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*Where*  
ONE ROAD  
*Leads*  
CERI HEBERT

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# Where One Road Leads

*Ceri Hebert*

## Dedication

To my sister, Lesley, the bravest woman I have the honor of knowing.  
You've been a true inspiration in my life. I love you.

## Chapter One

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” Cameron Warshaw muttered and pushed a hand through his dark hair.

Krista didn’t bother to stifle a chuckle, and was rewarded with a glare. She knew the disdain etched on his face was only for show. As much as he was a tough guy to work for, the damned man lived to tease her when he knew he could get away with it.

She put her feet up on the magazine strewn coffee table and grinned at him, spinning her old Boston Red Sox ball cap on her finger. Behind Cameron, past the pane of glass that separated her part-time office from the rest of the newsroom, everyone moved in well-ordered chaos. Chaos to the untrained eye, but in all actuality it was a well-oiled machine. A few glances were cast their way and at times she wished she had blinds to give her some privacy, but she was rarely there, so privacy wasn’t generally an issue. She turned her attention back to Cameron, who eyed her with a grim frown and furrowed brows, giving his best impression of stern and unmoved.

“Sure you can. Give up on the Scrooge act, Cam. I’ve known you long enough not to buy it. This is a good cause and only a temporary partnership if you’re really not into it.”

Cameron shook his head, but his mock sneer softened into a smile. “Scrooge my ass, Krista.” He picked up the eight-by-ten photo of Burgess Mill off her desk.

Krista eyed him cautiously. He'd said yes, but despite the fact they were friends, he always kept his eye on the bottom line. He wouldn't be the owner of one of the biggest newspapers in the country at the age of forty-five if he didn't put profit and business before sentimental emotions. Yet she could always count on him to help out a good cause.

"The rent I can swing," Krista continued, as if he needed further convincing. "It's the renovations I need help with."

"Why don't we buy it outright? Going through a landlord for every little approval is a pain in the ass."

Krista shook her head. "They won't sell. I know these people well. The mill has been in the family for over a hundred years and they like it that way."

"Then find someplace else," he replied quickly and put the picture back on the desk, not giving it another look. He fixed his eyes on her. They were sharp, the humor in them dissipating into seriousness. The businessman was rising to the surface.

Krista pursed her lips tightly and leaned forward. "Nope. Has to be there. Personal reasons. You understand that, right?"

Cameron studied her carefully then nodded. "Yeah, I understand," he said simply. "You're in for a tough road, I have a feeling."

She shrugged. So what part of her life hadn't been a tough road, from the time she was eighteen?

"Well, I'll get on the phone and tie up the loose ends. When are you going back up?"

Back to Quail Ridge. Her whole body tensed at the thought. She'd avoided the place for fifteen years. Even when her mother died five months ago she hadn't returned for the funeral. Her sister, Emily, didn't understand. Cameron did. And Krista knew her mother had understood too.

Not returning, though, probably made her more of a villain in the eyes of those in Quail Ridge who were around when the car accident happened, but that was the chance she'd have to take. She just had to hope most people either knew the truth or forgave her years ago.

"I'll be heading out at the beginning of the week. Have to fend off Emily about the house first, though. You're a god, Cam. I mean it," she said lightly and put the hat on her head so the bill rode slightly higher than her eyes.

"Yeah, don't I know it? Fortunately Gretchen knows it too," he said with a wink.

Krista rolled her eyes. Most ex-girlfriends would feel some jealousy, but Krista knew she really didn't qualify as an "ex" anything. What she and Cameron had was more of a momentary lapse in sanity that put to rest the questions of whether they were better friends than lovers. Gretchen was more his type—glamorous, vivacious, a real golden beauty, the kind of woman who bred jealousy in other women.

But not in Krista. The last thing she needed or wanted was a romantic entanglement. Her job kept her on the move too much. Keeping a relationship alive was hard enough without the added hassle of dealing with a job that put her into a lot of dangerous situations. No, romance was better left to women like Gretchen, and Emily and everyone else.

"You'll definitely stay at your mom's place?"

Krista shrugged again. "Well, it's half mine now. Might as well. Emily and I have plans to sell it, but I think I can put her off for a couple months. It's quiet and out of the way. Gus and I will be content there."

"And you'll be overseeing the renovations at the mill?"

"Yup. But I'd like to get settled in the house before I show up at the mill."

Cameron studied her for a long moment. “What are they going to say when they see you?”

Krista sat up and rested her arms on her knees. Ignoring Cameron’s office-wide no-smoking rule, she reached for the crumpled pack of cigarettes on the table, pulled one out and lit it. She smoked only when her nerves threatened to disintegrate. And that only seemed to happen when she thought about Quail Ridge and the past.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll be spat on,” she joked. “I’ll have to stay away from dark alleys and hire a food taster. Hell, I don’t know, Cam. I’m sure that it’s going to be tough. But if it’s not going to work out after I get things set up, I’ll hightail it out of there and hire someone to run the place. But they’re not going to chase me out until I get the youth center up and running.” Krista drew in a long drag from the cigarette, feeling its effects on her nerves. She examined the smoke as it rose languidly from the tip.

Cameron picked up the other notes and sketches Krista had given to him to look over. He’d already approved of her idea, so she wasn’t worried that he was going to rescind, but his opinion meant a lot to her.

“What about the rest of the world? It’s going to miss your talent.”

Krista glanced up at the photos on the white walls. Her career as a photojournalist laid out there, samples of some of her defining moments. Foreign countries and people, as well as those closer to home. She thought of their faces, their lives, and compared them with her own. Going home shouldn’t be as hard as what she’d faced in those other situations where life and limb were on the line on a daily basis. But her hometown, at the moment, was the most frightening place on earth.

“The world can do without one more camera for a while. Besides I’m not giving up the thrill completely. Think of this as a break.”

Truth be told, though, she was getting tired of chasing the story, the latest tragedy, the latest in human agony. She was tired of watching it all



unfold from a place where she couldn't do much to help. Now she wanted to make a difference. The youth center would be a start. And opening it in Quail Ridge, where so many had been hurt by that night long ago, would at least be a starting place to heal those wounds. If the others let them be healed.

"We'll get all the legal mumbo jumbo wrapped up and make sure that the owners are okay with the renovations we need to make. If they're not... Well, I'm sure we won't have to worry about that, now will we?"

Krista inhaled the last of the cigarette, her nerves soothed for the moment, whether from the dose of nicotine or the knowledge that Cameron would make sure everything went smoothly in dealing with Ed and Matt Burgess. She crunched the butt out in the pewter ashtray and sent him a wink and a grin. "I never worry when you're at the helm."

Cameron waved the gesture away. "So, you go away. Start your packing or whatever you need to do and Gretchen and I will see you tonight for dinner. You bringing a date?"

"Yeah, right. Unless I can bring Gus."

"No, Gretchen's mutt wouldn't approve."

Krista chuckled. Gretchen would deck him if she knew he'd referred to his wife's highbred Maltese as a "mutt". Gus was a mutt, but he was the best mutt in the world.

"No date. As usual. You know how I deal with relationships. The fewer I have, the better off I am." The smile on her face lacked humor, but she was far from regretful.

Standing, Krista stretched, grabbed her beat up canvas backpack and started for the door out of the office. She stopped before she opened it, and turned back to her boss and best friend. He was looking down at her papers.

“Thanks, Cam. I really mean it.” She didn’t say anything more. Tender scenes weren’t her thing. But Cam knew that, she was sure. He’d understand.

When she arrived at her apartment building, Gus was at the door as soon as she opened it, his big tan body blocking her way into the little foyer. He welcomed her home with all the love his canine heart could muster, his front paws doing his own little happy dance.

He was a big guy, part German Shepherd and part whatever, with chocolate brown eyes that looked at her with love and devotion and lop ears that perked whenever she spoke to him. His scars had healed and she wished that her own could’ve gone away as quickly.

Krista hung her bag on the hook by the door and sank to her knees, taking the dog’s head between her hands.

“Hey, dude, you miss me?”

Gus managed to lick her on the nose.

“Yuck.” Krista laughed and let go of the dog so she could wipe her nose. “You ready to get out of here? Just think, bud, in a little while you won’t have to be cooped up in this little place.” She reached for the red leash that hung on another hook. Gus started to dance again.

He’d love it up in New Hampshire, that was for sure, Krista thought as she attached the leash to his collar. He was much too big to be an apartment dog anyway. She had to bribe her landlord to have him in the studio apartment as it was, but he was extremely well-behaved and had won the hearts of her neighbors, who were suckers for hard luck cases. And Gus was as hard luck as they came.

When Krista was covering the destruction of a hurricane down in the Gulf coast she found Gus, starving and abandoned. Worse, he’d been tied up for so long his collar had cut into his neck and the flesh had begun to grow around it. It was too hideous a thing to ignore and for the

first time in her career as a photojournalist, she'd stepped in to do something about it. She rescued the dog and had him sent up to Washington DC, where he was treated for his wounds and malnutrition, and gave him a loving home and a new name. He looked like a Gus.

"Well, at least I'll have one friend up in New Hampshire," she told the dog as he led her down the hall to the stairs. Gus hated the elevator.

This was the best time of the day, when she could bask in the simple joy of making another creature sublimely happy by just taking him out for some fresh air and a stretch of the legs.

Why couldn't humans be so easily pleased?

Krista cut their walk short and settled for a quick trip around the little park at the end of the street. It took a strong arm to get him headed back to the apartment.

Emily would be calling at five-thirty, and Krista knew that she'd call on the dot. She'd want to know what was going on with the house. Her sister had been on her back about every little thing since their mother got sick. She liked things neat and tidy and wrapped up in the smallest amount of time humanly possible. Everything by the book, while Krista was more laid back. She'd thrown the rule book out years ago.

When Krista didn't attend their mother's funeral the shit had really hit the fan in an extremely messy way. Emily was just one more person who resented her and blamed her for some sort of misery. It didn't matter to Emily that Krista and her mother had already discussed and settled Krista's reluctance to go back to Quail Ridge.

"You do what you need to do, darling," Dolores Faye had told Krista.

Krista had gone up to Manchester, New Hampshire, to the hospital where her mother had spent her last days. They'd held hands and Krista had fought back the tears.

“If you don’t come to the funeral, I’ll know why and I know that wherever you are I’ll be in your heart. Your not being there will never change how we feel about each other.” Her mother’s words had been gentle, as they always were when Krista was concerned. Her words had come with another piece of advice though. To put the past behind her. Move on with the future and make her life happy and meaningful.

Emily hadn’t felt the same way about Krista staying away from the funeral. But Emily hadn’t gone through the hell Krista had in Quail Ridge either.

“I’m going to be walking through fire, my friend,” she muttered to Gus. She wondered what made her think that she was ready to go back now when she hadn’t been ready after her mother passed.

It didn’t help that Emily was bugging her about the house. She wanted it sold as soon as possible. Krista would’ve agreed, but she needed a place to stay, at least for a while. And maybe being in the old house would be a salve against everything she was about to face.

The house would be more of a home than the sparsely furnished apartment she lived in now ever was. This place reflected her life up until this moment. Simple, efficient.

Empty.

Not for the first time in the past fifteen years, Krista missed the home she’d grown up in. If things had been different, if she’d never gone to pick up Eddie and Ricky from the party they’d been at, she could’ve gone home anytime she’d wanted. She could’ve been there for holidays and other special occasions. If she hadn’t been in the car that night... She pressed her hand against her belly. It was surreal to remember that once upon a time she had a baby in her belly. She and Eddie had been going to have a child, but for that nightmare moment. The memory used to

make her shudder with regret, but now the loss was only a dull ache she could forget about most of the time.

No, she wouldn't think about that, not now. What was done was done and there was absolutely no way to turn back time and do it all again, to make different decisions or attempt to curb the anger she'd felt that night.

This was her life now, in this spare studio with her adoring companion and a job that she had always thought was fulfilling. Thought... Until her mother passed away.

During their last conversation, her mother had told her that even if she didn't come back for the funeral that it was time to heal the wounds inside.

Not to make things right exactly. Ricky might have convinced most people she'd been at fault that night, and there was no doubt in her mind that she played a big role in the accident, maybe the biggest, but she owed it to Liz and Eddie's memory to try to find forgiveness in the others she'd hurt.



"So, it's a done deal?" Ed Burgess popped open a can of soda he'd retrieved from Matt's fridge and brought it to his lips.

Matt nodded as he tossed his keys into the slate blue pottery bowl on the table by the door. "They start renovations on Monday."

"You don't sound very good about this."

With a shrug, Matt walked to the fridge and went after his own soda. "Just seems a strange place to open a youth center, considering the size of this town. And the stuff they want to do to the place, sounds pretty fancy."

“Nothing that would make the mill less desirable or change it too much,” Ed reasoned. “Besides we’re close enough to Nashua and some of the other big towns to draw in enough kids.”

It was the same argument that had convinced Matt to agree to the five-year lease. But there was still something... “I still don’t get why a bigwig from Washington DC would choose a little New Hampshire town.”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Matt. The place has been empty for two years now. If Cameron Warshaw hadn’t come along, we may have had to settle for something less desirable, for less money.”

“I guess,” he replied doubtfully, but then smiled. He wouldn’t let it bother him. The mill had been in the family for over a century. It was as important to him as it was to his parents, but it wasn’t his whole life. The uniform he wore was more important. The uniform his father still wore. It looked like any other small-town uniform, but he wore it with as much pride as any cop from a big city. It represented a lot of heartache but more honor.

Matt pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table across from his father. The kitchen was the gathering spot in his little cottage, just like it was in the Burgess house across town where he grew up. There were still little signs of Rachel everywhere, like the sunflower curtains that hung at the windows and the dishes in the hutch. And in other parts of the house. Every time he looked at something she’d picked out, he thought he’d change it as soon as he got the chance. He didn’t keep them around for sentimental reasons, but because he didn’t have the time or inclination to go out and replace them. No, sentimentality and Rachel didn’t go hand-in-hand. Not anymore.

“Got some other news for you.” Ed’s voice cut through his thoughts. His tone dropped and had taken on a serious note.

Matt eyed his father cautiously. Yeah, something was up. Usually Ed Burgess was a grinning, happy-go-lucky guy. Tonight he was quiet, as if caught up in some troubling thought.

“Go on,” Matt urged slowly, his hand tightening around the cold aluminum can.

“Krista Faye is back in town.”

There was a cold pit in his gut that only accompanied something particularly nasty. The last time he felt it was sixteen months ago when Rachel handed him back his engagement ring and told him that she couldn’t marry him because he was too much of a downer.

“Crap.” He wanted to choose a different, more colorful word, but his father wouldn’t approve, even if the situation called for it. He set the soda down on the table with enough force to slosh the dark liquid out of the opening and onto the tablecloth. “What is she back for?” He stared at the growing brown stain on the white material.

Ed shook his head. “Don’t know. Not my business. Maybe she’s packing things up at her ma’s place.”

Matt nodded and pushed an agitated hand through his short hair. “Hope that’s all. Although it’s kind of odd that she couldn’t even make it to her mother’s funeral. Seems she would’ve let Emily sort through all the final details.”

“You got to move on, Matt,” Ed said evenly.

Matt turned a glare at his father. Move on? Apparently his parents were more forgiving, maybe they were better people than he was. Yeah, they were. Always. But move on? No, he wasn’t moving on.

“Things are fine,” he grumbled, deciding on the outcome in his mind. “When she leaves things will go back to being fine.” If he kept believing that, he thought, nothing else could happen.

Ed downed the last of his soda and crumpled the can. “We’ll see. You do what you need to. Just wanted to give you a heads-up, just in case you bumped into her at the store or something.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I won’t embarrass myself or say something rude.”

The older man got to his feet and patted his son heavily on the shoulder. “I know you won’t. I’ve got to get going or else your mom is going to be sending out a search party. See you Tuesday for dinner, okay?”

“Yeah,” Matt responded distractedly. “Tell Mom I’ll take a look at the dryer while I’m there.”

He didn’t even hear his father walk out and close the door. Instead he was stewing. He hated it when he thought about that night nearly fifteen years ago.

It was the first serious accident he had to deal with on the force. A defining moment, one that could make or break a cop.

It nearly broke him. No, it *did* break him, in a way more profound than anything else in his life before or after.

He’d been the first cop on the scene that chilly April night. It had been a two-car accident on Route 168 leading into Quail Ridge. Not the best of roads even in broad daylight, it was full of sharp curves and rises and dips. One side was a sharp incline, made up of granite ledges, dirt and shrubbery. On the other side, beyond what he thought was a pretty rickety guardrail, there was a ten-foot fall into a river, which in the spring had a pretty good flow to it.

One car’s front-end had been smashed up, windshield shattered and smeared with something dark. The vehicle had come to a stop against the incline, in the wrong lane.

The other car had gone through the guardrail on the river’s side.



He hadn't recognized the Chevette at first. Or what was left of it. But when he did, he had to fight the nausea that gripped his gut like a rabid dog and the panic that turned his hands ice cold as he went down that steep embankment toward the battered remains. Even then he hadn't known that his little brother had been involved. He could've suspected. Eddie and Krista had been attached at the hip.

But he could hope and pray.

A lot of good that had done him.

And it wouldn't do him a bit of good to dwell on the fact that Krista Faye was back in town, for whatever reason. It didn't have to affect him or his life at all.

## Chapter Two

Two days later Matt was willing to eat his words. He'd seen Krista, from a distance, twice, at the grocery store in Milford and again at the bank in Quail Ridge. He didn't much like the ugly sensation that gripped his belly that first time. It was too reminiscent of how he'd felt fifteen years ago.

He tried not to be curious about her presence. He much preferred to hold on tightly to his contempt. Ignoring the questions that revolved around his head was a trick, but at last curiosity won out.

He pulled his cruiser into the short dirt drive at the Fayes' white farmhouse and got out. For a moment he took it in, the overgrown lawn and hedges that hadn't been trimmed in ages, probably since before Mrs. Faye had begun to lose her battle with cancer. The place looked nearly lifeless.

A Jeep Wrangler was parked next to the garage. The vehicle was scarred and dented. A haze of dust and a spattering of dry mud diminished its silver-blue paint. Its abused exterior made him wonder where life had taken Krista after that fateful night. She'd done a stint in the Women's State Prison, but after that, he had no clue. He'd never cared. But now he wanted to know. The wanting pressed at his head like a nagging ache. Once satisfied, he planned on going back to not caring.

More important than finding out where she'd been for the past fifteen years, though, he wanted to know when she was leaving.

A big dog trotted out from behind the house, his thick black and tan tail whipping back and forth and his tongue lopping out of the corner of his mouth. Matt could've sworn the dog was grinning. The animal gave a throaty, deep woof that wasn't one bit threatening.

"Gus, get back here. I'm sorry, I know he should be on a tie-out but—"

The woman stopped short, her mouth open as the rest of her sentence remained unsaid.

It was as if the whole world had fallen silent. Matt glared at Krista as she struggled to regain her composure, shutting her mouth tightly so it formed a thin line.

He looked her up and down, assessing her physical condition. She looked healthy anyway. Most of her figure was lost in the baggy green T-shirt that fell down to her hips. The lower portion of her body was clothed in faded blue jeans. She wore her baseball hat backwards, giving him a clear view of her face. No make-up, just a fair complexion with a smattering of light freckles across her nose. Her eyes were bluer than he'd remembered, but then he hadn't been the one gazing into them fifteen years ago.

The only thing that marred her pretty face was the scar that ran up from the left corner of her lip to her cheekbone before arcing down toward her ear and the other one that began directly between her dark golden blonde brows and disappeared into her hairline. These weren't thin lines. No, the accident had taken its toll on her as well.

But it had left her alive. He wished he could say the same about Eddie or Liz or the out-of-towner from Rhode Island who was an unfortunate passenger in the second car.

"Matt," she acknowledged through a tense jaw.

“Krista.” He was going to say she looked well, but he didn’t want to start making polite small talk with her. Best to get right to the heart of the matter. “How long are you here for?”

Krista laughed shortly and shook her head. “Well, if I was expecting a warm welcome in this town, I guess I would’ve been disappointed. Glad I’m more of a realist.” There was a smile on her face but it was as frigid as her tone of voice.

“Small towns remember things for a long time. Some things we never forget,” he replied as coldly.

The trace of a cynical smile on her lips disappeared. “Neither do I,” she replied evenly. “Sorry to disappoint you, Matt, but I’ll be here for a while. I’ll try to stay out of your way while I’m around.”

With a grip on her dog’s collar, Krista turned and walked toward the back of the house without so much as a goodbye.

For a long moment, Matt stayed put, staring in the direction they’d gone, not sure if he was more angry at the confrontation or puzzled. He settled for both.

The last time he and Krista had words, she’d been in tears, begging for him to believe her, that it wasn’t just her fault. She’d been a scared, hurt girl, the damage to her body fresh, and he hadn’t cared a bit for her because she had been the one behind the wheel. She had taken away three lives, one of which was his own flesh and blood.

Now she was a woman. A strong woman and he could tell she wasn’t going to be looking for any forgiveness from him. Now it seemed she was the one who didn’t care.

Krista landed hard in the kitchen chair, sending the legs scraping across the pale green tile floor in shrieking protest. She grabbed for the new pack of cigarettes that lay in the center of the table and then the

lighter. Her hands shook badly as she put the flame to the tip, inhaling deeply until the smoke curled down into her lungs. She'd wanted to give the damned things up, but that wasn't going to happen as long as she had run-ins like the one she'd just turned her back on.

Well, it was better than drinking. She hadn't touched a drop of that stuff since she had found out she was pregnant. Ever since the accident, she couldn't bear to even take a taste of alcohol. She wished she could've said the same about cigarettes. At least one cigarette every few days wasn't going to kill her. On the contrary, she needed them to ease her nerves, otherwise she might have a nervous breakdown.

She hadn't expected Matt to be her first encounter in Quail Ridge. She'd been careful not to go to any of the local stores, not quite ready to deal with the questions and accusations.

Of course not everyone had been as hostile as Matt had been back then. There were people who believed her story about what had happened that night. Not as many as those who didn't, but she had to hope that time had mellowed their sentiments. She never doubted how Matt would react. After all, Eddie was his little brother. They were direct opposites, but that wasn't strong enough to break that fraternal bond.

She just had to depend on the others to make her stay bearable.

But it was Matt and his father she was going to have to deal with more. And if he was this disgruntled about her return when he didn't know the truth behind it, how was he going to react when he found out she was leasing his mill?

Krista drew in another long breath off the cigarette. She was going to have to find another way to calm her nerves or else she'd be smoking a pack a day.

She remained there in the neat kitchen for a long time after she'd finished the cigarette, examining the room and trying to reclaim the

warmth she'd once felt there. Not an easy thing to do, now that her mother was gone and her sister living down in Boston. Even after her father had passed away when she was thirteen, the Faye household had been a typical home sweet home. Even though this house was full of things, Krista realized wearily that she had brought her emptiness with her.

There wasn't as much to do around the house as she'd first thought. Her mother, ever the organization queen, had left everything in order. The place really hadn't changed over the past fifteen years. A few new pieces of furniture, new dishes, but overall the place was still the same.

Krista had set up her sleeping quarters in her old room. It seemed empty. Boxes of her posters, knick-knacks and books were stacked neatly in plastic tubs in the back of her closet. Things she'd left behind when she went off to serve her sentence. Things that didn't seem important to her after she left prison. She let it be for now.

She had no interest in going down memory lane. She had enough of that when she'd driven into town for the first time on Route 168 and came to the stretch of road where the accident had occurred. Like someone else had control of the steering wheel, Krista found herself pulling over to the side when she came to *the* spot. She'd remained in the Jeep for a long moment and stared at it, mentally pressing back at the anguish that rose as far as her throat and pushed sickly at her chest.

The guardrail had been changed, but the years and elements had weathered it. The only indication that there had been death was the three worn white crosses planted in the rocky ground just before the ground fell away the ten feet to the river below.

Someone had recently put flowers down by two of the crosses. It was nice that someone still remembered, still cared. She'd made a mental note to come back at some point with her own flowers. The third one had

no trace of remembrance. That person hadn't been from the area. Still, she'd decided that she'd bring flowers for that person as well.

Maybe forcing herself to face these things would help her deal with her own demons. A visit to the cemetery would be her next challenge. She had been in the hospital when Liz and Eddie had been buried. Now it was time for her to pay her respects.

The shrill ring of the phone brought her out of her thoughts. She crunched out the remnants of her cigarette and pushed the chair away from the table.

"Hello," she greeted wearily.

"You sound like a bundle of energy."

"Cam," she said with a laugh. "What's up?"

"Just thought I'd give you an update. Sam Nielsen finished up with the last floor. It's ready for the painters to come on in on Monday. If they're as good as I've been told, they should have the place bright and shiny in two weeks, less if they really push. They'll be working on the dance studio first so we can get the flooring done."

"I really need to go take a look." Krista pulled the ball cap off her head and released her hair from its ponytail. She felt a headache coming on.

"You take your time. Get settled. Things are moving fine without you there. Mike Gibbons is doing a super job of overseeing the construction. You need to step in when all the renovations are complete."

"Yeah, I know, but I really wanted to be involved with them. I'll be in there when the painting starts. I placed the ads for the positions in last week's paper. I already have a handful of resumes." Krista eyed the pile of envelopes in the basket on the counter. She recognized a few names on the headers. Blasts from the past.

There was a long pause.

“You sound really down,” Cam noted. He always could pick up on her moods. “Are you having any problems settling in?”

Krista reached for another cigarette. One hadn’t done the trick. “Well, the villagers haven’t come after me with pitchforks and torches yet,” she replied dryly. “But I did have a visit from the local constabulary a little bit ago.”

“Why? They giving you a hard time? I could make a call to the chief...”

“Relax, it wasn’t an official visit. It was just Matt Burgess. He’s Eddie’s big brother. Just wanted to find out when I was leaving.”

“Shit, Krista, you didn’t tell me that the guy we’re doing business with was a cop.”

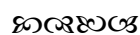
Krista shrugged and examined the glowing tip of the cigarette. “What difference does it make? We’re not doing anything illegal, are we? His dad is a cop too. But that shouldn’t affect business.” She crushed the cigarette out in the black ashtray. The ache in her temples had begun to migrate to the center of her forehead. Pressing her fingers into that spot, she willed the pain to dissipate.

“Still, it’s good to know the players.”

“Listen, don’t worry about me. Go make lots of money so we can make this place work. I’ll deal with the locals some way or another, or I’ll skulk back and forth between the house and the mill. Maybe I’ll get a disguise.”

“That’s my fearless girl. Hard to believe that you stood in hurricane winds when Rita struck, or took on insurgents in Iraq.”

Krista laughed again. “Stop exaggerating. You make me sound like Superwoman. Couldn’t be further from the truth, Cam.”





Matt leaned over the pool table, the tip of the cue pointed at the white ball. He tried to concentrate, but his mind kept going back to his visit with Krista. Totally unsatisfying. He certainly hadn't gotten the information he needed from her. To make things worse, she definitely wasn't what he expected her to be.

He made his play, but the ball missed the one he was aiming for by several inches.

"You suck, man," Dean said gleefully.

Matt let the insult go right past him. Instead, he stepped back and took a swig from the long neck on the little table behind him and waited while his friend took his turn.

He wasn't much in the mood for pool anyway, but it was his weekly ritual and he would be damned if he was going to break it because Krista's return was bugging him more than it should've. He should've been able to drop the anger like others had, but he was too used to it. The resentment fit like a glove.

Krista had carved out the defining moment of his life in a particularly cruel way. He'd been a different person before that moment when he saw his brother's body within the wreckage of Krista's car. Later, after the funeral, his dad had told him how proud he was of him, that he hadn't lost his cool at the accident scene.

But it had turned him from a fun-loving guy into a man who took life way too seriously and who couldn't let go of past sins. Because of this he'd lost his fiancée. Rachel had told him on the day she handed him his ring back that he needed to let go of the past. And in the meantime she was off to be with a guy who had learned that he didn't have to dwell in the bitter days gone by. She and Ricky were still together. He couldn't say he wished them well.

“Should we just end the game now?”

Matt glanced up. He hadn’t even realized that Dean was waiting on him. He smiled ruefully and put his beer back down. “How badly am I losing?”

“My great-grandmother could play a better game,” Dean replied, slapping Matt on the back.

With a laugh, Matt looked for his move and knocked his ball neatly into the pocket.

“So what is bugging you tonight?”

“Krista Faye is back in town,” Matt replied and pressed his lips into a tight line. He leaned back over the table for his next move.

“Yeah, I know. I ran into her yesterday. She was down at the office placing an ad.”

Matt straightened up, slapped his stick on the table and swung around to face his friend. “An ad for what? The house?”

“Well, actually she was placing an ad to announce the opening of a new daycare center.”

Matt froze, his stare pinned on his friend. Every muscle in his body tensed.

“Look I really shouldn’t have said anything. None of my business really,” Dean said quickly.

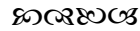
He didn’t need to say more. Dean might not want to know more, but Matt was going to make it his business. It was easy enough to put two and two together and come up with the fact that he and Krista were going to be more involved than he was comfortable with.

“The mill,” he ground out. “She’s leasing the mill.”

Dean laughed. “What?”

Matt glared at his friend. “The mill,” he repeated angrily. “The company that approached me to lease it wants to turn it into a youth

center. Complete with a dance studio, teen center and daycare. Damn it, Dean, she's coming back to stay."



Krista opened all the windows in the corner office that soon would be her home for at least eight hours a day, five days a week. The smell of paint was overwhelming and she longed for the crisp scent of New Hampshire in October. Indian summer had settled in and the temperature had to be about seventy-five degrees.

Her laptop sat alone on the old battered desk she'd bought down at the used office furniture store one town over. The chair wasn't much either. It was a leftover from the previous mill tenants. She could've sworn it tipped to one side, but she'd rather cut corners on her office if it meant adding to the amenities of the center. A new chair could wait for now. Her own office would be the last thing renovated, but looking around it, the cream paint on the walls, the dark woodwork and hardwood floor, there wasn't much she'd do to change it. She liked the old-fashioned feel of it. Maybe a plant or two and a couple prints on the wall. And a new chair that didn't lean.

No, definitely better to get the rest of the center renovated first. If things went as planned then they'd be set to open a few weeks before Thanksgiving.

She'd found a woman who would run the daycare, and a dance instructor. The other positions would be filled as the opening came closer. Until then there would be a thousand and one details to get squared away. Such a difference from what she was accustomed to. She'd never been in her office at the newspaper for more than two days

in a row, and that was only if she had to be. Now it would be a daily thing.

There was a stack of papers on her desk that needed her attention and some other organizing that couldn't be done from the house. She'd finally decided that coming to the mill couldn't be avoided. Her presence in town would be known anyway. Matt knew she was there, what else was there to worry about?

The booming voice and the slam of the door against the wall startled her, sending her heart pounding in a frenzy of beats.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Matt looked madder than hell. His hands were clenched in tight fists that looked paper white against the navy blue of his uniform shirt. In contrast his cheeks were florid. The other day he'd been annoyed, but now he was ready to exchange some words.

Krista forced herself to look away from him. She'd been waiting for this, and was actually relieved that the moment had finally arrived, but she'd be damned if he'd get the satisfaction of knowing that he rattled her.

"I'm setting up my office," she replied dryly. Well, she didn't intend to make it easy for him. She'd found over the past years that she was very good at tucking away her nerves and showing a calm, cool façade.

"Don't get cute with me, Krista," he growled. He shut the door and stalked toward the desk.

Krista rolled her eyes. "Cute is not in my vocabulary. I'm setting up my office. I'm running this youth center. But you know that, otherwise you wouldn't be here, now would you?"

Matt paused in front of her. She didn't look up at him, but kept him within her vision. She busied herself with opening an envelope, praying that her hands weren't shaking.

He moved past her, pacing to the window, his step quick and agitated. "This isn't right. If I'd known it was you..."

"Which is why I didn't come to you or your father with this."

"This has to be illegal. There must be a way to get out of this."

It seemed Matt was talking more to himself than to her so she didn't reply. Looking up from the papers on the desk, she took the opportunity to study him.

He didn't look at all like Eddie. Eddie had been tall and lanky, with dark shaggy hair and stunningly blue eyes. He had been a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy, the one who'd refused to go to senior prom because he wouldn't wear a tux. He'd been wild and so full of life.

Matt's energy was more bound up inside him. She could see it, bristling from him like it wanted to burst free but he wouldn't let it. His fists were still in tight balls at his sides as he stared out the window. He was a good three inches shorter than Eddie had been. His build was far more muscular and he filled out his uniform very well. If he'd been any other man Krista knew she'd definitely be attracted to him. Men in uniform hadn't been her thing, but a man like Matt could definitely persuade her otherwise.

Of course Matt was the last man she wanted to be attracted to. Their relationship was that of enemies. No, *he* saw her as an enemy and he was working on ways to eliminate her from his life.

"I'm afraid there's nothing you can do," Krista commented blandly. "The company who is leasing this building is quite legitimate as is the lease that we signed." She finally looked directly into his eyes, setting the steel in her stare so he knew she wouldn't back down. "You don't have to like me, Matt, but what I'm doing here is good. Even you can't deny that."

Matt paused and glared at her, animosity hard in his hazel eyes. She didn't shrink from the look, but met it steadily.

"You think this is going to make everything better? That it'll excuse what happened to my brother and Liz?"

Krista drew a deep breath of air into her lungs and expelled it slowly.

"I can't change the past. If I could, believe me, Matt, I would in a heartbeat. Maybe then I wouldn't have spent two years of my life in prison and I'd have my best friend back and maybe Eddie and I would be married and our..." She stopped abruptly. No, she didn't want Matt to know about the baby she'd lost. "I don't expect to become the hometown hero by opening this center, but if I could make things better, more enjoyable for other people, then everyone wins. This is not about me or making everything in the past go away so I can feel good about myself. I'll have to live with that night for the *rest* of my life, no matter what will come down the line."

There wasn't one hint of sympathy in Matt's hard eyes. He lifted his chin and stared at her coldly. "Then you agree that you were at fault that night?"

Krista stood, anger charging in a hot rush through her body. She was battered, both physically and emotionally. She wanted to put it behind her, but Matt wouldn't let her.

"I had my share of the blame, Matt. By letting my temper get the better of me and by hitting the brakes. Everything that led up to that moment was not my fault, though. I told my story fifteen years ago. The truth. It's not going to change for anyone. Is there anything else that you want?"

"You gave up *two years* of your life. Eddie *has* no life. You have a few scars. I saw what Eddie looked like that night. *I* was the first officer on the scene."

There was a pause as they stared at each other. The atmosphere in the room was cold and heavy. She could see the pain behind the anger in Matt's eyes. How could she ever explain to him that she'd felt the same emotions? That she'd gone through as much anguish as he had?

"Not all my scars came from that accident." Krista pointed to a long thick line that traveled the length of her jaw. "This came from a prisoner who decided she wanted a book I was reading and didn't like the fact that I told her she couldn't have it."

She lifted her hair to reveal another scar along the back of her neck. "Another prisoner just didn't like me. No particular reason. You might not like me here, and you might not think that I've paid enough for what happened but don't be expecting me to beg for your forgiveness again."

She sat back down at the desk, crossed her arms tightly against her chest and glared up at him, quite prepared to withstand whatever words he had to deliver. She would've stood, but her legs were getting shaky and she refused to give him any indication that he was doing any damage to her confidence. Silently, she prayed that this would be the last of her encounters with Matt. She never thought that he would wear her out the way he had.

"If there's anything else I can do for you, please let's get it over with, otherwise I have lots to do today."

For a long moment the only sound in the room was Matt breathing as they stared at each other. Maybe he was thinking of new and different things to say to her. Finally, though, he turned around and without another word left her office, closing the door behind him.

*At least you didn't cry*, she thought dully and stared at the door. A dark cloud hung in the air now. She drew in a deep breath and pushed away from the desk. She wasn't going to get any more done here for now.

Besides, since she was facing the past, she might as well face one more hurdle.

Grabbing her keys, she left the building and went for her Jeep. She shoved Matt into the back of her mind in favor of another person who was devastated by that night.



## Chapter Three

Even after so many years Krista knew the road to Liz's parents' house like the back of her hand. It was only ten minutes from the mill, back on one of the twisting roads. Once it had been a dirt road, well maintained, but still she and Liz used to joke about how far out in the boondocks she lived. The road had been paved somewhere along the line, but it was still narrow and it still wound through the woods. She'd made sure that Liz's parents still lived there before even coming up to New Hampshire.

It seemed like just yesterday that she'd done this drive. She remembered the last time. It had been to pick Liz up so they could go fetch their boyfriends from a party at a lakefront cottage near the town line. There had been no indication of the trouble ahead. Instead, as they drove, they sang to the radio, enjoying their freedom. They'd done so much laughing back then. She found herself smiling despite herself.

"Oh Liz, I wish you were here right now, telling me that I'm doing the right thing. That your parents aren't going to treat me like Matt did. I loved them so much."

Of course there was no reply, just the sound of the air coming in through the open window.

She didn't want to think about how Liz's parents were going to react to seeing her. The last time had been in court and they'd barely said anything to her, they'd been too caught up in their own grief. And Ricky had been with them, playing the dutiful boyfriend, there to comfort them

and mourn with them. She'd been denied that right. Perhaps Ricky had tainted their minds toward her as well and she'd face the same hostilities that Matt came at her with.

Krista reached to the console, not taking her eyes off the road, and felt around for her cigarettes but they weren't there. Just as well. They were becoming a crutch and she didn't want to rely on them.

The Frechettes' house was neat as ever. Liz's mom had been an avid gardener and her talents hadn't waned over the years. Though the flowering trees and bushes had lost their vibrant colors, the yard was neat as a pin. Not so much as one autumn leaf marred the green lawn that stretched from the front steps down to the road. The only thing that seemed out of place was a rusted frame of a swing set in the side yard.

Krista smiled despite her raw nerves. She and Liz had swung so high on that set that Mrs. Frechette had been afraid they were going to go over the top. The swings were long gone, as was the slide. She wondered why they kept the old wreck there. Maybe as a reminder of their lost child.

Krista pulled up behind an older model sedan and cut the engine. Her heart began to pound as she stared at the steering wheel, not ready to get out yet, not until her heartbeat returned to normal. For a long moment, she contemplated restarting the Jeep, turning around and heading back to her house. She was here without an invitation, and dropping in unexpectedly, especially under the circumstances, might not be the best idea.

She never had any kind of closure with these people, never had any contact with them after the accident. She'd figured they were probably in Ricky's court. He was a very persuasive boy back then. With the unbiased and possibly unintentional help of the driver of the other vehicle, Ricky had been able to convince everyone that mattered, except her own mother, that she'd been driving like a maniac that night. That it

was solely her fault and not the fault of two drunken boys brawling between the front and back seats.

Krista didn't know if the Frechettes ever believed her side of the story.

She looked away from the steering wheel and out the window. Patricia Frechette stood next to the side of the house, rake in her hand. She was staring hard at Krista. It was too late to leave now. Swallowing back on the fear that rose bitterly in her throat, Krista got out of the Jeep and walked slowly toward Liz's mother, pulling the ball cap off her head to give her fingers something to fidget with.

Mrs. Frechette stood statue still, her mouth slack, but her stare remained pinned on Krista. It didn't give anything away.

It appeared that Mrs. Frechette hadn't gotten the word that Krista was back in town.

"Mrs. Frechette. I'm sorry I didn't call first."

Patricia dropped her rake but she didn't reply. Her mouth shut tight, her lips drawn into a thin line.

"I thought maybe we could talk," Krista continued, hoping the woman would say something, anything to indicate whether her visit was welcome or not. "So I could tell you, finally, how sorry I am. I know I should've said it earlier, like fifteen years ago. I was afraid though."

Krista stopped a few yards away from Mrs. Frechette and drew in a deep breath.

A tear hovered on the edge of the other woman's eyes and her chin had begun to tremble.

"I'll leave if you don't want me here. I'll understand." She took one step backwards.

"Please don't," Mrs. Frechette replied, her voice a shaky whisper.

In a moment, Liz's mother had Krista in her arms, her slight frame shuddering hard. They stood like that for several minutes, relief coursing through Krista's body as she let the strain of fifteen years drain from her.

When Mrs. Frechette finally let her go, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve and looked closely at Krista. She reached up and touched one of the scars on her face.

"Oh honey, I'm glad that you've come home."

Krista gave her a tight-lipped smile. "Not everyone feels that way and I didn't know how you'd feel."

"Come on inside. I'll fix us some coffee or anything you'd like."

The Frechettes' house had gone through a major transformation. Nothing of the old days remained now. The white walls were clean and neat and cold. Even the furniture seemed harsh. The only thing that made it seem like the Frechettes' home was the family portraits. Krista stopped to look at them. They were such a happy family. Had been. Liz figured prominently in the display, her life mapped out from the time she was a baby up to a picture taken before prom, just a week before her death. Krista didn't think she could cry any more tears, but they streamed down her face anyway.

Since their boyfriends refused to go to the prom because of the dress code, Krista and Liz had gone together and had a blast. The picture on the Frechettes' wall was of Liz in her prom dress, her mother standing next to her. Krista hadn't realized how much mother and daughter resembled each other. They looked so happy. But on that night they both thought Liz had a future.

"I wish I could go back to that night," she told Mrs. Frechette, who stood in the doorway with two steaming mugs of coffee. "That was the best night I can remember."

Mrs. Frechette didn't respond.

Krista's gaze slipped over the other pictures, pictures of Liz's brothers Ryan and Adam and little sister, Beth.

"How are they doing?" she asked, pointing to the photo of the three.

"Fine. Come on, sit down and I'll fill you in. Let's see, Adam is still in town, on the fire department and working over at Hydro-Tech. Ryan is in the service. He's in Afghanistan right now. It's a worry, but we're proud of him. Beth is living in Nashua. She's married and had her first baby last January. She's a travel agent."

Krista took a seat at the dining room table across from Mrs. Frechette. She cupped the blue ceramic mug in her hands, taking comfort in the warmth and the scent of coffee that rose into the air.

"I bet Beth is a great mom," she said. She didn't know what else to say, but she knew that Mrs. Frechette was waiting.

"I'm back in Quail Ridge for a while," she started. "I'm opening up a youth center in Burgess Mill. I'd like to dedicate it to Liz and Eddie, to their memory. It's not much in trying to make up for their loss. I could never do that, but I thought it would be a start."

Mrs. Frechette reached out and put her hand on Krista's arm. Krista looked up and smiled.

"I never blamed you, Krista. I know that it may be too late for me to say that, but it's true. Deep down I knew that what Ricky said, what other people believed, wasn't the whole truth. You made a mistake anyone could've made. But I always felt there was more to it than that."

Krista released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and smiled. "It's not too late at all. Thank you for saying it."

"No, I should've made it known long ago. You were like a daughter to me, Krista. *Are* like a daughter. After the accident, it was like I'd lost two children, not just Liz. There are going to be lots of people here who won't be too happy to see you and will make their opinions known."

Krista gave a short laugh. "I've already had a few run-ins with Matt Burgess. I'm sure he'd love nothing more than to see me head right back from where I came from."

"There's also Liz's dad."

That bit of information socked Krista in the belly like a one hundred-pound sledgehammer. She blinked and tried to recover. John Frechette had been like a member of her family as well, a warm bear of a man who took her and Liz to get ice cream and then play at the playground by the school. He taught both girls how to fish and took them out hiking. He'd instilled in Krista the love of the outdoors she had now. He had even given her her first camera when she was eleven. If it hadn't been for him she probably wouldn't have taken up a career as a photojournalist.

After her own father had passed away when she was thirteen, John Frechette had become the father figure in her life.

And he hated her now.

"Maybe I should leave," Krista said, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable being within these walls. "The last thing I want is for you to get into trouble by having me here."

Mrs. Frechette waved her hand. "This is my house too," she replied sternly. "Anyway, he's not due home for a few hours. You just settle down and we'll finish our coffee and you'll tell me what you've been doing with yourself and I'll tell you what I've been doing and we'll have a good cry if need be."

So they did just that. Three cups of good black coffee later, they were hugging goodbye and promising each other that they'd meet up for lunch and talk about the office assistant's position that Krista needed to fill. She worried about what Mr. Frechette would think but again her worries were waved away.

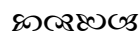
“It’s time I dealt with this. It was easier to tuck it away, but now I know how wrong I was. That Ricky had a tighter grip on John than I realized. He always claimed that Liz was the love of his life.” Patricia shrugged, her lips in a tight purse for a moment. “Who knows, maybe she was, but they were just kids. I think there was more to it than love. It’s really sad, but you know what they say, money talks. And Ricky’s father talks louder than anything.”

Ah yes, Krista thought grimly, Mr. Crowe. Big shot, man about town. Now there was a man not to be forgotten. Ricky hadn’t exactly had a warm relationship with his parents. He didn’t want anything to do with the way his father rubbed elbows with the “right” people. That was one of the reasons why Ricky was such an ass, anything to tick off the parents. The more outrageous the better. But when it came right down to it, he used his father’s connections and that was why she landed in prison and he went off to console everyone for their loss. It was a shock that John Frechette bought into it. Heartbreaking.

“It’s the past,” Krista said with a brave smile. She wrapped her arms around Mrs. Frechette’s slight shoulders and hugged her tightly. “I’m not going to think about that.”

“I’ll be here by your side. I may have to come sleep on your sofa, but you have me there to support you,” Liz’s mom said into her shoulder.

Krista knew she was joking about the sofa thing, but when she drove away, leaving the older woman retrieving her rake and waving goodbye, she was still worried about the consequences of the woman’s move to back her up.



Having Krista back in town over the past few weeks and seeing her as often as he did wasn't easy for Matt to adjust to. Apparently since she was "outed" she had no reason to hide. Once more she became the talk of the town and definite lines were being drawn. It ticked him off a little to know that both his parents were not as upset as him, but speaking his mind about the whole thing wasn't going to get him anywhere. For the sake of peace, Krista wasn't discussed in his presence.

It didn't make her go away, though. Signs of her work started showing up all over the little town. He couldn't walk down the street without seeing posters up in store windows proclaiming the transformation of Burgess Mill into the Quail Ridge Youth Center.

She certainly reached for the stars, he thought as he read down the list of things the center would offer. Kids from age zero right on up to teenagers would benefit in some way. Quail Ridge was a small town, population teetering on two thousand people. It would be hard to keep such a place afloat, but fortunately the town bordered on enough larger towns that he had no doubt there would be a strong enough influx of clients coming from those places.

If he didn't let his personal opinion of her get in the way, he'd let himself be impressed with what was taking place in the big brick building that dominated the downtown. If anyone else had been running it, he would've loved to get involved in some way, but he kept his distance, kept his walls high and fortified with contempt.

It was hard to ignore it, though, when he had to pass by the building several times a day.

"Unit ten, there's a ten-forty-four at Thirteen Birch Road, the Faye residence," the dispatcher said over the radio.

Matt grimaced and reached for his mic.



“Ten-four,” he replied through a clenched jaw and shook his head. Just what he damn well didn’t need.

Matt turned his cruiser around in the parking lot of the town’s pizza place and headed it out toward Krista’s house. He wasn’t sure what he’d find, but somehow this didn’t surprise him. Someone was bound to be up to mischief with her. It was a wonder it hadn’t happened before. It was time to put his professional hat on and act like a cop, putting resentment behind him.

When he arrived in her driveway five minutes later, Krista was standing outside her house, one hand holding tightly to her dog’s collar, the other gripping an aluminum baseball bat in the other. She didn’t look scared in the least. In fact she probably scared the person who was skulking around the place instead of vice versa. She looked fierce and completely pissed off.

Seeing him probably didn’t help matters any, but he took his notepad and got out of the cruiser and approached her.

The other day her dog seemed sweet and dumb, but this was another side of him. The dog grin was gone and Matt heard the deep rumbling growl from the dog’s throat. It gave him a second’s pause, but as soon as she commanded the animal to sit, he did and looked only slightly less menacing. Matt wondered what the heck she needed a cop for. It looked like Gus could handle whatever troublemaker was bugging Krista if her baseball bat didn’t do the trick.

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking at her coolly.

Krista rested the bat against the side of the house and let go of the dog’s collar with a command to stay.

“I think it’s Ricky Crowe,” she replied just as icily.

“Ricky?” Not a favorite subject. He frowned. “Why would he be here?”

Krista laughed humorlessly. “He’s been here before.”

Matt looked around the yard and into the trees beyond the house. They looked void of any human life, but just a few yards in they were thick with tangled bramble and bushes. Plenty of places for a person to hide.

He turned his attention back to the woman who waited impatiently for him. "Okay, why don't we start at the beginning?" He flipped open his notebook and took out his pen, poised to write.

"The first time I saw him was about two weeks ago. He kept driving by the house."

Matt glanced up at her. "That's not illegal."

Krista rolled her eyes. "Of course not. But he'd slow down and just crawl by the house. He must have done that five times the first day. Back and forth, staring at me when I was outside with Gus."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, just stared. Then last Tuesday I saw someone in the back woods, running from one tree to another. Whether or not he wanted to be seen, I don't know. If he was trying to hide, he was doing a lousy job."

"And you're positive it was Ricky?"

Krista didn't respond immediately. Instead she pressed her lips together tightly and shook her head. "Okay, I'm not one hundred percent sure. But it looked like him. Dark hair, a little shorter than Eddie was. I think it's a good guess that it was Ricky."

Matt made his notes. "Why didn't you report this when it happened?"

Krista laughed again. Matt glanced up at her. Her eyes were chilly.

"With my popularity, especially with the police department, I doubt I'd be taken too seriously," she replied evenly.

Matt tried to ignore the jab, though she was probably right. "So what made you change your mind and call today?"

"Come with me."

Krista led him through the front door, past the living room and into the kitchen.

Glass was strewn over the entire floor, glittering in the afternoon sun. Most of the bay window in the breakfast nook was gone. No, Matt noted grimly, not gone, just redistributed across the bright room. Just past the table, on the floor amidst the litter of glass, was an old red brick. Scrawled in white was the word “murderer”.

“Christ,” Matt murmured.

“My sentiments exactly.”

“But how can you be certain it was Ricky who threw this? Did you actually see him?”

“No, but he’s been here, or someone who looks a hell of a lot like him, at least five times in the past week, sneaking around in a not so sneaky way.”

“But you didn’t see him today.”

“No, not this time, but give me a break, Matt. Who else? Okay, fine, I’m sure there are others who would think this was very funny, but I think under the circumstances I’m right in my thinking.”

“Do you even know what Ricky looks like anymore? When was the last time you actually saw him? Besides when he was in his car.”

“Fine, it was fifteen years ago,” Krista replied, clearly annoyed at the direction he was taking this. Her brows furrowed and she put her fists on her hips.

“So you can’t be one hundred percent sure that it was him.” Internally Matt was kicking himself. He didn’t want to defend Ricky any more than he would want to defend Krista. He was doing his job. Nothing more. Remaining impartial was a part of his line of work.

Krista didn’t reply, just shook her head.

“Let me get this out of here,” he muttered and went to work.

After taking pictures of the scene, he put the brick in a bag.

"I'll be in touch. But in the meantime please call the station if you see anyone here who doesn't belong."

"I will," Krista replied stonily.

She walked him to the door.

"Thank you. I appreciate your help."

Matt paused and studied her closely. Despite her hardened demeanor, he could see she was scared. It wavered in her gray-blue eyes no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

"Just doing my job." He wasn't going to be moved by her vulnerability.

She nodded her understanding and without another word, he walked away.

Before heading home, Matt took a detour. Up along the ridge there was a neighborhood that served as more of a bedroom community to larger towns like Nashua or even Boston. The average citizens of Quail Ridge didn't reside in this section.

Though he hadn't been inside, Matt knew exactly where Ricky lived. The hundred-year-old Victorian didn't seem like Ricky's type of home, but he went for appearances. The house was high class, so it was his choice of a place to live.

Matt didn't relish the idea of going to Ricky's place now. It was more or less official business. He parked the cruiser in front of the attached garage, which he knew housed a silver BMW and a black Lexus SUV. Life was good for Ricky.

The motion detector light came on as Matt approached the front door. He pushed the doorbell and waited a long moment until he heard someone approach and unlock the door. It swung open. The smile on Rachel's dark red lips was tight.

“Matt.”

Matt froze. He knew that they were an item, had been together for over a year now—sixteen months to be exact—but he still couldn’t get used to the idea of seeing Rachel and Ricky together.

“Rachel. I need to speak to Ricky.” He was determined not to let his personal opinion of her take over.

The woman nodded. She was, as always, perfection, from the dark slacks and claret colored sweater, to her shiny nut-brown hair that fell in a silk curtain over her shoulders. He caught a whiff of her scent. Estee Lauder White Linen. That at least hadn’t changed. She stepped back to allow him in. As she closed the door he caught the glitter on her left ring finger. That was new. Matt frowned.

Rachel’s life wasn’t his concern any longer, hadn’t been since she handed him her engagement ring and told him he needed to forget about the past, move on and have some fun with life.

The ring she had on now had to be at least two carats bigger than the one he’d given her.

She led him into a living room furnished tastefully in antiques. Ricky was relaxed on the sofa, watching the evening news.

“Darling, we have company.” Rachel walked behind Ricky, sliding her hand across his shoulders.

Ricky’s gaze broke away from the television and turned on Matt. A smile crawled across his face as he stood.

“Officer Burgess. What do I owe the pleasure?”

“Can we talk alone?”

Ricky’s slick smile grew. He stood taller and set his shoulders back in a subtle attempt to intimidate Matt. Ricky was a good two inches taller, but Matt wasn’t falling for the tactics. He knew he could take on Ricky in a heartbeat.

"I have nothing to hide from Rachel. Whatever you want to say you can say in front of her."

"I want you to stay away from Krista Faye."

For a split second Ricky's smug expression flickered, but he recovered nicely, as Matt expected he would.

"Sorry, don't know what you're talking about. What would I want to get near her for? I have no use for her."

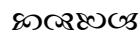
Rachel took a step closer to Ricky. Matt caught the look on her face as she crossed her arms over her chest, her elegant brows furrowed. She definitely wasn't comfortable with this conversation. She turned her attention to Ricky.

Inwardly, Matt grinned. There was going to be trouble in paradise tonight.

"I'll only warn you once. We're going to have surveillance on her house. So no more drive-bys. Or walks in the woods, if you had any thoughts about that. And I'm surprised. The brick seems pretty juvenile." He paused and studied the other man. Even though the expression on his face didn't change, Matt could see his eyes grow colder. "I'll show myself out. Have a good night."

Silence pressed against his back as he left the house. It was pretty plain, though, that as soon as he pulled away hell would break loose in the walls behind him. Now he didn't bother hiding the smile. It spread wide and satisfyingly across his face.

He hoped he got his point across.



The last of the glass tinkled as it landed in the garbage can. Krista put the broom and dustpan down and turned to look at the wasted

window. It was too late to get anyone in to fix it and the chilly October night air drifted in. While it smelled wonderful, it wouldn't do to be open to the elements all night long. Down in the cellar she'd seen a roll of heavy plastic, so she fetched it along with a roll of duct tape and grimaced as she put it up, dreading what it would do to the paintwork. *Such is life*, she thought grimly.

The phone rang two minutes after she put the roll down.

"Hello," she answered idly.

"I don't appreciate you siccing the cops on me, Krista."

A chill, colder than the autumn night, sliced through her. She sat down hard on the kitchen chair. "What do you want, Ricky?"

He chuckled. "Well, I thought I'd welcome you back to town. But now you have me on this bad guy list, I'm not so sure."

"Cut the crap, Ricky. It's just you and me here. Are you trying to scare me out of town?" Krista automatically reached for the pack of cigarettes that sat next to the empty ashtray. Her first cigarette in a week. But she needed it more than anything. It would help her sound more confident than she surely felt.

"I really have no idea what you're talking about." He sounded so nonchalant. "In fact my feelings are really hurt. I thought we were friends and here you are, accusing me of stalking you and throwing bricks through your window. I've got better things to do with my time."

"We're not friends, Ricky, and you can pretend all you want that you haven't been skulking around the woods or doing your little drive-bys. You're not going to chase me out of here. I'm sticking around for a long time. Deal with it." She kept her voice steady and cool. If he could tell she was shaken then he'd never leave her alone.

The laugh came again. "You seem to think I haven't changed over the years. Well, I'm not the same delinquent I used to be. Nearly getting

killed, having my best friend and my girlfriend get killed right next to me put things in a new light, Krista. I'm a changed man, a respectable one, and if you think that I would risk my reputation by hiding behind your house or throwing a brick through your window, you're sadly mistaken. If I wanted you gone, I have other ways to do it. On the contrary, I wanted to congratulate you on your endeavors. Who would've thought that a little ex-convict like you would make good. I really pictured you serving truckers in some greasy truck stop. I guess I'm not the only one who turned around a bad situation."

Krista pulled out a cigarette, put it to her lips and lit it. She drew in a long drag and blew it back out. "Well, glad your life is wonderful, but this conversation is pointless. So why don't you and I say goodbye and not have any contact with each other? That way you won't have to lie about it."

"It's hard not to bump into people in a town this size, Krista, so that I can't promise. But I would like you to make a promise. No more visits from Officer Burgess. For some reason he doesn't like me. I know he doesn't like you either, so let's leave him out of the picture for both our sakes."

Ricky hung up before she could say anything. Krista followed suit, placing the phone down on the table and leaning back in the chair, her eyes closed.

Somehow she had the feeling that she hadn't heard the last from Ricky. And next time a broken window wasn't all the damage he'd leave behind.



## Chapter Four

“Stay away from Richard Crowe.”

Matt looked up at his father.

Ed Burgess was a big guy. He had Eddie’s height and Matt’s muscles. When he was a kid, Matt used to pretend his dad was a marshal in the old west. Even graying and a few years away from retirement, Ed was impressive enough to intimidate the lowest-life bad ass they came across. But there was always a twinkle in his eyes that gave away the jovial guy beneath the cop exterior. He was the one who was called up to play Santa at any of the local holiday events, the cop who went to the local elementary school to give talks to the little kids.

Right now, though, there was no humor in his eyes, and his jaw was tense.

“Are you kidding me?” Matt sighed. *Of course he isn’t kidding.* He should’ve expected this.

“I got a call from Thomas Crowe this morning. If you have no proof that Ricky was involved over at Krista’s house, then you stay away from him.”

“Come on, Dad, I may not like her too much, but in this case I believe her. And the look on the guy’s face when I talked to him about it, there’s no doubt in my mind that he’s involved in some way.”

Ed rolled his eyes and pressed a hand to his forehead as if he were pushing back on a headache. “Looks don’t mean a thing, Matt. You *know*

that. Concrete proof is all that matters. And even then the bastard will probably find a way to wiggle out of it. But until you have more, stay away from him about this. You're a good cop, but the Crowes have the power to ruin your career."

Matt swore.

"Thomas Crowe had more colorful speech than that," Ed commented wryly. "Whether we like it or not, they're not a family we want to be messing with. Spoiled brats, each one of them."

Matt nodded. It made him wonder if Ricky had had any words with Krista after his visit. It worried him that things may be worse now, that Ricky might up the stakes because he was ticked off and knew that he could get away with it.

He got to his feet. "I'm going to drive over to Krista's. Just make sure that things are okay."

Ed nodded. "Just take care."

A van was parked behind Krista's Jeep, a local glass company apparently replacing the broken window. Gus lay on the front steps, enjoying the last of the warm October sunshine. Soon November would be here, along with the cold weather, rain and maybe even snow. The dog barely lifted his head when Matt walked up to him, but instead rolled on his back and exposed his belly with the hopes of having it scratched by some kind person. Matt complied.

"Must be nice not to have any cares," he told the dog before straightening up and ringing the doorbell.

Krista, dressed in faded jeans and a football jersey, opened the door but remained behind the screen door. The guarded expression fell across her face like a veil. Even though he was one of the good guys, he still didn't fit into that category with her.

“I wanted to see how things were going,” he explained stiffly. “If anything else has happened since yesterday.”

Krista pulled the door open and joined him outside. “No unwelcome visitors, if that’s what you mean. But I did get a phone call from Ricky last night. Telling me to stop accusing things that he’s too sweet and innocent to do. Since when did he become a pillar of the community?”

Matt laughed at the description. But the fact that Ricky had made that phone call was sobering. Ricky was as bold as he always had been. “Ever since he decided that he wasn’t going to get far if he remained the delinquent that he was. What exactly did he say?”

Krista gazed out toward the road, frowning. “Basically that my accusations to the cops has ruined our friendship and that he wanted to welcome me back to town anyways. And that if he wanted me gone he had other ways to do it.”

Matt didn’t reply right away. He took a moment to study her while she wasn’t glaring back at him. She was washed out, her skin pale, with dark circles under her eyes. She probably hadn’t slept too well and he couldn’t blame her.

He remembered back those fifteen years to when she was a teenager. She’d been vibrant, full of life, just like Eddie. There was a three-year age difference so he hadn’t known her too well back then, except to know that she’d been the kind of girl everyone noticed. Some of that vivaciousness had been sucked from her. Yet there was still strength there. Maybe more strength because of what she’d been through.

His gaze traveled to the scars on her skin. As ravaging as they were, they still didn’t detract much from her simple beauty.

“Unfortunately he’s found ways of improving his life and using his father’s connections,” Matt finally said, speaking before she noticed how he was looking at her. “I’ve tried not to have anything to do with him over

the years and that remains a good idea, but not at the expense of the law or other people's safety."

Krista turned her eyes to him. There was a bit of an undercurrent of trouble in the blue-gray depths. "Matt, don't do anything that's going to get you into trouble. I don't think he'll try coming around again."

From her expression, Matt knew that she didn't believe it. If Ricky had started this he probably wouldn't stop, but he'd be more careful.

The question was why? What were his reasons for wanting Krista gone?

"Don't worry about me," he told her gruffly, unwillingly touched by her concern. "I can take care of myself. I'm more worried about you being out here on your own."

For the first time in fifteen years, he saw her smile. It transformed her, erased a lot of those hard years.

"Well, those are words I never thought I'd hear from your lips, Officer Burgess."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Don't get any warm and cozy feelings, Krista."

Her lips turned down into a frown and she shook her head. "No, I wouldn't dare."

She was kidding with him, that was clear. It was crazy that he could smile back at her, but he was. It was definitely time to leave. If he didn't, before he knew it he could be sharing a cup of coffee with her.

He took a step backwards. "Remember to call if anything else happens."

"I remember. I don't think Gus would offer the kind of protection a policeman could give me anyway." She nudged the sleeping dog with her toe.

"I don't know about that, he seemed pretty fierce yesterday. He must be very loyal to you."

"I rescued him from a slow death. We've had a bond ever since."

Matt didn't ask her to elaborate. He didn't want to show his curiosity. Instead he nodded and stepped off the front steps. "Everything going okay over at the mill?"

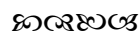
Damn, why didn't he just leave?

"Couldn't be better. Everything is on schedule. Listen, while we're on the subject, I have a question for you." She stepped off the front steps and walked toward him. "Word is that you teach tae kwon do and kick-boxing. I'm trying to set up classes at the center but need an instructor. Would you be interested? For a good cause?"

Matt paused and considered the idea. It wasn't a decision he wanted to make on the spot. "I'll think about it. Come up with the times you'd want to have the classes and I'll see if it would be something I could do."

Her smile was back, wide and engaging. It made a person not notice the scars that marred her face. "Thanks, Matt. At this rate I might have to change my opinion of you."

With a shake of his head, Matt returned to his cruiser and pulled out of the drive. Once more Krista Faye had surprised him. He was going to have to stay away from her.



"This cannot be happening." Krista moaned and pressed her hand to her mouth.

The damage was beyond belief. The day before, the nursery had been nearly complete, walls painted in pastels, a mural depicting teddy bears and bunnies covering one whole wall, new carpet. All destroyed.

Someone had brought in what must have been buckets of black paint and had splashed the entire room in the stuff. Even the ceiling was

covered with splatters. Worse, someone seemed to have taken a box cutter or other sharp device and had gouged the walls and the carpet.

Most bone-chilling was the single word carved right across one of the fanciful bears. "Murderer". Just like the brick from three days ago.

"Krista."

She turned and faced Mel Kangas, the contractor who had called her up that morning at six to report the destruction.

"You better come down to the dance studio."

"Oh, please tell me you're kidding," she protested, but followed him out of the room. She felt ill, felt like crying and throwing up all at the same time.

Three Quail Ridge police officers were already in the big dance studio. It was her favorite part of the whole place. On the first floor of the mill, along one wall were windows, nearly floor to ceiling, overlooking the river that ran next to the building. Bright sun flooded in, warming the room. Along the other wall were long mirrors. But now it was in ruins. More paint covered the new floors that were once shiny and ready to be used. Each mirror had been smashed.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Faye," Mel said and put his hand on her shoulder.

She just shook her head. She couldn't even speak. Anger and fear wriggled in her gut and she pressed her hand to her mouth to keep it all in.

More words were written on the walls, repeating the same sentiment as in the nursery joined by "leave town" and "killer bitch".

*How could someone hate me much?* She was desperate to come up with some kind of answer. Was it really Ricky? Would he be so bold as to come in here and do this? Risk what he'd built? She couldn't answer any of those questions that ricocheted around her brain. Of course maybe he saw her as a threat to everything he'd done in his life in the past fifteen

years. They were the only two in the world who knew the truth of the night in that car. He'd lied, and no doubt with his father's aid, convinced enough people of the lie that she'd paid the price.

What could happen to him if people changed their minds about it? She wasn't an expert on the law, but could the truth, after so many years, damage him that much? She doubted it, except maybe through public opinion. After all, it was her foot on the brake that caused all the misery. But it was Ricky and Eddie's actions beforehand that led her to stopping the car so abruptly.

She swallowed back on the ragged emotions. "Well, how long does this put us back? We have an opening in three weeks. Can it be repaired?"

Mel smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah, it can be repaired. But it's going to cost a lot."

She shook her head and stared at the devastation. "Doesn't matter. It needs to be done. I'm not going to let him beat me."

"Him?" Mel looked at her blankly.

She shook her head again. "I suppose I should go talk to the officers. Then I need to call my partner."

It was two hours later that she was able to reach Cameron. She hated telling him about the setback and decided to keep the personal attack out of it. It was better if he thought it was a vandal who wanted to trash the place, not someone who wanted to trash her.

Cameron was unquestionably upset and angry over the news. The idealist in him was ready to rebuild and worry about the finances later.

"Do you need me up there?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine. You and Gretchen will be up for the opening, I think I'll be all right until then."

“Okay, but if you need anything. Keep me updated on what the police are doing to capture these creeps.”

Creep. Singular. And he was a creep that wouldn't easily be caught. “I will. I'm sure that with all the attention it won't happen again. I'm so sorry this happened, Cam. This town has always been so sleepy. Occasional graffiti, but that's about it.”

“Then Quail Ridge was due. Unfortunately they had to choose the center. But we'll recover.”

They said their goodbyes and Krista leaned back in her chair and stared out the window at the street. It was only nine and traffic was already light. Leaves drifted across the street from the town common in a myriad of orange, reds and yellows. It didn't seem possible that such hatred existed in such a small New Hampshire town.

There was a tap on the door and Krista swung around to face it.

“Come in.”

Matt pushed the door open. “You okay?”

One corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile. “Better now that the nausea has settled and I'm turning my fear into anger. I'm so pissed off, Matt. You have no idea.”

“I think I do,” he replied with a frown.

“How did he get away with it? Somehow I can't picture him breaking in here and doing this. Well, I can see him planning it, but not carrying it out.” Krista pulled the pack of cigarettes out of her purse then paused, glancing up at Matt, who seemed lost in his own thoughts. She shoved the pack back in the bag and pursed her lips. The cigarette would have to wait.

“We'll be talking to him,” Matt said, still staring out the window. “I tend to agree with you though. He was the mastermind.”



She laughed shortly. "Mastermind. Sounds so criminal, so big city. Hardly Quail Ridge at all."

"Not at all. I'm used to calling parents when I find their kids drinking down by Crawford Pond. An occasional idiot with a can of spray paint. This is a hell of a lot different."

"Glad I could broaden your horizon," she replied sullenly. "But he's not going to chase me out of here. I've faced scarier people covering stories in the Mid East and Africa. Hell, even in our own country. He's child's play."

She was trying to sound braver than she felt. Those stories she went after, she kept herself as detached as possible. This time it was personal.

She looked back at Matt. "You go and take care of this creep and I'll get this place up and running."

Matt nodded. "By the way, I accept your job offer."

He hadn't realized that he was going to take the job until that moment. He planned on mulling it over for a good long time. The thought of working for her, or with her, didn't sit too well, but if it was for the kids then it couldn't be a bad thing to do. It would take away from his social life, then again it wasn't as if his social life was so incredible that he couldn't sacrifice a little of it to a good cause.

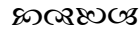
Krista gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you, I appreciate it. We'll work out the schedule to suit you."

He nodded. "Sounds good. Okay, I should go."

Standing, Krista followed him to the door, opening it for him. "Again, thanks for your help. If you need anything, please let me know. I'll be here for the rest of the day trying to get things straightened out."

"We'll be in touch. One thing I highly recommend is installing security cameras in this place. You may need them."

“Good idea. I’ll make those arrangements now.”



“I was with Rachel and my parents at a dinner party down in Boston. We left Quail Ridge at three p.m. and stayed at the Boston Harbor Hotel. We checked out of the hotel at eleven o’ clock this morning and came home. Sorry, Officer Burgess, I couldn’t possibly have been vandalizing the youth center.”

Ed Burgess wrote the information down and nodded at Ken Pickford to check the alibi out. Matt knew that it would check out beautifully.

This time they’d gone by the book, questioning Ricky. There was still a chance that he would cause trouble for them, but at this point Matt doubted it.

“Look at me.” Ricky held his arms out. “Do I look like a common vandal? I’m past those days.”

Matt eyed him sharply. He didn’t like the way Ricky looked. He had plenty of good looks, but he was too damned smug, like he was laughing at everyone. As if he had a secret that he was keeping from the world.

“Okay, we’ll check it out,” Ed told him, his voice flush with resignation. “You can leave now.”

Ricky laughed. “You sound so disappointed, Officer Burgess. Apparently you and your son are eager to pin these things on me. I wonder if you’re even looking for other suspects.”

Ricky stood and straightened his expensive jacket.

“You’ve done well for yourself over the past fifteen years,” Matt noted blandly.

Ricky shot him a harsh glance, his eyes narrowing. Some of the humor disappeared from the dark depths. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning that if your story about what happened the night Liz, Eddie and that other man died turned out to lack some important details then you have a lot to lose.”

Ed put his hand on Matt’s shoulder to stop him. Matt didn’t even know why he said the words. He really had no doubts before about the validity of Ricky’s version of the events leading up to the accident, until all this started. It seemed a bit of a coincidence.

Ricky’s mouth pulled back into a smile, a sharp-edged grin that didn’t touch his eyes. “If I were you, Officer, I’d really watch your words. I thought we got that straight the other day.”

Matt shrugged. “No accusations, Ricky. Just thinking out loud.”

“You’re free to leave now,” Ed said quickly.

“Yeah, yeah, I know...and I’ll make sure I don’t leave town either.”

As soon as he left, Ed turned to Matt. “Are you crazy taunting him like that?”

Matt turned his gaze from the door to his father. “Whose story do you believe? His or Krista’s?”

“To tell you the truth I’ve always believed her. But he had the right people on his side. It didn’t matter what I believed. I know you always thought she was solely at fault. Are you changing your mind?”

Matt rubbed his forehead hard. A headache was forming right above his brow. “Honestly, I don’t know, Dad. I would’ve gone on believing him if all this wasn’t happening. It was damned less complicated blaming her, that’s for sure.”

“But that’s certainly not fair to her. She’s paid her dues, Matt. Cut her some slack.”

“If I hold on to what I’ve believed for all these years, there’s no way that she’s paid her dues. Her dues won’t bring Eddie back.”

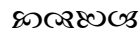
“It was an accident. A damned unfortunate accident caused by a split second’s bad decision. Both your mother and I have let it go. You need to let it go too.”

Shaking his head, Matt curled his lip. “Not yet. Everything is being ripped open all over again.”

Ed put his hand on Matt’s shoulder and squeezed. “I need you to do something for me. Take a couple days off. You need to go and relax. You’ve got yourself in knots over this.”

“Time off isn’t going to solve things here.”

“We’ll take care of things here, Matt. I think you need to distance yourself from the situation, from Ricky. He’s trouble through and through. I don’t need it coming down on you.”



Krista packed a turkey sandwich, banana, a bottle of water and three dog biscuits into her old khaki backpack and grabbed Gus’s leash. She put her camera strap around her shoulder and called for the dog.

She’d tried all the day before to get things done, but her head ached and she got to the point where she couldn’t concentrate. She needed some fresh air, even for just a few hours.

Patricia Frechette had practically ordered her from the office, claiming that she could handle anything that came down the line. She’d been working for Krista for just over a week now, despite her husband’s protests.

“Call me on my cell if anything happens.”

Patricia shook her head, her expression motherly and concerned. “No, you need a break.”

"I need to know if there's anything here that needs my attention. I won't be more than an hour or two away. Please promise me that you'll call if you need me."

The older woman sighed. It was a look that Krista remembered well from her childhood when she and Liz were bothering her. She bit back on the bittersweet smile that pulled at her mouth.

"If it'll get you out of here, I'll promise anything," Patricia replied.

Krista leaned over and gave her assistant a peck on the cheek. "Thanks. I'll check in with you in a little while. I'm going to take Gus out for a hike along the ridge."

"Got any pepper spray?"

"Are you joking?" Krista asked with a chuckle.

Patricia didn't share in the humor. "No, I'm not kidding. Take mine. Just in case." She rummaged through her big purse and came out with what she wanted.

Krista took the little canister reluctantly. If it would help the woman feel more secure then she'd take it.

"I won't need it, but I'll carry it with me. And my cell phone."

"Thank you for humoring an old woman," Patricia had said with a nod, apparently content.

An hour later Krista parked at the end of a dead end road. She locked the Jeep and she and Gus started along the narrow trail that would lead to the wilderness side of Quail Ridge. Trails intersected each other but she just headed up. For the first twenty minutes, she was surrounded by russet and gold, sunlight spilling through the trees in a spray of glittering light.

For the first time in days she felt peaceful. The smell of decaying leaves in the crisp air revitalized her. She'd forgotten how much she loved the smell of autumn in the woods. Gus dashed from tree to tree,

investigating every scent, every essence that Krista couldn't detect with her human nose.

He had such a love of life, probably more so after his brush with death. She realized that they were similar. She'd nearly lost her life, and her recovery had been a long hard road.

Of course they had come out of it in different ways. Gus came out with a love and appreciation of life. Krista had gone in the opposite direction. She worked hard to make her life better, but she never fully enjoyed it. She made it meaningful, but not fun. Maybe she needed some of that, to take a page from Gus's book, she thought and lifted her camera to her eye, snapping several pictures of the dog.

When she got to the top of the ridge, above the tree line, she settled down on a granite ledge and took out her sandwich and bottle of water. The breeze had kicked up again and now that she'd stopped moving, the chill settled in through her clothing. She zipped her fleece jacket up around her chin and sat back to enjoy the view of the surrounding area, capturing its beauty on film.

Several small towns spread out below her. While the ridge wasn't the highest spot around, it still offered a good view. From where she sat she could see as far as Nashua. If she had climbed Mt. Monadnock, several miles away, she could've seen all the way to Boston or the seacoast on such a clear day. But she settled for Milford.

She finished her sandwich, gave Gus the crusts and then took a long drink of water.

"I could stay up here all day," she told the dog who was finishing up the first of his biscuits. "Maybe we can come back and camp here in the summer."

"You really think you'll be here that long?"

The intruding voice almost sent her off the ledge. It would've been a short drop, but it would've hurt nonetheless. She put her hand on the canister of pepper spray as Gus burst to his feet.

Matt stood over her, a hulk against the powdery blue sky above. As soon as she recognized him, her heart rate slowed down to normal.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," he apologized.

"I bet you did," Krista replied dryly, looking up at him closely, "but apology accepted."

A half smile tugged on his mouth. "Thanks. You found my favorite spot, I see."

Krista noticed the straps of the backpack he wore. It was the first time she'd seen him without his uniform since she arrived in town and she had to reluctantly admit that he looked just as good in faded Levi's and a hunter green sweatshirt as he did in the dark blue cop suit. The wind ruffled his light brown hair and he looked more at ease than she'd ever seen him.

"I can leave and find another spot," she offered. She didn't want to leave, but she didn't want to create any more animosity with him.

"No, please don't. You got here first."

"There's plenty of room for another person if you want to sit. If you don't mind the company, that is."

He hesitated for a long moment, staring at her, probably weighing the pros and cons. A beautiful view in trade for sitting next to someone he'd hated for fifteen years. She was ready for him to take a pass on her offer and move on, but instead he sat down on the other side of Gus and took the backpack off.

"Well, maybe we're making progress," she noted with a smile.

He shrugged and removed an apple from his pack. "Just a chance to see if there's been anything else going on that I should know about."

Yeah, right. “No, nothing. Thankfully.”

He nodded. “Good. Glad to hear it. Maybe the perpetrator has had his fill.”

She doubted it, not after the bold move on the center.

“Do you really think it’s Ricky?”

Matt shrugged again. “He’s the most likely suspect though he has a rock solid alibi for the night the center was trashed. Of course I can’t see him getting into that kind of trouble, firsthand. I wouldn’t, however, put it past him to hire someone to do it.”

“But why? Why do you think he’d target me?” Krista wanted him to spill it, what he had against Ricky. There was something there. If he didn’t blame Ricky for the accident then he shouldn’t have this intense dislike.

“I can’t say for sure. I have my theories.”

“Tell me about them. I want to know.” Krista knew she was going to have to prod the information out of Matt, but now she had him up here, away from the office and the town and his uniform, maybe he’d be more comfortable telling her, human to human. If he could leave his dislike of her behind.

“I’d rather hear your side of the story, about the night of the accident.”

It surprised her. She didn’t think he’d want to hear about it, most of all from her. “I told my side a long time ago,” she replied quietly.

“I want to hear it again. I didn’t listen before. Not really. But I’m a little calmer now. Tell me what happened.”

Krista was kind of glad to get this chance. Especially since she’d been sure he would never care. She hadn’t gone into the details of that night with anyone from her past since the trial although she’d gone over every aspect in her brain. Talking about it now wasn’t what she wanted to do,



but it was an opportunity she couldn't pass. Maybe Matt would actually believe her. A little bit anyway.

She drew in a deep breath of sweet air and released it slowly.

"Eddie called me about nine that night," she began, staring out at the brilliant autumn foliage spread out beneath them. "He and Ricky were at a party at Frank Del Rossi's beach house and they didn't have a ride home. So I picked up Liz and we went to get them. I was so pissed at them. He'd been getting drunk a lot and I was sure he was going to get in trouble, especially being the son and brother of town cops. He always said that he'd never get in trouble *because* he was the son and brother of town cops."

"Yeah, he had that wrong," Matt muttered.

"I couldn't convince him of that. Maybe if he realized it, he'd be here today." Krista drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them.

"Continue."

"So we picked them up. They had a couple beers with them although they were already really drunk. I didn't know they had the bottles until we were driving. I guess they shoved them down their pants or something."

"You didn't have any?" There was only the slight indication of an accusatory tone to his voice so Krista chose to ignore it.

"No. I drank some back then, but never when I had to drive. My parents would've killed me and then taken away my car." She didn't add that she was carrying Eddie's child and she was morally against pregnant women drinking or smoking.

"Ricky said that you were driving erratically, trying to make him and Eddie sick, that you were yelling and carrying on. That you wanted them to pay for you having to go get them."

Krista shook her head at the ridiculous claim. “Yes, I remember him saying that. As if I wanted anyone puking in my car, excuse my vulgar term, but come on, really.” She had to laugh, though it sure wasn’t funny. “Actually the way it went was that Ricky and Liz were getting, um, close in the back seat and Eddie started ragging on them, which led Ricky to ragging on Eddie. All that good-natured joking led to them basically wrestling with each other over the seat.”

Krista shut her eyes. She could see that moment as clearly as if it were on a movie screen in front of her face. She’d yelled at them, threatening to dump them off at the side of the road so they could walk the rest of the way home. Ricky had just laughed and grabbed her by the shoulders, giving her a shake that sent her into the opposite lane.

“Before I could pull over, Ricky decided to try to climb over the seat, which instead turned out to be practically in my lap. I’d had enough, it was getting too dangerous.”

So she’d hit the brakes. Even now she could feel the moment, the sound of her tires squealing on the pavement, the bulk of Ricky’s body as the abrupt stop sent him over the seat and against the dashboard. And lastly the sight of the headlights in her rearview mirror at the last moment before the car she hadn’t noticed behind her struck them full force.

“I don’t remember anything after that. Just waking up in the hospital, I guess the next day.”

“I can see both Eddie and Ricky behaving that way,” Matt commented quietly. “I hate to say it but my brother was an ass. Ricky was a bigger ass.”

“I loved him, Matt,” she said against her knees. “As much as an eighteen-year-old could be in love. I saw myself with him forever back then. I know better now. But I’d never do anything so crazy as to hurt

them or Liz or myself.” *Or my baby.* “It was a careless moment that I’ve regretted every day since it happened.”

“I still don’t know what to think,” Matt admitted.

At least he was being honest, she thought. She hadn’t expected him to change his mind in just a moment. She could hope, though, that over time he’d accept the truth.

“I was so scared when I recognized your car,” Matt said faintly. His gaze was pinned on the horizon, but the way his mouth was tilted down and his jaw tight she could tell he could see that night as clearly as she could. “I knew how close you two were, and the chances were pretty good he was with you. I honestly didn’t expect there to be any survivors.”

“I know. It’s amazing that Ricky and I escaped. I saw the car when it was at Dupont’s Auto Salvage. It looked like a bomb had gone off in the trunk. It made me so ill.”

“When I saw you I didn’t think you were alive, Krista.”

Krista raised her hand up. She shut her eyes tightly, but all that served to accomplish was to give her a vivid image of the destroyed car. “Please don’t, Matt. I don’t want to know. The way I looked when I saw the damage for the first time was enough. My imagination is good enough to imagine what it must have looked like, and Liz, and your brother.”

She felt the tears burning in her eyes. She swiped them away quickly. She didn’t want Matt to see her hurt and fear and loss. Those were things that were better locked away and forgotten.

He’d seen them, though, and made a move that she figured was as awkward for him as it was for her. He leaned across Gus and put his arm around her in an effort to comfort her as best he could. It was oddly soothing, especially considering the source. For the moment, though, she let it sink into her, took it for what it was worth. It wouldn’t be repeated.

Once they parted ways up here on the ridge, they'd go back to their guarded relationship and that would be that.

Then she felt more, became aware of him as a man who she'd become, despite her better judgment, attracted to over the past few weeks. He'd been an antagonist up until now, but there was something inside him, a fairness that she sensed, and she was drawn to that. She inhaled his scent, the smell of soap and the outdoors, felt the smooth material of his sweatshirt against her cheek and the hard muscles underneath that.

The whole sensation, the ripple that traveled through her belly, was a lot like a girl's first crush—sweet, innocent and tempting, like taking a tentative step into the unknown. She wondered if he felt it too. In a way she hoped he did, but it would only serve to make her more vulnerable with him, if he realized that she was developing feelings for him.

His fingers played with her hair, caressed her shoulder. It wasn't about the past anymore, not to her. The possibilities of where this moment could go made her heart race on. It was an exciting sensation. She wondered what would happen if she turned her face to his. Sparks burst through her body.

Their cozy moment was disturbed when Gus pushed his way to his feet. At first Krista thought that it was because he didn't like the close proximity of the two humans, but he started barking frantically, facing the trail behind them.

## Chapter Five

Matt pulled away and got up to his feet as well, holding out a hand to help Krista up. Gus's woof was like the menacing sound he'd made after the incident at home with the brick. She doubted that some casual, innocent hiker was coming up. She thought about the pepper spray, but instead took the leash and attached it to the dog's collar.

"Is anyone out there?" she asked Matt, straining her eyes to see through the thick cover of trees. The only movement was the restless fall of leaves in the breeze. If anyone was out there they were out of sight, but Gus was sensing it, pulling on the leash to get out there to sniff their stalker out.

"I thought I saw something. Stay here, I'm going to take a look."

Krista grabbed his arm. "No, why don't we just walk away, get down the trail. I'd rather not know if there's someone out there."

"Damn it, Krista, I'm not going to run away." He pulled away from her and started down the trail that entered the woods. He walked slowly, looking all around him.

Krista considered letting Gus loose. Maybe the dog would flush out the person hiding out there.

Matt paused and looked into the dense woods. He took two steps off the path and paused again. Then he straightened out.

"Okay, John, come on out. Damn, what in hell are you doing up here?"

Krista had expected to see Ricky, not John Frechette come out of the trees, with a hangdog look on his face. She felt her jaw drop open when the older man walked up the path in front of Matt. He was dressed in a camouflage jacket and olive drab hat. He didn't meet her eyes, just stared down at the ground.

"So what's going on here, John? Out for a hike?" Matt asked quietly, keeping his gaze fixed on the older man.

He didn't reply. Though she remembered what Patricia had told her about John's feelings toward her, it was still too bizarre to imagine that John would think so ill of her that he would follow her up here. To do what? Talk?

"Come on, John," Matt continued. "We're all friends here. Let's discuss this, get it out in the open."

Krista wanted that too. It was horrible to think that this man still blamed her for Liz's death.

"I'm not in uniform here, John," Matt continued when John remained silent and nervous. "We can talk about it off the record."

"Please, Mr. Frechette. I don't want you to hate me." Krista finally spoke up. She walked up to him, got up close enough that she could look into his eyes. He tried to avoid looking at her, but she took hold of his hand as if he were a child and lifted it so he had to meet her gaze.

He jerked his face back from her hold. Disappointed, she dropped her hand. "Why did you come up here today?"

"I wanted to get you to leave," he replied gruffly.

"How did you think you were going to do that, John?" Matt didn't look pleased at all. His eyes narrowed and his lips tightened.

The older man just shrugged and stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. "Don't know. I was figuring it out as I went."

"Was it you who threw the brick through Krista's window?"

That seemed to get his attention a bit. He swung a startled glance toward Matt. "No, I didn't do that. I haven't been near her house."

"Or the center?" Matt added.

Krista grabbed Matt's arm. "Stop it, Matt. I'm sure he had nothing to do with that either," Krista insisted. She hoped not anyway. She hoped that there was still a chance that she and Liz's father could return to their old friendship. "Mr. Frechette. John, please, can't we talk about this? I would give anything to have Liz back. I loved her, she was the best friend I had in my whole life."

She took his hand but he didn't withdraw it. "There was more to that night than me slamming on the brakes. I told you the truth after the accident. You know me, John, you've known me nearly all my life."

His shoulders started to shake and his face reddened. She wrapped her arms around him. He stood stiffly in her arms, didn't return the embrace, but he didn't shove her away. Her body absorbed the shudders that ran through his chest. Moments before an unlikely person was comforting her and now she was on the giving end. There must've been something in the air for these two men to believe her words.

Well, maybe they didn't one hundred percent, but it was a start.

John pulled back and wiped his eyes off on the sleeve of his jacket. "I'm going home." Without another word, he headed back down the trail, his back slouched over.

"Well," Krista murmured when John disappeared down the hill. She looked back over at Matt who was staring at her. "This is just plain weird. I never expected..."

"I'm just as confused about things as he is, Krista," Matt admitted seriously. "I'm glad that it wasn't him behind the troublemaking though."

"My number one suspect is still Ricky. He has more to lose if people start doubting him. What is he doing for a living now, anyway?"

“He’s a lawyer over in Nashua. His father’s connections have gotten him a long way. He likes his life now. A part of me can’t believe that he’d risk it for this, but you may be right. *If* his story is false and it gets out then he may indeed lose the nice house on the hill and the fiancée.”

“What a mess,” Krista murmured and closed her eyes. “All I wanted to do was open a youth center to help out the families in this area. I just want to be left alone. I’ve learned to live with other’s ideas of what happened, as sucky as it is. I don’t want the extra troubles.” She opened her eyes again and looked out toward the land that stretched out beneath them. From their height it seemed like they weren’t even a part of that world.

“They’re still breaking the law, no matter what the circumstances. I think the center is going to do a lot for this community. Whoever is targeting you will be caught.”

He was right of course. But she saw it as more trouble down the road for her, more contempt from someone.

Despite the perfect sky and the brilliant landscape practically at her feet, and despite the moment of truce between her and Matt, Krista felt her afternoon was spoiled now. The wind wasn’t as fresh, just chilly, and the sun was getting lower behind the trees. Gus had settled back at her feet, relaxed now and looking sleepy.

“I better get back down to my car. Thanks for being at the right place at the right time,” she said and looked at him.

Matt studied her closely. She couldn’t imagine what he was thinking. Of the problems that she had brought back to Quail Ridge maybe. Was he regretting the way he embraced her before John Frechette intruded? Or was he regretting the intrusion?

“I’m walking you down,” he told her, his voice firm in case she decided to argue.



“No, that’s not necessary,” she said, arguing anyway. “I’ll be fine on my own. I’ve got pepper spray and Gus.”

“Too bad, I’m walking you. Come on, it’s starting to get cold.”

She could’ve said no again, but Matt had made up his mind, so she let him follow her back down the path. In fact, she was grateful he was there. If she’d gone alone, she would’ve been clutching the pepper spray for dear life, expecting bad guys to be hiding behind every tree. Obviously having Matt there had scared them all away. Of course she’d never admit that to Matt and kept her back straight and stride strong as they descended from the ridge.

When they got to the bottom of the trail, she was puzzled to only see her Jeep there.

“Where did you park?”

“I walked from home. There’s a trailhead about a quarter mile from my house. On the other end of the ridge.”

Krista rolled her eyes. “Get in and I’ll drive you home. Unless you want to walk.”

“I’ll take the lift,” he replied with a grin.

Matt watched the Jeep pull away from his driveway before going inside. “What the hell?”

What had happened up there on that ridge, sitting on the ledge with her, his arm around her? Had she felt it? he wondered.

Felt what? He let out a growl. He wasn’t sure what except that it felt rather nice, in a strange sort of way, holding her like that.

*But she may as well have killed your brother,* the part of his brain that believed that shouted out. How could he feel anything but contempt for her? Maybe she deserved everything that was happening. Maybe he was thinking all wrong about Ricky. Maybe it wasn’t him but some other

person who was pissed that she just waltzed back into town and set up shop in his mill and they wanted to chase her right back to where she came from.

And life here could go back to normal.

Except for one thing. There was another part of his brain that actually believed what she told him up there on that ledge, what she'd tried to tell him and everyone else after the accident. Would that justify the attraction he felt for her up there? The urge to protect her?

"Damn," he swore under his breath and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

He was taking the next three days off. Though he wasn't sure what he was going to do in that time, he didn't want to sit here and sulk or worry or stare at the walls. He would've offered to go help Krista with the mill, but somehow getting closer to her now would only cloud his feelings and his good sense.

Sitting here swearing wasn't going to make anything better either.

From where he sat he could see his back yard. It was littered with a patchwork of fall leaves. Raking would be good. He put the unfinished beer down and went out.

Some good physical labor—getting the yard cleaned up, maybe repairing the stone wall along the back boundary of his property and anything else he could come up with—would get him good and tired so he wouldn't dwell on the mess of thoughts and emotions that stewed in his brain.

Unfortunately the sun had already gone low enough that he only got a quarter of the yard raked before he had to call it quits. He certainly hadn't spent near enough time out there to get his thoughts to go away. On the contrary, with each moment that passed, he thought about Krista more and more. Worried about her more and more. Was she safe? Gus

didn't seem quite the dog to watch over her, no matter how much heart he had.

"She's fine," he muttered to himself as he hung the rake up in the garden shed.

"Who you talking to?"

Matt whipped around and found Dean leaning up against the door, grinning like a fool.

"Nobody," he replied grumpily and walked past him.

"Can't be 'nobody'. If it were nobody, you wouldn't be looking like you were ready to strangle the next guy who looked cross-eyed at you."

"Try me."

Dean made a face, his eyes crossed and tongue lolling out of his mouth.

Matt shook his head and rolled his eyes. "You're an idiot."

"But my kids like it."

Now Matt laughed. "Great, admit that you have the mentality of a three and four year old. I'm impressed."

"Hey, I couldn't think of anyone I'd like to impress more."

Matt replaced the padlock on the shed and walked back toward the back door, leaving Dean to follow him. He wasn't in the mood to entertain but a long evening lay in front of him like a boring, endless road. At least Dean would liven things up.

"You want a beer?"

"Nope. I tried calling but couldn't get you. You were out beating up your lawn with a rake. I'm here to drag you to my lair. Why don't you shower, get changed and let's head out."

*Oh, yeah, that's exactly what I need,* he thought and rolled his eyes behind Dean's back. In fact a night with Dean, his wife and kids would provide the distraction the lawn work didn't.

Being around Dean's family, though, didn't quite have the effect Matt had in mind. The boisterous group was a reminder of what he didn't have, what he might never have. What he might have had if he hadn't gotten all dour and serious.

Three-year-old Brianna climbed on top of her father, who was sprawled on the living room floor. The little dark-haired girl giggled and her father laughed as she tickled him mercilessly under his chin. Dean's wife, Suzette, was in the kitchen with Evan. The boy was feeding the three cats.

*Would Rachel and I have had cats? Children?* He shook his head. Rachel was sleek, elegant and spoiled. Children hadn't been discussed between the two of them back in the good ole days. Of course not too many teenaged boys thought much about being dads, at least not eagerly. That had changed over the years they were together, at least on his side. For her, however, he'd never once seen a glimpse of maternal instinct to her. It was a good thing that Ricky didn't seem too interested in adding new blood to his family.

And that, no doubt, was a definite good thing for everyone concerned.

"Uncle Matt!" Evan dashed out of the kitchen and leapt into Matt's lap. Matt laughed and put his arms around the little boy.

"Did you catch any bad guys today?" Evan asked. His brown eyes were wide. Dean had mentioned that for the past few weeks Evan had been fixated on cops. He was going to be one when he grew up. Before that it was a fireman. Next week it would probably be an army guy.

"No bad guys today, kid. I'm waiting for you to ride out with me and help spot them. Just as soon as you graduate from police school you and I will go out and look for bad guys together."

"I wanna go too!" Bri rolled off Dean's back and dashed across the room and crawled up on Matt's vacant knee.

“Two partners? Wow, I think I’m the luckiest cop in the world,” Matt declared. And Dean had to be the luckiest father in the world. No wonder he was so young at heart.

“Hey, you two, why don’t you let Uncle Matt breathe? Time to go wash up for dinner.” Dean looked up from the position Bri had left him in. His face was red from laughter, and the grin hadn’t gone away. He made a grab for Evan’s leg, which sent both children into peals of laughter. They shot off Matt’s lap and headed into the kitchen.

“I bet you’d be a natural.” Suzette leaned up against the doorjamb between the kitchen and living room, smiling at Matt.

Matt looked away from Dean and to his wife with a raised brow. “A natural what?”

“A natural father, you fool. Such a waste of talent.” She shook her head and walked back into the kitchen.

Matt eyed Dean suspiciously. “Please don’t tell me that Suzette is about to go all Yenta on me,” he said.

“Her? Little Suzy Sunshine who wants peace and love, bunnies and rainbows for everyone?” Dean pulled himself off the floor and sat on the couch.

“Better not let her hear that, she’ll deck you.”

“Nah, she’ll admit it freely. And to answer your question, I can’t answer your question. I have absolutely no idea whether she has any designs on you. At least I have absolutely no idea whether she’s picked out your prospective bride.”

“Well, in case she asks your opinion, please make it very clear to her that I’ll do my own looking. Not that I’m looking.”

“You should be. You’re getting to be an old man, Matt,” Dean elbowed Matt in the ribs. “You need someone in your life to take care of you,

entertain you when you get home so you don't have to do any late night yard work."

"Don't know if it's in the cards for me. I'm too serious, according to some people. What woman in her right mind is going to want me?" He said it with a grin, but deep down it was a rather depressing thought.

Suzette summoned everyone to dinner. Matt was thrilled to see an end to this conversation and was determined to steer clear of any further discussion of his love life for the rest of the night. He was much more interested in the food in front of him. According to Evan, Suzette made the best "basagna" in the world.

They'd planted the seed in his head, though. Settling down. One didn't just decide to do it, especially when one didn't have any kind of prospective mates in the picture. And hadn't since Rachel, really. A few dates here and there, nothing that went anywhere more than a couple weeks, which was fine with him. It was true, no matter how much it hurt to admit it, he hadn't been much fun. What woman wanted a guy who didn't smile or laugh?

It's not like he had lots of money to entice a woman, but then again, if it came down to that, he didn't want a woman who was more into him for his bank account than for his personality and love.

So, it looked like he was in for a long lonely life as a crusty old bachelor.

"Everything okay, Matt?"

He hadn't realized Suzette had been staring at him. Again he wondered if she had Cupid on her mind for him.

"Great, wonderful. Why do you ask?"

She laughed. "The way you were looking at your plate I thought maybe there was a bug in your food or something."

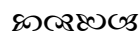
He smiled at her when she winked. Was there another Suzette in this world? Except when he tried to picture “her”, another woman’s face popped into his mind. What Krista was doing there, he didn’t know. She wasn’t exactly what he’d been thinking of. She wasn’t lighthearted; no, she was more like him, serious, suspicious.

But like him, before the accident she had been fun-loving, optimistic. No doubt full of dreams too. It was strange that he was wondering what things he and this woman had in common.

“Thanks for dragging him along, Dean. He’s absolutely no fun tonight,” Suzette griped. “Not even Evan and Bri could burn away that black cloud. Sheesh, great company you keep.”

“I promise, Suzette, if you give me another chance, next week I’ll be bubbly and sweet.” He flashed her a smile and dove into his meal with the exuberance of the two kids.

He wasn’t going to let his lack of a love life ruin the rest of the night. Maybe it was time to reclaim the person that he used to be.



Krista stared at the papers in front of her, organizing them into files. Her eyes were burning, she’d been at it for so long now. An hour longer and she was sure she’d go blind. There was a certain sense of satisfaction, though. The nursery had been repainted and the new carpet had been put down. The dance studio was going to take longer, but they were busy with it. The opening was two weeks away.

Every time she thought about that her stomach clenched up and the doubts reared their ugly heads again. There were so many small details that had to be seen to first, making sure the classes were all set with the proper supplies and instructors.

Then there were the tickets to the opening gala. A gala in Quail Ridge. It should've made her laugh, but instead she twisted her lips in a scowl. Cameron had actually been the one to insist on it, to raise more awareness for the center and possible corporate sponsorship. Of course to Cameron a gala opening was black tie and evening gowns. She wasn't so sure that was what they'd get for this one, but she didn't think tuxes would be involved.

"Well, I can't say that you look at home behind that desk."

Somehow she wasn't surprised to hear Cameron's voice above her.

"I told you not to come." With one last rub of her eyes, she looked up at her friend.

"I couldn't resist. I like to see what's going on with my investments. And I missed your serious face."

Though he must've been traveling for several hours, Cameron still managed to look like he stepped out of the pages of *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. The dark suit, the perfect hair, what more could a woman want? Well, most women, maybe. Gretchen definitely. Krista often thought if Cameron had been more of a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy there would've been a spark between the two of them.

"You have a golden tongue," she commented dryly. "You should've let me know you were coming. I'd have made sure I was really in a snit."

"That's my girl. What kind of restaurants does this little place have? I'm starved."

Now that he mentioned it, she was hungry too.

"Nothing too fancy, but the food is the best in town. Hope you don't mind walking."

They headed down Main Street. Flags that hung outside the stores flickered in the wind that pushed its way insistently down the narrow street. A truck rumbling by drowned out the sound of rippling fabric. The



smell of exhaust momentarily blocked out another familiar smell. On the other side of the hardware store was the diner that she used to love going there in the morning when breakfast was being served. Every diner that she'd ever come across since reminded her of Betty's Diner.

Krista led Cameron down the sidewalk, past the hardware store with its vacant rockers to the door of the diner. Faded eight-by-eleven posters were taped in the windows, announcing various town functions, all in the past. She could see a pile of *Quail Ridge Town Crier* papers stacked on a shelf, and two old gumball machines. She would have bet that the gum hadn't been changed in the fifteen years since she'd last been through the doors.

A woman came out of the door, grasping the hand of a tow-headed toddler. She smiled briefly and averted her eyes, but held the scratched plexi-glass door open for Krista. She thanked her and proceeded through.

"A possible client?" Cameron whispered in her ear.

"You never know," she replied. She didn't particularly want to think of anyone in this town as possible dollar signs.

There was something about a small-town diner that was the same everywhere she went. The same smell of frying bacon and coffee grounds, and clattering of pans from the kitchen behind the long Formica-topped counter. The same tired-looking waitress pouring coffee at a back table. Except she knew this waitress and the patron she served.

The place was pretty full with the lunch crowd and all that seemed available were the two stools at the end of the counter.

She slid into the last stool. Automatically her fingers went to trace the initials she'd carved into the surface. KF + EB. It seemed like that had happened in another lifetime. A bittersweet memory of carving that into the hard surface while Eddie distracted the waitress made her smile.

“Quaint,” Cameron remarked, looking around the place.

Krista put her hands on her lap and glanced at Cameron. “I warned you. But believe me it’s a hidden jewel. In the rough. Marty Clough is a magician in the kitchen.”

“If you say so. I reserve my judgment, but I’m game for anything. Did you know that my dad owned a place just like this?”

“Get out.” Krista picked up the laminated lunch menu.

“No lie. It was in Iowa. I remember hanging out there every Sunday from the time I was about four till I was ten and he got into the newspaper business.”

“I’m trying to picture you as a little boy in a baseball hat drinking milk shakes.” She eyed him closely. He grinned back at her. “Nope, just don’t see it. I think you were born at the age of thirty, wearing a business suit and driving a Mercedes.”

“Ouch. You’ll have to coax Gretchen into dragging out my baby pictures. It won’t take much coaxing actually. I think she’d love to show them off.”

“I’ll remember to ask.” Of course by then the photos would probably turn up ‘missing’.

There were tiny brass bells on the door to the diner that would announce new arrivals and people leaving. Krista glanced up from her menu when she heard them ring and froze. It was Matt coming in, looking particularly handsome in his dark uniform. He was greeted by nearly everyone in the restaurant with a small-town friendliness Krista wished she knew. Maybe if she worked really hard she’d be accepted again. Her gaze followed him through the crowded diner. He hadn’t seen her yet. It was the first time she’d seen him since she dropped him off after their meeting up on the ridge.

Even across the room she was too aware of him for her own comfort. She shifted on the stool and tried to get her mind back on choosing her lunch.

Cameron turned a probing stare toward her.

“What?” she asked as she tried to decide between the seafood salad sandwich and the Caesar salad.

“Want to tell me about the policeman?”

“Him? There’s nothing to tell. I think I’ll have the seafood. Maybe a house salad.”

“I saw the way you looked at him, Krista.”

Krista lifted her gaze away from the menu and glared at Cameron. “He’s a cop. He was on duty when the vandalism at the center was being investigated. Oh, and he’s also the owner of the mill.”

“And? Come on. You know that I won’t let this go until I have some answers that are acceptable.” His voice was low, and when he spoke like that, Krista knew he wasn’t going to let up.

She narrowed her eyes at him, but as soon as she was about to elaborate she was saved by the waitress.

Carla Devlin stared at her coldly. She’d been two years behind her in school. If she remembered correctly, Carla was a waitress here all those years ago. She’d had dreams of going to Hollywood. In fact, she’d been the lead in nearly every play in school.

“Hi, Carla.” Krista put on her best smile which was met with a furrowed brow.

“You ready to order?” Her voice was clipped as if it was a struggle to say anything at all to Krista.

Better to ignore the iciness, Krista thought. “Seafood salad in a wrap with a house salad for me and an ice tea.”

“Bacon burger and fries,” Cameron ordered.

Without a word, Carla nodded and walked away toward the kitchen.

“Brr,” Cameron noted.

“I’m used to it. I’m not exactly Quail Ridge’s favorite daughter. If they spit in my food back there, I won’t be surprised.”

“Any closer to finding out who wants to make your life miserable here?”

Krista grimaced. “Besides half the town? No, we haven’t found our vandal yet. But they’re working on it.”

“No more visitors at your house?”

“No, all quiet on that front too. Maybe whoever it was decided I wasn’t going anywhere and gave up the battle.”

“Well, as long as the cops are keeping you up-to-date on everything.”

Krista’s gaze wandered back to Matt, who had found a spot at the table with Burt Frost, a car mechanic, and his wife Teresa. Carla was at their table now, and instead of dour as she’d been while taking their order, she was vibrant, happy. Matt was grinning up at her. Krista was fixated by his smile. Apparently so was Carla. This smiling, glowing Carla was the girl she’d remembered back in school.

“Jealous?”

Cameron’s voice brought her back to reality.

Krista glared at her him. “No, I’m not jealous. Matt is Eddie’s brother. He’s one of the people in this town who hates me the most.”

## Chapter Six

Matt had seen Krista as he walked by the diner. He hadn't even planned on going in. His lunch waited for him in the fridge back at the station, but he couldn't help himself. As soon as he realized that she was with a man, a man he didn't recognize, he regretted going inside. He couldn't just turn around and walk back out, though. He pretended not to notice her and instead walked toward the back of the room to join Burt and Teresa. Even though he didn't look her way, he could feel her eyes on him. His curiosity about the man drove him crazy.

As soon as he sat, he glanced back over at the pair. They looked deep in discussion now and he wondered if the sensation of her eyes on him was just his imagination.

Matt guessed the man was probably her business partner from Washington DC. He sure didn't look like he was from anywhere around here. The pair certainly looked intimate, sitting at the counter, their knees touching, faces inches apart.

And what about it? Was it any of his business what kind of relationship they had? None whatsoever. But the wondering still rankled on his nerves.

He'd have to keep on wondering because he wasn't about to go introduce himself, not yet. He put it down to a stubborn streak.

So he sat there, chatting with Burt and Teresa, joking with Carla when she came to take his order for a lunch he really didn't need, all the while keeping an eye on Krista.

Over the past several days, he had to fight the urge to continue checking up on her. All things were quiet, which made him very nervous. The quiet before the storm, he thought grimly. Ricky's story checked out, he and Rachel were really down in Boston, and the police hadn't come up with any clues into the identity of the person or persons who had done their best to ruin Krista's plans with the mill.

The lack of progress on the case was frustrating to say the least. If it had been local hoodlums, there'd be some evidence left behind, or at least someone with a mouth too big to hold a secret.

There'd been nothing though. Not one mention of anyone even admitting to being there.

In Matt's opinion, the road still ended with Ricky.

Matt looked away from Burt, who was telling him all about his granddaughter's first birthday party, and locked eyes with Krista. It was a long look, tender and inquisitive. One that brought back the memories of the ridge, and the thoughts that had gone through his mind about her when he'd been surrounded by Dean's family. Her lips parted slightly. After a moment, he had to remind himself to breathe. Krista broke the contact first and turned her attention back to her companion, but Matt saw the darker pink tint in her cheek that hadn't been there moments ago.

What in God's name was happening here? Since when did this woman come to mean anything more to him than the instrument of his brother's death?

Like someone had opened a window in a dark stuffy room, he finally admitted to himself that he no longer blamed her.

A stool next to Krista's friend had opened up, so Matt drew in his breath and excused himself from Burt and Teresa's company and walked over to the counter. Krista's eyes widened at his approach, so he smiled at her, the first genuine smile he'd given her since her return.

"May I join you?" He kept his voice friendly and casual, including Krista's friend in his question.

It took a long moment before she responded with an affirmative. Apparently she was as shocked at his behavior as he was. She introduced her companion as Cameron Warshaw, her business partner who was up to check out the progress on the center. If Cameron knew anything about how Matt had previously thought or felt about Krista he didn't show it. There was no suspicion in the man's dark eyes.

"Pleasure to meet you, Matt."

The two men shook hands. As much as Matt sized Cameron up, he felt the other man doing the same. Typical male behavior.

Matt noted a similarity between this guy and Ricky. Both had a smooth, polished look that didn't fit into small-town New Hampshire. Both wore expensive suits that certainly weren't off the rack, and definitely not anything that would've been purchased locally. It was easy to see the dollar signs.

That was where the similarities ended, though. Ricky looked like a weasel. A good-looking weasel with a smooth tongue, but a weasel nonetheless. He had a perpetual smirk on his face, as if he were laughing at you behind your back. Matt figured that Cameron was a straight shooter. A bit aggressive, but then he'd have to be to be the owner of one of the nation's largest newspapers, but fair. Matt hoped he was right.

There was another difference. Ricky wouldn't be caught dead in the diner. Cameron seemed quite comfortable here.

“Krista has told me that there are no leads on the vandals, but that the police have been working hard,” Cameron broke into Matt’s thoughts. “I appreciate it. If you need any outside help, please let me know.”

“Thanks. We were hoping to have someone in custody, but it’s looking a bit more complicated than a bunch of bored kids.”

Cameron nodded. “Well, I’m glad that there haven’t been any repeats. I’m looking forward to the opening. I’d hate for that to have to be postponed. I hope you’ll be our guest that night. You have the perfect building for the center. Are you sure you don’t want to sell the place?”

Matt chuckled. “No chance. Sorry. The mill has been in the family for generations,” he replied. “You’ll have to settle for leasing. But it’s really been transformed. It’s a good project and the area will really benefit from it.”

Carla returned with their order, cutting short the conversation. After placing his plate down, a definite chill took over. Her eyes barely met Krista’s as she set the plate down with a clatter, as if she wanted to be out of her presence as quickly as possible. Matt noted the waitress’s clenched jaw and the hardness in her eyes. Krista, for her part, smiled warmly at Carla, apparently ignoring the other woman’s hostility. It was a fascinating exchange and Matt wondered how it would play out, who would be the winner. A few days ago he would’ve put his bet on Carla, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“Carla, I was wondering if you’d be interested in helping me out over at the youth center.”

Carla put Cameron’s plate down and turned back to Krista, a frown on her face.

“Doing what? I have a job.”

“I know. This wouldn’t be full-time, of course. But I was remembering back to school, you were a really good actress. I’m scheduling some



drama classes and I could really use some people to help. I've already recruited Mrs. Simonsen from school. Would you be interested in helping out?"

Matt studied the exchange closely. He could see Carla's eyes light up a little and she bit her lower lip. Her shoulders lost some of that rigidity, but an edge of doubt still lingered there.

"I might be," she replied cautiously.

Krista grinned. "Great. Stop by the mill and we can discuss it more."

"Um, okay, I'll do that. Thanks."

Matt had to smother a chuckle. He had the feeling that Carla felt like she'd just been hit by a truck and found that it wasn't as horrible as she'd expected it to be.

When Carla had disappeared back into the kitchen, Matt noted the smug look on Krista's face.

"Winning them over one person at a time?" he asked.

"If that's the way she has to do it," Cameron replied for her. "I think she's going about it the right way. Best to get the community involved. It's their center, not just ours."

"I agree," Matt said with a nod. "Carla still talks about acting. She's wanted to organize a community theater for years now. This would be wonderful for her."

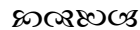
Krista smiled gleefully. Matt could almost picture her rubbing her hands together in delight.

"I haven't seen you this happy in years," Cameron remarked.

Matt noted the fondness with which the other man looked at Krista. They were close friends, maybe more. How much more, he was curious to know. She was a beautiful woman and when she was smiling, with the sparkle in her eyes, she was positively vibrant. But Cameron had a big gold band on the ring finger of his left hand. He hoped that meant a lot.

“Well, for the first time in a long time, I’m involved in something very positive. I love my career, but at the moment this project is more fulfilling,” Krista replied and stabbed at her salad with gusto.

Life was changing in Quail Ridge, Matt thought. Who would’ve guessed that it would be Krista Faye to bring those changes?



Krista glanced in her rearview mirror for the fifth time. Someone was following her. The car stayed about an eighth of a mile behind her. Sometimes she’d lose it around a corner in the twisty road, but when they came to a straight stretch, it was always there. Of course it could’ve been a coincidence, but somehow she doubted it.

The road forked ahead. To the right, it headed to Quail Ridge and if she went left, she’d end up heading toward the coast. Krista took this route even though she’d been heading home. With an eye on the rearview mirror, she growled an expletive when the car behind remained on her tail.

She couldn’t make out the license plate or driver’s face so she slowed down, holding onto the possibility that this might still be coincidence.

The other car slowed as well.

It had to be Ricky. She didn’t know what kind of car he drove, but the sleek silver car looked fancy, and right in his price range.

She turned again at the next intersection. If she drove in crazy enough circles then she’d know for sure. She considered pulling into a parking lot somewhere. No, even better would be to get behind him and follow him. Somehow.

Krista still knew some of the roads in the area. She sped up, and once she was around the next bend in the road, she pulled into a circular

driveway that had a thick growth of trees and blackberry brambles and waited until the silver car passed, then pulled back onto the road, now the follower.

“How do you like that?” she whispered, pulling behind her apparent stalker.

He hit his brakes, for a second, and then sped up.

“Oh no, you don’t,” she told the driver and increased her speed.

Unfortunately her old Jeep didn’t have the speed of the luxury car in front of her, but she was determined to give it her best shot. She at least wanted to get a license plate number and show the creep that she wasn’t afraid.

She pulled up closer to him, close enough to see the New Hampshire tag and commit them to memory. She managed to stick with him for another half a mile. The car ahead swerved abruptly onto another road that led back toward Quail Ridge.

She didn’t stand a chance. At the risk of tipping the Jeep, Krista took the turn and shoved her foot down on the gas. The little silver car had too much of a lead. Krista’s Jeep shook as she tried to keep up. She bit down on her bottom lip and she held onto the steering wheel with a death grip. But the car got farther away from her and disappeared around the corner.

As soon as she took that curve, she realized she was on the same stretch of Route 168 where she’d been in the accident. For a moment, her resolve shuddered, leaving her torn between the desire to run down the bastard and not wanting a repeat of that night long ago.

The other car was too far ahead anyhow. She’d never catch up now. She swore under her breath and eased her foot off the gas, but before she’d gotten back down to the speed limit, a Quail Ridge cruiser pulled up behind her, lights flashing.

“Oh sure, you go after me and let the other guy go,” she shouted in the rearview mirror but pulled over to the side of the road.

Before she had a chance to turn off the Jeep, let alone dig her wallet out of her purse, the driver’s side door flew open.

“Get out!”

There was no misreading the expression on Matt’s face. It was pure anger. His cheeks were red as the damned brake lights of the fleeing car in the distance and his eyes blazed with fury. She hesitated, but knew if she didn’t cooperate, there’d be more trouble.

“Now.”

“Okay, I’m getting out,” she grumbled and stepped down from the Jeep. She brushed past him angrily and turned to face him. “But you might want to tell me why. Most cops don’t force someone from their vehicle over a simple matter of speeding.”

“There’s nothing simple about this and you know it,” Matt ground out through his tight jaw. “What the hell do you think you were doing chasing after him like that? You think you could’ve caught him? And if you did catch him, what were you planning to do with him? Make him admit that he’s the one who is responsible for messing up the center and throwing the brick through your window?”

Krista set her jaw firm and glared at the now empty road ahead of her. Three white crosses glared against the dark woods a little bit up the road. She swallowed hard but didn’t answer.

“You know where you are, don’t you? And you’re driving like you want a repeat of that!”

“Stop it!” She pressed her palm against her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. God, she wanted a cigarette. That craving hadn’t visited her in well over a week, but it overwhelmed her now. Krista wasn’t in the mood to fight with him.

She had planned on catching up with Ricky and demand he tell her what he wanted. It probably wasn't the best idea because he'd just come up with some bullshit answer, a smooth lie she wouldn't believe anyway. And then what, she didn't know.

"He was following me," she exclaimed. The frustration that had been building inside her coiled in a ball in her chest. Maybe he'd understand where her desperation stemmed from. "For at least twenty minutes, he was just tagging along behind me. I turned the tables on him about three miles back. Why the hell didn't you stop him? He was going a lot faster than I was."

"I was more worried about you," Matt replied angrily. "Driving like a maniac. You could've gotten in an accident here, Krista. Besides you wouldn't have gotten anywhere with him, you know that, right?"

Krista nodded. Damn, he was right of course. Things had been quiet around here for a while and now she might have just stirred the pot.

"Damn," she swore bitterly. "Okay, I was wrong, I made a mistake. I'm sick of living on the edge like this. Waiting for something else to happen. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I mean, I expected some people to react badly to me, like you did, but I didn't think that I'd be attacked. I just wanted to do something good for this town. I never thought I'd be a threat to anyone. If he'd just let me be, there wouldn't have been a threat."

He had her in his arms before she even realized that he was going to embrace her. She sucked in her breath and stood stiffly for a moment trying to process the moment. He'd gone from being incredibly mad at her to wanting to comfort her. His body was warm and hard. She could feel his badge pressing into her and his hands smoothing down her back.

"What are you doing?" Krista asked, her voice a whisper. She rested her chin on his shoulder and leaned against him.

"I think I'm holding you," he replied. His breath tickled her ear.

Krista chuckled. "At the side of the road. A very strange place, Officer Burgess."

He pulled back, his arms still wrapped around her. Their gazes met and held for a long moment. The smile faded from his lips. She'd wondered off and on since their time on the ridge, and on every single occasion they bumped into each other, what it would be like to kiss him. It seemed like she was about to find out as he dipped his head down and caught her lips with his.

God, she hadn't been breathing those last few moments before the kiss. Now she inhaled against his mouth, tasting and smelling him. There was a bittersweet fervor in the way his lips moved over hers and she met it and returned it. His hands lingered on the small of her back and pressed her against his body. It was exciting, daring, and sent her heart racing, as it hadn't done in years.

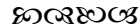
She pulled away first, though, to get her bearings. No, it couldn't be this easy. She didn't want to fall into a relationship with him. Not so soon after he'd given up on his contempt of her. These things would take time.

"Thank you for stopping me," she told him, detangling herself from his arms.

He let her do so without a fight, but he looked disappointed. "You're welcome. I want you safe. Just keep away from him, Krista. Don't encourage him. He's got enough pull to make your life miserable."

"I'll remember that," Krista assured him, but was caught up in the way his hazel eyes looked at her, steady, probing. He was trying to find out what was going on in her head.

She hoped she wasn't giving anything away. If she was, her heart wasn't going to stand a chance against him.



The phone rang, shattering the quiet of the night. Krista opened her eyes a crack as the noise ripped up her sleep again. She wanted to ignore it, roll over and pull the blankets back over her head until the offensive sound stopped. But, according to the soft red glow from her clock, it was nearly three-thirty in the morning and when phone calls came at that hour, it usually meant bad news.

She reached out and pulled the handset from the receiver and pushed the talk button.

“Hello,” she muttered, pushing her hair from her face. She rolled over so she was on her back and squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

“Have a nice drive today?”

The voice was soft but chilling. Krista bolted upright, her hand pressing against the thundering of her heart.

“Ricky?”

The line went dead, a low, monotone humming in her ear.

For a long moment, she held it up to her ear, half expecting the caller to return, but he didn’t. He didn’t have to. He’d done what Krista was sure he intended to. And did it well.

She shoved the blankets off her and got out of bed. The floor was cold and darkness pressed against the windows. She wondered what other things were outside those windows.

Wide-awake now, she went down to the kitchen and grabbed her discarded pack of cigarettes and lighter. She fumbled with the lighter twice before igniting the tip of the cigarette. In darkness, she sat at the table, the cigarette calming her frayed nerves.

Gus wandered into the kitchen and settled at Krista's feet. She scratched the top of his head while taking a drag from the cigarette and staring out at the blackness beyond the window. The dog seemed as restless and nervous as she was, otherwise he'd be sleeping. She appreciated the company, though. With him she didn't feel quite so alone.

Suddenly the whole backyard was flooded with light as the motion detector floodlight was activated.

Gus was on his feet, a low rumble in his throat.

Krista crunched out the unsmoked half of her cigarette and got to her feet, despite the fact that looking out the window was the last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to go back to bed and pull the covers over her head and wait until the sun came up. She didn't have any kind of weapons in the house except for Patricia's pepper spray and a few wicked sharp knives. Not ideal, but she withdrew a butcher knife and switched off the kitchen light. The only light came from the outside. Despite the fact she was living in a small town where people didn't lock doors, Krista had too much of the big city mentality and every door and window in the place was secured. Thank goodness. It was a small comfort but she'd take all the comforts she could get at that moment.

With Gus at her side and the knife gripped tightly in her fist, she peeked out the window into the whitewashed lawn.

Nothing moved within the reach of the light except for some leaves being pushed along by a breeze.

"Where are you, you bastard?" she whispered into the night. If nothing else moved within the range of the light sensor, it would go dark in a few moments. Would that be a good thing or bad? Maybe she'd be better off not knowing. The thought of danger lurking in the shadows made her shudder.



Just before the light went out, Krista caught a glimpse of a tawny bulk moving at the edge of the lawn, disappearing into the woods. Not the man she'd been expecting but a deer out for a late night snack.

It soon disappeared into the blanket of darkness that consumed the yard.

Gus grumbled once more.

"It was just a deer, big guy. We're getting each other freaked out over Bambi."

She backed away from the window and replaced the knife in its holder.

"Come on, let's go to bed. I'll even break the rules and let you sleep with me."

She was almost to the door when the sound of the phone broke through the night again. Krista froze and stared at the phone on the wall. It rang once, twice and then again. If it rang five times, the machine would get it.

She grabbed it on the fourth ring.

She didn't say anything, just listened. She could hear the raspy breath on the other end before the caller hung up. Not a word, but somehow that was worse than him saying anything at all.

In the morning she was going to get caller ID. She didn't think it would do much good, but a tiny sliver of peace of mind was better than nothing at all. She replaced the handset and proceeded to go to bed. Sitting up all night wasn't going to help her. If she was going to be scared, she might as well do it in the comfort of her bed.

## Chapter Seven

“You look beat.”

Matt glanced up from his desk at his father who stood in the doorway. “I am beat.”

“You’re working too hard.” Ed walked in and leaned up against the wall and crossed his arms, studying Matt steadily.

Matt chuckled but rubbed at the muscles at the back of his neck, which had tied themselves into knots at some point. “When have I ever complained about work? Besides I just had a mini vacation. My batteries are recharged.”

“Then what’s going on?”

“Just worried about what’s happening with the center. We’re getting nowhere on it.” Matt leaned back in the chair and looked at his father. He wasn’t sure he liked the careful way his dad examined him. What was he looking for?

“It’s a wonder you’re taking this so personally,” Ed commented. “Knowing how you feel about Krista.”

The ironic note in his father’s voice made Matt roll his eyes. There was a twinkle in his dad’s eyes and the hint of a smile.

“Well, we’re doing our best,” Ed continued. “We have a few leads, but until we get a big break, we’ll have to stay the course.”

“And hope it doesn’t happen again,” Matt muttered.

The thought of Ricky, sitting in his fancy house on the hill, laughing at everyone brought a rush of anger coursing through his veins. He wouldn't have any dirt under his nails over this, but he sure would have it on his conscience, if he had one of those.

"Why don't you get out of here? It's late." Ed pulled himself from the wall and walked to the desk.

"Is that why you're here?" Matt looked up at the clock on the wall. It was nearly three-thirty in the morning. "Mom hates you working this shift."

"We all have to pay our dues, Matt, even when we're staring at retirement. I'll be out of here in about half an hour too."

"And you'll have Mom home waiting for you," Matt said, almost wistfully.

A grin spread over the older man's face. A smile of pure contentment. "It's a nice feeling. You should try it."

"I did once, remember? Wasn't exactly the same thing."

Ed shook his head, the smile still in place. "No, not exactly. Rachel wasn't that type of woman, Matt. You found that out just in time."

"She chucked me, Dad, not the other way around."

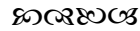
"True. But you would've figured it out eventually. No, a woman who'll wait up for you, who'll be *home* for you, that's what you need. And it's high time you started looking."

Matt stood and stretched. "I'll start tomorrow," he joked, trying to keep it light, because he really didn't want to go home to an empty house, but didn't want to admit that a woman, a wife, was what he needed. "Or maybe I'll just get a dog."

"We want grandchildren."

"You might have to wait for a bit." Matt put his jacket on and headed for the door.

“Not too long, I hope,” his father called after him.



“Take a look at this.” Patricia held up a piece of paper and waved it in the air with an agitated jerk.

“What do you have?” Krista pushed away from her desk and went across the office to Patricia’s desk. Patricia held the letter out to her, her lips pursed tightly and eyes squinted with uncharacteristic anger.

Krista’s mouth screwed up in a grimace of her own as she read the name at the top of the single cream sheet. Richard A. Crowe. “Now what?” She scanned the short letter, holding her breath.

“He wants something,” she grumbled, taking the check from Patricia’s hand. “A person doesn’t make a one-eighty so quickly. Not Ricky anyway. Donating money isn’t going to make things better.”

“You think he’s using it to clear his conscience?”

Krista studied the check, the donation that Ricky said he wanted to contribute to a wonderful cause. Three zeros followed the five. Was it that easy for him to write a check that large? She was comfortable financially, but she still couldn’t write that number so casually. Of course there was nothing casual about this.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. I think it’s a dig. He wants to get to me. I think I’ll pay him a visit. It’s long overdue, I think.” She forced a smile, but it didn’t come easily or even honestly.

“Honey, I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” Patricia warned.

“I’m not going to hide from him.”

Patricia placed a staying hand on Krista’s arm. “Please, think about it first. He may be playing games with you, but he can get nasty.”

“Yeah, I’ve already had a taste of that. I’ll be careful, I promise.”

She tucked the letter and the check into her purse. Tonight she'd go over there after dinner, when he was sure to be home. Maybe if they had this confrontation, he'd back off. She wasn't interested in revenge. That wouldn't take away the years of pain she'd endured. She wanted him to leave her alone.

Of course she wasn't so confident when she was standing at his door several hours later. A beautiful house indeed. It must've cost a fortune. No wonder he wasn't pleased to see her back in town. The tide could've easily turned against him those years ago. This might never have been.

Krista steeled her nerves and pressed the doorbell. She waited for a minute or two, which seemed more like five, before someone opened the door.

Suddenly, as if he expected her to show up, he stood there, leaning causally against the doorframe. It was the first time she'd seen him close up since they appeared in court together years ago. His appearance was polished, rich and confident, but she could still see the same cocky boy she remembered way back when. He gave her a flashy white smile and his dark eyes crinkled up.

"I was wondering when you'd come and say hello. Come on in."

Krista hesitated. She really didn't want to go in, but the only way Ricky was going to respect her and see she wasn't intimidated was to accept his invitation.

"Thank you," she replied coldly and walked past him into the foyer, her back stiff.

"Come into the living room and meet Rachel."

"I'll only stay a moment."

She followed him out of the foyer and into a large living room. A woman, as polished and elegant as Ricky, sat on the sofa, her legs

tucked up beneath her. She unfolded herself and stood, a sweet smile spreading slowly across her pretty face. Krista felt an immediate dislike.

“Rachel, this is an old friend of mine, Krista Faye. Krista, this is my fiancée, Rachel,” he introduced. “Krista is the mastermind behind the youth center.”

As if his woman didn’t know everything that was going on down at the mill. Krista didn’t appreciate him making it seem like the center was beneath his fiancée’s attention.

But Rachel smiled as if she hadn’t heard.

“Congratulations on a successful venture,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re looking terrific, Krista,” Ricky exclaimed, taking hold of her arms and turning her to the light. “You can barely see the scars at all.”

She couldn’t believe how fake he was. And to say it all with the grin on his face as if he were giving her the biggest compliment of her life.

“It is incredible, isn’t it?” she replied dryly. “Now, why I came.” She pulled her arms away from him and dug into her purse and withdrew the check. “I wanted to return this to you. I appreciate your generosity, but we can’t accept this. The center is fully funded by a private company. I’m sure there are other organizations far more deserving, groups that would get much more use from it.”

She didn’t think that her move was too much of a surprise to him, but he managed to look vastly disappointed. “There must be some good this money can do, Krista. Some equipment maybe? Really, it’s not much to Rachel and me, but maybe it could cover some child’s tuition. Listen, why don’t you keep the check and think on it for a while?”

Rachel came up and wrapped her arms around Ricky’s waist. “Please say you will. It would mean so much to us. We don’t want you thinking badly of Ricky.”

Krista narrowed her eyes. Just how much did Rachel know about Ricky's activities? Enough, she supposed, to know that Ricky was up to no good.

"Why don't you keep it instead," Krista suggested, "and consider donating it to a good cause that needs the money more than us? I wanted to do this politely, Ricky, but you leave me no other choice but to be blunt and to the point. I know what you're trying to do and it can stop right now. I didn't come back here to Quail Ridge to clear my name. Letting people know what really happened that night was not my purpose. In fact, it didn't even come to my mind until you made it an issue. Does your girlfriend even know what happened that night and how you and your father threw me to the sharks?"

Ricky's smile transformed from smooth to steely. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not sure I like your accusations."

Krista put the check down on the end table. "It doesn't matter. Just stay away from me."

She walked from the room, her back straight and head held high. She expected either Ricky or his fiancée to follow her, but she made it out to her Jeep without any further confrontations. Even though her raw nerves had her rattled inside, her confidence returned, and a sense of pride washed through her. Now this was more like she used to be before she came back to Quail Ridge.



There were two more days until the opening. Krista felt like a chicken with its head cut off, rifling through a stack of papers in search of the caterer's phone number. She shoved some bills aside with one hand and grumbled to herself. What sane person needed to go through this?

Saturday night would be the gala, as Cameron had called it, for adults. It would be a formal event, requiring a dress that Krista hadn't even started looking for. If she could've ducked out of the whole picture for the night she would've, but Cameron and Gretchen would've dragged her, kicking and screaming to this thing, dress or no.

Sunday would be more her speed. That's when the center would open to everyone. But first she had to get through the stuffy part. No, she thought as she shoved another stack aside, first she had to get through the damned party planning and wished she had Gretchen at her side. Gretchen could've done a flawless job with this.

"Just go to Nashua and get the dress," Patricia ordered. "I'll hold down the fort here."

"But I've got to make sure the caterers are all set and O'Dell's is delivering the tables at noon..."

"And I'll be here," Patricia replied. "I know where the tables go, I know where the chairs go. Heck, I know where everything goes. And I can call the caterer and make sure everything is right on track. Now please go. Don't put this off until the last minute."

Krista shot her a tight grin. "I hate to break this to you, but this is the last minute. Fine, I'll go. I can tell you won't leave me be until I do." She went for her jacket and purse.

"Oh, Krista, I need to ask you something before you go."

Krista paused and turned to her assistant. "Yeah, what is it?"

"John wants to come with me Saturday night but wanted to make sure it was okay with you."

Krista's brows rose. "Of course it's all right. My goodness, he doesn't need my permission. I thought we were all straight on that."

"I know, but he's still feeling badly."



Krista smiled. As far as she knew, Patricia didn't have any idea about the encounter on the ridge with John. A few days after that, she'd gone over to their house and talked things out. While they weren't back to the same comfortable relationship, they were at least on their way to repairing things.

"I want both of you there. This is for Liz as much as anyone else, after all."

Patricia smiled, relief clear in her eyes, and nodded. "I'll let him know. I'm glad that this is past us now."

"Same here. Now I'm going to brave the Nashua traffic. I'm becoming so spoiled by the lack of traffic here in town that I've forgotten about city driving. But I'll manage and I won't come home until I have a dress." She gave Patricia a painful smile. Dress shopping was the last thing in the world she wanted to do, but getting this trip out of the way had to be done.

She hit the mall first, figuring she'd have a better chance of finding something appropriate there. The stores were packed with holiday clothing but finding something that would suit her needs wasn't as easy as she thought. Maybe she was making it difficult, being too picky, but she'd gone through five stores before she felt desperation set in.

She had to leave the mall and start down the road to another store before she hit her jackpot. The tiny boutique didn't offer much selection, but when she found the velvet emerald green dress, she prayed that it would fit.

It clung to her figure, with a neckline that gave a hint of her cleavage. The sleeves came down past her elbows. Enough to cover the scars that marred her shoulder and bicep. It was perfect for the occasion. Even Gretchen would approve of her selection. Might even be amazed that she

was able to do it on her own. To Krista, high fashion meant designer jeans and a new football jersey.

As she replaced the gown on the hanger, Krista flinched, catching sight of herself in the three-way mirror. For once she didn't avoid looking at the remnants of the accident. Even now the scars were constant reminders of her loss. Hardly anyone had seen them, not even Cameron during their brief affair, except for the one on her arm. Only the scars on her face were visible to the world. The ones on her body were her secrets.

Transfixed, she ran a finger on the long white line that ran along her hip and down her thigh and eyed the one that marred her belly.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, nearly hypnotized by the sight, by the memory of when those scars were fresh, until voices in the store pulled her from her reverie. Quickly she looked away and shoved her jeans back on. It was better to pretend the scars weren't there.

She took her gown, the matching shoes and stockings and headed back to Quail Ridge. The afternoon light was quickly fading from the autumn sky. Sometime during the last few weeks the leaves had fallen from the trees. There were a few that clung stubbornly to the branches. Most, though, were now in drifts along the side of the road. The trees looked like gray skeletons reaching toward the powdery blue sky. All too soon they'd be covered with snow and it would be a different kind of beauty.

There was one thing she hadn't done, she realized. She turned the Jeep up a steep hill to the old center of town. Ridgeview Cemetery lay up there, the final resting place for a dear friend. Two dear friends.

She drove around slowly until she found Liz. It was the first time she'd seen the grave. Three enormous bouquets of flowers lay against the rose marble stone. Someone had spared no expense in their remembrance of the girl.

Krista shoved her hands deep into her jacket pockets as a chill breeze dashed against her body, tugging her hair across her cheek.

“Hey there,” she whispered to the stone, to the spirit of her best friend. “I know I should’ve stopped by before. And look, I came empty-handed this time. I’m sorry, next time I’ll bring something. I know you like lilacs, but you’ll have to wait until spring for that. But I see that you’re not lacking any flowers. They sure are pretty.”

There was no sound except the wind that rustled through the trees. So peaceful, but what else could she expect from a small town cemetery?

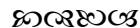
“I can’t stay long, they’ll be closing the gates soon. It gets dark really early now. I just wanted to say that I wish you could be here right now. I bet you’d have a great time at this gala I have to go to. Having you with me would be so much fun. I wouldn’t feel like such a fish out of water then. And we could do each other’s hair, like we did for prom.”

She didn’t realize she was crying until the tears turned cold on her cheek.

“I miss you so much, Liz.”

Krista swiped at the tears then turned to walk away. The sun teetered on the ridge now and she wanted to be gone.

She wasn’t ready to face Eddie’s grave just yet.



The phone rang and Krista’s heart chilled.

“Calm down,” she whispered to herself as she eyed the object warily, afraid who might be on the other end. Taking a deep breath, she snatched it up quickly.

“Hey, Krista.” Thank God it was Cameron. “Gretchen and I are over at the Black Horse Inn and would love to have you join us for dinner. You free?”

“It’s seven, Cameron. People around here usually have dinner by six.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen into that small-town mindset,” he joked.

“As it so happens, I don’t eat dinner much at all. So, despite your comment about how my people live, I’d be happy to join you, but only so I can gab with Gretchen. Certainly not for your company.”

“You wound me. But if you’ll accept my apology, we’ll meet you in the dining room in half an hour. Please, no jeans and baseball jerseys.”

“You’re a rat,” she pointed out with a smile. “I’ll be there.”

She did have some dressy clothes, though they usually went unnoticed in her closet. Krista pulled out a pair of black dress slacks and a white sweater. Nothing fancy, but it would be fine. She brushed her hair, applied a light dash of make-up—in practice for Saturday night, she told herself—and headed out the door with a goodbye to Gus.

The inn was only two miles away, a beautiful structure built in the late seventeen hundreds that served as a tavern and stop over point for the coaches traveling through. The owners had retained much of its antique charm. The rooms were well-appointed and comfortable and the restaurant on the main floor was one of the best in the state. Getting a reservation this time of the year was nearly impossible and Krista wondered what strings Cameron had pulled to get a room there.

They were waiting in the dining room for her when she arrived. She greeted Gretchen with a warm hug and the same for Cameron, but she turned her attention back to Cameron’s young wife. She was stunning, a golden blonde from California, who would’ve made it in Hollywood if the lure of a handsome newspaper man hadn’t brought her to the east coast.

She'd never regretted the move and had settled right in to the role of a wife.

"So, when did you get here and why didn't you tell me you were coming in this soon?"

"We thought we'd get away from DC sooner than planned. Gretchen wanted some time to soak up the atmosphere and see if you needed any help. I would've sent her up by herself, but I didn't want to be away from her for that long." Cameron took his wife's hand and squeezed.

"Aw, you're too sweet," Krista remarked. "You're too lucky, Gretchen."

"Yes, I certainly am. So when are you going to find someone to make you as happy?"

Krista gave her a wide-eyed stare. "What do you mean? I have Gus."

"No, darling, not the four-legged variety. A husband."

Krista chuckled and shook her head. "Don't hold your breath. I don't think I have any prospects in this area."

"What about Officer Burgess? He sure had eyes for you the other day," Cameron remarked with a wink.

Krista grimaced and rolled her eyes. She hadn't seen Matt since the kiss on the side of the road. But that didn't stop her from thinking of him much too often and in a way that she shouldn't. "There's nothing going on there. Until recently he couldn't stand the sight of me. I don't think he would consider me for any kind of relationship."

Which wasn't entirely true, she thought, but didn't feel bad for telling the little white lie.

"Oh, you have to fill me in. I love a man in uniform. No offense to you, darling," Gretchen cooed, patting Cameron's arm.

Krista sipped her glass of water and placed it in front of her. "There's nothing to tell," she insisted. "He's someone I knew from way back when. I dated his brother when I was in school."

Gretchen's smile faded and she detached her hand from Cameron's hold and took hold of Krista's. "Is he the one who died in the accident?"

Krista nodded. "Matt went through about fifteen years blaming me for it. He's only just coming around. Not exactly a rock solid foundation, you know?"

"But you're interested? I hope he's coming Saturday night. I have to meet him."

Krista groaned inwardly. Gretchen loved to play matchmaker. But this was one match that needed to be left alone. It was already going to be awkward between the two of them, they didn't need Gretchen stirring any pots.

"As far as I know he'll be there, but don't get any ideas, Gretchen. Not about him."

Gretchen pouted, apparently seeing her chance thwarted. She'd been trying to fix Krista up since they first met. In the beginning, Krista thought that it was in effort to keep her away from Cameron. She saw now that Gretchen just wanted people to be in love. It was very sweet, but Krista had managed to shy away from her attempts, usually by going off to some war torn country for a story. It seemed much safer than love.

"Well, we keep running into each other."

A sickening chill raked over Krista's skin. She recognized Ricky's voice as soon as he spoke. She didn't even have to look up. She didn't want to look up, but she did. Ricky had his famous smile, wide and so blatantly fake that it was embarrassing. At his side was the ever-suave Rachel.

It had taken Krista a little while after leaving Ricky's the other night to remember Rachel from school days. Popular cheerleader type. Class Treasurer. The works. She'd been Matt's girlfriend back then. She wouldn't have given Ricky a second look when they were teens. Of course

he was just a crude teenaged boy back then. Even with a well-positioned father, Ricky had been a hard one to take.

At least now she could explain Matt's intense dislike of Ricky. No doubt it stemmed from Rachel.

"Ricky. Rachel," she said shortly, meeting his eyes in a steady glare. Maybe he'd leave and she could try to salvage the rest of what had been a promising evening. But he remained at the table.

"Richard Crowe." He stuck out his hand toward Cameron, who was too polite not to take it, though he knew exactly who Ricky was. "And this is my fiancée, Rachel Patenaude."

"Cameron Warshaw," he replied and introduced Gretchen.

"Really good to meet you both. I wanted to say what a wonderful thing it is that you're doing for our little town. Especially in the memory of our friends. I'm sure I can speak for Krista here when I say that Liz and Eddie have been sorely missed."

Krista bit down hard on her lower lip, determined not to add to this conversation.

"Yes, Krista has told me all about it. A tragedy indeed," Cameron replied evenly.

Ricky had probably thought Cameron was going to be bowled over by his flash and charm. Both her friend and his wife, though, kept a cool, aloof distance from the newcomers.

"I tried to talk Krista into accepting a donation, on behalf of Rachel and I, seeing our connection to Liz and Eddie, and this project too, but she declined."

"Well, that was very kind of you, Richard. The project is fully funded, though. But I'm sure we could reconsider and put your donation to good use."

Krista nearly opened her mouth to protest, but Cameron flashed her a look that stopped her. What the heck was he up to?

Ricky's smile turned into an oily smirk as he glanced her way. "Well, the check is waiting for anyone who'd like to pick it up. Or I can bring it Saturday night."

"You'll be there?" Krista blurted it out before she could stop herself.

"We wouldn't miss it. Quail Ridge's first gala opening. It's sure to be quite an event," Rachel replied in such a way that Krista wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not.

"Well, we'll let you alone now," Ricky said. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Cameron and Gretchen. Krista, nice to see you again. Enjoy your dinner."

With his arm around Rachel's waist, Ricky left the table and went to a quiet little corner of the restaurant.

"What a prick," Gretchen murmured. "They apparently see themselves as small-town royalty."

"Pretty close to the truth actually. His father is a big mucky muck with connections in state and federal government. It was those connections that put me in jail and kept Ricky looking as innocent and sweet as a baby's behind."

"Well, the mighty still may fall," Gretchen said with a smile. She held up her glass of wine. "Here's to the meek."

Krista held up her glass and tapped her glass to Gretchen's, then Cameron's. "To the meek."



## Chapter Eight

Matt yanked the tie out of its knot again. “Damn thing,” he muttered and went to work on it again. He hadn’t worn a tux since his senior prom and now he remembered why. At least back then he had his mother there to tie the thing, but now it was just him. If worse came to worse, he’d take a drive to his parents’ house on the way to the center to get her to tie it for him. Why couldn’t they just have a big barbeque? He grimaced at himself in the mirror.

“Stop bitching to yourself,” he told his image. “People are going to think you’re nuts.”

It was nerves. Plain and simple. Seeing Krista again for the first time after he hauled off and kissed her was too nerve wracking and he was getting all bent out of shape because of it.

He pressed his lips together and willed his nerves to calm down. He didn’t want to act like he was fifteen again and facing Annie Lennon for the first time after they’d snuck a kiss at the back of the bus. That kiss hadn’t been repeated. He rather hoped the one with Krista could happen again. At a different location, of course, not at the side of the road when they were too worked up by the events surrounding them that had nothing at all to do with romance.

“Romance,” he said to his reflection and curled his lip. “Listen to you. Dad is getting to you.” Romance wasn’t something he needed with this

woman, but for some reason lately her face kept popping up when the topic came up.

And why not with this woman?

Matt turned away from the reflection and shoved the tie into his pocket. He didn't like where this conversation was going. He'd go over to his parents' and have his mother take care of the damned tie. And he'd listen to loud obnoxious music on the way, which would keep any unwelcome thoughts at bay.

Twenty minutes later, Matt knocked on his parents' side door, then let himself in. His dad would be working the late shift, but his mom would probably be cleaning up after dinner or settled down with a book.

"Hey, Mom," he called.

She was already in her bathrobe and a pair of pink fuzzy slippers, on the couch with her book.

"Oh, I wish I had a camera." She laughed and got off the sofa. "How handsome you are. But missing a tie."

Matt pulled the tie from his pocket and held it up. "I'm still completely hopeless. I'd hoped you could take care of it for me."

"Of course. You have a date tonight?" She took the tie and with a few deft moves, had him all set to go.

"No, I'm going all by my lonesome, Mom."

She stood back and tilted her head to the side, examining him closely. Then she shook her head.

"Such a waste. I'm sure you'll have all the single women paying you all sort of attention."

Matt shook his head. "Don't hold your breath. I'm not there to pick up women. That's not my style."

His mother shook her head. "I know it's not. But you never know what might happen. Did you know that your father and I met at a

fundraiser down in Boston? I'd just broken up with my fiancé. I wasn't looking either."

"I'll have to ask Dad what he said to you to change your mind," Matt replied fondly, picturing his parents as a young couple.

"You have a good time tonight, honey."

Matt kissed her cheek. "Yes, Mother, I will."

Then he was on his way to the gala, with no idea what to expect. He wasn't the first to arrive, which was fine with him. He parked in the lot behind the mill, met up with Carla and her boyfriend, Nate, and they walked in together.

As soon as he saw Krista, no one else seemed to matter. She was standing with her partner, Cameron Warshaw, who had his arm around a stunning blonde, but Krista outshone every other woman in the room. He barely recognized her, with her hair piled loosely on top of her head, honey blonde tendrils curling against her cheek and neck. The gown was completely feminine and showed off curves he thought she ought not hide so much. Usually she kept them well concealed with her jeans and big shirts. This gown embraced her body in rich emerald green.

This was not what he needed. He was already weak in his will to resist her, but seeing her so temptingly feminine could do him in.

"Oh my God, look at you, Officer Burgess." Patricia Frechette came up behind him and broke his attention away from Krista. "I don't think I've seen Quail Ridge residents so gorgeous."

Matt laughed and nodded then shook John's hand. John looked extremely uncomfortable in a pinstriped gray suit, and Matt had a feeling that there were a lot of men in the room who felt the same way.

"They have quite a turnout here," Matt commented, scanning the rest of the room and into the next. Dozens of people milled around, chatting

with neighbors and friends, some even dancing to the band set up at the back of the room. "And it's still early."

"I've never seen so many dressed up people," Patricia said with a smile. "Liz would've loved this. She loved getting dressed up."

Matt returned the sad smile. "Not Eddie. If he couldn't wear jeans, he wouldn't attend."

Patricia patted him on the arm sympathetically. "Well, you enjoy yourself anyway. Get yourself on the dance floor. I'm sure you won't have any problems finding a partner."

She and her husband moved off into the room, leaving Matt alone to decide his next move. Krista was still chatting, this time with Dan Greer and his wife, Madelyn. Dan wore a dark suit, but the fire chief still looked more formal than Matt had ever seen him.

As he stared, Krista's gaze moved past the Greers and locked on his. She smiled and lifted her hand in a small wave that in turn sent a shockwave through his body. So much for forgetting about the kiss. He wanted to go to her, was about to take the first step when he was grabbed from behind.

"Looky here! Matt, ya look like you belong on a wedding cake."

Matt turned on Tom LaCroix, a tall, husky bald cop with a perpetually ruddy complexion and bright blue eyes that always seemed to laugh. Right now he was laughing and so was his wife, Sarah. They were both dressed to the nines.

"You need a bride and you'll be all set," Tom continued and then looked around. "Nope don't see any, but I'll keep my eye out for one for ya."

"I bet you will," Matt replied with a chuckle. "And you'll probably announce it loudly if you do."

“You can count on me. Now where’s the appetizers? They promised appetizers.” With his arm around his wife’s waist, Tom propelled Sarah toward the buffet tables, leaving Matt to continue his path to Krista.

Except Krista was no longer standing there. Cameron and his companion were talking with Dale Hight, one of Quail Ridge’s selectmen, but Krista was nowhere in sight. Cameron had seen him, though, and motioned him to come over and join them.

“Nice to see you again, Officer Burgess,” Cameron said with genuine warmth and offered his hand.

“Matt, please. Nice to see you too.”

“This is my wife, Gretchen. Gretchen, this is Matt Burgess. He’s been helping investigate the vandalism to the center and he’ll be teaching some of the martial arts classes.”

Gretchen reached out a hand to him and smiled with all the enthusiasm of her husband. What a couple they made. Matt found himself liking these two immensely. And the fact that Cameron was so obviously in love with his wife helped alleviate any lingering feelings of jealousy Matt might have still felt.

“I’m very glad to meet you, Matt. I’ve heard good things about you from both Cameron and Krista.”

That was a surprise and he responded with a smile.

“Well, I don’t know how I deserved it, and I don’t know if I can live up to it.”

“She’s gone in to show Dan Greer and his wife the nursery area. I guess their daughter is moving into the area and they’re looking for daycare for her infant.”

“I’m sure she’ll have no problem filling all the openings. There are plenty of people looking for daycare, and even more teens looking for a

place to go. I think I'm going to go mingle. It was a pleasure, Gretchen, I'm sure we'll be chatting again."

Matt moved past the couple and into the room, stopping to say hello to friends and acquaintances. As he went, he was thoroughly ribbed for his outfit, but he returned the jokes in kind to the guys who he knew were not used to suits and ties either. He properly admired the women in the room, but he kept his eye out for Krista. When he finally saw her, chatting with two people he didn't know, he made his way over to her, suddenly realizing he wasn't sure what he was going to say to her and feeling not just a little like a school kid again.

He sucked in his breath. He'd wing it. He wasn't the kind of guy to have sweet rehearsed speeches. So if she didn't like tongue-tied guys he was in big trouble.

Krista watched as Matt tried to approach once more. She was amused to see him waylaid nearly every few feet. Of course she could've made it easy and gone to him, but she was really enjoying this and appreciated his efforts. Every time he caught her eye, he'd give her an exasperated grin. She'd shake her head and return the smile. His approach gave her such a warm, giddy feeling inside. She was more than a little nervous, thinking about the kiss they'd shared. Heat crept into her cheeks and she hoped he wouldn't see her blush.

"Wow," was all he said when he reached her. He took her hands and pulled her close and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"Yeah, who would've thought there was a girl hiding under those jeans and baseball shirts all those years," she joked lightly and squeezed his hands.

Matt smiled. "I always knew," he said softly. "Despite everything else."

His words sent her heart scrambling for solid ground. Instead it felt like it was in an exciting freefall. She mustered up the ability to keep it to herself though. “And may I return the ‘wow’. You look very sharp in that tux.”

“A little overdressed, but how many chances would I get to dress up in this penguin suit. This is for a good cause.” His gaze swept around the room before returning to her. “Looks like a great success.”

“I’m happy. Lots of faces I haven’t seen for ages. Lots of unfamiliar faces too. I’m still trying to sort them out. We’ve had a lot of people asking for applications for various classes. I can’t wait for tomorrow when the real fun begins.”

Tomorrow would be one big open house for everyone. It would prove to be more important to the future of the center than this night. Tomorrow would be for the kids, an open house for everyone in Quail Ridge and the surrounding towns to see what they had to offer.

“Well, that’s more my speed anyway,” Matt admitted and pulled at his collar.

Krista laughed. He acted all uncomfortable in the tux but he looked incredible. She had to check her emotions.

“So, we have plenty of munchies at the buffet tables. Open bar, if you’re interested.”

“I’m more interested in dancing,” Matt said. “If you’d do me the honor.”

Of course the band was playing something slow and romantic. She couldn’t say no, she didn’t want to say no. So she nodded and let him take her into his arms. It brought back the kiss all over again, just feeling his hand at her waist, his other holding her hand tight. There was only a hair’s breadth between their bodies and the heat grew quickly. She couldn’t speak, but took a deep intake of breath. He smelled so good. She

couldn't identify the musky, subtle cologne but was drawn to it and moved closer to it a fraction, hoping he wouldn't notice. By the way he increased the pressure of his hold she knew that he did, could probably feel her heart beat crazily against him.

She wanted to make witty conversation with him but found she couldn't think of anything to say through the battle of nerves with good sense. Nerves were winning out.

"You did a wonderful job here tonight, Krista," Matt said, his mouth so close to her ear. She liked the way his breath tickled against her face. It had been much too long.

"I had a lot of help," she admitted. "I was never much good at planning parties. My idea of a gathering was a few friends over for pizza."

"Then you've fooled me. This old mill never looked so good."

"Please, may I cut in?"

The sound of Ricky's voice was like a whip crack in the tranquil silence that had come between Krista and Matt. She tore her gaze away from its examination of Matt's face at the sound of Ricky's voice. She tightened her grasp on Matt.

"No, thank you," she replied coldly, her voice low. She didn't want any commotion this night. "Ricky, this isn't the time."

Ricky laughed and crossed his arms over his well-dressed chest. He looked better in a tux, more at home, than he ever did in jeans. Yes, he certainly had found his place in the world. It surprised her that he'd remained in Quail Ridge.

"Do you think I'm here to make trouble? Krista, come on, I have better manners than that."

She doubted it. He looked like he'd already had a couple drinks in him. If he was so bold sober, then what would he be like drunk? No, she remembered what he'd been like drunk. She wore the reminders. Every



day without her best friend was a reminder and not in the least, being robbed of her first child.

"You're welcome to be here, Ricky, but please find someone else to entertain yourself with," she said wearily.

Ricky chuckled. "You're just so much more fun," he replied.

Matt moved himself between Krista and Ricky.

"You need to leave now," Matt said quietly.

Krista was grateful. She didn't want to attract any attention. She glanced around the room. So far no one was looking their way, but Ricky's voice had an edge to it and she was afraid that he would have no problem drawing attention. In fact that's probably exactly what he wanted.

"Didn't you hear her, Matt? She said I was welcome to stay. As long as I'm a good boy. But according to our dear Krista, I'm not capable of being good. And apparently you're backing her up. What's with you, bro? She killed your brother as surely as she killed Liz. That okay with you now? Because I'm sure as hell not okay with it."

"If you don't leave now, I'm going to call the cops, Ricky," Krista growled and stepped up so she was at Matt's side. She was damned if he'd intimidate her. Matt's hand closed around hers and she was grateful for the momentary injection of confidence. Over the music, the scene was still unnoticed by others except a few couples who were close by.

Ricky shrugged indifferently. "Call them, Krista. I could care less. But before you do, let me tell you a few things about what was going on before that accident, some things you ought to know about Eddie."

Releasing his hold on Krista's hand, Matt grabbed Ricky by the arm, but Ricky yanked back.

"No, it's time we get some things aired out. You think everything was so perfect between you and Eddie?"

Krista curled her fingers into fists, anger roiling in her stomach and gathering in one tight, hot ball. So he was going to keep pushing her. The confrontation was long overdue. She didn't want to do it here. "You want to talk? Fine, outside."

Ricky ignored her. "Did you notice how often he drank? Why do you think he did that?"

"He drank all the time, Ricky. For a long time," she said lowly. Maybe if she started backing him toward the door he'd follow.

She noticed two others paying attention to the confrontation. Rachel and Ricky's father had been talking to Dale Hight, but now they were striding across the room. Whether they were coming to back Ricky or not, she wasn't sure. But on her side, she hoped, Tom, one of Matt's coworkers, was on his way. Krista would put her money on Tom and Matt in a second when it came to physically handling Ricky, but the senior Mr. Crowe had a lot of power. She wasn't too keen on facing it again.

"No, Krista, he drank, but not as much as he did when he found out you were pregnant."

"Oh God." Talk about pulling the rug out from underneath her and several other people who stood near. There seemed to be a collective intake of breath from those who heard. Even Rachel paused, her eyes growing wide. Krista couldn't even look at Matt, who still stood close by her side. Instead she wrapped her arms around herself.

"Shut up," she croaked, but stood her ground, anger pushing up against misery.

Ricky ignored her request. "He used to tell me that he couldn't stand how you thought that you two would make a happy little family with the baby. Shit, Krista, the last thing in the world he wanted to be was a father. He told me that night, before you picked us up, that he was going

to break up with you before you ruined his life. And I was there, supporting his decision. So was Tanya Rickford. Remember her? She was chomping at the bit for Eddie to be single. Of course things were already pretty hot and heavy between them before that night.”

“Shut up,” she repeated hotly. She wanted to throw herself at him and pummel him until he stopped talking, but she didn’t make a move.

“If it weren’t for you, he and Liz would still be here. Eddie wouldn’t have been out drinking that much if you weren’t so into keeping that baby. Funny, isn’t it, that crashing that car took care of the very problem that Eddie was trying get away from. A real hoot.”

Matt’s fist stopped Ricky’s rant and suddenly the room seemed to burst into commotion. Krista watched in stunned disbelief as Ricky went down like a rag doll. She could’ve sworn that she felt the floor rock when Ricky hit it. She backed up because she was too confused to join in the fracas. Matt was going toward Ricky, the look on his face telling her he was intent on getting another piece of him. But Rachel was at one of Ricky’s sides and Thomas Crowe was at the other, helping the man to his feet. Tom was there too, but Krista didn’t think his intentions were to aid Ricky in any way, but to remove him from the building.

Cameron appeared, too, and grabbed onto Matt before he could do more damage, and Gretchen had her arms wrapped around Krista’s shoulders, pulling her away.

“I don’t believe this,” Krista murmured. “Why did he have to do this?” She pushed away the hot flood of tears that stung her eyes and leaned against Gretchen reluctantly.

“Shh, honey. Come on, let the men sort this out. Let’s go find Patricia and she’ll take care of you. And I’ll take care of the other guests.”

“But I can’t let you do that,” Krista protested, but Patricia had been summoned and she was being pulled away. She had no clue how

Gretchen was going to handle damage control, but the woman looked confident. Between her and Cameron, Krista figured her presence wouldn't be missed for a few minutes until she managed to pull herself together.

Matt was grateful to Cameron and John for keeping him away from Ricky because he wanted to kill him. One punch, no matter how well landed, hadn't been nearly satisfying enough. But messing with Ricky was risky business, especially when Thomas Crowe was right there to protect his son.

Cameron guided him outside with a firm hold on his shoulder. Frigid air surrounded him along with the dim light from the streetlights.

He didn't want to talk about Ricky's accusations. Not with these two men anyway. He swore and leaned against the wrought iron railing and yanked the tie off and loosened the top button of his shirt.

"And of course, nothing is going to happen to him. Again. I doubt I'll get off so easily."

Cameron leaned up next to him. "Why do you say that?"

"Nobody touches that guy without any repercussions. Ricky would just as soon have my badge and see me behind bars."

"Well, I can't see that happening," Cameron mused.

John chuckled and shook his head. "Thomas Crowe likes to flex his political muscles. On anyone who he thinks offends him or his family."

Cameron waved his hand. "I know his type. I see them on a daily basis. Child's play. I can have him permanently off your back in five minutes. You stay here. I'm going inside to give Gretchen a hand trying to reestablish control over this party. I think I'll also have a word with the Crowe boys and salvage what we can from this night."

“Krista?” Matt thought of the horror on her face when Ricky had broke the news. It had to be a blow to her.

“I saw her go off with Patricia. I’m sure she’s fine. She’s a fighter, that one. One spoiled brat boy with a big mouth isn’t going to keep her down. Hell, I’ve seen her stare down a piece of terrorist crap without blinking an eye. This won’t get her down for long.”

Matt figured Cameron was way off about this, though, no matter how much faith he had in her.

A baby? He rubbed the palms of his hands over his face. He never figured, but of course he and Eddie hadn’t ever discussed things like that. Eddie wasn’t one to confide to Matt about such things, he’d always considered Matt too straight-laced. Matt racked his brain to try to remember if there had been any indication of things going wrong. Eddie always liked to drink but he didn’t think it had increased in those last few weeks.

Of course he hadn’t been living under the same roof as Eddie and had been caught up with his own life. Why would he notice?

“I need to talk to her,” he said and stood.

John nodded and followed him through the door.

Cameron was in a huddle with Ricky, Rachel and Thomas. None of the three from the Crowe party looked particularly pleased. Matt had the pleasure, though, of seeing the results of his handiwork. No doubt by the next day Ricky would be wearing a perfectly lovely bruise on his jaw. As he walked by, Matt caught the dark, hot look of hate in Ricky’s eyes. Matt looked away from him, but not before Ricky’s lips turned up in a wicked smirk.

Things weren’t over yet.

## Chapter Nine

Gretchen was being a perfect hostess under pressure. People continued to look uneasy, but the music was playing again and there were a few couples back on the dance floor.

Matt hadn't realized they were there, but Dean and Suzette stood close together, silent and serious. Matt waved an unenthusiastic hand to them as he walked by but didn't go over to talk. He'd try to explain to them later. He strode past them without so much as a word, heading toward Krista's office, not sure what he was going to say to her. Maybe she wouldn't even want to talk to him, have him in the same room but he'd worry about that if it happened.

He tapped lightly on the door. After a moment, Patricia opened it. She stood back and let Matt in, was going to close the door again, but kept it open. John was right behind him.

"Come on, honey, let's go home," John said and took Patricia's hand. With a smile to Matt, Patricia left with her husband.

Matt stood in the doorway but didn't walk in. Instead he studied Krista for a moment. She was at her desk, rummaging frantically through the drawers, muttering to herself. Her hair had come loose from its elegant style and she'd discarded her shoes by the couch.

"Thank God," she exclaimed with a relieved sigh, not directed at him, he figured, but at the pack of cigarettes clutched in her hand. He didn't think she even knew he was there.

“You don’t need those,” Matt said and shut the door behind him.

“It’s exactly what I need,” she retorted and removed one from the carton. “I think I know what I need. Matches. You have any matches?”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t smoke. Sorry. Now why don’t you put them down?”

Krista paused and glared at him. “Why are you in here anyway? You should be pissed at me.”

Matt furrowed his brows and strode across the room to her side. He took the pack from her hand and put them on the desk.

“Why should I be pissed at you?” he inquired, genuinely perplexed. “It wasn’t you putting on the show out there.”

Krista eyed the cigarettes, but she didn’t make a move toward them. “The baby. I never wanted anyone to know about it.”

Matt sighed. He didn’t understand why she thought he’d be angry with her. Finding out that she’d been pregnant back then and had lost the baby in the crash was a definite unexpected turn in this whole thing, a shocking blow.

Ricky was right about one thing. Eddie hadn’t been father material, that much Matt knew. It probably would’ve driven him to party harder, drink heavier. It surprised him that Krista hadn’t seen that about him. Maybe Ricky had been exaggerating about her desire to have a happy home with her and Eddie and baby making three. Had she actually lived with the loss of that perceived future?

“Honey, I could never be mad about that. No one here has any right to be angry with you. Why would you even think that?”

“You heard what Ricky said out there, that it was my fault that Eddie was drinking so much. I was so stupid.” Her gaze flicked up to him, but it didn’t look like she was actually looking at him. Her eyes were seeing something a million miles away. Or maybe fifteen years in the past. She

shook her head. "I never had a clue that he wasn't interested in being a father. I mean, he was young and all, but so was I."

Krista crashed on the sofa. She didn't look at Matt, but stared at her desk, maybe the pack of cigarettes. Matt went to sit next to her, regardless of whether she wanted him there or not.

"It wasn't your fault. He had choices as to how to deal with things. He never had to pick up a drink. He did. If it wasn't your car, then it would've been someone else's. Or it would've been his or my parents'."

He looked closely at Krista. She wasn't crying, but she had been. There was a tell-tale streak of mascara down one cheek. Right now she looked worn, pale and very sad. Her blue gaze was lost somewhere. Reaching out, he put his arm around her shoulder. She let him draw her to him until she was cuddled in his arm but he didn't think she even noticed. He'd let her be still and sit there for as long as she liked while the party was continuing outside.

He wondered what was going on with Ricky. He sort of wished he could be out there, hearing what Ricky had to say. He knew Cameron would have Krista's back, though, and probably was doing an admirable job of keeping Thomas and his son at bay. In fact, he'd bet his paycheck on Cameron before Thomas.

Krista was so quiet that he thought she'd fallen asleep, but when there was a knock at the door she sat up, pulling herself away from him.

"Come in," she said, standing and walking away from Matt.

He regretted the end of their moment but his attention was drawn to the door. He let out the breath he was holding in a fast rush when his boss walked in.

"Sorry to disturb you," Reg Camarillo said.



Matt got off the couch and crossed over to him. He hadn't expected to see Reg there and he didn't think it boded well for him. Who had called the cops anyway? Thomas or Ricky, no doubt.

"I'm sorry that you were called here, Reg," he apologized.

The chief shrugged. "I wanted to come to the party anyway," he admitted. At that point, Matt realized that things were going to be okay. Chief Camarillo didn't get that spark in his eyes when he was truly angry.

"So, what's going on out there?"

"Well, Ricky's dad insisted I stop by and listen to them whine. I'll tell you one thing, completely off the record, that little bastard got what he deserved. I heard you laid him out pretty good. It's a good thing you weren't in uniform. On the record, I'm here to tell you to take some time off until this blows over."

"Aw, come on, Reg, that's ridiculous," Matt began to protest.

The chief held his hand up. "No, Matt. Right now I need you to just take a breather. It was the only thing I could do to convince Ricky to not press assault charges against you."

"Crap," Matt ground out. "He gets to walk free after coming in here and talking trash about Krista and I have to go into hiding."

"Your friend Cameron is quite a guy," Reg said to Krista. "Thomas practically cowered at his feet. I don't think we'll have too much trouble with him now."

"Small comfort," Krista muttered with a small shake of her head.

"They're gone now. Matt, I'd suggest you leave too. I'll call when I want you back. It'll be paid leave, but leave nonetheless."

Matt nodded. He didn't have much of a choice.

"Okay. I'll be in touch. Krista, I'm sorry that things turned out this way. If it's any consolation, things are going pretty well out there."

She smiled weakly.

“Good night, you two.” Reg closed the door quietly behind him.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Matt paced to the window and looked out at the streetlights that dotted the road.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said and turned to her.

“What?”

“Let’s get out of here. I’ll drive.”

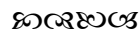
“But the party.” Krista held out a hand toward the closed door.

“Everything is under control out there. Do you really want to go back out there?”

Krista shook her head.

“Come on, please come with me.” Matt took her outstretched hand and squeezed it gently.

Krista shrugged. “Okay. Cameron and Gretchen picked me up, so let me leave a note to let them know I’m catching a ride with you and we’ll go.”



She had no idea what she was doing in Matt’s car. At the time, escape had seemed like a good idea. She really hadn’t wanted to stay around the party and was grateful that Matt had offered to take her home but when he headed off in the completely wrong direction she took notice.

“Where the heck are we going?” she asked, searching the darkness for any indication of where they were heading.

“North.”

“North?” Krista shot a glance at Matt’s face, which was cast in the pale green glow of his dashboard lights. “What do you mean north? Why aren’t you taking me home?”

“I think we need a change of scenery. Just for a little while.”

“How long is a little while, Matt?” She didn’t need the added confusion and Matt was being a little too elusive.

“Till the morning?” he replied evenly.

Krista laughed. “I only have this dress. I can’t sleep in it and wear it again tomorrow. This is crazy, Matt.”

Glancing away from the road, Matt smiled at her. “What part of this night hasn’t been crazy? I have a credit card and there’s a Wal-Mart on the way. I’m not going to wear my tux all night either.”

“All night,” she murmured. What did he have in mind?

“Where’s your sense of adventure? My parents have a cabin up on Lake Sunapee. Don’t worry, it’s a two bedroom place.”

“I should call Cameron.”

“No. No phone calls. For one night, no phone. We’ll be back tomorrow morning in time for the open house. No one will even realize we’re gone.”

“This is still nuts.”

But they stopped at the Wal-Mart along the way and, in their formal attire, each picked out an outfit for the next day, toiletries and pajamas. She was a little embarrassed by the intimacy of the whole thing, but in the end, as they stood there at the register, the clerk eyeing them suspiciously, Krista started laughing. She couldn’t help it. It didn’t mean that she had put the whole ugly night behind her, but it was like the pressure built up inside needed a way to burst free and she chose laughter.

"I don't know what I'm laughing about," she said, clutching her bag as they walked out into the dark parking lot. "There's absolutely nothing funny about what's going on."

"It's okay. We handle these things in different ways. I prefer your laughter."

Krista nodded.

Matt unlocked the door for her, and she got out of the chilly night air.

"How much further?" she asked, pulling the seatbelt across and clicking it in.

"About an hour. Why don't you close your eyes and sleep?"

She tried following his suggestion, but he turned on the radio and she was content looking out into the darkness and listening to the music.

What had happened that evening? It had been so promising, so exciting. The turnout had been better than she expected. And now here she was, fleeing town with a man who used to hate her but now had some sort of feelings for her. And her biggest secret was out. She felt torn open and naked, exposed.

There'd be questions, she knew. Matt would want to talk about it at some point and right now she didn't want to. She wanted to hide her secret away again and let everyone forget it. Rehashing it wouldn't do any good to her. Talking about how she felt when she woke up in the hospital, all torn up and in pain. They didn't tell her right away about the baby or about Eddie and Liz. In fact, they didn't tell her much about anything. She had her suspicions, but she didn't ask, not when her mother was sitting by her side, holding her hand.

Even her mother hadn't known she'd been pregnant.

They told her about her friends first. It was a horrible blow and she cried for a whole day.

Her doctor had waited until her mom was out of the room before he came and told her about the baby. He figured her mom hadn't known. He figured right, and in her grief she appreciated his understanding.

He'd been the last to know about the baby that had lived so briefly inside her. Or so she thought. Never did she think that anyone else knew.

But of course it made perfect sense that Eddie had told his best friend.

"I didn't mean to ruin his life," she whispered against the window, more to herself than to Matt.

"You didn't ruin it, Krista. When are you going to understand that? He did it to himself." Matt's voice was quiet as well, calming to her frayed nerves.

"He wouldn't have if I hadn't gotten pregnant."

Matt chuckled. "It takes two to tango. If you'd have known what would've happened and how he would've reacted, what would you have done?"

Krista thought about it. "I don't know," she finally replied. "I don't know. I was never much good at 'what if' games. What about you? What do you think you'd be doing now if that night never happened?"

"I don't think I'd be too much different," he replied. "I might be married now, but who knows."

"Rachel. You were seeing her back then, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was."

There was a tightness in his voice and she wondered if it hurt to see his ex-girlfriend with Ricky now. She wasn't going to ask him about that, not now when there were so many other complications.

"Are we almost there?" she asked, steering the conversation away from its potentially disastrous path.

“A few more miles to our exit. This drive used to take forever, it seemed, when we went up when I was a kid. But once we got up there, it was so worth the trip. I still go up a few times a year, kind of share it with my folks.”

“It must be nice to have a getaway.”

Her escape had always been on the road, sometimes overseas to war torn countries or places where disaster had struck. A place where she could bask in peace and quiet actually sounded like what she needed. She’d find it for one night, but tomorrow she’d have to face Quail Ridge and God only knew what. But it was the day that she’d been waiting for for so long. Maybe after it was over, she’d find her own little hideaway and just disappear for a while and rethink her life. Rethink whether she’d remain in Quail Ridge and run the center or entrust it to someone else’s hands and go back to her old life as a photojournalist. It would probably be simpler to worry about the troubles of the world and shove her own back into the same dark closet she’d kept them in for years.

It would be so much easier to go back to that life where the only people who she let in were Cameron and Gretchen. Staying in Quail Ridge would be opening herself up to others. She’d have no choice in that matter.

She didn’t know if she was ready for that.

When he pulled into the long, narrow drive that wound through the woods toward the lake, Matt noticed that Krista was already asleep. He hated to wake her up, but his alternative was to carry her inside. He thought that she’d prefer to walk.

“Krista, we’re here,” he whispered, shaking her gently.

Her eyes opened a crack and she nodded, straightening up in the seat.

"It might be a little chilly in there, but there are lots of blankets, and I'll get the fireplace started right away."

Krista made a noise of understanding and got herself out of the car. Matt gathered their Wal-Mart bags from the backseat and led her through the blackness toward the house on a path he knew well.

"Careful, it's a little windy," he warned and took her arm. She leaned against his side so he slipped his arm around her shoulders, offering more support.

The place had an unoccupied smell to it, a hint of must and dust. He flipped on the light switch by the door, and the room was flooded in warm light.

It was a comfortable room, one he could've been just as content living in permanently if he had to. The furniture was old, but well taken care of and familiar. The overstuffed couch had to be nearly as old as he was, in fact the newest piece of furniture was the television set and DVD player his dad had brought up two summers ago.

"I'm going to make some coffee and go change. I'll show you your room and you can either go to bed or have some coffee with me."

He hoped she'd stay up with him, but sleep was etched on her face, the line of her mouth tight. But she managed a smile for him anyway.

"Coffee sounds really good."

He led her up to the second floor and down the hall to his parents' room. "You can stay in here. There's a bathroom attached to it and it's well stocked. Come on down when you're ready."

"Thanks, Matt," Krista said. "For everything."

He nodded, a half smile forming on his lips. "It's okay."

Matt pulled the door closed behind him and left her to change out of the beautiful green gown.

He went to his own room, which he'd occupied since his parents first bought the cabin years and years ago, and stripped out of the tux, leaving it in a pile on the chair. He was going to have to pay big time for his lack of care when he returned it to the place he rented it, but he didn't care. He wanted to be comfortable and the black sweat pants and blue T-shirt would work fine. He had a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt for the next day. Anything but the tux.

Back downstairs, he got the coffee going and then took a look at the fireplace. His dad was very good about keeping everything in working order so Matt knew that lighting a fire would be safe. It would warm the room up faster than waiting for the furnace to kick in. Besides, there was something about a fire that he absolutely loved. It was one of the best ways to calm his nerves, staring at the dancing flames and hearing the crackle of the heat in the wood. It was hypnotizing.

As soon as the coffee was finished, Krista put in an appearance, now looking very much at home in a pair of deep green flannel pajama pants and a matching button up top. Her hair was loose and flowing in a mess of curls over her shoulders. She dropped her gaze, smiled and bit the corner of her lip.

Krista smoothed a hand down her sleeve. "I think I need to buy fifteen more of these outfits and just live in them, they're so comfortable."

"You must like green," Matt said with a smile. "It looks good on you. What do you take in your coffee? I only have powdered creamer."

"No, black coffee is fine. Oh, I love fires. It's been a long time since I sat in front of a fireplace. If I had a place like this, I don't think I'd ever want to leave it."

Her comments made him feel good, like they were on the same page anyway. "Have a seat on the couch. I didn't really get a chance to eat. We



have some crackers but not a heck of a lot more. We'll have to go out for breakfast tomorrow."

"Crackers are fine."

She took a seat in the corner of the couch and curled her legs under her. He gazed at the back of her head. The firelight glowed like a golden halo around her head. He'd never invited a woman up to this place, not even Rachel in all the years they were together. This was a place for family, his getaway from things in Quail Ridge, and even the thought of Rachel being there was like an intrusion.

For some reason, it was different with Krista. It wasn't that she could've been family, had things been different, that Eddie could've brought her up here had he lived. It was more like she belonged here right now, that he recognized her need because it was so close to his own. An overwhelming need for peace and quiet and to get away from whatever storm brewed back at home.

"The television works, if you want to watch it," he said and set the two coffee mugs down on the wooden table in front of the couch then went back to get the crackers.

"No, this is an escape. I could watch TV at home. I'd rather watch the fire. And can you hear the wind? It's kicking up out there."

He could hear the gentle rattle of the windows that faced the lake.

"Do you ever come up here alone?" Krista reached for her coffee. "I don't think I could. Feels a little spooky. But I bet you get used to it. And in summer I'm sure there's a lot of other people around here."

"We have lots of neighbors. None that are breathing down our necks, but in the summer you can usually always hear a party from somewhere nearby. Sometimes I come up here alone. I guess I'm used to it."

Matt looked at her. She held the mug up to her lips and smiled.

“My spooks came in different forms. I dealt with them with a camera. You’d think a little lonesome wind wouldn’t bother me after the things I’ve seen and done.”

“Where have you been?” he asked. She intrigued him. Sometimes she seemed so brave, a tough woman whose heart was steeled against everything around her. On the defensive at every turn.

“Iraq, Afghanistan, Thailand, Rwanda. And a little closer to home, down in New Orleans. Wherever I wanted to go. I was a bit of a vagabond after I got out of college. I had my camera and good hiking boots, and I hoofed it.”

“You’re putting me on, right?”

Krista turned her gaze to him. Light from the fire reflected on her face but he could see the dimple in her cheek. “About the hiking or college?”

“Hiking, of course. I’m not surprised about college.”

She looked back to the flames in the hearth. “No, I’m not kidding. I was a freelance photographer. That kind of life suited me for a long time until Cameron ‘discovered’ me. It was Hurricane Floyd that actually introduced me to Cameron. I got some great shots of the aftermath that ended up in a national newspaper. He liked my work, tracked me down and hired me.”

“The right place at the right time kind of thing?”

Krista shook her head, a sad smile turning her lips up. “I always seemed to be in the right place. Guess I had a knack. Or I was bad luck. I hope it was the former.”

“And when you started working for Cameron, he started sending you to all the hot spots overseas?”

Her grin widened. “No, I insisted on going. I guess I had him wrapped around my little finger.”

That little creeping feeling of jealousy moved back into his mind.

“Anyone tell you that you’re crazy?”

She turned her gaze on him, one brow raised. “On a daily basis. Which is one reason why I’m here right now. I started believing them. But is this any crazier than what I’ve been doing with my life?”

For a long moment, they stared at each other. He tried to figure her out, but decided that was unlikely to happen, any more than it was likely he’d figure out why his heartbeat was picking up pace as her gaze clung to his. His hands tightened on his coffee mug in order to keep from reaching out to her.

“Why did you kiss me out there on the road?”

Was he that transparent? Did she really know which way his thoughts were flowing?

“Wow, talk about a change of topic,” he said with a small laugh. Best to sound surprised by the question, he decided.

“Not really.” Krista stretched out and put the mug back on the table. Her hair fell in a curtain, blocking out her profile.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“I mean we were talking about crazy behavior.”

Matt laughed again. “It was crazy? I didn’t think it was crazy.”

Krista continued to level her gaze on him, but she smiled back. “It was too, Matt. Location and timing. What was going on?”

He had to think about it. It had seemed like the right thing to do at the time. It was hard to explain. For so many years he had this view of her, vicious killer or empty-headed teenager with a total disregard for others. At the moment, standing on the side of the road, as mad as he was for her going after Ricky like that, he saw her as something else. He realized that he’d been dead wrong about her. Saw that her grief and loss matched his. That all those years she had to live with it and with the knowledge that so many people blamed her for those deaths.

It had been such an unexpected relief, a physical sensation. He'd let go of her as his little brother's girlfriend and began to see her as a woman he wanted to know.

It didn't explain why he had kissed her though.

"Well, I can say why I took you in my arms. It was that or writing you a ticket. You were beside yourself."

"So a hug was the ticket to calm me down?"

God, he hoped he wasn't getting into a ditch with her, but there was a spark in her eyes. No, she wasn't mad. "It worked, didn't it?"

"And the kiss?"

The smile on his face disappeared and he looked at her steadily. Another long pause simmered between them. He could just about feel the heat radiating between them in that interval.

Matt took a deep breath and let it go slowly. "It just came naturally. Okay, fine, I wanted to kiss you, damn it. Why does there have to be some deep meaning?"

Krista leaned forward and caught his lips with hers. It left him stunned. Maybe this was how she'd felt when he had kissed her. Off guard, surprised. Pleasantly surprised.

Now they were in a safer place, Matt intended to explore this new development with care. He wanted to stop thinking and just sink into the way her mouth provocatively moved over his.

She was bold, the feel of her lips delicious and sensual. He pulled her closer, his hands riding over the soft flannel material of her pajamas. Her body was supple and molded against his touch. There was no question about whether or not this was crazy. It was insane and he wanted to drown in it.

Matt tangled his fingers into her hair. It was so silky and soft and thick. Tendrils tickled against his cheek and he brushed it away.

Krista pulled away from him and rested her cheek on the back of the sofa.

“This isn’t what I intended when I brought you up here,” he stated quietly, fingering a lock of her hair.

“I know that. If nothing else, you’re an honorable man. Besides, it was me who kissed you.”

“Now it’s my turn to ask why.”

“I was curious,” she replied with a shrug. “I wanted to see if it was as crazy and wonderful as I thought it was that day.”

“And?”

“And I don’t think it’s so crazy, but it was so wonderful.” Her voice was nearly a whisper that competed with the crackle of the fire. “Which leaves me in a predicament.”

“What kind of predicament?”

Krista took his hand and traced the lines on his palm. The simple touch sent volts of desire all through his body.

“Well, I don’t know how to say this delicately. I’m not the type to jump into things. Truth be told I’ve only ‘jumped’ twice in my life and once it wasn’t really jumping, more just dipping my toe. So this is kind of new territory for me.”

She stopped speaking and looked at him long and hard, her head still resting on the couch. Then her lips drew back in a smile. “I’m talking us right out of this moment, aren’t I?”

“Honey, I won’t talk you into or out of anything. Truth be told, while we’re being honest, I’ve only jumped twice too. So I guess that puts us on a level playing field.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Her voice was breathy and sexy, though he knew she wasn’t trying to be either. Somewhere beneath all the

hardness and cynicism there was an innocent young woman who had begun to surface.

“So this is still strange to me, but maybe because it feels so right,” Matt whispered. God he wanted her. He never, in a million years, would have thought he and Krista would be in this situation, sitting so close to each other on the sofa that their shared body heat rivaled that of the flames burning steadily in the fireplace before them. On the verge of something. What? Making love?

He stared at her, lifted his hand so he could touch her face. Her skin was so soft. His finger traced over one of her scars, a long white thin line that started at her parted lips and traveled up toward her temple. She drew in her breath, and Matt thought she would pull away. But she didn't, and he could see trust warm in her blue eyes.

A flash of remembrance dashed through his mind, of how she looked when he found her. But the image was fleeting because the woman in front of him was more powerful than any memory.

“I'm scared of this,” Krista told him. She reached up and took his hand, taking it away from her face and pulling it to her lap where she held it tightly.

“There's nothing to be scared of, Krista. I won't hurt you.”

“That's not what I mean. I'm afraid I won't be able to handle this, and I'll end up hurting *you*.”

Matt squeezed her hand and leaned forward, brushing his lips over hers.

“I'm willing to take that chance,” he replied against her mouth.

He snaked his arms around her waist and shoulders and drew her closer until she was leaned back across his lap. He reclaimed her mouth in a long, exploratory kiss, digging his hands deep into her hair. A flow of

lava-like heat swept through him when her tongue slipped between his lips to intertwine and dance with his. He fed off her sweetness and fire.

Krista pushed her hand up under his sweatshirt, and pulled him closer to her. Her body, against his, arched to him. The swell of her breasts, beneath the heavy material of her top, pressed against his chest. He swept his hand smoothly under her shirt so he could feel her skin. Her soft, curving flesh was warm to his touch.

Krista gasped against their kiss when his hand cupped over one of her lush breasts. But the contact drove her on, added fuel to the way her mouth possessed his. Boldly, he moved his thumb over the hardened peak. He longed to taste it, but her mouth felt so good against his that he didn't want to give it up.

Then she was pushing him away. Cold air snuck in where her body had pressed against him and he wanted her heat once more. But she had gotten up off the couch and turned away from him. He didn't ask, just stared at her. Her body was haloed against the orangey firelight. Her hair tumbled in a disheveled mass down her back.

She leaned over and put two more logs on the fire, sending a spray of sparks drifting up the chimney, then walked over to the lamp next to the sofa and turned it off.

The hot thrill of expectation raced through Matt's body as he sat as still as he could watching her. Of course she could lean over, kiss him on the cheek and say goodnight, but instead she stood in front of him, gazing down on him. Her expression was full of uncertainty, as if she were about step off a cliff into the unknown. She didn't speak as her hands went up to the buttons of her top and slowly released the first one.

One by one, the others came undone until the shirt fell away, leaving an enticing view of her torso, creamy skin against the dark fabric. With the same deliberate movement, she pushed the shirt off her shoulders so

it slid onto the floor behind her. Shadowy light revealed her full breasts, peaked with dusky, taut buds. Her shoulders were straight, her waist trim, sweeping into full hips that were still hidden beneath the pants she wore. The scars made him frown. There were so many. He had no idea. An angry slash on her shoulder and arm, one that crossed over her belly and a peak of one above the waistband. What lay beneath, he wasn't sure.

That was why she looked so scared. She saw her body as flawed, but she stood in front of him anyway, tall and straight. Brave. Waiting for him to either accept her or turn away.

He stood and went to her, wrapping his arms around her and pulled her close. His beautiful, wounded bird, ready to fly. He wouldn't let her. He was ready to jump in again and to embrace the desire that overwhelmed him for this woman.



Light and smell intruded on Krista's wonderful dream. She snuggled deeper under the blankets, wanting the dream to come back, but it was breaking up like a cloud of smoke in a breeze, becoming fainter until she could hardly remember what she'd been dreaming. She cursed the invasion of the real world until she realized that the scent, a subtle mixture of cologne and skin and lovemaking, came from the source of the heat next to her. Her body was cocooned by Matt's, his arms around her torso, his hand loosely holding hers. His legs were tangled with hers. The memories of their night came on stronger than the dream that had dissipated so quickly.

It had been more than she ever expected it could be, making love to him, by the fire and then again up on the soft mattress of his bed, under



the blankets where he made her feel safe and special and more of a woman than she'd ever felt before. Drifting off to sleep in his arms was one of the most incredible things, wrapped up in his warmth, his breath on her skin.

She opened her eyes and looked at his hands, still holding her. A ray of light glowed on his skin and fell away to the white sheet like a blaze.

"Oh my God." She turned herself over so she faced Matt. He was still lost in sleep.

"Matt, wake up." She shook his shoulder. "Come on, Matt, we've got to get up."

There was no clock in the room, but she could tell that the sun was high in the sky, and they had to get back to Quail Ridge for the open house.

Matt's eyes opened into slits, and he smiled. "Good morning," he whispered.

"We're late. We've got to get going."

She was already pulling away from him before he got her meaning and sat up in the bed, realization changing his expression from sleepy contentment to full understanding. She was already dashing out the door and down to the room that was supposed to have been hers for the night. Discarded on the unused bed was the bag of clothes he'd bought for her from the store the night before. She pulled them on quickly. Not even enough time to take a shower. Maybe when she got back down to the center, she could grab a quick one.

She'd worry about hair in the car, but she shoved her discarded undergarments into the bag and went downstairs to collect her pajamas and purse.

Matt had joined in with her urgent preparations. He closed off the flume in the chimney, returned the dishes to the kitchen and tossed his

sweatpants and sweatshirt in a bag. With his tux over his arm, he was ready to go in fifteen minutes. Krista paused to take him in. His hair stood in spikes and sleep hooded his dark eyes. She smiled, wishing she could take the time to enjoy being with him.

“What?” he asked, a smile turning up his lips. “I’m a mess until I get my first cup of coffee. We’ll grab breakfast at a McDonald’s drive-thru if you don’t mind.”

“It’s fine with me. I have to call Cameron and tell him that we’re on the way. He’s going to kill me.”

“No he’s not. I’m sure he’ll understand.” Matt locked up behind them and they dashed to the car. “I’ll have to come back up here and get the place cleaned up. You want to keep me company?”

Krista laughed. “That’s a long trip for a few dirty coffee mugs,” she noted. But maybe it was just an excuse.

He glanced at her, a small smile playing on his lips. He raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, I think another trip up here would be wonderful.”

Matt looked back at the road, but the grin on his face told her that the previous night was not a fluke.

As soon as they were on the main road, Krista called Cameron’s cell phone and hoped he wouldn’t be too upset. The biggest day, one that they planned to perfection, and she was going to be late.

Cameron picked up but before he could say anything, she blurted out, “Cameron, we’re on our way. I’m so sorry, but I promise we’ll be there in less than two hours. I owe you big time.”

“Krista, oh my God, where the hell are you? I’ve been worried sick!”

Wow, she thought with shock, he sounded really ticked. “I know I’m sorry, time got away from us. I’m horrified about this...”

“Just get back here,” he said, his voice steel.

“You can hold things down, right? The opening isn’t for another hour or so, so you won’t have too much of a wait.”

“There’s not going to be an opening. Oh hell, get your ass back here. This is such a mess.”

## Chapter Ten

The call ended before Krista could ask any more questions. What the hell was going on down there? No opening? What was he talking about?

“What’s going on?” Matt asked, glancing at her.

“I have absolutely no idea. But whatever it is, it’s not good. He’s really pissed and he wouldn’t say why. Cameron doesn’t get angry too often so it’s got to be bad.”

After a quick stop at the McDonalds off Route 89, they drove straight, making Quail Ridge in under an hour and a half. They went to the mill first but were only allowed to get two streets away. The area was closed off and emergency vehicles were everywhere. Even in the broad daylight the red strobing lights from the fire engines glowed against the brick walls of the mill.

“Oh good God,” Matt swore and got out of the car. Krista ran after him, up the street behind the mill. Her flesh went cold and her stomach roiled at the chaos surrounding the building and the acrid smoke that rose in a smutty gray cloud into the perfect pale blue sky.

The entire front of the building was a scarred black shell. The back appeared untouched, but the damage in the front seemed complete.

Matt stopped when he reached his father and Fred Seiberling, a member of the town’s fire department. A look of relief washed over Ed’s face but was quickly replaced by anger.

“Where the hell have you two been? We’ve been worried sick about you!”

“We went up to the cabin,” Matt replied. He had a hangdog expression on his face, like a little kid who knew he’d done something really wrong.

“And you didn’t think that maybe you should’ve let someone know? Damn it, Matt, that was irresponsible. Your mom and I have been going crazy with worry.”

“What happened?” Krista asked. Her head was somewhere between numbness and dizziness. The need to sit down overwhelmed her, but she battled it and turned her attention away from Ed’s red face back to the smoking remains of what had been her office and the nursery. The chaos. Across the street in the common onlookers milled around, gripping cups of coffee, gathered in clumps.

Then there were the news crews. Krista was sure they’d swooped down on the scene long before dawn and would be giving updates every fifteen minutes on the news. She wanted to scream, tell them to go away, but she swallowed back on it. What good would it do to lose control? It wouldn’t make the mill stop burning. It certainly wouldn’t stop the news crew, who evidently had just noticed her arrival, from coming her way.

She focused on what Ed was saying to her, but she kept her eye on the reporter and cameraman. She was keenly aware of Cameron and Matt closing ranks around her. Maybe she was safe for a moment, but she was too familiar with this kind of reporter and they’d find a way to her, no matter what.

“They’re trying to figure that out now,” Ed was telling her. “But in light of everything else going on here the past several weeks, they’re thinking arson. There’s more, Krista.”

Before Ed could say more Krista heard her name being called. A reporter was coming at her from behind, cameraman dashing behind her.

“Ms. Faye!” the female reporter called, waving her hand as she closed in on her. “Ms. Faye, do you think the fire has anything to do with the car accident fifteen years ago that took three lives?”

“Shit,” Krista growled, looking for an escape. Instead another reporter dodged past the policeman who’d been holding him back. She glanced at Matt. “Why would they link the two?”

Matt didn’t answer, but instead moved her aside gently and strode over to the woman. She must’ve been prepared for him, she dodged around him and continued her beeline toward Krista.

“Ms. Faye, in light of the vandalism at the mill several weeks ago, and now the fire here and at your house, do you think you’re being targeted for revenge?”

Krista turned on the woman, her heart seizing in her chest. Cameron grabbed her arm to hold her back.

“Krista, wait,” he said but she pulled away.

“What the hell is she talking about, Cam?”

Voices began to blend together. Matt had been able to keep the reporter in her spot, but the questions went on, echoing in Krista’s head. Cameron and Gretchen held on to her.

“Get her out of here,” she heard Ed Burgess saying. “She doesn’t need to be around here.”

“Come on, honey,” Gretchen soothed. “Let Matt and his dad take care of everyone here.”

Krista’s frantic sweep of the crowd found Matt. It appeared that the reporter had turned her attention on him, after all, he’d been involved in

the tragedy fifteen years ago. He may not have been the prime target, but she sure didn't seem to mind.

Before Gretchen could draw her away, she and Matt locked gazes.

"Go," he mouthed, waving his hand before returning his attention to the news crew.

Then she and Gretchen slipped away. They made it as far as the parking lot when someone else yelled out to her. Krista turned toward the voice.

Emily ran from the mill's parking lot, her tawny-colored leather coat flapping around her legs. Her presence here stunned Krista. She hadn't even spoken to Emily since she first settled back in Quail Ridge. Their last phone conversation had been an argument about what to do with their mother's home. Emily wanted to sell it, but Krista wanted to stay in it while she was getting the center put together.

Now Emily, her younger, sophisticated, highly polished sister, was racing toward her, not a speck of make-up on, her hair in a careless ponytail.

"Emily, what are you doing here?" Krista was able to get out before her sister was on her, grabbing her in a hug that nearly knocked her off her feet.

"I could kill you," Emily was saying against her shoulder. "But thank God you're okay."

Krista pushed her away, needing to get her breath back. "Would someone please tell me what's going on? Who called you? And what about the house?"

"The house, Krista, it's gone. Burnt down. We thought you and Matt..." Emily said brokenly.

"What?" Now she was truly stunned, like a blow to her belly. No wonder Cameron had been so angry. They thought she'd been in the

house and probably dead. Matt too, when they discovered him not at his own house.

“Ricky...”

“No,” Gretchen stopped her. “At least not directly, that we know of. His father took him out of town. He was on his way to the family’s house down on the Cape when this happened. But there’ll be an investigation into his involvement.”

Krista turned back to her sister. “The house?”

“It’s completely gone, Krista. Everything. Your Jeep, too. Tires were slashed.”

She took a deep breath, tasted the smoke in the air. Matt’s arm came around her to lend her support. Apparently he’d dealt with the reporter. She leaned against him gratefully. All she could think about was the loss. The mill before her, a piece of the town’s history, a building that had played such a big role in the Burgess’s family, was burning. Her center, a dream dear to her, lay in ruins. And her home, where she and her sister had grown up, destroyed as well.

Krista looked at Gretchen. “Gus? Did he get out?” she asked, her voice broken because she feared that the answer would be no.

“I don’t know, sweetheart,” Gretchen replied, brushing away the tear that slipped Krista’s cheek.

Matt tightened his hold on her. “We’re not done here, Krista. I think we’ve taken care of the reporters for now, but there are things we need to deal with here before we can go. I’m sorry, Krista.”

Krista turned into his arms. “It’s okay. I’ll be okay,” she murmured, but all she wanted to do was crawl into her own bed and pretend none of this was real. The acrid smell of smoke riding on the early November wind wouldn’t let her, though.



After a long day of answering questions, hashing and rehashing things, Krista was exhausted. She wanted to go home but she had no home to go to. She said goodbye to Emily, who promised to return to see if there was anything they could salvage from the ruins of their childhood home.

When there was nothing left for her to do, she stood outside, facing away from the mill, and closed her eyes tightly. Her head throbbed relentlessly, from the base of her skull right up to the center of her eyes. She rubbed the bridge of her nose.

A pair of hands touched her shoulders and she knew that it was Matt. He rubbed the tension-tight muscles.

“You can come and stay with me for now, until things get settled,” he told her.

She hadn’t even had a chance to think of the way their relationship had changed just overnight. She’d been too busy dealing with the mess with the mill and her home, and the “what now” of the whole day. She didn’t know what else to do, so she nodded.

Cameron eyed Matt. She could see the way his eyes narrowed a little. He was an astute man and Krista figured he could see the change between her and Matt and he didn’t know what to make of it yet. He knew her better than anyone, knew her vulnerabilities and the walls she’d put up. He’d be just as concerned for them coming down as she was. She appreciated his concern and touched his arm.

“I’ll be okay. With this anyway.”

Cameron nodded his understanding. “We’ll be at the inn indefinitely. If you need us. And Gretchen will bring you to get whatever you need.”

Krista glanced down at the new clothes that she’d picked up the night before. They weren’t going to last much longer and the only other

article of clothing she owned was the gown she'd worn yesterday and the new pajamas. Yes, she'd have to do something about that.

"I appreciate it."

She wanted her own stuff, though, her own comfortable clothing and shoes. Her camera was gone, all her equipment that she'd brought with her because she hated leaving it behind.

Then there was something she hadn't let herself think of since the first time she'd fully realized what she'd lost. Gus. Her sweet, faithful dog. She'd saved him from one hell only to have him perish in another. How could she ever forgive herself that?

Matt, with his arm still around her waist, led her away from her concerned friends. When she was in his car, she turned away from him so he couldn't see the tears she shed for her old dog.

Neither of them discussed the fire when they got to Matt's home. She'd never been there before and it felt rather odd to be surrounded by his things. It was a nice house, nothing grand, but she could feel the comfort and the hominess and appreciated that more than anything elegant. It was the kind of place where you could sit down and relax and kick up your heels.

"I have nothing in the fridge so why don't we order out?" Matt said as he dropped his armload of clothes on a chair by the dining room table.

Krista smiled wearily at him, but it was only a half-hearted effort at best. "I'm not too hungry, but I'd love a shower, if I could."

Matt took the things out of her arms and brushed his lips over hers. "Of course. I'll get you some towels and show you where everything is."

He led her up the stairs and to the bathroom at the end of the hall. Wordlessly, he turned on the light, pulled two thick towels out of the small linen cabinet in the corner and set them on the edge of the vanity.

"I'll go put these in the guestroom," he told her, then walked out.

Left alone, she turned the shower on as hot as her skin would allow and stood under its fast spray, letting it hit her neck. Tension melted away but not completely. Even as she dried off and combed the tangles out of her hair, she couldn't think about anything but Gus and her childhood home and of course Matt's building.

Then there was her dream, what she'd worked so hard for, opening the center to benefit the whole community. Maybe that could be salvaged, but now she wasn't sure she had the heart to be the one to raise it from the ashes.

Walking to the guestroom, Krista paused outside Matt's room. She took a step inside and looked around. It was as neat and tidy as the rest of the house, simple with little décor. Silently, she wandered farther in, hoping to learn more about him. On his dresser was a small royal blue dish that held various items—spare change, a key and other odds and ends she didn't want to poke around in. There was also an old family photo in a pewter frame. Her heart did a dip when she recognized a very young Eddie, sitting next to a black and white dog. Krista looked away quickly, not ready to deal with her feelings for Eddie after such a horrific day.

She turned her attention to the rest of the room. It was dark, and Matt's clock reflected a pale green against the surface of his bedside table. Smoothing her hand over the quilt, she wanted to stretch out on the bed and sleep, but thought that might be a little presumptuous. After all, he'd put her stuff in the room across the hall. He hadn't put out any invitation to stay in his bed for the night. Of course, maybe he was waiting to see how she felt about it first.

With a sigh, she left his room and crossed over to her own. She was too tired to examine the décor, but instead put on the pajamas and folded her clothes up neatly and put them on the trunk at the end of the

bed. She supposed she'd be sleeping here tonight. She didn't want to be alone, though. After the previous night, she found herself anticipating the closeness of his body with hers. A curl of desire unfurled in her body at the memory of their lovemaking, and the way he'd touched every part of her body and soul. God, she wanted that again, *needed* that again. She wrapped her arms around herself, holding the warmth of the craving to her, and looked away from the lonely guest bed.

Downstairs Matt was paying a pizza delivery girl. He put the box down on the table as Krista came into the living room.

"I hope you don't mind pepperoni. I wasn't sure what you like and pepperoni seemed pretty universal," Matt said.

Krista smiled at him. "That's fine, thanks. Can I get anything? Drinks? Napkins?"

"Sure, they're in the kitchen. We have a few bottles of soda in the fridge or water from the bubbler. I'll just take water if you don't mind."

In the kitchen there were traces of a feminine touch, the floral curtains and tablecloth didn't seem the type that a guy would pick out. Things matched too well. She'd noticed that about the bathroom as well, how the curtains matched the shower curtain and soap dish. Definitely a woman's influence. She frowned. She didn't want to be treading on someone else's territory as far as Matt was concerned. But then again, Matt didn't seem to be the type of man who would cheat on a woman. Maybe his mother had decorated the place. She held onto that assumption, preferring it to the other more likely possibility—that this had been Rachel's home too.

Out in the living room, Matt had the box of pizza open on the coffee table. She put the cups of water down and handed him a napkin.

"You have a nice place here. Very cozy." Krista settled next to him.

“Thanks. It’s home. Not that I spend a great deal of time here. Seems I work more than anything.”

Krista took a slice of pizza. “Did Rachel live here?”

Matt paused, his slice of pizza an inch from his mouth. He lowered it and looked at her, his dark eyes serious. He was so damned handsome, even with the frown on his face.

“Yes, we lived together for a couple years.”

Krista nodded. “I could tell. There are bits of her all around the place.” She smiled weakly at him. Like this was any of her business, she thought.

“There didn’t seem to be much reason to get rid of some of this stuff,” he said quietly.

“Very true.”

“After all, curtains are just curtains. I don’t hold on to this stuff because I’m still pining away for her. I think that I was out of love with her long before she left. She was kind enough to point it out to me. I appreciated that in the end.”

Krista turned her gaze to him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that you were carrying a torch. Maybe it was my way of feeling the situation out.” She sank her teeth into the pizza before she said anything else silly.

“Rest assured, Krista, there hasn’t been anyone in my life for a very long time.”

After finishing her slice, Krista settled back on the sofa. “What’s it like to live with someone? I’ve never tried.”

“I guess it depends on who you’re living with. I only tried it the one time with Rachel. It was cool in the beginning, but we soon found it to be a chore. When you go into something like that you can’t look at it like you’re a kid, playing house, where you can go home any time. It’s for real and it’s pretty hard to get out of.”

"I'd be afraid," Krista murmured.

"It's like any big decision that you make. You don't, or shouldn't, enter into it lightly. And it helps if you love the person."

Krista chuckled, but it wasn't a humorous feeling. "Maybe that's my problem. Everyone I love keeps dying on me. Now I don't even have my dog. I guess I must be bad luck or something. Poor Gus."

Matt put down his plate and moved over so he was leg to leg with Krista. He put his arm around her shoulders and turned her face toward him with his free hand.

"You are *not* bad luck, honey. You've got to stop holding yourself responsible for these deaths you're referring to. Just think, if you had been in your house last night you very well could've been dead too. That's luck, in my book. Or fate. The truth is out there. Boy, doesn't that sound like a television show? We'll find out who did this and it'll be put behind us. Move past the deaths of Liz and Eddie, let it go. And losing Gus isn't your fault. You need to see that."

"Of course if I hadn't come back, none of this would've ever happened. Gus would still be his happy dopey self and you'd have your family's mill all in one piece."

Matt leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "But I wouldn't have had the chance to figure out the truth, and to learn what an incredible woman you are. Now you have to start forgiving yourself. I'd like you to let me help you, if you could."

Krista turned to him. His eyes were dark and earnest. He didn't smile but she could tell that he would be there for her, if she needed him. It would be so easy to try to lean on him, but it would be against her nature. She nodded.

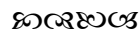
"I'll try," she whispered.

“Good.” Matt leaned over and lightly touched his lips to hers. She resisted the desire to sink further into the kiss.

“Now let’s finish this pizza. I didn’t realize how late it is and you look like you’re ready to drop at any moment.”

Krista smiled, realizing how right he was. She caught and held his gaze. His hazel eyes said so much, reflected the desire that enveloped her every time he was near.

“Matt, do I have to sleep in your guestroom tonight?”



“We’ve got one,” Ed told his son over the phone.

Matt wiped his eyes. He was barely awake and his father’s words didn’t make much sense. He looked at the clock on the stove. It was only five-ten in the morning. Instinct had told him to ignore the ringing of the phone. Being in bed with Krista was much more agreeable than getting out into the chilly morning air. But the phone rang persistently and finally he surrendered to it.

“Have one who?” he asked, leaning against the counter. He looked out the window. The morning was still a deep black, pressing against the glass.

“A suspect for the fires. He turned himself in last night. Matt, it’s Adam Frechette.”

Matt swore. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I wish I was, but he’s giving his confession to the fire at Krista’s and the vandalism at the mill. But not for the fire at the mill. We’re still working on that.”

“Patricia and John must be beside themselves,” Matt muttered. He never thought that Adam had it in him. It had to have had something to

do with revenge. Way back in the beginning, Adam had been as full of hatred as Matt had been toward Krista, just like his father had been. But those feelings in Matt had dulled to an ache over the years. He really thought Adam had let it go too. Apparently not.

He swore again. "Do you need me to come in?"

"No, you're still on leave. How's Krista doing? She still there?"

Matt knew his father was curious about what was going on between him and Krista. How could he explain it when he wasn't even sure?

"She's sleeping. She was pretty upset last night. I'm not sure what her next move is."

"Well, as long as she knows that I don't blame her for this. Not at all. I'm glad that you've come around."

"It took a while." Matt grinned despite the serious nature of the call.

"She's going to need some people on her side. This thing is all over the news. Rehashing of the accident, bringing up the time she spent in prison. Everything. It's damned unfair, if you ask me, but we should've expected it."

"I'll try to keep her away from the television," Matt replied sullenly. "She feels guilty enough over everything that's happened since the opening. These old wounds don't need to be ripped open again."

"Nothing we can do about it. Get back to sleep. I'll keep you updated on what's going on."

Matt hung up and sat down at the dining room table and stared out the window. It was still dark, but pretty soon the sun would creep up into the sky. He couldn't go back to sleep now, he was too troubled. He didn't want to wake Krista up either so he decided to go for a run.

He left a quick note for her on the table after changing into the sweatpants and sweatshirt that he kept hanging in the bathroom, then snuck out of the house.



The crisp November air struck him like a knife. A sheen of frost glimmered under the remnants of moonlight that dipped low in the west. He drew in a breath of the sharp fresh air and thanked God that he lived where it was so sweet and clear. Never in a million years would he trade it for a faster, more exciting life in a big city. Until Krista had come back to town, not much happened on the streets of Quail Ridge, but he knew everyone there and cared for them and that mattered more than any excitement.

He headed down the dark road that would eventually lead to town; the only sound was his sneakers slapping against the pavement and his breath, hot against the cold air. He didn't want to think of anything but pushing himself physically. His mind revolved around the current situation anyhow.

Everything else was too damned complicated. If it was just a matter of Krista coming into his life, well, he could handle that, at this point, gladly. The rest though, that was a different story. It hit a little too close to home. His nice quiet, well ordered home.

Now he had to deal with the realization that one of his acquaintances, someone he'd hung out with on occasion, was now confessing to arson. Adam could've killed Krista too. What in hell's name would possess him to do something so stupid?

What role did Ricky play in this? They were bringing him in for questioning. Matt figured he'd have a rock solid alibi, after all, he'd been down on the Cape all that time. But there had to be some connection. It was too big a situation for Adam to handle by himself. Besides, the two fires happened simultaneously. Adam couldn't have been in two places at once.

His mind kept coming back to it, like a magnet. Ricky had to be involved somehow.

Matt cut down Red Gate Road, which would double back and come up just above his own house. By now the morning sun had just broken through the bare branches, transforming the world into a silvery glaze. It would probably be melted away in an hour or so. He wondered if Krista would be awake and if she wasn't, the thought of crawling back into a warm bed with her was very enticing. It would be a relief to put off the real world for a little bit.

When he got inside, though, he found her in the kitchen making coffee.

She gave him a small smile. "Feel better? I couldn't believe it when I saw your note. You're an early riser."

Matt nodded. "I like getting out before I have to deal with the traffic down the road. And getting the exercise out of the way first thing is a good way for me to enjoy the rest of my day."

"Can I make you breakfast?" Krista asked, turning away from the coffeemaker.

"Hey, that's something I'm supposed to do for you. Why don't you sit down. I make a mean omelet."

Krista smiled and nodded, taking a seat at the table. "I'd like to go over to the house this morning to see if there's anything I can salvage. I should call a garage and get my Jeep taken care of."

"Sure, I'll drive you over and lend a hand. Seems like I'm not going back to work just yet."

"Oh, what a mess. If I only knew..."

"I know that it's soon, but what are your plans now?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Take a good look at the mill, see what's salvageable. Maybe we can rebuild. That's up to your family and Cameron, of course. If not then I clean up my mess and go back to my old life."

That plan left him cold. He didn't want to see her do that. He wanted her hang around, get the center up and running if possible. To see where this relationship was going. If she left now he'd never know.

"You know, I'm just thinking out loud here, but if you decide to rebuild at the mill, the top floor has been used as an apartment in the past. You could always move up there. At least until you can find something else, another house or apartment."

Krista nodded. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Until then you're welcome to stay here." Matt turned away from the eggs and faced her. He couldn't read the expression on her face. It was a mixture of longing and a deer ready for flight.

"I don't want to impose on you, Matt. I'm not even sure what's going on between us. I realize that we've probably already put the cart before the horse, but I don't want you to feel any obligation toward me."

Matt nodded, a little disappointed, but she had a point. Maybe they needed to figure things out a little more first.

"You do what you need to do, Krista. I'm not going anywhere."

He served her their breakfast and they ate in silence. He thought of letting her know about his father's phone call, but that would upset her more, knowing that it was Liz's brother who was involved in destroying her home and vandalizing the center. He wished they had more information, like who else was involved the previous night. There had to be at least one more person in on this whole mess. If only they could place Ricky at either location, but if there was something that Ricky was, it was careful.

Matt was antsy to get down to the station to get in on the mix, but he knew that he wouldn't make it past the front door. His father would keep him updated, though. Going over to Krista's house would at least keep his mind off what was going on downtown. Their silence continued

during the drive to her house but when they arrived he heard her sigh, a broken sound that cut through the car.

“I just can’t believe that it’s gone,” she said and got out.

Not much remained of the old farmhouse but the walls and chimney and the stairs running up to a bit of the second story. The rest was black charred rubble. The garage and a small barn had survived but her Jeep sat on four flat tires. Matt wondered why Adam hadn’t torched the car, but maybe he was hoping that the fire wouldn’t look suspicious. Of course that wouldn’t explain why he’d slash the Jeep’s tires. It was too much of a coincidence for the two occurrences to be exclusive.

How in the world did Ricky ever convince Adam to do this? Even Adam knew he’d never get away with it, apparently.

## Chapter Eleven

Krista walked up the edge of the ruins, squatted down and stared at the charred mess that was once the living room wall. Where was she going to start? Digging through this mess would be a horrible chore. And if she found Gus's remains? She didn't think she could bear that. She was crazy coming back here and facing this again so soon.

She stood again and turned away from the house. Pulling her cell phone out from her jacket pocket and the card that had the number of the local garage written on it, she called to arrange a wrecker to take the Jeep away. Then she walked back to Matt, who'd been waiting patiently by his car for her to let him join her.

"I don't see what I can do here. I don't think it's safe to just wade through that mess. If there's things in there that survived, I guess it doesn't matter." She'd never felt so defeated as she did at that moment. Never felt a bigger need to run.

"What now?" she asked him, desperation tightening in her belly. "I can't sit here and not do anything, Matt. What the hell can I do?"

Matt pulled her to him and held her in his arms. She pressed her cheek against his leather jacket. It was cool and tinged with the scent of his cologne. His hands rubbed up and down her back. Her helplessness brought her back to another time in her life when she felt completely lost. Of course at that time, when she stood in the circle of her mother's arms in the courtroom after she'd been sentenced to two years in the

Women's State Prison, she knew exactly where she was going, what she was facing.

Even after her release, she knew what she wanted to do with her life, how to rebuild it and make it matter.

Now, though, she wasn't sure. Things had been ripped away from her yet again and she wasn't sure how she was going to get them back.

"You don't have to do anything right now. Let things work out. Just step back from it and don't worry about it, at least for now."

Krista nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck and chuckled. "You don't know me very well yet. I have a problem sitting there twiddling my thumbs. I've always been able to up and leave when I needed to, when things got too tough where I was. I don't like to feel like my hands are tied."

She pulled away from him reluctantly. "When the Jeep is taken away, can you take me to the inn? I need to touch base with Cameron, see where things stand, if they stand at all."

"I'm at your beck and call right now, honey. Just point me in the direction you need to go and I'll drive you."

"Just until the Jeep is fixed." Krista looked up at his face and sighed. "Really, Matt, I can't expect you to drive me everywhere. I appreciate it, everything you've done since the night of the party. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there for me."

She wondered how things had turned out the way they had between them and even more importantly, where in the world was it going to go. Where could it go? She'd never been able to picture herself settled down into a solid relationship. She was too skittish about relationships. Not just the physical aspects. After all, they'd met that and it was absolutely more than she'd ever expected it to be. Absolutely nothing like the physical relationship that she and Eddie had had long ago, or the one

she and Cameron had stumbled through before giving it up prematurely. No, if everything else could be as heady and overwhelming as that night up at Matt's cabin, then she wouldn't be too eager to get out of town.

Getting out of town. Wow, she thought, that's bad. But she argued with herself, turning away from Matt and walking toward her injured Jeep, that it wouldn't be permanent. Just so she could think things through. She thought better when she was away from the troubling situation.

There were a few things that had to be taken care of first, like the future of the center and the mill, and whatever business that had to be done with the house.

She rubbed her forehead and leaned against her vehicle. Her head ached, but the rumble of the wrecker approaching the house caught her attention. She shrugged away her discomfort to deal with the matter at hand.

After the Jeep headed off to the garage on the back of the wrecker, Matt drove Krista to the inn where Cameron and Gretchen were staying. She invited him to stay, but he declined, telling her to call if she needed a ride anywhere. He left her with a light kiss and a hug.

Gretchen was on her feet as soon as Matt was gone and put her arm around Krista's waist. She pointed at Cameron. "Not one word is going to be said about the future until I take Krista shopping. She needs a new wardrobe and that is a priority."

Krista began to protest. Things needed to be discussed, plans needed to be made, but Gretchen was a force of nature. She had her purse and jacket on in seconds and was herding Krista out the door before she could say anything. Cameron seemed stunned by his wife's high-handed takeover of the situation.

In the end, Krista just sighed and rolled her eyes. So be it. At least shopping wouldn't take long. More jeans and jerseys, a couple sweatshirts maybe, and undies. And a few more pairs of those pajamas.

Krista directed Gretchen toward the local Wal-Mart. For the first several minutes of the drive, Gretchen was silent. Krista glanced at her. Usually her friend had something to say about anything and everything, but at the moment, she was keeping all her thoughts to herself.

"What?" Krista pressed, certain that whatever Gretchen was thinking about would come out sooner or later.

"So, what is going on between you and Matt?" Her tone wasn't exactly disapproving, more like an undercurrent of concern.

Of course Krista should've seen the question coming. She and Gretchen were close and Krista knew she wouldn't want to be left out of anything new in her life.

"I don't know," she replied honestly, then sank into the soft leather seat. Just remembering the way Matt's hands touched her body sent her mind spinning. She was certain she was glowing at the memory, that Gretchen would pick it up in an instant. She glanced at her friend.

"Okay, fine, since you're going to ask, yes, we've slept together. It was nice. No, it was more than nice, it was incredible. But I don't know. Settling down, even if this does go that direction, well, it's just not me."

"Why not? I mean, come on, Krista, if it's right with him then why the hell shouldn't you stay with him? He's so good-looking and sensible and good-looking and, well, a bit of a Dudley Do-Right, but where's the sin in that? And did I mention that he's really good-looking?"

Krista chuckled. "Then why don't you make a grab for him?"

"Because I'm married to the perfect man for me. Besides, I don't think Matt has any eyes for me. Haven't you noticed the googley-eyed looks he makes at you?"



“You’re high,” Krista replied blandly, but the thought gave her a little thrill.

“Not at all. Just in tune to love, my dear. I can see it a mile away, before anyone else can. I should be a matchmaker. I’d be a natural.”

“Matt and I don’t need a matchmaker, Gretchen. In case you haven’t noticed, the center is in ruins, I have no home and not much of a future here in Quail Ridge. If I didn’t have the center, there wouldn’t be anything to keep me here.”

“Except a really hot cop with bedroom eyes that any woman could drown in. Don’t you dare tell Cameron, but Matt has better eyes. Oh come on, Krista, the center isn’t in ruins. Cameron and I were discussing it and there’s no reason why things can’t be rebuilt. And if you can relocate your offices to another part of the building, you should be able to get things back on track in no time. You’ve got to at least give it a chance.”

“Yeah, everyone is going to be wild about the idea of letting their kids attend a center that’s been the target of two attacks,” Krista muttered through a tense jaw. Then she shook the tension away. “I’m not giving up on it so easily. I have this strong urge to get away and get this out of my system. Maybe an assignment. I could head overseas, see what’s what. That would definitely clear my head.”

“No, that would be escaping, Krista. Running away from this whole thing. I don’t know him, but I don’t get the idea that Matt would be the kind of guy who’d sit and wait while you were trying to get things figured out. He’d want to be there to help you figure them out. Maybe I’m wrong, but I don’t think so.”

Krista sighed heavily and leaned against the door to the car, watching the gray, barren November landscape go by.

"It's not me though. I've always done better on my own," she said distantly as she struggled against this newfound desire for ties.

"That's because you don't know any other way. I think you need to see things on the other side. I really hope you don't leave, Krista. Give him a chance."

Gretchen dropped the conversation when they arrived at their destination. Krista watched her expression as they entered the store.

Gretchen glanced at Krista and grinned. "Don't look at me like I've never set foot in a Wal-Mart before," she said with a laugh then grabbed a cart and headed off toward the women's clothing department. Shopping was shopping and she basked in it.

Krista protested at the amount of clothes that Gretchen piled into the cart.

"I don't need all these, really, Gretchen."

"Hush," she replied with a wave of her coral-tipped fingers. "I'm on a roll here. We need to head to the toiletry department. This is fun. Maybe I should become a personal shopper."

"Great, a matchmaking personal shopper," Krista muttered, following her friend to the other end of the store. "Just what the world needs."

"Oh, stop being so grumpy. A woman who doesn't like clothes shopping? Krista, you're definitely in a class of your own."

When Gretchen was finished their cart was filled to overflowing. Krista could've sworn the cashier's eyes bugged out when she saw them coming. Check out took ages and Krista swallowed hard when the total came up, but Gretchen whipped out her credit card before Krista could get hers out.

"No, this is on me. It was so much fun. Think of it as an early birthday present."

On the trip back to Quail Ridge, they stayed away from the topic of Matt and Krista's future with him. Instead they discussed what was going on down in DC and thoughts for going ahead with center. By the time they arrived back at the inn, Gretchen had been able to talk her into sticking around.

Cameron was pacing the room, phone glued to his ear when they arrived. He waved at them and went into the other room. Five minutes later, he came back in.

"Gretchen, you're positively glowing," he beamed.

"You know shopping has that effect on me," she replied. "We have enough stuff to open our own store, but Krista definitely needed this day. Look, she's glowing too."

Cameron laughed. "You do look radiant too, Krist. But I'm wondering if it was the shopping... But enough of that. The garage will have your Jeep back in about an hour."

"Thank goodness," Krista replied, preferring to ignore Cameron's sly comment. "I hate being dependent on anyone, even for a day. I've got to look for a place to stay. Oh man, there's too much that needs to be done."

"Go back to Matt's place," Gretchen ordered.

"Or get a room here," Cameron added.

"I should probably do the latter," Krista agreed, avoiding Gretchen's look of disapproval.

Gretchen shoved her elbow into her husband's side. "You've got a big mouth. I'm trying to get a romance going. You keep your mouth shut, okay?"

Cameron grimaced but nodded. He threw a wink at Krista though.

"Enough of that," Krista scolded. "What's our next move, Cam?"

“Rebuild, of course. I don’t give up on things easily, Krista. You know that. The center will open. If the Burgesses need persuading, I’ll do it. Ed Burgess is already talking our way, but if he balks, we’ll have to wine and dine him into submission.”

Krista chuckled and shook her head. “The Burgesses won’t need convincing. I don’t know how quickly things can be rebuilt though.”

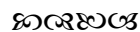
“The damage isn’t as extensive as we first thought. Lots of smoke and water damage. Your office is completely gone, but really, it’s not as bad as we thought. Don’t lose hope.”

“I haven’t. I’m just tired of it all. Tired of waiting for the next little mishap. I’m not a quitter, but sometimes I feel that maybe we’d have better luck setting this up in a different place.”

“That would defeat the purpose, now wouldn’t it?”

Krista shrugged, but nodded.

As soon as the Jeep was back in her possession, Krista transferred all her bags from Gretchen’s car into it and headed back to Matt’s. She’d give her head another night to think things through before making any decisions.



Matt thought Krista would never return, or that she’d decided to stay at the inn with her friends. Not that it would’ve come as a big surprise. He could see that she wasn’t entirely comfortable at his house. While he could understand why, he was hoping that the more time she spent there the more she wouldn’t want to leave.

Besides, he had more news for her. It was time to tell her about Adam. Whether or not that would make her feel any better, he wasn’t

sure. But knowing that the perpetrators were in custody would no doubt give her some peace of mind.

He breathed a sigh of relief when her Jeep pulled into his drive. He watched her out his kitchen window, studying the worry still etched on her features. She pulled a few bags out of the passenger seat and looked up at the house. He waved to her and she smiled weakly.

Matt greeted her at the door.

"I'm glad you came back," he told her, taking the bags from her hands so she could remove her jacket.

"Well, I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet but I didn't want to disappear on you," she replied. Her brow was furrowed, but there was a definite light in her eyes when she looked around the living room. Her jaw wasn't quite so tense.

"Regardless, I'm glad you came back. I have news for you, but I need you to sit down."

Krista turned to him, her frown deepening. He felt like he was kicking her when she was down.

She took a seat at the table anyway and Matt sat across from her.

"They have two people in custody. Actually, they had one early this morning, but now they have two, and they're searching for a third."

Krista let go of her breath and closed her eyes. "Anyone I know?" she asked.

He wondered if she really wanted to know; her words were reluctant.

"Yeah. Adam Frechette turned himself in about four this morning. He was pretty forthcoming about his part in the whole thing."

Krista dropped her head onto her forearms, which she had folded on top of the table. "I can't believe it," she murmured.

"There's more, Krista." Matt reached out and stroked her bowed head.

Slowly she lifted her head and met his eyes.

“Around noon, John Frechette turned himself in as well.”

He knew that it would be more of a shock, especially when everything seemed to be well and forgiven between Krista and John. Apparently it was an act. John hadn’t forgiven her at all. He’d been biding his time, planning on this for as long as she’d been back in town, stoked, no doubt by someone else’s desire to see her suffer.

“I can’t believe this. It can’t be happening. Who’s the third person they’re looking for?”

“Ricky,” he replied shortly. “He was the one who planned all this really. But he’s nowhere to be found.”

“That I’m not surprised about. But what the hell was he thinking he’d get out of this? Was it all just a matter of revenge?”

“John and Adam couldn’t say. That was their reason, but they wouldn’t speak for Ricky.”

“I take it he isn’t down on the Cape like he should be.”

“No. His father said that when he woke up this morning Ricky was gone. We’ll find him, Krista.” What he didn’t say, but what he saw in her eyes, was the worry that he’d come back and try to finish what he’d started. The man was crazy and nothing he’d done was reasonable. “You look exhausted. Why don’t you go lie down?”

“I doubt I’d sleep,” she murmured but she stood. For a long moment, she stared at him, her lips in a tight frown. “At least not alone. Are you busy?”

Matt smiled. “No, I’m not busy.”

He took her hand and led her up to his bedroom. She closed the door behind them then crawled onto his bed, looking at him. It wasn’t a sexual look, but a patient look, her blue-gray eyes sad and tired but inviting. He kicked off his shoes and climbed up next to her. She nestled

her body against his, wound her arm around his waist. She was warm and smelled like his shampoo and his soap. It was altogether too intimate, but he didn't want to let go of her. Instead he pulled her closer and watched her close her eyes. He continued to gaze at her as the tension drained away from her face and the muscles in her jaw relaxed. Soon her breathing became deep and even as sleep took hold of her. He closed his own eyes and drifted off as well.

The room was bathed in gray light as evening moved in. A knocking downstairs brought him out of sleep but didn't disturb Krista. Matt detangled himself from her arms and moved off the bed so as not to wake her and went downstairs.

He expected his father to be at the door and couldn't have been more surprised to find Rachel standing there, her arms wrapped tightly across her chest. As beautiful as she was, she looked miserable. She held a rolled up newspaper in her tight grip.

"Rachel, what is it?" He moved back so she could come in out of the cold.

She walked into the house and looked around it. This was the first time she'd been back since she walked out over a year ago. He could see her assessing the room and he wondered if she was picking out everything that he hadn't changed and wondering why.

"Why are you here?"

Rachel stopped her examination of the room and turned her attention back to Matt.

"I didn't know where else to go. I had to tell someone. It's about Ricky."

"You know where he is?" Matt demanded.

"No, I don't. I heard that John and Adam Frechette turned themselves in, though. As soon as I heard I came back. I wanted to tell

you that I never knew, Matt. I never had any idea that Ricky was that hung up on what happened fifteen years ago. He was in love with her, no, is *still* in love with her. With Liz. He's obsessed with her. I never knew that, he kept it hidden. I feel like such a fool."

Matt frowned. He didn't quite buy it, though she was playing distraught pretty well. "Why are you telling me? You don't owe me anything, Rachel. From the moment you handed me the ring and walked out that door your business ceased being my business. My only interest in Ricky right now is getting him in custody and having him pay for what he's done to Krista and my family."

Rachel sat down on the couch and shrugged the jacket off, like she was perfectly at home. He didn't like it much, but he let her.

"Don't you think that I'm not sick about that, Matt? I am. It's like I've been living with a stranger all this time." She examined the big sparkly diamond on her left ring finger. "But now that I know the truth, I'm scared to death of him."

She stared off across the room, which gave Matt a good opportunity to examine her closely. He'd known her for more years than he cared to remember and had thought that he knew everything there was to know about her. She said she was scared and on the surface she looked scared, her brown eyes wide, and her lips in a pout. Even her skin was a shade paler than usual. But she still held her slim frame in a confident pose. No, he didn't quite buy her fear.

"Where do you think he is?"

"I have no idea. If I did, Matt, I'd tell you. He'd be in custody right now. But he could be anywhere. His father has plenty of places where he could go."



"I still don't know why you're here. Why didn't you go to your parents? Why here?" His voice was harsher than necessary, but he wasn't going to apologize for it. Her presence left him cold.

Rachel stood, not looking at him. She walked across the room to the fireplace and trailed her finger along the white wood surface. She stopped and picked up a picture of Matt and his parents.

"Rachel," Matt prompted when she didn't answer.

She placed the frame back in its spot and turned back to him. A small smile pulled at her lips, a sad expression on her beautiful face. There was a time when that little smile, the way her brows furrowed, would've worked on his heart, melted it right down.

But that was then and this was now. She hadn't been a part of his life for too long. Certainly too long to slip back into old habits.

"I always felt safe here," she said. "It seemed natural to come here."

Matt inhaled deeply. Damn, he didn't need this. Not now when everything else was going crazy. Not when there was a woman upstairs in his bed sleeping who could very well mean a great deal to him. No, already did mean a great deal to him.

"You can't stay, Rachel. This isn't your home anymore."

"Wow. That's cold, Matt. I'm not planning on moving back in or anything serious like that. Just a friendly face, some warmth. Company."

"I already have company."

Rachel nodded. "I saw her Jeep out in the driveway."

"But you came anyway, knowing that Krista was here. I don't get you, Rachel."

"I was hoping that history would win out." Rachel stepped toward him, biting her lower lip as she reached out for him. She pressed her hand against his chest.

For a split second, he anticipated feeling the same old thrill that he used to feel with her whenever she touched him. But it didn't come. All he felt was the urge to get her out of his house as soon as possible, before Krista woke up and came downstairs.

"What's going on?"

Matt turned toward the stairs. Krista stood on the bottom step, her hand on the railing. Her hair was messy from her nap and she looked stunning but the expression on her face was one he hoped he wouldn't see. Distrust.

## Chapter Twelve

The chill had wakened Krista but the voices that floated up from downstairs got her out of bed. Rachel was the last person she expected to see in Matt's house, but there she was, looking right at home, her hand on his chest like she was moving in for a more intimate touch. Krista almost retreated back upstairs before they saw her, but she decided to confront them, face the situation so she knew right off where she stood.

Matt had the good graces to look like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have, but as he had his attention on her, Rachel met her eyes. There was something there, a challenge, maybe? As if they were competing for Matt.

Then the look was gone, or covered up. Rachel backed off from Matt, let her hand drop to her side.

"I'm sorry to intrude," she apologized smoothly. "My timing is awful. I wanted to talk to Matt about Ricky."

Krista came down into the living room. "What about him? He had something to do with the fire, didn't he? Where is he?" Krista felt herself go into battle mode. If Rachel knew something then she wanted to know. Had a right to know.

"I don't know where he is, Krista. I hope you believe me."

Krista stared hard at her, trying to detect a lie. "I don't know."

"But since you're here, I'll give you a heads-up. He's crazy. That's the only way to explain his behavior since you've been back. He's on the

loose, Krista, and I'm afraid that he'll be coming for you and finish off what he tried to do the other night."

She smiled at Krista, a sad little expression that made Krista think that she pitied her.

"I guess coming back here wasn't such a hot idea, was it?" The tone of Rachel's voice chilled and she held out the rolled up paper to Krista. "Today's paper. I hope you weren't expecting the past to stay buried. It's coming back on everyone."

Krista reluctantly took the paper. She'd avoided watching the news, after all the questions the reporter had asked.

"You sure did a number on everyone's lives, didn't you? Not just on Eddie's and Liz's but Matt's and mine too. He never was the same after Eddie died."

"It's time for you to go now," Matt warned, taking a step forward.

"And Ricky, well, we know what it did to him, don't we? Because of you I've lost two men. Great job."

Then Rachel returned her attention to Matt, bestowing on him a glance that lingered a bit too long. Matt glared at her as she said her goodbyes to him. As soon as Rachel was out the door he seemed to let out a sigh of relief.

When Rachel's car pulled out of the driveway, Krista turned to Matt. "Now what was that really about? Just to give me a warning about Ricky and this?" She held up the newspaper. "Or was there something more?"

"I'm not sure. She said she felt safe here. I don't know if it was for show or if she's really afraid of Ricky or...or if she realized that the grass wasn't so green on the other side."

"And she wanted to test the waters back on this side?"

Matt shook his head. "I don't know, Krista. I guess. I told her it wasn't happening."

"I know, Matt. I could tell that when I saw the look on your face before you knew I was there. You don't owe me any explanation though. It really isn't my business." Suddenly she was just damned tired. The fight was leaving her, leaving her with the desire to curl up and sleep.

Matt took her into his arms. "I would like it to be your business."

She leaned against him, resting her chin on his shoulder. The newspaper slipped from her fingers. She didn't really want to read it anyway, rehashing of old history and bitterness.

"Do you think that he'd really come after me? Is he crazy like she said?"

"His behavior isn't exactly sane. I don't know how he managed to convince John and Adam to get involved. I don't know what's going to happen to them either, but I'll be honest that I'm more worried about what Ricky will do. Maybe he won't do anything. Maybe he'll stay gone or maybe we'll catch him and he'll go to prison."

She pulled away from him reluctantly. She liked the warmth his body put out but she needed to step back from it. She was too used to facing danger, but it had never been this personal. The trouble she was used to being involved with generally wasn't aimed directly at her, but at the world around her. It had been so easy to stand strong in the middle of it.

This was different. It was about her this time and she was at risk. If she was at risk, would she be dragging Matt into it with her?

"I have to go," she said, not able to look at him. She turned away and walked toward the kitchen.

"What do you mean? Where are you going?"

He followed her but she still didn't turn to him. Instead she gathered her jacket and the bags she'd carried into the house.

"Out of town. Until this passes. I don't need anyone else to get hurt. If what Rachel says is true, I don't want to be where he can find me."

“Then I’ll take you up to the cabin.”

“No, further away than that. Please understand, Matt.” She pressed her mouth against his. Damn, she didn’t expect it to be so hard to walk away. It had never been hard before.

“Cameron will take care of things with the mill. We want to continue our plans for opening the center if it’s still okay with you and your parents.”

“Will you be a part of it?” Matt asked.

“I will. But not until it’s safe for me to come back here.”

Matt cupped her face with his hands and leaned in, touching his nose to hers. “Stay with me one more night. Please,” he whispered and claimed her lips in a feathery touch.

Need and desire welled up and pushed at her heart with incredible force. She squeezed her eyes shut, but tears burned anyway.

“It’s too late for you to leave now,” he continued, then kissed her again, this time with more determination. His lips lingered on hers, enticing her mouth to open and welcome the passion he offered.

The bags slid from her grip and dropped to the floor at their feet. Matt’s hands slipped up her arms, bringing her closer. She had no desire now to back out of his embrace. Maybe he was right, maybe it would be better to wait until the morning. Her only fear was that in the morning she’d lose her resolve to leave.

It was worth it, though, she thought, her mind a haze of desire. If she didn’t take this one last night with him, she was afraid that she may never get another chance. Finally, she let go and gave herself freely to her desire.

She pulled her mouth away from his and feathered kisses up his cheek to his ear. “Take me to bed,” she whispered.

In a swift, fluid movement, Matt had lifted her into his arms and carried her up the flight of stairs and to his room, his uneven breath warm on her cheek as he held her close.

Never in her life had she felt as cherished as Matt made her feel. Slowly he drew the clothes off her body, gently kissing each spot of exposed skin as he went. Though they stood next to the bed in the darkness, Krista felt as if her legs would give way at any moment, yet such intoxicating energy pulsed through her. Her heart pounded fiercely, but nothing compared with the touch of Matt's drugging kisses on her skin.

As soon as he'd removed the last piece of her clothing, Matt began to pull his sweatshirt over his head, but Krista stopped him, needing to do it herself so she could make him feel the same delicious waves of need that raked her body.

Matt started to speak, but Krista shushed him, tracing her tongue over his lips until she pushed his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Her arms snaked around him, and she savored his smooth skin.

"This is torture, you know," he whispered. His voice had a definite shake to it.

Krista giggled. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to do that." She released the button on his jeans.

"Liar," he replied, but when Krista glanced up at him, he was smiling. His smile grew when she pushed the jeans down over his hips.

With that, Matt took command. He kicked the jeans aside and propelled Krista to the bed where he lay her down gently, his hands wandering over her flat belly and up over the soft orbs of her breasts, his mouth following eagerly.

Their lovemaking was an explosive progression from slow and heartbreakingly sweet to desperate and hot. She knew when morning broke she'd have to leave, for how long she didn't know, but she didn't want to go without experiencing the overwhelming power of his body moving with hers, carrying each other to the highest peaks of rapture.

At last, when she lay curled against Matt's sleeping frame, Krista knew it was time to go. If she waited until morning, she'd find some other reason to stay with him. Right at this moment her resolve was strong, though reluctant.

She eased herself from under the arm draped over her waist, leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. His eyes cracked open.

"I have to go now," she whispered, then kissed him again, on the corner of his mouth.

Matt sat up. "Now? It's not even six in the morning." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Yes, now. Please, just let me go."

Matt stared at her for a long time, frowning. "Where are you going?"

"A friend's house," she replied. "I'll leave you her number."

"I hate this."

Krista leaned into him and caught his lips in a slow, succulent kiss, her fingers running through his short hair. Reluctantly, she pulled back. "I hate it too, but I'd hate it more if something happened to you because of me."

"I can take care of myself. And you," Matt replied defiantly, drawing her back into his arms. "I'm not going to let Ricky scare me."

Krista nestled her face into the crook of his neck. "I'm not taking any chances. There's so much happening, with the publicity, Ricky being on the loose. I just need to take a step back from it."

"You'll be back, right?"



She pulled away from him and gazed at him steadily. Gently, she traced her finger along his jawline. His eyes were filled with a heat that sent a thrill melting through her body.

“I promise I’ll be back. This isn’t over between us. Not by a long shot.”

Matt gathered her back into his arms and captured her mouth with hungry urgency. The last kiss, she thought dizzily, and blood beat furiously through her veins. She tore herself away and climbed out of the bed.

No more, her frantic mind told her. As Matt stared at her, she pulled her clothes back on. He began to climb out of bed but she stopped him.

“Please don’t,” she pleaded as tears gathered in her eyes. Without another word, she fled his room and dashed downstairs.

Gathering up her discarded bags, Krista walked out of Matt’s house alone.



Krista pulled the Jeep up in front of the yellow two-story duplex. It had been a few years since she’d been in this neighborhood but it hadn’t changed. It never changed. It looked a little bleak in the early November morning light. The tiny lawn in front of the building was grayish-green. There had been an attempt to brighten the place up with a little garden and flower boxes, but it was sleeping for the winter. Out of the whole street, it was the best-kept house. Penny had always made it a point to make each of her homes as pretty as she could, no matter what the surroundings were like.

The door opened and Penny Larkin burst out, trotting down the stairs with a grin on her face.

If there'd been another mother in Krista's life, it was Penny. She'd come into her life when she most needed a friend and in the most unlikely place for that to happen. Penny had been in prison for a year when Krista had become a resident. She'd been doing time for embezzling money from her company. She'd told Krista that she did it because her father was very ill and his medical insurance couldn't cover the cost of treating him. In the end, her father died and Penny was put in prison. But the double blow didn't destroy her and Krista had looked upon her as a role model.

She'd become Krista's island in the storm as well, and she watched after her when there were others who wanted to harm her.

Krista left the prison six months before Penny's release but over the years, they'd remained close. There wasn't a month that passed when she didn't at least call and check in on the older woman. She'd visit when she could, but hadn't been there for so long. Still, Penny hadn't changed much over the past few years. Her hair was sunshine yellow, cut in a pageboy bob and her eyes still sparkled. Prison life hadn't beaten her either. She'd come out of there more determined to make up for the things she'd done wrong.

"It's about time you got here," Penny exclaimed and took Krista in her arms. Krista held on for dear life, such a relief to be back with the one person in her life who could actually understand what she'd been through.

"It's a long drive," Krista replied against her shoulder.

"No, I meant since you were last here. What has it been, two years?" Penny eased her away. "You got any bags?"

Krista laughed. "About a million Wal-Mart bags. I seem to have lost my luggage."

Penny eyed her sharply but didn't question her about it. "Well, let's get them inside and see what we can do with them." Penny went down to the Jeep and started unloading blue bags. When she had her arms filled, she headed back up to the house. Krista followed with the rest.

The duplex was neat and tidy as usual. Even though the furniture was worn, it was well kept. The whole place felt like home. A small white cat lay stretched out in the late morning sun along one windowsill and a black and gray tabby took up residence in another. Several of Krista's photos hung throughout the room, along with Monet prints that Penny had always been fond of. The decorating was rather a mish-mash of styles, but it only added to the charm.

"We'll put you in the work room. I'm sorry, but business has kind of been taking over the place."

"But it's going well?"

Penny laughed. "Oh, honey, I had to get two assistants to help out. They're only part-timers but it takes some of the load off me." She led Krista to the back room, a sunny room with three walls lined with shelves and supplies for Penny's gift basket company. A long table was folded up against one of the walls along with four folding chairs. Still, the room managed to look comfortable; the little twin bed covered with a pale blue and rose quilt and a white bedside table held a vase of daisies.

"There's a dresser in the closet for your things if you want to unpack. We'll have to find you some suitcases or something better than the bags you have. Why don't you get yourself settled and I'll get us some coffee in the dining room."

Penny left her alone to put her things away. Even though she knew she wouldn't be staying long, she put her clothes away in the drawers. She always did that, whether she was staying a week or just a day. It made the place feel more like a second home that way.

When her things were taken care of, she returned to the living room where Penny was laying out the coffee and her famous, and Krista's favorite, ginger snap cookies. The air was filled with the scent and warm sunshine.

"It feels so good to be here." Krista sighed and took a seat that overlooked the street below. It looked so cold outside, a stark contrast to the comfort inside. Already most of the tension that had gripped her over the past several days bled away.

"Well, it is more than good to have you back, Krista. Tell me now, what's going on with that center of yours? I'd have thought you'd be neck-deep in work up there to get it going."

"There have been some complications," she replied reluctantly and took a sip of the black coffee.

The way Penny looked at her, her brows raised and expectant, told Krista that she knew there was more wrong than what Krista had already told her. Not that she'd ever lie to the woman, but there was no point in even trying to hide the seriousness of what was going on up in Quail Ridge.

"Complications? What sort of complications are we talking about? I thought you said the people there were treating you well, considering."

She drew in a breath. "It's about what I expected. Sort of."

"Well, some people are long on memory and short on forgiveness," Penny agreed and bit down on a cookie. Her brows furrowed in displeasure.

"Some were a little shorter than others," Krista replied dourly.

Penny eyed her closely, her eyes narrowing. "So, what aren't you telling me? Out with it or I won't stop pestering you."

Krista drew her breath in and held it. She looked outside to the busy street. She already missed Quail Ridge and the peace and quiet.

“Okay, it wasn’t so simple settling back in town and starting the center.”

Krista proceeded to tell Penny about the troubles that started right from the beginning with the mystery stalker, the brick through her window and the vandalism at the mill. Penny shoved her coffee mug aside and leaned her elbows on the table, not bothering to hide the anger on her face. Her expression softened slightly when Krista told her about Matt, though.

Krista finished up with the details of both fires.

Penny took Krista’s hand and squeezed it. “Oh, honey, you didn’t deserve any of this. How cruel some people are. Did they ever catch the person?”

“Working on it. Anyway, Matt and I slowly worked things out. I think the fact that the other survivor of the crash was most likely the brick thrower helped my case anyway. I tried to get things worked out with other people. Some were easier to work with than others. Others just didn’t want me around, period. If Ricky had just ignored my presence in town, none of this would’ve happened.”

“Outrageous,” Penny seethed. She let go of Krista’s hand and grabbed another cookie. “Now that’s someone who deserved to be locked up.”

“I’m hoping.” Krista nodded.

“This Matt fellow, the cop, he wouldn’t be Eddie’s brother, by any chance?”

“The one and the same.”

“Well, at least you have friends up there. And more, with Matt. He sounds like an honorable man, Krista.”

Krista grinned into her coffee before taking a sip. A warmth that couldn’t be attributed to the sunshine washing in through the window or

the heat from the coffee glowed in her cheeks. "He's a very good man. I'm lucky that he came around."

"Then why did you leave him?"

"I didn't want him hurt. I was afraid that Ricky would come back. Ricky's dad had dragged him down to their house on the Cape after the opening. But he's disappeared since. His fiancée warned me that he's looking for me. Wants to finish the job."

"Oh Lord, Krista, the man must be crazy."

Krista laughed humorlessly. "Crazy is right. I don't know what he thought I was going to do to him. Blow his cover maybe. It was never my intent to make people believe the truth about that accident. After all these years it didn't seem to matter. Hell, I didn't even realize that Ricky was still in town. I even tried to explain it to him. He didn't believe me."

"You think he's really out to get you? Is that why you came here? To hide out?"

"Is that awful? It was part of my reason for being here. I also needed to be with a friend, someone who really knew me and knew what I'd gone through in those days."

"I don't care what reason brought you here, honey. You're always welcome. Though I'm curious about what's going on with you and Matt."

"We're kind of on hiatus. I don't know, Penny. I can't go back there until I know it's safe. I won't put anyone into any danger up there. Any hint of it and I'm out of here."

Penny waved her hand. "How's he going to know where you are? Bring him here and I'll show him a thing or two."

Krista laughed. She knew getting it out would help alleviate some of her stress and fear. "You may look like a mild-mannered mom, but underneath you're a tiger," Krista noted with a wink.

Penny nodded. "I take care of my own, and you're like a daughter to me. I'd protect you to the death."

"Well, I sincerely hope it won't come down to that." Krista sighed and reached for another cookie.

"Now tell me what's going on with that center of yours and with your plans for the future. You're no quitter, I know that for a fact."

Krista filled Penny in on the rest of the story and hopes for the future. By the time they were done talking, the cookies and coffee were gone and the morning had passed into afternoon. Penny retreated to the kitchen and despite her protests, Krista joined her and they made lunch together while they talked about old times and new.

It was so good to be back with her. Krista didn't think she'd ever want to leave, but that night as she lay in bed, listening to the occasional traffic outside the window, she found herself longing to be back in Quail Ridge in Matt's arms. She squeezed her eyes shut and recalled the way his hands slid over her body, and how his lips touched every part of her. How in the world was she going to be able to stay away from him?

## Chapter Thirteen

Matt pressed the play button on his answering machine for a second time, puzzled.

“Matt, this is Bill Rhodes. Can you come down to my office if you get this before six o’ clock? I’ve got something that you need to see.” The machine beeped. There was an edge to the man’s voice, but Matt couldn’t figure it out.

Matt picked up his keys, wondering why Bill needed him. He went back outside into the darkness and got into his car. It was already quarter to six and he figured Bill’s office would be closed by now.

The lights in the office were on when he arrived, though no clients were in the parking lot and the reception area seemed void of life. The only indication that the building was occupied was the woof from the back room, followed by another higher pitched bark.

“Bill? It’s Matt,” he called.

After a moment, Bill came out from the back room. He smiled warmly and extended his hand. “Thanks so much for coming down. Wasn’t sure who else to call. Come on back.”

Matt followed him to the back of building where the kennels and examination rooms were. He was truly confused. He assumed that he was there in an official capacity. Maybe someone had brought in a rabid animal, but he certainly wasn’t animal control. Right about now he wanted to be home, get out of his uniform and into sweats and make



something for dinner, even though it would be another lonely meal. Instead he was in the veterinarian's office on a mystery mission.

When Bill stopped in front of a metallic kennel and opened it, Matt understood why he was there. He sucked in his breath, knelt down on the floor and shook his head. He couldn't suppress the grin that pulled on his mouth. For the first time since Krista left him, he felt a charge of elation.

"I don't believe it."

Gus lifted his head and looked at Matt soulfully, the tip of his tail flipping with all the strength he could muster.

"Where in the world have you been, buddy?" he asked and touched the dog's neck gently.

"Someone brought him in. A guy out hunting this afternoon. He said he was just lying under a tree. He thought he was dead and almost left him there. Poor guy carried him out of the woods to his truck. I really don't think he would've survived another night out there."

Matt glanced away from the dog and up at the vet and shook his head again. "This is incredible. We thought he was in the house during the fire, thought that he was killed."

"Well, he has some burns, so he must've been close enough to get some damage, but most of his problems right now are exposure, dehydration and hunger. I know that he's Krista Faye's dog and I know she's out of town. If you're in contact with her, maybe you could pass the word along to her that he's alive and will be well in a few days."

Matt stared at the dog, worse for wear, but recovering. "I haven't been in contact with her for about a week. I'm sure I'd be able to contact her though. She'll be thrilled."

That was an understatement. Losing Gus had been a huge blow to her, one of many she had to deal with. But possibly this would bring her back to Quail Ridge. He could hope anyway.

“How long will he need to be here?”

“I want to keep him for a few more days but I don’t see why he’d need to stay longer than that.”

“Okay. Could I take him, if Krista can’t? He can stay with me until she can get back to town.”

Bill nodded. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

Matt gave the dog one more pet then stood. “I’ll get in touch with her. But just in case, call me when he’s ready to go home. And send any bills to me, if need be.”

Bill walked him back out to the reception room.

“Thanks for calling me, Bill. It’s good to have some good news for once.”

The vet thrust his hands in the pockets of his white lab coat. “That’s for sure. I take it this mess over at the mill hasn’t been resolved.”

“We’re getting closer and in the meantime, we’re rebuilding the place. I think there’s a lot of people in town who were pretty outraged by what happened and are kicking in to get the center up and running.”

“Well, it sure is good to see people come together over this.”

Matt smiled. “Just need to bring Krista home for it. Well, thanks again, Bill. Have a good night.”

She’d come home, he thought with determination while driving back to his house. She’d come back to town when and if she thought it was safe. That was the problem, though. Ricky still hadn’t been found. Of course he could be in another country by now and completely out of the way. If he were smart he should be, but lately Ricky hadn’t been so smart and was bent on some kind of destruction. Krista’s destruction.

Damn, he missed her. He didn't think it was possible to miss her so much. Cameron would know where she was, but he hadn't asked the other man, didn't want to intrude on her seclusion. If she'd wanted him to know where she was she would've called him by now. But she hadn't and he had to respect that.

Of course he had the number she was at. Maybe she was waiting for him to call her. She didn't ask him to before she left. Maybe she assumed he would.

Now he had a reason to. He wanted to let her know about Gus. If it would help her out then she needed to know right away.

In the house, he grabbed the slip of paper with her friend's phone number off the refrigerator.

Matt dialed the number, suddenly nervous about hearing the sound of Krista's voice again. If he heard her voice, he was bound to think about their last night together and the way she'd completely took his body over. He swallowed deeply and rubbed his eyes as if he could rub away the memory of her body pressed against his.

"Hello," a woman greeted.

Matt sucked in his breath and quickly composed himself. "Hi, I was wondering if Krista was there. This is Matt Burgess."

There was a pause on the other end. "Um, hold on, let me see." The phone was muffled, as if she'd put her palm over the speaker, but he could hear the murmuring of voices before the hand was moved. "Here she is," the woman said.

"Matt, what's going on?"

Matt could detect the note of hope in her voice. She was probably hoping he had news that Ricky was behind bars. Well, he couldn't give her that good news but he hoped that the news that he did have would be just as happy.

"I have some good news for you," he replied.

"Is it Ricky? You have him?" Her voice lifted. He hated to burst her balloon when there was such hope in her tone.

"No, honey, we haven't found him yet, but we're still looking. We *will* find him, don't worry. No, the news I have is that Gus was found alive today."

There was a long pause on the other end.

"Are you kidding me?" She didn't sound as if she believed him.

"I'd never kid about something like this, Krista. I got a call from Dr. Rhodes. A hunter found Gus in the woods and brought him into town. He's dehydrated, really hungry and cold but the doc says that he's going to make a full recovery."

"I can't believe he got out of the house. Oh, Matt, I can't believe this," she exclaimed with undisguised joy.

"Neither could I, but it's true. He's going to need you, honey. Can you come back for his sake? And stay? Please?" Restless, Matt stood and walked to the kitchen window. The blackness of night seemed more dense than usual. For a moment, he wondered if it was a good idea to bring her home after all, but he shoved the thought away with an annoyed shake of his head.

The pause was long. Matt was sure she was going to say no, that she wouldn't come back until Ricky was behind bars. He couldn't really blame her if she made that decision, but he mentally crossed his fingers that she would tell him that she was packing up immediately to return to Quail Ridge.

"Stay where?" she asked, the joy slipping from her voice a bit as reality nudged its way back into the conversation. "I don't have a home, Matt. Is the top floor of the mill ready for someone to live in?"

He should've realized that she wouldn't immediately agree to return and stay at his place. It was probably for the best. They weren't exactly ready to move in with each other, despite the fact that physically they'd reached that point. Emotionally they had a ways to go, but he still held onto the hope that it could happen for them. If he could get her to stop running.

"We could get the utilities turned on in no time, but you'd need furniture. The place is rather bare."

"Definitely a problem," she mused. "But I should be there for him." It seemed like she was talking more to herself than to him.

"You can stay with me, Krista, at least until the loft is ready," he told her quietly and closed his eyes. "No strings attached, no expectations."

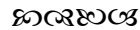
There was that silence again. *Damn*, he thought, *what is she thinking?* That it would be as hard to make that deal, as it would be for him to keep it? It would be impossible to have her under his roof without touching her, kissing her. Loving her.

He heard her sigh from the other end of the line. "If I can't come up with anything else, I'll accept, but only as a last resort. But I will take the loft. I just need to arrange for some furnishing."

"Well, I'll accept that," Matt replied, feeling a bit disappointed, but better knowing that she'd be back in town. Gus would be much happier with her than with him anyway. And then they could figure out where their relationship was heading in a more leisurely manner.

"I'll be back up sometime tomorrow. Thanks for letting me know, Matt. I appreciate it. A huge weight's been lifted from my shoulders." Her tone of voice was stronger now that she'd made up her mind, as if she were shoring up her courage to come back. He smiled to himself in admiration.

After he gave her the number of the vet's office, they said their goodbyes, and Matt hung up, feeling only slightly better than he had before he made the call.



Early the next morning, before the sun barely cracked over the roofs of the buildings surrounding Penny's house, Krista gave her friend a tight hug goodbye with a promise that she wouldn't spend so much time away. Then, with her little Jeep packed with four old brown suitcases to replace the Wal-Mart bags, she headed out of town and back up north. Her heart already pounded in expectation of not only seeing Gus again, but Matt as well. She shoved the tear off her cheek with the back of her hand and grinned as she thought of the old dog. Her smile dimmed a little when she thought of Matt waiting for her too. The same amount of joy filled her, but it was a completely different emotion. Different than she'd ever felt before and at the moment she refused to name it. Not yet. It had only been a week, but it seemed much longer than that since she'd said goodbye to Matt and disappeared. Seeing him again would tell her for sure if their few days together had been a fluke or something real.

Her departure had been an attempt to put their relationship into perspective as much as it had been a way to escape the situation with Ricky. She'd figured that fact out not long after arriving at Penny's. She'd been surprised at how much she missed Matt and her desire to put down roots in her hometown and begin a real relationship.

She wasn't going to jump right back into his bed, though. *Take things slowly*. No need to rush if this was something she wanted to last. The only problem was that she was having a hell of a time convincing herself

that that was what she wanted. Instinct pushed her to go straight to Matt.

Before leaving Penny's, she'd called the vet where Gus was recovering and was told that while he was doing very well, he'd need to stay for at least another two days. Krista booked a room at a hotel outside town and then made a list of basics that she'd need to furnish the loft. A bed, a table and a couch. A secondhand furniture store outside Quail Ridge could provide those bare necessities. The rest of the stuff could be picked up as she needed.

Her first stop back in Quail Ridge was Dr. Rhodes's office to see Gus. Tears fell quickly down her cheeks. She pushed them out of the way and sat on the hard floor next to Gus's kennel. The dog lifted his head and his tail beat madly against the metal wall behind him. She held out her hand to him. He laved it enthusiastically with his tongue.

"You don't know how happy I am to see you, you old dog," Krista said, her voice cracked with her tears. "Why did you have to scare me like that?"

Gus reached out a paw and swatted Krista on the leg. With the back of her hand, she swept away the tears that blurred her vision and grinned.

"Yeah, you're going to be okay. I wish I could bring you home right now, but to tell the truth, I don't have a home to go to right now, just a cold hotel room. I'm working on it, though." Krista managed a shaky smile for the animal.

The dog scooted himself closer to her and rested his chin on her thigh, his brown eyes gazing up at her. She stroked his smooth head, amazed that even after all he'd been through, he still loved her, trusted her.

“Oh Gus, what has happened to us? I thought coming here would be good for us, but it seems like everything has gone wrong. I think we can recover from this, though, and make everything okay. We just need a little time and no more setbacks. Right now I’ve got some things to do. Don’t you worry, big guy, I’ll be back really soon.”

Krista lifted the dog’s chin and tucked him back inside the kennel then shut the door. She hated to leave him, and turned away from the sad expression in his eyes but it was only for a while. On her way out, she thanked the vet.

The first bite of winter was in the air, crisp, clean and with a chilliness that wouldn’t be retreating until spring. Krista pulled her gloves out of her pocket and headed toward her Jeep. She looked around the parking lot. Her vehicle was the only one there, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she wasn’t alone. Fear crept through her veins and tightened her grip on her keys.

“Damn you, Ricky,” she muttered when she reached the Jeep. She steeled her nerves. She knew she wouldn’t be able to stay here if she was afraid he’d be lurking behind every tree, every corner.

As soon as she was in the Jeep, the key in the ignition, she forced her mind away from her fears and to more important, more sensible matters. There was too much to do. Get the furniture she needed delivered to the loft apartment at the mill, talk to the contractors about where they were with the reconstruction and contact Cameron to let him know she was ready to push on.

Go see Matt.

She didn’t start the engine of the Jeep, but just stared out toward the grayish forest, where the land climbed up to the ridge. Behind her was Lower Main Street, which would lead to downtown Quail Ridge. It was her life fifteen years ago and everything in her heart told her that this



place was destined to be her future. Her youth center was being rebuilt and she couldn't hand it over to someone else and walk away. She had the land where her childhood home once stood. Emily might not agree, but why couldn't she put a new house on it?

Just like she couldn't walk away from those aspects of her life, she couldn't walk away from Matt either. Maybe it was too soon, but she couldn't deny the importance of his presence in her life, and her feelings for him.

She loved him.

Krista chuckled and shook her head. Okay, she'd keep that fact to herself for now. No need to scare him away or give away too much of herself so soon. There would be plenty of time to explore her feelings, their feelings for each other, if he was willing. She had a feeling he would.

There was one thing she had to do before she could move on with her life in Quail Ridge. She started up the Jeep and headed back into town. Before reaching the center, she turned off on a road that would lead her to the cemetery. The time had come to say goodbye to Eddie.

If she were ever going to have a life with Matt, she'd have to do this, for the sake of her heart and mind. Put the past and her feelings of guilt to rest.

Under the drab sky, Krista found Eddie's grave, marked with a gray marble stone that was a few shades darker than the clouds that hung low. For a long moment, she stayed put in the Jeep, staring at the plot. Someone had left an enormous pot of rust colored mums, fading in the mid November chill. She felt bad about coming empty-handed, but there was nothing she could think of that she could bring for Eddie now. After hearing what Ricky had to say about Eddie and those final weeks, she didn't think he'd want anything from her anyway. Except freedom.

Now it was her time to ask for freedom.

Krista pushed open the Jeep's door and stepped out onto the fading grass and stood at the foot of the grave. She hadn't known what she'd feel at this moment. Sadness and regret swelled up from deep inside her and tightened her throat. She swallowed at it and wrapped her arms around her body against the sudden cold that didn't come from the wind that rode over the treeless terrain, but from deep within herself.

It wasn't the overwhelming heartbreak she'd felt back in the beginning when she believed that Eddie had gone to his grave loving her. A tear slid from the corner of her eye, leaving a cold trail as it slid down her cheek.

"I wish you would've told me how you felt," she said stonily. "I never would've pushed you into fatherhood. Maybe I would've hated you for it, but you'd still be alive and Liz would still be here. And our baby too."

Krista pushed back on the unexpected anger. What good would it do to get angry with a man who'd been dead for fifteen years? What was done was done.

"It's too late for that now," she murmured. "Maybe nothing we could've done would've changed things. I don't know, Eddie. What I do know is that I have to say goodbye to you. Let you go. Let our past go so I can move on with my future. I want it to be with your brother." Krista smiled and shook her head and looked up into the sky. "Isn't that funny? In an ironic kind of way? He's a good man and I love him. I'm hoping he'll feel the same way about me."

"Very touching." The voice that crept up behind her was icier than the wind, which had turned bitter.

Krista's heart leapt straight from her chest into her throat. She swung around and locked gazes with Ricky. He stood between her and her Jeep.

No doubt he hadn't been living in the manner in which he'd been accustomed to. His dark hair was rumpled, not by the stiff breeze that had picked up from the west, but from a lack of grooming, just like the beard and moustache that darkened his face. Even his clothes were tired and wrinkled.

Despite all this, there was a glint in his eyes, a terrible flash in his smile that said more than words ever could. It bordered on maniacal. She'd seen it before in her travels, but never had it been aimed at her. A sickening sensation stabbed at her belly. She clutched at her abdomen and took a step back from him.

"Leave me alone, Ricky," Krista warned, but it sounded as ridiculous to her as it no doubt did to him. His smile widened and he chuckled, but the grin died quickly.

"How many times do you come to his grave?" he asked coldly.

"What?" Krista pulled her gaze from him, glanced around to see if there was anyone within yelling distance, anyone who could help her. The cemetery was empty except for her and Ricky. The road was out of sight and there wasn't a house within a half a mile. She was at Ricky's mercy and this didn't look good for her. She doubted her ability to talk him down from his hatred.

"I visit her every day," Ricky continued. "Well I did until I had to leave town. Every *fucking* day I would come here and talk to her."

Ricky took a step toward her. Krista eyed his stance. His hands were shoved deep within the pockets of the old sheepskin jacket. She prayed it was because his hands were cold, and not because he held a weapon. Something he could use to hurt her. She edged to the side. She wanted to get closer to the Jeep.

“Every damned day for fifteen years. Fifteen years that she *should’ve* been alive and with me.” His eyes were absolutely emotionless and it chilled her right to her soul.

“I lost her too, Ricky. I loved her too.” Krista choked out, hoping that somehow she’d be able to reach him and remind him that he wasn’t the only one devastated by that night.

“No!” Ricky pulled a hand out of his pocket and pointed a bare finger at her. “No, you didn’t love her. Not like I did. You couldn’t have possibly.”

“I didn’t kill her,” Krista moved over an inch, but kept her eyes on the man.

“You *did* kill her,” he countered hotly. “You might as well have just pointed a gun at her and put a bullet in her head.”

He stepped closer. The hand that was out of his pocket flexed and tightened with nervous energy. It hardly seemed like this was the same man who she had run-ins with since returning to Quail Ridge. This Ricky was nervous, crazy and deadly. Of that she had no doubt. Debating with him over the events of the night that led to Liz’s and Eddie’s deaths would be pointless. He’d never see the truth. He’d see what he wanted to see, what he’d convinced other people must be true.

“Do you want me to leave town? Is that all?”

Another half step to the right. Krista prayed he wouldn’t notice.

Ricky laughed again. “No, I don’t want you to leave town, Krista. Do you think I can go back to my old life? No, that’s gone. Quail Ridge, Rachel, everything here is gone for me, thanks to you.”

“Then what do you want?”

Ricky pulled his other hand out of its pocket. The gun was small, but deadly enough, especially when he lifted it and pointed it directly at her.

Krista sucked in her breath and bolted to the right. If she could make it to the far side of the Jeep, she could crawl in and escape.

It was a futile plan. She almost made it to the bumper when the first bullet knocked her off her feet, slamming into her hip. Raging hot pain sizzled through her flesh straight through her bone. Instinctively she pressed her hand against the wound, but that only brought on more agony. Still, she needed to try to stop the flow of blood that had already saturated the leg of her pants.

The whole world became deadly calm except for the panic that ricocheted through her mind. Krista heard Ricky's steps approach her.

"If she's dead then you're going to have to be dead too. I'm here to finish what you started," Ricky said through a tightly clenched jaw as he stood over her.

Krista barely registered the words. What difference did it make anyway? She drew her gaze away from him and stared up at the heavy clouds overhead. Fat snowflakes twirled out of the sky, peacefully falling in wayward spirals toward her. Even when the second bullet struck her, she didn't take her eyes off the flakes. They hypnotized her and took her mind off the pain, dulled the fear.

She drew her breath in and held it in her lungs before exhaling, thinking that this could be the last breath she'd ever take.

The world faded. Krista blinked away the tears that mixed with the snowflakes on her cheeks. Ricky was gone and all she could see was the sky and the snow. In a way, she was happy the end was so peaceful. Seeing Matt's face over hers didn't even surprise her, but she was heartsick that she couldn't understand what he was saying. Maybe it was his goodbyes. She whispered hers back to him, letting him know he loved him.

## Chapter Fourteen

“I didn’t think this day would ever come.” Krista sighed. She leaned back in the passenger seat of Emily’s Yukon and stared out the window as they cruised across the border into New Hampshire. Spring left a haze of pale green on the tree branches, pushing away the gray of the mild winter behind them. Krista opened the window a few inches and raised her face so she could feel the cool air brush past her skin.

Every little thing was richer and she appreciated the fresh breeze more than she ever had before. Her body may have been battered, but she came out of each conflict with a stronger appreciation for life.

It had been a tough winter, though. One of the hardest. Spending Thanksgiving in the hospital was one thing, but the recovery nearly beat her and there had been days that she had wished Ricky’s bullets had done their job. But she pushed on. That had been her way since the beginning. So she bit back on the pain and the frustration and even when she just wanted to pull the covers over her head and go back to sleep, she got up and went to physical therapy and made her body work again.

“Almost there,” Emily announced.

Krista glanced over at her. Even things between them had changed. For once in their lives, they leaned on each other, tried to understand each other.

Staying with Emily had been an only choice. Quail Ridge was too far away from her rehab and physical therapy so Krista's sister had offered her a place to stay in Boston over the winter. It had been a wonderful chance to work on their relationship as well. As soon as March rolled to an end and she was ready to leave her strenuous therapy behind, though, Krista faced her longing to go back home for good.

"You sure you're okay with me keeping the land?" Krista asked. Their parents' property had been a point of contention between the two since their mother's death.

Emily laughed. "It's more important to you than I'd ever thought. I really never realized you'd want to settle there of all places."

"I never thought so either. But it's where I need to be. It's definitely time for me to take the reins back at the center, and I miss my dog."

Emily chuckled. "Sorry, but my landlord would've had my butt out on the pavement if I brought a dog in."

"You don't have to apologize, Em. Gus was much better off at Matt's. They've really bonded over the past few months. I hear that Gus even goes running with Matt on occasion."

"And what about you and Matt?"

What about it? Krista looked back out the window. Matt was a large part of her reasons for going back, just as he'd been before Ricky had sidetracked her for several months.

At least once a week Matt had made the drive from Quail Ridge to Boston to visit. He'd even sacrificed Thanksgiving with his family to spend it with her while she was in the hospital recovering from her gunshot wounds to her shoulder and hip. He'd even smuggled in some of his mother's turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie. It had been the best meal she'd ever eaten in her entire life, and sharing it with the man she loved made it all the better. Despite the pain it caused,

she'd laughed when he spread out a little tablecloth across the hospital tray table.

Though she was reluctant to do it, she made him tell her what had happened that day.

"The last thing I remember was that second shot hitting me. I saw the snow falling and then your face. I thought I was dead."

Matt squeezed her hand. "I know. You told me goodbye and that you loved me. You scared the hell out of me, honey."

"How did you know to come?" She felt her cheeks burn. Had she really said that she loved him? It must've come as a shock to him to hear those words from her.

He squeezed her hand.

"Several people saw Ricky drive into town. It took a while to track him down. We had no idea that you were even up at the cemetery until we drove up on the two of you."

"I went up there to say goodbye to Eddie," she confessed.

Matt nodded. She didn't have to expand on it, he understood.

"By then you were on the ground, Ricky standing over you. I thought for sure we were too late."

Krista squeezed her eyes shut but a flood of tears escaped anyway. Matt tucked a tissue into her hand.

"What happened then?" she asked roughly.

"As soon as he saw us, he backed off and headed down to Liz's grave. By then we had two other units there so I stayed with you until the ambulance got there."

"And Ricky is in custody?"

Matt paused. Krista patted her eyes with the tissue so she could see Matt's face clearly. His jaw was tight and his gaze dropped down to their hands.



“You don’t need to worry about him anymore. He took his own life.”

Krista sucked in her breath and held it but she really wasn’t surprised. Like Ricky had said, what was left for him?

“I can’t say I’m surprised. Sad, but not surprised.”

Matt looked back up. “Sad? He nearly killed you.”

Krista shrugged. “He was just one more casualty of that night fifteen years ago. And it all could’ve been prevented.”

It brought it all to an end though. It was safe now to go back home and rebuild her life. She would pick it up where she left off, would move into the loft at the mill until she could put up a new house on her property and step back into the role of running the center. And back to developing her relationship with Matt.

“We’ll see where we go from here,” she told Emily now. “Now that things are getting back to normal.” Three more miles and they’d be back in Quail Ridge. The closer they got the sweeter the air became.

Emily smiled. “He’s crazy about you.”

Krista chuckled. This was the first time she had ever discussed her love life with her sister.

“Then he’s crazy. I don’t think he’s had moment of peace since I came back into town.”

“Just think how dull his life would be without you,” Emily pointed out.

“I’m looking forward to dull. I’ve had enough excitement to last me five lifetimes. From now on, if he wants excitement, he’s going to have to look elsewhere because I plan on taking up knitting and gardening.”

“The hell you will. You’ll find something else to do and I’ll be jealous and amazed by you again.”

“What?” Krista shot her sister a look of shock.

“You heard me. Despite everything you’ve gone through in your life, you never gave up. You took it and made yourself better for it. I don’t think I could’ve handled a fraction of what you did. I would’ve folded like a house of cards.”

“You don’t know that,” Krista replied quietly.

“Yes, I do. I knew it all along, that’s why I’ve kept my life as simple and safe as I could. I’ve had a good life, but it’s been dull and I resented your freedom and your success.”

Krista felt stunned by her sister’s confession. How could anyone be envious of the chaos that had been her life? “I can’t believe you felt like this. I always thought you were ashamed or embarrassed by me.”

With her free hand, Emily reached out and took Krista’s hand. “I won’t lie to you and tell you I didn’t feel those things in the beginning. It was hard going to school with everything that happened, but it passed.”

As they passed the Quail Ridge town line, they fell into silence. It gave Krista time to digest what Emily had told her. Another thing to add to her list of things to fix, but they seemed to be off to a good start.

Anxiety built inside her like a gathering of agitated birds in the pit of her stomach. She pressed her hand against her belly hoping to calm them as they neared the center of town. Who would be waiting for her? This was her first time back since the fires, not including her brief visit to the cemetery. Maybe no one would be there for her.

“Where are we going?” Krista had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn’t noticed that Emily had turned off Main Street and was headed toward their old home... Well the remains of it anyway.

“There’s some things I want to get from the barn while we’re in town. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I guess not,” she replied faintly. She didn’t really want to see the remnants of her home, but after everything that Emily had done for her, she couldn’t say no.

“What’s going on here?” Krista sat up in the seat as they approached their driveway. At least a dozen cars lined the road on both sides of the drive.

“Hmm, not sure,” Emily replied, her voice light and casual, but a tiny smile played on her lips that said she knew exactly what was going on.

“Liar.” Krista couldn’t find her voice to say anything else.

Emily turned the truck into the drive. Where the old house had once stood there was a new structure, a two-story Cape Cod style home. Krista pressed the palm of her hand against her open mouth. Through the blur of hot tears she saw the crowd of people in the yard and the “Welcome Home” sign over the porch.

“What have you done?” she asked her sister through her hand.

“We thought you needed a real home to come back to,” Emily replied.

Krista fell against Emily’s shoulder and Emily slid her arm around her.

“No one deserves it more than you do. Now why don’t you wipe your eyes and get out and meet your adoring fans.” She gave Krista one more squeeze then eased her up.

Before she opened the door and climbed out, Krista looked at the crowd of people waiting expectantly for her. It was overwhelming, nearly too much for her senses, but these people had banded together to show their support for her. It filled her heart to near breaking. This was the first time since the accident stole all normalcy from her life, that she could say with any certainty people weren’t judging her negatively.

Emily had to urge Krista out of the vehicle and immediately they were crowded by well wishers. Carla, Patricia and both Matt’s parents were

there, and many others who had played roles in making the youth center happen. They hugged her and welcomed her back, but as much as she appreciated and soaked up their attention, she wanted to see Matt and Gus. Neither of them seemed to be present though. Maybe Matt was on duty, with Gus still at his house. It took a bit of the elation out of the moment.

“Okay, people.” Emily pushed through the crowd and took Krista’s hand. “Thanks for coming, but Krista’s had a long drive and I’m sure she’s dying to get inside and take a look at her new home.”

There was a murmur of agreement, final hugs and goodbyes. Krista held onto Patricia longer than the rest. Patricia had lost so much, too—her daughter, then her husband and one of her sons. Despite it all, she stayed firm in Krista’s camp and managed the center in her absence.

“We’ll talk, okay?” she whispered in Patricia’s ear before she released her. She wanted to help Patricia as much as she possibly could.

Patricia nodded and kissed Krista’s cheek then pulled away.

At last Emily stood in front of her. “I’m leaving now. I put your bags on the steps. I’d stay but I really need to get down to Boston before the traffic. I love you, big sis.”

She kissed Krista softly on the cheek and before Krista could react to her sudden exit, Emily had climbed into her truck and started it up.

So that was it. Everyone was gone and she was left with her new home. Two suitcases sat next to the door, waiting for her to bring them in and to start her life there.

She picked up her suitcases and opened the front door, filled with expectation, wondering what she’d find. She stepped into a tiled foyer with a tall oak coat rack next to the door and a tall, leafy ficus tree. Beyond was the living room. She walked in, admiring the dusty rose carpet, white walls with blue, green and rose stenciled flowers. Someone

had been busy. They'd done a wonderful job making the room look welcoming and warm. The walls were decorated with Ansel Adams and Renoir prints and an old grandfather clock that had belonged once to Krista's grandmother. Emily had taken it after their mother's death.

More plants hung in the sunny windows, giving the place life. It was a beautiful little home and she marveled at how Emily had managed to have it built so quickly and without her knowledge.

After admiring the living room, Krista turned and gasped.

Both Matt and Gus stood in the entryway to the kitchen. Both smiled, Gus in his own, tongue-lolling way. For a long moment, she stared at them. She'd cried too much in the past few months and she didn't want to do it now, but what she wanted and what she got were two different things. She shoved the tears away impatiently and walked over to them quickly. She sank down so she was at Gus's level and touched his head. The dog tipped his head up and lapped at her hand.

"You're looking good, Gus," she said to him. "Matt's been taking good care of you, hasn't he?"

Then she turned her attention up to Matt. He held out his hand and she took it. His grip was warm and firm and he helped her to her feet, but didn't immediately take her into his arms, neither did she go.

She'd only seen him a week ago, but it seemed like months and months and she drank him in, his heathery green sweater and faded blue jeans that hugged his thighs. He'd gotten a haircut. She reached out to touch his hair, trailing her hand over his cheek. She bit her bottom lip as she gazed at his eyes. They were more green than hazel. He looked more than fine, better than she'd seen him look during any of his visits to Boston. On the other hand, this was the first time that they'd been together in some kind of normal situation. She was at last healthy, in her own home and without both the threat of someone trying to cause her

harm or Matt doubting her, and it was a bit overwhelming. She found herself rather shy at the moment, lost as what to do next, but she held onto his hand and smiled.

“I’m in shock,” she confessed with a shrug. “You and Emily keep secrets rather well.”

Matt grinned back. “Well, we thought it would make a good welcome back to town. There’s still some work left to be done, like the landscaping, but we thought that we could leave that for you.”

Krista nodded, but she was too caught up in the way his eyes held hers, like there was something more important to be said other than landscaping. She wouldn’t push, though, in case she was way off base.

“No, this is fine. I think I’d love to do some gardening, something peaceful after a long day at the office.”

She was pleased with the look on Matt’s face, the way he tilted his head and nodded, and the way his lips turned up in a slight smile. It made her want to kiss him. He’d been careful with her after the shooting, as if he’d been afraid that he would hurt her more. Yet it seemed so hard to wrap her arms around him and feel his body against her. It was what she’d been dreaming about for months. Now she was nearly speechless and shy with him.

“Can I bring your bags upstairs? Show you the rest of the place?”

His suggestion provided a good break from the awkward moment. Matt retrieved her suitcases and led her up the carpeted stairs to the second floor.

“I’m stunned,” Krista declared, not wanting to let another long moment of silence pass between them. “How in the world did this go up so quickly?”

She recognized touches from Emily's home mixed in with the new décor, but there was still enough empty space for her to put in her own flair.

"Well, we cheated a little," Matt replied. "It's really a modular, but it's hard to tell."

"Really?" That did surprise her, but the place was sweet and as he gave her the brief tour, she admitted that it was perfect for her, exactly what she would've chosen for herself.

"It's like starting from scratch," she declared when they came back into the living room. Maybe that was what she needed to do, leave the past behind and look only to the future.

"I've been so used to living out of a suitcase and an empty apartment for most of my life," she explained to him. She wanted him to understand how much this meant to her, how much she was ready for this.

"I never made a home for myself," she continued. "Not since I had to leave Quail Ridge to go to jail. Nothing in my life seemed certain or solid after that. I never felt safe enough to put down roots."

Matt nodded, his lips tight and brows furrowed as if troubled. "I was just the opposite."

Then for the first time since her arrival, he pulled her gently to him. She melted against his hard chest and inhaled deeply as if to reclaim his essence. It felt so perfect being in the safe circle of his arms again, as if they would provide as much protection from the outside world as the walls of this house could.

"I thought I had set down roots and I was determined not to break them, not even when Rachel walked out on me. I needed that anchor. I needed to keep the familiar close at hand. Now suddenly those things don't have the same meaning."

Keeping her arms tight around his waist, Krista pulled back so she could look at Matt's handsome face.

"I hope you're not planning on pulling up stakes and moving out of Quail Ridge," she teased, although she was deathly afraid that that was exactly what he planned on doing.

When he laughed and pulled her back to him, a great deal of weight lifted off her shoulders.

"No, I'm not leaving town," he assured her. "I put my house on the market, though. Since we decided to put up this house for you I thought I'd move into the loft over the mill. A new start without the pieces of Rachel and our old life together."

Krista nodded her understanding. This was as big a step for him as it was for her.

"Then we're both starting fresh together." Krista kissed his cheek, and then feathered kisses across his stubble-roughened skin until she reached his mouth.

"Together," he murmured against her lips. His hands roamed up her back and tangled in her hair. "I love you, Krista. I hope that doesn't scare you."

Krista shook her head. "Nothing scares me anymore, Matt. I love you too."

Matt caressed her cheek. The touch was so sweet and she hadn't realized how much she wanted, needed and missed it. She was starting from scratch, and that meant she no longer would be afraid to let love into her heart.



## About the Author

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Look for these titles Ceri Hebert

*Now Available:*

Sweet Forever

*Torn between the home she loves and the man she's falling in love with,  
Hayden must decide which one she will leave behind.*

## Sweet Forever

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When Hayden Merrick travels to meet her grandmother for the first time, she doesn't expect to find the father who abandoned her or a man who could prove to be the love of her life.

There hadn't been much time for romance in Ben's Winslow's life and no woman has interested him enough until Hayden arrived at his neighbor's home. As soon as he meets her, Ben believes she could be the woman he's always hoped for, but he has to convince her life could be just as sweet on the prairie as on the coast.

Hayden's plans to return to her home are put on hold as she struggles with a difficult decision—pursue a life in South Dakota or return to the one she's loved at the edge of the ocean? Ben hopes he can give her the best of both worlds.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Sweet Forever*:

The sound of waves crashing on the ragged Maine shore greeted her. Hayden stood on the walk at the top edge of the lighthouse. Only a slim iron rail stood between her and hundreds of sharp rocks that were jumbled into the ocean below. It was almost hypnotic, the way the waves rushed in, surging around the seaweed-strewn ledge, bubbling up in white frothy foam before they retreated. The surf came in rougher by the moment, though, and suddenly Hayden's peaceful, hopeful mood ebbed with the inky water below.

The lightning that danced along the horizon reminded her of the storms on the prairie. It lit the swelling sea in a strobe of charged bluish

air before blinking off. In the flashing electrical discharge, Hayden caught a glimpse of sails on the horizon. Before she could identify the ship darkness took over the earth once more.

Wind picked up and whipped against her face and dress. Hayden, only she really wasn't Hayden, looked down. The gown she wore was a wedding gown made of ivory velvet. The panic in her heart picked up with the vehemence of the wind that pushed against her.

Her wedding day, and she stood, the beam of the lighthouse behind her, waiting for her groom.

A long, blue erratic thread of light jumped from one voluminous thunderhead to the next giving Hayden another glimpse of the ship nearing the Maine coast. Waves pummeled at its sides, tossing it in the air like it weighed no more than a child's toy.

Hayden leaned over the railing, the rough, weatherworn metal frigid against the delicate material of the gown on her belly.

A monstrous wave dashed against the rocks below, breaking into a trillion icy beads of salt water that flew up, with the help of the tempest assaulting the coast. With shrieking fury it belted the lighthouse, pulled and scraped at Hayden.

"Ben!" She screamed his name, but the gale just threw it back in her face. It was foolish to think that her man could hear her anyway. His ship neared shore, but not close enough for him to hear her, even in the best of conditions. But his name erupted from her throat again and again in a futile attempt to reach him.

As soon as they touched the lids of her eyes, her tears froze right along with the rain that sliced through the air. Another bolt of lightning, quickly followed by a second, then a third lit the Bonnie Mae for a full three seconds. Enough for Hayden to see the bow strike the breakwater that stretched like a bony finger into the crushing water.

The cacophony of thunder, wind and surf couldn't match the sickening crack of the wooden hull as it shattered against the rocks. Only two other sounds competed against the storm's rage, and that was the hellish chorus of cries from the men on the doomed ship, and the last wrenching call for her husband-to-be before Hayden collapsed onto the rain-soaked surface of walk.

"Ben!"

Ben hadn't been in bed for more than fifteen minutes before he heard Hayden call out his name. Despite the muffled quality of her voice, he could still detect the urgency, the fear emanating from it. Heart pounding, he threw back his covers and was out of his room, ready to break down Hayden's door if he had to. He hesitated for a moment to knock and called her name, though, but receiving no answer, he shoved it open and rushed in, not sure what he'd find.

He found her in bed, covers twisted around her legs as if she'd been struggling with them. His pulse picked up its pace at the sight of her nightgown clinging to her body. It had crept up her legs to mid-thigh, revealing a teasing display of flesh. Her face was a grimace and wet with tears and sweat, but she was still asleep. He knelt at her side and put his hand on her shoulder, and shook her gently.

"Hayden," he whispered. He didn't want to wake her too abruptly, but he wanted to pull her out of her nightmare.

Her eyes fluttered open, unfocused and lost.

"It's okay, sweetheart, I'm here," he whispered gently, his hand going to her cheek to push back a lock of dark hair that clung to her damp skin.

Finally her eyes locked with his, her brows raised. She reached out a hand and placed it on his. It was ice cold.

"Ben?"

"Yes. You had a nightmare. Are you all right?"

Hayden pushed herself up, and propped her body up with one arm while sweeping her hair off her face with the other. Her gaze left his and traveled around the room. She still looked as if she were immersed in her dream, not quite sure what was real.

"I'm fine," she confirmed, but her voice was shaky and thin.

Pale moonlight glistened against her skin, tinting her an iridescent hue that seemed almost unreal and wholly enticing. It took nearly all his strength not to gather her into his arms and make love to her right then and there, but he wouldn't take advantage of her state of mind.

"Do you want me to leave?" Ben hoped she'd say no. He remained kneeled at the side of her bed.

Hayden looked down at him, her eyes so dark he couldn't read them. Her lips were turned down in a slight frown, as if she were recalling the images that had caused her to yell out for him. He wanted to know what she'd seen, but even more wanted to soothe it away, to make her forget all about it. He wouldn't do it without her permission, though. She had the opportunity to tell him that she was all right, but he prayed she would tell him she didn't want to be alone.

"Could you stay? Maybe just for a little while?" Hayden shifted over on the mattress and moved the sheet back so there was enough room for him to climb in with her. He paused, his heart pounding against his chest in a beat that sounded more like the hooves of a thousand head of cattle. How in hell was he going to manage to lie next to her without making love to her? Yet he couldn't just say no and walk away. She needed him and he decided right then and there that he could never let her down.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice rough with desire.

She simply nodded and lay back down, hugging the pillow to her cheek, but kept her eyes on him as he settled onto the bed. He pulled the sheet up over their bodies. Her face fell into shadows, but he stared hard

at it, the soft curve of her cheek, half cast in moonlight, and the swell of her bottom lip. They faced each other, not touching, not speaking, just feeling. The warmth of her body under the sheet and her soft breath against his face. She must have had her window open because a cool breeze whispered against his shoulder and he caught the muted scent of the prairie mingling with her essence.

The thrill of being so close to her in such an intimate setting swept like a hot fire from the tips of his ears right down to his toes before climbing up and centering in a tight ball in his middle. It made him want to touch her, to glide his fingertips over every curve of her body.

“Can you hold me?” Hayden whispered, her breath tickling against his face. “I want you, Ben. Please don’t say no.”

*Can a psychic investigator disprove an accidental death  
before she and her lover are next to die?*

## **A Killer's Agenda**

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Brad Norton doesn't believe his aunt's death is the accidental shooting the police claim it to be. His instincts tell him there's a more sinister explanation. In order to get to the bottom of it, he's going to need professional help.

Pairing up with Alex Leahy, a clairvoyant private investigator, wasn't exactly in his plans. He didn't expect the fiery redhead to take over the case and get under his skin so quickly, but things happen fast when Alex is around.

Still, they can't plan a future together with a killer on the loose. When their investigation intensifies they bring him out of hiding. The danger grows to an entirely new level, however, when attempts are made on their lives.

With six deaths already confirmed, it's a race to stop their man before Alex and Brad are next on the list.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *A Killer's Agenda*:

The day dawned gloomy and dark with torrential rain that sometimes plagued the area. No open windows this morning, Brad thought. The windshield wipers were barely keeping up with the blast of water. Why he had agreed to help a woman he barely knew was beyond him. No, he knew why. She intrigued him. Maybe it was this clairvoyance she professed to or maybe it was the fact that she had an answer to his every question. Either way, he wasn't at all sure he liked it. Not one bit.



He welcomed the chill of the rain as he walked swiftly up the porch steps. It served to clear his brain if nothing else. Before he could knock, the door opened and Alicia rushed out, a cap pulled low over her dark curls and a back pack slung over her shoulder.

"I'll be home about one or two," she tossed back as she barreled directly into Brad. He caught her before she lost her balance. Startled, she looked up and then grinned, reminding him of her sister. "Sorry about that, Mr. Norton. Alex said you were coming this morning." She took a few steps backward, closing the door against the rain. "Nice body," she remarked, gazing at the damp black tee shirt that molded his chest and shoulders.

He raised a brow in surprise, his lips twitching. In her own way, Alicia threw him off balance just as easily as her sister did.

"Don't move," she commanded, closing her eyes for a brief second. She stood perfectly still for a few moments and then flung her arms out dramatically, her expression suddenly intense. "I see the scene. Pouring rain. She doesn't know he's returned from the war. She rushes out the door, late for work and he's standing there. She doesn't see him and before she knows it, she's in his arms. Tears mingle with the rain as their lips lock and he pulls her close. Scene fades with fog swirling around both of them." She sighed, leaning against the doorjamb, her dreamy blue eyes opening and finding his. "We'd be a natural. Care to wait for five or six years and then take Hollywood by storm?"

Suppressing laughter, he shook his head. "I don't think so," he said dryly. "Although thanks for the compliment."

"Darn! I guess it's just as well. By then I'd be in my prime and you'd be getting old."

Brad's gaze snapped to hers. When she grinned impishly, he couldn't help laughing.

"I figured that would get a reaction," she said mischievously. "Go on in. Alex is somewhere in there, cleaning like mad." She skipped down the stairs. "By the way, I meant it about the nice bod. See you later."

He watched her drive away, amused, and then turned and rang the doorbell. It was flung open almost immediately. Alan stood there, dressed in sweats, a sandwich in one hand and a large glass of milk in the other.

"Hey, man, come on in. Thanks for helping Alex this morning," he said, swallowing a mouthful of food. "We don't normally practice on Sunday but it's a really big game next weekend. I can't miss it or the coach'll have my head. Alex told me to tell you coffee's on in the kitchen if you want some. Gotta go."

He reached behind Brad and grabbed a helmet sitting on the foyer table, then grimaced at the rain. "Lousy morning to practice in." He glanced back at Brad. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm young. I can take it." He began to whistle as he slammed the door behind him.

Brad found himself grinning as he saw him pull a hood over his head and jump into a car that pulled to the curb minutes later.

For some reason, he found himself wondering how his father would have reacted to the last ten minutes. *Yeah, right.* No child of Andrew Norton's would have been as spontaneous, as sure of themselves. It was then it struck him like a lightning bolt. Hell! He was becoming his father without even realizing it. He liked order, predictability. *That* was the reason Alex Leahy mesmerized him. She was impetuous, mysterious, and contradictory. Everything he wasn't and yet he was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. Like a forbidden fruit that he desperately wanted to savor.

The sound of the vacuum cleaner interrupted his thoughts. Instead of climbing the stairs, however, he wandered into the kitchen, helping himself to the coffee Alan had mentioned. He liked this room, liked the way it made him feel with its warm oak cabinets and table. A pang of

memory shot through him. Besides Maggie's cozy domain, the kitchen had often been his favorite place at his aunt's as well. She had given him her unbiased and complete love when he had so desperately needed it. There had been long talks around the kitchen table, dinner conversation that skillfully guided a lost teenager out of his shell. The sting of unexpected tears surprised him. Guess it would be a long time before the pain disappeared entirely. His memory of her deserved as much.

He took a deep, steady breath, inhaling the fragrance of the coffee. As he took another sip, the noise upstairs stopped. No point in reliving the past. His job now was to find this creep and make him pay.

Moments later, Alex appeared, her curls tamed in a casual pony tail. She wore scruffy jeans and a Panthers tee shirt that was about two sizes too big for her. The pull was there again the minute he set eyes on her. Not one of the women he had dated would have been caught dead in the outfit she was wearing, at least not in front of him. Her lack of artifice was immensely appealing, not to mention the fact that those scruffy jeans hugged her curves admirably.

"Morning, Brad. Thanks again for coming over." She sighed, lips curving as she helped herself to a cup of coffee. "I'm almost done. My idea of a clean room and my siblings' differ markedly, but I promise I won't keep you long." She tucked one leg underneath her as she curled into a kitchen chair, taking a sip of coffee with obvious enjoyment. "I gather Alan and Alicia have already welcomed you? I heard your car drive in before my sister left."

"Welcomed is a mild way of putting it," he responded wryly.

She laughed. "I know exactly what you mean. Alicia doesn't just live life, she embraces it. Things are never dull when she's around."

He leaned back in his chair, wrapping his big hands around the mug of coffee. "Do any of you ever stop for a breather?"

“Sure. If we have to. This is minor. Just imagine my mother and father and my twin brothers here as well.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Chicken,” she teased, setting her cup down. “Have you contacted the attorney in Charlotte?”

“Last night. He’s agreed to meet with us Monday afternoon if that works for you.”

“It does only because I purposely kept my schedule light due to my parents being away. As a matter of fact, I’ve got a few weeks relatively free.”

“Good. Then we’ll leave tomorrow about eight. It’ll take half a day to drive there without rushing.”

“Sounds fine.” She warmed both their cups with fresh coffee. “If you don’t mind a suggestion, instead of wasting time going back and forth, why don’t we continue north after tomorrow? We’ll compile notes as we go.”

He arched a brow. “You okay with that?”

She gave him an impatient look. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t.”

“Okay. Are your parents okay with you traveling with a strange man for over a week then?”

“You’re not serious?”

“Perfectly.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You going to ravish me?”

“The thought has crossed my mind once or twice.”

“Odd. You’re not alone in that then.”

He laughed. “Are you always so frank?”

“I try to be.” She leaned forward. “Brad, I’m getting the distinct feeling that this whole thing is going to get a lot more complicated than either of us first thought.”

“Emotionally or investigative wise?”

“Both.”

“You backing down?”

“Absolutely not. I’m just warning you.”

“Lady, you’re way too late for that.” He captured one of her hands, pulling her up as he stood. “Way too late.”

Just before he leaned down to capture her lips, he told himself he was acting totally out of character. It wasn’t in his nature to move so quickly or act so spontaneously. Yet she stood there, lips slightly parted, her green eyes deep and dark and he had to kiss her. Wasn’t sure he should but that made no difference.

Sensations rocketed through him as his lips crushed hers. When he trailed them along her neck, she melted against him, winding her fingers in his thick hair.

He was the one who finally pulled away enough to look down at her, shaking his head ruefully. “I’m beginning to think the only way to get you out of my system is to sleep with you.”

She arched a delicate brow. “Sleep or have sex?”

“Both.”

“One doesn’t have to include the other.”

He ran a finger along her lower lip. “With us it would.”

“Don’t be too sure.”

“About the sex?”

“About sleeping.”

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