

MILLS & BOON



## Vintage INTRIGUE

# Whispers in the Night

DIANE PERSHING

# **Diane Pershing**

## **Whispers in the Night**

### **Аннотация**

When strange things began happening at her isolated home, lonely widow Kayla Thorne turned to handyman Paul Fitzgerald for protection. But was that a mistake? Because Paul was not only an ex-cop, he was an ex-convict—though he swore he'd been framed. Yet if he was so eager to prove his innocence, why was he spending time fixing her house, instead? Paul seemed intent on gaining her trust—and as the mysterious dangers escalated, Kayla needed someone to keep her safe. Paul was the perfect protector, because he needed nothing from her... or did he? Suddenly Kayla wondered just why Paul had come to her—and how close he meant to get....

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## **“Thank you, Paul.”**

The look on her face was relaxed and full of trust. She closed her eyes, and in a moment he could see her even, shallow breathing, indicating that she was asleep.

He pulled up a chair and sat down next to her, watching her as she slept. He felt an odd stirring in the region of his heart, which perfectly complemented the way his gut was churning at his deceit.

He should be rejoicing; he was finally on the informant's trail. In the next few days, Paul was sure, he'd be able to find him and complete his goal, the one he'd set in motion by coming here to work for Kayla.

What he was thinking about instead was something that gave him no joy whatsoever. He was starting to care about Kayla Thorne. To care about her a lot.

God help him. And her.

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## Diane Pershing



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# DIANE PERSHING

cannot remember a time when she didn't have her nose buried in a book. As a child, she would cheat the bedtime curfew by snuggling under the covers with her teddy bear, a flashlight and a forbidden (grown-up!) novel. Her mother warned her that she would ruin her eyes, but so far, they still work. Diane has had many careers—singer, actress, film critic, disc jockey, TV writer, to name a few. Currently she divides her time between writing romances and doing voice-overs. (You can hear her as Poison Ivy on the Batman cartoon.) She lives in Los Angeles, and promises she is only slightly affected. Her two children, Morgan Rose and Ben, have just completed college, and Diane looks forward to writing and acting until she expires, or people stop hiring her—whichever comes first. She loves to hear from readers, so please write to her at P.O. Box 67424, Los Angeles, CA 90067 or online at [diane@dianepershing.com](mailto:diane@dianepershing.com). You can also visit Diane's Web site at [www.dianepershing.com](http://www.dianepershing.com).

To Tom Gale, social visionary, poet extraordinaire and genial host. Thank you for the lovely week on your porch and the two books that came about as a result. Ain't serendipity grand?

And to the small but vibrant artists' colony of Cragmoor, New York. I borrowed liberally from your history, edifices and geography; I also invented some history, edifices and geography, which is why it's called fiction. If I offend, I apologize in advance.

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# Chapter 1

Creak.

The noise woke Kayla from a much-needed, dreamless slumber. Her eyes popped open and she sat straight up in bed. The bright red numbers of the bedside clock read 2:30 a.m. For several moments she remained frozen, trying to listen over the pounding of her heart. When nothing more happened, she figured—hoped—it had been her imagination, and slowly, she sank back down into her down-filled pillow, her lids drifting shut.

Cre-e-eak.

There it was again, coming from the porch directly below the bedroom. Not the high-pitched squeaking of the old chains that supported the double swing there, nor the cracking sound of tree limbs swaying in the wind. No, this was definitely creaking, and definitely coming from the porch, which had several loose wooden slats that protested loudly when someone was walking on them.

Like now.

All thoughts of sleep evaporated as fear coursed coldly through her veins.

Oh, God, Kayla thought. Something or someone was on the porch.

Quickly, her mind composed several explanations, none of them good. The likeliest was an animal. Of course, it would have

to be a pretty heavy animal to make that noise. What kind of wildlife was up here? Deer? Coyotes? She shuddered. Bears?

She would ask some of her neighbors, although she used the word loosely; there was nobody around for a couple of miles. Maybe she was making a big deal out of the whole thing.

Cree-ee-eak.

Or maybe she wasn't.

Her heartbeat accelerated. Were the doors locked? Yes, of course. The other times she'd been here at the cabin with Walter, he'd laughed gently at her city-girl fears and told her no one in the little mountain community of Cragmont bothered locking doors. They all trusted one another. But without having Walter on this visit, she'd been unwilling to be quite so trusting herself. And the noises were getting louder.

What to do? Kayla's mind raced frantically, keeping time with her pulse. She could hide under the bed. Throughout a nightmarish childhood, she'd discovered that the way to stay out of danger was not to call attention to herself, to avoid becoming a target.

But she didn't do that anymore. For the past few years, she'd forced herself to meet danger and fearsome challenges head-on and deal with them. Not happily or easily, and not that the inner fear went away—no, she was pretty sure she was one of the most frightened people in the world—but, as best she could, she tried not to let the fear defeat her.

And she wouldn't let it defeat her now.

Despite the dread, despite her rapid pulse rate, she summoned up reserves of strength. Throwing back the covers, feet dangling over the side of the bed, she ordered her imagination to rid itself of horrific fantasies while she considered her next move.

At that moment, Bailey woke up. The aging, partly deaf, one-eyed Yorkshire terrier began to bark. Not because of the noise below, but because Kayla had dared to disturb his sleep. Not much of a watchdog, old Bailey, but company, at least. The sound of his bark was high-pitched and annoying, and automatically, Kayla tried to shush him. Then she changed her mind. Maybe barking was a good thing; yes, in fact, Bailey's barking might scare off the intruder.

Whoever or whatever that was.

Licking her suddenly dry mouth and shivering from more than the chilled night air of early autumn, she put on her robe and her ridiculous-looking-but-oh-so-warm bunny slippers, then grabbed the poker from the fireplace in the corner. Ancient wood floors protesting under her feet, she left the shelter of the master bedroom and, scooping up the yipping dog, crept halfway down the stairs.

"Hush," she whispered to the small animal, briefly covering his snout with her cupped hand. He might frighten off an intruder, but her eardrums couldn't take much more. Besides, Kayla needed to hear what was happening outside. Bailey, bless him, quieted down, curling his shivering body into a snug little ball. Holding him tightly, she strained her ears.

There was more noise below, only now it came not from the porch, but from the side of the house. There was the sound of rustling leaves, crackling branches, and then a kind of moan-grunt-growl.

Oh, God. Was that how a bear sounded? City girls didn't know a grunt from a growl from a snarl, or what kind of animal emitted which. Well, one thing was for sure, she was not going outside to check it out. If whatever it was out there wanted her, they'd have to come in and get her, and that was what fireplace pokers were for.

So, still trembling from the icy cold and her jangling nerves, Kayla sat down on the second-from-the-bottom step and peered through the banister rails at the uncurtained windows and beyond. The middle of the night was a very dark time; all she could make out were the tall trees of the forest that surrounded the property and the shadows cast by the full moon.

Full moons and werewolves?

Do not go there, she admonished herself, her teeth chattering as she stifled a nervous giggle. The real world was scary enough without having to bring in the paranormal.

Which she didn't believe in, anyway...mostly.

Bailey's whimpering broke off that avenue of thought, and she held the tiny dog more tightly as he buried his face in her armpit. No, not much of a watchdog at all, she mused again ruefully. Poor baby.

Her ears strained to listen for more noises. And they were

there—more branches crackling, another growl or grunt, a longer moaning—definitely chilling, but moving farther and farther away.

And then there was silence. Seconds stretched into minutes of absolutely no sound, save for the soft rustling of leaves and a far-off hooting owl.

Kayla's adrenaline rush of fear receded with the sense of danger. It might return, of course, but for now she felt her body relaxing. Sighing, she reflected that nothing in her life ever went simply, without complications. Even the escape to her late husband's family cabin, and the hoped-for solitude and peace it offered.

She'd been here for two days, since Friday, and mostly she'd sat on the broad, wood-slatted porch that ran the entire width of the house and stared out at the view: the Catskill Mountains glowing with autumn colors and shifting light. A small valley, with tiny villages nestled among the hillsides. More glorious reds and yellows and oranges. Acres of piercing blue sky above the ridge.

And Kayla hadn't been happy, not yet. But she'd felt the beginning of healing, at least. Now, if she could just get a good night's sleep...

Her wish would not be granted on this night, for sure, not with her nocturnal intruder. She was, after all, the only one up here; there was no more Walter to offer shelter and strength. Which brought to mind one fact she had always known: When push came

to shove, she was, once again, and always, alone.

Knock, knock, knock. "Miz Thorne?"

Kayla jerked awake with a start, not quite sure where she was. Disoriented, she glanced around at her surroundings. It seemed to be daylight. "What?" she mumbled.

Knock, knock, knock. The repetition caused her to turn her head in the direction of the noise. There were two faces, both male, peering at her through the living room window. She started; her sudden movement woke Bailey up and he began barking again.

"Hush, Bailey," Kayla said, but the little dog kept it up, so she was forced to resort to "Go fetch Arnold," the signal for him to hunt for his small rag doll and bring it to her. And to quieten.

As the animal took off, Kayla waved weakly at the newcomers, one of whom she knew, and pointed back where there was a side entrance to the house. Rubbing at her face, she hurried through the living room, into the kitchen, then opened the door.

"Mr. Boland," she said, nodding, trying to sound awake even though her mouth felt as if someone had injected sour milk into it during the night. Apparently she'd fallen asleep on the stairs, sitting up; her mind felt woozy and her back ached.

"Hank," the middle-aged, potbellied and balding man corrected her with a smile, one that revealed two gold-capped upper incisors. "None of that 'mister' stuff needed."

"Hank," Kayla repeated, then added with an answering smile,

“Please come in.”

As he walked past her, she shifted her attention to the other man, the one she didn't know, and who remained outside, a little distance away. The instant she got a good look at him, however, the smile disappeared from her face, and she hissed in an involuntary breath.

Good heavens, he was huge! Fearsome, too. An Incredible Hulk, only better-looking. And not green.

The stranger was several inches over six feet. His dark hair was clipped very short, as if it was growing out after having been shaved off. Olive-colored skin covered a slightly hooked nose, chiseled cheekbones and chin line. His mouth was thin and stern. He reminded her of those early photographs of smileless Native American warriors. His new-looking jeans, scuffed work boots and faded denim jacket over a black T-shirt did nothing to disguise the broad, powerful body beneath. Bodybuilder powerful, a look she'd never cared for.

But it was the expression, or lack of it, in his pale eyes under heavy black brows that made her swallow again. Hard and bleak, not a flicker of warmth, or even life, in them. A shiver of trepidation bordering on fear skittered along her spine.

Hank made a come-on-in gesture to the man. “This here's Paul Fitzgerald. He's real good with his hands.”

Automatically, Kayla looked at the newcomer's hands. Large, broad, callused. Capable of inflicting severe pain, she was sure. “Is he,” she murmured.

“Paul’s one of my new guys.”

New guys? she wondered briefly, but then she remembered what Walter had told her about Hank Boland. The hardware store owner-plumber-electrician-handyman in Cragmont’s tiny town center, three miles down the road, was an ex-con, and he believed in giving a second chance to those who’d served their time at the nearby penitentiary.

Which meant the stranger standing at her back door had recently been incarcerated.

Terrific. Just terrific. The perfect way to start the day.

“I see,” she said, swallowing before adding automatically, “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Fitzgerald.”

Lame, she told herself, truly lame, as the stranger nodded curtly. She was so not pleased to meet him. An ex-con and a truly scary-looking one, at that.

Something in her attitude must have transmitted itself to the newcomer because he didn’t come any closer and he didn’t offer to shake hands, for which she was grateful; if he took one of hers in his, she might never see her poor fingers again.

“Yeah, Paul here can fix anything,” Hank said cheerfully. “Used to do some remodeling. He’s real good.”

“I see.”

“I was coming up to check on that leak in the church floor you mentioned on Friday afternoon. And I figured I’d bring someone to take care of that list of chores you need done,” Hank continued, smiling again as he produced a piece of paper with



notes scribbled on it. "Paul's just the man for you."

Wrong, she wanted to say. Most definitely. No one who appeared that cold, who radiated suppressed violence from every pore, was the man for her. Good heavens, he was the walking incarnation of her worst nightmare.

What had he been in for? she wondered. Terrifying innocent victims into early graves?

Her hand flew to her chest as she realized that, for the second time in several hours, she was scared to death. First her night intruder, now this behemoth who could have been cast as the Really Bad Dude in a biker movie. If she stayed in his presence any longer she was in danger of having a panic attack.

"Can't you do it?" she asked Hank, aware that her voice held more than a tinge of desperation.

"Sorry. I'm real busy with the Gillespie place. Whole roof is rotted from last year's ice storms. Got to finish that job before winter comes again."

"Come on, Hank," the other man growled, his voice low pitched and irritated as he turned away. "I'm making the lady uncomfortable."

"No, wait." Hank scurried out the door again and grabbed the large man's arm to keep him from leaving. Then he turned to Kayla. "Miz Thorne," he pleaded. "Give him a chance. He got a real raw deal. He wasn't even guilty."

"Isn't that what they all say?" It was out of her mouth before she could stop it, and she was rewarded with a look of cold

contempt from Fitzgerald.

“No,” Hank replied, pushing at the larger, extremely reluctant man, urging him closer to Kayla. “I mean, he really wasn’t guilty. He was framed. Paul here should never have gone to jail. He was innocent.”

These words, coupled with the sincerity on Hank’s face, made Kayla pause. She took in a deep breath then exhaled it, giving her time to regain her composure. Then she made herself return her gaze to the huge man one more time, trying for objectivity.

He stood just back from the doorway now, less than a foot from her, and, once again, the sheer size of him overwhelmed her. She was five eight, but she had to crane her neck upward to see his face. It remained unsmiling—his eyes were an unusual silver-gray, she noted—and his expression remained hard. It was obvious he was not trying to curry favor or to win her over in the least.

Which, for some odd reason, impressed her. Kayla knew what it was like to be categorized, unfairly judged and then disdained. Surely she owed it to herself, if not to him, to give the man a chance to be seen as an individual.

Besides, her reaction to the stranger wasn’t really about him at all, and she knew it. It was her custom to be rigorously honest with herself, and what she was dealing with here was old stuff, an automatic fear response to a highly testosterone-fueled member of the male sex, a subgroup she could live the rest of her life without, thank you very much, and be quite content.

“Well...” She clung to the doorknob, still vacillating between reason and the instinct to flee.

Just then, Fitzgerald glanced down at her feet—at her bunny slippers, for heaven’s sake, which she had forgotten she was wearing. When he looked up again, she glimpsed a brief flicker of something close to amusement in his eyes. In the next second it was gone, but she’d seen it, and it made her reconsider. She would keep an open mind, give the man a chance.

“Well, um,” she said again, “I think it’s time I washed my face and changed into actual clothes. Help yourself to coffee. Both of you.” She indicated the automatic coffeemaker she’d set last night before going to bed. “I’ll be right down.”

When the woman turned and hurried quickly out of the kitchen, Paul’s gaze followed her movements. Mouth suddenly dry, he licked his lips. He felt like a long-starving man in a room that contained a three-course meal, one he wasn’t allowed to eat, but dammit, no one could stop him from looking. Even in a long robe, her womanly shape was apparent. Slim and tall, with an indented waist and gently rounded hips, she moved gracefully, despite those ludicrous slippers

When he’d first seen her standing in the kitchen doorway, the front view had been just as arresting as the rear was now. Shoulder-length, straight, pale blond hair, sky-blue eyes in a broad, high-cheekboned face that wasn’t beautiful but not plain, either. Character, his father would have said. The woman had character.

She also had breasts—full, rounded ones. He could tell from the way the robe was tied and from the way they bounced gently as she moved.

Real breasts. Real hips. Real blue eyes. Not pictures. A real, live, graceful, damned attractive woman.

Who wasn't too nuts about him.

Not that he blamed her. He was hard and he was angry. He had nothing left in him of politeness or manners. In the past four years, civilized behavior had been slowly leached out of him by his brutal surroundings, until he'd learned just to survive. However he could.

As Hank poured them two generous cups of coffee, Paul walked over the threshold into the kitchen, musing that he'd accomplished the first part of his purpose, gaining access to Kayla Thorne. But he'd been knocked for a loop by the woman who'd greeted them. She was so different than he'd expected her to be. In the pen they'd watched a lot of TV, and Kayla Thorne was all over the tube. She was famous. Infamous, really.

It was a great story. She'd been a special-duty nurse to millionaire Walter Thorne's ailing wife. Then six months after the wife croaked, she'd married Thorne, who, at age seventy, was forty-five years her senior. There had been three years of marriage, but the age difference and polar-opposite economic status had given the tabloids and gossipmongers a field day. Thorne had died last year, and she'd been left a wealthy woman, sharing an estate of several million dollars with Thorne's grown

sons.

In all that time, Mrs. Thorne never gave an interview, never talked about herself, never defended herself. During the marriage and since. So the media had invented a personality for her, a cross between a wet-dream fantasy and money-grubbing schemer. Before the wife croaked, was there kinky stuff going on between the old man and the sexy nurse? they'd asked. Had the two of them murdered the first Mrs. Thorne? they'd implied. And finally, had she cold-bloodedly knocked off the old man?

She'd been officially cleared of any complicity in either death, both of which were from natural causes, but suspicion remained, even in Paul's mind. Money could buy you all kinds of ways to cover up a crime. Besides, once he'd heard her maiden name, Vinovich, he'd associated her with lowlifes and liars. He had a lot of evidence and personal experience to back that up.

Judging from this first meeting, however, unless she was one hell of an actress, it appeared as though both his and the media's assumptions had been off base. Kayla Thorne was softer than her pictures. More of a real person than a viper. The blond hair was natural, not bottle-created. She was polite, too, no diva, not one of those la-di-da, newly wealthy, lady-of-the-manor types.

The house was a surprise, too, from the outside for sure. Old, shabby even. Needed a third of the slats replaced, a new paint job. No servants that he could see. The kitchen was like the "before" of a before-and-after remodeling ad. Except for the shiny, new-looking coffeemaker and microwave oven,

nothing in here had been updated in years. Old, bent pots and pans hung from hooks above the stove. The tile was chipped, the linoleum water-stained and ancient. One large, deep sink, probably installed in the 1930s. All that money and the whole place was ready for the wrecker's ball. Damned strange was all he could say.

He heard her footsteps before he saw her appear from around the corner. He'd been propping a hip against one of the tile counters, sipping his coffee, but he straightened automatically as she entered the room, dressed in a comfortable-looking navy blue sweat outfit and tennis shoes, her hair pulled back from her face in a ponytail. Her face was shiny, as if she'd just washed it, which made her look about eighteen, although he knew she was about ten years older.

"Did you find the milk?" Avoiding eye contact with Paul, Mrs. Thorne directed the question at Hank, who sat at the small, two-person corner table.

"Sure did," Hank said, "and the sugar."

"Well, good," she said, pouring herself a cup, taking a sip and then venturing a quick, sideways glance at Paul. The kitchen was small, there wasn't a lot of room for maneuvering, so she stood close. He could smell fresh soap and some flowery kind of body lotion. For a moment, he felt light-headed.

"It's good coffee," he said, trying to remember how to be pleasant. He wanted this job, for more reasons than the obvious one, and it was, so far, not a done deal.

Out of nowhere, a small animal appeared in the doorway, something dirty and floppy in its teeth. Paul frowned. He'd never been a fan of Yorkshire terriers—rats with hair, he'd always thought of them—and his opinion was now reinforced as the runty-looking thing seemed to realize there were two newcomers in the kitchen. Dropping the toy from its mouth, it began a ferocious, high-pitched, extremely irritating round of barking.

The woman looked down at the tiny dog at her feet, then scooped it up into her arms. "It's okay, baby," she cooed, which made it stop barking and begin whimpering, an equally unpleasant sound, to Paul, anyway. "Bailey's a little upset," she told them. "We had some kind of nocturnal visitor and he got scared." She caressed the animal some more. "You want a treat?" she asked him, then got a dog biscuit out of a nearby jar.

Paul watched her stroke the small animal's head, scratch it behind its ears. Her hands were pretty and slim, her fingers long, with short, unpolished, efficient-looking nails. He sure wouldn't mind those hands stroking his head, those fingernails scratching his skin, in all kinds of places.

At the image, he felt his body stirring. Damn. He really hadn't expected his hormones to do a dance in Kayla Thorne's presence. Although, he knew none of it showed; he'd trained himself to keep all emotion out of his expression, all physical reaction to a minimum. But now, as a free man—for the present, at least—it sure wasn't easy.

Not that it had anything to do with this specific woman. In

his state, she could have been any female of the species. On top of that, there were too many other sources of stimulation this morning not to have some kind of reaction. He'd been locked up for four years, and now here he was, on top of a gorgeous mountaintop. There was an endless expanse of forest all around, not to mention fresh, clean air, a warm kitchen, even freshly brewed coffee.

And the woman. His groin tightened even more with a fierce desire that nearly took his breath away. Yeah, most especially the woman.

She wasn't the first female he'd encountered since being released five days ago. But it had been a long, long time since he'd been intimate with one, and at the moment, Kayla Thorne was provoking a reaction far stronger than anything he'd expected.

He didn't like it. Not at all.

He angled his body away from her. "This place is pretty old," he said, steering the conversation toward safer territory and figuring he'd score points if she thought he really did know what he was doing. "A hundred years or more, I imagine."

"It was built in 1895," she said.

"Just move in?"

"Hell no." Hank answered the question cheerfully from the corner table. "Property has been in the Thorne family forever."

Mrs. Thorne correctly read Paul's one raised eyebrow. "Walter, my late husband, said he liked to keep it just as he remembered it as a child, before garbage disposals and subzero



refrigerators.” A small, fond smile lit her face. “He was happy here, with his grandparents, every summer. A golden time, he called it.”

Damn, she had a great smile, Paul observed, attracted to her genuine niceness. Then he ruthlessly banished the thought from his brain. He had an agenda here, and none of the softer emotions were welcome. Besides, he no longer believed in much of anything having to do with men, women and possibilities.

Too close, Kayla thought. She was standing way too close to Paul Fitzgerald in the small kitchen. Despite the impersonal chill of his gaze, his big body radiated enough energy to power an electric blanket, and it was warming her up. Setting Bailey down, she said brightly, “I think the kitchen is a bit small for all of us, so shall we go outside?”

She swept past both men and out into the garden that covered the entire area between the house and the driveway. Whew, she thought, as the cool morning air hit her. If she had a folding fan, she’d flutter it in front of her face, that’s how hot her cheeks felt.

Hot now, shivering earlier, all in Paul Fitzgerald’s presence. But why such a strong reaction? He terrified her, that was why, she told herself. But was that all it was?

No, she was forced to admit to herself. Standing next to him in the kitchen, she had felt an odd kind of—what? A connection with him. Not to mention a quivery, shuddery sensation in various body parts. There was a name for it: chemistry.

Hello and welcome to good old-fashioned lust.

No! Her mind rebelled. How could that be? Paul Fitzgerald had the personality of a serial killer. Heck, he might even be a serial killer, for all she knew. And while there seemed to exist women who found potentially violent, dangerous men a turn-on, she was definitely not one of them. Never had been, never would be.

It was the lack of sleep, she told herself. Her fragile emotional state since Walter's death. This, whatever it was between her and Paul Fitzgerald, was an aberration, and would soon pass. She fervently hoped. And she could help it along by not hiring him.

There! she thought, mentally brushing her palms against each another in job-well-done fashion. She'd made her decision. Fitzgerald was history. She was sorry if he needed the job, but her own peace of mind had to be her first priority.

The men had followed her out the kitchen door, and now the three of them stood along the fenced-in compost heap that was situated in the shadow of a tall pine tree. "I hate to sound stupid, Mr. Boland, I mean, Hank," she said with another bright smile, avoiding Fitzgerald's gaze, "but are there bears around here?"

"Bears?"

"I heard something last night. It woke me up, and I guess Bailey wasn't the only one who got scared. I must have fallen asleep listening for it again."

"Bears?" Boland repeated, scratching his head. "Could be. We're on the edge of wilderness up here, you know. Or it coulda been a coyote, even a raccoon."

“Are raccoons heavy enough to make the porch creak?”

“Well now—”

“There’s your culprit,” Fitzgerald said, cutting him off, crouching down and picking something out of the compost heap. “Chicken bones.”

“Excuse me?” Kayla said.

“If you don’t want to attract wild animals, you need to keep animal remains out of the compost. Carrot peelings, coffee grounds, stuff like that, is all that should go there. No bones or animal fat.”

The slight condescension in his tone made her cross her arms over her chest and declare defensively, “I know that.”

He raised one jet-black eyebrow. “Do you?”

“Yes. Walter, my late husband, taught me well, and I’m very careful about what I put in that compost heap. Nothing but vegetation. All other garbage is wrapped tightly in plastic and kept in the mudroom until garbage pickup day. I’m not a total fool, you know.” She was annoyed, at him for figuring her for a dimwit, and at herself for having lustful thoughts about him just moments ago.

Which, thank heavens, were now gone.

“Besides,” she said, her chin sticking out defiantly, “I haven’t had any chicken since I’ve been here, so there’s no way I could have put those bones in there.”

Again, the raised eyebrow, the shrug. Then he stood, towering over her, blocking out the sun with his body. “Maybe it was a

tramp,” he said, hitching his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans, the material of his T-shirt tightly stretched across pecs the size of boulders. “Some homeless guy. What do you think, Hank?”

“Maybe,” the other man said. “Up here’s usually too big a hike for strangers, but there’s some great hiding places if you’re on the run.” He scratched his head again. “Gee, Miz Thorne, I wish I could help. Are you sure you’re all right here, all by yourself?”

“I’m fine.”

“How long you planning on staying?”

“As long as I need.”

“Oh, I thought it was maybe a few days, that’s all.”

She lifted her shoulders. “I really don’t know.”

“But not during the winter, right?” Hank persisted. “It gets snowbound up here in the winter.”

“Isn’t there a plow service?”

“Can’t count on it. Hardly anyone up here then. You’d be pretty much alone, with no way to get down the mountain.”

“Maybe,” Fitzgerald joined the conversation, “someone from your family should come up here and stay with you. Your dad? A brother?”

Kayla nearly laughed bitterly at the ludicrousness of that suggestion, but all she said was “I don’t think so. And, anyway,” she added philosophically, “winter’s a long way off.”

“Maybe only a month or so,” Boland said. “It’s late September. Snowfall begins in the autumn.”

“Hank Boland,” she said, her hands on her hips. “Are you trying to scare me?”

He held up both hands, palms out, and grinned sheepishly. “I’m just old-fashioned, I guess, about women being alone up here where there’re wild animals. In case you get, you know, attacked or something.”

She gave him a forgiving smile. “You’re allowed to be as old-fashioned as you like. But I assure you, I really can take care of myself.”

An amused, exaggeratedly patient look passed between the two men, one of the aren’t-females-foolish? variety, but she decided to ignore it. The male brain worked differently from the female’s, and that was just the way it was.

“Well, look,” Hank announced, “I’d best check on that leak under the church. Why don’t the two of you go over the stuff on your list?”

Now was the moment, Kayla knew, the one where she could say, “I’m sorry, but Mr. Fitzgerald won’t do.” She wouldn’t have to explain her reasons. After all, she was doing the hiring here and didn’t owe anyone anything.

But before she could, Fitzgerald said, “What church is that?”

Kayla pointed toward an expanse of birch trees on the far side of the house. “It’s over there. The Old Stone Church. It’s part of the property.”

Paul had always been fascinated by early American architecture, and now his curiosity was piqued. “Mind if I take

a look with Hank?”

“We can all go, I guess,” Mrs. Thorne said.

As they followed Hank down the gravel driveway toward the main road, Paul asked her, “Does the church still function as a church?”

“Mostly it’s used for weddings and funerals. Anyone who wants to belong to a congregation has to go down the mountain to Susanville.”

Susanville.

The name sent a chill through him. It was where he’d just spent four hellish years in the penitentiary. Where the families of the prisoners rode the bus from New York City and Albany and Buffalo on Sunday mornings, filled with excitement and picnic baskets, and returned on the same bus, subdued and sad, their baskets empty, on Sunday nights.

As they walked along the main road for a brief period, then turned up the path leading to the church, Paul shook himself mentally. He was out now. His lawyer had gotten him released on a technicality, but if he was lucky, he’d never have to go back. Hell, he couldn’t go back. Didn’t think his soul could take another day there.

Which was why he was here, high in the Catskills, on the way to checking out an old church with Kayla Thorne. She held the key to his freedom, although he doubted she was aware of that.

And, if he played his cards right, she would never have to be.

## Chapter 2

Kayla remembered the first time she'd seen the Old Stone Church; it had been nearly four years before, when Walter had brought her here on their honeymoon. As he'd shown her around his family's mountain retreat and related stories of his childhood, there had been rueful pride and unabashed sentimentality in his voice. At the moment, she couldn't help comparing that time with this one.

Somewhat guiltily, she contrasted her late husband with Fitzgerald. Walter had been under six feet, reedy rather than muscular. And, of course, a young-thinking but still aging man of seventy. Fitzgerald was so much taller and broader, so much more muscular...and so much younger. Always a fast walker, Kayla had had to slow her pace to match Walter's stride. Today, she had to hurry to keep up.

They paused at the front of the building, which was relatively modest as churches went, one story made to look a lot taller by its sharply pitched roofline and a high, broad steeple. The bell tower still had its original nine-hundred-pound bell, one that was rung on special occasions.

Fitzgerald ran one huge hand over several of the dark gray and dusty brown stones that made up the entire facade. "Solid workmanship," he said, and she detected a flicker of admiration—an actual emotion?—on his face as he did. "Do you know

anything about it?”

“Just what’s in the brochure. It’s native fieldstone and was carved by Italian masons,” Kayla explained, “brought to America in the mid 1890s for that express purpose. A wealthy widow, Honoria Desbaugh, built it to honor her husband. For years, it was run by some monks, an offshoot of a sect called the Brothers of the Sacred Nazarene. Our cabin was their dormitory. One by one, the monks died out, and the place was pretty much abandoned till the 1920s, when Walter’s family bought the entire property.”

“The church is a real tourist attraction in the summer,” Hank added. “Good for the town.” He pulled open the thick wooden front door, and they followed him in.

As it had before, the cool quiet of the church’s interior had the effect of a balm on Kayla’s nerves; even if she hadn’t been aware of being tense, the easing of the tightness in her shoulder muscles and abdomen was a dead giveaway. She stood in the nave and breathed deeply of the air—it had the slightly musty but clean smell of damp earth and old caves.

The calm lasted seconds only, because Paul Fitzgerald came up to stand beside her, his hands in his back pockets as he peered upward, his gaze taking in the high ceiling and its heavy beams. She couldn’t help noting his strong neck and prominent Adam’s apple. The filtered sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows cast shadows on the sharply defined planes of his face.

Good Lord, she thought, he was like some kind of stone monument himself.



“This has been kept up,” he said.

Hank, still standing near the door, said, “Mr. Thorne paid for the restoration years ago,” to which Kayla added, “Walter set up a fund to keep it up in perpetuity.”

“Religious, huh?”

“Not particularly,” she said. “He intended the church to be nondenominational, sort of a general, all-purpose place to worship whatever god you believe in.”

He angled his head to gaze down at her. His pale eyes were grim and joyless, and spoke of bone-deep bitterness. “What if you don’t believe in any kind of god?”

“Doesn’t everyone need to believe in something?” she asked him softly.

His gaze remained on her face for another moment or two, revealing nothing of whatever was going on inside him. She felt, again, her blood running cold, signaling her dread of violence. The bleakness in Fitzgerald’s eyes did that to her.

Then he shrugged and looked away. “If you say so.”

He walked over to one of the walls, and as he had outside, rubbed his hand over the stone. His attention caught by something near his feet, he bent over and scraped a nail against a floorboard. “This must be it, Hank. The leak’s under this area of rotting wood.”

“Okay.” Hank headed for a small side door near the altar. “I’ll just check in the basement, see where that water’s coming from. You two look around, I’ll be back in five minutes or so.”

Kayla watched as Fitzgerald ambled past the pews and to the altar. On the rear wall were five wooden statues of saints, each about four feet high. He studied them silently for a moment. What was he thinking? she wondered. Had he ever had any beliefs?

Why couldn't she shake this need to understand this emotionally cutoff man? He was none of her business, especially as she would be sending him on his way as soon as they got back to the house.

Annoyed with herself, she followed his progress as he strode over to the east wall and, one by one, perused the stained-glass windows. Several were dedicated to people who'd passed away, dating from the early 1900s to the 1970s. Desbaughs had given way to Montgomerys, who'd given way to Thornes. She joined him at her favorite, an exquisite rose window, its colors pale pink to deep red and all hues between. Along the bottom of the window ran a green-leafed vine, above it the words "Entwined forever."

"Isn't it beautiful?" she said as they both gazed at the fine craftsmanship combined with a delicate sensibility.

He didn't reply for a moment, then he nodded. "Yeah."

"I'm having a window made in honor of Walter."

Again, he made no reply at first. Then he said, "Good for you." Was he being sarcastic? She had no way of knowing.

They were near the rear of the church now and he pushed open the back entrance door. Sunlight poured in, obliterating the

shadows and sense of mystery in the old building.

Fitzgerald pointed ahead. "What's that?" he asked, but didn't wait for her answer, striding out the door toward what she knew was the memorial arch.

By the time she'd caught up with him, he'd already covered the cracked paving stones that led to the monument, a tall, narrow archway made up of small, ivy-covered stones. He stood beneath it and gazed out. Her instinct was to join him beneath the high curving shrine, appreciate the view, tell him a story or two about the arch's history.

But the thought of standing under it, next to Paul Fitzgerald, made her distinctly uneasy. She remained several feet behind and to the side of it.

A sudden wind came up, the way it did here in the mountains, and she had to raise her voice to answer his previous question. "It's called the Memorial Arch," she told him, "in honor of the Native Americans who used to roam these mountains. Mrs. Desbaugh had some Mohawk blood in her, and asked that it be part of the original construction."

He looked back at her, a slight frown forming between his thick brows. "Am I breaking some kind of law by standing here?"

"Not at all." The wind whipped her ponytail around to smack her in the face, and she pushed it away.

"But you'd rather I didn't."

He was reading her unease. "No, no, it's not you. I'm just being...superstitious."

“There a curse or something?” he asked sardonically, and she knew he was scoffing at the possibility. “Something bad happens if you stand under this thing?”

“Not at all. People stand under the arch all the time. Sight-seers, couples getting married. It’s fine.”

She was being silly. But, in truth, she was actually afraid to stand under the arch with him. At the same time, she was experiencing this unexpectedly strong pull toward the ancient monument, a sense that she needed to be under there, next to Fitzgerald.

What was that about? And why the fear? Nothing popped into her head. She sighed, shook her head. The only way she’d get the answer was to—as she’d learned—go toward it and find out. Sometimes she yearned to return to the days of being the little girl who hid from life, but her path had gone in a different direction. For better or for worse, she was a woman who faced and fought her fears.

Shoulders squared with determination, Kayla took the few steps that had her standing side by side with Paul Fitzgerald, under the arch. The minute she got there, the wind died down, leaving her with that same vague sense of unease.

Also a nearly palpable awareness of—darn it!—that connection again to the man by her side, the way she’d felt earlier, back in the kitchen. Only it was stronger now, as if there was some invisible wire strung between them, with a jolt of electricity passing through it.

She knew that she and Paul Fitzgerald made an all-too-intimate picture: a man and a woman, surrounded by history and tradition, enveloped by a monolith that marked sacred ground, one used in ancient ceremonies of all sorts...including weddings.

Her heart stuttered. Oh, God, was she doing a you-are-my-destiny head trip? Because if she was, then fate had a major sense of humor, pairing a grieving widow with an embittered ex-con who looked like he ate small children for breakfast.

Turning her head, she studied his profile. The slight hook to his strong nose brought back her initial impression of him. "Do you have any Indian blood?" she found herself asking.

He turned to look at her, his features carefully neutral. "Cherokee. My grandmother."

"I thought so." A grandmother he'd loved, she just knew it.

Kayla was always interested in family stories; ordinarily she would ask him to tell her about his grandmother, but there was that don't-go-there quality to Fitzgerald that discouraged questions. As though to prove her point, he turned away from her and stared out at the view again, which, from this angle, offered mostly treetops, and beyond, Shawangunk Ridge, with its single soaring pine tree reaching high into seemingly endless clear, blue skies.

The only expression on his face was a slight downturn of his mouth. "Nice," he said.

"Something of an understatement," she countered wryly.

"There you are," Hank said from behind them.

She nearly jumped with surprise as he came up to them, wiping his hands on a large white handkerchief. "I can fix that leak in the basement. No problem."

Kayla stepped out from under the archway and faced the older man. "I'm sorry, Hank," she said. "Really I am. I already told you on the phone that Walter was adamant when it came to the church. Any repairs, anything that needs to be done, is to be performed by a restoration expert. I've called the man Walter used, and he'll be up in a couple of days to look it over and give me an estimate. I just wanted to see if there is something I should do until then."

Stubbornly, Hank shook his head. "Those people cost a lot of money. Hell, me and Paul and a couple of my guys could do it just as well, cost you a third of what them fancy experts charge."

She could see that she was dealing with a bruised ego, and she felt badly. Hank had always been kind to her and helpful to Walter. "If it were up to me..." she said, then shrugged with an apologetic smile. "It's out of my hands. It's actually in the will."

Again, he shook his head. "Damn foolishness," he muttered. Then, resigned, he stuffed the soiled handkerchief into his back pocket. "Guess I can't fight a will, now, can I?"

"How about we go back to the house and take a look at your list?" This abrupt change of subject came from Fitzgerald, who didn't wait for a reply before taking off, around the church rather than through it.

As Kayla and Hank followed, she was thinking, once again,

that it was time to dismiss him. Just because he'd admired the church didn't make him someone she wanted around her all day. Besides, she reminded herself, she had way too strong a reaction to him, equal parts attraction and repulsion, neither of which she needed in her life at the moment. It was most likely the nurse in her that was stirred up by the pain she sensed beneath the man's steel surface. He might need healing, but he wasn't about to get it from her.

"Um, Mr. Fitzgerald?" she began as the three of them strode up the driveway to the house.

"Call him Paul," Hank said genially.

Before she could go on to tell him that she wouldn't be needing his new recruit, Fitzgerald had taken the list of chores from Hank, glanced at it and headed for the drainpipe that ran down the side of the house near the kitchen door. He knocked on the metal, then said, "I think it would be better to replace this instead of repairing it. I'll clean out the rain gutters first and make sure there are no rats making nests. Or snakes."

If he could have invented a better conversation-stopper, Kayla had no idea what that would be. "Snakes?" she squeaked.

Hank shrugged. "We got 'em up here, sure."

Her hand flew to her throat. "I hate snakes."

He shook his head sadly. "They're part of the habitat, Miz Thorne."

But Fitzgerald had already headed for the rear of the house and Kayla and Hank followed. He leaped up onto the porch,

forgoing the three steep steps, and kicked some of the floor slats with his foot, then rapped his knuckles on several pieces of wood siding.

“Yeah, it’s old,” he said with a nod, “but it’s good solid wood. Oak. They don’t make them this way anymore. I’ll have to find some older house undergoing demolition, cut and shape some of the slats. I can do that in Hank’s shop, bring them up here, install them. No problem for me there, I’ve done it before.”

Paul was aware he was doing a blatant selling job, being chatty as a woman over the back fence. But he’d seen the look in Kayla Thorne’s eyes, the one that said she’d made up her mind and was about to give him the heave-ho.

He couldn’t allow that. He needed access to her. If his first stab at finding out about her family had gotten no response, if his little attempt to introduce the topic of her brother had taken him nowhere, there were still several more ways to bring up the subject.

But only if he had the time and opportunity to do so, and to have that, he needed to remain here, on the premises.

“Let’s look at the rest of the list, okay?” he said, trying for upbeat but doubting it came out that way. He no longer knew how to be or sound cheerful. Tension and anger had filled every day of the past four years and he wondered if it would ever go away completely.

Instead of waiting to hear her answer, he slid open the sliding glass doors off the porch, entered the living room and took the



stairs, two at a time, to the upper floor. When he heard her footsteps behind him, a small part of his tension eased. At least she was letting him get this far without canning him.

For the next half hour, he toured the house with her, not giving her much of a chance to say anything. There was no problem he couldn't handle and he let her know it. More squeaking floorboards, several window trims needing to be recaulked. A little electrical work, a jammed closet door. Stair treads needed to be replaced, a banister reinforced. A couple of bathroom fixtures leaked and the water pressure wasn't strong enough.

They wound up again on the rear porch, where, this time, instead of kicking at loose slats, Paul got his first real look at the view.

It stopped him cold.

It was broader and more expansive than the one from the Memorial Arch, and it had it all: mountains, autumn-colored trees, the ribbon of a river cutting through a small valley. Houses nestled into the hillsides. Wisps of white clouds, a sun that was becoming stronger by the minute. And, to add to the perfection, a single eagle soared overhead, its wings stretched wide, riding the shifting wind currents as if it were the master of the skies.

His gaze shifted again from the eagle to the panorama before him, the whole thing hitting him like clean, fresh oxygen after being in smog all day. As he drew in a deep breath and exhaled it, something tight inside began to gradually loosen up, leaving room for a sensation that, at first, he had trouble identifying. But

the sensation grew stronger and he let it take him over, until he could put a name to it.

Elation.

It was as though, while he stood there, his spirit was being cleansed. Garbage out, beauty in.

God! He was free!

He felt like shouting it out loud. After four long years behind bars, four years of a living hell, he was no longer a prisoner. Instead, he was way, way, way high up, above all the pain and violence, as unfettered as the eagle circling overhead.

Unexpected emotion flooded him. To his horror, out of nowhere he felt moisture forming behind his eyes.

No.

Gritting his teeth and expending every effort of will he could muster, Paul forced himself to cut off the feeling before it took him over.

No softness, he reminded himself. He would allow nothing to blunt the edge of his purpose. Nothing.

He took another moment to regain his composure, during which a disturbing thought struck him: Had Kayla Thorne noticed his reaction? Bad enough to feel weak inside, but to have a witness? Unacceptable. He slanted his gaze over to where she stood, half a yard to his right, also taking in the view. She seemed composed, but the edges of her mouth were turned down, and even in profile, he could tell she was concentrating on some thought.

“You can see a lot more from here than you can from the church,” he observed, his voice cracking slightly, hoping the words sounded as casual as he’d wanted them to come out.

Kayla, her mind a jumble of images and emotions, was waging an inner war with herself. She adored looking out over what she secretly thought of as her hills, but today there was an added dimension to her appreciation: it was as though she were seeing it through the eyes of the man by her side.

Good heavens, what this must mean to him! In jail, he couldn’t have had anything to stare at but walls and bars, other prisoners, guards. No colors, just grays and drabness. This had to be beyond precious to him.

Or was it? Was she, once again, letting her imagination run away with her, filling in, providing the missing pieces to a man who chose to remain inscrutable? Was he the kind of person who truly appreciated nature’s colors and the infinity of sky overhead? If he wasn’t, then why was she trying to make him into that man? After all, if she was hiring a handyman, all she needed to know about him was if he could do the work.

Which was when she realized she’d done an abrupt about-face. She’d changed her mind. Or he’d done it for her. It didn’t matter. After he answered a few questions, she was going to offer him the job.

So much for absolutely, positively making her mind up, she thought, disgusted with herself. She was a wuss.

Hank came around the side of the house and joined them on

the porch, a small toolbox in his grip. “I got to take off, Miz Thorne. So, what do you think? Will my new man do?”

She told herself she was in charge, that no matter how tall or broad or menacing—or wounded—Paul Fitzgerald might be, he had no power over her. Turning her head and meeting his silver-gray gaze directly, Kayla said, “I need to ask you a few questions first.”

“Ask away.”

“Do you ever smile?”

As though she’d surprised him, there was the briefest suggestion of softening around his mouth, then the flinty look returned to his eyes. “When I have something to smile about.”

“Well, I don’t do jokes.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “That’s a shame. I could use a good laugh.”

Another man might have said those words with some irony, or even as an invitation. But there was not a hint of amusement in his words; his face remained expressionless.

“You sure could,” she agreed, thinking—like the utter fool she was—that she would make him smile if she died trying. Why it was important to her, she had no idea.

“And you have experience?” she asked. “I mean with old houses, not just new ones?”

“Yes. In my former life, on weekends, I was part of a crew that renovated historical homes.”

“What were you in jail for?” she continued. “Even though you

were innocent,” she added quickly, still not sure if she totally trusted that assessment. If there was smoke, there was usually fire.

He didn’t respond for a moment; instead, his eyes grew hooded again and his nostrils flared, letting her know she’d hit a sensitive area.

Well, too bad.

“I mean, if you were accused of being a rapist or a murderer,” she added, her chin jutted out to let him know she wouldn’t be browbeaten, even if the old trembling inside had started up again, “you know, bodily harm kind of thing, well then, I think you can understand that I’m not too nuts about you working here. Even if you were innocent.”

It was a reasonable question, Paul knew it and acknowledged it, but still, he had to tamp down the fury roiling in his gut. He gave himself a moment before he spoke. “I was accused of taking payoffs.”

“Paul here used to be a cop,” Hank chimed in. “A good cop, Miz Thorne, decorated and all. Made detective. But there were some corrupt officers in that precinct. You know, taking bribes and selling dope they’d confiscated. Maybe you read about it, a few years back. It was in Albany, the precinct near the capitol buildings? The cops and the drug ring?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, nodding.

“See, Paul didn’t like what was going on, told them to cut it out or he’d turn them in. So they set him up.”

“And you know this, how?”

“Paul told me. And his lawyer. Also a couple of friends I have on the force. And I believe them. I got a sixth sense about cons, Miz Thorne. Like I said, Paul’s innocent.”

“You have quite a champion,” the woman said, her face reflecting her lingering doubt.

He didn’t blame her. The tangible proof of his innocence wasn’t available, and she wasn’t thrilled with another ex-con’s “sixth sense.”

All he could do was nod his gratitude to Hank and wait for the next question.

“And you were in jail how long?”

“Four years.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, my. A policeman in jail for four years.” Her face reflected a mixture of sympathy and horror. “That must have been tough.”

He felt his jaw tense at the effort to keep his expression neutral. “I survived.”

Barely, he thought. Everything she was imagining, all that she’d read about cops in jail—gang rapes, brawls, weapons made out of kitchen utensils—he’d seen it all, and even taken part in some of it. Never being able to turn your back, making sure you were so strong they were scared of you. Yeah, he’d survived. By being terrified every day and night of those four years, and never, ever letting it show.

He watched her expression as she made up her mind about

him. He wasn't aware he'd been holding his breath until, still obviously doubtful, she said, "Well, if Hank trusts you, I guess that's good enough for me."

A small stab of disappointment hit him in the gut. He should have been glad, should have congratulated himself on getting the job, on taking the first step toward clearing his name. But all he felt was let down.

What had he expected? A ringing endorsement of his superior character? That Kayla Thorne would look at him and just know he could do the work? That he would be responsible, would put in long hours and not skip corners? Would be honest and reliable? The way he'd used to be, back before his life had changed one-hundred-eighty degrees from relative heaven to a hell blacker than a starless night? Maybe that was too much to expect of anybody.

"Good." Hank slapped Paul on the back and handed over the toolbox he'd been carrying. "I'll leave you to it, then. Get started, Paul, okay? Make a list of the supplies you'll be needing and we'll take care of it tomorrow."

"You're leaving?" she asked Hank, and Paul could tell she was not pleased.

"Got to get to the Gillespies'," he told her, his gold teeth glinting as he smiled reassuringly. "I'm late as it is. I'll swing by and pick you up about four," he told Paul, then hurried off.

Kayla watched him leave, nearly called out that she'd changed her mind and to take this hulking, smileless man with him.

But she didn't. She'd said he could work for her, and at the least, he deserved a chance. Had she expected an armed guard to come with the package?

"Well, if you'll excuse me, you do what you need to do, and I'll just...be around," she finished lamely, and headed into the house.

Knowing she was being a coward, she kept out of his way all day, staying as busy as possible. She took down curtains to have them cleaned, did a couple of loads in the ancient washing machine, puttered in the garden for a while. Basically she managed not to be wherever Paul Fitzgerald was.

At lunchtime, she asked him if he'd brought lunch, and when he told her not to worry about that, she made an extra ham and cheese sandwich and brought it, along with a bag of chips and an apple, out to the porch, setting them on the scarred round table positioned between two ancient Adirondack chairs.

"Your lunch is out on the porch," she told him when she found him at the side of the house, working on a pipe.

"I told you not to bother," he muttered.

"Well, I did, so be gracious and eat it."

Without giving him time to reply, she herself headed into the kitchen and had her lunch there, even though she always took her meals on the back porch. She and Fitzgerald had been getting along just fine, she figured, by not being in the same room at one time. Avoidance? Worked for her. She could keep this up for the week or so it took him to finish his chores, and then she wouldn't



have to see him again.

If in the darker recesses of her brain she was aware she was expending entirely too much energy on keeping her distance from the new handyman, that awareness remained subliminal. She'd come up to the mountain to escape stress and to recoup her energies. To rest. But being in Paul Fitzgerald's presence wasn't restful in the least.

The early morning air was crisp and clean. A slight chill forecast the coming winter. The perfect beginning to the day, just the way Kayla liked it.

She sipped her coffee, then expelled a huge, grateful sigh. Would she ever stop being appreciative, she wondered, of her luck, of the chance to be away from the relentless noise and chaos of city life in Albany? Up here there was only quiet. Peace. Solitude.

She'd actually slept well the night before. If there was a bear around, she'd told herself before turning in, then it would just have to share the mountain with her. As for the mysterious chicken bones, someone—a hiker, some kids—must have thrown them in the compost heap because they were too lazy to find a trash bin. Whatever. Here she was, the start of a new day, and she was beginning to get a sense of who she was, a sense of...

“Beware the bones of the dead.”

Kayla literally jumped up off her chair, one hand to her thudding heart, the other making sure the coffee mug was firmly

on the table.

At the far end of the porch stood an old, slightly bent woman with long, straggly white hair, a once-beautiful face, and a look of manic intensity in her eyes. Like something out of a fairy tale, Kayla thought wildly. Not Disney, but Grimm.

Bailey, who had been sleeping at Kayla's feet, rose, took in the newcomer and began to bark.

"Bodies and bones. They will rise and destroy everything," the woman said, her voice amazingly resonant, her dark eyes boring into Kayla's with mad fervor.

Even as the words sent a chill down her spine, Kayla couldn't help making an absurd association: Was the woman talking about the chicken bones? The ones from yesterday? Were chicken bones going to rise up and give birth to—what? Baby chicken bones?

She stifled a nervous giggle, then ordered her one-eyed Yorkie, "Bailey, be quiet." As usual, he continued barking until she picked him up, at which time his barking became a combination growl and whine.

Swallowing her fear and trying to keep her tone conversational, Kayla took a few tentative steps toward her visitor. The way the old woman's spine was curved, she suffered either from scoliosis or advanced arthritis. "You must be Melinda."

The so-called "wicked witch of the mountaintop," a local character who lived in a shack deep in the woods, half crazed, it

was said, but harmless. Walter had told Kayla about her, but in the previous visits she'd made up here with him, she'd never met the woman. At the moment, the word harmless wouldn't have been Kayla's first choice.

At the mention of her name, Melinda ceased talking and just stared at her, that same wildness in her eyes not diminished by her silence. Then she shifted her gaze to the dog. "Hush, now," she ordered, and like that, Bailey did, whimpering for a brief moment, then burying his nose in Kayla's neck.

Maybe she really was a witch, Kayla thought, thoroughly spooked. Still, she took another hesitant step toward her visitor. "Um, may I offer you something to drink, Melinda? Some water?"

As Kayla moved closer, the old woman's eyes widened and she backed up until she was at the edge of the long porch. There were three steep steps from there to the ground, and sensing her visitor's panic, Kayla became concerned that she might fall.

"I won't hurt you," she assured her, reaching a hand toward Melinda but remaining where she was. "Tell me about the bones, Melinda. I'm interested."

The old woman paused briefly. "The bones," she muttered, almost to herself, a faraway look in her eyes. Then her gaze focused again, horribly fierce and quite crazed. She pointed a crooked finger at Kayla. "Bodies and bones. They will destroy you."

## Chapter 3

With that, Melinda whirled around, missed the top step, and might have injured herself had she not fallen against an extremely tall man with an extremely broad chest.

“Whoa there,” Paul said, as a black-clad, elderly woman barreled into him, then slithered around him and scurried off, down the stairs and into the trees beyond. Paul watched her go, then turned to his employer, who stood several feet away, a shivering dog held tightly to her chest.

“Who the hell was that?” he asked her, setting his toolbox down on a side table, then divesting himself of his backpack. “And what was that about bones?”

“A local character named Melinda. She lives somewhere in the woods. And I have no idea what she was talking about.”

“She dangerous?”

“I sincerely hope not. From what I know she lives with an equally strange niece and the two of them manage to take care of each other.”

Paul glanced back at where the old woman had been headed, then returned his gaze to Kayla Thorne. “Weird.”

“Very.”

God, she looked good!

Again, no makeup. Hair swept back, gathered at her nape in a clip. Jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt—sporting a green palm

tree against a white background—and sneakers. The opposite of anything considered remotely sexy or provocative, and all he could think about was how much he wanted to get naked with her.

Now and in last night's X-rated dreams.

In which he had conjured up her body, her creamy skin, eyes the vibrant color of the sky up here in the mountains. The rounded breasts, the long legs—he'd woken up this morning desperately wanting them wrapped around him. Desperately wanting her.

Man, did he need a woman, and soon. Hell, wouldn't anyone be horny after four years of going without?

Last Thursday, the night he'd been released, he'd stayed on in Susanville and headed for a singles' bar, intent on finding a willing female and taking care of that need. He'd done the same thing the following night.

On both occasions, the women had been willing, but, for some strange reason, Paul had found an unexpected emptiness to all the conversations he'd struck up, the knowing, two-way, "how long do we have to make small talk before we wind up in the sack?" tone of them. It had seemed, somehow, wrong.

Not morally; he'd given up on moral right and wrong years ago. Just not the way he wanted it to be.

Probably, if he'd been ten, even five years younger, it wouldn't have been a contest. Forget not feeling right, raging hormones would have dictated that he get laid, however he could. But he

was nearly thirty-seven and was no longer ruled by his body's needs. Especially after four years of practice.

"Coffee?" Mrs. Thorne asked him, snapping him out of his carnal reverie and back to the present. "I'll get you some from the kitchen."

She moved toward the sliding glass door, which, for some reason, set off the dog's yammering. Paul winced at the sound; all day yesterday the mutt had alternately hidden from him and faced him, barking its stupid head off. He'd dealt with the little runt by ignoring it.

"Bailey, be quiet," the woman scolded, setting the ball of hair on the porch floor.

"It's okay." Maybe it was time to make friends with the annoying thing. The Thorne woman would like that.

He approached the frantically yipping animal, now trying to back away but finding himself imprisoned by his owner's feet. Paul squatted on his haunches, which made him eye level with the woman's upper thighs, which he tried not to think about. Looking down, he held his fingers under Bailey's nose.

"Hey, it really is okay," he whispered. "I'm one of the good guys."

His words must have had an effect, because the dog stopped barking and cocked his head, as though not quite sure what to do with this change of attitude. Then, tentatively, Bailey sniffed at Paul's fingers. Dark button eyes peering out at him from under bushy, nearly white brows, the canine emitted a halfhearted

growl.

Paul moved closer. "You're a tough little man, aren't you?" he said, stroking the animal's head, then looking up to meet the woman's amused gaze. From this angle, he could see the underside of her high, rounded breasts, a view that didn't bother him in the least.

"Wouldn't figure you the Yorkie type," he observed.

One eyebrow arched upward. "Oh? What type would you figure me for?"

He shifted his attention to the dog; the thought of reaching up to cup one of her soft breasts in his hand was way too distracting.

He scratched behind his new best friend's ears. "Well, now," he managed to say with the part of his brain still functioning, "that's kind of difficult. Before I saw you, I figured you for some kind of purebred, one of those show-dog types. You know."

"A Yorkie is a purebred. And what do you mean, before you met me?"

Bailey made satisfied noises as Paul continued to scratch around his head. "I read about you in the papers, saw you on TV. The mysterious millionaire's widow. Even in the pen, we got the news."

"Oh."

"Then, yesterday, when I saw the bunny slippers, well, that kind of changed things." He glanced up at her again, watched her face flush slightly.

Her mouth twisted in a smile. "Not many have seen me wear

those and lived to tell the tale.”

He nearly smiled back. “Well, then, I guess I’m lucky. Anyhow, someone who wears bunny slippers would go for something a lot more, well, fluffy. You know, a cocker spaniel. Like that.”

In mock indignation, she slapped her hands on her hips, unintentionally causing her T-shirt to mold itself more tightly to her upper body. “Wrong on all counts,” she announced. “I used to have a Lab. Well, not all Lab. A mix.” Her smile was tinged with sadness. “She was golden, a little bit of shepherd, a little bit of collie. When I was a kid.” A brief shadow of memory crossed her face before she brought herself back to the present. Mrs. Thorne nodded. “But you’re right. Bailey would not be my first choice. I inherited him.”

Paul raised an ironic eyebrow. “Someone left this to you?”

“Be careful. You might hurt his feelings. He belonged to Walter’s late wife. She doted on Bailey, spoiled him rotten. When I came to take care of her, he grew attached to me. He’s pretty old and he’s mostly deaf, not to mention blind in one eye.”

“Which is why he’s not much of a watchdog.”

“True. Poor Bailey can’t hear anyone coming unless they’re practically on top of him. But when a stranger comes into his limited view, by heavens, he gives it his all.”

Paul lowered his gaze again, moving his scratching to under the dog’s chin; Bailey raised it for easy access, a look of sensual pleasure on its face. Paul couldn’t help himself—he felt some



kind of sympathy for the old thing. Aging, deaf, orphaned. Hell, what would it hurt to fuss some over the little guy?

Bailey began to moan, an oddly human sound. “He likes that,” the woman said.

“Yeah. Most living creatures like to be rubbed and stroked. It feels so good.”

He hadn’t really meant it like it came out. Well, not consciously, anyway. But when he shot a glance up at her, he saw from the awareness in her eyes that his remark had hit home. They locked gazes for a moment, hers surprised, even a little alarmed. And was it his imagination, or did he see the tips of her breasts harden to become two firm pearls?

In the next moment, she removed her hands from her hips, raising her arms to fuss with her hair and causing the T-shirt to lose its body-molding effect. Her attitude changed; now she seemed nervous, distracted, not at all pleased.

Oops, he thought. Busted.

No need to worry, he’d nearly said out loud. I won’t lay a hand on you...unless you want me to.

And he had about the proverbial snowball’s chance in hell of that happening. A real shame, because, damn, he wanted her! Not for the first time, he felt blood rushing through his veins to pool between his upper thighs, giving him an instant erection. He was grateful his crouching position kept that particular fact from her.

He patted the dog once more, saying casually, “I’ll take you

up on that coffee, if you don't mind."

Only after she'd gone into the house did he stand.

With Fitzgerald trailing her into the kitchen, Kayla felt as though every nerve ending in her body was exposed. Only now did she admit to herself that she'd been looking forward to his arrival all morning, and that when he'd appeared on the porch, she'd been way too glad to see him.

What had happened to yesterday's gut-level fear of him?

Not a factor today. Or not so far. Slowly, he was becoming an individual to her, no longer a symbol of masculine domination and brute strength. In fact, seeing him with Bailey, he'd seemed nearly human. And the bunny slippers remark—she'd almost caught him in a smile there. How would a full-throttle grin look?

She found herself wishing the fear response would come back; it had been a real barrier to that other response he aroused in her, the one that brought out all kinds of inappropriate female yearnings, the mental, emotional and physical kind.

"Any disturbances last night?" he asked from behind her.

"Not a one. Or else I slept through it."

"Good. I'm going to work on your plumbing this morning, okay?" They'd reached the kitchen, but she didn't really want to face him yet, so she didn't. "That's a priority in these old houses," he continued, "keeping them dry and free from the elements. Hank'll be up in a couple of hours with some supplies—wood, hardware, new tank innards."

"That's fine."

Wow. Her handyman was actually stringing sentences together. Yesterday's communication had been all clipped phrases, and curt, need-to-know answers to her questions. Hank had done most of the talking. The selling, really.

She wished the kitchen were larger; it was still way too small to hold him. He stood just behind her as she poured him coffee from the pot; again, she could feel the heat from his big body, could smell his lime after-shave, could hear the sound of his breathing.

And was she totally insane or was his breath caressing the back of her neck? The sensitive skin there felt all tingly. Again, she couldn't fail to notice that this much closeness, rather than feel threatening today, made her body shift and sing in odd places.

That connection again. Oh, lord, she really did have a problem here.

"Black, right?" she asked him.

"Excuse me?"

"Your coffee."

"Oh. Yes."

After handing him his cup, Kayla sidestepped him, turned and leaned against the counter, keeping her gaze chest-level. He wore a clean work shirt of tan denim, its sleeves rolled up to reveal a light dusting of dark hair on his muscular fore-arms... and on the left one, a fierce-looking tattoo of a hawk and a knife intertwined.

Startled, she tried not to stare, but he caught her reaction.

"I got it when I was inside," he told her matter-of-factly. "It

was purely defensive, trust me. If I hadn't joined one or another of the gangs, well—" he shrugged "—let's just say I didn't have much of a choice if I wanted to stay alive."

"Oh."

She shuddered inwardly at what she could only imagine the conditions must have been like for him in prison.

Don't ask him about it, she begged herself silently. Keep your distance. Look at the tattoo, remember where he's been. It was safer to keep an arm's length and more between herself and potential violence, which included the men who worship it.

Sipping her coffee, she darted a quick glance at his face. His hair was so very short, so close to his head, making the bones and contours of his face seem sharply defined. It wasn't that he was particularly handsome, only that he was so very masculine. Had he always worn his hair like this? Or was it growing out from being shaved in jail?

Another sip, eyes lowered, then another glance at him, at his face this time.

To find him staring straight at her, a look of half-lidded intensity on his face that made her breath stop. His nostrils flared, his mouth was tight with some kind of tension.

Oh, lord, Kayla thought weakly, save me.

Unable to avert her gaze, she couldn't help noticing that he was looking at her as though she were the highly coveted grand prize in some major contest, one he was hell-bent on winning.

The heat rose to her cheeks, her insides quivered and became

liquid. It was true, then. Not only was she sexually drawn to Paul Fitzgerald—despite her efforts not to be—but the feeling was definitely mutual. It was hard to miss it.

The moment was short-lived, so fleeting it might have not even happened, because in the next instant, the animal intensity of his expression was gone, wiped off his face. His gaze hardened; his mouth once again became a thin, smileless line.

He turned toward the door leading to the rest of the house. “I’ll take the coffee with me upstairs,” he said, his voice gruff as he added, “Thanks.”

For several moments after he left the kitchen, Kayla stood where she was, waiting for her breathing to return to something approximating normal.

She spent the rest of the morning doing chores and—as she had done the previous day—avoiding her new handyman. However, by lunchtime, when she was in the kitchen and he was working upstairs, she decided to stop being silly. To act like a grown-up for a change. Standing in the doorway, she called up the stairs, “Can I make you a sandwich?”

“No, thanks,” he called down from the upstairs bath. “I brought my own today.”

“Well, I’m going to sit out on the porch and have my lunch. It’s a beautiful day. Care to join me?”

It seemed to take him quite a while before he answered. “In a few minutes, sure.”

Humming to herself, Kayla brought out a tray with her

sandwich and two tall glasses of freshly brewed iced tea. Seated, she was just sipping her drink when she heard the glass door slide open and close again behind her. She smiled at Paul as he lowered himself onto the matching Adirondack chair, the table between them. True enough, he had a brown paper sack with him, and when he set the contents out on the plate she'd provided, she laughed.

"Peanut butter and jelly," she noted, holding up her own pb and j sandwich. "Great minds..."

Anyone else might have offered an answering smile, a wink, something. Not him. Instead, he grunted and took a large bite of his sandwich.

The return of the cutoff noncommunicator, Kayla observed silently. Aloud, she said, "I appreciate the work you're doing."

He chewed and swallowed before answering. "I'm getting paid, Mrs. Thorne."

"Kayla, please. And I'll call you Paul, if that's okay."

He hesitated before nodding. "Fine."

"Now, back to the compliment I was paying you. I admire people who take care with whatever they do. Pride in your work is a lost art."

In the midst of another bite, Paul stopped chewing. Her words created a small glow inside. It had been such a long time since anyone had seemed to appreciate anything he did, and hell, he was human after all.

Still, he'd decided to have lunch with Kayla Thorne for an

entirely different reason. To ask her about her brother. He should have done it yesterday, but he'd gotten the feeling she wasn't real comfortable with him yet. Today, there seemed to be a definite improvement in her mood.

Do it, he lectured himself silently. Use the time to get the information you need.

And forget about wanting her. The woman had good sense—she wasn't about to get mixed up with an ex-con, and he wasn't about to screw up his reasons for being here with any sexual nonsense.

But how to start? So, he could say, tell me about yourself—any sisters or brothers? Right. Like they were on a blind date or had just met at a bar. Okay, start casually, lead into it. Gazing around him, Paul said, “This place is really something.”

“Yes, I'm lucky it's in the family. Although, given the choice, I'd rather Walter were still alive.”

It was such a sad little comment, and it took him by surprise. He studied her face, open, honest and completely devoid of makeup or artifice of any kind. “So...you loved him.”

She seemed taken aback. “Of course I did.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to get personal. It's just—” he shrugged “—you're so different from what the papers made you out to be.” After it was out, he wondered if it had been a wise thing to say.

But she didn't seem to mind. Lifting one shoulder in an answering shrug, she said, “They make it up. I'm a creation of the media. They're getting back at me for refusing interviews and

insisting on my privacy. I wanted to mourn my husband's death. They couldn't understand why someone wouldn't welcome their fifteen minutes of fame."

"Yeah. Being damned in the press can really play havoc with your life, big-time."

"Is that what happened to you? I don't remember the details. Were you tried in public, too?"

"Believe it. It started out with one of those 'anonymous sources' you read about. He called a reporter with the scoop on me, how I was a dirty cop."

Talking about it dredged up that familiar sense of outrage. He took a sip of his tea to calm himself and to watch Kayla's face for any hint of recognition. Nope. Nothing there but polite interest.

"An investigation was opened," he continued, "and then there was a trial. It was pretty carefully orchestrated. I never had a chance. The guy, the 'anonymous source,' he started the whole thing."

She shook her head. "I hate when people hide behind anonymity—it keeps them from having to be responsible for their actions."

"He didn't stay hidden, trust me. He testified at the trial." He was talking about her brother; again, Paul watched her closely, but she showed no signs of having heard any of this before. "It was all a lie."

"But now you're out. You've served your time."

"I could still go back. See, this chief witness against me was a



paid informant, working for the district attorney, and the defense wasn't informed of that. His testimony was pretty damaging. Had my lawyer known about him, he could have impeached his credibility."

"So, they had no choice but to release you."

"Pending a new trial. They'll let you out if it's a first offense and not a crime against person or persons." He was telling her more than she needed to know, but there was something about Kayla Thorne that made talking to her easy.

She nodded. "I see. Well, good luck."

He gave a mirthless grunt. "I'll need more than good luck. But we're working on it. I want to clear my name," he added with more vehemence than he'd intended.

"Well, of course you do." Compassion flowed out of her. "It must have been so hard on your family, you being in jail."

"My family?"

"Your wife, children. If you have either."

It was one of those questions that women usually asked to find out if a guy was married before she got involved with him. However, in her case, he figured, she wasn't on a fishing expedition; she was just being courteous.

"No kids," he told her. "And my wife divorced me while I was in jail."

"Oh."

"My family stood up for me, though. My dad and brothers are responsible for me having this second chance—they're helping

to pay for the lawyer. If for no other reason, I need to prove my innocence, for them. To pay them back.”

“How are you going to do that?”

By finding out where your son-of-a-bitch brother is, he wanted to say. Jay Vinovich, aka Jay Goodall, the anonymous source and main witness. When Paul found him, he would pay, in spades.

“I’m working on a few leads,” he said, then plunged ahead with the topic that, after all, she had raised. “I can’t say enough about my family. They really came through for me. How about yours? During this whole thing, this bad rap in the press, did your family stand by you?”

If she’d been a window, at that moment the shutters would have snapped closed. “I don’t speak to my family much,” she said. “Not at all, actually.” She turned away from him, gazing instead at the vista before them.

“Oh, sorry. No mom and dad?” He made himself push it. He had no choice. “No brothers or sisters riding to your rescue?”

“My mother is gone, and I’ve lost touch with all the rest of them.”

“All the rest?”

“I’m the only girl of five children.”

He already knew that, but he whistled and said, “Big family.”

“Too big.” Her smile was inward, and bitter.

“And you don’t see any of them?”

“No.”

“That’s a shame,” he said with a sinking heart.

A damned shame, in fact. In more ways than one.

As though, after the flurry of dialogue, they’d each agreed to a time out, conversation stopped. Paul went back to his lunch, barely tasting his sandwich, and wished he knew what to ask next. What he’d learned so far from Kayla Thorne was exactly zip, and he tried to fight the growing sense of despair in his gut. Maybe she was exaggerating the estrangement; maybe she’d lost touch, but you could always find out where your family was, couldn’t you? If you really needed to...?

But he’d prodded about as much as he could at this time. Besides, he’d never been good at fishing expeditions. He figured if a person wanted to talk about a difficult subject, then they would. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t. He personally hated to have his privacy breached, but that was what he was trying to do to her right now.

For extremely important reasons, he reminded himself. The difference between a second chance at life and the possibility of going back to hell for several more years.

The sun felt good on Kayla’s back as, later in the afternoon, she pulled weeds from the garden on the far side of the house. Rich autumn smells filled her nostrils, from a neighbor burning leaves to the wild onions that grew at the edge of the porch. She listened to the sound of sawing and nail-pounding from upstairs, birds twittering in the trees all around. It was like surround sound for nature. She sighed. It had been a long time since she’d felt

such contentment, such a sense of peace....

“Kayla!”

The harsh sound of her name made her jerk her head up. No, she thought, standing, wiping her hands on her jeans, pushing her hair off her face, no doubt leaving traces of dirt on her cheeks as she did so. She'd been so absorbed in her role as the happy gardener, she hadn't heard his car drive up.

“Steven,” she said, turning to face the newcomer, who stood a few yards away, and wishing she were clean and nicely dressed. Walter's son always made her feel as though she'd thumbed a ride on a cabbage truck and didn't know enough to clean up afterward.

She said nothing other than his name, not “It's good to see you” or “How nice of you to stop by,” because neither were the truth, for either Steven or her.

She'd tried, in her years with Walter, to let his older son know that she had no intention of trying to replace his mother, that she had no interest in Walter's money, and that she truly cared about his father. But Steven, stiff-necked and given to deep grudges, had never bought it. So to keep the peace, Kayla had learned to be civil to him. But it wasn't easy.

He was dressed today as he always was, in an exquisitely tailored designer suit and tie. His cuff links were gold, his loafers soft Italian leather. His salt-and-pepper hair was perfectly styled, his face showed nary a whisker on its clean surface. Nothing was out of place, which was how he wanted his entire life to be. Twice married and twice divorced, Steven hated messiness and loose

ends.

Which was how he viewed his father's widow.

He stared at her and she stared back. She considered not opening the conversation, but she'd been placating him from the day they'd met, and old habits died hard. "I didn't expect you," she said with composure. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes."

"Well then, shall I make us some coffee?"

"No, I don't want coffee." He folded his arms across his chest and glared at her.

"Then just what is it you do want, Steven?"

He wanted his father back. She knew that, and wondered if he did. Kayla was enough of a student of human nature to know that first his mother's death, then his father's, had shaken Steven to the core, and in his pain he'd lashed out at the nearest target: Kayla. She'd withstood many of his verbal assaults; some she'd answered, at other times, she'd just walked out of the room, leaving him frustrated and probably even angrier.

"My lawyer tells me you haven't responded to our suit yet," he said.

"My lawyer tells me he's taking care of it."

"I thought, maybe, we could speed things up."

"Oh, did you?" She, too, crossed her arms over her chest. "And how exactly did you think we might do that?"

"I've hired a new firm of private detectives," he said with an air of gotcha! "They're researching your entire life, top to

bottom, beginning with your birth, through the day you were hired to take care of my mother and on to when you supposedly walked in on my dead father. There are a lot of gaps in your story. This time, they're going to find the truth."

She'd heard these threats before. When Walter had told his sons, Steven and Joe, that he was marrying Kayla, Steven had had her investigated. What showed up was all there was to know—she'd led a life that had its share of pain, limited success, some tragedy, some joy. There were things that she'd thought were her right to keep private, but not according to Steven. Still, insofar as proving her a gold digger, the most innocent of the accusations, or a murderer, the least, they'd come up with exactly nothing. Because there was nothing to come up with.

The deaths of both Sonny and Walter Thorne had been completely natural. Sonny had had terminal cancer; Walter had an embolism that burst loose and caused instant death. Kayla had played no part at all in either.

But Steven couldn't hear that. Wouldn't.

"Are you through?" she asked him.

"These people mean business, Kayla. They're going to find out every black moment in your life, everything you're ashamed of and want kept hidden. Why did you run away from home at sixteen? How did you support yourself as a runaway?"

"Steven—" she said warningly.

"How many lovers did you have before you met my father? I know you killed him, and I won't let you profit from it."

She held up a warning hand. “Stop it. Just stop it. Go away.”

Instead, he began to walk toward her, the look in his eyes threatening. For the first time in her dealings with Walter’s son, she wondered if she was at physical risk.

She held up both hands now, palms outward, toward him. “Please don’t come any closer.”

“You heard the lady.”

The menacing voice from behind startled her. Turning her head, she saw Paul standing back a few feet and to her left. He was shirtless, the muscles of his upper torso gleaming with sweat. In his hand, he held a hammer.

Teeth clenched tightly, Paul had to fight the rage building inside him. He wanted to rip the guy’s heart out.

When, from the upstairs window he’d been working on, he’d heard a murmured conversation between Kayla and a man she called Steven, he’d figured it was none of his business, so he’d kept on working. When the man’s voice had grown louder, he’d decided to make it his business and, picking up a weapon, tore down the stairs.

Just in time to hear the last few threats and Kayla’s answers. He held the hammer down, by his side. For now.

The minute the guy in the suit saw Paul, he took a step back. His eyes raked him up and down, then took in the hammer. “Who are you, her bodyguard?”

“Does she need one?”

“Or maybe you’re her lover. How long has this been going on?”

And doesn't that add a nice little wrinkle to my father's death?"

"Listen, you little creep—"

Paul started toward him, but Kayla put up a restraining hand. "Paul, don't," she said, then turned back to the "suit"—Steven, she'd called him. "This man is doing work for me, Steven, for you and Joe and me, taking care of the things that need repairing in the house."

He greeted her statement with marked skepticism. "Yeah, right. Well, when I'm through with you, your name will be off the deed—it'll be Joe's and mine alone."

"Why? You've never liked this place or wanted it."

"Now I do. And I'll fight you tooth and nail for it."

"Why don't you take a hike?" Paul said, having kept his mouth shut long enough. The guy was really irritating him.

Kayla shot him another cautioning look. "Please, Paul, you're not helping." Again, she addressed Steven. "You're free to do whatever you want. But I need you to leave. Now."

"You can't throw me off my own property."

"We have a deal, remember? Whoever is staying up here is in charge. I'm here now. Please, just leave."

Paul had to restrain himself from making an I'm-backing-her-up threat, but he managed to keep his mouth shut. Still, he trained his gaze on the guy in the suit, letting him know if he didn't get his ass off the property pronto, he'd have him to deal with.

Steven's eyes narrowed while he considered his next move. Then he said, "I'll leave. For now. But this isn't over," he added,



and turned to go.

As he strode briskly away, Paul followed him around the house to the driveway and, slapping the side of the hammer into the palm of his free hand several times, watched as Steven slid into a sleek Jag, gunned the motor and backed down the driveway before turning and heading down the mountain.

Shaking his head, he stalked back to where he'd left Kayla. She was still there, her hands in fists at her side, a look he hadn't seen on her face before. She was quietly furious. He couldn't blame her.

He shook his head again. "What a creep."

"How dare you?" she said.

"Excuse me?"

"What gave you the right to say what you said to him? Who gave you permission?"

Paul was so taken aback by her attack, he could barely speak. He'd expected, at the least, agreement on Steven's lousy personality; at the most, maybe a thank you or two. He had not expected to see this slender woman shaking with a silent rage aimed squarely at him.

"Well, excuse me," he said when he managed to find the words. "I thought I was helping you."

"By doing your caveman routine? I don't want that. I don't need that."

"Listen, lady, you might think you don't need it, but the guy was—"

She made an impatient gesture with her hand, cutting him off. “Spare me. I know how to handle Steven.”

“Didn’t look like you were doing much of a job.”

Her chin jutted out in defiance. “All right, then, I wasn’t doing much of a job. Either way, it’s my business. If you’d had your way there would have been a fight. I don’t like fights. And I don’t like men who engage in them. When and if I need your help, I’ll ask. Do you understand?”

He glared at her, all kinds of hostile responses whipping through his head, but none he would say to a woman. He ground his back teeth together and clenched and unclenched his jaw muscles several times before he was able to say, “Yes, ma’am. I most certainly do.”

Chafing at her dressing-down and his impotence to respond, he stormed off, heading for the stairs and the resumption of his chores. Damned if he’d ever come to the widow Thorne’s aid again.

In fact, he decided, he didn’t need this stupid job at all. He could find Jay Vinovich without Kayla’s help. It would be difficult; but he could do it. He’d have to, because when he was done here for the day, he was done here for good.

## Chapter 4

An hour later, Kayla found Paul at the top of the staircase, working on the banister, which had a tendency to jiggle when you touched it. She stood several steps below him. His back was to her, and she waited for him to acknowledge her presence. He took his sweet time doing it, which she probably deserved. And when he finally angled his head around, his face was a perfect mask of detachment. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry,” she told him.

His gaze met hers without blinking, then he nodded once, growled “Fine,” and returned to his work.

She remained where she was. “Paul? I really am sorry. I shouldn’t have blown up at you like that. It was Steven who deserved my anger, not you.”

She waited again while he seemed to mull over her words. Then he turned around and stared down at her. At this angle, he seemed impossibly tall and imposing, and she was glad he was on her side. As though reading her mind, he set down his tools and lowered himself onto the top step, his elbows resting on his bent knees, his hands clasped between his legs.

Grateful that he was obviously willing to discuss things a bit longer, Kayla sat a couple of steps lower down, angled her body around and gazed up at him. “You had a hammer in your hand and a look in your eye. And, well, I get this kind of knee-jerk

reaction to, well, the way men are so quick to use physical threats to settle scores between them. You know, pissing contests. They make me uncomfortable. I prefer to try to reason things out.”

“I have a knee-jerk reaction to men who threaten women.”

She allowed herself a small smile, acknowledging the ambiguity in the situation. “Good for me you do. This time, anyway. It made Steven go away. Thank you.”

He rubbed a hand over his face, scrubbing at it, as though he were tired. Then he emitted a loud sigh. “He’ll be back, you know.”

“Steven never goes away.”

“Is he out of control? Has he ever been violent with you?”

“Not so far. Let’s hope he remains that way.”

His look said he was skeptical about that possibility. “Well, whatever you think about the way I handle myself, a physical threat is the only language some people understand. I’m good at that. So—” He paused, frowned as he silently considered something. Then he shook his head, as though thoroughly disgusted with himself before he went on. “Look, I’ll stay out of your business. But...hey, I’m here if you need me.”

At these words of support, even though they’d been delivered with obvious reluctance, a sweet warmth filled her insides. “That’s about the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in, well, in a long, long time.”

She reached up and laid her hand on his forearm. It was the first time she’d actually touched him, and the fact that his skin,

under a light dusting of surprisingly soft hair, was warm and his arm was rock-hard with muscle reassured her even more. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Crea-e-eak.

At first she incorporated the noise into her dream, something sensual about a huge, unsmiling-but-studly man and a bed with old box springs.

Crea-ee-eak.

But then Kayla sat straight up in bed, her heart thudding, her throat clogged with fear. It was not a dream. It was the same noise she’d heard two nights ago. Again, it came from her downstairs porch.

Instinctively, her mind sought answers. If it was an animal, there was nothing out there to attract it. She’d thoroughly cleaned the compost pile. All garbage was in plastic bags in the mudroom. There wasn’t even anything growing in her garden to tempt the noncarnivores; all the weeds were gone. She intended to plant all kinds of nourishing vegetables after winter passed, in the early spring.

Crea-eee-eak.

A wild thought entered her head that she ought to get Paul to fix those loose slats. Sooner rather than later. But if he did, she wouldn’t have any warning sign when there was a trespasser, and then, whatever or whoever it was could creep up on her while she was sleeping.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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