Love Inspired SUSPENSE

RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

VIRGINIA SMITH

Murder at EAGLE SUMMIT

Steeple Hill

Virginia Smith
Murder at Eagle Summit

Аннотация

A romantic ski resort seems the perfect place for a wedding. Until a murder on the slopes turns everyone on Eagle Summit into suspects. Liz Carmichael, the bride's cousin, saw a shadowy figure on a chair lift in the middle of the night. But was it the victim or the killer?Liz goes to the police–and finds herself giving the report to her ex-fiancé, Deputy Tim Richards. After a three-year estrangement, she could finally make things right–unless the killer finds her first….

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A scream pierced the mountain air.

Liz!

Heart pounding, Tim crouched on his snowboard, picking up speed. His gaze searched the downhill path. There! Liz, unmistakable in her pink ski jacket, lay facedown. A man loomed over her.

Tim let out a howl of rage. He didn't have time to think about words, just bellowed like a bear. An angry bear. If that man harmed one hair on Liz's head…

The guy let go. With lightning speed, he darted away. Tim shot across the snow in a direct path to his ex-fiancée. He threw himself to his knees on the snow beside her and gathered her up in his arms.

"There, baby. It's okay now. I won't let anything happen to you."

She threw her arms around his neck, her sobs loud in his ear.

In that instant, Tim knew. In fact, he'd always known.

He was still in love with her.

VIRGINIA SMITH

A lifelong lover of books, Virginia Smith has always enjoyed immersing herself in fiction. In her mid-twenties she wrote her first story and discovered that writing well is harder than it looks; it took many years to produce a book worthy of publication. During the daylight hours she steadily climbed the corporate ladder and stole time late at night after the kids were in bed to write. With the publication of her first novel, she left her twenty-year corporate profession to devote her energy to her passion—writing stories that honor God and bring a smile to the faces of her readers. When she isn't writing, Ginny and her husband, Ted, enjoy exploring the extremes of nature—snow skiing in the mountains of Utah, motorcycle riding on the curvy roads of central Kentucky, and scuba diving in the warm waters of the Caribbean. Visit her online at www.VirginiaSmith.org.

Virginia Smith
Murder at Eagle Summit

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean: wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

—Psalms 51:7

For my husband, Ted.

Thank you for introducing me to Utah skiing.

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ONE

"Have you ever seen an uglier dress in your life?"

Liz Carmichael pitched her voice to be heard over the windshield wipers and the downpour of rain battering against the roof of the car. Rainfall this heavy was unusual in December, but nothing about this warm Kentucky winter could be called usual. She lifted her head from the passenger headrest and cracked one tired lid to see her friend's reaction to her question.

Jazzy clutched the wheel with both hands, her gaze fixed on the wet road through the windshield. Lightning flashed across the coal-black sky above them, illuminating her dainty profile in an eerie white glow.

"It was pretty awful," she agreed without looking toward Liz.

From the backseat came Caitlin's voice. "But the bride was beautiful."

"What bride?" Liz snorted. "If there was a girl somewhere inside all those ruffles, I couldn't see her."

"Oh, there was a bride, all right. I have her check to prove it." The corner of Jazzy's mouth twisted. "And a stiff neck, too."

"Yeah, and my lips are numb." Caitlin, the flutist in their classical ensemble, sounded tired, too. "I think that's the longest we've ever played at a wedding reception. We earned our money tonight, that's for sure."

Liz rubbed a thumb across the calluses on her fingertips, sore

from playing her cello for two hours straight. “I just hope the check doesn’t bounce.”

She snapped her jaw shut. She must be more tired than she thought. That was a bit much, even from her.

Caitlin poked her shoulder from behind while Jazzy said, “Don’t be such a sourpuss. Of course the check won’t bounce.”

Liz half turned to give Caitlin a crooked grin. Good thing her friend knew her well enough to see through her cynicism and realize the reason for her grumpiness.

The car slowed as they approached the entrance to Liz’s apartment complex.

“I thought we played well. Did you notice—”

“What’s going on over there?” Jazzy cut her off with a finger stabbing at the windshield.

Liz looked where Jazzy had indicated. Flashing blue and white lights from a pair—no, three police cars sliced through the dark haze of the downpour.

“They look like they’re in front of your building, Liz.”

Liz leaned forward to peer through the torrent of rain as Jazzy guided the car through the parking lot. As they drew near, a person in a dark rain poncho exited her building and sloshed through the water pooling on the sidewalk. The figure slid inside one of the police cars. Oh, no. What if something had happened to one of her neighbors?

What she noticed next made her stomach twist. A light shone in the second floor window on the left side of the building.

Her window.

She had turned off the lights before she left. She always did.

"I think…" Her voice came out choked. She swallowed and tried again. "I think they're in my apartment."

Caitlin's gasp was almost drowned out by the rumble of thunder outside.

Jazzy pulled the car to a stop behind the third police cruiser and cut the engine. The sound of rain hammering against the roof grew louder in the silence. Dread gathered in Liz's core. Had her place been broken into? Had she been robbed?

Shuffling sounds from the backseat made Liz look around. Caitlin had pulled her hood up over her head and was tying it in place beneath her chin.

Liz cleared her throat. "You don't have to get out in this weather. You'll get soaked."

Jazzy slipped her car keys into the pocket of her raincoat before turning a disbelieving stare in Liz's direction. "Are you crazy? We're your friends. We're coming with you."

A flash of relief loosened her tense shoulders, but only for a second. She needed to get in there and see what was going on in her apartment. She braced herself, pushed open the car door and exited the vehicle at a run. Dimly aware that Jazzy and Caitlin followed, she splashed across the sidewalk and into the breezeway of her building. Water plastered her bangs to her forehead and dripped into her eyes. Blinking furiously to clear them, she ascended the six stairs in two leaps. Her friends right

behind her, she skidded to a halt in front of her door.

It stood open.

Just inside the doorway, two police officers, one male, one female, blocked her way. Both wore thick rain ponchos and hats covered in plastic.

Someone rushed up beside her, and Liz felt her arm caught in a tight grip.

"Oh, Liz, I'm so sorry." Her neighbor, Mrs. Evans, peered up at her from beneath a creased brow. "You've been burgled."

No. Not again. "I have?"

Mrs. Evans nodded. "They left your door open, and I peeked in. When I saw the mess, I knew something was wrong so I called the police." Her clutch eased and she patted Liz's arm. "You're not nearly as messy as all that."

All what?

"You're Elizabeth Carmichael?" The female officer's badge read R. Lawrence. She and the man stood shoulder-to-shoulder so Liz couldn't see past them.

Almost fearfully, she nodded.

"I'm afraid someone made quite a mess of your apartment."

"What…" Liz cleared her throat "…what did they take?"

The other officer, T. Franklin, lifted a shoulder. "You're going to have to tell us." He stepped aside and gestured for Liz to enter.

She took a step forward and stopped. A shudder ran down her spine. The sight that greeted her was hauntingly familiar.

The couch cushions had been pulled off and tossed aside.

Books lay strewn over the floor in front of the empty bookcase. Sheet music littered the floor.

"Oh, no," said Caitlin behind her.

"Not again." Jazzy's whisper echoed her thoughts.

Liz's hand rose involuntarily to her throat. Once before she and her friends had been the victim of a break-in when their trio was hired to play at an out-of-town wedding. Only, then she'd been present when the intruder arrived.

But that was four months ago. That man was in prison for murder.

"As far as we can see," Officer Franklin said, "your television and stereo are here, and your computer is in the other room. We need you to walk through, and without touching anything, tell us if you notice anything missing."

"The bedroom looks worse." Liz winced at Officer Lawrence's sympathetic warning.

While Jazzy, Caitlin and Mrs. Evans waited by the door, Liz stepped slowly across the living room. Hands clasped to keep from picking anything up, she did a mental inventory. CDs and DVDs were scattered around the floor. Were any missing? Impossible to tell. Sheet music…well, she wouldn't know until she went through it, but she couldn't imagine anyone would want her cello music. Her DVD player had been pushed cockeyed, but it was still there. Still showed the correct time, even.

Bracing herself, she headed for the bedroom. The officers followed. Bile churned in her stomach when she saw the mess the

intruder had left: dresser drawers upended all over the floor; the mattress shoved off the box springs; the contents of her jewelry box scattered across the top of the dresser.

Her computer desk drawers had been dumped and her personal papers strewn everywhere. Bank statements, receipts, letters, all littered the room. Hard to tell if any were missing. She'd have to alert the bank and her credit card companies, just in case they'd taken something, or made note of her account numbers. But the computer was still there.

"Do you have any firearms that may be missing, Miss Carmichael?"

Liz whirled toward Officer Franklin. "No. Nothing like that."

"How about the jewelry?" asked Officer Lawrence. "Is it all there?"

Liz's fingers hovered over the brooch on her blouse as she inspected the tangle of necklaces, earrings and bracelets. She didn't wear much jewelry, and didn't own any expensive pieces. A couple of pieces from her grandmother had sentimental value, but there was certainly nothing a thief would want.

"I don't understand." She looked at the officers. "There doesn't seem to be anything missing."

"Well, count yourself lucky." Officer Franklin's smile flashed on and off again. He turned on his heel and headed back toward the living room.

Looking at the disaster all around her, Liz didn't feel very lucky.

Officer Lawrence offered a more genuine smile. “It might have been kids looking for cash. We’ll dust for prints and see if we can find anything. In the meantime, here’s my card. If you discover anything missing, you be sure to let us know, okay?”

Throat tight, Liz nodded. She followed the woman back into the living room, where her friends rushed forward to enfold her in a group hug.

“You don’t have to stay here,” Caitlin whispered. “You can come home with me tonight.”

Jazzy’s head nodded against hers. “Tomorrow we’ll come back and help you clean up. And we’ll get new locks for your door and windows.”

Liz returned the pressure of their embrace. She had never been more grateful for her friends.

From his vantage point on the other side of the parking lot, Jason slumped low behind the steering wheel and watched the shadowy figures moving back and forth through the window. Dark sheets of rain shrouded his car and protected him from the cops’ sight.

He fingered his cell phone. Duke wasn’t gonna like this. But putting off the call only postponed the inevitable. He dialed the number.

The call was answered on the second ring. “Did you get it?”

“It wasn’t there.”

The sound of soft swearing greeted his news.

“You’re sure you aren’t mistaken.”

Jason’s teeth snapped together at the implication that he couldn’t handle a simple job. When he could reply in an even tone, he said, “I’m sure. I know everything that girl has in her apartment. It ain’t there.”

The silence on the line went on longer than Jason’s patience. “You want me to nab her?”

“No.”

The answer was quick, too quick. Was Duke thinking about taking him off the job? Jason couldn’t afford that. His take on this job was gonna pay off some pressing gambling debts.

“It won’t be like before.” He gulped, remembering Duke’s blistering tirade when he’d roughed up an old guy last week. Duke had been furious with Jason, but who knew the guy would come home early and catch him? At least he got the goods, and was well away before the cops arrived. “Let me talk to her nice. I’ll bump into her in a restaurant or something, pour on the charm. I’ll get it out of her.”

“I don’t want to risk you being seen. Again.” The last word dripped derision. “Besides, I don’t think that will be necessary. Our friend says he can get Miss Carmichael out here, and he’s confident she’ll bring it with her.”

“But that’ll take months.” Jason did whine then. He needed money now. “I’m sure I can—”

“Don’t do another thing. You just get yourself on a plane.”

“The job’s still mine, though, right? You ain’t gonna take me

off of it after I put in so much time?”

The low chuckle could have been insulting, or it could have been meant to comfort him. Jason gnawed his lower lip. He didn’t want to tick the guy off.

“Don’t worry, my friend. I’ve got several little tasks lined up to keep you busy until Miss Carmichael gets here. Just come home.”

The line went quiet.

Jason straightened in the seat and reached for the ignition. As he started the rental car’s engine, a shadow walked across the apartment window. Too unclear to identify, but it could have been her. He shifted into Drive, and when the car started to roll forward, he touched a finger to his forehead in a farewell gesture.

“I’ll be seeing you, girlie.”

TWO

Six Weeks Later

"What are you doing on your day off tomorrow?"

Deputy Tim Richards picked up his Coke and took a pull on the straw before he answered. "Skiing with the wedding party."

"Oh, yeah, I remember." His lunch buddy, Deputy Adam Goins, unwrapped a cheeseburger as he answered. "This weekend's the wedding thing."

"Uh-huh. The others are out on the slopes right now without me, in fact." Tim glanced through the fast-food restaurant's windows. High above their cruisers, an American flag flapped wildly in a strong breeze. The vivid colors stood out starkly against a totally white sky that held the promise of powder soon to come. In fact, a few wind-whipped flakes were already stabbing at the glass. "That's all right. I wouldn't want to be out there today, but tomorrow's going to be great."

Adam's silent laugh shook his shoulders. "You sound like me. If there isn't a clear blue sky, no wind and at least six inches of fresh powder, I'd rather stay home. I'm not surprised you've become a snow snob, now that you've been in Park City a while. You've lived here three years, right?"

"Right. But I've lived in Utah all my life."

Born and raised not forty minutes from here, Tim hadn't even left his hometown for college. He'd attended the University

of Utah, down in the Salt Lake valley, and roomed with his childhood friend, Ryan, the groom-to-be.

"Yeah, you know what I'm talking about. So you're off until, when? Monday?"

"Sunday. The wedding's Saturday night."

Tim bit into a couple of fries. Ryan and Debbie had decided to get married up here in Park City, instead of down in Salt Lake where they lived. Some romantic idea of Debbie's, probably, to get married at a ski lodge. Tim figured it must be costing Debbie's family a bundle. Nothing in Park City came cheap.

Of course, they were probably getting the musicians for free.

He took another drink from the straw, but his throat felt suddenly clogged. It wasn't the fries. It was the thought of the musicians. Or rather, one musician.

Liz would arrive late tonight. After three long years, he would see her tomorrow.

If he choked on the mere thought of her now, how would he act when he actually saw her?

Snow swirled around Jason as he glided down the slope. The place was practically deserted. The lifts would stop running at four, in ten more minutes. Most everybody had already headed down the mountain toward the lodge. Big flakes slapped at his goggles and gathered in the creases on the front of his ski suit. He could barely make out the trees on the other side of the run. A miserable day to be out on the slopes, but he had a meeting to

attend. One he couldn't miss.

He glanced backward to make sure nobody was coming around on his left, then zipped into the thick evergreens lining the west side of the slope. The wind wasn't nearly as bad here, and he was shielded from the worst of the heavily falling snow. Weird place to hold a meeting, if you asked him. But nobody did. Just told him where to be and when to be there. Jason made it a practice to do as he was told.

A snowboarder in a dark jacket waited at the appointed spot, one foot planted in the soft snow and the other still attached to the binding of his board. Jason glided to a stop nearby. At first he thought it might be Duke, but when the guy pushed his goggles up on his hat, he realized it was someone new. Jason's pulse kicked up a notch or two. Was he finally going to meet Duke's mysterious boss?

"Hey, how's it going?" The man clipped his words short.

Jason replied with a guarded nod. "Some day out there, huh?"

A sound from behind made him turn in time to see a skier zigzag through the trees toward them. Jason admired the way the man maneuvered in the close area, the precision with which the edges of his skis carved through the deep snow. He zoomed up to them, planted his ski poles and raised his goggles like the first guy.

About time Duke got here.

"I see you two have met." Cold blue eyes slid from Jason toward the stranger.

“Not proper like. I didn’t catch your name.” Jason kept his tone deferential, just in case.

The man stiffened, and his eyelids narrowed.

Duke pulled off his knit hat and slapped it against his thigh. Dislodged snow flew through the air. “I don’t think names will be necessary.”

Jason had taken off his glove, ready to thrust his hand toward the man by way of introduction. Instead, he shoved it back on and grabbed the handle of his pole.

“I don’t have long.” The stranger pulled back the cinched wristband of his jacket to look at his watch. “They’re going to wonder where I’ve gone. So say whatever you brought me here to say and let’s go before we’re spotted.”

Jason studied the man with interest. So Duke had invited him to the meeting, not the other way around. He wasn’t the boss, then. Duke had mentioned another guy who was in on this job, a new guy. Someone who insisted he could get the Carmichael chick out to Utah.

Duke pulled the hat back on and settled it over his ears. “I just wanted to touch base with you both. Make sure we all understand the plan.”

“I don’t need to understand any plan. I’ve done my part.”

Jason dipped his head to look at the snow between his ski tips. This guy had nerve, he’d give him that. Jason wouldn’t dare talk to Duke in that tone.

But when he risked an upward glance, he saw that Duke’s face

remained impassive. “She arrives tonight?”

The man nodded. “As arranged.”

“And you’re sure she’ll have it with her?”

The other man gave an impatient grunt. “I don’t see why I have to repeat myself. I’ve assured you she’ll have it.”

A flash of indignation set Jason’s teeth against each other. The guy’s tone spoke volumes about the relationship between these two. The newcomer sounded like a man talking to his partner. Duke apparently accepted him as such, while he kept Jason at arm’s length, handing out orders with no explanation and expecting unquestioning obedience. Like Jason was some kind of flunky or something.

Duke smiled. “Good. I think that’s all we need from you, then. You can go.”

Disgust curled one corner of the man’s mouth. “You brought me out here for that?”

“Unless you’d like to stay and hear the rest of the plan. I’m sure we can find another part for you to play. I rather thought you preferred not to dirty your hands with the details, though.”

Jason had a hard time keeping a straight face at the speed with which the guy snapped his goggles over his eyes and zipped away, pushing his board across the snow with his unbound boot. Within seconds he was lost from view in the blinding snow beyond the mass of trees.

A gust of wind whistled through the pine needles and rattled the branches above them. A mound of snow fell on Jason’s skis.

He used the tip of his pole to scrape it off.

"So my part of the plan," he said, "is to go through her room tomorrow when she leaves. You got a passkey for me?"

"I have a passkey." Duke pulled the glove off his right hand and shoved it under his left arm. "And I have something else, another little thing to take care of."

Jason stabbed the pole into the soft snow. Duke always had a "little thing" he wanted Jason to take care of. Next thing you knew, Duke would be ordering Jason to pick up his dry cleaning or something.

"Okay, but I'm upping my price this time." Emboldened by the stranger's tone with Duke, Jason spoke more forcefully than he would have before. "All these things I've been doing for you —running down to Vegas or over to Denver to pick up packages —they take a lot of time. More than I thought. And besides, you never tell me what I'm doing. I'm starting to think you don't trust me or something."

Duke unzipped his ski suit. The cold smile on his thin lips sent a shiver through Jason that had nothing to do with temperature.

"Actually, you're right," Duke replied. "I don't trust you. You're sloppy, and since I've developed a relationship with some new associates in Europe, I can't afford to surround myself with sloppiness."

He reached into the breast of his ski suit. When he pulled his hand out, Jason went completely still. Duke held a pistol with a silencer attached. And it was pointed directly at Jason's forehead.

THREE

The snow on the ski slope outside Liz Carmichael's balcony glowed in the pale moonlight. Tall fir trees tossed long shadows across the frozen surface of the smooth trail as far up the mountain as she could see. Branches gyrated in an icy gust of wind and the shadows danced on the snow. Then a heavy cloud raced across the sky, blotting out the moonlight and hiding the stars from view.

Liz shuddered as the icy breeze reached her balcony. The wind here had a different quality than in Kentucky, probably because the frigid Utah air didn't hold a trace of Kentucky's trademark humidity. At least the climate made the snow light and powdery, great for skiing, something she didn't get the chance to do back home.

Back home. That was the first time she could remember thinking of Kentucky as home. She leaned her elbows on the balcony railing and bent to rest her chin in her hands as her gaze wandered up the mountainside. But where else would she call "home" if not Kentucky? Not Portland, where Mom and Dad lived and where she had grown up. Too much time had passed since she'd left. Mom and Dad lived in a condo now, and she felt like a visitor when she went to stay with them at Christmas. That old saying was true, you can't go home again.

There was a time in college when Utah had started to feel like

home, but that was in the past, and had been for three years.

Until now. Because the part of her past she most dreaded seeing lived here. Was nearby even now, somewhere in this trendy resort town. A familiar guilt stabbed at her, and her thoughts skittered away from memories of the incident so fresh in her mind it might have happened yesterday.

The cloud moved past the moon, and white light illuminated the landscape as a movement down below on the slope caught her eye. A bulky figure carrying a long snowboard tromped through the darkness toward the chairlift on the other side of the thick tree line. Liz glanced at her watch. After 1:00 a.m. Strange time to hike up for a ride. Maybe a treasure hunter.

Locals did that sometimes, combing the slopes after hours looking for valuables dropped from the chairlift. Not usually at 1:00 a.m., though. Maybe it was a snowboarder who had lost something on the slopes during the day and couldn't sleep until he found it.

The glass door behind her slid open. She didn't straighten from her position leaning across the railing, but turned her head to identify Caitlin stepping through the door.

"Brrrr." Her friend rubbed her arms briskly beneath a pink terry cloth bathrobe. "What are you doing out here? It's freezing."

"Couldn't sleep."

Caitlin stepped up beside her. "Me either. A long travel day always does that to me. Jazzy doesn't seem to have the same

problem, though. She's completely zonked out."

Liz glanced backward through the glass and toward the closed bedroom door of the condo. "When did she finally hang up?" The third member of their trio had been on the phone with her boyfriend since the plane's wheels touched the landing strip at the Salt Lake International Airport.

"About thirty minutes ago." Caitlin laughed. "Isn't it great to see how happy she is with Derrick?"

Liz bit back a snarky response. "Great" wasn't how she would describe Jazzy's obsession with her new boyfriend. "Nauseating" was the word she'd use.

But she was trying hard to control her tongue on this trip, so she remained silent.

"Are you sure nothing else is bothering you? You've been really quiet since we got here. That's not like you."

There was something bothering her. Nerves had twisted her stomach to knots as she'd walked through the airport, watching for a familiar face to materialize in the crowd at any minute. She'd stared at every tall, dark-haired guy they passed, daring one of them to show up, and half-afraid they both would. When she was finally seated in the rental car with her friends, their instrument cases and luggage piled in the trunk and the backseat, she'd realized neither of them was coming. But instead of relief, the knots had tightened even further. Why couldn't one of them have met her at the airport? Then she could have put the dread of those first meetings behind her.

Caitlin was watching her closely. Liz gave a half smile. “I’m a little uptight. Can’t stop thinking about all the family stuff I’m going to have to deal with tomorrow.”

Her friend’s eyebrows formed surprised arches. “Have you seen your relatives at all since you left college?”

Liz shook her head. “Only Mom and Dad. None of the Utah contingent. And my grandma’s going to let me hear about it, too.”

“Well, your cousin’s wedding is a perfect opportunity for a reunion.” Caitlin linked an arm through hers. “Come on inside. You don’t want to get sick.”

There’s an idea. If she was sick, she’d have the perfect excuse to miss all the wedding festivities. And all the wedding guests. Especially the best man.

With a sigh, Liz straightened. She was healthy as a horse, and she wasn’t going to fake an illness. Debbie was her favorite cousin. They’d been as close as sisters growing up. After Debbie’s mother died, she’d spent every summer with Liz and her family.

Since Debbie had paid for Liz and her friends to fly all the way to Utah to play at her wedding—or more likely, spent hours convincing Grandma to pay for their trip—the least Liz could do was show up and look happy.

As she turned, the chairlift on the other side of the tree line started to move. Ah, that explained the middle-of-the-night stroll. It was an employee doing some sort of facility check or something. Weird timing but she’d noticed a line of groomers leveling the snow up on the mountain when they arrived, and it

was ten o'clock then. The resort must have to do a lot of their maintenance work after hours, when the skiers were asleep.

Caitlin slid the glass door open and gestured for Liz to precede her. "You're going to have a great time this weekend, Liz. Not only do you get to enjoy a reunion with your family, but you're bound to see some of your college friends, too."

Liz stepped into the warmth of the suite. Yes, some of her friends from college were in the wedding party. And at least one person she would not categorize as a friend. A handsome face swam into focus in her mind. Her heart heaved with a guilty thud. Suddenly, three years didn't seem very long. Not nearly long enough.

FOUR

Despite the late hour when she finally fell asleep, Liz's body refused to conform to the two-hour time difference between Kentucky and Utah. Her eyes popped open at six o'clock in the morning.

"Nooo!" She turned over in the bed and covered her head with a pillow to block the sight of the despicable red numbers glaring at her from the alarm clock. Four hours' sleep was definitely not enough, not with the busy day in store for her.

But a return to sleep proved impossible. Her body told her it was after eight, high time to be up and about. With a resigned sigh, she heaved herself out of bed and stumbled, bleary-eyed, to the bathroom for a shower.

Thirty minutes later, dressed and as ready to face the day as she would ever be, Liz headed for the kitchen of the two-bedroom condo Cousin Debbie reserved for them. The place wasn't fancy, but diehard skiers typically didn't care, as long as they had a bed and someplace to dry out their ski clothes at night. The furnishings in the sitting area, an attractive sofa and love seat combo, were clean enough to satisfy even the fastidious Jazzy. The coffee table boasted a few small dings and dents, but the dust-free surface gleamed, and the lemony scent of polish lingering in the air spoke well of the housekeeper's attention to detail.

The door to the second bedroom was closed. Jazzy and Caitlin were apparently still sleeping.

At least some of us will be rested today, the lucky dogs.

Liz searched the cabinets in the compact kitchen. A set of dishes—two sizes of plates, cereal bowls, mugs with saucers—lay neatly stacked in one, and an assortment of glasses in another. The rest of the cabinets were empty. A coffeemaker sat on the counter, taunting her with its empty carafe.

Wish I'd remembered to pack some coffee. We're going to the grocery today no matter what.

Liz grabbed her purse and headed for the lobby.

Though the town of Park City boasted many timeshares, condos and hotels, the lodge at Eagle Summit was situated adjacent to the main chairlift of the small, privately-owned ski resort. Out-of-town skiers loved being able to walk a mere hundred feet from their condos to the lift. And a city bus stopped right in front of the lodge, if guests chose to ski at the bigger and more famous area resorts, Deer Valley and Park City Mountain Resort.

Liz preferred Eagle Summit. During her years in college, she'd skied here fairly often. Eagle Summit had fewer chairlifts and not as much in the way of vertical terrain as the more well-known resorts, but Liz had always enjoyed the wide, tree-lined slopes that management kept meticulously groomed. And the lower price college kids paid for a day pass counted for a lot.

Liz remembered one time when she and Tim were skiing—

She skidded to a halt on the stone-tiled floor as she entered the lobby area. No! I will not take a stroll down Memory Lane!

Being back in Utah, and especially up in Park City where Liz had spent so much time with Tim, would trigger a lot of memories if she allowed her mind to wander in that direction. Which she did not intend to do.

In the lobby a dark-haired woman sat behind the front desk, a highly polished counter to the right of the main entryway. She looked up when Liz entered, nodded, and went back to whatever she was doing. Liz scanned the lobby. Wouldn't you think they'd have coffee set up for the guests who don't want to fix their own up in their rooms? She couldn't see any, though.

Beyond the front desk was a coffee shop with no sign of movement in the darkened interior. A copy of today's edition of USA TODAY rested on the floor in front of the glass door. She spotted a small sign that said they'd open at seven. A wave of irritation tightened her lips, but she forced herself to relax. She'd been up for almost an hour already without coffee; another ten minutes wouldn't hurt her.

She wandered in the direction of a huge stone fireplace in a cozy sitting area that took up one corner of the lobby. Overstuffed chairs and a big, comfy-looking sofa were clustered around a furry bearskin rug, while a giant moose head stared mournfully at her from above a rough wooden mantle. Though dead animals wouldn't be Liz's first choice of room décor, in a lodge-type setting, with thick cedar beams crisscrossing the high

ceiling, it worked. She crossed to stand in front of the hearth, enjoying the heat still emanating from a few ash-covered embers in the grate. To the left of the fireplace, three floor-to-ceiling windows looked out onto the deserted slopes. The morning sun was starting to lighten the sky but had not yet managed to climb above the mountain peaks. Deep shadows covered the snow-packed ski area.

A jingle behind her made her turn. A fiftyish man dressed in a dark gray suit strode across the lobby fingering a huge set of keys and mumbling to himself. He approached the coffee shop, picked up the newspaper and fitted a key into the lock, his lips moving as he muttered.

Finally. Maybe a jolt of caffeine would chase the heavy tiredness out of her limbs. Liz followed the man through the door.

"Oh." He turned a startled look her way, which he immediately replaced with a professional smile. "Good morning. I'll bet you're looking for a cup of coffee."

Well, duh. That's why I'm in a coffee shop. But Liz returned his smile and managed a pleasant, "I sure am."

"It'll take me a minute to get it started. The girl who was supposed to open this morning just called in sick, so I've got to…" He disappeared into a room behind the serving counter. The drone of his voice continued, though Liz couldn't make out the words. The overhead lights flickered on, brightening the room considerably. A second later he reappeared, a foil packet

in each hand. “But at least you know it’ll be fresh.” He held the packets up for her inspection. “Regular or decaf?”

Liz didn’t hesitate. “Definitely regular.”

“Coming right up.” He whirled around to a metal commercial coffee machine on the back counter and pulled an oversize filter off a stack on a shelf above it. “I haven’t seen you before. Have you been at Eagle Summit all week?”

Liz paced to the far end of the counter to peek into a glass display case. Parchment-covered trays lined two shelves, empty except for a couple of bran muffins. Her stomach threatened to rumble, but there was no telling how long those muffins had been there.

“No, my friends and I arrived last night.”

He slid the basket of coffee grounds into place and pressed a button. The high-pitched sound of water running through pipes began as he turned toward her and extended a hand across the counter. “I didn’t think I’d seen you before. I’m Greg Harrison. My wife and I own the place.”

Surprised, Liz shook his hand. “You own the lodge?”

He waved toward the back wall, beyond which lay the ski area base. “And the resort. Well, us and the bank, of course. We bought it a couple of years ago.” He glanced at the muffins in the case. “Oh, don’t even think about eating those. The bakery should be here with their daily delivery any minute.”

Liz slid into one of the tall wooden chairs as he pulled the old muffins out and wadded up the crumb-covered parchment paper.

Eagle Summit must be a smaller business than she thought, if the owner had to step in when a coffee shop worker called in sick.

He chatted as he wiped the trays down and lined them with fresh paper. “My wife oversees the ski resort, and since my background is in the hospitality industry, I take care of the lodge.”

“You both must stay pretty busy.”

“You know it.” He flashed a grin in her direction as he slid an empty tray back into the case. “But at least we love what we’re doing.” He raised a hand and snapped his fingers in the air. “You’re with the Carmichael wedding party!”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

He grimaced. “I wish I could say we have so many reservations that it’s hard to keep track of all the guests, but that wouldn’t be true. We’ve been looking forward to this wedding for months. Besides, you look like you’re related to the bride.”

“She’s my cousin.”

His smile brightened. “Ah, then you’re the musician from Tennessee.”

“Kentucky, but yes.”

“I’m eager to hear what you think of our new reception room. I hope the acoustics are okay. Your cousin’s is the first wedding we’ve held in it since we remodeled.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.”

He flashed an absent smile in her direction and went into the back room again. The odor of fresh coffee permeated the air and

Liz watched the carafe fill with the dark liquid.

Mr. Harrison returned with a pitcher of cream and a container full of sweetener packets just as the stream of coffee slowed to a drip.

"There you go." He set an oversize mug on the counter in front of her. "Those fresh muffins should be here any minute."

Liz sipped her coffee black from the mug. Ah!

"It's okay," she assured him. "I'm meeting the bride for breakfast at eight." She lifted the mug in a mock salute. "This is perfect until then."

She picked up her mug with one hand and retrieved the newspaper from where he'd tossed it on the counter, then selected one of the six tables lining the wall. The chairs were spindly and narrow, a fifties diner–type look with red vinyl seat cushions. Liz indulged in a broad smile as she imagined Grandma's reaction to their insufficient width when she arrived in…she glanced at her watch…about forty minutes.

The bedroom walls were closing in on Tim. For the millionth time he glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Six minutes since the last time he checked. Twenty-seven minutes since the time before. And one hundred eighty-four minutes since he first woke at 3:07 a.m. with his brain whirling around the thought he could not banish. Liz was here, at Eagle Summit Resort just a few minutes away. He would see her today.

Lord, does she ever think about me?

Dread and anticipation churned together in his gut. How would she react when she saw him?

With a jerk, he threw off the blanket and rolled out of bed. His mind had become his enemy, this room his prison. He had to get up, get moving. A hot shower would do him a world of good, clear his head.

He flipped the wall switch and light flooded his sparsely furnished bedroom. Two steps took him to his dresser, where he gathered his clothes. As he slid the drawer shut, his gaze fell on a small black box nestled amid the odds and ends on the surface of his dresser. What perverse sense of self-punishment stopped him from getting rid of the thing three years ago, like he should have? He'd started to a dozen times. As long as he kept it where he could take it out and look at it every so often, moving on was impossible. But something always held him back.

Swallowing hard, he picked up the box and hesitantly opened the lid. The diamond caught the light and winked at him from its bed of black velvet.

Maybe this weekend he could finally get some closure, put the past behind him.

Tim snapped the box closed and held it for a moment in his hand. Then he set it back on the dresser.

Two refills later, when she had read every interesting article in the paper and had just started on the sports section out of desperation, a familiar figure finally stepped through the

doorway.

"Liz! I'm so glad to see you!"

Liz stood as Debbie raced across the room to gather her in a hug. Liz returned the embrace with as much enthusiasm as the bride-to-be. It had been far too long since she'd seen Debbie. Though they'd been in constant touch through e-mail, she realized with a sudden rush of emotion just how much she'd missed her cousin and college roommate—far more than she had allowed herself to realize.

Her hands lingered on Debbie's arms after their fierce embrace ended, and she looked her cousin over. Debbie was largely unchanged. If anything, she was prettier than ever, with her thick, dark hair falling well past her shoulders, and bangs accenting her round eyes.

"You look fantastic," Debbie said at the same time Liz gushed, "You're going to be a beautiful bride!"

Their laughter mingled, and three years melted away.

"Ahem!"

An indignant voice cut into their reunion. Liz, her back to the new arrival, took a deep breath and rolled her eyes at Debbie, who bit back a giggle. Steeling her expression, Liz turned to face the third-most-dreaded encounter of the weekend.

"Grandma, you look wonderful." She knew her voice gushed, but she couldn't stop herself. "You haven't aged a day."

Actually, she hadn't. Her grandmother looked exactly the same as she had three years ago. Finger curls of steel-gray hair

still clung tightly to her scalp. The same knowing, brown gaze pierced Liz like a laser beam. And the floral-print dress she wore, not to mention the support hose and sturdy black shoes, were as familiar as Liz's own wardrobe. Only a lot older.

"Elizabeth. I'm glad you decided to show up. I half-expected you wouldn't."

Yeah. Same Grandma.

The old lady accepted a kiss of greeting, then pulled out a chair and examined the small cushion with a jaundiced eye. Liz hid a smile as Grandma pushed the chair back under the table and turned toward Mr. Harrison, who hovered behind the counter, watching their reunion.

"I believe we'll take our coffee out on the sofa in the lobby. Can you send someone to build up the fire?"

"Of course, Mrs. Carmichael. I'll bring a tray out immediately." His tone was deferential. Apparently Mr. Harrison had encountered Grandma before this morning.

Debbie linked arms with Liz as they followed Grandma to the lobby. "How was your flight? Everything okay with your room?"

"The flight was uneventful," Liz told her, "and the room is great."

She'd barely settled in a square, overstuffed chair catty-corner to the couch that Grandma claimed when Mr. Harrison arrived with a tray full of coffee and Danish. He set it on the rough-hewn sofa table and filled two mugs from the carafe, then refilled Liz's, as well. With a slight bow toward Grandma and a grin in Liz's

direction, he disappeared silently.

Grandma stirred three sugar packets into her coffee, raised her mug to her lips and caught Liz's gaze over the rim. "Elizabeth, I hope you've brought it."

There was no need to wonder what Grandma referred to. Liz gulped a fortifying sip of scalding coffee.

"There you are!"

She turned gratefully toward the timely interruption. Jazzy and Caitlin strode across the lobby, looking much brighter and more alert than Liz felt. Liz inspected her friends with fresh eyes, aware that Grandma was examining them through her usual critical lens.

Liz performed the introductions. "Grandma and Debbie, these are my friends from Kentucky. Jazzy plays the violin, and Caitlin the flute."

Astute about the niceties with elderly relatives, they each shook hands with Grandma first, and then the bride. Petite Jazzy turned on her elfin grin. "Mrs. Carmichael, I'm so pleased to meet you. Liz has spoken of you."

Grandma sent a suspicious glance at Liz. "Has she now?"

Jazzy nodded and settled into the chair opposite Liz as Caitlin eyed the tray. "I'm going to go grab some coffee. Want some, Jazz?"

"Please."

"Would you see if they have any butter for these rolls, dear?" Grandma gave Caitlin a brief smile. "Not that I expect them to

have real butter, but it doesn't hurt to ask."

"Yes, ma'am."

While Caitlin headed toward the coffee shop, Grandma turned a hard stare toward Liz. "As I was saying, Elizabeth. Have you brought it?"

A cold shaft shot through Liz. She felt like a kid again, pinned under Grandma's glare. She nodded.

Grandma's eyebrows arched. "Well?"

Aware of Jazzy's curious stare and Debbie's cringe, Liz reached for her purse, which she'd placed on the floor beside the chair. Under the watchful gaze of Grandma, she fished in the depths of the leather bag until her fingers encountered a familiar silken box. She pulled it out and, cradling the box in her hand, flipped the lid open.

Inside, a golden, jeweled brooch, shaped like a dragonfly, nestled against a red velvet background. Delicate pearls and glittering emeralds, undoubtedly fake but still beautiful, caught the dull lobby lights and tossed rainbow glints toward her. She took a long, last look at the pin, bidding it a mental farewell, then snapped the lid closed and held it toward Grandma.

"Here you are."

Grandma drew both hands up to her chest and reared backward, her expression horrified. "I can't take it back! It has passed on, however inappropriately. Give it to her."

She nodded toward Debbie.

Liz extended the box toward her cousin. Debbie's eyes

widened, creases wrinkling her smooth brow. Her hands remained clasped in her lap.

"I don't know, Grandma," she said, her gaze on the box. "Seems to me like it should wait until after the wedding. Don't you think?"

"Not after the wedding, dear." Grandma's lipsticked mouth pursed. "But it's true that my mother gave it to me on my wedding day, not before." Her glare caught Liz's gaze and held it. "Perhaps it is safer to wait until the day of the wedding. We don't want to repeat the dreadful mistakes of the past."

A rush of heat ran from the top of Liz's head through her core. No, of course she didn't want a repeat performance of what had happened to her and Tim. Still, if a mistake had been made, it could only be attributed to Grandma, the person who had jumped the gun in passing down the heirloom brooch. But Liz certainly wasn't going to point that out.

"Liz?" Jazzy leaned forward in her chair, her face full of questions. "You're giving away your pin? But you love that pin."

Caitlin arrived in time to hear Jazzy's question, and turned an inquiring gaze on Liz as she handed Jazzy a full coffee mug.

"Love it or not," Grandma said, her voice unyielding, "it is not hers to keep. It belongs to Deborah now."

"Not yet," Debbie rushed to say. "Not until I'm married." The smile she turned toward Liz held a touch of desperation. "It's yours for another three days."

Liz drew her hand back to her lap and curled her fingers

protectively around the box. The silk felt cool and smooth to her touch.

"I don't understand." Caitlin dropped onto the third sofa cushion, on the other side of Grandma. "I thought that pin was an heirloom that's been in your family for a long time."

"Oh, it has." Grandma sipped from her coffee before returning the mug to the sofa table. She settled back. "I have an oil painting of my grandmother wearing the brooch in 1885, when she first immigrated to this country from England. That would be Elizabeth and Deborah's great-great-grandmother."

"Wow." Jazzy eyed the box in Liz's hand. "So Liz got to keep it for a while, and now it goes to Debbie?"

Liz gritted her teeth. Here it came. She had been friends with these girls for three years, since she moved to Kentucky and joined the Lexington Community Church young adult group, but she'd never told them—or anyone else in Kentucky—about the shameful part of her past.

Grandma turned a highbrowed glare her way. "It would have stayed with Elizabeth if she had married that nice young man she was engaged to, like she was supposed to."

FIVE

"Engaged?" Caitlin's blond eyebrows shot upward and disappeared beneath her bangs.

Liz squirmed under her friend's openmouthed stare.

Jazzy looked as shocked as Caitlin. "You never told us you were engaged."

Liz sank lower in the chair. A lame excuse came to mind: The subject never came up! But now was not the time, nor the place, to get into a big discussion about her past. She gave Jazzy an "I'd rather not talk about this right now" look.

But Grandma either didn't see it or didn't care. "Oh, yes. She was engaged to a fine young man she'd dated all the way through college, a local boy from a good family. His parents go to my church." She frowned at Liz. "After Elizabeth broke his heart, I couldn't look them in the eye for months."

Liz opened her mouth to say that she didn't break his heart, but she closed it again. The expression on Tim's face that night still haunted her. To say she hadn't broken his heart would be a lie.

"Liz was right to break off the engagement," Debbie argued loyally. "Marriage is a serious step, a lifetime commitment. If she wasn't one-hundred-percent sure, she did the right thing."

Liz gave her a grateful look, but she could see the unspoken accusation hovering in her cousin's eyes.

I know, I know. I could have handled it a lot better.

“That’s as it may be,” Grandma said, “but it doesn’t change the fact that the brooch is to pass to the first woman to marry in each generation of our family.” She closed her eyes briefly and inclined her head over her mug. “Perhaps I acted hastily in giving Elizabeth the brooch as an engagement present. Since I was blessed with two sons and no daughters, I was too eager to see the heirloom handed down. I never dreamed the outcome would be so…” Her lips tightened. “Disappointing.”

Time to change the subject. Liz dropped the box into her purse and straightened in her chair.

“I’ll hold on to it until Saturday, then,” she told Debbie. “So. What’s on the agenda for today?”

Judging from the expressions on Jazzy’s and Caitlin’s faces, the subject was far from closed. A third degree loomed on the horizon, but at least they were willing to delay the discussion.

Debbie, too, thank goodness. “We’ve got about a million appointments,” she said. “You are coming along with Grandma and me to visit the florist and the caterer, and I need to stop by the jewelry store sometime and pick up Ryan’s ring.” Her gaze shifted to Caitlin and Jazzy. “You two are welcome to come along with us today, if you like.”

“Actually, we thought we’d take advantage of the location and go skiing.” Caitlin grinned in Jazzy’s direction. “Jazzy has never skied, so she’s looking forward to giving it a try.”

Liz tried not to envy her friends their day on the slopes. That sure did sound a lot more fun than running around Park City with

her surly grandmother.

A commotion behind them caused Debbie to turn, and her face lit up. “There’s Ryan! He and some of the guys are skiing today, too.” She set her mug down and leaped up from the couch.

Liz started to twist in her chair. She hadn’t seen her cousin’s fiancé since she left Utah three years before.

Debbie froze. Her eyes widened and she looked down at Liz. “Oh, look.” Her voice held a note of strain. “All Ryan’s groomsmen are with him.”

A sudden panic snatched the breath right out of Liz’s throat. All his groomsmen? Including the best man?

Tim followed the guys through the front entrance of the lodge, their thick ski suits shush, shush, shushing with every step. He hung toward the back of their small group, half-wishing he’d arranged to meet up with them later at the chairlift. But there was no sense in postponing the inevitable meeting. He was sure to run into Liz sooner or later. Might as well get it over with.

“There they are.” Ryan lifted a hand to wave at Debbie, then slowed to fall in step with Tim as they crossed the lobby. “Looks like Liz is here. You okay with that?”

No. Not by a long shot. But what choice do I have?

Tim forced a casual smile. “Sure. Water under the bridge.”

Ryan clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, dude.”

As they approached the group by the fireplace, Debbie launched herself into Ryan’s arms and greeted him with an

enthusiastic kiss that belied the fact they saw each other several times a week. Tim watched their embrace with a sense of satisfaction. Ryan was his best friend, and one lucky guy. Every man deserved to have a woman who loved him like Debbie loved Ryan.

He ignored an un-Christian twinge of jealousy. Every man? Even him?

His gaze swept the group of women seated around the fire. A couple of strangers, Debbie's grandmother and—

Pain punched him in the gut. His feet stopped moving.

Liz sat in a big padded chair, holding on to a coffee mug with both hands. She was staring into her cup, her head tilted forward, so he indulged in a moment looking her over, noting the changes three years had wrought. Her hair had grown long. As he watched, she smoothed it behind a delicate ear. She looked a bit thinner, her neck more slender and elegant. Ah, but that chiseled nose hadn't changed, and neither had those soft lips he remembered so well.

Her shoulders rose as she drew in a breath, and in the next moment she looked up. Their gazes locked.

The breath whooshed out of his lungs.

She was even more stunning than he remembered.

Lord, this is not fair. Couldn't she have gotten uglier?

Two faint spots of color appeared on her cheeks and she looked away, but not before Tim saw her lips press firmly together. Her shoulders angled slightly away from the group,

from him. He'd received some instruction in body language in his law enforcement training, so he recognized the meaning behind her unconscious gesture. She was distancing herself. She didn't want anything to do with him.

Tim cleared his throat. If that's the way she wanted to play it, fine. He rounded the sofa and stood on the other side of the coffee table from Liz and Debbie's grandmother.

"Mrs. Carmichael, it's a pleasure to see you again."

She gave him a warm smile and allowed him to take her hand. "It's been too long, young man. You should attend church with your parents more often."

"Oh, you know how it is when you have to work for a living. I don't get too many weekends off, and when I do, I have a church up here in Park City I've grown fond of."

Mrs. Carmichael released his hand and gestured toward the two strangers. "Allow me to introduce these lovely girls." She inclined her head. "But I'm afraid I've already forgotten their names."

The blonde seated on the couch beside the elderly lady extended a hand. "I'm Caitlin Saylor. And this is Jasmine Delaney."

He shook her hand and reached for the brunette's as Mrs. Carmichael identified them. "They're Elizabeth's musician friends from Kentucky, here to play at Deborah and Ryan's wedding. Girls, this is Tim Richards, Elizabeth's former fiancé."

The petite brunette's expression froze as her eyes flicked

toward Liz. Then her smile widened artificially. “My friends call me Jazzy. It’s nice to meet you, Tim.”

“You, too.” Thank goodness his voice sounded normal.

Mrs. Carmichael nodded at the girls. “Tim is a sheriff here in Park City.”

“Deputy Sheriff,” he corrected with a grin. “Welcome to Utah.”

He steeled his expression and turned toward Liz then. “You’re looking well, Liz.”

A smile flashed onto her lips and disappeared just as quickly, though she didn’t meet his eyes. “You, too, Tim.”

The sound of her low voice caused Tim’s heart to twist unexpectedly. He steeled himself against the assault of a million memories. Oh, the words that voice used to whisper in his ear.

Ryan came to his rescue.

“Liz, long time no see! C’mere and give me a hug.”

Liz hurriedly set her mug on the table as Ryan pulled her out of the chair and into an embrace.

“Hey, come meet the guys.”

Ryan performed the introductions and hands were shaken all around, while Tim stared out the window and battled a million memories the sight of Liz had unearthed.

He cleared his throat and nodded toward the window. “Hey, look. The lifts are running. Time to get our gear and hit the slopes.”

Ryan glanced at his watch. “We have fifteen minutes. We’re

going to get first tracks this morning, guys. Ought to be some awesome powder after that storm came through yesterday afternoon."

Patrick, one of Ryan's friends from work, started to turn away, then stopped. "Hey, is Jeremy joining us again today?"

Everyone froze. Debbie bit her lip and cast a wary glance at Tim. Ryan's eyes widened. Even Mrs. Carmichael stared into her coffee, uncharacteristically silent. Though it took every ounce of control he could muster, Tim forced his face to remain completely impassive. And he did not look at Liz.

"Uh, not today," Ryan said. "I think he's working or something."

Thank You, Lord. I don't think I can handle both of them in one day.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's get 'er done." Patrick, a newcomer to their group, obviously had no idea of the history he'd just unearthed. And as far as Tim was concerned, he didn't need to know. Like he told Ryan earlier, that was water under the bridge.

"Yeah," Tim agreed, "let's get going." He nodded toward Mrs. Carmichael and the girls, and continued to ignore Liz as he walked away.

While the guys headed for the door, Ryan pulled him aside. "Hey, dude, I hope you don't mind that Jeremy hung out with us yesterday. I wouldn't have asked him if you'd been along. You know that, right?"

Tim forced a laugh. “What is this, grade school? You can hang out with whoever you want. I’m your friend no matter what.” He grinned. “Even if you do have really bad taste in choosing the rest of your friends.”

Ryan clapped him on the shoulder. “Good man.”

A figure ran across the courtyard beyond the big windows by the fireplace, and a moment later a teenager in full winter gear ran into the lobby. He left a trail of snow on the tiled floor from his snowboarding boots as he jogged toward the front desk. His voice, pitched high with excitement, carried across the lobby.

“Where’s Mr. Harrison?”

Something in the kid’s tone drew Tim’s attention. He couldn’t hear the reply mumbled by the woman at the desk. But the teenager’s next statement carried clearly to the group by the fireplace.

“We found a frozen dead guy on the Crested Eagle lift!”

SIX

Liz sat straight up in her chair. Did that kid just say…

A memory surfaced. Last night, standing on the balcony, the figure trudging across the slopes in the moonlight. Later, the chairlift starting to move. Had she seen the man moments before he caught a lift ride to his death?

She turned in time to see the woman at the front desk point toward the coffee shop. The teenager ran across the lobby and dashed through the door.

"Did you hear that?" Debbie's round eyes swept the group around the fireplace.

"I certainly did." Grandma grabbed Debbie's hand over the back of the couch. "Deborah, we must find another location for the wedding immediately, though where we'll find someplace suitable on such short notice is beyond me. I'll call Reverend Bowers and see if he can free up the sanctuary."

Debbie shook her head, confusion creasing her forehead. "Why do we need to move the wedding?"

Grandma's nostrils flared. "You can't have a wedding on a property where a death has just occurred!"

Ryan returned to the group. Liz looked up in time to see Tim disappear into the coffee shop.

"Tim's going to see if he can help," Ryan told them. "He'll join us on the slopes after the sheriff gets here."

Startled, Liz's gaze flew to Ryan's face. "The sheriff? Why?"

Ryan shrugged. "Routine, I guess. A death at a local business probably needs an official statement or something. And somebody has to notify the next of kin and all that."

Debbie looked up into his face. "Do you think we should move the wedding?"

Ryan put an arm around her waist and squeezed. "No. This place is just what we wanted for our big day." He lowered his voice. "But I don't think we'll ski here today. I'm sure they'll have to close that lift for a while, and that will shut down all the runs it services."

Debbie looked at Jazzy. "If you're still planning on skiing today you might want to go with the guys."

"You're welcome to join us," Ryan said. "We'll probably head over to Park City Mountain."

"Sounds like a good idea," Jazzy said, and Caitlin nodded. "I've never been on skis, so I can learn there as well as here."

"Park City Mountain's ski school is really good," Debbie said. "You can sign up for a lesson when you buy your lift ticket."

The sight of that figure carrying a snowboard across the snow would not leave Liz's mind. She really didn't want to go into that coffee shop with Tim in there, but what if she was the only one who had witnessed the dead person's final moments? She stood abruptly. Everyone looked at her.

"I need to talk to Mr. Harrison," she said.

Grandma's voice followed her. "We have a schedule to keep

today!"

"I'll only be a minute."

Liz stepped through the open doorway in time to hear the end of the teenager's account. Tim glanced at her once, then returned his attention to the kid. Thank goodness. Even that brief glance made her want to scurry for cover, like a bug on the kitchen floor. She had forgotten how handsome he was. Or maybe she'd just wanted to forget. Either way, she certainly hadn't anticipated feeling a surge of attraction when she saw him again, and she didn't like it. Not one bit.

"…and Cameron said he thought it was a joke, you know? Like the time Dawson dressed up his mom's sewing dummy in ski clothes and sent it up the lift. But when Cameron tried to pull it off, he saw it wasn't no dummy." The kid's eyes went round. "It was a dead guy."

Mr. Harrison emitted a strangled moan.

"Where is the body now?" Tim's voice held an authoritative note that Liz had never heard. Of course, he had become a deputy after she moved to Kentucky, so she'd never seen him in an official capacity. His steady tone acted as a calming counterpoint to the teenager's shrill delivery.

"Up at the top of the lift, lying on the unloading ramp. It fell off the chair when Cameron jerked it." He included Liz in his explanation. A patch of stark white skin surrounded his eyes like a mask on his deeply tanned face, caused by hours in the sun wearing ski goggles. He looked back at Mr. Harrison. "He called

the base, and Mrs. Harrison sent the ski patrol over there. Then she told me to come tell you, because you didn't answer your cell phone."

"It's back in my office." Mr. Harrison's expression became apprehensive. "Did Cameron say who it was?"

The teen shrugged. "He didn't say."

Tim unzipped the breast pocket of his ski suit and pulled out a cell phone. "I'll call the sheriff."

The resort owner started visibly, then gave a resigned nod. "Thank you, Brandon. Tell Mrs. Harrison we'll need a couple of snowmobiles when the sheriff arrives."

Brandon nodded and left, leaving Liz alone with Mr. Harrison…and Tim. He spoke into his phone in curt, clipped sentences. Mr. Harrison watched from his position on the other side of the counter, while Liz stood next to Tim, so close she could smell the subtle scent of his aftershave. He was still wearing the same brand he'd worn in college. She took a sideways step, putting a comfortable distance between her and her ex-fiancé.

Tim disconnected the call and dropped it back into his pocket. Only then did he finally look at her, his expression politely blank. "Did you need something?"

"I—" Liz cleared her throat. "I might have seen something. Last night. Uh, I mean this morning. Early." Unable to hold his gaze, she addressed Mr. Harrison as she described her late-night episode on the balcony.

"Let me get this straight," Tim interrupted. "You saw a man

walking up the slope in the middle of the night, and you didn't think that was odd?"

"At first I thought he might be a local looking for loot dropped from skiers on the lift, you know?" She avoided looking at him, not wanting him to see that she was remembering how they'd done that a couple of times themselves, searching for lost treasures by the light of the moon.

"Locals don't typically turn on the chairlifts."

His cool, professional tone sent heat to Liz's face. "When the lift started running, I figured it was an employee doing an equipment check or something."

"At one-thirty in the morning?"

"Some employees have to work late into the night, especially at the resorts with night skiing." She hated that her voice sounded defensive.

"Eagle Summit doesn't have night skiing," Tim said.

"Well, how was I to know that?" she shot back. "I've been gone three years, you know."

"I know." His mouth clamped shut on the last word.

"Do you think the deceased is an employee?" Mr. Harrison seemed alarmed at the thought. "Surely not. It must be a snowboarder who snuck by the lift operator during the final sweep yesterday, trying to get in one last run. At least—" he paused to swallow hard "—that's what I thought until I heard Miss Carmichael's story."

Tim nodded. "We'll need to pull the daily logs and verify that

the operators on duty yesterday recorded a good last chair, but if what Liz says is true, I'm guessing the end-of-day procedures will all check out."

"Maybe it was somebody trying to do a little unauthorized night skiing," Liz suggested. "Some of those extreme boarders are crazy, you know."

Liz snapped her mouth shut. No need to remind Tim about the nature of snowboarders. He had been an extreme snowboarder and skier during college. He'd skied anything and everything that had even a thin layer of snow, inbounds if he had to, out of bounds preferably. He and his buddies had worked as part-time lift operators, not for the pay, but for the free lift passes.

Why couldn't she just keep her mouth shut and resist the urge to remind Tim of the past? For some crazy reason Liz wanted to jab at him, to cut through that professional mask and get a glimpse of the Tim she knew so well.

Tim ignored the jab. From the corner of her eye she saw him watching her, but she refused to look at him. Instead, she focused her attention on Mr. Harrison.

The poor guy looked as if he might faint. He bent at the waist and planted his elbows on the counter to drop his forehead onto his hands. "This is terrible. Think of the publicity."

Odd reaction, considering someone had died. "Publicity?" Liz asked.

The resort owner nodded without raising his head. "I know, I know. What a self-centered response, and completely

mercenary. Some poor man froze to death right here on our property. I'm sorry for him and his family, I really am. But do you know what this is going to do to us?" He tilted his head to look up at her without straightening. "We're barely making our payroll as it is. If word of a death at Eagle Summit gets out, who's going to want to ski here? This could sink us."

At the sound of rustling behind her, Liz turned in time to see Grandma stride through the door. The outrage on her face sent Liz backward ten years to the time she and Debbie were fifteen-year-olds caught joyriding around the neighborhood in Grandma's new Buick. Thank goodness Grandma had another target in her sights at the moment. Though Liz felt sorry for Mr. Harrison.

Grandma planted herself inside the doorway and speared the resort owner with a searing gaze. "Young man, I'd like a word with you."

The man straightened and managed to look like an aging delinquent in a suit and tie. "Yes, ma'am?"

"My granddaughter has decided to ignore my advice about moving the wedding to a more suitable location." A single flare of her nostrils left no doubt as to her opinion on that matter. "So it appears the wedding party will be staying here after all, as arranged."

Mr. Harrison let out a quiet sigh. "I appreciate that, Mrs. Carmichael."

"I'm sure you do. However, I just attempted to check in and

was told by the impertinent girl at the front desk that a room won't be available until four o'clock." She brought her wrist up before her face to glance at her watch in a deliberate gesture. "That is eight hours from now. Unacceptable, sir. Quite unacceptable."

Mr. Harrison hurried around the counter. "A misunderstanding, madam. I assure you, your suite is ready, and I think you'll be pleased with it. I've personally selected all the accommodations for the bridal party, the best the lodge has to offer. I'll make sure the staff understands you and your guests are to receive VIP treatment."

"Hmmph." Grandma's sniff indicated her willingness to be mollified, especially if she could enjoy VIP status. She caught Liz in her gaze. "When you're finished here, Elizabeth, join Deborah and me in my suite. And don't be too long."

She followed Mr. Harrison out of the shop, leaving Liz and Tim alone. Five awkward seconds was all Liz could handle before she headed for the exit.

"Liz!"

She stopped, but did not turn. Silence stretched between them. Liz fought the urge to look at him, to see his expression. But she'd taken all of the cold glances she could handle from him this morning. She would not turn around and face another one.

Finally he spoke. "Don't go far. The sheriff will be here in a minute. He'll want to talk to you." His voice was flat, impersonal.

The same voice he'd used three years ago, the day their engagement crumbled.

Throat tight, Liz gave a single nod and left the coffee shop.

SEVEN

Tim stood inside the front entrance, watching for the sheriff's car. When the white Durango pulled beneath the awning, he stepped outside.

"Richards." Sheriff Zach Daniels stood from the driver's seat and folded muscled arms over his barrel chest. "What's the situation?"

Tim straightened to his full height and still had to raise his chin slightly to look the six-four sheriff in the eye. "Everything's quiet down here. Word hasn't gotten out yet. The body's up at the top of the lift." He briefly outlined the information he'd learned from the teenager, the sheriff nodding as he listened. "The owner, Mr. Harrison, has arranged for a snowmobile to take you up."

Sheriff Daniels's gaze swept over Tim's ski suit. "You off today?"

"Yes, sir. But I'll stick around if you need me."

Daniels gave a curt nod and leaned into the car to grab the radio. He requested a deputy to be dispatched to Eagle Summit Resort before tossing the radio back inside and slamming the door closed. "Hang close for a little while. Somebody will relieve you shortly."

The man strode toward the door without waiting for an answer. Tim fell in step behind him. Inside, a handful of skiers marched across the lobby toward the rear door, their ski boots

clattering on the tile floor. Mr. Harrison, hovering beside Liz near the front desk, spotted Tim and the sheriff and hurried in their direction.

"I'm Greg Harrison," he said. "My wife and I own Eagle Summit Resort."

Sheriff Daniels shook the man's hand. "I understand a body has been found on the premises." His voice boomed throughout the lobby. The skiers skidded to a stop and turned to stare.

Harrison winced and spoke in a low voice. "If you don't mind, can we step into my office to talk? I'd prefer not to alarm the guests."

He led them to an office beyond the front desk. When he opened the door and gestured for them to enter, Tim followed the sheriff into a large room with no windows and only two chairs —one behind a cluttered desk and one in front of it. Sheriff Daniels strode without hesitation to the high-backed desk chair. Tim crossed to stand against the opposite wall, turning in time to see Liz precede Harrison through the door. The sheriff noticed her and turned a questioning glance on Tim.

"This is Liz Carmichael," Tim said as Harrison closed the door. "She arrived in Park City late last night and witnessed something that might prove helpful."

The sheriff's stern expression relaxed into a warm smile when he looked at Liz. Tim shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His attractive former fiancé frequently had that effect on men. Daniels rose and extended a hand across the desk.

“Miss Carmichael, I’m Zach Daniels, Summit County Sheriff. It’s a pleasure to welcome you to our town.”

Liz took his hand. “Thank you, Sheriff.”

He gestured toward the chair, and Liz seated herself, placing her purse on the floor beside her. Harrison came to stand against the wall beside Tim, while Daniels slid back into the desk chair.

“Where are you from, Miss Carmichael?”

“Portland originally, but I live in Kentucky now.” She perched on the edge of her seat, hands clasped tightly in her lap. “Though, I’m not a stranger to Utah. I went to college at the U.”

“Ah, a fellow alumni from the University of Utah.” Sheriff Daniels leaned against the chair back. “But I’m sure you were there long after me. I probably graduated about the same time as your grandfather.”

Tim saw Liz’s rigid posture relax a fraction as she returned his smile. “I doubt that. You’re not nearly old enough.”

“You’d be surprised.” He propped his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers. “I’ve never been to Kentucky, but I hear it’s beautiful. Where do you live?”

Tim watched as the sheriff drew Liz out with a few minutes of chatter, admiring his technique that put her completely at ease. He effortlessly extracted the reason for Liz’s trip to Utah and the details of her arrival in Park City. Tim would have jumped in with, “Describe what you saw” immediately, but he recognized the wisdom of Daniels’s approach. A calm witness was much easier to question. Only when Liz relaxed enough to rest her

back against the chair did he bring the conversation around to the point.

"So tell me about last night, Miss Carmichael. Deputy Richards said you saw something that may be important?"

The sheriff's first mistake, though an unwitting one. At the mention of Tim's name, Liz glanced sideways at him and her shoulders stiffened.

She can't stand to be in the same room with me.

Which was completely unfair. After all, who was the injured party here? Who got dumped three weeks after announcing their engagement to his friends and his whole family? Who was left looking like a chump? He gathered his eyebrows into a scowl as Liz gave a halting account of her midnight view from the balcony.

Sheriff Daniels let her finish before uttering a word. "Interesting. Did you notice what he was wearing?"

"A bulky jacket, probably a ski jacket. It might have been black or some other dark color. I…" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't know about the rest. I want to say jeans, but I can't be sure. They could just as easily have been ski pants."

"And snowboarding boots?"

She nodded, then hesitated. "I—I think so. I mean, if he was carrying a snowboard, surely he had on the boots."

"About how big was the snowboard he carried? And how did he carry it?"

She shot Tim another quick glance that stabbed at him. Did the sheriff's question bring to mind for her the time she helped

him shop for the right size of snowboard, as it did to him? Her lips tightened for a moment before she answered. “I can’t say for sure how long it was. Four and a half feet, maybe? He carried it lengthways, under his right arm as he walked.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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