B.J.
DANIELS
LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT
MEN
in
UNIFORM

B.J. Daniels
Love at First Sight

Аннотация

KAREN SUTTON NEVER GOT IN TROUBLE OR CAUSED A SCENEBut when she witnessed a murder, good breeding went by the wayside. She set out to expose the murderer–and came away with amnesia. The only thing she knew: she'd married the sexiest, strongest, single most beautiful man she'd ever seen.Solid and built, Jack Adams was a tough-guy cop who always got his man. But this time the girl next door got him–as her husband! Jack had tried everything to deter Karen from her pursuit. The only way to protect her was to pose as her new groom until the killer was caught or she remembered…or Jack died from wanting the witness.

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Love at First Sight
B.J. Daniels

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B.J. DANIELS

wrote her first book after a career as an award-winning newspaper journalist and author of thirty-seven published short stories. That first book, Odd Man Out, received a four-and-a-half star review from RT Book Reviews and went on to be nominated for Best Intrigue for that year. Since then she has won numerous awards including a career achievement award for romantic suspense and numerous nominations and awards for best book.

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Marcy Jane Johnson, who taught me to cook and then passed on a legacy of wonderful recipes that she collected throughout her lifetime.

Bon appétit!

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CHAPTER ONE

Saturday night, March 18

Just when Karen Sutton thought her evening couldn't get any worse, her blind date spilled a full glass of Beaujolais on her best dress. Who was she kidding? Her only dress. After five years running her father's business, her wardrobe was more Carhartt than Cartier.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Howie cried, sounding a little too much like Heloise as he began to explain how to get red wine out of velvet, as well as four other dress fabrics. Something told her he'd done this before. "Here, let me get a waiter—"

She grimaced as Howie called to a man dressed in black, mistaking him for a waiter. The man fortunately pretended not to hear and kept walking.

"Really, it isn't necessary," she repeated to her date and excused herself, less concerned about Howie's clumsiness and the dress than taking advantage of the opportunity to escape—even if only long enough to drown her dress in cold water, if not herself.

"This is your own fault," she muttered as she hurried off in search of the restroom. She'd been caught off guard by her sweet grandmotherly neighbor, Mrs. Talley Iverson, and while sampling warm chocolate-chip cookies fresh from the elderly woman's oven, had somehow agreed to have dinner with a

visiting grandnephew.

How could Karen have forgotten how much she hated dating? Probably because it'd been a while. Not that there weren't plenty of men in her life. Builders, bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians. She even went out for a drink or dinner sometimes with them. At least with those men, she had something in common. And she didn't have to wear a dress.

Howie Iverson, on the other hand, owned a floral shop in eastern Montana and knew the Latin names of all the species. Karen's experience with floral arrangements was limited to other people's weddings and funerals. Did real men still send women flowers? Not the men she knew.

Except for Howie Iverson. She swore an oath never to date any more of Talley Iverson's relatives, no matter how sweet the woman or how scrumptious her cookies.

As Karen turned down what had to be her fifth long hallway, she realized she hadn't been paying attention and was now lost.

Lost in the Hotel Carlton. Great. The wonderfully rustic old resort hotel on the edge of Missoula, Montana, was enormous and half-empty since it was off season. As she tried to backtrack in the maze of hallways, feeling like the little kid in The Shining, she heard voices. Hopefully someone knew the way back to the restaurant.

She turned a corner, now obviously in a far wing, and spotted a man wearing a baseball cap knocking at one of the rooms down the hall. She started to call to him, but just then, the door opened

and a woman appeared. Liz?

The man said something Karen couldn't hear. Liz's hand came up as if to slap him but he caught her wrist and pushed her back into the room. Just before he disappeared, he turned his head in Karen's direction. Their eyes met for only an instant. The hotel-room door slammed.

Shaken, Karen turned and rushed back the way she'd come, feeling like a voyeur. Liz hadn't seen her, Karen was sure of that. But the man—he'd looked right at her and seemed surprised.

Was he Liz's secret lover, the one Karen had only heard about that morning? She cringed recalling what she'd just witnessed—and almost collided with a woman coming around the corner.

"Excuse me," Karen said, as the woman, neither acknowledging the collision or the apology, hurried away. Karen looked after her. Wasn't that the newest member of her mother's bridge club?

"There you are!"

Karen jumped, startled as she came face-to-face with her date.

"I was afraid you were lost," Howie said. "Oh, look at your dress! You really should have gotten cold water on that right away. It's going to be difficult to get that spot out now."

She looked down at the huge red stain and was startled to see how much it resembled blood against the pale blue of the velvet. No wonder the man with Liz had looked so surprised.

But it didn't explain the way he'd reacted to Liz. Or her to him. Not that it was any of Karen's business, she reminded herself.

Until this morning, she hadn't even seen Liz since high school. Almost sixteen years.

That's why she'd been so surprised when she'd run into her on the street in Missoula and Liz had insisted they talk over a latte at the corner coffee shop. Karen became even more uncomfortable when her former classmate, who had nervously kept watching the door, confessed that she'd done something she probably shouldn't have, then blurted out that she'd been seeing a mystery man, someone she'd met through the personals column in the newspaper.

"I really should get home and soak this dress, don't you think?" Karen said to her neighbor's grandnephew and her very-last-ever blind date.

She couldn't wait to get out of the dress and end the date, and not in that order. Nor did she want to think about Liz and the man in the hotel hallway. Liz was a grown woman. She knew what she was doing.

But even as Karen said it, she feared Liz had gotten in over her head. She kept remembering the way the two had reacted to each other in the hallway. That was one romance headed south.

Twenty minutes later, Karen was trying to gracefully close her apartment door on Howie Iverson and the entire evening, when she was literally saved by the bell.

The phone rang. "Thank you again, but it isn't necessary," she said politely to Howie's offer to have her dress cleaned. Hurriedly she shut the door, bolted it and ran to answer the phone.

“Hello?” She could hear breathing. “Hello?”

The line clicked.

Karen stared at the receiver.

Had it been Liz? Maybe.

Or a crazed serial killer checking to see if she was home alone? Probably.

Or a wrong number, she thought, trying to corral her imagination and shake off the ominous feeling she’d had since opening the door to find Howie peeking through a bouquet of the strangest-looking flowers she’d ever seen.

But as she started to hang up the phone, she knew it wasn’t the date—as awkward as it’d been—that had her so jumpy.

On impulse she hit star 69. The phone number the automated voice repeated didn’t sound familiar. A wrong number, just like she’d thought. The line began to ring. Hang up! You’re going to look like a fool!

“Good evening, Hotel Carlton.”

Her pulse pounded at her temples. Had Liz called her? “Yes. Could you please ring Liz Jones’s room?”

“One moment, please.”

It suddenly struck Karen that Liz wouldn’t have registered in her own name. Actually, she probably wouldn’t have registered at all. While Karen didn’t know much about clandestine affairs, she thought the male lover acquired the room, and probably under some assumed name like Smith.

So why was she still waiting on the line when she knew the

clerk would come back any minute to say there was no Liz Jones registered?

The extension began to ring. Liz had registered—and under her own name? Well, it was a new decade for women.

Someone picked up after the first ring but said nothing.

Karen swallowed. "Liz?"

No answer. Just soft breathing.

What was she doing? Karen quickly hung up and stood staring at the phone. Who'd answered? More important, who'd called her from the hotel in the first place? She blinked. The answering-machine light blinked back at her, bright red.

Quickly she rewound the tape, surprised to find herself trembling. Jeez, she felt like a kid who'd been caught playing phone games. "I saw what you did. I know who you are." I'm an idiot. Come and get me.

Except she hadn't seen anything and knew even less. Not true. She'd seen Liz with a man. The lover who'd insisted his identity be kept secret? And now Karen had not only seen him—he'd seen her!

She jumped as the answering machine clicked on and Liz's distraught voice filled the room. "Karen? Please pick up. I really need to talk to you. I found out who he is. You know, the man I told you about. I found out everything. This is so freaky." Pause. "All right, I guess you're not home. I need to talk to him first, anyway. You know, give the bastard a chance to…explain, huh?" She sounded close to tears and getting more angry by

the moment. “I can tell you one thing. I’m not going to let him get away with this. He’s going to pay.” A knock sounded in the background. “That’s him now.”

The line disconnected, the silence too loud, too final in the suddenly morguelike room.

Liz had called. Karen checked the time on the answering machine: 7:48. That would have been just after Howie spilled her wine all over her dress while explaining greenhouse flower pollination. And just before—

Her pulse roared in her ears. My God, Liz had been on the phone calling her at the same time Karen had rounded the corner in the hotel and seen the man knocking at Liz’s door!

Karen felt a shiver. Had that been Liz who’d called a few minutes ago? Then why hadn’t she said something? And who’d answered the phone in Liz’s room when Karen had called? The secret lover?

This is none of your business. Except that Liz had involved her in it by confessing it all to her. Now Karen felt as if she’d just sat through an unsettling movie, only to have the projector break down before the end. She needed an ending. Preferably a happy one.

“Maybe I should call Liz’s hotel room again,” she said to the silence, worried that neither of them was going to get a happy ending.

Get a life, Sutton. And get out of this dress!

CHAPTER TWO

Sunday morning

It wasn't until very early the next morning that Karen, half-asleep, got the news.

Howie brought it, along with some of his aunt's still-warm homemade fried pies and a spray can of spot remover.

Karen opened the door barefoot, in the old T-shirt she'd slept in and a pair of thrown-on worn jeans. "Howie?"

He stuck the fried pies under her nose like smelling salts.

She took a whiff and a pie and stumbled groggily into the kitchen, following the smell emanating from her automatic coffeemaker. What time was it, anyway?

Howie trailed after her into the tiny kitchen. "Like I was saying, I have this friend at the Hotel Carlton flower shop. She says the police have been swarming all over the place since she got there this morning."

Sleepily, Karen took a bite of the palm-size, lightly frosted, still-warm apricot fried pie and chewed, moaning in pleasure. Better than chocolate. Better than sleep. Better than even— She stopped chewing. "What?"

Howie handed her a napkin and pointed to a crumb on her chin. She wiped at it robotically as she watched him pull down a cup and fill it with coffee. He handed it to her.

Police? She took a gulp of the hot strong coffee, desperately

needing to get up to speed. Her head cleared a little as the caffeine started to kick in. She took another drink. Her eyes began to focus. They focused on Howie.

He smiled in acknowledgment and refilled her cup. Somehow she hadn't expected to see him again after last night. How long did his aunt say he'd be in town?

"It turns out someone was murdered at the hotel last night," he said as he handed her the full cup. "Can you imagine that?"

She stared at him. Unfortunately, she could imagine that. What the caffeine hadn't yet completely accomplished, the word murder did. "Who was murdered?"

"Her name hasn't been released yet," he continued, his interest appearing to wane as he obviously got to his real purpose for waking her this early on a Sunday morning. "I came by to see if this spot remover works. If you'll get me your dress…"

She barely heard him. A woman had been murdered? Her heart picked up a staccato beat while her pulse buzzed in her ears. Just because a woman had been murdered at the hotel last night, didn't mean it was Liz. After all, it was a huge place. What were the chances the victim was even someone she knew?

"Karen?" Howie waved the can of spot remover in front of her to get her attention. "The dress?"

She pointed absently in the direction of the couch, drained her coffee cup and looked around for her purse.

"You did soak the dress overnight in cold water, didn't you?" he asked.

She hated to tell him.

"I don't see the dress," he called back to her from the other side of the breakfast bar.

She pointed again, this time more in the direction of the corner, as she dumped the contents of her purse on the kitchen counter and sorted through it feverishly for the number Liz had given her. She and Liz had exchanged phone numbers on coffee-shop napkins, but at the time she'd figured she'd probably never see Liz again—let alone call her. But her instincts told her that Liz wouldn't have stayed at the hotel last night. Not after learning the truth about her lover.

With relief, she spied a latte-stained corner of napkin, pulled it free and reached for the phone.

"Oh!" she heard Howie exclaim. He must have found her dress where she'd thrown it last night.

The line began to ring. Pick up, Liz. Come on. Answer your phone.

When the answering machine came on, she hung up, not wanting to leave a message. What message would she leave, anyway? "Call me if you're not dead? Otherwise—"

Okay. Liz wasn't at home. Still no reason to panic. Maybe she had stayed over at the hotel last night. Karen tried the Carlton number only to get a busy signal.

"Howie, I have someplace I have to go," Karen said, shoving everything but the keys back into her purse and quickly finishing off her fried pie before she looked around for shoes. She spied

her Birkenstock sandals poking out from the end of the couch and slid into their familiar worn comfort.

Howie was holding the dress out and tsk-tsking.

"Look, Howie—" That dress had been nothing but bad luck. She'd bought it on impulse because it was on sale and for just a moment, she'd seen herself in the dress having a romantic candlelight dinner with a still faceless Man of Her Dreams. Obviously sale dresses came with dream glitches she should have been warned about. "Here, give me that." She snatched the dress and the spot remover from him, stuffed the spray can in her purse and tucked the cursed dress under her arm. "I have it covered. Trust me. I know just what to do."

"Well, I really think—"

"No time for that now," she said, cutting him short as she ushered him out the door ahead of her.

She left him standing in the courtyard as she hurried to her Honda. As she threw her purse and the dress into the passenger seat, she couldn't help but notice how much the stain still looked like blood. A bad omen.

Omens now, Karen? Bad-luck sales dresses. When did you become so superstitious, anyway?

As she drove across Missoula toward the Carlton, she berated herself for being such a fool. She was wasting a perfectly good Sunday morning. The sun shone as bright orange as one of Talley Iverson's apricot fried pies, making the day almost as wonderful, although a little cool considering this was spring in Montana.

Who was she kidding? It was March and it was still too cold for the way she was dressed. She flipped on the heater the moment the engine warmed up and cruised toward the mountains debating her own stupidity.

Why did she even think the murdered woman might be Liz?

Well, gosh, could it be the whole secret-lover thing? Or maybe the way Liz had reacted to the man in the hotel hallway last night? Or the way he'd reacted to her? Not to mention that strange phone call and the message from Liz?

All circumstantial evidence. Not even evidence at all. Just one woman's hysterical jump to dire conclusions. She should be concerning herself instead with how to let Howie down easily—yet firmly. And what was with him and those warm fried pies this morning? It was as if Talley Iverson were pulling out all the stops. Karen knew she really should be doing something about Howie and his matchmaking aunt rather than worrying about Liz, a woman she hardly knew.

You just have to know what happened, don't you? You're as bad as your mother!

Oh, that hurt.

Not that it deterred her.

She was going to the hotel. She'd find out who was murdered. If it wasn't Liz, she'd feel relieved and foolish. But she was all right with that.

She caught her reflection in the rearview mirror. She looked like a wild woman, her shoulder-length brown hair standing

out in every which direction! Glancing around in the car, she found an old navy blue scrunchie and battled her hair into semicompliance while she drove. No easy task. Now all she had to do was get control over her life again.

Ahead she could see the Hotel Carlton etched against the clear dark blue of Montana's big sky. As warm as it was in the car, she felt a chill.

JACK ADAMS SAW HER the moment she walked in. Not that she stood out particularly—even the way she was dressed. The lobby was such a zoo because of the murder, he doubted anyone else noticed her. He wasn't sure what had made him look down when he did from the mezzanine where he'd been hiding out. Or what it was about her that held his initial attention.

Her hair looked pulled up into a ponytail of sorts. Stray strands of golden brown curled around her face making her eyes seem large and wide. Brown eyes, he guessed, although he couldn't tell from this distance. Some freckles probably. Late twenties, early thirties. Jogs or works out at the gym three times a week, he figured. Teaches school or day care. Born and raised in Montana. Probably here to meet her mother and grandmother for the hotel's Sunday breakfast brunch. Your typical Girl Next Door. Case closed.

He wished Denny wasn't busy interviewing witnesses. Detective Dennis Kirkpatrick had started the game one night at a bar, betting his talent for observation was keener than Jack's. It had become a duel to the death ever since. But this time, Jack

thought he could beat Denny at his own game. This one was almost too easy.

BY THE TIME she walked into the hotel, Karen rued her impetuous behavior. This wasn't like her. Not at all. What really brought it home was just how foolishly she was dressed. No coat. No socks. No bra. Now, chilled, she felt nearly naked and knew everyone in the place was probably staring at her chest. She crossed her arms. What was she doing here?

"Excuse me," she said as a bellhop cruised by. "Can you tell me who was murdered?" she blurted out, wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible and go home.

The kid stopped, leaned over and said conspiratorially, "I heard her name was Jones. Liz Jones."

Karen felt the blood drain from her face. Her heart jackhammered and the room seemed to spin crazily.

"One of the maids found her this morning," the bellhop continued in a hushed whisper. "Strangled with her own panty hose, I heard. The cops are still here asking questions down in the ballroom but so far I don't think they've found the killer."

Hadn't she known it would be Liz? Oh, yeah? And how exactly had she known that? First superstitious and now psychic? She didn't like this.

Get a grip. You suspected it was Liz or you wouldn't be here. So, tell someone what little you know and let's get out of here.

She glanced down the hallway toward the door marked Ballroom. All her fears rushed to her head like too much

champagne. What did she really have to tell the police? That Liz had been involved with a man in some secret relationship. And the name of the man? She didn't know. What did he look like? Well, she only saw him for an instant. Did she think she would recognize him again if she saw him? Maybe.

He'd looked surprised when he saw her, probably because her dress had appeared to be covered in blood. It was actually red wine that her blind date had spilled on her. No, he wasn't blind, just nervous.

Karen took a breath. All right, she didn't have much to give the police. For all she knew he could have been Liz's ex, the one she said she'd left because of his jealousy. But if any information Karen had could help find the killer—

BELATEDLY, Jack noticed two things about the young woman that made him glad he hadn't made that bet after all.

One was the look on her face as she stopped a bellhop near the entrance. She wasn't asking directions to the dining room. She looked too apprehensive. Too…suspicious.

But that wasn't all. He hadn't noticed before just how quickly she must have dressed. It was a little too cold out for sandals, especially without socks, and she wore no coat over her faded T-shirt and worn blue jeans.

But what really convinced him she'd been in a hurry was what he glimpsed beneath that washed-thin T-shirt. Nipples. No bra. She had definitely looked like the prim-and-proper, wouldn't-be-caught-dead-in-public-without-a-bra type.

Whatever the bellhop had said to her had left her shaken. Maybe she'd just heard about the murder. Then what had gotten her out of bed so abruptly this morning? It wasn't meeting Mom and Grandma at the buffet. Not that half of Missoula hadn't come up for breakfast this morning after the news of the murder. He really doubted it was the link sausages and powdered scrambled eggs that had brought them.

Curiosity. The same stuff that killed cats. So was that what she was doing here, too? Idle curiosity? No, not as anxious as she appeared nor dressed like that, he told himself. Not this woman.

He looked closer. She was nervously kneading something balled up in her right hand.

Damn, he thought, craning over the mezzanine railing to see her through the crowd. She reminded him a little too much of himself—someone who'd been dragged out of bed too early in the morning. Only he had a good reason. He wondered what hers was. And if they had anything to do with the other?

KAREN FELT SOMETHING in her hand just as she reached the ballroom doorway. She uncurled her fingers, surprised to find the latte-stained napkin with Liz's number on it. She started to put the napkin and number in her purse, but as she took a step into the ballroom, she looked up and saw that the room was empty, the police gone.

No, not entirely empty.

Her feet halted so abruptly she almost toppled forward onto her face. Through the bank of windows facing the parking lot she

could see the cop cars pulling away. What had literally stopped her in her tracks was the lone man she saw silhouetted against the window, watching the police leave.

Her heart dropped to her stomach. Could it be? She stared, her eyes widening as she realized he was dressed just as he'd been last night. And there was something about him—

Seemingly unaware of her presence, he pushed open the door and started toward the parking lot.

Karen stumbled back from the doorway, bumping into the wall as she looked around for a policeman. But she saw no one in uniform—and the man was getting away!

JACK WATCHED HER, now definitely intrigued. One minute she was peeking into the ballroom, the next she was reeling back out, looking as if she'd seen a ghost.

What the hell? He moved down the mezzanine to get a look into the ballroom, wondering what she could have seen. Empty. How had he missed Detective Denny Kirkpatrick, the man he'd been waiting to literally grab when the cop came out of his last interview? Because Jack had been watching the Girl Next Door instead of tending to business. And it looked as if the cops had left by a rear exit. Just his luck.

He glanced to where he'd last seen the woman standing just moments before and swore under his breath. She was gone! But something lay on the floor. A round white object the size of a golf ball.

He took the stairs two at a time. In the spot where she'd

been standing, he reached down to pick up what appeared to be a balled-up white napkin. Great investigative work, Adams. A dirty napkin. He started to discard it when he noticed what looked like writing on it.

He uncrumpled the napkin. A phone number?

CHAPTER THREE

Karen scrambled out the front door of the hotel toward the parking lot at a run. If she could just get the license number on the man's car—

Across the parking lot, she saw him get into a large, dark sedan. From this distance, she couldn't even see the plates, let alone the make or model of the vehicle to give the police. Newer, expensive, American-made, would be her best guess and that, she knew, was worth nothing.

She sprinted to her car, leaped in and started it. All she could do was follow him and hope to get close enough without him getting suspicious.

But as she drove past the hotel, she had the oddest feeling she was being watched. First omens, then bad-luck dresses, clairvoyance, now paranoia? What next?

She sped off after the mystery man, the road dropping down the mountainside in tight switchback curves. In the distance she could see Missoula glittering brightly in the sunshine but ahead on the narrow two-lane road, no sign of the car. Had he seen her? Is that why he'd taken off so fast?

She gripped the wheel, heart pounding, expecting to come flying up on his car around the next curve as she careened off the mountain. He probably wasn't even the killer. Just some poor harmless man who resembled the man she'd seen with Liz last

night.

Harmless. Karen liked the sound of that, she thought as she swerved around another blind curve. Beat the heck out of the alternative: that she was chasing a killer and he'd be waiting in ambush for her around the next bend.

Unfortunately, she didn't think of the man she'd seen last night in the hotel hallway with Liz as harmless.

She tried to still her hammering heart and quiet the voice of logic yelling Are you nuts? in her ears. Come on, she wasn't even sure the man was Liz's secret lover, let alone the murderer. He could be the jealous ex or a man Karen hadn't even heard of. After all, before yesterday, it had been sixteen years since she'd even seen Liz.

So why was he driving so fast? And what had he been doing in the hotel ballroom? Had he already talked to the police? Wouldn't that be something if he'd told them everything and here she was chasing down his license number for nothing.

She turned on the radio, needing a little calming country-and-western music right now. A few cheating hearts, a lot of boot scooting and some down-home, baby-done-took-my-truck-and-my-dog heartache. An old Hank Williams tune filled the car. That was more like it.

Unfortunately, even cranked-up country wasn't going to help. Liz had been murdered and Karen was chasing a man she thought was a killer. At the heart of it, Karen knew she felt as though she'd failed Liz. She should have done something, especially last

night after she got that message from Liz on her answering machine.

Sure, Karen Sutton, Ms. Lovelorn, the last person who should be dispensing advice on love and relationships. What did she know about either?

But she had good sense, she argued, feeling the need to defend herself as she wheeled around another corner. There could be something said for a woman with good sense. At least her mother had always said so.

Right. If her mother could see her now! No amount of good sense could explain why she was chasing a possible killer. Nor could any of her rational arguments convince her she wasn't in danger. She'd never been this close to murder before. She didn't like the feeling.

But that's why she had to try to get the man's license number.

So where was he? Maybe she'd lost him. Maybe he'd turned off. Or maybe he'd seen her following him and doubled back to get behind her—

She glanced in her rearview mirror. A car. She caught only a flash of color as it disappeared around a corner but it didn't look large nor new nor dark-colored. But someone was definitely behind her! Was there any way he could have changed vehicles?

Just on the brink of paralyzed fear, she rounded another switchback in the road and spotted the large, dark car still moving ahead of her. She exhaled, an undaunted Karen back at the wheel. Hallelujah.

Ahead the road turned onto the main four-lane highway into Missoula. All she had to do was get close enough to see his license plate. If she waited, he'd be in the increased traffic and she'd lose him.

She floored the gas pedal and felt the car pick up speed. Just a little farther. Just a little faster. She could see the back of the car now, the man's head silhouetted inside, but still she couldn't make out the plates as he sped ahead of her. But she did notice a large dent in the car's left rear fender. Other cars wove in and out of the lanes. If she could just stay with him—

Something behind her caught her eye. Her gaze shot to the rearview mirror, then down at her speedometer—Oh, no—then back again at the flashing red-and-blue lights behind her. Her foot automatically came up off the accelerator.

No, not now! Not when I'm this close!

She stubbornly jammed her foot back down as she ignored the flashing lights in her mirror. She saw the dark-colored sedan accelerate and pass a truck several cars ahead of her.

She pulled into the passing lane, eyes focused on the sedan. The sound of a siren screamed over the roar of her car's engine and flashing blue and red ricocheted off her rear window as she searched the traffic ahead for the sedan.

She glanced back to find the cop right behind her. But ahead, the sedan had disappeared in the traffic. She'd lost him. Unlike the cop.

Reluctantly, she let her foot up off the accelerator and began

to slow.

JACK WASN'T SURE what he'd expected. Hell, after the way the first morning of his supposed vacation had gone, why did he expect anything to go as planned?

He certainly hadn't expected his Girl Next Door to speed. But he had definitely expected her to slow down and pull over when he flashed his lights and siren at her.

And she had. Eventually. Taking her own sweet time. By the time she had, he was ready to call backup to stop her. Backup on the Girl Next Door. What was wrong with this picture?

Then when she'd finally stopped by a strip mall, he could have sworn he caught her glaring at him in her rearview mirror. He wasn't great at lip-reading but he knew whatever she'd mouthed wasn't very ladylike.

All things total, this didn't exactly fit his first impression of her. This woman was starting to cause him concern.

As he pulled in behind her Honda, his lights still flashing, he cut the siren and sat watching her cautiously. Just when he thought nothing she could do would surprise him, she began to beat her fist on the steering wheel.

Then her eyes met his in her rearview mirror again. No mistaking it. The woman was glaring angrily at him. He shook his head. This was not the way to react to being pulled over by a cop. He ought to know.

His radio crackled. "I got that name on the phone number you gave me, Jack. Listed to Liz Jones."

He wondered what his Girl Next Door was doing with the murdered woman's phone number. It kept getting more and more curious by the moment.

"Run me a plate, would you?" He read the numbers off the license on the Honda in front of him and waited.

"Karen Anne Sutton."

He wrote down her address and phone number, then he opened his door and cautiously walked toward her car.

She rolled down her window with the same kind of anger he'd seen in her rearview mirror.

"Goin' a little fast, weren't you?" he asked.

"Do you realize what you've just done?" she demanded.

"Pulled you over for speeding?" Jack stared at her. Her eyes weren't brown. But a combination of blues and greens flecked with gold. Hazel, he supposed, but at the moment, they were more blue. An electric blue that hurled flaming arrows. At least he'd gotten the freckles right. A sprinkling of them ran across the high cheekbones and the bridge of her nose, standing out against her pale skin. The freckles picked up the golden brown of her hair, which had now pretty much escaped from the ponytail. Even disheveled she looked good. Wholesome. Just not quite so innocent as he'd first thought.

"Speeding?" she cried.

"Speeding and failing to slow down and pull over after an officer of the law both flashed his lights and siren for you to do so," he added.

“I wasn’t speeding,” she snapped. “I was chasing a killer. Well, a possible killer.”

“I guess I didn’t see the distinction,” he said carefully. “I thought cops chased possible killers. May I see your driver’s license and car registration, please?”

She made no move for her purse. “I was trying to get his license-plate number. He was driving a larger, newer model, dark-colored sedan with a dented left rear fender. Well? Aren’t you going to do something?”

He shifted his gaze to the highway. Cars breezed past. Some large, dark-colored, newer model American cars. Some dented. If she had been chasing someone, he was gone. And if she hadn’t —

Jack looked down at her, afraid to take his eyes off her for long for fear of what she’d do next. “Your driver’s license and car registration, please?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Those expressive eyes blinked, still hot with anger. She started to reach for her purse but stopped in midmotion and blinked again, as if seeing him for the first time, really seeing him.

It was one of the few times he wished he looked a little more like a cop. Instead he was dressed a lot like her. Faded hockey jersey, worn jeans, Top-Siders. No socks. Definitely should have taken off the baseball cap, though.

Indecision and alarm flashed over her features. She glanced back at his Jeep, the light on top still flashing. She wasn’t buying

that he was a cop. Why wasn't he surprised? Par for the morning.

As he dug his badge from his jeans pocket, he noted that all four doors of her car were locked and she'd left her engine running. Worse, she looked ready to run again herself. He just wondered what she was running from. Or chasing.

He held the badge up and watched her study it intently.

"And you are—?" she asked, pointing out his lack of a name tag.

"Detective Jack Adams. Now may I see your license and registration?"

She flashed him a smile about as genuine as Naugahyde. "Of course, officer."

He watched her rummage in her purse. She was all nerves and he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd pulled a pistol out of her bag. He wondered if the nerves were her way of showing anger. Or fear? Either could make her dangerous.

With a start, he caught a glimpse of a spray can in her purse. Then her fingers were grasping it and as if in slow motion, he watched her pull it out. He stepped back, now fully expecting the worst. Pepper spray.

That's when he spotted a blue dress in the passenger seat. A dress with what appeared to be a huge bloodstain.

"Drop that and step out of the car," he ordered, automatically reaching for his weapon.

THE ORDER came out of the blue. Karen turned, her gaze rocketing up to his. Only he wasn't looking at her but past her

to— Karen groaned. That damned dress! That dress was going to be the death of her.

"Drop the spray and get out of the car," he ordered again. "Now!"

She dropped the can of spot remover Howie had given her. It tumbled to the floor. "All right, all right," she said quickly, trying to calm him before he did something crazy like shoot her. You never knew with these cop types. "It isn't what you think."

"It never is," he said coldly. "Step out of the car slowly and keep your hands where I can see them."

This wasn't happening. Earlier she'd thought he hadn't looked much like a cop. Not with his head of thick, unruly sandy-blond hair under his baseball cap and those big brown eyes and that slight crook in his nose in that otherwise boyish face. Not to even mention the way he was dressed.

But he looked like a cop now. And he definitely sounded like one.

Carefully, she opened her door and stepped out very deliberately. Judging from his body language, she'd be wise not to make a wrong move.

"It isn't blood," she said, adding a feeble, terrified chuckle. "It's wine. Red wine. My date spilled it on my dress last night at the restaurant and I should have put cold water on it right away but—" She was babbling, sounding all the more guilty when she wasn't guilty of anything but stupidity. Unfortunately, she suspected a lot of people went to prison for that very crime.

“And I suppose that wasn’t a can of pepper spray you were pulling out of your purse, either,” he said.

Pepper spray? “No,” she groaned, realizing what he’d thought. “It’s spot remover.”

“Put your hands on top of the car, legs out,” he ordered.

Oh, not “Assume the Position!” This would be funny if it wasn’t so not funny. She did as she was told. She could feel the chilly Montana air under her T-shirt. Why hadn’t she taken the time to put a bra on? She tried to concentrate on Talley’s fried pies waiting for her at home. Even the thought of Howie waiting for her seemed like good news right now.

The detective moved in behind her. She felt her face flush with embarrassment as she waited expectantly for the feel of his hands. He skimmed his palms down her legs, over her butt, between her legs, then around in front. Of course her nipples were hard as pebbles by then.

All she could think about was her mother. Pamela Sutton, a staunch Republican, City Garden Club member and bridge player, would be horrified—not that her daughter had been arrested for suspicion of who knew what—but the fact that her normally sensible only off-spring hadn’t been wearing a bra at the time of arrest. And at Karen’s age!

Karen closed her eyes as Detective Jack Adams’s hands brushed over her. She hated to think that this was the most intimate she’d been with a man in—how long?

“Don’t move.”

She opened her eyes as the cop sidled around beside her and, keeping his gaze glued to her, reached into the Honda to pull out the dress. That rotten-luck sale dress.

He stared at the stain.

If only she'd let Howie take the dress to the cleaners.

He held it up to his nose and sniffed.

She closed her eyes for a moment, not wanting to even think how the dress might smell after she'd worn it last night and then thrown it behind her couch.

He looked at her over the wad of dress. "Beaujolais?"

She nodded, feeling close to tears. "Blind date."

He reached into the car and came back out with the spot remover. He motioned for her to unassume the position. She straightened and crossed her arms, trying to hide just how ill at ease and chilled she was.

She thought he might apologize. For frisking her. For thinking she had a dress in her car covered with blood—someone else's. For even suspecting she'd pepper spray a man of the law.

He tossed the dress and the spot remover back into the car, seemingly as upset as if the wine had been blood and the spot remover pepper spray. His gaze met hers. His look said he was still a cop. And she was still a speeder.

She waited for him to give her a ticket.

Instead he gave her a smile.

Without her consent, her heart did a little pitter-patter and her knees went soft. She really needed to get out more.

“I’ve heard that brand of spot remover’s pretty good stuff,” he said after a moment. “So, want to tell me again why you were speeding?”

She opened her mouth to argue, then thought better of it. He was offering her a chance to bare her soul. She’d already bared nearly everything else for him. And she did need to talk to a police officer about Liz. Why not a cop she’d been almost intimate with?

She let out a long sigh and glanced toward the strip mall. “Is there any chance we could talk about this over coffee? Maybe a doughnut?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Jack watched her bite into a lemon-filled jelly doughnut, enthralled. He'd never seen a woman who enjoyed food this much. He couldn't help smiling as she licked lemon from her lips in almost orgasmic delight.

He got her another doughnut.

Between bites, Karen Sutton began to tell him about Liz Jones, washing her statement and the doughnuts down with large amounts of black coffee.

If what she was saying was true, she really had been chasing the man she thought to be Liz Jones's killer. Being a cop had left Jack as skeptical as he was cynical and suspicious. But even he had to admit, he'd over-reacted earlier. The woman had knocked him off-kilter, like a load of laundry thrown to one side of the washing-machine tub.

He knew he should be more concerned about that, but as he watched her stare deeply into her coffee cup, her hair framing her face, the sunlight streaming in the window, making her freckles glow like gold dust, he realized this woman was definitely a new experience, one he was rather enjoying.

True, her story was unbelievable. Maybe that's why he tended to believe it. Or maybe he just wanted to believe it because of the woman telling it.

"Didn't it seem odd that a classmate you hadn't even seen in

sixteen years would be so anxious to tell you her most intimate secrets?" he asked.

Karen shook her head. "I think she just needed someone to confide in, someone she thought she'd never see again."

"But you said you exchanged phone numbers," he pointed out. He still had the once balled-up napkin in the Jeep.

"It was just the polite thing to do at the time," she said between bites of doughnut. "I really never expected to hear from her again."

Jack studied his Girl Next Door. No longer appearing nervous or angry or frightened or suspicious, she seemed only too happy to tell him everything she knew about Liz Jones. She even seemed to forget for the moment that she wasn't wearing a bra. When they'd first sat down, she'd kept pulling the body-hugging fabric away from her skin, never letting either of them forget her recent frisking.

There was something so appealing about her candor, so appealing about her, he found it hard to concentrate. "Did she say how she met this guy?" He handed Karen a napkin and pointed to a spot on her cheek. "Powdered sugar."

She eyed him a little oddly for a moment before taking the napkin and dabbing at her cheek. "That's the weird part. They met through a newspaper ad. She'd put something in the 'I Saw You' column after seeing a man on a street corner."

Jack had seen the personals column in the local newspaper and had always thought only college students placed those kinds

of ads.

"Our eyes met on the bus Friday. I wore a blue coat. You wore a smile. Want to get the rest of us together?"

"I spilled my coffee on you Saturday at Hooked on Java. Call me embarrassed. Or just call me."

Liz Jones must have been a woman who liked taking risks. He wondered about the woman sitting across the table from him, then reminded himself that thirty minutes ago she'd been chasing down a man she thought was a killer.

"Let me get this straight," he said carefully. "The man who answered her ad was a total stranger. But Liz started a relationship with him, not even knowing his name or who he was. Don't you find that a little…bizarre?"

Karen looked thoughtful for a moment. "Even when we know each others' names, how well do we really know each other?" she said philosophically.

He stared at her, dumbstruck. Could he have been that wrong about this woman?

She laughed at his shocked expression. "All right, I found the entire thing really bizarre. But Liz seemed fine with it. At first. I think something had happened that worried her and that was one reason she needed someone to talk to."

"So, how did you end up at the Hotel Carlton?"

She grimaced. "Blind date."

"I've had a few of those myself," he said with a chuckle. "Only I'm usually the one who spills the wine rather than wears it."

She looked up, her eyes met his. Angry, her eyes had been electric blue. Now though, they reminded him of the waters of a high mountain lake filled with summer reflections. She smiled. Killer smile when she wasn't trying to look innocent. Something hot arced across the table between them. Or maybe it was just the spring sunshine and her smile. She had a kind of sex appeal beyond the cute lightly freckled face, the perky full breasts, the shapely butt, the muscled legs. This was not your typical Girl Next Door. He had a feeling she wasn't your typical anything.

She continued her story right up to the scene in the hotel hallway between the mystery man and Liz Jones.

"What did he look like?" Jack asked, excited that he'd have something to give to Denny. Not that Detective Kirkpatrick deserved anything after the trick he'd played on Jack that morning, getting him out of bed at daybreak.

"Average height, brown hair, medium build," Karen said. "His face was shaded by a baseball cap."

"You just described half the guys in the United States."

"I know," she groaned. "I just saw him for a second. Then later in silhouette."

Jack took another shot at it. "What about the way he was dressed?"

"Blue jeans, jean jacket, baseball cap."

Dressed like that, he'd be Joe Blow Invisible in Montana.

Jack tried not to let his disappointment show. She seemed so anxious to help. "Anything about him strike you as odd or

unusual?"

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "There must have been something or I wouldn't have recognized him again this morning."

Jack wished he could be sure about that. But he couldn't even be sure she'd been chasing the right guy. There were always mug-shot books. Or a police artist. But he doubted either would be productive. She couldn't provide enough for a good composite, let alone pick him out strictly from a more than likely outdated mug shot.

"You believe he was her secret lover?" Jack asked. "The one from the personals?"

Karen nodded. "I'd put money on it."

A betting woman. Wouldn't Denny love her? He clamped his jaw down on the thought.

"Why?" he asked, curious, since he suspected she didn't take her bets lightly.

She proceeded to tell him about Liz's message on her answering machine.

"What's eerie about it is that at the same time Liz was calling me to tell me she'd found out who he really was, I was coming down the hallway. She was expecting him. On the tape, I heard a knock at the door and she said something like, 'That's him now.'

"Add to that the way she greeted him at the hotel, trying to slap him, and his reaction, pushing her into the room as if he didn't want anyone to hear their conversation or to see them together,"

she concluded.

"You think he's married?"

"Seems likely, huh?"

He finished his coffee. It was time to turn all of this over to his partner. And time for Jack Adams to get on with his so-called vacation. Denny could handle it from here. So why was Jack dragging his feet? Did he even have to ask? He smiled to himself. At thirty-four he knew himself pretty well.

"We need to get you, your information and that message on your answering-machine tape to Detective Kirkpatrick at the police department," Jack said finally.

She nodded. "You're not on the case?"

He laughed and looked down at his clothing. "I'm actually on vacation." Kind of.

She smiled. "You must be very dedicated, chasing speeders on your vacation."

He almost told her about seeing her at the Hotel Carlton, about making a bet with himself about her, about thinking there was something interesting and suspicious about her, about picking up the coffee-stained napkin she'd dropped and following her. "Just a chance encounter," he said.

"Just my luck."

He wasn't sure how to take that, but she was smiling.

He met her gaze and almost laughed at the tension that sparked between them. Sexual tension? It had been so long he almost didn't recognize it. Almost.

“What now?” she asked, her eyes large and expectant.

Several thoughts leaped to mind. He wondered if she had plans for later tonight. Except later tonight, he’d be frying freshly caught fish over his Coleman miles from here. Remember all those plans you had at the lodge?

“Oh, there is one other thing,” she said, toying with her coffee cup, the nervousness back. “The guy I saw at the hotel with Liz —” Her gaze came up to meet his. Fear darkened her eyes. “He saw me, too.”

Jack felt his gut clinch. “Did he know you?”

She chewed at her lower lip for a moment. “I don’t think so. He looked…surprised when he saw me, but it could have been because I had red wine all over my dress, which as you know looks a lot like dried blood.”

He nodded, remembering only too well. He finished his coffee, then excused himself. In the quiet of the men’s room, he punched in the number on his cell phone, telling himself he was doing the right thing. But he wondered if the woman back at the table would agree. She seemed to have a definite mind of her own.

“I wouldn’t worry,” he said, when he returned to the table. “By now the police could already have someone in custody.”

She looked relieved as she put down her empty coffee cup. “That is possible, isn’t it?”

“I’ll try to find out for you.”

She gave him her home number and he dug one of his cards

from his wallet and wrote his cell-phone number on the back, still thinking he'd be fishing before nightfall. "Call me if you need anything."

THE PAST TWENTY-FOUR hours felt like a twilight-zone roller-coaster ride. Karen drove back to her apartment in a strangely electrified daze, wondering when the ride would end and the old Karen's quiet life would return. She couldn't believe she'd tried to chase down a killer. Even a possible killer. That just wasn't like her.

No, she wasn't anything like the Karen Sutton she'd been prior to running into Liz yesterday morning. The old Karen Sutton had only read about murder and she'd definitely never been pulled over for speeding and frisked.

She felt her cheeks flush at the memory. Just the thought of Detective Jack Adams warmed more than her face. She'd even thought she felt high-voltage currents at the coffee shop. Crazy. She'd just met the man. He was a cop, for heaven's sake. A cop who'd pulled her over for speeding. So how did she explain her reaction to him? Shoot, she couldn't even explain her reaction to this new fearless her.

Maybe it was adrenaline. Adrenaline and too much sugar and caffeine.

She decided she'd take this new Karen home, get her cleaned up and properly clothed, then wait for Jack's call. Once the sugar, caffeine and adrenaline wore off she'd be her old self again.

When she reached her apartment, she was actually glad to see

Howie waiting for her on the front step. She needed a good strong dose of reality right now.

"I have a confession," he said solemnly.

A confession. Great. She'd heard enough confessions for a while. But she and Howie did need to talk and she didn't mind the company right now.

She opened her apartment door, just thankful to be home. She still felt numb from the shock of Liz's murder. But at least it was out of her hands now.

She put Detective Adams's card by the phone, cell-phone number up. Just in case.

"I'm not sure I'm up to any confessions," she said and turned to find Howie inspecting her poor, deprived houseplants.

"Do you have any organic fertilizer?" he asked.

"Howie, we need to talk."

"Your plants really need water—and fertilizer, Karen."

She decided to take pity on her poor neglected plants, which she only remembered to water when they looked as if they were on their last stems, to ease her own guilt.

"I think there might be some Make-It-Grow that your aunt gave me under the sink," she said, then added, "This isn't going to work, you know."

He looked up from digging under her sink. "What?"

Why did she feel they had never been on the same page? Maybe not even in the same book? "This. You and me."

Howie straightened, turning bright red. "You mean you

thought—" His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "But, Karen, you and I don't have anything in common."

Now she was the one confused. "If you realize that, then why did you take me out, bring me pies, offer to water and fertilize my plants?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry if you thought I was interested in you, but, Karen, there's someone else."

"Someone else?" For just an absurd instant, she felt betrayed. No, this weird ride wasn't over yet. She took a wild guess. "Your friend at the Hotel Carlton?"

He nodded and smiled, almost starry-eyed.

Okay. She was starting to get it. That's why he'd taken her to the Carlton. "You took me out to make her jealous." It didn't do much for her ego but hey, if she could help out true love—

Howie shook his head.

She plopped down on the sofa. "Okay, then I don't get it."

"Aunt Talley asked me to take you to dinner because she thinks you would be perfect for J.T. and she wanted my opinion. I was planning to talk to you about it but then I spilled your wine and the time just never seemed right after that."

Her head hurt. It had been a long day and it wasn't even half over. "J.T.?"

"My cousin."

Another of Aunt Talley's grandnephews. She watched Howie mix the fertilizer, wondering how many nephews Aunt Talley had. Well, she wasn't dating them no matter what her Cupid-

playing neighbor tried to tempt her with.

The memory of the fried pies almost made her reconsider. What was she thinking? “Howie, I’m not going out with J.T.”

“Don’t worry,” he said as he began to water her pitiful plants. “He’s not interested, either.”

Karen winced although she didn’t know the man and knew his rejection wasn’t personal since he didn’t know her, either.

“Aunt Talley will be disappointed,” Howie was saying. “She really believes that each of us has a perfect match and that J.T. might be yours.”

Karen hoped that was meant to be a compliment. She closed her eyes. Not a good day. “Are there any of your aunt’s pies left?” she asked, opening her eyes hopefully.

Howie brought her one on a plate with a glass of milk. He was going to make someone a fine spouse.

“Aren’t you going to have one?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never cared for sweets.”

The man was an aberration. Probably ran on the male side of the Iverson family. “So—” she licked icing from her lips “—what is J.T. like, just out of curiosity?”

“He’s…interesting,” Howie said, returning to the plants.

Interesting? The kiss of death. Worse than “nice personality.” Good thing he wasn’t “interested” in her.

Karen finished her pie and milk and Howie finished reviving her plants and left. She locked and bolted the door, feeling vulnerable and a little afraid. She wished Jack would call soon.

As she showered and dressed, she kept thinking about the man she'd seen at the hotel with Liz. She jumped when the phone rang, her heart thundering, her fingers trembling as she picked up. "Hello?"

For one heart-stopping moment, she was afraid it might be The Breather again. When she heard Detective Jack Adams's voice, a bubble of pleasure filled her. Pure helium.

He burst that bubble immediately. "I just talked to Detective Kirkpatrick."

"Did they find the killer?" She held her breath.

"Sorry. Denny says he didn't interview anyone who admitted to even knowing Liz."

Karen stumbled into the nearest chair. She hadn't realized how much she'd been hoping the killer had already been caught. "He was in the hotel ballroom this morning. I saw him." He'd returned to the scene of the crime. Why?

She closed her eyes and tried to calm her hammering heart. "I'm the only one who can place him at the hotel last night with Liz, aren't I?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"It looks that way." Jack seemed to hesitate. "Karen, when you and Liz exchanged phone numbers on napkins at the coffee shop, did you see Liz put hers in her purse?"

"Yes… Oh, God," Karen whispered, seeing where he was headed. "You think she still had my number in her purse when she was killed?"

"I had Denny look through her personal effects. No napkin

was found in her purse. Nothing with your number on it. But I checked. Two calls were made from her hotel room last night. Karen, both were to your number. One before her death. The other after."

Karen felt as if all the oxygen had been suddenly sucked out of the room. The Breather. That had been him calling from Liz's room. She hugged herself, fighting for air. "He has my phone number."

CHAPTER FIVE

"He just has a phone number written on a napkin," Jack continued quickly. Liz must have left it by the phone when she'd called Karen and been interrupted by the killer. "That doesn't mean he knows you're the woman who saw him in the hotel hallway."

"Yet. How long will it take him to get my name and address?" All the man had to do was look in the city directory. Karen's name was listed along with her address. Jack had already checked.

He wanted to reassure her. But he couldn't. Now he just wanted to get Karen out of her apartment as quickly as possible. Make sure she was safe. Let Denny handle it from here on out. If Jack was smart, that's what he'd do. If he wanted to keep his job, that's what he'd do.

"Detective Kirkpatrick wants to talk to you," he told Karen. "It's probably best that you not stay at your apartment. Why don't I pick you up? How long will it take to pack enough for a couple of days?"

"I pack fast when there's a killer after me."

He'd known she wouldn't argue; she was too smart for that. At least, he'd hoped that was the case and was relieved when she said, "I'll be ready in twenty minutes."

He smiled. He also liked a woman who knew when to move

quickly. “Good. I’ll pick you up.”

He hung up feeling relieved. Actually, too relieved. How had he gotten so involved in this? It wasn’t his case. Hell, he was on probation, a forced two-week vacation. He should be miles from this case, from this town. Detective Captain Brad Baxter wouldn’t like this.

But once Jack was sure she was safe—

He put the cell phone into his pocket and looked up to find his friend and partner staring at him, waiting, and none too patiently.

“You want to tell me what this is all about?” Denny demanded, from across the table at the small greasy spoon on the edge of Missoula where he’d met Jack. “I thought you were on vacation. What’s with all the questions about the murder?” Denny asked, more quietly, although at this time of the afternoon, the place was almost empty.

“What do you mean, ‘I thought you were on vacation?’” Jack snapped. “You called me this morning with that cryptic bull about ‘Jack, I’m in trouble. I’ve got to talk to you. It’s urgent. Come to the Carlton. Hurry.’ Remember?”

“It’s not important now,” he said, glancing at the waitress refilling a ketchup container at a far table.

“Not important?” Jack said, trying to hold his temper as he stared at his friend. Denny Kirkpatrick had been cursed with dark good looks that as far as Jack could tell, got him in trouble with women. It was his affinity for practical jokes that got him in trouble with everyone else.

Denny's call early this morning had sounded like the real thing. Jack had leaped out of bed, grabbed the first thing he found to wear and took off for the Carlton, running scared that Denny truly was in trouble. But when he'd gotten to the hotel and seen all the cop cars, he'd thought it had been one of Denny's tasteless practical jokes.

Either way, he wanted to throttle his friend.

"If this is another of your jokes—"

"I did need to talk to you, but it can wait, that's all," Denny said.

"What happened to urgent?" Jack demanded.

"This murder."

Jack decided to let it drop. He had Karen to worry about right now. She was in worse trouble than Denny. Maybe.

"What is the story on this murder?" Jack asked.

Denny shook his head. "Probably just invited the wrong man to her room. You never answered my question. What's your interest in this and why didn't you show at the hotel?"

"Oh, I was there," Jack told him. "The minute I saw the cop cars, I figured you'd set me up just to mess with Captain Baxter. So I waited for you to go to the men's room to give you a swirlie before I officially began my vacation."

Denny smiled and seemed to relax. "Sorry I missed that. Couldn't you just see Baxter's face when I came back to the crime scene dripping wet? Imagine what he'd say when I told him that Jack Adams had done it to me."

Unfortunately, Jack could imagine that. He was already on the boss's list as a rebel cop who had stepped out of line one time too often. It was why he was on this…vacation.

"Because of you, I met a woman this morning," Jack said.

His friend laughed. "And you're mad about that?"

"Unfortunately, it turns out she's a witness in your murder case."

Denny sat up abruptly. "Why didn't you mention that right away?"

"Because I was hoping to find out why you called me to the Carlton this morning."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry I worried you," he said, actually sounding as though he meant it. "You're a good friend. So, tell me about this woman."

"We're picking her up," Jack said, getting to his feet. He tossed the cost of their coffee and a tip on the table. "I'll fill you in on the way."

When Jack finished telling him about Karen, Denny grinned and shook his head. "She really went after the guy she thought was the killer? She's some gutsy lady. I can't wait to meet her."

Yeah, Jack thought miserably. Karen Sutton was turning out to be Denny's kind of woman.

"Do you have your tape recorder?" Denny asked on the way to Karen's apartment. "I was thinking I'd take her statement some place quiet away from the office."

Jack shot him a look.

Denny grinned, acknowledging that Jack knew him too well. “Baxter’s going nuts over this case. I don’t really want him to know about this woman you found. Not yet.”

Jack wanted to warn his friend about bucking Baxter. Denny should have already learned from Jack’s example. But Jack also knew dispensing advice to Denny was like spitting into the wind. “Why would Baxter care so much about this case?”

“Are you kidding?” Denny asked in surprise. “I thought you said your witness knew the murder victim?”

“Liz Jones, right?” Jack had gotten his information from the same bellhop Karen had talked to.

“Liz Jones, now,” Denny said. “Until the day before yesterday, she was the Mrs. in Dr. and Mrs. Carl Vandermullen.”

Jack let out a low whistle. “She was married to him?”

“Was is the key word here. Nasty divorce. She’d been living in their place in Columbia Falls—he’d returned to Missoula to the house they own here up Rattlesnake Canyon.”

“So, what was she doing in Missoula?” Jack asked.

Denny shrugged and looked away. “I guess just finalizing her divorce.” Was it Jack’s imagination that his friend seemed to avoid his gaze? “Baxter wants us to tread softly. He doesn’t want to get on the doctor’s bad side by seeing headlines like High-Profile Doctor Suspected in Wife’s Murder. It’s hard on a man’s political career. And you know Baxter.”

Unfortunately, Jack did. Brad Baxter had much higher aspirations than police captain.

As Jack pulled up in front of Karen's apartment, he saw Denny frowning to himself. Why did Jack have the feeling that there was a lot more to this case than his friend was telling him?

Jack felt a surge of happiness when the door opened and he saw Karen looking freshly scrubbed and smelling wonderful as if she'd just come from the shower. She couldn't have looked more like his Girl Next Door. Except, call him old-fashioned, but his idea of the Girl Next Door didn't include chasing killers.

As Karen looked past him to Denny, Jack saw the flash of interest in her gaze. He'd seen it a million times before. Denny just did that to women and one look was usually all it took for Denny to have a conquest. Annoying as it was, it was something Jack had gotten used to over the years. But it had never made him feel such a pang of jealousy before.

WHEN KAREN HAD PEEKED through the peephole, she'd felt a surge of joy just at the sight of Jack's boyish face.

"That's it?" he asked in surprise when he saw only the one small bag beside the door.

"I travel light," she told him, handing him the tape from her answering machine. That's when she'd noticed the man with Jack.

"Karen Sutton," Jack said by way of introduction as he pocketed the tape. "Detective Dennis Kirkpatrick."

Detective Kirkpatrick had classic good looks and the moment Karen saw him, she knew she'd seen that face before somewhere.

"Everyone just calls me Denny," the dark-haired man said

smoothly, flashing her a snake-oil-salesman of a smile as he held out his hand.

His dark eyes shone with faint amusement—and definite interest as he gazed deep into hers. She'd never liked his type. Too smooth, too charming, too much. But she couldn't be sure about this new Karen. She'd showered and changed and didn't feel half-naked anymore, but she also didn't feel quite herself, either. This new braver, more impetuous Karen scared her.

That's why she wasn't sure what her reaction was going to be as she let Denny envelop her hand in his larger one and was relieved when she felt nothing. Zip. Not even a little flutter. Nothing that is, other than frustration at not being able to place where she'd seen him before. She liked this new Karen better all the time.

"You look familiar," she said, taking her hand back.

Denny grinned, looking pleased, obviously taking it as a compliment as they walked to her car. "Got that kind of face, I guess."

No, actually, few men had such a classically handsome face and she was sure he knew it. She shook her head. "No, I know you from somewhere. You look very familiar."

His grin faded a little. He shot a look at Jack.

Jack put her bag in her car and looked over at her, his expression dark as if he suspected it was some kind of pickup line.

Right. She told herself Jack would be singing a different tune when she remembered where she'd seen Denny before. "Don't

worry. It will come to me," she assured both detectives. "I'm good with faces. I always remember." Eventually.

JACK DROVE KAREN to Denny's favorite bar in her Honda, while Denny took the Jeep and a different route. Jack picked up the tail a couple of blocks from Karen's apartment. With relief, he didn't notice anyone else following them.

Denny led them through the back entrance and down a set of stairs to a small conference room in the basement. Jack took a seat across the table from Karen, wondering what he was still doing here. Denny could definitely handle it from here on out. In fact, the best thing Jack could do, careerwise, was to clear out now.

"Interesting place to interrogate witnesses," Karen noted.

"It's a safe place." Denny set the tape recorder on the table but didn't turn it on. "And right now the fewer people who know about you the better."

She nodded. "I understand the situation I'm in. The killer must be worried about me or he wouldn't have called my number from the murder scene."

Smart woman, Jack thought.

"How did he get your number?" Denny asked.

"I figure he either overheard Liz leaving a message on Karen's answering machine or he found the number on the napkin beside the hotel phone or a combination of the two," Jack said.

"You think he's afraid she told me something?" Karen asked.

Who knows what the man was hiding, Jack thought.

“Possibly.”

“I would imagine he wants to tie up any loose ends,” Denny said. “You’re a loose end.” He reached over and turned on the tape recorder.

Jack sat listening to Karen retell her story, realizing he wasn’t going anywhere until he knew she was safe.

When she’d finished, she asked, “What now?”

“You go somewhere safe while the department tries to find the guy,” Denny told her.

“For how long?” she asked anxiously.

Denny shook his head.

“What if you don’t find him?” she asked, sitting up a little straighter. “I have work. I have responsibilities.”

Denny reached over and turned off the tape recorder. “There might be another way.”

Jack had a feeling he wasn’t going to like this.

“What?” Karen asked, sounding interested and making Jack all that more leery.

“You say Liz met this guy through a newspaper personals ad,” Denny began. “It’s a long shot, but what if you were to put—”

“An ad in the personals,” she said, jumping on it. “That’s a great idea.”

“It’s a stupid idea,” Jack interrupted but neither of them seemed to be listening.

“It would have to be something that he’d recognize, maybe might even be looking for,” Denny said. “Such as, ‘I saw you

at the Hotel Carlton Saturday night. You saw me. I know everything. I think we'd better talk, don't you?'"

"Right," Karen agreed. "Bluff."

"Run an ad for a murderer?" Jack demanded, loud enough he got their attention. Just when he thought the woman might have some sense. "Great idea," he said getting to his feet. "Right up there with chasing the killer in your Honda."

"Excuse me, but if you have a better idea, let's hear it," she snapped back.

"Give the police a chance to find him?" Jack suggested.

"I'm not stopping the police from finding him," she said. "I'm just not going to sit around waiting for the killer to find me first. I have to do something."

"She's right, Jack."

"Stay out of this, Denny," Jack warned. It might be Denny's case, but he and Jack both knew he had no business suggesting this to Karen. Cops didn't put their witnesses in danger. Not good cops, anyway. What was Denny thinking?

Jack leaned toward her, his palms on the table. "You can't even be sure that the killer is the mystery man or even the man you saw with Liz."

"Then what would it hurt to run the ad?" she said.

Her logic scared him. "But if you're right and he's the killer, then you're talking about threatening a man who has already killed once. Even a woman with your affinity for danger wouldn't seriously consider something that crazy."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Wouldn't it make more sense to hide out for a while and give the trained professionals a chance to find him?"

"Crazy?" she demanded. "Crazy is just sitting around waiting for him to come after me. Crazy is waiting on the off chance that the police do find him. No offense, but it isn't like you two are Canadian Mounties. You don't always get your man. I'm sorry, but I can't hide and wait for him to be captured. That's a luxury I can't afford. I have work that has to be done, people who are depending on me."

"If you're dead," Jack said with more force than he'd meant to, "they'll have to find someone else to depend on."

She groaned. "It's not that simple. Anyway, I thought you were on vacation?"

"He's actually on probation," Denny interjected.

Thanks a lot, buddy. Jack swore under his breath.

"Then this really doesn't have anything to do with you," she said to Jack.

He wanted to assure her he was involved, a lot more involved than she knew or he wanted to admit. But she was right. It wasn't as if he'd be able to help find the killer. Or protect her in any official capacity. Nor did the cops always find the killers and put them behind bars. The worst of it was, there was more than a good chance the killer would come after her. Too good a chance.

"I'm going to put the ad in the paper," she said, her gaze challenging his. "I don't see any other choice. Waiting for him to

come after me isn't acceptable."

Jack shook his head in frustration. "Let's say the killer is the same man Liz met through a personal ad," he said reasonably. "He sees the ad, he answers it. Then what?"

"Karen meets with him," Denny said without hesitation. "At some place where we can see him from a distance. She won't ever be in danger. There'll be cops crawling all over the place. It will work, Jack. She'll be safe."

Jack didn't bother to look at Denny. Instead he sought out Karen's gaze, reminding himself that he had no say as to what this woman did, no matter how dangerous it was.

He wasn't sure who he was more angry with. Denny. Or himself. Denny was right. This wasn't his case. Karen Sutton wasn't his concern. Denny was just trying to find a killer. Jack knew Denny would do everything he could to protect Karen. But would it be enough?

He swore under his breath again as he straightened and stepped back. "The killer isn't going to show. What kind of fool would answer your ad, let alone agree to meet you somewhere?"

"He'll show," Denny said with conviction. "She's the only person who can place him at the murder scene and he knows it."

"Dammit, Denny, she might not be able to identify him," Jack snapped.

"But he doesn't know that, does he?"

"Denny's right," Karen spoke up. "The man will have to call my bluff because he has too much to lose not to."

KAREN FELT Jack's gaze shift to her again. She'd been aware of him across the table while she was giving her statement to Detective Kirkpatrick. Jack had been deathly quiet as if he had no interest in what was taking place.

She'd wondered what was keeping him here now that he'd put her and Detective Kirkpatrick together, especially after Denny had mentioned that Jack's two-week "vacation" was actually probation. Wasn't he jeopardizing his job by just being here?

"You think the killer has too much to lose?" Jack asked quietly. "What about you? Are you really willing to risk your life? If he shows, it will just be to kill you."

She looked into his brown eyes, determined not to let him frighten her any more than she already was—which was considerable. But looking into his eyes had a danger all of its own. She felt as if she'd grabbed a frayed toaster cord. The heat of his expression warmed her to the core.

"My life is already at risk, Jack." She certainly didn't need him telling her how dangerous it was to put the ad in the paper. But what other recourse did she have?

Didn't he see that she was only doing what she had to? She couldn't hide indefinitely and she wasn't one to wait for trouble to come to her. At least this new Karen wasn't.

Why did it matter what he thought, anyway? Just because he hadn't written her a speeding ticket, didn't mean he was on her side. Especially now that she knew he was on probation. He couldn't help her, even if he wanted to.

“Let’s just hope you see the killer before he sees you,” Jack said angrily. He turned to Denny. “It’s too dangerous. Too many things can go wrong. I don’t like it.”

Denny just stared at Jack for a long moment. “You don’t have to like it, Jack,” he said quietly. “It’s up to her.”

“Captain Baxter would disagree with you, Denny.”

Karen heard the threat, saw it harden Denny’s expression. “Denny’s right,” she said. “Once I put the ad in the paper, the police can’t stop me. They will have to protect me.” She looked to Denny for confirmation. He nodded.

Jack swung around to look at her, anger and disappointment in his eyes. Obviously she wasn’t the woman he’d thought she was.

But it was her own reaction that bothered her. She felt sick inside with a disappointment of her own. “I appreciate everything you’ve done to help me, Jack. But please don’t jeopardize your job or let me keep you from your vacation any longer.”

He nodded, his gaze saying more clearly than words that he was washing his hands of her. “Don’t worry, I’m going home to finish packing right now.”

IN THE LATE-AFTERNOON light behind the bar, Karen watched Jack pull away in his Jeep, feeling bereft and strangely alone.

Denny’s words drew her attention back to him. “I’ll put you up someplace safe,” he was saying beside her.

She stared at him for a long moment, wondering why he still looked so familiar. “No, thanks. I’ll find my own safe place.”

He looked as if she'd just turned him down for a date. "Karen—"

"Don't worry," she said, cutting him off. "I'll keep in touch. Can I drop you anywhere?"

He held her gaze as if searching for something, then shook his head. "The editor said he could get your ad in tomorrow morning's paper."

She nodded, surer than ever that she knew him from somewhere.

As she climbed into her car, she realized she would have to find a place to stay for a few days at least until she saw whether the newspaper ad worked or not. She tried not to think past that. It had to work. She had to draw the killer out and get this over with.

Probably a motel would be her best bet. Something on the edge of town, out of the way. Or she could go to her mother's. The place was like a fortress. But Karen knew there wasn't any way she could keep her little problem from her mother if she did. Mostly, she didn't want to worry her mother. Nor would her mother approve of the seedy mess her daughter found herself in. Pamela Sutton would never understand how a "nice" girl could get involved in something like this.

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