

RAEANNE THAYNE

ALL IS
BRIGHT



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SAGE

SAGE MCKNIGHT INHALED A BREATH THAT SMELLED of pine, snow and home as she walked up the new curving sidewalk of sculpted concrete that led toward the front door of a massive log and glass structure in Silver Strike Canyon.

She had been away far too long.

Her home base in the Bay Area, a small loft near the California offices of her father's architectural firm of Lange & Associates, was an easy flight to her hometown of Hope's Crossing, Colorado.

Under normal circumstances, she should have been able to come back often, but she had spent most of the past year overseeing a pair of major commercial projects overseas while

keeping tabs on the progress at Wolf Ridge through the occasional visit and reports from her father.

This season was a gift, one she fully intended to savor. Somehow, almost miraculously, both commercial buildings had finished ahead of schedule and the rest of her commitments had eased enough to allow her to spend the entire month of December staying with her family.

On the flight in, she had been shocked to realize this would be the longest span of time she had spent in Hope's Crossing since her sophomore year of college, when she had temporarily put her schooling on hold to deal with more urgent matters.

She drew in another deep breath, as if the mountain air could scrub both her mind and her lungs clean from the residual particulates of urban living.

This wasn't wholly a vacation. She would be working on several other designs virtually as well as being available nearby while crews put the finishing touches to this gorgeous house in front of her, on a forested hillside a mile from the Silver Strike ski resort.

Sage considered Wolf Ridge her crowning achievement, the project she had poured her heart and soul into over the past nine months.

No vehicles except her rental were out front but she had spoken with Sam Delgado, the contractor handling the construction end of what had turned into a complete overhaul. He told her he wouldn't be on-site but had given her the access code so she could walk through and check the progress.

Anticipation swirled through her like the light snowflakes that brushed her cheeks. She had kept up with the progress of the job virtually and with pictures from Sam and her fa-

ther, but that wasn't the same as actually having her boots on the ground.

Sage punched in the code and pushed open the door, nerves jumping inside her.

She always loved this sense of discovery when she walked onto a job site she hadn't visited in a few months, that thrill that still washed over her at seeing an abstract vision she designed months ago taking shape, becoming reality.

She had just pushed open the door when her father's SUV pulled up behind her rental car. A moment later her dad climbed out and walked toward her, smiling broadly.

With anyone else, she might have felt a little resentment that she wouldn't have the chance to see the progress of her passion project on her own. But her father was Jackson Freaking Lange, one of the world's preeminent architects. She still sometimes couldn't quite believe it, even after ten years of having him in her life.

She had spent her first nineteen years without a father of her own, though she had gained a loving stepfather when she was three and she still deeply loved Chris Parker, even after he divorced her mother.

Still, not knowing so much as the name of her birth father had left a small void in her heart, an empty spot she hadn't known how to fill when she was younger.

Since they found each other a decade earlier, Jack had become a steady source of support, professionally and emotionally.

"Welcome back," he said now, his deep voice so dearly familiar. He opened his arms and hugged her with a warmth that touched and comforted her.

"How did you know where to find me?" she had to ask.

He gave a little laugh. "Where else would you be? I knew

what time your flight was coming in and guessed this would be your first stop. In your shoes, I would have done the same thing.”

They were so alike, both of them passionate about the art and aesthetics of architecture. Of course, she could never begin to compare to all her father had achieved, but she was working to make her mark in her own way.

“I’m going to assume you didn’t stop at the bookstore to see your mother first before rushing out here.”

After Jack and Sage had found each other, during the most difficult season of her life, he and her mother had reconnected. They had been wildly happy together since then. In a way, she felt as if she had played a part in bringing them back together.

Sage shook her head now, feeling a little guilty. “I’ll see her soon enough. Remember, I’ve got Taryn’s birthday party in an hour. I wanted to squeeze in a stop here first.”

“Naturally.” He smiled. “Do you mind me tagging along? Don’t feel obligated. If you would rather check things out first by yourself, I can wait in my car until you’ve had time to bask in the glow.”

She had to laugh that he could read her with such accuracy. “No. You’ve been in on Wolf Ridge from the beginning. It will be fun to see it together.”

The two of them walked into the grand foyer, with its soaring ceiling and commanding staircase.

She had seen this part before but was thrilled all over again at how bright and welcoming the space was now, compared to how it had been before the massive renovation, with afternoon light pouring in from several new windows to play across the wood plank floor.

“Oh wow!” she exclaimed. Everything looked even better than she had dreamed.

Built thirty years earlier when the Silver Strike resort was new, the massive estate had good bones and a gorgeous view of the surrounding mountains and the Silver Strike Reservoir, glittering in the distance. But for all its size, the interior spaces had been dark, cramped, with small rooms, narrow hallways and no cohesive design.

In many ways, it might have been easier for the owner to sell the property and start over after his life circumstances changed. She was glad he had decided to keep it, instead hiring Jackson Lange & Associates to rehabilitate the space.

Sage had gone for a mix of rustic and industrial throughout the eight-bedroom, ten-bathroom house, with a mix of glass, wood and metal.

Others might not have seen the potential of Wolf Ridge. She could only be grateful that her client, difficult as he might be, hadn't been one of those people.

“Have you heard from Tucker?” her dad asked, again guessing her thoughts with uncanny accuracy. “Is he happy with the progress?”

She made a face. “Who knows? Mason Tucker is a tough nut to crack. We have had more change orders on this job than any other residential property in my experience.”

Jackson nodded. “The man has been through hell and I imagine his circumstances are still fairly fluid. I'm sure he only wants to make sure everything will still work for him exactly as he needs it.”

She did understand that. She also knew the internal conflict a man like Mason Tucker must be experiencing, to know his life would never be the same as it once was. With that in

mind, she had tried to approach all aspects of this renovation with compassion and consideration.

Mason had turned out to be a tough man to please, but she could only hope he would be reasonably happy with the finished project.

They walked through the house, each room a new discovery for Sage. Since she had been here, most of the finish carpentry had been done, the multilevel kitchen cabinets installed and new flooring laid throughout.

Part of her enjoyment at seeing the changes came from her father's admiration. "Everything works together perfectly," Jackson said. "I love the industrial look, with all the support beams showing and the turnbuckles and rivets. It's perfect for a house here in Hope's Crossing, especially in this canyon where mining was such an integral piece of the history."

"Many of these elements were already here, just hidden behind drywall," she said. "It made sense to highlight them."

"It's beautiful," her father said, the pride in his voice warming her all over again.

"I think it's some of my best work," she admitted, something she hadn't said aloud to anyone else, even her father.

"I suppose it helped that Tucker was willing to throw piles of money to the renovation."

"Definitely."

Her father's phone pinged suddenly, while they were still walking through the rooms on the main floor. He glanced at his smartwatch. "Oh shoot. I'm going to have to run. That's Nick. He's done early with basketball practice. Since your mom is busy at the bookstore getting ready for the party, I'm on pickup duty."

Her breath seemed to catch a little, as it always did at the thought of her nine-year-old brother.

“Yes. Go. You don’t want to leave him waiting out in the cold at the community center. Thanks for stopping by to take a look, Dad. It was fun to share at least this much with you.”

He gave her another hug. “Are you kidding? I know how important this one is for you. It’s fantastic, Sage. I’m so proud of you.”

She tucked his words of praise into her mind to take out in those moments of doubt. Jackson Lange thought her work was fantastic. Yeah, he was her father but he wouldn’t say the words if he didn’t mean them.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I’ll see you at Taryn’s party.”

With another hug, he hurried out of the house, leaving her standing near the empty gas fireplace of the great room.

On impulse, she pulled out her phone to document her steps as she finished the tour, wishing she had thought to bring her gimbal or at least a selfie stick.

“We’re now walking into the home theater,” she spoke to her outstretched camera, “one of the more challenging rooms of the renovation. Prior to this update, the room had a series of steps leading to the different levels of recliners. Obviously, that would no longer work for the homeowner, so we chose to remove the steps completely, instead building a gradual slope with room to maneuver around each level of seating. Beyond featuring state-of-the-art electronics that will be easily upgradeable, everything in here—from the blackout window shades to the sound system to the recliners themselves—can be controlled through a single smart home phone app.”

She turned the camera to face her. “Doesn’t this look like a wonderfully cozy place to watch a movie or catch your favorite sporting event?”

She smiled into the phone camera, then moved back into

the wide hallway leading to the library/office, her own favorite spot in the house.

“You can see here we have sliding pocket doors that open and close with the push of a button. We chose to replace the traditional doors in many of the spaces with these pocket doors, which gives more room for the homeowner to navigate, and we also...”

Her words trailed off as she heard a sound behind her and turned to see a large, dark-haired man using a wheelchair, framed in the doorway.

He frowned, an expression she had become all too used to seeing there, during their few in-person interactions and their more frequent video conferences.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. “You’re not filming this, are you?”

Sage dropped her phone with an inward wince and stopped recording. Technically, this was still her job site, which meant she had full permission to check on the progress of the work until they handed the finished home over to the owner, who happened to be this man, former professional baseball player Mason Tucker.

With effort, she forced herself not to show any of her dismay. Out of all the clients she had worked with during her career thus far, Mason Tucker was the only one who made her palms sweat and her stomach feel knotted with stress.

“Mr. Tucker. Um, hi.” She forced a smile, feeling awkward as hell and wishing she had waited until the contractor would be here to take a tour.

“I haven’t been here in weeks and wanted to document the progress that has been made since I visited last. I didn’t see any vehicles outside and assumed everybody was gone for the day.”

“I’m parked in the garage of the guesthouse.”

“I didn’t even know you were in town. Have you been here long?”

The last she knew, Mason had been living in Portland, where he had once played for the same baseball team as another town resident, Spencer Gregory, who was married to Sage’s friend Charlotte. Sage knew Spence and Mason had remained friends, despite life circumstances that had led to both of them retiring.

For a moment, she wasn’t sure Mason would reply, then he finally shrugged. “I wanted to be close as we started to wrap things up so I can keep an eye on things and be on hand if there are any questions or problems. My daughter and I moved into the guesthouse a month ago.”

Why hadn’t her dad or Sam Delgado told her Mason was already living in Hope’s Crossing?

Beyond that, she suddenly thought, how in the world was he making the guesthouse work? That place wasn’t at all wheelchair accessible, with three steps leading into the place, narrow hallways and no accessible bathroom like those she had designed for this main house.

Renovating the guesthouse was part of the master plan but not until all the work was finished on Wolf Ridge itself.

“That place is a mess. How are you getting around?”

“I’m managing,” he said, his voice curt. “I can still get around on crutches, as long as I don’t have to go far.”

“You shouldn’t have to go far, from one end of the guesthouse to the other. It’s tiny.” She imagined a man Mason’s size would make the space shrink to almost nothing.

“It works fine for me and Grace. It’s only a few more weeks anyway, right?”

“I suppose.”