

*Love Inspired*  
**SUSPENSE**  
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

EVIDENCE  
*of*  
MURDER

JILL  
ELIZABETH  
NELSON



**Samantha's intercom buzzer sounded.  
On shaky legs, she padded to the  
kitchen and pressed the button  
to hear who was there.**

"Ms. Reid, this is Officer Johnson of the Plymouth Police Department. Your intruder says he has a right to be here. Would you mind coming down?"

A few seconds later, Samantha cautiously unlocked her door and peered out into the night. A pair of officers held a man between them—someone she recognized. She glanced up into the stone face of Ryan Davidson, the same man she'd seen in a photo earlier that day.

Their gazes locked, and raw emotion flickered in his blue eyes. The power of his bewildered pain snagged her breath. In recent times, she'd seen that look in another pair of eyes.

Her own.

## ***JILL ELIZABETH NELSON***

writes what she likes to read—faith-based tales of adventure seasoned with romance. By day she operates as a housing manager for a seniors' apartment complex. By night she turns into a wild and crazy writer who can hardly wait to jot down all the exciting things her characters are telling her, so she can share them with her readers. More about Jill and her books can be found at [www.jillelizabethnelson.com](http://www.jillelizabethnelson.com). She and her husband live in rural Minnesota, surrounded by the woods and prairie and their four grown children who have settled nearby.

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Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or  
famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword?...No,  
in all these things we are more than conquerors  
through Him who loved us.

—*Romans* 8:35, 37



To the victims and their families affected by  
violent crime. May they find peace and comfort  
in the Lord who loves them.

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## ONE

One more nasty surprise in this old building might send her screaming for the funny farm. Samantha Reid glared at the door in front of her. Another unexplored room to tackle. What mysterious trial lay beyond? They'd disturbed a mouse nest in one of the dryers, and herds of spiders scurried for cover every time they moved something. Did spiders run in herds? They sure seemed to around here, especially down below in the basement—mice and spiders. Sam shuddered.

Good thing nothing was down there except museum-quality dry-cleaning equipment that must have dated back to the early days of the industry. That stuff could stay put until she found a place interested in carting the heavy pieces away. But up here on the main floor, she didn't have the luxury of delaying the project.

Squaring her shoulders, Sam turned the knob and eased open the door to the storeroom. She groped along the wall and flipped the light switch. A pair of fluorescent tubes flickered to life as smells of dust and chemicals nipped her nose. Her gaze scanned the twelve-foot-square room, and she puffed out a long breath that didn't stir the sweaty bangs plastered to her forehead.

How had a lifelong bachelor like Abel Morris accumulated so much junk? She stared at a maze of stacked boxes and metal shelves stuffed with dust-coated paint cans and half-empty jugs of cleaning solvent.



“Great!” Sam rubbed the small of her aching back. Her best friends, Jenna and Hallie, were going to be delighted at this discovery of a fresh room full of junkyard treasures. They’d been sorting and throwing things away for hours and had barely made a dent.

Fur brushed Sam’s bare calf. She stiffened then relaxed at the familiar rumble that accompanied the touch. An Abyssinian cat wound around her sneaker-clad feet. Chuckling, she bent and scooped up the long, lean feline. The cat’s motor revved up a notch as he rubbed his head against Sam’s chin.

She stroked the soft, blue-gray fur. “So, Bastian, was I nuts to buy this neighborhood dry cleaners and expect to make a go of it?”

Her breath hitched, as it had many times since she signed on the dotted line. She’d paid out a big chunk of the inheritance money from her grandmother in order to become an independent businesswoman in Apple Valley, Minnesota—a healthy distance from her loving but smothering hometown. Twenty-six ought to be old enough to strike out on her own, shouldn’t it? Nine years had passed since that one horrible night. Sam shook herself and deposited the cat on the cement floor. She had to stop going to that place in her mind.

The throaty tones of Hallie Berglund’s television-personality voice came from the front room, followed by Jenna Newmann’s bright laugh. Sam’s shoulders relaxed. With the help of her friends and God, she could make a success of this business. She would.

Sam studied the room again. Her gaze caught on a toaster-size cardboard box high on a set of freestanding metal shelves in the middle of the room. The side of the box was labeled in red marker: *Lost, but alas, not found*. She laughed. God rest his soul, Abel Morris had been no ordinary hoarder; he was a poetic packrat. Now that was one box she had to open.

She stepped to the shelves. Her five-foot-five-inch height put the box level with the top of her head. Grasping the sides, she pulled it toward her. It was a little heavier than she liked. She put

one foot back to brace herself. Something soft squished beneath the heel of her sneaker.

*Mrrrow!*

Bastian! Sam jerked her foot up. The box tilted toward her, threatening to land on her head. She ducked, still on one foot, teetered, and grabbed for the shelf. Off balance, she fell forward, toppling the set of shelving onto a stack of boxes, which thumped to the floor every which way, scattering contents.

*Umph!* Sam found herself spread-eagled and facedown atop the set of shelves that now rested on upended boxes. Acrid fumes from broken solvent bottles stung her throat and eyes. Throbbing from various body parts let her know she'd have a fine set of bruises in the morning.

"What happened?"

Hallie's alarmed voice brought Sam's head around. The tall, slender woman stood in the doorway, dark eyes wide, long-fingered hand clamped over her mouth. A short, generous figure shoved past her into the room.

"Phew!" Jenna coughed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, just help me up so we can get out of here." Sam struggled to push away from the set of shelves and find the floor with her feet. Two pairs of hands grasped her arms and hauled her upright. She pulled her friends with her out the door and slammed it shut.

Choking, they headed for the side exit and fresh air. The route took them between antiquated clothing presses, puffers and a pillow-cleaning machine—nothing like the state-of-the-art equipment due to arrive in a few weeks.

Mere steps behind her friends, Sam barreled into the side alleyway and hauled in a breath of outdoor oxygen.

Next to her, Hallie shook her head like a dog shedding water. "Whoa! Whatever was in those bottles is potent."

Jenna pinched her nose. "Stink and a half!"

"I know." Sam slumped against the brick wall of her building. "Perchloroethylene. Perc for short. It's petroleum-based and so

toxic and flammable it's all but banned in the industry. That's why I have to pay an arm and a leg to have a hazardous-material company haul it out of here. We're not to touch it...well, except to clean up the mess I just made."

In the late afternoon, the two-story dry cleaners cast shade across the space between it and the print shop next door. The coolness was welcome on this late summer day. Sam's nose and eyes cleared, but a weight still pressed her lungs. How could she possibly finish this gargantuan cleanup task in time to—

*Stop it!* Breathe in, breathe out. All would be well. This was a minor setback. She— "Bastian!"

Sam tore open the door and raced back inside the building. The smell wasn't too bad from this distance, but what if she'd shut her cat in the storeroom?

A plaintive meow brought her up short. She changed direction, charged through a doorway and skidded to a halt in a small vestibule facing a closed and locked exit to the rear alleyway. She turned and gazed up the wooden stairs that skirted the wall and led to her second-floor apartment. The Abyssinian perched regally on the top landing, slim body encircled by his long tail. The jerky tip-twitch matched the glare from those copper eyes.

A muted giggle slipped past Sam's lips. "Your humble servant begs your pardon. I have mightily offended your highness. Allow me to admit you to your chambers." She trod up the stairs and let him into the apartment, then headed down to find her friends. As she reached the bottom, they came toward her from the direction of the odorous storeroom.

"I'll take that." Hallie reached for something Jenna held in her fist.

The shorter woman danced away, tucking the item behind her back. Both of them laughed, but Hallie crossed her arms over her long-tailed shirt. The two friends were a study in contrasts, like a dusky-skinned Amazon queen matched with a jovial munchkin.

But they were identical in their attention to personal grooming—except for today.

Not on her life was Sam going to tell the elegant Channel Six news reporter that tufts of her black hair stuck out like she was Einstein's photonegative image. Nor would she inform the fastidious head chef and part owner of The Meridian "fine dining experience" that she looked like she'd been dipped in wheat flour. Thank the Lord for friends who would give up a Saturday and risk their manicured nails to help with a dirty project like hers.

Sam grinned. "What's up with you two?" She looked from one to the other.

Jenna held out her arm and opened her fist. A roll of 35 mm film rested on her palm. "I thought I kicked something when I ran out of there. I found it under one of the presses."

"Strange. Maybe the film was in that box of unclaimed property I was trying to get at when I took my tumble."

"Could be, but I want to develop it," Hallie said.

"Why? It's probably just shots of some stranger's boring vacation from sometime in the last century." Jenna surrendered the roll.

Hallie flipped the canister in the air, caught it, and stuffed it into her jeans pocket. "Call it journalistic curiosity. Besides, I don't often get a chance to process film the old-fashioned way."

Sam shook her head. "Go upstairs and order a pizza, ladies. I'll crack a few windows and open that storeroom door so things can air out awhile before I lock up for the night."

Jenna snorted. "Why not leave the windows ajar? Maybe some idiot thief will sneak in and take a few of these priceless treasures off our hands."

*Thief?* Sam's stomach rolled. Sensory impressions clamored for attention in her head. A door crashing inward. A dirty face with crazed eyes. The sear of burning flesh.

Sam blinked and shook off the flashback as she walked away without a word.

“Nice going, Jen.” Hallie’s fierce whisper carried to Sam’s ears.

On the other side of the building, Sam shoved a window sash upward. Why was she still so touchy about the subject of break-ins? The incident happened when she was seventeen. She was a grown woman now. It was past time to get over it. But the pep talk didn’t wash the sawdust from her mouth.

Two hours later, alone with her cat, Sam started running a bath. As the water splashed into the tub and steam rose, she opened a bottle of scented oil and poured a healthy dollop into the rising pool. The exotic floral aroma enveloped her. Wonderful!

She pulled the padded band out of her ponytail, and her thick, honey-brown hair fell loose to brush her shoulder blades. As soon as the water filled two-thirds of the tub, she eased in. Bubbles tickled her neck, and the knot in the small of her back loosened. The phone jangled, and she sat up, then shook her head and lay back again. Whoever it was could leave a message. She was going to enjoy a good, long soak.

By the time she climbed out, her muscles were relaxed and supple. Sam glanced across her shoulder into the wide mirror as she dried her back. The towel ran with little sensation across pale splotches of faded scars and puckers of skin-graft seams. She took a long-handled sponge, dipped it into an open jar of emollient, and rubbed every inch of the damaged skin until the lotion was absorbed. She rinsed the sponge, then donned pajamas before slipping into the smooth robe of real Chinese silk Jenna had brought back from a mission trip to the Far East.

On slipper-clad feet, she wandered to the kitchen for a glass of milk. Bastian, recovered from his sulk, twined around her legs and purred. Milk in hand, she surveyed her domain. Once the business was up and running, she’d have to remodel this apartment. Fifties retro was back in style, but all this burnt orange wasn’t trendy décor; it was the real deal.

A blinking light on the phone caught her attention. She crossed the room and pushed the button. Static hiss came through, then a shaky sigh, followed by, "I'm coming over. We've got a big problem."

Sam frowned. That husky growl sounded like Hallie. Couldn't be. Nothing ever got the queen of poise that ruffled.

A buzz sounded near Sam's ear, and she let out a squawk. Someone was downstairs at the private entrance. The buzz sounded again, loud and long, like the person was leaning on the button. The noise let up. Gingerly, she pressed Talk. "Hello?"

Heavy breathing answered. The hair on Sam's arms stood at attention.

"It's me." A familiar voice spoke—familiar but off. "Let me in. I have to see you. Now!"

"I'll be right down, Hallie. Are you okay?"

"In! Now!"

Sam bounded down the stairs and opened the door. Hallie barged past her. She'd changed clothes into embroidered white capris and a fitted button-down shirt. Her long legs devoured the steps to the apartment two at a time. Sam trotted behind.

"What's the matter?"

Hallie didn't look at her. Lips pressed together, she was laying out photos in a long line on the kitchen table.

Sam crept forward and gazed down at the pictures. Chills cascaded down her spine. Bloody bodies. A woman's head lolled back on a couch, bright spatters on her slack face. A young girl stared from a separate frame, crimson-chested, eyes wide and lifeless. Another showed someone—maybe a man—with the barrel of a shotgun tucked under his chin and a good portion of his head missing. Samantha let out a shriek and leaped backward, hand to her throat.

## TWO

“What are we going to do about those?” Sam stabbed a finger at the photos on the table.

“Burn them, shred them or report them. Take your pick. It’s probably someone’s idea of a sick joke—a staged Halloween prank or something.”

Sam shook her head. “The people look too real. And the blood.”

“Lots can be done with makeup and cameras. I should know.”

“But you raced over here with them. You think they’re genuine. We have to turn the pictures over to the police.”

Hallie blew out a long breath. “I thought you should see them first. Shall I make the call?” She pulled a cell phone from her purse.

“No! We’ll take them to the station ourselves.” Keeping her eyes averted from the gruesome evidence, Sam swept the photos into a stack. “I’m not having a police cruiser pull up outside and cops knocking on my door. This is an upscale neighborhood. If anyone sees, they’ll wonder what hinky things are going on with the new owner.” She handed the pictures to Hallie. “Put these in something. I’ll get dressed.”

Half an hour later, they stood facing the night duty sergeant on the other side of a thick window—bulletproof, no doubt. The man stared at them with pale eyes set in a square face above a pair of Brahma bull shoulders. Intimidation on the hoof.

Sam swallowed. Hard.

"I'm Sergeant Garner. You wish to report a crime?" The officer's voice was surprisingly gentle coming from that massive package. Graying hair and a lined face put him in his upper forties.

"I'm Hallie Berglund, reporter for Channel Six news, and this is my friend—"

"Samantha Reid." Sam raised her hand like she was in grade school. Her face heated, and she offered a weak smile as she tucked her arm to her side.

Hallie placed the bag containing the film casing into the dip in the counter that allowed objects to pass under the barrier. "This was found at my friend's place of business. I developed it tonight and came up with these." She set another baggie with the prints into the tray. "They appear to be photos of a multiple murder."

Garner eyed the material without touching it, and then assessed both of them with his gaze. "You haven't actually seen any bodies?"

Sam and Hallie shook their heads as one.

"Just pictures, and no idea where and when the crime may have occurred."

They nodded in tandem.

The sergeant pursed his lips. "Can you show me some ID? We'll take your names and contact information. If we need to talk to you after we see what you've got, we'll be in touch."

On Wednesday afternoon, Sam lugged another sack of junk out to the rented Dumpster in the back of the building. She hefted the bag and slung it over the edge. A *crunch-thump* announced a safe landing. She dusted her hands together and headed back inside, humming.

She hadn't heard a peep about the pictures. That must mean they weren't really crime scene pics. Good thing, too. She was neck-deep in renovations. Of course, she'd had to break down and hire a cleaning crew—an expense not in the budget, but worth every penny if she could open her business on schedule.



She waved at a couple of the workers as she threaded between machines to her cracker-box office beside the customer service area at the front of the building. Seated behind her desk, she pulled out the ledger and checkbook and started working on the stack of bills. Honestly, how did that inheritance money evaporate faster than snow in July? Her business plan showed start-up capital available for at least a year...but only if she didn't have any setbacks.

Sharp raps sounded at the front door. Who would be at the customer entrance when they were clearly not open for business? The knock came again, and she hurried to answer, then stopped dead in her tracks.

The wide front window showed a police cruiser parked at the curb. At the door stood a lean man in a suit and two uniformed officers, one male, one female. The suited man flipped open a black case and displayed the PD insignia. The guy looked around the age of the duty sergeant from the other night, but he had thinning, silver-sprinkled hair and was angular-bodied where the sergeant had been bulky.

Maybe the visit had nothing to do with the photos. And maybe water flowed uphill.

Sam unlocked the door and eased it open.

"I'm Detective Connell," the man said. "Are you Samantha Reid?"

"Yes."

"May we come in and speak with you?"

"Certainly." Sam held the door wide. "Is this about—"

"It is." The detective and the uniforms stepped inside. Voices and clatter from the work area drew Connell's hawkish gaze. "Who's here with you?"

"Just my cleaning crew. I'm getting ready to open, and this place was a mess."

"Could you tell your people to stop work?"

"Now?" Sam blinked at the detective.

“Right now. We have a warrant to search.” He handed her a folded sheet of paper.

What had she just been thinking about setbacks? “You’d better come to my office and explain what’s going on.”

Connell jerked a nod to the uniforms and followed her alone.

Sam faced the detective from behind her desk. “Those photos were for real?”

He nodded, dark eyes flat. “A family named Davidson. Ten years ago, they were shot to death in their home a few blocks from here. The incident was ruled murder/suicide. But those photos prove there had to be at least one more person at the scene. Maybe someone who set it up to look like the dad shot his wife and daughter and then himself. The case has been bumped up to straight murder, and now we’re looking for a killer a decade after the deaths.” He jaded tone said he didn’t hold out much hope of solving the crime.

Sam sank into her chair. Here she’d told her mother this was a safe neighborhood. “What do you want with me? I was a clueless teenager ten years ago, zits and giggles and all. And I lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.”

“You’re not a suspect, Ms. Reid, but we need to search this building.”

“What else could you possibly expect to find after all this time?”

“We have to be thorough. The film was here. Something else could be.”

“Fine, but you’ll have to assign someone to Dumpster diving.” She marched out into the work area. Her cleaners were gone, and the two uniformed cops were already digging into things.

The detective stepped up beside her. “Could you show me where the film was discovered?”

“Just the room where it was found. Except for some perc cleaning solvent awaiting pickup by the hazmat people, the box it was in and everything else has already been cleaned out. Good luck sorting through the garbage.”

Connell frowned. “Did you save anything from the box?”

Sam headed back toward her office. "Odds and ends. They're in here."

She handed him the paperweight from her desk. It was a smoky crystal rendering of a trout mounted on a hefty slab of black obsidian. "That was in the box. And this." From the front of the filing cabinet, she plucked a ceramic magnet that featured a picture of a baby sitting in a high chair, bawling. The inscription said, *No Whining!* "Seemed like a good daily reminder." She gave it to the detective.

"There were any number of hotel key cards accumulated from customer pockets, but I threw them out. I did keep these, however." She opened the top drawer of the cabinet and pulled out a small bucket. The contents clattered as she plunked it onto the desk. "Lots of regular keys, but no way to know what they open or who owned them."

"I can have this stuff tested for blood and prints, but if nothing pops up, you'll likely get them back." He shook the contents of the bucket. "I'm surprised you haven't tossed these."

Sam smiled. "There's a crafter in my hometown who makes wind chimes out of old keys. I was saving them for her."

"What else was in the box?"

"I'm not sure. I knocked a shelf over, and the contents spilled out when I was getting it down." She crossed her arms. "We found assorted manicure items, a few eyeglass cases, combs, pill-boxes, that sort of thing scattered on the floor. But they're—"

"In the Dumpster."

"Right."

The detective's gaze traveled around the room. "Did you bring in the furnishings for this room, or were these things here when you bought the place?"

"Mr. Morris used this room as a storage area, not an office. Everything in here came from outside."

"What about the contents of the closet?" He jerked his chin toward the closed door at the side of the room.

“Same thing. I emptied this whole area.”

“More Dumpster work.” One side of his mouth curved downward.

“No. Sorry. This was one of the first places I cleaned out. That Dumpster-load has already been collected by the city. How do your officers feel about combing the landfill?”

Connell shook his head. “I’ll tell the uniforms to leave this room out of their search.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

The detective reached inside his jacket and pulled out a five-by-eight photo. Sam took a step backward.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Reid. This one isn’t of a dead body. Have you ever seen this man?”

Sam took the picture and studied a man a little older than herself, wearing faded jeans and a Nike T-shirt. He stood on a dock with a sparkling river in the background. The Mississippi? Close-cut blond hair framed a bold-featured face—straight nose, square chin, wide lips pressed into a thin line. Nothing extraordinary, except for the eyes. Blue as a mountain lake and twice as chilly. Her pulse rate jumped up a notch. “I don’t know him, and I’m glad. Is he a suspect?”

“Our job would be a lot easier if he was. Relatives usually top the list.” Connell took the picture back. “Ryan Davidson. He came home from college and found his family like your photos showed. At least that’s what he’s always claimed, and we have reason to believe he’s telling the truth.”

Sam pressed her palms together. “How awful for him. He still lives around here?”

“A houseboat near Hastings, about thirty-odd miles from here, right where the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers converge. He owns a rental houseboat company that caters to tourists.”

“Really! What does he do in the winter?”

“He’s got no ties. Just takes the whole shebang south to Missouri.” He shook his head with a tight smile.

Either the detective envied Davidson's footloose life or thought he was nuts. Personally, she'd go with the latter. What was life about except settling in to become a vital part of a community? "How long will your people be out there?" She gestured toward the workroom.

"At least twenty-four hours. We'll finish as quickly as we can. Since this isn't a crime scene and you're not suspected of anything, feel free to come and go, but don't remove anything further from the building. Have a good day, Ms. Reid." The detective walked out.

Sam wilted into her chair. By the end of tomorrow, the rumor mill could have her reputation as trashed as the garbage out back. With that cruiser parked in front and uniformed officers searching, what were the neighbors already thinking in their fine houses up the street? A cloud of suspicion could doom her business before she even opened the doors.

A muted clatter outside her bedroom window jerked Sam awake. Save for the glow from her bedside clock, her room lay wrapped in darkness. She lifted her head from the pillow and looked at the time. The digital numbers read 1:32 a.m. A sharp bang resounded below.

Outside or inside? Her heart *kabumped* and every nerve ending buzzed. Maybe it was just some critter digging in the garbage. Not likely. She'd closed that lid.

Bastian mewled and leaped up on the captain's bench in front of the window, his lean form a shadowy outline. The direction of his stare was fixed as if he could see through the curtains and make out something—or someone—in the alley. A rattle carried to Sam's ears. That sounded like an attempt at the private entrance door.

Muscles rigid, Sam lay motionless. Her pulse throbbed.

Bastian growled, deep and low.

She couldn't just lie here until whoever it was found her and

did whatever he came to do. How many books had she read where the stupid character did that? Or, dumber still, snuck around with some lame weapon like a bat to try and nab the burglar herself? She'd always wanted to yell, "What do you think nine-one-one is for, dummy?"

As suddenly as the paralysis had gripped her, it lifted. Sam sprang upright and grabbed the cordless phone from her nightstand. A few punches and she was talking to a no-nonsense woman who took her information and promised to get a car there immediately.

With the line still open to the dispatcher, Sam scooped Bastian up and perched on the edge of the bed, staring into the darkness. Her hand ran the length of her cat's back. Again. Again. Bastian's fur crackled and stood on end. He hopped off her lap, growling a protest. The operator kept assuring her help was on the way, but where were they? Sam gripped the edges of the mattress, ears perked. Sure, the police hung around here all day, and now when she needed them—

Sirens blared outside and lights flashed. Voices yelled, followed by clatters, then quiet. The cruiser lights continued to strobe.

Her intercom buzzer sounded. On jelly legs, Sam padded to her kitchen and answered.

"Ms. Reid, this is Officer Johnson of the Apple Valley Police Department. Your intruder says he has a right to be here. Would you mind coming down?"

Why did the police always ask questions like a person really had the option to say no? "Let me get my robe."

A few seconds later, Sam unlocked her private entrance and peered out into the night. Under the entrance light, a pair of officers she'd never seen held a man between them—someone she did recognize. She glared up into the stone face of Ryan Davidson.

Their gazes locked, and raw emotion flickered in those intense blue eyes. The power of his bewildered pain snagged her

breath. In times not long enough past, she'd seen that look of a stunned victim in another pair of eyes...whenever she looked in the mirror.

Why was this woman staring right through him, all white face and big green eyes? Was he a ghost or something?

Ryan studied her. One arm hugged her trim waist. The opposite hand clutched her robe at the neck. She was kind of cute with that heart-shaped face and tousled hair, but it looked like he'd scared her something fierce. Not his intention. So what had he meant to accomplish by his impulsive visit to the old neighborhood? Insomnia wasn't much of an excuse.

His shoulders slumped, but the officers retained their grips like manacles around his biceps. He was lucky he wasn't in handcuffs. Yet. "I'm sorry, ah...Miss Reid, isn't it? I didn't mean any harm."

She frowned. "Why are you skulking around my property?"

"I wasn't skulking exactly. Not even looking for physical clues. I was searching my memory of that night. Did you know I cruised by here right before I went home to find—" His voice cracked. "Anyway, I ended up pacing back and forth in this alley. Kicked the Dumpster in frustration, and I've got the throbbing toe to prove it." He lifted a tennis-shoed foot. "I suppose that's what woke you."

"Do you want us to run this guy in for trespassing, Ms. Reid?" asked the officer who'd identified himself as Johnson.

Ryan held his breath. She wouldn't. Would she?

Her gaze darted away, and the tips of white teeth nibbled at her bottom lip. "I don't know. I doubt Mr. Davidson poses a danger, but—"

"You know him?"

"You know me?"

Ryan's words tangled with Johnson's.

"From a photo." A flush spread across her cheekbones.

Yes, definitely attractive, but where had she seen a picture of him? “I wasn’t in those photos you turned in. The detective laid out the whole roll for me to see.” What shadowed her eyes? Pity? Ryan’s jaw clenched.

She met his stare. “I assume it was the same detective who showed me a print of you down by the river.”

Ryan snorted. “Sure, updating their file with a sneak shot after they get me all riled up. Bet I looked like a lunatic.”

Static crackled from the nearby police cruiser, followed by a garbled voice. The officers released Ryan and backed away. “If you’re not going to press charges, Miss,” Johnson said, “we need to answer that call.”

“You should go, too, Mr. Davidson.” Samantha Reid narrowed the door opening so he could only see half of her body. “There’s nothing for you to find here. The police haven’t uncovered anything new, and I doubt they will.”

She moved to close the door, but before she could, a small creature darted from the doorway into the alley.

“Bastian, come back here!” the woman called. “Oh, no, I must not have shut the door tight above.”

“I’ll find him. Little animals have certain ways of moving in the dark. Hang tight. I’ll bring him to you.”

“But—”

“It’s the least I can do for getting you up in the middle of the night. Besides, you’re not dressed for a walk.”

Her brows scrunched together. “Bastian won’t come to you.”

“We’ll see.” He headed in the direction the cat had disappeared, a mental *Here, kitty, kitty* going in his head. Not that he’d ever talk out loud that way to such a dignified animal.

“Of all the arrogant guys!” Samantha fumed as she threw on jeans and a T-shirt. He’d better be gone by the time she got downstairs again, or she’d clobber him with her flashlight. Bastian was particular about who he allowed to touch him. She



was the only one who could get close, and who knew how long that would take? Her night's rest was officially over.

She stormed down the stairs and flung open the outside door.

"Hi." Ryan Davidson grinned down at her, the purring Abyssinian cradled in his arms. "He was just investigating your alley and didn't go far."

She gaped up at him.

"Here." He handed her the cat.

A mewl mixed with his purr. The cat's head swiveled toward Davidson.

"Nice Aby. Good ticking in his coat." He scratched behind Bastian's ear, and the cat nosed the man's hand. "Well, g'night, then. Hope you can still catch some z's." He gave her a lopsided grin and turned away.

"Th-thank you." Sam watched his broad-shouldered figure stride into the night. She hugged her cat close. "Traitor," she murmured into his perked ear. Her heart was a traitor, too. It had done a distinct pitty-pat when Ryan Davidson smiled.

## THREE

Muted dock lighting played over Ryan's bedroom ceiling in rhythm with the slight sway of the water beneath the boat. He lay on his back with his arms under his head. The murmur of the river teased his ears. The soothing sights and sounds usually had him out in seconds, but his carefully constructed world had blown apart again with the discovery of those pictures.

How had the roll of film ended up at Old Man Morris's dry cleaners?

He'd hoped a walk through the area might jar his recollection of something suspicious he'd seen that night. But then, who was to say he'd encountered a single thing connected to his family's deaths? Would he even have noticed if he had? Arriving in Apple Valley following the end of his sophomore year at the University of Wisconsin, he'd zigged and zagged aimlessly through the neighborhood, dreading going home, his father's angry words from their phone call echoing in his head.

His gut soured. He heaved himself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed and rubbed his forehead.

*Dad, would you ever have understood my decision not to follow in your footsteps as an investment banker?* His family's deaths had robbed him of the opportunity to find out. What if he'd headed straight home? Could he have saved them? Or would he have joined them stone-cold in the grave?

At least his dad hadn't killed himself or mom and Cassie. A breath trembled in his lungs. How did he feel about that? Relieved. Yeah, beyond belief. But guilty, too. Why had he ever believed the cops' conclusion about that night?

But if his dad didn't do it, then someone else murdered them all. Ryan shot to his feet. He paced, fists clenched, bare feet smacking the hardwood floor.

Who would do such a thing? A psycho? Then why hadn't the nutcase been caught committing similar atrocities? That kind seldom stopped killing voluntarily.

But if the murders were done in cold blood for a reason, then finding the cause would reveal the killer. Sure, the police were back on the case, but why should he trust them? They'd treated the tragedy like a slam-dunk murder/suicide and closed the book. Now, ten years after the fact, the authorities were sniffing up a cold trail with dozens of hotter cases piled on their docket.

No, he was the only one with a strong enough motive to dig and not give up until he found something.

*Dad, I promise I'll find out who killed our ladies and you.*

Too bad he couldn't have a chat with Abel Morris and ask where the guy found the film. Miss Reid sure got stuck with a mess not of her own making, but maybe she knew something from scouring through the building that she didn't realize was important. It might be in his best interests to be friendly with her. He'd shot himself in the foot tonight with his prowler act, but maybe finding the cat had helped his cause.

Tomorrow, he'd do what he could to cement a better impression. Besides, even if nothing further panned out in the investigation, a guy would be certifiable to pass up the opportunity to get acquainted with a smart, fine-looking woman who showed rare character by turning in those photos. Not many people would step forward these days to get involved in someone else's troubles. He knew lots of people who would have just shredded

the nasty pictures and gone on with their lives without a second thought.

Ryan stretched out on the bed and willed his limbs to relax. What would it take to make Miss Reid smile?

At 9:00 a.m., someone knocked on the front door of the cleaners. Not the police. They were already here. She answered the summons to find a grinning teenage boy bearing a gift.

Flowers? Who would they be from?

Sam took the enormous glass vase from the delivery person's hand, tipped him, and then carried the vase of white calla lilies to her office desk. She worked the small envelope from its holder and opened it.

*Humble apologies. Your Midnight Marauder.*

Sam laughed. Who would ever have thought she'd find anything funny about an apparent break-in attempt? Her eyes narrowed. Oooh, this Davidson guy was slick. He'd better not have some notion of getting on her good side so she'd let him hang around. She had a business to get started and enough distractions without adding one more to the list, even if Bastian had given his stamp of approval to the big, blond outdoorsman.

A crisp thank-you note accepting his apology ought to be the end of it. A quick search on the Internet yielded the address for Davidson Houseboats. Sam dashed off her thanks and took the note with her as she headed out the door to meet Hallie for lunch at Jenna's restaurant. Then she had a truckload of errands to run. She might as well make herself scarce until the police finished combing the building later today. Hopefully.

A fifteen-minute drive through busy suburban streets brought her to the white stucco and half-timbered restaurant in Lakeville. Sam stepped into the welcome of savory and delicate aromas. Her gaze searched the wood-beamed dining room for Hallie. She spotted her, sleekly groomed in a tailored green pantsuit, waiting at a cloth-covered table. Sam waved and Hallie answered with

a wide grin. Sam settled opposite her friend, and they ordered their favorites—seafood fettuccini alfredo for Hallie and a chicken salad pita with a garlic dill pickle for herself.

“You look frazzled.” Hallie spread her napkin on her lap. “You need to ease up and take time to smell the roses.”

Sam wrinkled her nose. “How about the calla lilies?”

Hallie’s eyebrows climbed. “Spill your guts, girl.”

By the time Sam finished telling about the police intrusion yesterday, the Davidson disturbance last night, and the flowers on her desk this morning, her friend was leaning halfway across the table, jaw slack.

“Oh, hon.” She settled back. “And I thought a reporter’s life was adventurous.”

Sam sniffed. “This feels more like a trial.”

“The Perils of Samantha Reid.” Jenna’s words and chuckle brought Sam’s head around.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to get the whole scoop, as Hal might say.” Jenna winked a hazel eye. “That Ryan fellow sounds like a dish. Better keep him.”

“I second the motion.” Hallie lifted a hand and waggled slim fingers.

Sam scowled from one to the other. “Romance has no place in my life right now, and certainly not in his. He’s got a murder investigation swirling around him.” She groaned at the conspiratorial look her friends exchanged. Thank goodness, the food came just then, and Jenna glided back to her kitchen while she and Hallie dug in.

A half hour later, Sam paid her bill and exited into the warm sunlight outside the restaurant.

“Just a minute!”

Hallie’s urgent tone stopped Sam halfway across the parking lot. She turned to find her friend striding toward her, unsmiling.

Sam’s brows drew together. “What’s up?”

Hallie stopped in front of her. "I didn't want to mention it over lunch. Spoil anyone's appetite, you know. But now that something's happened with those pictures, I have to come clean with my station about what we found." Her gaze darted away and then returned to meet Sam's. "I have to do my job, or I'll lose it. There will be media attention, most of it directed toward Ryan, but—"

"I get it. Someone besides the police will be asking me questions. Will they assign you to the story?"

"If the main crime reporter is too busy, I might get a taste of the action." A smile crossed her lips then morphed into a frown. "I just wish you weren't involved."

"Don't worry about it. Maybe some good can come of this mess, and you'll get another step closer to that anchor spot."

Hallie's gaze warmed. "Spoken like a true friend, thinking about the other person first. You can always say, 'No comment,' and let us get our answers from the police and Davidson."

Sam shrugged. "It might be kind of nice to speak my piece. At least people will know that all the police attention isn't because I'm running drugs out of the dry cleaners or some other nefarious activity at my shop." She smiled, but the edges of her mouth quivered. How *would* she handle a camera in her face? She barely managed standing up front in the church choir.

Hallie put a hand on her arm. "I know you hate the spotlight. Too bad you've got a reporter for a friend."

"Finding that film wasn't your fault, and we both turned it in."

"Like we had a choice?"

"Right. But none of this involves us directly. It'll blow over. You'll see." It better, or her family would start camping out on her doorstep. *Aaagh!*

"Speaking from experience," Hallie said, "with the next homicide, this cold case will go in the deep freeze again, and you'll open your business on time."

"Sure, but Ryan will be stuck not knowing who killed his family."

“Ryan, is it? I knew you liked him.” Hallie strolled away, laughing.

Scowl plastered on her face, Sam hustled to her car. She gripped her car key, tip pointing through her fingers, a defensive preparation that had become second nature. “Just because I feel for the guy’s situation doesn’t mean I’m the least interested in any other way,” she grumbled under her breath. “I’ve got too much on my plate to take on old mysteries.” She slid into the driver’s seat and picked up the thank-you note from the center console. After she mailed this, there would be no reason for further contact with Ryan Davidson.

At the end of the afternoon, Sam returned to the dry cleaners to find the police gone, but a mess left. Evidently, their job description only required tearing things apart but excluded returning anything to proper order. She spent over an hour in the back alley chucking things back into the Dumpster. The disarray inside the building could wait. It would have to, because her energy fuel gauge was running on empty.

She called the cleaning crew to resume in the morning then handled a few bookkeeping chores before shutting the office door and checking the locks on all of the outside doors and windows. Hallie was right. She was exhausted and needed to unwind. A movie and popcorn sounded like a great evening.

When she opened her apartment door, Bastian darted out. The feline streaked down the stairs and into the main building.

Sam shook her head. “Okay, so you’re annoyed at being cooped up all afternoon. Enjoy playing watchcat tonight.” Stifling a yawn, she stepped into her kitchen. He’d be all right. He had a litter box, a bed and food and water in a corner near the storage room.

A few hours later, Sam crawled between the sheets and slept so deeply a tornado could have blown her out of bed and she might not have noticed. The next day, feeling rested, she went out for her morning run in the nearby park. When she returned,

sweaty and breathing hard, she headed for her office. A truck would be here in a few days to cart the old machines away, and with a little extra hustle the building should be ready on time to receive the new stuff. The plan was back on track.

She opened her office door, stepped over the threshold, and halted on a gasp. Her beautiful vase lay shattered on the floor, flowers strewn everywhere. “Bastian, what did you do?”

No, the cat couldn’t have been in here. The door was closed.

The desk phone shrilled and Sam jumped. It rang again, and she tiptoed between glass shards to answer it.

“Hello, I’m Vince Graham from Channel Six news.” A male voice rumbled. “We’d like to speak to you about—”

“Sorry. No comment.” Sam smacked the phone into the receiver. Who cared about news stories right now? Somebody had been in her building!

Heart pounding, she scurried from window to door, testing all the locks. At last she came to the window above Bastian’s empty bed. A breeze caressed her face like a subtle taunt. The sash gaped open wide, and the antiquated window had been missing its screen since the day she bought the place. She’d meant to have one installed, but it hadn’t happened yet, and now—Sam hugged herself, the scars on her back tingling. She’d had an intruder for real, and she slept through it. And where was the Abyssinian? In all her racing around, she hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him.

Her spine stiffened. Only one person had shown an unnatural interest in this building besides the police. And he’d mesmerized her cat. Maybe Bastian went with him when he snuck out after rummaging through her office. So much for apologies. The louse!

She should call the police immediately. She— Oh, no, not that again.

Her business didn’t need any more attention from the authorities. With the police search and a middle-of-the-night visit from a squad car, neighborhood confidence in her business was probably in the tank. She could confront Davidson herself. Sure,



she could. What was he going to do to her? It was broad daylight, and if she went right now, she'd catch him at his business. Let him take some negative publicity this time, the sneak. Someone needed to tell him he'd gone over the line—and he'd better have her cat all safe and sound.

Sam whirled on her heel. If Davidson thought his life was insane right now with the police investigation and reporters sniffing a story, he was about to get a visit from one mad woman.

## FOUR

Standing on the dock, Ryan shook his customer's hand and gave him the keys to the four-passenger houseboat that swayed on the river's current. "Take it nice and easy navigating the locks and dams, Mr. Timmons. When you stop, make sure to set your anchor like I showed you, and keep your outside lights on during the night so other craft won't run into you. Printed instructions are in the wheelhouse, if you need to refresh yourself on anything. But most of all," Ryan stretched his lips into a smile, "enjoy yourselves."

"Sounds good." The pudgy man beamed. Behind him, a pair of grade school-age girls chased each other, giggling, on the upper deck. The man's stocky wife, clad in shorts and a tank top, lolled on a lounge chair in the bow of the boat.

Ryan waved as Timmons joined his family on board. "You folks have a great time on the Old Miss." He untied the boat from the dock and watched them go on their way. Heat from the morning sun bathed his neck. Too bad the sun couldn't warm anything beneath his skin or make his smile for real.

"Mr. Davidson." The clack of feet on the dock accompanied the voice.

Ryan turned to see a tall woman with a caramel complexion picking her way toward him across the boards. Why did females torture themselves with high heels? If one of those silly spikes

wedged in a board, she'd topple over, and he'd be fishing her out of the drink. The woman's face looked vaguely familiar. Behind her clomped a shaggy-haired guy toting a video camera on his shoulder. Ryan looked beyond the mismatched pair, and his stomach clenched. A van with the Channel Six logo painted on the side sat on the asphalt in front of his log-cabin-style office building.

*Uh-oh!* How had the news media gotten wind so quickly?

The smiling woman reached him and held out a slender hand. "Hi, I'm Hallie Berglund, a friend of Samantha Reid's."

Ryan narrowed his eyes at his visitor. So that was how. Ms. Reid couldn't wait to garner attention for her business by letting her reporter pal in on the action. He'd misjudged her as a woman of integrity when she was really out for number one like anybody else.

The reporter-woman's smile faded. "I'm sorry. I know this must be a difficult time for you, dredging up bad memories. Looking at those pictures was bad enough for me, but—"

"You saw the photos?" Ryan's spine stiffened. "Did the police show you? Not hardly! Or was it the lady dry cleaner angling for a little free publicity?"

Color bloomed in Hallie's cheeks. "I developed those photos." She squared her shoulders. "And Samantha's other friend, Jenna, found the film at Sam's place. We're all in this happy little conspiracy together. Sam and I turned them in to the police, so maybe now you and your family will have an opportunity for a killer to be caught. All I want is to chat with you so we can air a segment that maybe, just maybe, will flush a rat out of hiding...or, at the least, entice someone to come forward with helpful information."

Ryan's mouth opened, but he was fresh out of things to say. How could a guy speak with a mouth full of crow anyway? A wry chuckle gusted from his chest. "Come on in." He waved toward his office. "I guess I could share some more of my foul mood, if it'll help your ratings and my family's chance for justice."

"Now you're talking." The smile returned to the reporter's face.

They stepped up the dock toward the sidewalk that would take

them up to the building, the cameraman backpedaling ahead of them. Ryan shook his head. The guy'd been filming the whole time. How much of himself shooting blanks from the hip would come out on the TV news? Ouch! He hadn't been firing harmless blanks; he'd been filling his own foot with lead—again—where the attractive Samantha Reid was concerned.

"Don't worry." The woman next to him spoke under her breath. "Your quantum leap to Planet Wrong Conclusion will end up on the editing floor. You have a lot to learn about Sam, and I'd like you to still have that chance."

Ryan stared down at her. Was the woman a mind reader? And what was that knowing smirk all about? Her gaze turned toward the parking lot, and his followed. A midsize car jerked to a halt on the tarmac, and a woman dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and a practical pair of running shoes lunged out of the vehicle. She charged toward them, small purse slung over her shoulder, glossy ponytail swinging.

Sam? Er, Miss Reid? She looked steamed enough to blow a gasket. No way could she have heard his conversation with her friend.

"Where's Bastian?" She halted in front of them, hands on hips. Little gold flecks in her green eyes glinted up at him.

"Ba— Oh, your cat. Last time I saw him, he was purring in your arms."

"Don't try to tell me you didn't sneak into the dry cleaners last night to finish your snooping expedition. My vase is broken, my flowers are wilted, a window is open and my cat is gone!"

"Someone broke into your building?" The reporter gripped her friend's arm. "Oh, how awful! Are you all right?"

Ryan looked from one woman to the other. Hallie's mouth had drawn up into a tight line, and Sam deflated and that full lower lip quivered.

"I'm f-fine." She sure didn't look it. "I slept through the whole thing."

The women's stares at each other conveyed volumes of information Ryan couldn't read.

"Honest, Miss Reid—"

"Sam." She met his gaze.

Good. Now he had official permission. "Sam, I was nowhere near your neighborhood last night. You have my word on it."

Her gaze searched his face. "Then who..." The words trailed away.

"Maybe the same person we're all looking for."

"Please don't tell me that. As furious as I was with you, I wanted you—no, *needed* you to be the one. Then I wouldn't have to imagine other possibilities."

If only he was guilty. Maybe that would take the haunted look from her eyes. He knew the feeling all too well. What was her story, anyway?

"It seems like none of us is going to have any peace of mind until we get to the bottom of this." Hallie's voice drew their attention. "Maybe finishing the interview will be a step in the right direction."

Ryan nodded in unison with Sam.

The reporter grinned. "You two make quite a pair of intergalactic travelers. You arrived at the same planet on the same morning!"

Clearing his throat, Ryan led the way toward his office building. The cameraman brought up the rear, not filming for the moment.

"What did Hallie mean by that?" Sam asked as she fell in step beside him. The girl had long legs and a runner's stride. Another thing to like about her.

Ryan shrugged. "Oh, some remark she made earlier about a quantum leap to a conclusion."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

As they climbed onto the porch, Old Jake heaved himself to his feet and ambled over.

Sam scratched the animal's head. "Labrador, right?"

Jake groaned his ecstasy and leaned into Sam's leg.

Ryan laughed. "We figure he's mostly Chocolate Lab with a little Springer Spaniel thrown in."

"Is that why he's got a few splotches of white in his coat and around his muzzle?"

"The gray face is his age showing."

"You must've had him for a long time then."

"This summer. He's mostly deaf, as well as old and a little arthritic. Whoever owned him decided he was no good for hunting and dumped him off in the country to fend for himself."

Her eyes flashed. "That's awful!"

"No argument from me. He wandered up here this spring, skin and bones."

"He's well fed now." She ran her hands down his sides.

A throat cleared behind him. "Oops, sorry!" Ryan turned and motioned to the reporter and the cameraman.

Then he led the way into the cool office lobby. A faint scent of cedar greeted them from the genuine wood that lined the walls and floor.

Larry, one of the staff, looked up from behind the long reception counter and froze with his hand poised over calculator keys. "Did I space out some business interview we were supposed to do today?"

Ryan waved at him. "Personal. About...you know."

Larry jerked a nod then went back to pecking at the machine. Ryan led his guests into his office, which looked out the side of the building nearest the guest parking lot.

"Not much for frills, are you?" Sam stood gazing around the room. "And I thought *my* office was bare."

Ryan took fresh stock of his surroundings. An old metal desk, a bit scuffed and dented but serviceable, took up much of the floor space. A lone filing cabinet stood nearby, and a state-of-the-art computer center filled one corner. No artwork hung on the pale walls, just a plaque indicating membership in the local

chamber of commerce. No photos or other personal memorabilia sat on the desk.

The nicest piece in the room was a rather crude oak gun case that he'd cobbled together in high school. It worked fine to hold his several shotguns and rifles, though. The only other item of interest was the view from the French doors behind his desk, and that showed only a small deck, the paved guest parking lot and a wall of trees beyond that.

Yeah, his world had gotten pretty stark. The fault of one devious killer, and Ryan meant to find out who that was.

"Let's do the interview out there." Hallie pointed toward the deck. "That will give us the outdoorsy feel without standing under the hot sun."

"I'm game." The deck offered a clear view of his boats and docks, as well as the access road to his property. He did as much of his paperwork as possible out there, listening to the wind ruffle through the pines that crowded his place.

Ryan opened the French doors, and soon he and the reporter stood on the end of the deck closest to the river. The camera would be able to take in the water and boats behind them. Sam perched on a bench built into the deck rail, out of range of the electronic eye. Ryan wiped his palms on his jeans and glanced at the reporter. "What would you like to know?"

She looked toward the camera. "You rolling, Stan?"

"Still getting the angle and focus," he answered, fiddling with his lens.

"Could we have a quick practice run?" Ryan cleared his throat. "I'd kind of like to know what you're going to ask." And maybe take the edge off his gut reactions before the real deal.

"That's fair." Hallie nodded. "I'll probably start out with something like this— It's been ten years since you found your family shot dead in your home. In all this time, did you never suspect that they had all been murdered?"

"No, I didn't." He shook his head. "My dad was under unusual

stress at work and not acting like himself. Besides, I was too busy blaming myself to take a closer look.”

“How could their deaths have been your fault?” Sam’s cry broke in. “You weren’t there.”

Her gaze riveted with Ryan’s. His face went hot and tense. “We had a major fight on the telephone that evening, my dad and I. I figured I broke his heart, and that was why I lost my family.” What was it about this woman? That was more than he’d ever told anybody.

Her lips molded into a soft O. “What a terrible way for things to end between you.” If he didn’t know better, he would have said she was seeing straight into his soul, just like the other night.

“It doesn’t matter now.” Ryan’s voice came out rough. “Whoever killed my mom, and my sister and my dad had better hide under the biggest rock he can find, because I won’t rest until I find out what happened. And why?”

Hallie’s shoulder moved between him and Sam. “What do you hope the discovery of the photos will accomplish?”

He returned his attention to the reporter. “New evidence means a fresh investigation that is bound to uncover facts that were never looked at before.”

“Anything specific you can share with us?”

“Let’s just say I’ve given the police access to—”

Brakes squealed and tires screeched. Ryan turned. The next client wasn’t due for twenty minutes...but this was no client. *Yikes!* None of those vehicles held clients. A *Minneapolis Star Tribune* newspaper van roared up the drive, followed by a Channel 11 TV truck, flanked by a *St. Paul Pioneer Press* car, jockeying for position. The whole world chased a scoop.

Hallie whirled toward Sam, who sat with mouth agape. “So do you want to wait around and be mobbed or get out of here?”

“But what about your interview?”

“If I know Stan the Man, he got it the first time.”



"Too right." Grinning, the camera guy lowered his equipment from his shoulder.

Ryan glared from reporter to cameraman. All that personal stuff that popped out of his mouth had been caught on film? Wasn't the cameraman supposed to wait for some kind of cue from the reporter?

Sam rose. "My car sits between the ones for the *Press* and the *Trib*. We'll never make a getaway."

"There's a pickup in the back." Hallie nodded toward Ryan. "Yours, right?"

"Wait a minute—"

"If you wait ten seconds, you'll have a feeding frenzy, not an interview." She pinned him beneath a pointed stare. "Go. Leave us. We'll stay and thumb our noses at the competition."

People were piling out of the vehicles in his public parking lot. It was hard enough to talk to one reporter about his family's murder. If a mob of them got in his face, he'd probably slug somebody.

He met Sam's beseeching gaze. "We're outta here!"

Her teeth flashed as she grinned and headed for the French doors. "I'm with you."

Ryan grabbed her hand, and they dashed inside through his office and out into the hallway behind the reception desk. "Circle the wagons!" he called to Larry, who gazed at them wide-eyed. "Don't let them take you alive."

A throaty laugh came from the woman next to him. Her warm hand in his, Ryan tugged her up the hall and out the back door, leaving his employee gaping after them. They piled into his gray Silverado, and he peeled out of the staff lot toward the gravel road that provided a second egress to the property.

"Where are we headed?" Sam turned toward him, flushed face alight.

He smiled. "Your place. I feel like huntin' me a cat. And while we're at it, we may as well catch a burglar."

By the wary glint that entered her eyes, he knew he'd better not add *killer*. He hated to tell her, but whoever sneaked into her place and snooped through her office might be connected to the murders. She was up to her dainty nose in this investigation whether she wanted to be or not.

## FIVE

Sam studied the profile of the man behind the wheel of the pickup. Nice strong chin, a little on the square side, but not jutting, and definitely not weak. Just right. And his hand holding hers had been just right, too, wrapping her palm and fingers in a big grip, but not squeezing.

All well and good, but why was she alone in a pickup with a guy she'd just met? She'd wanted to escape the deluge of reporters as much as Ryan, but why did she feel perfectly at home sitting here? And safe? The police maintained he wasn't a suspect in the murder case. However, those words hadn't meant a lot to her inner security barometer. Less than an hour ago she'd believed him capable of breaking and entering. What had changed?

The dog. Despite his tough exterior, the man had a core of kindness. Even her moody cat knew it and trusted him. And Sam trusted animals. They had a sense about people that human beings often didn't.

Ryan shot her a glance with his intense blue eyes, and the corners of his mouth tilted up.

What was the matter with her? She'd better quit staring, or the guy would get the wrong idea.

She looked out the window where the tree-lined bluffs of this picturesque area flashed past. Ryan's place of business was roughly a half hour from her dry cleaners. Funny that they both

lived where they worked and owned their own businesses. Did that mean they were the same sort of people?

Not really, because that was where the similarities ended. He lived in a secluded woodland area, she in a business district. His house traveled with him whenever he wanted to pick up and leave, while hers stayed planted where she intended to put down roots. No, when a person looked at it logically, they weren't much alike at all. If they could get this awful investigation behind them, they would have no basis to develop an ongoing relationship. She'd just have to disappoint Jenna and Hallie in the matchmaking department. So why did that thought make her heart sink?

*Shake it off, girl. Stick with the program.* "Why do the police say you couldn't have been the one who—er, you know? They generally look at family first. Excuse me for asking. My gut says you're okay, but my head's not quite there yet."

Ryan let out a short laugh. "I'm familiar with that internal tug-of-war, and I don't blame you for asking. They *did* suspect me at first. Who wouldn't? But they ran into a brick wall when they considered timing and gunshot residue."

"I don't follow what you're saying."

"A stray pellet stopped the clock on the wall behind my dad's desk, pinpointing when the shootings took place. When the crime scene techs tested me from top to bottom for gunshot residue, they didn't find a speck. No way could I have taken a shower, changed clothes, dried my hair, and dispose of my tainted outfit between the time the murders were committed and the time the first squad car arrived on the scene. They were pretty much forced to acknowledge that my part in events was exactly as I said. That's when they decided the whole thing was murder/suicide, and my dad was the bad guy." He snorted.

"Precisely what whoever did it wanted people to believe."

Ryan met her gaze, grim-faced, then turned his attention back to the road. "And I was no better than the cops in my thinking."

"Why should you have been?"

“Because he was my dad, that’s why! A son should know better!” Sam lifted her hands, palms out. “I get the point.”

His shoulders sagged. “Sorry. I’m still riled about all this.”

“I don’t blame you. When you and Hallie were talking, what were you about to say you gave the police?”

“The code for a storage unit. They said they’d check it out today. I rented a unit near the old neighborhood, and that’s where I stuck all the family stuff I didn’t get rid of after the funerals. I was pretty shook up and didn’t sort through anything after selling the house and the furniture. Just boxed it and stuffed it into a rental garage. I pay the rent bill every month, but to tell you the truth, I haven’t been back since.”

Sam frowned. “I can understand why you were in no shape to look at things at the time, but ten years is quite a while to leave your family memories locked away in a storeroom.”

His knuckles whitened around the steering wheel. “Not if you think your bid for independence as good as pulled the trigger.”

“Do I ever understand that ‘bid for independence’ thing! I’m still fighting for mine.”

“What do you mean? You own a business, and I don’t see you living with parents.”

“A month ago you would have seen exactly that.” Sam rolled her eyes. “And no business, either.”

“No kidding!”

She bobbed her head. “Not even a teensy exaggeration. After finishing high school half a year behind the rest of my class, it took me another six to finish college because I needed to work so much to help pay old medical bills. Happily, my job was in a dry cleaners, where I learned a trade hands-on. So when my maternal grandmother left her only granddaughter a sizable chunk in her will, I suddenly found myself free of financial obligation and able to pursue a career that combined my experience with my business degree.” Sam stretched out her legs in the roomy interior and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"The only hitch was finding a dry-cleaning establishment to purchase that would get me out from under my family's watchful eye and yet not be so far away that they would have instant heart failure when I told them I was moving."

Ryan chuckled. "Where are you from?"

"Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Hallie's from there, too, as well as another friend I'm close with, Jenna. She's part owner and full-time chef at The Meridian."

Ryan whistled under his breath. "I've heard that restaurant is the hottest taste sensation since buttered toast."

Sam laughed. "I take it you haven't paid a visit."

He waved a hand over his polo shirt and jeans. "Suits and ties and power lunches were my dad's thing, not mine."

"Jenna's restaurant welcomes tennis shoes seated next to designer leather loafers. We'll have to go sometime." Sam halted on an intake of breath. Did she just ask this guy out?

"Sounds great!"

By the size of Ryan's smile, that's exactly what she'd done, and there was no taking it back now. At least not totally. "You know, to apologize for accusing you of taking my cat. You did flowers—I guess I can do lunch." She forced a big smile. Could he see her pulse racing? Well, he probably couldn't miss the flush that heated her face.

"You know," Ryan said, "Bastian likely just slipped out to explore the neighborhood. He seems to possess a normal case of curiosity, considering his species."

"You're probably right. If you can find him as easily today as you did the other night, I'll owe you big-time."

"Like dinner *and* a movie?"

Sam sank in the seat, face blazing. This guy was milking her mistake for all it was worth. Why? With all that was on his mind right now, romancing the woman who found those brutal photos couldn't be high on his priority list.

"Did you call the police about the break-in?"

What did he say? She shook her head free of confusion fumes. "Oh, the break-in? No, I thought it was you."

"So, it's okay if *I* break into your place, but no one else?"

"Davidson, if you're trying to push my buttons, you're doing a stellar job. I'll call the police right now." She snatched her purse from the floor where she'd tossed it and yanked out her cell phone. She almost dropped it when she heard a shrill ring. But it wasn't her tune. She looked over at Ryan.

He pulled a cell from a belt holder. "Davidson here." Long pause. "What? How did anyone get there before you? The case hasn't even broken on the news yet." Another pause. "Oh, I see. Yes, I'll be right there."

Ryan snapped the phone shut and turned toward Sam, gaze bleak. "That was the police. They opened my storage unit, but someone beat them to it...years ago."

"I don't understand."

"Someone made a stew of my family's stuff, but it wasn't a recent job. Everything's covered with dust. They want me to get over there pronto and tell them if something's missing. The trouble is I'm not sure if I'll know. I was in such a fog when I put everything in storage."

The rasp in his tone jerked a knot in Sam's heartstrings. "If they need you now, let's do it."

"You'd go with me?" Furrows smoothed from Ryan's brow, and his ice-blue gaze heated.

Sam's heart-knot melted. "Well, I'm not too keen on being left on the side of the road. Besides, I can report my break-in to the authorities there."

Ryan smiled. "Smart lady."

Ryan stared at the carnage in the Gopher Storage garage. Boxes had been upended and the contents rooted through—loose papers tossed everywhere, his mom's novels jumbled amidst his dad's textbooks. Broken items were strewn across what little

floor space remained among the crammed-in personal belongings. He spotted his mother's favorite white blouse, torn and dusty and yellowed, tossed carelessly on top of a collection of his sister's high school tennis trophies.

Memories sucked him under like quicksand.

He tore himself away and staggered the few feet to his pickup. Gripping the edge of the truck box, he hung his head, hauling in deep breaths. A warm hand fell on his shoulder. He glanced down into solemn green eyes.

"Give yourself a minute," she murmured. "You'll be okay."

"Yeah." He exhaled loud and long. "Seeing that stuff hit me hard."

"Mr. Davidson," a terse voice spoke from behind them, "did you notice anything missing?"

Ryan turned to face the officer who had introduced himself as Detective Connell. The lean man stood with a pen and small notebook in hand. Ryan shook his head. "Nothing obvious, but I'll have to go through things in order to be able to give a better answer."

"Fair enough." The detective stuffed the pen and notebook in his suit jacket pocket. "Our guys will be through dusting for prints soon, and then we can turn you loose on the place."

"Thanks."

"Detective Connell," Sam spoke up, "my business was broken into last night."

The officer stiffened.

"I found evidence of the intrusion this morning," Sam continued, "and my cat is gone. At first, I thought it was Ryan paying me a return visit, but he says not, and I believe him."

Connell cocked a brow at Ryan. "Yes, I heard you were prowling the old neighborhood the other night."

"I didn't break into the dry cleaners."

Seconds ticked past as their stares dueled. Ryan's jaw clenched. What did the guy expect to see—a guilty sign flashing behind his eyeballs?



Abruptly, Connell shifted his attention to Sam. "We'll look into this as soon as we're done here." He crossed the pavement toward the garage where a pair of technicians worked.

"Let's get in the truck and turn on the AC while they finish," Ryan said to Sam.

They climbed in, and Ryan started the vehicle. He ran his palms up and down the steering wheel, his gaze fixed on the white police van that sat nose to nose with the Silverado. "It'll be tough to go through that stuff, but it's probably needed to be done for a long time."

Sam didn't say anything, just nodded. Silence fell, not uncomfortable, just...heavy, as if patiently awaiting something significant.

Ryan cleared his throat, swallowing the lump that kept creeping up his windpipe. "The last time I spoke to any of my family wasn't much fun."

"Tell me."

Ryan closed his eyes and tumbled back in time.

*He whizzed up the Interstate, tunes from a mellow country radio station keeping him company. His cell phone rang, and he checked the caller ID then turned down the radio. "Hi, Dad."*

*"Where are you?"*

*No "Are you all right, son? We've been worried." Ryan squelched the sarcasm before it reached his lips. Michael T. Davidson didn't have warm fuzzies in his vocabulary. Why should his offspring expect any? "I'm almost to St. Paul."*

*"Good. You'll be home in less than an hour. Your mom and sister have nose prints all over the front window."*

*"Yeah, I got a late start. Loose ends to tie up."*

*"I'm on the Internet right now studying the business offerings for junior year, and I've got a plan mapped out that will shoot you straight into Stanford for your postgraduate work."*

*Ryan squeezed his eyes shut then popped them open. Dad's*

voice droned on about “the plan” that would have Davidson and Son printed on the stationery of his investment firm. A sour taste settled on Ryan’s tongue.

“I’m not going to major in business. I’ve decided to take forestry.” Wow! Did that pop out of his mouth right here on the phone? Silence roared from the opposite end of the connection. “Sure, I get good grades in the number-cruncher classes,” Ryan continued, “but I’m bored stiff. I love the outdoors—working with nature. Remember those Boundary Waters canoe trips I went on with my youth group? And all those weekends on our Mississippi houseboat? When you let me tag along hunting with your business clients, you said I had a knack—”

“I’m not in the mood for this joke, young man.” Dad’s tone was a brick wall. “You know my position. Hunting and fishing are relaxing hobbies, but there’s no money in it. My son is not making a career out of such wasted effort.”

“Too late, Dad. Before I left school, I declared forestry my major.”

“Are you on drugs, nature boy?” The words sliced like razors. “Huh?”

“We’re not about to toss away everything you’ve planned and worked for all these years on a whim.”

Heat seared Ryan’s veins. “Wrong! All the things you’ve planned for me and made me slave for all these years. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m twenty—”

“You are a child, Ryan. An unstable little boy. I won’t have your mother and sister upset by your antics. Don’t you even mention—”

“Mom and Cassie won’t care what major I take, as long as I’m happy. You’re the one who goes ballistic if anyone tries to wiggle out from under your thumb.” Ryan winced. Had he just shouted at his father?

A foul word entered Ryan’s ear. He blinked. His controlled dad never cursed. But more followed—worse than dock

*lingo—mixed with orders about what an ungrateful son could do with his trees, and his wildlife, and his canoe and his pigeons. Pigeons?*

*His mom's voice, high-pitched, entered the background. Dad's thunder dialed up in volume, and Ryan pulled the phone away from his ear, words still pummeling him.*

*"Ryan?"*

*Mom. She must've snatched the phone.*

*"I'm here." His words rasped through a tight throat.*

*"Come home, okay? Whatever's going on, we'll work it out."*

*The noises faded and disappeared. Mom must have left Dad's office.*

*"Cassie and I can't wait to see you. This'll be a great summer." Her voice quavered, and she cleared her throat. "Don't worry about your dad. He's had a tough time at the office lately. We have to give him a little space to work it out."*

*Good old Mom, the enabler. He'd learned that bit of shrink-speak in his general psychology elective. "See you soon. Tell Cass she'd better have her tennis game polished up, because I'm going to wipe the court with her."*

*Mom let out a thin chuckle. "Sure, honey. Bye."*

Ryan opened his eyes, back in his pickup, staring at the police technicians' van, his family dead and gone. "That was the last time I heard my parents' voices, and I never got to speak a word to Cassie, not then, not ever again."

A slender hand covered his, resting on the seat. "I'm honored you shared that with me. You've kept everything bottled up for too long. Talking it out is one of God's ways of bringing healing."

"God? If He exists, He's the One who let all this happen." Ryan pulled his hand away. "Mom trusted Him. Cass, too. And I did once upon a time in a fairy tale."

Sam's gaze darkened, but she met his glare strong and steady. "Happily ever after doesn't come without trials in this world. But

if I didn't know it was there for us with a loving God, I would've given up and died years ago—mentally and emotionally for sure. Maybe it's time for Ryan Davidson to join the living again, too."

He snorted. "Yeah, well, you can keep your 'loving God' theory. And just where do you get off lecturing me about life, Ms. Sheltered Homebody?"

The color drained from Sam's face at the same rate as the anger seeped from Ryan's heart. Would it help if he bit his unruly tongue off? He had no right to expect another ounce of grace from her, any more than he expected any from the God who let his family die.

## SIX

Sam groped for the door handle. "I'll see if Detective Connell is ready to investigate my break-in." She hopped out. "He'll probably give me a ride home so you can get busy here."

"Wait. I'm sor—"

She shut the door and hurried, stiff-legged, toward where the detective was consulting with one of the lab techs. The humid breath of summer wafted across her skin, but a chill fist gripped her heart.

She'd been right when she first saw Ryan Davidson's photograph. He was a cold and bitter man, and by his own admission, not a believer or, for sure, had seriously backslidden. Obviously, he needed the help and healing only God could give, but she was no counselor. At least she could count herself officially beyond temptation to think of him in any romantic light. Not that she had been, of course, but now she had an unanswerable comeback for her conniving friends.

"Detective Connell," she called. "Whenever you're ready to leave, I'd like to ride with you to my place."

The detective looked up, but his gaze traveled to a point beyond her shoulder. Sam turned and almost bounced off Ryan's broad chest. The guy was sneaky quiet. She hadn't even heard him get out of the truck.

"You left your car at my place," he said.

"I'll get Hallie or Jenna to bring me over to get it later."

“No need. This project will have to wait a little longer.” He jerked his head toward the garage. “I have to get back to work now because we have three families coming for boats this afternoon, and Larry can’t handle all that alone. But as soon as we close up shop, we’ll bring the car to you if you’ll trust me with the keys.”

His open gaze and gentle smile sent tingles to Sam’s toes. She rifled through her purse. Honestly, this guy was confusing, a prodded badger one minute and faithful collie the next. She separated the key for her car from the rest of her ring and handed it to him.

His smile broadened. “See you soon.”

She watched him stride away. As he opened his truck door, he met her gaze. “If Bastian hasn’t turned up by then, I’ll help you hunt for him, and we can talk about our date at The Meridian.”

“It’s not a date,” she blurted, but he climbed in and shut the door on her words.

Behind her, she caught a soft chuckle from Detective Connell. She whirled on her heel and marched toward the detective’s unmarked sedan. Conversation was light on the way to her neighborhood. Sam sat in the front passenger seat and watched increasingly familiar landmarks pass by. The lab vehicle followed them. As they pulled up behind her empty carport in the alley between her business and the one next door, she spotted the green van belonging to the professional cleaners parked out front.

Sam groaned. “Oh, no! I got so upset over the break-in, I forgot they were coming this morning. When I left, I locked everything up tight, so they’ve been waiting there, accomplishing nothing all this time.” A vision of the bill for the unproductive hours flowed past her mind’s eye.

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s in the vehicle,” Connell said. “Maybe they went for coffee.”

“Maybe.” Sam stepped out of the car, pulling her building keys from her purse. “I’ll open up.”

The detective trailed her to the side door that led into the main work area. She aimed the key toward the lock then halted. "Do you hear that?" She stared up at Connell. A scrape and thud came from inside the dry cleaners.

Connell frowned. "Are you sure you locked this door?"

"Absolutely positive. Securing doors and windows is like a reflex with me."

"All right." Connell and motioned her back.

Sam stood between the pair of lab technicians who'd come up behind them. With the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, the detective gripped the edge of the doorknob. Skin prickling, Sam watched the knob turn.

Face set in stony lines, Detective Connell slid his gun from his shoulder holster and lunged through the door. "Police! Freeze!"

From inside, a curse in Spanish fell on top of an exclamation in English. The tightness in Sam's chest eased. She knew those voices. "Oh, no, it *is* the cleaning crew." She rushed through the doorway.

Connell stood with his firearm trained on four men, their mouths agape and hands raised.

Sam groaned. "I'm so sorry, everybody. I thought someone had broken into my place again."

The detective shot her a grimace and holstered his gun.

Ramon, the crew leader, stepped toward her. "Did you not say to come to work this morning?"

"Yes, but I had an intruder overnight and left in something of a hurry this morning. But I know I locked the door after me. How did you get in?"

The crew leader glanced at Connell then back at Sam. "The door was open. We thought you left it that way for us."

"I always lock doors. I—"

The detective raised a hand. "Just show us the break-in evidence, Ms. Reid."

Sam swallowed a bitter taste on her tongue. The police didn't believe her about the door and neither did her cleaning

crew. They cast her dark glances as they returned to work. Stiffening her spine, Sam stalked toward the other side of the building. They'd have to start believing her when she showed them the open window by the storage room and the shattered vase in her office.

She stopped, mouth open, in front of the closed window, its lock hasp now in place. "Ramon, did you or your men shut this window?" A chorus of denials met her question. She turned toward the detective. "Then someone sneaked in here again after I left and before the cleaning crew arrived. They left that side door open and shut this window in order to make me look like an idiot."

Connell's left eyebrow raised a miniscule degree, but he said nothing as she led him toward her office. Her stomach burned. Her intruder might as well have slapped a *hysterical female* sticker on her forehead with this monkey business. Good thing everyone would change their minds in a minute.

"Here now. See?" She thrust the office door open then stopped and stared. Her glass vase brimming with calla lilies sat unscathed on her desk. Impossible!

Detective Connell brushed past her into the room. "You say your vase had been knocked to the floor?" His gaze scanned the linoleum then moved toward the desk.

"I'm not making this up, Detective. I know what I found when I came downstairs this morning. Scared the daylights out of me."

The detective let out a noncommittal grunt, bent and ran a finger across the flooring. Then he stood and leaned over the vase, hands clasped behind his back.

At least the officer was taking a close look.

"At first, I thought my cat knocked the flowers over," she said, "but the door was shut so he couldn't have been in the office. It wasn't until a little later that I realized Bastian was missing altogether, and the thief must have taken him or let him out."

*Meowwww!*



The feline complaint came from the direction of the closet on the other side of Sam's desk.

"Bastian?" Sam hurried forward, but Connell stepped in front of her.

He pulled a white hanky from his pants pocket and used it to cover his fingers as he worked the knob.

Fingerprints. Of course. Sam gave herself a mental smack.

The detective eased the door open. Tail straight up, Bastian scuttled out. He circled Sam's feet, then stopped and mewed up at her. She scooped him into her arms. "Bastian, I was so worried about you! Where have you been?"

"Right here, apparently." The comment came from a smirking technician.

Sam glared at him. "My cat was in my apartment upstairs all day and didn't come down until after I closed the office last night and secured the doors and windows. You can think I'm crazy, but I know I had an intruder, and that he returned with a fresh bouquet and my cat this morning in order to cover his tracks."

"We'll dust the vase, the stick that holds the gift card, the windowsill, and the doorknob for prints." Connell nodded toward the techs. "And get Ms. Reid's here for elimination."

The pair shook their heads, but started unloading their kit.

"Thank you, Detective." Sam watched as she stroked Bastian, who'd settled in to purr. She scratched him under his chin, and her fingertips encountered something crusty. A closer look revealed a dark streak of gunk in the hair beneath his jaw. Sam touched it. A bit sticky and her finger came away streaked with a ruddy substance.

"Bastian's been into something," she told Connell. "At the risk of appearing foolish again, I'd say it looks like blood, and it's not the cat's. He doesn't have a scratch on him."

The detective performed his own examination then nodded toward one of the lab men. "Let's test this, Gabe."

The one called Gabe chuckled and shook his head. “If you say so.”

Sam held her cat’s head still, turning Bastian’s purrs to growls, while the tech swabbed the area. He sprayed a chemical onto the cotton tip of the swab, and the dark substance turned a vile purple.

Eyes wide, the tech met Connell’s gaze. “It’s positive for blood.”

## SEVEN

Around 7:30 p.m., Ryan pressed the buzzer by the entrance that led to Sam's apartment. The twilight of the back alley enfolded him, though the sun wouldn't go down for another two hours. The shade brought the temperature of the ninety-plus degree day into the more comfortable eighties range.

Behind him, a vehicle door slammed. That would be Larry getting out of the pickup. They'd made quite a caravan coming up the road—he in Sam's car, Larry in Ryan's pickup, and Larry's son Derek in Larry's SUV. Ryan pressed the buzzer again.

"Davidson!" Larry called, and Ryan swiveled toward his friend's voice. "Catch." Larry grinned as he sent Ryan's pickup keys arching through the air.

Ryan snagged them and waved as his friend hopped into the SUV beside his mirror-image son. The vehicle drifted past him on the way out of the alley, and Larry stuck his head out the window. "Catch that good-lookin' woman while you're at it."

Ryan sent him a mock scowl. "Get lost, Lar."

The man chuckled as the SUV pulled away.

The door behind him rattled, and Ryan turned toward the sound. Sam's unsmiling face peeked up at him.

"I'm so glad it's you." She flung the door wide. "You'd better come in."

"I like the welcome." He grinned down at her and stepped across the threshold.

"You might change your mind in a minute." She poked her head outside. "Where's your employee? Larry, was it?"

"His son arrived home for the weekend from summer term at college just as we were closing up shop. We left Derek's car at the office. He'll get it tomorrow when he and Larry go in to work. The kid's going to help Lar while I take an unheard-of summer Saturday off to start going through that garage." If he didn't know better, by the quiver in his chest, he'd say he was almost eager for the task.

"Okay, then, it's just you and me. That's probably good because I need to talk to you." She brushed past him, grim-faced, and led the way across a cavernous workroom that smelled vaguely like chlorine.

"Uh-oh!" Ryan trailed behind her, glancing around. The place was spotless and bare, except for large pieces of equipment that seemed to sprout out of the concrete floor like stalagmites in a cave. By the white marks in the yellowed paint, even the shelving had been removed from the walls. "What did I do? Or more to the point, what do you *think* I did now?"

She glanced over her shoulder, a spark of amusement in her green gaze, and poked her tongue out at him.

Ryan laughed. Every time he was with this woman, he liked her better. So why did he always get testy and start acting like Bigfoot on steroids around her? He wouldn't have been too surprised if she'd snatched her car keys just now and shut the door in his face after the way he snarled at her outside the storage garage. Either he was more charming than he thought, or she was one forgiving woman. Most likely the latter. Another reason to like her more than he should. He needed to remember that acquaintances were fine, but attachments were the plague.

Guttural feline yammering sounded from across the room, and he stopped and looked around. Sam's Abyssinian bounded toward him. The cat practically climbed up his pant leg, but lack

of claws hindered the effort, so Ryan scooped him up. "Hi there, Bastian. So you came home on your own after all." The cat purred. Ryan grinned and winked at Sam. "This is terrible, you know. It means *I'll* have to pay for the movie."

Sam shook her head, a slight frown on her lips. "That is so unfair. Bastian never likes anybody, even me sometimes." She wagged a finger in his direction. "And I didn't say I'd go to a movie with you, Davidson."

"Well, then, we'll have to find something fun we could do together. Rock climbing? Ballooning? Skydiving?" He wasn't getting a smile out of her. Maybe she was mad at him after all.

"Would you be serious? You're wrong about the Aby returning on his own. He was brought back and planted where my mystery intruder wanted me to find him."

Ryan's grin faded. "I'm officially serious. You'd better tell me what happened."

"Come in here and I'll show you."

She went through a doorway framed by some nice old woodwork. Ryan followed and found himself in the glass-fronted customer section of the building. Without a pause, Sam skirted a big mark in the floor that indicated a large counter had stood there. She disappeared inside an adjacent room. Ryan stepped behind her into an office containing furniture almost as bland as his, except bright paintings and photographs graced the walls. A small television sat on top of the filing cabinet and a large glass vase stuffed with white flowers perched on her desk.

"See?" She pointed to the floral arrangement.

"I thought you said the bouquet I sent was on the floor this morning and the vase smashed."

"This isn't your bouquet. Oh, it looks a lot like it. In fact, the container is identical, but it's a style common to most floral shops. I know. I made a few phone calls."

"Shouldn't that have been Detective Connell's job?"

Sam shrugged a shoulder. "I suppose he's made the same calls by now, but I had to know for myself and couldn't wait."

"Curiosity, eh? A trait you share with your pet." He set the cat down and peered at the vase of flowers. "Did you ask the shop workers if anyone came by this morning and bought a bouquet of calla lilies?"

"Of course, but the results were negative. Whoever pulled the switcheroo was too smart to buy the flowers in the area."

Sam bent beside him over the bouquet, and a soft floral scent drifted to his nostrils, not from the lilies. *Nice.*

"See here?" She pointed to the gift card. "The handwriting on the greeting looks similar to the original—basic calligraphy. However, I didn't notice until after the police left, but I'd swear that the ink on the original was black. This is dark blue."

She straightened. Ryan stood tall and looked down into her face.

"Maybe your gift card got wet and the ink faded so your intruder couldn't be sure if the color on the original was black or blue when he tried to have it duplicated."

"You believe me about the break-in?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"The police didn't. Well, not at first anyway. Then I found the blood."

Ryan's heart jerked. "The what?"

"The intruder stuck Bastian in the closet. The cat heard our voices and started meowing up a storm. When we let him out, we found blood under his chin."

"He was hurt?"

"Not a mark on him. Wherever Bastian was, someone was bleeding."

Ryan sank back onto the edge of the desk, throat tight, as if ghostly fingers pinched his windpipe. Images of his family flashed before his mind's eye. His nose recalled the scent of their lifeblood and the acrid remnants of shotgun powder saturating the air.

“Ryan, are you all right?”

“Yeah.” He leaped up and paced the length of the office. “Memories. They get to me at the oddest times.”

“I know what you mean.”

He halted and met her gaze. Would this woman ever stop piercing his soul with her compassion? She did know. How?

“You need to get out of here.” He strode forward and gripped her arms. “If someone can slip in and out, apparently at will, it’s not safe for you to stay.”

Those green eyes turned to stone, and she pulled away from him. “I appreciate your concern, but I will not be driven from my home again. I. Will. Not.”

Again? Ryan studied her with a narrow gaze.

That stubborn chin came up. “If my clandestine visitor had wanted to harm me, he would have done so already. I think he was more concerned about throwing dust in the authorities’ eyes about whether he was even here. Chances are this is the end of it.”

He crossed his arms. “Don’t tell me you’re going to sleep well at night.”

Her gaze fell. “In time I will. Besides, I had all the manual locks changed this afternoon, and a state-of-the-art key code and alarm system goes in on Monday, about the same time as the antiquated dry-cleaning equipment goes out.”

Ryan snorted a chuckle. “You are a most independent woman, but no one could accuse you of being slow in the head.”

One side of her mouth lifted. “Thank you. I think. I know you don’t quite get why my independence is so priceless to me, but—”

“Then help me understand.”

She tilted her head as if contemplating a deep subject. “I may do that sometime.”

“Rain check, then.” Ryan went to the closet door and opened it. He measured the thickness between his fingers and opened and shut it twice, rattling the latch each time. Then he did the same

for the office door. "They're both real sturdy. Solid wood. And they fit snug in the frame. They don't make doors like this anymore unless they cost an arm and a leg. No way your cat brushed up against either of these and popped the latches loose like you can with some of the flimsy doors these days."

"I agree. Without an intruder, there's no logical explanation for how Bastian got into the closet, much less into the office." She flopped her arms against her sides. "But there's nothing more to be done about it right now. Let's watch Hallie's interview with you on TV."

Ryan looked at his watch. "The news isn't on yet."

Sam gave him a long-suffering look. "We were on at five o'clock. I recorded it."

"We?"

"You'll see." She grimaced and picked up the remote control from beside the set.

He perched on the desktop again, while she took the chair.

Soon Hallie Berglund's face appeared on the screen. In the background, sunlight sparkled on the rippling river, and several of Ryan's houseboats bobbed on the surface. Both his and the reporter's faces filled the screen, but only briefly. The camera wide-angled, and Sam's lithe figure joined them in the picture. There he went spilling his guts to her and the whole world about the reason he blamed himself for his family's death, followed by his hotheaded threat to the killer. Of course, he hadn't realized he was already being taped at the time. Sizzling footage for a news interview, but man, oh, man, what had he been thinking?

"What was I thinking?" Sam moaned.

Ryan turned toward her at the echo of his thought. Her face was pasty pale. She punched the remote, and the television fell silent.

Her eyes were fathomless pools. "If my family catches wind of this murder-investigation thing, they'll camp on my doorstep. And now I've been on television." She moaned and dropped her head onto her arms atop the desk.



“I’m about ready to camp on your doorstep. I may have poked a hornet’s nest with my big mouth, and if the killer was watching, there’s no way he’s going to believe you’re a disinterested party.”

Sam’s head rose slowly until she met his gaze with eyes like green steel. “Then I guess we’re in this together until a murderer is caught.”

## EIGHT

Around nine o'clock the next morning, Sam pulled up outside Ryan's storage unit. His Silverado was backed up to the raised door, tailgate down, but there was no sign of the man's blond head. She sat still, gnawing on her lower lip. Should she go in? She hadn't exactly been invited, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. After her morning run, driving over to check on Ryan seemed like the natural thing to do.

After all, she had a legitimate interest in seeing solutions found. But her presence in no way meant she had anything more than a sympathetic interest in Ryan's situation. Temporary allies were all they could be. If he'd even let her stick around today. And if she had the guts to go inside.

Well, for pity's sake, she was here, wasn't she? The worst he could do was toss her out.

Inhaling a deep breath, Sam climbed out of the car and stepped into the relative dimness of the garage. A thump from deeper in the garage drew Sam down a narrow aisle between stacked boxes, scattered debris and small pieces of furniture.

Ryan was manhandling a box from the top of a stack as Sam rounded a corner and caught sight of him. He must have heard her approach because he turned toward her.

His face lit. "You're here!" The smile dimmed, and he shifted

from one foot to another. "I mean, just because I mentioned I was doing this today, I didn't expect—"

A knot dissolved in the pit of Sam's stomach. He wanted her to be here. "No worries, Davidson. I had nothing better to do this Saturday than to see if we can get a few clues. Besides, it was a good way to avoid calls from reporters. I don't need any more of that kind of publicity." There. That should let him know her presence was strictly business.

Ryan grimaced. "I think we've had plenty of limelight." He set the box on top of a chest of drawers. "Did your parents give you any grief over the news broadcast?"

Sam echoed Ryan's grimace. "I don't think they've heard about it. We talked on the phone last night. They didn't mention it, and I didn't bring it up."

"Brave girl."

"Believe me, in this case, silence is the better part of valor."

Ryan grinned and pulled the tabs free on the box. "Want to see what's in here?"

Sam laughed and pointed.

"What?"

"You've got a cobweb hanging from your ear."

Ryan swatted at the side of his face then wiped his hand on his jeans, leaving a white streak behind. "Glad I could be your entertainment this morning. Now let's get down to business."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n!" Sam saluted, still grinning. "What's the plan?"

"It's going to take more than a day to get through all this, and I don't want to handle anything more than once so I've mentally divided the garage into quadrants. This is the left rear quadrant. We'll look at things piece by piece and carry them out to the truck bed when we're done. Next we'll do the left front quadrant and stack the stuff in the left rear as we finish with them. Then we can put the things from the truck back into the garage before we start on the other half of the unit. Make sense?"

“Mr. Organized.”

“You got it.” He flashed a smile.

“Are you going to keep everything?”

Ryan shrugged. “Probably not. The pickup will come in handy to haul out what I’m going to junk or donate to the Salvation Army.”

“Gotcha. So open that box already.”

Ryan pulled the flaps up and reached inside. He came out with a square, fuzzy-topped bed pillow in a vivid shade of pink. “My sister’s. These are her things.” He reached in again and emerged holding an eight-by-ten framed photo. “This is her senior picture. She was within a week of graduating.” His face went flat.

Sam’s heart wrung at the bleakness in his voice. “The best thing we can do for her now is find out why she never go to wear her cap and gown.”

Ryan met her gaze, a muscle twitching in the side of his jaw. “I’d just as soon slam the door on this garage and walk away again. The best thing you can do for *me* today is keep me on task.”

“May I see the photo?” She held out her hand. Ryan gave the picture to her, and Sam studied the young woman. Cassie. The name suited her.

Glossy brown hair framed a pixie face with a glowing complexion. The brown eyes contained a spark of mischief mixed with anticipation, as if she could scarcely wait to find out what life held for her next. What an outrage that someone dared to snuff out that bright promise! A price needed to be paid for such a vicious act. That was justice. She knew a thing or two about the subject. Sam’s jaw ached, and she suddenly realized she was grinding her teeth together.

“You look ready to bite the toenails off a bear,” Ryan said.

Forcing her jaw to relax, Sam handed the picture back. “She was beautiful. Let’s get to work.”

“Okay. Do you want to finish going through this box? I’ll move on to something else.”

“What should I be looking for?”

“Anything inconsistent with a teenage girl that might point to a potential killer.”

“But I won’t know if something of hers is missing.”

Ryan shook his head. “I wouldn’t, either. I may have packed the boxes, but I did it in a hurry. When I was growing up, the contents of Cass’s room were a deep, dark mystery to me, so it doesn’t matter which of us looks through her things. In fact,” he fished out a lacy bra between thumb and forefinger then dropped it back into the box, “you’re probably the better candidate. I’ll assign you Mom’s things, too. How about that?”

“Sounds like I’ll be doing most of the work.” She sent him a mock pout.

He laughed. “Then you have no clue how much stuff my father had in his study. It was practically a library. And then there are the rest of the household goods. You should feel sorry for me, lugging around heavy cases.”

“In your dreams, buddy.” Sam brushed past Ryan and reached into the container for the next item.

Chuckling, Ryan moved into another part of the garage. “Thanks,” he said from the other side of a wall of furniture and boxes.

“You’re welcome. After dealing with that dry-cleaning building, I’m an old hand at sorting through things.”

“I don’t mean just for helping out with the grunt work. You’ve already made this day less of a nightmare for me. That’s priceless.”

Oh, why did he have to say something so sweet? The backs of Sam’s eyelids prickled, but she pinched the bridge of her nose and kept the moisture in. She took a few deep breaths. “I’m glad,” she finally managed.

Ryan hefted another box of books that used to belong to his father. The dry texts had no interest for him, but might for the library. He carried the container out to the truck and shoved it

onto the bed with about a dozen others containing different things. He'd thought today would wring the heart out of his chest, but most of what he'd handled was fairly impersonal property. Maybe he'd get through this with his cool intact.

He swiped at his sweaty forehead with the back of his arm. Well, maybe not his cool. That garage was turning into a cooker. His watch showed nearly eleven o'clock. Time for a break, and then they'd better come back with some fans or else hang it up for the afternoon. Mornings and evenings might be the only workable times for this activity.

"Sam, you ready for a break?"

No response came from the shadowed interior of the garage. Ryan wandered back inside. "Sam?"

"Hmmm?"

"Are you all right?"

"What? Oh, sure. I was just engrossed."

Ryan stepped around a pile of boxes and found his helper perched on a crate near a shaft of sunlight. A pile of crumpled notebooks sat by her side, and one with a red cover lay open in her hands.

She smiled up at him. "My family complains that I have a gift for tuning out the world when I'm concentrating on something."

"What are those?" He gestured toward the notebooks.

"Your sister was an amazing writer."

"Oh, you found her school assignments. She always got As in English courses."

"No, these are private journals." Her eyes widened, and she leaped to her feet. "I'm so sorry! I shouldn't be reading her personal thoughts. I should have given them to you right away and let you look, but I didn't know what they were at first, and then I just got carried away. I—"

"Whoa! I invited you to go through Cassie's things."

"But—"

"No problem, and that's the end of it. Did you find anything?"

She shook her head. "I discovered a tender heart and a fresh

and witty mind. The world is the poorer without Cassandra Davidson. But no discernable clues about murder. Of course, I haven't reached the end of this one. It's dated the most recent to her death."

"Bring it with you." He turned away and motioned her to follow. "Let's go get something to eat."

"And drink."

"You got it. I'm about ready to spit whole cotton balls. And while we're on the road, we might as well drop this stuff off at the library and the Salvation Army." He held the passenger door of his pickup open for Sam.

She glanced at her car, parked at an angle in front of the storage unit. "Will the Malibu be okay there?"

"Should be. We won't be gone long."

Nodding, she climbed in, and Ryan shut the door. Then he locked the garage and hopped in behind the wheel. Sam looked natural sitting beside him in tan capris and a baggy T-shirt knotted at the waist. At home in a truck. No fancy airs about her. She was as damp and dusty as he felt, but utterly appealing with that smudge of dirt on the tip of her nose. The cute snoot was already buried in the journal.

He chuckled and started the pickup.

"What?" She blinked at him.

"Not a thing." He turned up the air-conditioning. "I think we'd better save The Meridian for another time."

She laughed. "Yes, they might draw the line at early American sweatshop attire. It's a fast-food kind of day."

"You're talkin' my language, li'l lady." He headed the truck out of the lot and, a few turns later, merged with traffic on I-35. "Salvation Army first? It's on the way."

"Mmm-hmm."

Ryan shook his head. Better not plan on much conversation. What was in his sister's journals, anyway? Could he read them without freaking out? Maybe he needed to take the chance.

Half an hour later, they'd dropped off the clothing and household items at the Salvation Army and sat across from each other at the burger place.

Sam laid the notebook on the table beside her lunch tray and tapped her fingertips on it. "Your sister had a lot of perceptive thoughts about her friends, school, your parents and you, too."

Ryan groaned. "What did she say about me?"

"Mostly that she saw how unhappy you were with the choices that were being forced on you, and that she hoped one day you'd break loose."

He sat back in the booth hard enough to jerk the legs up. "Wow. I didn't think anyone else noticed."

"Cassie picked up on many things. You'll have to take the whole stack of notebooks home with you when we're finished for the day."

Ryan chomped a bite of his burger and chewed, his gaze fixed on the blazing red cover of the last journal his sister ever wrote. Would he feel like a voyeur, invading her innermost thoughts? He wouldn't know until he tried. Besides, he'd post the contents of those journals on a mile-long billboard if he thought it would net him a killer.

He swallowed his bite. "Any word from the police about that blood on the cat?"

Sam stuffed a French fry into her mouth and shook her head. "Too soon. Police labs are notoriously swamped. And a cold case isn't a top priority for them."

Ryan wrinkled his nose, but changed the subject. "Bastian. That's a unique name for a cat—well, anything, for that matter. How did you come up with it?"

She smiled, still working on her pile of fries. "I've watched a lot of movies and read a lot of books, more than most people in my little lifetime. I love stories and their power to help you see the world with fresh eyes...to carry you away to places you've never been and may never go...to set your mind on a



quest for answers you may not have sought before. Stories were Jesus's favorite teaching method, because they pierce the soul like little else, except perhaps music."

"I read more magazines than books, but a good country tune can haunt me for weeks." Ryan crumpled his burger wrapper. "And this leads to Bastian how?"

"*The Neverending Story*. It's a movie about a boy named Bastian who finds a mysterious book in an old bookseller's shop. As he reads it, he gradually realizes that he is literally part of the story. Unless he—the boy from the real world—can find a way to convince people to believe in stories once again, the beautiful land of Fantasia will be consumed by the Nothing, and his world—our world—will become a place of despair dominated by reason without heart." She shuddered. "So I named my cat Bastian to remind myself that the world I experience with the physical senses wouldn't even exist unless it was sustained by the unseen realm where God dwells."

"Whew!" Ryan laughed. "You got all that out of a movie?"

Sam frowned and stared down at the remnants of her meal. "I guess I can put together some odd analogies. It came from having a lot of lounge-around time. Don't you believe in God?" Her head came up, and that green gaze zinged straight through him.

Ryan shifted in his seat. "At one time, I thought I did."

"Not good enough, Davidson." Her eyes narrowed. "Did you decide to shove God away because of what happened to your family?"

"That just sealed the deal. I remember walking into the house that night hoping Mom wouldn't ask me if I was keeping up with church attendance in college. Hah! I figured she'd be the one to chuck me out on my ear, not Dad, if she found out I was sleeping in on Sundays. But what was the point of keeping on with a religion I questioned?"

"Questions, eh?" A grin stretched Sam's lips that matched the gleam in her steady gaze.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“God’s not afraid of questions, but I think you’re too chicken to ask them. Want to come to church with me tomorrow? I’ve started attending Community Bible Church near my business. Right in your old neighborhood.”

“Now you really are talking nuts. That’s where my family used to go to church. I don’t need to be gawked at and accosted by long-lost buddies of my parents.” Ryan got up and stuffed his garbage into the container.

Sam followed suit, still with that smirk on her face. Well, Miss Know-It-All could take her chicken theories to the dump. He got his final answer about how much God cared for him when his family died.

They got back into the pickup and headed out again on the freeway. Some tailgater did the same. Ryan moved over to the center lane. The tailgater moved over, too—a couple of guys in a Ford SUV.

“If you’re in such a hurry,” Ryan spoke to the rearview mirror, “why don’t you grab the fast lane, buddy?”

“Huh?” Sam looked up from the notebook that had reclaimed her interest.

“I wasn’t talking to you, just some pinhead who can’t keep his distance.”

Sam laughed. “Not that unusual in this city, I’ve learned.” She returned to the journal.

Ryan studied the traffic. He’d get back over into the right lane after he passed this convoy of semis. He checked the rearview. Finally! The SUV was moving into the far left lane. Ryan accelerated to overtake the semis. Pinhead accelerated faster and came alongside the pickup. Ryan glanced over, and his heart did a somersault.

He gaped into the barrel of a pistol pointed out the window by the SUV’s passenger, who aimed at one of Ryan’s tires.

The muzzle flashed. Two bangs sounded one on top of the

other. The pickup fishtailed. Ryan fought the wheel, but it was a losing battle on only three tires. At 75 mph they hurtled into the midst of that convoy of semis.

Air horns blasted and a scream stalled behind the giant goose egg lodged in Ryan's throat.

## NINE

A shriek burst from Sam's throat. The notebook flew as she dug her fingers into the edges of the seat. Air horns wailed, brakes squealed, road stripes blurred, a semitrailer loomed then slid past. The pickup bucked and slid sideways onto gravel at the edge of the road.

Impact struck from behind. Metal crunched on metal, and the Silverado lurched, jarring Sam's spine to from neck to tailbone. Tilted up on the two wheels of the driver's side, the pickup dove into the ditch.

Sam's scream climbed another octave.

The truck whumped down onto all fours as it plunged nose-first toward the grassy embankment at the bottom of the ditch. Sam's seat belt brought her up short, and pain shot through her shoulder and stomach. A pop sounded from the dash with a flash of light and a stink like a firecracker exploding in her nose. Her scream ended in a faceful of smelly air bag as the Silverado slammed to a halt in a screech of tortured steel.

The air bag shriveled away, and Sam hauled in a shuddering breath. A taste like ashes filled her mouth as fine gray dust settled in the cab. Long seconds ticked past, marked by tooting horns from traffic on the road above and the labored grind of the pickup engine.

"Ryan?" The question came out a croak. A groan answered her. Gingerly, she turned her head. Well, her neck wasn't

broken, anyway, but her chest hurt like she'd been pummeled by a steel balloon.

A pruned air bag lay in Ryan's lap. He sat slumped, eyes closed, but his heart beat so hard the pulse showed through his T-shirt.

"Ryan?"

Head wobbling like a drunk, he turned and looked at her. "They shot at us."

Even with a brain stuffed with gunpowder-smelling wool, that statement made no sense. "No, I think..." She concentrated. "We blew a tire and almost got run over by a herd of semis."

Ryan's arm lifted and a shaky hand reached for the key in the ignition. He clicked the switch off, and the hiccuping engine died. "The tire..." Ryan halted, coughed, and slumped back against the seat. "That guy in the SUV blasted it with a pistol. We're supposed to be dead." His head came up, and he grabbed her hand. "Are you all right?"

"'Not dead' is pretty all right at the moment."

A smile quavered across Ryan's lips. "You are the most amaz—"

Whatever he said was drowned in sirens and shouts from the roadside above.

Sam unbuckled her seat belt. "Shall we make our grand entrance?" She put her hand on the door latch, but Ryan's fingers closed around her other arm.

"Let me get out and make sure the gunman didn't come back to confirm his kill."

"He'd be an idiot if he did with all these witnesses around." She checked the side-view mirror. Vehicles and people stood at the edge of the ditch, and a squad car was coasting to a stop among them, bubbles whirling. "It looks like a three-ring circus out there."

"Nice to be the center of attention again."

"So let's get this over with." Their gazes met, and Ryan dipped a slight nod.

She pushed open the door and jumped out onto the grass.

Oops! Jumping was a mistake. The world spun, and she hit her knees. She could count every bone in her body. Her muscles, too.

“Just stay still, Miss.”

Sam looked up.

Deep brown eyes squinted down at her from the dark face of a young man in a police uniform. The name pin on his shirt pocket said Edwards. “An ambulance is on the way.”

“Ambulance?” The word came out as a squeak. “No! No ambulance. I’m fine. Just shaken up. See?” She pressed a hand against the side of the pickup and hauled herself to her feet.

“Miss, really, you should stay still until the paramedics look at you.”

“Fine. They can look, but no ambulance and no hospital.” Sam stepped forward and pain speared up her left calf. Oh, goody, she’d pulled a muscle, but she would eat dirt before she let on.

“You allergic to hospitals, Hopalong?”

“Who?” Sam blinked at Ryan, who’d rounded the rear of the truck and now stood a few feet from her.

He shot her a half grin, half grimace. “You’ve never heard of Hopalong Cassidy?”

She shook her head. Her ignorance might be showing, but this was a way better topic than ambulances and hospitals.

“I guess you’re not a fan of old Westerns. I’ll have to educate you. But first—”

“Is this your pickup, sir?” Officer Edwards interrupted.

“It is.”

“The front driver’s-side tire is blown,” a new voice said.

Sam turned. On the other side of the truck stood another man in uniform, studying the pickup and the gouge in the earth that led from the lip of the road to the crash site.

“It was a drive-by shooting,” Ryan said.

Both officers stared at Ryan. Sam’s stomach quivered. Someone had shot at them! The reality sank in. She gripped the edges of the truck box.

“Someone in another vehicle fired at you, missed, and hit the tire?” Edwards pulled a small wire-bound notebook and a pen from his shirt pocket.

“No, they aimed for the tire. I saw the weapon. It was a pistol, maybe a .45. They could hardly miss.”

Edwards’s pen skimmed across the paper, while the other officer moved around the pickup, studying the vehicle from every angle. Edwards looked up and narrowed his gaze at Ryan. “Description of the vehicle and the shooter?”

Ryan frowned. “The whole thing didn’t take more than a few seconds, but I noticed this brown Ford Explorer practically riding our bumper earlier on. Minnesota plates.” He scratched the back of his neck and blew out through his nose. “Didn’t notice much else, except when the SUV pulled alongside us, I saw a patch of rust about the size of a silver dollar on the passenger’s-side door. Then the gun grabbed my attention, so I didn’t zero in much on the guy holding it. Dark brown hair, and he wore glasses. The sun glinted off them. Could have been Hispanic or maybe Caucasian with a deep tan. That’s about it.” He shrugged.

Edwards made no comment, just wrote.

The other officer joined his partner. “I spotted no bullet holes in the vehicle, but the remaining tires show wear.”

The pen stopped, and Edwards’s gaze fell on Ryan.

Sam stepped away from the pickup. “We were shot at. I heard two bangs, one right on top of the other.”

Ryan looked from one officer to the next. “I had an appointment for a tire change next week. I know they’re ready to be replaced, but they weren’t ready to blow.”

Edwards scribbled in the notebook. “Did you see the gun, too, miss?”

“No, I was reading.” Sam stopped on a gasp. “The journal! I almost left it.”

She turned and hobbled back to the passenger door, flung it open, and spotted the edge of the red book on the floor, peeking

from beneath the deflated air bag. She snatched it up and grabbed her purse that had also upended on the floor. Good thing the zipper had been closed or items would have been strewn all over the cab.

A siren let out a pair of *bleeps* from the road above. Sam looked up as an ambulance cruised to a halt. Her stomach lurched. She swallowed and looked beyond the medical vehicle. Wow! She hadn't notice before but a semi was jackknifed on the freeway about a hundred feet up the road, blocking two of the three lanes. No wonder vehicles were still inching around the site. Traffic would be bottlenecked for miles.

Ryan stepped up to her side. "I figure we're about as popular with the commuting masses as a pair of squirrels at a blue jay convention."

Sam laughed. "You have this knack for picking up on what I'm thinking. Only you put it more colorfully."

"I've thought the same thing about you." He grinned down at her.

Sam's heart did that odd little pitty-pat she'd come to associate with the effect Ryan had on her. Foolish woman! She dropped her gaze.

A rumble neared from skyward, and they both looked up.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Ryan said, "and I rarely am, that would be a news chopper. Let's take cover."

His arm went around her waist, and that pitty-pat morphed into a gallop. She let him guide her up the embankment toward the paramedics heading down toward them. The medical personnel closed in around them, firing questions about their condition. The good news was they were distracting her, but the bad news was that the whole troupe was drifting toward the waiting medical van. She'd have to smell those antiseptic scents, see that equipment, remember...

"You'll be fine," Ryan murmured, and his arm tightened around her waist.

How did he know what she was feeling? She hadn't told him why...yet. But he was right. Everything would be okay. These



people wouldn't take her anywhere she didn't want to go. They were just trying to help.

A few seconds later, she and Ryan were perched on the fender of the ambulance, being examined by the paramedics—pulses and blood pressures taken, pupils examined for evidence of concussion, more endless questions asked.

“You have a nasty scrape here, sir,” a female medic said to Ryan. “We'll have to dress this.”

Sam looked down. The woman cradled Ryan's left arm in her hands, checking out a three-inch rounded area that showed purplish flesh dotted with blood spots.

“How did that happen?”

The medic glanced at her with a slight smile. “Probably the flying cap from the airbag in the steering wheel. It's not an uncommon injury after an accident. I've seen worse.”

“Well, it hurts worse than it looks,” Ryan huffed.

Sam's laugh joined the paramedic's, and fresh air inflated her lungs. She hadn't realized she'd been taking shallow breaths. This wasn't so bad. Not bad at all. So much for irrational fears. She beamed at Ryan, who scowled then winked and shook his head.

Warmth spread through Sam's insides. This would be one of those rare perfect moments in life if she wasn't sitting on the edge of an ambulance after being shot at. Or maybe the surrounding circumstances were what made this a perfect moment. Or maybe she was simply nuts to indulge any feelings whatsoever for Ryan Davidson. He was not a candidate to win her heart. If only she didn't have to keep reminding herself of that fact.

## TEN

“They don’t believe me about the shooting,” Ryan said, as he watched the squad car pull out of the storage lot, where he and Sam had just been dropped off. “They think I’m trying to make an excuse for the accident.”

“Join the club.” Sam touched his arm. “When the evidence technicians left my office yesterday, I got the impression they were still snickering at me behind my back.”

Ryan sighed and gazed down into her soft green eyes. “With my tire shredded all over the freeway, they might not find any evidence of my claim.”

“You should still make sure Detective Connell is made aware of what happened.”

“I’m pretty tired of talking to police officers.”

“Can’t say that I blame you.” Sam headed toward her car. “Let me take you home.”

Ryan fell in beside her. “You should stay with one of your friends for a while. I don’t like you being alone, and you probably shouldn’t hang out with me anymore. I’m a trouble magnet.”

Sam stopped, turned and poked a finger into his chest. “Look, Davidson, I didn’t ask to be thrown into this mess, but here I am. And whether our stories are believed by the authorities or not, someone is trying to stop us from discovering anything more about what happened to your family. That makes me angry.”

Ryan folded her hand between both of his. "Be wise. Protect yourself. Maybe you should go back to Eau Claire for a while."

She pulled away, gaze hardening. "If I run and hide now, I'll lose everything I was trying to gain by moving here. Don't misunderstand me—I'll take precautions, but ultimately I'm not my own protector. Somebody bigger than both of us saw us through today."

His heart felt like a rock in his chest as he strode toward the passenger's side of the vehicle. "I can't handle being responsible for your life. I've got my hands full with my own."

He slid into the car and slammed the door.

Sam plopped in behind the wheel and glared at him. "Don't get a hero complex, Davidson." Her door slam trumped his. "I'll be just as glad as you will when this gets resolved, and we can go our separate ways."

Ryan deflated against the seat. "I didn't mean..." His words trailed away. What had he meant? Was he so used to taking care of only himself that there was no consideration to spare for anyone else? If that was true, his world had grown pitifully small.

Sam set Cassie's journal on the seat between them and started the car. The trip passed in silence. All too soon for Ryan, they crossed over the Mississippi River at the bridge in Hastings. Sam turned onto Highway 10, and they entered wooded lands. The big river loomed on their left. A few minutes later, the sedan nosed into a parking spot outside the log cabin that housed the boat business and came to a stop.

Ryan heaved out a long breath and made no move to exit. "Larry's out on the dock with the clients, so he must have left Derek inside to jockey the reception desk."

"I'm sure that's a favorite chore for a teenager on a beautiful summer day."

Suppressing a smirk, Ryan glanced at the woman beside him. Her gaze no longer held anger, just a gentle sadness. He curled

his fingers against the impulse to tuck a stray lock of honey-brown hair behind her ear. "How are you doing?"

"Sore."

"Me, too. If you even suspect a problem you should see a doctor. Don't hesitate. If you don't have insurance, mine will cover."

"You got it."

"All right then." He opened the door and stepped out.

"Ryan!"

He stuck his head back into the car.

She held out the red notebook. "Don't forget this."

"Thanks." Their gazes held. Did she get that he was thanking her for a lot more than handing him the journal? No one had stood by him like this for years. Never, really.

Her chin bobbed in a small nod.

He smiled and clutched the notebook to his chest as he watched her drive away. His battered muscles protested the simple walk into his office building. By the time he'd offered explanations to his employees, made light of their alarm, and the last patron had been dealt with for the day, Ryan had never been so glad to climb aboard his houseboat and relax at the galley table with a glass of iced tea. Old Jake slept on the floor next to him. The journal beckoned him from the center of the table.

At last he picked it up and flipped through it. His sister's flowery scrawl filled only about a third of the pages. He settled back and started at the beginning. Pretty soon he was smiling. He'd forgotten about the spring musical she starred in a month before she died. He could practically hear the enthusiasm in her voice. Cass never did do anything halfway, and she was always up for a challenge. Maybe that was why Sam reminded him of his sister from time to time.

Ryan read on and found Cassie's thoughts about him and how she wished he'd take control of his future. The entries turned darker. His parents had started arguing a lot. Or rather, Dad was ranting, and Mom was placating and crying. Cass was worried

about them. If Ryan had been home, he would have been worried, too. He turned the page and came to the last entry, dated the very day before the murders.

*Dad was at it again tonight. Mom forgot to pick up a couple shirts at the cleaners today, and Dad went ballistic. I went to the top of the stairs and listened. I know I shouldn't do that, but I can't help it. This isn't about shirts or being fifteen minutes late meeting Dad for lunch like yesterday. This is more, and I have this terrible feeling that something awful is going to happen if I don't figure it out. I wish Ryan was here. He'd know what to do.*

Ryan's throat tightened. She'd had so much faith in him, but she was wrong. He wouldn't have had a clue...any more than he did now.

*I wonder if Mom and Dad are thinking about getting a divorce. I hope they can work it out. Maybe there's a chance. Before Dad stomped off to his study, he said something about seeing a counselor. Hah! I'd love to be a mouse in the corner if he does. Dad taking advice from a shrink? Get real! Even though sometimes I think we'd all be better off in therapy.*

*I mean, we look like this model family. All upright and prosperous and churchgoing. But behind closed doors, we're pretty messed up.*

*Now I'm depressing myself. I'd better try to get some sleep. I have a test in trigonometry tomorrow. Ewww!*

Ryan closed the notebook and set it on the table. Sam had been right. Cassie saw a lot that nobody would ever have guessed with her social-butterfly personality. The giggles must have been her mask to fit in with the Davidson public persona.

So Dad was going to see a counselor. Ryan took a sip of his tea. He believed that about as much as Cassie had. Did Dad say

that just to appease Mom? Doubtful. Michael T. Davidson never backed down from confrontation, nor did he compromise. Ryan was his father's son, all right. Just look at how he defied his family's killer on television. And he meant every word.

If the shooter thought he'd scared Ryan out of finishing his investigation of the storage garage, he was wrong. Maybe it was time to start asking questions of his father's old business associates. It only made sense to assume the murders were connected to something his father was into. Dad was the one who suddenly started acting out, and anyone who thought his mom or sister could possibly be involved in something deadly had a screw loose. Besides, he'd noticed a pattern in the debris in the storage shed. Everything that had been his father's had been rifled through and not as much of his mom's or sister's.

The mob? They did hits, didn't they? Had his dad been a closet gambler? Ryan shook his head. The family finances he'd inherited showed no sign of fiscal mismanagement. Then what?

The answer had to be big, and bad and worth killing a whole family over. Now he and Sam were targets of someone who would do anything not to be found out—someone who got wind about the case reopening before it was even broadcast on the news. Someone who had people to do his bidding. A chill crawled across Ryan's skin.

How could a couple of ordinary citizens stand against a murderer with resources inside the system? But what were the alternatives—give up or get killed? Sam wasn't buying that, and neither was he. She'd better be praying hard and have some pull with the man upstairs, because Ryan sure didn't have His ear.

## ELEVEN

Every joint protested her movements as Sam dragged herself up the front steps of the church the next morning. How heavenly if someone would carry her. A pair of strong arms attached to a blue-eyed outdoorsman appeared in her mind, but she cast the image into the oblivion it deserved. No good could come of such fantasies.

She spotted Jenna as soon as she stepped into the narthex. Her friend was chatting with Mrs. Stevens, a quick-witted octogenarian that Sam had liked from the first day she attended this church. But right now her gaze was glued to the woman's walker. How much would the old gal take for that thing?

"Hey!" Hallie breezed past, grinning. "Get a move on." She threw the words over her shoulder. "The choir is due on stage in five minutes."

"Move, shmooove," Sam mumbled. "A shuffle is top speed today." Despite her words, Sam increased her pace and hobbled into the choir room a few feet behind her friend.

"Why are you limping?" Hallie handed Sam a midnight-blue robe.

"I'll fill you and Jenna in after the service. And I'm going to pick a bone with you about that news broadcast at Ryan's place with me front and center."

Hallie grimaced. "They didn't edit you out of the clip like I recommended. You and Ryan were just too good together.

Speaking of tall, blond and striking, where did you and he go after you skipped out on the rest of the news services? Boy, were they spitting mad!" She laughed. "If I was a chicken, I would've been fried for sure."

"You're living in ancient history. Enough water has flowed under the bridge since then to float the thing clean away."

Both of Hallie's eyebrows flew into arches beneath artfully tousled bangs.

Sam grimaced. "Didn't you know? Ryan and I made the news again last night."

Hallie flapped her arms against her sides. "I was out on assignment. Didn't even turn a television on."

The call came for the choir to move onto the stage.

Sam touched Hallie's shoulder. "I'll tell you later." Then she fell into line with the sopranos, while her friend filed in with the altos. Prelude music swelled from the baby grand piano and electric guitars, with a snappy drumbeat keeping time.

Sam gazed out on the gathered worshippers. The five-hundred-seat sanctuary was largely full. Most of the congregants were middle-aged or senior citizens. Families with young children were scattered among them. The demographic fit the area, which housed primarily the prosperous and established in life. They were not the sort that wanted their security threatened by such things as a messy murder investigation, and she was the neighborhood newbie. No wonder so many eyes had fastened on her. Dark disapproval shouted from compressed lips. Or was her paranoid imagination playing tricks on her?

The cue sounded, the director lifted her arms and the choir burst into song. At least her throat didn't hurt, and as the glorious melody of praise went on, inhaling against bruised ribs became less of a challenge. Her surroundings faded.

Sam's eyes filled with moisture. God was so good. She and Ryan had lived through what might easily have been a gruesome accident. The news had reported last night that the truck



driver who rear-ended them was fine, too. Excellent reasons to praise God. If only Ryan could return to the joy and peace of faith.

Aches and pains faded to a minor annoyance as the service progressed. Pastor Myles gave a rousing sermon on Psalm 91 that confirmed Sam's conviction that divine protection had staved off disaster yesterday. Too bad that stubborn Davidson man wasn't present to hear it.

Sam returned to the choir room after the service, basking in the glow of grace rediscovered. She squeezed her way between boisterous knots of choir members, intent on hanging up her robe.

"Say, Samantha." A hand closed around her arm. "I've been dying to ask."

She looked into the plump face of Martha Stahl, a fellow soprano with sprinkles of gray in her brown hair and the restless gaze of a wary animal. In the space of three seconds, the woman's eyes focused somewhere over Sam's shoulder, above her head and to one side, but never straight at her.

"Ask what?" Sam said.

"However are you coming along with your business renovations?" Martha twittered a laugh. "I mean, with the police and reporters around all the time." She leaned in close enough for Sam to smell the woman's spearmint gum. "It was so spooky, you finding those old murder photos." A shudder flowed through the ample frame. "Do you suppose Abel Morris had something to do—"

"No, I don't think so, and the police don't, either."

"Well, that's good." Martha's smile didn't climb above her nose. "Eldon and I took our clothing there for years. We'd hate to think we were dealing with a...well, you know—a crazed killer." The last words came out a stage whisper.

Heat crept up Sam's neck as she realized talk was subsiding around them and heads were turning their way. She reached for a hanger, threw her robe around it, and thrust it back into the closet. "Some people are waiting out front for me. Nice talking

to you, Martha.” *And may God’s mercy cover me for that bit of polite prevarication.*

Sam headed out of the choir room, hunting for a glimpse of Hallie, but she must already have gone to the narthex.

“My husband and I were good friends with the Davidsons, you know.” Martha’s voice sounded right on Sam’s heels. “Eldon did business with Michael’s investment firm. Hasn’t found one he’s been satisfied with since.”

Sam paused in the narthex. Lots of people loitered around the large, vaulted foyer, chatting, but where, oh, where were Hallie and Jenna to rescue her from present company?

Martha hovered alongside her. “Say, whatever happened to the young man who survived the tragedy? What was his name? Ooh, he was on the news with you, too.” She snapped her fingers. “I can see his face but— Ryan Davidson!”

“Yes, that’s it.” Sam’s gaze swiveled another direction.

“No, that’s him!” Martha pointed.

Sam turned to look, and her eyes widened. She’d found Hallie and Jenna, all right. They were part of a group gathered around a fair-haired man.

Ryan?

He came to church! She hurried forward, ignoring twinges from her sore leg and leaving Martha in the dust. Ryan broke free from the circle and beelined toward her, brow furrowed, chin down, as if bucking a strong wind. This was a man on a mission, not a penitent seeking God.

Sam stopped and let him finish crossing the distance between them. “What are you doing here?”

“You invited me, remember?”

“You laughed at the idea. So what epiphany brought you here?”

“No epiphany. Insight. I realized last night that lots of my dad’s old business contacts attend here.”

Of course. It had been expecting too much for Ryan to suddenly leap into the waiting arms of God when he’d spent so

many years putting distance between them, but this motive reeked like dead fish. The great outdoorsman had come hunting a killer in church!

What happened to the welcome? Ryan studied Sam's face. A minute ago she'd glowed like one of those scented candle thingies with a bulb inside them. At least she smelled good. Her floral perfume drifted to his nostrils. Her swishy calf-length skirt, lacy blouse and the unbound hair flowing around her shoulders made her feminine as a china teacup, except he'd seen firsthand how tough she could be.

She folded her arms. "Find anything out?"

"Got a few business cards so I can look people up later." He displayed the cards in his palm. "As I expected, everyone's falling all over themselves to talk to the long-lost—"

"Ryan Davidson, you look just like your father when he was a young man." The voice boomed from a stocky giant of a man with a hefty woman attached to his arm like a limpet.

They looked familiar. Ryan's brow puckered.

The woman beamed. "Eldon and Martha Stahl. Remember us?"

"You were in Dad's golf league." Ryan held out his hand to the balding man and found it swallowed in a meaty paw.

"We golfed together, shot skeet together, made money together. Why, I even gave him legal advice on occasion."

"Oh, yes, you're the lawyer." Ryan retrieved his hand a little the worse for wear.

Martha bobbed her head. "Your mother and I collaborated on more fund-raisers than I care to count. I still miss her." The woman's full lower lip quivered.

Ignoring the pang in his own heart, Ryan forced a smile. "Good to see you again. Would it be all right if I contact you another day? I'm talking to a few people who knew my folks well. Now that new evidence has come to light I've got way more questions than answers."

The lines around Eldon's eyes and heavy jowls deepened. "Martha and I were vacationing in the Bahamas when the tragedy happened. I don't know what help we can be to you, son, other than to sympathize."

"And maybe that's all he's looking for." Martha nodded. "Sometimes it's good to reminisce about the departed. You come anytime. I make a mean coffee cake." She winked.

Ryan's taste buds suddenly remembered sampling some of that cake when he was a kid at a church social. She was right. It was mean.

Eldon cleared his throat and began moving away, but his wife resisted, leaning toward Ryan. "I never believed that your father did...well, what they said he did. I simply wouldn't listen to the talk."

The woman's husband won the tug-of-war, and they headed up the hall. Eldon dipped his head toward his wife and spoke out of the side of his mouth. "You soaked up every gory detail, Martha."

Ryan barely caught the words, but they left him cold to the marrow. His family had been the whisper of the neighborhood ten years ago, and now they were gossip fodder again. Only this time Ryan was going to encourage every word until someone spilled what they knew. Was he mistaken in thinking that Eldon Stahl would prefer to avoid further conversation? Not hardly. His dad's former legal advisor just went to the head of the interview list, even if that meant he had to eat Martha's coffee cake.

Speaking of eating...Ryan's stomach growled. What happened to Sam? He looked around. Maybe now would be a good time to try The Meridian. He spotted her heading out the front door, flanked by Hallie Berglund and a short woman who must be her other friend, the chef, Jenna Newmann.

Ryan's shoulders slumped. He'd wanted to ask her how she was feeling today. Personally, if his quest for truth hadn't spurred him out of bed this morning, he'd have taken a couple of aspirin

and slept in till the crack of noon. If Sam hurt half as much as he did, she had to be a true believer to attend service, much less get up and sing in the choir.

He wandered toward the door. How would it feel to have something to believe in again?

He snorted as he stepped into the hot, humid sunlight of full summer in Minnesota. Faith had to be whole hog or nothing. He could see that much by watching Samantha. She'd been through something really tough, but she still hadn't told him what, and she'd come through it with her faith intact. No, if anything, her trust in God had grown deeper. Unshakeable. Why hadn't his survived the test?

She might avoid him for the moment. For some reason she was angry with him. But he'd track her down later, because he had some gut-aching questions for Samantha Reid that had nothing to do with catching a murderer.

## TWELVE

Sam sat back in the easy chair she occupied in the living room of Jenna's town house. Her stomach was full of yummy eggplant parmesan prepared as Sunday dinner by the master chef herself. Sam had withheld her update on the Davidson saga until after the meal. Now that she'd spilled her load, Jenna and Hallie stared at her like pups at a new dish, as her dad would say.

"You walked away in one piece from an accident like that?" Hallie faded against the plushy white couch as if wilted by a blast of heat.

"I'm amazed, too. The pastor's sermon on Psalm 91 was so appropriate."

"How are you today?" Jenna laid a hand on Sam's knee.

Sam chuckled then clutched sore ribs. "When I was drying myself after my shower this morning it was easier to count the places I *wasn't* bruised. Other than that, I'm fine."

Hallie sat up straight as a board. "You were shot at, girl. Consider me overthinking that you and that cute guy should get to know each other better. The further you stay away from this investigation the better. Let the police do their jobs."

"You mean I've done my civic duty, and now I should mind my own business?"

"Exactly." Hallie gave a sharp nod. "Here's your next project. Keep away from Davidson at all costs."

"I think that issue has taken care of itself. Yesterday, Ryan instructed me to keep my distance for my own safety. Then he showed up at church this morning, not for spiritual enlightenment, but to look for a murderer in our midst. I'm afraid that didn't impress me much. The man is obsessed, and not with the right things."

"He's not a believer?" Jenna shook her head. "That's sad. He's trying to deal with a horrible loss in his own strength. I can hardly imagine the pain."

Sam sighed. "I think sympathy for him has prompted bad decisions on my part." What else could have caused her to lose her focus on getting ready to open her business? Infatuation? She'd better not be that wimpy where her heart was concerned.

"Mmm-hmm." Hallie bobbed her head. "Like running over to that storage garage to help him sort through his old life."

"He's a fun guy if you don't push the wrong buttons, and faith is one of them."

"Fun guy or not, right now he's poison for you. And I can't believe you didn't come over and spend the night with one of us after what happened."

Jenna dipped her chin. "You've got more guts than me to stay alone in your apartment."

"You know my reasons, ladies." Sam gripped the arms of her chair. She would not, could not, give in to fear.

Hallie sniffed. "By the dark circles under your eyes, you spent a sleepless night."

"Okay, so what?" She lifted her hands in mock surrender. "A security company is coming tomorrow to install an alarm system. I'll sleep better after that."

Jenna and Hallie looked at each other. "Slumber party!" they said in unison.

Hallie grinned at Sam. "It'll be girls' night in at your place tonight."

“Oh, I couldn’t let you—”

“You can’t stop us.” Jenna rose from her end of the couch. “I’ll get packed. This is going to be fun.”

Sam shook her head. “You haven’t tried my guest bed yet.” She showed a scowl to the obstinate pair, but her insides danced. How did she ever get blessed with such great friends? Too bad Ryan didn’t have a few buds like these. And why couldn’t she keep her pesky thoughts off that man?

Curled up in her pajamas on the love seat in her apartment, Sam sipped her steaming lemon tea then choked and wiped a trickle from the corner of her lips. “You two are insane!”

Her friends’ laughter brought a giggle from Sam. Hallie threw another piece of popcorn, and Jenna made like a snapping turtle, snatching it in midair with her mouth. She crunched the kernel with smacks and grins. Sam and Hallie hooted.

“I’m so glad I thought of this,” Sam said when she could catch her breath.

“Yeah, right.” Hallie licked the tips of her fingers. “You and your ideas.”

Smiling, Sam settled back in her cushy seat, eyelids weighted, limbs loose as taffy. Bastian snuggled beside her, occasionally kneading his clawless paws against her leg. How refreshing to laugh and relax. It had been many days since she’d felt safe. She hadn’t realized how uptight she’d become.

Her phone jangled. Sam set Bastian on the floor, heaved herself out of the chair and grabbed the wireless unit on the side table. “Hello, Reid residence.”

A familiar deep chuckle answered her. “For a second there, I thought maybe I’d called my own house, and your mother answered.”

“Oh, hi, Dad.” Sam perched on the arm of the couch.

“What’s this crazy stuff we hear about you finding evidence in some old murder case?”



Sam gulped and took a deep breath. "Not one to beat around the bush, are you?"

"So there's something to the rumor?" All lightness had left her father's tone.

Sam shot a grimace at her friends, who gazed back sober-faced. The moment of truth had arrived, but just how much of it did she need to tell? Too many unnecessary details would net her a pair of houseguests determined to haul her back to Eau Claire.

"Some old 35 mm film, Dad. The photos were rather awful, but Hallie and I turned them over the police. They came and searched my building for more evidence, but didn't find anything. I don't expect more to come of it from my end."

"Hmmm. Well, your mother and I want to know if anything develops...and I don't mean that as a pun." Increased volume underscored his seriousness. "We're not used to you being this far away from home."

Sam forced a laugh. "Dad, you're not used to me being away from home, period."

Long, heavy sigh. "I know, baby girl. We're doing the best we can to let go, but it isn't easy. The old house seems pretty empty without you. Your mom and I just rattle around here at loose ends."

Sam stifled a groan. Way to lay on the guilt trip. "I couldn't bunk at home forever, Dad. It was about time for me to get a life, don't you think?"

Should she tell them about Ryan? What was the point? She had good reason to back off from that association, and keeping a low profile would probably remove her from some unknown villain's radar. Maybe. Hopefully. Evidently, her parents hadn't caught wind of her accident and might never. So why should she worry them? "Dad, I'm the soul of caution. You should know that by now."

Across the room, Jenna shook her head, and Hallie rolled her eyes. Sam stuck her tongue out at them.

Her dad snorted. "You forget I *do* know you. You're all guts

and heart. That's how you got through...well, everything. You also have the work ethic of a whole colony of ants, so make sure you get out and have some fun once in a while."

"Actually, I'm having fun tonight. Jenna and Hallie are here, and we're laughing till our ribs ache." She rubbed her side. Her ribs ached without the giggles, but who was telling? *Shut up, conscience!*

"In that case, I'll let you go."

"Love to Mom."

"Sure thing, honey."

They said goodbye, and Sam cradled the handset.

She stifled a yawn behind her hand. "I don't know about you two, but I'm going to have to get some shut-eye. The truck's coming bright and early in the morning to cart away the old equipment, and then the painters will show up and the security people."

"We're working girls, too." Jenna stood up and stretched. "Ready to turn in, Hallie?"

Hallie stuck out her lower lip. "Am I the only night owl?"

Sam waved at her on the way toward the bedroom. "Knock yourself out with my DVD collection until you're ready to hit the sack." She stopped and turned at the bedroom door. "Bastian will keep you company."

"Thanks a lot." Hallie wrinkled her nose at the cat, who ignored her and went on grooming himself on the love seat.

Chuckling, Sam closed her bedroom door and crawled between the covers. In the room next to hers, she heard Jenna settling onto the guest bed. She yawned and rolled onto her side. How good to feel safe.

Ryan hunkered down in the driver's seat of the Ford Ranger he'd rented until he found a new full-sized pickup. Ten p.m. and summer night had settled around the dry-cleaners building across the street, as well as the other businesses in this small pocket of commerce. Street corner lights illuminated large areas, but Ryan

had selected a shadowed section of curb to park beside. The streets were deserted on this edge of a business district that offered no night spots.

Ryan rolled down his window. A distant crowd roar let him know that somewhere in a nearby park a softball game was winding down. The balmy evening breeze carried the scent of summer cookouts. He gazed down the road into the residential neighborhood surrounding the businesses. If he started the Ranger and drove five blocks ahead and another half a dozen south, he'd pass his old house. Something he'd never done in ten years—until just last week, when the new evidence was discovered. Now he'd driven past nearly every day, struggling to recall anything he might have noticed back then that would lend another clue.

Just went to show how self-absorbed he'd been that night. No memories other than his own misery had surfaced yet.

Shaking his head, Ryan blew on his supersized convenience store coffee. The rising steam carried the bitter bite of the jet-black brew. He studied the brick dry-cleaners building. All the lights had gone off in the apartment above. By the hint of blue flickering in one window, someone was watching television. He'd put his money on the reporter lady.

When he pulled up to the curb outside the business earlier this evening and saw those three women going inside together, he'd scrapped the notion of letting Sam know he'd stick close tonight. Her two watchdogs might start needling him with questions again like they'd done at the church.

*Does Sam know you're here?*

*Say, there's a bandage on your arm. What have you been up to?*

*Did you enjoy the sermon?*

Hah! Psalm 91 and all that divine protection business must be for someone else, not him or his family.

It was time people close to him stopped getting hurt, and it looked like prevention was his responsibility. Sam had gotten

involved in his problems through no fault of her own. After all the unexpected support she'd given him, he could spare a little guard duty until she got that new security system installed. He should have thought about doing this last night, since mulling over his sister's journal kept him awake until the wee hours anyway.

Ryan yawned then sipped his coffee. He'd had a few hours' shut-eye before he got here, and he'd head home as soon as it got light for a couple hours' nap before his workday started. Sure, he was tired, but it was a good tired. At last he was doing something for somebody else. Something that would have made his mom and sister proud. Maybe even his dad.

Nobody was going to touch Samantha Reid. Not on his watch.

## THIRTEEN

“Police. Step out of the vehicle!”

The sharp voice and a metallic rap on the side of the pickup jerked Ryan awake. He sat straight, wincing at the protest from his bruised muscles, and stared into a granite-jawed face. Then the beam of a flashlight blinded him, and he put up a hand to shield his eyes.

“Let’s see the other one, too,” the voice commanded. “Nice and easy.”

Heart hammering, Ryan lifted both hands. Was this guy really a cop? The glint of light off a gun inclined him not to ask.

“Out! Real slow.”

Ryan eased the door open and stepped one foot onto the pavement. Bubble lights came on atop a patrol car parked nose to nose with his SUV. Police for sure.

“Keep the hands high.” A second voice came from the far side of the patrol car.

They had him in a crossfire. Ryan lifted his arms and dragged his other foot out of the vehicle. Ooph! His leg had started to go to sleep. “I’m not—” His knee buckled under him, and he toppled to the sidewalk, barely catching himself on his palms. The sting chased the last vestige of sleep from his brain.

A curse sounded above him. Rough hands hauled him to his

feet and shoved him facedown across the hood of his truck. A second pair of hands frisked him.

“He’s clean.”

A snort. “He’s either drunk or high.”

“I’m not. I can explain. I’m here to keep an eye on Samantha Reid.”

“Who?”

“The woman who owns the dry cleaners and lives in the apartment above.” Still flattened over the vehicle hood, Ryan looked over his shoulder at one of the officers.

“A stalker then.” The man’s sneer rivaled Clint Eastwood’s. “Or maybe the mystery prowler that’s got us doing double drive-throughs in this neighborhood.”

“You don’t understand. I—”

“Save it. They’ll want to hear everything down at the station.”

His hands were dragged behind his back, and cuffs clicked shut, ringing his wrists in cold steel. But not as cold as the iron band that squeezed his heart.

He’d fallen asleep on the job. Maybe they *should* just haul him down to the jail and lock him up for all the good he ever did for people he cared about. And he *did* care about Sam, whether he wanted to or not.

A ringing noise tugged at the edges of Sam’s consciousness. Her eyelids flickered. What? Not the alarm yet. Her room was still too dark for morning to be here. The ringing stopped. Sam drifted toward sleep. The ring tone came again. Her eyes popped open. The telephone!

She glanced at her bedside clock. Four-thirty a.m. Who could be calling at this hour?

Sam rolled onto her elbow and grabbed the handset from her nightstand. “Hello?” Her voice sounded like she’d been chewing sand.

“Ms. Reid, this is Detective Connell. Sorry to call so early,

but we were hoping you could come down to the station as soon as possible.”

“We?”

“Ryan Davidson and I.”

“Ryan’s at the police station? What’s he doing there?” All thought of sleep fled.

“He was arrested for parking after hours in a business district and on suspicion of stalking.”

“Oh, my! Who did he appear to be stalking?”

“You.”

Was that laughter Sam heard in the detective’s tone? “I’m sorry. You’re going to have to explain that to me.”

“Evidently he’s been parked outside your building, determined to protect you from whoever he thinks has been perpetrating attacks against the both of you.”

“You mean to catch whoever it is so he can find his killer.” A slow burn started in her middle.

“No, he says that consideration was secondary.”

“Really?” Sam’s tummy did a little flutter, and the burn turned to mellow warmth.

“Can you join us at the station?”

“I think I’d better.” Sam threw the covers off her legs.

“Excellent. I have something to share that may set you both at ease.” The man said goodbye and hung up.

Curiosity running full blast, Sam threw on jeans and a blouse then padded into the living room. She stopped by the couch and shook her head at the long, lean figure stretched out on the cushions, an afghan thrown over her, and the cat curled in a nest near her feet.

Hallie stirred and lifted her head. “Where are you going? The sun’s not even up yet.”

“You spent the night on the couch? The spare bedroom is only a few feet away.”

Hallie chuckled. “You warned me about that bed, remember?”

Besides, I fell asleep watching TV, then woke up about 2:00 a.m. to shut it off and couldn't get my lazy self to leave the couch. It's comfy!" She hauled herself into a sitting position and ran a hand through her hair. Bastian protested the disturbance with a mewl then repositioned himself and went back to sleep.

"Don't get up on my account. I'm going down to the police station."

"You're going where? Now?" Hallie's brown gaze bored into her.

"Ryan's there. He was arrested for stalking me."

"Get outta here! He's a perv on top of being an obsessive killer hunter?"

Sam laughed. "Killer hunter? I'm going to have to share that original phrase with him. He might put it on a T-shirt. No, he was standing guard outside the building last night—until he got arrested for sitting out there."

"And you're just going to run because he called."

"That was Detective Connell on the phone. He says he has something to tell both of us."

"I'll bet he does!" Hallie flopped back. "Something like 'butt out of police business.' You could have said no. I thought you'd decided to swear off Davidson for good."

"Get some more sleep, Ms. Groucho. But don't you try to tell me you'd ignore any man who'd get himself arrested trying to protect you."

Her friend chuckled. "Excellent point. Go ride to the rescue of your knight in shining armor. I'm willing to bet he'll need a lift from the police station."

"You're right. I hadn't thought of that."

"Oh, and if Detective Connell tells you anything that's an actual news scoop, let me know so I can be the first reporter to call and ask what's up with the case."

"Will do, newshound."

Smiling, Sam went down to her car, which was parked under



the port between her building and the print shop. The sky had begun to lighten, but no streaks of dawn yet showed on the horizon. She sobered as she drove toward the police station, not a place she wanted to see the inside of again, but here she went because of Ryan. Hallie was right. She needed to guard her heart. God was doing something in Ryan's life, and the last thing either of them needed were some misguided romantic notions getting in the way of what was eternally important. If only her pulse didn't do the salsa whenever he turned that lazy grin her way.

"God, give me strength to keep my priorities straight where Ryan is concerned." She spoke her prayer aloud as she pulled up near the station.

Inside, the dispatcher buzzed her through the vestibule. Then a night duty sergeant—not the intimidating hulk of her earlier visit—escorted her to a bare little cubicle where a scarred table sat surrounded by three dingy white walls and a dull mirror. Ryan slouched at the table, sporting the shadow of a beard and a brooding gaze. His head came up when she walked in, but he didn't smile, just nodded, looked back down and picked at a gouge in the tabletop.

Sam pulled out a chair and sat. "If it makes you feel better, I don't plan to press charges."

One side of his mouth lifted, and his vivid eyes glinted under thick lashes. *Brad Pitt, eat your heart out.* Sam looked away and cleared her throat. "Detective Connell says he has some kind of big announcement. Any idea what it is?"

"Wish I did. Then I could prepare myself for whatever new humiliation lies in wait."

Sam bit her lip to hold in a snicker. The guy was seriously miserable.

Ryan folded his hands in front of him and met her gaze. "I've been sitting here for an hour and a half, mostly alone, but Connell dropped in about twenty minutes ago to say you were coming to get me. He seemed too full of himself to suit me. He actually cracked a smile and bounced on his heels."

“That’s major excitement for the stone-faced detective.”

“You said it.” Ryan scratched at his temple then smoothed his hair. “I’m really sorry for getting you dragged out of bed this way. Creating another problem for you was not my intention.”

“Apology accepted, and if the police have anything that leads to a resolution of more serious issues, I’m all for being called in to hear it.”

The door opened, and Detective Connell strode through. His hawklike gaze took them both in as he settled into the remaining chair. He laid a file on the table and placed one lean hand on either side of it. “Several individuals’ fingerprints were lifted from the film casing that contained the photographs of your family’s deaths.” He nodded toward Ryan. “We eliminated Hallie Berglund’s and Jenna Newmann’s prints. A couple others matched Abel Morris’s military records. We were left with one more partial thumbprint.”

Sam leaned forward, heart thumping. “Did you get an identification?”

“We have found the individual.”

Ryan leaped up, chair legs scraping on the scuffed tile. “You have him in custody?”

Connell lifted a silver brow. “Kindly be seated, Mr. Davidson.”

Ryan opened his mouth, snapped it shut, and plunked into his chair. “I’m seated and in control of myself.”

The fist that lay on the table near Sam said otherwise. She laid her palm across it and squeezed.

Color returned to Ryan’s face, and the rigid set of his shoulders relaxed a millimeter. “Okay, now I’m as calm as I’m going to get. Please tell me you’ve got this joker behind bars, and you can give me a name.”

“We know where he is, but not who, and he will never occupy a jail cell.”

“What?” Sam’s spine stiffened. “How can that be?”

Ryan rocked back as if struck.

Connell held up a hand. "The man who presumably took those photos is a John Doe who occupies a grave in the county cemetery. He was killed in a hit-and-run near the Morris Dry Cleaners on the night of the murders and was never identified. Nothing was found to connect him to the Davidson homicide, so the cases were treated as unrelated events."

Ryan snorted. "Awfully coincidental that the murders and the fatal accident took place in the same neighborhood on the same night."

"Agreed. But police must follow a chain of evidence. Now we have the link that connects the two cases. It's a fair assumption that our John Doe is also the murderer. Whether he acted on his own or had an accomplice remains unknown."

"Pretty suspicious that Mr. Doe was run over blocks from the crime scene." Sam rubbed a spot between her eyebrows where a headache had begun to form. Even a giant step forward still left them in the dark. "Abel Morris must have found the film somewhere on his property and tucked it into his lost-and-found box, not realizing what was on it."

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. "The film could have flown out of the killer's hand when he was struck. Old Man Morris maybe didn't even find it until some time after the accident. If it *was* an accident."

"Valid speculations." Connell's gaze moved from Ryan to Sam and back again. "We have reopened the file on the hit-and-run. A camera was indeed found near the body, but since it contained a blank roll of film, no wider search was made for missing film. You may rest assured that any other possible leads will be followed, but that is all I can tell you at this time."

A memory teased the corners of Sam's consciousness. What had she noticed recently that might fit with this scenario? Oh, yes!

"Hold on one red-hot millisecond." The men's heads swiveled toward her. "When I bought the dry cleaners, I did a meticulous inventory of Abel Morris's records to see what had been done to

the building in the last couple of decades.” Both men sat forward, elbows on the table, gazes intent. Sam gave them a grim smile. “I remember thinking it odd to find a notation of a single basement window replaced in the fall ten years ago, and no other renovations at that time.”

Ryan made a sound like a press releasing steam. “The hit-and-run took place in the spring. If he didn’t notice the broken window until fall, Morris probably didn’t connect the dots.”

“Hold on.” The detective lifted a hand. “A case of film is unlikely to shatter glass.”

“Which means something heavy was with the film,” Ryan said.

“Maybe.” Connell nodded slowly. “Or the break might be unrelated to the hit-and-run. I’m certain the investigators at the scene would have noticed a breached window in the building next to where the incident took place.”

“Not necessarily,” Sam spoke up. “Bushes lined the front facade on either side of the entrance. I’ve had them torn out now in order to plant something more attractive. But back then a heavy object could have arched behind them and gone through a window, no one the wiser until Mr. Morris checked his furnace in preparation for winter.”

“Which means,” Ryan’s voice came out brisk, “that there likely is something else to be found at Sam’s place of business.”

She shook her head. “Unfortunately, it’s probably in the city landfill by now.”

Ryan slumped back in his chair.

The detective pursed his lips, brows knitted together. “I will note this information in the file. Please go home now and let us do our job.”

Ryan stood and leaned toward Connell, the pads of his fingers pressed against the table, knuckles white. “I have no problem with the police doing their job, but I do have a problem with being shot at on the freeway. And an even bigger issue when an innocent party is my passenger at the time.”

The officer rose and tapped the edge of his file folder on the tabletop. "I've read the report of the incident."

Ryan straightened, crossing his arms over his chest. "I suppose you're going to tell me I was seeing things when that guy poked a pistol in our direction."

"I have no reason to disbelieve your story, but you've made the assumption that the incident is connected to your family's murder case. Perhaps it was exactly what you called it—a drive-by shooting. The vehicle you described is similar to one involved in a gang altercation last month. We're following up. You can trust us on that, as well."

Sam waved a hand like a student asking to speak. She seemed to have that habit in this police station. "What about my break-in, my vase, the blood on my cat?"

Connell smiled down at her like an indulgent instructor. "The results aren't back yet from the lab, but I'm certain we'll find a logical explanation for everything."

Resisting the urge to smack the detective, Sam got to her feet and grimaced at Ryan. "Let's blow this joint."

"Get outta Dodge, you mean?"

"Whatever, Mr. Cowpoke."

"Hey, I'm just a city boy with a country heart."

A smile tilted the edges of Sam's lips as she led the way out of the station. Ryan Davidson could charm a poodle out of its bow. Way bad for her peace of mind. But he was so much fun to be around, even in the midst of a murder investigation.

The charmer sat silent on the drive back to the dry cleaners in the early morning light. A dozen questions tangled themselves in Sam's mind, but she couldn't bring herself to ask any of them. Ryan needed a chance to process what he'd heard. She pulled up behind his vehicle and stopped, but left the engine running.

He turned toward her. "So they've found the shooter. I thought I'd feel some sort of relief when that happened, particularly since

he's as dead as my family, but mostly I'm just confused. Too much still doesn't make sense."

"I'm with you on that."

Ryan sighed and shook his head. "Let's leave it for now. I've got some thinking to do. But in the meantime, would you let me treat you to supper next Saturday?"

"Aren't I the one who owes you a meal at The Meridian?"

"I'm talking about letting me cook for you at my houseboat. I grill a juicy steak."

Sam gripped the steering wheel. "I don't know, Ryan. I do like you, but we need to be careful about...I mean, this is an emotionally charged situation as it is without—"

"Don't worry." He looked away. "I didn't mean the invitation as a date, more like a thank-you for all you've done. I'll invite Larry and his family, too. Besides, can you really turn down a cruise on the beautiful Mississippi?" He shot her a lopsided grin.

Her heart did its usual boogie. "Well, when you put it that way..."

His grin went full-blown. "I'll pick you up at six."

"I'll drive myself. No point in you making two round trips." Did she sound as breathless as she felt?

"Stubborn woman."

"I prefer to consider myself sensible. What can I bring to contribute to the meal?"

"Just yourself. This is all on me." He stepped out of the car, turned and sent her a wink then shut the door.

She watched him go to his vehicle and snatch something from the front window. He strode back toward her car, and she powered down her window.

"At least they didn't tow it." He waved a parking ticket. "See you later, Miss Sensible."

Chuckling, Sam headed her car for the port. When she got out, Ryan's vehicle was gone. She glanced at her watch. Going on 7:00 a.m. Too late to grab a few more z's. It was time for her

morning run, anyway. Then she'd treat her overnight guests to scrambled eggs and toast before the equipment movers arrived.

A flutter overhead drew her attention. She spotted a little bird, a sparrow maybe, peeking over the edge of a vent hood in the side of her building. There must be a nest up there. Funny she'd never noticed the vent until now. It couldn't be more than eight inches wide, and it wasn't in the right spot to connect to any of the old equipment that was about to go down the road. But Abel's records showed this wasn't the first time the building had been renovated.

She stepped closer and looked up into the hood a foot or so above her. A tuft of blue-gray fur waved from the crack between the brick and the metal. How had Bastian gotten up there?

## FOURTEEN

“At least we know how Bastian got into the closet.” Sam stared at the jumble of items on the floor of her office—everything from the closet, including the shelving. After emptying the storage area, she’d found the interior end of the vent way in the back, the tin cover hanging by a single screw. The duct led to the outside and was open at both ends. She’d felt the breeze.

“It’s a good thing you discovered this before winter hit,” Jenna said. “Abel Morris must have been paying through the nose for heat with a hole in the wall like that.”

Hallie snickered. “I’ve got this picture of him at his desk huddled in a sweater, wondering where the draft was coming from.”

“I hate to bust your bubble,” Sam said, “but Mr. Morris never used this area as an office, even though that’s what it was supposed to be. Maybe the lack of a window bothered him. Not that a window would have been much to look through when your only view would be the alley and the wall of the building next door. Anyway, the door to this room was closed and locked, and it was chock-full of junk just like the rest of the place. I cleaned it out for myself before I even roped you two into helping me.”

“That’s why he didn’t know there was a problem.” Jenna nodded. “Now you can fix it.”

“Sure, I can cover the holes for now, and I’ll put filling in the ductwork on my list for fall work, but I’m still left with a huge



puzzle. For starters, how did my cat climb seven feet straight up to get into the hole? He doesn't even have claws. Even if he did, as marvelous as cats are in their mysterious ways, they don't climb brick walls. That means someone pretty tall stuffed him into the vent."

Jenna humphed and nudged a box with her foot. "Maybe Bastian bit the guy who did it, and that's how the cat got blood on its chin."

"Oooh, smart thinking, girl!" Hallie held up a hand and collected a high five from Jenna.

"Okay, another conundrum answered. Maybe." Sam picked up a shelf board and leaned it against the wall. "I'm sure Detective Connell will let us know results on the lab test soon."

"Speaking of the police," Jenna said, "shouldn't you tell them about this?"

Sam groaned and rubbed a hand across her forehead. That headache had never quite gone away. Probably a product of too little sleep and too much excitement. Her bruises from the accident ached from all the activity of emptying the closet, and she hadn't even gone for her run.

"You know what?" She planted her hands on her hips. "I'm going to wait until Connell drops by or calls. The way things have gone in this investigation, he'll no doubt figure I let the cat outside by accident, and some passing vagrant stuffed him into the vent as a joke. Unless, of course, my substitute vase or my window casing yields the prints of some desperate felon. Then they might take me seriously, but I'm not holding my breath."

"What?" Hallie said. "For the prints or to be taken seriously?"

"Both."

A knock sounded at the front door.

Sam headed that way. "Either the movers or the security people are here." She stepped into the front room. A man with the moving company logo on his jumpsuit stood outside. She waved to him then turned toward her friends. "My day is off to

a rousing start. Just pray that it settles down from here and everything goes smoothly. I've got to get my mind off all this weirdness and concentrate on preparing to open my business."

"You got it." Hallie hugged her, and Jenna joined them.

They broke apart, and Sam took in a fortifying long breath. "Thanks, ladies, that felt good. I'll remind myself all day long that your prayers are with me."

"You just do what you need to do." Jenna touched Sam's arm. "We'll let ourselves out the back. I've got to scoot. I'm cooking for the lunch crowd, and I like to arrive at the restaurant plenty early to get everything lined up." She leaned in toward the others. "Veal scallopini or pilaf-stuffed eggplant with mango sauce, if either of you are hungry later on."

Sam's stomach growled. "Oh, man, I forgot to eat breakfast or feed you two, either."

"Fuggedaboutit," Hallie said. "That fresh scoop on the Davidson case was all the breakfast I needed. Once again, Channel Six got it first." She and Jenna moved off in the direction of the apartment stairs.

"Thanks for everything!" Sam called after them.

The man outside pounded on the door again. Sam pasted a smile on her face and went to answer. *Please, God, could the rest of this day be normal?* But then, with all she had on her plate, not counting murder mysteries, she probably wouldn't know what normal looked like.

An average, boring day, that's all he wanted. Was it too much to ask?

Ryan bent and picked up more trash with a gloved hand and stuffed it into a plastic garbage sack. The whole boat had looked like one giant party pad when this group brought it back this morning, and they'd done a number on the transmission from mishandling. They hadn't been happy when he'd refused to return their damage deposit. Tough! You play, you pay.

So far the only good thing about today was no more customers on the schedule. Mondays were typically slow, so that was no surprise. After he finished cleaning this boat, he'd start canvassing the people he'd met at church who said they'd speak to him about his family. Maybe by the time Sam came for their cookout and cruise on Saturday he'd have progress to report. Ryan smiled and attacked his job with renewed vigor.

By 2:00 p.m. he had locked up shop and was on the road toward his old neighborhood. His pickup seemed to naturally take a route that brought him past Sam's business. A security company van sat in the alley between the cleaners and the print shop.

Good. They could both rest easy tonight.

Five blocks farther on, he made a right turn. As he straightened the wheel, a picture flashed through his head.

It had been so dark that night. No stars. No moon. Streetlights, sure, but no houselights because it was late and people were in bed, which left lots of dark patches. The streets were deserted—all except this muscle-bound jogger in a gray sweatsuit who raced up the sidewalk toward him. The man clutched a paper sack, face shadowed under a raised hood.

Heart pounding, Ryan pulled the Ranger over to the sidewalk and put it in Park. His hands shook. He pulled them away from the steering wheel and pressed them together between his knees. That was no jogger. More like a runner. Somebody tearing pell-mell from the scene of a crime. And a sound had carried to him, faint and jumbled amidst the turmoil in his head.

Laughter.

The glee had seemed then like a cruel god mocking his private pain, but it had really been a killer chuckling over a family left dead in their own blood.

Ryan struggled to breathe against the fist that squeezed his insides. A black film coated his vision. Blind rage. He'd heard of it but never been in it—until now. And the rage was against

himself! How could he have driven right past his family's murderer and not known?

He slammed the heels of his hands against the steering wheel. Stupid anger. Foolish thing to blame himself for, but his head and his gut didn't see it the same way.

The guy had been carrying something away from the crime scene. Something bigger than just a camera and a roll of used film. Did whoever ran the man down take the sack he carried? The break-in at his storage garage said maybe not. Had they found what they wanted in the storage unit? Not if they were still nervous about what might be discovered at the dry cleaners.

A wolf smile grew on Ryan's face. Somebody was running scared. Yeah, he'd kind of guessed that much. But whoever it was didn't have everything in his possession that he considered vital to his safety. That meant he and Sam might still run across something. Or rather, he might find it. Sam had been through enough trouble over his family's tragic history. He needed to keep her out of any further investigating. Later this evening, after he made his rounds in the old neighborhood, he would go through that storage garage like a whirlwind, even if he had to stay up all night and work by flashlight to finish.

Ryan started the pickup and drove up the street, a strange buoyancy in his belly. What was it? Hope? Now there was a scary thought. He'd lived without that luxury for so long it was hard to know whether to trust such a feeling. What if all his efforts led to nothing? What if the police investigation came up empty? What if— *Cut it out, Davidson. Keep your eyes on the prize.*

He stopped in front of his childhood home and turned off the truck. Only the general shape of the house remained the same as he remembered. The structure had new siding and new windows. The picture window was now a bay window. The maple tree in the front yard was bigger, but the elm tree that had been on the opposite end of the yard was gone, no doubt victim to rampant Dutch elm disease.

A black Lexus coupe sat in the driveway in front of the leftmost stall of the triple garage. Someone was home. He probably should have called first, but he wanted to catch people unprepared.

Sucking in a breath, Ryan got out of his vehicle. On stiff legs, he went up the sidewalk and the front stairs. These had been redone, too, and the door was a deep maroon, not the brown he remembered. The doorbell was in the same spot, though. He pressed it. New ring tone.

Maybe he could stop being so nervous about possibly being asked inside. Chances were it would look like a stranger's home to him—which it was. The door opened, and a citrus scent carried out to him on machine-cooled air. A gray-haired woman in a sequined blue T-shirt and designer jeans peered up at him through thick-lensed glasses. Over her shoulder, Ryan looked into a vestibule done in bold reds and golds. Not at all similar to his mother's understated taste.

"May I help you?" The woman's voice came out as delicate as her slim frame.

"Excuse me. My name is Ryan Davidson. My family used to live in this house. I was wondering—"

"Oh, *those* Davidsons. Young man, I cannot possibly imagine what you've been through." Her tone said she had no intention of trying to imagine. "But I'm tired of all this hounding. I've already told the others—"

"What others?"

"Why, the police—some Detective Connell, I think—any number of reporters, and that private investigator fellow who came by Saturday morning. Now he was at least charming and gracious."

"Private investigator?" Ryan stiffened. "Did he say who hired him?"

The woman glared up at him. "My goodness, young man, can't you keep track of your employees? He said he was working for you."

“Me!” Ryan rocked back on his heels. “I have never hired a P.I.”

“How very odd.” She pursed her lips. “He showed me his license and a piece of paper with your signature on it. Well, it said Ryan Davidson anyway.”

“What did he look like?” He held his breath for the answer.

*Let this be a solid lead at last!*

“Dark hair. Glasses almost as thick as mine. Not quite as tall as you, but stocky and somewhat older. He smiled a lot, but I wasn’t sure the teeth were real. They were so white in that tanned face.”

“Possibly Hispanic?” Like the guy who shot at his pickup.

The woman shrugged. “Could have been, but I’m not sure.” She opened the door wider. “Come in, and I’ll give you as much of the conversation as I remember.”

“Great! Thanks.” Ryan stepped over the threshold. From the entry hall, the living room opened up before him. The new owners hadn’t changed the dimensions of the room, but nothing else was the same—carpet, drapes, furniture, wall hangings, all different.

“I’m Anna Parkins.” His hostess led the way into the living area.

Ryan took a hesitant step into the room. On the far side lay the kitchen. The new owners had opened up part of a wall and installed a peninsula that gave the whole area a more spacious feel and offered a clear view from room to room. Not the case that night a decade ago.

Then, he’d entered the house through the garage into the kitchen. Right off, he’d caught the faint reek of gunpowder. Not believing his nose, he’d proceeded toward the living room, calling, “Mom, I’m home.” No answer but a burst of canned laughter from a television sitcom turned up unnaturally loud. He’d rounded the corner and caught sight of a pair of dark heads sticking above the back of the couch.

“Hey, you two, I’m home. Where’s the welcome wagon?”

No reaction.

He stepped farther into the room. Tripping over his own feet,

he staggered to a halt. Now he identified another smell that had been nagging for his attention.

Blood.

Like the red that coated the fronts of his mother's and sister's shirts and splashed the off-white fabric of the couch.

"Young man, are you all right?"

Ryan jerked at the woman's voice. "Um, yes." He cleared his throat. "I'll be fine." He shook his head and focused on the here and now.

The woman perched on the edge of an overstuffed couch situated in a different position than the arrangement he remembered.

Ryan took a seat in an armchair. "This supposed private eye have a name?"

"Sam Diamond. I asked him if he was as good a P.I. as Sam Spade, and he thought that was pretty funny." She laughed, and then stopped and pursed her lips. "Considering that you say he wasn't a real private detective, I'll bet he chose the name Sam Diamond as a play on the book character."

"Unfortunately, you're likely right. I don't imagine he left a business card, fake as it might be."

"He didn't, and that should have tipped me off." The woman sighed. "I feel like an idiot. The real deal would have left one so I could contact him if I thought of anything."

"Don't beat yourself up, Mrs. Parkins. You didn't do anything wrong. So what did this faker ask you?"

The woman crossed her arms and sat back. "He asked some of the same things as that police detective. Had anyone been around snooping into the old murder case? When we remodeled, did we find anything suspicious—keys, hidden safes, lockboxes, that sort of thing? Have there been any rumors going around the neighborhood about the suspicious deaths?"

"What were your answers?"

"No to everything. Nobody snooping, except the police and him, and we'd never heard a peep from our neighbors about the

murders. It was like they went out of their way *not* to talk about it." The woman grimaced and shook her head. "As the home owners, we didn't need to be reminded about it everywhere we turned, anyway."

"I can understand that." Ryan leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "When did you buy this place from the people I sold it to—Eckert, I believe was their name?"

"Oh, about nine years ago. They only stayed here for a few months. I think they got creeped out by... Well, anyway, we got the place and changed things to suit us."

"And, as you told Detective Connell and this fake P.I., you never ran across anything unusual?"

"Not unless you call a hornet's nest in the eaves unusual." She slapped her knee and giggled. "That was quite a surprise on old Herb. I've never seen him run so fast in all his life."

"What about my dad's study? Did you do anything different with that room?"

"Sure did. It's a guest bedroom now. Do you want to see?"

"No, that won't be necessary." Ryan stood, heart thudding in his throat. Walking into that room might just about undo him. "I've taken up enough of your time."

The woman narrowed her eyes in his direction. "Son, I think it would do you good to take a look. Come on."

On stone feet Ryan followed his hostess up a hallway. Not the hallway of his memory—all different in color and style and the wood floor, bare of carpet, beneath his feet. Still, his pulse ran riot, and he tasted bile in the back of his throat. Maybe he should turn around.

Mrs. Parkins threw open the door. "Go in."

Stomach quivering, Ryan stepped over the threshold and halted, gaping.

His hostess chuckled. "Herb let me do my worst in here. Over the top, isn't it?"

"That's one way to put it." Hard to say if this sudden prick-



ling behind his eyes was relief that this room contained no vestige of old tragedy or heartfelt thanksgiving that he would never have to sleep here.

The place looked like the Attack of the Man-Eating Sunflowers. A gargantuan specimen was painted on the ceiling, and every available surface sported some size or shape of sunflower. The dimensions of the room were different than he remembered, too, changed in order to accommodate the attached bathroom to his right. From what he could see, sunflowers lurked in there, as well.

He turned toward Mrs. Parkins. "What did you do with my father's built-in bookshelves? They were primo mahogany. He always went on about it."

"Eldon Stahl from up the street bought the shelving. Insisted on removing the wood himself. Paid a good price, too. Never knew what he did with the boards. I assume he made shelves in his own study. I have to say, though," she said as she stepped into the room, "he was mighty funny about the project. I'd come in here and catch him tapping on the walls."

Ryan's teeth ground together. Stahl again. If his dad's bosom golfing buddy had anything to do with— He aborted his thought with a shake of the head. There were too many questions unanswered to go leaping to conclusions. A guy didn't hire a killer in order to get some bookshelves.

But what kinds of deadly secrets might be shared around the ninth hole, or more like in the clubhouse after throwing down a few? He'd gobble a whole pan of Martha Stahl's coffee cake to find out.

## FIFTEEN

Ryan walked up the sidewalk toward the Stahl's brick colonial home, shaking his head over a couple of interviews he'd done while waiting for someone to be home here at the lawyer's house. People from the neighborhood had been very talkative to the bereaved son. Who would have guessed that his mom had been known as the sharpest bridge player in the neighborhood, or that his dad saved old coins and gave them to a friend next door who collected them? Calculation in his mother and thoughtfulness in his father were unexpected traits.

He rang the Stahls' doorbell, and a dog yapped while footsteps sounded on top of the barking. The door swung open, and a fluffy white animal lunged at his tennis shoes. Ryan bent and picked up the Pekingese, which anointed his chin with its tongue.

"You're right at home already." Martha Stahl's laugh warbled. "Chauncy likes you."

"Most critters do." He turned his head away from more licking and took in the stout woman's casual attire, a flowered muumuu. Her gaze dodged his and went to the dog, then to the door frame. "Have I stopped by at a bad time?"

"Only if you wanted some coffee cake. I'm fresh out today, but come on in."

Ryan set the dog down and followed her up a high-ceilinged hallway. The heels of her strapless mules clacked on

the tile floor. So far, so terrific. He was inside, and he didn't have to eat any cake. He glanced into a room they passed on the left, but it was a formal dining room and not a study. He'd give his right arm to see what Eldon Stahl had done with those bookshelves.

Mrs. Stahl led him down a couple of steps into a sunken living room covered in plush carpet from wall to wall. An enormous flat-screen TV hung above a fireplace that dominated one wall, and surround-sound speakers blended into elaborate corner pieces of the vaulted ceiling. Judging by the richness of the classical music filling the air, the system was integrated with a top-notch stereo, as well. A pair of enormous mullioned windows took up most of another wall and let in a flood of sunlight, though the air conditioner kept the room comfortably cool.

Most of the backyard, featuring a cement patio surrounded by a manicured lawn, was visible from here. The yard was enclosed by a tall privacy fence, which somewhat defeated the purpose of the great big windows. At the far end of the yard, several small enclosures sat on legs that lifted them a couple of feet off the ground. Rabbit hutches? No. He caught the flutter of gray wings. A dove cote? Some sort of birds lived in there, anyway.

He turned and his hostess twinkled at him like Mrs. Santa gone Hawaiian, only her gaze went somewhere over his shoulder. "Make yourself at home. I baked some monster cookies yesterday—the ones with everything but the kitchen sink in them—so I'll get some."

Ryan gulped. "Don't go to any trouble."

"Oh, it's no bother, dear. None at all. You know us Norwegians." She chuckled. "We can't have company without feeding them." With an airy wave, she left the room, Chauncy on her heels. The dog's toenails *click-clicked* on the hard flooring of the hallway.

Ryan wandered over to the wall to the right of the fireplace, where framed photos dominated most of the space. He recognized Mr. and Mr. Stahl in some of them, posing with younger

adults who resembled them. The Stahls' children, he assumed, but couldn't say for sure, as they were too old to have been in high school at the same time Ryan was. Other photos held an even younger generation. Grandkids, most likely.

He paused at an eight-by-ten enlargement of Eldon Stahl with a rifle cradled in his arm. A wide, toothy grin announced his glee at winning the shooting trophy in his other hand. Behind him, Ryan recognized the skeet range where the elder Davidson used to take his son from time to time. So Mr. Stahl was handy with a gun. Ryan grunted. Maybe so, but Stahl was not the man Ryan had seen running that night. That guy had been muscular, not portly, and a good bit shorter than Eldon Stahl's jumbo dimensions. Besides, the unknown runner now occupied a spot in the graveyard.

Shaking his head, Ryan moved on down the line then stopped again. This photo looked out of place. It was half the size of the others and hung in a spot that disturbed the symmetrical proportions of the rest of the grouping. He wasn't much of an interior decorator, but he could tell that much.

Ryan studied the photo. Five men crowded near a pair of golf carts, wide grins on their faces—big boys out to play. Behind them the fairway stretched lush and green, beckoning their next shots. All of their faces were familiar, though Ryan could put names only to Eldon Stahl: Rick Granger, the now-deceased husband of the neighbor who'd told him about his mom's bridge prowess; and his dad.

Ryan's pulse rate quickened. The photo must have been taken the summer of the murders. The senior Davidson was wearing the monogrammed polo shirt Ryan and Cassie had given him the previous Christmas. Too bad he was clueless as to the identity of the other two guys. Another example of how kids paid scant attention to their parents' world as people with lives and friends of their own.

His dad's face looked genuinely happy in the picture, like his life was as cloudless as the pale blue sky above the little group.

Whatever took him into agitation and depression must have happened soon after this.

"Here we are, young man," Mrs. Stahl singsonged behind him.

Ryan turned, then hurried forward and took the metal tray with a clear pitcher of yellow liquid, two glasses, and a plate of megasize cookies on it.

"Set it on the coffee table. Thank you so much." The woman's muumuu rustled as she went to an armchair and eased into it. "Be a dear and pour me a glass of that lemonade."

"Happy to." Ryan gave her a glass and took one for himself. What could she have done wrong with a container of lemonade? The powdered stuff was pretty much mix and stir these days. He took a sip, and his throat puckered. Cold all right and as tart as—

"Fresh lemons." Mrs. Stahl held up her glass. "I always squeeze them. Takes time, but the flavor is worth it, don't you think?"

Ryan put off the need to answer by taking another tiny sip. No sugar or unnatural additives, that was for sure. He set his glass down.

"Try a cookie." The woman grabbed one for herself and took a generous bite, attention fixed on the unlit fireplace.

He picked one up between thumb and forefinger. "Who are all those guys with my father?" He pointed the cookie at the mismatched photo.

"Your father?" She halted her cookie half way to her mouth. "Where?"

"The little picture at the far end."

Mrs. Stahl stepped over to the photo and studied it as if she were trying to make sense of a Picasso. "How did that one get into the collection? I took it down years ago. I— Eldon!"

Ryan stood up. "Your husband? Where is he, by the way?"

"What? Oh." She blinked at him. "The dear man's out of town on a case. He'll be back on Wednesday, and then we leave the next day for a convention in Los Angeles. I can hardly wait to dive into those shops on Rodeo Drive." She tittered.

Ryan frowned. More delays in visiting with Mr. Stahl. "When will you be back in town?"

"Next Monday...unless we decide to stay a little longer and see the sights." She returned her attention to the pictures. "I wonder why he put this old memento back up?"

"You're saying it's a recent change?" Ryan joined her by the photo.

"My, yes." The hand not holding a cookie fluttered near her throat. "Maybe after he saw you the other day, he got sentimental."

Or felt guilty and did it to punish himself. Guilt was a strange motivator. Ryan frowned.

"I know the other guys, but who are these two?" Ryan pointed to a short, slender man, almost frail-looking, who stood next to his father, and a stocky man of average height who stood with a golf club over his shoulder.

"Don't let the size of the small one fool you." His hostess chomped at her cookie. From the snap of her teeth, it had been a hard bite. "Randolph Hanes is a shark. He was senior partner at Eldon's firm until he became Hennepin County district attorney. Now he's a candidate for state attorney general in this fall's election. And the other one." The hand did its flutter again. "Warren Seiler's outstripped them all. State Supreme Court judge now. A nicer fellow you would never want to meet and fair as the day is long. A very good choice for our state."

"So my dad was out golfing with your husband's entire firm?"

"Why not?" Mrs. Stahl glanced up at him then away. "He invested money for all of them."

"I didn't know that." His gaze followed her back to her seat, but he remained by the photo. "They must have respected him."

"Yes, and liked him, too. He had this dry wit about him, you know."

Ryan shook his head. No, he didn't know, and liking his dad was a foreign concept. Maybe if the two of them had shared some of the mutual respect the senior Davidson had reserved for his

business associates things might have been different. Maybe if they'd had more time to— Save the speculation! He'd never know now, and finding out who robbed him of that opportunity was Priority One.

"I suppose now that Mr. Hanes and Mr. Seiler have moved on, your husband is senior partner."

"Oh, no. Eldon deferred that to someone else. He's semiretired. Has been for years. I'm surprised he took on this out-of-town case and then committed to go to that conference. You haven't tried your cookie." She waved her half-eaten one.

Ryan gave her a smile—if he was lucky, it didn't too much resemble a grimace—and took a bite. He chewed, then looked at it and then at her. "These are pretty good." She'd managed to put together an array of ingredients like oatmeal, M&M's and chocolate chips into a tasty treat. Maybe it was just simple stuff like cake and lemonade she had trouble with.

He sat down across from her. "The woman who lives in my old house now tells me your husband got my dad's mahogany bookshelves from his office."

Her pudgy face screwed in on itself. "Really? That can't be possible. Eldon's had the same oak décor in his office for fifteen years."

"You don't know anything about my dad's bookshelves?"

Mutely, she shook her head, at last meeting his gaze straight on.

Ryan looked away. It was either that or let her see the suspicion in his eyes. He pulled a business card from his wallet. "I've been leaving these with everyone I've talked to today. My cell phone number is written on the back. Please tell your husband that I'd like to speak with him at his soonest convenience." He held out the card to his hostess.

She snatched it with a smile tighter than a rubber band and tucked it into a pocket of her muumuu. "Well, I suppose you need to get on with your evening now."

So he was being given the boot. "Thank you for your time...and the cookies and lemonade."

"You're most welcome, young man." She led the way into the foyer. "Sorry I couldn't help you with any information."

*But you did. More than you know.* He stopped beside her at the front door. "Did you by any chance have a visit from a guy a little shorter and stockier than me, wearing glasses and a big smile in a tanned face? He might have been pretending to be Sam Diamond, a private detective in my employ."

Mrs. Stahl peered at him like he'd asked her if the moon was made of cheese. "Whyever would someone like that drop by to see me?"

"No reason." Ryan shrugged and bid her goodbye. He climbed into his pickup and headed for home, thoughts churning.

If the purchase of the bookshelves in his old house hadn't been an excuse to check out the office area, he'd guzzle a whole pitcher of Mrs. Stahl's lemonade without taking a breath. And who else needed to search that area than a man desperate for something still missing? But bookshelves and mutual business associates didn't add up to motive or proof, and without a reason for the murders, proof might be impossible to come by.

Maybe the proof and the motive were all wrapped around the item others so desperately sought. He *had* to find it before they did.



## SIXTEEN

On Thursday afternoon, Sam ran her hand across the smooth faux marble surface of the newly installed customer service counter in her front room and smiled. Finally, tangible progress. She inhaled and filled her nostrils with the scent of fresh paint. This area was almost ready to receive the public. Too bad the work space still had a long way to go. At least, passersby could look in the big picture window and see a pleasing appearance. Hopefully, that would whet their appetites to use her services when she was ready to throw open the door.

Time to get back to the task at hand. She grabbed the handle of the cart containing her paint supplies and wheeled it into the rear workroom. The space yawned like a massive cavern. The dingy walls sure resembled the sides of a cave, and they were all hers to tackle. Paying a cleaning crew had taken any money she might have used to have the painting done.

Steeling her jaw, she broke out a clean paint roller and installed it on the end of the handle. A crew was scheduled to arrive next Tuesday to lay the new floor cover, when the hazmat folks would cart away the old chemicals. That day would creep up all too soon. There was no time to waste. She would not be daunted.

A shrill ring came from the direction of Sam's office. Who could that be? Jenna and Hallie would be tied up at work, and

the next edition of the phone book hadn't come out yet for other people to have access to her business number. Maybe it was Mom or Dad. With no new harrowing events in recent experience, she could handle that. She leaned the stick of the paint roller against the cart, went into her office and picked up the phone on the fourth jingle.

"Hello. Reid Cleaners."

A low whistle met her ears. "Very professional, Sam. I almost wish I was calling about the status of my suit."

Sam laughed and relaxed with a hip on the edge of the desk. "You own a suit, Davidson?"

"I'm crushed." Ryan's laugh answered hers. "I'll have you know I'm a very classy dude."

"So how'd you get this number, Mr. Bowtie and Tuxedo?"

"Now you've stepped over the line, woman. I don't do tails, and this country boy wears a string tie to go with his high-gloss leather cowboy boots under the suit pants."

"I stand corrected, and I'd like to see you in that getup sometime."

"Don't hold your breath. I'm not sure where I put my suit after the funeral. But to answer your question, I called directory assistance. I wasn't positive you'd have a listing yet, but I should have known you'd be on top of that detail."

Sam settled in the chair behind her desk. "What's up?"

"How do you know something's going on?"

"With all the crazy stuff that's happened, I thought—"

"Maybe I just wanted to hear your voice before Saturday."

His tone was intimately serious. Heat crept up Sam's neck, and she squirmed in her chair. Getting together for a cookout might be a bad idea if Ryan thought there could be something going on between them.

"No worries, Miss Skittish," Ryan went on. "You know I'm big on keeping things casual. Happens I am calling for a purpose. But first, any more suspicious activity at your end?"

“Not so much as a bump in the night. I’m on the fast track toward Grand Opening.”

“That’s great. You should be relieved to know that I finished going through the storage garage.”

“Wow! Weren’t you nervous someone would try to stop you?”

“I brought my dog along. He wouldn’t bite a postman and couldn’t hear a Mack truck, but he’d bark if he smelled anyone sneaking around. And I do happen to know how to use the shotgun I kept within arm’s reach, but Old Jakester snoozed the whole time.”

Sam humphed. “Pitiful that a person has to go around armed to take care of their personal business. But that’s a big job done, and you did it all by yourself.”

“You got it. Me, myself and I. In my grandiose dreams I thought I could finish in one marathon night. However, it’s taken me the last three evenings and almost no shut-eye, but I know exactly what’s missing.”

Sam sat forward and put her elbows on the desk. “Ooh! Tell me.”

“The box of items from my dad’s desk. Not a trace of it. I’m not clear on exactly what was in there. I swept everything into a container and taped it up. But the fact that the whole thing is gone indicates pretty clearly that someone was after something that was in my father’s possession, but I don’t think they’ve found it yet.”

“With all the weird happenings, I suspect you’re right.” Sam rose and paced to her filing cabinet and back. “Office stuff, huh? Did your father have a computer? Is that missing, too?”

“Nope. I kept that and used it for a while after downloading everything business-related and making sure his clients got what pertained to them. Then the machine got obsolete, and I junked it for a newer model. If anybody had wanted something from that computer, they never made an effort to get it.”

“Strange.” She stopped pacing and leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb.

“This whole mess is beyond bizarre, but how do you mean that?”

“These days most folks hide confidential things on their computers.”

Ryan snorted. “That would not have been my dad’s *modus operandi*. This was ten years ago, and he was in his upper forties then. Computers were necessary evils to him. He knew how to operate one to conduct his business, but still used pen and paper whenever possible.”

“Have you called Detective Connell about your missing box?”

“Done. In fact, I had a bunch more to tell him that I found out from visiting with a few people in my old neighborhood. It’s too much to go into on the phone, but I thought you might like to know this tidbit since you helped with the project.”

“Thanks. I did want to know, and you’ve got me curious for more.”

Ryan’s chuckle warmed her ear. “See you on Saturday then.”

“I’m salivating for that steak. Medium rare.”

“Yes, ma’am. You just made my job easy. That’s the way I like mine, too.”

They hung up, laughing. Sam sobered, staring at the phone. Had Davidson meant the remark as a sign of compatibility? Uh-oh! He might claim he wanted to keep things casual, but did he mean it? And what about Larry and his family? Ryan said he was inviting them. Were they still coming, or was the evening going to be just the two of them?

She should call back and make some excuse. Her hand closed around the receiver, then she released it as if scalded. Ryan would see through her in a heartbeat and make some remark that would disarm her defenses. No, when she called to bow out of their *nondate* that kept sounding like a date, she needed a real reason, and she knew exactly the creative pair of friends to help her come up with one.

*Sorry, Ryan. She headed back to her painting project. I can’t let galloping attraction derail the work of God in your life or get me sucked into a relationship that’s not right for me. Besides, I’ve*

*got a business to get up and running. There's a ton at stake for both of us.*

Several hours later, bespeckled with dried paint, Sam leaned back in her office chair on the phone with Jenna. "It would be so much easier to keep my distance if I didn't like Ryan on so many different levels. When I'm away from him, I can think sensibly, but when I'm talking to him, I feel like I've known him since diapers, and he makes me laugh. Sometimes we say out loud exactly what the other one is thinking. It's almost spooky! And he's protective without stifling my independence. You know how much that means to me."

Jenna laughed. "I don't suppose it helps any that he's cuter than a bug's ear, like my grandma would say."

Sam snickered. "My grandmother used that saying too. I never could figure out what would be so good-looking about a bug's ear...if a person could see one. But I will admit that if a bug's ear resembled Ryan it would be pretty cute."

She and Jenna shared a chuckle.

"Seriously, though," Sam resumed, "I've got to keep my head on straight, and I need your help. Think up some personal crisis that requires me coming to your rescue so I can get out of going to his place on Saturday. A hangnail, anything!"

Jenna clicked her tongue. "Sorry, girlfriend. I'm at a culinary trade show this weekend in Atlanta."

"Can you stick me in your luggage?"

"I'd love to, but I think you'd better just deal with this issue head-on."

"You mean, tell him I cannot—will not see him anymore?"

"If you think that's what the Lord is leading you to do."

"You sound skeptical." Sam put her tired feet up on the desktop. "Do you honestly think I should encourage a relationship with a guy who's not walking with God? At least not yet, anyway."

"You think he's headed that direction?"

"I'm convinced he's on a collision course with a pivotal

decision, and I don't think the Almighty's going to take no for an answer."

Silence echoed over the line for several breaths. "I can't say I'm crazy about the physical danger that could be a part of your association with Ryan, though the recent quiet could indicate that maybe, just maybe, that road incident was unrelated to the murder case, as the police have implied."

Sam let out a loud, long raspberry.

"Okay, you don't buy that," Jenna went on. "I have my doubts, too, but let's take a peek at this hot/cold thing you've got going in your head about him. Now please understand that I don't recommend you fall for a guy who's not on the same page with you spiritually, but there's a question that begs to be asked. Have you ever considered that your contact with him is not a hindrance, but a vital part of what's drawing him toward renewing his faith?"

Sam plunked her feet to the floor and groaned. "If I accept what you're saying, then I have to keep risking *my* heart."

"The job bites, doesn't it?"

"Thanks for noticing, Jenna."

"That's what friends are for." She laughed. "But if you're supposed to hold the communication lines open with Ryan, then you can rest assured that the Lord's plan will be good for you, too. There's nothing wrong with friendship, if that's all it can ever be."

"I'm going to call Hallie and see if she'll go with me to his place."

"Now you're thinking constructively."

They ended the conversation, and Sam immediately punched in Hallie's number. Ten minutes later, she hung up the phone and slumped in her chair. She'd forgotten that Hallie was scheduled to cover a special event at Valley Fair on Saturday night, and then she was headed out bright and early the next day for a Berglund family reunion in Branson, Missouri.

"Now what am I going to do?" Sam asked out loud.

A meow answered her. She looked down to find Bastian

perched at her feet, staring up at her. A slow smile crept over her face. "You'll go with me, right? Keeping you and Old Jake away from each other should be sufficient distraction for both Ryan and I. If you can't handle a deaf, arthritic dog, I'll demand you turn in your feline license." She scratched the cat between its ears. "And if Larry and his family happen to make it to the party, so much the better."

She rose and headed for her apartment, Bastian at her heels. Sound decisions ought to make a person feel at peace. Then how come her insides were jumping around like popcorn? If only she could tell whether the unsettled feeling was dread or anticipation.

The next afternoon, loud rapping at the front door carried to Sam's ears over the contemporary Christian music playing on the radio. "What now?" She balanced her trimming brush on the edge of a paint can and wiped her hands on a rag. Stepping into the front room, she spotted Detective Connell peering in at her, a sack in his hands. She hurried forward and opened the door.

The detective stepped inside with a nod in her direction. "I'm returning the things that came from the box where you found the film. Nothing unusual came up with any of it." He handed her the sack. "Usually we call people to come get the items, but I was driving past."

"Thanks, that was good of you. As you can see," she gestured to her paint-spattered clothing, "I'm a little busy. Any results on the vase and the blood?"

Connell scratched behind an ear. "That's another reason I came by. We're at an impasse."

"And that means?" Sam clutched the sack to her chest.

"Among some inconclusive smudges, no clear fingerprint, but yours was found."

"Fingerprint? Singular?"

A teensy smile turned the edges of Connell's lips upward. "Your intelligence makes it difficult to dismiss your claim of a break-in, but if I may speak frankly, your history may make you more susceptible to exaggerated fears in that regard."

Sam took a step backward. "What do you know about my past?"

"The information isn't that hard to come by for a police officer. A phone call to the department in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, answered a lot of questions."

"All right. So you know about the attack. That still doesn't answer why only one fingerprint was found on all those objects."

"The only clear print was on the vase." Sam opened her mouth, but the detective held up a hand. "The smudges could also belong to you and no one else."

Sam lifted her chin. "Follow me." She led him into her office and flung open the closet door. In terse sentences, she explained about her discovery of the vent. "Even if, as you imply, I accidentally left the workroom window open so my cat could get out, and I hallucinated the broken vase from a hysterical preoccupation with intruders, there is no way Bastian climbed seven feet up a brick wall to get into the ductwork and end up in my closet. And how do you explain the blood on his chin?" She plunked the sack of keys and other items onto her desk and faced the detective, arms crossed.

Connell returned her stare with a bland face. "I don't know how your cat reached the vent, but the blood was not human."

"Not?"

"It came from a bird."

Sam gaped.

"A pigeon, to be exact," the detective continued. "Cats do catch birds, don't they?"

She snapped her jaw closed. "Not cats without claws."

Connell shrugged. "Perhaps he came across a fresh carcass. Birds get run over from time to time." He headed for the outside door.



Sam glared after him, stomach churning, nails digging into her palms. Was the detective's insinuation true? Had the stress of moving away from home, starting a new business, and discovering grizzly murder photos shoved her over the deep end into paranoid delusions?

## SEVENTEEN

Ryan flipped the steaks in the marinade pan that sat on the counter of the galley in his houseboat. Then he opened the refrigerator door and checked to see that he hadn't imagined putting the seven-layer salad together or buying the Boston cream pie from the grocery deli. Everything was there...just like the last time he looked.

Man, he was wired tighter than an electric guitar. Why did he want so badly to impress this woman? Because he liked her way too much, that's why. He smacked the fridge door shut.

*Get a grip, Davidson.* Just because Samantha Reid was exactly the kind of girl his mother would have loved to see him bring home didn't mean he had to fall for her. In fact, he'd better not, for her sake as much as his. Then why had he invited her here tonight? Gratitude? He snorted aloud. At least he could pretend that was the reason—to everyone, including himself.

Ryan climbed the stairs onto the deck and took a look at the coals in the grill. They were just beginning to turn white around the edges. Not yet time to tuck the foil-wrapped potatoes into them. Gas grilling was okay if a guy was in a hurry, but charcoal gave a much better flavor.

He glanced at his watch. Sam could be here any minute. He stepped off the boat and strode up the dock, boards echoing a hollow tattoo beneath his feet. Old Jake barked from the water's

edge, and a flock of gulls squawked and flapped into the air. Ryan reached the bank, laughing. The dog trotted over to him, tail wagging, and teeth bared in a doggy grin.

Ryan scratched the old boy behind the ears. "We picked a good night for a cookout, didn't we?" The frequent Minnesota wind had given it a rest today, and the temperature hovered in the low eighties under a sunlit sky dotted with wispy white clouds. Even the humidity had dropped off, leaving the air fresh, but not close. He inhaled and savored the tang of pine.

The hum of a motor brought his head up. The dog stiffened and faced the road. "Here she comes, boy. Ready or not, eh?"

Sam's Malibu wheeled into the driveway then stopped in a parking slot next to the office. She stepped out dressed in a T-shirt, jean shorts and sandals, her glossy hair up in its usual ponytail. Glancing his way, she smiled and waved. Ryan's pulse did a little dance. She opened the back door of her car and leaned inside. He strode toward her, battling to keep a Lake Superior-size grin down to no more than Lake Minnetonka-sized, but not having much success.

What was the matter with him? Sam was cute and smart and funny, but so were lots of other girls he'd dated. Yeah, but none of those others saw into him like he was a window without shades. And none walked hand in glove with the Almighty, either. His step slowed. Maybe if he kept reminding himself of that daunting fact it wouldn't be sheer torture to steer his boats south in the fall. Of course, if he didn't solve the mystery of his family's deaths, he wouldn't be going anywhere. Not even on his annual solo trek into the Boundary Waters wilderness area this fall. Usually he— *Oh, no! She didn't!*

Sam turned, face flushed, cradling her cat in her arms.

*Haroo!* Behind him, Old Jake's howl sounded much like the bay of a bloodhound and prickled the hairs on the back of Ryan's neck. The cat yowled and squirmed. Sam struggled to hang on to her pet but lost the battle. Bastian hit the ground on all fours

and streaked toward Ryan. Was the animal so crazy for him that the dog didn't deter it? Jake lunged ahead, and Ryan grabbed for his collar and missed. The animals met on the lawn between Ryan and Sam. They both rushed toward the scene of what could soon become carnage. Then Ryan put on the brakes, and so did Sam. They gaped at the animals, then at each other and burst into laughter.

"What's up with this?" Sam planted her hands on her hips.

"Goofiest thing I've ever seen." Ryan scratched his head.

The cat and the dog stood nose to nose, sniffing at one another. Jake's tail wagged fit to pop right off its rump, and Bastian purred like a motorboat. The cat stopped sniffing and twined around Jake's front legs, rubbing and arching its back. The dog swiped his new friend's head with its tongue.

"They like each other." Ryan laughed.

"Instant BFFs." Sam giggled.

"Maybe we should get them matching collar tags—Best Friends Forever."

"How about BFFF—Best Furry Friends Forever?"

Their gazes met then darted away. The pets ambled off, side by side, toward the porch of the building.

"Hey, you two." Larry's voice came from behind Sam. "We're here with our appetites." Vehicle doors slammed.

Ryan shook himself and waved at the threesome walking toward them. He'd been so out of it he hadn't heard them drive up. The trio stopped a few feet away. Larry needed to stow that smirk in a hurry. Ryan shot him a scowl. Lar just grinned bigger.

Ryan turned toward Sam. "You've met Larry, but the line-backer beside him is his son, Derek, and the gorgeous female riding herd on both of them is Larry's wife, Nancy."

Nancy gave a mellow laugh and clasped one of Sam's hands between both of hers. "Larry's told me about you. I'm tickled pink to meet any woman who makes Ryan Davidson blush at the mention of her name."

Sam stared toward him, eyes wide, while heat crept up Ryan's cheeks. "One thing you'll learn about Larry's family—they all have an outrageous sense of humor."

She quavered a smile and returned her attention to Nancy. "I can't tell you how relieved—er, glad I am that you were able to join us."

"Let's go see what we can accomplish in the galley." Nancy hustled toward the boat, Sam in her wake.

Ryan stared after them. Relieved?

Sam settled back in the chaise lounge chair on the afterdeck of Ryan's houseboat and patted her full stomach. That was some dinner her host put on. Ryan and her dad could get some heavy rivalry going in the grilling department.

Her misgivings about this evening had been all wrong. Great food and great company—who could ask for more?

Charming woman, that Nancy, and quite pretty with a rich crown of close-cut chestnut hair, barely touched with silver, and a sprinkle of light freckles across her pixie face. Larry looked like a lumberjack compared to her, but he was a card and a half.

Sam's tummy muscles ached from all the laughter—and the inch-thick steaks, too. Derek took after his father in appearance and seemed a good-natured kid, soft-spoken and witty in an understated way. But Chef Ryan had been downright subdued. Even while they sat around a table inside a screened-in portion of the foredeck, gobbling Ryan's delicious food and joking, he'd laughed at the right times but said little. After the meal, she'd been shooed away from the galley by Nancy and Derek, who took over the cleanup.

Now, comfortably enthroned in the chair, Sam watched Ryan stow the last of the grilling gear in a small chest. He glanced at her, and she tried a smile on him. His mouth curved upward then he turned and disappeared down the hatch that led into the living quarters.

This was an amazing boat. Larry, who'd conducted the tour while Ryan cooked, said the *River King* was a top-of-the-line custom-designed floating house. The main deck circled the central living quarters, which were accessed from the foredeck and the afterdeck via a short set of stairs that left the top half of each room with a view of the outside through large windows. The interior contained a complete kitchen—er, galley, a spacious living/dining room, a pair of bedrooms and a bathroom a lot of nice hotels would envy. Above the living quarters was a canopied top deck with an enclosed wheelhouse for the driver overlooking the foredeck.

“So what do you think of the *River King*?” Nancy settled on a chaise next to Sam.

“You read my mind. I was just thinking about how impressive it is. I’m surprised at the amount of space in such a compact package. It’s almost as roomy as my apartment. I can see why people would enjoy renting one these things for a weekend or a week.”

“But you wouldn’t want to live in one?”

Sam blinked at the petite woman. “I’d never thought about it.”

“Ah. Well, this one is a cut above the rentals anyway. The helm on one of those is on the main level cutting back some of the living space.” She gazed out over the water. “We’ll cast off soon and cruise down toward lock and dam number three, then turn around and come back. By that time the full moon should be out. It’ll be a gorgeous night.”

A soft meow sounded near Sam’s feet. Bastian hopped up on the lounge chair and proceeded to march up Sam’s body and settle on her chest. Jake sidled between the lounge chairs and rested his muzzle on Sam’s arm, big eyes fixed on the cat.

Nancy chuckled. “You’re almost as popular with the critters as Ryan is.”

Sam shook her head. “I’m Bastian’s humble servant. He deigns to allow me to feed and house him and maybe pet him

once in a while. It's each other these animals are crazy for." Purring, Bastian stretched out a paw and patted Jake's nose. The dog heaved a sigh. "See what I mean?"

Ryan's laugh joined theirs. Sam looked up to find him watching them from the upper deck next to the wheelhouse.

He leaned his elbows on the railing. "You know what? I don't think it was me Bastian took to—I think he smelled Jake on my clothes."

"Have you ever heard of a cat and a dog making instant friends?"

"Sure, but it's not the usual thing."

"I'll say not. I wonder if Bastian will let me take him home."

Ryan grinned. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Time to head out. The best view will be on the foredeck." He saluted and withdrew into the wheelhouse.

"I guess we've been told." Nancy rose and stretched.

Sam set Bastian on the deck and got up. She followed the woman toward the front of the boat. Glancing back, she shook her head. The cat and the dog had taken over the lounge she'd vacated. Jake lay stretched across the cushion on his side with Bastian curled between his legs.

She went on and found Nancy standing by the front rail. A motor rumbled to a start below while Larry and Derek charged around tossing information back and forth about lines cast off. A minute later, the boat eased away from the dock and entered the current.

Sam looked down into the dark water parting before their craft. The wake whooshed away from the blunt nose of the houseboat, and a not-unpleasant briny smell wafted on the breeze. Her gaze was drawn to the wooded bluffs above the banks sliding past.

"Look." Nancy nudged her side.

Sam gazed in the direction the woman pointed. A trio of brown ducks paddled and flapped along the water's edge.

For the next hour she moved around the boat, chatting with

members of Larry's family and enjoying the sights, but a void took up an ever-larger residence in the pit of her stomach. Where was Ryan? She glanced toward the wheelhouse. Well, technically she knew where he was, but why didn't he get Larry or Derek to spell him so he could come down and join the fun?

She leaned against the rail on the port side and frowned into the gathering darkness. Why wasn't she happy they were keeping their distance? Wasn't that what she wanted? Not really. She'd be comfortable with friendship, all right, but that wasn't going to work when every time she looked into his eyes, she wished he would wrap his arms around her. Still, they were caught up together in a situation that needed to find resolution. Hadn't he said there was more to tell about his interviews with neighbors this week?

Maybe she should break down and visit the captain at his station. She could just pop in there, and if he wanted to talk he would. If not, she'd find an excuse to return to the deck.

Sam turned and—*oof!* She bounced off a solid chest.

"Sorry about that." Ryan chuckled.

Sam gazed up into his dusk-shaded face. "That's the second time you've done that to me. You move quieter than Bastian."

"I didn't mean to sneak up on you, but you looked lost in thought, and I didn't want to interrupt."

"Derek or Larry took over for you at the wheel?"

"Nope. Nancy. But she brought her enforcers with her. The guys threatened to toss me overboard if I didn't get down here and take advantage of the full moon." He gestured toward the golden orb hovering above the midnight-blue horizon. "In case you haven't noticed, my crew members are up to their meddling necks in a matchmaking conspiracy."

Sam laughed. "They're not too subtle, no. My friends were playing the same game until they got nervous about somebody making targets of us. Or you, anyway, and me getting too close to the action."



“Yeah, I’m probably an idiot for asking you out here. It was an impulse, but I didn’t want to take it back.”

She prodded him in the ribs with her fingers. “It was my choice to accept the invitation.” No reason to tell him she’d wanted out, or why, when her biggest misgivings had little to do with physical danger.

The boat began a sharp turn, and Sam staggered. Ryan caught her and held her steady. His warm arm around her felt even better than she’d feared. With her nose in his shoulder, his leathery, slightly spicy, cologne pleased her nostrils.

“Knock it off, you jokers!” Ryan hollered toward the upper deck. “Sam and I don’t need all this help.”

Chuckles answered from somewhere in the dimness above, but the angle and speed of the turn eased off. Ryan released Sam, and she stepped away from him, struggling to calm her pulse. She was in deep trouble and loving every second of it.

“Let’s go forward.” Ryan offered his arm.

“Hey, you two.” Larry’s voice carried to them. “Don’t worry about the animals. They’re fine in the wheelhouse with Nancy.”

“Busybodies,” Ryan muttered under his breath.

With a giggle, Sam twined her hand around his elbow and walked beside him to the bow. The running lights on the ends of the rail made halos on the water, and an owl hooted nearby.

“This is fun and relaxing. I’m glad I took the chance and came, but I suppose we can’t avoid unpleasant topics forever. I had a visit from Detective Connell.” She faced Ryan, who gazed into her eyes, brows drawn together. She told him about the inconclusive fingerprints and the detective’s noncommittal reaction to the mystery of how her cat ended up in the closet.

Ryan frowned. “I don’t get this guy. At first, I thought he was pretty on top of things, but now he seems determined to ignore every anomaly.”

“I know what you mean, but there are a couple of factors that contributed to his nonchalance. First off, he checked my back-

ground and found out why I have a phobia about intruders. Secondly, he got the lab results from the blood on Bastian's chin. It was pigeon."

"Pigeons! Of course! That's what they were." Ryan paced across the foredeck.

"What are you talking about? You look like you're about to jump out of your skin."

He closed the distance between them, shoulders rigid. "My dad mentioned pigeons in that phone conversation the night he was killed. I had no idea what he meant. Then I saw something when I visited on Monday with Martha Stahl—"

"The woman from church?"

"That's her. They have cages full of birds in their backyard. I was too far away to see what kind they were, but they were big and gray."

"Like pigeons. What in the world would pigeons have to do with your family's deaths?"

"I haven't a clue. Not yet. But I do remember my father wise-cracking sometimes about this group of guys around the city who were into training and flying carrier pigeons." He gripped the rail of the boat. "I have to find out who was in that club. Eldon Stahl knows. I think he knows a lot. He and Martha were in the Bahamas when my family was killed, but that doesn't mean he couldn't have hired it done."

"Not Eldon and Martha!" He could have slapped her and not surprised her more. "Sure, they're a little different, but why—"

"I know. I know." Ryan lifted his hands. "Until I have a motive, I'm just shooting my mouth off. This is good progress, though." He gusted a long breath. "So what about you then? Isn't it about time you told me—"

"Ouch!" Sam smacked at her forearm. "My mosquito repellent must be wearing off."

"Come on. We can sit at the table inside the screen room and frustrate those bloodsucking Minnesota state birds."

Sam laughed and let him usher her to the back of the boat and into the screened-in area. A small light from inside the living quarters shed a faint glow around the area. "Maybe Larry's family wants to join us." She took a seat.

"Nah. They're probably hanging out in the wheelhouse. I doubt we'll catch a glimpse of them, what with their nefarious objectives."

Grinning, Sam shook her head.

Ryan's gaze turned sober. "I'm going to be honest here. If it weren't for my absolute commitment to see justice done for my family, you'd be the first woman in the last decade to tempt me to get acquainted beyond a few laughs and then *sayonara*."

Sam's throat thickened. "To tell you the truth, you've thrown me off balance, too. I almost chickened out of tonight. I have to confess I brought Bastian because I thought trying to keep the animals apart would distract us from each other. A relationship isn't in my calculations while I'm so caught up trying to start my business and—" She stopped and swallowed.

"And?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "Honesty, right?"

Ryan nodded.

"Any man I look at seriously needs to share my faith."

"Oh."

He was taking this pretty coolly. Why? "All you have to say is *oh*?"

Ryan ran a fingertip across a seam on the clear plastic tabletop. "I'd already figured that out. My mom preached the same message to me before I went off to college. 'Don't get hooked up with someone who doesn't believe like you, or you're asking for heartache.' She meant well, but she didn't realize I was already having my doubts."

"At least you're not offended that I spoke my mind."

He sat back so his face was hidden in the darkness. "Do you trust me enough to let me in on whatever happened to you and how your faith survived?"

## EIGHTEEN

Sam's heart rate quickened. He was asking for a story she hadn't told anyone in years. Even with her parents, she rarely revisited the specifics. Yet, she'd known this moment would come with Ryan. Could she get it out in a way that might make an eternal difference to this man?

She drew in a quavery breath. "I was seventeen years old, barely into my senior year in high school. My mom and I have always been close. We like to do hobbies together. One of them used to be candle making."

"Used to be?"

Sam held up a hand. "Don't interrupt. This is going to be tough enough."

"I'm all ears and no mouth. Go ahead."

She wiped sweat from her forehead that had little to do with the warm summer night. "One fall evening my mom and I were home by ourselves melting wax in the kitchen when the back door crashed open. I whirled toward the sound, and my mom whirled, too, with the pot of hot wax in her hand. The whole thing splashed across my back. I remember searing pain and screaming fit to burst my throat.

"This big, grungy guy with whacked-out eyes rushed toward us. He had a knife in one hand and a stick in the other. That stick whipping toward my head is the last thing I knew until I woke up with the paramedics loading me into the ambulance."

A deep groan answered her from across the table. Sam closed her eyes and sat back in her chair, hands squeezed together in her lap.

“The intruder was high on meth and needed money for his next fix. He demanded my mom give him her purse, and when she tried to help me instead, he cut her on the arm and the face. She healed quickly, but she still bears the scars...on the inside, as well as the outside. Finally, he got the purse, then grabbed a DVD player and disappeared into the night.

“The entire horrible thing took only minutes, but I spent ten months going from one skin-graft surgery to the next, and battling infection in between. Somewhere in there, we moved out of the house I grew up in. We couldn’t stand to live there anymore. And I didn’t get to graduate with my class. It took me until the winter of the following year to earn enough credits for my diploma.”

Sam opened her eyes and found Ryan leaning toward her, gaze fixed on her face.

“I can only imagine the courage it took for you to recover.”

“Courage? Not hardly.” A stiff laugh escaped her lips. “If it had been up to me, I would’ve given up and died from one of those infections. Pure grace carried me. I lived in the Psalms during most of that period. There was something in that book of the Bible for every mood and trial I experienced. Want to know the verse that got me through the darkest times?”

Ryan’s nod was barely perceptible.

“Psalm 27:13. ‘I am still confident of this; I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.’” Sam moved toward him until their faces were mere inches apart. “I have seen that goodness. I see it every day, and it trumps the meanness of people every time.”

Ryan eased away from her into the dim perimeter around the table. “Did they catch the guy?”

She shook her head and settled back into her chair. “They tried. One police lieutenant was particularly diligent about the case. He had a daughter around my age. My mom and I would

get called in now and then to ID a potential suspect. Or mostly my mom did. I wasn't up and around much during that time."

She shrugged. "Maybe seeing the man brought to justice might have given me some sort of closure, but I figure it this way. It's almost impossible for anyone so enslaved by a chemical to get free without divine help. And unless he takes that help, he lives in his own hell that will eventually kill him...and then hell really begins. What do I need with retribution?"

Ryan's chair legs scraped against the planks as he stood. "You think I should give up my hunt for a killer?"

Sam placed her elbows on the chair arms and studied her fingers steeped in front of her. Did she? "No. Not really. I admire your commitment."

"I hear the *but* in your voice."

"Doing it on your own isn't going to give you the satisfaction you expect."

"So I should leave it to the police?"

"You should leave it to God." She gazed up into Ryan's drawn face. "Let Him guide your steps. Have you ever stopped to realize that He knows who arranged what happened to your family?"

With something like a growl, Ryan turned his back to her. "Then why hasn't He done anything about it?"

Sam barely heard the words. Good question. An indifferent God, that's what Ryan must see. *Lord, please give me wisdom here.* "Certain divine laws are in place in this universe. They work every time, but not always in our *timing*. Of course, in this case, you'll notice the shooter was dead minutes after the crime, probably victim to whoever hired him. Evil devours evil—one of those divine laws. At the moment, it appears like whoever ordered the deed has gotten away with murder. That's a lie. He never will."

She rose and touched Ryan's shoulder and found the muscles tense and hard beneath her fingertips. "I have the strongest impression that the answers you want are on the way, but if your heart isn't right when they come, you will lose way more than you gain."

He whirled away from her touch and plopped into his chair, staring into the darkness. "What more could I lose?"

"Your future. The life your family would have wanted you to have."

A muscle flexed in his jaw. "What about *their* lives? Oh, sure, if my mom and sis were right about what they believed, they're okay. Better than okay. But my dad—" He exhaled with the sound of a teakettle under pressure.

"So that's what's got you hung up." Sam slipped into a chair beside him and held out her hand. He gripped it. "You're not sure where your father is, and you can't stand the thought of accepting the mercy of God that he may have missed."

"I loved him."

The tortured words raked through Sam's insides. "I know." Her statement came out as hoarse as his.

Ryan bowed his head, and a drop of wetness *plinked* to the tabletop.

"That woman did it again," Ryan grumbled under his breath, and threw himself over onto his other side in bed. She dragged his guts out for the world to see—well, just her and him, but sitting there letting his emotions leak out felt like running naked through the streets.

He sat up and propped his elbows on his knees, pressing the sides of his head with his palms. Since he was just a kid, had he told his dad that he loved him? How could he, when he hadn't thought about his father in those terms beyond early grade school? Had his dad ever said those words to him? Not that he remembered. How pitiful was that for both of them?

Ryan looked at the bedside clock. One in the morning and he hadn't slept a wink. He crawled out of bed. Without turning on a light, he padded in his bare feet and pajama bottoms to the kitchen. He filled a glass with cold water from the fridge door, then settled onto a stool at the peninsula counter. Moonlight

spread shadows around the living/dining room. A dark lump on the carpet moved and whuffled in its sleep.

Was Old Jake dreaming of Bastian? It was a good thing the cat was completely sacked out when Sam brought his carrier up to the wheelhouse and put him in it. He'd woken up then and yowled all the way to the car with Jake barking up a storm from the boat where Ryan held him by his collar. The old dog had given him the most disgusted look when Sam drove off, and then he spent the rest of the evening moping around—much like his master.

What was that last thing Sam whispered in his ear before she walked off into the night? *God's not like your dad. You don't have to win His approval to have His love.*

Ryan let a sip of cool water glide down his throat. Did that mean God loved him right now in all his anger and confusion? Had He loved him when he doubted anything to do with faith in his high school and college years?

Did God love him the night his family died?

"That's a tough one to get my head around, Lord." Ryan shook his head. Now he was talking out loud to Someone he didn't know if he believed in. No, that was wasn't quite right. He might as well admit he believed God existed. Ryan just wasn't sure He could be trusted.

From up the hall, a tune started playing. Leaving his glass, Ryan went back to his bedroom, picked up his cell phone from the nightstand, and checked the caller ID window. An international call? Who did he know that was out of the country? Ryan flipped open the phone and settled onto the edge of his bed.

"Davidson here."

"If you had the sense of a gnat, you'd be long gone from Minnesota."

Ryan's heart thumped. "Who is this?"

"You know."

"Eldon Stahl? I thought you were at a convention in Los Angeles."



“Apparently, I’m smarter than an insect. You have no idea who you’re threatening.”

“And you do.” Ryan made it a statement rather than a question.

“I have...suspicions. Nothing I can go to the authorities with even if I wanted to.”

Ryan lunged to his feet, stranglehold on the phone. “You were in on it!”

“Never!” The word blared in his ear. “But I’ve got to protect...” The man didn’t finish his sentence.

“Protect what? Who?”

No answer.

“Tell me who killed my family.”

Deep sigh. “Just get out of there. Go into hiding and stay gone. I won’t call again.”

“Don’t hang up! Who’s in the carrier pigeon club?”

*Click.*

“Hello? Hello? Argh!” Ryan punched his mattress. Then he froze, eyes narrowed, nostrils flared.

So he hadn’t imagined the danger he was in, like the police hinted. Someone was out there, stalking, biding his time for the kill.

“Okay, God. Sam told me to let You guide my steps. I’m open to ideas right now on how I can keep from being killed and nab a killer at the same time.”

Slowly, a picture unfolded in Ryan’s mind of himself standing on the bank of a Boundary Waters river, fly-fishing. He cast the bait out and reeled it in, something struck, and his rod bent nearly double. He’d hooked a monster!

Ryan shook himself. What a foolish fantasy when he was trying to figure out how to catch a— Wait a minute!

He rose, went to his closet and dug out his trekking backpack. When a guy needed to hook a monster, he should choose his spot to best advantage and use the perfect bait. Ryan knew just the place—the wilderness; and the irresistible morsel—himself.

## NINETEEN

Roll up. Roll down. Up. Down. Dip the roller in the paint another time. These walls were endless! At least, she'd had no distractions this afternoon after church, and the clock was already edging up on 4:00 p.m.

Bastian was still pouting from being taken away from Jake and hadn't tried to jump on her cart, play with the brushes, or pounce on the roller while she was attempting to get more paint on the wall than on herself or her cat. Those two animals made quite the unique pair. Sam smiled and hummed along with the worship CD on the player.

How was Jake doing today? For that matter, how was Ryan? When she left last night, he'd looked pretty shell-shocked. Not her doing—well, maybe a little, but mostly God's in a good way. Evidently, Ryan wasn't quite ready to come back to church, but hopefully he would deal with his baggage and get on a healthy track with his life, whether that included her or not.

A sudden pinch in Sam's chest halted her roller. Yeah, right. Who was she kidding that she didn't care if that man chucked her out of his life?

Frowning, she plied her roller with fresh vigor. She should call him in a while and see how his day had been. Besides, it was only polite to thank him for the lovely evening on his houseboat. Uh-huh, and she was the Queen of Polite. A rueful smile stretched

Sam's lips. Funny how people made up excuses to do whatever they wanted to do. Oh, well, she'd call him anyway.

The phone in her office rang. Maybe that was Ryan now. She put down her roller and hurried to answer. Wouldn't it be nice if he missed her enough to be the one to call first?

She picked up the receiver on the third ring. "Hello."

"Hi, sweetie. You sound a bit breathless. What are you up to today?"

"Hello, Mom."

Her mother laughed. "That was enthusiastic. Did I call at a bad time?"

"Not at all." She leaned her back against the filing cabinet and crossed one ankle over the other. "I'm painting. I should finish by tomorrow, just in time for the flooring and the hazmat people to trip over each other on Tuesday and my equipment to arrive on Thursday."

"Oh, my! You're accomplishing a lot in a hurry. Are you sure you're not overdoing it?"

"I feel great, Mom."

"And no more strange happenings around there?"

"Other than a break-in, a missing cat and a freeway accident?"

Her mother gasped then sighed. "You! That wasn't funny."

No, it really wasn't. Her folks knew about the photos and the police search of her premises, but she ought to confess that she hadn't been kidding by her last remark. Only she'd rather be boiled in oil than cause her mother a moment's unnecessary anxiety. No unexplainable or dangerous things had happened in a while. Chances were any danger had blown right past her. She wasn't that sure about Ryan, though, with all the poking around he kept doing. Another reason to call him soon.

"Are you still there, honey?"

"Huh?" Sam shook herself and wandered over to her office chair. "Many apologies, favorite Mom of mine." She settled into the seat. "I'm a tad distracted, as you can tell. So what have you

and Dad been up to?" She listened with half an ear to a description of the craft fair her parents attended yesterday.

She chatted with her mother a few minutes more, ended the call, and then punched in Ryan's business number. He'd given her his cell number, but she'd see if he was in the office first.

"Davidson Houseboats. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Larry. Is Ryan handy?"

"Nope. Sorry. He's gone for a week. Didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Sam tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Hmmm. I assumed you and he had a deep discussion last night, and that was why he suddenly hared off to the Boundary Waters about six weeks earlier than usual and with no notice."

Her jaw dropped, but she quickly snapped it shut. "You mean up north on the border between Canada and the U.S.? Why would he go there?"

"Every fall, he takes off canoeing alone in the wilderness. Says it clears his head after a summer of nonstop people-pleasing."

"He goes alone? What if he has trouble or someone needs to contact him?"

"Ryan knows that area better than a lot of the park rangers, but he did take Jake with him this year." The sound of papers rustling came over the line. "Yep, here it is. Around noon today he faxed me his canoe route. He had to wait and see which entry portal to the Superior National Forest had an open slot for a single. They're pretty strict about how many people they let into the park at a time. Groups have to reserve months in advance to have a hope of getting in."

"Does he usually leave you his route?" Sam reached out and repositioned the vase Ryan had given her. The calla lilies were long gone, but she'd replenished it with a summery bouquet of daisies.

"You betcha. That way, if he doesn't come out of there as scheduled, we can send in the cavalry." Larry chuckled. "But don't worry. Ryan knows how to handle himself. If it'll make you feel better, I can give you the route. Got pen and paper?"

“No, uh, that won’t be necessary. The directions wouldn’t mean anything to me anyway.”

“All right, but I figured maybe he had you in mind when he left this odd instruction.”

“Odd?” She straightened.

“Yeah, when he called early this morning to let me know he was leaving, he told me whenever he got his route settled to go ahead and share it with anyone who asks.”

“What *is* that man up to?”

“Beats me.”

“Oh, sorry. I was talking out loud to myself.”

Larry laughed again. “Just don’t answer yourself, and you’re okay.”

Sam ended the call with thanks to Larry and his family for the nice time last night. She went back to her office and cradled the receiver, brow furrowed. No wonder Ryan hadn’t been in church this morning. He’d fled the area. No, maybe she was looking at his actions all wrong. Hadn’t Jesus been driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for a time of fasting and prayer? Maybe he was doing some heavy soul-searching.

But why hadn’t he at least phoned her and let her know he was leaving? That hurt a little. No, it hurt a lot, and it shouldn’t. He didn’t owe her anything. If he was out there getting right with God, she shouldn’t complain. Still, an explanation would have been nice.

*Oh, quit whining, girl, and get back to work.*

A stupid, annoying knot hung around in the pit of Sam’s belly as she returned to painting. Two more hours passed before she cleaned her paint gear and put it away. In the center of the large, empty work area, she stretched her arms over her head, worked a few kinks out of her back, and then did a 360-degree turn in place, admiring her handiwork. Another day should do it.

She went up to her apartment and fixed herself a tuna sandwich on whole wheat with lettuce and tomatoes. Bastian

came out of hiding long enough to snap up a fresh dish of cat food, but he wouldn't tolerate petting, not even a scratch behind his ears. Sam shrugged. His loss.

Her door buzzer sounded as she licked the last of the mayo-laced tuna from her fingers. She rinsed her fingers over the sink, swiped them dry on the hand towel, and pushed the answer button. "Who is it?"

"Apple Valley police detective, Miss."

The police again? She didn't recognize this officer's voice. "What do you want?"

"We have information for you."

"Why didn't Detective Connell stop by with it?"

"Connell's on vacation, Miss."

Oh, great! The lead detective on Ryan's family's case was off to Tahiti. Well, maybe not that far afield on a policeman's salary. "I'll come down. Be prepared to show me your badge."

"No problem."

Sam clomped down the stairs. Bastian streaked past her on the way. She let him into the main building and closed the inner vestibule door. That cat was not escaping into the alley again. Then she pushed the proper buttons on the wall keypad to disable the alarm system. A peephole would be nice in her living quarters vestibule, but she'd have to get around to ordering a new door for that. Until then, she'd keep some of the good, old-fashioned features. She undid the deadbolt, but only opened as far as the chain would allow.

A stocky man of medium-tall height flipped open a PD badge with one hand. His other hand stayed planted in the pocket of a nondescript suit similar to Detective Connell's favorite mode of attire. Brown eyes stared soberly at her from behind glasses on a tanned face.

Sighing, Sam pushed the portal shut and undid the chain. Might as well find out what was up now? She opened the door.

Her visitor burst through and stuck something bulky in her

face. Sam stared cross-eyed down a pistol barrel, millimeters from her nose, while her heart performed unnatural contortions.

“Where’s Davidson?”

The snarled question brought a little gasp from Sam, the only sound she could make through her closed throat. That hard brown gaze bored into hers, as if he could dig right into her head and extract information.

“Up.” He gestured toward the stairs with the end of his pistol and shoved her in that direction.

Scrambling and falling to her knees then scuttling upward, she made it to her apartment, but the intruder was too close on her tail to shut the door on him. He grabbed her bicep and thrust her into a chair by the table. Sam’s gaze darted around the room. Where was a weapon when she needed one? The knife she’d used to spread and cut her sandwich lay by the sink instead of on the table near her empty plate where it could have been of use. A butter knife against a gun wasn’t fair odds, anyway.

Her captor leaned toward her, close enough that she smelled jalapeño breath. “I’ll ask again. Where’s Ryan Davidson?”

“I don’t know.” The words squeaked out. They were true, too. As she’d told Larry, the directions for the route Ryan had taken into the wilderness would be meaningless to her. Therefore, she couldn’t pass on any specifics to this slime bucket. And she sure wasn’t about to offer any generalities like Boundary Waters.

A cell phone began to play a syncopated tune, and the guy pulled one from the pocket where he’d tucked his fake badge—unless, of course, he was a real cop, but dirty. Sam swallowed, fear thoughts spurting through her brain, paralyzing her.

He flipped his phone open. “What did you find?... Excellent... Was anyone there when you got into his office?... Good. Make a copy of the map and leave the original on the counter where you found it. No one needs to know you were there... Are the birds with you?... *Stupido!* Go get them. Counselor will want regular updates. Then get over here and pick us up... Yes, I’m

bringing along an insurance policy. If we have any trouble flushing Davidson out, a few yelps out of her should bring him running.”

Sam’s captor grinned down at her with very white teeth. Horror strangled her. She jumped up. He shoved her down.

“Be still.” Panther-slow, he moved behind her.

The chill of his gun barrel grazed the back of her neck. A shiver shook her from top to toe. An odd sound like a plastic bag rattling came from his direction. Then a chemical-reeking cloth clamped across her mouth and nose.

Sam’s shriek came out muffled. The pressure of his gun against her neck held her still.

“Nighty-night, *chica*.”

Blackness rolled over her and sucked her under.



## TWENTY

Sam woke up to find herself in a twilight room lying flat on her back on a mattress that must have been stuffed with beans—really big, lumpy beans. And what was that smell? She licked dry lips. Ewww. Some rotten chemical.

Memory rushed back. She'd been kidnapped!

She lunged to a sitting position. Whoa! Her head whirled, and she sank back onto the lumps. Where had they taken her?

Gingerly, she rose onto her elbow and gazed around the room. From the dim light that filtered under a door, she made out bare wooden walls, a rough wood floor and no furnishings other than the cot on which she lay, a three-legged table against one wall and a bucket in the opposite corner.

Steps sounded outside the door, and a pair of foot-size shadows cut off part of the light. The lock rattled, and the door swung open.

The dark outline of a large man stood backlit—tall, broad and muscular. Not the guy who snatched her from her apartment. This was Mr. Atlas's bigger cousin. Sam's parched mouth became the Sahara. Boat-size boots clomped across the floor toward the table.

Now Sam made out a tray in his hands. The faint scent of food wafted from it. Sam's stomach roiled. He set the tray on the table and swiveled toward her. The light from the outer room fell across his ebony face. A nose ring and piercings in his ears glittered at

her. His shaved bald head glowed nearly as bright. He didn't smile. If she could melt into the mattress she'd do it in a heartbeat.

"Stop intimidating the nice lady, Byce." The one who'd posed as a police detective came into the room, no longer attired in a suit, but jeans and a casual button-down shirt he hadn't bothered to tuck into his waistband. He stopped in front of her and held out a bottle of water. "Here. Byce forgot this." He pronounced his cohort's name in two syllables with long vowels.

Sam struggled to a sitting position and snatched the bottle, staring up into the Hispanic man's face. "People *will* miss me." Her statement would probably carry more weight if her voice didn't crack.

He shrugged. "Not until at least morning. By that time, we'll be in the air on the trail of your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend, so I don't know what good you think taking me will do."

A tight smile crossed his face. "I like to hedge my bets."

"Speakin' a bets, Enrique, mon," the pierced giant spoke in Jamaican patois, "we got a game to finish."

The one called Enrique threw Sam a little wave then followed Byce. A telltale bulge beneath his shirt suggested a handgun tucked into the waistband of his jeans. The door closed and the lock clicked.

Sam worked at the cover of the water bottle. It was still sealed, so the contents probably weren't drugged. She took several rapid gulps then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

From Enrique's words it must be the same night she'd been kidnapped. Maybe not much time had passed. How soon could she expect to be missed? Not as soon as she'd like. She just talked to her mother, and her folks probably wouldn't contact her again for a couple of days. Jenna was still out of town at her convention, which didn't get over until Wednesday, and Hallie took off this morning for a three-day trip to Branson, Missouri. True, the floor layers and hazmat were scheduled for the day after tomor-

row, but they were unlikely to call 9-1-1 if she wasn't there to let them in. No-show customers were probably a part of everyday business for them.

So if this was still the same night she'd been grabbed, how far could these lowlifes have taken her? The Minneapolis airport? No, she hadn't heard any jets passing overhead. Maybe a private airfield. Whoever was behind Ryan's family's death and all the strange things that had been happening to her and Ryan had to be a person of power and influence.

Her bones chilled, though the room was stifling. Against someone of that stature, how could she or Ryan hope to keep their lives?

*God, You surefire are our only hope.*

The small plane's drone vibrated through Sam, quivering her fear-jellied insides. Enrique flew the four-passenger Cessna she'd been shoved into at dawn after a long, sleepless night. A grim future and a lumpy mattress hadn't been the only culprits keeping her awake. Who could close their eyes for more than a second with a couple of goons outside the door who could burst in any time? They hadn't. She'd give them that much. They probably slept like babes. The jerks!

Sam gripped the edges of her seat. They hadn't tied her up. Why bother? She wasn't exactly going to jump out of the plane minus a parachute. Behind her, caged pigeons cooed, a small soothing note to her frazzle nerves. That and the constant prayers she sent heavenward. Too bad it felt like her pleas were bouncing off the plane's roof.

A pigeon cooed again. Had Bastian killed one of them? If so, that meant he'd come into contact with these people. Which one had been her burglar? Sam's skin crawled. If only she didn't have to imagine either of these creeps invading her first floor while she slept above.

"How we s'posed to find this Davidson dude wit' nothin' but a bunch a lines on a piece a paper, mon?" Bryce waved what Sam

assumed was a copy of the map Ryan faxed to Larry. "Only a word here, a word there. What's a Ka...wi...shi...wi?" He pronounced the syllables one by one, but Sam suspected he'd slaughtered the pronunciation of the Native American word. She probably would, too. "I don't see no towns, no roads, unless these blobs and squiggles—"

"They're lakes and rivers," Enrique snapped. "And quit worrying. The map's good enough that I could probably find Davidson by myself, but Counselor set us up with a tracker who knows the area."

Counselor? Her lead captor kept referring to their head honcho in a tone like the person was more than flesh and blood. Sam's brow furrowed. Where in this tangled maze of events had someone mentioned a counselor? Oh, yes. The last entry in Cassie's journal, the one she'd read just before these wise guys forced her and Ryan off the freeway.

A sharp intake of breath brought the scents of sweaty men and cheap cologne into her nostrils. It made sense. Cassie must have heard her dad mention Counselor to her mom, and assumed he meant counselor with a small *C*—someone a person sought for mental or emotional help. Hah! This particular counselor was hardly out to help anyone but himself and at any cost.

Evidently, the birds were his. Ryan was right when he said he needed to find out who was in the carrier pigeon club. Would she get the chance to share with him this new information, or were they doomed to unmarked graves?

*Oh, Ryan, why did you take off all of a sudden?* If she was going to smack anybody, it ought to be him for leaving her in the lurch.

Enrique began talking on the radio, and the plane's nose dipped. Sam gazed out her window onto wooded terrain dotted with lakes and twined with rivers sparkling beneath the morning sun. A distant clearing showed a flatbed truck the size of a thumbnail. A logging operation? They slid past that spot as the plane continued to descend. Sam gulped to open her ear canals.

Before them another clearing appeared with a fire lookout tower standing at its edge and what looked like a crude tarred airstrip flanked by several structures, one of them a log house. A few minutes later they bumped and lurched to the ground. The plane slowed nearly to a stop then turned and taxied to a tin garagelike building.

No one stepped out to greet them. Maybe the place was as deserted as the private strip they'd taken off from this morning. It was certainly even more secluded. So much for hollering for help.

Enrique opened his door, and warm, pine-laden air swept into the plane's cabin. "Wait here. I'll see if our host is ready. If I sense anything bogus about this setup, we'll take off like a shot. Keep an eye on our guest." He jerked his head toward her.

Byce peered around the back of his seat, and one corner of his ample mouth lifted. "She a-goin' no place in a hurry."

Enrique hopped out and headed for the log house across a lawn that hadn't been mowed in recent history. When he was about halfway there, the door opened and a white-haired guy in a long-sleeved shirt and jeans stepped out onto the porch. He walked up to Enrique, and they talked with some nodding and head shaking and gesturing. Then the older man ambled toward a heavy-duty pickup parked beside the house. A pair of canoes were tied across the cab.

Enrique returned to the plane and ordered them out. Byce unfolded his long legs and stepped down. Then he opened Sam's door. "Out ya go."

Sam ignored his outstretched hand and navigated to the ground by herself. Her legs still vibrated from the rocky plane ride. Or was that weak-kneed terror?

Wow! Sam lifted her nose and inhaled an enormous breath. That was the freshest air she'd ever smelled. Too bad present company destroyed her enjoyment of it.

The pickup roared up to their little group. A faded Superior National Forest logo was painted on the driver's door. The white-

haired tracker stuck his head out the window, wrinkled face folded into a scowl. "Remember. I don't see nothin'. I don't know nothin'. This monkey business could cost me my job. I take you in, help you find this guy then take you out."

Enrique flashed an oily smile. "No problem. That's all Counselor hired you to do."

The oldster snorted. "That shark don't hire fellas like me. He collects his debts. And collects and collects."

Enrique frowned. "Well, now, I'm sure you don't want him to hear you've developed a bad attitude, would you?"

The tracker's leathery skin paled. "Get in. We got about a half-hour drive to the river. The lady rides up front with me. You gents pile in the back with the supplies and that bird cage."

"Sorry." The thug leader smiled. "The *chica* will fit nicely between us."

"Have it your way."

"Thank you. I always do."

Enrique opened the passenger door and motioned to Sam. With leaden limbs, she hoisted herself in and scooted over beside the tracker. Whew! What happened to the delicious air? The old guy smelled like he hadn't bathed since his lawn was mowed last. Enrique climbed in on her other side. Great! She was sandwiched between stinky and stinker.

A few minutes into the ride along a narrow, bumpy track between stands of birch and pine trees, Sam knew one thing: the shock absorbers in this truck were useless. About anything else, including survival for her and Ryan, she hadn't a clue.

## TWENTY-ONE

Curses fouled the air as Enrique spun the canoe for the third time in less than a minute. In the bow of the craft, Sam bordered on vertigo.

“What the matter wit’ you, mon?” Byce chuckled, gliding up beside them, canoe pointed in the right direction, while the nose of Sam’s craft headed back the way they’d come—a whopping fifty yards of progress upriver from the launch point. “You don’ know how to paddle a canoe? Jamaican’s born wit’ a paddle in they hands.”

From the bow of Byce’s canoe, the old tracker cackled. “You ready to let me drive that thing now, city slicker?”

With some more cursing, Enrique threw his paddle into the bottom of the boat, and they drifted backward at a sideways angle toward the bank.

Sam grinned. Thank goodness no one else could see her expression. Mr. Cool-and-In-Charge had a big, fat Achilles’ heel—pride with a capital *P*.

A few minutes later, Sam perched in the bow of a canoe slicing through the crystal clear water under the propulsion of the old tracker’s know-how, while Enrique sulked as Byce’s passenger in the other boat. The morning sun heated Sam’s skin. She’d have a fine burn before long. Of course, everyone but her was wearing long sleeves and a hat. But then, she hadn’t been

allowed to pack for the expedition. At least the old guy had brought high-powered bug lotion. With the insect population in the deep woods, that was a necessity.

Sam hid as much of her bare arms as she could beneath her paint-stained T-shirt and watched the amazing countryside pass. No wonder Ryan loved coming out here. A cooling breeze shushed through stands of spruce and cedar trees. Scents of wildflowers mingled with tree smells, a winsome spice in the pure air. She looked down into the clear, clean water. Eating-size fish darted away from the boat's shadow.

"God's country, miss," the old tracker said.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, and he grinned, displaying a black hole where several teeth had been on the left side of his mouth. "You can call me Chuck."

Sam turned away without responding. If she called him anything, it would be goodbye and good riddance. The beauty of the day dimmed as her chest constricted. All around, birds sang their hearts out. Why wouldn't they? They lived free in untamed wilderness.

*God, I'd love wings to fly out of here right now, but if it's all the same to You, I'd just as soon they not belong to angels carrying me home quite yet.*

A piercing cry rang out above, and Sam's head jerked up.

"Bald eagle," Chuck said.

Sam searched the sky. There, directly above the canoes, a great bird soared. The eagle cried out again and dipped toward them. Lower. Lower. Its shadow passed directly over Sam. "He covers me with his feathers," she murmured the words from Psalm 91. In the next second, the bird veered away and soon became a distant black speck in the cloudless sky. But it had left behind one very precious commodity—hope.

A couple of hours later, the party stopped in a clearing that was obviously an established campsite on this route. Stones ringed a blackened spot on the ground, and a pair of logs served as seats



off the ground. Sam chose a perch as far away from the others as possible. Enrique raised a brow at her, but made no comment as he leaned a rifle with a scope against the log beside him.

Byce brought the cage of five pigeons and set them at his feet. "We gonna let fly now?"

"Not yet." Enrique shook his head. "When we reach Davidson's camping area, we'll send Counselor a message. Maybe we'll get lucky, and the target'll be in camp. Then we can finish the job on the spot. If not, we'll send word we've picked up the trail."

Byce shrugged. "You da boss."

Chuck started passing out bottles of water and sandwiches. "That bird thing is a real interesting way to communicate, seein' cell phones ain't too reliable out here."

"Counselor doesn't want us calling him on anything traceable. Not even a landline, if there was one." Enrique chomped a bite of his sandwich.

Sam nibbled hers then held it away and inspected the contents. Not a bad flavor, just different.

"Deer sausage, miss." Chuck let out a gravelly laugh.

Sam gobbled hers down and accepted another one. The fresh air had given her an appetite. Besides, she needed to keep her strength up in case she had an opportunity to run. Not that she had a candle's chance in a windstorm of finding her way out of these woods on her own, but she'd rather be eaten by a bear than murdered by dirt-sucking worms.

She licked her fingers free of crumbs and took a swig from her water bottle. "Are you the one who broke my vase?" She eyed Enrique.

"Ah, she speaks." He grinned.

"Pretty clumsy of you."

He sobered and drew up stiff. "It was Gracie here." He socked Byce in the arm.

"I didn't do it, mon. How was I to know that dumb cat follow me into the office? I'm mindin' my business, lookin' for the key,

and it brush against my legs. Send me to the moon, mon! I try to shoo it out, and it jump on the desk." The Jamaican spread his hands in a gesture of innocence.

Enrique snorted. "Riiight. Then you get so rattled you chase the critter out a window you leave open and drive off without noticing it's in the back of the truck with the birds. *Stupido!*"

Byce muttered something nasty under his breath and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

Sam studied the cage. "So what did Bastian do? Transform himself thin as a cookie and slip between the bars?"

Byce bent and pressed one side of the cage. A door pushed inward. He let go, and the door snapped shut. "Easy to get in. Can't get out." He lit his cigarette and puffed out a cloud of smoke.

Sam shook her head. The jerk ought to get forty years to life for polluting the clean air.

"I had to drag him back there and make him mop up his mess." Enrique smirked. "You can thank me that we returned the cat. Byce wanted to break the nasty thing's neck as soon as he found it in the birdcage. But I figured it'd better show up on your premises somewhere so I had Byce stuff it in the vent instead. Had no idea where the ductwork led, but if the critter got stuck and died in there, so much the better. Stink up your place as a little payback for all the trouble."

Sam's fingernails dug into her palms. "Yes, I've noticed you're all compassion. Since you're trying to impress me, how about explaining how you got my fingerprint on that vase?"

"Simple." The man sat up straight and slapped his knee. "Your prints are all over your office. I found a real nice one on your desktop, lifted it with tape, and slapped it onto the glass of the new vase. Pain in the neck to replace that bouquet, but a brilliant touch. Confused you and the police. Made you look like the *loco* female, eh?" He *tsked*.

"You seem to know a lot about what's going on with the police. I can't figure out if you're a wannabe cop or a dirty one."

Enrique scowled and stood up. "Let's go. We're wasting time." Gaze boring into Sam, he hefted his rifle and patted the handgun bulge at his waistband. "Remember, *chica*. If we see anyone on our little vacation, keep your mouth shut. I will not shoot *you*. I will shoot *them*."

Sam's insides went hollow.

In silence, the group hurriedly packed up. On the way to the canoes, Byce sidled over to Sam. "He flunk out the police academy years back," the Jamaican muttered with a dark scowl toward his leader's back. Then he stalked away.

Sam snorted. Such a huge failure would have been a major blow to Enrique's ego. And there was sure no love lost between this pair of crooks.

Back in position in the bow of the canoe, Sam pulled her arms close to her body and lowered her head, partly from inner chill, partly to protect her skin from the sun and partly to help herself concentrate.

Byce mentioned hunting a key. At the time of the break-in, her extra keys were in police custody, and this mystery boss would have known that from his contact inside the department. The key these bozos were looking for must not be in her bucket.

What other keys did she have? Her car keys? Those were out. She had obsolete keys to the dry cleaners, but they would have belonged to Abel Morris since time began. Access to her building was now controlled by keypads. Keypads! That concept opened a whole new bottomless pit of possibilities. There were lots of electronic gadgets people called keys. But she hadn't found anything like that in scouring the building. Well, except for stray hotel key cards, but she'd tossed those.

Besides, Ryan said his father and electronics weren't on the best of terms. So where would Mr. Davidson have put his secrets if not on his computer?

Man, she could give herself a headache trying to figure this

out on her own. There was a lot to tell Ryan. Maybe he could make heads or tails of the fresh clues. Would she ever get the chance to share them?

By late afternoon, they'd paddled across several pristine lakes and up sparkling creeks. Occasionally they spotted another party on one of the lakes, but Chuck managed to make sure they never passed near them. Several times they came to portages where they stopped, unloaded and carried everything across dry ground, often rocky and steep, before entering another waterway. They traveled around and over beaver dams, and once they glided past a cow moose standing belly-deep in a lake, munching on water lilies. At last, they came to a small tributary off the main waterway.

"This is it!" The tracker headed the canoe into the side channel. "We're almost there. We've got a nasty little portage ahead. Some distance beyond that is where his camp'll be. This guy picked a real remote spot for himself."

"The better for our business with him."

Sam shivered at the snarl in Enrique's tone. The guy was reaching the end of his patience, and that couldn't be good for anyone. Within a few minutes, the creek petered out into a rocky swamp. They debarked and unloaded on the driest bit of land they could find.

Sam paced the rocks, stretching her legs, while Chuck strapped the gear down for portage. Enrique dug trail mix from a pack and passed the bag around. Bryce grumbled that there was no beer to wash it down. Sam nibbled her peanuts and raisins and cast around in her mind for a conversation starter. Anything to delay their move into Ryan's proximity. Enrique enjoyed talking about himself. Maybe she could use his ego as an opening.

She forced herself to approach the man hunkered on his haunches with his snack. "Did you know the police have deter-

mined that the shooter in the Davidson case was a man who died the same night in a hit-and-run incident?"

Enrique rose, swiping his hands together. "Figured they'd get to that eventually."

"Were you the hit-and-run driver?"

The man laughed. "Would have been a lot more fun than dropping the dude off so he could pose as a jogger in the neighborhood, and then waiting to pick him up afterward. Saw it happen though."

"The hit-and-run was an actual accident?" She stared, wide-eyed.

Her captor chuckled harder. "Never considered that, did you? Some drunk tearing up the road at high speed, weaving all over the place. He jumped the curb and schmucked that high-brow hitter neat as you please. I got in there real fast, before the police came, and searched the body for the key the old Counselor was so desperate for, but didn't find a thing." Enrique shrugged. "Then I skedaddled, and the whole thing got dropped. Ten years later, we hear you found photos of the murders on your property, and he's hot after that key again."

"Let's get a move on," Chuck's call brought their heads around. "I'd like to make camp before nightfall."

Without further comment, the oldster flipped a canoe over his head and headed into the swamp, stepping from rock to rock.

Her captor snarled a nasty word then grabbed Sam's arm in a painful squeeze. "Here, Miss Chatty." He thrust a pack into Sam's hands. "It's our food and water. Don't drop it."

"I know. I've carried it at every portage."

He shook another pack at her. "Just be glad you don't get this one. It's twice as heavy, but I don't trust you with it." He stuck his face in hers. "Ammunition. Plenty of it." Cackling, he swung the pack onto his back, along with his rifle and picked up the cage of pigeons.

Byce was already hopping awkwardly after Chuck, the second canoe teetering on his head. Enrique motioned for Sam to precede him.

Head up, she stepped onto the first rock, then the next and the next. Many of them were moss-coated and slippery. At least, she'd been wearing tennis shoes with good tread when she was kidnapped.

Ahead of her, Byce yelped as one foot slipped from a stone. His leg sank up to the knee in watery muck. The canoe toppled from his head and splashed into the swamp. He retrieved the boat with a flurry of angry comments and stomp-squished onward. For twenty minutes they trekked, sometimes uphill onto dry ground, but always back down into swamp. Sam swatted biting flies and mosquitoes until she thought she'd slap herself silly. And then...

Magnificent! That was the only word for the bright aqua lake surrounded by lush vegetation that lay before them. If the trees and grasses were any greener, the color would hurt her eyes. A steady north wind brought welcome coolness and rippled the lake water into sparkling rills. Sam smiled and reveled in deep breaths of sweet air.

"Move along!" The harsh voice at her back jerked her to reality.

A few minutes later, they were again paddling in the canoes. They continued for fifteen minutes or so, and then Chuck slowed their boat and brought it next to Byce's. "According to the map, his site'll be around yonder bend. We can paddle past the place. Even if he's there, he won't know us from any other wilderness explorers."

Enrique pointed at Sam. "He will with her along."

"In that case, we'd better put in and leave her off."

"Not alone, and not with you. Byce will stay with the *chica*. You will paddle me over to Davidson's campsite. If all goes well," he said, grinning, "we can turn around and leave as fast as our paddles will carry us."

“No!” The word burst from Sam’s lips. She’d had enough. She had to do something and do it now. “I won’t let you.” She glared at Enrique. “Ryan!” The scream echoed across the water. She lunged to her feet. “Run!” The craft wobbled wildly, and she toppled into the lake.

Cool wetness welcomed her. She sank with her eyes open. Sunbeams tinted the water gold, like liquid light. From above came splashes and angry shouts. Sam shook herself from the dreamlike state and swam with broad strokes away from the commotion. Silver flickers of fish darted out of her way.

Which direction was she going? Toward land or away from it? She came up for air. Oh, no, she was headed for the middle of the lake. A canoe cut across her vision, and she stared into the furious face of the leader of this deadly expedition. A telltale click said he’d cocked the pistol pointed her way.

“Get to the beach, and don’t make another sound. Right now, I’d just as soon turn you into fish food.”

Shortly, Sam lay on a rock, soaking wet and her mouth gagged with the tail of Enrique’s shirt. Rope bound her ankles, and her hands were tied behind her back. Bryce stood guard over her. Chuck and Enrique’s canoe slid away in the distance toward the campsite Ryan had marked on his map. The craft went around a bend and was lost from sight.

Sam closed her eyes. *Please, God, let Ryan not be there.* Minutes ticked away. Sam breathed in...out...in...out—each breath a prayer.

*Blam!* Sam jerked. A flock of geese honked and burst up from the lake. *Blam!* Sam went limp, tears seeping from the corners of her eyes.

## TWENTY-TWO

Enrique's canoe hove into view a minute later, but he and the old tracker didn't return to the rock where Sam lay. From the bow, Enrique waved toward Byce as Chuck guided their craft toward an inlet several hundred yards up the shoreline. The big Jamaican didn't look Sam in the eye as he loaded her into their canoe. Soon they joined the other two in a large clearing where Chuck had started building a fire and Enrique struggled with tent poles. Without a word, Byce toted Sam to a spot under the shade of a pine tree. He plopped her on the lumpy ground and left.

Numb inside and out, her gaze barely registered the camping preparations. The men talked, but mostly their words were eaten by the wind. She heard enough, though. Things like "fixed Davidson" and "dispose of him tomorrow."

Sam roused as Enrique took a pigeon from the cage and fastened a small tube to its leg. He was smiling as he did so. Gloating. Fury surged to Sam's extremities, and she fought her bonds, but to no use. Ryan's murderer released the bird, and it took off. All of them watched the pigeon shoot straight south. Enrique took out a second bird and did the same as for the first. Of course, the dirty rat had to insure that his message of triumph reached his master in case something happened to the first courier.

Chuck let out a low whistle. "If that ain't the crazy funnest thing I ever seen. Prob'ly have to get myself some a them pigeons now."



He turned away to tend his growing fire. After a while, he cooked something in a pot dangling from a makeshift spit, but Sam's stomach responded to the scents with nausea. The three men laughed and joked around the campfire while they ate. Finally, Chuck approached her with a plate and a bottle of water. He set the items down on the ground, helped her to sit up, and pulled the gag out of her mouth.

"Enrique's plenty mad about that stunt you pulled. Good thing everything turned out okay after all. He says I can feed ya."

She turned her face away. "Not hungry. It's just a last meal anyway."

Chuck shook his head. "Have it your way. At least drink a little water." He held the bottle toward her. She let him pour some between her lips.

A short time later, the sun began to set, and the bugs started getting bad. Bryce picked her up and deposited her in a corner of the tent. Sam lay on the hard ground, staring into the dark. Why didn't they just kill her and get it over with?

After a while, the old tracker entered the tent, yawning. He tucked a small, inflatable pillow under her head and tossed a blanket over her. Then he turned away and rolled into a blanket next to her. Within minutes, light snores came from his still figure. Enrique slipped inside next, cuddling his rifle, and settled on the far side of the tent. The atmosphere was growing stuffy with all the bodies in close quarters. A tiny red glow bobbing outside and a faint whiff of tobacco smoke revealed that Bryce was pacing back and forth in the clearing.

Other than the Jamaican's soft footfalls and Chuck's whiffled snores, Sam was left with only the night sounds of the forest. Rustles and squeaks of small nocturnal animals, the shushing of wind in the trees, and from the lake, a loon released its haunting trill. Before Bryce's cigarette winked out, exhaustion claimed her, and she dozed off into fitful sleep. Discomfort woke her many times, but the need for forgetfulness quickly claimed her again.

*Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!*

Sam sat up with a lurch, her body aching in protest. She winced against flashes of light that blazed through the thin tent shell. The men leaped up, shouting and swearing and bumping into each other. A foot kicked her in the shoulder. The sound of guns cocking accompanied the milling herd into the night. Staccato bangs continued, punctuated by men's shouts. Sam tugged and yanked at the bonds around her hands, but Bryce had done his job well.

A ripping sound from the side of her tent brought her head around. Through a slice in the fabric a head poked through. Sam's breath caught, and her heart hammered against her ribs.

"Ryan?" she whispered. "I thought they shot you."

"Nah, they plugged my canoe, but explanations later, hon." He reached through with a knife and made quick work of the rope around her ankles. Sam swiveled and he did her hands, then grabbed her shoulders and hauled her out of the tent.

She looked toward the commotion and found the outlines of Enrique's and Bryce's forms, crouching near the water's edge. Flashes continued from a shadowy craft on the lake, interspersed by answering gunshots from shore.

"Come on!" Ryan pulled her to her feet. "They're going to figure out any second that my homemade fireworks aren't bullets."

Sam staggered forward and folded. "My legs are numb."

Strong arms scooped her up, and Sam inhaled the scents of wood smoke and pine on her rescuer. Heavenly! Ryan hustled toward the trees with her.

A shout came from behind them, and a gun's report accented a bee-buzz past Sam's ear. Deep barking joined the fray, then a canine snarl followed by a male screech. "Get this dog offa me, mon!" A gun sounded again and the dog yelped.

Sam gasped, and Ryan's stride faltered, but then he picked up the pace, and the woods embraced them. Dark trunks of birch and fir flowed past her. Were Ryan's feet guided by radar or

something? Oops, not quite. His stumble nearly deposited them both on the ground.

“Set me down,” she hissed. “I’ll make it now.”

Her feet met terra firma, and Ryan grabbed her hand, tugging her onward with barely a moment for her to get her bearings. Sam stumbled behind him. She was slowing him down, but she couldn’t help it. At least, he seemed to know where he was going. She sure didn’t. For all she knew, the next step would take them off the edge of a cliff or into the lake.

Large bodies thrashed through the trees behind them. “Davidson!” Enrique’s voice pursued them. He appended his shout with a furious comment on Ryan’s lineage.

Sam and Ryan emerged from the trees on the lake’s edge by the rocks where she had lain, thinking he’d been killed. Impending dawn tinted the darkness a rosy hue. A canoe sat waiting on the bank.

Ryan flipped the boat upright and pushed it into the lake. “Get in.” She complied in an awkward scramble, and he hopped in behind her.

“I thought you said they shot your canoe.”

“Not this one. No talking now.”

Sam pressed her lips together and swallowed her heart back into her chest. Honestly, if she wasn’t so overjoyed to see Ryan alive, she’d shove him into the water as payback for all the torment she’d suffered believing him killed, not to mention being kidnapped and terrorized on account of him dashing off into the wilderness. But first, they needed to get out of gunshot range as fast as Ryan could paddle, which appeared pretty fast. Sam watched the lake skim beneath them as continued vile shouts from the woods prickled the hairs at the base of her neck.

*Whoof!*

The bark from shore halted Ryan’s paddle. Sam looked over her shoulder. She made out a dark blob perched on the rock they’d just left.

"We have to get him." Sam touched Ryan's shoulder, but he'd already begun turning the craft.

He skimmed the boat up to the side of the rock and did a squiggly little backpedal that interrupted forward momentum. The dog leaped, but clumsily and with a high whine on landing in the bottom of the canoe between Ryan and Sam. She reached down and touched the animal's flank. He yelped and her hand came away wet.

"He's bleeding," she told Ryan.

"My pack...is behind you." He spoke between grunts of effort at the paddle.

Sam turned and grasped the pack. Movement drew her gaze to the rock outcropping rapidly diminishing behind them. Enrique, by the size of the dark outline.

"Duck!" Sam minded her own words as a sharp report sounded.

The canoe skimmed faster. Another shot cracked and Sam heard a *plink* in the water wide right of them. The rifle spoke again, but without evidence of a bullet strike nearby. The murk must have swallowed them from view. Sam peeked up over the bow and could barely discern the outline of the shore, let alone the owner of the voice that still snarled unintelligible curses. She let out the breath she'd been holding and sat up.

"You're an Olympic rower, Davidson." She rifled in the pack and came out with one of his extra T-shirts.

"Adrenaline'll do that to you," he puffed back at her, and the canoe slowed the smallest degree.

Sam pressed the soft cloth to the dog's side. He whined, but didn't fight her.

"How bad is Jake?" Ryan asked.

"I can't tell. It's too dark. He's not gushing or anything."

The rhythmic *shirrrr* of his paddle answered her. Minutes dragged past, and the sky continued to lighten. "I think the bleeding's slowed."

"Good." The canoe slowed, as well. "We'll have to make this portage under rotten conditions."

Sam raised her head to find they were at the rocky swamp. Ryan got out and held the boat for her to debark. Old Jake crawled out after her, whimpering, then collapsed on the ground.

"I'll have to carry him." She looked up at Ryan. "I'm strong. I can do what I must."

"Don't I know it!" One side of his mouth lifted.

Sam stroked Jake's head while Ryan hastily prepared the canoe for portage. He slung his pack on one shoulder and a rifle on the other, and then hefted the boat. Sam gathered the dog in her arms. Jake was no miniature poodle, but at least he didn't thrash, just whined as she cautiously followed Ryan step by step across rocks she could barely see. Her ears stayed tuned for telltale noises of pursuit behind them.

"They'll come soon," Ryan said, as if reading her mind.

The portage took tortuously long, but at last they stood at the other end. Sam's arm muscles quivered by the time she laid the dog on the floor of the canoe. At least, the first rays of the sun had begun to peek over the horizon as Ryan took up the paddle and sent their craft upriver against a steady current.

Sam examined Jake's injury. "He's got a gash along his side that'll need stitches," she told Ryan, "and he's lost a lot of blood. He should be okay, though, if we get him medical attention soon."

"Just as quick as we can. Have to ditch our tails first. Do you hear?"

Sam held her breath and listened. Angry voices carried faintly on the morning breeze. Their pursuers were on the portage. Ryan didn't turn his head, just kept paddling. Sam watched the muscles strain and ripple beneath his shirt. Her heart pounded in rhythm with his strokes. He guided their craft around a bend in the river then headed it to the bank.

"What are we doing?" Sam climbed out behind him.

The dog made a weak effort to sit up. "Stay." Ryan pointed to the ground, then grabbed his rifle out of the boat. He laid a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Keep watch over Jake. I'll be right

back.” His head darted close, and he touched his lips to hers, then he was gone up a faint trail into the woods.

Sam pressed fingers to her mouth then shook herself and turned toward the suffering animal in the boat. She knelt and found Ryan’s canteen in his pack, as well as a tin dish he must have been using to feed Jake.

“Have some water, boy. It’ll do you good.” Her voice shook as her ears strained for sounds of what might be happening. The dog lapped up the water like he might never see moisture again. She poured him more. “That should help put some fluids back in your—”

*Blam!* Sam jerked and slopped the water out of the dish. The same gun spoke again, answered by a report with the tone of the rifle she thought had shot Ryan. Enrique was returning fire. *Blam! Blam!* Those last two had to be Ryan’s again. That meant he was still all right, but had he killed their pursuers? Under these circumstances, she wouldn’t blame him, and neither would the law, but still she shuddered.

In silence she waited, heart pounding. At last, footfalls and panting breath came toward her from the trail. Sam stood as Ryan burst from the trees and came to a stop before her. He looked ragged with beard shadow on his cheeks and dark circles under his eyes, but his gaze was steady, his jaw set.

“Wh-what happened?” She gulped.

“I climbed a tree for cover and a good angle and returned the favor. Put a few slugs into their boat hulls.” He grinned. “They’re up a creek with plenty of paddles, but no canoes.”

A giggle snorted through Sam’s nose. “Sorry, I think I’m losing my mind here. We’d better get going before they catch up to us on foot.”

“No rush. There’s a big old swath of deadfall from the ’99 wind-storm between us and them. They can’t get through anytime soon.”

Her heartbeat hesitated then sped up. “You mean we got away?”

“We’re home free.” He spread his arms.

Laughing, she lunged into them, and then laughter turned to sobs.

“Shh-shh, honey.” He squeezed her close. “I’ve got you.” Was he planting gentle kisses on the top of her head? Oh, yes. And saying words that her heart echoed. “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!”

“We’re not out of the woods yet, sweetheart. No pun intended.” Ryan hunkered down beside Sam in the clearing where they’d stopped for midmorning break. She sat on a rock in the shade. He handed her an energy bar and a handful of dried fruit.

As she took the food, his gaze narrowed on the rope burns around her wrists. “I intended for them to come after me, but it never occurred to me that they’d bring you.”

“What do you mean?” She blinked at him. “I thought you came out here to do some soul-searching.”

Ryan let out a wry chuckle and settled onto the rock next to her. “I did that before I left. I had a phone call from Eldon Stahl. He and his wife are hiding out in some foreign country right now. He warned me to disappear because they’d be on my doorstep any minute. I prayed and asked God for an idea about what to do. All of a sudden it occurred to me that running up here was the perfect trap, as long as they found out where I was going.”

“You used yourself as bait?” Sam nibbled a piece of fruit. “That was awfully risky.”

Ryan shrugged and bit into an energy bar. “I know this place—those city boys don’t. But how could they resist coming after me? I gave them a golden opportunity to dispose of me and let everyone assume I’d gotten lost in the wilderness and lunched on by wolves.” He wagged the bar at her.

“Nasty picture.”

“Sorry.” He turned his head to hide his smile. “When I got up here, I set up a fake camp using old gear and a second canoe I portaged all by myself, two trips every time, thank you very

much. Made myself another camp where I could watch whoever stopped by with bad intentions. I figured to catch myself a crook and make him tell me the name of his boss. But I didn't expect to put you in danger." He looked into those wide green eyes. "Part of the beauty of the idea was to draw them *away* from you."

The corners of her lips tilted upward. "It means a lot to me that you didn't just run off without telling me in order to put some distance between us. Part of me thought that."

"Never! Consider me Ryan 'Burr' Davidson where you're concerned. Could you handle that?"

"Hmmm. Let me think about it." She ducked her head and began unwrapping her energy bar, but not before he caught the little smirk on her face. "So Enrique put holes in your boat and figured that'd make you a sitting duck for them to hunt down. How were you able to use said boat for your fireworks display?"

Ryan chuckled. "The all-purpose male fix-it for every crisis known to humanity—duct tape. The tape wouldn't hold for any serious paddling, but it served my purpose."

"Very clever, Mr. Davidson."

"Very desperate, Miss Reid. I scrambled to turn my extra bullets into makeshift firecrackers and get everything in place for a predawn rescue. I couldn't leave you with them a minute longer than necessary. I'd recognize that ponytail anywhere." He reached over and tweaked it. "When I saw through my binoculars that those lowlifes had brought a certain woman with them, my heart nearly stopped." He stared at the ground. "I guess the inspiration wasn't from God after all because it put you in danger again."

Sam's hand rested on his knee. "I have no doubt that it was divine inspiration. Sure, I hated every second in those men's custody, but I found out a few things. Maybe something that will lead to the big boss."

Ryan looked up and slid a finger along her jawline. "I found out something, too. Catching the crook who ordered my family killed is important, but it's not top priority. When push came to



shove, getting you to safety is what mattered, and like you told me, so is the future my family would want for me.”

He picked up a small stick from the ground and twiddled it between his fingers. “I prayed for those things the whole night long like I’ve never prayed for anything in my life, and I felt like...well, like God became real to me. Not just an idea anymore, but a person who listens and cares. I’m going to be okay now. Spiritually, I mean.” His cheeks warmed.

“I know you are.” She leaned against his shoulder and munched another bite of her snack. “But aren’t you the least bit curious what I found out?”

Ryan nudged her away from him. “Spill, woman.”

She laughed. Oh, how he treasured the sound. He grinned in return, and from a spot under a Red Pine, Jake let out a woof. The old dog rose and padded gingerly toward them then eased himself down beside their rock.

She scratched behind his ears. “He’s going to be all right. Now we just have to figure out who Counselor is.”

“Counselor?”

“Enrique kept calling their boss that name. I think your sister overheard your dad talking about this guy to your mom. The reference was in her diary, but she misunderstood.”

“Of course!” Ryan got to his feet and paced to the water, pulse thundering, a fresh recollection washing through his brain. “I think I know who Counselor must be. At least, I can narrow it down to one of two people.” He turned toward Sam.

She stood and brushed crumbs from her fingers. “Who?”

“My dad had a lawyer friend who liked the nickname Counselor. I can’t for the life of me remember the guy’s real name. I’ve discovered that kids don’t pay nearly enough attention to their parents’ lives.”

He stepped over to his pack and began shoving things into it. “When I visited Mrs. Stahl, I ran across a photo of my dad on the golf course with the lawyers who partnered in Mr. Stahl’s firm

over a decade ago. Eldon's not Counselor, I'm sure of that much, but it has to be one of the other two—Randolph Hanes, a district attorney who's running for state attorney general, or Warren Seiler, now a Minnesota Supreme Court justice. My money's on Hanes. Mrs. Stahl called him a barracuda."

Sam came to stand over him. "You could be right. Chuck called this Counselor guy a shark."

Ryan looked up at her while he zipped the pack. "Sounds like a match, but either one of these bigwigs would have the world to lose if they were proven a murderer."

"Proof," she said as he stood up. "Exactly what we need. We have to find the key."

"The key?" He stared at her.

"I don't know what it is yet, but together we'll figure it out. In the meantime, there are probably two pigeons heading toward Mr. Hanes or Mr. Seiler right this minute, telling him we're on the loose. What's to say Enrique and company are the only people he could send to do us in?"

## TWENTY-THREE

“It’s good to know we’ve got a team actively working on our side at last.” Ryan slid his hand across the seat of his pickup and curled his fingers around Sam’s.

As per common practice with those trekking into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, he’d left his vehicle parked at the outfitter’s in town and let them transport him to the entry site. But he was sure glad when they delivered it back to him this morning at the hotel in Ely. A guy felt a lot of freedom in having wheels at his disposal. At least they didn’t have to ride in the cop car that was leading the way to the local PD office.

He smiled at Sam, and she squeezed his hand. She still looked tired but at least somewhat refreshed after a restful night in her own hotel suite with an officer stationed outside. He’d had one outside his door, too. Only the sunburn across Sam’s cheeks and on her arms reminded him of the ordeal she’d been through on account of him. They both wore new jeans and matching BWCA T-shirts.

“It was so good to wake up in a comfortable bed and realize life could soon get back to normal,” she said. “I even remembered to call the floor layers and the hazmat people and reschedule.”

“What about Bastian?”

She laughed. “He’ll be miffed about being left alone for so long, but he’s got food and water and a bed in the workroom.”

Ryan smiled. The woman had it all together.

"I hope Jake is all right at the vet's." She reached out to adjust the air-conditioning.

Ryan returned both hands to the wheel and negotiated the traffic that came with Ely's summer tourist season bonanza. "I called before we checked out of the hotel, and the old boy had a good night. Nothing to do but lie around and snooze and eat? I'd say Jakester is in his glory."

He pulled up beside their police escort outside the local PD building, but a lot more than locals waited for them inside. Ryan glanced at the lovely, capable woman beside him. "Those lowlifes made the mistake of their lives when they hauled their kidnap victim onto federal lands." When he and Sam reached a ranger station yesterday afternoon, the rangers had been extremely interested in their story, and they'd made phone calls. Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation had driven in from Minneapolis to hear the account for themselves. "Maybe Enrique and his crew have been rounded up by now and are singing like canaries."

Sam laughed. "Cooing like pigeons, you mean." She sobered. "Do you think they'll let us go home today?"

"Only if it's safe. I'm not taking any more chances with your life." He got out and walked with her inside, flanked by a pair of officers.

They were ushered into separate cubicles. After an hour's chat with an agent, Ryan and Sam were reunited in a larger room, where they went over their stories again with both agents. Their accounts had the men darting in and out of the room to initiate verifications.

The one who'd introduced himself as Special Agent Becker returned after his latest foray. "They found the plane that made the illegal entry into the BWCA at Charles Ferno's fire watch station. The description you gave of this man Chuck matches Ferno's." He nodded toward Sam, who was nursing a can of 7UP. "We're running the plane's registration now."

A knock sounded on the door, and it popped open to admit

the grizzled head of the local police chief. "Got one! They just brought in a big fellow who talks with a Jamaican accent. Found him stuck hip-deep in a mud hole, bawling like a newborn calf."

"Thanks," said the agent who'd given his last name as Grant. "Would you like to identify him, Miss Reid?"

Her gaze darted toward Ryan, who gave her a nod. "Um, sure, but can my friend come with me? He saw them, too, just not as close up."

Becker opened the door and waved them through.

"We'll let you go in and take a look one at a time so we get separate corroborations on him."

Ryan followed Sam up the hall then waited outside while she entered a cubicle with the agent. They emerged less than a minute later, Sam pale, her lips compressed into a thin line. Ryan touched her arm, then took his turn in the little room, where one-way glass looked into an interview chamber. Inside, a large, bedraggled, bug-bitten, mud-coated lump of humanity hunched at the table.

"That's Byce," Ryan confirmed to Agent Becker.

They left the cubicle and rejoined Sam in the hallway. She met Ryan's gaze. "Looks like the wilderness beat him up pretty good."

Ryan crossed his arms and rocked back on his heels. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

Sam slapped her hand over her mouth, but Ryan still heard her snorted giggle.

Smiling, they returned to the conference room and found lunch waiting in foam boxes. The agents left, and Ryan tucked into his hot roast beef sandwich with gravy and mashed potatoes. Sam picked at hers.

He jabbed his fork her direction. "Not hungry?"

She sighed and met his gaze. "Enrique's the most dangerous one, and he's still out there."

"And he's no more capable of looking after himself in the wilderness than Byce."

“But he’s with Chuck, and that man *does* know the BWCA.”

“And we’re sitting in a police station surrounded by dozens of cops, plus federal agents. The day is young, darlin’, and the troops are just beginning to swarm. Have faith.”

The tight lines around Sam’s mouth smoothed away. “I like the way you talk. I’m being an idiot.” She smiled and took a bite of her potatoes.

The afternoon drifted on while they batted around ideas of what the mysterious “key” could be and played Go Fish and Hearts with a deck of cards begged off the duty sergeant.

Around 3:00 p.m., Agent Grant stepped inside, a frown on his face. “Still no sign of Chuck Ferno, but a short time ago, a man fitting Enrique’s description attempted to take a canoe from a couple of fishermen who happened to handle guns pretty well themselves. They exchanged shots. One of the fishermen is in critical condition in the hospital, but Enrique came out of the BWCA in a body bag. We hope to have a full identification on him soon. Perp like that’s bound to have a rap sheet.”

Sam paled. “How can I be thankful and sorry at the same time?”

The agent withdrew without comment.

Ryan pressed his forehead into his palms. He heard Sam move, and soon her hands closed around his shoulders from behind.

“You can’t blame yourself for Enrique’s vicious actions,” she said.

“Tell that to the family of the hurt man.”

A chair scraped away from the table, and Sam settled beside him. “Let’s pray for his recovery.”

Ryan lifted his head. “I’m too new at this. Not sure what words to use. You say the prayer, and I’ll say ‘amen.’”

They took hands and bowed their heads. Ryan inserted “amen” several times as Sam poured out her heart to the Almighty. She barely finished speaking when the door opened again.

Agent Becker entered the room holding a file folder and a piece of paper. “Just got a faxed report. Around noon, the home

of Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Warren Seiler, known as ‘Counselor’ to his friends, was searched under warrant. A number of things turned up, including cages of carrier pigeons. Only one more thing I can share with you. Evidence was found that suggests Judge Seiler left the country this morning.” He tucked the fax sheet into the folder. “It would appear you are safe to return home. We can talk to you quite easily as needed from the Minneapolis Field Office.”

The photo of the genial-looking, round-faced Seiler passed through Ryan’s mind. “He’s the one Martha Stahl described as a nice guy and a great judge.” He slammed his fist onto the tabletop and glared at the agent. “He ordered my family murdered, and no one knows why. And now he’s on permanent vacation in Rio or wherever.”

“Ah, Ryan.”

Sam’s gentle words wafted over him like a breath of compassion. He deflated. “Sorry.” He stood and shook the agent’s hand. “Thanks for what you’re doing. I’m happy to be alive, and more than happy that Sam survived, but this bites.” He strode out the door and up the hall.

In the fresh air he stopped on the sidewalk. Sam touched him, and he turned into her warm embrace. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll deal with this.” He rubbed her back, and his palm passed over small ridges of scar tissue. Way to remind him that no matter what came at a person, life was precious and worth fighting for. “I meant what I said that I finally got it through my thick skull what’s really important.”

“That’s awesome.” She smiled up at him. “Let’s grab Jake and head home, Mr. Davidson.”

Sam dozed during the last leg of the trip home but roused when they reached the north end of the Twin Cities. Full dark had come by the time Ryan shut off the truck outside Sam’s business. She drank in the brick building with her eyes. “Home

sweet home at last,” she murmured. “Seems like I’ve been gone a century, not two days.”

Ryan chuckled. “Despite all the indications that we’re safe, I won’t be satisfied unless I go through your building top to bottom before I leave.”

“And I won’t be happy unless you do.”

Ryan powered the windows down several inches. “Jakester should be all right in here for a few minutes now that the sun’s down.”

They got out and walked up the alley between the dry cleaners and the print shop until they reached the side door. Sam punched in the lock code on the keypad. The light flashed green and the latch clicked.

Ryan pushed past her into the darkness of the interior, and the lights came on in the big, bare workroom. Sam stepped over the threshold. Paint and turpentine smell greeted her. She waved a hand in front of her nose. Man, the fumes had accumulated from lack of ventilation.

The door closed behind them, automatically locking again, but Sam turned quickly to the blinking alarm panel, which would send an SOS to the security company if someone didn’t punch in the code to let it know the proper owner was home.

Everything normal. Then why did she feel like she’d forgotten something?

Shrugging, she followed Ryan to the storage room. He opened the door and flicked on the light. They both peeked inside. Another empty area, except for a cluster of old solvent bottles on one shelf. He turned off the switch and headed up front.

“I wonder where Bastian’s hiding?” Sam looked right and left, trailing in his wake. “Mad as a hornet and refusing to come greet me, no doubt. Probably crouched under the new counter. He’s already laid claim to one of the niches. Little does his highness realize that his kingdom will diminish to our apartment after the business gets up and running. My employees and I can’t



have him underfoot while we're dealing with hot presses and steam cleaners."

"Funny cat." Ryan passed through the door into the customer area. "Where's the light switch out here?"

Sam came along behind him and turned it on.

"The remodel looks gooood." Ryan nodded at her then went toward the office.

Sam bent and inspected under the counter. "Bastian's not—"

"Where did this come from?"

The sharpness in Ryan's tone brought her head up. *Ouch!* Too fast. The back of her skull connected with the edge of the countertop.

She went to her office, rubbing her scalp. "What are you talking about?"

"This." He held out the trout paperweight. "It used to sit on my dad's desk. I gave it to him for his birthday one year. Bought it in Ely on one of our church canoe trips."

"The police had that and some other things in custody to check for prints and blood last time you were here. They gave the stuff back because they didn't find anything."

A mewl came from the direction of the closet. Sam's mouth fell open. "Not again! How—"

"My doing, I'm afraid."

The pleasant voice brought both of them around to face the doorway. A portly figure with a gentle, smiling face filled the space. Only the miniature pistol he pointed in their direction wasn't so friendly. And why was he holding an open jug of perc cleaning solvent?

## TWENTY-FOUR

Ryan stood frozen, gaping at the man who ordered his family slaughtered.

“What a pity I didn’t know that knickknack came from Michael Davidson’s home office,” Warren Seiler went on. “I have no idea how such an object might connect with the missing key, but I could have appropriated it from the police evidence room and found out. Perhaps we could all have been spared catastrophe.”

This was not how Ryan had pictured meeting the killer after all these years. And certainly not how he’d imagined reacting. Cold. Blank. Nothing. Like every feeling had shut down.

“You’re the murderer.” He hardly recognized his own voice, so flat and toneless.

Seiler had the gall to lift his chin like he was offended. “The Honorable Judge Warren Seiler. I have never murdered anyone, though I’ve tried dozens of vicious killers.”

Something sparked in the pit of Ryan’s belly. “You ordered it done.” Now there was heat in his tone.

“I ordered nothing of the kind. Your father threatened me. He told me if I didn’t turn myself in, he would give the authorities the safety deposit key. Unacceptable! I merely sent a professional to reason with him, but of course, the stubborn man wouldn’t listen.”

“So it’s my dad’s fault they’re all dead? You’re sick!” His volume had gone up several notches. “Why? I have a right to know.”

The man winced, but his gun's aim remained steady. "The reason doesn't matter now. Everything is ruined anyway."

Next to Ryan, Sam touched his sleeve and gave a miniscule shake of the head. "Judge Seiler." She turned her attention toward the other man. "You're a fool to be here in this country yet. There's a manhunt on for you. Maybe you should leave now."

"In due time we shall all leave." Seiler's mouth quirked upward, and he pulled the trigger. An inch of flame spurted, but that was all.

"Oh, no!" Sam gasped.

Ryan took a step forward. "You're holding us at bay with a lighter?" He charged.

Seiler flung up the arm carrying the jug, and a generous wave of the contents splashed onto Ryan torso. Chemicals and fumes seared Ryan's nostrils and stung his eyes and nose. Gasping and choking, he staggered backward and hit the corner of Sam's filing cabinet.

She screamed, and water struck Ryan's face. Blinking through a moist haze of tears and H<sub>2</sub>O, he saw her holding the empty flower vase. She thrust a tissue box from her desk into his hands. Still clutching the fish paperweight—if this murderous scum was after it, he wasn't going to let the man have it—Ryan dabbed around his watering eyes with tissues.

Her back to Ryan, Sam moved between him and Seiler. "You've spread that solvent all over the building. Not enough to stink us out, but enough to accelerate a fire." The man tendered a half bow. She turned toward Ryan. "I'm so sorry. I should have realized that smell wasn't just turpentine. And I should have remembered that my alarm system was off when I was kidnapped. The judge had to reactivate it after he got in here somehow."

"Smart woman," Seiler said. "With the alarm deactivated, it wasn't hard to slip in through that antiquated window. But I debated long and hard what to do as I awaited you in the comfortable apartment upstairs. Leave it off and have you immedi-

ately become nervous when you returned and realized your electronic security was deactivated while you were gone? Or activate it and gamble you wouldn't remember it had been turned off? Apparently, I chose correctly." The man beamed, radiating benevolence.

Sam shook her head. "We were nervous anyway after all you've put us through."

Head still woozy from fumes, Ryan stepped around Sam...or tried to. He wobbled and she steadied him. Leaning on her shoulder, he lasered Seiler with a glare. What Sam had told him about those caught up in unrepented evil suddenly became crystal clear. If he could feel sorry for this guy and the eternity he faced, he would, but he wasn't that spiritual yet. "You haven't chosen anything right for years. You're a doomed man and don't have a clue."

"Ah, ah, ah!" The judge wagged the lighter pistol. "This thing can shoot flames several feet if I pull the trigger hard enough. Now back away, because you're a walking torch now, young man."

"So are you," Sam spoke up. "If you've been spreading this stuff around, your clothes are saturated with fumes. You took a big chance just flicking that pistol Bic a minute ago." She lifted her hands, palm out, in a placating gesture. "Now if you put down that jug and the lighter, we can all walk out of here alive."

Everything benign left Seiler's appearance as his face twisted, and his gray eyes sparked rage. "Do you think that's what I want? To walk away? To live my life in a foreign country, disgraced? My honor, my name is...*was* everything! Michael tried to take it from me, and I stopped him. But you two..." He paced forward, holding the jug in front of him, the pistol trained on it. "You couldn't leave it alone." He took another step away from the doorway.

Ryan grabbed Sam's hand, and she met his gaze. *I love you*, he mouthed. Then he released her hand, shoved her toward the door, and kicked upward at the solvent bottle. Was his aim good enough in his chemically induced high? His toe connected with

something. Not the bottle. Something soft. Seiler's arm, the one that held the solvent.

The judge screeched, and the jug flew toward the far corner of the room, liquid splashing out of it onto the desk and the wall. Flame spurted in that direction.

"Run, Ryan!"

Sam's yell activated his feet, and he raced out the door after her just as heat struck him in the back. He reached down and ripped off his solvent-soaked shirt as he tore through the workroom on Sam's heels. A *whoomph* announced that other areas had begun to catch fire. From the front of the building, high-pitched screams trailed them.

They reached the side door, Sam first. She put her hand on the knob, but turned her head in the direction they had come. Ryan blocked her line of sight. "Don't look. Just go!"

She yanked open the door, and they stumbled into the alley. "Bastian. Oh, Bastian!" Sam moaned and fell to her knees. Ryan hauled her upright, sucking in great lungfuls of chemical-free oxygen. His head cleared more with every passing moment. Right now, this city air tasted even better than the BWCA's.

And what do you know? He still had a grip on his dad's paperweight. He shoved the fish end into his jeans pocket. The rock end was too big to fit. "Let's get to the truck." He tugged her up the alley while pulling his cell phone from his belt holder.

Screams from inside the building had ceased, but not the crackle of flames. The brick outside of the structure could withstand a lot of heat, but the interior was a big wooden tinderbox. Not much chance that Sam would salvage anything but a shell.

Déjà vu struck him as the 9-1-1 dispatcher answered, and he said, "Hello, this is Ryan Davidson..."

Sam reached the pickup across the street with Ryan beside her, talking on his phone. She looked back to see flames dancing in

the glass-fronted customer area of the business she'd poured her sweat into. From the backseat of the truck, Jake began to whine.

"Fire trucks are on their way," Ryan said.

She gripped his arms. "We've got to go back for Bastian."

"Have you lost your mind? We can't go in there."

"Not inside the building. The alley. The vent." Her words came out in the same frantic spurts as her thoughts. She took a deep breath. "The screw holes were stripped on the inside cover in the closet so I just hung it back up loosely. Instead, I put one of those little rubber strips on the bottom of the closet door to keep the outside air inside the closet and not waste air-conditioning until I could get the whole thing plugged properly."

Ryan's eyes widened. "That door is thick and sturdy, almost as good as a fire door, and you've cut off fumes from getting into the closet space. There's a chance!" He headed for the rear of the pickup.

Sam followed him. "We need something long to reach into the ductwork and knock the vent cover off. If Bastian will hop up the mismatched boxes I stacked in there rather than reinstalling the shelves, he can crawl through to us."

"My fishing pole." He pulled a rod from the gear in the back and dashed toward the alley.

Sam didn't need any urging to keep up with him. "And for once that contrary cat better come when I call him."

Ryan halted abruptly, and she plowed into him. She bounced backward a couple of steps.

"Don't take the chance. Get Jake." He jerked his head toward the truck.

"Smart thinking." The knot in her chest began to ease. This might work. It had to!

She yanked open the pickup door. "Come on, Jakester. You've got to help save your BFFF." The dog seemed to understand because he jumped out with only a minor whimper over the strain to his stitches. "This way. Come on."

In her approach to the alley, she skirted in a wide arch away from the front windows that could blow out from heat at any time. If the firefighters were here already, they'd have apoplexy at these civilian antics.

She and Jake darted past her carport to where Ryan stood under the vent, calling, "Bastian! Come out, buddy! You can do it."

He turned at their approach, fishing pole in one hand, base resting on the ground. "The vent cover's off, and I can hear him caterwauling, but he hasn't responded to my voice."

Sam went quiet. Sure enough, above the dull rumble of fire in the main office, frantic meows came through loud and clear. Sam's heart leaped. "Bastian! Oh, your highness, please come to me now." The mewls cut off and scrambling sounds were heard, then ceased, and the meowing began again.

Ryan turned toward his dog. "Speak, Jake!"

His shout must have reached through the old dog's dim hearing, because he woofed. Then woofed again and again, while the humans called encouragement. Long seconds dragged past.

A feline head poked out of the hole in the brick wall, ears flat to its skull. *Mrrrrrrrowwww!* Bastian made his outrage known loud and clear as Sam gathered the cat in her arms, laughter bubbling from her chest.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Sam awoke the next morning to the gentle, rhythmic sway of a houseboat under her bed. Ryan had put her up in one of his rentals. Sunlight peeked around the edges of the blinds on the windows. She'd slept late and still felt like she could roll over and snooze some more, but haunting flashes of memory from the night before spurred her out of bed. Bruises and body aches put a hitch in her stride on the way to the bathroom...er, the head, as it was called on boats. She was getting to be a regular river rat.

What should she do today? For that matter, tomorrow? The rest of her life? She didn't have a business anymore. Strangely, that fact didn't put her under a black cloud of depression. The question of "what next" occupied her throughout a shower and donning the casual skirt and blouse Nancy had brought over, among other necessities, in the middle of the night.

She stepped out onto the deck and gazed across the water toward the next dock. Ryan waved to her from the rail of his boat. A smile bloomed on her face.

What a manifestation of God's grace that they had lived through the last few days. And what had he sort of said to her in her office right before he risked a fiery death to save her life? So the man who liked to keep relationships casual had a serious thing for her. The notion thrilled her to her toes. Did that mean she might feel a little bit the same way?



Hmmm. Yep. She had it bad.

He beckoned to her and then headed into his living quarters. Something was up.

Sam hustled down one dock and up another. As she stepped onto Ryan's boat, Jake and Bastian wandered around the corner from the starboard side of the deck. Bastian trotted over to her and twined around her legs, purring. She bent and scratched him behind his ears and then gave Jake a rub under his chin.

Her cat hadn't been this friendly to her in a long time. Must be Jake's influence. Evidently, Bastian was a dog kind of cat, not a people kind of cat. Anyway, she wouldn't be taking him home with her, whenever she determined where home was. Old Jake deserved his buddy with him for as long as he had left on this earth.

She entered Ryan's living quarters and found him sitting on his couch, staring at the fish paperweight on his coffee table. He looked up as she came in. No smile, but a warming in the blue gaze.

"Join me." He patted the cushion next to him. "I didn't want to do this without you present."

"Do what?"

"Open it."

She sank onto the couch. "There's some kind of trick to this paperweight?"

"That's why I bought it. My dad loved ingenious gadgets." He picked it up and showed it to her from every angle. "Looks solid, right? Even the police examining it for forensic evidence wouldn't be able to tell this was here."

He took a pin from the coffee table and stuck it into the trout's barely open mouth. A soft click sounded. Ryan twisted the base, and the fish came free. He held the base between them so she could see the hollow center about the circumference of a nickel. A torn scrap of yellow legal pad was rolled up inside of it.

With a tight little laugh, Ryan pulled it out. "Just like my dad. Write it down with pen and paper."

“Yes. Whatever ‘it’ is.” Sam leaned in toward him as they read the neat block letters.

SECURENET

USER: MTDAVID

KEY: 0628R1122C

“I don’t believe it.” Ryan eased to his feet, staring at the paper as if mesmerized. “He used the computer after all.”

“You’ve lost me.”

He met her gaze, face alight. “Securenet is like an Internet security deposit box. You pay a rental fee to store data there. They’re top of the line, have been since the midnineties. And the key for the data lock is Cassie’s and my birthdays.”

Sam’s brows drew together. “That’s a pretty elementary password. Warren Seiler should have been able to figure out that out without working up a sweat.”

“Not if he didn’t know where Dad put the information he was trying to hide. And anyone who knew Michael T. Davidson would never figure him to trust something important to an electronic brain.”

Sam laughed. “Your father outthought his enemy by putting the information in the last place anyone would look for something he tucked away.”

“But under duress he told the shooter that night where he hid the key to the information. He must have been promised some kind of mercy in exchange.”

“An empty promise.” She rose beside Ryan. “Let’s go to your computer and find out why all this blood was shed.”

A few minutes later, Sam perched in a chair beside Ryan while he booted up the computer in his office. She gnawed on her lower lip as he navigated through the Securenet system. A file came up that contained numbers and company names and a few lines of text here and there. Sam couldn’t make heads or tails

of the material, but Ryan scrolled through a few pages and then lowered his forehead to his computer desk.

“A measly insider trading scheme, and my dad found out about it.”

Sam leaned toward the screen. “Why is Martha Stahl’s name listed here at the bottom of the page?”

“Huh?” Ryan lifted his head and peered close. “I can’t believe it!”

“What?”

“Mrs. Stahl had friends in key places. She was Seiler’s source for the inside information, and she was in on the scheme with him.”

Sam slumped back in her chair. “Oh, no! Eldon must have realized at some point what she was doing. She’s who he’s been protecting.”

Ryan frowned and shook his head. “This offense wouldn’t have rated more than a country-club stint in a minimum security prison, but the great and mighty Counselor with his eye on career advancement was willing to kill a whole family to protect his reputation.”

Sam nodded. “And Martha and Eldon were willing to keep quiet about what they suspected regarding the murders rather than skewer their own reputations.” She waved a hand at the data on the screen. “Are you going to turn this information over to the authorities?”

“Sure, it ties a bowknot on the case. However, the statute of limitations has run out. Martha won’t even get even a slap on the wrist.”

“Not from the human courts, but the scandal will sting more than a little.”

Ryan cupped her face in his hands and leaned close. “I think we’d better pray for the Stahls. They have no idea of the eternal danger they’re in.”

Warmth overflowed from Sam’s heart and spilled from her eyes. “I think, Ryan Davidson, that every member of your family would be proud of the Godly man you’ve become.”

\* \* \*

Six weeks later, Sam allowed Ryan to guide her out the door of The Meridian with a hand in the small of her back. The outside air held a hint of fall crispness, and she pulled the embroidered jacket of her matching dress closer around her. She glanced at her escort and smiled. He looked fabulous in a Western-style suit.

Ryan patted his tummy. "That *was* a 'fine dining experience,' just like the TV ad says."

Sam laughed as he opened the passenger door of his pickup for her. "Told you! Jenna is a master chef. I'm going to get fat living with her."

"Not as hard as you work." He handed her up to the seat.

"Helping Jenna at the restaurant and you with the houseboats has been loafing compared to all the effort I put into a business that may never be."

"I'd like to talk to you about that." He tapped the end of her nose, shut the door, and walked around to his side. When they got on the road, he looked over at her. "Everybody at church has been really supportive about you rebuilding."

Not a word about *him* sticking around to cheer her on. Sam stared out the window to hide the disappointment in her eyes. She would *not* pressure him to stay here this winter. "I'm grateful to my dad for talking me into taking out the maximum insurance. I could demolish the shell and rebuild brand-new with a little extra bank financing, but my enthusiasm for the project is in the basement." No way would she tell him why.

"Well, we'll just have to see what we can do about that." He grinned and did a little bounce in the seat.

She gave him a sideways look. He just chuckled and turned the pickup north on the freeway, instead of east toward their home areas. "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out."

"Secrets now, eh?" Lightness returned to her tone. She would

enjoy being with Ryan every minute she could until he left for those long winter months.

“By the way, Detective Connell called again.”

Sam snickered. “He’s been exceptionally attentive these past weeks.”

“The whole department was embarrassed that Judge Seiler had a pipeline into their records, and it was nothing more than the good-old-boy system. ‘Keep me informed if anything comes up on this case. I knew the deceased.’ Wink. Wink.”

“So what did the detective want this time?”

“Real news. I didn’t want to talk about death and killers over our meal, but they’ve identified the John Doe in the graveyard.”

“Go, home team!” Sam smacked her hands together.

“Yeah, Connell was pretty pleased with himself that he thought to send the guy’s prints to the FBI, who passed them along to Interpol. The Honorable Judge Seiler went overseas to recruit his talent. The shooter was some pro out of the Russian mafia with a name I’m not even going to try to pronounce.”

They merged onto I-494 headed west, and Sam was truly mystified. “No hints about our destination?”

“I think you’ll like it.” He shot her a smug grin and would say no more on the subject during the next twenty minutes as they drove through moderate evening traffic.

“Lake Minnetonka?” Sam noted the huge, tree-lined lake on her left. The maples were in full ruddy color, and the water sparkled at her through the foliage. “We’re not going for a swim this late in the season.”

“Just a boat ride.” He turned the pickup into a marina parking lot and pulled into an empty spot. A man locking up the office building waved at Ryan. He waved back, then went around and helped Sam out of the truck, shaking his head at the questions that kept popping out of her mouth. He led her by the hand past the building, down the sidewalk, and onto the docks.

Ryan halted them at a certain slip.

Sam gaped. "What is the *River King* doing here?"

"This is its new home. The *King*'s not going anywhere except dry dock when the ice starts forming."

"But—"

Ryan placed a finger over her lips. "I sold my business to Larry, who's only been summer help all these years and an odd-job carpenter in the winter. Going full-time with their own company is a dream come true for him and Nancy. And Derek's pea-green jealous that he has to return to school and not head south with them in a couple of weeks."

A sob escaped Sam's lips.

"You're crying?" Ryan's eyes widened. "Aren't you happy?"

Sam threw her arms around him. "I'm ecstatic," she blubbered.

"Oookaaay." He patted her back and let her bury her face in his lapel. "Um, I hope you don't mind if I keep busy this winter helping a certain wonderful woman put her business back together."

"I guess I could handle that." Her voice came out muffled against his jacket.

"Good, because I'm going to need something to do while the boat shop is constructing my charter yacht."

"Your yacht?" Sam lifted her head and stepped away from him, wiping at her eyes with her fingertips. She probably looked like a raccoon now from smeared mascara, but who cared?

Ryan swept his arm toward the vast body of water. "Lake Minnetonka is about to see the classiest floating facility for day trips, weddings, anniversaries, weddings, birthdays, weddings, graduations, weddings—"

She smacked him on the arm. "What is this 'wedding' fixation?"

His gaze searched her face. "Because one day, when the time is right, I'd like to talk about applying the word to us. Would you be open to that idea?"

If joy had a visible glow, she'd be a lighthouse. She ducked her head and turned away. "I might be persuaded to consider the prospect. But only if you promise me an awesome Boundary

Waters honeymoon.” She swiveled back toward him. “I demand beautiful memories to replace the dismal.”

Ryan’s hearty laugh warmed the evening air. “I think that can be arranged.”

He offered his arm and ushered her aboard his houseboat. They cast off as the setting sun spread shafts of pink and amber across the rippling water.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear Reader,

I hope you are inspired by the courage and perseverance of Samantha and Ryan as they wrestle with enemies of the heart and mind, as well as those who threaten their very lives. Thankfully, most of us will never face the awful loss to violet crime to the degree that these two characters do, but we can all relate to the confusion and temptation to bitterness that the death of a loved one or an undeserved wrong can thrust into our lives.

No, life will never be the same after such trauma, but can't it be good once more? Take heart that God is not only with us in sorrow, but stands ready to lift us out of grief and redeem the loss with fresh purpose and new direction. My own losses, which have been profound at times, have taught me that He indeed brings beauty from ashes and the oil of joy for mourning.

Write to me through my contact page at [www.jillelizabethnelson.com](http://www.jillelizabethnelson.com) if you have an encouraging story to share about new life after loss, and your testimony may be featured in my newsletter. I'm eager to hear from my wonderful readers!

Excellent blessings,

*Jill Elizabeth Nelson*



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Past trauma has instilled in Samantha a heightened fear of intruders. For many years, this fear crippled her ability to move outside her personal safety zone. What fears do you possess that may be holding you back from your potential? How might you overcome them?
2. Because of catastrophic loss, Ryan no longer believed God cares about him. Many people are angry with God, and blame Him for the negatives in their lives. Why is this false reasoning, and how can people process their hurts without losing their faith?
3. Samantha is concerned about how appearances might affect her reputation and the success of her business. Keeping a good name is important in life, but where do we draw the line between maintaining a good reputation and doing the right thing, even though it might have a negative impact on how others perceive us? Does Samantha successfully strike this balance? How might her example apply to your life?
4. Ryan has decided that forming attachments to other people isn't worth the risk of losing them. Why is this ultimately more hurtful than taking a chance on investing in others?
5. Samantha is willing to risk her safety to maintain her hard-won independence. Do you agree with her decision to hold her ground in the face of threat? Why or why not?
6. Ryan began questioning his faith before his family was killed. Samantha assures him that God is not afraid of his questions. Does that statement make Ryan uncomfortable?

Why? Can questions be a legitimate part of the process of making faith personal?

7. The hallmark of character is integrity, which sometimes means owning up to wrongdoing and facing the consequences in order keep others from suffering needlessly. Which characters in the book display a lack of integrity in this way, and why do they choose the dishonorable path? Have there been times in your life that you've been faced with similar choices, though perhaps on a lesser scale? What did you choose? Why?
8. Some people will do anything to gain power and position and keep the esteem of society. What might be the root causes of that level of ruthless ambition? How can we keep our perspective when we see the abuse of power?
9. Unresolved issues between Ryan and his father have stolen his hope. How so? There are layers to this problem that are common to humanity. During Ryan and Sam's discussion on his houseboat, a new depth to this barrier is revealed. What is it, and does the realization free Ryan emotionally?
10. Samantha has an unusually compassionate attitude toward the criminal who devastated her life. What is it? By the end of the book, how does her hard-won wisdom help Ryan begin to walk free of bitterness?
11. At the conclusion of the book, what does Ryan give up in order to stay close to a person he has grown to love? Does he gain much more than he loses? Can you think of times in your life when you needed to let go of something in order to gain something else? Did the relinquishment ultimately benefit you?

12. By the final chapter, Samantha's focus is no longer on establishing an independent life as a successful businesswoman, but on her relationship with Ryan. Why are relationships always more important than accomplishments?



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EVIDENCE OF MURDER

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