

The background of the cover is a monochromatic blue-tinted photograph of a serene landscape. It features a calm body of water in the foreground, a small island or peninsula with several trees in the middle ground, and a distant shoreline with more trees under a clear sky. The overall mood is peaceful and quiet.

Unquiet
Spirits

Dee Lloyd

UNQUIET SPIRITS

...In the living room, with her face almost pressed against the glass doors, Kit was peering intently out at the lake. She whirled around when he entered. Her eyes were wide and frightened and her face was drained of all color.

“What happened?” He rushed to her side.

“Who was that couple on the beach?” Kit’s normally soft voice was shrill.

“I didn’t see any couple.”

“They were walking along the beach, heading this way, right after you went out. You must’ve seen them.” Kit’s hands flew wildly as she spoke. “The woman waved at you. Then you stopped for a minute before they went up the path to the lodge ahead of you.”

“Kit...” He grasped her shoulders and held her still for a moment. “I didn’t see anybody.” He looked directly into her eyes, trying to calm her with the force of his mind. “It must’ve been a trick of the light. Clouds passing across the moon can make strange shadows.”

“Listen to me, Bart. That was no trick of light. There was a thin man...not as tall as you but taller than the woman. She was about my height, I think. And she waved...” Kit caught her breath and shook her head as if in disbelief...

PRAISE FOR UNQUIET SPIRITS

“5 Hearts!...The story has all the mystery and suspense one could look for in a romance and yet has a bit of the paranormal when one adds the ghostly lovers of Kit’s dead mother and the man who was her true soul mate. Does Kit find who is behind all this? Will the answer come from the couple from beyond? A must have for anyone’s collection who loves romantic suspense.”

—Louise Riveiro-Mitchell
The Romance Studio

“...Enchanting...and the characters engaging. I devoured it all in one night, anxiously reading to find out who done it and guessing at the possible suspects along every turn. The repartee between Kit and Bart was bright and the ghosts added an element of fun to the mix...A fun read, which I would recommend.”

—Karla Brandenburg
The Road to Romance

“3 Ribbons!...An intriguing mystery. The ghost of a dead mother comes back to talk to her daughter. The challenge of keeping the heroine alive, will keep the reader turning the pages in search of answers...It keeps the reader on the edge of the seat trying to figure out who the villain could really be. I recommend this novel to all the mystery buffs out there. I enjoyed it immensely.”

—Mariah
Romance Junkies

“...A thoroughly engrossing experience from the first word to the last. Kit was a wonderful blend of innocence, uncertainty, strength and sensuality. Bart was perfect as a childhood friend turned lifelong partner. The protective instincts brought out in him by Kit’s dilemma warmed my heart. And it was comforting to believe that it might be possible for a much-loved parent to be able to help in life even after they are gone. I absolutely loved the addition of Laila and Raoul!...A ‘must read’ for anyone who believes in a true, deep abiding love—in a soul mate. Dee Lloyd has created what is sure to be a classic. I know I’ll be reading it again...and again...and again!”

—Tracy Atencio
Romantic Interludes

“4 Roses!...An entertaining book filled with suspense, mystery, action, romance plus a twist of the paranormal.”

—Susan
Love Romances

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Change Of Plans
Ghost Of A Chance
Mine
Ties That Bind

UNQUIET SPIRITS

BY

DEE LLOYD

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UNQUIET SPIRITS
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To Amanda, for making the writing possible.

And to Terry...always.

CHAPTER 1

Kit leaned back against the office door and released a long, shaky breath. She'd done it! Ten minutes ago she'd burned the last major bridge behind her. She could take off on an exciting, carefree adventure any time now—if she could think of a single place she wanted to go.

Alone.

Kit forced herself to focus on the familiar scene. The gleaming desktop looked unnatural without its usual piles of paper. Behind it, the leather bulk of her father's empty desk chair glared at her, emanating waves of cold disapproval. She fought down the familiar wave of guilt. She hadn't made the decision to step down lightly. If she was ever to sort out the chaos of her emotions, she had to get completely away from Florida and its memories.

Yesterday, after she'd performed the unpleasant task of informing Gunther Roth and his team that she could not approve the funding for the next phase of his genetic restructuring research, she'd handed the

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reins of the foundation over to her assistant Gordon until further notice. And, as of today, there would be no more Schofields running Schofield Pharmaceuticals. The board meeting had simply put the official stamp on Gordon's role as CEO.

She took a deep breath and stifled the panic that rose in her throat every time she thought about cutting ties and starting a new life.

She glanced hastily around her. The noonday sun poured through the picture window and glinted off the brass desk lamp onto the gleaming walnut desk. She gave herself a mental shake. She should take a memento of this six-year segment of her life. She picked up the onyx pen set Bart had given her when she had taken over this office six years ago.

Their innocent affection had been so comfortable then.

She reached over to flip on the intercom. "Hi, Helen. Please tell Gordon I'm ready to go."

Thank goodness she'd already said her private farewells to her executive assistant and friend.

She straightened her shoulders and stood up as tall as her five-foot-two frame would stretch. The staff would see the fashionable, decisive Kit Schofield they were used to seeing. She grasped the doorknob and launched herself into the hallway where Gordon waited for her.

"Are you all right, Kit? Would you like to wait a bit to say your farewells?"

There was genuine concern in his brown eyes. Kit wished she could throw herself into his brotherly, middle-aged embrace and tell him what was upsetting her. Gordon would gladly take over and re-organize her tangled life for her. But she was the only person who could sort out that chaos.

"No, no. I'd like to get it over with," she said, fixing a bright smile on her lips.

As if she didn't have a care in the world, she sauntered over to the

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crowd of well-wishers who'd left their desks to say good-bye. After all, they thought she was heading off on a holiday to launch another phase in her glamorous golden life.

Solid as always, Gordon remained at her side.

They stepped out through the glass outer doors into the humid September day. The hot Florida sun beat down on their heads. The asphalt of the parking lot was so hot it glistened in the brilliant sunshine.

Kit stopped at the base of the steps and brushed a sisterly kiss on Gordon's cheek. "Thanks for everything, Gordon. You don't have to walk me to the car. It's right over there in the shade."

Annoying tears began to well up behind her eyes as she strolled across the quiet parking lot toward the privacy of her little red sports car. She had to think positively. Who knew what wonderful experiences were just around the corner? Maybe she'd take a long trip. Be away from Florida for the hurricane season.

Deep in thought, she was only vaguely aware of someone gunning a powerful motor about a hundred feet to her right.

Suddenly, tires squealed as a white van with darkly tinted windows turned sharply and skidded into the parking lot. Startled, she turned toward the sound. The van picked up speed and hurtled around the circular driveway in her direction. Was the driver drunk? She took a couple of cautious steps backward toward the curb to give the van plenty of room to get by her. But the driver seemed to be steering right for her.

"Kit! Get back here!" Gordon shouted.

She whirled around and leapt back toward the building. The van swerved and mounted the curb after her. Gordon, moving amazingly fast for a man of his age and girth, grabbed her arm and yanked her hard out of its direct path. However, the front bumper managed to catch Kit's left leg and knock her loose of Gordon's grasp. She spun, flying

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against the concrete steps of the building.

Instinctively, she tucked in her chin and tried to protect her head with her arms. The last thing she felt, before the world went black, was a fierce jolt of pain across her shoulders and down her right arm.

In brief moments of semi-consciousness, she was aware of sirens and voices and pain. Above all, pain. She sensed she was in a moving vehicle for a while. Then there were occasional hazy moments of awareness when a vaguely familiar woman's voice gave brisk instructions and the pain receded for a while. But it returned—again and again.

She didn't know if it was hours or days later that Bart's low voice wrapped around her like a soothing blanket. She didn't quite catch the words. She simply couldn't muster the energy to focus on them. But he was there.

Time had little meaning for her as she drifted in this painful limbo.

Eventually, the fog lifted, leaving only the pain. She opened her eyes a slit to find herself in a dim hospital room. Then...Bart bending over her.

His blue eyes were dark with concern and he looked as if he hadn't shaved or slept in days. Just the sight of him made the pain fade for a moment.

She was so glad to see him. It had been weeks since they'd decided to do the only sensible thing and avoid each other. She tried to smile at him.

"You've finally decided to wake up, have you, Kittle?" He turned and nodded at the gray-haired nurse standing on the other side of the hospital bed. "Will you call Dr. Wheeler, Bea?"

Bea? Slowly, Kit made the connection. Bea Foster was the private duty nurse who had looked after Bart's father. What was Bea doing here? And where exactly was here?

"She said she wanted to be notified as soon as Kit regained

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consciousness,” Bea agreed. “I’ll be right back with your meds, Kit,” she added.

Bart bent to place a light kiss on Kit’s forehead. “I’ll bet that’s the only place that doesn’t hurt,” he said.

That was true. And what really frightened her was the enormous amount of plaster she was wearing. Her upper body was tightly wrapped and she could see her right arm encased in a cast. Her left leg was in another cast. She seemed to be suspended in some kind of contraption attached to pulleys. She tried to move her toes. The pain in her leg was intense, but one toe moved slightly.

“Bart,” she croaked, “please. Am I paralyzed?”

He looked into her eyes, while his fingers lightly caressed her cheek. “Oh, no, Kittle. You may not think so right now, but you were very lucky. You broke your collarbone and your right arm. Cracked that not-so-funny humerus. You also did a good job on the tibia of your left leg. The good news is you didn’t injure your spine. And you didn’t hit your head.” He held her gaze for a moment as if he were going to say something more. Then he looked away.

She lay quietly for a moment. There was something he wasn’t saying.

Bart ran his fingers impatiently through his blond thatch of hair, then looked at his watch.

“Damn! The timing couldn’t be worse, Kit, but I couldn’t just leave you a message.”

“Your dad!” she gasped.

“No, no. Dad is fine. Everyone is fine...except you, Kittle. But I’ve accepted a job with my old boss. Out of the country. It’s a special negotiation.”

The only thing she knew about those negotiations was that, during the last one, he’d been held hostage in some Middle Eastern country for three months. She couldn’t stand it if anything happened to Bart.

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“Don’t worry, Kit,” he assured her. “That last trip was a comedy of errors. People got their wires crossed. It won’t happen again.”

She didn’t have the energy to tell him she wasn’t fool enough to believe that. She closed her eyes to keep back insistent tears.

“Please don’t go to sleep on me, Kit. I have to go in a few minutes. My flight leaves in an hour.” He cast an anxious glance at the door. “I was hoping I could be here when Dr. Wheeler came in to explain about your injuries.”

She wanted to tell him she didn’t want him to leave...that she was in pain and didn’t want to be alone. But she simply mumbled, “Good-bye, then. Keep safe.” And let the tears come.

“Bea,” Bart called urgently, “hurry with that medication.”

Kit was sure no kind of medication would erase this sense of desolation, but whatever was in the injection Bea gave her dragged her back into sweet oblivion.

CHAPTER 2

A full seven months after the attack that had sent her to Healing Springs Hospital, Kit finally took the wheel of her sweet, little, red Miata and headed home to West Palm Beach. She hummed tunelessly, and reveled in the morning sun on her face and the wind whipping through her hair.

It was a relief to be going home. Being around a couple who were as much in love as Bart's twin brother Bret and his wife Milly were was not easy; however, she'd survived their devastating cheerfulness at Christmas and their toasts to a rosy future at New Year's. Then the warm and fuzzy season was over and Bart was still away on his hush-hush business trip.

She'd done her best to put him out of her mind, but couldn't resist skimming Bret's European newspapers for a glimpse of him. Apparently Bart's business involved quite a bit of high profile partying with gorgeous and more-than-sociable socialites. One news photo of a

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New Year's Eve gala at somebody's villa on the Côte d'Azur had hurt. The photographer was interested in catching a prince of some minor principality kissing a woman who was not his wife, but in the background was a well-built blond man. A smiling Bart Thornton had a beautiful dark-haired woman draped all over him.

Kit had no right to be upset. She and Bart had promised they would pretend those uncontrolled moments after Ronald's attempt to kill her had never happened. She only wished she could forget the incredible surge of emotion and passion that had exploded into their first kiss of relief.

But there was no point in dwelling on that.

She'd been lucky. Her bones had healed straight, her casts were long gone and the ugly discoloration on her legs and upper body had faded away. She refused to spend one more second trying to figure out who the mysterious driver of the van that hit her could be. The police put the incident down to "random violence." That had to be good enough.

Kit parked in front of her stone-and-timbered home and sat looking at it for a moment. The house was wildly out of place among the stucco, concrete and gleaming glass of West Palm Beach's oceanfront mansions. The idea of an English country manor on a Florida beach had tickled Grandfather Schofield's sense of whimsy. Over time, the stone and timbers had become weathered enough to fit in with the palm trees and bougainvillea. Laila had loved it. Kit liked it well enough, but found its size a bit overwhelming for one person.

Well, she was home! Milly had tried to talk Kit out of leaving this morning, but she knew she'd already stayed too long. Without even bothering to call her housekeeper to say she was returning, she'd packed a few essentials and left.

She stepped briskly out of the car, got her bag out of the trunk and ran quickly up the front steps. She felt fine now—healthy, strong. Fine.

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When she unlocked the front door, she was met by the smell of furniture polish and echoing silence.

A pile of mail sat beside the vase of fresh flowers on the waist-high table that graced the marble-tiled entrance hall. The gleaming oak surface was ideal for sorting mail.

She riffled through the envelopes quickly, telling herself there was no point in looking for Bart's bold scrawl. His brother had received a note from him last week saying he'd be back in West Palm in a week or so. Bret figured he could be here as early as tomorrow. That was another good reason for her to leave the newlyweds.

She didn't have much luck with men. Ronald had fooled her completely. He'd seemed so sincere about loving her and wanting her to be the mother of his children. She shivered to think how close he'd come to killing her for the money. *If Bart hadn't fired first...*

Bart. It always came back to Bart. Falling in love had blindsided them both. She had loved Bart since she was five years old. Actually, she had idolized both him and his twin brother, Bret, from the moment her mother had married their father. Even after the divorce, the long holidays Kit had spent with Uncle Will and her two wonderful "cousins" were the happiest times of her life.

Then everything had changed. The attraction to Bart had sneaked up on her. As the nightmare of her marriage intensified, so did her impossible desire to be with Bart. The barely controllable lust that suddenly sparked between her and the golden man who had always been something between brother and a dearly loved cousin was wrong. No matter that he was no blood kin. In her heart and in her fondest memories, he was family.

That put him out of bounds.

Automatically, she sorted the envelopes, tossing the junk mail into the wastepaper basket. There was a letter from Canada.

Kit had met her grandmother, Johanna, for the first time when she

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was fifteen and they had rarely met since. But they'd shared a genuine fondness for each other from the moment Johanna had clasped Kit to her rather spectacular bosom and stated, "I have always wanted a granddaughter. You will call me Johanna."

They also shared the ownership of Spirit Lake Resort.

Because she and Johanna did most of their resort business by email and fax—occasionally by telephone—a letter from Johanna was rare. And it was always a cryptic marvel of brevity. What could she want this time?

She tore open the envelope.

Kat:

(Kit smiled at her grandmother's persistence. Kit was named after her grandmother Katrina; she should be called Kat. Shouldn't she?)

We need to develop your grandfather's old sawmill property. Betsy Warner has worked up a cheerful business plan that will expand the resort business and do a lot to counteract all the silly talk about our hauntings.

Will you come up here to talk to her or should we come to Florida?

—Johanna

Hauntings? Johanna and Aunt Elsa were a little eccentric, but had they gone right round the bend?

Who on earth was Betsy Warner? Whoever she was, Kit hoped her business plan was more sensible than Johanna's last brainstorm. That one had proposed that seventy-year-old Johanna and dear, vague Aunt

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Elsa, who must be pushing sixty, build stables, buy horses and provide trail rides for resort guests. It might have been a good plan, if either of the women had ever been near a horse.

Why not go up to Muskoka and find out? Kit felt a spark of her old energy. *Yes.* She'd go to Canada. And if this "cheerful business plan" had any possibilities at all, throw herself wholeheartedly into it. Best of all, she'd be away from West Palm Beach when Bart returned home. She wouldn't be running away. She'd be on a business trip.

Besides, it was past time she paid some attention to the place.

And to her only living relatives.

Kit grinned. This was just what she needed. With a little effort, she could be on the road tomorrow morning. Or, maybe she'd fly to Toronto, buy an SUV there and do the short drive up to Spirit Lake directly.

Yes, and she could leave the truck at the resort when she returned home. If she returned home.

She found she was humming again. No one listening would recognize it, but this tune was even more upbeat and cheerful than the one she'd mutilated in the car. Being tone deaf didn't matter when you were alone!

* * *

"What do you mean, 'I just missed her'?" Bart stared at his brother in disbelief. "Where is she?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Bret admitted, looking away from him to close the folder he'd been reading and put it on the pile at the edge of his desk. "Can I get you a beer? Or a coffee?"

"You're not sure?" Bart bellowed, ignoring the ridiculous offer. "The guy who ran Kit down and almost killed her is still at large. How could you let her take off without telling you where she was going?"

His brother's grimace said it all. How did anyone stop Kit from doing something she'd made up her mind to do? The headstrong,

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scrawny kid with the big blue eyes had grown up to be a much too attractive, dangerously independent woman. Didn't she realize someone had tried to kill her?

"Hold on. I don't know precisely where she is right now. Kit's healthy again and decided to visit her grandmother up in Canada. Seems they have some business to discuss about that resort Johanna runs.

"And it's good to see you, too, bro. All in one piece this time."

Bart didn't acknowledge the sarcasm in his twin's voice. "Yeah," he snapped impatiently. "It's good to get home again."

"Bart, settle down."

Bart bristled, but he knew he was overreacting and bit his tongue.

"Kit told me to welcome you home and say she'd see you when she got back from the resort. She's in good shape," Bret assured him more gently.

His brother's blue eyes darkened in sympathy. They hadn't discussed the obvious change in his relationship with Kit, but Bart didn't have a hope of hiding anything that important from his twin.

"Her injuries are healed," Bret went on, "and her frame of mind is much healthier too. She's finally putting the mess with Ronald behind her and is attempting to get on with her life. Told us she'd had enough coddling."

"That could be. But I need to see Kit for myself."

During the months while he'd danced delicate circles around "neutral" diplomats and played the idle, rich fool for them, Bart had been going nuts with worry about her. But he couldn't leave until he got the response the American government wanted from the foreign officials they couldn't contact openly.

"Do the police or your people have any kind of a line on the guy who tried to run her down?"

"Nothing. The police finally filed it as a 'random violent incident.'

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Whatever that means. Trust me, I've questioned everyone I can think of who could possibly have a motive. Gordon was a big help. He and I went over employment records at Schofield's going back five years. No disgruntled employees who might have seen themselves as passed over for promotions, nobody laid off, fired...nothing."

Bart nodded. Gordon Timbrill was the third of Kit's "almost-brothers"—courtesy of two of her mother's half-dozen marriages. He could see why Bret trusted him. Gordon would never do anything to harm their golden, little Kit.

"And Kit had her lawyer go over the details of her will with me. It's very straightforward. She's made sure Gordon will continue to run Schofield Pharmaceutical so that cuts him from a possible suspects list. He'd gain absolutely nothing from her death. The bulk of her money will go to the Schofield Foundation for a children's wing at the hospital her father supported. Apart from that there are few small legacies, you know the kind of thing—to her housekeeper, her handyman, et cetera.

"Her only relatives are her Aunt Elsa and her grandmother. Kit has left them each quite a substantial sum. And her shares in the lodge. I investigated them myself. They're comfortably off...no urgent need of funds there that I could find."

"You can't be sure. There's an awful lot of money involved. What do you know about them? Kit never mentions having family."

"When I asked Will if he'd met them while he was married to Laila, he told me all Laila told him was that she was seriously estranged from her family. Refused to talk about her relationship with her father. She left home when she was seventeen and returned only once while her father was alive, and that was to buy the lodge next door to his property for her sister and stepmother to run."

"I guess I'll have to ask Kit about them," Bart said, "when I catch up with her."

"We weren't able to get Kit to speculate much about how anyone

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would benefit from her death. She refuses to admit it could be anyone she knows. I've had a man at the Schofield Foundation for days. He hasn't come across anything yet."

"I guess you're doing what you can, but I'm not buying that random violence thing," Bart stated. The uneasiness he'd been feeling about Kit's safety was getting stronger by the minute. He needed to see her. "Damn. Why didn't she wait until I got home? You did tell her I was coming, didn't you?"

"She said she needed to get away from all of us. Maybe you should let her do that."

"Shit, Bret! She's in danger." And he had no intention of letting her run around loose, not while she was a target.

"It's been seven months since the hit-and-run. If it was a serious attempt on her life, wouldn't you expect there would've been at least some kind of threat? But not a whisper from anyone. I've had a couple of good men from Greco Associates keeping an eye on her and they're sure no one's following her or sniffing around here."

His twin had a point, but Bart couldn't shake off the bad feeling he'd had since he'd heard Kit was en route to Muskoka alone. "She's been safe staying with you and Milly. But right now she's out from under the wing of Greco Associates."

A horrible thought struck him. "She's not driving alone all the way from Florida to central Ontario, is she?"

"She decided against that. She flew from Miami to Toronto. She's having a car delivered to the hotel tomorrow and driving north from there. It's only about a three-hour drive."

"When did she leave?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"And she gets the car tomorrow? That means that right this minute she's on her own in a strange city."

"Take it easy. She checked in with Milly first thing this morning."

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She's doing some shopping this afternoon, then tonight she's taking in a musical she's wanted to see. She'll take delivery of her car and head up to Spirit Lake sometime tomorrow."

"Good thing I haven't unpacked. I can leave right away. Where's she staying?"

"Milly will know," Bret said.

Milly did.

Bart phoned Toronto, discovered Kit was indeed registered at the mid-town luxury hotel, booked a suite for himself on the same floor and headed for the airport. There was no point in warning Kit he was coming. She'd only tell him to stay away. And he wasn't about to do that.

CHAPTER 3

Yes!” Kit beamed at her afternoon’s purchases. Two sets of sweats, one scarlet, one turquoise; several cashmere pullovers; hiking boots and wool socks; a shiny blue raincoat; black denim pants; and a leather jacket with a detachable faux-fur lining. She ran her fingers over the two wonderful coy, kitten-soft flannelette nightgowns. Not one sexy or provocative item among them, she thought with satisfaction. Step one in pleasing no one but herself.

It might seem silly to be buying these warm clothes after strolling around the elegant Yorkville mews in eighty-degree weather today. The little gardens were a riot of color. It could have been midsummer. However, she remembered finding the cabins at Spirit Lake Resort a little chilly after sunset and in the early mornings. She was looking forward to spending those cool nights in her flannel gown, alone under a down-filled duvet.

She’d been enjoying little flashes of memory of her one real visit

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there.

Laila laughing as they paddled a canoe in the morning mists; Johanna, a tall, dynamic blonde Viking of a woman giving her a fierce welcoming hug; Aunt Elsa, healthily pretty in the background. And Raoul, Elsa's fiancé, with the snapping black laughing eyes.

Kit smiled at the memory of her first overwhelming crush. Raoul was a musician, he was gorgeous, he was funny, he had a delicious French-Canadian accent! And, amazingly, even though her glamorous mother was always with them, he still paid attention to Kit. She had spent the whole two weeks blushing at his outrageous compliments and teasing.

She later heard he'd left the area without marrying Elsa and she wondered idly if he had ever returned. She'd bet those dark eyes still had plenty of the devil in them, even in his sixties. She'd like to see him again, she mused.

But right now she'd better stop daydreaming and get something to eat before she left for the theater. The musical was reputed to guarantee lots of laughs and had a feel-good ending. Another bonus was that it featured songs Kit remembered from her pre-teen days.

The show lived up to its billing. On the way back to the hotel in the back seat of the cab, Kit hummed the familiar melody of "Dancing Queen." Now that brought back good memories. She remembered a wonderful ski holiday with Uncle Will and the boys. Laila's two-year marriage to Will had ended when Kit was seven, but afterward she'd spent more holidays with the Thorntons than she had with Laila. She'd been an adoring twelve-year-old when sixteen-year-old Bart and Bret had taught her to dance to the driving strains of "Dancing Queen."

She was still smiling at the memory when the cab pulled up in front of the hotel. After paying the driver, she allowed the affable uniformed doorman to open the car door.

She smiled back at him. "Thank you, Winston." The elderly man

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had given her helpful directions for her shopping trip this afternoon and had told her his name when she'd tipped him.

She was stepping onto the flagstones of the entranceway as she exited the cab when her high heel caught on the edge of a stone. She lost her balance and was halfway to the ground when Winston caught her.

A loud crack like a car backfiring on the street a few feet away startled her. Before she could twist around to discover the source of the noise, the doorman shoved her down onto the cold, damp flagstones. As he did, there was a second sharp explosion. He flinched, then collapsed on top of her.

"Stay down," he said, when she tried to get up. "Someone's shooting."

"Don't be..." she began, but stopped when she saw the blood. His top hat had been knocked off and she could see blood in his white hair. It was dripping down the side of his face into his jaunty goatee.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Somebody help him."

"I'm all right, miss," he mumbled.

"The shooter's car's gone," a wonderfully familiar, deep male voice said. Someone lifted the doorman off her and strong arms helped her gently to her feet.

"My God, Kittle, you're covered in blood."

That handsome, anxious face was the most wonderful sight she could imagine.

"Bart?" she cried as she threw her arms around him. Had she lost her mind? He couldn't be here. His fierce hug reassured her that he was. "I wasn't hit. The doorman..."

"Got to get you inside," he muttered as he put one arm around her waist to half-support, half-carry her into the hotel. Over his shoulder, he called to the cab driver who was hovering over the injured doorman, "I'll be right back."

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Once they were in the lobby, away from the windows that overlooked the brightly lit circular driveway, Bart held her at arm's length. His intense blue eyes quickly traveled over her body. "You're sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm sure." Her knees hurt and her hands were scraped, but that was nothing. Bart was here!

He set her in one of the big easy chairs that were placed in scattered conversation groups around the huge carpeted room.

"Don't move a muscle. I'll be right back," he called over his shoulder as he headed back to the front doors. "Just going to check on the doorman."

* * *

Bart's heart was pounding as if he'd run five miles with a heavy pack. The smears of blood on Kit's cheek and on the shoulder of her red leather pantsuit had thrown him for a loop. He could have lost her. The near miss made him even more determined. From now on she was going to be wearing him like a second skin. At least until they caught the scum who was trying to kill her. Lord! He'd almost succeeded this time!

By the time Bart got outside, the doorman was on his feet and surrounded by cab drivers from the taxi rack. A police car with flashing lights and siren was screaming to a stop in front of the anxious crowd.

From the looks of the men intent on explaining what had taken place, Kit could give her report to the police when they had finished with the other witnesses to the shooting. Bart spun on his heel and strode back to her.

"Come on, Kit," he said, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. "Let's get up to your room. We need to talk. The police can find us there."

"Is Winston all right?"

"The doorman? He's on his feet. A little wobbly, but he's damned

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lucky to be alive.” It went without saying that so was Kit. “Looks as if the bullet just nicked him. Let’s get out of here before the police find us or we’ll be tied up for hours.”

As he might have expected, she dug in her heels. “Bart, I’m a witness. I have to talk to them.”

“Can you identify the shooter? Or the car?”

She shook her head.

“You can talk to them later. I’ll tell whoever’s in charge of the reception desk that we’ll be in your room.”

She opened her mouth to speak but he carried on.

“Because you’re too shaken up to wait down here.”

That must have been the truth because his spunky Kittle accompanied him without further protest. He kept a firm grip on her hand. The connection and the warmth of her slender fingers in his reaffirmed that she was alive. And he was going to keep her that way.

On the long elevator ride to the twenty-second floor, he drank in the sight of her. Lord, she was beautiful! How could he have been immune to that face and that body for all those years?

Her pale blonde hair was longer than it had been seven months ago, wisps escaping from the thick French braid hanging down her back. She was thinner, too. That made her lovely cheekbones more prominent, her heavily lashed blue eyes look even larger. He tore his eyes away from her too-tempting, generous mouth that was made for laughing...and for kissing.

His glance skimmed the curves of her breasts, her waist, her hips. That was even worse. He switched his gaze to the numbers above the elevator doors. That was safer. But he still gripped her hand. And she let him.

“How did you happen to be there right when I needed you?” she asked as she took her hand away to unlock the door to her suite. Her husky voice was a little shaky and her hands trembled slightly as she

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slid the plastic card into the lock slot.

He could tell she needed to be held, but he hesitated to take her in his arms. They'd agreed.

"You told Milly and I called your grandmother at Spirit Lake to double check your plans. She confirmed you were going to see a show tonight and drive up to the lodge as soon as you took delivery of the SUV tomorrow. The concierge told me which show he'd recommended and when you'd be expected back. I was sitting in an armchair with a view of the circular drive when I heard the shot," he reported. "What I'd like to know is how the guy with the gun happened to be there at the right time."

Kit took off her bloodstained jacket, threw it on a striped couch and turned to face him. The strain on her face and the yearning in her eyes snapped his control.

"Oh, Kittle," he breathed, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tight against him. "I can't help it. I need to hold you."

The fierce strength with which she gripped him back showed how much she needed to be held. Holding his gaze almost defiantly, she raised her slightly parted lips to be kissed.

Bart told himself she should be treated gently, tenderly, after what she'd been through, but he couldn't stem his ferocious hunger for her. For months he'd ached for her touch. He needed to taste her, to plunder every recess of her mouth. He'd waited too long to stroke and kiss every inch of her sexy body.

The first touch of their mouths ignited a blaze that flared out of control.

Kit's fingers rammed deep into his hair and held his head, while her tongue stabbed and stroked and mated with his. Lips and teeth nibbled at lips and tongues in a frenzy of need.

Bart cursed the difference in their height as he bent over her and ran his palms up and down her back. Finally, he could not stand the

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distance between their bodies any longer.

“Dammit, Kit! I feel like a Great Dane trying to make out with a flea!”

He grasped her buttocks and lifted her against him.

“You silver-tongued devil! A flea!” She laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist. “How’s that for a cooperative flea?” she said, as she nibbled on his ear.

Bart’s erection was instant and total.

* * *

Kit could feel his hardened penis against her sensitized mound. The pressure against the tiny bud inside made her wriggle against him. She had wanted Bart like this forever.

“Stop wriggling or it’s all over.”

Bart slipped his arms under her buttocks and began to carry her toward the bedroom. With a joyful laugh, she toed off her shoes and let them fall to the floor. Almost dizzy with happiness, she frantically began to unbutton his shirt and press nibbling kisses on his neck and chest. She had despaired of ever being with Bart like this!

The laughter died in her throat.

She couldn’t let this happen. Every cell in her body craved fulfillment, but she wouldn’t be able to live with the guilt if they made love. Her conscience struggled with her body and won the gargantuan battle by a hair.

When Bart felt her body stiffen, he stopped in his tracks. Kit raised her head as she flattened her hands against his chest to push him away slightly. Her eyes, slightly unfocused and smoky with passion, were full of regret.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. There was a terrible depth of despair in her voice. “We can’t, Bart.”

He gripped her even more tightly against him for a few seconds.

“I wanted you to be my brother for so long.” Her blue eyes searched

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his, clearly desperate for understanding. “In my mind, you were. It doesn’t make sense, but no matter how much I want to make love with you, I can’t do it.”

He took a long, shuddering breath.

“If that’s what you believe, Kit, I’ll go along with you,” he rasped. “Just give me a minute and I’ll put you down.”

* * *

He leaned against the doorframe, with Kit still wrapped around him, squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on stepping back from the brink. Kit wanted him. His body ached for her. It wouldn’t be impossible to coax her to make love tonight, but she’d regret it. And he wanted more than one night with her. The long separation had taught him she belonged in his life. It wouldn’t be easy, but he could wait until she realized they were meant to be together.

Finally he made himself put her down.

The dazed, unhappy expression in her eyes was almost more than he could bear.

“Stay here. I’ll just be out in the hall,” he bit out. And, mentally cursing his lack of judgment, and his unbelievably adolescent lack of control, he grabbed the room key off the table where Kit had tossed it and made his escape to cool off.

Damn it. He’d promised himself he would move slowly. He’d known it would take more than a spectacular bout of lovemaking to make Kit realize there was really no reason to feel guilty about wanting each other. Because this was about more than simply satisfying an urge. The long months he had spent apart from her had taught him that much. What he felt for Kit was much more complicated than that.

He liked women and had enjoyed quite a number of them. He liked their laughter, their insight, their softness, their passion. He’d even had a couple of fairly long-lasting relationships. When they were over, though, he had never looked back. And he knew why. No matter how

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hot the relationship was in bed, he'd always held himself at a comfortable emotional distance from his lovers.

With Kit, that couldn't happen. They'd started out close. He'd loved her since she was five years old. Only the lust was new. And the strength of his desire for her made every other attraction he'd ever felt seem like a schoolboy crush. His body craved hers. But he was frankly terrified at the thought of being in love with her. Kit would own him, body and soul.

After one trip to the end of the corridor and back, he had sufficient control of himself to open the door and speak to her.

When he saw her sitting in a miserable lump not three feet from where he'd left her, he almost lost all the control he'd gained. "If we want to get to Spirit Lake tomorrow, we'd better not mention the Florida hit-and-run."

"Right," she replied. "We don't have anything to tell them anyway."

He retreated to the hall, where he completed another dozen laps of the corridor before the police arrived.

By the time the uniformed officers were convinced Kit didn't have any idea who could be shooting at her in a city she'd never before visited, it was almost three o'clock in the morning.

The door had barely closed behind them when Bart yawned and announced, "Don't even suggest I sleep on that couch, Kit. There are two beds in your room."

She looked at him as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Have you lost your mind, Thornton? We've had this discussion. You can sleep in your own room."

"Kit," he said wearily, "forty-eight hours ago I was changing planes at Heathrow. I've been in motion ever since. I'm too wiped to be a gentleman and sleep on a short couch. And I'm sure not leaving you here alone."

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“The doors have good double locks,” she protested half-heartedly. “And the man from hotel security said they’d keep an eye on this suite tonight.”

“Be nice, Kit. Just get used to the idea that, until we catch the guy who’s after you, I’m going to be very close by. That may pose a problem from time to time.” He gave her a wry, sexy grin, then spoiled the effect by yawning again. “But, I promise you, not tonight.”

* * *

Kit was too tired to argue. She covered her own yawn with her hand and couldn’t help smiling back at him.

“Okay, sit right there.” She pointed imperiously at the chair he’d been sitting in for the past couple of hours. “Give me ten minutes to get into bed. Then you can have the bathroom. Don’t you dare wake me. See you in the morning.”

Even half-dead on his feet, Bart exuded a powerful aura of barely leashed energy. The air seemed charged with his unadulterated masculinity. Sometime, when she hadn’t been looking, the funny, energetic kid who had been her whole world had grown into this gorgeous, virile man. And she was going to pretend they could go back to a time when she hadn’t noticed the changes? That she wasn’t affected by his animal magnetism? Who was she trying to kid?

* * *

When Kit emerged from the bedroom at eleven o’clock the next morning, Bart had already fetched his unpacked bag from his own room, changed, and was reading the morning paper in the living room of the suite.

“Coffee?” He gestured idly at the little coffee maker on the bar. “It isn’t fantastic, but it’s hot.”

Bart was wearing what she called his “commercial attaché smile” this morning. Not being able to read his real feelings usually annoyed

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Kit, but this morning she was thankful for the barrier.

“Thanks,” she said and quickly downed a cup of coffee.

They went down to the hotel’s casual restaurant for a late breakfast. As promised, the shiny silver, five-passenger sport utility vehicle was delivered to the hotel right at noon and, within the hour, Kit was driving her new SUV up Highway 400 toward Ontario’s cottage country.

Although Bart seemed content to look at the scenery and listen to the stereo, she was intensely aware of him. His muscular body was inches away from her in the other bucket seat, but in the enforced intimacy of the vehicle the air seemed charged with his masculinity and energy.

“Well, what do you think of my truck?” she asked, to break the silence.

“It’s a gas-guzzling SUV, Kit.” Bart had reverted to the know-it-all, big brother attitude that had infuriated her so much when she was a teenager. Well, she wasn’t going to bite. She would continue to be pleasant and coldly logical.

“Don’t be negative, Bart. It’s also a truck,” she defended her new toy. “And it’ll come in handy at the lodge. Besides, I can hardly wait to see how it handles those rough back roads up north.”

“Uh-uh,” Bart objected. “No exploring the wilderness this trip, Kittle.”

She set her jaw and declined that gambit, too.

They passed the Holland Marsh, a huge, drained swamp, whose rich soil produced much of the fresh produce that fed the surrounding cities. As far as the eye could see was a checkerboard of various shades of green.

“I read somewhere how many tons of onions alone come out of the Marsh,” Kit began.

“Time to talk about last night.” Bart changed the subject to the one

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she really didn't want to discuss. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he must have realized her intention.

"No, no. I mean about the shooting."

She stifled a sigh of relief and concentrated for a minute on the stream of traffic merging onto the highway.

"What is there to discuss? Some nut was looking for a blonde to shoot. And he chose me."

"Come on, Kit. You don't believe that any more than I do. Somehow, the guy knew you'd be there. He knew you'd be outside Schofield's after the board meeting seven months ago, and he knew you were coming back from the theater last night." He took a small notepad out of the pocket of his denim jacket.

"Let's see. The concierge knew. Did you notice anyone listening in when you had him get the ticket for you?"

She didn't have to think about it. "No. I waited until the crowd cleared the lobby for the airport shuttle before I spoke to him. I was the only one at the counter."

"Did you talk to anyone else about your plans? The doorman maybe."

"No one. The only other people I spoke to yesterday were salespeople in Bloor Street boutiques, and the topic was style." She was beginning to resent this. "What makes you think I've suddenly become a silly blabbermouth who tells her plans to total strangers? I didn't chat!"

"Ouch!" Bart flashed her his wicked grin. "The pretty little flea bites!"

His comment reminded her of their laughter last night. And the exuberant joy in their kisses. She didn't want to go there. She scrambled to gather her thoughts.

"I...I guess I did chat. I asked Johanna's advice about the show. when I phoned to tell her I'd arrive at Spirit Lake late afternoon today."

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“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you mention talking to Johanna before. I know she’s your grandmother and she and your aunt run a resort,” Bart prompted.

“You know Laila wasn’t much for family,” Kit began, relieved to talk about a less emotionally charged topic. “She never even mentioned an older sister and a father and stepmother in Canada until her father, Jacob, died when I was fourteen. I didn’t know I had a grandfather until Laila and I went to his funeral. That’s when I met Johanna and Aunt Elsa.”

“That must’ve been a strange visit.”

“It was, but we stayed on for a couple of weeks and I had a good time getting to know Johanna. Raoul, Elsa’s fiancé, was wonderful to us. I had a real crush on him.” She smiled reminiscently.

“Your grandfather owned the resort?”

“Oh, no. He ran a very small sawmill operation, but his stroke made running it impossible. When Laila discovered the three of them were attempting to live on what Johanna earned as a part-time cook at a highway restaurant, she made a flying visit to Spirit Lake and bought the resort next door to the sawmill property. She gave Johanna and Elsa each an interest in it and a permanent roof over their heads.

“Being Laila, she kept financial control of the company herself. Johanna took over as manager; Johanna’s brother, Paavo, became chef; Elsa took over the housekeeper duties.

“It was a good deal for everyone. Laila got to one-up her father, who apparently treated her with disdain, and to play Lady Bountiful to her sister and her stepmother. Johanna and Elsa got generous salaries in addition to a percentage of the resort profits.”

“So you became responsible for the resort when you were fifteen,” Bart said, softly.

“Johanna runs it. I just rubber-stamp her ideas,” she said with a little shrug.

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Bart laughed. “And Bossy Brat never even has a suggestion?”

Remembering the good years when she, Bret and Bart had been the Three Bs, she grinned back at him. “I occasionally make a suggestion.”

The lighthearted mood didn’t last long.

“We have to find out who else at Spirit Lake knew the exact time you’d be in front of the hotel.” Bart was serious again. “We’re not going to be able to relax our guard for a minute, you know. This guy always seems to be able to find you.”

“Bart, I really don’t want to talk about this.”

And, miracle of miracles, he let it be.

For the next hour or so, they sped along the dual highway through rolling farm country. Their conversation consisted of little fragments about how well the SUV handled and whose side of the road held more horses and cows.

When they started to see signs for restaurants and donut shops a few miles north of Barrie, Bart suggested they stop for coffee.

“If you’re not desperate for a caffeine fix, I’d really like to get to the lake,” Kit replied.

“Fine with me.” Bart took out the little notepad again. “Who do you know with connections in both Miami and Toronto?”

“Me.”

“Schofield’s doesn’t have any Canadian branches?”

Kit wheeled into the parking lot of a roadside restaurant, stopped and turned off the engine.

“I cannot drive a new vehicle on unfamiliar highways and talk about who wants to kill me at the same time,” she said slowly and deliberately.

Bart hated to see his usually gutsy Kit on the verge of tears. Particularly when it was his fault. But he couldn’t lay off. He was operating in the dark here.

He flashed her an apologetic smile, then got out of the truck. He

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went around to the driver's side, opened her door and saluted smartly.

"Expert and charming chauffeur reporting for duty, ma'am," he said.

When he offered his hand to help her, she put her smooth hand in his, but didn't get out of the SUV. "Only if you promise to keep under the limit and vary the speed."

"I know Will insists you do that with a new car, but it's not necessary any more."

Kit gave him an exasperated look and plunked herself back down in the driver's seat.

"I'll do it," he agreed hastily. "But it won't be easy to keep the speed down. You've got a lot of tempting horses under that hood."

The truth was he wanted to drive to see if they were being followed. Having a vehicle delivered made too many people aware of when they were leaving and what Kit was driving. They might as well have announced their departure over the hotel public announcement system.

He took note of the cars behind him as he eased out of the restaurant lot onto the busy highway. A white Ford sedan with two men in the front seat, then a dusty Jeep followed him out of the parking lot. First chance he got he dodged into the fast lane, stayed there for a few minutes, then moved over to the slower inside lane.

"Bet you didn't think I'd ever obey your orders like this," he said, with a grin.

She shot him a frosty look. "You've been driving for fifteen minutes."

The Jeep continued in the fast lane, but the white Ford remained doggedly behind them. He cut his speed by another few miles per hour. So did the driver of the Ford.

"So, does Schofields have any Canadian branches?"

"No."

"Is the Spirit Lake Resort your only business connection up here?"

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“Yes.” She turned on the radio. Loud rock music rattled the air.

Bart punched the off button and took a deep breath. She was deliberately provoking him. If he allowed himself to explode at her, she’d simply refuse to say another word to him. Back in their teenage years when they were the inseparable Three Bs—Bret, Bart and Brat—icy silence had been her most effective weapon against him and Bret. It was the last thing he wanted now.

“Come on, Brat. We don’t have a lot of time before we get to the resort and I’d like to have some kind of handle on what we’re facing. Talk to me, Kittle. I can’t protect you if I have no idea where the threat is coming from.”

“But why can’t I make you understand? Don’t you think I’ve gone over and over every possibility?” She was almost screaming. “I...don’t...know!”

He flipped on the directional signal to indicate he was turning off on the shoulder.

“Don’t stop. I’ll answer your questions while you drive,” Kit said, resignation heavy in her voice. “Maybe we need a fresh slant on this.”

He turned off the signal. It was a good thing she’d given in. If his hands weren’t on this steering wheel, he’d have her in his arms right now. And that would be a big mistake.

“All the people I have anything to do with live in Muskoka. There aren’t many and I hardly know them. I haven’t been up to Spirit Lake since my mother’s funeral seventeen years ago.”

“That narrows it down. We can leave Toronto out of our calculations for now. Bret can handle the Florida end of things. As soon we get settled in at the resort, I want you to jot down the names of everyone you have contact with at Schofield’s, at the yacht club, the foundation...anywhere else you have an influence in Miami or West Palm Beach. Bret can follow up on anything we come up with.”

“Bret and I already did this, but I’ll try to come up with some more

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names,” Kit said. She was calm and cooperating fully now. “You can eliminate the yacht club. I haven’t had anything to do with it for years. I renewed the membership every year because I thought someday I might want to use it.”

He knew why. The Three Bs had been fiercely competitive about their sailing and expected their own children would someday attend the sailing school and continue the competition into the next generation. To their teenaged minds, future marriage partners had been unimportant trifles. Right now, he refused to imagine Kit having children with some other man.

“Right. Now talk to me about the people at Spirit Lake.”

As he spoke, the white Ford signaled it was turning off onto a side road. *Good.* That was one distraction he didn’t need right now.

“I guess I should start with Johanna,” Kit began. “Not your typical grandmother. Imagine a blonde Xena the warrior princess.”

Bart burst out laughing. “Your grandmother?”

“That’s what she looked like when I first saw her seventeen years ago. A Nordic warrior maiden. She must’ve been in her fifties then. I guess it’s at least ten years since she and Elsa came down to see me in Florida. It just dawned on me that she must be around seventy now. She’ll have changed some.” Kit paused for a moment. “Anyway, all I can give you are a confused teenager’s impressions.”

“I doubt you’ve been confused a day in your life,” Bart replied.

“I was having trouble with my mother, the ultimate free spirit, suddenly having family ties.”

“Just ramble then. We have at least an hour before we get there. Tell me everything you remember about the family. And their business.”

And Kit filled him in as fully as she could about the estrangement between Laila and her father and stepmother, and what she could remember from their two-week visit after Jacob’s funeral.

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“All you can say about your Aunt Elsa is that she was quiet, and Paavo was fat and funny?”

“Everything was so new and different to me I guess I didn’t pay much attention to them.”

“So they own this resort...” Bart prodded.

“Actually, sixty per cent of it belongs to me,” Kit admitted. “But Johanna runs it. She’s made quite a few changes over the last couple of years. All I’ve done is approve the blueprints for the renovations and sign the checks.”

Once they’d turned onto another multi-lane highway north of Huntsville, they found themselves within a few minutes of the resort. For miles they had been driving through some of the most dramatic scenery Bart had ever seen. They caught glimpses of one sparkling lake after the other as they sped along and occasionally on either side of them, jagged pink granite rock-cuts towered above the highway. They were in the heart of the Ontario skiers’ and snowmobilers’ playground.

“Love those Deer Crossing signs,” Bart said, with a laugh. “What are you supposed to do when you’re cruising along in this traffic at sixty or seventy miles an hour and a deer decides to cross the road?”

“Pray, I guess,” Kit said. “There wouldn’t be time to snap a photo. My favorite signs though are the Look Out for Falling Rocks ones.”

Bart chuckled and gave a fake shudder. “I guess you have to be a fatalist.”

They had reached an area where all the road signs had the names of lakes on them. A few little communities were clustered around general stores, restaurants and gas stations at the intersections of main roads. The occasional craft store or antique shop sported intriguing signs.

“I’m curious, Kit. I know South Florida holds some pretty difficult memories for you”—he could feel her freeze at his words, but they couldn’t pretend Ronald had never existed—“but you could’ve gone anywhere in the world to get away. Why did you decide to come up

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here?”

“I got an intriguing note from Johanna just at the moment I’d made up my mind I needed to leave West Palm. Some woman named Betsy Warner has come up with an expansion plan for the lodge, which Johanna wants me to look at. Besides, I loved it up here and always wanted to come back.

“The intriguing part was Johanna’s statement it was a cheerful plan, which would counteract what she called ‘our hauntings.’ I can’t wait to find out what she meant by that.”

Bart loved Kit’s laugh. It was a beautiful, hearty laugh, always surprising coming from her slim, deceptively fragile-looking body.

“I hope it’s a joke,” was Bart’s only comment.

“There’s the sign!” Kit announced. “Turn right at the top of the hill.”

The well-traveled gravel road was more what Bart had been expecting for most of the drive. Barely wide enough for two large vehicles to pass on, it wound through the heavily treed forest. Finally, a little over a mile along, they came to a fork in the road. Bart followed the arrow on the large Spirit Lake Resort sign. To his left, through the trees, he could see two entrances to what seemed to be a huge empty parking lot.

“Looks as if Spirit Lake guests can have all the privacy they want this week.”

“Not funny, Bart. We’ve been closed for renovations since Christmas. I think Johanna said the grand opening was Canada Day weekend. That’s July first. Of course, they always get a lot of Americans over the fourth.”

“How many staff do you figure are on site now?”

“There should be just Johanna and Paavo at the lodge. Maybe Elsa. The summer staff, mostly students, will be arriving in a week or so. They’ll be doing some painting in the guest cabins and sprucing up the

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place generally.”

On the right was a wide green lawn. “Is that a putting green I see?”

“That was new last summer,” Kit said. “It looks better than I expected.”

They came around a curve and got their first glimpse of the lodge.

“Oh,” Kit exclaimed. “The photos didn’t do the renovations justice! I couldn’t imagine the cedar shakes on the tower roof, but it looks great. Isn’t the whole thing perfect, Bart?”

He had to admit the large sprawling wood-and-glass building in front of him, with its odd little tower above the central part of the structure, was perfect. Ungainly, but perfect for its surroundings. The walls were of reddish brown cedar planks; the high-pitched cedar shake roof was a slightly lighter shade of brown.

From the number of windows and balconies he assumed the long, two-story wing on the left housed the guestrooms. The stubbier two-story wing on the right probably contained the restaurant. The main entrance under the four-story tower was a gleaming expanse of glass.

He was glad to see several pickup trucks and an electrician’s van parked in the circular drive. At least the lodge wasn’t completely deserted.

The minute he stopped the SUV in front of the wide open, brass-fitted glass doors, Kit leapt out onto the interlocked brick walk, and turned slowly, looking around her with a big smile on her face.

Maybe coming here was a good idea. She looked happier than she had for almost a year.

CHAPTER 4

As Kit waited for Bart to get out of the truck, she drank in the clean, fresh air. A flash of yellow appeared in one of the lilac shrubs that flanked the entranceway. The tiny warbler perched on an upper branch and began to sing its heart out. A flood of happy memories came over her. She could almost hear Laila's infectious laugh.

She sensed someone approaching from the edge of the maple trees on the far side of the main lodge building. However, when she turned with a smile to greet whoever it was, there was no one there. She must have seen another bird out of the corner of her eye. She felt a little foolish, but Bart hadn't noticed. Maybe she was just getting a bit spooked by everything.

Bart, however, seemed more interested in the noise of vigorous hammering and the squealing of an electric drill inside the lodge. He gestured toward the open doors.

"Well, are you going in?"

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She hurried inside ahead of him.

There was no one in the lobby, but she could hear Johanna's voice over the sound of hammering that echoed through the empty rooms. It seemed to be coming from the bar.

"...so you'll have to get the fixture I ordered. I'm sorry you have to drive to North Bay to get it, but that's the one I want and you promised me. Kat!"

Johanna stopped her tirade and swooped down on Kit, pulling her into an enthusiastic hug. Kit remembered well being crushed against that impressive bosom and inhaling Johanna's lavender scent. She hadn't changed a bit. Perhaps her blonde hair was more generously streaked with white, but she was still as strong and vital as ever.

"And this is?"

"My good friend, Bart Thornton," Kit told her. "You met his father, Will, when you visited me in Florida. Bart was away."

"Hello, Bart. We spoke on the telephone yesterday," Johanna said. "I was so sorry not to meet you when I was in Florida. You're so important to my Kat. You'll stay with us, of course."

"Thank you, Mrs. Seppanen. I'd hoped to. I didn't realize you were closed to guests," Bart said.

"You will call me Johanna," she asserted firmly. "And we're never closed to family. I'm grateful you didn't let Kat come alone after her horrible experience in December.

"Come. Let's get you settled. I have the first guest cabin prepared." She stopped and leveled an assessing stare at Bart. "You'll share the cabin? It has two bedrooms."

"Yes," Bart responded instantly.

"Oh, no," Kit said at the same time.

"We still haven't caught the person who tried to harm Kit," Bart explained. "I intend to stay right with her until we do."

"You can have the cabin, Bart." Kit was beginning to feel her

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authority slipping away. This was her resort! And her life. “Is anyone using the tower suite, Johanna?”

Johanna opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it again. She merely shook her head.

“Good. I’ve been looking forward to staying there again. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“There’s a small problem with... It’s not ready.” Johanna had apparently made up her mind. “The guest cabin is. Come.”

Johanna reached behind the desk for an envelope with Kit’s name on it. “The key. We’ll get a second one for Bart when you come back for dinner.”

If she were to be honest with herself, she was glad Bart insisted on sharing the cabin. The near miss last night had shaken her more than she wanted to admit. Anyway, she didn’t have a hope of winning this battle with both Bart and Johanna determined to have their way. She might as well give in graciously.

“Fine, Johanna,” she said with a broad smile. “That’ll be handy for my morning swim.”

Johanna was already on her way outside. She stopped short when she saw Kit’s silver truck.

“So this is the SUV you mentioned. You were right. It’ll be so useful once the resort is open.” She beamed at her and gave her a quick hug. “It’s the most beautiful truck I ever saw. I’ll drive it myself when the resort reopens.”

She pointed out a single lane of pavement that led down toward the beach. “You’ll be in the first cabin. The one nearest the beach. You can drive down and park behind the building. I’ll let you get settled in on your own, while I finish explaining the rules to that contractor. We’ll eat at seven?”

“Sounds good,” Bart answered for both of them.

“Come for drinks in my suite at six. Kat knows where it is. I’ll let

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Elsa know you're here. Paavo, of course, has been cooking all day. Bring a good appetite." With that, she turned on her heel and hurried back into the lodge. "Come as you are. It's just family tonight."

And they were alone again.

"You drive, Bart. I'll walk down to the cabin and take a look around."

Bart hesitated, then said, "Don't wander off without me. As soon as I get our luggage into the cabin, I'm looking forward to having you show me around."

As she watched the SUV head off down the road, Kit felt herself begin to relax. The hot afternoon sunshine on the back of her head and shoulders felt wonderful. For the first time in months, she realized she had no pain anywhere. Striding along, swinging her arms and breathing in the country air made her feel totally alive again.

Keeping her relationship with Bart on an even keel wasn't going to be easy, but the drive up had proved it was not impossible. Maybe enjoying the isolation and quiet of the resort would ease the tension between them.

She turned a corner and got her first glimpse of the long, sandy beach. Boats of all kinds—windsurfers, canoes, pedal boats, kayaks—were pulled high up on the sand. At the dock were a couple of runabouts used for waterskiing, a skiff and even a little Flying Junior. The Three Bs had all learned to sail in that kind of sloop.

They had all become too sophisticated, spending their time on powerboats and yachts. Sailing would be good for Bart. And he could use the relaxation. He hadn't cracked one joke in almost two days!

Bart appeared at the cabin door as she approached.

"I put the luggage in the living room," he said, holding the door open for her. "I thought I'd let you decide which bedroom you wanted."

"Oh, I like this," she said once inside the living room. The large,

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bright room was furnished with a good-sized sleeper sofa, two armchairs and a large desk. One wall was taken up with a wood-burning fireplace constructed of large irregular chunks of the pink and blue-gray granite they had noticed on the drive up. The sofa was upholstered in blue corduroy and the chairs in green. Both colors were present in the flowered drapes on the sliding glass doors that opened onto the beach. A large painting of tangled scarlet poppies hung over the sofa.

Bart went directly to the sliding glass doors that gave them a sweeping view of the beach to check the lock and security bar.

To the right of the living room through an archway was a little kitchen, which contained a stove, refrigerator and a small table with two chairs. They wouldn't have to have all their meals at the lodge.

Bart joined her. "Have you learned to cook yet, Kittle?"

"Enough to get by. But I was counting on you having picked up some gourmet skills in France. You must've learned something between parties." She couldn't resist the little dig.

"Not in the kitchen." His wicked grin teased her. "But I can make a sandwich. Of course, my specialty is treating a woman like a goddess and preparing burnt offerings for her."

She laughed. "Luckily, Paavo is a great cook, as I recall."

"Which bedroom?" he asked, picking up her luggage.

The two bedrooms were identical, each containing two double beds.

"You'd better choose, Bart," Kit said in a phony feeble voice. "After all, you're the studly bodyguard. I'm merely the helpless, ineffectual damsel in distress."

"You'd better believe it, little lady." Bart lurched over to her in a really bad imitation of the Duke's gait. "I'll keep you safe." Then in his own voice. "I'll take the room closer to the front door. But, seeing we also have the patio doors to contend with, I'll probably sleep on the sofa tonight."

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She was relieved he hadn't suggested sleeping in the second bed in her room as he had last night. She wasn't sure what her reaction to that would be.

* * *

He carried her suitcases into the second bedroom, then paused to pose in front of the mirror. He sucked in his stomach and flexed his biceps at his reflection. "Studly, you say? Ah, yes. How about unique?"

"You're full of it, Thornton. I know where I can get one exactly like you. Maybe a couple more scars on him, but the same general pattern." She grinned.

That grin at his clowning was the real Kit. She was going to be all right. Or she would be once they caught the person determined to end her life.

"I'd like to see the layout of the resort, Kittle. And you can point out all the exciting and healthy ways we're going to entertain ourselves over the next little while. Speaking of that, how long are we staying?"

"Depends on the cheerful business proposal... whatever that is. And I guess whatever it is that's spooking Johanna. She has always seemed invincible to me. I didn't think anything frightened her, but I think she's upset about something," Kit replied, opening the front door and waving him out it. "See how security conscious I am? I'm not going out the sliding doors because they can only be unlocked from the inside and I don't want to leave the place open. This one has a proper lock."

She looked so proud of herself that he didn't have the heart to tell her a child could jimmy that lock. He was going to have to make some serious changes in the security around here.

About fifty feet from the cabin, the gravel path ended at the pale yellow sand beach.

"Come on. Take off your shoes."

Kit was leaning over to untie the laces of her deck shoes. As she rolled up the cuffs of her jeans, the denim pulled tight across her nicely

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rounded bottom. Bart forced himself to look away to take off his own shoes.

“I need to get my blood moving,” Kit said, jogging on the spot.

Bart didn’t tell her that being around her had his blood moving just fine, thank you.

“Let’s jog right to the far end of the beach and work our way back more slowly. I’ve been looking forward to pounding my feet on this hot, packed sand.”

Bart figured the beach stretched a good half-mile in length. As they jogged along at a leisurely pace past the lodge, Bart had time to look around him. Facing south as it did, the lodge would get the sun all day long. At this hour, the slanting rays of the afternoon sun reddened the cedar planking and made the windows reflect like mirrors. The building stood out like a jewel against the darkening wooded hills behind it.

Beyond the east end of the beach ahead of them, there appeared to be a bit of a swampy area, perhaps the inlet of a small river or creek. And behind them, where the guest cabins were located, the land curved and rose abruptly to a jagged cliff.

Kit had spoken of the lake as a small one, but it appeared to be a good size. He could see several islands spread out across the expanse of water. He didn’t know how much of the lake was hidden by the cliffs behind the cabins.

They were almost at the end of the groomed sand when Kit took his hand. “Let’s look at the boats,” she said, leading him onto a long floating dock.

His eyes were caught immediately by a little white sailboat moored off to the side of the dock. “A Flying Junior!” he breathed. “I haven’t seen one of those for years.”

Kit was beaming up at him. She had loved those sailing days as much as he had. This seemed so right...to be standing there with Kit’s smaller hand in his, looking out at the sailboat.

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“I wish we could be Bart and the Brat again,” she said wistfully. “We had the world by the tail.”

“We still could,” he said. The adult world he and Kit would share would be a bigger, even more vivid and exciting one. Somehow he had to find a way to convince her it was possible for them. “All we need is common sense and a lot of caution.” *And a hell of a lot of self-restraint.*

He held up their joined hands. “Hey, I’ve been touching you for a couple of minutes and it hasn’t exploded into a wrestling match.”

The devilish glint in Kit’s blue eyes almost did him in.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve been contemplating flipping you to the mat and trying out my step-over-toe-hold on you. But I might be smarter to wait until I’ve perfected it.”

“Whenever you’re ready, Crusher.”

Kit slipped her hand from his and he didn’t resist.

“Maybe sailing would be a safer sport for us. Let’s see if we can get a sail in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow. Yes.” He had to get focused. “I want your permission to do an evaluation of the resort’s security system, Kit. I expect it’ll need some serious beefing up.”

“My permission? Who are you, sir, and what have you done with Bart?”

In spite of his oblique reference to the danger she was in, Kit’s laugh was easy. Perhaps she was beginning to realize he was there to relieve her stress, not add to it.

“Go ahead. It’s something that needed to be done anyway.”

“Let’s both try to get business over with in the morning. I sure would like to see if I can handle a Junior.”

“I may still have to wrestle you to the ground,” Kit threatened. “I, the owner of this establishment, will be the one on the tiller.” She looked at her watch. “We’re going to have to skip the staff cabins and the other outbuildings if we want to unpack and freshen up before

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dinner.”

“I really wanted to get a mental picture of the lay of the land today.” He had the uneasy feeling there was something about this place he was missing. And that it was important to Kit’s safety.

“We’ll make time for a stroll around the rest of the property after dinner. This far north, the sun doesn’t set until almost ten o’clock this time of year.”

He had to be content with that.

Kit seemed to be as anxious as he was not to spend too much time in the intimate confines of the cabin. They unpacked quickly, showered and changed into fresh casual clothes. Kit’s dark gray T-shirt turned her blue eyes almost silvery. He could so easily get lost in those eyes.

“We can check out the staff cabins before dinner if we hurry,” Kit suggested. “Then we can take the back way to the lodge. It’s shorter.”

The unoccupied staff cabins were in a well-lit wooded section on the far side of the lodge building. They did a fast tour of that area, then Kit took Bart along the gravel path by the beach to the tiered deck, which surrounded the swimming pool.

“Why on earth do you have a chlorinated pool not a hundred yards from a whole lake of fresh water?” Bart asked.

“Blame it on Aunt Elsa,” Kit told him. “When Johanna gave me the list of major renovations for the resort three years ago, the swimming pool was Elsa’s only request. She refuses to swim with the ‘slimy fishes.’ I figured if I could have all the rooms redone, every bit of plumbing replaced and new windows everywhere for Johanna, and have Paavo’s kitchen modernized, I could have a pool built for Elsa.”

“Nice deck,” was Bart’s only comment.

The elevators were just inside the back doors next to a door labeled “Stairs.”

“Johanna’s apartment is in the tower?” Bart asked.

“Oh, no. It’s over the dining room and bar wing. The elevators

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service the whole second floor. It's easier to show you than explain." They got into the elevator and she pointed out the four buttons. "'Basement'—that's storage, laundry and furnace room. This is obviously 'Lobby.' The second floor is where we get off. The third floor is the tower suite where I wanted to stay and fourth is my favorite room—the library at the top of the tower."

They stepped into a small area with three doors leading off it. "As you can see through the window, this door opens into the corridor of guest rooms. This one"—she knocked on a door with a little brass "Private" sign attached—"is Johanna's suite."

The door opened immediately.

"Wonderful! You're right on time," Johanna, resplendent in a long, silk, Chinese-red tunic with two gold dragons emblazoned on its front panels, pulled Kit into a fragrant hug. "It's good to have you here, child.

"You too, Bart," she said, hugging him as well.

"You said to come as we were," Kit said, looking down at her jeans. "I'm glad I put on a fresh shirt at least."

"You look lovely. Besides, when you're seventy years old, you have to take every advantage you can get over the competition," Johanna said, with a saucy wink at Bart.

"Johanna, there's no competition. You are in a class by yourself," Bart said and bent to kiss her hand with a continental flair.

Kit chuckled at the pleased but flustered look on her grandmother's face. She hadn't prepared Johanna for Bart.

"Well, now," she said, smoothing a nonexistent wisp of silver-blond hair off her unlined forehead. With sparkling eyes and genuine smile, she looked hardly a day older than she had seventeen years ago. Johanna slipped her arms through Bart's, then Kit's. "Come meet everybody."

She hustled them out of the elegant vestibule with its oriental rug,

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cherry wood telephone table and gilt-framed mirror and into a vast, pale-green carpeted living room. A tall, solidly built man with keen eyes, a pleasant smile and a shock of white hair stood as they entered. Almost immediately, a shorter, smiling, dark-haired man rose from a sofa on which the other occupant, a slender, blue-eyed brunette remained seated. Kit noted with relief that they were all wearing casual clothes.

“Mike Martin, Betsy and Joel Warner, I want you to meet my granddaughter, Kit, and her dear friend, Bart Thornton.”

As they approached, the brunette got up from the sofa and hesitantly took Kit’s outstretched hand. “I’ve wanted to meet you for ages,” she said. Her timid smile extended to her blue eyes. “Johanna talks about you all the time.”

Betsy was probably in her early forties and not at all what Kit expected of a woman in the promotion business. She seemed almost shy, but Kit liked the unreserved way she held eye contact with her. Her husband didn’t appeal to Kit as much, although, even with his thinning hair, Joel was good-looking enough. He had regular features and the solid body of someone who worked out. Something about his smile, though, reminded her of her late husband. It was attractive, but a little too practiced.

“Betsy has been working with me recently on a whole new image for the resort,” Johanna said. “But I mentioned that in my letter. Joel doesn’t work for us. He has a real estate agency in Huntsville.”

That explained the professional smile.

“And this is Mike.” It was obvious from the warmth in her grandmother’s voice that the older man was a close friend. Kit was glad she found Mike’s firm handshake as attractive as his smile. “Mike owns the general store and garage you passed as you turned onto the Spirit Lake Road.”

The ringing of the telephone interrupted her introductions. Johanna

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excused herself to answer it.

Mike, with the efficiency of a man who knew his way around Johanna's apartment, took over the duties of bartender and brought Bart the scotch and Kit the white wine they requested.

"Elsa says she's running a bit late, but she'll be here soon," Johanna announced. "I was afraid she was having another bout of stomach problems. She's been under the weather a lot lately. And Paavo sends his apologies. He'll join us as soon as he can, but right now he's in the kitchen doing something to a sauce that he doesn't dare leave."

"Do you think he'll take a meat cleaver to me if I pop into the kitchen and interrupt him?" Kit asked.

"Anyone else, maybe. But don't stay long."

The gleaming modern kitchen was a marked contrast to Johanna's elegant living room. The air was redolent with a mix of wonderful aromas. Kit could smell herbs, some kind of poultry, a trace of citrus, perhaps a whiff of chocolate. Her mouth watered.

Then she spotted him. Paavo was as short and round and dark-haired as his sister, Joanna, was tall, trim and blonde. He was standing by the stove slowly stirring something in a stainless steel double boiler.

"Paavo," she said, hesitantly, "may I interrupt you?"

A wide smile broke over his broad face. "Kitkat! My little Kitkat. Come, give Uncle Paavo a big hug." He wrapped one muscular arm around her, gave her a hearty kiss on the cheek and never stopped stirring. "I am almost finished here. Let me look at you. Ah, what a beauty you grew into." He grinned. "And not so tall I get a crick in my neck looking at you!"

"I don't know how I stayed away so long," Kit told him.

That was true. Johanna and her brother had given her unqualified acceptance. Never demanding that she achieve anything, they seemed happy with her simple existence.

"What's that I smell? You sweetheart, you're cooking those little

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Cornish hens I loved so much.”

“With zesty orange sauce,” Paavo admitted with a grin. “That’s what I’m stirring now.”

She breathed in the heavenly aroma. She caught sight of Bart hesitating in the doorway.

“And this is your young man?” Paavo had evidently seen him too. “Well, come join us then.”

Bart moved in from the doorway to the kitchen. “You’re sure? I was told to approach you slowly. Joanna suggested you might take your cleaver to some of my favorite parts if I disturbed you when you were creating.”

“I’m finished with the delicate part of this.” Paavo moved a couple of saucepans and turned to take Bart’s hand. “Paavo Seppanen, Kit’s not-quite great-uncle.”

“Bart Thornton, Kit’s...” He almost said, “Kit’s not-quite cousin,” but he didn’t want to re-enforce Kit’s notion they were semi-related. “Ah, we’ve known each other since we were children. I was told to say that Elsa had arrived.”

“Good timing. Give me a minute to turn this down and I can leave this for a little.” Paavo removed his white bibbed apron. “I will go with you for a drink before dinner. Now, you do know not to mention our ghost to Elsa. Talk about the hauntings upsets her.”

“Our ghost?” Kit echoed slowly. “We have a ghost?”

“Don’t worry. He doesn’t harm anyone,” he hastened to assure her. “More of a nuisance than anything. Disturbed some of the guests, you know. I guess I shouldn’t have mentioned him. I thought Johanna would’ve warned you. No doubt she will tell you about it after Elsa leaves. Now, not a word to Elsa.”

To hear down-to-earth Paavo referring to ghosts as if they were an everyday pest like mice or ants was mind-boggling. Bart looked uneasy at the turn in the conversation. After his and Bret’s encounters last

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summer, Kit understood why he would be unable to take talk of ghosts lightly.

“Of course. Let’s get back to our drinks then,” Bart said, “and greet your aunt.”

Elsa seemed to have shrunk over the years. Her obviously bleached blonde hair was very short and her face was no longer round and ruddy. In fact, Kit would’ve passed this pale, hollow-cheeked woman on the street without recognizing her. Only Elsa’s large pale blue eyes had not changed.

She narrowed them a little when she saw Kit. She didn’t rise from her chair to greet her, but she did reach out her hands to be grasped. “Pardon me for not getting up. I haven’t been well lately. My, you do resemble your mother. You’re even about the same size. I’d hoped you’d get some of your father’s height.”

“Now, Elsa, no criticism of short people allowed.” Paavo handed her a crystal wineglass containing a dark red liquid. “Here’s your aperitif. How you can drink that bittersweet wine blend is a mystery to me.”

“I can taste it. That’s why!” Elsa snapped.

He raised his glass. “Let’s toast a welcome to Kit and Bart. May your visit be a happy and relaxed one.”

Over the next half-hour, the conversation centered mainly on Kit’s recuperation from the incident in Miami and renovations past and future to the resort. Joel suggested that the resort really needed an executive-length golf course and went on at some length about how perfectly suited the adjacent piece of land would be for one. No one gave him any argument and the subject dropped.

Kit was relieved no one mentioned the violent end to her brief marriage or the possibility someone else might still be trying to kill her. Of course, none of the guests at the dinner party knew she’d been shot at in Toronto only last night.

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Bart and Mike seemed to be hitting it off. From what she could gather of their conversation, Mike had bought the general store when he retired from the RCMP a few years ago. Having been stationed in Ottawa for a number of his years as a Mountie, then as part of CSIS, the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service, Mike had spent a fair amount of time in the same diplomatic circles as Bart had. He had even dealt with some of the same people.

“Well out of it!” Mike said with a laugh.

She heard Bart agree heartily. Did that mean Bart really had done his last “negotiation”?

The hot red sun was still hovering over the horizon and turning the clouds into vivid jagged strips of red and gold. Kit wandered over to the large wall of windows with her wineglass and was gazing at the sunset when Betsy joined her.

“Breathtaking, isn’t it?” Kit breathed.

“I never get enough of the sunsets up here,” Betsy said, after a moment.

“Have you lived in Muskoka long?” Kit asked.

“I accepted a job as assistant manager at one of the big resorts down the road about a year ago. I figured I’d worked in Niagara Falls hotels long enough and thought I’d try Muskoka for a change of pace. I’m glad I did.”

“And now you’re working at Spirit Lake?” Kit didn’t mean to sound critical, but it did sound like a step backward.

“Not exactly,” Betsy said with a tight smile. “I’m doing some consulting work for Johanna.”

“Oh, yes, she mentioned something about changing the image of the resort.”

“What do you think of the idea?” she asked hesitantly.

“She never did tell me any details.” Kit could see Bart heading toward her and Johanna coming out of the kitchen. She expected dinner

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was about to be served. “Give me a quick summary. I think Johanna’s almost ready to announce dinner.”

“Basically, it’s about utilizing the acres of maple trees behind the sawmill. Turn it into a real maple sugar bush. Have tours of the operation at sugaring off time. Sell maple syrup, maple candy, fudge, souvenirs, maybe some woodcarvings, paintings.”

Once she was caught up in selling her plan, Betsy was a different woman. “Have hayrides for kids, turn the sawmill property into a children’s playground.” She flashed Kit an eager smile. “Maybe a child-sized fairytale village. Or even have a petting zoo.”

“Whoa! Too many ideas. Let’s take a look at the property and talk tomorrow some time. Will you be here?”

“Sure, I will. What time?”

Bart had come up beside them during Betsy’s pitch. “Why don’t you come along, Bart?” Kit suggested with a wry grin. There was no way he’d let her go alone anyway. “They told me the sawmill property was too dangerous to explore when I was here as a kid, so I’m eager to check it out. And I’d like to hear your opinion of its possibilities.”

Betsy didn’t seem pleased to have Bart included in their morning jaunt. Maybe she thought Kit would be more easily influenced alone.

“Oh, please excuse me. Johanna is giving me the high sign,” Betsy said. “With Elsa under the weather, I offered to help her serve dinner.”

Johanna ushered them into the dining room. “I’ve put out place cards,” she said. “Go on in and get yourselves seated. Betsy and I will arrive with the appetizers in a minute.”

On the lace-covered table, silver and crystal gleamed in the light of a dozen slender tapers. Johanna’s idea of a “casual dinner” was unusual.

The appetizer was an attractive plate of shrimp, cracked crabs legs and slender wedges of avocado, melon and lemon on a bed of lettuce. When Kit commented on the delicious creamy dressing, Paavo

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admitted that it was his own.

Elsa had been served a mound of jellied consommé and crackers.

“Are you allergic to shellfish, Elsa?” Joel asked.

Elsa shuddered dramatically and scowled across at Paavo. “No. I just dislike it intensely. That and fish. We aren’t having a fish course, are we? Paavo?”

Paavo assured her she would be spared fish. Apart from that, the conversation was pleasant as they enjoyed Paavo’s meal. The potato leek soup was smooth and delicious. The Rock Cornish hens à l’orange were as delectable as Kit remembered. The chocolate mousse cake was decadently rich. And the coffee was dark and smooth. Around it all the wines flowed. Mike kept an alert eye on the level in the wineglasses and topped them up quite unobtrusively. As the wine went down, the company relaxed.

All except Elsa, who picked at her food and drank only imported mineral water with it.

When everyone moved to the living room for coffee and cognac, Kit insisted on helping Johanna to clear. Once in the kitchen, while Kit rinsed plates and Johanna loaded the dishwasher, she decided to be blunt.

“Elsa looks terrible, Johanna. What’s wrong with her?”

“I should’ve written you about this, but you were in hospital yourself when we found out. She finished chemo for pancreatic cancer two months ago and we thought she was getting better. I don’t like this recurrence of the nausea.”

“No wonder she’s so thin,” Kit said. “What does her doctor say about it?”

“She won’t go. I’ve tried to convince her that she can’t waste any more time, but she says this was expected and she has to wait it out. There’s no talking to Elsa when she’s made up her mind.”

“I’ll see if I can talk her into getting some different expert advice.

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We could fly her anywhere, you know.”

“I wish you’d try. I’m worried sick about her,” Johanna said. “Perhaps you could get your Bart to talk to her, too. I’ve a feeling that man could charm the birds out of the trees.”

“Bart is not my anything,” Kit began, but she could see by Johanna’s expression that she had her own opinion. “By the way, about those ‘spooks’ you mentioned in your letter...”

“Oh, that’s only nonsense. Not worth discussing.” Johanna slammed the door to the dishwasher shut and spun the dial. “We’d better get back to the rest of the company,” she said and left Kit standing there drying her hands on a tea towel.

Loud laughter resounded in the living room. Mike was wiping his eyes. “You’re a wicked mimic, Bart,” he gaped. “How did the ambassador react?”

“It was pretty hard for him to be convincingly indignant when we’d all caught him with his hand up her skirt.”

Bart made room for Kit beside him on the sofa. “Betsy asked if I found the lofty diplomatic set intimidating. I was giving them an example that proved every group has its phonies.”

That was true enough. Kit had married one. “When you were in Ottawa, Mike, you must have seen some things which didn’t fit the public image.”

He had. In fact, almost everyone had an anecdote. The conversation continued to be entertaining and animated. Although she couldn’t put her finger on exactly why, Kit had a feeling the laughter was a little forced—as if there was some topic that everyone was determined to avoid. Could it be Elsa’s illness? Or perhaps it was the ghost.

Across the room, Kit noticed Elsa’s eyelids were starting to drift down from time to time. She went over to sit on the footstool at her aunt’s feet.

“I’m sorry to hear about your illness, Elsa,” she began. “I’m

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worried about you.”

“No need,” Elsa snapped. “I get along fine.”

Well, that certainly didn’t do anything for the flow of conversation. Kit let her gaze drift around the room. Both Joel and Betsy were looking in her direction. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw tears in Betsy’s eyes. She seemed genuinely upset by Elsa’s problems. Elsa must be friendlier to Betsy than she was to her. “Have you had a second opinion about this setback you’re having?” She wasn’t going to abandon her plan to help Elsa.

“You’ve been talking to Johanna.”

“Just briefly. I really would like to arrange for you to see another specialist. We could make a holiday of it, Elsa.” She tried to make it tempting. “We could go to anywhere in the world...Boston, New York or one of the European medical centers. Toronto, if you’d be more comfortable there.”

“Thank you, Kit, but I’m sure I’m getting over this spell. I’ll be fine in a day or two. I just need to get home now.” Elsa got to her feet, but would have toppled over if Joel hadn’t caught her.

“Betsy and I thought we’d offer you a ride home, Elsa,” he said, steadying her.

“Newlyweds don’t need to be bothered with an old lady,” she muttered.

“We’d love to have your company, Elsa,” Betsy assured her with a smile. “And we’re not newlyweds anymore. We’ve been married over six months.”

“Still newlyweds,” Elsa insisted. “Besides, my car...”

Silently agreeing Elsa was in no condition to drive, Kit offered, “Leave the key with me. I’d be glad to drop it off at your house tomorrow if you like.”

The departure of Elsa and the Warners signaled the end of the party.

“We’re meeting Betsy here in the morning to have a look at the

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sawmill property,” Kit told Johanna as they left.

“Now, Kat, you need rest to mend your body. Sleep in. Don’t worry about Betsy. She’ll be here whenever you arrive. I’ve stocked your refrigerator with everything you need for breakfast and lunch. We won’t start serving three meals a day until next week when the summer help starts to arrive.”

“I’ll rest, Johanna.” Kit smiled. Her grandmother still treated her like the fifteen-year-old she’d been when she was last at Spirit Lake.

As they stepped out into the cool moonlit night, Kit shivered. “I should’ve brought a sweater,” she said.

Bart put his arm around her and drew her close to his side. “Just snuggle up to the Thornton furnace, little lady,” he said. “That should keep the frostbite off until we get to the cabin.”

Kit slipped her arm around Bart’s waist. “Add a little Schofield heat and it’s even better,” she said. She only wanted to keep warm, she told herself.

Who was she kidding? What she really wanted was to slip her hand into the back pocket of his jeans to feel his heat and let her fingers caress the clenching muscles of his buttocks as he walked. She took a shaky breath. What harm could it do, for the next few minutes, to let herself enjoy the press of his strong arm around her and the sensation of his hard torso against the side of her breast?

* * *

Bart heard her sigh and smiled. Yeah, this was the way it should be. Kit belonged right here, snug against his side. A year ago, this snuggling would not have been a problem. But it sure was now. He wanted her. How he wanted her!

“It’s a little cool to take that walk. Why don’t we take advantage of our big granite fireplace and relax in front of a fire for a bit before we hit the sack?” he suggested, knowing he was playing with another kind of fire altogether.

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“I’m too tired for exploring anyway,” she said. “It’s been a long, emotional day.” Her slow smile as she gazed up at him made him wonder what she was thinking.

Suddenly she looked over her shoulder toward the beach. “That’s the second time! I can feel somebody out there staring at me. But when I turn to look, there’s no one there. I hope I’m not going to start jumping at shadows.” Kit sounded truly exasperated at herself.

Swinging around so Kit was behind him, Bart turned to survey the lighted path and as far as he could see into the surrounding shrubbery. With the strong east wind stirring the branches, he couldn’t tell if anything was moving around out there.

He grinned and quoted an insult they’d found so hilarious when they were kids: “It’s all in your head, Kit, and there’s nothing in it. But let’s get inside anyway.”

But he didn’t think she was imagining things. He was sure no one had followed them up from the city, but something out there was making him uneasy too.

He hurried her into the cabin, then made a quick tour through the rooms to reassure himself everything was exactly as they’d left it. In his bedroom, he stopped to get his Beretta out of his bag. He should have had it with him all evening. He tucked it into the back of his belt and slipped on his leather jacket before he came out into the living room and gave Kit the okay sign.

“All clear?” she said. Kit was squatting in front of the fireplace lighting the fire that had been laid for them.

“I thought the wood was only for decoration when we were unpacking in eighty-degree weather this afternoon,” he said, as he watched the dry kindling burst into flame.

He picked up a flashlight from the telephone table in the entryway. “There’s a pretty good drinks selection in that little bar. Why don’t you check to see if there’s something worth putting in a snifter, while I

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check around outside. I'll sneak out the glass door. Lock it behind me.”

CHAPTER 5

The wind was stronger now and colder. It whispered loudly through the pine needles and roared through the noisy poplar leaves. Bart zipped up his jacket and started his patrol. He could see the moon rising over the nearest island and flooding the beach with light. He'd head down there as soon as he had circled the cabin.

With the light from the moon and the lantern-shaped fixtures on either side of the front door, Bart hardly needed the flashlight, but he shone it around as far under the trees as the beam would carry. The undergrowth had been cleared away around the cabins, probably to keep the mosquitoes down, so there was no place for anyone to lurk around the cabin. Bart was pretty confident no one was in the immediate vicinity.

The wind had blown in some cloud. Dark ribbons of it drifted across the almost full moon without blocking much of the moonlight. The brilliant moon path on the rough water was dramatic and wild.

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He had walked along the beach as far as the path up to the swimming pool, when he noticed the unusual silence. The wind was still whipping the froth off the tops of the dark waves, but it made no sound. He stopped for a moment to listen. This was too odd. Had he gone suddenly deaf?

He strode quickly up the path. This tour around the lodge building would be a quick one.

He heard a nighthawk's high-pitched screech. Then the natural sound of the wind in the trees. Thank God, his hearing had returned to normal. What could have caused his sudden deafness?

The security lights around the resort were beaming over the swimming pool, walkways and parking lots. Not a person was in evidence anywhere. From what he could see through the windows, the interior of the lodge itself was in darkness, except for a few lights in the lobby and the ends of the corridors. And, of course, in Johanna's second floor suite.

Everything seemed to be secure,; however, he understood Kit's uneasiness. There was an unsettling atmosphere about the place.

Possibly they were feeling the isolation of the resort. Both he and Kit were used to living in big, busy cities. Here, in the off-season for tourists, there probably weren't a half-dozen people within ten miles of them.

He was more relieved than he wanted to admit to get into the warm cabin and close the door behind him.

In the living room, with her face almost pressed against the glass doors, Kit was peering intently out at the lake. She whirled around when he entered. Her eyes were wide and frightened and her face was drained of all color.

"What happened?" He rushed to her side.

"Who was that couple on the beach?" Kit's normally soft voice was shrill.

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“I didn’t see any couple.”

“They were walking along the beach, heading this way, right after you went out. You must’ve seen them.” Kit’s hands flew wildly as she spoke. “The woman waved at you. Then you stopped for a minute before they went up the path to the lodge ahead of you.”

“Kit...” He grasped her shoulders and held her still for a moment. “I didn’t see anybody.” He looked directly into her eyes, trying to calm her with the force of his mind. “It must’ve been a trick of the light. Clouds passing across the moon can make strange shadows.”

“Listen to me, Bart. That was no trick of light. There was a thin man...not as tall as you but taller than the woman. She was about my height, I think. And she waved...” Kit caught her breath and shook her head as if in disbelief.

Pulling her into his arms, Bart patted and stroked her back as if she were an upset child. “What is it, Kittle?”

Kit relaxed against him for a moment, then pulled back and held up her right hand. She closed the fingers into a fist, then splayed the fingers out wide a couple of times. “Like this,” she whispered. “She did it like this. And that’s how Laila always waved. She always said if the queen had her own special wave, she could have hers. When I was little, she called it throwing stars.”

“Oh, Kittle.” He held her closer. He hated to see her so upset. He should have realized how hard the last couple of days had been for her. After the drive-by shooting, returning to the lake where her mother had drowned was more than Kit’s nerves could take.

“You could be right. We’ll ask Johanna in the morning if there were a couple of guests in the lodge whom she neglected to mention. That’s probably who they were. It’s possible I missed them.”

The moment the soothing words were out of his mouth, he knew he’d made a big mistake.

“And it’s possible you are a horse’s ass!” Kit wrenched herself out

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of his embrace. Her face was flushed with indignation and fury. “Don’t you dare humor me, Bart Thornton. I’m not imagining things. I don’t know why you didn’t see them, but I know I saw those Spirit Lake ghosts everyone refuses to talk about.”

“I didn’t see them,” he repeated quietly.

“You don’t believe me.” She glared at him.

“I won’t lie to you. I don’t know what to believe. I still have trouble accepting that Bret and I saw your friend Yvette’s ghost last summer. I know it happened, but I can’t make it fit into my view of what really exists in this world. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t apologize often and Kit knew it. Her expression softened a little.

“Don’t be angry. I’ll try to keep an open mind. In the morning, I’ll do my damndest to pin down Johanna about her ‘hauntings.’ And we’ll see if we can talk to Paavo.”

“He wasn’t afraid to mention the ghost,” Kit agreed.

He went over to the bar, splashed a healthy shot of cognac into each of two snifters and handed one to Kit. “Don’t sip,” he said. “Take a good swallow. Then come sit in front of the fire.”

He took a large swallow himself and felt the burn all the way down his esophagus. Not the best cognac he’d ever drunk. However, almost immediately, he felt the warmth start to spread.

She gave him one last resentful glance, swallowed a mouthful of the fiery liquid and winced. “Now I know why I don’t drink this stuff.”

“This one is medicinal,” he told her as he sat down beside her on the couch. “Take another swig.”

She made a disgusted face and shook her head violently. “I don’t like it.”

“One more swallow. Once that hits bottom, you should stop quaking.”

This mouthful made her choke and gasp. When she could breathe

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again, she gave him a crooked smile and said, “Am I supposed to say something about what a great cognac this is?”

“No. You’re supposed to sit back, look at the crackling fire and tell me I’m not only the nicest jackass you know, I’m the best looking and most brilliant.”

When she placed her hand on his chest and met his eyes, he could see she was relaxing. Her composure was far from restored, but her color had returned to normal.

“I’m sorry Bart. I shouldn’t have screamed at you. And you are the nicest jackass I know.”

“How about the rest of it?”

She shook her head, but she did smile.

“I’ll take what I can get. For being so gracious, I’ll even get you something to drink you might enjoy more than cognac. Wine, soda, tea?”

“Thanks, but I had plenty of everything at Johanna’s.” From the way she was slurring her words, he figured she had. “Just be a good jackass and hold me a little.”

Holding his breath, he lowered his arm, which had been resting along the back of the couch and draped it loosely around her. She pulled her feet up under her and curled up against him, resting her cheek on his chest.

“Ah,” she sighed. “So comfortable. I’m not too heavy, am I?”

He gathered her delectable body closer and smiled wryly. There would not even be a passionate kiss tonight. That cognac, on top of the wine with dinner, was apparently more than Kit could handle.

Her breathing was getting slower and deeper. He could get used to holding Kit and listening to her even breathing as she slept. But he was determined to have so much more than that. Soon, Kit would give him her passion with the same intensity she had always given him her unqualified, loving friendship and loyalty. She was worth waiting for.

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Suddenly, she gave a gentle little snort and seemed to awaken long enough to say, “You’re right, you know, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? What happened to jackass?

“I’ll make Johanna explain. She lured me here by suggesting something strange was damaging the resort’s image but...” She drifted off again.

What had Kit seen? He certainly hadn’t encountered any ghostly spirits walking the beach. But she was convinced Laila’s spirit had waved at her. Could the sudden eerie silence he’d experienced for a few seconds be connected with Kit’s sighting?

He took a deep breath. Snuggling with Kit in front of a blazing fire was not something he could do much longer. He had fought the impatient stirrings in his groin as long as he could. Another minute or two and he wouldn’t be able to resist the urge to kiss every sensitive spot on her drowsy body until she needed him as much as he needed her.

But not when she’d had too much to drink! It was past time to put her to bed—her own bed—alone.

Bart hoisted Kit into his arms and got to his feet. He carried her into her room, yanked down the duvet and placed her gently down on the bed.

She clung to him. “No,” she mumbled. “Stay with me, Bart.”

“I don’t dare,” he said, untangling her arms from around his neck. “But next time you ask, Kittle, look out!”

He tucked the duvet under her chin and kissed her firmly on the mouth. Then forced himself to walk out of the room...fast.

* * *

Kit woke to the sound of bird song and the delicious aroma of bacon and coffee. She opened her eyes, then closed them again quickly. The morning light coming in her window sent a sharp pain through her temples.

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She hadn't had this kind of a headache since New Year's Eve, when she and Uncle Will had finished off the pitcher of grasshoppers he had concocted for her. But she hadn't overindulged last night. Then she remembered the cognac Bart insisted she drink. She also remembered the reason why he'd insisted she drink it.

Against the insides of her eyelids, she could still see the sharp silhouettes of her mother and a slim man strolling hand in hand in the moonlight. The worst of the shock was over, but she was still shaken by the experience.

But why would Laila be walking the beach? She couldn't be seeking vengeance. Her drowning had been an accident. *Oh, God!* No one had ever even hinted her mother might have been murdered. Kit took a deep breath. She mustn't overreact. Somehow she had to treat this bizarre situation logically.

She wondered if Johanna and Paavo knew that their ghost was Laila. Well, she couldn't find out if she didn't get out of bed.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes again. This time wasn't so bad. Then she noticed she was still in the jeans and T-shirt she'd worn last night. Oh, no! Bart must have had to put her to bed. And she vaguely remembered snuggling up to him in front of the fire. *Way to send mixed messages!* What a way to begin her life as the spanking new Kit.

She grabbed a fresh pair of jeans, underwear and a turquoise cotton shirt and stumbled into the bathroom. At least she'd be clean when she faced Bart. And she would be so breezy and sisterly his teeth would ache from the sweetness and light.

By the time she appeared in the kitchen, her hair was still damp, but her teeth were clean and the pills she'd taken were beginning to take effect.

"Morning, sunshine," Bart called out to her from the kitchen. "Your orange juice is poured. Your toast just popped, your bacon is in the oven keeping warm and you can get your own coffee."

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“You are disgustingly cheerful.” She picked up her juice and drained half of it before going to the breakfast table, where Bart was spreading what looked like homemade jam on his toast. “But thanks.” She bent down and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re a sweetheart.”

“That’s twice you called me that. Be careful or I’ll wonder if you have designs on my virtue.”

She laughed. “Virtue?”

“Eat your breakfast, Brat. We have to get out and coax some answers out of your relatives.”

Calling her “Brat” was a good sign. Apparently, he, too, wanted to pretend they could revert to the Three Bs.

“Mmm. Nice crisp bacon,” she told him, concentrating on her plate and avoiding his eyes.

“I’ve been thinking about seeing ghosts walk by me on the beach without my noticing. What if someone was projecting a hologram of the two figures? I don’t know how directional the equipment is. What do you think? If the show was set up for viewing only from the angle of this cabin, that could be the answer.”

“Who’d want to convince us the place is haunted? It isn’t as if someone is trying to drive us out or wants to buy the place and is attempting to drive the price down.” She drank some more of her coffee. “I don’t think so.”

“Probably not. Holograms would take a lot of high tech skill and equipment,” Bart agreed. “But we can’t rule anything out. Okay, here’s this morning’s plan. You get Johanna to tell you what the lodge ghosts have supposedly been up to, and I’ll try to find out who she told about your Toronto theater plans. And it wouldn’t hurt to get Betsy’s take on the ghosts.”

“I doubt if we’ll get anything except her pitch for getting tourists to next year’s sugaring off activities. But I’ll try.”

Someone was tuning the baby grand on the little stage in the bar

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against the background rhythm of hammering in the dining room when they entered the lodge. Betsy, who was at the computer behind the reception desk, waved at them.

“I’ll be right there,” she called. “Johanna had to go into town to pick up something. She said to tell you she’d be back this afternoon.”

“Do you know when Paavo’s expected today?” Bart asked.

“I’m not sure he’s coming in today,” she said. “I assumed Johanna would be here to take the piano tuner home when we made our appointment. She has eyesight problems and her sister who usually drives her can’t be here this morning. I’m afraid I’ll be tied up here for another hour or so. Do you want to have a coffee? It’s set up in the bar.”

“I don’t know that I need another coffee. Why don’t we return Elsa’s car and see how she’s feeling this morning, Bart?” Kit suggested. “We need to talk to her anyway.”

“Joel and I dropped in first thing and she had a good night. Actually, she’s gone into town with Johanna. I do wish I didn’t have to hang around with the piano tuner. I’d love to show you all the renovations while you wait.”

“You’re apparently a hands-on consultant,” Bart commented.

Betsy blushed. “I know I said I didn’t work here all the time, but Elsa was there and I didn’t want to embarrass her. The truth is that I’ve been doing her job for quite a while. She wasn’t feeling well for a long time before they diagnosed the cancer. Then she was in Sudbury for a few weeks for the treatments. Johanna asked me to take over the housekeeping preparations for the big opening next month. Of course, I’m still planning the possible expansion of our activities into the maple bush and kiddie land.”

“Get on with whatever you were doing. Don’t worry about us. Bart and I can wander about on our own for an hour or so. Just give me your master keys. I know pretty well what work we’ve had done.”

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Kit knew exactly what she wanted to see. She realized now it was the one area that had not been listed on the renovations list. “I’ll give you a call at the desk if I need any information.”

She led Bart into the large bar that opened off the lobby. The maroon-carpeted floor with its tiers of round tables and armchairs was sloped slightly toward a little dance floor. On its little round stage the bar shared with the dining room beyond it, a small dark-haired woman was busily tuning a baby grand.

“Looks like Johanna is actually going ahead with live entertainment on the weekends. I don’t think that’s happened since Raoul left the area.”

As soon as she was sure they were out of earshot of the reception desk, she added, “I want to see the tower suite. That’s where Laila and I stayed, and I want to know why Johanna was determined not to put us in there.”

They did a quick tour of the dining room and exited by the door to the patio and pool area. The kidney-shaped pool was attractive, but the area looked bare without deck chairs and tables.

“What’s that building?” Bart asked, pointing to a small wooden building at the far side of the pool fairly close to the beach.

“Change rooms and sauna,” Kit told him. “That was one of the first renovations Johanna requested. With her Finnish upbringing, she loves to have a really hot sauna, then beat herself with birch twigs and leap off the dock into the cold water of the lake.”

Bart shuddered. “What, no chains and leather?” he said with a grin.

“She and I had a sauna last time I was here, but I skipped the twigs. Johanna insists it’s wonderful for the circulation. You and I will have to try it. It’s relaxing.”

“Relaxing? That’s not the word that comes to mind when I think of getting hot and sweaty with you, Kittle.” The look he gave her was steamy enough to match any sauna. “But I’m game to try it. We’ll have

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to have our sauna before the summer help arrives, though, if we're going to do it properly."

The thought of doing a sauna "properly" with Bart made Kit swallow hard. She had visions of his big, muscular, naked body with sweat trickling down his strong neck, the planes of his chest wet and gleaming in the misty light, with drops of sweat mingling with the steam and beading on his body hair...

Bart's broad grin told her he knew exactly the direction her thoughts were taking.

"Come on, Bart," she said, heading through the back door to the elevators. "I want to see what Johanna is hiding in the tower suite."

Inside the elevator, Bart pointed at the buttons. "All right, button one is the floor with Johanna's suite and guest rooms."

"Three is the tower suite and four is the library. I used to love it up there. Want to see it first?"

The pleasant smell of leather and old books greeted them when they stepped off the elevator. A large picture window filled one wall on the lake side of the room. The other walls were lined from floor to ceiling with shelves filled with faded leather and cloth volumes. Comfortable leather-covered easy chairs and loveseats were nicely spaced around the room and a massive leather couch faced the window.

"Laila had that sliding wooden ladder installed when she bought the lodge so none of the books would be beyond her reach."

"And that wrought iron staircase leads to the cupola?" Bart guessed.

"That's where I went to read." Kit put her foot on the first step. She remembered how much fun it had been to race up inside this openwork cylinder. Each triangular step was attached to a central metal pole and to the bottom of an ornate iron hand railing that wound around the spiral staircase. By the time she got to the top she was always a little dizzy.

Bart caught her hand. "Let me go up first."

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Kit's automatic reaction was to refuse to be ordered around, but Bart's serious look made her swallow her objection. "You're taking this studly bodyguard business seriously, aren't you?"

He didn't reply but grasped the hand railing firmly and shook it. The metal joints squeaked a little, but after close examination, he pronounced the structure secure enough.

"I don't think this room gets a lot of traffic," he said as he started to climb.

"That's why I used to come up here."

The stairs complained a little as they took his weight, but didn't seem to be in any danger of collapse. He disappeared for a moment at the top, then reappeared.

"All clear up here," he called down to her.

She made her noisy way up the stairs and emerged into the bright, comfortable haven she remembered so well. The cupola was always warm with sunlight streaming through the panes of glass. She started over to open the vents at the top of the windows when she caught a whiff of disturbingly familiar perfume.

"Someone's been up here," Bart said. "And recently."

"That perfume..." Kit wandered around the little room looking for something, anything that would explain what she was sensing. Nothing had changed in all those years. The upholstered bench seat that circled the room was the same.

The only difference was the half-dozen large, sun-faded floor cushions that had always been piled neatly in the corner were spread haphazardly around the floor. The scent seemed strongest there. She breathed it in.

"Laila had that scent created for her when we were living in France. You can smell it?"

"I remember now. Laila always wore that perfume."

Kit whispered, "It's as if she just left the room. Why is this

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happening?”

Bart dragged a couple of cushions into a pile and sat on them, drawing Kit down beside him. “We need to think a minute, Kit,” he said, leaning back against the upholstered bench, with his arm around her shoulders.

The pose was casual, but the sensations that raced through her body at the contact were electric. “There’s been so much talk of ghosts we’re ready to leap to conclusions. Could Laila have given someone a bottle of that perfume or left any of it here?”

“It’s unlikely. It was her signature scent. And after her funeral, Uncle Will and I cleared everything of Laila’s out of the tower suite. She had only one suitcase with her that last trip. She wouldn’t have brought more than her purse atomizer with her. And can you think of any reason anyone would try to convince us Laila’s ghost is here in the tower?”

“And if it is really her ghost, what does it want with us?” Bart stopped and wrapped both arms around her. “Tell me I didn’t say that!” he said into her hair.

Kit slid her hands under his jacket and encountered the weapon he carried in his belt at the small of his back. Surprised that he carried it with him this morning, she looked up at him.

“That was no ghost who shot at you,” he said. “We can’t get distracted from the real danger.”

She burrowed back into his warmth. Poor, logical Bart sounded as if he needed comfort more than she did. These signs of Laila’s presence didn’t distress her. They confused her and tested her assumptions about the world around her, but they didn’t frighten her. Laila, alive, was self-centered and frequently thoughtless, but she was never malicious. If Laila was here, they had nothing to fear from her.

Maybe she could help her straighten out her feelings about Bart. She smiled against Bart’s chest. Some hope! When it came to men,

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Laila had the worst judgment in the world.

Bart brushed some stray hairs off her forehead and tilted her chin up so that they could look into each other's eyes. When he lowered his deep blue gaze to her lips, she couldn't help but part them in anticipation. He nibbled lightly at her lips. When he slowly inserted his tongue into her mouth, she sucked on it gently, then gradually imitated his intimate stroking and exploring of her mouth. This kiss was sweet and leisurely. Bart seemed to be telling her they had all the time in the world to explore their feelings. That they could be together. She threw away all common sense and surrendered to his delicious warmth and her need to be held and loved.

The warmth quickly turned to blazing heat. Nothing had ever felt as good as Bart's hands stroking and caressing her arms, then her back. When he slipped them under the hem of her T-shirt and she could feel the heat of his fingers against her skin, she moaned. Then they moved around to the sides of her breasts and, finally, he took the weight of her breasts in the palms of his hands.

Their shirts had to go. She tugged his shirt out of his shorts and ran her hands over his smooth back.

He lifted her onto his lap and lowered his head to suck her swollen nipple through the lace of her bra. She stifled a cry of pure pleasure.

From below, she heard a muffled, scuffling sound. Obviously, Bart heard it too because he raised his head from her breast.

Footsteps, then silence came from the library below. Kit sat up straight and strained to hear. She caught fragments of inarticulate whispers, then a woman's joyous burst of laughter. A male voice rumbled quietly.

Bart stiffened. "Who is down there?" he whispered.

She hoped the couple were strangers, but she had a feeling she knew who it was. From the look on Bart's face, she figured she wasn't the only one who recognized Laila's laugh.

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After another long pause, a sultry feminine voice said something too low to understand. The man chuckled. The woman laughed again.

After a short silence, there were more indistinct words, then thumps of something hitting the floor and rustling sounds.

“Are they getting undressed?” she asked in disbelief.

“Sounds like they’re in a hurry,” Bart said.

A few moans and some rhythmic creaking of sofa springs confirmed their suspicions.

“Right to business. Not much finesse,” Bart commented with an amused grimace. “And we’re trapped up here. This is embarrassing.”

Kit agreed. They couldn’t leave without alerting the couple to their presence. That metal staircase made sneaking out impossible. And they were going to have to leave soon. The sighs and moans from the library were more arousing than she wanted to admit and one glance told her the effect they were having on Bart’s body.

She stood up and tiptoed over to the top of the staircase.

“I can’t see anyone from this angle.”

Bart caught her and pulled her back. “Stay back. We don’t know who’s down there. Just because they’re horny doesn’t mean they’re harmless.”

“But who can they be?”

“One thing is for sure. We’re not hearing ghosts. Those two definitely have bodies.”

The moans were getting louder and the thumping was speeding up.

If this kept up much longer, she and Bart were going to be back on those carelessly piled floor cushions. Bart must have caught her expression because he gave her a knowing chuckle.

“Keep that thought, sweetheart. We’ll be back,” he whispered.

The building crescendo of noises from below reached its peak and the male voice shouted one hoarse word. “Laila!”

Without considering what she might find in that little room, Kit

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flew down the metal stairway.

“Kit, stop!” She heard Bart call to her, but didn’t stop her headlong dash. There had to be some reason her mother had chosen this bizarre way to appear to her. No matter what she found in that little room, she had to know.

Kit’s canvas shoes slapped down on the creaking stairs. Bart was right behind her. His heavier footsteps pounding down made the whole structure shudder.

The room was empty.

Bart pushed past her with his Beretta drawn as they advanced on the back of the leather couch. Only silence and the scent of French perfume greeted them.

Not so much as a hair or an indentation on the leather remained as evidence of the ghostly lovers and their enthusiastic passion.

CHAPTER 6

“I don’t know if I’m disappointed or relieved that I didn’t come face to face with a couple of naked ghosts,” Bart said as the elevator reached the lobby.

“Nothing about this is amusing, Bart. Johanna should’ve warned me.”

Kit’s stormy face told him his feisty Kit was back. Anger was healthier than the fragile state she’d been in since the shooting incident.

The elevator doors were closing behind them when he saw Betsy dash in through the front doors.

“Great timing,” she exclaimed when she spotted them. “Ready to check out the playland site?”

“No,” Kit bit out. “Not until we have a chat about the tower ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” Betsy’s smile faded. “You should talk to Johanna about—”

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“I want you to tell me what’s been going on here. Johanna mentioned some talk about hauntings in her letter and has barely allowed a minute to speak to me since I arrived.” Kit grasped Betsy by the arm and took her over to a table just inside the entrance to the bar.

Bart sat back to enjoy watching Kit in action. Betsy was a businesswoman in familiar surroundings, ten years older than Kit and two inches taller, but Kit was clearly dominant. Her blue eyes blazed steadily at the older woman as she waited for her to speak. Betsy’s blue eyes looked everywhere but at Kit’s face, while she obviously searched for words. Finally, she looked directly at her and forced a smile.

“I think Johanna has overreacted to reports of a few unusual sounds in the night,” she said. “And once the rumor got around that a guest or two had heard something strange, an amazing number of people were sure the lodge was haunted.”

“Betsy, Bart and I were in the cupola library a few minutes ago. Believe me, the ghosts are not a rumor.”

“You said ‘ghosts.’ Did you see more than one?”

“We didn’t see any,” Bart interrupted, catching Kit’s eye. “We heard voices.”

“We’ve only heard of one ghost!” Betsy gasped. “Both guests told us the ghost was a man.”

“They saw him?”

“No. They heard him laughing. The first one swears some invisible spirit was juggling his girlfriend’s underwear and his socks and briefs at the foot of the bed. Then, when the girlfriend started to cry, the ghost gave a loud nasty laugh.”

“So the ghost can be a joker. Was the other episode more upsetting?” Kit asked.

“It was to the man who found all his condoms tied in knots,” Betsy said. “He heard the laughter too. And the ghost called his girlfriend by name and warned her the condoms were much too large for the

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equipment.” Betsy giggled. “The guest was really steamed when she told us about that.”

“Sounds like a serious message to me,” Bart said with a grin. “I’d think twice about a relationship if I got that kind of supernatural interference.”

“If we weren’t in the resort business, I might find it really funny,” Betsy said. “But it’s the kind of thing that could put the Seppanens out of business. That’s why we thought we should change the focus of our advertising. Instead of promoting Spirit Lake as a romantic getaway, we would create a kiddie playland. The maple sugar operation would give us a theme. A restaurant on site could feature waffles and pancakes and a souvenir shop would have our own special maple candy and little syrup bottles.”

“That’s not going to be enough if the ghost continues his antics. I doubt if parents will want to take their children to a haunted resort.” Kit frowned.

“The only hauntings have occurred in the tower suite,” Betsy said. “And we’ve decided not to put guests in there any more.”

“How long has the ghost been doing pranks in the tower suite?” Bart asked.

“As far as I know, it started a couple of months before the lodge closed for renovations,” Betsy said. “I honestly don’t think it’s been around long. The first report seemed to surprise Johanna. You’ll have to ask her.”

“Or Paavo,” Bart said.

“I appreciate your being open with us, Betsy. And I’ll explain to Johanna that I didn’t give you any choice,” Kit said, getting to her feet. “Let’s get back on track and check out your plans for the site.”

“It’s a beautiful day for it.” Betsy slipped into her sales pitch mode again. “There have been so many hot days already this season that the lake water is unusually warm and the black flies have been pretty well

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killed off.”

They walked briskly past the cabin they were staying in along the single lane of pavement to the cluster of larger guest cabins at the far end of the resort property. Suddenly, just past the last cabin, they were in the woods. Bart was intrigued by the contrast between the manicured grounds of the resort and the natural state of the fresh green undergrowth they plunged into. The path through the towering maple trees to the sawmill property was overgrown and rough, but not impassible. The air was pleasantly warm and late morning sun filtering through the screen of maple leaves dappled the mossy path. The ground was soft and loamy, but last fall’s dry leaves crunched under his feet. He breathed in deeply.

“I can see why you wanted to come up here,” he said, reaching out to take Kit’s hand.

“I used to take Raoul’s golden retriever pup for runs down this path,” Kit told him. “I wonder if Raoul took Pitou with him when he left. Goodness, that’s seventeen years ago. Pitou would be long gone.”

The stripped sawmill frame stood alone in the middle of a large clearing.

“It looks strange,” Kit mused. “It used to have a high tower and a long, flexible metal belt that fed the logs to the saw blades. When they were cut, the belt took the boards up and dropped them in a big pile over there.”

“All of that was dismantled and sold off, along with the saw,” Betsy reported.

“I guess the family house is gone too.”

Betsy shook her head. “Actually, Elsa lives in it. She had it put on a trailer and hauled to a lot she bought in the village. This building should’ve gone too, of course, but Elsa feels nostalgic about it, so Johanna agreed to leave it standing as long as possible. I was hoping, if you approve the whole scheme, we could get the demolition done and

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the debris carted away before the grand reopening.”

“A lot of your ideas sound good, Betsy,” Kit told her. “I’ll try to have my decision to you in a day or two.”

Bart could sense Kit digging her heels in. She never did like to be pushed.

As they walked the area, Bart felt the tension growing in Kit, until she was almost trembling with it. She needed a break from the emotional impact of the resort. Laila had died here. And her ghost apparently lingered here.

“It’s noon. Let me take you into the grand metropolis of Huntsville for lunch, Kit. I need to pick up a few things while we’re there. My carry-on bag has only the essentials.”

Betsy recommended a couple of restaurants. That gave him the opening he was looking for. “What do you do for evening entertainment in the area, Betsy?” he asked.

“Not much. The focus is really on outdoor sports up here. There’s always movies. Bowling. A number of the lodges have live entertainment.”

“I guess you drive down to Toronto to catch a show now and then.” Kit sneaked in her little prompt.

“Joel and I go down to see my dad as often as possible since my mom died last year. We often take him to see a show.”

“I was surprised at the number of musicals playing this week.”

“You chose a good one. Johanna asked me if I thought you’d like it. I hope you did,” Betsy said.

So, Betsy had known where Kit was Thursday night.

“About your lunch...” she added. “If you don’t feel like doing the half-hour drive to town and you’re content with good plain food, there’s Ruby’s here in the village. She makes her own burgers and the fish in her fish and chips is fresh, caught locally.”

“I had the best burgers of my life at Ruby’s.” Kit turned to Bart

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with real animation in her face.

“Junk food forever!” Bart quoted the Three Bs’ cheer with a chortle.

The village of Spirit Lake consisted of about a dozen buildings at the intersection of Highway 60 and Spirit Lake Road. The largest of these was Mike’s General Store. One of the first houses they came to was the old log house Kit recognized as the one Elsa had moved from the sawmill property.

She pointed it out to Bart. “Maybe Elsa will be back from town by the time we’ve had our lunch and we can have a talk with her,” she suggested.

She braked suddenly when she saw a small, neat sign that said merely “Ruby’s.” She wheeled in and parked the truck with a dozen or so other cars in a good-sized lot beside the nondescript, white clapboard building. The restaurant they stepped into was surprisingly crowded. There were some seats at the counter, where a large, gray-haired man wearing a chef’s hat was manning the grill, and one vacant table for two in the center of the room. The booths around the edges all appeared to be occupied.

A wiry, middle-aged woman in a navy blue waitress uniform turned from the table she was serving to call out, “Just sit anywhere you can find a seat. I’ll be right with you.”

Then she straightened and stared at Kit. “*Mon Dieu!*” she gasped. She plunked the plate she was carrying down in front of her customer and hurried over to them. “For a moment, I thought you were Laila. You look so much like her. If you can wait at the counter for a few minutes, I’ll have a booth for you. And I’ll have time to talk.”

The moment the dark-eyed woman opened her mouth, Kit recognized her. “Bart, this is Ruby,” she said. “Of course we’ll wait.”

Then a familiar voice called out from a booth on the far side of the room, “Kit. Bart. Why don’t you join me?”

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Mike Martin smiled and waved.

“Gladly,” Bart said, as they slid into the booth. “Nice surprise to find you here.”

“Not much of a surprise,” Mike said with a laugh. “I have lunch here every day. You’ve got to try the fish. Fresh-caught pickerel. I guess you call it walleye. Best flavor in the world.”

They agreed to try it.

“You want a beer or wine with it?”

When they said they wanted only water and coffee afterward, Mike, using some kind of sign language known only to him and Ruby, signaled their order. “I’ve had my lunch, just about to have coffee,” he said. “Then I’ll get out of your hair.”

A dark-haired teenage boy appeared with Mike’s coffee and their ice water.

“Thanks, Raoul,” Mike said.

“Raoul.” The name rang a bell. “Is he related to Ruby?” Kit asked. “It seems to me Raoul Dupré, who introduced me and my mother to Ruby’s burgers, was a cousin of hers.”

“Well, this Raoul is Ruby’s son.” Mike put down his coffee cup. “You said last night, Bart, that you wanted to discuss something with me. I have a few minutes now.”

“Frankly, we could use your help,” Bart said. “You know Kit was hit by a car back in December. What you probably don’t know is it was an intentional hit-and-run.”

“Johanna didn’t tell me that.” Mike’s lined face was full of concern.

“I didn’t see any point in worrying her,” Kit said.

“Did they catch the driver?”

“They don’t even have a lead,” Bart said. “Worse than that, he made another try to kill her Thursday night. Took a couple of shots at her through a car window as she was arriving at the hotel in Toronto.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t some kind of crazy drive-by shooting?”

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“I don’t dare assume that,” Bart said. “I don’t believe in coincidences. And he was right on target. Kit stumbled and the bullet grazed the doorman as he caught her.”

“You may be right, but you have to admit it’d be pretty hard for anyone to know the exact moment Kit would be arriving.” Mike’s police instincts had kicked in.

“Not if he knew which show I was seeing and exactly when it was over.” Kit found herself backing up Bart’s argument.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Keep your eyes open for anything or anybody unusual. Running the general store, you’d know all the locals and most of the regular summer people. There won’t be a lot of strangers arriving because the lodge won’t be open for another month.”

“A few of the college students who’ve signed up for summer help are expected to trickle in late next week to do some clean-up and painting in the cabins,” Kit added. “I wonder how many students Johanna usually hires.”

“That should be easy to find out. And, of course, I’ll keep an eye out for strangers. Are you going to want some local security people? I know a few reliable ex-Mounties who live in the area,” Mike suggested.

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” Kit willed Bart to say she was perfectly safe in his care. His exasperated glare told her he wouldn’t. “Give me time to tell Johanna about the shooting myself before you talk to her about setting up security measures.”

“You’ll tell her today?”

She nodded her agreement.

“Then I’ll talk to some men about forming a security force after I get back to the store.” Mike looked at his watch. “I’d better get back and relieve my assistant for what looks like a very late lunch break.

“Johanna’s not going to be thrilled,” he warned as he slid out of the

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booth. Then he grinned. "I'll try to make her think it's her idea."

The pickerel arrived, as delicious and flaky as Mike had promised.

Bart ate both his portions and was eyeing Kit's second filet when Ruby slid into the booth across from them.

"Raoul," she called. "Bring more pickerel for—"

"Bart Thornton." Bart stood up as far as the booth would allow.

"Bart," Ruby finished. "Would you like coffee now or with your rhubarb pie?"

"With the pie," Kit said.

Ruby nodded her approval of the decision, then openly ogled Bart for a moment. "Well, Kit, you seem to have as good taste in men as your mother did." She delivered her verdict with a broad grin and tucked a strand of salt-and-pepper hair that had come loose back into the large knot at the back of her head.

"Every bit as good, if not as varied." Kit returned the grin.

"Ah, but I think Laila had finally met her match in Raoul. And you two have that same look." She looked pointedly at Kit's left hand.

"Oh, no," Kit protested. "Bart and I aren't... Are you telling me that Laila and Raoul were involved? But he was engaged to Elsa."

Suddenly, it all clicked into place. How could she have been unaware of what was happening right in front of her? From the moment she and Laila had arrived, Raoul had ignored Elsa. And Laila came alive and sparkled as she only did when she was snaring a new man. *Was Ruby right? Had Laila actually fallen in love with Raoul?*

Ruby sighed heavily. "He never looked at any other woman the way he looked at Laila. A lot of women fell for him, but ever since they were kids, he measured them all against Laila. None of them ever matched up."

"I had such a crush on him when I was fourteen."

"Hey! I thought I was the one you were panting about!" Bart said.

"You weren't crush material. You and Bret were my best buddies."

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Raoul was a charming, full-grown adult who paid attention to me.”

“Time for that pie?” Ruby asked.

Bart was looking at the menu printed on the paper placemat. “Make mine blueberry,” he said.

Ruby signaled to her son who brought coffee and removed their plates.

“I’d love to see Raoul again,” Kit said.

Ruby gave another massive sigh. “So would I, *chère*, but no one has seen him since Laila’s funeral. He left Elsa a note saying he was heading down below.”

Bart raised an eyebrow. “Down below?”

“Anywhere south of here. From here, usually Toronto,” Ruby explained. “Sometimes the States. We figured he thought he’d make his name as an entertainer down there eventually. But we never heard a word about him. It was as if he dropped off the face of the earth.”

Kit suspected Raoul Dupré had done just that. The lusty, good-humored laughter of the ghost in the library could well have been his.

“Just took his duffel and his guitar and left. He didn’t even come back for Pitou. I guess he assumed I’d look after him. Pitou, at least, left a lot of offspring around here.”

The jingling of bells attached to the front door signaled the arrival of four new customers. Ruby sighed and slid out of the booth. “But that was a long time ago. Next time you come in we’ll talk about happier things. Like your plans for the lodge. Mike tells me the renovations look great. Enjoy your dessert now.”

* * *

The sight that confronted them when they arrived at the lodge dashed all thoughts of cornering her grandmother about the ghosts from Kit’s mind. Johanna and Betsy were deep in conversation, and Johanna looked as if she’d been crying.

“Elsa didn’t want you to know about this last series of tests until she

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had the results,” Betsy was saying.

Johanna turned to Kit. “I insisted on taking Elsa to the doctor today. That’s when I discovered her trips to town with Betsy for ‘therapy’ were really for another series of blood tests. I talked to Doctor Evans myself. The cancer has spread. He and the specialist don’t think Elsa should be put through any more procedures. It seems all we can do is keep her as comfortable as possible.”

“Maybe we can try other specialists,” Kit suggested.

Bart could not help but think of this news in relation to the attacks on Kit. From what Bret had told him, Elsa, Kit’s last living blood relative, was slated to inherit half of Kit’s share of the lodge and a significant amount of money. That could have been temptation enough, but now it didn’t make any sense for her to be behind the attacks. At the time they’d occurred, Elsa had known she probably didn’t have much longer to live. He’d have to get Bret to shift his focus more into the workings of the foundation.

“Let’s talk about something else,” Johanna said. “Tell me about your day. Did you get over to the sawmill?”

“I sure did. I think you’ve got something there, so long as we keep it simple and oriented to little kids. No big, loud rides or roller coasters to spoil the peace of the lodge.”

Betsy looked surprised and pleased after Kit’s earlier reaction. She produced a detailed plan that included all the buildings and the landscaping of the playground area. For the next couple of hours, they talked about the pros and cons of Betsy’s sketch.

“All right. If we’re going to begin construction this summer, the first thing to do is get someone in to demolish the old mill building.”

“Elsa has objected to that for months,” Johanna stated. “I’d hate to cross her right now.”

Betsy sighed and began to gather up her papers. “Speaking of Elsa, I told her I’d drop by on my way home. Joel is off at another golf

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tournament. Just a one-day event this time. So you don't have to be concerned about her eating. I'll see she gets something down."

"Maybe you can convince her that we'll be building a happy place, not tearing down memories," Kit said.

"I'll try. But she seems determined to keep the old mill standing as long as she can. See you in the morning and we'll make some decisions about contractors and schedules."

"Tell you what. If I can raid the lodge freezers for some steaks," Bart suggested, "I'll fire up the gas grill outside the cabin and fix you ladies a feast the likes of which you have never tasted."

"He means we can make a salad and he'll grill the meat," Kit said.

"Well, that's a feast to me." Bart licked his lips. "You're talking to a man who spent the winter in France, gourmet capital of the world, dying for a properly cooked, thick, grilled piece of tender beef!"

Johanna pointed out the appropriate chest freezer and they left him digging happily in well-marked frozen meat packages.

The sun was still fairly high in the sky as Kit and Johanna strolled along the path above the beach toward Kit's cabin. Kit pointed to the larger of the two islands in the middle of Spirit Lake. "I always thought it would be fun to have a cabin on that island."

"Raoul was going to build there at one time."

"Laila was going to sell the island to him?" That surprised her. Laila had been possessive of every square inch of land at Spirit Lake.

"I don't know what the arrangement was." Johanna paused as if she wasn't sure how to go on. "He and Laila spent a lot of time checking out its possibilities during her visits that last summer."

"But he was engaged to Elsa, wasn't he?"

Johanna shrugged. "Officially."

"I guess there was a lot I didn't know about my mother. Ruby told me Laila and Raoul hadn't seen each other since their teenage romance broke up. I was at camp when she died and didn't know she'd been

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spending time up here.”

“It was a miserable time for poor Elsa. From the moment Laila arrived for Jacob’s funeral, Raoul had eyes for no one else. Then, after her body was found the next summer, he left and never returned. He didn’t even tell Elsa he was leaving. Just left her a note saying he was sorry to wreck all Elsa’s plans for the big day, but he had to leave right away for an appointment with a really big promoter.”

They walked along in silence for a while. When they reached the deck of Kit’s cabin, they sat on the wooden lawn chairs and stared out at the lake.

Suddenly, as if it were yesterday, she remembered her first visit to the island. Handsome, laughing Raoul had helped her and then Laila out of a canoe into the shallow waters off the island’s little beach. Then, after swiftly scooting the craft onto the beach, he grabbed their hands and tugged them laughing along with him, as they splashed through the warm water toward the sand.

“Tell me, Minou,” he’d asked. As always, there was laughter in his flashing dark eyes. “Where shall we build our cabin? In a clearing up in the trees or down here on the beach?”

“Minou?” Kit had said, hoping to divert attention from the blushes he always could provoke. “Why do you call me that?”

“It’s a good French name for a cuddly, little kitten.”

His laugh echoed in her memory. Raoul had been such a charming tease and he had loved this part of the country so much. She wondered why he’d never returned. An icy shiver slid up her spine. Or if he had ever left.

She broke the silence. “I hear a couple of guests had interesting encounters with ghosts in the lodge last fall.”

“Foolishness.” Johanna’s comment lacked conviction.

“Bart and I heard them in the library this morning,” Kit stated firmly.

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“Them? There’s only one.” Johanna snapped around to face her. “I mean, we’ve had only one reported.”

“There were two. They were making love,” Kit insisted quietly. “The male voice called out Laila’s name. Haven’t you ever heard them, Johanna? Your apartment shares an elevator with the tower.”

“Oh, my little Kat.” Johanna gave a resigned sigh. “He called her name? But Laila isn’t still wandering. She was laid to rest.”

“Last night, I saw the two of them walking on the beach, Johanna. I couldn’t see their faces, only silhouettes against the moonlit water. But Laila gave me her silly wave.”

“What on earth is going on here, Kat? I used to laugh at people who were superstitious, but over the years I’ve had to admit there’s much in this world that can’t be explained. And this makes me very uneasy. If Laila’s back, she wants something.”

Kit had to admit her grandmother was right about that. The living Laila had been delightful, but always self-centered and demanding. Her ghost probably wouldn’t be different.

“They’re both back.”

“It’s Laila’s return that disturbs me. That’s new. I’ve sensed Raoul’s presence a number of times over the years. Mostly, late at night when the bar is closed. I’ve heard him stepdancing on the stage. Sometimes a few phrases of a song. One time, though, I was feeling particularly lonely and went up to read in the cupola. That time I heard him singing Jacob’s favorite hymn. It made me feel better.”

Kit was so involved in what Johanna was saying that she didn’t notice Bart’s arrival until he spoke.

“*Voilà*, the raw material for a gourmet masterpiece!” he announced, holding up the brown-paper-wrapped steaks and a dark bottle. “A nice Beaujolais to complete the feast.”

Their serious faces made him do a quick visual sweep around. He should never have left Kit alone, even to walk back to the cabin.

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“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“We’re fine,” Kit assured him. “Johanna was telling me a little about our ghosts.”

“Do you mind repeating it for me?” Bart said as he sat down with them.

Johanna told him about being aware of Raoul’s spirit for years.

“Has Paavo heard him? His kitchen is right next door.”

“Not that he’s mentioned.”

“Sounds as if Raoul never did leave Spirit Lake. Did anyone ever instigate a formal search for him after he supposedly took off?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. It was a dreadful time. Elsa was beyond doing anything. She had just lost her sister. The fact she was angry at Laila for stealing her fiancé made it even more difficult for her. Add to that the embarrassment about being jilted.

“Most of us tried not to mention Raoul at all, much less try to find him. His friends and relatives knew how broken up he was about Laila’s death and assumed he needed to get away from everything that reminded him of her.”

“He must’ve left,” Kit said. “According to Ruby, he packed and took his guitar with him.”

“Someone packed,” Bart countered.

“I doubt if we’ll ever know what happened to him,” Johanna said. “Unless that’s the point of these appearances that started up all of a sudden.”

“When did Raoul’s ghost start making scenes for outsiders?” Bart asked.

“Right before we got into renovating the public rooms. Early December, I guess. At least, that’s when the two incidents in the tower suite were reported. I wonder now if there were others which no one mentioned. Now that I think of it, several couples did leave before their

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planned departure times.”

“Somehow we have to find a way to send the ghosts on to wherever they belong. Apparently neither Raoul nor Laila is at peace. And let’s try to be practical here. If Raoul carries on with his pranks, there’ll be no point in planning a kiddie land or the maple business,” Kit said, trying to get her mind working on some kind of normal, logical track.

“That’s true enough. Ghosts aren’t exactly a drawing card for a family resort,” Johanna agreed.

“You were going to tell Johanna about the attacks, Kit,” Bart reminded her.

“You mean the car that hit you?” Johanna asked. “Are you saying that was intentional?”

“Witnesses have sworn to it,” Bart told her.

“I should’ve told you before, but I didn’t see any point in worrying you. But the situation has changed a little.”

“A little!” Bart exploded. “Someone shot at her in Toronto Thursday night.”

Johanna gasped. “Were you hurt?”

“Only some bruises I got when the doorman tackled me to the ground. He was lucky the bullet just grazed him.”

“You mean someone actually is trying to kill you?” Johanna was clearly thrown by the news. “Did anyone see the shooter?”

“Not really. Everyone was too concerned about the doorman and Kit,” Bart said. “The assailant was in a van with tinted windows and no one got the license number.”

“So he could turn up here.” Johanna was suddenly all business. “We have to get some security people lined up.”

“We had lunch with Mike today. He and Bart came to the same conclusion,” Kit said.

“But who would want to kill you, Kat?” Johanna frowned. “And how did he know when you would be at the door of the hotel?”

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“Some of the people at the hotel knew she was at the theater and what time to expect her back. And we also have to consider how many people here were aware of which show she was attending.”

“Here? But she was shot in Toronto.”

“It’s only a three-hour drive.”

Johanna’s shoulders sagged for a moment when she absorbed the implications of Bart’s statement. But Kit was glad to see her grandmother’s fighting spirit surface as she straightened and met Bart’s eyes.

“Well, I knew,” she bit out. “And Betsy. Who else was here Thursday morning?” She thought a moment. “Jim was here servicing the photocopier again. He might’ve overheard. Oh, yes, and I told Paavo about the show when he was here at noon. No one who would have any reason to want to kill my Kat.”

“I can’t see any of you setting up the attacks on Kit, but I have to look at everyone. My brother Bret has some people working on finding a Florida connection with Toronto or the Huntsville area.”

“I hope they’re good,” Johanna snapped.

“The best,” he replied. “But you can see why solving the ghost problem is going to have to take a back seat to finding this guy. Tempting as it is to look into Raoul’s disappearance, I can’t allow myself to get distracted from my bodyguard duties. Particularly when it’s the Kittle’s ticklish little body.”

Bart stood up and pulled Kit out of her chair. “Come on, body. I need kitchen help. Time to cut and dice.”

Johanna joined them. “You must explain to me why you call my Kat that strange name.”

“Our housekeeper, Anna, called her that when she was five. Kit had just come to live with us.” Bart grinned. “It’s a Scottish word that means ticklish and unpredictable.”

“And it no longer fits!” Kit told him. “You may not have noticed,

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but I've become a well-organized, dependable business woman."

Bart hooted with laughter.

"And I am not ticklish any more." Kit's blue eyes were full of the devil as she shot him a smug grin.

If Johanna hadn't been with them, Bart wouldn't have been able to resist that challenge. Just the thought of running his hands over Kit's curves in search of her sensitive, ticklish points had hot blood rushing to his groin. He feinted a step in her direction.

She laughed and held her hands out to ward him off. "No attacking the kitchen help."

"Don't tempt me," he growled and began to unwrap the steaks.

Johanna looked on with a knowing smile. "I'll uncork the wine," she said, "while you thaw the steaks in the microwave and start up the grill. Kat and I will prepare the salad."

Bart saluted smartly. "Yes, ma'am."

Shortly, they were back out on the deck, sipping red wine, when Kit said thoughtfully, "Laila refused to talk about the estrangement between her and her father. Do you know what caused it, Johanna?"

"Stubbornness on both sides. I watched it from the sidelines and could do nothing. Your grandmother had been gone for three years, but Laila resented me from the moment Jacob told her we were getting married. I'm not sure whether she thought I was too young for him, or because she thought it was too soon.

"He was very strict with both the girls, but Laila defied him constantly. When she was seventeen, she got pregnant. Although she refused to say who the father was, I had my suspicions..."

"Raoul?" Bart guessed.

"It seemed likely, although Laila insisted she had been with several tourists that summer. Besides, Raoul had gone off to New Brunswick with a country band by then."

"He left home at seventeen, too?"

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“He was three or four years older, I think,” Johanna said. “Anyway, there was no prospective husband in the picture. Jacob was adamant that Laila go to his cousin in Toronto, have the baby and give it up for adoption. Laila was equally determined to keep the baby, but she was not quite seventeen and still supposedly under her father’s control.

“And that’s how it worked out. Jacob was positive he was doing the right thing. Laila said she would never speak to him again if he forced her give up her child. They both stuck to their guns. The baby was given up for private adoption. And Laila never forgave him.”

Kit sat silently staring into the depths of her wine for a moment. She couldn’t believe Laila, who had never been able to keep a secret, had not told her about this. Had she ever known her mother?

“That means I have a half-brother or sister somewhere,” she mused. “Was it a boy or a girl, Johanna?”

“I don’t know. Laila said she didn’t want to know and we were not to be told either.”

Bart knew the news was a shock to Kit, but just maybe they had the first lead to someone who would profit from Kit’s death. He didn’t know why the illegitimate son or daughter wouldn’t simply file a claim for half of Laila’s estate. Possibly because Kit’s fortune was much larger.

“The cousin should know,” he said. “And whoever did the legal work for the adoption. If you can give me the names, I’ll get Bret looking into it right away.”

Johanna frowned. “I don’t have any information about the lawyer, but Jacob’s cousin was named Rikka. Her married name was Anderson. Maybe spelled with an ‘e.’ Elsa kept all of Jacob’s papers.” She looked at her watch. “I’ll give her a call. It’s almost eight o’clock, so I’d better do it now. I’ll see if we can get them from her in the morning.” “I’ll put the steaks on while you call,” Bart said. “Come on, Kit. It’s time to start tossing that salad.”

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Johanna was reaching to pick up the telephone in the living room when it rang.

“That must be Bret,” Bart said as they headed into the kitchen. “No one else knows to call us here.”

But Johanna did not call for them. She spoke briefly into the phone and finished with, “Fine. See you shortly.”

“I hope it’s all right with you two,” she called, “but I invited Mike over to share that ton of sirloin you defrosted.”

“Good idea,” Bart said.

Then she was dialing again. Another brief conversation and she was back with them.

“Elsa said she would bring the file of Jacob’s papers over sometime after noon. That’ll give her time to find it. And Mike’s bringing a French loaf and dessert to go along with the steaks.” She gave an apologetic little shrug. “The man likes to eat.”

Mike arrived shortly and proved her right. Kit was amused at the way Bart beamed at them all as they polished off their steaks. In spite of the unpleasant topic they were postponing, it was a friendly, laughter-filled meal.

As they sat out on the deck with their coffee, Mike told them he’d arranged for three teams of two men to patrol the resort for the next few weeks. Kit agreed they should report to Mike, or to Bart when Mike was not available.

“I intend to be available.” Mike’s military bearing said he would brook no argument. “If we have the slightest suspicion someone, who has no compunctions about using a firearm, might turn up gunning for Kit, I’ll be on site. May I use your guestroom, Johanna? I’d prefer to keep a close eye on you as well, at least until we discover the gunman’s motive.”

“Why would anyone want to harm me?” Even though Johanna pooh-poohed his suggestion, she looked pleased at his concern for her.

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“But you’re welcome to set up your headquarters in my apartment.”

“Then come with me while I pack my things,” he suggested.

The heat in his warm brown eyes and Johanna’s flushed cheeks told a story they weren’t openly telling.

It amused Kit how quickly the after-dinner cleanup went after that. In minutes, everything was cleared away and they were gone.

Immediately, the cabin seemed to shrink.

CHAPTER 7

Bart stood by the fireplace and looked at her with unmistakable desire in his eyes.

Kit went over to the picture window. Although he didn't move a muscle, it seemed no matter where she moved, no matter where she looked, all she could see was Bart. His lean, tanned face and thick blond hair drew her eyes. She yearned to plunge her hands into that silky thatch and draw his firm mouth down to hers. She didn't dare. One kiss and a wave of that incredible heat would sweep away every bit of her control. She had barely managed to resist making love with him Thursday night. And they'd come so close this morning in the cupola. She wasn't sure she had the strength to do it again.

The masculinity and energy that surrounded Bart acted like a magnet drawing her to him. The temptation was overwhelming.

No. There were good reasons why she must not give in. Less than a year ago she'd been so infatuated with Ronald that she'd married him.

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And Bart was forbidden fruit. She had felt like part of Will Thornton's family for most of her life.

Oh, but the heat in Bart's deep blue eyes and that hard body...

"I've been neglecting my exercise routine," she said, searching madly for some neutral topic. "I usually run in the mornings."

"I like a morning run." Bart sounded as if he was waiting for her to make further plans.

"I think I'll take a canoe over to the island for a swim after my run. Are you up for that?"

"Sure. I want to explore the island anyway, and I don't have to be back here until mid-afternoon. Mike said he hoped to have a man here about two o'clock to install some alarms on this cabin and talk about beefing up electronic security on the rest of the resort."

Bart picked up their mugs from the coffee table and headed toward the kitchen. "Were you thinking of going for a jog now?"

"I think I'll have a shower and read in bed for a while," she said. She made herself meet his eyes. "Where are you sleeping?"

"I figure the other bedroom will be all right tonight. I'll do a careful check around outside now. And Mike said he'd do a tour later after he's settled in at Johanna's. If we leave our bedroom doors open, I'll hear you if you need me." Still holding the mugs in his hands, he leaned over and kissed her quickly on the lips. "Next time we share that bedroom, sweetheart, you'll invite me in."

"Good night," she said, and made her escape into the bedroom.

The cheerful warbling of the birds in the trees didn't quite match the eerie scene in front of them when they emerged for their run at about seven o'clock. The sky was a solid arch of pearly risen mist. Because the cool night air was still hovering over the warmer water of the lake, hundreds of little swirling columns of mist were rising all over its glasslike surface.

"Look, Bart"—Kit pointed out as they stepped out onto the deck—

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“mist devils. Beauties. Some of them must be five or six feet tall.”

“I want some pictures.” Bart ran back into the cabin and emerged with his camera.

“They won’t be there long,” Kit said, as Bart moved around to get the angles he wanted. “As the breeze comes up, it moves them along and they dissipate. Laila and I used to love mornings like this. We’d paddle our canoe out to them and see how many we could catch and cut through.”

“Let’s do it. I saw some paddles under the deck,” Bart said. “You paddle and I’ll take pictures.”

Bart got the paddles and together they quickly launched the nearest of the simulated birch bark canoes lined up on the beach.

About a hundred yards out from shore they caught up with the first little swirl of mist. Kit steered the canoe through the middle of it, neatly slicing it into two much smaller wisps. She laughed aloud and aimed for another one, then another. The rising breeze was moving the mist devils faster across the water, and with Bart’s weight in the bow, she couldn’t seem to paddle hard enough to catch up with them.

“Put that camera down and paddle, you lazy lump! I can’t get around the point to that big patch of devils without help.”

He turned and grinned at her. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you about catching more bees with honey than vinegar?”

She hit the water with her paddle at just the right angle for the splash to catch him square in the face. She chortled. She didn’t know she could still do that.

“Paddle!” she commanded, with a broad grin on her face.

Bart cursed and fished in the pocket of his denim jacket for a tissue. “You knew that would get water droplets on my lens, didn’t you? Hey! Look at the size of that pillar of cloud over there!”

He casually jerked his chin to the left to indicate the direction, then continued wiping the lens of his camera. Kit angled the canoe so that

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Bart, sitting in the bow, no longer blocked her view. He had spotted a real prize. It was probably over five feet tall and much thicker than any of the others.

“I’ve never seen one like that,” she said. “But I doubt if I can catch up with it.”

“All right. I’ll paddle,” Bart grumbled, tucking his camera carefully under the little v-shaped deck in the bow.

Before he could pick up the paddle, the breeze shifted about and began to blow the swirling chunks of mist back toward them.

“Let’s let them come to us,” he said.

The first half-dozen moist wisps floated by on either side of the canoe as they sat still in the water. Kit shivered. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck rising. In spite of the dampness, there seemed to be static electricity all over her body. They should go back to shore.

When she tried to raise the paddle, she found she couldn’t move.

Suddenly, this wasn’t childish fun any more. Some kind of purposeful, unnatural force was at work here. Kit cast a panicky glance around her. The rest of the lake was calm and smooth as a mirror. Bart, totally unaware of the strangeness of the situation, knelt in front of her, happily retrieving his camera. Being unfamiliar with the morning mists’ usual behavior, he wasn’t troubled by the mist devils’ serene, undeviating progression toward them.

She opened her mouth to urge Bart to paddle them back to shore, but nothing came out. Uneasy, but somehow more mesmerized than terrified, she sat waiting.

As the large, strangely dense column of mist approached at a sedate pace over the surface of the water, it began to rotate slowly. About a hundred yards away, it changed direction again and glided in a wide circle around the canoe, gyrating more quickly. Kit’s heart began to pound as the mist devil twirled in front of them. Bits of mist flew off it like chips of rock from a sculptor’s chisel. Three thudding heartbeats

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later, the semi-transparent, grayish mass had become a woman.

Kit gasped as the mist woman raised her arm and flicked her fingers in a unique little wave.

“Holy shit!” Bart whispered. “It’s Laila.”

The apparition certainly had her mother’s figure. It looked to be draped in some kind of silvery material that clung to her every curve. As the mist woman glided just above the surface of the water, only her hand moved in its childlike wave.

By the time the ghost reached her side of the canoe, Kit could discern her mother’s features. Her lips were fixed in a half smile. Except for a trace of blue in her wide eyes, every part of her was colorless. And was looking less and less like mist. The upper half of Laila’s body was still translucent, but was beginning to look pretty solid.

“What...” Kit had to swallow and start again. But she had the use of her voice again. “What do you want?”

“We’ll talk, Kit, sweetie,” the ghost said brightly in the lighthearted voice Kit hadn’t heard for seventeen years. “Come ashore.”

Well, the mist woman certainly issued commands and expected them to be obeyed the way Laila had. She turned, apparently confident they would follow, and led the way around the point of the island to the side not visible from the lodge. She headed for shore. The peculiar electricity left her body and Kit found she was able to use the paddle. She and Bart paddled along behind the Laila figure in stunned silence.

Laila glided onto the beach of a secluded, crescent-shaped cove. They followed. Bart stepped into the knee-deep water, pulled the canoe up onto the sand and gave Kit his hand.

“You okay?” His blue eyes were concerned.

“Bewildered,” she whispered. He seemed to be taking this whole scene more in stride than she was.

He squeezed her hand and held onto it as they climbed up onto a

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grassy knoll, where Laila lounged in the shade of a clump of mountain ash. Add a tinge of color to her skin and put a tall glass in her hand and she'd look exactly as Kit remembered her at countless social gatherings.

"Come closer," Laila's ghost commanded, stretching out one pale hand. "Sit by me. Both of you."

Kit was grateful she still had hold of Bart's hand so that she didn't totter. If he hadn't been there, she was sure her knees would've given way under her.

Kit sat next to the specter, her mother's look-alike, on the coarse grass and tried to get hold of herself. What did this spirit, or whatever it was, want from her?

"It really is me, sweetie."

Oh, Lord! Could it read her mind?

"I need to talk to you. Bart, too."

When Laila reached out to her, Kit flinched away from her touch.

"Kit, sweetie, you know I wouldn't hurt you." Laila's earthy laugh was reassuring. "I didn't even spank you all those times you deserved it."

Kit held her breath, bracing herself for the chill as Laila's hand slowly stroked her cheek, but she felt nothing at all. The ghostly hand did not even stir the air.

Laila sighed. "Can't feel me, can you? That's one of those darned rules. No sensation either way. And no going anywhere but the lake and the tower. Not yet, anyway."

Ghostly eyes that gleamed like blue-tinged pearls fixed on Kit's. There was such a depth of sadness in them. She covered Kit and Bart's joined hands with hers.

"I've been waiting for you for such a long time. You and your soul mate are the first ones to be able to see me in all these years."

Bart found his voice. "Why is that?"

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“The strength of your love allows me to materialize,” she replied. “And only you can return Raoul to me.”

“Raoul?” Kit broke in. “I don’t know how we can find Raoul. No one has heard from him since he left.”

“I’ll explain. But first, I must warn you of danger, Kit. Your troubles are based right here. I know you and Bart are looking at your business interests all over the world for the reason behind the attempts on your life. Don’t be fooled because those vicious attacks took place far away from Spirit Lake. It all starts here. You must believe me. This is the deceptively calm center of the storm. The evil at the heart of the whirlwind flings destruction great distances.”

“Someone here is trying to kill her?” Bart exploded. “Who?”

“How I hate rules! When I was alive, I specialized in breaking rules, but I can’t do that now,” Laila said, shaking her head sadly. “And the biggie right now, darling, is I can’t give you specific information. Events must happen as they will.

“But know this: my death was no accident and the same person murdered Raoul.”

“You’re asking us to find the murderer?” Bart asked.

“It’s too late for revenge. Please find Raoul’s body so we can be together forever.”

“You were together in the library yesterday,” Kit muttered.

“Thank you both for that. Another rule I’ve cursed is that Raoul and I can only make love in the presence of true and lasting love. There has been precious little lovemaking over the years, let me tell you!”

“But we’re not...” Kit and Bart began together.

Laila raised her hand. “Don’t waste your lives!” she commanded. “Raoul was the only man I ever loved and we spent most of our lives apart. What you have is precious. Be together.”

Try as she might, Kit could not shift her eyes from her mother’s mesmerizing gaze. The sincerity and absolute conviction she saw in

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those shimmering light blue eyes shook her to the core. Was Laila right? Were she and Bart struggling to contain a love that was meant to be freely enjoyed?

“Oh, heavens. I must run.” Laila sounded as offhand and breezy as if she’d just been reminded of another social engagement. “I forgot the rule governing length of appearances. After all, this is my first.”

As Laila’s body swiftly returned to mist, her vibrant essence paled along with it.

“Please, find Raoul.” There was nothing offhand about her faint, hollow voice as the plea faded on the wind.

As Kit stared at the long, unbent grass of the slope where her mother’s ghost had sat, an immense weight of sadness filled her. It was as if she had lost her mother a second time. Bart’s grip tightened on her fingers. When she turned to look at him, he pulled her onto his lap and held her tight.

She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head against his chest. His heart was beating as loudly as hers. She snuggled into his embrace and wished he would hold her forever. When she could breathe normally again, she loosened her grip and looked up at him.

“She really was here, wasn’t she.” Kit more stated than asked.

“I can’t deny it.” Bart still sounded shaken, but he was able to give her a crooked grin. “But your mama sure isn’t a typical Halloween ghost.” He winked. “Sweetie.”

Reluctantly, she scrambled off his lap and got to her feet. “If you only knew how I hated it when she called me that in front of my friends.” She shrugged and said honestly, “It sounded pretty good today, though. For a few minutes, it was like having her back.”

Laila had packed so many disturbing ideas into those few minutes that Kit needed time to think about them.

“Well, so much for our plans for a morning run and a swim,” Bart said as they strolled across the sand to the beached canoe. He

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apparently didn't want to talk about Laila's revelations just yet either. "Do you want to have a swim when we get back or do you think we should return Elsa's car?"

"I want to think about what Laila said about the murders before I talk to Elsa," she said.

"We said we'd return the car. We don't have to stay and chat, but I'd like to get that address book of your grandfather's. Ghostly insights aside, we need to find out more about Laila's pregnancy and what happened to the child."

"I guess we have to." He was right. But her mind was still reeling. "Neither of us asked her about that."

Laila had controlled the conversation, just as she had in life.

Kit looked out at the lake. The sun was shining out of a blue sky and a light breeze rippled the surface of the lake.

"The mist devils are all gone," she said. That was obvious.

Bart shuddered. "Those mist devils really spooked me."

"I always wondered if Spirit Lake was named after them."

Bart waded into the water and held the canoe while Kit climbed into the bow seat. "No pictures this time. I get to steer."

"You hate giving up control, don't you?"

"Not true. Sometimes it's fun to let a woman take over." His irrepressible grin distracted her from her gloomy thoughts. She wished she could toss aside her inhibitions and find out how much fun they could have.

That's what her mother's ghost was urging her to do.

They were halfway to shore before he spoke again. "If, as Laila the sexy ghost says, she and Raoul were murdered, they weren't together when it happened. Ruby said Raoul disappeared after Laila's funeral."

"We need to find out more about the day Laila drowned," Kit said. "Probably Johanna is the one to ask. If she's willing to talk about it."

When they entered the lobby, Betsy was at her usual place behind

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the reception desk working on the computer, but she hurried out to intercept them. “Isn’t the silence lovely?”

Kit realized that for the first time the lodge was blessedly free of hammering and other construction noises. “It must be a relief for you,” she said.

Betsy hesitated, then asked, “Do you have time to talk for a few minutes this morning?”

Surely she wasn’t going to try to push her for a decision on the kiddie playland already. “I’m sorry, Betsy, but I’m meeting Johanna and I have a full day planned.”

Betsy’s face fell and Kit regretted being so curt with her. But she’d had enough hard sell for a while.

They found Johanna at a table in the bar having a midmorning cup of coffee and looking over a sheaf of invoices. She looked happier and much more relaxed than she had last evening. Settling Mike in had apparently been the right thing to do.

Her brown eyes brightened when she saw them and she took off her reading glasses.

“Just in time for coffee. I made some fresh and Paavo dropped off some cinnamon buns. They’re still warm.”

They got their coffee and were enjoying their first bites of the delicious sticky buns when Kit simply couldn’t wait any longer to think of a smooth way to ask. She blurted out, “No one ever told me what happened the day Laila drowned, Johanna. Do you remember much about it?”

Johanna gave her a long look and carefully placed her cinnamon bun on her napkin before replying. “Oh, I doubt if I’ll ever forget that day. The kitchen was in turmoil. Paavo had just fired his sous-chef for arriving drunk and was cursing and banging pots like a madman. Elsa was grumpier than usual because of the amount of attention Raoul had paid Laila in the bar the night before. Laila had taken a book and a

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lunch over to the island to get a bit of peace, I suspect.

“I wasn’t aware she was gone until sometime in the mid-afternoon when a fisherman pulled up to the dock towing Laila’s canoe. Apparently, he’d found it floating down in the long bay. Elsa and Paavo and I rounded up everyone we could find and scoured the lake for her.

“We found her blanket and book in a clearing on the far side of the island, but no sign of Laila. Her body didn’t surface until a few days later.”

“She went off alone?” Bart asked.

“That’s what Elsa told me. She was covering the reception desk and saw Laila leave. I didn’t see her because I was in the dining room most of that morning with a couple who were planning a big reception.”

“Strange that her things were still on the island if she was canoeing when she drowned,” Kit said.

“That’s what I thought at the time,” Johanna said. “Someone suggested she might’ve gone out to eat her lunch in the canoe to get away from a bee or ants or something. That was probably what happened.”

Kit could think of other possibilities. Perhaps someone had come by and enticed her out for a paddle. Or, for some reason, she had never reached the island at all. *But who could have done that?* Raoul loved her. Elsa had the obvious motive but, according to Johanna, she’d been on the reception desk that day.

“Johanna...” Betsy was standing in the doorway. “The computer technician is on the phone again. Do you want to talk to him or should I have him call again later?”

“We’ve been playing telephone tag for days. I’d better get it.”

“Don’t worry about us, Johanna,” Bart said. “We should leave. We promised to return Elsa’s car to her. Do you have anything you’d like us to take to her?”

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“Take some cinnamon buns,” she said. “Oh, and Mike said to remind you about this afternoon—whatever he meant by that. He got a late start for his morning run, but he should be back soon. He said if you need to talk to him, he’ll be up in my suite making phone calls.”

“Tell him I’ll be back for two o’clock.”

“And don’t worry about us for meals today. We have lots of food at the cabin,” Kit called after her. “While we’re out, we may wander a bit.”

Betsy headed back to the reception desk. “Would you like me to call Elsa to tell her you’re bringing the car?”

“Good idea, Betsy. She could be resting,” Kit said.

As they headed out the door, Kit suggested after they delivered the car that they go to Ruby’s for lunch. Bart agreed, as long as they were back in time to meet the man who was to install the security devices.

Elsa’s garage was near the road and she’d left the doors open for them. Kit waved at Bart as he drove her aunt’s car inside.

Elsa’s log house was set a long way back from the road, down a well-kept gravel driveway. From the number of flowerbeds, it was obvious Elsa was a gardener. A thick row of peonies—some white, some red, all of them covered with big heavy blooms—ran the whole length of the driveway. On either side of the front steps were crowded beds of brilliant red and yellow tulips.

Elsa was leaning over the railing of the front stoop, shouting at a tall, thin, redheaded man who was standing on the lawn a few feet away holding the leash of a large German Shepherd pup. She was furious.

“And I’ll have the animal control people pick up that mongrel if you don’t keep him tied up. Don’t think I won’t,” she spat out as Kit pulled up by the front steps.

“Now, Elsa,” the man said. His face was as red as his hair with the effort to hold onto his temper. “Blitzie is just a pup. You have to make some allowances for that.”

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“Don’t ‘now, Elsa me,’ Tomas. I won’t put up with any animal that digs up my flowerbeds. I’ve warned you once before. Keep him tied or lose him.”

“Dammit, Elsa,” he exploded. “We’re out in the country. A pup should be able to stretch his legs.”

“And a woman should be able to have a flower garden,” she shouted back at him. “Take your mutt and get off my property before I have you arrested for trespassing.”

He glared at her for a minute, then tightened his hold on the pup’s leash. Before he turned and stalked off, he bit out, “One of these days you’re going to push someone too far, Elsa. And I hope I’m there to see it.”

Elsa was still breathing heavily when Bart returned from parking Elsa’s sedan. She finally seemed to become aware of Kit getting out of the car and Bart approaching on foot, but she didn’t acknowledge their presence. Instead, she dashed inside, only to pop back out again before they were halfway up the stairs. She was clutching a large cardboard file folder tied with a string in front of her.

She seemed to have enough energy today to be quarrelsome, but her face was still pasty white, almost gray. She was bundled up in baggy brown corduroy pants, a white turtleneck and a heavy brown cardigan.

“Here,” she said, thrusting the file at Kit before she reached the top step. “Johanna said you wanted to look at this.”

It was obvious from the way she had positioned herself squarely between them and the door that she did not intend to let them inside.

“How are you feeling today, Aunt Elsa?” Kit accepted the file and stood awkwardly, holding the file in one hand and the box of buns in the other. She took one more step.

“About the same,” Elsa snapped, not backing up an inch. Her blue eyes were icy.

Kit waited for her to say something more. Her cold silence was

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becoming uncomfortable.

“I was hoping to talk to you a little about my mother,” Kit said. “And her life when she was young.”

Elsa gripped the railing of the little stoop and laughed. At least, Kit assumed the decidedly unpleasant rasp was intended to be a laugh. “You really don’t want to hear my version of life with darling Laila.”

“But I do,” Kit said, taken a little aback by her vehemence. “I know Laila was far from perfect. But I never met my grandfather and wonder about him. And I hoped we could talk about the kind of child Laila was. And why she left Spirit Lake so young.”

Elsa tottered and started to fall back toward the house. Bart leapt up the last couple of steps and caught her.

“Open the door, Kit,” he said.

“I didn’t invite you into my house,” Elsa muttered as Bart picked her up and carried her inside.

Kit followed. She hovered uncertainly near the door, looking around the large, cozy room for a place to deposit the box of cinnamon buns.

“We’ll leave as soon as we can get someone to stay with you,” Bart said firmly. He placed Elsa in the easy chair nearest the door.

“Joel is coming over,” she said with a triumphant smirk.

“We’ll wait.”

“I don’t understand, Aunt Elsa. What do you have against me?” Kit was truly shocked at her reception.

“I’ll be glad to tell you that much,” Elsa bit out. “You’re the spoiled daughter of a spoiled mother. Laila stole my life.”

“How could she do that? She left home when she was seventeen.”

“She stole him from me. Twice!” Elsa snapped her mouth shut and closed her eyes. Apparently she had said all she was going to.

Kit looked helplessly at Bart, who looked equally lost about what they should do next. They couldn’t leave the sick old woman alone, no

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matter what she said she wanted.

The sound of a car door slamming came as a relief. Joel rushed into the room and headed straight for Elsa.

“Are you all right, Elsa?” he asked.

“I’m fine, dear,” she replied with a sweet smile. Was this the same woman? “It was nice of Kit and Bart to drop by, but I’m a little tired.”

Joel turned to them.

“Hello again,” he said, flashing his vendor’s smile. “Elsa tires very easily these days.”

“We were waiting for you to arrive before we left,” Bart said.

At this awkward point, Kit was glad to have the cinnamon buns. “Paavo dropped these off at the lodge and Johanna thought Elsa might enjoy one,” she said as she handed the container to him.

“If she doesn’t, I sure will.” Joel accepted it with a genuine grin. “I’ll see you to your car.”

Elsa had retreated behind her eyelids again, sparing them from having to say any good-byes.

“I’m afraid Elsa is in a rotten frame of mind these days,” Joel said. “Was she terribly rude?”

“Well, she did tell us to get out in no uncertain terms,” Bart told him crisply.

“Aunt Elsa is my only living relative, and for some reason she won’t even talk to me.” Kit tried not to sound as hurt as she felt. “She seemed happy to see you, though, Joel. I couldn’t believe the change in her attitude when you walked in.”

“I’m sorry she hurt you.” Joel sounded as if he meant it. “I have no idea why she’s taken such a scunner to you. She’s always been exceptionally kind and generous to us.

“You wouldn’t know, but Betsy lost her mother to cancer a couple of months before we came up here and Elsa kind of adopted us,” he said. “Betsy is very fond of her. She can hardly stand the thought of

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losing a second mother the same way. Did she tell you she's moving in here to look after her?"

"I didn't know." Kit wondered if Elsa was hurt because her only niece hadn't offered to be with her.

"Elsa is much weaker this morning than she seemed last night," Bart commented.

"Yesterday was one of her better days. I guess today isn't."

"Tell Betsy I'll gladly hire private care nurses to help her out," Kit said.

"I will." Joel looked surprised at the offer. "I'd better get back inside. I told Betsy I'd stay around until she got off work."

Back in the SUV, Bart asked, "Where to? The cabin for a sandwich and a little privacy, or Ruby's?"

"Ruby's."

They'd have to talk about the morning's encounters, but right now she couldn't handle another emotional scene. She was still stunned by Elsa's open hostility. Coming on the heels of Laila's revelations about murder and upsetting talk of soul mates, the unpleasant scene with Elsa was the last straw.

It was too bad she didn't have the right personality to adopt Scarlett O'Hara's philosophy. She wished she could act now and "think about it tomorrow." She'd wanted to sort out all those tangled emotions sooner than that.

In a few minutes, maybe she'd get Ruby talking about Laila and Raoul when they were young. Some more background might help them with the mission the ghost had pressed on them.

* * *

On the drive home after lunch, Bart gave himself a mental pat on the back. His years of diplomatic undercover work had come in handy. He'd participated in conversations with Mike and with Ruby pretty well for a man whose brain was totally occupied elsewhere. He had

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considered, then agreed with Mike's suggestions for installing cameras around the property and motion sensors around various doors and windows. He'd listened while Kit questioned Ruby about Elsa's relationship with Raoul when they were younger.

"I swear it was all in her mind," Ruby had said. "Poor Elsa was in Raoul's grade in school and followed him around for years. He never paid a bit of attention to her. He had a lot of girlfriends, but none after he started seeing Laila.

"Finally, twenty years after Laila left, Elsa wore him down and they got engaged." She'd shrugged. "I always thought the steady job performing at the lodge had something to do with his proposal. The place was packed on weekends."

"And then he disappeared," Kit had said. "Did you ever wonder if something happened to him?"

"Oh, Raoul's dead," Ruby said flatly. "No question. He would've called. At least he'd have made arrangements about Pitou. Most people think he got into some kind of trouble in the city. But I often wonder if he ever got there." She took a big breath. "He didn't say good-bye."

"Did he have any enemies around here?" Kit had asked.

But Ruby couldn't or wouldn't name anyone. The woman scorned was always an obvious suspect. Or could Ruby be protecting someone else?

Bart's mind simply wouldn't stay focused today. Laila's disturbing words kept interrupting his thoughts. Ever since they'd left the lake, the phrase "soul mates" had been ricocheting like a bullet around in his head. Each time the bullet glanced off his brain, another frightening word flashed through his mind. A word like never-ending. Then there was fidelity and commitment. And giving up all friggng control of your life.

Laila's otherworldly certainty terrified him. Soul mates loved without reservations and forever. He wasn't capable of love and he

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didn't want any part of it—at least, he never had.

But he couldn't leave the idea alone. The sex would be the ultimate experience, wouldn't it? A true union of mind and body. All his efforts to avoid thinking about making love with Kit were useless. The longer he spent within arm's reach of her, the harder it was to keep his hands off her perfect body.

He glanced over at her. She was frowning slightly, her eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead, her delectable full lips pursed in thought. The hot afternoon sun beaming in through her side window spotlighted her breasts. Her nipples were hard and thrusting at her pale green T-shirt. Could Kit be wondering about the same thing? She had a real hang-up about being part of his family. Give him one long wonderful night of lovemaking and he knew he could change that.

He'd promised her they wouldn't make love until she was ready.

But why not speed up the process?

Kit responded best to logic. *Yes.* Argue that sure she had close ties with his family, but they weren't related. Even during Will's brief marriage to Laila, he and Bret had never thought of Laila as a mother figure. She had discouraged it.

Another argument was that he'd then be by her side day and night for protection. And, a big point, they had the same views on the future. He couldn't ever see himself as a husband and father. Kit wasn't looking for one. Her late husband had cured her of looking for happily-ever-afters.

Their lovemaking was going to be so good. Their kisses generated a heat that almost incinerated both of them. Kit never denied she wanted him. He shifted in his seat.

To hell with wasting time with logical argument. Wherever this relationship was headed, they were going to make love. And soon.

He needed a clear mind to let him concentrate on keeping her alive. He and Kit would have to sort out their feelings eventually, but not

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necessarily before they explored the fire that crackled every time they were in the same room.

And he was going to make sure they were in the same room... day and night.

CHAPTER 8

After dropping Bart off at the cabin to meet with the security device installers, Kit waited for Johanna and Betsy in the round bar booth closest to the archway to the lobby. She paid little attention to the pages of figures and sketches in front of her, while Johanna fielded yet another telephone call at the desk and Betsy checked some correspondence on her office computer.

Kit breathed a large sigh of relief. Finally, she had a moment alone. She hoped Bart's meeting would keep him away long enough for her to catch her breath. *Lord! That man exuded enough potency and energy to power the whole resort.*

Why was she pretending she could resist him? For as long as she could remember she'd wanted to spend every minute she could with Bart. And now, after years of deep affection, she was madly, uncontrollably, in lust with him. She'd tried to reason her way out of these new feelings, but it was no use. She wanted his hard, muscled

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body in her bed. She knew him well enough to predict the laughter and joy he would bring to their lovemaking. Why not enjoy it?

Bart didn't have a hang-up about being surrogate family. She was the one who had desperately wished for years that he was her brother. Well, he wasn't! He was her best friend. And he was going to be her lover.

She was going to do it. Her pulse began to pound in anticipation. *Maybe tonight!*

She just had to be careful not to allow Laila's insistence they were soul mates to confuse her. Lust, that's all it was. *Good healthy lust.* She and Bart could have no future. Bart would never tie himself down to one woman, and she had learned a lesson from her disastrous marriage.

But if they were lovers, they could make the present wonderful. And who knew how long they could make the present last?

She couldn't think in terms of months or years. Always in the back of her mind was the ominous shadow of the person who had already twice tried to kill her. She shuddered and glanced uneasily around the empty bar.

As if on cue, a loud shot snapped the silence. Kit threw herself down flat on the bench.

Oh, God! The shooter had found her!

Another shot, then three in rapid succession. Then three more.

Those weren't gunshots! She knew those rhythmic explosions of sound. Cautiously raising her head above the level of the tabletop, she looked at the empty stage. No dancer was visible, but unseen hard heels and toes made the unmistakable tempo of an Irish jig echo through the room.

DAH...DAH...dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah...dah, dah, dah...DAH, dah.

She got to her feet, but could not take a step. A cold, invisible force held her feet in place. The same electricity she'd felt in the canoe

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crackled all over the surface of her body. She waited.

There was no need to search the room for a hidden tape player. This was no sham. Raoul was making his presence felt. Loud as gunfire, the clicking of his hard shoes sounded in the rhythm of his favorite dance. She could almost hear the rich laughter that used to be in his voice as he sang along with the jig, “Did you ever go into an Irishman’s shanty...”

Her nerves tingled in response to the peculiar electrical tremor in the air. A shiver crawled over her skin. A deep primitive instinct urged her to run and hide. A twinge of curiosity suggested she stay. She wasn’t afraid Raoul’s spirit would harm her, but, if she could only make her frozen legs work, she’d run.

The staccato sounds of step dancing stopped abruptly. The icy tingling of her skin stopped. The chill restraints on her legs left just as suddenly. She could move if she wanted to, but some strange quality in the sudden silence compelled her to stay. There was a reason she needed to be here.

“Where’s the music, Raoul?” she said, trying to play it cool. Half of her mind said she had lost all her marbles. The other half was eager to know why Raoul was contacting her.

The dancing feet sounded a fanfare.

“Ah, Minou, Minou.” A warm baritone voice spoke from the stage. “So sleek and lovely. My pretty little kitten has become such a beautiful adult female. Come closer.”

As she approached, Raoul slowly took shape. He wore his signature performing clothes—black boots, black denim pants and turtleneck with a red vest and beret. His dark eyes dominated a handsome face that was the same lustrous, pearly gray color as Laila’s.

The brilliant smile he flashed at her warmed his black eyes. But the sharp image of the whole man lasted only a moment. The instant Raoul materialized completely, he began to disappear again.

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“I can’t stay, Minou,” he said. “I couldn’t resist the urge to show off.” The only visible parts of him now were his head and shoulders. His lips stretched in a sheepish smile and his shoulders raised in a familiar shrug. “I spent too much energy doing your jig.”

“I’d like to have seen it,” she said, and was surprised to realize she meant it.

“Be careful, Minou.” His voice was losing power and he was fading quickly. “Don’t trust...anyone.”

“What do you want from me, Raoul?” Kit asked quickly just before he disappeared entirely.

“Bury...bones...” said his disembodied voice.

And he was gone. She thought she heard him finish with a whispered, “Laila.”

Nothing was left of him, no lingering scent, no echoing sound. It was hard to believe she hadn’t imagined the whole encounter.

As if in answer to her thoughts, the ghostly feet tapped out a short staccato “Shave and a haircut, two bits!”

She smiled, remembering Raoul’s irrepressible sense of humor. The smile vanished quickly, though, when she remembered the grisly task his ghost had asked of her. And the repeated warning.

Who was her enemy who stayed in the calm eye of the storm sending death and destruction to her, even at a great distance? Laila’s imagery had been poetic, but the message was someone at Spirit Lake had hired a killer to eliminate her.

Kit was still standing in the middle of the little dance floor, staring at the empty stage and hugging herself, when Johanna returned.

“Well, that’s settled,” Johanna announced. “That man...” She looked at Kit and stopped dead in her tracks. Her worried gaze snapped to the stage.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said, putting her arm around Kit’s shoulders. “Raoul’s been here. What did he do this time?”

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“He danced.”

“No pranks then.” Johanna seemed relieved. “I’ve heard him more than once in here. I’ll never forget how frightened I was the first time.”

She bent her head to peer into Kit’s eyes. “He really is harmless, you know,” she assured her.

“Raoul wasn’t in the mood for pranks. He only appeared long enough to warn me I was in danger.”

“You saw him?” Johanna’s surprise was almost comical. “But no one else has... His warning must be serious. Who did he say it was?”

Kit had to laugh. Then she couldn’t stop. “Can’t tell me who,” she choked out between gasps of near hysterical laughter. “It’s against the rules.”

Then the tears began to flow.

* * *

The moment he entered the lobby, Bart heard her voice. Kit was in trouble. He yanked the Beretta free of its holster as he ran into the bar. She was standing in the middle of the tiny dance floor with her arms wrapped around her middle, gently sobbing, while Johanna patted her shoulder.

He surveyed the room quickly, then clicked the safety back on his weapon and returned it to the holster on his belt.

“What happened here?” he snapped, taking Kit in his arms.

“She saw the ghost,” Johanna told him.

“It was Raoul,” Kit said, struggling impatiently out of his embrace. She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “I feel so stupid. There’s nothing to cry about. He warned me I was in danger. But we already knew that, didn’t we?”

She moved unsteadily toward the paper-strewn table. “I can look at that information you’ve gathered now, Johanna.”

“Not today!” Bart said firmly. Kit was not in any shape to deal with business right now.

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Both women turned to look at him, surprised at his tone of voice. It was time they both learned there was a limit to his easygoing acceptance of their plans.

“Kit’s had enough. I’m taking her back to the cabin for a rest.”

“Bart, the lodge is reopening in three weeks. We have to make arrangements to get the sawmill demolished and carted away before guests start arriving. They expect a peaceful quiet holiday. Besides, the security men are still there.” He could tell Kit’s heart wasn’t in her protest.

“They’re gone. Mike had briefed them and got them started on the outdoor stuff earlier. All I had to do was check their work. Come on, Kit. Two ghost encounters in a day is a good excuse to play hooky.”

Kit straightened her shoulders and raised her stubborn chin. He did love her spunk! Then she met his eyes and he could see common sense getting the better of her pride.

“Is Betsy coming in tomorrow?” Kit asked.

“As a matter of fact she just told me Joel is playing the second round of a local tournament tomorrow and she’d be coming in for a while tomorrow afternoon.”

“Perhaps it would be better to go over all this then if Betsy will be here.” The small catch in her voice betrayed the frayed state of her nerves. “What do you think, Johanna?”

Johanna met Bart’s eyes. Her steady gaze held understanding and what looked like grudging approval.

“Tomorrow it is,” she agreed.

On the way back to the cabin he pointed out the men setting up surveillance cameras in the trees. “They won’t be hooked up to Mike’s command central in Johanna’s suite until sometime tomorrow, but at least they’ll be in place. Until then, we have these.” He pulled a little black FRS out of his pocket.

“What’s that?”

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“Like a walkie-talkie, but with a much bigger range. Mike and I have them. So do the guys doing the patrols. I have one for you too. Now tell me about the ghost.”

Kit reported her short conversation with Raoul’s ghost.

“That goes along with what we heard from Laila,” Bart said. “But why the hell are they appearing to us if they can’t give us any valuable information?”

Kit’s weak grin showed how exhausted she was. “I don’t think they’re here to do anything for us. They want us to do something for them.”

“Find Raoul’s bones,” Bart said with a grimace.

“And bury them beside Laila’s.”

“That’s not going to solve the question of who is behind the attacks.”

“I guess we’re on our own for that,” she said.

After he showed her how the security on the windows and doors and the motion sensors worked, it didn’t take much to convince Kit to take a hot, relaxing bath, then have a nap, while Bart called Bret to see what he’d learned from his people in Florida.

Keeping his mind off a vision of Kit in the bath he had prepared for her wasn’t as easy. The fragrance of the relaxing oils wafted through the cabin and made him think of having her, relaxed and warm in his bed. He could almost taste her damp, sweetly scented breasts, feel her silky skin under his palms...

Enough. What he needed was a good long run, but he couldn’t leave Kit alone in the cabin until the alarm system was activated. He said he’d make some phone calls. Better do that.

Bret didn’t have much for him. He hadn’t found a Toronto connection at Schofield’s, but he did have one piece of information. His contact with the Toronto police reported that two of the cabbies who’d witnessed the shooting at the hotel agreed on the first three digits of the

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van's license plate. That would help as corroboration only if they could get the license number of a suspect to check it against. But it was something.

When Bart told him what he knew about the child Laila had given up for adoption, Bret breathed a sigh of relief. "A lead," he said. "Someone who might benefit from Kit's death."

"All I have is the approximate year of birth and the name of Laila's aunt," Bart cautioned.

"Rikka Anderson or Andersen. Right?"

"Kit got some family papers today. Wait until we can go through them to start your search. I'll let you know the minute we find any more information. Johanna's good friend, Mike Martin, is an ex-Mountie and CSIS agent. I thought I'd see what he can turn up on Rikka with his Canadian connections."

"Good idea. Are you getting a computer up there or do you plan on freeloading off me forever?"

Bart laughed. "I'm thinking about getting one. It's damned frustrating having to rely on other people. However, you're building up credits. Just tell me what you've got."

Bret was almost finished background checks of everyone who had left Schofield's or the foundation in the last year for any reason. So far he'd found nothing interesting. Bart gave him Raoul's, Mike's, Joel's and Betsy's names to add to his list before ending the call.

Bret was right about the computer. For one thing, he wanted to run a quick check on the dozen college students who were descending on them in less than a week to spruce up the cabins. While he had no idea who Kit's enemy was, he didn't want to download anything onto the lodge's equipment. He knew exactly the computer he needed to run some of those background checks himself. He just had to find out where to find it up here and how to get it almost immediately.

A quick call set Mike on the task of locating Rikka Anderson. Mike

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would get approximate dates from Johanna and tap his buddies who were still in CSIS. As the search had no possible ties to international terrorism or questions of national security, he was sure they shouldn't have any problem. Mike also said he'd order the computer from a company in North Bay, which would courier it to the lodge within twenty-four hours.

He decided he'd better get Jacob's file from Kit so he could skim through it while she was resting. He opened her bedroom door. Too late. She was already in bed, fast asleep. She probably would want to be the first to examine her grandfather's private papers anyway.

Frustrated at every turn and muttering curses under his breath, Bart snatched a mystery novel off the bookshelf and threw himself onto the couch with it. It didn't take him long to discover he didn't give a damn who had killed the unpleasant old man in the story. He was replacing the book on the shelf when there was a quick rap at the door.

A glance through the peephole revealed Paavo's concerned face.

"How's Kit?" he asked, without any preamble. "Johanna tells me she had an unsettling meeting with our hotel ghost."

"Much better than she was when Johanna saw her. She's resting right now," Bart said as he accepted the picnic basket Paavo thrust in his hands. "What's this?"

"Cold supper," Paavo said. "I'll put it in the fridge so you can eat it when you're ready. Just heat the rolls."

Bart followed him into the kitchen and watched him put the contents of the basket in the refrigerator.

Paavo gave a sheepish grin. "I feel like the lady of the manor."

At Bart's puzzled look, he laughed and explained, "I was forced to read a really bad novel in school where the baron's wife went around carrying a basket of calf's foot jelly and dispensing it to ailing villagers. I wanted to do something to cheer Kit up, but couldn't bring myself to make calf's foot jelly." He shuddered. "Fried chicken and potato salad

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seemed more cheerful to me.”

“Good thinking!”

“Did Raoul frighten her much? Johanna said she looked upset.”

“More shook her up,” Bart replied. “He warned her she was in danger here.”

“Ghosts rattle me!” Kit emerged from the bedroom, looking lovely and flushed from her nap. She was wearing turquoise sweats that deepened the blue of her eyes. “Hi, Paavo. You were right. We do have ghosts. I met both of them today.”

“Both?” Paavo looked genuinely startled.

“We were given a solemn warning by Laila this morning,” Bart told him.

Kit shot him an angry glance. She always hated it when he answered for her.

“Laila? But Raoul is the only ghost we’ve ever had in the lodge!” Paavo stared at him. “You heard her too?”

“Kit and I were together in the canoe when we saw her, Paavo. She claimed the location of the attacks is misleading. That the source of the danger to Kit was here in Spirit Lake.”

Paavo’s ruddy face paled. “Attacks? I knew you were injured by a hit-and-run driver, Kit, but I didn’t know it was intentional.”

“My manager, who pulled me out of the way, is convinced the van was steering right at me, Paavo,” Kit admitted.

“Then, Thursday night, someone shot at her outside her hotel in Toronto,” Bart said. “He missed Kit but injured the doorman.”

“Why would the ghost say the source of the danger was here?” Paavo apparently had no difficulty believing they’d talked to a ghost. “Nobody here would want to kill you, Kit!” Paavo looked appalled at the thought. “Johanna and I love you as if you were our own.”

“Could someone who worked for the resort have a grudge against her?” Bart suggested.

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“No one. I’m positive. Kit is the best possible boss. She has always let us run our own show here.” He rolled his eyes heavenward. “When I think of trying to please Laila’s whims! She was always threatening to fire somebody. I think I heard, ‘You can be replaced!’ more often than ‘Good morning’ when she was here.”

That opened up the field in the investigation of Laila’s murder. Elsa was the obvious suspect because she made no secret of her hatred of her sister, but Bart wondered if perhaps it hadn’t been a crime of passion. Maybe Raoul was simply an unexpected witness who’d had to be eliminated.

“Laila actually fired Steve Farby—he’s one of Ruby’s cooks now—for refusing to defend himself when she accused him of falsifying some invoices. I don’t mean to put her down, but I’m afraid a lot of people found your mother hard to take, Kit. I was fond of her, but I didn’t always like her.”

Kit patted Paavo’s arm. “I can understand that,” she said with a wry grimace. “Laila really didn’t care much what anyone thought of her.”

“But I don’t understand,” Paavo said. “Why has her ghost suddenly started appearing? And Raoul become visible? What’s happening?”

“They seem to want to make sure we know they were both murdered,” Bart said.

“And they want Raoul’s body found and buried properly,” Kit added. “I get the impression if that happens, they’ll be able to leave.”

“After all these years... I suppose you’re going to try to get the answers.” Paavo heaved a great sigh. “I had hoped we’d never know for sure what happened.”

“But you suspected that Raoul hadn’t really left,” Kit said.

“You have to understand. At the time, there was so much confusion. The police investigated and decided Laila’s drowning was an accident. Then, when Raoul left after the funeral, I think we were all relieved. His desperate mourning was hard on Elsa, and Elsa made sure her black

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moods were hard on everybody. Life calmed down after he was gone. I didn't allow myself to think about what might have happened to him."

"So no one really looked for him," Kit said.

"Ruby called everyone she knew, but the police weren't interested in looking for an adult who had left a note saying he was going away."

"The note he left for Elsa," Bart said. "What did it say exactly?"

"Just that he was sorry to wreck all Elsa's plans for the big day, but he had to leave right away for an appointment with a really big promoter."

"Did anyone check the handwriting?"

"As a matter of fact, Ruby did insist that the bank manager compare it with Raoul's signature. It checked out."

"Paavo," Kit said thoughtfully, "did you know Rikka Anderson?"

"Rikka." He frowned. "Not a common name. I think your grandfather had a cousin Rikka. Is that who you mean?"

"I think so. I was told Laila lived with her for a while after she left home. If Rikka is still alive, I need to talk to her."

"I wish I could help, but I never met her. Maybe Johanna would know more." Paavo looked at his watch. "Seven-thirty!" he exclaimed. "I'm late for a dinner engagement. Enjoy your supper."

He hurried out the door, taking with him most of Kit's usual self-confidence. She was suddenly shy. For the first time in her life, she didn't know what to say to Bart. He stood quietly beside her, watching Paavo's departing figure through the front window. She was much too aware of him and of her rash decision to seduce him tonight. It had seemed so simple this afternoon. Bart would start his sexual banter and she would pick up on it. They would laugh together and she would kiss him. It wouldn't take long for him to discover she was serious.

He was close enough she could smell the light sandalwood scent of his aftershave and almost feel the heat of his body. Her pulse raced at the thought of what might be ahead. He'd been kind and thoughtful

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today. But not his usual self. She couldn't remember one teasing sexual innuendo. What if he'd changed his mind? What if he no longer wanted her?

He seemed unusually tense. This silence was going on much too long. Was he having the same kind of thoughts she was? But he couldn't know what she was steeling herself to do. He turned to look at her.

She couldn't go through with it.

But, Lord, his deep blue eyes were hot and sexy. And his firm lips just begged to be kissed.

"Paavo delivered supper," those kissable lips pronounced. Certainly not the provocative quip she was hoping for. "Hungry?"

She nodded.

He placed a warm hand on the small of her back and guided her toward the kitchen. His gentle touch made her catch her breath. "Let's see what he brought us."

She'd make up her mind later. She smiled to herself. Maybe she could do it. All she needed was a little encouragement.

* * *

When he felt her start under his hand, Bart choked down disappointment. Kit was not herself tonight. She was nervous. Every time he touched her or even looked at her, she jumped. He wished he could risk holding her to try to calm her down, but he knew once he had her in his arms, he wouldn't be able to stop with a few soothing kisses. Since he'd decided this afternoon that he was going to show Kit how right their lovemaking was going to be, he'd been in a state of semi-arousal. But obviously, tonight was not the night. The Great Seduction would have to wait.

Kit was busily rummaging in the refrigerator and hauling out the containers of food Paavo had brought. She still hadn't met his eyes.

"What a wonderful idea. Paavo is such a sweetie," she said. "He

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knows how much I love his fried chicken. Oh, and potato salad.”

Kit commented on each different salad she discovered as she opened the containers and put them on the table. Bart set out plates and cutlery and put the rolls in the microwave to heat. He uncorked the bottle of chilled Chardonnay and poured some into the stemmed glasses from the wicker basket. Perhaps the wine would help them both to relax.

Kit sat down and took a sip of her wine. “Perfect,” she said with a smile. “Let’s take our time with supper and enjoy this.”

“Paavo seems to have forgotten he wasn’t cooking for a whole dining room full of people,” he commented as he loaded his plate.

“Mmm,” Kit had already bitten into a drumstick. “Delicious.” She licked her lips and actually met his eyes. “We won’t have to go out to eat for days.”

What was happening here? He could swear that warm look was intended to tell him something he wanted desperately to hear. Was she coming on to him? Or was that sensuous purr all about the chicken?

He raised his wine glass. “To your thoughtful great-uncle,” he said. *And to the woman who is driving me crazy.*

“To Paavo,” she responded with another smoldering look. “And this chicken.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

“When we’ve finished this feast, what do you say we go through your grandfather’s papers?” That might take his mind off the pressure building in his lower unit.

The light in Kit’s eyes dimmed a little, but she agreed.

“But not until after we’ve had some of Paavo’s sinfully rich chocolate mousse cake. It’s his specialty.”

The cake was delicious and set Kit to purring again. If she weren’t at the end of her emotional tether from today’s experiences, he would be kissing her and licking the creamy chocolate from her lips. And

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they'd be embarking on the night of their lives!

"Come on, Brat," he said, standing up abruptly. He'd had all he could take of Kit in this sensuous mood when he had no hope of sharing it more intimately. "Let's get at those papers."

She looked a little hurt at his sudden change of mood, but she picked up their wine glasses and followed him into the living room. They settled down on the sofa with the folder of papers Elsa had given them. My God, was that only this morning?

Half an hour later, he turned over the last of his pile of the papers.

"Nothing!" he muttered. "Nothing but invoices, receipts and customer lists for the sawmill."

"All I got was tax stuff." Kit sounded equally disgruntled. "Not one personal bit of information in the entire file. Not an address or phone number. Elsa must've gone through the file and removed anything that could possibly have been of any use to us. She has definitely passed her resentment of Laila on to me."

"She was pretty antagonistic this morning. Do you think it's worth appealing to her again?"

"Probably not," Kit was saying, when the strident ring of the telephone at his elbow interrupted.

"Thornton," he said.

"I had some luck," Mike's voice announced cheerfully. "I've found Rikka Andersen. She has a condo in an adult community outside Orillia. I spoke to her a few minutes ago. She was about to retire for the night, but said she'd see you and Kit tomorrow morning at nine a.m. if you'd like to come to her home. I said you would, but that I'd get back to her if you had any problem with the time. The drive should take a little over an hour."

"Hold on." He turned to Kit. "Any reason we can't be in Orillia by nine o'clock tomorrow morning?"

When Kit said there wasn't, he told Mike they would be there and

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got the Andersens' address from him.

"Let's hope the private adoption procedure was relaxed enough Rikka was told the name of the adoptive parents," he said after he'd reported Mike's news. "I'm anxious to find out where your half-brother or sister was when you were being attacked."

Kit didn't appear to find the news as encouraging as he did.

"I don't want the attacker to turn out to be my brother or sister," she said. "It would be too cruel to discover I'm not an only child, only to find out my newfound sibling wants me dead."

"I know you don't, Kit, but what I want is a quick capture of the person who's trying to kill you." He hated the feeling he was flailing around at an enemy who seemed less substantial than the ghosts who'd been visiting them. "Tomorrow we might get a name at least."

A name that came with a nice monetary motive attached. Of course, it would be easier for Laila's child to get part of her estate through the courts than by murder. If he knew Kit, the case wouldn't even go to court. She wouldn't put up a fight if the claim was reasonable.

"You don't need some long lost brother or sister, Little B." He put his arm around her and nuzzled her hair. "You've got me."

She spun out of his arms and leapt to her feet, her eyes blazing blue fire. "You idiot! You don't qualify!"

She fixed him with a searing look and stalked toward her bedroom.

She was furious at him. And he had no idea why.

Then it hit him. She was angry because he was pretending to revert to his former unthreatening place in her life. She didn't want him as a brother or a cousin! The breakthrough he'd almost despaired of had actually happened.

Overwhelmed by what she'd revealed, he started after her, but she stopped in the doorway and turned to look at him.

"We'd better get some sleep, Bart," she said in a stiff, rigidly controlled voice. "It's after eleven and we'll have to be on the road by

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seven tomorrow morning.”

He took a deep breath. If that was the way she wanted to play it, he'd go along.

This was no time to confront Kit with the reality of their relationship. She had been on an emotional roller coaster all day.

“Better make that six-thirty,” he said as calmly as his racing blood would allow. “We have to allow for extra time to find the condo.”

The moment she closed the door behind her, he punched the air.

“Yes!” he hissed under his breath. Kit was almost his.

CHAPTER 9

Kit had expected to lie awake for hours, but apparently she'd finished mulling over the uncertainties in her life and had dropped off to sleep the moment her head hit the pillow. When she awoke with the sun streaming in her bedroom window she found herself amazingly refreshed. Simply making the decision that she and Bart were going to make love had released a lot of tension.

She'd chickened out on the seduction, but she had told him he didn't qualify as a brother. The delighted comprehension in his eyes had told her she'd made her point.

She smelled fresh coffee the minute she opened her door.

"Morning, Kit," Bart said briskly as he handed her a mug of coffee. "I thought we could stop for breakfast on the road. Unless you'd like something here before we leave."

"Thanks," she said, taking a sip of the hot, black brew. "As soon as I get my fix of caffeine, I'm ready to go."

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“See you in ten minutes.” He disappeared into his bedroom.

He didn’t seem to want to talk to her this morning. Of course, when she thought of how she’d fallen apart on him after her encounter with Raoul, she didn’t blame him. Today was going to be different. She smiled in anticipation. Bart had no idea how different it was going to be.

The drive to Orillia went smoothly, in spite of the fact it was raining heavily the whole way. Their breakfast at a little Dutch restaurant on the outskirts of Huntsville was pleasant. Kit enjoyed the unique flavor of the pancakes with lingonberry sauce. Bart, of course, had been everywhere including the Netherlands, and chatted comfortably with the proprietor as he wolfed down his breakfast herring.

They didn’t have any trouble finding the condominium complex. Situated on the shores of Lake Couchiching, the fifty-odd spanking new townhouses sat on acres of nicely—if unimaginatively—landscaped land. Each unit was a different shade of pastel aluminum siding from its neighbors. Rikka Andersen’s pale green townhouse was at the end of the road right on the lake.

The pleasant-looking woman who answered the door looked amazingly young for someone who had to be at least seventy years old. Her eyes were bright and curious, her round face was not excessively wrinkled, and her short salt-and-pepper hair was thick and shiny.

“My goodness,” she said when she saw them, “you don’t have to tell me who you are, my dear. You’re the image of your mother. I’m Rikka Andersen. Come in. Come in.”

Kit introduced herself and Bart as they followed Rikka into her living room.

With the exception of several red accent vases, everything in the room was green. The rug was minty green, the sofa and chairs were forest green, and there was ivy everywhere. The result was amazingly restful and appealing.

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“So you’re the little girl Laila had when she was living with me,” Rikka opened the conversation once they were seated. “I did some figuring this morning. That was forty-two years ago. But that can’t be right.”

“So Laila’s baby was a girl!” she said. “You don’t know how many years I wished I had a sister. You’re right on the timeframe, though, Mrs. Andersen. I wasn’t born until ten years later in Florida.”

“Please call me Rikka. You too, Bart. My husband had five brothers and there were so many Mrs. Andersens around...” Her rich laugh resounded in the little green room.

“Thank you, Rikka. But I didn’t know about my mother’s other child until a couple of days ago and I’d very much like to meet her. Have you any idea where I might find her?”

“Oh, my dear,” Rikka said. “Not even Laila knew where the child was going. Once she’d promised her father she would give up the baby for adoption, she insisted she not see it.”

“That doesn’t sound like Laila,” Kit protested. Laila had been flighty and willful, but never completely callous. “She always cared very much about me.”

“Oh, she wasn’t uncaring. She insisted on meeting the hopeful adoptive parents before she’d consent to giving them the baby. My brother Karl, who was the lawyer who handled the adoption, tried to discourage her. Told her if she wanted to divorce herself completely from the child and keep its birth a secret, meeting the parents was a big mistake. But she insisted. She said she didn’t have to know their names, but she wanted to meet them face to face. Karl eventually gave in.”

“Laila always got her own way,” Kit mused. “Come to think of it, being forced to give up the baby is the only example I’ve heard of when she didn’t.”

“Meeting them seemed to reassure her that the child would be loved

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and looked after,” Rikka continued. “Once she’d done that, she felt she had to cut herself off from her completely.”

“Did you meet the adoptive parents?” Bart interrupted.

“Yes. Karl’s assurances weren’t enough for me. I needed to see them for myself. They were a lovely couple who already had three adopted children, two boys and a girl. Laila’s child was going to round out their family.”

“Could you tell us their name, Mrs...Rikka?” Kit held her breath.

“I’m sorry. I promised them faithfully I’d tell no one. Particularly not Laila’s family.”

“But surely that meant Laila’s father...not her yet-unborn daughter,” Bart said.

“My word is my word.” Rikka’s lips tightened. “Even though Karl’s been dead for some years, I did promise him not to tell.”

“I don’t know if you heard, but Laila is dead too,” Kit told her, hoping that information might have some influence.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She sighed and gazed at Kit for a moment. “You do look so much like her.”

“After she had the baby, Laila continued to live with our family for another three years. My husband paid her tuition for her chef’s course at a local community college. Her first job was at one of Robert Dawlish’s restaurants. He was quite a few years older, but he swept her off her feet and they were married within weeks. I think she was happy with him, but they only had a little over a year together before a stroke took him. There she was, twenty-one years old and heiress to a restaurant chain fortune.”

“Did Laila keep in touch?” Kit really hoped her mother had realized how lucky she’d been to have had this kind woman in her corner.

Rikka laughed. “No more than I expected she would. She wasn’t one to look back. But she didn’t like to owe anybody either. A year or so after Bob Dawlish died, she paid off my mortgage. Said I’d done

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more for her than her own family. But I never saw her again after that. Your mother was a woman who paid more attention to where she was going than where she'd been."

Rikka stood up and took Kit's hand. Apparently their interview was over.

"I wish I could've been more help to you," she said and started to move toward the entry hall.

Then she stopped and squinted up with a half-smile at Bart. "You know I'm remembering impressions about that couple," she said slowly. "Thinking they didn't look like farming people, even though they did come from the Niagara Peninsula."

"Did they?" Bart returned her smile.

"Yes, indeed. And something about them reminded me of that old newspaper cartoon. You know the one. The husband had a couple of long hairs sticking straight up at his crown and was always in trouble with his boss."

Kit wondered what she was driving at.

"You know...he had a pretty blonde wife." Rikka smiled more broadly. "He had a funny name."

"Dagwood," Bart guessed. "I haven't thought of that cartoon in years."

"Yes," she said. "Seem to think of them in connection with that comic strip."

She winked mischievously and gave Kit a quick hug. "Sorry I couldn't give you a name, dear, but I did make a promise. Let me know if you find your half-sister."

As they dashed for the car in the pouring rain, Kit's brain was in a whirl.

"Did Rikka mean the family name was Dagwood?"

"Apparently," Bart replied as they buckled themselves into the SUV. "With a name like that, the odds of finding her have just

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shortened a lot.”

“My secretary’s name is Helen Dagwood. What are the chances of that?” Kit said.

Bart stopped with his hand on the ignition key. “Is that her husband’s name?”

“Hers. She never married. But Helen is at least fifty. She’s not my mysterious half-sister.”

“But she’s a real lead,” he said turning the key. “Can you get in touch with her?”

“She usually visits with her brother’s family on Sundays. I’ll give her a call at home this evening to see if she can help us. But I don’t think she’ll know anything. If they are not out on his boat, I should be able to reach her. They were planning to do a two-week cruise down to Tortola and through the Virgins sometime this month. I’m not just sure when.”

Bart frowned. She could see the way his mind was working. Her secretary would have known when she would be leaving the company offices the day of the hit and run. But he didn’t know Helen. Helen was not just an employee. She’d been devoted to Kit’s father and had always been a good and loyal friend to her. She simply wouldn’t have any part of a plan to harm her. She couldn’t possibly be the Florida connection they’d been looking for.

She looked at her watch. “It’s only ten o’clock. I said I’d meet Johanna and Betsy about one. We should make it in plenty of time.”

On the drive back to the lodge, Kit dominated the conversation. To the background counterpoint of windshield wipers, she filled the air with talk. She made conversation about Rikka’s revelations about Laila’s years with her and rambled on about the possibilities of Betsy’s plans for the lodge. She asked Bart’s opinion of Joel’s suggestion they construct a golf course on the Elmhurst property he was selling. In fact, she succeeded in avoiding any discussion with Bart about Helen’s

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possible relationship to the Dagwood family who had adopted Laila's child.

It was before noon when Bart pulled up in front of the lodge.

He laughed when Kit accused him of speeding.

"You shirked your duty, Kittle. You're supposed to keep me on the straight and narrow, but you were too busy not letting me get a word in edgewise. The rain stopped and I took that as a sign I could turn on the speed."

"Judging by the color of those clouds, we're in for more of it."

"Mike and I were supposed to walk the grounds later, but I think I'll see if he's free to do it now."

The lodge was buzzing with activity. Apparently the tradesmen were working a seven-day week to meet their deadlines before the reopening.

"Kat," Johanna welcomed her, "this is marvelous. Betsy arrived earlier than she planned, too, so we can probably get everything settled today."

That turned out to be an optimistic prediction.

Shortly after Kit arrived, Betsy had plunked three piles of neat folders on the table and the three of them had sat down to work.

They had hardly opened the first folder when Johanna was called away from the booth. The emergency this time had to do with venting for the new air conditioning system.

Half an hour later, Kit was still waiting in the booth with Betsy, getting hungrier by the minute and beginning to wonder if they were ever going to look at the bids Betsy had gathered for the demolition and earthmoving on the sawmill land.

"Kit." Betsy cleared her throat. "I'd really like to talk to you privately when you have the time. Could you free up some time for me later today?"

"I'll try," Kit said. Was she going to try to sell her on Joel's golf

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course idea now? “I don’t know about this afternoon. Bart and I have a few calls to make. What do you say we try to do it tomorrow?”

“That would be good.” Her hands fluttered over the papers in front of her. Whatever Betsy had in mind, she was uneasy about it.

“I understand you’re staying with Elsa now.” Kit opened a new topic after she’d skimmed the first bid for taking down the old sawmill building.

“Actually, Joel decided to move in too.” Betsy didn’t look as thrilled about it as a newlywed should. “He thought that would be easier over the next little while than trying to operate two households.”

“That makes sense.” Joel struck her as the kind of man who would prefer not to make his own meals. “Johanna said he was in a golf tournament today. Not great weather for it.”

“He left for the course early enough. When they teed off, it was only sprinkling. But he called about an hour ago to say he was coming home to change into some dry clothes. Heaven knows how long this round will take because of the rain delays.”

“I know the umpires call ball games. Do they cancel golf tournaments often?”

“Not very. I’m sure the club officials will want to get this round in. It’s hard to reschedule with so many amateur tournaments planned. And Joel played so well yesterday he could win it if he plays his game today.”

Johanna returned announcing that Art, the ventilation man, had the problem almost solved and should be finished soon. She picked up her stack of folders and the three of them attempted to examine the first bid.

No sooner were they all concentrating on the figures than Paavo breezed in to inform them he was heading to the kitchen to begin the inventory of staples in the hotel pantry. He didn’t stay long.

Then, as they were actually getting down to the specifics of

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demolishing the old mill, Elsa stormed in with fire in her eye.

Joel followed close behind, fruitlessly attempting to slow her down.

“Am I or am I not part owner of this resort?” she blazed. Either anger had given her false energy or this was one of her good days. “Did you think that your presence here, Kit, meant I was no longer a factor in deciding what was to be done about my old home?”

“Now, Elsa, I’m the one who decided not to involve you in the preliminary meetings. I hoped to save you the effort,” Johanna broke in.

“Well, I’m here,” she said, plunking herself down on the chair Joel dragged over to the open side of the booth. She leaned on the table and glared at Kit. “And I refuse to let you tear down the sawmill. Incorporate it in your design. I don’t care what else you do. I don’t want you to touch that building. Do you understand?”

“Fine!” Kit said. “It remains standing.” She shuffled through some papers. “Let’s look at how that’ll affect the areas we had planned to bulldoze.”

“Just like that?” Betsy looked annoyed, but didn’t try to talk her out of it as Kit had been sure she would. It was amazing how her confidence seemed to dim when Joel and Elsa were around.

“Aunt Elsa is perfectly within her rights to demand that the building be left standing. As she said, she’s one of the owners.”

Kit had been expecting this. After all, this was the elderly woman who had moved the family home to a new site to preserve it.

Elsa searched Kit’s face. “You’re serious,” she said. “I keep forgetting. You may look like her, but you’re not Laila.”

Kit didn’t know how to respond to that so she turned to show a folder to Betsy. “You have estimates from three landscaping companies here,” she said. “Their bids aren’t too different. You and Johanna have a better handle on their reputations. I’ll leave that decision to you.”

She was turning her attention to another folder when Paavo strode

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in, waving a sheet of paper. "I have the invoice, Johanna. Where are my spices?"

"You weren't here when that box arrived, Paavo. I put it in the linen storage room," Betsy told him.

"Spices in the linen room!" Paavo was just getting wound up for a major explosion when Bart and Mike entered from the lobby with big grins on their faces.

"Hope you're ready for a short break," Mike said.

Short break? They were just getting started. Had someone put a "Welcome" sign on the door?

"When Bart and I were over at the sawmill, we spotted something you might like to see, Kit."

"Now what?" Johanna asked.

"Nothing unpleasant. A robin's nest in the old lilac bush," Mike said.

"It has two little blue eggs in it." Bart sent her the kind of smile that used to get her in trouble in the Three Bs' days. "Come on, Kit. The robin will probably be back on the nest by the time you get there."

"Really?" The thought was appealing. After all, she was changing her ways. And if she was in the country, she should see some of it. "How high is it off the ground?" That was always a consideration.

"About five feet," Mike answered. "Maybe less."

"We'll only be gone about half an hour," Bart pressed. "There looks to be a break in the rain clouds, but it's still spitting a bit so I brought your jazzy raincoat." He held up the bright blue rubberized raincoat she'd picked up in Toronto.

"Just give us a few minutes here, Bart, and I'll be right with you." Kit turned back to the papers on the table.

"If it's clearing, I'd better get back to the course," Joel said. "You'll be all right, Elsa?"

"I can take her home when she's ready," Betsy suggested.

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Kit called out to Joel as he left, "Hope you get your golf game in."

Paavo gave Betsy a pointed glare. "I'll just get my kitchen supplies from the housekeeping storage," he said and stomped out of the room.

Johanna got right to business. "We need to decide exactly what we want done in the way of rough landscaping so we can get the bulldozers in next week. Otherwise, we're going to have all that noise and dust when we have guests staying in the lodge."

"This is a rough sketch of the way I saw it," Betsy said. "We'll have to think of some way to utilize the storage building. Can we, at least, remove the old foundations of the sawmill itself, Elsa?"

Elsa set her jaw. "Don't touch any of it," she said.

About ten minutes later, Kit realized she really couldn't leave any time soon. "I'm afraid I'll have to wait until this afternoon to see the robin, Bart," she said.

Elsa, who'd been sitting quietly staring off into space, spoke up. "I haven't seen a robin's nest for years. They used to nest in that lilac every year when I was a child." She sighed. "Too bad it's raining. I'd like to go over there."

"Wear my slicker," Kit suggested.

"Do you good to get some air," Johanna said.

"It's not unpleasant out there in the woods," Bart urged. "It's warm and the rain is only a light drizzle."

"I'll go," Elsa decided. "Who knows how long I'll feel up to it."

"While you're gone, I have some calls to make," Mike said and headed up to his temporary office in Johanna's suite.

When Elsa left with Bart to do her bird-watching, Kit thought she looked more cheerful than she'd been since she arrived.

"That's the first interest she's shown in anything in quite a while," Johanna said.

"Except stalling the kiddieland development." Betsy sounded a bit disgruntled.

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* * *

Bart wondered what on earth he was doing out here in the damp woods with Elsa for company. Earning a star for his crown, Anna would have said. That's what the housekeeper who had raised him and Bret always said when either of them did something they really didn't want to do for someone. To give her credit, Elsa was better company today than he'd expected. She wasn't chatty, but what she said was civil.

Johanna had obviously set the groundskeepers to work on the path to the sawmill since he and Kit had walked it. But even though it was in better shape today, Elsa seemed to be finding it hard going. It didn't stop her, though. She plodded along quite cheerfully.

"Thank you, Bart," she said unexpectedly when they came in sight of the weathered old building. "I didn't think I'd get to see this place again. Now I can say good-bye."

"This needn't be the last time," he said.

"Oh, but it is," she said. Then she stopped walking and turned to face him. Her blue eyes looked at him intently from deep inside the blue hood. "You do love Kit, don't you?"

What could he say? That he wasn't sure he was capable of loving anyone? He nodded.

"Then be careful. Loving Laila's daughter could be dangerous." She paused. "She killed him, you know."

"Raoul?" he asked.

"He loved her. She killed him." Her voice was as unemotional as if she'd been reporting the weather.

"But he attended her funeral."

She smiled and nodded her head. "He did, didn't he?"

Was this an oblique admission she had killed Raoul because he loved Laila?

She started walking again and headed toward the lilac clump in the

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middle of the clearing. He led her around to the side where he and Mike had seen the nest and pointed it out to her.

“The robin hasn’t returned,” she said, standing on tiptoe. “And I can’t see the eggs.”

“That’s easily solved,” Bart said, hoisting her up so her head was well above the nest.

She pushed the hood back off her face to get a better view. “I’d forgotten how blue their eggs are,” she exclaimed.

Without any warning, one sharp crack of gunfire split the silence.

At almost the same instant, Elsa collapsed in his arms.

Instinctively, Bart dropped to the damp ground with her and scanned the edges of the clearing for any sign of motion. Not a leaf or a branch moved in the quietly falling rain. The sniper must have been set up at the first bend in the long driveway to the road. He would have a clear shot from there.

Bart tried to dig for his weapon from his belt, but Elsa’s limp form pinning his raincoat down made it difficult. It would be pointless to try to pursue the shooter anyway. He’d be long gone. Again. And this time, he had hit his target.

The wrong target!

Gently, he lifted Elsa and placed her on the ground. One quick look at the bullet hole in her forehead and the amount of blood in the hood of the raincoat told him she was dead. Although he knew it was futile, he felt for a pulse. There wasn’t a flutter—not at the artery in her throat, not at her wrist.

Not far down the road, he heard a car start up.

Bart wiped the rain out of his eyes with unsteady fingers and retrieved the cell phone from his pocket. He dialed 911 and, without wasting words, he reported the bare facts and the location to the operator. Then, because he didn’t want to chance having Johanna answer the phone, he dialed Mike’s cell phone number so that he’d

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break the news to Johanna and Kit and Betsy. He didn't want them to hear about Elsa's death from the police.

Bart had no doubt Kit was the intended target. Or that the person who had wielded the rifle was a sharpshooter. Not many people could have made that shot. The only person he knew for sure had that kind of training was Mike. But Mike had spoken to him from the lodge. Of course, with the cell phone he could be anywhere. *Damn!*

The area was full of hunters. He knew some partridge hunters prided themselves on using a rifle instead of shooting the bird full of lead shot from a shotgun.

He broke a couple of dead branches off a nearby maple and rammed them into the ground on either side of Elsa's head, then took off his blood-smeared yellow coat to form a kind of tent to keep the rain off her face. Common sense told him a little rain would make no difference to her now, but he couldn't just leave her with the rain pelting on her face.

He sat on his haunches and stared dismally at Elsa's body. *Poor, unhappy woman.* But Kit wasn't the one lying there! The killer thought he'd killed Kit. Suddenly it struck him how close he'd come to losing her. Sheer blind chance had kept her safe at the lodge. Thank God she'd changed her mind about accompanying him to see the nest!

He made himself concentrate on what he knew about the killer. That precision shot hadn't been made by an amateur. Not for the first time, he wondered if someone had put out a contract on Kit's life. *But who?* Laila had said the source of the threats was in Spirit Lake.

He snorted in disgust. His best source of information so far was a ghost!

He'd better check the driveway for any trace of the killer's movements in the damp earth before the police vehicles arrived and obliterated them. There were no footprints in the damp ruts or on the grassy crown of the driveway. The killer had probably walked off the

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edge of the drive just as he was doing. However, where it met the road, fresh tire tracks indicated that a car had turned around. That didn't prove it was the gunman's car. He could have approached through the bush. Besides, there was nothing distinctive about the tracks that he could see.

The big question was how would the killer know Kit might be at the sawmill? The trip to see the birds' eggs had been a spur of the moment thing. Bart cursed under his breath. The whole world had been in the bar when he had tried to talk Kit into coming out here. *Wait a minute!* He could eliminate Betsy and Johanna. They knew Kit wasn't with him. But Joel and Mike and Paavo didn't know. Of course, as far as he knew, none of them had a reason to want Kit dead.

It was time to do his own serious digging into the backgrounds of every single person at Spirit Lake Resort.

He needed that computer today. He hoped Mike's friend who owned the store in North Bay was as efficient as Mike said he was. He had to get access to the Greco Associates search engines and databases. And fast.

But all he could do now was wait.

* * *

Kit was the first to notice Mike standing in the entrance to the bar. Something about the tension in his stance and the grim expression on his rugged face alerted her. Something dreadful had happened.

"What happened?" she gasped. "Is it Bart?"

"Bart's fine," Mike said, coming to stand by Johanna. "But there was a shooting at the sawmill."

"For mercy's sake, Mike, tell us," Johanna said. "Was someone hurt?"

"I'm afraid Elsa was hit." He put a hand on her shoulder. "The bullet struck her in the head and she was killed instantly. Bart said she was looking at the bird's nest when someone shot her. He didn't see the

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shooter. Just heard a car leaving.”

Kit was too stunned by the news to speak. And then it occurred to her—Elsa had been wearing her blue slicker! Her aunt had been killed in her place! A wave of helplessness and choking guilt swept over her. She was the intended target of that bullet.

Betsy screamed, then sat hugging herself and rocking back and forth, tears pouring down her face. Her muttered moans of “No, no, no!” were interspersed with raw, harsh sobs.

Joel hadn’t exaggerated when he said Betsy thought of Elsa as a second mother. The woman’s grief was real. Kit put her arm around Betsy’s shaking shoulders, but she shrugged her off. Kit didn’t blame her. It was her fault that Elsa was dead.

Johanna was pale from shock, but she got to her feet, ready to take charge of the situation. “Did you call the police?”

“Bart called 911. He wanted me to break it to you before the police and ambulance got here.”

Shortly, the whole resort seemed to be overrun by Ontario Provincial Police officers. Kit, along with everyone else who was at the lodge, was questioned briefly. But most of the police concentrated their efforts on the murder site.

Kit’s first thoughts were of Bart. She knew he would blame himself for being unable to protect Elsa and wanted to go to him. However, Grace Jacobec, the OPP sergeant in charge, insisted that nobody was to leave the lodge. The police officers outside the lodge were having enough trouble keeping out the local reporters, who apparently monitored 911 calls, without allowing everyone involved free movement around the property.

Kit would be eternally grateful for Mike’s presence. He knew all the OPP officers by name and was able to fill them in on what he knew of the situation. After Sergeant Jacobec returned from the scene of the shooting, Mike set her up at a table in the far corner of the dining room

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to get statements from everyone who could have been aware Elsa and Bart were setting off for the sawmill.

Paavo enlisted Kit's help in making and serving sandwiches and coffee in the bar for everyone waiting to see Jacobec and for the OPP personnel who drifted in out of the damp from time to time.

Every time she heard the door open, Kit hoped she would see Bart. Time and time again she was disappointed. Finally, he strode into the lobby. Even though the rain had long since ceased, dark patches on his blue knit shirt told her it was still soaking wet. His thick blond hair was dark with rain. He looked cold and totally miserable.

When he caught sight of her, his face lit up with relief. She abandoned her tray of sandwiches on an empty table and ran to meet him. When she threw her arms around him, he clasped her fiercely in a soggy embrace. He held her so long and so tightly that she could hardly breathe, but it felt wonderful. She'd give up breathing entirely if she could stay safely in Bart's strong embrace.

When he released her, he held her face in his hands and gazed steadily into her eyes. "Are you all right, Brat?" he asked quietly.

"I'm fine." Now that he was here, she was. "You'd better get into some dry clothes."

What a lame greeting! That wasn't what she wanted to say to him. She wanted to tell him how glad she was that he wasn't the one who'd been shot. That she couldn't imagine her life without him. That Elsa's death wasn't his fault. There was no way he could have protected Elsa from a skilled man with a rifle.

"I'll dry," he bit out.

Mike and Johanna joined them.

"Yeah, but I threw some jeans and a shirt in Johanna's office for you," Mike announced. "Better put them on. It's going to be a while before we can get out of here."

Bart seemed about to argue, but then merely shrugged and stomped

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off in the direction of Johanna's office.

The three of them sat down to wait for him in the nearest grouping of the colorful armchairs scattered around the carpeted lobby across from the registration desk.

"He's feeling very guilty right now," Mike said, looking after Bart's glum figure.

"What does he imagine he could've done to prevent the shooting?" Kit said. "Besides, I'm feeling guilty enough for both of us. The rifleman thought he was shooting me."

"Nonsense," Johanna said. "You don't know that. And we all know the guilty person is the one who pulled the trigger."

Bart emerged, grim-faced, from the office. The jeans were a bit loose around the middle but long enough in the legs. Mike's navy T-shirt looked good on him. However, dry clothes apparently hadn't done anything to improve his mood.

"There's nothing you could've done to protect her, you know," Johanna said.

"And you couldn't have caught the guy," Mike added. "Whoever shot her was too far away to catch up with."

"Don't blame yourself," Kit added.

"My God, Kit," he snapped. "I held her up so he could have a clear shot at her!"

"That's crap and you know it!" Mike retorted, then took a deep breath. "All right, at this early stage, no one has an airtight alibi." Mike was clearly determined to change the focus of the conversation. "Paavo"—he held up his index finger— "was alone in his larder organizing spices and other supplies for the grand opening."

"He wasn't in the room when Elsa and I left," Bart added.

"He could've been within earshot."

"But I doubt if he's an expert shot with a rifle," Kit added. And her sweet Uncle Paavo would never want to kill her.

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“I don’t think he’s fired a weapon since he got out of the Army reserve,” Johanna added. “He doesn’t approve of hunting. Refuses to have any kind of game on the menu.”

“That’s one thing we have to check about everyone, of course.” Bart reached behind the registration counter and picked up a pen and a small pad of paper.

“Art Harris, the ventilation man”—Mike held up a second finger—“qualifies on one count because he was still in the building when you left for the sawmill. But he was more than likely on Highway 11 on his way back to his shop when Elsa was shot. That’s yet to be determined.”

“What earthly motive would he have?” Kit asked.

“Something else to check,” Bart said, scribbling on the notepad. “Possible connections with Kit or with Elsa. We can’t ignore the possibility the rifleman knew it was Elsa he was shooting.”

Johanna shook her head. “Elsa was always quarrelling with someone, but I can’t see anyone getting angry enough with her to shoot her.”

Kit’s mind flashed back to the angry face of the redheaded man named Tomas. But she was inclined to agree with Johanna. She didn’t think a threat to set the authorities on a roaming dog qualified as a motive for murder.

Mike was holding up a third finger. “Then there’s Joel. He’s so upset about Elsa’s death that he wasn’t very coherent about where he was. From what I could make out, he was waiting out a rain-delayed start to his golf game at the club. They all teed off at the same time when the rain stopped. The rest of his foursome should be able to verify that.”

“Check time the rain stopped fifteen miles away at the golf course.” Bart jotted another entry on his notepad.

“Again,” Kit said, “no motive. Joel doesn’t want me dead. He’s trying to sell me a very expensive piece of real estate for a golf course.”

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“Good point.” Mike held up a fourth finger. “Then there’s me.”

Johanna shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly.”

“I was alone in your suite, Johanna, when Kit changed her mind about going with Mike and Elsa took her place.” He protested with a crooked smile. “I didn’t do it, but I don’t have an alibi either. You and Kit and Betsy were here together and have the only real alibi. Bart is pretty well out of the running too.”

“Yeah, I was too busy holding the target,” Bart muttered.

They were interrupted by a commotion at the door. A courier had fought his way through the handful of reporters. He was waving invoices and arguing with the policemen at the door. He was determined not to leave without completing his emergency delivery.

“Listen, man,” the courier insisted loudly. “This is flagged top priority. My boss’s boss will have my neck if I don’t hand these six boxes to Bart Thornton this afternoon.”

While Bart hurried to make sure the courier wasn’t turned away with his computer equipment, Mike went to get Sergeant Jacobec’s permission to accept the delivery and take it to the cabin. He returned with the news that Grace Jacobec was about to make a brief statement to the press. The police were finished with all of them for now and they were free to leave.

“You’d better hurry if you want to get that computer working,” Mike urged. “The forecast is for thunderstorms and high winds. I can’t tell you how often the power goes out up here. One tree down on the telephone lines and you’re out of business for days sometimes.”

As they strode down the path through a fine drizzle, a brisk east wind hurried them along. Long before they reached the cabin, the back of Kit’s sweatshirt was soaked through and she wished she had her slicker. Oh, Lord! Her slicker! Her imagination conjured up the scene with Elsa, in the bright blue coat, lying on the ground covered in blood.

“At least this is a warm rain,” she said, trying out her best Pollyanna

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voice. It sounded unconvincing even to her.

“Not for long.” Bart pointed to a line of much blacker clouds rushing in their direction. “That cold front is arriving right on schedule. I hope we don’t get the thunderstorms with it. All I need is the power to go out the minute I get my equipment set up.”

The delivery van was parked by the cabin when they arrived. Within minutes, Bart had the door unlocked and the boxes were deposited in Bart’s bedroom. As the front door closed behind the delivery men, Bart hauled Kit into his arms.

“Kit. Kit,” he kept repeating as he kissed her again and again.

CHAPTER 10

Kit wrapped her arms around Bart and clutched him tightly against her breasts. Her hands moved in restless circles on his muscular back. He felt so good, so strong and full of life.

His kisses were everywhere. On her neck, her jawline, her ears.
“It could’ve been you, Kit!” His voice broke.

Then he possessed her mouth. She plunged her fingers into his hair to hold his head steady as she responded just as fiercely. She couldn’t get enough of his taste, the strong thrusting of his tongue against hers. This was the way a kiss should be. No holds barred.

Just as she was beginning to tug the back of his shirt out of his jeans, Bart stopped the motion of his tongue. She became conscious of a telephone ringing in the background. She could feel him beginning to pull away from her.

“Don’t answer,” she pleaded, when she could catch her breath.

“It could be Bret.” He sounded as reluctant as she was to break

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apart.

Slowly, he [unless you have him pick her up earlier, the way it's described it sounds like they're standing face to face] stepped away from her. He yanked the cell phone out of his pants pocket.

"Thornton," he barked into the receiver. "Sorry, Bret, but we've had a major development here. Our sniper just killed Kit's aunt, Elsa. Yeah, he's a sniper all right. He got her with one shot in the head."

Bart wandered off into his bedroom with the phone. While Kit listened to him filling his brother in about the circumstances of Elsa's death, she took advantage of the moment to try to get a grip on her emotions and consider what she needed to do next. How could Bart snap from such intense passion to this businesslike mode? She was barely capable of coherent thought.

"That's great," Bart was saying as he came back into the living room. "Do you know if they still live in Niagara Falls?" He sounded excited. "That's all right. I should have my computer system set up within the hour and I can do a search on that.

"What I need you to do is patch me into the Greco Associates' search engines and the databases I need to do some in-depth searches." He winked at her. "Anything on any of the other names I gave you?"

There was a long pause while he listened intently.

"Thanks, Bret. That's a relief. Mike's the guy who rounded up the local ex-cops to work security for us here. No, don't come up here. I need you in Florida. Keep trying to contact Helen Dagwood. She looks like our best lead right now."

After he ended the call, Bart teased her with a long, smug smile.

"Well," she exploded, "what did Bret find out?"

"Mike is apparently who he says he is," he began slowly. "Joel had a colorful youth in Detroit, but seems to have cleaned up his act since. The gang he was involved with ran a protection scheme and beat up a lot of kids. Joel's parents moved to Windsor to get him away from the

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gang before he got a police record. It seems to have worked.”

“And?” she almost shouted in exasperation. He would tease on his deathbed, which might be very soon if he didn’t tell her everything Bret told him right now.

“And, my darling Brat, your friend Helen Dagwood is the older adopted sister of your half-sister! There’s every chance she’s the one who told her where to find you after the board meeting.”

That couldn’t be true! Helen couldn’t be the killer’s Florida contact. Of course, there was a chance that her half-sister was not involved with the killer. Maybe Bart was on a totally wrong tack.

“I gather from what you said that Bret hasn’t been able to reach Helen,” she said.

“Not yet. All Schofield’s would tell him was that she was on vacation. And would be for another twelve days.”

“That’s probably all they know. She never leaves a number where she can be reached when she takes a holiday. She says she works for Schofield’s twenty-four/seven the rest of the year. I’m sure they’re on the boat. And heaven knows where they are in the Caribbean.” She expelled a deep breath. “Did he find out the names of the Dagwoods’ other adopted children?”

“Robert, Andrew and Elizabeth Anne.”

“Elizabeth Anne,” she tried out the words. “I have a sister named Elizabeth Anne.”

“Don’t get too fond of her. She’s probably the one who’s had three attempts made on your life. Now we have to find her. And her pet sharpshooter.”

“I’ve been incredibly lucky.” She shuddered at how close she’d come to being killed each of those times.

“You’ve been hung with horseshoes, Kittle.” He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a quick, hard hug. “But we can’t count on that continuing. We have to catch this sister of yours.”

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She straightened up and looked steadily into his blue eyes. It was time to show some backbone.

“All right, do you want a pair of willing hands to help unpack and set up that computer?”

She was rewarded by Bart’s patented devilish grin. “Oh, Kittle, I can’t let myself think about wanting your willing hands right now. We have work to do. By the way, I told Bret I’d ask you if you wanted him and Milly to come up here to be with you.”

“No.” She didn’t even need to think about it. “That would only put them in danger too.”

Bart nodded vigorously. “I agree. Let’s get to work.”

A couple of hours later, Kit was collapsing the last of the cardboard boxes Bart’s equipment came in when a loud roar of wind in the trees made her look up. Although the sun wouldn’t set for another two hours, the sky was black as night. The day’s steady drizzle had become a heavy downpour. Against the security lights outside the patio doors she could see small branches flying almost horizontally. A few wet leaves were plastered against the window glass. Although the cabin was warm, the mere sight of the wild night outside was chilling.

Across the room, Bart was oblivious to the weather outside. His eyes were fixed on the monitor as his fingers flew over the keyboard of his computer.

“I’m just about set up,” he said, stopping to stretch. “We have access to the Greco Associates’ databases now. Mike’s coming over later to get us into some special Canadian databanks that should help us to trace the Dagwoods from a farm on the Niagara Peninsula. Give me another few minutes and we can break for something to eat.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a bright flash of lightning arced into the lake. Almost immediately, a large crack of thunder shook the glass in every window in the building.

“Damn! So much for that idea. We can’t afford the delay, but we

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can't risk lightning frying the computer either," he grumbled as he shut everything down. He contemplated the surge bar for a second, then unplugged it. "I don't know if this would handle another lightning strike like that last one."

"I saw some flashlights and candles in a kitchen drawer," Kit told him as she headed for the kitchen. "I'll get them out. You can get some matches from the shelf beside the fireplace. I'll try to call Helen's brother Robert to see if he can get me in touch with Helen. We can't wait until she gets back from holiday to find out where to find Elizabeth Anne."

"Couldn't Robert give you the information about Elizabeth Anne?"

"I'd rather talk to Helen about it. I've never met Robert. I'd be able to tell if Helen were trying to hide something from me. We need the truth about her sister right away."

Bart blew out an exasperated breath. "Yeah, unfortunately our main suspect has an alibi. Betsy is the only woman connected with the lodge who's the right age. And she was with you this afternoon," Bart said.

"I'm glad. I didn't want to think I was so wrong about her," Kit said.

"Don't relax your guard though. She'd probably have an accomplice."

"Like her husband."

"Too bad he has an alibi too. According to Mike, Joel is also a hunter."

"But he was in a golf foursome at the crucial time," Kit said, throwing her hands up in frustration.

Another brilliant flash of lightning lit Bart's face. He looked very tired.

"Did you get anything at all to eat today?"

"I don't think so. Did you?"

She shook her head and said, "I'm not too interested in food right

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now.”

“We should try to eat something,” he said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. “Why don’t you try to reach Robert Dagwood, while I dig the leftovers from Paavo’s cold supper out of the refrigerator. We can serve ourselves whatever we want.”

Kit went directly into her bedroom and dug out her address book. Yes, she had put Robert’s phone number down under Helen’s as a backup number. Unfortunately, his voice mail informed her he wasn’t available at the moment... whatever that meant. She left the message that she needed to reach his sister as soon as possible.

The insistent rumble of thunder and almost constant flashes of lightning were getting to her. Electrical storms fascinated her, but they always jangled her nerves. When she put down the receiver, she stood at the bedroom window for a moment rubbing her arms and looking out at the dark, turbulent world. She turned to find Bart standing beside her.

“I’d forgotten for a few minutes how thunderstorms affect you,” he said. “Let’s get away from the window.” He led her to the doorway of the bathroom, then placed his hands on either side of her face and tilted it up for long, tender kiss.

That’s all it took for the glowing ember low inside her to flare into flame. One touch of his mouth on hers and she was wild for him. She opened her mouth, but when he tried to deepen the kiss, she laughed and fought him for control. She had felt so helpless in the face of today’s events that she didn’t want to be passive. She needed to be the one nibbling and sucking at his lips and tongue. She wanted to thrust her own tongue into his mouth. He joined her laughter and brought the tender battle back to her. His mouth was hot and delicious as his tongue tangled with hers.

Bart’s hands were everywhere—in her hair, stroking her back and her sides, tantalizing the sides of her breasts.

She was hardly aware he had already unfastened her bra and was

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sliding the sleeves of her sweatshirt off her arms. In spite of her murmured protests, he broke off the kiss long enough to pull the shirt off over her head.

“I’ll take your mind off the storm,” he murmured into her hair. “You won’t see or hear it in the shower. A nice hot shower will relax you. I’ll make your whole body slick with suds.” Why was he coaxing? He must know she didn’t need persuading. “And I guarantee I’ll keep you distracted.”

She was so distracted already she was almost out of her mind.

He was sliding her sweats and panties down over her hips as he spoke. She kicked off her shoes to help with their removal. They joined her shirt and bra on the cool tile floor. She had a flash of embarrassment when she realized she was totally naked, while Bart still had all his clothes on.

“Now you,” she commanded in an oddly hoarse voice.

“No sooner said than done!” he said, stripping off his shirt and jeans in one swift motion.

He quickly retrieved a condom from his shaving kit on the bathroom vanity and put it in the soap dish. Then he bent to turn on the water and adjusted the shower head to a very light spray.

Kit stood, admiring his strong, well-muscled body. Bart was more beautiful than any Greek statue she’d ever seen. She was floating on such a supercharged, hormone-induced cloud that she marveled he apparently still had some active brain cells that could work efficiently.

He stepped under the spray, then reached for her hands to help her into the tub.

“Come on in. The water’s fine.”

He positioned her with her back to him and touched the sensitive sides of her waist. Involuntarily, she jerked away. “You know how ticklish I am,” she said with an accusing giggle.

“A little soap will clear us of that,” he said. “Slippery fingers won’t

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tickle, Kittle, my love. Hold this.” He placed a tube of lavender bath gel in her hands. “Just squirt some on my hands.”

He rubbed his hands together until they held an amazing quantity of suds. Slowly, he proceeded to slick them over her stomach.

He nibbled on the back of her neck as he moved his hands upward. “See. No tickles,” he mumbled against her skin.

No tickles, but as his soapy fingers caressed her breasts, wonderful sensations traveled over the surface of her whole body. Then he turned his electrifying attention to the silky hair that covered her sensitive mound.

She needed to press her soapy body against him. This was taking too long.

As if he could read her mind, he turned her around to face him. He held her at arm’s length. No one had ever looked at her with such longing!

“You are truly beautiful,” he whispered. Then he grinned. “But you’ve rinsed off all the suds. Keep your back to the water. We’ll have to do it again.”

She tolerated his exquisitely pleasurable torture for another minute or two. His zealous kneading of her breasts loaded them with suds. It also made her knees ready to give way.

“My turn!” she decided, handing him the tube.

She filled her palm with gel and began to massage his shoulders, then rubbed thick suds down over his hard biceps, his forearms and his long-fingered hands. She refilled her hand and spread gel on his chest. When she tweaked his flat nipples, they instantly hardened under her fingers and she felt his penis jerk against her abdomen. Then she had an idea. She gave him what she hoped was a seductive smile and stroked swirls of suds into the golden hair that began at his nipples and arrowed downward.

Only then did she allow herself to look down at his truly heroic

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equipment, where it thrust proudly out of its nest of blond hair.

“In the interests of efficiency...” she said, dropping to her knees. She continued to massage his nipple with the tips of the fingers of one hand while she slowly drew her soapy right breast along his rigid sex.

“Will I get enough suds on it this way, Bart?” she asked.

He moaned appreciatively. She twisted her torso to drag her other breast over his swollen tip. She repeated the movements until most of the suds had been transferred from her body to his. Bart’s hoarse moans were becoming more intense and Kit’s nipples had become so hard and swollen she thought they would burst. She couldn’t keep this up much longer. Every cell in her body craved his touch. The welcoming emptiness between her legs had become so insistent she thought she’d die if he didn’t fill her soon.

“Brat! You’re killing me. Time to get serious here.” He hoisted her to her feet and turned her so her back was against the tile wall. When he lifted her leg and hooked it around his waist, his penis was almost where she wanted it.

“Hate to do this, sweetheart,” he said, reaching around to unhook the shower head, “but if I don’t rinse off some of these slippery suds, I’ll never get the condom on.”

“Let me,” she said.

“Not this time.” He dipped his head to give her an open-mouthed kiss while his hands dealt with the rolled condom. “I’m too close.”

Bart’s tongue searching her mouth while the warm water coursed over her swollen petals was almost too much for her.

She tried to say “Hurry,” but it wasn’t necessary. Bart lifted her and she guided him safely inside. She wrapped both legs around his waist, pulled him tight and wriggled against him.

The sensation of his hardness filling her almost triggered her release.

“Don’t move,” he warned. The strain of holding back showed in the

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lines of his face. "I want to make this last."

"Next time," she urged. "Make it last next time."

"I promise, sweetheart," he breathed. Then he began to move. Slowly at first, then with more and more urgency until he was pounding into her like a piston in an engine. And with every thrust of that piston the hot coil deep inside her tightened.

"Look at me, Kit."

She opened her eyes to meet the deep, deep blue of his.

"I want to see your eyes this very first time."

One more mighty thrust and the tense coil within her snapped. She screamed his name as a powerful orgasm rocked her. She had never felt anything like the tremors that pulsed on and on.

With a triumphant shout and violent series of shuddering spasms that matched hers, Bart reached his own release.

They clung together under the spray while the world came back into focus. Bart leaned against her for a moment. Kit tried to slide one foot down onto the slippery porcelain of the tub to take some of their weight, but he hoisted her back up so they remained connected while he turned off the shower.

"Get used to this, Brat," he whispered into her wet hair. "Now that you're mine, I don't know that I can ever let you go."

With her body still vibrating from their lovemaking, skin to skin with the man she'd loved all her life, she couldn't imagine ever wanting to leave.

Bart stepped out of the tub still holding her securely in his arms, grabbed a couple of towels from the rack and headed for the bedroom. Dumping her unceremoniously on the bed, he clambered after her to kneel over her as he proceeded to dry her with one of the large, rough towels.

Laughing at nothing, they pulled the feather duvet up over them and snuggled their damp bodies together. Kit was trying to remember if

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anything had ever felt this right to her when a blinding flash of lightning lit the windows. Thunder was still rattling the panes when the lights went out.

Bart pulled her head onto his shoulder and she curled up in the shelter of his arms and turned her face into his damp chest. He smelled deliciously of lavender and recent sex. She slipped her leg between his thighs. She thought she felt a slight stirring of his sex. He pulled her closer still and said, "Let's cuddle a while, Kittle. I want to enjoy the storm."

What would be the best way to avoid thinking about the lightning? In a minute or two she would initiate something. She inhaled a couple more deep breaths of Bart's musky scent and closed her eyes for a minute.

When she opened them again some time later, they were still under the duvet, but it was tented over Bart's back as he knelt over her, lavaging her breasts with his tongue.

"Ready for the long, slow version of the loving?"

"Do I get to be on top?"

"As often as you like." He went back to his task.

And he was good as his word. Kit got to choose any position that pleased her, and she was astounded at how inventive she became as the time went on. They loved and laughed and dozed in each other's arms all night long while the storm raged around them almost unnoticed.

She awoke with the unfamiliar sensation of having a man's body spooned around hers. Warm breath tickled the back of her neck, a muscular arm was heavy across her middle and a hairy leg trapped one of hers. Sensuous memories of last night filled her mind for a lazy moment before other, much less pleasant, memories crowded in.

The person who'd been trying to kill her had killed Elsa by mistake. It was time to confront the horrible truth. The sniper was going to try again and probably be successful. She didn't see how Bart and the

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security men could prevent it. The longer she stayed here, the more likely it was that someone else would be injured or killed. She couldn't stand it if Bart were killed trying to protect her. She was going to have to leave. Maybe charter a plane for...where? She wasn't used to living her life without a plan. There must be a way and somewhere she could go without alerting anyone here that she was leaving.

That would take some thought.

Bart would be devastated if she simply left him now. But he would be out of danger.

She made herself concentrate on the here and now. The winds had quieted and she couldn't hear any rain, but the bedside light had not come on. The power was still out. Probably trees had come down on the power and telephone lines. And the roads!

There would be reports on the local radio station. She tried to extricate herself from Bart's sleeping embrace and reach for the radio. He stirred, then moved his leg so that, although she could turn a little, it now effectively trapped both of hers.

She twisted around so she could look at him. Asleep, he looked like the innocent boy she'd grown up with. *Oh, Bart!* An overwhelming wave of tenderness swept over her. She brushed a light kiss over his warm, sleeping lips.

"Mmm. Nice way to wake up." He opened one blue eye. "Does this mean you want to play some more?"

"No," she said. "You have to get up."

He shifted slightly so she could feel his morning erection.

"Hey, I'm mostly there. Give a man a minute." He grinned at her. "One night in the sack and she's insatiable."

"Bart!" She clipped his shoulder. "Get off me."

He lifted his leg off hers and allowed her to sit up. But he looked at her warily, as if he expected her to regret being so uninhibited last night.

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“Thanks,” she said, getting off the bed.

“What for?” he asked cautiously.

“For letting me out of bed,” she replied. Then added, “Where I spent the best night of my life.”

She didn’t know what she expected after saying that, but she didn’t expect him to swing his long legs out of the bed and give her a relieved smile as he stood up.

“Well, then...neither of us has any regrets.” He raised one eyebrow and waited.

“None!” she told him.

“Okay.” He expelled a breath he’d been holding and flipped a switch on the bedside lamp. “Apparently the power is still out. But it’s past time we had something to eat.”

“Something cold, I guess,” Kit said.

She was thankful they were past the morning-after’s slight awkwardness and getting on with the ordinary business of living, but wished she knew what was going through his mind. And wished he could have used words that were a little more emotional than “okay”!

The storm had blown itself out and the morning was bright and clear. The cabin, however, had cooled considerably.

Bart lit the fire to take the dampness out of the air, while Kit took some rolls and fruit cocktail out of the refrigerator.

“This will have to do for now,” she said. “The lodge has backup generators. We can get something hot over there later.”

They soon discovered that the power outage had affected the telephone lines and the local radio station in addition to the electricity. They were able to get the North Bay station, which apparently had backup power. It seemed that, because of the number of downed trees, many areas could be without power or telephone service for several days.

That was not what Kit wanted to hear. The realization that they

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were isolated without power or telephone at the mercy of a mysterious enemy with a .22 and deadly aim was chilling. As if he could read her mind, Bart gave her a reassuring hug and a light kiss.

“Let’s head over to the lodge and see what Johanna and Mike know about our situation here.”

The air was quite cool, probably in the low sixties, but was clear and the sun was shining brightly. The paved path was littered with small branches and leaves ripped off by the high winds.

They met one of the security men on the way. “What a night!” he said.

“You weren’t out in that storm!” Kit exclaimed.

“Had to be,” he replied, with a grimace. “Your electronic security won’t work without power. I was on my way to tell you the generator is working fine at the lodge.”

“Thanks. We’re on our way,” Bart said.

The lobby was deserted when they arrived, but Mike was getting off the elevator. “You saved me a trip,” he said. “I was heading to the cabin with a thermos of hot coffee, but you can come up to the apartment and have a cup with Johanna and me.”

It was a subdued Johanna who greeted them in the cheerful breakfast nook. The reality of Elsa’s death had hit her sometime in the long hours of the night. Her red-rimmed eyes had lost some of their luster. Although her makeup was fresh and she looked quite smart in her navy track suit, somehow, for the first time, she looked her age. Her stepdaughter had been part of her life for over forty years. It must be hard to think of the lodge without her.

Kit gave Johanna’s shoulder a squeeze and sat down beside her.

“Were you able to get any sleep?” she asked as she poured mugs of coffee for herself and Bart.

“Mike insisted I take one of the sleeping pills Dr. Sedgwick gave me when I broke my arm last summer.” Johanna made a grimace of

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distaste. “I resist taking pills, but it did let me get to sleep for a while.”

Kit raised the mug to her lips and breathed in the fragrant steam before taking her first energizing sip of coffee.

“Mike and I have been talking. We don’t know when the police will release Elsa’s body,” Johanna said, her voice breaking a little. “But Elsa wanted to be cremated. She didn’t want a funeral...simply asked for her ashes to be buried in the family plot.”

After a pause, she continued, “I visited the funeral home quickly last night to set up visitation for a couple of hours this evening and from one to three tomorrow afternoon. Elsa’s minister will conduct a short memorial service at three o’clock.”

Apparently Mike could see Johanna was close to tears again because he continued for her. “And, as soon as the remains are released, we’ll have an interment service at the graveside.”

“Bart and I will do anything we can to help.” Kit suddenly remembered the hordes of people who had come back to the lodge for refreshments after Laila’s funeral.

“You’re not planning to have people back here afterward, are you?”

“It wasn’t easy, but we managed to talk Paavo out of that when he was here earlier.”

Mike and Johanna exchanged glances. From Johanna’s compressed lips, Kit gathered they had different opinions about what he was going to say next.

“It’s the only way, Jo,” he said before turning his attention back to them.

“The power disruption from last night’s storm is causing us a lot of problems. The OPP have closed some secondary roads because of fallen trees and downed live wires. Some of my men won’t be able to get here until they clear the roads and get them open again. That leaves our security patrols a bit thin. And with the electronic equipment inoperative for the most part, I figure your cabin isn’t the best place for

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you.”

“We’ll move into the lodge,” Bart agreed. “That would simplify the security problems.”

“Good. Having you in the building will make me feel better about leaving Johanna here. You and Kit can have the bedroom I’ve been using. There are two double beds in it and I’ll leave my computer set up in there. I’ll be here most of the time, but I’ll sleep at home.”

She could see why Johanna would be unhappy about that plan.

“You don’t have to do that, Mike,” Kit said firmly. “We need you here. If you think the cabin is unsafe, Bart and I will stay in one of the guest rooms.”

“The security is much better here in the tower section. We can lock off the bedroom wings entirely. And with the elevator and stairs to this area side by side we can concentrate all our manpower there.”

“Fine. We’ll move into the tower suite.” Kit was surprised at how little apprehension she felt about sharing space with the ghosts.

Johanna’s eyes widened. “But, Kat, you know Raoul...”

“The bullet that killed Elsa wasn’t fired by a ghost, Johanna,” Kit interrupted. “Laila’s and Raoul’s spirits mean me no harm. I’m not saying they are comfortable to have around, but they’re not dangerous. Would you object, Bart?”

* * *

“I’m game if you are.” Bart couldn’t help but smile at the thought of sharing a suite with the recently reunited passionate ghosts. It had definite possibilities.

“How long do you figure the electricity will be off?” Bart got his mind back on track. “I need to get online as soon as possible.”

“We have the generator here. But power isn’t the only problem with using the net.” Johanna picked up the telephone receiver. “Still no dial tone.”

“So much for doing the background searches today.”

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“I was out to the road earlier and the phone company crew told me that they hoped to have the lines cleared by the end of the day,” Mike told them.

“All I’ll need to pack is an overnight bag then,” Kit said, downing the last of her coffee. “Drink up, Bart. I’d like to see if the tower suite is as beautiful as I remember it.”

CHAPTER 11

Stepping into the tower suite was like entering a different era. Bart felt as if a time machine had zapped him into the Edwardian era. All the elegant chairs and sofas in the large living room were upholstered in satin—some of them rose, some pale blue, some ivory. He spotted a cherrywood desk by a leaded window. Everything gleamed, from the finish on the mahogany tables to the gilt frames of the mirrors and the pastoral paintings. The deep rich reds and blues of the oriental carpets seemed to hold it all together.

It was the kind of room he could see Laila commissioning. As a matter of fact, he thought he caught the scent of her distinctive perfume in the air. He felt the hair rise on the back of his neck as he scanned the corners of the room.

“They haven’t changed it a bit!” Kit said with glee. “I wouldn’t want to live here, but isn’t it impressive?”

He allowed it certainly was.

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“Wait until you see the bedrooms,” she said, taking his hand and leading him into a voluptuary’s dream room. The carpet was thick and white. The chaise longue was pink satin. And the wall of satin brocade drapes and the bedspread on the huge bed were a deep rich red. The paintings were pastoral. But they were a real contrast to the innocent country scenes in the living room. These depicted lusty males and voluptuous women enjoying each other in the woods and fields. Their aroused bodies were painted in loving detail.

He emitted a long, low whistle. “That painting was there when you were a kid?”

Kit laughed. “I didn’t sleep in here. The other bedroom was mine. It had the same satin theme, but much more restful paintings.”

“But you saw this one.” Bart seemed genuinely shocked.

“Laila was so determined never to be a hypocrite that she leaned too far in the other direction.” This wasn’t the first time she’d defended Laila’s brand of parenting. “You always knew where you stood with her. Laila often said she refused to give her daughter a false picture of the world—that you couldn’t learn the facts of life too young.”

Bart was still shaking his head when she led him into the other huge bedroom. Its satin drapes and chaise longue were pale blue and its bed was an oversized four-poster covered in white lace.

“Looks like we have our choice of Early Virginal or Late Bordello,” he said.

“My vote is for this one.”

“Sure. By the time we get home from the funeral home tonight, I don’t think it’s going to matter much.” Bart looked warily about him. “Do you think we’ll be spending the night alone? I’m not much for performance art and Laila said it was our kissing that allowed her and Roaul to regain their bodies for some lovemaking the other day.”

“Let’s hope they stay upstairs in the library.” Kit led the way quickly through the rest of the suite. The dining room was impressive,

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the kitchen not much bigger than the one in the cabin and the ensuite bathrooms elegant.

When they stopped by the living room window that looked out over the lake, Kit sighed. “I can’t help thinking it might be a good idea if Laila appeared again. She might be able to give us some hint about Elizabeth Anne.”

She looked up at him with that sensuous smile that sent him instantly from the slow simmer he lived at when he was around her to a full boil. What could he do but kiss her?

From her response, she needed a kiss as much as he did. Would he ever get enough of her taste? Until now the moment had always been sufficient. He’d always had a short attention span with women. He pushed aside frighteningly appealing thoughts of forever and concentrated on kissing Kit.

Finally the need to breathe ended the kiss and Kit rested her forehead against his chest.

“I didn’t hear any panting chorus making out in the background,” he said.

“I wasn’t listening,” she whispered hoarsely. “Let’s go pack and we can come here directly from the funeral home this evening.”

And, reluctantly, he agreed they should get it done before the phone lines were cleared and he could get to work.

* * *

At five o’clock the next afternoon, Kit and Bart arrived back at the lodge. The sun was shining brightly and the air was warm and fresh. It was a pleasant change from stuffy, heavily flower-scented air.

Although they’d had to run a gauntlet of shouted questions and thrusting microphones from the car to the funeral home, Kit was grateful to the phalanx of husky members of the funeral home staff who kept the reporters and TV cameras outside. So far, the headlines had been interested in the fact that a hit man had turned up in central

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Ontario to kill a local resort owner.

Thank heaven they hadn't yet made the connection with her highly publicized past. The national press and tabloids alike had had a field day when Bart had been forced to shoot Ronald in self-defense. The reporters had dubbed her "Billion Dollar Kitten."

Headlines like: \$\$\$\$ *Kitten in Tragic Love Triangle!* had screamed at her from the bookstands and grocery lineups. She wasn't looking forward to what the press would make of her current troubles.

* * *

The interminable hours of accepting well-meant sympathy from total strangers were finally over. As was the brief, but highly emotional memorial service. In spite of the fact the phone lines had been down for most of the two days since Elsa's death, the population of Spirit Lake and nearby communities turned up in large numbers to offer their condolences to her, Johanna and Paavo. Kit suspected that a good number had come to get a look at "Laila's daughter who'd been living down below and really owned the lodge."

She did know Ruby and some of the tradespeople who had worked on the lodge this past week. There were also a number of faces she'd seen at Ruby's, but mostly she'd talked to a continuous stream of strangers.

All the visitors spoke to Johanna and seemed genuine in their affection for her. She introduced Kit and Bart to absolutely everyone. Kit wondered at her grandmother's social skills and her stamina as she turned each conversation to the visitor's own family and interests. Mike never left her side.

Of all the visitors, Betsy Warner was easily the most upset about Elsa's death. Even tranquilized as she was, she had trouble speaking without weeping. They did not stay the whole time but returned often. Joel hovered around his wife and treated her with more sensitivity than Kit had thought he possessed.

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Paavo looked frazzled, but, no matter how inappropriate some of the comments about Elsa's death were, he did not fly off the handle once. Just before she and Bart left, he hugged them both and told them to leave. He would get rid of the stragglers.

* * *

Kit got out of the SUV and leaned back against the door for a moment. She tilted her face up to the sun, closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Are you going to have that rest you were talking about?" Bart asked.

"No," she decided. "I want to get out of this suit and into some jeans. Then I want you to go for a sail with me. I need to blow the cobwebs out."

Bart's face lit up. "Give me a minute to check if we have telephone service again," he said as they both headed into the lodge.

"Well?" she asked, tucking in her T-shirt and zipping up the fly of her jeans.

"It's a go. I never thought I'd be glad to hear dead air on the phone. When I called in our location again before we left town, that sugary voice was still repeating her litany. 'Service will resume soon. Our work crews are currently in that area,'" he chanted in a wicked imitation of the canned voice.

"Quick!" she urged. "Get changed. The sun will be up for a while, but I don't want the wind to die on us. I'll go down and get the sail bag out of the beach hut."

He grabbed her wrist with an iron grip. "Not without me." He pressed a fast kiss on her lips. "I don't want anything to happen to you, Kit. Maybe we should rethink this sail. Even with the security patrol doubled, we can't guarantee the killer isn't lurking out there somewhere."

"Please, Bart," she coaxed. "Even if he is avoiding the patrols, he

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couldn't know we're going out in the boat. We just decided a couple of minutes ago. And Mike said he'd had the team do a scan of the whole property this afternoon. Come on, Bart. It'll be fun."

He threw up his hands and gave in. "You'd test a saint, Brat."

Within minutes, they'd crossed the hot sand of the beach to the dock and Bart was putting the sails up. Kit kept up a constant stream of chatter.

"It's been so long since I've been in a sloop this size. Remember the day I tried to cut between Bret and the buoy and flipped my Flying Junior right over?"

"I remember spending most of the day diving for your centerboard."

She laughed. "Well, I never forgot to fasten its safety chain again, did I?"

"Enough talk. Get in here if you want to get a sail in before the breeze drops on us."

Not allowing another minute for nostalgia, he was at the tiller and skillfully caught a breeze that had the little sloop gliding quickly away from the dock. "Drop the centerboard, mate. And get ready to come about. Hard alee."

Kit moved to the lee side of the boat and ducked as the boom went over her head. As she hauled in the sheet that held the jib sail, it filled with wind and they embarked on a reach that would take them three miles without another bit of effort on their part.

The warm wind felt wonderful on her skin. She looked back at Bart, who was smiling broadly at her. This was the way she always pictured him, with the sun on his tanned face and the wind ruffling his blond hair

They didn't need to speak. They reveled in the sounds of the boat—the slap of the waves on the bow, the snapping of the sail and the hissing of the water as it passed under the hull. She luxuriated in the warmth of the sun on her back and marveled at the number of new

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homes that had gone up on the south shore in the years since she'd visited Spirit Lake.

After they passed the island where they had talked with Laila, Kit pointed out a distinctive rock formation beside some cleared pasture on the mainland. The fairly level land had some gentle slopes and thick wooded sections from what she could see. It was beautiful!

"Bart, come about. That's the property Joel was talking about. I'd like to see it if you don't mind. I think he may be right about the golf course."

Bart came about and brought them in fairly close to shore.

"Joel cornered me last night after most people had left," he said. "I think he figures I have some influence with you. He said he'd drop off some very rough sketches of the prospective course for you to look at." He bent down so he could see under the sail. "Joel described a narrow inlet he thought would make a challenging water hole for the course. Do you think that's it over there?"

"Let's try to get a little closer on the next pass," she said. In spite of herself, she was becoming enthused about Joel's idea.

When they came about for the second time, they agreed they'd found the inlet. "I'd like to explore that whole shoreline in a canoe or a kayak," she said.

"As soon as we find the guy who's doing the shooting, I'd like to do that too," Bart said as the sails filled and in moments he had the boat speeding along on their original course.

Suddenly, the sails went limp.

"Hey, what the hell!"

Although the height and movement of the waves indicated that the wind was steady, the sloop was completely becalmed. It sat rocking gently in the water, between the island and the Elmhurst property, going nowhere. Suddenly there was no fresh breeze on Kit's face, but, in spite of the stillness of the air, she felt a distinct chill. The sun's heat

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had faded with the wind.

This had to be Laila's doing.

Bart's reaction was unexpected. He'd been apprehensive and shaken by Laila's appearance in the morning mists on Saturday. This time he was furious.

"What the hell is your mother up to now? Do you hear me, Laila?" he called. "We've had enough. Stop the tricks. If you want to tell us something, talk to us. After the stress of the last couple of days, your daughter needs some consideration."

There was no response from the still air.

"Do you suppose she's back on the island?" Kit squinted in that direction across gold-tipped waves into the sun that was getting lower in the western sky. "I don't imagine there's any point in trying to paddle over there."

"She stopped us here. She can come to us."

"You weren't rude as a child." The lilting voice chastised him from off the stern, just over his shoulder.

Laila's translucent form materialized slowly. She sat cross-legged on some kind of silvery cushion about a foot above the water and pouted at him like a sulky child.

"You're right. I was brought up better. I apologize. But if you meant this visit to be amusing, Laila, I want to go on record that it's not! We came out here because Kit needs to relax and forget about murder for a few minutes." He stared boldly at the apparition. "Can you help us find the person who is trying to kill her?"

"I can only help you to find Raoul's bones. You will find there is a connection." Apparently, Laila had decided to be more direct this visit.

"Elsa came close to admitting to me that she was responsible for his death before someone shot her," Bart ventured.

"Can you tell us who killed Elsa?" Kit interrupted. It was time she gave them some information they could use.

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Laila shook her shimmering locks. “I don’t know. My range is limited to the lake and the tower.”

“Then can you tell us if the other daughter you never bothered to mention to me is here in the area?”

Her mother’s ghost flinched as if she had struck her.

“I don’t know that either.” For the first time, Laila’s voice sounded hollow and more how Kit imagined a ghost would sound. “So the baby was a girl!”

A wave of such deep sorrow emanated from the ghost that Kit felt like weeping when it reached her. From the expression on Bart’s face, he had felt it too.

“I can tell you this much.” Laila straightened her shoulders. “Elsa’s jealousy is behind the attacks on you. That is a fact.”

“But someone killed her.”

Laila waved away Kit’s objection. “True. But Elsa’s hatred was the driving force. It simply ricocheted back on her.”

“Does that mean there’ll be no more attacks on Kit?” Bart asked. “Did Elsa put out a contract that dissolved on her death?”

“I hate being this useless, but I don’t know that either,” Laila said petulantly. “Raoul and I do feel that the danger to you is not over. We’re both limited in our powers, but we’ll do what we can to help you, kitten. He’d like to tell you that himself, but I seem to have a lot more staying power when it comes to appearing to live people. I don’t understand the rules on that at all. However, in spite of that, I’m running out of time here. I need to tell you about Elsa’s diary.”

“She’s been keeping a diary?”

“I’m not sure if she kept it up, but she was still scribbling in one when I came home for my father’s funeral. Those little blue books were very important to her. I always wondered what she could possibly find to write in them. She had such a dull life, I was sure she made up stories to fill the pages. But she wouldn’t be able to resist putting down

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the details of what you need to know to find Raoul's remains."

Laila put the palms of her hands together in supplication. "Please do it quickly. We've been too long apart." Then her eyes sparkled and she gave them a startlingly radiant smile. "I must thank you, though, for spending your nights in the tower. It's been wonderful for us!"

"How do you suggest we find the diaries, Laila?" Bart asked.

"Elsa always hid anything private in what she called her 'secret hidey hole.' I found it when I was ten and read a little of one of her diaries. It was so boring I never bothered again. I doubt if she ever changed the hiding spot. If you lift one of the tiles in the base of the electric fireplace in Elsa's bedroom, you'll find it. There's a big space down there between the studs on top of the sub-flooring. It's only a guess, but I think you'll find the diaries there."

She gave her funny little wave and was gone.

A blast of wind filled the sails and they had to scramble to grab the sheets to control them.

With Bart's firm hand on the tiller, they took full advantage of the gusty wind in the long process of tacking back up the lake. They worked smoothly as a team, slipping back into the rhythm they'd had years ago. It seemed so right to be doing this kind of thing together. Hiking out over the edge to balance the angle of the sails, then swinging her body to the other side when Bart brought the boat about made Kit feel intensely alive. The wind in her hair blew the cobwebs from her mind and the physical activity helped lighten her mood.

For a long time after the interlude with Laila, the only words spoken were short commands and comments on the behavior of the Flying Junior.

Finally Bart wondered aloud, "How do we get Betsy and Joel to let us search for the diary?"

"They haven't been staying at Elsa's house. Joel told me it was too upsetting for Betsy. He took her home to Huntsville the day of the

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shooting.”

“Do you think Johanna has a key to Elsa’s house?”

“Probably. If she doesn’t, Paavo would. I think he’d taken to dropping off food he thought might tempt her since she got sick.”

“Look at those clouds.” Bart pointed at a bank of pink-tinged puffy clouds just beginning to be edged with gold slightly above the horizon.

Kit sighed at the beauty of the sky, then turned to meet his eyes. With his tanned skin and golden hair burnished by the setting sun, he was so handsome he made her heart ache. She wished she could freeze this moment. She could no longer deny that she would love him forever.

By the time the western sky was completely crimson and the sun was slipping behind the hills they had reached the dock. They stowed the sails and walked hand in hand up to the lodge.

At first, she hadn’t liked the idea of having security guards at the foot of the elevator, but tonight, as they greeted her, she found their presence reassuring.

When she and Bart got off the tower elevator, they saw a large, fluorescent pink note stuck to their door. It announced in Johanna’s bold script, “Casual supper any time after eight. Paavo is cooking.”

“I don’t know if I’m up for a full course dinner,” Bart said. “But we can get the key from Johanna and get over to the house right after dinner.”

As it turned out, Kit didn’t go with him to find the diaries. When they told Johanna, Mike and Paavo what they’d learned in their late afternoon encounter with Laila, all three advised that she stay in the security of the tower. She agreed on the condition Bart promise not to read anything they found until he got back and they could all do it together.

No one did justice to Paavo’s delicious lasagna, in spite of knowing he’d been up at the crack of dawn making it for tonight. Finally, Bart

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pushed his plate away.

“I’m sorry, Paavo,” he said getting to his feet, “but I don’t have any appetite tonight. I can’t concentrate on anything but the chance Elsa’s diary might tell us the name of the murderer. If Laila was right that Elsa hired someone to kill Kit, she could’ve mentioned it in her diary.”

“Even if she didn’t, there might be a clue there to his identity,” Mike agreed. “I’ll go along and watch your back.”

Kit and Johanna cleared away the dishes, while Paavo packaged up the leftover lasagna and put it in the refrigerator.

“I can’t believe Elsa would try to have you killed because she was jealous of your mother,” Paavo said, pouring coffee for the three of them. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Johanna agreed, “but you know how Elsa brooded about the past these last few months.”

She turned to Kit. “Elsa’s reaction to the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer wasn’t what I expected of her. She became violently angry at the unfairness of it all. She wailed about the emptiness of her life. One evening I sat with her while she drank half a bottle of that potent French aperitif she liked and listened to her talk about what her life would’ve been like if she had married Raoul.

“She kept saying Laila had stolen her man and her children.” Her sad eyes were filled with regret. “I ignored her, Kit. I should have done something.”

“Don’t be silly, Johanna,” her brother said. “What could you have done for her? What could any of us have done?”

The sudden sound of a telephone ringing was startling. Kit, who was closest, grabbed the receiver.

“Yes?” she said.

“It’s Bart,” his deep voice told her. “We’re still at Elsa’s. We found the diaries right where Laila said they’d be.”

“Aren’t you coming straight back here?” Surely he hadn’t called to

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say they'd be delayed for some reason.

Bart laughed. "We're on our way now. I'm calling to let you know the phones and the power are back on. Every light in Elsa's house was blazing when we got here. Tell Paavo he can turn off the generator. See you in a few minutes."

CHAPTER 12

Bart and Mike came bursting in the door about fifteen minutes later carrying armfuls of very dusty, blue leather-bound books.

“Thirty-five of them,” Mike announced. “I counted them on the drive over.”

“And we didn’t read a word,” Bart said, “as promised. But those books don’t look as if anyone has disturbed the dust on them in a very long time. Better spread some newspaper.”

Johanna retrieved newspapers from the recycling box.

Paavo shouted, “Wait!” then rushed to get cloths and disinfecting spray cleaner from under the sink.

“Can we move it along here?” Bart urged. “Just lay out the newspaper.”

“We prepare food in here,” Paavo huffed indignantly. “Who knows what drifted down through Elsa’s old floor boards?”

Hiding a smile, Kit accepted the dampened cloths and passed them

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out. "Each of us can take seven books and dust them off. As soon as you have your pile, look to see the dates of the beginning and ending entries of each book. We really need to find Elsa's latest entry."

"I know we do," Johanna said, making a small grimace of distaste, "but these are private diaries."

Mike slipped an arm around her shoulders. "I appreciate your principles, Jo, but if Elsa was plotting Kit's murder, we have to know who she was doing it with."

Johanna opened her first volume. "Of course," she said. "But this still doesn't feel right to me."

Bart dug in the pocket of his leather jacket for his ever-present notebook. "I'll jot down the dates."

"No dates in mine," Paavo announced. "Just her name, age and the month at the top of the page: 'Elsa Sepannen. Age ten. February.'" He flipped pages. "At the end of this book she's eleven."

"Let's put a sticky note on each volume with that information." Johanna got a little pink pad from the drawer under the kitchen phone. "That way we can put them in order."

It didn't take long to discover that Elsa stopped writing diaries sometime in her fifty-fifth year. She'd written several books a year in her teens and had slowed down to just a few entries a year before she stopped writing entirely.

Kit could taste the disappointment. A heavy cloud of gloom was almost tangible in the room.

"So she didn't write anything about hiring a killer." Bart's voice was flat.

"Well, Laila didn't say the diaries would tell us about that. She only said we'd learn about Raoul's murder," she said with a sigh.

"How old was she when Laila drowned?" Bart asked.

"Laila was forty-one," Kit volunteered. "I think Elsa was three years older."

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“That’s right,” Johanna corroborated. “We should maybe look at the previous summer though. Laila and Kit came up here when Jacob died.”

Bart sorted through his diaries. “Forty-three,” he muttered. “Here it is.”

“I have one, too,” Johanna said. “It’s at the end of one of my books.”

“It’s at the beginning of one of mine,” Kit admitted. Now that the moment had arrived, she didn’t want to delve into the mind of the woman who had hated enough to kill.

“Sounds as if Johanna starts,” Bart said. “Why don’t you skim the entries and read us anything you think is important.”

She nodded and began to read silently.

“The first few entries of: ‘Age forty-three. June’ are about her engagement to Raoul.” She turned to Kit. “Don’t you find it strange how she tops every page with her age? Most women prefer to ignore the numbers.”

“She seems obsessed with the passing years.”

“Anyway,” Johanna continued, “she writes pages of detail about their wedding plans and admits she never thought he would agree to marriage. She is ecstatically happy about the engagement and about getting one up on Laila. The last entry in this volume ends with this:

‘I sent the princess an announcement of our engagement. I wanted her to know right away that her prince was mine now. No matter how many times she’s been married, I know she’s never forgotten Raoul. I wish I could see the smug look wiped off her damned perfect face when she reads the announcement card. I’d dearly enjoy seeing her suffer. I suppose I’ll have to make do with my dreams of her gulping great ugly sobs. God knows it’s her turn.’

“That’s all I have.” Johanna put her elbows on the table and lowered her chin into her hands.

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Hearing Elsa's words was depressing. Although Kit wanted to hear more, she dreaded what the diaries might reveal. She watched the emotions cross Bart's expressive face as he read.

After quite a few pages, he spoke. "She goes on for quite a while about how she wants Laila to suffer. She writes about how much she and Johanna have to do caring for Jacob after his stroke. But she doesn't seem to mind that. Most important to her is that Jacob rejected Laila and did not ask for her." He looked around the table. "I'll skip the entries about Jacob's death."

Johanna murmured her thanks.

"Elsa goes on at great length about how considerate Raoul is to her during the funeral. Then she says this:

'Laila doesn't show any sign of leaving. She and her daughter have been here for almost two weeks now. Raoul is being too charming to them. He says it is his duty because they are family and *la visite rare*. But I see the way he looks at her. And the way she looks back at him with those damned big blue eyes. He is falling under her spell again. I hate her. I hate her. I hate her!

'I swear if Laila doesn't get out of here soon, that pampered little girl of hers will be a motherless orphan.'

He ran his finger down the center of several pages skimming their contents. "There are pages and pages on the same theme. Trust me—you don't want to hear it. Here. 'August.' Laila has come back to visit. She writes:

'The slut isn't even pretending not to be trying to steal Raoul from me. They spend their days out on that island. And Raoul won't even discuss setting a wedding date any more. He didn't exactly say the engagement was off, but he did say I could keep the ring. I can't accept it's over. He'll change his mind. That bitch!'

"More railing against Laila." He scanned a few more pages. "Elsa's happy again. Apparently, Laila and Raoul had a major quarrel and she

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left.”

He read on. “Raoul spent a lot of time on the road that winter. Elsa was suspicious there was another woman. She was sure it was Laila.”

Kit watched him read for what seemed a very long time, dreading the moment when he would find the description of her mother’s murder. She was sure now that Elsa had killed her.

Bart slowly closed the diary. “She did kill your mother, Kit,” he said softly. “Laila came back to the lodge the next July. According to Elsa, she lorded it over everyone and monopolized Raoul’s time. Her blatant flirting with Raoul at the bar one night infuriated Elsa to the point that she decided she had to kill her. She pretended not to notice the flirting at the time but, as soon as she got Laila alone, she told her they needed to have a private talk. Laila didn’t like the idea, but she agreed to meet her for a morning paddle the next day.”

“But Elsa was on the desk when Laila left,” Johanna began. “Oh, of course, that’s only what she told us.”

“Elsa spent the night making preparations. She packed a lunch basket. Tucked in a book and a blanket, then paddled over to the island, dragging an empty canoe with her. She set the scene and left one canoe on the beach.

“She waited for Laila at a picnic table by the beach with a thermos of coffee and some croissants. She poured herself a mug of coffee and dumped some of Jacob’s sleeping medication into the thermos. It was that simple. Laila, obviously trying not to alienate Elsa further, drank the coffee and passed out.

“Elsa put her in the canoe, paddled out into the mist, dumped her out and used her paddle to hold her under the water. When she was sure her sister was dead, she flipped the canoe over and swam to the island where she’d left the second boat. She was dressed and at work by nine o’clock.”

It sounded so matter-of-fact when he told the story, but Kit could

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see every detail of the chilling scene in her mind's eye—Elsa's determined, sturdy figure hoisting Laila's unconscious body into the canoe, paddling out into the lake, then coldly holding her sister under the water until she drowned. And all the while the glistening mist devils gliding serenely around them.

"You'll probably want to read all of this on your own some time." Bart's voice was full of concern. "The next part is in one of your books, Kit. Do you feel up to finding the details of Raoul's killing?"

"Let me do a fast read for you," Mike offered. "I'm not as intimately involved as you are."

"Thank you," she said. "I'd have a hard time concentrating right now."

Mike took the volume from her and began to skim through the first few pages. "She's terribly proud of herself for the way she was able to behave after the fisherman found the upturned canoe floating. 'I deserve an Academy Award for playing the distressed sister,' she says here. 'It was hard not to gloat.'"

Johanna had squeezed her eyes shut and was shaking her head in disbelief. "I was completely taken in," she whispered.

"We were so frantic," Paavo said, patting his sister's hand. "Then there were all the search crews to deal with. Those terrible three days before the divers found the body."

Mike sat silently staring at the diary. "Well, here it is. Five days later, the day after Laila's funeral. 'Age forty-four. July.'

"Raoul was in such a state at the funeral yesterday that he barely spoke to me. And now this!!! I can't believe he would leave without speaking to me. All he says in the note is he's sorry to wreck all my plans for the big day, but he's heading down below. Some big promoter agreed to see him. Keep the ring.

"I've let him push me around long enough. Does he think I'll just let him walk away? He'll get his ring back. And more than that.

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“I called Raoul and told him to come and get his ring. He’s going to come here before he leaves this afternoon. He thinks he’s leaving this afternoon.’

“She started a new page with this entry,” Mike said.

“I am so tired and so depressed. I did it. I killed the only man who ever mattered to me. Too bad I never mattered to him.

“Raoul got here about four o’clock with his guitar and his duffle bag. Said he was taking the 4:45 bus south. When I asked him if he was coming back, he said he didn’t know. Not much mattered now that Laila was gone. The fool didn’t know that was what made up my mind to do it. He said he was sorry for everything.

“I said I was sorry, too, and gave him his ring. As he was putting it in the pocket of his duffel, I took Dad’s hunting pistol out of the kitchen drawer. When he straightened up and looked at me, I shot him right between the eyes. And that was that. It was a pretty good shot. Papa would have been proud of me.”

“My God!” Johanna gasped.

“And she was killed exactly that way,” Kit breathed.

“The hard part came next. I got a shower curtain and rolled him onto it to catch the blood. Then I had to hoist him into the wheelbarrow and take him out to the sawmill.

‘I got the old steamer trunk out of the basement and tipped him into it. Then I crammed in his guitar and duffel and slammed it shut.

‘It took me three hours to shovel away sawdust, then dig a four foot deep hole in the soil, fill it in and pile a good six feet of sawdust back on top.

‘God, I’m tired. Laila was much easier.’” Mike set down the book.

“That explains why she was so against the demolition of the sawmill,” Johanna said.

“And, dammit, we’re going to have to call the police in again.” Paavo voiced everybody’s sentiments.

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“I don’t imagine, after all those years, it’ll make a lot of difference if Raoul’s bones spend another night at the sawmill,” Mike said. “I vote we get a good night’s sleep. We’ll deal with this tomorrow.”

Mike’s cell phone rang and he excused himself.

“Don’t you dare say you need to go to the cabin to check your email,” Kit said, getting to her feet. She could see how badly Bart needed to rest. “I don’t want to move back tonight. Whatever Bret has discovered will wait until morning. We’re both ready for bed.”

“Look how she bosses me around. I’m just her love slave,” Bart said with a broad wink.

She was sure she blushed scarlet. “What a thing to say to my grandmother!” she said as she swatted him halfheartedly. To tell the truth, she was eager to be alone with him after spending the past couple of days in constant company.

Mike strode back into the room. “That was Sergeant Jacobec. She tells me Elsa’s body has been released to Johnson’s Funeral Home for cremation according to your instructions. We’re to contact him about when we want to have the interment. I didn’t mention the diaries. We can tell her about them tomorrow.”

“I suggest we have the service as soon as possible. Maybe even tomorrow,” Kit said. “The media will be all over us when the news of finding Raoul’s remains is released.”

“I’ll call him in the morning,” Johanna agreed.

“I can’t take any more tonight. I’m ready for my bed,” Paavo said. “Call me if you need me tomorrow.”

They said good-bye to Paavo at the top of the stairs. As she and Bart entered the elevator, Kit whispered, “I can’t wait to get to the tower suite for some privacy.”

“Don’t count on it,” Bart said, bending over to kiss her. “You have another relative we haven’t heard from tonight.”

“Oh, you don’t really think Laila will be there. I got the impression

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from something she said that she and Raoul have been in the library these last couple of nights.”

“We can hope they go there tonight.”

All was silent when they entered the suite. It wasn't until they were passing by the dining room that they heard the first loud bang. Bart pushed her to the floor and threw himself on top of her as he drew his gun.

Kit began to laugh as the little explosive sounds came in rapid succession. “It's all right. It's only Raoul.”

If the entertainer were not dead, Bart would cheerfully have killed him for frightening him tonight. He sat up with Kit in his arms and looked at the black-clad figure with the dazzling smile standing on the dining room table. Even pale and semi-transparent, he could see why the Sepannen sisters had fallen for him. Dead, he exuded charisma; alive, he must have been dynamite.

“I'm sorry to startle you, *minou*,” the apparition said. “But I've always wanted to dance on a table, and this might be my last chance.”

“Feel free,” Kit said. “But don't use up all your energy before you say what you want to say this time.”

“Ah, but with you and your young man here together, I have all the energy in the world!” He spun into a quick few steps of a dance that sent staccato reports echoing through the room. “Ah, wonderful.” He sighed and stepped down off the table with a pale hand outstretched.

“I've been aware of his presence, but I have not met Bart. And I want to thank him.”

Bart took his hand and from the startled expression on his face, Kit could see he had felt nothing at all from Raoul's touch.

“I used to have a pretty good handshake, Bart,” Raoul said with a wry smile. “Now it's an empty gesture. The thanks, however, are sincere.”

“Yes.” Laila materialized at Raoul's side. “Soon our long separation

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will be over.”

“I can’t read minds,” Raoul said with a smile, “but I can see that you two want to be alone. Laila and I will retire to the library. Good night, but not good-bye. I suspect we will meet again. And, my sweet little *minou*, be careful. Stay close to your brave man. The danger did not end with Elsa’s death.”

“I wish I knew how to help you, sweetie,” Laila said, blowing her a kiss. “But I don’t seem to have retained any practical talents.” She brushed a true air kiss on Bart’s cheek before she and Raoul faded from sight.

“Yes, we really are leaving.” Laila’s sensuous chuckle filled the air. “We’d rather play than watch. Have fun, children.”

“I can’t think of anything more effective to cool the libido than having the ghost of your woman’s mother tell you to have fun!” Bart drawled. He swept her into his arms, but his laugh was a little shaky.

“Let’s see what I can do to heat it up again.” Kit plunged her hands into his hair and lowered his head so she could kiss him. His tongue tangled with hers and, all of a sudden, she was no longer tired. The electricity they always generated started her blood pounding in her veins.

“Let’s get out of the dining room,” he mumbled against her mouth.

Without breaking the kiss, she started to lead him toward the second bedroom, her fingers swiftly working at the buttons of her silk blouse as she went. When he realized where they were headed, he stopped kissing her long enough to ask, “Do we get to sleep in the red satin bordello? Now there’s a challenge.”

“I’m sure you’re up to it.” Kit grinned at him, whipped off her blouse and tossed it on the floor. “Race you. First one to hit the red bed naked gets to be on top.”

It was a close race, but Bart got there first. She landed on top of him.

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“Hey, Brat. No fair. I won. Get your luscious body off me, woman.” He gave a low chuckle. “Did I say that?”

“Bet you can’t make me,” she said, nibbling and licking the sensitive spot behind his ear.

He emitted a very satisfying rumble of pleasure. “Oh, I’ll bet I can, sweetheart,” he said, running his hands slowly down her back until his fingers curved around her bottom. “In a little while.”

She stuck her tongue in his ear. His whole body jerked.

“Maybe I’ll let you play for a while,” he said as if it was a big concession.

Their play was unrestrained and full of laughter. Bart’s responsiveness made her even hotter for him. And when he claimed his winner’s prize, their coming together couldn’t have been more perfect.

“I’d say we met the challenge of the scarlet satin,” Kit murmured sleepily against his chest as they lay entwined and completely relaxed.

“Umm-hmm,” Bart agreed and pulled the satin duvet over them. Then, with Kit snuggled in his arms, he dropped off to sleep.

When Kit awoke the next morning, the suite was empty. There was, however, hot coffee in the coffee maker and a note propped against an empty coffee mug.

*I hated to leave without waking you, but I thought you’d appreciate the rest. I’m meeting Mike downstairs in Johanna’s office.
See you there.*

Love, Bart

P.S. I have never enjoyed a challenge more. You are unique, sweetheart.

Well, he hadn’t said he’d love her forever but he had signed it

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“love.”

When Kit looked into the office, she saw Sergeant Jacobec had arrived and was sitting at Johanna’s desk, engrossed in reading Elsa’s diaries. Bart met her at the door.

“I’m not needed here right now,” he said, guiding her toward a sofa in the lobby. “How did you sleep?” His tender smile made her feel as if she had never left his arms.

“Do you have to ask?” She was sure her smile was truly sappy.

“Mike and I have made our statements about finding the diaries. Needless to say, I didn’t mention Laila’s input. We stretched the truth a bit and said Johanna suggested Elsa could have left family papers under the tiles.”

“Are they going to investigate at the sawmill?”

“Grace dispatched some men with shovels as soon as she read the entries about Raoul’s shooting. I suspect it won’t take long to find the trunk. Elsa was pretty precise in her description of where she buried it.”

“I want to check the answering machine at the cabin,” Kit told him.

“Good. Let’s get over there. I need to see if Bret has got back to me about a couple of things.”

The interior of their cabin with its casual furniture looked comfortable and welcoming after the sensuous elegance of the tower suite.

“I’ll download my email while you retrieve the phone messages, Kit.”

She pushed the play button and made a mental note to get a second phone line installed for as long as they were there.

Most of the messages on her machine were hang-ups, but there was a demand from Bret to call him immediately and one from Helen Dagwood. The canned voice announced Helen’s call had been made at nine o’clock last night, shortly after the phone lines had been reactivated.

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“Kit, I’ve been so worried.” Helen’s usually calm voice sounded agitated. “Elizabeth called and told me your aunt had been murdered and that attempts had been made on your life. I’ve been calling and calling. What’s going on up there?”

There was a pause, then she added, “We’ll be at sea so I’ll be out of touch most of the day tomorrow. But we’ll be in port tomorrow night. I’ll call again at eight p.m., Eastern Daylight time. If you get this, please be there at eight.”

“Bart,” Kit called, “listen to this.”

Bart got up from his computer and took the receiver from her. “So Elizabeth is in the area,” he said when he handed it back.

Finally, they were getting somewhere. Helen would have a location and a phone number for the mysterious Elizabeth. Kit didn’t know how she was going to last until tonight for Helen’s call.

“Bret wants you to call,” she told him.

“I think I know what that’s about. He sent me a couple of emails. He thinks he may be on to something. Tell me, what do you recall about a grant to a Dr. Gunther Roth?”

“Surely Bret doesn’t think Dr. Roth is behind the attacks,” she exclaimed. “He has to be wrong. Dr. Roth is a quiet, scholarly scientist. I can’t imagine him dealing with a killer.”

“Tell me about the grant, Kit.”

“I hated to do it, but I cast the deciding vote when the funding committee decided not to renew his cancer research grant.”

“You must have had a good reason.”

“I didn’t like the direction his genetic restructuring research was taking. He and his team were getting into a couple of series of experiments that seemed to be leading to iffy human cloning issues. He sincerely believed what he was doing was morally acceptable. I didn’t.”

“That certainly could give him a motive, Kit. If you were gone, would he have another chance at the funding?”

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“Possibly. He has some supporters on the committee. He’d have to make some major changes in his proposal, though, to get another vote.” She could see Gunther Roth’s thin, earnest face as he tried to convince her his research had to do with science, not morality. No. He was a coldly logical, not a violent man. “Besides, he wouldn’t have the contacts to hire a killer.”

“Possibly not,” Bart said as he dialed his brother’s number.

After he had vigorously denied avoiding all communication and explained about the storm taking out the power and phone lines, Bart didn’t say much.

Kit wandered into the living room and opened the folder with the golf course sketches Joel had dropped off at the lodge yesterday. They were surprisingly professional. She wondered who else was involved in the golf course proposal. At least, if Joel was working with someone else, that meant another person who had no motive to kill her.

Thinking this way was bizarre. She was behaving like the type of apprehensive, timid woman she most disliked.

“Bret has really been digging. He discovered Gordon Timbrill’s wife loves the race track. He also discovered Gordon hasn’t the slightest difficulty covering her losses. He even complimented Bret on being so thorough and showed him his yearly household budget. Can you believe he has set aside a yearly allotment for her gambling?”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Kit said, with a fond chuckle. “Gordon is a terrific administrator. If he finds a situation he’d rather not change, he very capably accommodates it.”

“The Gunther Roth investigation is not as reassuring. It seems he made a number of vague threats of the ‘I’d like to kill that woman’ variety when you pulled the funding. And co-workers admit he said he wished the hit-and-run had been successful. With you gone, he thinks his life would be back on track.”

“That doesn’t mean he’d take action to get rid of me. I can’t see him

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plotting to take anybody's life. Besides, Laila told us the attacks originated here."

"Laila also admitted she didn't know anything that would help you find the killer."

She had to admit he was right. "True. Relying too much on Laila's statements could be a bad idea."

The next phone call was from Johanna.

"Kit," she began with no preamble, "the only times the minister could be here for Elsa's interment are this afternoon at four or Friday morning. I told him tentatively that four o'clock today was fine. Paavo and Betsy can be there. Can you?"

"Of course we can," Kit told her. They agreed to take separate cars and meet at the cemetery.

If they did it today, possibly they'd get the ceremony over with before the media circus about Laila and Raoul's murders began. She shuddered at the thought of what the tabloids would make of this. Laila had been the darling of international tabloids. She could imagine today's headlines: *Tragic Love Triangle #2!* or *Luscious Laila Murdered by Jealous Sister!* And, worst of all, variations on the theme of *Billion Dollar Kitten Discovers Mom's Murderer!* No one around here would ever look at her the same again. The peace and quiet of Spirit Lake would be a thing of the past for her.

She needn't have worried. There was no press at the cemetery when they arrived. In fact, the only other mourners there were Betsy and Joel. And Betsy was again too tranquilized for any kind of conversation. The graveside ceremony itself was mercifully brief. Once the minister had prayed over the little urn and blessed the ground, Elsa's ashes were buried in the Seppanen family plot.

Afterward, when Kit wanted to see her mother's grave, Johanna led them to a plot in a newer part of the cemetery. Laila's grave was marked by an elaborate stone angel. She and Bart exchanged a wryly

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amused look. It was easily the largest headstone in the cemetery.

"I guess I didn't get the significance of Laila's grave being in another section at the time," Kit said to Johanna. "She really was ostricized by the family, wasn't she?"

"Jacob was a good man," her grandmother said with a sigh, "but a hard and stubborn one. When he disowned Laila, he took her name off the deed to the plot. Even after she came up here and bought the lodge for us, he refused to acknowledge her as his daughter. To Jacob, changing your mind was an admission of weakness."

"That can't have been easy for Laila."

Or Johanna either, Kit thought.

"But there's one good thing about having her own grave," Bart said thoughtfully.

Kit looked at him quizzically.

"When they bury Raoul's bones beside her, they won't be sharing a grave with Elsa."

"Wouldn't that have been ironic!" Kit smiled slowly. "But now they'll soon both be at peace."

"We sincerely hope," Johanna said fervently.

When they arrived at the lodge, Mike was waiting outside. Bart rolled down his window.

"I talked to Grace Jacobec on the cell phone on the way over," Mike reported. "She tells me they found the trunk with Raoul's remains. Even found the diamond ring in the duffel bag."

"That's a relief. Now we can finally get the guy buried."

"Johanna was glad to get that episode resolved at last."

"Aren't we all?" Bart thanked him and slowly drove down to park behind the cabin.

"I guess that means we won't be seeing the ghosts again." Kit was surprised to find herself almost sad at the prospect.

"If they go," he said getting out of the car and looking carefully

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around before heading up the walk.

“You can’t think they’ll hang around!” Kit hurried after him. Then a thought struck her. “Actually, I’m not sure why Laila was here at all. Raoul could have told us most of what we learned from her.”

He punched in the security codes and opened the door. “Maybe we shouldn’t look for logic here, sweetheart.”

Nevertheless, she couldn’t help wondering if she’d seen the last of the lusty spirits.

Bart announced he was going to see what he could discover about Elizabeth Anne and disappeared into the computer room. Kit read for a while, stared out the window at the lake for a bit and wished she could go for a run. She was not used to doing nothing.

It was after seven o’clock before she convinced Bart that he could break from his searches long enough to have some soup and a sandwich.

“Nothing much to report,” he said, stretching and rubbing his eyes. “I hope your friend Helen has something to tell you. All I learned is Elizabeth Anne has never worked or had a driver’s license in the United States. She has in Canada, but hasn’t had one motor vehicle violation—not even a parking ticket that I can find. No arrests. I have to see if Mike can get me access to her tax information to see where she’s employed. All I have is a mention of ‘service industries’ on one form.

“Come.” He wriggled his fingers at her in a “gimmie, gimmie” gesture like a greedy child and flashed his devilish grin. “Give me a kiss to cheer me up.”

The man was pure golden temptation. And, at least for now, he was hers. She threw herself into his arms so enthusiastically he staggered and rocked back on his heels. “Now that’s cheerful,” he said, smoothly settling himself on the nearest chair and lifting her onto his lap.

His thorough kiss banished all dismal thoughts of cemeteries and

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long-dead bodies from her mind. His arms around her were strong and possessive, his thighs were hard under hers. His unique taste was exciting and addictive. She wanted to go on kissing him forever.

Eventually, the kiss ended and he held her tightly for a long moment.

“Umm, nice,” she murmured, resting her cheek on his chest. If she could have purred, she would have.

“More than nice,” he said seriously. “I needed that. Sometimes, the need to kiss you is like the need to breathe. It’s just got to happen.” He released her, swatted her bottom lightly and stood up. He laughed and caught her just before she landed on the floor. “But you were going to feed me, weren’t you, woman?”

“Right now, I’m not sure you deserve it,” she said over her shoulder as she flounced into the kitchen.

They pushed serious topics to the backs of their minds while they ate. She asked about his father, and about Bret and Millie. He suggested they might possibly get a larger sailboat and motor it down the river to Lake of Bays and sail it there. She was still stunned by the thought that he even considered staying here long enough to invest in a boat when the phone rang.

Bart checked his watch. “Right on eight.”

“Kit, I’ve been so worried. How are you?” Helen’s voice was as clear as if she were in the next room. “Lizzie called and told me your aunt had been killed. She was so upset I could hardly understand her. What’s happening up there?”

Kit explained as clearly as she could about the shooting attempt in Toronto and Elsa being shot. Then she asked who Lizzie was.

“Well, Elizabeth Anne, of course. Isn’t she working with you?”

Kit motioned Bret to get on the bedroom extension. “You mean Betsy?” she asked.

“That’s what her husband calls her. She hasn’t been making a

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nuisance of herself, has she?"

"No," Kit said cautiously. "Why do you ask?"

"She hasn't mentioned her wild idea that she's related to you?"

"Could she be?"

"I didn't think so, but it's vaguely possible. Just before she died last year, Mom confessed to Lizzie that she did know something about Lizzie's birth mother. She'd even met her once. Mom said she was beautiful, blonde and from somewhere in Muskoka. That was all she knew. Except that her first name was Laila.

"Lizzie was determined to find out more, and when she discovered Laila Schofield was from some place in Muskoka, she leapt to the conclusion she was Laila's daughter and that you two were related."

"That's some leap, Helen. Surely, having you working for her mother's husband half a continent away from her place of birth is too much of a coincidence."

"My working for your dad and then for you is one of her arguments that she's right. My uncle, who has lived in Miami for years, recommended me for the job at Schofield's. He's also the lawyer who checked out the legalities of Lizzie's adoption for them."

Now that made some sense. It wasn't a coincidence. It was a connection that could happen.

Helen was still talking. "She's been fascinated with you ever since. She calls me all the time to get the latest news on you. She's obsessed almost. But much too shy to approach you. She really is a sweet girl, you know. Full of enthusiasm, but basically insecure. Luckily, Joel understands her."

"Helen, this is too strange."

"That's what I think. But Lizzie insists Laila is an unusual name. And the age is right. Once Lizzie got up there, she met your aunt, who recognized her."

"But she doesn't look anything like Laila," Kit objected. "How

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could Elsa have recognized her?”

“She said Lizzie looked exactly like her father when he was young.”

She looked like Raoul? Dear Heaven! She did!

“Oh, Helen. I wonder if it could be true. I have to think about this.”

“I have to go now, Kit. I’ll call you when I get home next week.”
And she rang off.

Kit was left staring at the receiver.

Bart took it from her hand and hung it up.

“She does look like Raoul,” she said slowly. “And she wanted to talk to me a few days ago, but I avoided her because I thought she wanted to make another pitch for the kiddieland.”

“You don’t want to believe it, but if she is your sister, she’s probably behind the shootings.”

“You’re right, but I’m going to call her.”

“She’s been so heavily tranquilized since Elsa was killed I don’t think you could have much of a conversation.”

Kit spent a disturbed night. Even Bart’s presence could not distract her from the intriguing and terrifying possibility that Betsy...or Lizzie...was her sister. And the question that if she was, could that highly emotional, timid woman be capable of plotting her murder?

CHAPTER 13

Betsy was on the telephone in Johanna's office when Kit searched her out. She looked older than her forty-two years, but she seemed more alert than she had at the cemetery the previous afternoon. The dark circles under her dark eyes made her look even more like Raoul's specter. Kit wondered why she hadn't seen the resemblance before.

"The student summer help were supposed to arrive on Saturday. I'm calling to put them off for a week. Neither Johanna nor I can imagine dealing with them right now," Betsy said as she replaced the receiver.

Kit was bursting with questions. *Are you my sister? Why didn't you contact me? And why would you want to kill me?* There was no way to ease into this. She decided to come right out with it.

"I talked to Helen last night."

Betsy leapt to her feet. Her dark eyes widened at the mention of her adopted sister's name.

"She says you think we could be sisters."

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Betsy's lower lip trembled and her eyes filled with tears. "Elsa was sure we are. Oh, Kit, I wanted so badly to talk to you. But Joel and Elsa insisted I wait." She was obviously trying to regain her composure. "And you were always busy."

Kit wanted to keep her distance, but years of wishing she had a sister pushed her toward the older woman. Tears were flowing down her face when she opened her arms. Betsy rushed to hug her.

Nothing would ever convince Kit that this woman wanted her dead.

They clung together for a moment that was unbelievably moving, yet awkward too. When they broke apart, they sat on the wooden chairs in front of Johanna's desk and stared silently at each other.

"You have Raoul's eyes. And his hair," Kit said.

"I wish I could've met him. And Laila, too, of course." Betsy dabbed at her eyes. "I swear, I'm not going to cry any more."

"How long have you known about being Laila's child?" Kit asked.

"Mom told me in May that my birth mother's first name was Laila and she was from Muskoka. I got a job up here and met Elsa in September just before Joel and I were married. She believed I was her niece. Darn!" She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. "I said I wasn't going to cry any more."

"I wish you'd contacted me then," Kit said.

"Elsa said you'd figure out a way to keep me from inheriting some of Laila's money, and Joel wanted me to wait until his lawyer had a suit ready to file. They couldn't understand what I wanted most was to get to know my family." She flashed her a smile that was pure Raoul. "I wouldn't object to having money, but that isn't the reason I came looking for Laila's family."

Betsy seemed sincere. However, Kit couldn't forget Ronald's apparent sincerity.

"Elsa tried to tell me you cheated me out of my share. But you had no idea I existed, did you?"

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“Elsa wasn’t entirely rational.” She was sure Betsy wasn’t ready to hear Elsa had killed their mother and her father. “If I’d known, I’d have had my lawyers arrange to treat you fairly.”

“Something else. Oh, dear.” Betsy frowned. “I might as well tell you. Elsa’s will is being read tomorrow anyway. She made me her heir. She had some idea she was getting back at Laila by not mentioning you in her will. I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“I really hadn’t thought about it.” And she hadn’t. But the fact Elsa’s estate would have been so much bigger had Kit died first was something to think about.

All in all, nothing had changed. She felt Betsy was not involved in the attempts on her life. She desperately wanted to be right about her newfound sister, but she didn’t have a lot of confidence in her own ability to read character.

* * *

The next few days were less than pleasant. Kit knew she was being difficult, but Bart was being stubborn too. Her conversation with Betsy on Thursday morning had sparked a major disagreement. Bart insisted Betsy was the most likely suspect. If Kit had been killed before Elsa’s death, Betsy had the most to gain. That motive was gone, but she might not understand Kit was unlikely to fight her in her attempt to get some portion of Laila’s estate. To put it simply, he thought she was greedy and he didn’t trust her.

Kit knew his reasoning made sense, but she was torn between wishing Betsy to be the sister she wanted and knowing she probably wasn’t. Her internal struggle made her dig in her heels all the more. Then Bart had the nerve to forbid her to be alone with her sister. To forbid her!

If she were honest with herself, she’d admit she was being unreasonable. She hated the distance that was growing between them and knew she was responsible for putting it there. He hadn’t called her

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Brat in days. That's because she was behaving like one. Today, after they got back from the Elmhurst property, she would apologize. Maybe she'd do it sooner than that.

* * *

Bart slammed down the phone. Joel had reported his .22 caliber hunting pistol stolen two weeks before the shooting attempt in Toronto. Well, if he was their shooter, the .22 was probably at the bottom of Spirit Lake now.

He was becoming more and more frustrated. It had been six days since Elsa's killing and he was no closer to finding the person responsible.

Bret's interviews in Florida turned up the fact that Gunther Roth had been alone in his lab at all three important times. But he had no obvious contacts with the kind of people who would know a killer for hire. They were still looking into that.

The Betsy and Joel combination looked most likely, but he had nothing but a motive. If he could only prove opportunity.

And he was still digging into Joel's alibi for Elsa's shooting, even though it still seemed solid. Because the tournament had drawn golfers from all over central Ontario, running down the three men who made up the rest of Joel's foursome was taking time. Bart had talked to Joel's longtime golf buddy from Bracebridge and the player from Gravenhurst, but he hadn't yet interviewed the golfer from North Bay. He was expected to be in town this morning, however.

The golfers had waited out the rain delay in the clubhouse bar. They agreed Joel had gone home to change, but hadn't been gone long. "He sure didn't have time to wander around the back roads shooting people," one of them insisted. But Bart had a gut feeling Joel was his man. Maybe Jimmy Soles from North Bay would have a different perspective.

Joel was still trying to sell Kit the land for a golf course. He'd

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called several times to arrange a time to have her walk the property with him. She had finally given in and agreed to do it this morning. Bart didn't like her being anywhere near Joel, but Bart would be with her. Because the road on the lodge side ended at the river that led into Lake of Bays, they were going to go over by canoe rather than drive all the way around the lake on the other side.

Then this chance to talk to Jimmy Soles had come up last night. He'd had to arrange for Mike to take his place or start another argument with Kit. God, she was quick to explode lately! They couldn't seem to agree on anything. And they didn't seem to be able to talk about anything.

Even after yesterday morning's meeting with the lawyer, she hadn't wanted to talk to him. She had wanted him with her for the reading of the will, though. As expected, Elsa had named Elizabeth Anne Warner as her heir. That meant Betsy now owned all of Elsa's possessions, including her twenty percent of the Spirit Lake resort.

Elsa had written a nice note to Betsy saying she was happy she'd discovered such a lovely niece—one who didn't seem to have inherited any of her mother's traits and only the endearing ones of her father. He could tell Kit was hurt, but she hadn't said a word about the indirect slur.

The coolness between them was driving him nuts.

Well, it was almost time to go if he was going to have a chance to talk to Soles before he teed off.

He got up from the desk to see Kit standing quietly in the doorway looking at him. Something in her eyes told him she hadn't come to pick a fight this morning. *Thank God!*

She met him halfway and slipped her arms around his waist. "I'm sorry to have been such a bitch," she said, looking up at him. She meant it.

"Not a bitch," he said, bending his head to kiss her. It wasn't a

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passionate kiss, but it sure made him feel better. “More like a brat.”

She grinned and stepped aside while he locked the door and reset the security alarm.

“I got an email from Mike this morning,” he told her as they walked along. “He said the paperwork on Raoul is taking time, but his remains will be released for burial by Sunday at the latest. He and Johanna decided to set the interment for Monday.”

“It’s kind of a relief that the ghosts haven’t appeared again,” she said. “We haven’t finished the task they gave us.”

“It’s almost finished,” he said, somehow doubting they’d seen the last of them.

Johanna was waiting at the door when they arrived.

“Mike’s morning run is taking a little longer than usual,” she said. “He makes it a two in one activity by checking at the store and coming back. Sometimes it takes a bit longer, but he should be back any minute.”

“See you later then.” Bart dropped a kiss on the tip of Kit’s nose and whispered, “Later.”

Bart didn’t question why he was so determined to break Joel Warner’s alibi. He simply knew that it was important. That kind of certainty usually paid off. Joel might not be the marksman, but his location at the time of Elsa’s killing would tell him something he needed to know.

Something in Jimmy Soles’s statement changed the solid picture the other two golfers had painted. According to them, they’d all waited out the rain delay in the clubhouse. But Jimmy said, when Bart asked whether Joel was with them, “Oh, Warner was there for a while. He went home to change, then came back. I thought at the time his clothes were very wet for somebody who’d just changed them, then waited out the heavy rain in a car.”

That was the first he’d heard that Joel hadn’t been with the others in

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the clubhouse most of the time.

And Kit and Mike were meeting Joel this morning in an isolated location.

Bart thanked Soles for his help and leapt into the SUV. He tried to reach the lodge on his cell phone, but found he was in one of those dead zones that the mineral content of the rock in the area caused from time to time. When he did get the lodge phone, the only person available to answer was Dan, who was on elevator security that day.

“Nope, Kit and Mike aren’t back yet. They never left. I guess you didn’t hear Mike got hit by a car this morning?” Dan said.

“Is he all right?”

“Broken leg and a slight concussion is what I was told. Betsy took Johanna to the hospital.”

“Then where’s Kit?” Bart held his breath.

“I took a carafe of coffee up to her in the tower suite about fifteen minutes ago.”

Bart used most of the horses under the hood of the SUV getting to the lodge. Every instinct he had was on red alert. Something was wrong. In spite of Dan’s assurances, Kit was in danger.

There was a white van parked in front of the main doors of the lodge when he arrived. Ever since he’d received the first three license plate numbers of the Toronto shooter, he’d automatically checked the plates of any light colored van.

He hurried by this one, did a double take, then ran back to check the plate again—655. The three numbers he’d been looking for!

Betsy was hanging up her jacket when he reached the lobby.

“Whose van is that out front?” he asked.

“Mine,” she replied. “Why?”

Joel was the shooter. “Where’s Kit?” he demanded.

“In the library, I think.”

He brushed by Dan, who was still at his post at the base of the

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elevator and took the stairs two at a time. He burst into the suite calling Kit's name. The suite was empty. But the shower was running and an untouched carafe of coffee sat on the table. He knew his crazy woman had gone alone to meet her killer. Dan said he'd delivered the coffee fifteen minutes ago, so she hadn't been gone long. Bart almost flew back down the stairs.

"Come with me, Dan," he shouted as he dashed out the back door. "I'm going to need a hand launching one of those beached runabouts. I hope to hell the gas cans are full."

His heart was pounding harder and louder than their running feet as they headed for the beach.

"Don't let Betsy out of your sight, Dan," he said when they finally had the boat in the water and he pulled away from the dock.

* * *

Much earlier...

Johanna had been gone about an hour and Kit was so frustrated she was pacing back and forth across the oriental carpets of the tower suite. Obediently, she had gone to the library and taken down one of her all-time favorite fantasies from the shelf. She'd sat in one of the cushioned bay windows to read, but even *The Lord of the Rings* couldn't hold her interest. She was giving up even trying to read when Johanna called from the hospital. Mike had a broken leg and a mild concussion. They were going to keep him for observation for a while. It just proved how a person couldn't take precautions against everything. What rotten luck to have a drunk driver veer into him!

Lord, she was tired of being cooped up. How much longer was this going to go on? The main suspects were under surveillance. Bret had men keeping an eye on Gunther in case he turned homicidal. Betsy was at the hospital with Johanna.

She was supposed to be considering a real estate deal right now. Not hiding in the tower. She didn't have Joel's cell phone number to

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tell him she was canceling their appointment and she really didn't want to alienate her newly discovered brother-in-law.

She could take one of the kayaks and head over there on her own. She was tired of cowering in a corner while everyone protected her. It's not as if she didn't know exactly where she was headed. She and Bart had spotted the inlet when they were out in the Flying Junior.

At the moment, Dan was her appointed keeper, but she could solve that problem. She unsnapped the FRS from her belt where Bart insisted she wear it at all times.

"Dan," she said to his prompt response, "would you mind bringing a carafe of coffee up to me in the tower suite? If I'm in the shower, just leave it on the table."

She turned on the shower and closed the bathroom door. Knowing Dan would come up in the elevator, she ran down the stairs and out the back door to the beach. She ignored the canoe which had been left out for her and Mike and dragged one of the kayaks into the water. She'd make better speed in a kayak. She'd explain to Joel about Mike's accident and why she couldn't keep her appointment with him today. She'd be careful. She wouldn't even set foot on shore.

The lake was strangely still and silent. The surface was so smooth she could see the clear reflection of a few little clouds in the calm, sunlit waters. The only sounds were the faint hiss of the hull sliding over the surface and of her blades dipping into the water. She set up a regular rhythm with the two-bladed paddle that set the kayak skimming swiftly toward the mists hovering around what she thought of as Laila's island.

She wondered for a moment why the mists were still heavy on the water when the sun was getting so high in the sky. The mists reminded her of the first morning she'd seen Laila's ghost.

"I'm going to miss you, Laila," she whispered and thought she heard an echo whisper back, "...miss you..."

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The mist devils seemed to be separating as she neared the island. When she rounded the point, they were far enough apart she could see Joel standing on a little dock on the mainland. When he caught sight of her, he beckoned.

“I was afraid you’d changed your mind,” he called as she drew near. “Wasn’t Mike coming with you?”

She stopped a few feet away from the dock where Joel was untying a rope at the bow of a flat-bottomed rowboat.

“Mike was hit by a car. He’s in hospital with a broken leg and a concussion.”

“That’s too bad,” Joel said, straightening up. “Well, are you ready to check out the property?” His salesman’s smile was wide and ingenuous, but it didn’t reach his cold eyes. “I thought we might take a pass along the waterfront first. Sorry. The boat’s not very classy, but it’ll get us in where we need to go. It’s the one I use for duck hunting. The first water hole will be over there.” He pointed to the inlet she and Bart had noticed. “The rough is pretty dense along the edge. That’s why you need to see it from the water.”

She suddenly realized that coming here alone to meet Joel had been a mistake.

“We can beach your kayak here,” he said.

She really didn’t like his smile. And she definitely wasn’t going to compound her mistake by getting into a boat with him.

“I’d prefer to follow you in the kayak.” She smiled back. “I didn’t want you to think I’m not interested in the property, Joel, but I’m sorry, Mike’s accident changes my plans. I’ll check the waterfront with you, but I won’t be able to see the whole property today after all. Johanna might need me. So I think I’ll just stay in the kayak and after I’ve seen this bit, I’ll head straight back.”

His smile dimmed a little, but Joel agreed and clambered into the rowboat. Their progress was slow because Joel kept putting down his

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oars to give her his sales pitch. That made it hard to keep a distance between them. She had to concentrate on back-paddling to keep her kayak from colliding with his boat.

She heard fragments of what he said, “Good location for an executive length, par three golf course. Of course you can’t see much in this mist. Build a bridge over the river to facilitate access from the lodge.”

His voice was distinctly strained. He was trying too hard.

To lighten the atmosphere a bit, she said, “Having Betsy as a partner in the resort is going to be great. She is full of good ideas and so eager to make them work.”

Joel looked at her strangely. “You really don’t get it, do you?” He stopped rowing and shipped his oars. “You won’t be there to see it.”

Startled, Kit took her paddle out of the water for a moment, allowing the kayak to glide up beside the skiff. Joel grabbed the wooden rim of the cockpit and yanked the kayak tight against the side of the rowboat. Kit’s paddle was caught between the two boats.

He fixed her with an icy stare. All pretense was gone. He was prepared to kill her this time. She tried to figure out how she could get out of the kayak quickly enough if he drew a gun, but he just held onto her boat with both hands.

“You’re a hard woman to kill. And you tricked me into killing Elsa, you bitch. That ruined everything. She promised me if I killed you she’d leave everything she owned to Betsy. That sure would’ve been a lot more if I’d managed to kill you before she died. We’d have a bigger share of the resort and nice sum from your estate, too.”

“Betsy wants me dead?”

He laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. “Christ, no! Silly woman is thrilled to death to meet you at last. She’ll bawl for another week when they find your body.”

“Everyone will know you shot me. They know I’m meeting you this

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morning.”

“Oh, I’m not going shoot you. I left my trusty hunting pistol at home. You’re going to die in a boating accident. Like your mother—the unlamented Laila.”

The mist devils must have caught a breath of wind because they scooted closer.

“But killing me now won’t get Betsy anything. She’s not in my will.” She tried to toe one heavy walking shoe off, but the confines of the kayak were too tight.

Joel’s knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the rim of the cockpit. “Maybe yes, maybe no. But I made a promise. Elsa came through on hers. It’s my turn. And”—he bared his teeth in a grin that was distinctly feral—“when you’re gone, I’m married to Laila Schofield’s only child.”

“Don’t do this. You’re a businessman,” she wheedled. “I can make it worth your while.”

Kit knew she didn’t have a chance of talking him out of killing her, but she might gain a little time. Maybe she could get her paddle free and get a lucky shot at his head so she could get away.

He shook his head. “Elsa won’t rest easy as long as you’re alive. God! She hated you!”

He took one hand off the rim of the cockpit to reach behind him for an oar. During that split-second of inattention, the boats drifted enough apart Kit was able to yank her paddle out and swing it at him. The kayak rocked crazily. All her strength and desperation were in that swing, but the blade glanced harmlessly off Joel’s shoulder.

Before she could swing the paddle again, he jammed the rim of the cockpit down hard enough to flip the craft. Kit screamed as it turned over. That scream cost her all her breath and gained her a mouthful of water. She found herself upside down, totally submerged, desperately in need of air and struggling to get her legs out through the small

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opening of the cockpit in which she'd been sitting. One of her walking shoes momentarily caught under the deck of the kayak. After what seemed an eternity, she got her feet free and streaked up to the surface.

Choking and sputtering, she gasped life-giving air. Before she had really caught her breath, she felt a crack on the back of the head that made her see stars. She dived under again, but she was still choking and had to surface again. The moment her head broke water, the oar came at her again. This time she saw it and was able to swerve out of its way.

She flailed around in the water, trying to stay afloat while she dodged Joel's jabs with the oar. Repeatedly, it struck her shoulders and her arms. She had to get away from his boat.

With the lining of her jacket and her track suit taking on water like sponges, her arms were becoming too heavy to function. The heavy shoes she'd worn to walk the possible golf course were like anchors dragging her down. She took a big gulp of air and submerged to tear at the laces. Somehow, she found the strength to loosen them and push the shoes off.

Dazed and in pain, she fought her way back to the surface, only to be pushed under again and again by the strong thrust of Joel's oar. She tried to breathe, but swallowed water instead.

This time as she sank, the chill and the blackness closed in on her. She didn't have the strength to fight her way back to the surface. Her lungs ached and she knew she was losing consciousness.

* * *

Bart had the throttle open full as he sped across the mirror-smooth waters. On either side of him two tall columns of mist kept pace.

Ahead of them, in the long bay beyond the island, smaller mist devils drifted steadily. A fanciful man might say they almost marched in file to some undisclosed destination behind the island. He understood why some early settler called this Spirit Lake.

Joel wouldn't dare shoot her, would he? Too many people knew she

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was meeting him this morning. Besides, he wanted to sell that property. *Yeah, sure!*

Think of anything but the possibility you might be too late, he told himself, peering into the gathering mist for some sight of her. If...when he found her, he would tell her he loved her and wanted her with him forever. Oh, yes, he did love her.

He would never forget the horrific sight that met his eyes when he rounded the point. The kayak was floating upside down. Joel stood, feet planted firmly in a rowboat, jabbing his oar at Kit, who was coughing and choking as she floundered in the water. Columns of mist whirled ineffectually about them.

Bart killed the throttle. Just as he pulled his revolver from this belt and aimed it at Joel, he saw Joel's oar connect hard with the side of Kit's head. She stopped struggling and sank before his eyes.

Joel could wait. He dropped the gun, kicked off his shoes and dived in after her. But she'd submerged a good thirty feet away. By the time he got to the spot where he thought she'd gone down, he could find no trace of her. The water was so dark and full of weeds. Heart pounding, he dived again and again, to no avail. He surfaced one more time, took a deep breath and looked about him.

Laila's silvery form flashed in front of his eyes.

"This way," she said urgently and moved to a spot about ten feet away.

"Down there!" She pointed an elegant finger.

Bart filled his lungs and dived straight down. He descended—it seemed forever—without encountering anything but long, slimy weeds. Then he had her!

He dragged Kit to the surface and, as they reached the air, a powerful damp force lifted her from his arms and propelled her high out of the water. Misty arms draped Kit's limp, unconscious body across the overturned hull of the kayak.

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* * *

Kit was aware of cold, damp bonds tightening around her and squeezing until she coughed and spewed out water. Laila's voice whispered that she was going to live. Then Bart was beside her, holding her gently and firmly, while she coughed up what seemed like gallons of water.

When she was able to raise her head, she saw that, while she'd been submerged, Joel apparently had rowed close to the runabout with the intention of climbing aboard. The mist devils were doing a good job of keeping his rowboat in place. Every time Joel dipped his oars, the devils spun his boat like a top.

"Don't move, sweetheart," Bart said. "We can't let Joel get away."

She watched Bart swim strongly to the rowboat, but before he could climb aboard, the two tall columns of mist stationed themselves on either side of it. Slowly, they took the forms of Laila and Raoul. Laila raised her hand and gestured toward Joel. The mist devils spun him straight up out of his boat into the air. When he fell into the water with a great splash, Laila nodded serenely.

Joel ducked under the water and surfaced only a couple of feet from the kayak. When he reached toward her, Kit wasn't sure if he meant to drag her back into the water or join her on her perch.

The moment he reached for her, however, tendrils of mist wrapped themselves around his arms and dragged him away.

Bart swam back to the kayak and put his arm around her shoulders as he treaded water beside her.

She could see the terror in Joel's eyes as he struggled to evade the ghostly strands. He was having major problems staying afloat. Any part of his body that cleared the surface of the water seemed to be vulnerable to the mist devils. One tentacle caught his foot and dragged him face down backward through the water.

He wrenched around and broke loose, then disappeared from view.

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Kit thought at first that he was gone for good but, from the action of the mist devils, she guessed that he was trying to reach the island by swimming underwater. The mist creatures converged over his route.

There was no escaping the mist, although its power apparently ended at the surface of the water. Each time Joel's head broke water to breathe, it was pushed back under.

From all over the lake, swirling columns of mist converged over him. Gradually the smooth surface of the water began to swirl along with them. The calm waters became a powerful whirlpool.

"Stop them, Laila," she sobbed. "I can't watch this."

"Elsa drowned me right here, sweetie. And Joel won't stop following her orders until you're dead, too. My main mission, I finally realize, is to keep him from doing that."

Joel's dark head came up for air for the last time. With horror, Kit watched the whirlpool catch his body and gradually suck it down into the depths of the lake.

Bart's warm arm tightened around her as she slipped into welcome oblivion.

* * *

Three dawns later, as the first rays of the morning sun hit the face of the marble angel on Laila's grave, Bart put down his shovel and came to stand beside Kit. The funeral director had given them the little brass urn containing Raoul's ashes the evening before and had promised to have the grave opened before dawn.

"It's done, sweetheart," he said. "And not one reporter caught wind of any of it."

"They're together now," Kit said with a relieved sigh, placing her hand in his as they turned to walk back to the car.

"Good-bye, you two," she called over her shoulder. "And thank you."

Suddenly they were no longer alone. A handsome dark-haired man

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and a delicately lovely blonde woman were strolling hand in hand beside them.

“Don’t be so solemn, sweetie,” Laila said. “Raoul and I are ecstatic!”

“We don’t know what happens next, but we’ll be together,” Raoul said with a huge grin and tugged Laila into his arms.

“But not at the lodge,” Kit said, hoping she was right.

Laila laughed. “We’ll more than likely leave that to you.”

“You wouldn’t want your grandchildren to grow up with ghosts, would you?” Bart asked.

“Grandchildren?” Kit asked.

Bart had talked about being together forever. He had told her he would have had nothing to live for if she had drowned. But he had not said he loved her. And he had not spoken of children.

“You want children, don’t you?” He actually winked at the ghosts.

“Bart,” she said, impatiently, “this is serious. Do it properly.”

“Here we go again with ‘properly.’ I thought we were doing fine with distinctly improper behavior.”

“Better ask her,” Raoul advised.

To Kit’s surprise, Bart dropped to his knees at the side of the road.

“Kit,” he began solemnly, “will you be my wife?”

She could see no hint of a smile on his face. “But you’re not ever going to get married. You’ve told me that for years.”

“I am if you’ll have me, sweetheart. I love you, Kit. And I’ll never be happy without you.” He looked up at her with his heart in his deep blue eyes.

“You are soul mates,” her mother whispered.

“Please say you will so I can get up off this damp ground,” her romantic lover added.

“Get up, you goof,” she said. “I love you more than life. Of course I’ll marry you.”

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He was on his feet in a flash. His kiss was a passionate promise of forever. She offered him everything she was in her response.

When the kiss ended, the ghosts were gone. Probably.

DEE LLOYD

Award-winning author Dee Lloyd credits her upbringing in Timmins, a Northern Ontario gold mining town, for her love of dramatic scenery and her conviction that nothing is impossible to a person who is willing to work for it. When she was thirteen years old, she told a reporter for the *Timmins Daily Press* that she was going to be a writer. Many careers—ranging from sales clerk in a record store to teacher of literature and creative writing—and years later, she is doing just that.

She is fascinated by electronic publishing and the fresh new settings and story lines, which this new medium encourages. Married to Terry Sheils, EPPIE award-winning author of horror, humorous mystery, and historical novels, Dee states, “Writing is as essential as breathing in our house.”

A former Senior Editor with LTD Books, Dee is a popular speaker at Romance and Mystery conferences. She enjoys coordinating her Library In Your Hand workshops in which authors introduce readers to the pleasures of reading novels on handheld readers, PDAs and Pocket PCs.

Dee’s *Ties That Bind* won an EPPIE Award for Best Contemporary Romance.

When asked where she lives, Dee says, “We live in Toronto and enjoy the kind of shopping, theater, art, museums and the great zoo that this great city offers. However, Terry and I suspect that we really live on an island in the beautiful lake country of Central Ontario. That’s where we

get to spend time with our daughters and their families. I'm sure the grandchildren think of us being there. It's our natural habitat."

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