The startled sheriff's jaw dropped and the blood seemed to drain from his face. "Kidnapped, you say," the stricken lawman responded with a noticeable south Louisiana accent. "And left in the swamp? The hell you say! Where the dickens did ya'll stay for so long? How'd ya'll live?"

"You know that little way station shack that LSU uses for the research staff?" Gene answered for the three exhausted captives.

"Yeah, kind of."

"That's where I found them. I was going to restock my supplies and they had found my stockroom, making themselves at home!" The gleeful professor laughed, the Sheriff readily joining in with an aire of relief.

"The hell you say!" was all the laughing officer could respond.

"We're really ready to get home now, so could we call our father?" Amanda asked the rotund lawman impatiently.

"Oh, oh, of course. Here's the telephone right here." the astonished Sheriff responded, pointing to a phone on his desk. "Just help yourself young lady and if there's anything else I can do for you. . . . But, seeing how this was a kidnapping and all," the lawman corrected himself, recollecting his professional demeanor, "I'll have to ask you a

few questions before you leave. If you want to get someone to come here and pick you up, I think we should be about finished by the time they get here."

"Thank you, I'll tell my father to come here to get us," the older girl replied wearily. Amanda picked up the telephone, searched through her memory for their father's private number and dialed. "Dad? Daddy? It's me dad, Amanda. . . yeah, I'm alright and I'm certainly not dead! Yeah, Elizabeth's right here with me too and she's fine!" Liz moved quickly to her sister's side, motioning for the phone. "No, I really don't want to explain all the details to you on the phone, but we were kidnapped and brought to Louisiana, that's where we are right now and we need a way home." Elizabeth impatiently grappled for the receiver, prompting Amanda to brush her away. "No, we're in a little town so I don't think there's an airport large enough for the jet, wait, let me ask." Amanda turned to the lawman, "Excuse me, Sheriff, is there an airport around here that'll land a private jet? Somewhere close?"

"Uh, yeah, Lafayette ain't too many miles down the road and I know they land medivac jets there all the time. Sometimes even commercials."

"Daddy, you can fly to Lafayette, Louisiana, then you'll have to get here to the Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff wants to ask us some questions about the kidnapping. How long do you think it'll take you to get here? Okay, we should be finished by then. Oh, and daddy, there's someone else I want you to meet. He saved our lives. . . ." Elizabeth continued reaching for the phone line, Amanda brushed her away once more. "No, he's just a friend, but I really want you to meet him, he's great." Amanda looked up at Logan with tears pouring down the young girl's face. "Oh, and daddy, I love you and I've missed you terribly! The Sheriff will give you directions here." She began sobbing in earnest, handing the phone to the waiting lawman. "Daddy was crying," the sobbing lass told Elizabeth. "Daddy was crying and said he didn't know how much he loved us until we were gone!"

Elizabeth joined her sister in a deluge of tearful awakenings. The teary young girl walked over, hugging her sister tightly, wailing on each other's shoulder. "But, I didn't get to talk to him," she cried. "I would like to have at least said hi!"

"Daddy said he wanted to hurry and get to the airport so he spoke quickly. You can be the first to greet him here. I promise. Logan, you'll be here to meet him, won't you?"

"Yeah, it kind of looks that way. I guess you want to ask me some questions, too, huh, Sheriff? But, I'm really ready to see my family, too. And Morgan! God, I can't wait!"

"Do you want to call your folks, son?" the still dumbfounded Sheriff asked, fumbling over his words.

"Yes, sir," the impatient young fireman answered. "I'm sure they all think I'm dead."

"Well, I'll tell you what, go ahead and make your phone call then I'll get one of my deputies to take your statement and get as many details as possible. That way you'll be ready as soon as your ride shows up!"

"Oh, thank you very much Sheriff! Just give me a couple of minutes on the phone and I'll be ready." Logan smiled at Amanda and Elizabeth, picking up the phone. His hands trembled as he dialed his parents' phone number. "Hello, Pop, it's me, Logan. . . no, really! No, really, it is me! I'm alive and okay. I'm in some little town in Louisiana and I need you to come and pick me up! I really don't know where we are. I'll put the Sheriff here on the phone in a minute and he can give you directions. Pop, are you still there? Are you alright? Pop?" A worried look suddenly crossed Logan's face. "Oh, there you are! I thought maybe you'd passed out on me or something. Well, I guess I could be kind of like a ghost! I love you Pop! Let me give you to the Sheriff so he can give you directions. I'm ready to get home! And please call Morgan, bring her with you if you can! I want to see her very much! I'll see you soon, here's the Sheriff!" the fireman handed the receiver to the still astonished lawman.

Tears began streaming down the fireman's face from hearing his father's voice. He could also feel the bond that had grown between him and the girls beginning to stretch. Logan looked lovingly between the two softly sobbing girls, "We don't have to say goodbye-goodbye, you know. I'll give you some phone numbers where you can reach me. You can call me anytime! I mean that. And I want your phone numbers too, okay?"

Both girls ran to Logan, wrapping themselves around him lovingly. "I'm really going to miss you so much!" Amanda told him tearfully. "Tell that Morgan of yours, if she doesn't treat you right, look out!"

"Oh, Logan," Elizabeth squeezed him tightly, "You've helped me more than you can imagine. Thank you for being there for us. I love you Logan! And Morgan and Amanda better both watch out!" The sentimental lass broke down into a long tearful sob, squeezing him with all her might.

"I love both of you, too, and I know you'll be just fine." Logan responded, his sobs gradually diminishing. The Irishman turned quickly to the large desk, quickly jotting down several phone numbers. "The first one is my parent's number, you can always track me down there. My cell got roasted with my truck, but as soon as I get another you will be the first to get it. I'll see you again before you leave. I just want to go ahead and get this questioning over with!"

"You bet you will!" Amanda prodded him, then grabbed and kissed him fully on the mouth. She tucked a small slip of paper with her phone number into his shirt pocket.

"Sis!" Elizabeth scolded, moving her sister out of the way. Following her sister's lead, Liz kissed Logan warmly, then grabbed him tightly once more around the neck. "You'd better not try to sneak out of here without saying goodbye!"

Logan stepped away from them, turning toward the officer, "I guess I'm ready, Sheriff." The fireman quickly turned to their rescuer. "Professor Thebideaux, I can't thank you enough for getting us here! There's no telling where we would have ended up if not for you!"

"You're very welcome," the smiling professor answered. "Just get yourself home safely now. Time's wasting!" The graying gentleman spun curtly, preceding Logan through the exit door.

"Deputy Riggs is waiting for you in the interview room. Oh, and son, hell of a job to get yourself back in one piece! You deserve a medal after what you've been through!"

Logan smiled at the lawman and shot a warm, parting glance back to the girls. They both smiled warmly, watching the excited Irishman leave the small office. I'm really going to miss them, he thought, searching for the room where the deputy was waiting for him. Yeah, I'm going to miss them both!

Logan found the small room and stepped through the door, his stomach spinning like a clothes dryer in the fast cycle. The deputy smiled at the fireman from across the room. "Please have a seat, this shouldn't take very long. Here's a pen and paper. If you would, please give us any details that you can remember about the kidnapping. Were there any accomplices? Did you hear any names or addresses? Anything that might be important in our investigation of the incident."

"Okay, I remember the guy saying he had a partner. All he called him was DuBose. The kidnapper mentioned that he had to go to the airport in Baton Rouge to pick him up. I guess that was where he was headed when he wrecked my truck. That son of a bitch!"

"Great! If you'll just write all that down along with a description of how you became involved in the first place as well as where you have been for the past week, that'll be all we need. Then you can get out of here."

Logan began writing every detail that he could remember on the tablet.

Setting down his pen, the fireman flipped back through the pages that he had written, reading his words and correcting a few small parts. "There, I think that's about all I can come up with." He looked quickly at his watch. "My parents should be here soon. Hopefully they'll have Morgan with them!"

"Nervous?" the deputy asked simply. "I know I would be in your situation. I'd probably be shittin' bricks right now! I have to admit, you've been through one hell of an adventure. Can't say I envy you none though."

Logan could hardly comprehend what the deputy was rattling on about. His mind was ablaze with everything in the Universe all at once, it seemed. The pining lad missed Morgan so much. What a joy he will feel, holding his love tenderly in his arms!"

"I'll let you know when they arrive," the deputy responded coolly, as if doing just another part of his job.

Logan understood, however, having been in similarly excitable conditions with the necessity of staying detached as a matter of keeping his sanity. "God, don't let me have to be like that anymore! I want to feel life and passion again!" the reluctant fireman prayed at the sudden recognition.

The officer stood slowly to his feet. "Would you like me to bring your family in here or would you like to greet them in the lobby?" the patrolman asked politely. Logan felt a sudden wave of compassion for the man standing across from him.

"Thanks, my friend," the understanding young fireman responded, collecting his thoughts through the warmth of the compassion. "I think I'll wait in the lobby. That way I'll get to say farewell to Amanda and Elizabeth as they leave." The compassionate young man held out his hand to the officer, smiling warmly at him.

Logan could feel the deputy's whole demeanor change. The man softened, smiled softly at Logan, took his hand and shook it briskly. "I admire you guy," the smiling lawman commented, raising his dark sun shades and allowing his honesty to show through the veil of professional detachment. "Good luck with the rest of your life!" The deputy released his grip, pulled his shades back over his eyes and turned for the door.

Logan silently followed the deputy into the small waiting area and took a seat. The sounds of a tearful reunion floated through the Sheriff's wooden door. The girls' father must have already arrived he surmised. God, I wish my family would hurry and get here, but they're not coming by jet. I suppose it'll take them a little longer. Logan leaned comfortably back into his seat and the door to the Sheriff's office swung suddenly open. Both girls pranced happily out, each holding the arm of their gleeful looking father. Amanda noticed the sullen young man and halted the procession.

"Logan! This is our daddy, Roland Krause. Daddy, this is our knight in shining armor, Logan Keohane! I don't know what we would have done without him!"

"It's wonderful to meet you, Mister Keohane. Thank you ever so much for taking care of my girls. I don't know how I'll ever repay you. Just let me know if you ever need anything! Can we give you a lift home. . . to Houston is it?"

"No, thank you very much," Logan answered with a smile. "It was a pleasure being with your daughters. They are both really lovely people! I'll never forget our times together. And you don't owe me anything, I am glad to have been able to help Amanda and Elizabeth. You have two wonderful daughters here!"

"Oh Logan, I'm going to miss you!" Elizabeth joined in, rushing over to the young man to hug his neck. "I will call you soon, you can count on it!"

"I'll miss you, too," Amanda replied with a tight hug. "Come see us Logan. We want to meet that girlfriend of yours."

"Are you girls ready?" Roland questioned softly. "The jet is waiting for us. And I'll bet you're ready to change into some clean clothes! Gosh, it's going to be so great to have you guys back home!"

Amanda and Elizabeth returned to their father's side and disappeared through the dirty glass of the exit door. "Bye Amanda. Bye Elizabeth," Logan called after them, leaning back into his chair, trying to relax and get comfortable for the remainder of his wait. Suddenly a familiar car pulled into the parking lot past the glass doors. The joyous lad could hardly contain his excitement. He rushed to the exit, seeing his father get out of the automobile. His mother exited the passenger side. Where was Morgan, he wondered, exploding through the doors toward his father. "Pop," Logan cried, "Mom! You can't imagine how good it is to see you!" A smile, wide as the heavens, stretched across the young man's face, embedding itself so deeply that he was afraid the remnants would never go away. The excited lad fell into his loved ones' arms.

"Logan! Logan, me lad!" Yancy sobbed, hugging his returned son tightly. "Oh my God! Anne, our son has returned! We've missed you so much, lad. I . . ."

"Pop, I'm okay, really! And boy do I have a story for you!" Logan squeezed his father and mother tightly around the neck. Yancy seemed to just melt into his son, grabbing a hold so tightly that Logan thought he was going to be crushed. "I've missed you guys. I've missed you so much! I love you!"

"Oh son, we thought you were dead! I mean, they found your truck and everything! Where have you been? We didn't know what to do!" the sobbing Yancy whispered wetly into his son's ear, never loosening his grip. Streams of tears ran freely down both men's faces as they stood outside the doorway in an embrace of the ages.

"Oh God," Logan heard his mother's familiar voice cry out, shaken. "My God, Logan!" Anne returned his embrace with the warmth and love that only a mother can imbue. "Oh Logan, it's so wonderful to have you back! We thought you were dead, but now you're home!"

The three family members embraced in front of the Sheriff's Office for a long time. Logan finally had to snicker under his breath at a thought that flashed through his mind, "We're going to need rubber boots if we stand here much longer!"

"Let's get the boy home!" Yancy eventually instructed his wife, pulling gently away from his once lost son. "Are you ready? Let's get on the road!" The man wiped his

cheeks with a sleeve, held Logan by the arm and pulled him toward the waiting car. "God it's good to see you're smilin' face, lad!"

Anne took a position on Logan's other side, floating across the parking lot as if floating on thin air. "You know, Morgan always held out for you! She told me time after time, 'I know Logan's alive and he'll be back, soon!' But, I refused to believe her! She didn't come with us because we couldn't find her. She was busy somewhere moving all of the stuff from your apartment! We thought we should move you out since your rent was due. Morgan has arranged everything and is having all of your stuff brought to our house to put in our garage. She's such a wonderful girl! I think you've finally found a pearl!" Anne informed her attentive son lovingly with a huge smile.

"I know I have and I plan to do everything I can to keep her around! I really know now how much I love Morgan. I have missed all of you so much that it's unbelievable! Will she be at your house when we get there?"

"I don't know," Yancy offered helpfully. "She called this morning, saying the movers would be arriving in the afternoon to load up then they would be heading out. We even tried to call her cell. She was probably just really busy and didn't have time to return the call. We left so quickly and all!"

"You know, maybe I should run into the office and make sure the Sheriff doesn't need anything else before we leave. Wait for me right here and I'll be right back." Logan rushed off to let the lawmen know he was leaving. They dismissed him quickly, sending the excited lad off with a smile. Logan returned to the car at a trot. "Let's go!" he pleaded. "I'll tell you my story on the way home. You're not going to believe this!"

Logan sat back easily into the familiar feel of the vehicle, watching their surroundings zoom past. The excited young man recounted his adventures, starting with the old Cajun fellow who took his truck. "Now that was one wacky guy!" the smiling lad commented, laughing at the once frightening memory.

Logan sat restlessly staring out of his parents' living room window. God, it seemed like hours since he had arrived back in Houston. Maybe Morgan was having trouble with the movers or something. Come on Morgan, the anxious lad repeated over and over in his spinning brain. Hurry up Morgan, I want to see you!

Finally, the familiar sight of Morgan's car pulled into the driveway. Logan was beside himself. The nervous young man almost knocked over a small table as he turned to run toward the front door. Shit, he thought, stopping his hasty exit to catch and upright the porcelain lamp that toppled from the little table. Mom would shoot me if I broke that lamp! The piece is one she brought from Ireland that's been in her family for years! Logan quickly looked out the window to check on Morgan's progress. Where was she?



She must have driven all the way to the back of the house! Damn it, Morgan, why didn't you stop in the front of the house and make this simple?

The fumbling lad finally succeeded in stilling the lamp and ran through the living room doorway toward the kitchen where the back entrance was. Morgan would have to come in that way if she was parked in back. Logan bolted through the den, past his startled parents. "Morgan's here!" the breathless lad exclaimed. "She's parked around back!" Dodging the heavy wooden coffee table in the middle of the room, he made a line straight for the white swinging kitchen door. Here I come Morgan, he thought, bursting through the pivoted opening. The lad looked left just as his lover was closing the rear door. Her back was to him. "Morgan!" he cried out breathlessly. "Oh, Morgan!"

Morgan's head snapped his way, going limp and dropping a large box that she was carrying. The carton hit the floor with a loud thud, only compounding the impact of the moment. All that Logan could remember later was the lovely woman's emerald eyes, huge as the moon herself, and the sudden smile that he could feel a mile away. Bolts of energy coursed up and down the lad's spine, watching her hurdle the abandoned box and leap into his arms. "Logan. Oh Logan, I knew you'd be back for me!" Morgan repeated over and over between her kisses. "I knew you weren't dead! You promised you'd be back soon!"

"Morgan, I love you! I love you so much! I've dreamed of this moment for too long." Logan took the crying redhead warmly into his grasp, kissing her deeply and passionately. He could feel his parents watching over them and really didn't care, he was in the arms of his true love, the one link with his soul. The whole world disappeared, leaving only him and Morgan. Nothing could drag him away from her arms right now, nothing! Logan could feel their hearts and spirits join in a reunion rivaling the return of Heaven to Earth. For him, this was Heaven.

"I hope there wasn't anything breakable in that box," the joyous young man chided the excited woman, holding her closely and smiling.

"Hell, I don't care if it was a Ming vase!" Morgan answered sincerely and softly. "Oh Logan. It feels so wonderful to have you in my arms, I'm never going to let you go! Except maybe to go to the bathroom!" the playful redhead chided softly, standing back to look at her lover. "Where have you been? Is that the same uniform you were wearing to work the morning you left?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid I didn't get an opportunity to pack for the occasion," Logan laughed, holding both of Morgan's hands tightly. "I'll tell you all about my adventures later. Right now I just want to be with you. Gosh, you're more beautiful than ever! Morgan, it's so wonderful to be back here, holding you, to feel you in my arms and kiss you! Believe me, I'm not going to let you go, either. I've been doing a lot of thinking, I've had a lot of time to do that," he laughed, hesitating, trying to find the courage to say what he really wanted to ask her. "Morgan," the nervous lad started over, "Will you

marry me? Be my wife?" His knees almost buckled, asking the last part. Logan could feel his face getting redder and redder.

"Oh Logan, I'd be so honored to have you as my husband," Morgan answered tenderly, "Yes, I'll marry you whenever you want! I love you and I can think of nothing better than to spend my life with you! Well, almost."

Logan looked puzzledly down at her, "What does that mean? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is wonderful! But, we've got to talk. You see, I've met this Irish couple, and they have this opportunity for both of us. They want us to move to Ireland and I really want to go! I know how you love your job and this city and all, but, will you at least listen to their offer? For me?"

Logan burst out laughing, hysterically, "Oh Morgan, if you only knew," the relieved young Irishman finally spouted. Calming down, he looked around to see that his parents had left at some point, giving them privacy. "Honey, I will gladly listen to any offer to go to Ireland! I've re-evaluated a lot of things in my life and going to Ireland has become a high priority, I have been hoping to convince you of the same thing! Do my parents or anyone else know about this?"

"No, I haven't told anyone," Morgan answered quietly. "I wanted to wait for you, first. I really didn't know what you would think of the idea. But, you don't know how wonderful it sounds to hear you're wanting the same thing me. I've had such a strange longing to be there, like Ireland was home! I've actually been feeling homesick! The feeling's been really strange."

A knock at the back door interrupted them, a strange face peering through the glass. "Oh shit, the movers! They've got all of your stuff out in their truck, what do you want them to do with it? I guess we could get them to take it all back to your apartment, if you want. Whatever feels right to you. But, you can always stay at my place if you want, at least until we decide what we're going to do permanently."

"Sounds like a good idea to me, no need having two apartments. Let's get the stuff in the garage. When can I meet this couple you told me about?" Logan asked, heading toward the door.

"I can call him tomorrow. He's pretty excited about talking to you. I can't wait until you meet him, you'll really like him, I know you will!" They stepped, hand in hand, through the doorway, attending to Logan's personal belongings. "And guess what? They know your uncle in Bantry!"

Logan laughed hysterically once more, "Of course they do!" The spinning Irishman could only shake his head, approaching the moving van. "Where's my sword?" he suddenly asked, peering into the back of the overstuffed truck. "God, I hope my sword is alright, it's my most cherished possession!"

"Don't worry sweetie, I have your sword safe and sound, wrapped up in the back seat of my car, along with the rest of the stuff from our ceremony. No one else has even touched any of it!"

"You are wonderful!" Logan praised, smiling at Morgan's glowing face.

## Chapter 20

### A Grand Reunion

"Gosh, I'm nervous!" Logan admitted to Morgan, feeling a bit embarrassed. They strolled casually down the long hotel corridor toward the ballroom, where they had been directed. "I don't know why, it's only been a month since I saw Amanda and Elizabeth. I guess maybe it's because this is such a different environment. Their family and my family and everyone is going to be there."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Morgan soothed him calmly. "It was really nice of this Mister Krause to invite everyone up here to Dallas and pay for our lodging and everything! I can't believe he rented a whole ballroom to have a little welcome back party for everyone. This guy must really be loaded!" She laughed, obviously enjoying herself very much.

"Yeah, that's what the girls say," Logan answered absently.

"You didn't ever. . . you know, think of ditching me for one of them, did you?" the redhead prodded him, suddenly serious. "I know you said there was nothing going on between you guys, and I believe you, but, I mean did you ever think of having all that money and a pretty, young woman?"

Logan laughed. She was starting to sound like an immature little girl. "Of course not!" he answered boldly. "How could I even think about that after knowing how we feel for each other. And Jeez, after what we experienced during our ceremony! Honey, you are the one for me! I thought about you day and night while I was gone. All I wanted was to get back to you!" The loving Irishman hesitated, looking at Morgan sweetly. "But maybe if we had been there another month or so. . . ." He grinned devilishly, Morgan swatting him playfully across the shoulder.

"You big lug!" Morgan teased, swatting him again. "I'll show you another month or so while you're sleeping on the couch!" She laughed fully, grabbing his arm confidently as they turned the corner into the large room.

The couple was stunned, as maybe a hundred and fifty people or more milled around the floor, listening to the live band playing on the distant stage. "Jeez, Mister Krause went all out for this thing didn't he?" Logan gasped, stopping in his tracks at their entry.

"May I have your name, sir?" a distinguished looking gentleman asked as the couple stepped forward. He held a clipboard with a list of names type written on several pages.

"Logan, Logan Keohane," the surprised lad answered, undauntedly.

"Oh, yes, very good sir. The guest of honor has arrived! I believe your parents arrived previously and are mixing with the other guests. They are the charming Irish couple named Keohane, I assume?" the doorman addressed them with a warm, friendly smile. "This must be the newest Missus Keohane."

"Yes," Logan answered very proudly, "This is my wife, Morgan. And you are?"

"I am John Scarborough, Mister Krause's personal valet. And I must say, it is very good to meet you, Mister and Missus Keohane. We've all heard so much about you from the girls. I'm afraid you've left an indelible mark on those two, a very good one!" John held out his hand to Logan, shaking hands warmly. The courteous Valet took Morgan's hand, kissing it lightly. Morgan giggled softly. "If you'll pardon me, I must greet the newly arriving guests. Please proceed and have a smashing time!" The debonair gentleman stepped casually past them, presenting himself to the newest arrivals.

Morgan and Logan entered the room delightedly, beginning a search for familiar faces. "An indelible impression, huh?" Morgan kidded the smiling lad, poking him discreetly in the ribs. "You never kissed my hand like that!"

Logan chuckled softly, jostling his new wife playfully with his shoulder. "What can I say, I'm just an indelible person," he laughed again. "Look, there's pop." The cheerful lad weaved through the crowd to his father's side. "Hey, dad, what time did you guys get here? We just came in."

"Oh, I guess about thirty minutes or so," Yancy answered cheerfully. "What a grand party this has turned out to be! And to think, I didn't want to come. If our expenses hadn't been paid I might not have."

"This is fabulous isn't it?" Morgan responded, wide-eyed, looking around the crowded room. "I can't believe the trouble they've gone through to arrange all of this! This is amazing!"

"Really!" Logan agreed wholeheartedly. "Where's mom?"

"She's fishing through the hors d'oeuvres and getting herself and me a drink. There she comes now. And my, but she has a handful to bring back. Go help your mother, son."

Logan turned, searching the crowd for his returning mother. Spotting her, the helpful young man shuffled off to assist his mother with the load. "Hi mom, what've you got?"

"Hi, Logan! How long you been here? Take this," she handed him a glass of dark liquid and a small saucer of finger foods. "Your father is going to be delighted, they have Guinness on tap here! This is all wonderful, thanks for bringing us! Oh, by the way, I met one of your young friends at the bar, Amanda, I believe it was. What a nice, sweet young girl! She recognized me right off, said she could see you in my face. She must have carried on for five minutes about what great things you did for them! What a sweet girl!"

Mother and son arrived back to their waiting spouses. Logan handed the dark brew to his father. "They've got Guinness, dad, on draught! Here, mom got you a pint!"

"Oh my lad, you do know how to bring an old Irishman to a lovely party!" Yancy smiled at his son, licked his lips, taking a long drink of the brew.

"Morgan, let's go get a drink. That Guinness looks wonderful. Mom said Amanda was at the bar earlier, I'd really like you to meet her."

"Okay," the nervous redhead responded, still looking incredulously around the crowd. "I could use a glass of wine myself."

Logan took his new wife by the hand, squirming through the crowded room to the large main bar. He was a bit disappointed at his arrival, unable to locate Amanda. "What would you like, hon?" the disappointed lad asked Morgan tenderly.

Umm, she thought momentarily, "A glass of red wine."

Logan turned to order their drinks, coming face to face with Elizabeth. "Hi," the chipper girl greeted him energetically, "Long time, no see! It's great to see you, Logan."

Are you going to introduce us or just stand there like a knee on a cypress tree?" Elizabeth laughed more warmly than Logan could remember. "He's good at that you know!" the teasing girl addressed Morgan directly.

"Sounds like you know him well!" Morgan answered cheerfully, grasping Logan's thick arm.

"Morgan, this is Elizabeth. Elizabeth, this is my new wife, Morgan!" the young man introduced, looking down at Morgan, who extended a friendly hand to the young girl. "So, tell me, how've you been?"

"Just wonderful! Everything has come together so nicely since we got back. I've decided to change my major to Research Biology. Something about that swamp fascinated me and now I can't get enough, you know, studying about new plants and animals and stuff! Amanda has applied for Med School, can you believe it? Miss I'm-going-to-college-to-find-a-man-to-support-me! And she's really excited about the possibilities! The most amazing thing, though, is how well we're all getting along! I mean, my father has undergone a drastic turnaround! He can't spend enough time with us. And Amanda and I are best of pals now, can you believe that?"

"That sounds wonderful! A Research Biologist, huh? Going back to the swamp after all!"

"No, I think I'll try a tropical rain forest next!" the happy girl laughed gloriously. "I've missed you Logan," she started, looking tenuously at Morgan. "He has been one of the best friends I ever had," Liz explained quickly.

"You don't have to explain," Morgan answered warmly. "Logan has told me all about you guys, even how he showed you his rear after falling into that can! That must have been a sight to behold!" the taunting redhead looked at Logan and laughed. The surprised young man turned red-faced, hanging his head embarrassedly.

Elizabeth shrieked with laughter, "That was a trip!" the young girl shrieked breathlessly through fits of chuckles. "I couldn't believe him!"

"And just what's so funny here?" the familiar voice of Amanda called from behind Logan.

"We were just talking about Logan's butt!" Elizabeth shrieked again. "And the moon that suddenly appeared out of a bucket!" The howling girl was laughing so hard she lost her breath and grabbed Logan's shoulder.

"Yeah, that was quite a sight. And you should of seen his face right after he fell into the bucket!" Amanda joined into the escapades. The three girls laughed together hysterically.

"Okay, enough already about my butt! Can we change the conversation now, please?" Logan asked the girls awkwardly. "Morgan, this is Amanda," he stopped, sneering playfully at the girl before continuing. The laughing gradually subsided and Logan continued, "Amanda this is my wife, Morgan."

"I've heard so much about you, Morgan. It's a pleasure to finally get to meet you! You have a one in million guy there, you're a lucky girl." Amanda smiled warmly at Morgan, holding out her hand then retracted it. The warm young woman, instead, put her arms around Morgan's neck, hugging her tenderly. "If you ever find another one like him send him my way, will you?" she said softly into Morgan's ear.

Morgan lovingly returned her hug, promising she would do just that. The two girls separated and Amanda asked, "So, what got the conversation going about Logan's butt? Did I miss something good?" She looked around puzzled.

"I just told Elizabeth how Logan had told me everything about all of your adventures, even showing you his rear," Morgan returned happily.

"Oh, he did huh?" the surprised girl looked a bit sheepish. "If you'll excuse me for just a second I think I'm ready for another drink."

"That's just where we were heading, may I join you?" Logan asked Amanda warmly.

"I'd love the company!"

Logan and Amanda took a few steps to the nearby bar, leaving Morgan and Elizabeth chatting and giggling amongst each other. Ordering their drinks, Amanda looked at him seriously. "Did you tell her everything? Even about the morning that. . . ." she stopped as the bartender set the drinks in front of them.

"No," Logan comforted the worried lass softly, "I believe that some coffins are best left unopened." He smiled lovingly at Amanda, relief flooding her face. "So, I hear you applied for Med School, what brought on that decision?"

"I guess the change was from the things that I saw that were possible, especially what happened with your hip and all. When I helped you with your injury, I decided right then and there that helping people was something that I wanted to pursue. If I can find out what you did that day, maybe I can give the world a gift and show others how to heal themselves without chemicals, hospitals and pain and suffering for a lifetime! I've discovered that my life is worth living after all! And I thank you from every ounce of my being for giving me enough of an opening into that possibility that even a person as blind as myself could finally get the drift. Logan, I love you, you're one of my best friends in the world! Thank you so much for everything!" She reached out, taking his hand lovingly.

Logan was touched deeply. The appreciative young Irishman had never realized what an impact he made on these girls. The only real impact the lad considered having on anyone was putting out an occasional fire. The joyous lad soaked up her admiration like a dry sponge in a full bucket. The warmth she radiated permeated his very bones. "Oh, Amanda, I love you too. And you've had such an impact on me, too, that I can even begin to describe it. Thank you for everything, I'll be your friend forever!" Picking up their drinks, the couple moved through the line toward the others. Morgan and Elizabeth were still chatting and laughing. "Hey guys," Logan greeted them as he and Amanda approached.

"Logan, guess what! I invited Elizabeth to come and stay a couple of weeks with us in Ireland this summer! Won't that be grand! You guys can catch up on old times. And of course we want you to come too, Amanda!" his new wife blurted out excitedly.

Amanda looked over at Logan and smiled. "That'll be a blast! I told daddy all about your new opportunities and all. Now we get to come for a visit. How fun!"

Logan looked at Morgan smiling ear to ear. "What a grand idea! We'd love to show you guys around the countryside."

"The Mullins' already said we could use any of the B and B's if we wanted to bring guests over. Jeez, now I can't wait!" Morgan answered comically.

"Well, come on. You told us the overall of what you are going to be doing in Ireland, now give us the details of how it happened!" Amanda prodded insistently.

Logan began telling Amanda the story of Morgan's encounter with Jim Mullins and how his needs perfectly matched their qualifications. The young girl stood before them dumbfounded at the relationships and synchronicity of all the happenings. Elizabeth finally had to go and pry the drink from Amanda's hand as she stood spellbound before Logan. Morgan interjected frequently offering her perspective of the situation, making the story even more intriguing to the girls.

"My God," Amanda finally uttered softly. "You bet I'll come and visit! And I'll be calling before that. I want to find out about all of this stuff as it's happening! No more Miss Meekness!"

"Oh, another thing," Logan returned again. "Did you hear they caught that DuBose fellow? Seems the guy was so intelligent that he used his real name and address for his airline tickets to Baton Rouge! I guess the cops didn't have to search very hard to find him after that. We'll probably all be together at some point to testify in court against him."

"Yeah, we heard about that yesterday." Amanda answered happily. "They say the trial probably won't be for about a year, however, so we'll have plenty of time to recover!"



"Look, there's our dad!" Elizabeth interrupted, pointing through the crowd. "Come on, he wants to see you." Elizabeth grabbed Morgan and Logan by the arm, dragging them through the crowd.

Logan slightly remembered Roland Krause from their brief introduction at the Sheriff's Office. The cheery looking fellow was a handsome man of forty some-odd years, greying at the temples but with fire in his eyes. Logan could readily see where Amanda got her feistiness. "Dad," Elizabeth called to her father. "Hey dad." Hearing his daughter's voice, Roland looked their way.

"Elizabeth! Amanda! And who is this you have with you? Oh, Logan, yes, of course I recognize you! And you must be the lovely bride, Morgan!" Morgan blushed for the first time at being called a bride. "How wonderful to finally get an opportunity to meet you Morgan. And to see you again Logan! I've heard so much about you, I've been searching everywhere tonight to locate you. In fact, I ran across your parents only five minutes ago. They say you're getting ready to move to Ireland! Beautiful country, my wife and I, may she rest in peace, went there soon after we were married, spending almost a month touring the countryside. A lot has changed since then!"

"You never told us you and mom went to Ireland!" Elizabeth objected sternly.

"You never asked!" the man simply replied, smiling lovingly at her.

Logan took Roland's extended hand, shaking it firmly. "It's a real pleasure to see you again sir! The last time we met was such a brief encounter. I've heard a lot about you, too. You have two wonderful daughters, here. I can't think of two people I'd rather be stranded in the middle of nowhere with. Except, of course, Morgan," the young man continued shyly.

"Well, I still can't tell you how appreciative I am of you taking care of my girls. I don't know what you guys did out there, but, I do know they've come back really focused young women. Did they tell you what all they're up to? I'm so proud of them and I love them both dearly!"

Both girls blushed, their father wrapping his arms around their shoulders, kissing each on the forehead. "Oh dad," Amanda replied coyly, Logan, however, could feel how much she was loving the attention. The smiling lass had been missing her father for a long time.

Roland took each girl in turn, hugging them lovingly. Releasing his warm embrace, the gentleman turned to Logan and Morgan. "What do you think?" the proud father asked the smiling couple, waving across the busy room.

"This is fantastic!" Morgan blurted out ecstatically. "We were expecting a small get together, just to kind of let everyone meet one another. You really know how to throw a party, Mister Krause. Thank you so much for inviting us!"

"Well, this wouldn't be much of a party without Logan here, after all he's done for my daughters and myself," the gentleman responded loudly over the impinging crowd noise. Pausing his conversation, Roland briefly looked over the crowd annoyingly. "Let's go somewhere quieter!" the suddenly disturbed gentleman finally continued, taking Logan and Morgan each by an arm. Weaving through the growing crowd, the trio, followed by Amanda and Elizabeth, scampered to the nearest exit. Wordlessly, Roland led them through the large double doors, into the surrounding hallway. Passing through a heavy line of familiar, arriving guests, the cordial host greeted each with a quick smile and, "Hello, good that you could come. I'll be back shortly."

With the young Irish couple still in his grip, the hurrying gentleman continued down the crowded hallway searching for a quieter location. Slowing his pace somewhat, the fellow smiled quickly at Morgan and Logan, stating, "I hope you don't mind leaving the party for a few minutes. I have something I'd really like to discuss with the two of you. I prefer to speak in a much quieter place, know of any?"

Mystified, Logan looked at his young wife, shaking his head negatively. Morgan also had a puzzled look on her face. What could this guy want? Logan pondered. It would be a little easier to read into the situation if he knew the man a little better. As it was, the startled young man was feeling a bit concerned. What if the man thought I did something to his daughters? Or, what if he thought I was somehow involved in the kidnapping scheme? What would he do then?

Arriving at the Reception Desk, Roland asked directions to the Hotel Lounge. "Should be quiet in there," the directing man informed the small group. Almost trotting down the wide hallway, Morgan was having difficulty keeping up with the longer legged men. "Oh, there it is!" the hurried fellow announced.

That phrase sounds kind of familiar, Logan smirked, thinking of the captives initial arrival to the tiny island hideout. Quite a different circumstance this time, however.

Almost bursting through the heavy wooden swinging doors, the party entered the quiet pub. Roland looked diligently over the available tables, choosing a larger table near the rear of the room, away from most of the other customers. "This should do just fine," the satisfied man agreed with a smile. The little group sat around the circular table, Logan dying with curiosity. Why didn't he at least give us a hint as to what this is all about, before dragging us into this place, the worried young Irishman wondered. I hope nothing's wrong!

Settling himself into the cushioned chair, Roland looked seriously between Logan and Morgan. "I'm really sorry about dragging you out of your own celebration, however, there's something I really want to talk with you about for a few minutes," the older gentleman began seriously. Dumbstruck, Logan looked at Morgan, who stared at the speaking man with a look of astonishment written across her bewildered face. "I . . . I really don't know how to begin. I don't know how much my daughters told you about my situation over the past few years, but, maybe that's where I'll start. You see, Mary,

my wife, died of a cerebral hemorrhage about five years ago. I was devastated. I loved my wife very much, and everything just happened so suddenly! I immersed myself into my business, trying to block out the pain of her loss. But, it seemed like nothing could ease my agony. At first, the avoidance was a trip here and a trip there, trying to find relief. I found, as long as I was working I could keep my mind off Mary's memory. Yet, any time I stopped for a few minutes, she would haunt me again."

The waitress suddenly appeared out of nowhere, it seemed, the group fixed on Roland's story. "Can I get you something?" she asked politely. "Beer, wine, a mixed drink?"

"No, not right yet," Roland responded with a slight smile, "We'll call you when we're ready." The harried waitress spun wordlessly, disappearing once again into the dimly lit room. Roland folded his arms across the heavy wooden table in front of him. "Anyway, as I was saying, I found that by staying busy I could avoid the haunting loneliness of Mary's memory. I soon buried myself so fully in my work that I hardly had time to sleep."

Logan looked lovingly at the man's two daughters. Amanda stared at her father, tears rolling freely off her chin, dripping onto her tight, black sequined dress. Elizabeth dappled the tears from the corner of her eyes with a tissue, foraged from her small handbag. The tender young man could feel a world of compassion for these two young girls. How many people, he wondered, have misconstrued a loved one's actions as a personal affront, alienating themselves from that dearly loved person because of some misconception? The empathetic Irishman returned his focus to the father.

"Unfortunately, the consequences of this action far outweighed what I had hoped, I began to lose my daughters, also. I didn't think they would understand my situation, so I never tried to explain myself to them, not that it was the proper way to handle things, anyway. I began avoiding the other two women that I loved dearly, in order to keep from showing my pain. I didn't want to hurt my daughters by showing them how much turmoil I was in."

Leaning back into the soft chair, Roland laid his hands nervously across his lap. A tear trickled down the confessing man's face, peeking up at both his daughters. He seemed unable to look them in the eye at the moment. Looking toward Logan, the sorrowful man continued, "When Amanda and Elizabeth came up missing, I thought I was going to die! The last two loves of my life were gone. I couldn't work. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I went into my office, staring at my phone every day until forcing myself to return home to stare at the telephone there, just praying that I would get some word as to their whereabouts. When Amanda called from Louisiana, I swore at that moment I'd never neglect the love of my daughters again! I really do love you two!" the now softly crying gentleman looked directly into the eyes of the two sobbing girls. Amanda pushed roughly away from the table, rushing to her loving father's side, followed immediately by a heavily sobbing Elizabeth.

"Oh, daddy, I know you love us," Amanda wailed, draping her arms tightly around the tearful man's neck. "You've made that perfectly clear over the last month! Elizabeth followed suit, crying openly.

"We love you, daddy!" the younger sister cried. "You're the greatest!"

Logan couldn't help shedding a few tears, himself, at the tenderness of the moment. Morgan was crying compassionately, along with the loving family. Roland hugged his daughters, standing up to pull them close to him. The tearful group stayed locked in embrace for several minutes.

Eventually, Roland released his grip on the girls, looking each in the eyes, smiling. "I love you guys so much!" the sniffling father repeated warmly. He slowly sat back into the chair, wiping his eyes with a white handkerchief, produced from his suit pocket. Looking at Morgan and Logan, the gentleman smiled slightly and continued, "Anyway, that's not why I asked you two down here. But, I'm glad the story did come out," he smiled again at his daughters. "The reason I asked you here is; when the girls returned home, they told me all about what you had done for them and that it is directly from your efforts that they are here right now. Not only did they tell me these things, but, they seemed so different in their whole approach to life that I am totally amazed!

"Their ideas were different, their actions were different, everything! I know I was pretty out of touch with my daughters, yet, these changes were so noticeable that they couldn't be overlooked. Both girls really chose for themselves what they wanted for their own lives, taking the initiative to change course study at school and really apply themselves! They seemed different around their friends and family, presenting themselves much more self-assuredly. But, most of all, both girls seemed to really be at peace with themselves, all this after a harrowing experience that would have traumatized most people for the rest of their lives!" The narrating gentleman sat silently with a puzzled look across his face. He leaned forward, drawing nearer to Logan.

Logan smiled shyly. He felt a warm, glowing feeling ease steadily through his body. Wow it felt good to really help someone!

Roland began speaking once again, recapturing his attention. "I guess I just wanted to express my thanks to you personally. First of all, for getting them back here alive and unharmed. But, also for just being there for them. I don't know exactly what went on out there in the swamp, but, seeing the results of it maybe we should all go spend some time out there."

Logan blushed brightly. "You know there is no need to thank me Mister Krause. I only did what I felt we needed to do to survive." Logan squirmed slightly in his seat, feeling a bit uncomfortable. "Heck, your daughters taught me more than I could ever tell you." He smiled softly at the two young women. Amanda and Elizabeth both turned red and hung their heads bashfully.

"Oh Logan, you. . . ." Amanda started coyly.

Roland smiled brightly at everyone in the small group. "Anyway, I offer my greatest appreciation to you Logan and also to you Morgan. And I also wish both of you the most blessed and happiest future in your new endeavor."

Morgan and Logan looked at each other with twinkles in their eyes. "Thank you, Mister Krause," Morgan reiterated. "We certainly wish you the very same. I have already invited Amanda and Elizabeth to come and visit us, so now I am personally inviting you as well. Any time you would like to get away to the Emerald Isle just let us know. You are welcome to be our guest anytime."

"Thank you, Morgan," Roland responded thoughtfully. "That kind of brings me to my next point. I hear you are going to work for Life Specialties in Ireland."

"Yes, I am," Logan answered curiously.

"You know I own a mid-sized oil exploration company." Roland continued, digging for the structure to relay his request. "We have several offshore rigs up in the North Atlantic. We must keep all of our crews fire ready and our fire suppression equipment up to date. I've researched your new company fairly comprehensively as of late and would like to train all of my people with you guys. Not only my North Sea crews but my whole company. This seems to be a growing company with very high standards. It's just what we need!"

Logan couldn't control his excitement. "Yes sir, I think I'm going to work for a very high class organization. I will be glad to relay that information to Mister Mullins upon our arrival. I'm sure he'll be very happy to send you all the appropriate paperwork and all."

"Oh, there's no need for that," Roland responded with a smile. "I've already contacted Mister Mullins personally and requested that you be our personal trainer, no matter the cost. Needless to say, he was very happy to have you on board."

"Thank you very much, Mister Krause. I'll do my best. But, you know, I'll be in training myself for about four months."

"Yeah, we have found a small cottage out in the country in County Galway." Morgan continued excitedly. "We'll take a month or so to get settled, then he'll be in training after that."

"Will you have income during that time?" Amanda asked, concerned.

"Yeah, we'll have a small salary while Logan trains for his position and I train to run the bed and breakfasts." the smiling redhead answered, "but, Logan and I will manage. We both have some money saved up, enough to supplement ourselves for a while."

Roland reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a small, leather bound book. "I don't think you'll have to worry about that for a while, dear." the gentleman smiled at his oldest daughter. Producing a gold ballpoint pin from his shirt, Roland opened the leather booklet. "I can't let you guys go off and struggle financially. If there's one thing I have plenty of, it is money. You have both shared more with me and my family than I could ever repay. But at least consider this a token of my appreciation." The smiling gentleman began writing in the checkbook.

Morgan and Logan looked at each other gleefully. The excitement sparkled in the beaming redhead's emerald eyes. The young Irishman smiled ear to ear, unable to hide his joyous excitement. Wow, this was unexpected. "Mister Krause, I . . . I just can't. . . ."

"You know I won't take no for an answer!" Roland beamed. "It is really important to me for you to accept."

Elizabeth and Amanda chimed in, still standing behind their father. "Yeah, you better listen to him!" Elizabeth giggled. "He really doesn't accept no as an answer."

"Yeah!" Amanda joined, "You guys are going to have to get everything ready for our visit anyway! We're not coming until you say yes."

Roland Krause finished writing the check, tearing the slip of paper out of the small folder and handed it to Morgan. "Here, you take this and put the funds to good use." He smiled warmly at the young Irish couple.

"Thank you so much, Mister Krause! I'm looking forward to seeing you guys in Ireland." Morgan took the slip of paper, looking quickly at the writing. The stunned redhead's eyes opened widely. "Mister Krause," she stammered, "we. . . we really can't take this! My God, it's. . . ."

"It's for you guys," Roland interrupted. "If anyone should be feeling unworthy of something, that should be me. All I have given is money. What has been returned to me is life! I have my daughters, my peace of mind, and a hope for a loving future. Money is really a poor way of repaying the return of my spirit. Unfortunately, this is the only way I have at the moment."

Morgan looked disbelievingly at her husband. "Honey, we have two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," the shaking girl almost mumbled. "Two hundred and fif. . . ."

Logan's jaw dropped. This was incredible! Yeah, he really liked living in the creative flow of life! "Oh, thank you so much, Mister Krause! I don't know how to. . . ."

"You're very welcome," the smiling man responded warmly. "Only, if you call me Mister Krause once more, I might take it back! My name's Roland, I want to be your friend!" the laughing gentleman blushed. "Now, with the formalities over, what do you say we head back to the party and celebrate a little!"

"Let's go," Amanda and Elizabeth shouted simultaneously.

"I'm for it! That's one thing I'm learning to do very well, celebrate!" Logan agreed heartily.

"It's party time!" Morgan squealed, tucking the check securely into her purse.

Logan walked quickly over to Morgan, "Oh, honey, I love you so much! We are going to have such a grand life in Ireland! Together we are unstoppable, know that? I'm so glad I met and married you! We have a long, glorious life together just waiting for me and you!" The loving Irishman kissed his wife tenderly.

"You are for me, Logan Keohane!" Morgan answered tenderly, turning toward the waiting celebration.