

A Cold Place in the Sun

By Peggy Staggs

Chapter 1

I rescue people for a living. To make things interesting, if I'm not successful I die, someone else dies, or there's an international incident. Just another day at the office in my little corner of a secret agency.

The bell above the ancient door at the neighborhood grocer dinged as I entered. The pristine tile floor contrasted with the 1950's style shelves.

I carry two cell phones. My personal one never rings, the other only rings when I'm someone's last, best hope. I took a bag of cat treats from the shelf and tossed it in my basket. My last-best-hope phone vibrated in my pocket. The display read TUG, short for The Umbra Group. I knew one thing for sure, life was about to get very exciting very fast. "Hello."

"Giving is the root of all good. All giving begins with a good heart." Click. Mr. Winston hung up.

Two goods...that's not *good* news. Someone's life has become desperate. I handed the basket to the clerk. "I'm sorry. I don't have time to put these back." Carl, my cat, wasn't going to be happy.

"No worries, Laura." The teenaged boy smiled at me. "I'll put them back."

Outside, a cold New York wind beat at the Christmas decorations. A gust grabbed my hair and splayed it across my face, blinding me in a flurry of blonde. I clutched my jacket as the blustery weather threatened to steal it from me.

Battling the wind all the way down the block, I made it to the bus depot. By the double glass doors sat a man holding a sign that read, "My wife's been kidnapped and I'm a dollar short on the ransom." Mr. W.'s sense of humor. I put one dollar in his cup. "What about coffee and doughnuts?"

He smiled. "Thank you, Mrs." He held out a dirty hand in gratitude. I accepted it and he slipped me a note.

The urgent phone message had put an explanation point after emergency. I stepped inside the bus station out of the cold and took up a vantage point by the newsstand. I had to hurry, but I couldn't let down my guard. I rubbed the scar on my shoulder. Experience had taught me better. I had to be sure no one was watching. After pulling a magazine from the rack, I thumbed through it with metronome precision. My attention was not on the celebrity whose dress did little to cover cleavage nature had not provided. No one took notice of me except the owner of the newsstand. I replaced the magazine.

Sure I hadn't attracted any attention, I opened the note. "L. Come to my home. W."

I'd been to Mr. Winston's condo several times. Thanksgiving every year, Fourth of July every summer, and this year I had an invitation to Christmas dinner. But I'd never been there for an assignment.

I would have preferred time to go home and change clothes, but from the tone of the summon, I didn't feel I had the extra time.

I hailed a cab.

Mr. Winston lives on Central Park West in a multi-story co-op. An ancient doorman stands guard at the front door. I never use front doors.

I slipped down the alley and found my entry point. The freight elevator. It was so much more inviting than the garbage shoot. Because of my front entry phobia, Mr. W. long ago provided me with a back entry key. I guess the super complained about me breaking in.

Inside, I took the elevator to the twelfth floor.

A thin woman in a blue maid's dress pulled open the tall door. She looked at me with a blank superior stare. She never seemed to remember me from visit to visit.

"Hello, Beth, is Mr. Winston in?" I tried to sound as if I belonged in this multi-million dollar neighborhood even though I looked more like I'd just come from the bargain section of a thrift shop in my jeans and khaki jacket.

She closed the door behind me.

The 21st century keypad by the entry stood out against the wall from early 1900's.

In healthier days, Martha Winston had restored the home to its original glory. Warm colors, rich woods and grand oriental carpets graced the nearly seven thousand square feet of luxury.

"Please wait in here." She opened massive oak French doors that led to Mr. W's home office. He was spending more time here lately than in his office at TUG. A privilege that comes with being the head of the organization. Although the reason he was here was no perk.

There had definitely been some changes since my visit on the Fourth of July. New surveillance cameras were tucked discreetly up by the crown molding. I notice things.

Occupational habit.

Odd, I thought. Why all the precautions? After all, this was the twelfth floor.

I did a turn around the book-shelved room. A new panel behind the desk most likely hid the control center for the cameras. At the window, I brushed away a crumb of sawdust from the sill. Yup, newly wired. I circled the room. New high-end security cameras and motion detectors were scattered among the books and pictures.

Mr. Winston stepped into the room. “Laura,” he said in a hushed tone. “Martha is resting.” After softly closing the French doors, he turned to me. “I apologize for having you come all this way, but Martha isn’t doing well. Her doctors are very concerned.” The lines between his eyes deepened. “She isn’t responding to the new medication as we’d all hoped.” He didn’t motion for me to sit down. Instead, he rounded his desk and opened a drawer.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” It sounded so inadequate. “I thought she was doing better?”

“She went in for a routine checkup a few weeks ago and they found several more spots of concern.” He leaned forward, putting his hand on the desk for support. “It looks bad. She is so pale and she’s lost weight.”

We both knew Martha didn’t have an ounce to spare. “I’m sorry.” That didn’t sound any more adequate than it had the first time.

He shook his head. “We’re going to cancel Thanksgiving.”

Sorrow gripped me with a cruel hand. Martha was a sweet woman and I’d enjoyed her quirky sense of humor. “Is there anything I can do?”

Mr. W. focused on the packet between his hands. “No.” The sadness in his eyes burdened my heart. Something more lingered there. Was it guilt? That didn’t make any sense. He couldn’t have done anything to prevent Martha’s cancer.

An uncomfortable silence lingered in the room.

I struggled for something to say. “When she wakes up, tell her I hope she’s feeling better soon.” I made a mental note to send her flowers before I left for where ever I was going.

He nodded. “This is very sensitive.” He handed me an envelope. “Ambassador Adams’s son is missing in Paris. The Ambassador thinks he’s run away. Our sources report he’s fallen in with a group of youngsters planning on setting off a series of bombs in the Paris Metro.” He closed the drawer. “If they pull it off, it will cause an international incident and end the Ambassador’s career.”

“I understand.”

“The Ambassador is a personal friend of Martha’s. So you can see how important this is for...for us. Your flight leaves this evening.”

“I’ll do my best.” I accepted the packet.

“You always do. That’s why I’m sending you.” Stress seasoned with concern hollowed his words.

* * * *

Time is always an issue so I keep a packed bag at the ready. Actually five; one each for cold weather urban and wilderness, one each for warm weather urban and wilderness, and one for Carl. It makes quite a stack in my closet.

Carl stood and stretched as I opened my apartment door. “Grab your toys, Buddy. You’re going to spend a few days with Mrs. Cumo and Ethel.” My next door neighbor is a lifesaver. She never hesitates to take Carl even though she works. The tiny woman always seems to be home when I need her. An interesting fact that I’ve asked her about on several occasions. She always has a plausible reason for being where she is.

I’ve lived next door to her for almost a year and I still don’t know exactly what she does for a living. Oh, sure I’d done a background check, but with little success. The only name I could

find for her was Mrs. E. Cumo. I figured as long as the police or FBI didn't show up, I wouldn't worry. After all, she knew little more about me.

I maneuvered around the dining table and into my bedroom. My apartment is crammed with as many of my family's belongings as my tiny corner of the city would hold. As a result, my decorating style is more storage locker than HGTV.

Grabbing my cold weather urban bag and Carl's travel tote from the closet, I came eye-to-eye with an old metal candy box. The box contained all the information I'd gathered on the murder of my family. That's how I spend my extra time. It isn't much of a life, but it's the only one I have left.

I took the container down and carefully placed it in the fireproof box under my bed. I spun the combination lock and slid it back out of sight. I always secure it before I leave on a mission. It's part habit, part uber-cautious.

The only people at TUG who know I exist, besides Mr. Winston and a handful of techs, are my rescues. I take special care that they don't even find out my name.

After tossing our bags on a dining chair, I opened the package I'd gotten from Mr. W. and found the usual; airline ticket, hotel reservation, and intelligence report.

"I'm headed for Paris, Carl." Carl, with his usual excitement over my missions, rolled over and batted at my pant leg. Standing in the center of my family's possessions, the circumstances of the upcoming rescue filled my thoughts. I'd be rescuing a kid...reuniting a family...I had to be successful.

The only information other than that was a pass phrase. They'd say, "Paris never sizzles." To which I'd reply, "It sizzles in the winter."

I shoved my bags outside the door and grabbed Carl. After securing my apartment, we went next door. The weight of the mission surrounded me like a shroud.

I realized how much I'd come to rely on Mrs. Cumo. She takes in Carl and doesn't ask a lot of questions and I bring her a special treat from wherever. There are times when that's almost as big a challenge as the rescue.

"Laura, how are you?" Mrs. Cumo's four foot nine inches barely made it past my shoulder. It made her no less imposing. A fact I found curious. What could this woman do for a living that gave her such a striking aura? "Oh, off again, dear?" The ordinary world and Mrs. Cumo think I write freelance articles for magazines. That's what I tell them and that's what I put on my tax return. "Do you have a minute? I just took scones out of the oven."

This was no surprise. The hallway was filled with the aroma of baked goods. There are some things I can resist without a thought. Mrs. Cumo's scones are not on that list. The warm bouquet of warm cranberries and cinnamon made the decision even harder. I glanced at my watch. I could take a few minutes for treats and still make my flight. "You know the answer to that." She stood aside as I set my bag down inside the door.

"Your agent must be working overtime this month." Mrs. Cumo was a puzzle. Somewhere in her fifties, she had no family photos in sight. Her taste in furniture was a wonderful combination of antique and contemporary. The elegant selections fit together with professional grace.

"Yes, he is." She had no idea. My ribs were still bruised from my last mission. "Thank you for taking care of Carl. I never worry about him when he's here." I let my big cat thud to the floor.

Right at home, he sauntered over to Ethel, Mrs. Cumo's white Persian. A lot of ear washing and playful swats preceded snuggling in for a nap.

"I enjoy him." She pulled a second cup from the cupboard and filled it with dark, rich coffee. Next, she pulled a bowl of pristine whipped cream from the refrigerator and set it next to

a towel-wrapped plate of scones. “Help yourself. Take plenty of whipped cream. You’re too thin.” She took a round scone for herself. “Where to this time?”

“Paris.”

“And what’s your article about?” She watched me take a treat.

“What it’s like to be the son of a diplomat. I shouldn’t be more than a few days.”

“Ah, Paris.” She smiled, apparently lost in thought of a time I’d never hear about. Then she added, “And the diplomatic corps is always interesting in Europe.”

The distracted look in her eyes had me asking, “Have you been there?”

She straightened. “It’s such a romantic city. I love *An American in Paris*. Gene Kelly splashing through the rain.” She laughed. “I love old movies.”

It’s always the same, I ask her questions and she sidesteps them. I used to push the point, thinking she was just reluctant to talk about herself. It never worked. I’ve gotten used to it.

She got up and went to the kitchen as I swiped up the last of my whipped cream with the end of my scone. “I appreciate everything, but I have some research to do before my plane leaves.”

“Don’t you worry about Carl. I have a feeling I’ll be working some overtime this week, but I know I can count on him to take care of Ethel.” We walked to the door. She handed me a brown bag, one I knew was filled with more scones. “For the trip. Airline food is dreadful.” She smiled. “Be careful.” And she closed the door behind me.

I tell her where I’m going—generally—and she tells me to be careful--specifically. It’s the ritual we’ve settled on.

With three hours before my plane left, I had enough time to get to the library, find an open computer, and get the information I needed. I never use my home computer for mission research. With no trail to follow, I remain anonymous.

I tapped my fingers on the desk as I waited for the Google map to come up. My missions typically are retrieval: the usual; people, documents, occasionally money, and even jewels. Said people tend to *misplace* documents and themselves on a regular basis. But kids...this would be my first. Families hold a special fear for me. I had to have everything just perfect.

In the packet, I got all the basics. The kid — Geoffrey, was the only child of the American Ambassador to France. The sixteen year old had tangled himself up with local teen militants who had done what bad guys do...they kidnapped him.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose. That didn't help, so I rubbed my temples. That didn't help, so I massaged the back of my neck. That didn't help, so I concentrated on pushing all the brain baggage aside and got down to work. I compartmentalize well.

TUG provides me with detailed maps and information, but I'm a control freak. I doublecheck.

Done, I went to the airport, secure in the knowledge that Carl was safe and my life would be waiting for me when I returned. The little internal voice that keeps me alive and sane for the most part reminded me not to get smug. There are always monkey waiting to throw their wrenches into my machinery.

* * * *

My backpack is equipped with a special tag that ensures it stays with me, avoiding the standard channels and prying eyes.

In the airline waiting area, I found a seat where I could see everyone coming and going. I tucked my backpack securely between my feet as someone approached.

“Anyone sitting here?” I looked up. The voice belonged to a woman who appeared to be in her sixties. She looked like a retired school teacher with her four books and large satchel. Her sturdy figure was in contrast to the cane she leaned on.

When I’m on a mission, I want to concentrate. This woman wanted to chat. Why me? There were plenty of seats closer to the gate.

“Where are you headed?” She plopped her large satchel on the seat between us and sank into the semi-padded chair. It looked more like a carpet bag from the 1800’s than a modern case.

“Paris.” Maybe one word answers would discourage her.

“Ah, Paris. What a wonderful city. I wish I could live there all season. It’s so romantic.” She settled back. “If we’re going to be on the same plane, perhaps we’ll be near each other. I’m Mei O’Hara.”

Great. “Laura Barlow.” We shook hands. I have enough to do without trying to remember a new name every other week. As Mr. W. always says, “Keep things simple, my dear.” That advice has saved my life several times.

“Do you get there often? Or is this your first trip?”

Yup, chatty. “Business takes me there occasionally.”

“Business? You look so young. What do you do?” A smile reached her dark eyes that held a suggestion of Asian heritage.

I stick to my cover story. Less to remember that way. “I’m going to write an article for a magazine.”

“The press. How exciting.” She sat straight and turned toward me. “Have I read anything you’ve written?”

To this I always want to reply, do you read the magazines I write for? But the manners my parents drummed into me won’t allow it. “I doubt it I write for niche publications.”

“Interesting. Is there a market for travel writers?”

Believe it or not, I get this kind of question all the time, so I've done some research to add to my cover. We chatted writing for a few minutes. Finally I said, "Where are you going?" Maybe if I got her talking about herself, she'd tell me all about whatever and I could concentrate on my surroundings.

"Oh, I'm on a world tour."

"That's exciting." With luck, she'd tell me stop-by-stop where she was going and I could just nod occasionally and wouldn't have to answer.

"I'm meeting my tour group in Paris. We're not going to stay there, we're going straight to Egypt. Then through Africa and—"

I tuned out. She droned on as I looked around the area. People entered the area in preparation for the upcoming flight. Their carry-on luggage clogged the spaces between the rows of chairs. I didn't see anyone actively trying to blend in.

Forever later, they called our flight. The group I work for alternately sends me economy, business, and first class. No doubt a function of the emergency facet of recovering those in need. Today, I found my seat in business.

I stowed my backpack under the seat.

A flight attendant sauntered down the aisle toward me. "Excuse me." He looked down his long nose at me as if I were a necessary evil on his air craft. He stood there with his hands on his hips. "Are you able to perform the duties that go with one of those seats?" He pointed to the exit row sign.

I can kick your ass. "Yes."

"Are you sure?" He tilted his head to one side as he looked me up and down.

"I'm more than able."

He stiffened. "The door is heavy."

This guy was headed for annoying at the speed of light. I gave him my best fake smile. “I work out.”

For a second, I thought he was going to ask me to lift something. Instead, he headed for the front of the plane.

He brushed past the woman I’d been talking to me in the terminal. “He’s a snot.”

I hadn’t expected the malice that accompanied her words. We looked at the attendant, who now stood laughing with a showy redheaded passenger.

“You know him?” I asked the woman.

“I wish I didn’t. This is his regular flight.”

“You must make this trip often.” I’d gotten the impression this was her first flight to Europe.

She laughed. “I did. I was a buyer for Maxine’s Clothes.”

That took me by surprise. “Really?” Whoops, that wasn’t very nice. “I mean...”

She laughed. “Don’t worry. A lot of people have that reaction. They don’t expect an old woman to be buying young women’s clothing.” She smiled and winked. “I am, or was, the best.” She shifted her large purse from one shoulder to the other as she leaned hard on her cane.

“Remember that tee shirt craze last spring? The one with the offset neck?”

“I have two of them.” I leaned against the seat next to me. She had that rare talent of making people instant friends.

“That was me.” She smiled. “It was the last thing I did before I retired.” She glanced back at the steward who had no intention of checking out anything but the newly arrived redhead. “You’d think.” She indicated the cane. “He’d be a little more useful than ears on a peach. No time for an old woman when there’s a redhead to attend to.” A hint of a southern accent snuck in when she said peach.

A couple moved down the aisle toward us. I smiled, took her heavy bag and helped her to her seat. “You’re so sweet.” She dug in her bag and handed me a card. “I’ll be back in New York in a few weeks. Call me and we’ll have drinks.”

I promised and returned to my seat three rows back. I figured I was here first, so I took the seat I wanted on the aisle.

I pulled the Sky Mall magazine from the seat pocket. Instead of reading it, I went over plan A in my head.

I’d memorized the area around the embassy, the spot where they were holding the ambassador’s son, and all the streets in between. I had a couple of tentative plans, but I wouldn’t finalize anything until I got eyes on the area.

I’d escalated to forming plan B when—

“Excuse me, I believe that’s my seat.” The accent was Scottish—not Scottie from Star Trek Scottish—but a smooth warm tone, with the slightest burr to his S’s...very sexy. The slim, dark haired man smiled at me. “Of course if you’re set on that one, I don’t mind the window.”

I’d take him up on that offer. I got to my feet and moved out of the row. Turning, I looked up into the most beautiful hazel eyes I’d ever seen. For a flashbulb instant, I stood transfixed.

“Are you staying long in Paris?” He settled into his new seat.

What was it with people today? Did I have a sign on my forehead that read, “Please talk to me I’m a lonely recluse who doesn’t get out much?” The thought stopped me, leaving me half out of my seat. I hadn’t realized until this second how solitary my existence had become.

No. I had a very orderly life. I performed a very useful service. I saved people. I nearly squeezed my eyes shut. I had a cat, a Kindle with almost a thousand books on it--all of them read—and my last big date had been with a fifty-something woman eating scones.

“Are you ill?” he asked.

I sat down. I needed to concentrate on my mission. I couldn't make an exception even for this good-looking guy. A kid's life was at stake. Loneliness tugged at my heart. "No." This was the third holiday season since my family's murder and my official death. Mr. Winston had cancelled Thanksgiving dinner for obvious reasons, so I'd be alone.

"Business?"

"Yes." Seriously? Couldn't anyone take the hint with my one—word answers? The downside was that he'd quit talking and I'd be deprived of that great accent.

"Are you going to take time for pleasure?"

My face heated. I knew instantly it was not that nice glow kind of pink that's so pretty on some. Oh no, this was full—blown sunburn hot. I knew I was as red as if I'd spent a week in the Sahara without sunscreen. I felt totally stupid. I had to get a grip. He's just a guy—with gorgeous eyes and a killer accent. "No."

"That is a shame. Paris is a romantic city."

What is this? A conspiracy? Pleasure. Romance. Not two words I'd thought about in a long time. A nervous laugh bubbled out of me. Shit.

"That's an odd response."

"Sorry. I don't have time for romance. I'm on a deadline." That had sounded *so* much better in my head.

His eyebrows raised as he half-turned to face me. "That *is* too bad." The rich full tone in his voice sent little jolts of electricity sparking along every nerve in my body. I squirmed.

"Maybe I just haven't found the right person." Oh-my-God, did I really say that? Out loud! Since I spent most of my time in public not talking to people, I was definitely out of my comfort zone.

I felt my heart racing as the force of his smile met my diminishing will. I relied on my ability to blend in, to not be noticed. This guy wasn't going to let me do that.

TUG's training taught me how to kick most anyone's butt in a few seconds, pull an injured person out of a deadly situation, and get them home without alerting anyone. But this...was not in the training manual.

"That *is* disappointing for our side."

Was he flirting? I'd been a bookworm, graduating high school at sixteen, college at twenty, and receiving my master's at twenty-one. So right now I felt as if I were walking on the moon without oxygen. "Our side?"

"Men in general." He held out his hand. "Since we're going to spending the night together we should introduce ourselves. Ian Newell."

"Laura Barlow." Whoa, back this speeding train up. Spend the night together? Oh, yeah, right. My face went Sahara red. Again. This guy was smooth. Not the kind that's polished in bars, but a natural easiness that comes with genuine emotion.

"You do turn the most charming shade of pink." The irresistible smile he gave me as he leaned back held more danger than I'd faced in a long time.

We spent the night eating the scones Mrs. Cumo had sent along, talking and laughing. Our hours together filled a hollow place in me with warmth and humor.

Too soon the pilot announced we'd be landing.

In Paris he'd find romance and I'd find the Ambassador's son.

He'd drink champagne and laugh in the lights on the Champs-Élysées and I negotiate a shadowy alley.

He'd meet people and make friends and I'd pull someone from peril then disappear.

Nothing would change.