

UNEDITED, UNREVISED**HARD EVIDENCE
Big Sky Secrets, Book #1
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CHAPTER 1

Erin Cole shivered away an uneasy feeling as she unlocked the door of Millie's Provisions and stepped into her new life. The cold. Surely it was only the cold that raised goose bumps on her arms and sent an eerie premonition crawling down her spine.

A silly, city girl reaction to the loneliness of the mountains after being away for so long.

Unlike the tragedy that still haunted her hometown an hour away, nothing newsworthy had ever happened in Lost Falls. The peaceful little village, just a few dozen touristy businesses trailing here and there along the shore of Bear Island Lake, swelled with vacationers and bumper-to-propeller traffic during the summer, then slept quietly with only a handful of year-around residents to brave the long winters.

She'd come back to put old ghosts to rest once and for all. She was past all of that; and didn't plan to give in to the old fears that had dogged her for so many years.

As she stepped into the little general store, the crisp scent of northern Montana pine and the gentle slosh of waves along the shore of Bear Island Lake gave way to the steady tick of the old Coca Cola clock above the cash register and the smells of leather and cinnamon and the cold ashes in the potbellied stove in the corner.

It all brought back a rush of sepia-toned images from a childhood spent at this lake. Of all the times she and her cousins Kris and Megan, and their best friend Laura, had sat on the wooden steps just outside, licking melting ice cream cones as they decided on their next adventure. They'd been inseparable, back then.

The good memories helped settle her nerves. The bad ones she still tried to forget.

Owned by her grandparents, Millie's had always reminded her of a magician's hat. Small as it was, it still held everything from bait to books,

from groceries to camping gear and tourist supplies.

Her favorite part had always been the little café set up in the front window, with six wrought iron ice cream tables, and an old-fashioned soda fountain complete with eight brass stools that could spin.

And now, this place would be her future. Who would've thought? Brimming with a rush of emotion, she locked the door behind her and started across the pine-planked floor.

A shadow moved across a beam of moonlight at the back of the store.

She froze, the back of her neck prickling.

The ticking of the clock slowed.

The glass-fronted pop and beer cooler compressor hummed louder as she strained to listen. An inexplicable sixth sense told her that the shadow had not been her imagination.

Holding her breath, she edged backwards toward the front door, her heart pounding against her ribs and her palms damp.

Ten feet to go.

Five.

She reached blindly behind her for the dead bolt, not daring to turn her back.

Had the intruder heard her come in? How fast could she spin around and escape? But what then?

Her car was parked behind the building, near the back door.

The surrounding campgrounds and rustic cabin resorts were empty, now that the tourist season was over. The closest year-around business was sporting goods store at least a half-mile away that wouldn't open until mid-morning.

And with her bad ankle, the chances of outrunning anyone past the age of six weren't good. God--I need some help, here.

From the back room came the sound of something scraping against the floor...and was that the rasp of a harsh, indrawn breath?

Rising fear washed through her, turning her knees weak as she fumbled with her car keys.

The back door squeaked. Closed with a soft snick of the latch.

Which meant the intruder had left...or did it?

If she ran to her car, he could be out there, waiting to attack. Or he could still be in the store, lying in wait for her. If he was, it could be hours