

Love-Inspired
SUSPENSE
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

STRANGER IN THE SHADOWS

Shirlee
McCoy



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Stranger in the Shadows

Аннотация

Someone was watching Chloe Davidson. She had the unsettling feeling the stalker was waiting to strike. But who could it be? After a heartbreaking tragedy, Chloe had relocated to sleepy, safe Lakeview, Virginia, where she'd spent idyllic summers as a child. Where handsome minister Ben Avery had welcomed her and helped her believe in more than she'd ever thought possible. Yet her fear had followed her. Chloe kept seeing a stranger lurking in the shadows. And her things were going missing. Was it just her fragile imagination? Or was a sinister somebody much closer than she ever expected?

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To Brenda Minton who makes me laugh when I want to cry. Thanks for the brainstorming sessions and the pep talks, but mostly thanks for being you. And to Bob and Jan Porter and Dick and Carolyn Livesey who are true encouragers. Thanks for always cheering me on!

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EPILOGUE

ONE

It came in the night, whispering into her dreams. Silent stars, hazy moonlight, a winding road. Sudden, blinding light.

Impact.

Rolling, tumbling, terror. And then silence.

Smoke danced at the edges of memory as flames writhed serpentlike through cracked glass and crumbled metal, hissing and whirling in the timeless dance of death.

Adam! She reached for his hand, wanting to pull him from the car and from the dream—whole and alive. Safe. But her questing hand met empty space and hot flame, her body flinching with the pain and the horror of it.

Sirens blared in the distance, their throbbing pulse a heartbeat ebbing and flowing with the growing flames. She turned toward the door, trying to push aside hot, bent metal, and saw a shadow beyond the shattered glass; a dark figure leaning toward the window, staring in. Dark eyes that seemed to glow in the growing flames.

Help me! She tried to scream the words, but they caught in her throat. And the shadow remained still and silent, watching as the car burned and she burned with it.

The shrill ring of an alarm clock sounded over the roar of flames, spearing into Chloe Davidson's consciousness and

pulling her from the nightmare. For a moment there was nothing but the dream. No past. No present. No truth except hot flames and searing pain. But the flames weren't real, the pain a fading memory. Reality was...what?

Chloe scrambled to anchor herself in the present before she fell back into the foggy world of unknowns she'd lived in during the weeks following the accident.

"Saturday. Lakeview, Virginia. The Morran wedding. Flowers. Decorations." She listed each item as it came to mind, grabbing towels from the tiny closet beside the bathroom door, pulling clothes from her dresser. Black pants. Pink shirt. Blooming Baskets' uniform. Her new job. Her new life. A normality she still didn't quite believe in.

The phone rang before she could get in the shower, the muted sound drawing her from the well-lit bedroom and into the dark living room beyond.

"Hello?" She pressed the receiver to her ear as she flicked on lamps and the overhead light, her heart still racing, her throbbing leg an insistent reminder of the nightmare she'd survived.

"Chloe. Opal, here."

At the sound of her friend and boss's voice, Chloe relaxed, leaning her hip against the sofa and forcing the dream and the memories to the back of her mind. "You've only been gone a day and you're already checking in?"

"Checking in? I wasn't planning to do that until tonight. This is business. We've got a problem. Jenna's gone into labor."

Opal's only other full-time employee, Jenna Monroe, was eight months pregnant and glowing with it. At least she had been when Chloe had seen her the previous day. "She's not due for another four weeks."

"Maybe not, but the baby has decided to make an appearance. You're going to have to handle the setup for the Morran wedding on your own until I can get there."

"I'll call Mary Alice—"

"Mary Alice is going to have to stay at the store. We can't afford to close for the day and between the two of you, she's the better floral designer."

"It doesn't take much to be better than me." Chloe's dry comment fell on deaf ears, Opal's voice continuing on, giving directions and listing jobs that needed to be done before the wedding guests arrived at the church.

"So, that's it. Any questions?"

"No. But you do realize I've only been working at Blooming Baskets for five days, right?"

"Are you saying you can't do this?"

"I'm saying I'll try, but I can't guarantee the results."

"No need to guarantee anything. I've already left Baltimore. I'll be in Lakeview at least an hour before the wedding. We'll finish the job together."

"If I haven't ruined everything by then."

"What's to ruin? We're talking flowers, ribbons and bows." Opal paused, and Chloe could imagine her raking a hand through

salt and pepper curls, her strong face set in an impatient frown. “Look, I have faith in your ability to handle this. Why don’t you try to have some, too?”

The phone clicked as Opal disconnected, and Chloe set the receiver down.

Faith? Maybe she’d had it once—in herself and her abilities, in those she cared about. But that was before the accident, before Adam’s death. Before his betrayal. Before everything had changed.

Now she wasn’t even sure she knew what the word meant.

It didn’t take long to shower and change, to grab her keys and make her way out of her one-bedroom apartment and into the dark hallway of the aging Victorian she lived in.

Outside it was still dark, brisk fall air dancing through the grass and rustling the dying leaves of the bushes that flanked the front porch. Chloe scanned the shadowy yard, the trees that stretched spindly arms toward the heavens, the inky water of Smith Mountain Lake. There seemed a breathless quality to the morning, a watchful waiting that crawled along Chloe’s nerves and made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. A million eyes could be watching from the woods beside the house, a hundred men could be sliding silently toward the car and she’d never know it, never see it until it was too late.

Cold sweat broke out on her brow, her hand shaking as she got in the car and shoved the keys into the ignition.

“You are not going to have a panic attack about this.” She

hissed the words as she drove up the long driveway and turned onto the road, refusing to think about what she was doing, refusing to dwell on the darkness that pressed against the car windows. Soon dawn would come, burning away the night and her memories. For now, she'd just have to deal with both.

Forty minutes later, Chloe arrived at Grace Christian Church, the pink Blooming Baskets van she'd picked up at the shop loaded with decorations and floral arrangements. It was just before seven. The wedding was scheduled for noon. Guests would arrive a little before then. That meant she had four hours to get ready for what Opal and Jenna had called the biggest event to take place in Lakeview in a decade. And Chloe was the one setting up for it.

She would have laughed if she weren't so sure she was about to fail. Miserably.

Cold crisp air stung her cheeks as she stepped to the back of the van and pulled open the double doors. The sickeningly sweet funeral-parlor stench nearly made her gag as she dragged the first box out.

"Need a hand?"

The voice was deep, masculine and so unexpected Chloe jumped, the box of wrought iron candelabras dropping from her hands. She whirled toward the sound, but could see nothing but the deep gray shadows of trees and foliage. "Thank you, but I'm fine."

"You sure? Looks like you've got a full van there." A figure emerged from the trees, a deeper shadow among many others,

but moving closer.

“I can manage.” As she spoke, she dug in her jacket pocket, her fist closing around the small canister of pepper spray she carried. She didn’t know who this guy was, but if he got much closer he was going to get a face full of pain.

“I’m sure you can, but Opal won’t be happy if I let you. She just ordered me out of bed and over here to help. So here I am. Ready to lend a hand. Or two.” His voice was amiable, his stride unhurried. Chloe released her hold on the spray.

“Opal shouldn’t have bothered you, Mr...?”

“Ben Avery. And it wasn’t a bother.”

She knew the name, had heard plenty about the handsome widower who pastored Grace Christian Church. Opal’s description of the man’s single-and-available status had led Chloe to believe he was Opal’s contemporary. Late fifties or early sixties.

In the dim morning light, he looked closer to thirty and not like any pastor Chloe had ever seen, his hair just a little too long, his leather jacket more biker than preacher.

“Bother or not, I’m sure you have other things to do with your time, Pastor Avery.”

“I can’t think of any offhand. And call me Ben. Everyone else does.” He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners, the scent of pine needles and soap drifting on the air as he leaned forward and grabbed the box she’d dropped.

Chloe thought about arguing, but insisting she do the job

herself would only waste time she didn't have. She shrugged. "Then I guess I'll accept your help and say thanks."

"You might want to hold off on the thanks until we see how many flower arrangements I manage to massacre."

"You're not the only one who may massacre a few. I know as much about flowers as the average person knows about nuclear physics."

He laughed, the sound shivering along Chloe's nerves and bringing her senses to life. "Opal did mention that you're a new hire."

"Should I ask what else she mentioned?"

"You can, but that was about all she said. That and, 'It'll be on your head, Ben Avery, if Chloe decides to quit because of the pressure she's under today.'"

"That sounds just like her. The rat."

"She is, but she's a well-meaning rat."

"Very true." Chloe pulled out another box. "And I really could use the help. This is a big job."

"Then I guess we'd better get moving. Between the two of us we should be able to get most of the setup done before Opal arrives." Ben pushed open the church door, waiting as Chloe moved more slowly across the parking lot.

"Ladies first." He gestured for her to step inside, but Chloe hesitated.

She hated the dark. Hated the thought of what might be lurking in it. The inside of the church was definitely dark, the

inky blackness lit by one tiny pinpoint of light flashing from the ceiling. She knew it must be a smoke detector, but her mind spiraled into the darkness, carried her back to the accident, to the shadowy figure standing outside the window of the car, to the eyes that had seemed to glow red, searing into her soul and promising a slow, torturous death.

She swayed, her heart racing so fast she was sure she was going to pass out.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ben wrapped a hand around her arm, anchoring her in place, his warmth chasing away some of the fear that shivered through her.

“I’m fine.” Of course she wasn’t fine. Not by a long shot. But her terror was only a feeling, the danger imagined.

She took a deep breath, stepped into the room, the darkness enveloping her as the door clicked shut. Chloe forced herself to concentrate on the moment, on the soft pad of Ben’s shoes as he moved across the floor, the scent of pine needles and soap that drifted on the air around him.

Finally, overhead lights flicked on, illuminating a wide hallway. Hardwood floors, creamy walls, bulletin boards filled with announcements and pictures. The homey warmth of it drew her in and welcomed her.

Chloe turned, facing Ben, seeing him clearly for the first time, her heart leaping as she looked into the most vividly blue eyes she’d ever seen. Deep sapphire, they burned into hers, glowing with life, with energy, with an interest that made Chloe step back,

the box clutched close, a flimsy barrier between herself and the man who'd done what no other had in the past year—made her want to keep looking, made her want to know more, made her wish she were the woman she'd been before Adam's death.

His gaze touched her face, the scar on her neck, the mottled flesh of her hand, but he didn't comment or ask the questions so many people felt they had the right to. "The sanctuary is through here. Let's bring these in. Then I'll make some coffee before we get the rest from the van."

Chloe followed silently, surprised by her response to Ben and not happy about it. She'd made too many mistakes with Adam, had too many regrets. There wasn't room for anything else. Or anyone.

"Where do you want these?" Ben's question pulled her from her thoughts and she glanced around the large room. Rows of pews, their dark wood gleaming in the overhead light, flanked a middle aisle. A few stairs led to a pulpit and a choir loft, a small door to one side of them closed tight.

"On the first pew will be fine. I'll start there and work my way back." She avoided looking in Ben's direction as she spoke, preferring to tell herself she'd imagined the bright blue of his eyes, the warm interest there. He was a pastor, after all, and she was a woman who had no interest in men.

"Am I making you nervous?"

Startled, Chloe glanced up, found herself pulled into his gaze again.

“No.” At least not much. “Why do you ask?”

“Sometimes my job makes people uncomfortable.” He smiled, his sandy hair and strong, handsome face giving him a boy-next-door appearance that seemed at odds with the intensity in his eyes.

“Not me.” Though Ben seemed to be having that effect on her.

“Good to know.” He smiled again, but his gaze speared into hers and she wondered what he was seeing as he looked so deeply into her eyes. “And just so we’re clear. Florists don’t make me uncomfortable.”

Despite herself, Chloe smiled. “Then I guess that means we’ll both be nice and relaxed while we work.”

“Not until we have some coffee. I don’t know about you, but I’m not much good for anything until I’ve had a cup.”

His words were the perfect excuse to end the conversation and move away from Ben, and Chloe started back toward the sanctuary door, anxious to refocus her thinking, recenter her thoughts. “I’ll keep unloading while you make some.”

Ben put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her before she could exit the room. “If the rest of the boxes are as heavy as the last one, maybe you should make the coffee and I should unload.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You will be, but I won’t if Opal finds out I let you carry in a bunch of heavy boxes while I made coffee.”

“Who’s going to tell her?”

“I’d feel obligated to. After all, she’s bound to ask how things

went and I'm bound to tell the truth."

For the second time since she'd met Ben, Chloe found herself smiling at his words. Not good. Not good at all. Men were bad news. At least all the men in Chloe's life had been. The sooner she put distance between herself and Ben, the better she'd feel. "Since you put it that way, I guess I can't argue."

"Glad to hear it, because arguing isn't getting me any closer to having that cup of coffee. Come on, I'll show you to the kitchen." He strode out of the sanctuary, moving with long, purposeful strides.

Chloe followed more slowly, not sure what it was about Ben that had sparked her interest and made her want to look closer. He was a man, just like any other man she'd ever known, but there was something in his eyes—secrets, depths—that begged exploration.

Fortunately, she'd learned her lesson about men the hard way and she had no intention of learning any more. She'd just get through the wedding preparations, get through the day, then go back to her apartment and forget Ben Avery and his compelling gaze.

TWO

The industrial-size kitchen had a modern feel with a touch of old-time charm, the stainless steel counters and appliances balanced by mellow gold paint, white cabinets and hardwood floor. Chloe hovered in the doorway, wary, unsure of herself in a way she hadn't been a year ago, watching as Ben plugged in a coffeemaker and pulled a can of coffee from a cupboard. He gestured her over and Chloe stepped into the room ignoring the erratic beat of her heart. "This is a nice space."

"Yeah, it is, but I can't take credit. We remodeled a couple of years ago. The church ladies decided on the setup and color scheme. Opal pretty much spearheaded the project."

"That doesn't surprise me. She's a take-charge kind of person. It's one of the things I admire about her."

"Have you known her long?" He leaned a hip against the counter, relaxed and at ease. Apparently not at all disturbed by the fact that he'd been called out of bed before dawn on a cool November day to help a woman he didn't know set up flowers for a wedding he was probably officiating.

Strange.

Interesting.

Intriguing.

Enough!

Chloe rubbed the scarred flesh on her wrist, forcing her

thoughts back to the conversation. “Since I was a kid.”

“You grew up in Lakeview?” His gaze was disconcerting, and Chloe resisted the urge to look away.

“No, I visited in the summer.” She didn’t add more. The past was something she didn’t share. Especially not with strangers.

Ben seemed to take the hint, turning away and pulling sugar packets from a cupboard. “It’s a good place to spend the summer. And the fall, winter and spring.” He smiled. “There’s cream in the fridge if you take it. I’d better get moving on those boxes.”

With that he strode from the room, his movements lithe and silent, almost catlike in their grace. He might be a pastor now, but Chloe had a feeling he’d been something else before he’d felt a call to ministry. Military. Police. Firefighter. Something that required control, discipline and strength.

Not that it mattered or was any of her business.

Chloe shook her head, reaching for a coffee filter and doing her best to concentrate on the task at hand. Obviously, the nightmare had thrown her off, destroying her focus and hard-won control. She needed to get both back and she needed to do it now. Opal was counting on her. There was no way she planned to disappoint the one person in her life who had never disappointed her.

She paced across the room, staring out the window above the sink, anxiety a cold, hard knot in her chest. New beginnings. That’s what she hoped for. Prayed for. But maybe she was too entrenched in the past to ever escape it. Maybe coming to

Lakeview was nothing more than putting off the inevitable.

Outside, dawn bathed the churchyard in purple light and deep shadows, the effect sinister. Ominous. A thick stand of trees stood at the far end of the property, tall pines and heavy-branched oaks reaching toward the ever-brightening sky. As the coffee brewed, the rich, full scent of it filled the kitchen, bringing memories of hot summer days, lacy curtains, open windows, soft voices. Safety.

But safety and security never lasted. All Chloe could hope for was a measure of peace.

She started to turn away from the window, but something moved near the edge of the yard, a slight shifting in the darkness that caught her attention. Was that a person standing in the shadows of the trees? It was too far to see the details, the light too dim. But Chloe was sure there was a person there. Tall. Thin. Looking her way.

She took a step back, her pulse racing, her skin clammy and cold. This was the nightmare again. The stranger watching, waiting on the other side of the glass. Only this time Chloe wasn't trapped in a car and surrounded by flames. This time she was able to run. And that's just what she did, turning away from the window, rushing from the kitchen and slamming into a hard chest.

She flew back, her bad leg buckling, her hands searching for purchase. Her fingers sank into cool leather as strong arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her upright.

“Careful. We’ve got a lot to do. It’s probably best if we don’t kill each other before we finish.” Ben’s words tickled against her hair, his palms warm against her ribs. He felt solid and safe and much too comfortable.

Chloe stepped back, forcing herself to release her white-knuckled grip on his jacket. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to run you down.”

“You didn’t even come close.” His gaze swept over her, moving from her face, to her hands and back again. “Is everything okay? You look pale.”

“I...” But what was she going to say? That she’d seen someone standing outside the church? That she thought it might be the same person who’d stood outside her burning car, watching while the flames grew? The same person who’d been in jail for eleven months? “Everything is fine. I’m just anxious to get started in the sanctuary.”

He stared hard, as if he could see beyond her answer to the truth that she was trying to hide, the paranoia and fear that had dogged her for months. Finally, he nodded. “How about we grab the coffee and get started?”

Go back into the kitchen? Back near the window that looked out onto the yard? Maybe catch another glimpse of whoever was standing near the trees. No thanks. “You go ahead. I’ll start unpacking boxes.”

She hurried back toward the sanctuary, feeling the weight of Ben’s gaze as she stepped through the double wide doors.

She didn't look back, not wanting him to see the anxiety and frustration in her face.

She'd been so sure that moving away from D.C., leaving behind her apartment, her job, starting a new life, would free her from the anxiety that had become way too much a part of who she was. Seven days into her "new" life and she'd already sunk back into old patterns and thought processes.

Her hands trembled as she pulled chocolate-colored ribbon from a box and began decorating the first pew. Long-stemmed roses—deep red, creamy white, rusty orange—needed to be attached. She pulled a bouquet from a bucket Ben had brought in and wrestled it into place, a few petals falling near her feet as she tied a lopsided bow around the stems.

"Better be careful. Opal won't like it if the roses are bald when she gets here." Ben moved toward her, a coffee cup in each hand, sandy hair falling over his forehead.

"Hopefully, she won't notice a few missing petals."

"A few? No. A handful? Maybe." He set both cups on a pew and scooped up several silky petals. "I brought you coffee. Black. You didn't look like the sugar and cream type."

He was right, and Chloe wasn't sure she was happy about it. "What gave it away?"

"Your eyes." He didn't elaborate and Chloe didn't ask, just lifted the closest cup, inhaling the rich, sharp scent of the coffee and doing her best to avoid Ben's steady gaze.

Which annoyed her. She'd never been one to avoid trouble.

Never been one to back away from a challenge. Never been. But the accident had changed her.

She took a sip of the coffee, pulled more ribbon from the box, forcing lightness to her movements and to her voice. “They say the eyes are the window to the soul. If you’re seeing black coffee in mine, I’m in big trouble.”

“I’m seeing a lot more than black coffee in there.” He grabbed a bouquet of roses, holding it while Chloe hooked it in place and tied a ribbon around the stems, feeling the heat of Ben’s body as he leaned in close to help, wondering what it was he thought he saw in her eyes.

Or maybe not wondering. Maybe she knew. Darkness. Sorrow. Guilt. Emotions she’d tried to outrun, but that refused to be left behind.

She grabbed another ribbon, another bouquet, trying to lose herself in the rhythm of the job.

“The flowers look good. Are they Opal’s design, or Jenna’s?” The switch in subjects was a welcome distraction, and Chloe answered quickly.

“I’m not sure. They were designed months before I started working at Blooming Baskets.”

“Do you like it there?”

“Yes.” She just wasn’t sure how good she was at it. Digging into the bowels of a computer hard drive to find hidden files was one thing. Unraveling yards of tulle and ribbon and handling delicate flowers was another. “But it’s a lot different than what

I used to do.”

“What was that?”

“Computers.” She kept the answer short. Giving a name to her job as a computer forensic specialist usually meant answering a million questions about her chosen career.

Former career.

“Sounds interesting.”

“It was.” It had also been dangerous. Much more dangerous than she ever could have imagined before Adam’s death. But that was something she didn’t need to be thinking about when she had a few dozen pews and an entire reception hall left to decorate.

Chloe pulled out more ribbon, started on the next pew and wondered how long it was going to take to complete the decorations on the rest. Too long. Unless she started working a lot faster.

She moved forward, more ribbon in her hand. Ben moved with her, his sandy head bent close to hers as he helped hold the next bunch of roses in place, his presence much more of a distraction than it should have been. “Maybe we should split up. You take the pews on the other side of the aisle. I’ll finish the ones over here.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

Absolutely. “I just think we’ll get the job done more quickly that way.”

“Maybe, but we seem to be making pretty good headway together. Two sets of hands are definitely helpful in this kind of work.”

He had a point. A good one. If she had to hold the flowers and tie the ribbons it would probably take double the time. And time was not something she had enough of. “You’re probably right. Let’s keep going the way we are.”

“Silently?”

Chloe glanced up into Ben’s eyes, saw amusement there. “I don’t mind talking while we work.”

“As long as it’s not about the past?”

“Something like that.”

“I bet that limits conversation.”

Chloe shrugged, tying the next bow, grabbing more ribbon. “There are plenty of other things to talk about.”

“Like?”

“Like what Opal’s going to say if she gets here and we’re not done.”

The deep rumble of Ben’s laughter filled the air. “Point taken. I’ll lay off the questions and move a little faster.”

Four hours later, Chloe placed the last centerpiece on the last table in the reception hall; the low bowl with floating yellow, cream and burnt umber roses picked up the color in the standing floral arrangements that dotted the edges of the room. Roses. Lilies. A half a dozen other flowers whose names she didn’t know.

“You did it! And it looks almost presentable.” Opal Winchester’s voice broke the silence and Chloe turned to face

the woman who'd been surrogate mother to her during long-ago summers, watching as she moved across the room, her salt and pepper curls bouncing around a broad face, her sturdy figure encased in a dark suit and pink shirt.

"I didn't do it alone."

"I know. Where is that good-looking young pastor?"

"Home getting ready for the wedding. Which he's officiating after spending almost four hours helping with the floral decorations."

"Did he complain?"

"No."

"Then I don't expect you to, either." Opal slid an arm around Chloe's waist and surveyed the room. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is. You and Jenna did a great job."

"So did you and Ben." Opal cast a sly look in Chloe's direction, her dark eyes sparkling. "So, what did you think of him?"

"Who?"

"Ben Avery. As if you didn't know."

"He's helpful."

"And?"

"And he's helpful." Chloe brushed thick bangs out of her eyes and limped a few steps away from Opal, smoothing a wrinkle out of a tablecloth, determined not to give her friend any hint of how Ben had effected her. "How was your drive?"

"You're changing the subject, but I'll allow it seeing as how I'm so proud of what you've accomplished this morning. The

drive was slow. I thought I'd never get here." Opal adjusted a centerpiece, straightened a bow on one of the chairs. "But I'm here and happy to announce that Jenna had a bouncing baby boy fifteen minutes ago."

"That's wonderful!"

"Isn't it? A wedding and a birth on the same day. You can't ask for much better than that. I'm going to stop by the hospital after the reception is over. Maybe slip Jenna a piece of wedding cake if Miranda and Hawke don't mind me bringing her some. Speaking of which," She paused, spearing Chloe with a look that warned of trouble. "You're going to have to attend."

"Attend?"

"The wedding."

"No way." She had no intention of staying to witness the marriage of two people she didn't know, two people who, according to both Jenna and Opal, were meant to be together.

Meant to be.

As if such a thing were possible. As if meant to be didn't always turn into goodbye.

"I understand your reluctance, Chloe, but it's expected."

"You know I never do what's expected."

"I know you never did what was expected. You're starting fresh here and in a small town like Lakeview, doing what's expected is important."

"Opal—"

"Don't make me use my mother voice." She glowered,

straightening to her full five-foot-three height.

"I'm not ready for a big social event."

"Well, then you'd better get ready. The entire church was invited to the ceremony and the reception. It's a community event."

"I don't attend this church."

"But Jenna does. You'll be taking her place, offering support to the couple and representing Blooming Baskets."

"I'm sure—"

"I won't listen to any more excuses. I don't like them." The words were harsh, but Opal's expression softened, her dark eyes filled with sympathy. "It's been a year, Chloe. It's time to move on. That's why you're here. That's what you want. And it's what I want for you. So, ready or not, you're attending the wedding."

Much as Chloe wanted to argue, she couldn't deny the truth of Opal's words. She did want to leave the past behind, to focus on the present and the future. To create the kind of life she'd once thought boring and mundane but now longed for. "Okay. I'll stay. For a while."

"Good. Now, I'm going to make sure everything is perfect in the sanctuary. You grab yourself a cup of coffee and put your leg up for a while."

"I'll come with you."

"You'll do exactly what I told you to do." Opal bustled away, leaving Chloe both amused and frustrated. Opal was a force to be reckoned with. In her absence, the room felt empty, the hollow

aleness of the moment a hard knot in Chloe's chest, the beauty of the flowers, the tables, the bows and ribbons reminding her of the wedding she'd almost had.

Almost.

All her plans, all her dreams had died well before the accident. Now her dreams were much simpler and much less romantic. She wanted to forget, wanted to move on, wanted to rebuild her life. Maybe with God's help she could do that, though even here in His house, she felt He was too far away to see her troubles, too far away to care.

And that, more than the flowers and decorations and memories, made her feel truly alone.

THREE

Ben Avery's attention should have been on the bride and groom, the wedding party, the guests who joked and laughed, ate and talked as the reception wound its way through hour three with no sign of slowing. Instead, his gaze was drawn again and again to Chloe Davidson. Straight black hair gleaming in the overhead light, slim figure encased in a fitted black pantsuit, she smiled and chatted as she moved through the throng, her limp barely noticeable. On the surface, she seemed at ease and relaxed, but there was a tension to her, a humming energy that hadn't ebbed since he'd first seen her unloading the van.

He watched as she approached Opal Winchester, said a few words, then started toward the door that led outside. Maybe she needed some air, a few minutes away from the crowd, some time to herself. And maybe he should leave her to it. But he'd seen sadness in her eyes and sensed a loneliness that he knew only too well.

And he was curious.

He admitted it to himself as he smiled and waved his way across the reception hall and out the door. Already the day was waning, the sky graying as the sun began its slow descent. The air felt crisp and clean, the quiet sounds of rural life a music that Ben never tired of hearing.

He glanced around the parking lot, saw Chloe leaning against

Blooming Baskets' pink van and strode toward her. "It looks like the flowers were a big success."

"Opal is pleased, anyway." Her eyes were emerald-green and striking against the kind of flawless skin that could have graced magazine covers. Only a deep scar on the side of her neck marred its perfection.

"She should be. You worked hard." He leaned a shoulder against the van, studying Chloe's face, wondering at the tension in her. Opal had told him almost nothing about the woman she'd hired a week ago. Only that Chloe was recovering from surgery and working at Blooming Baskets. There was more to the story, of course. A lot more. But Ben doubted he'd get answers from either woman.

"So did you. Thanks again for all your help." She smiled, but the sadness in her eyes remained.

"It was no problem. People in my congregation call me all the time for help." Though he had to admit he'd been surprised by Opal's early morning summons. Flowers? Definitely not his thing.

"That may be true, but being woken up before dawn and asked to do a job you're not getting paid for goes way beyond the call of duty."

"But not beyond the call of friendship."

"If that's the case, Opal is lucky to have a friend like you."

"In my experience, luck doesn't have a whole lot to do with how things work out."

“You’re right about that.” She straightened, brushing thick black bangs from her eyes. “Opal came into my life just when I most needed someone. I’ve always thought that was a God thing. Not a luck thing.”

“But?”

She raised an eyebrow at his question, but answered it. “Lately it’s been hard to see much of God in the things that have happened in my life.”

“You’ve had a hard time.” The scars on her neck and hand were testimony to that, the pain in her eyes echoing the physical evidence left by whatever had happened.

Chloe’s gaze was focused on some distant point. Maybe the trees. Maybe the last rays of the dying sun. Maybe some dream or hope that had been lost. “Yes, but things are better now.”

He was sure he heard a hint of doubt in her voice, but she didn’t give him a chance to comment, just shrugged too-thin shoulders. “I’d better get back inside before Opal sends out a posse.”

The words and her posture told Ben the conversation was closed. He didn’t push to open it again. Much as he might be curious about Chloe, he had no right to press for answers. “I’m surprised she hasn’t already. There must be at least five unmarried men she hasn’t introduced you to yet.”

“Is that what was going on? I was wondering why almost every person she introduced me to was male.” She laughed, light and easy, her body losing some of its tension, her lips curving into a

full-out grin that lit her face, glowed in her eyes.

“You should do that more often.”

The laughter faded, but the smile remained. “Do what?”

“Smile.”

“I’ve been smiling all day.”

“Your lips might have been, but your heart wasn’t in it.”

She blinked, started to respond, but the door to the reception hall flew open, spilling light and sound out into the deepening twilight.

“There you are!” Opal’s voice carried over the rumble of wedding excitement as she hurried toward them. “Things are winding down. It won’t be long before Hawke and Miranda leave.”

“Are you hinting that we should get back inside?”

“You know me better than that, Ben. I never hint.”

It was true. In the years Ben had been pastoring Grace Christian Church, Opal had never hesitated to give her opinion or state her mind. A widow who’d lost her husband the same year Ben lost his wife, she was the one woman Ben knew who’d never tried to set him up with a friend, relative or acquaintance.

She had, however, told him over and over again that a good pastor needed a good wife. Maybe she was right, but Ben wasn’t looking for one. “So, you’re telling us we should get back inside?”

“Exactly.” She smiled. “So, let’s go.”

There was no sense arguing. Ben didn’t want to anyway. He’d come outside to make sure Chloe was okay and to satisfy his

curiosity. He'd accomplished the first. The second would take a little more time. Maybe a lot more time.

That was something Ben didn't have.

Much as he loved his job, being a pastor was more than a full-time commitment. Opal's opinion about a pastor needing a wife aside, Ben had no room for anything more in his life. That was why he planned to put Chloe Davidson and her sad-eyed smile out of his mind.

Planned to.

But he knew enough about life, enough about God, to know that his plans might not be the best ones. That sometimes things he thought were too much effort, too much time, too much commitment, were exactly what God wanted. Only time would tell if Chloe was one of those things.

He pushed open the reception hall door, allowing Chloe and Opal to step in ahead of him. Light, music, laughter and chatter washed over him, the happy excitement of those in attendance wrapping around his heart and pulling him in.

"Ben!" Hawke Morran stepped toward him, dark hair pulled back from his face, his scar a pale line against tan skin.

Ben grabbed his hand and shook it. "Things went well."

"Of course they did. I was marrying Miranda. Thank you for doing the ceremony. And for everything else. Without your help we might not be here at all." The cadence to his words, the accent that tinged them, was a reminder of where he'd grown up, of the life he'd lived before he'd come to the States to work for the

DEA, before he'd been set up and almost killed. Ben had met him while he was on the run, offered the help Hawke needed, and forged a friendship with him.

"There's no need to thank me. I was glad to help."

"And I'm glad to have made a friend during a very dark time."

He smiled, his pale gaze focused on his wife.

"Are you returning to Thailand for your honeymoon?"

"We are. I want Miranda to experience it when she's not running for her life."

"Try to stay out of trouble this time."

"I think my days of finding trouble are over." He paused, glanced at the hoard of women who had converged on his bride. "Miranda is finally going to toss the flowers. Come on, let's get closer. My wife doesn't know it, yet, but as soon as she finishes, she's going to be kidnapped."

That sounded too good to miss and Ben followed along as Hawke moved toward the group. Miranda smiled at the women crowded in front of her, turned and tossed the bouquet. Squeals of excitement followed as the ladies jostled for position, the flowers flying over grasping hands and leaping bridesmaids before slapping into the chest of the only silent, motionless woman there.

Chloe.

Her hands grasped the flowers, pulled them in. Then, as if she realized what she was doing and didn't like it, she frowned, tossing the bouquet back into the fray. More squeals followed,

more grasping and clawing for possession. Chloe remained apart from it all, watching, but not really seeming to see. Ben took a step toward her, hesitated, told himself he should let her be, then ignored his own advice and crossed the space between them.

FOUR

"I think that's the first time I've ever seen a woman catch the bouquet and throw it back." Ben Avery's laughter rumbled close to Chloe's ear, pulling her from thoughts she was better off not dwelling on. Hopes, dreams, promises. All shattered and broken.

She turned to face him, glad for the distraction, though she wasn't sure she should be. "I didn't throw it. I tossed it."

"Like it was a poisonous snake." The laughter was still in his voice and, despite the warning that shouted through her mind every time she was with Ben, Chloe smiled.

"More like it was a bouquet I had no use for." She glanced away from his steady gaze, watching as a little flower girl emerged triumphant from the crowd of wannabe brides, the bouquet clutched in her fist. "Besides, it seems to have gone to the right person."

Ben followed the direction of her gaze and nodded. "You may be right about that, but tell me, since when do flowers have to be useful? Aren't they simply meant to be enjoyed?"

"I suppose. But I'm not into frivolous things." Or things that reminded her of what she'd almost had. That was more to the point, but she wasn't going to say as much to Ben.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"You're not into frivolous things but you work in a flower

shop.” His gaze was back on Chloe, his eyes seeming to see much more than she wanted.

To Chloe’s relief, a high-pitched shriek and excited laughter interrupted the conversation.

“Look,” Ben cupped her shoulder, urging her to turn. “Hawke told me he was going to kidnap his bride. I wasn’t sure he’d go through with it.”

But he had, the broad-shouldered, hard-faced groom, striding toward the exit with his bride in his arms, the love between the two palpable. Chloe’s chest tightened, her eyes burning. At least these two had found what they were seeking. At least one couple would have their happy ending.

For tonight anyway.

The cynical thought weaseled its way into Chloe’s mind, chasing away the softer emotions she’d been feeling. She brushed back bangs that needed a trim and stepped away from Ben, ready to make her escape. “I’m going to start cleaning things up in the sanctuary.”

“You most certainly are not.” Opal appeared at her side, a scowl pulling at the corners of her mouth. “You’re going home. I’ll take care of things here.”

“I’m not going to leave you to do all this alone.”

“Who said I’d be alone?” As she spoke a white-haired gentleman stepped up beside Opal, his hand resting on her lower back. Opal glanced back and met his eyes, then turned to Chloe. “This is Sam. He and I go back a few years.”

“A few decades, but she won’t admit it.” The older man smiled, his face creased into lines that reflected a happy, well-lived life. “Sam Riley. And you’re, Chloe. I’ve heard a good bit about you.”

“Hopefully only good things.” Sam Riley? It was a name she hadn’t heard before. That, more than anything, made her wonder just what kind of relationship he had with Opal.

“Mostly good things.” He winked, his tan, lined face filled with humor. “But I promise not to share any of the not-so-good things I heard if you’ll convince Opal to go for a walk with me after this shindig.”

“Sam Riley! That’s blackmail.” Opal’s voice mixed with Ben’s laughter, her scowl matched by his smile.

“Whatever works, doll.”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?” But it was obvious she didn’t really mind; obvious there was something between the two. A past. Maybe even a future.

And no one deserved that more than Opal. “If you agree to go for a walk with Sam, I’ll agree to go home without an argument.”

Opal speared her with a look that would have wilted her when she was a scared ten-year-old spending the night with her grandmother’s neighbor. “And that’s blackmail, too. I thought I’d taught you’d better than that, young lady.”

“You tried.”

Opal looked like she was going to argue more, then her gaze shifted from Chloe to Ben and back again. She smiled, a

speculative look in her dark eyes. "Of course, I'll need the van and you'll need a ride back to the shop. Ben, you don't mind giving Chloe a ride to Blooming Baskets, do you?"

"Of course not."

"I appreciate that, Ben, but we've put you out enough." It was a desperate bid to gain control of the situation. One Chloe knew was destined to fail.

"You're not putting me out at all."

"Good." Opal smiled triumphantly. "It's all settled. We'd better get started, Sam. It's getting colder every minute and I don't plan on freezing just so you and I can go for a walk." She grabbed Sam's arm and pulled him away.

"I guess we've got our orders." Ben's hands were shoved into the pockets of his dark slacks, his profile all clean lines and chiseled angles. He would have fit just fine on the cover of GQ, his sandy hair rumpled, his strong features and easy smile enough to make any woman's heart jump.

Any woman except for Chloe.

Her heart-jumping, pulse-pounding days of infatuation were over. Adam's betrayal had ensured that. Still, if she'd had her camera in hand, she might have been tempted to shoot a picture, capture Ben's rugged good looks on film.

"Trying to think of a way out of this?" Ben's words drew her from her thoughts. She shook her head, her cheeks heating.

"Just wishing Opal hadn't asked you to give me a ride. Like I said, you've already done enough."

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” His hand closed around her elbow, the warmth of his palm sinking through the heavy fabric of her jacket as he smiled down into her eyes.

And her traitorous, hadn’t-learned-its-lesson heart skipped a beat.

She wanted to pull away, but knew that would only call attention to her discomfort, so she allowed herself to be led out into the cool fall night and across the parking lot toward the trees that edged the property. Evergreens, oaks and shadows shifted and changed as Chloe and Ben moved closer. Was there someone watching? Maybe the same someone she’d seen that morning.

Chloe tensed, the blackness of the evening pressing in around her and stealing her breath. “Where’s your car?”

“It’s at my place. Just through these trees.”

Just through the trees.

As if walking through the woods at night was nothing. As if there weren’t a million hiding places in the dense foliage, a hundred dangers that could be concealed there. Chloe tried to pick up the pace, but her throbbing leg protested, her feet tangling in thick undergrowth. She tripped, stumbling forward.

Ben tightened his hold on her elbow, pulling her back and holding her steady as she regained her balance, his warmth, his strength seeping into her and easing the terror that clawed at her throat. “Careful. There are a lot of roots and tree stumps through here.”

“It’s hard to be careful when I can’t see a thing.”

“Don’t worry. I can see well enough for both of us.” His voice was confident, his hand firm on her arm as he strode through the darkness, and for a moment Chloe allowed herself to believe she was safe, that the nightmare she’d lived was really over.

Seconds later, they were out of the woods, crossing a wide yard and heading toward a small ranch-style house. “Here we are. Home sweet home.”

“It’s cute.”

“That’s what people keep telling me.”

“You don’t think so?”

“Cute isn’t my forte, but my wife, Theresa, probably would have enjoyed hearing the word over and over again. Unfortunately, she passed away a year before I finished seminary and never got a chance to see the place.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“You must miss her.”

“I do. She had cystic fibrosis and was really sick at the end. I knew I had to let her go, but it was still the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

Chloe understood that. Despite anger and bitterness over Adam’s unfaithfulness, she still mourned his loss, and desperately wished she could have saved him. She imagined that years from now she’d feel the same, grieving his death and all that might have been. “I understand.”

“You’ve lost someone close to you?” He pulled the car door

open, and gestured for her to get in, his gaze probing hers.

“My fiancé.” Ex-fiancé, but Chloe didn’t say as much. “He died eleven months ago.”

“Then I guess you do know.” He waited until she slid into the car, then shut the door and walked around to the driver’s side. “Had you known each other long?”

“Three years. We were supposed to be married this past June.” But things had gone horribly wrong even before the accident and they’d cancelled the wedding a month before Adam’s death.

“Then today’s wedding must have been tough.”

Chloe shrugged, not wanting to acknowledge even to herself just how tough it had been. Dreams. Hopes. Promises. The day had been built on the fairy tale of happily-ever-after and watching it unfold had made Chloe long for what she knew was only an illusion. “Not as hard as it would have been a few months ago.”

“That’s the thing about time. It doesn’t heal the wounds, but it does make them easier to bear.” He smiled into her eyes before he started the car’s engine, the curve of his lips, the electricity in his gaze, doing exactly what Chloe didn’t want it to—making her heart jump and her pulse leap, whispering that if she wasn’t careful she’d end up being hurt again.

FIVE

It was close to seven when Chloe pulled her Mustang up to the Victorian that housed her apartment. Built on a hill, it offered a view of water and mountains, sky and grassland, the wide front porch and tall, gabled windows perfect for taking in the scenery. When Opal had brought her to look at the place the previous week, Chloe had been intrigued by the exterior. Walking through the cheery one-bedroom apartment Opal's friend had been renting out, seeing its hardwood floors and Victorian trim, modern kitchen and old-fashioned claw-foot tub, had sealed the deal. She knew she wanted to live there.

Unlike so many other places she'd lived in, this one felt like home.

Tonight though, it looked sinister. The windows dark, the lonely glow of the porch light doing nothing to chase away the blackness. Her car was the only one in the long driveway and Chloe's gaze traveled the length of the house, the edges of the yard, the stands of trees and clumps of bushes, searching for signs of danger. There were none, but that didn't make her feel better. She knew just how quickly quiet could turn to chaos, safety to danger.

She also knew she couldn't stay in the car waiting for one of the other tenants to return home or for daylight to come.

She stepped out of the car, jogging toward the house, her

pulse racing as something slithered in the darkness to her right. A squirrel searching for fall harvest? A deer hoping for still-green foliage?

Or something worse?

Her heart slammed against her ribs as she took the porch steps two at a time. The front door was unlocked, left that way by one of the other tenants, and Chloe shoved it open, stumbling across the threshold and into the foyer, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end, her nerves screaming a warning.

Shut the door. Turn the lock. Get in the apartment.

The lock turned under her trembling fingers, her bad leg nearly buckling as she ran up the stairs to her apartment. She shoved the key into the lock, swung the door open. Slammed it shut again.

Safe.

Her heart slowed. Her gasping terror-filled breaths eased. Everything was fine. There was nothing outside that she needed to fear. Even if there was, she was locked in the house, locked in her apartment.

A loud bang sounded from somewhere below, and Chloe jumped, her fear back and clawing up her throat.

The back door.

The realization hit as the step at the bottom of the stairs creaked, the telltale sound sending Chloe across the room. She grabbed the phone, dialed 911, her heart racing so fast it felt as though it would burst from her chest.

Blackness threatened, panic stealing her breath and her oxygen, but Chloe refused to let it have her, forcing herself to breath deeply. To take action.

She grabbed a butcher knife from the kitchen, her gaze on the door, her eyes widening with horror as the old-fashioned glass knob began to turn.

Chloe clutched the phone in one hand and the knife in the other, praying the lock would hold and wondering if passing out might be better than facing whatever was on the other side of the door.

Ben Avery bounced a redheaded toddler on his knee, and smiled at his friend, Sheriff Jake Reed, who was cradling a dark-haired infant. "I'm thinking we may be able to go fishing again in twenty-one years."

"You're going next weekend." Tiffany Reed strode into the room, her red hair falling around her shoulders in wild waves. Three weeks after having her second child, she looked as vivacious and lovely as ever. "Jake needs a break."

"From what?" Jake stood, laid the baby in a bassinet and wrapped his arms around his wife. "This is where I want to be."

"I know that, but Ben's made two week's worth of meals for us. It's time for you to take him out to thank him."

Ben stood, the little girl in his arms giggling as he tickled her belly. "I made the meals because I wanted to. I don't need any thanks."

“Of course you don’t, but you and Jake are still going fishing next weekend. Right, honey?”

Jake met Ben’s eyes, shrugged and smiled. “I guess we are. What time?”

Before Ben could reply, Jake’s cell phone rang. He glanced at the number. “Work. I’d better take it.”

Tiffany pulled her daughter from Ben’s arms, shushing the still-giggling child and carrying her from the room.

Ben made himself comfortable, settling back onto the sofa and waiting while Jake answered the phone. Whatever was happening couldn’t be good if Jake was being called in.

“Reed here. Right. Give me the address.” He jotted something down on a piece of paper. “Davidson?”

At the name, Ben straightened, an image of straight black hair and emerald eyes flashing through his mind.

“Okay. Keep her on the phone. I’ll be there in ten.” Jake hung up, grabbed a jacket from the closet.

“You said Davidson?”

“Yeah. Lady living out on the lake in the Richard’s place is reporting an intruder in the house. My men are tied up at an accident outside of town, so I’m going to take the call.”

“Did you get a first name?”

“Chloe.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. “Sorry, that’s not the way it works.”

“It is this time. I’ll stay in the squad car until you clear things,

but I'm coming."

"Since I don't have time to argue or ask questions, we'll do it your way."

It took only seconds for Jake to say goodbye to his family, but those seconds seemed like a lifetime to Ben, every one of them another opportunity for whoever was in the house with Chloe to harm her. As they climbed into the cruiser and sped toward the lake, Ben could only pray that she'd be safe until he and Jake arrived.

Sirens sounded in the distance and Chloe backed toward the window that overlooked the front door, her gaze still fixed on the glass knob. It hadn't turned again, but she was expecting it to and wondering what she'd do if or when the door crashed open.

"Chloe? Are you still there?" The woman on the other end of the line sounded as scared as Chloe felt.

"Yes." She glanced out the window, saw a police cruiser pull up to the house, lights flashing, sirens blaring. "The police are here. I'm going to hang up."

"Don't—"

But Chloe was already disconnecting, tossing the phone and knife onto the couch and hurrying toward the door. The stairs creaked, footsteps pounded on wooden steps and a fist slammed against the door. "Ms. Davidson? Sheriff Jake Reed. Are you okay?"

"Fine." She pulled the door open, stepping back as a tall, hard-

headed man strode in, a gun in his hand.

“Good. I’m going to escort you to my car. I want you to stay there until I’m finished in here.”

“Finished?”

“Making sure whoever was here isn’t still hanging around.”

Still hanging around?

Chloe didn’t like the sound of that and hurried down the stairs and outside, the crisp fall air making her shiver. Or maybe it was fear that had her shaking.

“I won’t be long. Stay in the car until I come back out. I don’t want to mistake you for the intruder.”

“And I don’t want to be out here alone.” She might not like the idea of someone being in the house, but she liked the idea of staying outside by herself even less.

“Then it’s good you don’t have to be.” As he spoke a figure stepped out of the cruiser. Tall, broad-shouldered and moving with lithe and silent grace.

Chloe knew who it was immediately, her visceral response announcing his name, her betraying heart leaping in acknowledgement. “Ben, what are you doing here?”

“How about we discuss it in the cruiser?” He wrapped an arm around her waist and hurried her down the steps. Strong, solid, dependable in a way Adam had never been. The comparison didn’t sit well with Chloe. Noticing how different Ben was from the man she’d once loved was something she shouldn’t be doing.

“Climb in.” He held the cruiser door open for her, then slid in

himself, his knee nudging her leg, his arm brushing hers.

She scooted back against the door, doing her best to ignore the scent of pine needles and soap that drifted on the air, but he leaned in close, his jaw tight, his face much harder than it had seemed earlier. "Are you okay?"

"Just scared."

"Jake said someone was inside the house with you. Did he make it into your apartment?"

"No, but it looked like he was trying to get in." She shuddered, watching as the lights in the attic area of the Victorian flicked on.

"Did you see the person?"

"I saw something before I went in the house, but if it was a person, I couldn't tell. There was no way I was going to open the apartment door to take a look."

"I'm glad you didn't. That would have been a bad idea." The porch light flicked off, then on again, and Ben pushed open the car door. "That's Jake's all clear. Ready to go back inside?"

"Of course." But she wasn't really. Sitting in the car with Ben seemed a lot safer than stepping back into the darkness.

He rounded the car, pulled open her door and offered a hand. "It'll be okay, Chloe. Whoever it was is long gone."

Chloe nodded, not trusting herself to speak, afraid anything she said would be filled with the panic and paranoia that had chased her from D.C. Nightmares. Terror. The feeling of being watched, of being stalked. She'd been plagued with all of them since being released from the hospital nine months ago. Post-

traumatic stress. That's what the doctors said. That's what the police said. Given enough time, Ben and Jake would probably say the same.

She braced herself as she stepped back into the house, sure that Jake would tell her he'd found nothing, that her mind had been playing tricks on her, that nothing had happened. She was only partially right.

Jake seemed convinced that something had happened, but his list of evidence was slim—an unlocked back door, a smudge of dirt on the back deck that might have been a footprint, fingerprints that might have belonged to the intruder, but more likely belonged to someone who lived in the house.

“We'll get prints of the other tenants. See if I've picked up anything that doesn't belong to one of you. Can you come to the station Monday?”

“I've got to work, but I'm sure Opal will give me the time off.”

“Good. In the meantime, keep the doors locked and don't take unnecessary risks. I'm thinking this is probably a kid playing a prank or hoping to find some quick cash, but you never know.”

“No, you don't.” Chloe shifted her weight, trying to ease the ache in her leg, trying to convince herself that the sheriff was right and that what had just happened had nothing to do with her former life.

Tried, but wasn't successful.

He must have sensed her misgivings. His gaze sharpened, going from warm blue to ice. “Is there something you're not

telling me? If so it's best to get it out in the open now."

"I'm just not sure what happened tonight was random." There. It was out. For better or worse. If it made her look crazy, so be it.

"And you have a reason for thinking that?" His tone was calm, but there was an edge to his words, a hardness to his face that hadn't been there before.

"This isn't the first time I've been followed into a building. It's not the first time I've felt like I was in danger."

"It sounds like there's a lot more to the story than what happened tonight. Maybe we should finish this discussion in your apartment." He started up the stairs, giving Chloe no choice but to follow.

Which was fine.

It was better to get everything out on the table now rather than later. And Chloe was pretty sure there would be a later. As much as she'd hoped things would be different here, she hadn't been convinced she could leave all her troubles behind. Apparently, she'd been right.

"Do you want me to wait outside?" Ben spoke quietly as he followed her up the stairs and Chloe knew what her answer should be. Yes, wait outside. Yes, keep your distance.

Unfortunately, knowing what she should say didn't make her say it. "No. You're fine. I'm going to get some coffee started. Then we'll talk."

She stepped into the living room, limped to the kitchen, and pulled coffee and a package of cookies from the cupboard. If she

had to talk about the past, she might as well have sugar in her while she did it.

“Cookie, anyone?”

The sheriff shook his head, a hint of impatience in his eyes. “You were going to tell me why you don’t think tonight was a prank.”

Chloe nodded, forcing her muscles to relax and her tone to remain calm. Sounding hysterical was a surefire way to make herself seem unbalanced. “Eleven months ago someone tried to kill me. He failed.”

The words had an immediate effect. Both men straightened, leaned toward her. Intent. Focused. Concerned.

Now if they’d just stay that way through the entire story, Chloe might believe that things really were going to be different.

“Who?” Jake pulled a small notebook from his pocket, started scribbling notes in it.

“A man named Matthew Jackson.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“Federal prison serving a life sentence for murder.”

“Murder?” Ben reached over and took the cookies from her hand, pulled two out of the package and handed her one.

“My fiancé was killed in the accident Jackson caused.”

Jake glanced up from the notepad. “And you think that has something to do with what happened tonight?”

“I don’t know. I just know that ever since the accident, things have been happening.”

“Things?”

Was there a tinge of doubt in Jake’s voice, a look of disbelief on his face? Or was Chloe just imagining what she’d seen so many times on the faces of so many other police officers. “Like I said, I’ve had the feeling that I was being followed. A couple of times I was sure someone had been in my apartment.”

There was something else, too. Something that she didn’t dare bring up.

“You contacted the police?”

“Yes. They investigated.”

“And?”

“At first they thought I was being stalked by some of Jackson’s friends. He was part of a cult that I’d helped close down a few months earlier.”

“The Strangers?” Ben took another cookie from the pack.

Surprised, Chloe met his gaze, saw the interest and concern there. “Yes.”

“I remember hearing about it in the news. A computer forensics specialist was investigating a cult member’s death and found evidence that implicated the leader. He went to jail for money laundering, but they couldn’t prove that he’d killed his follower.”

“The deceased’s name was Ana Benedict. She started working as an accountant for the cult’s leader and was dead a few months later. Her death was ruled a suicide, but her parents didn’t believe it.”

"You seem to know an awful lot about it." Jake was still writing, a frown creasing his forehead.

"I worked freelance for the private investigator Ana's parents hired. They had her laptop, but there wasn't much on it. I was hired to search for deleted files and I found plenty. Ana had documented everything. The Strangers were involved in the drug trade and were laundering money through their organization. I brought the information to the FBI."

"And Jackson blamed you when the cult dispersed."

"Yes."

"You said that after the attempt on your life, you felt like you were being followed and that someone had been in your apartment. The police suspected other cult members?"

"For a while."

"And then?"

Chloe grabbed mugs and poured coffee into them. Anything to keep from facing the two men who were watching her so intently. "They decided it was all in my head."

"I see." Jake spoke quietly, but Chloe knew he didn't see at all.

She turned back around, handing a cup to each man. "Look, Sheriff Reed—"

"Call me Jake."

"Jake, there may not be evidence proving I'm being stalked, but that doesn't mean it's not happening."

"I don't think I said it wasn't." He sipped his coffee, exchanging a glance with Ben, one that excluded Chloe and

conveyed a message she couldn't even begin to figure out.

"No, you didn't, but I've been told it enough times to imagine that's what you're thinking."

"What I'm thinking is that I don't know what happened in D.C. Whatever it was, it's not going to happen here." He placed his coffee cup on the counter. "I'd better head out. If you think of anything else that might be helpful, give me a call."

"I will." Chloe followed him to the door, holding it open as he stepped out and started down the stairs.

Ben held back, the concern in his eyes obvious. "Will you be okay here alone?"

"I've been living alone since I was eighteen."

"That doesn't mean you'll be okay."

"Of course I'll be okay. What other choice do I have?" She tried to smile, but knew she failed miserably.

"You could stay with Opal."

And bring whatever danger was following her into her friend's life? Chloe didn't think so. "No, I really will be fine."

Ben watched her for a moment, his gaze so intense Chloe fidgeted. Then he nodded. "All right. Keep the doors locked and be safe."

He stepped out into the hall and pulled the door shut behind him, leaving Chloe in the silent apartment.

Be safe?

She didn't even know what the word meant anymore. She sighed, grabbed a cookie from the package and collapsed onto

the easy chair. Maybe she'd figure it out again. Maybe. Somehow she doubted that would be the case.

SIX

“Sounds like your friend has a big problem.” Jake’s comment echoed what Ben had been thinking since he’d walked out of Chloe’s apartment.

“Really big.”

“Unless the police in D.C. are right and the stalker is all in her head.”

“She seems pretty sure about what’s been going on.”

“Being sure of something only means we’ve convinced ourselves that it’s true. I don’t put much stock in it.” Despite the gruff words, Jake sounded pensive and Ben knew he was leaning toward Chloe’s version of things.

“You seemed to believe someone was at her apartment.”

“I do. I’m just not convinced it has anything to do with what happened in D.C. It could just as easily have been a kid, or someone out to steal a few bucks.”

“It could have been.”

“But you don’t think so?”

“I think there’s more to the story than Chloe is telling. I think that until we have all the information, it’ll be hard to know exactly what’s going on.”

“Agreed. I’m going call some friends that are still on the D.C. police force and see what they have to say.” He paused as he pulled into the driveway of his house. “Regardless of what they

say, I'm treating this like any other investigation until I can prove it's not one."

"I didn't expect anything less."

"And I didn't expect to be as curious about you and Chloe as I am." Jake grinned, pushed open his door. "So, are you going to tell me what's going on between you two, or am I going to have to speculate?"

"I met her at the wedding today."

"And?"

"And I would have introduced the two of you if you'd been there."

"I'm almost sorry I missed it."

"Almost?"

"Tiffany isn't ready to take the baby out or leave him with a sitter yet. I'm not ready to spend my Saturday away from her."

"Who'd have thought marriage would make you into such a romantic?" Ben grinned and got out of the car. "I'd better head home. I've got to work tomorrow."

"Good avoidance technique, but I still want to know about you and Chloe."

"You've been living small-town life for too long. You're getting nosy."

"Only when it comes to my friends."

"Sorry to disappoint, but you know as much about Chloe as I do."

"I'm not interested in what you know about her. I'm wondering

what you think of her.”

“Right now? I think she’s a nice lady who’s been hurt a lot.”

“Look, Ben, if you were anyone else, I’d keep my nose out of it, but you’re not, so I’m going to say what’s on my mind.”

“Go ahead.”

“Chloe does seem like a nice lady, but I know trouble when I see it. I see it when I look at her.”

“And?”

“And be careful. I don’t want that trouble coming after you.”

“Thanks for the worry, but I’m pretty good at taking care of myself. I’ll be fine.”

Jake nodded, but his jaw was tight, his expression grim. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Really bad. Watch your back.”

With that he walked away, stepping into his well-lit house, into the warmth of family and home, and leaving Ben to himself and his thoughts.

Thoughts that were similar to Jake’s.

Trouble did seem to be closing in on Chloe. If Ben were smart, he’d keep his distance from it and from her. Unfortunately, he didn’t think that was going to be possible. Something told him that Chloe was about to become a big part of his life. He might not want the complication, might not like it, but that seemed to be where God was leading him. If that were the case, Ben would just have to hold on tight and pray the ride wasn’t nearly as bumpy as he thought it was going to be.

Apparently, Chloe's intruder was big news in Lakeview, and at least half a dozen customers converged on the flower shop minutes after it opened Monday morning. Opal seemed happy about all the business, but by noon Chloe was tired of the sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle questions. How many times and how many ways could a person say "I don't know" before she went absolutely insane?

Not many more than Chloe had already said.

She pulled a dozen red carnations from the refrigerated display case, grabbed some filler and headed back to the shop's front counter, doing her best to tamp down irritation as she listened to two elderly women discuss the "incident" in loud whispers.

"Here they are, Opal." She spoke a little more forcefully than necessary, hoping to interrupt the women's conversation.

It only seemed to make them think she wanted to be part of it.

The taller of the two smiled at Chloe. "Those are absolutely lovely, dear. I'm impressed that you could focus on picking the perfect flowers after such a harrowing experience."

"Thank you." What else could she say? "I try to keep my mind on the job."

"But aren't you terrified?" The shorter, more rotund woman shuddered, her owl-eyed gaze filled with both fear and anticipation, as if she were hoping for a juicy tidbit of information to pass along.

"Not really." At least no more than she'd been before she'd come to Lakeview. "The sheriff assured me he'd do everything

he could to find the person responsible.”

Though Chloe wondered if he'd be saying the same after he talked to the police in D.C. She wasn't looking forward to the conversation they were going to have when he found out about her recent hospitalization and its supposed cause.

She refused to worry about it and tried to focus on her job instead, shoving the carnations into a vase and scowling when two stems broke.

“Keep it up and I'll be out of business in no time.” Opal took the flowers and vase from her hands, smiling at the women who were watching wide-eyed and interested. “I'll finish this up. Aren't you supposed to go to the police station today?”

“Yes, but it can wait.”

“You know how I feel about procrastination. It only makes more work for everyone. Go punch out and head over there. Since we don't know how long it's going to take, I think you should just take the rest of the day off.”

“We've had a lot of business so far, Opal. Are you sure you want to handle the rest of the afternoon alone?”

“I handled it alone for two years before I hired help. Besides, I've hired a kid from church to come in after school until Jenna gets back. Laura's her name. She's a senior trying to save money for college. It should work out well for all of us. Now, go ahead and do what needs doing. Then go have some fun.”

“Fun?” Fun was puppies and kittens, laughter and friendship. Relaxation. Fun was something Chloe wasn't even sure she knew

how to do anymore.

“Yes, fun. Go shopping. Get your nails done. Better yet, go to Becky’s Diner and have a slice of warm apple pie with a scoop of ice cream on it. That’s fun.”

“It does sound good.” But being at home sounded better. Safe behind closed doors and locked in tight.

“But you won’t do it.”

“I might.”

“Hmph. We’ll see, I guess. Now, get out of here. I’ve got work to do and you’re distracting me.”

“Destroying flowers and distracting you. I don’t know why you keep me on.”

“Because you bring in so much business. Now, shoo.”

Chloe laughed as she stepped through the doorway that led to the back of the shop.

It didn’t take long to punch out and gather her jacket and purse. Outside, the day was misty and cold, the thick clouds and steely sky ominous. Several cars were parked in the employee parking lot behind the building, but Chloe was the only person there. In the watery afternoon light, the stillness seemed unnatural, the quiet, sinister, and she was sure she felt the weight of someone’s stare as she hurried toward her car.

She shivered, fumbling for her keys, the feeling that she was being watched so real, so powerful, that she was sure she’d be attacked at any moment. Finally, the key slid into the lock, the door opened and she scrambled in, slamming the door shut,

locking it.

Against nothing. The parking lot was still empty of life. The day still and silent.

“You’re being silly and paranoid.” She muttered the words as she put the car into gear. “Being afraid because an intruder is in the house is one thing. Being afraid to cross a parking lot in the middle of the day is ridiculous.”

But she was afraid.

No amount of self-talk, no amount of rationalization could change that.

She sighed, steering her vintage Mustang toward the parking lot exit. Opal was right. She needed to do something fun, something to get her mind off the tension and anxiety she’d been feeling since Saturday night, but she hadn’t had time to make friends since she’d come to Lakeview and she had no intention of going anywhere or doing anything by herself. The fact was, despite what the D.C. police had told her, despite what her friends, doctors and psychologist had said, she couldn’t shake the feeling that danger was following her. That the accident hadn’t been the end of the violence against her. That eventually the past would catch up to her. And when it did, she just might not survive.

No, she definitely didn’t want to go anywhere by herself, but she didn’t want to go with someone, either. Look what had happened to Adam because he was with her when a murderer struck.

Hot tears stung her eyes, but she forced them away. Tears wouldn't help. Only answers could do that and Chloe didn't have any. She'd been living her life, doing what she thought was right, trying her best to be the person God wanted her to be. Then the rug had been pulled out from under her, the stability she'd worked so hard for destroyed. All her childhood fears had come to pass—death, heartache, pain, faceless monsters stalking her through the darkness. Now, it seemed that God was far away, that her life had taken a path that He wasn't on and that no matter how hard she tried to get back on course, she couldn't. As much as she wanted to believe differently, as much as she knew that God would never abandon His children, abandoned was exactly how she felt.

Abandoned and alone, her mind filled with nightmare images and dark shadows that reflected the hollow ache of her soul.

SEVEN

By the time she finished at the police station and returned home, it had started to rain. First a quick patter of drops, then a torrential downpour that pinged against the house's tin roof and seemed to echo Chloe's mood. Outside, the clouds had turned charcoal, bubbling up from the horizon with barely contained violence.

Chloe put her mail on the kitchen table, grabbed a glass of water and opened sliding glass doors that led to the balcony off her living room. From there she could see the stark beauty of the lake as it reflected gray clouds and bare trees. Winter would arrive soon, bringing with it colder air and a starker landscape. It would be good to capture those changes on film, to hang a few new photos on the wall. The thought brightened her mood.

It had been a long time since she'd photographed anything. In the aftermath of the accident, she hadn't had the time or the inclination. Now, with surgeries and physical therapy behind her, she did. She just hadn't had any desire to.

Except once.

An image flashed through her mind—sandy hair, vivid blue eyes, a half smile designed to melt hearts.

“Enough!” She grabbed her digital camera from the top drawer of her dresser, refusing to think about Ben and determined to do what she should have months ago—regain her

life. Get back into her routines. Enjoy the hobbies she'd found so much pleasure in before the accident. Maybe she couldn't go rock climbing anymore, but she could shoot pictures. And she would.

A soft tap sounded at the front door and Chloe jumped, her heart racing. She wasn't expecting company. Anyone could be out there, waiting to finish what was started almost a year ago.

She sidled along the wall, imagining bullets piercing the door and knowing just how ridiculous she was being. "Who's there?"

"Ben Avery."

"Ben?" Surprised, relieved, Chloe pulled open the door and stepped aside so he could walk in. "What are you doing here?"

"Carrying out my orders." He smiled, rain glistening in his sandy hair and beaded on his leather jacket, the scent of fall drifting into the room with him. Fall and something else. Something masculine and strong.

Chloe took a step back. "Orders?"

"Opal and I ran into each other at the diner. She asked me to bring you this." He held out a brown paper bag, and Chloe took it, catching a whiff of apples and cinnamon.

"Apple pie?"

"And ice cream. She had Doris put that in a separate container."

"Fun in a bag?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"Those are Opal's words. Not mine. She said I should have a little fun today. I guess she wanted to make sure I did." Chloe

smiled, touched by her friend's thoughtfulness, though she wasn't sure she was happy with her methods. "Thanks for bringing this over. I'm sure you had better things to do with your time."

"It seems like we had this conversation before. And I'm going to tell you the same thing now that I did then—I can't think of any." He leaned his shoulder against the wall, his vivid blue gaze steady. "Of course, bringing it here was only part of my job."

"What was the other part?"

"I'm supposed to make sure you eat it."

"Tell me you're kidding."

"I'm afraid not. She said that if you faded away to nothing she wouldn't have any reliable help at the shop."

"She's conveniently forgetting Mary Alice and the new girl she hired."

"Laura. She mentioned that she'd left her to watch the store for a few minutes and had to hurry back."

"You and Opal must have had a long conversation."

"Not too long." He didn't seem inclined to say more, and Chloe decided not to press for details. Knowing Opal, she'd said more than she should have. Eventually, she and Chloe would have to talk about that. For now, the pie smelled too good to ignore.

"Since you've been ordered to make sure I eat this, maybe we can share." She moved into the small kitchen and set her camera down, grabbing two plates from the cupboard.

"I was hoping you'd say that. I brought enough for both of us." Ben moved toward her, an easy grin curving his lips and

deepening the lines near his eyes. Was he thirty? Thirty-five? Older?

She shouldn't be wondering, but was.

And that didn't make her happy.

"You knew I was going to invite you?"

"No, but I was hoping." He pulled a large plastic container from the bag, opened it up to reveal two slices of apple pie. "It's my day off. Apple pie, ice cream and interesting company seemed like a good way to spend part of it."

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