Love Inspired SUSPENSE

RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Hidden in Shadows

HOPE WHITE

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Аннотация

An intruder in her house? But why?Tea shop owner Krista Yates has nothing worth stealing, and Wentworth, Michigan, is hardly a danger zone…or is it? DEA agent Luke McIntyre warns Krista that the prowler has some dangerous connections, and that she needs around-the-clock protection.Luke's presence in her life is a bit too easy to get used to - and his growing presence in her heart makes her dread saying goodbye. But her nonstop defender can't hide Krista away forever. And there's more than her safety - or her love - at risk when the threat steps out of the shadows again.

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Agent McIntyre wasn't motivated by love, but rather by duty.

He'd stay over Krista's garage and unravel this threat before anyone got hurt. She sensed he was a warrior type, a controlling force.

Krista turned off the lights and headed upstairs. She didn't want a controlling force in her life. She'd fought long and hard for her independence.

The past was the past, long gone, buried with the news that her father's killer had died in prison.

It had been years since the nightmare had resurfaced to haunt Krista. Yet tonight, thanks to a stranger breaking in to her house and the DEA agent sleeping in her garage, the violence was back in her life.

Along with the memories.

HOPE WHITE

An eternal optimist, Hope White was born and raised in the Midwest. She began spinning tales of intrigue and adventure when she was in grade school, and wrote her first book when she was eleven—a thriller that ended with a mysterious phone call the reader never heard!

She and her college sweetheart have been married for thirty years and are blessed with two wonderful sons, two feisty cats and a bossy border collie.

When not dreaming up inspirational tales, Hope enjoys hiking, sipping tea with friends and going to the movies. She loves to hear from readers: hopewhitebooks@gmail.com.

Hidden in Shadows
Hope White

Though a mighty army surrounds me, my heart will not be afraid. Even if I am attacked, I will remain confident.

—Psalms 27:3

This book is dedicated to my friends at Sassy Teahouse in Redmond, Washington.

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ONE

Okay, so Krista didn't expect a welcoming party when she returned home from her mission trip, but she didn't expect the house to be trashed either.

As she stepped inside the front hallway of her bungalow, a shaft of moonlight illuminated the mess in her living room. Sofa cushions were strewn across the shag rug, the end table was tipped over and mail littered the floor.

Anastasia was not happy. Who would have thought a ten-pound cat could actually do so much damage? That she could tip over furniture?

Krista dropped her purse, went to the oak bureau and pulled the chain on the vintage lamp.

Nothing.

"Anastasia," Krista scolded. The cat had probably chewed through the cord again. You'd think one shocking experience would be enough for kitty to keep her fangs off the electrical wire.

"Come on, Natalie took care of you." Krista edged her way through the living room, hoping to find a lamp with an unchewed cord, and hoping she got some light before her attack cat decided to pounce.

She tried a second lamp, with no luck. Being stalked by a crazy cat in broad daylight is one thing, but in pitch black it could be

its own kind of shocking experience.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty," she cooed.

Krista was so not in the mood for surprises. Exhaustion filled every cell of her body after spending fourteen hours traveling from Mexico to Michigan. It was bad enough she'd missed her connection, but then they'd lost her luggage. She waited an hour and gave up, asking them to send it home when they found it.

At least she had the important stuff: her Bible, book of inspirational quotes and digital card with the hundreds of pictures she'd taken on the mission trip. She couldn't wait to upload the shots to her Faithgirl blog.

"Ana-sta-sia," she called out. The cat was sure to be in attack mode. After all, Krista had abandoned her for nearly two weeks. How dare she!

"Kitty, kitty, kitty," Krista said, feeling her way down the hall to the kitchen.

It wasn't like Krista had completely abandoned her. Her best friend, Natalie Brown, stopped by to check on the feline.

The wall phone rang, making Krista yelp.

She snatched the receiver. "Hello?"

"Welcome home!" Natalie said.

"Thanks, I'm glad to be home. Just wish I had some light." She ran her hand across the wall in search of the switch.

"What do you mean?"

"The cat ate through my lamp cords." She flicked the switch but the ceiling light didn't come on. "Did I forget to pay my bill?

No, I set it up on bill pay before I left."

"They wouldn't turn off your lights if you missed one payment, silly girl."

"I'm a tired girl and I can't see what I'm doing and any second now Anastasia is going to strike."

"But it was a good trip, right?" Natalie asked.

"It was amazing." Her heart filled with pride at the memory of helping the children in the small Mexican village. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Fred Skripps won the fishing contest, the new condo complex on Fourth got approved and they're bringing in a busload of tourists Friday. Be ready, tea mistress."

"Ready is my middle name."

"Bad, Krista, really bad."

"Sorry. Long flight, they lost my luggage and I'm hungry."

"Check your refrigerator."

Krista made her way to the fridge and pulled it open. Unfortunately the fridge light wasn't working either, but moonlight lit the kitchen enough for Krista to see her friend had left her some goodies.

"You're wonderful," Krista said.

"Says the woman who just spent ten days on a mission trip. You're welcome. There's chicken casserole, fresh fruit and takeout from Pekadill's."

"My mouth is watering. But if my power's out I can't heat it in the micro."

“Did you check the fuse box in the garage?” Nat offered.

“That’s next. If I don’t fall asleep on my way out there.”

“Anastasia would have a field day with that.”

“Did you see her at all?” Krista fumbled in the kitchen junk drawer.

“Once, the first time I stopped by. She thought I was you.”

“How’d that go?” Krista pulled out a red mini flashlight.

“She ran, hid and never came out again.”

“Except to trash my living room,” Krista said.

“You want me to send Timothy over?”

“No, thanks. I’ll be fine.”

“He wouldn’t mind.”

“I’m good, really.” Krista liked being able to take care of herself. Natalie had done plenty, and Krista didn’t like taking advantage of Natalie’s boyfriend’s good nature. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

“I’ll stop by the tea shop.”

“Sounds good.”

She hung up and pointed the flashlight into the living room. “Kitty, kitty.” She aimed in all the corners, above the bookshelf, then got down on her knees and held her breath as she flashed the light beneath the sofas.

“This is ridiculous.” She stood. “I’m not going to let you punk me, kitty.”

Pointing the flashlight ahead of her, she marched into the kitchen and flung open the back door. The smell of winter

floated through the yard, wrapping around her shoulders like a soft blanket.

Home. There was nothing like it.

She marched outside to the detached garage. Shoving the flashlight into her sweater pocket, she heaved open the garage door and reached for her flashlight. A crashing sound made her jump back.

"Anastasia, how did you get in here?" Krista aimed the flashlight into the garage—

And screamed at the sight of a large man rummaging through her toolbox.

Instinct demanded she run, but for a second she couldn't move. Then the intruder turned to reveal a skeleton-masked face. He was holding a weapon in his hand.

Panic shot her out of the garage, her heart pounding against her chest. She raced for the house, focusing on the open door…

The man shoved her from behind and she went down against the cobblestone walk, the breath knocked from her lungs. It couldn't end like this. Who would run the tea shop?

Oh, of all the things to be worried about.

Eyes pinched shut, she braced herself.

But nothing happened.

She heard crunching of footsteps through the dormant garden as the man raced off. Could he be some homeless guy trying to stay warm?

"Hey!" a male voice called out behind her.

Followed by a pop. Then another.

She swallowed back the panic that threatened to make her sick.

Special Agent Luke McIntyre hit the ground when he saw the weapon aimed in his direction. Taking cover behind the house, he slipped his Glock from his belt and waited. He didn't want a shoot-out in this small town, but he had to defend himself.

And the woman.

Luke counted to three and poked his head out. The guy was out of sight.

A car's engine sputtered and cracked. Luke raced around the house in time to spot a dark green minivan peeling away from the curb. On the ground lay a nail gun.

Neighbors' lights popped on with interest and he quickly holstered his gun.

There was no doubt Krista Yates was in trouble.

Luke busted tail to get to Wentworth after the tip came in about Victor Garcia. The drug lord was sending men to the quiet Michigan town to finish some business with the Peace Church mission group. Garcia was a bold one to be using a church group to move drugs, but it didn't surprise Luke.

Garcia had been on the DEA's watch list for months and just when they thought they had enough to bring him in, the drug lord fled, probably to Mexico. Luke's office thought they'd lost him for good.

But Luke hadn't given up. Not on this one. There was too

much history, too much at stake.

Luke slipped into town and touched base with the police chief, asking that Luke's position as DEA agent be confidential so as not to alert Garcia's men and chase them off. Luke knew that gossip in a small town traveled like wildfire.

Luke wanted to catch Garcia's men in the act of retrieving the drugs so he could hurt Victor Garcia where he'd feel it most: in his business.

No, Luke didn't just want to hurt Garcia. He wanted to destroy him.

The chief explained that Krista Yates coordinated the mission trip, and had somehow missed her connection, so she was arriving later than the rest of the group.

The question was, what was Garcia's connection to Krista Yates?

Luke started around back, the sound of sirens blaring in the distance. He pulled out his shield and clipped it to his jacket pocket. Didn't want Barney Fife thinking he was the perp.

He turned the corner.

The woman was gone.

"Miss Yates?" he called out.

"Who are you and what did you do with my cat?"

He turned toward the house. She was aiming a fire extinguisher at him.

He raised his hands and bit back a smile at her aggressive stance. "I'm a federal agent, ma'am." He nodded toward his

shield.

"Oh." She put down the extinguisher. "Wait, how did you get here so fast? Did you say federal agent?"

He took a step toward her and stopped. She looked shaken, petrified. He couldn't blame her.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm with the DEA."

Her green eyes were innocent, yet weary, and a bruise was starting to form on her cheek.

"You'd better ice your cheek or you're gonna look like Rocky Balboa after ten rounds in the ring." Lowering his hands, he started for the house.

She reached for the fire extinguisher.

"I'm on your side, remember?" he said.

"Then fix my lights."

"Excuse me?"

"There's no light in my house. I went to the garage to check the fuse box and that guy jumped me, I mean jumped over me." She shook her head in confusion.

"Go on inside and I'll check the fuse box."

"It's dark inside."

"Okay, then wait on the porch. The cops should be pulling up any second now."

She hugged her midsection with one hand and clutched a charm at the base of her neck with the other. Although she acted strong, she looked broken and terrified.

And way too fragile.

Luke went into the garage, pulled out his pen flashlight and inspected the fuse box. As he expected, all switches were in the Off position. Luke snapped them on and light beamed from the house onto the back porch.

"Want me to close the garage door?" he called.

No answer.

Luke peered out from the garage. The woman was gone. What the heck? Did the guy come back? Send an accomplice? He started for the house.

"Police! Freeze!" a female shouted from behind him.

Luke raised his hands. "I'm a federal officer."

"Yeah and I'm Judge Judy. Get down on the ground."

"If you'd let me turn around—"

"Do it!" The woman sounded too young and green to be holding a firearm.

The guys in Luke's division would have a field day if the pip-squeak cop shot him in the back due to lack of experience.

"I'm going, I'm going." Luke dropped to his knees, interlacing his hands behind his head.

"All the way down!"

He hesitated, bitter memories tearing through his chest. Being forced down…

Held there while his partner, Karl, fought for his life.

"I said get down!" she ordered.

"Deanna, what are you doing?" the Yates woman said, coming out of the house.

“Stay in the house, Krista,” the cop ordered.

“No, he’s a good guy.”

Good? Hardly.

Krista walked up to Luke, removed his shield and flashed it at the cop.

He doubted the rookie could see past her adrenaline rush.

Luke heard another car pull up.

“How do you know that’s real?” the female cop said.

“It’s real,” a man offered.

Luke recognized Chief Cunningham’s voice. Luke had spent a good hour with him earlier tonight going over the case.

“Lower your weapon, Officer West,” the chief said.

From the concerned look on Krista’s face, Luke sensed the female cop didn’t follow the order. This was probably the most action she’d seen in her entire year on the force. If she’d even been on the force a year.

“West!” the chief threatened.

Krista sighed with relief and touched Luke’s shoulder. “You need help getting up?”

Right, he still hadn’t moved, paralyzed by the dark memories that he couldn’t bury deep enough. Guilt had a way of rising to the surface to mess with your head at the worst possible moments.

Krista gripped his arm to help him stand. As if he needed help from this fragile thing.

Fragile. Innocent. Dangerous.

“I’m fine.” Luke stood and turned to the cop. She looked

barely twenty.

"Sorry about that," the chief offered.

"No problem," Luke said.

"Yes problem," Krista countered.

They all looked at her.

"Anastasia is missing." With a shake of her head, she went into the house.

Luke glanced at the chief. "Who's Anastasia?"

"Her cat," Officer West said.

Luke glanced at the house. Krista had nearly been taken out by a member of Garcia's gang and all she could think about was a silly cat?

"Officer West, continue your patrol and don't tell anyone about Agent McIntyre's presence in town," Chief Cunningham said. "I'll handle things here."

"The guy who jumped Miss Yates was driving a dark green minivan," Luke said.

"Okay, thanks." Officer West walked to her cruiser.

"These are not teenage pranksters, West. Radio in if you spot the van. That's an order," the chief said. "Yes, sir."

The chief turned to Luke. "Ready?"

"For what?"

The chief started for the house. "I have a feeling Krista isn't going to be in a talking mood until we find her cat."

"You're kidding."

"Welcome to Wentworth, son." Chief Cunningham climbed

the steps and disappeared into the house.

"Fantastic," Luke muttered.

He was allergic to cats, and even more allergic to small towns. He grew up in one and hightailed it out of there before he hit his seventeenth birthday. There was too much gossip in a small town, too much imagined drama.

He climbed the steps and glanced across the yard. Imagined? Most of the time. In Krista Yates's case he was pretty sure she'd brought it home with her from Mexico, probably in her luggage, or in something she saw or said.

He shook his head. She was a talker, for sure, but he couldn't imagine the sweet-faced blonde saying anything offensive or rude. This wasn't about manners, it was about one of Mexico's biggest drug cartels moving product into the country via innocents.

The Yates woman defined innocent.

Luke stepped into the house and found the chief and Krista in the living room. "So the house was like this when you got home?" the chief said, eyeing the mess.

"I thought it was the cat."

"You thought the cat tipped over your end table?" Luke asked.

"She's a really big cat and she's rather upset with me right now."

"The sooner we can get a description of the man you saw in the garage, the more accurate it will be," the chief said.

"You don't think he killed her, do you?" Krista asked, her eyes

rounding with fear. Wide, green, helpless eyes.

"Now, why would he kill your cat, Krista?" the chief said.

Krista narrowed her eyes. "You, of all people, should not be asking me that. Gladys still has scars from the quilting open house."

"Point taken."

"Anastasia? Here, kitty, kitty." She glanced at Luke. "Get the Whiskas. On top of the microwave." She disappeared upstairs.

Luke glanced at the chief.

"The sooner we find the cat…" the chief said with a shrug.

Luke found the bag of cat treats in the kitchen. As he grabbed them, his gaze caught on a photograph on the windowsill of a teenage Krista, and he guessed her mom, and perhaps grandmother. They looked like a team, arms around each other, ready to take on the world.

They were a loving family. He'd always wondered what that looked like.

It's not like he hung out with the guys at work and their families. He'd had a few invitations, but he knew he didn't belong and would make everyone feel awkward.

He never seemed to belong.

And that was fine by him.

"I got the cat treats!" he called out, more than a bit irritated with this diversion from their course of finding her attacker.

The chief was on the phone, and Luke started up the stairs. Krista met him halfway.

"No shouting," she whispered.

"I was shouting?"

"You shake and I'll grab."

"Excuse me?"

"The cat. You go ahead of me and shake the bag and I'll grab her when she comes out."

"Ma'am, we really need to talk about—"

"Shake and grab."

If the guys found out about this, he'd be more of a laughing stock than if he'd been shot by Rookie West.

She motioned for him to slip around her. The staircase was narrow and he couldn't help but brush up against her as he passed. She smelled fresh, like flowers, even after a twelve-plus-hour flight. How was that possible?

Shaking the bag, he started down the hallway, glancing into a bedroom. Neat and tidy, the four-poster bed was covered with a down comforter and the curtains looked handmade.

"Kitty, kitty. I love you, kitty," she crooned.

He kept shaking, ignoring the generous use of a word he'd rarely heard growing up. What the heck was wrong with him tonight?

Lack of sleep. He'd gone too long on five hours a night. It was bound to catch up to him.

"Wait." She touched his arm.

Warmth seeped through his leather jacket as he eyed her petite fingers.

She pointed to the next bedroom and released him, tiptoeing ahead. He glanced at his arm, struggling to remember the last time he'd felt any gentle, nonthreatening human contact.

Yeah, man, you do need sleep.

After he nailed Garcia and his production line. After the murderer was in jail. After…

What? There'd always be another Garcia.

Luke's job would never be over and he'd never be satisfied.

Krista crooked her finger and he followed her into the bedroom. This one had to be hers. A canopy bed centered the room, draped in light purple and pink material. A Bible lay on her nightstand and a tray of antique perfume bottles lined her dresser.

Luke glanced away.

Krista pressed her fingers to her lips and kneeled down pointing beneath the bed. He motioned to the bag of treats and she nodded for him to shake. He shook. They waited. No cat.

"Oh, boy. She's gotta be under here." Krista shimmied beneath the bed.

He felt something brush against his pants and glanced down to see a black-and-white cat doing a figure eight around his legs.

"Miss Yates?" he said.

"Yeah?" her muffled voice answered.

"Is this the cat you're looking for?"

She wiggled back out and sat cross-legged on the floor. "Anastasia?" With a confused frown she glanced up at Luke.

“She hates people.”

“I’m not people. I’m a federal officer, remember?” He smiled, hoping she’d be able to shift gears quickly and give them the intruder’s description before too many other things clouded her memory.

“Wow.” She looked up at him with awe. Respect.

He didn’t deserve it.

“Not a big deal.” He passed her the treat bag and she opened it.

The cat pounced on Krista. “Okay, okay,” she laughed, a sweet, carefree sound.

“About your statement…” he said.

The cat purred and rubbed against Krista’s knee as she put a treat on the hardwood floor.

“Ready?” he said.

“Sure.” She stood and Luke automatically reached out to steady her. He withdrew his hand, afraid his touch might damage her somehow.

He turned to leave the room.

“Wait a second, can you hold this?” She handed him the treat bag.

She put her hands together and stood at her dresser. “Thank you, Lord, for allowing me to help such wonderful children in Mexico, for seeing me home safely, for my friends, for Anastasia and for Agent Luke for being my hero tonight. Amen.”

He wanted to correct her, tell her he was no one’s hero, not by any stretch of the imagination.

“Okay, let’s get this over with,” she said. “I’m exhausted.”
She took a step toward the door, wearing that pleasant smile.
The crack of a gunshot echoed through the window.
Luke grabbed her and hit the floor.

TWO

Here she was, knocked on the ground again. Not exactly how she pictured her first night home. She'd hoped to get into a bubble bath to wash the plane scum from her skin, sip a cup of chamomile tea and crawl beneath her down comforter.

Instead, someone was shooting at her.

"Stay here." Agent McIntyre stood and pressed his back against the wall.

"But the cat—"

He pressed two fingers to his lips to shush her. His expression was fierce, intense. She was glad she wasn't on his bad side. She started to get up.

"Right there," he ordered, slipping a gun from inside his jacket.

Her breath caught at the memory of little Armando Morales. Images of the little boy covered in blood, moaning in pain, made her freeze in place. Armando had been an innocent bystander caught in a territorial shoot-out among drug dealers.

Yet he was just a child.

The whole experience reminded her how lucky she was. She may not have had a father or siblings, but she lived a safe, healthy life in Wentworth.

At least she had…until tonight.

The stairs creaked as Agent McIntyre went to investigate. She

scooted to the door and leaned into the doorjamb, wishing that this was some kind of crazy dream brought on by exhaustion. Sure, she'd returned home, downed a few scoops of casserole and had crawled into bed. The peas in the casserole didn't agree with her, sparking nightmares that began with her being chased down by her garage stalker.

Another popping sound shattered that wishful thinking. It sounded farther away than the first, definitely from outside. Her windows hadn't been shattered by the shots.

"Anastasia?" she whispered, needing a hug, even from a crazy cat.

Hugs were something she sorely missed since Gran passed away and Mom moved to Florida with Lenny. Krista missed a lot of things and had hoped to fill that emptiness with her missionary work with kids, and maybe, in the not too distant future, a loving husband and children of her own.

Only, she was a disaster in the relationship department and had decided to stop looking so hard. She prayed about her life, asked God to help her find inner peace.

Kind of hard to find peace when people are shooting at you.

"Miss Yates?" Agent McIntyre called from the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes?"

"It's safe. You can come down."

She headed downstairs where the intense, yet handsome, agent was waiting for her. Her eyes caught on the gun in his hand and

she froze.

He glanced at his weapon. “Sorry.” He shoved it into its holster and pulled his jacket over it to conceal the weapon.

“The gunshot?” she asked.

“A neighbor was trying to scare off a raccoon. The chief’s out there talking to him now.”

“Probably the Bender kid. Someone should tell his dad to lock up the rifle.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Come on, let’s take your statement about the man in the garage before you fall asleep on us.”

She ambled through the living room. “With all this adrenaline rushing through my body I doubt I’ll ever sleep again.”

Anastasia raced past her into the kitchen.

“How about some tea?” she offered over her shoulder.

“I’m good, thanks.”

Was he ever. Agent McIntyre was good at being there to protect Krista, acting confident and unshakable. He was pretty nice to look at, too.

Warning! Sleep alert!

She was not one to ogle a stranger, but she was tired, hungry and confused. A man had broken into her house and garage. Looking for what? And wait a second, why was a federal agent at her house?

She turned to him. “Hey, you never told me why you’re here.”

“First things first. Let’s get ice for your cheek.”

She touched her face. “It looks bad?”

“Not yet, but it will if you don’t ice it.” He took a kitchen towel from the rack, opened the freezer and dropped a handful of cubes in it. He reached out to place it on the bruise and she took it from him.

“Thanks,” she said, holding it in place and leaning against the counter. “You’re an expert at first aid?”

“I’ve been knocked down a few times.”

Yeah, she could see that. He was tough, the kind of man who stayed focused and didn’t back down from a fight.

“Ready to give a statement?” he said.

“Sure.”

Chief Cunningham stepped into the kitchen from the back door. “I gave the Bender kid a lecture about firearms. Took away the rifle for the time being, until his dad gets back from his business trip.”

“I was about to question Miss Yates,” Agent McIntyre said.

“Please call me Krista. Miss Yates makes me feel like an old maid.”

“Okay, Krista.” Agent McIntyre sat at the kitchen table and opened a small notebook.

Good, he looked less intimidating sitting instead of towering over her. The man had to be over six feet tall, dwarfing her five-foot-three-inch frame. His good looks and hard-edged demeanor made her uncomfortable. He was different than the few men she’d dated in Wentworth.

Not just different. He was a cynical man who’d chosen a

violent career.

She sighed and found a bag of chamomile tea. She'd lost her dad to violence and saw what violence did to innocent children on her mission trips. Krista believed in discussing problems, praying about them. She wondered if a man like Luke McIntyre ever prayed. She doubted it.

"Can you describe the man in your garage?"

"No, I'm sorry. He was wearing a skeleton mask."

The agent hesitated in his note taking. Why?

"Did anything unusual happen at the airport in Mexico before you boarded?" he continued, focusing his blue-green eyes on his notepad. She'd noticed their brilliant color when he'd helped her trap Anastasia.

"Nothing unusual other than missing my first flight, which meant missing my connection in Chicago, and then losing my luggage."

"Did anyone talk to you at the airport?"

"Not really."

"Anyone at all. The slightest, seemingly insignificant conversation could help us."

"I chatted with a young mother. She had the cutest little newborn."

"Any men?"

"I don't like talking to men."

The agent snapped his eyes to meet hers. "You don't talk to men?"

“Strangers. I don’t trust them.”

“Smart girl.”

Irked, she turned her back to him and poured hot water into the cup. “Thank you, Agent McIntyre, but I stopped being a girl ten years ago.”

Silence filled the room. She’d overreacted. She couldn’t help it. Being called a “girl” hit a nerve.

It reminded her of when she was a little girl, innocent and trusting. When she made the mistake of talking to a stranger.

“Anyway, no talking with strangers,” she said, turning to Agent McIntyre.

Chief Cunningham stood quietly in the corner, arms crossed over his chest. He knew the story, the loss and devastation to the Yates family. The chief was the only one who knew the truth, knew that Mom and Krista had fled to Wentworth from California because the little girl had been so close to a killer, looked him in the eye, even shook his hand.

Krista had been only five when she’d told the stranger that Father was still at work in the Lincoln building. No one could have anticipated how that bit of information would change everyone’s lives. It led the disheartened investor to Dad’s office where an argument turned violent and Dad was killed.

After Dad’s death, Mom fretted that the killer would come back for Krista since she’d seen him, so Mom packed up their belongings and moved to Gran’s house in Michigan. A year later they got word that Dad’s killer had been caught and sentenced

to life in prison.

Krista was safe, but Mom and Gran couldn't drop the overprotective parenting style. Mom probably would have objected to Krista going on the mission trip if she'd still been living in Wentworth.

"And when you landed in Grand Rapids?" the agent asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"I got paged."

"For what?"

"Someone found my license, but I had my license so it was a mix-up. By the time I got to baggage claim, I discovered they'd lost my luggage."

"Did you get there as luggage was coming out on the conveyor belt?"

"No."

"So someone could have taken your luggage?"

"I guess, by accident, sure."

The agent and police chief exchanged glances.

"I don't have anything worth stealing, if that's where you're going with this."

"You might have had something you didn't know you had," Agent McIntyre said.

Then again his job was to see conspiracy around every corner.

"Why are you here again?" she asked and sipped her tea with one hand, while holding the ice to her cheek with the other.

"I'm investigating drug trafficking from Mexico into the

Midwest."

"You think they used my suitcase to smuggle drugs?" she said, her voice pitched with disbelief.

"It's not that simple," Agent McIntyre said.

"What, then?"

"We got a tip that the leader of the drug cartel sent men to Michigan to tie up some loose ends with a church group. The tip came shortly after your group left Mexicali."

"So, you think someone in the mission group was smuggling drugs?"

"It's a possibility, yes," McIntyre said.

"No. It's not. I know you're used to dealing with criminals, Agent McIntyre, but people like us don't break the law."

"Luke."

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Luke. You don't have to call me Agent McIntyre."

"Oh, okay." But it wasn't okay. She didn't want to call him by his first name, didn't like the fact he was accusing someone in her church of smuggling and she didn't like that he was still here at nearly one in the morning.

"Is that all?" she said.

"You didn't recognize anything about the assailant?"

"The man in the garage? No. He could have been some teenager fooling around for all I know."

"Krista, I want you to stay with me and Jane tonight," Chief

Cunningham said.

"Thank you, chief, but I'm fine here."

"You're really not," Luke interjected.

"You don't know that for sure."

"Why risk it?" he said.

"What about staying with your friend, Natalie, or the Sass family?" the chief suggested.

"Look, I haven't had a good night's sleep in nearly two weeks. I need to sleep in my own bed!" she shouted, then slapped her hand to her mouth. She didn't mean to lose it like that. "Sorry, I get cranky when I'm tired."

"I'll stay with her," Luke said to the chief.

"No, really, that's okay." She wasn't sure what scared her more: the stranger jumping out of her garage or the handsome agent offering to sleep under the same roof.

"Krista, you either stay at our house or with the Sasses, or let Agent McIntyre bunk on your couch. You pick."

No one had spent the night since Mom came back for Gran's funeral two years ago. Mom had moved to Florida with Lenny, and since Gran's death Krista had been in the family house alone.

And tonight they were asking her to share it with a stranger.

"I won't let a strange man stay in my house," she said.

"I'm a federal agent and I'm here to protect you. What's the problem?"

"It doesn't look right," she said.

Agent McIntyre glanced at the chief.

“Small town, people talk,” the chief explained. He glanced at Krista. “We’ll tell them Agent McIntyre is my nephew from upstate New York.”

“I don’t like lying,” Krista said.

“Undercover work isn’t the same as lying,” Luke said. “It’ll help me figure out who’s behind all this.”

“I understand, but—”

“How about I stay in the loft above your garage? I noticed a room up there.”

“Great idea,” Chief Cunningham offered. “It’s well insulated and heated since the previous owner ran his mechanics business out of the garage.”

“It’s pretty gross up there,” Krista said, feeling bad that she couldn’t offer better accommodations.

“I’m sure I’ve slept in worse.”

She wondered what could be worse than a cold, damp garage.

“It’s a good compromise,” the chief offered. “He can keep an eye on the house from the garage.”

True, he could see her bedroom window from the garage. A thought that was both comforting and unsettling.

“It’s either your garage or my car,” Luke said. “And I don’t want your neighbors to think I’m stalking you from the street.”

“Okay, fine. There’s a cot up there, although we haven’t used it in years.”

“I wasn’t planning on sleeping much anyway.”

Of course not. He’d be watching the house. Watching her.

“I’ll have patrol swing by every hour.” The chief shook Agent McIntyre’s hand. “You’ll check in tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good night, Krista.”

“Good night. Thanks, chief.”

The chief walked out to his cruiser and Luke hesitated at the back door.

“You should have better security. Anyone could pop one of these windows and—”

“This is not New York City,” she argued.

“You’re right about that.” He turned to her, scribbling something in his notebook.

Probably that she was a smarty-pants, disagreeable, cat-obsessed, crazy woman.

“You ever consider getting a dog?” he said.

“Not really, why?”

“They make great alarm systems.”

“You’re a dog person?”

“That surprises you?” He looked at her.

It did actually. Dog people were loving and kind. This man seemed guarded and cynical.

“Kind of, I mean, Anastasia adores you and she usually hates dog people.”

“Told you that, did she?”

Was he joking with her? No, she was just exhausted and imagining it.

He glanced out the window and back at Krista. “Good night, then.”

“Wait, I’ll get you some blankets and a pillow.” She went upstairs to the hall closet and pulled out pink linens. She guessed not his usual color, but pale pinks and purples were her favorite and she’d decorated the house accordingly.

She wasn’t used to having company and wondered what else he needed.

He’s not company. He’s a cop after a criminal.

What did the man look like? What color was his hair? His eyes? What did he say?

Childhood memories assaulted her. She’d tried to describe the man who came looking for her dad, but she was too upset that Daddy wasn’t coming home. Ever.

She hugged the linens and made for the stairs. She thought she’d put it behind her, buried the memories and the fear so deep that they wouldn’t rise to scare the wits out of her.

But danger was back, in the form of the DEA agent bunking in her garage.

How on earth did she get embroiled in this mystery? She refused to believe someone on the mission trip had a connection to a drug organization. She just wouldn’t accept it.

“Here,” she said, stepping into the kitchen.

Agent McIntyre was eyeing photos lined up on the window ledge.

“Your mom and…?” he asked.

“Grandmother. We moved here when—” She stopped short. She couldn’t even talk about it. “We moved here when I was five.”

He turned and eyed her with speculation. She shoved the linens at him. “This should keep you warm. Sorry about the color.”

He took the blankets and pillow. “Hopefully I won’t break out in hives.”

He was teasing again? She wasn’t sure, couldn’t be sure of anything right now.

“Yes, well.” She opened the back door. “I’m up and out by eight to prep the tea shop for customers.”

He stepped onto the back porch and turned to her. “I’m right outside if you need me.”

He shot her a half smile, his blue eyes sparkling with color. Oh, heavens, she was tired all right.

“Thanks, good night,” she said.

“Lock up behind me.”

She shut the door and clicked the lock. He nodded his approval through the window and headed out to the garage.

He’s just doing his job, Krista.

Sure, intellectually she knew that, but emotionally? Emotionally she heard Gran’s and Mom’s worried voices, felt the iron hand of control clamp down on her shoulders. They’d meant it out of love, but sometimes she just couldn’t breathe.

Where are you going, Krista? What did you do today? Who did you talk to?

It wasn't until she was in her late teens did they explain that the protective habit was born out of love. They loved her so much they didn't want to see her hurt by a stranger. They'd developed the habit because years ago they'd feared for her safety after her father was killed.

Agent McIntyre wasn't motivated by love, but rather by duty. He'd stay over Krista's garage and unravel this threat before anyone got hurt. She sensed he was a warrior type, a controlling force.

Krista turned off the kitchen light and headed upstairs. She didn't want a controlling force in her life. She'd fought long and hard for her independence. She'd practically begged Mom to relocate to Florida with Lenny. Krista didn't want Mom missing out on wonderful years of retirement with her new husband because she had some irrational fear about Krista being hurt.

The past was the past, long gone, buried with the news that Dad's killer had died in prison.

It had been years since the nightmare resurfaced to haunt Krista. Yet tonight, thanks to a stranger breaking into her house and the DEA agent sleeping in her garage, the violence was back in her life.

Along with the memories.

THREE

The Yates woman might have been exhausted last night, but she woke up with more energy than a kid on a gummy bear high.

By eight she was out the door, headed to the family tea shop. Luke followed close behind, both to protect her and to look for insight into this woman, her friends and the townspeople. Insight that would give him a clue as to who might be Victor Garcia's drug mule. The criminal wouldn't be stupid enough to actually smuggle drugs through Krista's luggage, would he? No, Luke sensed something else was going on. He just didn't know what.

He'd tried talking Krista out of opening the shop today, suggesting she needed a day to recover from her trip. But she was having none of it. She told him this time of year, right before the holidays, people needed the respite from their busy lives to enjoy a cup a tea. She'd said, "It's not about the tea. It's about friendship and connections."

Two things completely foreign to Luke.

Sitting in the back of Grace's Tea Shop, he read the paper to get a handle on the local flavor. He glanced around the shop, painted in pale purple with frilly lace framing the windows. Dainty chairs bordered small, round tables and a lit fireplace took the chill out of the morning air.

Luke did not belong here. This was a woman's place, a peaceful place.

“Coffee?” Krista offered, walking up to him with a pot. She looked enchanting this morning with her long, blond hair pulled back and her cheeks rosy from cooking scones and muffins.

“I thought you specialized in tea?” he said.

“I figured you were a coffee kind of guy.”

“You figured right.”

He wondered what else she’d figured out about him.

She poured him a cup and said, “Black, right?”

He nodded. “I think we should come up with a story about why I’m here at the tea shop.”

“You’re a customer, simple enough.”

“I have a feeling I’m not your usual demographic.”

“I’ve had men in here before.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Okay, well, not every day, but occasionally.”

“To ease suspicion, we’ll go with the story that I’m Chief Cunningham’s nephew and you hired me as your temporary handyman.”

She rested the coffeepot on the table. “I told you, I’m not into lying, especially to my friends.”

“Then I’ll be the chief’s friend, and you can give me a list of things you need fixed. I’ll be your handyman for real.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“What? I’m pretty good with a hammer.” Working on his own house had been cathartic after Karl’s death.

She placed the coffeepot on the warmer and pulled vegetables

from the refrigerator. “I’ll think about it.”

He could tell the thought of Luke shadowing her, being close, made her uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure if it was because he was a constant reminder of the threat hiding in the shadows, or if it was something else.

Maybe she sensed the darkness that haunted him and knew instinctively to keep her distance. From him.

He sipped his coffee and remarked how good it tasted. “What’s in this?”

“A secret ingredient.” She winked.

He snapped his attention back to the paper. She was too nice, too gentle and it made him uncomfortable.

A tall brunette breezed into the back, oblivious to Luke’s presence. The woman was dressed in a tailored suit and high heels. Her perfume filled the kitchen, the smell a sharp contrast to Krista’s subtle floral scent.

“She’s back!” The brunette rushed to Krista and gave her a hug. “How’d you sleep?”

“Pretty good.” Krista motioned to Luke. “This is Luke. Luke, this is Natalie.”

The woman turned to Luke, her eyes flaring with interest.

Luke stood and extended his hand. “I’m a friend of Chief Cunningham.”

“Well, hello.”

They shook hands.

“How long are you staying in Wentworth?” Natalie asked.

"Not sure. A few weeks, I guess."

"Wonderful." She winked at Krista.

Krista blushed. "Knock it off."

Could Krista really be that shy and innocent? One more reason Luke should stay close. She'd be an easy target for one of Garcia's men. Because she coordinated the mission trip, Luke had to assume Garcia's men would come looking for her first when they got to town. That is, if they weren't already here.

Yet if last night's intruder was with the Garcia operation, he would have done more to Krista than hurdle her and flee the scene.

A short guy, late thirties, marched into the back of the shop. Busy place, and they weren't even open for business yet.

"Krista!" the man said, wrapping his arms around her for a hug. He was either oblivious to Luke or was purposely ignoring him.

Krista made a face at her girlfriend over the man's shoulder and broke the hug. "Good to see you, Alan. I've got to check the soups." She went to stir a pot on the stove.

"I heard the Bender kid shot out your windows last night," Alan said.

"No, they didn't shoot out her windows," Natalie offered. "A stranger was caught rifling through her garage."

"Right on both counts," Krista said.

"Alan, meet the chief's friend," Natalie said, introducing them.

The man turned and his jaw hardened. Alan was in his mid-thirties, clean-shaven with perfectly combed hair and suspicious eyes. He was about four inches shorter than Luke's six-foot-one-inch frame.

Luke shook hands with Alan, who squeezed extra tight. He was making his mark, letting Luke know Krista was off-limits. Whatever. Luke wasn't here for romance and he surely wouldn't get involved with a fragile creature like Krista Yates.

"Nice to meet you, Alan," Luke said.

Alan nodded and turned back to Krista. "So, what really happened last night?"

"Someone broke into the house and the garage," she said.

"What?" Natalie said. "I was there at six to check on Anastasia. Oh, my goodness, is she okay?"

"She's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine." Krista waved them off and went back to stirring the soup.

"Krista, are you really okay?" Alan placed his hand on her shoulder.

Krista stopped stirring for a second, then continued. Luke didn't miss the hesitation. Alan ignored it.

"I was a little rattled, but I'm okay," Krista said. "The cops got there right away."

"You shouldn't be living in that house alone," Alan said.

"Thanks, but I'm a big girl, Alan."

"She's not alone. I'm staying over the garage," Luke offered.

Alan and Natalie looked at Luke as if he'd just announced

Martians had landed in the town square.

"My friend, the chief, was worried about the perpetrator coming back so he asked me to stay close," he explained.

"The perpetrator?" Alan said. "Are you a cop, too?"

"I've had some experience in law enforcement, yes."

"What kind of experience?" Alan pushed.

"You want my résumé?" Luke pushed back.

"Take the discussion outside, guys," Krista said. "I've got to get moving if I'm going to open by eleven." She corralled everyone out the back.

Alan hesitated and turned to her. "Dinner tonight?"

"No, but thank you. I'm still jet-lagged."

Alan touched her arm. "You shouldn't have opened today, Krista."

"It's the busy season, you know that. The Christmas teas cover half my expenses for the year. I can't lose that revenue."

"But—"

"Look," she interrupted Alan. "I appreciate your concern, I really do. But the Sass twins won't clock in for another hour and I need to get back to work."

Natalie and Krista hugged. Krista stepped back into the shop before Alan could get another hug. She shut the door, leaving the three of them standing by the herb garden.

Luke's cell vibrated and he checked the caller ID. It was his supervisor, Agent Marks.

"Excuse me," he said to Alan and Natalie.

With a nod, Luke walked to his car and answered his cell.

"McIntyre," he said.

"Any progress?" Agent Marks questioned.

"Not yet, sir."

"Did Miss Yates recognize last night's assailant?"

"He was wearing a mask."

"Do you want to bring her in for protection?"

"She'd fight me on it." Luke saw in her eyes how devoted she was to her business and it sounded like this was the prime season for revenues.

"It's your call. I've put an alert out on her luggage."

"Thanks."

"Be careful," Marks warned. "And call for backup if you need it."

"Yes, sir."

He pocketed his phone and eyed the tea shop, an old brick house converted into a small restaurant in the heart of town.

"Nice meeting you," Natalie called out to Luke as she breezed to her older-model Volvo in the parking lot.

"You, too," he said.

With a curt nod, Alan walked to a newer SUV and took off. Luke noted Alan's license plate and would call it in later. There was something about that guy…

Luke couldn't be jealous, not over a complete stranger like Krista. More like, his protective instincts were kicking in. He'd seen how Krista needed space, didn't like Alan touching her.

Whatever that guy thought of their relationship, Krista had a completely different take on things.

Luke should head back to Krista's house, get tools and start his handyman cover. Instinct told him not to leave her alone, not even for a few minutes. He called the chief's private line.

"Cunningham," the chief answered.

"It's Luke McIntyre."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, sir. I was wondering if you could do me a favor and swing by the tea shop with some tools. I'd rather not leave Krista alone."

"Put you to work, did she?"

"Not officially, but I'm trying to convince her it's a good cover."

He chuckled. "I'll bring by my toolbox. We think we got something on the perp's car. A dark green minivan with an Ohio plate was dumped on the other side of Silver Lake. Fits the description."

"So the guy's still close."

"Looks that way."

A scream echoed from the tea shop and Luke bolted for the house.

FOUR

He should have checked the entire building, every corner, beneath every table, inside every teapot before leaving her alone in there.

He whipped the back door open. “Krista!”

Nothing.

“No, no,” he ground out between clenched teeth. He raced to the stairs leading to the second-floor office. Taking the stairs two at a time, he pulled out his firearm, got to the top and spun around, pointing the gun into the room.

Directly at Krista.

With round, terrified green eyes, she dropped the teapot in her hands and it crashed to the floor into pieces. He swung the gun around the room.

They were alone.

“What happened?” He holstered his gun. He took a step toward her and she backed up.

She was scared out of her mind. Because of Luke.

He put out his hands in a calming gesture. “I’m sorry about the gun. Okay? Just breathe.”

Luke took a deep breath and she mimicked him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded affirmative.

“You screamed. Why?” He didn’t move, didn’t step closer. But

he wanted to. He wanted to put his arm around her and calm her down, stop her trembling.

His touch would probably make her shake more considering he'd just pulled a gun on her.

"What happened?" he asked.

She pointed to the broken teapot on the floor. Lying beside it was a dead mouse.

"That's why you screamed?"

She nodded again. "It was…in the teapot. So, so I was checking other ones and you…" her voice hitched.

He threatened her with a gun.

"I'm sorry. I thought…never mind. I tend to go to the worst-case-scenario places. But you're okay, that's all that matters. Everything's fine."

But it wasn't fine. There was no way a mouse could open the lid of a teapot and climb inside.

"Has this happened before?" he asked.

"We have mice problems. All restaurants do," she said, defensively.

Good, she was coming out of her fright.

"The teapot was on my desk when I came upstairs. Strange, because I don't remember leaving it here."

She touched the calendar desk pad. Somewhere, deep down, she sensed the danger as well. But for now, Luke would shelve the possibility of this being a threat against her and help her get her bearings back.

“Krista!” a girl called from downstairs.

Krista didn’t answer at first. She just stared at Luke. He stepped aside, giving her ample room to pass. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel threatened. She needed to trust him if he had any chance of protecting her.

“I’ll clean up,” he said. “Broom?”

She pointed to the far end of the long attic office. He stepped around her and she rushed downstairs.

The high pitch of excited female voices drifted up from the restaurant. He grabbed the broom and hesitated, trying to calm the adrenaline rush. Couldn’t help reacting the way he did. He’d been a few seconds too late and his partner died because of it. Luke wouldn’t make that mistake again, especially not with a complete innocent like Krista.

With a deep breath, Luke got the broom and began sweeping up the mess. Shards of china, loose tea and a few candy wrappers.

He eyed the dead mouse. A few inches away he spotted a white scrap of paper folded a few times. He grabbed a pair of latex gloves used by the kitchen staff and opened the note.

Welcome Home, Pretty Lady.

“Great,” Luke muttered. He had to assume this was a threat, right? A dead mouse in a teapot. So Garcia’s man had been here in the shop?

“That’s too close.” It’s not like the quaint tea shop would have video surveillance. He’d have to do it the old-fashioned way and check the locks for signs of tampering.

He took his time cleaning up, giving Krista space. She needed to recover from the sight of the dead mouse, and a man pointing a gun at her. But he wasn't going far. When the chief stopped by Luke would hand off the note and have him send it in for prints.

It seemed tame for a drug lord's henchman. Subtlety wasn't their style. They were more direct, more in-your-face vicious.

Now you get to watch him die.

Garcia's words slashed through Luke's chest like a knife. His best friend, the only guy in the world who both understood and accepted Luke for who he was, broken parts and all, died right in front of Luke. And he was unable to do a thing about it.

Luke shoved back the memory and the pain. Stuffing the note into a plastic baggie and then into his pocket, he headed downstairs to call in this development.

If only he knew what it meant.

Thank goodness Krista was feeling more like herself halfway through the lunch rush. She thought her nerves would never stop skittering.

First a break-in, then a dead mouse, then Luke aiming a gun directly at her chest.

She reminded herself that that was normal behavior for a man like Luke, but still, the image was not easy to shake. Pulling a gun because she'd found a dead mouse was definitely overkill. Then again, he didn't know what had made her scream.

"Table four needs more cream and jam," Tori Sass said, breezing into the kitchen with a handful of plates.

“Right up.” Krista squirted sweetened whipped cream onto a plate and spooned a dollop of jam beside it. Some liked their scones extra sweet. She wondered how Agent McIntyre liked his.

No, he’d probably never tried a scone. He seemed more the doughnut type of guy.

Why was she thinking about him again? She was tired, that’s all. Tired and frightened out of her right mind between the mouse and firearm.

She’d never forget the look on his face when he’d swung around and pointed it at her. He looked powerful and determined.

And maybe a little frightened. Was that possible?

Sure, even in his line of work a person felt fear, she reminded herself.

“How’s the order for table seven?” Tatum Sass asked.

“Almost there.” Krista refocused on the tea sandwiches in front of her and arranged red rose petals in between them.

Make them feel special, Mom had taught her. It was Krista’s role to give local women a place to gather, share dreams, hopes and fears, in a safe environment.

Yet Krista wasn’t feeling safe right now. Between the jet lag, lack of sleep and this morning’s excitement, she was exhausted and more than a little off kilter.

“You look tired,” Tatum said, waiting for her order.

“Thanks, now I feel so much better,” Krista joked.

“Why don’t you take a break? This is the last food order.”

Krista nodded. “I’ll be out back.”

She untied her apron and flung it over the hook. She could use a few minutes of fresh air. Luckily, it was unseasonably warm for a November day in Michigan, so she grabbed a sweater and stepped outside.

And spotted Luke trimming back the rose bushes. She'd meant to do that before her trip, before the fall hit. But she'd run out of time, what with the Sass girls starting up community college and having limited availability.

As Luke tended to the rose bush, she remarked how normal he looked, like a regular guy. Not like a violent man who packed a gun against his ribcage.

With seemingly gentle fingers, Luke snipped the rose stem with some kind of knife. A pocket knife.

"Hey, I've got pruning shears," she said.

He turned to her and she could have sworn she read regret in his eyes, probably because he'd scared the wits out of her earlier.

"Hang on," she said. She went back inside, dug into the white china cabinet and found the shears. As she opened the door to go back out, she nearly ran into him.

She didn't expect him to be so close. Nor did she expect her heart to skip a few beats. And not out of fear.

She handed him the shears. "Thanks."

"It's the least I can do considering I scared the—" he paused "—you know."

"Have you been out there all afternoon?"

"Pretty much."

“Did you get lunch?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll make you a sandwich.” She motioned him into the shop, but he hesitated.

“Come on, it’s safe,” she joked.

He followed her inside and washed his hands.

“Turkey okay?” she asked, putting on gloves.

“You even guessed my favorite sandwich? How do you do that?” He settled at a table in the back.

“Everyone likes turkey.” She pulled out bread, lettuce and tomatoes.

Tori came into the back with a tray of plates. She slid them by the sink and turned to Krista. “Who’s the guy?”

“A friend of Chief Cunningham,” Luke said.

Krista kept working on the sandwich. She couldn’t blame Luke for acting the way he did this morning. It was his job to suspect danger around every corner.

And that suspicion might keep her safe.

Tatum joined her sister in the kitchen.

“Chief Cunningham’s friend,” Tori explained to her sister.

Tatum walked over to the Luke and shook his hand. “I’m Tatum and this is Tori.”

“Tori, can you start on the dishes?” Krista asked. “I’m not sure I’ve got the energy.”

“Sure.”

Krista finished making Luke’s sandwich, garnished the plate

with a pickle and a few olives and put a mini scoop of fruit salad in a dish. She placed it in front of him.

"How much?" he said.

"On the house."

He glanced into her eyes. "I can't do that."

"Why not?" Krista asked.

"It's freeloading. Let me at least do the dishes after I eat."

"Great idea!" Tori said, drying her hands and rushing off into the dining room.

"No, really I couldn't—"

"Sure she could," Tatum said, putting her arm around Krista's shoulder. "In case you haven't noticed, she has a hard time accepting help from people."

"Wise guy," Krista said.

"It's true." Tatum smiled and breezed out of the kitchen.

"Nice kids," Luke said.

"They consider me their auntie."

"Well, Auntie, I'd really like to do your dishes in exchange for lunch. And anything else I can do to help, just say the word. Okay?"

"Sure."

Krista went to clean up the stainless steel prep counter. Her insides warmed at the thought of how nice it was to have a man care about her.

Then she reminded herself he was here for work, and part of his job required him to stick close and catch whoever was

working in tandem with the drug cartel.

She rinsed off the prep table with bleach water and started on the dishes.

"Hey, hey, that's my job," Luke said.

"I'll leave some for you, no worries."

The back door opened and Alan stepped into the kitchen. He glared at Luke. "You're still here?"

"I work here."

"Yeah, right." He turned his back to Luke and went to Krista. "Hey, I wanted to make sure you were doing okay."

He touched her arm and she tried not to recoil. Alan wasn't a bad guy, just not a guy she wanted touching her. She knew he wanted more than she had to give him, and she didn't want to encourage the affection.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Really? Because I was worried this morning."

"Thanks, just tired." She stepped away from him and rearranged the tea jars. Maybe if she kept her distance he'd get the message.

She didn't want to be rude, but she wasn't sure how to handle this situation. She'd been clear with him months ago that she wasn't interested, that she wasn't ready to get serious. With anybody.

Which wasn't exactly true. If she found the right man, a Christian man as devoted to God as he was to Krista, well, she'd definitely consider. Only there weren't a lot of single guys of her

generation left in Wentworth. Most of her classmates had gone off to college, landed important jobs in the city and didn't return home.

"Business run smoothly this morning?" Alan asked, eyeing the tables out front.

"Sure, why?" she asked.

"It's your first day back and you've got to be exhausted. I mean with your long travel day and early morning…"

God give me patience.

If he kept reminding her how tired she was, she was going to pass out right here on the hardwood floor.

She turned to him. "I'm fine, Alan, really. And I appreciate your concern. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to finish up these dishes, so I can close early this afternoon."

She smiled brightly and hoped she'd been nice about her obvious attempt to kick him out of her space.

"I'll check on you tonight." He reached out to touch her shoulder.

"Great, thanks."

The phone rang, saving her from having to rudely pull away.

She sidestepped Alan to answer the phone. "Grace's Tea Shop."

"Yes, this is Thunder Travel Tour. We're bringing a bus through Wentworth and would like to book your restaurant for a high tea."

"Great, what's the date?"

As she took the order, she spied Alan hovering over Luke as he ate his sandwich. What was Alan's problem? One, she and Alan weren't dating, and two, Luke wasn't interested in Krista that way.

As if he heard her, Luke glanced at Krista.

She snapped her attention to her reservation book. "That date looks good. How many?"

"Twenty-six."

"We offer a set menu for that number. Would you like me to e-mail it to you?"

"That would be great."

Krista spied Alan hovering by the doorway as if he wasn't leaving without saying a proper goodbye. As she finished the call with the travel agency, she wondered if she needed to be more direct with Alan so he could move on and find another woman to date.

"I look forward to working with you," Krista said and hung up.

Alan took a step toward her just as Tatum rushed into the kitchen. "A group of eight just walked in for high tea."

"Now?" Krista checked her watch. "We didn't have a reservation." It was nearing three, which meant Krista wouldn't be closing up anytime soon.

"No reservation, but they hoped we'd have an opening."

Krista nibbled at her lower lip. She was exhausted.

"Tell them you're booked," Alan offered.

Krista looked at Tatum. "Tell them we'll have a table ready in

fifteen minutes."

Tatum nodded and went into the dining room.

"Krista, you're obviously exhausted," Alan said.

"It's all part of running my own business." She opened the refrigerator and pulled out spreads to get working on the tea sandwiches. "Thanks for stopping by, Alan."

He must have heard the dismissal in her tone. She'd been pleasant enough, and hoped he'd take his cue to leave.

"I'll call you later," he said.

With a nod, she focused on the sandwiches. A minute later she heard the door close and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Luke walked behind her to the sink. "Eight is a big order. Sure you're up to it?"

She eyed him. "What is with everybody today? I'm a big girl and I know my limitations," she said a little more firmly than she'd intended.

Luke put up his hands. "Didn't mean to offend."

"You've got a sink full of dishes."

"So I do." He turned and got to work.

Krista was exhausted by the end of the day and looking forward to a nice, quiet evening.

Instead, she came home to a crowded house full of friends who'd orchestrated an official welcome-home party.

As she stood in her living room surrounded by friends she felt so full, so at peace. Yet a part of her had hoped for quiet time to upload more photos to her blog, and maybe even sneak in that

long bath she'd been fantasizing about.

She should have known something was up when the Sass girls offered to close the shop. They always had friends to catch up with after work, and church activities to attend, yet today they practically forced Krista out the back door so they could clean up.

They'd all been in on the plan: the Sass twins, Natalie and friends from church. Their goal was to show her how much she'd been missed.

"Krista?" Luke said.

She turned to him. He seemed completely out of place and more than a little uncomfortable surrounded by these down-to-earth folks.

"Looks like you're okay here so I'm going to meet up with the chief for an hour," he said.

"Oh, okay, sure."

"Hang in there." He smiled.

She realized he was the only person in the room who saw through her smile and knew how tired she really was.

"Thanks. And thanks for being my busboy today."

"Maybe you'll promote me to handyman?"

"We'll see."

"Enjoy yourself." He made his way through the crowded living room and practically ran out the front door. She wondered what made him so uneasy about the group. Was it simply that the suspect could be among them? No, she wouldn't accept that possibility.

Natalie weaved her way through the crowd. “Did we surprise you?”

“Totally.”

Natalie put her arm around Krista and gave her a squeeze. “I know you’re tired, but they insisted.”

Krista glanced around the room and spotted Tori and Tatum’s mom, Julie Sass, chatting with the youth minister.

“I should have known something was up when the Sass girls offered to close.”

“Yeah, why’s that?” Natalie asked.

“They’ve always been nervous about locking up and setting the alarm.”

Natalie scanned the room. “Where’s Alan?”

“He doesn’t like to share me.”

Natalie snapped her attention to Krista.

“Sorry, that was mean,” Krista said.

“No, it was accurate. I didn’t think you noticed.”

“I notice a lot. I just keep it to myself.”

Like she noticed how Luke bolted from the party as soon as possible. He acted as if being around friendships and laughter physically pained him. Maybe even terrified him.

Her cell vibrated on her hip. It was a text message alerting her that something tripped the alarm at the tea shop.

“Drat. The girls must be having trouble setting the alarm. I’ve gotta buzz over there for a minute.”

“You can’t go,” Natalie said. “It’s your party.”

“It will take five minutes.”

“Then I’ll go with you. You look too tired to drive, anyway.”

“Gosh, thanks.” With a smile, Krista led Natalie out the front door. Within minutes they were at the shop.

“Stay here,” Krista said, grabbed her keys from her purse and went to reset the alarm. The back door was open.

Why would they set the alarm before they locked up?

Panic gripped her stomach. “Tori? Tatum?” Krista called as she stepped into the shop.

No one answered. “Girls!”

She started for the stairs to the office and spotted broken glass and loose-leaf teas sprinkled on the hardwood floor. Backing up, she grabbed her cell phone from her belt and called 9-1-1.

“9-1-1 emergency.”

“This is Krista—”

Someone grabbed her from behind, yanking the phone out of her hand and tossing it across the room. He had his arm around her neck and waist.

“Where is it?” he growled into her ear.

“What do you want?”

“Your purse, your money.”

“Let me go!” She struggled against him, but he was too strong and about five inches taller than Krista.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Her attacker shoved her aside and Krista lost her balance, banging her head on the counter as she fell to the floor.

She opened her eyes and spots cluttered her vision. Stunned and confused, she struggled to sit up and lost the battle. Collapsing against the floor, she focused on taking deep, slow breaths.

“Krista!” Natalie cried.

And the world faded to black.

FIVE

This couldn't be happening. He'd left her for ten minutes.

Adrenaline rushing through his body, Luke gripped the door handle ready to jump from the chief's cruiser.

Come on, come on. They couldn't get to the shop fast enough.

The chief finally pulled into the parking lot and Luke flung open his door.

"Wait for backup," the chief ordered.

Backup? Small-town law enforcement was no match for the likes of Victor Garcia.

"I got it." Luke jumped out of the chief's cruiser and bolted for the restaurant.

He reached inside his jacket and slipped out his Glock. He turned the corner to the back door and froze at the sight of Natalie kneeling over Krista.

No, he wouldn't accept it. He couldn't handle the possibility that Krista had been hurt…maybe even killed. His shoulder muscles tensed.

The chief rushed into the doorway, along with another cop.

"Natalie, what happened?" Luke demanded, rushing to Krista's side.

"Out front, some guy ran out front!" Natalie shouted.

"We'll check it out," the chief said.

"Someone call an ambulance," Natalie pleaded.

"It's on the way." Luke shoved his gun inside his jacket. Didn't want Krista opening her eyes to see Luke hovering over her brandishing a gun.

He kneeled on the other side of Krista and gently gripped her wrist to take her pulse. Her skin was cool to the touch, but her pulse was strong and steady.

Thatta girl.

He noticed a red bump on her forehead.

"What happened?" He glanced at Natalie. She was pale, looked like she was going to pass out herself.

"Natalie, breathe," Luke ordered. "Krista's going to be okay."

She had to be okay.

"Talk to me," he prompted Natalie.

She sniffled. "Something tripped the alarm and Krista thought the girls were having problems setting it, but we got here and the door was open and the…girls! Where are they?"

Krista moaned. "Why all the shouting?"

The chief kneeled beside them. "How is she?"

"She's coming around." Relief settled low in Luke's gut. He glanced at the chief. "Natalie's worried about the girls who were working here earlier."

"I'll check upstairs and call their mom."

Krista moaned and blinked her eyes open. Luke had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Confusion creased her forehead. "I'm on the floor."

"That you are." He placed her hand on her stomach. He'd been

holding it while taking her pulse and hadn't let go.

"What happened?" She touched her forehead where an ugly bruise was already forming.

"You don't remember?" Luke asked.

"I was at the party and then, no, it's foggy."

She automatically reached for her silver charm at her neck. He guessed it was her touchstone.

"Where are the paramedics?" Luke whispered, glancing out the back. He couldn't stand seeing her hurt like this, lying on the floor and probably suffering from a concussion.

The chief came downstairs. "The Sass girls are home, safe and sound."

"Thank God," Natalie said.

"Something tripped the alarm," Krista said. "I remember now."

Luke snapped his attention to her. "What else do you remember?"

"The floor, tea and glass everywhere."

Luke glanced over his shoulder at the tea racks. Sure enough the floor was covered with broken glass jars of tea.

"A man was here," Krista whispered.

Luke glanced at her. "Did you recognize him?"

"He grabbed me from behind and…" She closed her eyes.

Luke fought the urge to reach out and hold her hand, tell her everything was going to be okay.

Natalie took Krista's hand and squeezed it. "It's okay, Krista."

Krista opened her eyes and stared directly at Luke. She wanted something. He didn't know what.

"Is it…safe?"

"Yes. He's gone."

But they both knew what she was really asking was if this was connected to Garcia's drug business.

"Did he say anything?" Luke asked.

"He wanted my purse."

"Do you think it was the same guy who was hiding in your garage?"

"I don't know."

Two paramedics rushed into the kitchen and lay a backboard on the floor.

"I'm really okay," Krista protested.

Luke and Natalie stepped aside, letting the EMTs tend to Krista.

"Natalie, where's her purse, do you know?" Luke said.

"In my car."

With a nod, Luke went outside.

And spotted a man digging around in the front seat of the car. Gutsy. The place was swarming with emergency response personnel and he was trying to snatch the car? So much for this being a quiet tourist town.

Luke came up behind the guy, grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

"Find what you're looking for?"

“Hey, what’s the problem?” The guy struggled, but Luke pinned him against the car.

“The problem is you breaking into a stranger’s car.”

“This is my fiancée’s car.”

Natalie stepped out of the tea shop. “Timothy? What are you doing here?”

“You know this guy?” Luke said.

“He’s my fiancé, Timothy Gaines.”

Luke released Timothy.

“Who are you?” Timothy demanded as he rubbed his shoulder.

“A friend of the police chief.”

With a disgruntled nod, Timothy turned to Natalie. “You okay, honey?” He gave her a brief hug, then stepped back and looked into her eyes. “I was driving by and saw your car in the lot. You left the keys in the ignition.”

“I’m okay. Krista was attacked.”

Luke studied the dynamic between the couple. Although they were engaged there was something awkward about their interaction. Then again, Luke would have no idea what a loving couple looked like. Dad had abandoned them when Luke was five, and Mom didn’t want to complicate her life by getting involved with another man.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke spotted the EMTs carrying Krista out of the shop.

“The chief will want to talk to both of you,” Luke said, and

marched to the ambulance. “Where are you taking her?”

“Westfield Clinic. If they think it’s more serious they’ll transfer her.”

“I want to go with her,” Natalie said.

“I need you to stay here and give your statement to Officer Sherman,” the chief said.

“I’ll follow her to the clinic,” Luke said.

“Good.” The chief and Luke shared a knowing look.

Krista’s situation seemed to be getting more dangerous by the hour. Another reason Luke needed to stay close.

Closer than close.

The ambulance pulled away and Luke followed in his car. He’d left Krista in a house full of people, thinking she’d be safe, that no harm could possibly come to her in that environment.

His mistake. One he wouldn’t make again.

But he’d been anxious to get out of there, away from the friends and church folk who surrounded her, welcomed her.

Loved her.

Something Luke hadn’t experienced much in his life. Mom tried, but Luke always sensed he’d been more of a burden than a bright spot in her life.

Sure he was. He’d been a troublemaker in school, always acting out, getting sent to the principal’s office. Looking back, he realized it was anger at his life that drove him to lighting fires and stealing bikes. First abandoned by his father, then ten years later losing his mom to cancer.

Anger didn't begin to describe the war brewing inside Luke's chest as a teenager. After three years of being shuffled around in the foster care system, Luke channeled his anger into a different kind of war. The war in Iraq. At least it made him feel like he was doing something productive with all his rage.

Rage he'd buried, deep. Yet here he was, thinking about the past. A waste of energy.

He needed to focus on keeping Krista Yates safe. The image of her limp body lying on the floor reminded him of…

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