

B.J.
DANIELS

HOWLING IN THE
DARKNESS



INTRIGUE ...

B.J. Daniels

Howling In The Darkness

Аннотация

GUARDIAN OF THE NIGHTDanger! Undercover agent Jonah Ries couldn't explain to the stunning woman who'd mistaken him for her blind date exactly how he knew someone was trying to harm her. But evil stalked Moriah's Landing, and Katherine Ridgemont was its target. When she learned of Jonah's deep secret, Kat might not give him the time of day. Only that wouldn't stop Jonah from watching over the vulnerable beauty after dark. As the anniversary of Kat's mother's mysterious death approached, the instinct to protect became a fire in Jonah's blood. A fire matched by his determination to save the woman he loved from the unknown forces that haunted the night....

Содержание

“You never did say what you were doing out here this late at night,”	5
Howling in the Darkness	8
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	9
CAST OF CHARACTERS	12
Contents	14
Chapter One	15
Chapter Two	30
Chapter Three	43
Chapter Four	58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	68

“You never did say what you were doing out here this late at night,”

Jonah said.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Kat lied. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t sleep either.” He kept looking at her with that same I-can-lie-as-well-as-you-can expression on his handsome face.

She turned, planning to take off, but he moved too fast.

One hand came to rest at the small of her back as his lips unerringly found hers.

She would have fought both him and the kiss, but he had taken her by surprise and left her reeling when it ended abruptly.

“I hate having regrets,” he said matter-of-factly, then turned and left her on the deserted dock without another word, leaving her to stare after him, the taste and feel of him still on her lips.

It seemed he had no qualms about leaving her with one big regret—that she wouldn’t be kissing him again.

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

Harlequin Intrigue has four new stories to blast you out of the winter doldrums. Look what we've got heating up for you this month.

Sylvie Kurtz brings you the first in her two-book miniseries **FLESH AND BLOOD**. Fifteen years ago, a burst of anger by the banks of the raging Red Thunder River changed the lives of two brothers forever. In *Remembering Red Thunder*, Sheriff Chance Conover struggles to regain the memory of his life, his wife and their unborn baby before a man out for revenge silences him permanently.

You can also look for the second book in the four-book continuity series **MORIAH'S LANDING**—*Howling in the Darkness* by B.J. Daniels. Jonah Ries has always sensed something was wrong in Moriah's Landing, but when he accidentally crashes Kat Ridgemont's online blind date, he realizes the tough yet fragile beauty has more to fear than even the town's superstitions.

In Operation: Reunited by Linda O. Johnston, Alexa Kenner is on the verge of marriage when she meets John O'Rourke, a man who eerily resembles her dead lover, Cole Rappaport, who died in a terrible explosion. Could they be one and the same?

And finally this month, one by one government witnesses who put away a mob associate have been killed, with only Tara Ford remaining. U.S. Deputy Marshal Brad Harrison vows to protect Tara by placing her In His Safekeeping— by Shawna Delacorte.

We hope you enjoy these books, and remember to come back next month for more selections from MORIAH'S LANDING and FLESH AND BLOOD!

Sincerely,

Denise O'Sullivan
Associate Senior Editor
Harlequin Intrigue

Howling in the Darkness

B.J. Daniels

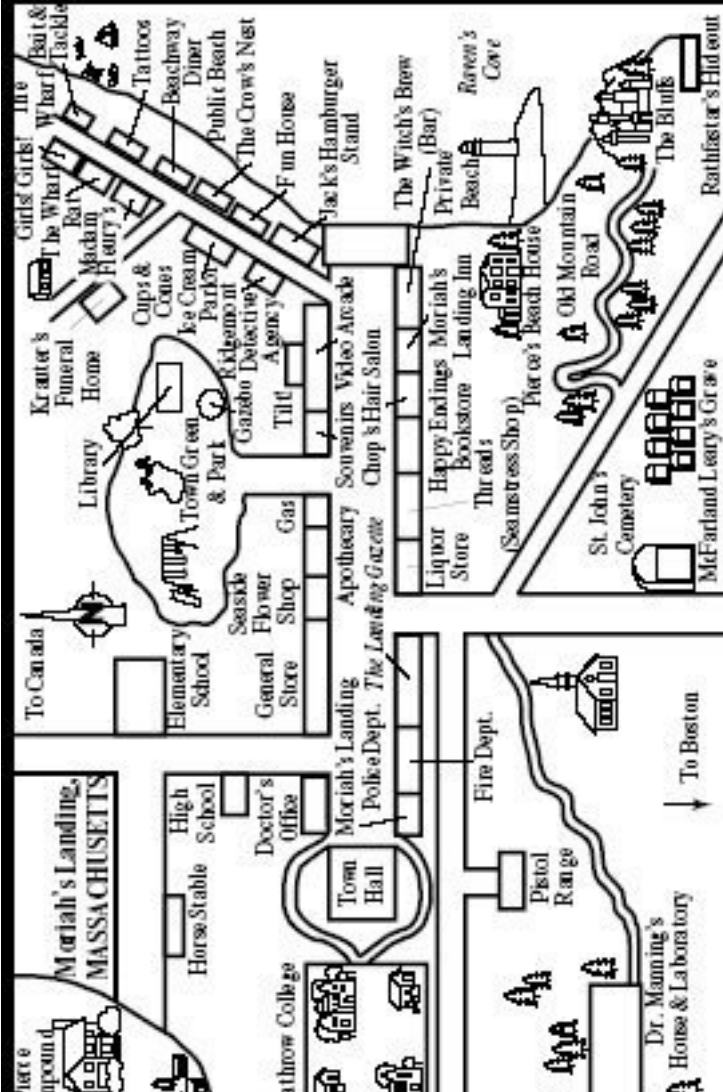


www.millsandboon.co.uk

Special thanks and acknowledgment
are given to B.J. Daniels for her contribution
to the MORIAH'S LANDING series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A former award-winning journalist, B.J. Daniels is the author of thirty-seven short stories and fourteen novels. Most of her books are set in Montana, where she lives with her husband, Parker; two springer spaniels, Zoey and Scout; and a temperamental tomcat named Jeff. Her first novel, *Odd Man Out*, was nominated for the Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Award for best first book and best Harlequin Intrigue. B.J. is a member of Bozeman Writers Group and Romance Writers of America. When not writing, she enjoys reading, camping and fishing, and snowboarding. Write to her at: P.O. Box 183, Bozeman MT 59771.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jonah Ries—The FBI agent has more to fear in Moriah's Landing than even he knows.

Kat Ridgemont—The private investigator has a deadly secret admirer after her.

Arabella Leigh—Is she as crazy as everyone thinks she is when she warns Kat of danger and death?

McFarland Leary—His ghost is due to rise again.

Cassandra Quintana—What does the fortune-teller see in the cards that she isn't telling?

Ernie McDougal—Is the shy Bait & Tackle shop owner into more than fish and lures?

Emily Ridgemont—The seventeen-year-old has a secret of her own.

Brody Ries—The owner of the Wharf Rat bar will do anything for money.

Tommy Cavendish—The fifteen-year-old doesn't know what he is getting into.

Deke Turner—The former FBI agent comes to Moriah's Landing with only one thing on his mind: revenge.

Marley Glasgow—He hates women. But enough to kill?

Max Weathers—The FBI agent disappeared after being sent to Moriah's Landing to investigate an anonymous tip.

Dr. Leland Manning—How far will the scientist go in his

quest to discover the secret in witches' descendants' genes?

Leslie Ridgemont—She might be dead, but in Moriah's Landing that doesn't mean she is gone for good.

This one is for Jeff Robinson, a great writer, a great friend. Not only has he always supported my career—but he keeps my husband, Parker, busy playing basketball so I can write. Thanks, Jeff!

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter One

A killer fog rolled in off the Atlantic, moving silently through the darkness as it approached the small town nestled at the edge of the sea.

Jonah Ries didn't see the fog coming any more than he could see the future. But he felt it. At first just a disquieting sense of foreboding. Then he came roaring up over a rise in the rocky landscape and saw the sign, Welcome to Moriah's Landing, and he knew, a soul-deep knowing, that this was the last place on earth he should be.

He slowed his motorcycle, the feeling of darkness so strong he could see himself flipping a U-turn in the middle of the road, throttling up the bike, his taillight growing dimmer and dimmer beneath the twisted dark limbs snaking over the pavement.

But he could no more turn back than he could convince himself he had nothing to fear in Moriah's Landing. He knew what he would risk coming here. A hell of a lot more than just his life, he thought as he swept down the hill, passing St. John's Cemetery without looking in that direction, and heading for the wharf.

Overhead, a half-moon rode the star-specked sky, reminding him he had five days, tops.

He felt the first hint of the fog long before he saw it. Small patches of dampness brushed past his face, ghostlike

as spiderwebs. But the moment he turned down Waterfront Avenue, the mist moved in as thick as wet concrete, obliterating everything, forcing him to pull over, park his bike and walk the rest of the way.

Might as well just get it over with. He reached under the left side of his leather jacket for the reassuring feel of his .38 nestled in the shoulder holster. Snug as a bug. Too bad what he feared most couldn't be killed with a bullet. Not even a silver one.

He made his way along the brick sidewalk toward the faint beat of the neon bar sign at the end of the street, unable to throw off the ominous feeling he'd gotten at just the sight of the town's sign.

Nor had he realized how late it was until he noticed that the shops were all dark, locked up for the night. Of course, it wasn't Memorial Day yet. That's when the tiny Massachusetts town would come alive with tourists, especially this year, with Moriah's Landing celebrating its 350th anniversary.

Tourists would flock here for the beach—and the witch folklore, bringing a morbid fascination for the town's dark, witch-hanging past.

Tonight, though, the small township lay cloaked in a fog of obscurity, silent as McFarland Leary's grave, as if waiting for something to happen. Unfortunately, Jonah feared he knew what that something was.

"Hey!" A voice came out of the darkness from the end of the street near the blurred, flashing bar sign for the Wharf Rat. Jonah

could barely make out the form, but instantly recognized it, just as the man coming out of the bar had recognized him.

“Hey.” The man staggered forward, then stopped, clearly jarred momentarily from his drunken state.

Jonah reached blindly for the first door next to him, grabbed the handle and turned, praying it wouldn’t be locked, but prepared to use whatever it took to get in. He shoved with his shoulder as he turned the handle, losing his balance in surprise as the door fell open and he stumbled in, closing it behind him.

“You’re late,” a female voice admonished.

He froze, his back to the dark room. From beyond it, a narrow path of light ran across the carpet to his feet. He turned slowly, comforted by the feel of the .38.

She stood behind a large antique desk, one hand on her hip, her head cocked to the side so her long mane of raven’s-wing-black hair hung down past her shoulder like a wave. He could feel her gaze, dark and searching, long before he stepped close enough to really see her face.

“Sorry,” he said without thinking. He had plenty to be sorry about so he didn’t mind.

Her eyes narrowed. “I guess you didn’t get my last e-mail.”

He shook his head. Unfortunately, he hadn’t gotten any of her e-mails.

“Are you ready?” she asked, sounding a little unsure of herself. He sensed this was new territory for her.

Ready? He watched her pick up her purse and jacket and

then hesitate. He couldn't help but stare at her. She had the most interesting face he'd ever seen. Wide-set dark navy-blue eyes with dense lashes, a full, almost pouty, mouth and high cheekbones, all put together in a way that startled and interested him at the same time.

"Yes?" she asked, eyeing him, definitely not sure now. "Is there a problem?"

Not unless being totally confused was a problem. He started to tell her that she was making a mistake. But then she came around the corner of the desk and he got the full effect of her little black dress.

Wow. It was a knockout on her, formfitting against the warm olive glow of her skin. Silver glittered on her wrist, dangled from the lobes of her ears and swept the curve of her neck and throat. Nestled in the hollow between her breasts hung a small silver lighthouse charm.

"Did you have some spot in mind?" she asked. The tap of her heels drew his attention back up to her face as she moved toward him.

He had lots of spots in mind. But she'd caught him on a night when he was already off-kilter and she was the last thing he'd expected to run across. So it took him longer than it should have to realize she thought he was her date—an online blind date, it seemed. Even worse. And from the way she was dressed, they were going out for a drink. Maybe a late supper.

Unfortunately, her "real" date would probably be along any

minute. Jonah realized he'd be damn disappointed when that happened. The problem was, leaving here right now wasn't an option.

At least not out the front door where he feared the man he'd seen would be looking for him.

Past her, he saw a way out—literally. A back exit and a chance to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak.

“How about the Moriah's Landing Inn?” he asked, realizing he had a better chance with her than alone if he hoped to avoid the man he'd just seen in the street. The hotel was only a few doors up on Main Street and had a very nice restaurant. And it was easy to get to since he figured he was probably supposed to be driving a car. Which he wasn't. More important, they could get to it quickly by going down the narrow alley out back, therefore cutting down the chance of an ugly confrontation with his past.

“Great,” she said, sounding a little surprised.

Probably because of the way he looked. “I apologize for the way I'm dressed,” he said, glancing down at the jeans, biking boots and the laundry-worn blue chambray shirt he wore underneath his old brown leather jacket. He ran a hand over his stubbled jaw, then raked it on up through his hair. Not exactly hot-date material.

She looked down at her dress. It hit about thigh-high on her legs. Black platform sandals gave her a few more inches in height, putting them on about the same level. Her eyes came back to him, a tantalizing flush to her cheeks. “Is the dress too—”

"It's perfect," he said, meaning it. "You look sensational." Meaning that, too.

She quirked a smile at him and ducked her head. "Thanks."

Yes, definitely new territory for her. This was a woman who didn't often feel vulnerable. But she did right now. He couldn't help but wonder why. Even if he hadn't had to make a quick getaway, her vulnerability made him all the more anxious to get her out of here before her real date arrived.

He glanced out the front window toward the street, the fog dense as chowder. No sign of the dark figure he'd seen earlier. "Why don't we go out the back? It's closer that way."

She lifted an eyebrow but said nothing. He helped her with her jacket, wondering how much she knew about her real date, and opened the back door, glancing down the quaint brick alley to make sure no one was waiting for him.

As they left, he noticed the small sign hanging over the back door. Ridgemont Detective Agency. She worked for a private investigator? Just his luck.

He could hear music and the faint murmur of voices traveling on the sea breeze coming up from Raven's Cove. His heart picked up the beat of her heels tapping the brick as they walked closer to the wharf, wrapped in the dense cloak of the fog, making what was already an unimaginable night surreal.

He told himself he'd just stolen someone else's date. That alone could explain his uneasiness. Also he was home again, back in a town he'd vowed never to return to. Unfortunately, he knew

only too well all the things that could be lurking in Moriah's Landing.

She took his arm, the dark alley almost intimate as the foghorn groaned out past the cove. He breathed in her scent and tried to relax. He was safe with her. But he knew relaxing would be impossible as long as he was in Moriah's Landing. And dangerous.

The apparition came out of the mist so unexpectedly Jonah didn't even have time to reach for his weapon, let alone sense the presence. Suddenly a dark figure appeared in front of them, her black hooded cloak blowing out in the breeze like the wings of a vulture.

He started at the sight of the old crone, her gray hair a silver aura sticking out from under her black hood, her eyes bottomless holes in her wrinkled face.

Reflexively he stepped between his date and the old woman as the crone reached clawlike gnarled fingers toward them.

"It's just Arabella," his date whispered. "She's harmless."

How little she knew.

The old woman's gaze locked with his for an instant, then she stumbled back as if she'd seen a ghost. Or something worse. "Katherine," she cried, fear contorting her face as she gasped for breath and reached around him, trying to pluck at the fabric of his date's jacket sleeve.

"Danger comes in with the fog," the crone croaked, her gaze on Jonah. "Danger and death." Then the old woman stumbled

back into the mist, leaving Jonah shaken. If he couldn't even sense an old woman coming in the fog, how did he plan to protect himself from the real trouble here?

Katherine must have seen his expression. "Arabella's just local color," she said with a laugh, and pulled him toward the Moriah's Landing Inn. "I wouldn't be surprised if the town council paid her to freak out visitors as part of our witch-folklore ambience."

Jonah looked over his shoulder. The old woman was gone. But like him, she'd sensed something had come in with the fog, unleashing evil in Moriah's Landing.

They walked past one of the "witch" shops along the narrow alley that peddled magic, from herbs and oils to tarot cards and crystals.

"I'm sure you've heard about all this foolishness?" his date asked as she glanced into the shop window, then at him.

"What foolishness?" he asked, pretending he didn't know and that he wasn't still shaken by their run-in with Arabella.

"Witches, the supernatural, all the hype that comes with Moriah's Landing," she said with a laugh. "According to local legend, early resident McFarland Leary was a consort to a witch."

They crossed Main Street to the entrance of the Moriah's Landing Inn. He opened the door for her, anxious to get inside. Because of the hour, the hotel lobby and the restaurant were nearly empty. A young waiter showed them to a table by the window facing the cove—farthest away from the door and Main Street.

“When they started burning witches at the stake in Salem, many of the witches fled to Moriah’s Landing where they were hidden by McFarland Leary and his consort, a witch named Seama,” she said, and nervously plucked up her cloth napkin from the table. “Seama and her secret coven give the town its supernatural ambience.”

She glanced at him, then out at the foggy darkness as if there was nothing to fear beyond the window. “McFarland Leary is our resident ghost, cursed by the witch he betrayed.” She swung her gaze back to him. Definitely nervous, making him pretty sure she didn’t know much about him. “Seama was carrying Leary’s child when she caught him cheating on her with a mortal and she damned him for eternity. Then she disappeared with her unborn baby. Some people swear she later returned to town and her descendants live among us.” She smiled at that. “The town accused Leary of being a warlock and sentenced him to die. Warlocks were used for kindling around the stakes to get the fire going hot enough to burn the witches. But Moriah’s Landing likes to be different. The town hung Leary from a big oak tree on the town green and buried him in St. John’s Cemetery as a warning to others who might want to consort with witches. Now Leary rises from his grave every five years to seek revenge on the town. Or at least that’s what the chamber of commerce wants you to believe.”

She took a breath as she finished her story and let out a little tense laugh. “Welcome to Moriah’s Landing.”

Obviously, her real date wasn't from town. He smiled, gazing intently into her dark blue eyes, anxious to change the subject, no matter what it took, even if it meant flirting with a beautiful woman. "I like it already, Katherine." At least Arabella had provided him with his date's name.

"Kat." She dropped her gaze, a faint blush rising in her cheeks, making her even more appealing, as if she wasn't already. "Everyone just calls me Kat."

Except for Arabella. He glanced toward Waterfront Avenue, the fog too thick to know if the man he'd seen was still out there looking for him. "You sound as if you don't like the town," he said, not sure how much he was supposed to know about her but determined to keep her talking about herself so she didn't start questioning him. "What makes you stay?"

She seemed surprised and he feared he'd already messed up. He wasn't ready to go back out on the street. Even if it had been safe, he found his "date" intriguing. Maybe too intriguing.

She took a sip from her water glass, then picked up her menu. "I've never even thought about leaving. Can you believe it? I didn't even leave to go away to college."

So she went to the all-girl Heathrow College at the edge of town.

"I'm eighth generation," she said as if that explained it. "In Massachusetts you aren't considered a native unless you have at least eight generations buried in the local cemetery."

A local girl. Just his luck.

“Your ancestors must have been fishermen,” he guessed, opening his own menu, although he wasn’t in the least bit hungry.

“Seventh generation,” she said. “Dad died at sea when I was a sophomore in college.”

“I’m sorry.”

She nodded and peered at him over her menu, her wide blue eyes magnetic. “Commercial fishing,” she said, then dropped her gaze again behind the menu.

He nodded to himself, more than aware that the sea had always taken men from small fishing villages like Moriah’s Landing and would continue to as long as men went to sea. And men would always be drawn to the sea. Some forces in nature pulled at you with a witchery that Jonah understood better than most.

“What about your mother?” he asked, hoping his question was general enough.

“My mother—” he heard the catch in her throat, the hesitation in her voice “—died when I was three. I can’t remember her.” She closed her menu, clearly closing the subject.

“I’m sorry. I hope that isn’t all the family you have here,” he said, doing a little fishing of his own.

“There’s my half sister, Emily. She’s seventeen and a real handful, but I love her. She’s all the family I have left and she graduates from high school next week. Tell me more about you.”

More about him. He studied his menu wondering about the man she was supposed to be having dinner with tonight. He could only guess that they met online, considering her comment about

getting her e-mail, and that they obviously hadn't met face-to-face—until tonight. He knew nothing about online dating. But it was pretty clear that she didn't know her date very well—nor he her. “There isn't much to tell.”

“Your father wasn't a fisherman, I'll bet.”

Far from it. He shook his head and smiled as he lowered his menu. Fortunately, the waiter saved him. “I have to have lobster,” Jonah told her. “How about you?”

“I don't eat seafood.” She shook her head. “Not because of any moral stand or because of my father. I've just never liked it. I'll take the chicken,” she said to the waiter.

“Kat,” Jonah said, trying out the name. He liked it. It fit her. “You must know practically everyone in town.” Cause for concern.

“Everyone,” she said, and laughed.

She would know his family. The thought left him cold.

“It's one of the problems of living in a small town,” she said. “Everyone knows everything about you. And you them.” She shrugged. “But it's home, you know?”

He didn't know. He glanced out the window toward the wharf. The neon from the bars at the end of Waterfront gave the fog an eerie glow.

“You can't even see the lighthouse tonight the fog is so thick,” Kat said, following his gaze to the night, sounding worried about fishermen who might be trying to get to safe harbor.

Jonah looked out past Raven's Cove, where he knew the

lighthouse loomed up from a jagged island outcropping of rock, then back at her as the waiter brought their salads. He couldn't stop thinking about Arabella's warning. Or his own uneasiness. He told himself it was just the fog. Just being back here.

"So tell me about your work," Kat said.

He watched her take a bite of her salad, captivated by her mouth. "My work?"

"Computers. What is it exactly that you do?"

He let out a laugh. So he was supposed to be a computer nerd? Great. "It's too boring for words. I'm sure your job is much more interesting."

She shook her head, smiling. "You aren't one of those people who thinks the private-eye business is like on TV?" She had a great smile. He felt heat as his gaze locked with hers.

"You mean it's not?" he asked, trying to sound disappointed as he looked deep into all that blue. It was like looking down into the sea. Bottomless and full of mysteries.

She licked her lips, her cheeks flushing again, and dropped her gaze to her salad, her fork poised above a piece of endive. "It actually consists of tedious, time-consuming hours spent digging up facts. But I started the business because I wanted to help people, so I don't mind." She shrugged and let her gaze lift to his again.

He didn't know if the jolt he felt came from her look—or the realization that she was the P.I. of Ridgmont Detective Agency. Bad news. But although he was more than a little attracted to her,

he wouldn't be seeing her again after tonight. In fact, he planned to be out of Moriah's Landing as quickly as possible. As soon as he finished what he'd come here to do.

He managed to steer the conversation away from himself throughout the rest of their dinner date, careful not to give anything away—or let on that he wasn't her real date. He even got her to relax a little.

"I had a nice time," she said shyly outside the restaurant after dinner, sounding surprised. Why did he get the feeling that she didn't date much?

"I had a nice time, too," he said, realizing it was true. He hadn't meant for the date to last this long. He could no longer pretend he was just buying time. And yet he felt off balance again out here in the fog, being with this woman who should have been with someone else. "Can I walk you home?"

She shook her head. "I just live a block or so from here." She tugged her jacket around her and shifted her feet. Her gaze came up to meet his. Oh, those eyes. And that mouth.

Stirred by a yearning stronger than the force of the moon on the sea, he bent to kiss her good-night. Goodbye.

Her eyes fluttered closed. Her lips parted. A hairbreadth from her wonderful mouth Jonah felt something brush the back of his neck, something cold as the kiss of death.

He jerked around, only to see wisps of fog streaming past as if blown up from the sea by a gust of wind. Except there was no wind, just as there was no one right behind him. But that didn't

mean there wasn't a presence out there in the mist watching them. "Let me walk you home."

She opened her eyes in surprise, licked her lips and turned her face away, unsure. Again. "I am more than capable of walking myself home." Obviously upset with him for not kissing her, she took a couple of steps backward.

"I had a great time," he said, not wanting to let her go. Suddenly afraid to let her go.

She nodded, turned and disappeared into the fog.

He waited and then followed her at a distance as she walked to her clapboard three-story house at the edge of the town green, unable to shake the feeling he'd had that instant before he'd almost kissed her.

Before turning back to the wharf, he listened for the sound of the bolt sliding on her door, and then for the footsteps he'd heard to retreat, shaken by the fact that someone else had followed her home as well.

Chapter Two

Kat couldn't lose the odd feeling that had come over her outside the restaurant. It wasn't just that her date hadn't kissed her. Or that he seemed to cool toward her. As she'd walked home, she'd heard footsteps behind her on the brick pathway. Two sets.

When she'd stop, so did the others, which only strengthened an illogical but growing fear that someone was after her—just as someone had been after her mother twenty years before. The Beretta in her purse and the fact that she was an expert markswoman, had given her little comfort tonight. She'd been spooked and running scared, both highly unlike her.

Once inside her house, she closed the door behind her, locked it, then pulled aside the curtain to look out into the fog, seeing nothing, hearing nothing but her own ragged breath and the erratic thump of her heart. Logically, she knew the sound of the footsteps had probably been some weird echo because of the fog, just as she knew what had caused this sudden case of paranoia. The very mention of her mother.

She kicked off her heels and padded barefoot farther into the first floor of the house she'd lived in her whole life, noticing as she looked upstairs that a light shone from under her sister Emily's bedroom door. She could hear music playing and Em on the phone talking with one of her friends, both reassuring sounds. She was glad the seventeen-year-old was home on a school night

and would be graduating next week, although it worried her that her half sister didn't seem to have any plans after graduation. But tonight, Kat was just glad not to be alone in the house.

As she passed the phone on the small table at the bottom of the stairs, she noticed that the answering-machine light was flashing. Distractedly, she hit Rewind. She still felt a little scared and wished she'd taken her date up on his offer to escort her. But wasn't that possibly the mistake her mother had made? Trusting a man? The wrong man.

She hugged herself as the answering-machine tape stopped. What was wrong with her? Her date had been perfectly nice. He'd made her laugh. He'd made her forget how uncomfortable she'd felt about online blind dating. He'd seemed interested in her, in her work. And she couldn't discount the obvious attraction she'd felt for him.

But once they were outside the restaurant, he'd started to kiss her and hadn't—as much as she'd wanted him to. Why was that? Not out of shyness, that was for sure.

And yet he'd seemed almost scared of her at first. The way he'd come into her office, appearing confused. Late. Showing up looking as if he'd just gotten off work at the docks. She'd been nervous about meeting him. But he'd seemed nervous, too.

And he hadn't been the nervous type. Nor had he been anything like she'd expected. The strong jawline, dark from a day's stubble, the deep brown eyes, a shade lighter than his short brown hair. He'd looked more muscular, rugged..dangerous than

she'd expected.

The thought startled her. She'd already been the dangerous-man route. Just the once. But a smart woman learned the first time. Or she ended up dead on the town green. She didn't want to be the kind of woman who picked the wrong man. Like her mother.

Kat shoved that thought away and hit the play button on the answering machine.

"Hi, it's Ross."

Her head jerked up, her attention dragged from her date—to the voice on the answering machine.

"Sorry about tonight. I really wanted to meet you in person, but something came up at the last minute. Maybe we could do it another time? See you online."

Disbelieving, she pushed rewind and listened to the message again. Her online date had stood her up?

She felt a chill. Then who had she just spent dinner with?

Desperately, she tried to remember what the man had told her about himself during their meal. Only vague generalities that could have fit any man! No wonder he'd seemed surprised when he'd come into her office. No wonder he'd seemed so interested in her, in her work. Because he knew nothing about her! And he didn't want her asking too many questions about him. She'd been so nervous, she hadn't even noticed. Until now.

A thought struck her. Maybe his interest in her hadn't been just to cover his deception. Scared, she tried to remember what

she'd told him about herself. Why had he pretended to be her date?

She felt sick inside. Normally, she was damn good at reading people. But dating—God, it made her so anxious. Probably because it had been so long and she'd been so scared that he would turn out to be another Mr. Wrong. Mr. Dead Wrong. And maybe he had been. Thank God she hadn't let him walk her home. She hugged herself, suddenly cold. Had his been one of the set of footsteps she'd heard following her home? The thought froze her to her core.

“Sorry about your date.”

Kat looked up the stairs as Emily leaned over the railing in her favorite, worn-thin teddy-bear pajamas. Emily was small and slim with their father's gray eyes. She'd pulled her dark, shoulder length hair into a ponytail, making her look even younger than her seventeen years. “I saved the message for you. What a jerk. He didn't even come up with a decent excuse for standing you up.” She frowned. “Have you been working all this time?”

She considered lying. “No, I...went out to dinner.”

“By yourself?” Emily made it sound as if she couldn't imagine anything worse. She probably couldn't.

“No, actually, I met someone.” She tried to assure herself that it had been innocent, needing desperately to believe that. He'd just taken advantage of the situation. What man wouldn't who saw the chance to have dinner with a young woman in a sexy black dress? An honest man. A man with nothing to hide.

“Who was this guy?” Emily asked, coming down the stairs to eye her more closely.

Kat wished she’d lied and said she’d worked late. “No one you know,” she said defensively, unable to forget that she’d been attracted to him, a man who lied to her. “I don’t need to have my dates checked out by you.” She flipped off the downstairs light, picked up her black platform heels where she’d dropped them by the door and started up the steps past her sister, hoping that was the end of it.

“As if you don’t give me the third degree about every guy I date,” Emily said, trailing after her.

“That’s different,” Kat said, stopping on the landing. “I’m twenty-three. You’re seventeen and you still have a lot to learn about men.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “As if you’re the authority on men. I’ve dated more this year than you have in your life!” She swept into her room, slamming the door behind her. Emily always had to get in the last word.

Kat stared after her, just wishing the last word hadn’t been the truth. Tonight proved how little Kat knew about men. In spades.

She climbed to her own bedroom on the third floor, not bothering to turn on a light. The room was large with two bay windows on each side and a tiny, railed widow’s walk at the end facing the town green and, past it, Raven’s Cove and the Atlantic. Light filtered in from the pale gray fog.

She dropped her shoes beside the bed and, opening the French

doors, stepped out onto the walk into the damp mist, feeling oddly vulnerable. She no longer felt safe—not when she couldn't trust her judgment any more than she had tonight. Who had she gone to dinner with?

She drew in a breath of the cool, wet night air and looked out at the wisps of mist moving like ghosts through the town green, trying to convince herself that she wasn't her mother. But more and more when she looked in the mirror, she saw the startling resemblance to the old photographs of her mother.

Worse, she feared the similarities were more than skin deep, since her first choice of a man had been deadly wrong, a choice she'd paid for dearly a year ago. Now, it seemed, she'd made another mistake tonight, and to think she'd been tempted to let him walk her home.

The fog drifted across the green, weaving in and out of the trees. She caught a glimpse of the gazebo just beyond the wide sweeping branches of the witch-hanging tree, the white lattice of the gazebo dark with its cloak of dense ivy. It had been on a night like this almost twenty years ago—she shuddered and stepped back inside to close and lock the doors. How could she not help but think of her mother tonight?

KAT WOKE IN A SWEAT, the sheets tangled around her, her heart pounding. She sat up, terrified. Her hand shook as she reached to fumble on the lamp beside her bed, frantically trying to fight off the horrible images that surfaced to consciousness

within her. The clock beside her bed read 2:28 a.m.

She'd had the dream again. Only this time, she swore she could smell her mother's perfume. And for a moment, she would have sworn she wasn't alone in the room.

She hugged herself as she glanced around her bedroom, seeing nothing but familiar objects—and no place for anyone to hide. After a few minutes, she curled back under the covers and, although she fought sleep and the possibility of the nightmare coming back, she finally dozed off again.

She woke to the sound of the radio alarm. It jolted her out of bed, dragging remnants of the nightmare with her. She stumbled to the bathroom, disrobing to step into the shower. The hot water and the light of day helped. By the time she dried off, she'd convinced herself that there'd been nothing to fear last night—including the dream and her mystery date.

Logically, if he'd meant her harm, he wouldn't have taken her to the Moriah's Landing Inn on Main Street. He'd have suggested someplace where there was less chance of them being seen together. And even though she'd heard footsteps on her way home, it didn't mean whoever it was had been following her.

By the time she'd dressed for work, she'd discounted her fears from the previous night, even coming up with a logical explanation for the nightmare's return after all these years. The twentieth anniversary of her mother's death was only days away. Just the mention of her mother and her death had no doubt spooked her last night on the walk home and triggered the

nightmare, even making her believe she smelled her mother's perfume. Just as she'd imagined hearing someone in the room, before her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

But as she left for work, she didn't cut across the town green as she normally did each morning. Her lapse in judgment last night and the dream still had her feeling a little vulnerable. She knew it was crazy, since she was trained to be able to take care of herself in most situations. And what did she have to fear in Moriah's Landing in broad daylight, anyway?

On Main Street she spotted Arabella coming toward her and braced herself for another of the woman's dire warnings of impending doom. But to her surprise, Arabella appeared to cross the street as if to avoid her. Kat saw the poor woman make the sign of the cross and duck down one of the narrow brick alleys.

Normally, Kat found Arabella's bizarre behavior amusing, but this morning it made her a little uneasy.

Worse, Kat found herself looking for her mystery date in the faces she passed. She couldn't help wondering who he was and if she really might have been in danger last night.

As she neared her office, she spotted something lying on the front step. She slowed, glancing around, suddenly feeling as if someone was watching her, waiting for her to find what he'd left for her.

On her office doorstep lay a small bouquet of daisies tied loosely with a short piece of frayed red satin ribbon. No white floral box. No card. Just freshly picked daisies and a worn red

ribbon.

As she stooped to lift the flowers gently, as if they were an armed bomb set to blow at even the slightest movement, she told herself they were just flowers. Nothing sinister about daisies. Of course, they had to be from Ross. A small gesture after standing her up last night. Maybe she'd give him a second chance.

And yet she held the flowers away from her as she opened her office door and, after putting them in a glass vase with water, she set them in the front window away from her desk, away from her sight, anxious to e-mail Ross a thank-you, anxious to find out for sure if he'd left them for her. Or if it had been someone else. Her mystery date?

She checked her messages, not surprised to find one from the insurance company asking her to sign off on Bud Lawson's recent vandalism at his curio shop. Bud was anxious to have it settled so he could get reimbursed for repairs before the start of tourist season—which was only days away.

Since she'd started Ridgemont Detective Agency two years ago, insurance investigations and workmen's comp made up the bulk of her work, with a few skip traces and domestic-problem cases thrown in. But she loved the work, the slow, methodical plodding that led to a logical conclusion.

She called Bud and set up an appointment for after lunch, then went through the rest of her messages. Her friend Elizabeth had called to remind Kat about her fitting this afternoon at Threads for her dress. She was to be Elizabeth's maid of honor at her

upcoming wedding.

Kat couldn't be more happy about Elizabeth's wedding. Dr. Elizabeth Douglas, a criminology professor at the local college, was about to marry a man she'd secretly had a crush on since high school: Cullen Ryan, a detective with the Moriah's Landing Police Department. Kat glanced toward the window, thinking about Elizabeth and the fun they'd had at college. The daisies caught her eye. She felt a flicker of memory and frowned. What was it? Something about daisies. Something unpleasant.

Shaking her head, she checked her e-mail again. Nothing from Ross yet. Her gaze went to the street, as it had so often done all morning. She watched the pedestrians wander by, mostly early tourists.

She realized she was looking again for only one face in the passersby, and after a few moments of not seeing that face, she opened the Lawson case file and reviewed the list of either stolen or vandalized items Bud had sent her. She thumbed through those, making notes, wondering if there wasn't a pattern to the recent rash of vandalisms and robberies in town.

"Hi," a woman's voice said, making Kat jump.

Kat hadn't even heard anyone come in. She looked up from her desk to find her friend Claire standing over her. "Hi, sweetie." She got up to give Claire a hug. "You look great." A lie. Claire looked pale and thin. All those years in the hospital. Just the sight of her made Kat hurt.

But her friend was smiling and she had put on a few much

needed pounds.

“I hope I’m not bothering you,” Claire said, appearing more anxious than usual and yet obviously trying to hide it. Claire, with her long straight blond hair and large blue eyes, had been so beautiful and carefree before their freshman year at Heathrow College, before one tragic night changed her life forever.

While still beautiful, there was something about Claire now that seemed too brittle, too fragile, as if anything could make her break into a million pieces.

“I thought maybe we could have an early lunch.” Claire flashed her a smile, but it seemed a little too bright, as if her friend was trying too hard. “There is something I needed to talk to you about.”

Kat glanced at the clock, surprised it was almost eleven-thirty. “That’s a great idea.” She closed the Lawson file and picked up her purse, curious and yet concerned what that something Claire wanted to discuss might be. “I’m starved.”

“Do you mind going to the diner since it’s close?” Claire asked.

“Maybe Brie’s working and she can join us for a moment if it’s not too busy,” Kat said.

Claire nodded, but didn’t seem enthused about the idea of seeing their friend. Kat wondered what was up. Something.

“Can you believe Elizabeth is getting married in less than two weeks?” Kat said as they started across the street toward the diner. It still surprised her. Of Kat’s friends, Elizabeth had always

been the serious one, the smart one, the one who'd been more interested in her profession than men compared to the rest of them. She and Elizabeth had drifted apart after college. Only recently had they gotten close again. Kat hadn't realized how much she'd missed her friend and envied Elizabeth finding a man like Cullen. "Who would have thought Elizabeth would ever marry a cop though?"

Kat stopped, realizing that Claire was no longer walking beside her. She turned to see that the woman at Madam Fleury's fortune-telling booth had motioned Claire over.

Kat had seen the dark-haired seer a few times around town and heard through the grapevine that her name was Cassandra Quintana, a fortune-teller hired for the season. While Yvette Castor owned the fortune-telling booth along Waterfront Avenue, it appeared Cassandra had been hired for the upcoming tourist season. No one seemed to know much about the woman—not even Yvette. Protectively, Kat worked her way through the traffic and tourists, unable to imagine what the fortune-teller would want with Claire—except to take advantage of her.

"What's going on?" Kat asked as she joined Claire in front of the brightly colored booth.

Cassandra Quintana raised her dark somber eyes, but said nothing. An attractive woman of about fifty, Cassandra's dyed dark red hair was pulled back under a brilliant-colored bandanna. She wore a glaring geometric-design caftan covered in astrological symbols and dozens of thin multicolored cheap

bracelets.

Kat glanced at her friend. Claire appeared paler, if that were possible, and was visibly shaking. “What did you say to upset my friend?”

“She didn’t say anything,” Claire said, obviously lying.

“Please, let’s go. Come on, I’m starved.” Claire started across the street toward the diner.

But Kat wasn’t through with the fortune-teller. “My friend isn’t well,” she said the moment Claire was out of earshot. “I won’t have you upsetting her with any of your crystal ball crap.”

The woman arched an eyebrow, and then with the flick of her wrist—the cluster of cheap tin bracelets jangling—she produced a tarot card as if pulling it from thin air. She dropped the card on the table in front of Kat. It was the devil card. “I charged your friend nothing. You, however, will have to pay me for information about the man you’ve been looking for all day, but I assure you it will be worth every penny.”

Cassandra smiled at her surprise and tapped the card, drawing Kat’s attention to the devil’s face. Incredibly, it looked a whole lot like her mystery date from last night.

Chapter Three

Kat hurried after Claire, catching her as she stepped inside the diner. “I hope you don’t believe any of that mumbo-jumbo stuff. That woman just pulled the devil card out of her sleeve as if that was supposed to scare me.” Kat shook her head. “I can’t believe those people.”

“The devil card?” Claire asked, sounding worried as Kat stepped past her to slide into a booth by the window.

“A woman I met at the hospital read tarot cards,” Claire said as she took the seat opposite Kat, still looking concerned. “The devil is the fear card. It symbolizes fear of the unknown.”

Kat groaned, wishing she hadn’t said anything. “It’s just the card the woman happened to have up her sleeve, Claire. My only fear is that she said something to upset you.”

Claire didn’t seem to hear. “The devil card can also be a sign of temptation, the demonic side of you, tempting you in some way.”

Kat felt a shadow fall across the window and looked up as a man passed in front of the diner. For just an instant she thought he was her mystery date from last night. Maybe the devil was tempting her.

“Some people believe the cards reveal hidden truths and can forecast the future by opening a channel into another world,” Claire was saying as she pulled one of the plastic-covered menus

from behind the condiments.

“A channel? Like HBO?” Kat asked, reaching for the other menu.

Claire laughed, the first real laugh Kat had heard out of her in years. “More like the Learning Channel.” Her friend smiled. “You shouldn’t be afraid of the cards. It isn’t as if they’re some form of sorcery.”

“I’m not afraid of the cards,” Kat said, sounding defensive. “But needing to know the future seems...dangerous to me.”

Claire disappeared behind her menu. “Haven’t you ever wondered, though, why things happen the way they do? Like if maybe there aren’t some supernatural forces at work here that decide our destinies?”

Kat realized that maybe her friend needed to believe that what had happened to her was destined—and that none of them could have done anything to stop it, especially Claire herself. Five years ago Kat, Claire, Elizabeth and two other friends, Tasha Pierce and Brie Dudley, were pledging to the top sorority on campus. On a dare, they decided to spend the night in St. John’s Cemetery next to McFarland Leary’s grave.

As part of the hazing, one of the girls had to enter a haunted mausoleum—alone. They drew lots and Claire “won.” Kat had wanted to take Claire’s place, but Claire said this was something she had to do. As soon as she entered, the girls heard a scream and rushed into the mausoleum. But there was no one there.

Searchers had combed the town and the cemetery, finding no

sign of Claire. Then, two days later, she miraculously turned up in the cemetery after escaping her attacker.

Kat blamed herself because she should have insisted on taking Claire's place. She could see Claire was frightened. Almost as if Claire had somehow sensed the danger. If you believed in that sort of thing. Some thought McFarland Leary had attacked Claire—a ghost. Whoever had hurt her friend was no ghost. He'd been a flesh-and-blood monster.

"You know me," Kat said now. "I have trouble believing in anything I can't see. But, wait a minute, yes, I do see a cheeseburger deluxe in my future."

Claire peeked out from behind her menu, her smile sympathetic. "You should have your cards read sometime. You might be surprised what you find out."

The last thing she wanted was to be surprised, Kat thought as she glanced through the window at Cassandra in her fortune-telling booth. "Even if I wanted to know the future, I'm not sure I could believe a woman who dressed like that," she joked, again trying to lighten the mood. When she looked at her friend, she saw Claire frowning at her.

"You had the dream again, didn't you?" Claire whispered.

Kat felt a chill. "How did you—"

"You look as if you didn't get any sleep last night." Claire shrugged. "Maybe I just know the look. I've seen it enough mornings in my mirror."

Kat knew that Claire had had her share of nightmares.

“Do you want to talk about it?” her friend asked. “I’ve learned quite a lot about dream interpretation—”

“From your friend the tarot-card reader?” Kat guessed.

Claire smiled. “Sometimes it helps if you understand what the dream is about. I have a book I’ll drop by.”

“I know what the dream’s about,” Kat said as she looked toward the window. “My mother.” The moment she said the words, she wished she hadn’t. Her mother was thought to have been the first victim of the serial killer who’d terrorized the town twenty years ago, and perhaps was even the same man who’d attacked Claire five years ago.

“I’ve often wondered why I was spared,” Claire said. “I know he planned to kill me, too.”

Kat didn’t want to talk about this. Especially today. She knew that half the people in town, including Claire at one time, believed that the attacker had been the ghost of McFarland Leary. Kat couldn’t deal with that discussion, not today. There were enough weird things going on in her world right now without digging up Leary, no pun intended.

“You said there was something you needed to talk to me about,” Kat said, hoping to change the subject.

Claire nodded. “It’s my little brother, Tommy. I’m worried about him. He’s spending too much time with those older boys who hang out at the arcade, Razz and Dodie, and my mother is so busy with the younger children...” Claire came from a huge family with the kids ranging in age from twenty-three to three.

Kat was very relieved Claire's request had nothing to do with ghosts or fortune-tellers. Tommy, she could handle. Tommy Cavendish was a sullen fifteen-year-old, who Kat had seen hanging out along the wharf with the boys Claire had mentioned, two locals who were always in trouble. She thought Claire probably had reason for concern.

"I think Tommy might be involved in something...illegal," Claire said quietly.

"What makes you think that?" Kat asked.

"He's so secretive and he has money, more money than a boy can make at his age running errands. I've tried to talk to him...."

Kat nodded. "Emily doesn't listen to me either. What is it you'd like me to do?"

"I was hoping you would find out where Tommy's getting the money," Claire said.

Kat could see how hard it was for Claire to involve someone outside the family, even a close friend.

"I would pay you—"

"We can talk about a fee later," Kat said, not wanting to offend Claire by refusing her money, and at the same time feeling she owed her friend.

The rest of their lunch, she and Claire chatted about Elizabeth's wedding, their bridesmaid dresses and how lucky Elizabeth was after everything that had happened with the recent murders. How lucky they all were that René Rathfastar had been stopped before he killed any more young women. Moriah's

Landing, they agreed, attracted weirdos.

The one man they didn't talk about was the one who was believed to have killed Kat's mother and attacked Claire. That man, whom Claire hadn't been able to identify, was still at large.

Kat noticed her friend staring across the street at the fortune-teller. "Want to tell me what Cassandra Quintana said to you?"

"She said I will find peace soon. But first I must confront my past by going back to where it all began."

"You aren't really going to go back to the cemetery based on what some fortune-teller told you, are you?"

"She knew what I'd been through," Claire said, sounding a little defensive. "I could see it in her eyes. She knew."

Sure she did. Kat wanted to tell her it didn't take psychic powers to know about Claire's attack. It had been in all the newspapers. Everyone knew. But advising her to go back to the cemetery...

"I think you should ask your doctor at the hospital about this first," Kat advised.

Claire nodded and looked toward Cassandra's booth again. "Did you notice her eyes? It was almost as if she can see everything."

Yes, Kat thought, remembering only too well what Cassandra had said to her. The seer did seem to see everything. But being observant wasn't the same as being all-knowing.

For just an instant, Kat was almost willing to pay the fortune-teller just to find out who her mystery date was, and why, since

he'd come into her life, she no longer felt safe.

As Kat was paying their lunch bill, she spotted her sister, Emily, walk past in the new bright red jacket Kat had bought her because she'd just "die" if she didn't have it. Claire's concern for her little brother, Tommy, mirrored Kat's own for her sister as she watched Emily head toward Main, then disappear into the side door of the arcade, a local hangout, and not a safe one. Also, unless Kat's watch had stopped, school wasn't out yet.

"I just saw Emily," she told Claire. "I need to talk to her. I'll see you later at Threads?" Kat and Claire were both scheduled to get their dresses fitted for Elizabeth's wedding.

"Sure," Claire said distractedly. "Thanks for lunch. You won't forget about Tommy?"

She squeezed her friend's hand. "Don't worry. I'll see what I can find out."

Emily was talking to a couple of girls from school when Kat entered the arcade. The moment her sister saw her, she looked horrified.

"Are you checking up on me?" Emily demanded in an embarrassed whisper.

"I just want to talk to you for a minute."

"Here?" Emily glanced around as if she feared everyone had seen her talking with her older sister. Heaven forbid!

"If you don't want to be seen with me, we could go outside," Kat suggested, only half-serious.

Emily took her arm and steered her out of the arcade. "That

was so embarrassing.”

“Being seen with your sister?” Kat said, trying to remember when she was a teen if she acted this weirdly.

“What do you want?”

“For starters, why aren’t you in school?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “I told you last week that we were getting out early today.”

Kat raised an eyebrow.

“You never believe anything I tell you.”

Kat didn’t want to argue. “I was just having lunch with Claire and I had a thought. I know you’re looking for a job this summer before college.” Another eye roll. “I was thinking, I could use someone to do filing and other things around my office.”

“You aren’t serious?” Em looked aghast.

“Well, I just thought—”

“That has to be the most boring job...I can find my own job, thank you. A job where I don’t have you looking over my shoulder the entire time.” Emily let out an exasperated sigh. “As if...” She started to turn and go back into the arcade.

“If you change your mind—”

“Yeah, right,” Emily said, and disappeared back inside.

Kat stood on the sidewalk for a moment, watching her kid sister through the arcade window. She and Emily hadn’t shared the same mother. But they shared some of the same problems. Emily’s mother had taken off when Emily was about nine, leaving their father and Kat to finish raising the girl. Their mothers had

been a lot alike, it seemed. Only, Kat's hadn't left town—just left her young daughter home with her aging grandmother so Leslie could see other men while Kat's father was at sea.

Kat went back to work but had trouble concentrating. Still no e-mail from Ross. She couldn't keep her mind on business, her mind wandering to Claire and the fortune-teller and her mystery date. Nor could she seem to shake the uneasy feeling she'd had since last night. She remembered the devil tarot card. Temptation and fear, huh?

She glanced toward the daisies, still trying to imagine what it was about them that bothered her. All she needed was for Arabella to stop by now with another one of her warnings and her day would be complete.

Kat was almost glad for an excuse to leave the office and walk down to Threads for her fitting. The day was warm and clear, the smell of the sea mixing with all the scents of Waterfront Avenue—from the herbs and oils of the witchcraft shops to the corn dogs and cotton candy of the street vendors. There was an excitement in the air that was contagious, as if the whole town was counting down to Memorial Day weekend and the upcoming anniversary festivities.

For the first time all day, Kat felt a little better. The groups of tourists made her feel safe, the fresh air chasing away the darkness of the dream—and the events of last night. She hardly even looked for her mystery man in the faces she passed.

But half an hour later, her good mood vanished when Claire

didn't show. Kat tried calling her at home. No answer. Had she decided to do what the fortune-teller had told her? Had she gone to the cemetery, a place that terrified her friend and could set back the progress she'd made?

As she left the shop, Kat realized she had just enough time to make her appointment with Bud Lawson at his curio shop off Main. From the looks of the place, it had obviously been kids who'd vandalized the shop. Bud was still cleaning up when she got there.

"Any idea who they might have been?" Kat asked.

"Same ones that have been hitting all the shops," he said with disgust. "You can bet Dodie and Razz were in on it, but how are you going to prove it? And even if you could, they'll just get their hands slapped. Someone needs to do something about those hellions."

Kat knew he had reason to be angry, but still, that kind of talk worried her since there was no proof that Dodie and Razz were behind the vandalism.

Back at her office, she made out her report for the insurance company, trying to keep her mind off everything but work. It proved impossible. She found herself calling Claire's number every hour on the hour, but still no answer. Neither Elizabeth nor Brie had seen her. Both told Kat not to worry. But they hadn't seen the look on Claire's face after talking to the fortune-teller. Did her friend want a quick cure to her pain? Who wouldn't?

When Kat checked her e-mail, she was relieved to see one

from Ross, her real online blind date. Her relief was short-lived when she read it though, and realized he hadn't left the daisies.

Flowers? Me? Way too traditional. Try date again? Witch's Brew? Coffee? Meet at your office? 7? Ross.

A man of few words. A cup of coffee at seven at night? She thought about her mystery date last night and the quiet, romantic window table at the Moriah's Landing Inn, and shuddered as she e-mailed Ross back:

Seven it is. We'll meet at the Witch's Brew on Main Street, the last building before you hit the wharf. I'll be wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

He'd missed the little black dress. His loss. But she wasn't about to wear it again. In fact, she might burn the dress.

Ross had been one of those impulsive actions she hoped she wouldn't regret. She'd joined an online dating service as a fluke. Ross had sounded nice, safe, and the next thing she knew she made a date with him. She felt anxious about finally meeting. Especially after last night's imposter date and the scare he'd given her.

She turned in time to see a familiar figure passing outside her office on the other side of the street. Kat hurried out of the office to catch Tommy, and was almost to him when she saw a man in an old army jacket stop the boy on the street, show him something and then head toward her.

"Excuse me," he said, approaching her.

She just assumed he was one of the panhandlers who passed

through town in the summer, bumming money for food or gas.

“Excuse me,” he said, smiling, but the smile did nothing to warm his gray eyes. He had a scar on his left cheek that looked like a crescent moon. “I’m trying to find a friend of mine.” He held out a snapshot in his palm. “Maybe you’ve seen him?”

She tried to hide her surprise as she stared at the photo of two men, the one standing before her sans the scar on his cheek and her mystery date holding a basketball and looking hot and sweaty. Both wore shorts and T-shirts, both were tanned and in great shape, and both were smiling into the camera as if they were the best of friends.

So, Kat wondered as she looked up at the man, why didn’t she believe it?

“Sorry,” she said, and started to move past him.

“You’re sure?” he asked, touching her arm to detain her. His tone as well as his expression seemed a little too intense, a little too desperate.

She pulled out of his reach, stepping back as she moved away from him. “I’m sure.”

As she hurried after Tommy, crossing the street when he did, she realized that she should have at least asked the stranger the name of the other man in the photo. But he’d made her uncomfortable. She wondered what he wanted with her mystery date. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good, she’d bet on that.

“Hi!” she said, catching up with Tommy in front of Bait & Tackle, the local bait shop.

The boy flinched as if she'd hit him. He glanced around nervously, looking guilty as hell. "Hi." He seemed to wait expectantly for her to tell him what she wanted. She'd forgotten what fifteen was like. Just as she'd forgotten seventeen, it seemed.

"I noticed you going past and I haven't seen you for a while," she said.

He nodded, still waiting.

"I saw that man stop you," she said, turning to look back down the street. The man in the army jacket was gone. "What did he ask you?"

Tommy seemed relieved, as if she'd asked him something he didn't mind answering. "He said he was with the FBI and that he was looking for a man and had I seen him."

A different story. "Had you seen him?" she asked.

Tommy shook his head.

She realized Tommy was again waiting patiently to see what she wanted with him. "You know I have a job opening at my office for the summer, and I thought—"

"I have a job," Tommy interrupted.

"Oh, shoot, I thought you'd be great at it," she said, hoping he didn't ask what job as she glanced back down the street. She noticed Alyssa Castor, the daughter of the owner of Madam Fleury's—Yvette Castor. Alyssa appeared to be window-shopping—and tailing Tommy.

Kat saw the girl's expression as she stole a look at Tommy.

Kat recognized the look: idol worship. It appeared Alyssa had a major crush and, as always seemed to be the case, he didn't even know she was alive—let alone following him.

“So where are you working?” Kat asked conversationally, watching a few tourists mingle past.

“I'm just running errands for a few guys,” Tommy said, sounding both defensive and evasive, two sure giveaways, if there were any.

“Em's looking for a job.” She hoped. “Errands, huh? Here, along Waterfront?”

He squirmed a little. “Just for Ernie here at Bait & Tackle and Brody at the Wharf Rat and some other guys.”

She nodded, trying to imagine what errands someone like Brody at the Wharf Rat—a bar—would have for a fifteen-year-old boy. Alyssa had stopped a door behind them pretending to admire a huge gargoyle in one of the witch-shop windows. “Maybe you could run errands for me, too.”

He shrugged. “I'm pretty busy already, you know.”

She didn't know, but she planned to find out. “So what type of errands could I maybe get you to do for me? If you had time? Get me lunch? Or take packages to the post office? What do you do for the other guys?”

Before Tommy could answer, loud angry voices erupted from the bar in question. An instant later, a man came flying out of the bar's front door as if thrown. He stumbled and fell to the bricks, followed quickly by another.

“Take it outside,” a third man called after them, flinging the cap of one of the men to the ground. The first man stumbled to his feet and dived at the second man still on the bricks. The two began wrestling awkwardly, obviously having had way too much to drink.

What caught and held her attention weren’t the quarreling drunks, but the man who’d just thrown the pair out of the bar. She stared at her mystery date from the night before, wondering why she was so shocked to see that he worked at the Wharf Rat. No wonder she’d been attracted to him! The man was an obvious loser—which unfortunately was her type of late. Maybe someone from the FBI really was looking for him.

He looked up, meeting her gaze, and she quickly swung back around to Tommy, disgusted with herself for being attracted to the wrong type, but also feeling relieved he wasn’t some psychopath just passing through town whom she’d not only had dinner with but had almost kissed.

When she turned, however, Tommy was gone. So was Alyssa. Angry that she’d let Tommy get away so easily, she crossed the street and started toward her office—and tripped over nothing, pitching headlong toward the brick pavement.

Chapter Four

“Hello.” Jonah caught her in his arms. Had he tripped her? He couldn’t believe it. Not when he’d promised himself he’d keep his distance from her. But that seemed damned impossible in a town the size of Moriah’s Landing. Even if he’d wanted to.

She looked surprised—either that she’d tripped on seemingly nothing but thin air—or that he’d rushed in to catch her with such quickness. She also looked a little suspicious. Imagine that.

She shook herself free of him, dark blue eyes sparking with anger and a little fear. “I’m sorry, do I know you?” Oh that mouth. He desperately regretted having not kissed her last night.

It was obvious she’d found out about their “date.” He scanned the small crowd that had gathered around the brawling drunks, but he didn’t see anyone he knew in the faces. “Sorry about last night,” he said, turning his attention back to Kat. “Not sorry about the date. Just that I didn’t mention, I wasn’t him. My name’s Jonah.” He held out his hand.

She ignored it. “You took advantage of the situation.”

He smiled. “That I did.”

“You aren’t in the least bit sorry, are you?” she snapped, and started to turn away.

He caught her arm and leaned close to her ear, the scent in her dark hair intoxicating. “The only thing I regret is that I didn’t kiss you when I had the chance.”

“You blew your chance,” she snapped, pulling free of him. “And since you won’t be around long, with the FBI looking for you...”

He caught her by the wrist. “What did you say?”

“A man who said he’s an agent from the FBI is showing your picture around town, asking if anyone knows how he can find you.”

Deke Turner. Damn. “What did he look like?”

“Stocky, with gray eyes and a small crescent-shaped scar—”

He swore and released her. Definitely Deke. Definitely the man he’d recognized in the fog last night. The same man who’d recognized him—just before Jonah ducked inside Kat’s office.

“So you do know him.” Did she sound disappointed?

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ll be leaving town,” she said, looking way too hopeful. So that’s why she’d warned him about Deke.

He could still feel the warmth of her wrist between his fingers even though he was no longer touching her. Just as he could still sense something around her like a bad aura. “You suppose wrong.” He couldn’t leave now, even if he wanted to.

“Too bad,” she said, and walked away.

He stared after her, still shocked by what he’d felt when he’d touched her and angry with himself for feeling anything. He blamed it on being back in this town. But unlike last night when he’d felt only an ominous presence around her, today he’d definitely detected something much stronger, much more

dangerous.

Kat Ridgemont was in some kind of trouble. He could feel it. And if there was one thing he knew, it was trouble.

He considered going after her, trying to warn her. Yeah, like Arabella had last night?

"I see danger in your future," a woman said behind him.

He turned to find the fortune-teller leaning against the wall, watching him from her dark hooded eyes.

"And I see dead people," he answered, stealing a line from a movie.

"You will see a lot more if you aren't careful." With that, she pushed off the wall and disappeared back into her booth, her jewelry jangling after her.

He shook his head as he went back inside the bar. As if he didn't have enough problems, now he had a damn fortune-teller telling him things he already knew.

His biggest concern right now, though, was Deke. No, he thought, it was not getting involved in whatever trouble Kat Ridgemont was in. He didn't need more trouble. He had enough of his own. But he couldn't forget the feeling he had when he was around her any more than he could forget her. Both a problem.

"I think you've finally found your calling," the owner of the Wharf Rat jeered as Jonah stepped behind the bar again. Brody Ries straddled a stool at the far end, a cigar hanging from his thick lips, his small brown eyes narrowed against the smoke spiraling up. "You seem to have a real talent for mean-drunk

tossing.”

“You might be right, cuz,” Jonah said, hiding his irritation, which alone was a full-time job.

“Maybe getting kicked out of the FBI was the best thing that could have happened to you,” Brody said, and laughed, never one to pass up the opportunity to kick a man when he was down. “Working for me, you get to learn about real life. Not like that fancy-ass school you went to, I can sure as hell tell you that.”

Brody had always resented the fact that Jonah had gotten a scholarship his freshman year in high school to go to Wentworth Academy in Boston. It was there that he’d put his past behind him. Moriah’s Landing. His family. And all that both meant to him. He’d never looked back, going on to college and then getting into the FBI. If he’d had his way, he’d have never come back here.

But plans change.

“You know, it’s odd,” Brody was saying, “one of your old buddies was in here just last night, not two hours before you showed up. An ex-FBI agent by the name of Deke Turner. Ring any bells?”

Just that loud clanging one that reminded him how dead he was if he ran into Deke again. “Maybe, but then the FBI is kind of a large place, you know, Brody.”

“Oh yeah?” Brody looked disappointed. And skeptical. “Too bad. You two have a lot in common. It seems he got booted out of the FBI, too. Only, I would have sworn he said he knew you. What’s wild is that he said he just got out of the slammer

and heard about your trouble with the feds and decided to come looking for you. Seems he just missed you. Maybe he'll come back in today."

Jonah busied himself behind the bar, trying to keep from looking toward the door and letting Brody see just how worried he was about Deke showing up right now.

"So, what exactly are you going to teach me, Brody?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light, trying to change the subject.

"Oh, you'll see, cuz. We'll see how you do behind the bar first." He studied him. "I'll be watching you real close. The only reason I'm trusting you at all is because we are blood."

Don't remind me, Jonah thought. I'll be watching you even closer, cuz. He'd seen Brody's expensive sports car, the fancy clothes, heard about the ostentatious home outside of town, the money-hungry ex-wife and the semiclassy influential friends, all out of Brody's league. Either the bar made a lot of money and Brody's manners had improved, or his cousin was into something dishonest but highly profitable. Jonah would bet on the latter.

"I can't tell you what your giving me a job means to me," he said honestly. The Wharf Rat was the heartbeat of the wharf area. Something illegal going on? This was the place to find out. Brody had his fingers in anything and everything—including a poker game with a man Jonah was dying to meet.

"We've all been down on our luck," Brody said, still eyeing him. "But all the way from an FBI agent to barkeep, that's one long fall."

He'd expected Brody to be suspicious—and he was. Jonah would have to watch himself. His cousin was no fool.

“Even you, it seems, can hit the bottom of the barrel,” Brody said, as if in awe. “Maybe if you play your cards right, you won’t always have to be a bartender.”

Jonah was counting on it.

BACK AT HER OFFICE, Kat took out her frustrations doing the job she hated most: filing, which included kicking a few file cabinets and slamming a few drawers.

Her face still burned, Jonah’s words still buzzing in her ears, the memory of his touch branding her skin with a fire his words had done little to put out.

She was totally disgusted with herself.

She couldn’t believe she’d felt relieved to find out he had a job in town and wasn’t just some drifter passing through. Right now she’d love to see his backside heading out on the highway.

Especially since she hadn’t missed his reaction when she told him about the “FBI friend” asking about him. As if it wasn’t bad enough that he was a bartender at the Wharf Rat, she suspected that wasn’t even the worst of it.

Digging into the huge stack of filing, she reminded herself of her plan to get a receptionist. The problem was, every time she thought about hiring someone, something came up. This time, it was a new furnace for the house. She also wanted to help with Emily’s tuition in the fall. Kat was determined that girl was going

to college. If not Heathrow, then somewhere else.

Their father had left them both insurance money, but it wouldn't be enough if Emily got into a good college. Kat had been given the greater share because their father had known she would have to finish raising Emily if anything happened to him. Emily wouldn't get the bulk of her inheritance until she turned twenty-one, which had become a sore point with her sister.

"Daddy didn't trust me," Em had cried.

"I'm sure he just thought you would appreciate the money more when you finished college."

Her sister had given her one of those eye-rolling looks. "I'd appreciate it right now since I'm not going to college."

Kat hadn't pushed it, but she wanted more than anything for her little sister to get an education. Em didn't have any idea how much fun college could be. But Kat did. Her best friend, Elizabeth, could attest to the good times they'd had. Kat had taught her to loosen up and Elizabeth had taught Kat how to study—the only reason Kat had gotten her degree. Elizabeth had also encouraged her to go into criminology and open an agency with the money Kat's father had left her. It had been the best two things Kat had ever done.

To her surprise, it was almost seven by the time she finished the filing. She walked to the Witch's Brew to finally meet Ross, her real online blind date, hoping he'd make her forget all about her mystery date from the night before.

JONAH CLIMBED UP the back stairs to his apartment over the bar, checking to make sure no one had been inside since he'd left. He knew Brody had a spare key and had come in while he was gone this morning. No doubt to look around for proof that Jonah was as down on his luck as he'd said.

But this time, the short piece of dental floss he'd left out of habit in the door was still in place and the second-story windows were still locked. He knew nothing had been touched as he glanced around, a deep gut knowing. The intensity of the feeling scared him, making him only too aware what being back in Moriah's Landing was doing to him. Another cause for concern.

The apartment looked worse than it had last night—and that was saying a lot. Last night he'd been too exhausted to care if it resembled a Dumpster—it already smelled like one. The moment he'd opened the door with the key his cousin had given him, he caught the entrenched scent of long-ago fried fish and spilled beer. The plasterboard walls had holes in them the shape of fists, a sure sign of what kind of renters had been here before him.

The place was small. Just a studio, with the orange shag carpet of a lost bad era, a lumpy stained gold couch that doubled as a bed, two mismatched kitchen chairs with bent legs, an ancient metal table with unimaginative graffiti carved in the top and a makeshift kitchen with a fridge that ran all the time.

The bathroom was so small he could barely turn around. It contained only a toilet and a standing metal shower stall. No sink. But as Brody said, "There's a sink in the kitchen, and hell, it's

better than living on the street, right?”

Jonah would have much preferred the street. But living over the bar fit better into his plans. He closed the blinds and reached under the couch, pushing aside the ripped underlining for the thin shelf he'd attached to the frame. Carefully he withdrew the small, state-of-the-art laptop he'd sneaked in early this morning with the groceries, and booted it up.

Last night he'd been anxious to get on the computer, but Brody had kept him up most of the night, giving him the third degree about his expulsion from the FBI. Then he'd had his first shift at the bar early this morning, no doubt just so Brody could search his room.

Anxiously, he now typed in his access number, waited for the satellite online connection, then found himself typing “The Landing Gazette, archives, obit, Ridgemont.”

He told himself he was just curious. Kat said she was three when her mother died. If the mother had died in Moriah's Landing...A list of obituaries for Ridgemonts appeared on the screen. Only four were female, two were much too old to have been Kat's mother, the third too young. He brought up the fourth obit, startled by what he saw. Kat was the spitting image of her mother, Leslie Ridgemont, at the same age.

But that wasn't the only thing that shocked and scared him. Kat's mother had been murdered.

He clicked back to the archives and called up the stories on the murder, becoming more intrigued and worried as he read.

The body had been found in the gazebo just feet from the witch-hanging tree on the town green—and only yards from the house where Kat lived.

A chill washed over him. The twentieth anniversary of Leslie Ridgemont's death was only days away. He didn't need to check the Farmer's Almanac to know that the moon would be full on that night—just as it had on the night of her death.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.