MILLS & BOON

Vintage INTRIGUE

In His Sights

JUSTINE DAVIS

Justine Davis
In His Sights

Аннотация

SHE WAS A SUSPECT IN HIS INVESTIGATIONBut Redstone employee Kate Crawford was also the most captivating woman securities expert Rand Singleton had ever known. Despite the protective feelings she stirred, he couldn't reveal his true identity. He'd been sent to do a job. Getting emotionally involved with the vulnerable beauty wasn't an option.Kate could think of only one reason why an enigmatic, charm-oozing man like Rand was in town–he was up to something. And she had too much at stake–professionally and emotionally–to fall prey to a seductive stranger's schemes. Still, with Rand's knee-weakening caresses wreaking havoc on her heartstrings, would she be able to expose his secrets before he uncovered hers?

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Noticed that the watch on his left wrist was definitely out of her league.

Noticed that while the jeans and knit shirt he wore weren't blatantly expensive, the belt around his slim waist was.

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Why would a good-looking guy who obviously wasn't down on his luck rent a room from an elderly couple in a tiny place like Summer Harbor? And be so darned nice to them to boot?

She could only think of one reason.

He was up to something.

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JUSTINE DAVIS

lives on Puget Sound in Washington. She says that years ago, during her career in law enforcement, a young man she worked with encouraged her to try for a promotion to a position that was at the time occupied only by men. “I succeeded, became wrapped up in my new job, and that man moved away, never, I thought, to be heard from again. Ten years later he appeared out of the woods of Washington State, saying he’d never forgotten me and would I please marry him. With that history, how could I write anything but romance?”

Once upon a time, there was a genre of books that was sadly misunderstood by many people who didn’t read them. Those who did read them loved them, cherished them, were changed by them. But still, these books got no respect on the outside, in fact were belittled, denigrated, held up as bad examples, while their readers and authors were sneered at and insulted by people who, although they never read the books, had somehow arrived at the idea that it was all right to slap others down for their choices. But those readers and authors kept on in the face of this horrible prejudice. Why? Because they found something in these books that they found nowhere else. Something precious, that spoke to them in a very deep and basic way.

Then one day, this beleaguered genre was given a gift. A fairy

godmother if you will, a person with an incredible knowledge of these books and why they worked, and an even more incredible generosity of spirit. A one-person support system who gave so much to the writers of these stories, and was ever unselfish with her time and that amazing knowledge. And her endorsement counted for something; readers took her word and knew they would rarely be disappointed. She was a rock, a pillar on which the genre depended. Her loss has left a gaping hole that can never be filled, and will always be felt by those who love these books—and loved her.

For those reasons and so many more, the Redstone, Incorporated series is dedicated to

MELINDA HELFER

Lost to us August 24, 2000, but if heaven is what it should be she's in an endless library, with an eternity to revel in the books she loved. Happy reading, my friend….

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Chapter 1

"You'll just love him. He's the sweetest man. Absolutely charming."

Kate Crawford gaped at her grandmother. "You rented out a room? What room? To what man? Why?"

"My goodness, do you think you could string a few more questions together?"

Kate sat down, certain she wasn't understanding something. Her plans to make a grocery run for her grandparents were obviously going to have to wait.

"Gram," she said slowly, "what have you and Gramps done?"

"I told you," Dorothy Crawford said patiently, "we rented out our room."

"Your bedroom?"

"It's the only one that made sense, since it has the private bath and sitting area. We're thinking of using some of the income to add an outside stairway to the upper deck, then it will have its own private entrance as well."

"But—

"We're not using it, after all. The stairs are just too much for your grandfather's knees."

"I know that," Kate said.

And she did; she'd been the one to help them move into the one downstairs bedroom in the house. She hadn't liked the idea—the

room was too small and the bathroom was way down the hall—but it had seemed the best temporary solution they could manage until they could afford to do a remodel. Or talk her grandfather into the knee replacement surgery he insisted he didn't want, a decision Kate suspected was also based on finances.

"If you needed money," Kate began, but stopped when her grandmother gave her the look she knew too well.

"We won't keep taking from you, Kate. You've done so much, too much, for us already."

"I could never do too much."

"And that's why your grandfather and I have to step in now and then, or you'd spend all your time and money on us, instead of having a life of your own."

"But—"

"No buts. Besides, it's done. We have a renter. We can't back out now."

And that brought Kate back to one of her initial questions. "Who is this person you've rented a room to? There's no one in town looking for a place that I know of."

In any place but Summer Harbor that might be a ridiculous statement, but here it was quite reasonable that if someone was looking for a place to live, everybody in town would know it. It was easy to keep track of such things when you only had a couple of thousand people to deal with.

"Oh, he's not from here."

That alone was enough for Kate, and her voice was rather

sharp when she demanded, “Where is he from, and what’s he doing here?”

“I believe he’s a photographer,” her grandmother said. “And I can do without that tone, young lady.”

Chastened, Kate reached out and put a hand over Dorothy’s. “I’m sorry, Gram. You know I just worry.”

“You worry too much,” Dorothy said, but the stern tone had been replaced by a lovingly gentle one. “This is Summer Harbor, you know. Bad things don’t happen here.”

Tell that to Joshua Redstone, Kate thought.

The thievery at Redstone Northwest had already come to the attention of the multibillionaire entrepreneur who owned the business, and while she doubted there was another boss of his stature who would care, she knew Josh Redstone was different. Very different. It was one of the many reasons she loved her job there.

“Ah, good,” her grandmother said at the sound of a tap on the door, “here he is now, so you’ll get to meet him. Then you’ll see there’s no problem.”

Kate turned, expecting the man to walk right in. But he politely waited for her grandmother to call out to him.

“Come on in, Rand.”

Since Dorothy Crawford was hardly one to call a man by his last name unless it was preceded by a Mister, Kate had to assume Rand was his first name. She turned to look at the door as it swung open.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but this wasn't it. The man who came in was, in a word, beautiful. Young, but beautiful. Six feet or better, with hair a shade of platinum blond she'd only seen on children until now. It was thick and a bit unruly, falling forward over his forehead in the same way a child's silky hair did.

But while young, he was anything but a child. He moved with a very male kind of grace that told her he was probably an athlete of some kind, or at least in good shape.

Very good shape, she amended wryly as she got a better look.

"No point in you knocking if you're going to be living here," her grandmother was saying. "Just come on in."

The man glanced at Kate before he answered her grandmother, and Kate felt an odd little jolt at the sight of vivid, cobalt-blue eyes.

Oh, now that really wasn't fair. Not fair at all.

Then he smiled, not at her but at her grandmother, and Kate instantly went on guard.

"I stopped at the market for some things," he said, "so I picked up the sugar you said you'd forgotten."

"Well, wasn't that sweet of you?" Dorothy cooed.

Her grandmother actually cooed, Kate thought, barely managing to resist shaking her head in shock. That sort of reaction was usually limited to babies and puppies. Certainly not grown men. And for all his boyish looks, there was no mistaking this Rand was just that. He looked to only be in his twenties, but

he was still all man.

"Gram," she began, unable to stop the urge to caution that rose in her.

"Ah. You must be Kate," the man said. "I should have guessed."

Instantly provoked, and not quite sure why, Kate went on the offensive. "And why is that, Mr….?"

"Singleton," he supplied politely. "Rand Singleton, Miss Crawford."

He made her feel like a schoolteacher, with that very proper "miss." An old schoolteacher. But if he thought that would distract her, he was mistaken.

"Why would you assume I'm Kate?" she persisted.

"Because," he said with a smile at her grandmother, "beauty seems to run in the family."

Oh, good grief, Kate thought. He can't think anybody's buying this!

Then she caught a glimpse of her grandmother's face and, astonishingly, the spots of color rising in her cheeks. Her jaw dropped. Her grandmother, it seemed, was buying it by the bagful.

Her eyes narrowed as she turned them on the newcomer. He met her gaze steadily, with one brow lifted as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.

I don't care if you do, she muttered inwardly.

"If you doubt that," he said softly, clearly aimed at her, "you

need a new mirror."

"And you need a new line," she said as her grandmother smiled with obvious pleasure.

She had a mirror, and she knew perfectly well what she looked like. Average. Nice eyes, although of late they were tired and bloodshot more often than not. Hair was okay, kind of a nondescript dark brown, but healthy and shiny even if simply clipping back the shoulder-length strands was her only effort at a hairstyle.

No, nothing striking or eye-catching about her, not these days. There had been a time, in the big corporate world and with the help of polished makeup, chic haircuts and stylish clothes, that she had drawn that kind of attention, but no longer. She didn't look bad for a woman of forty-one, but she was still average.

And still old enough to be this guy's…aunt.

She nearly laughed aloud at her own absurdity. The man must have seen the change in her expression, for his own changed to one of puzzlement.

No, I haven't changed my mind about you, she said to herself in answer to his look. I'm just realizing I'm as touchy as any woman of a certain age confronted with an attractive man too young for her. Especially when he seems to be flirting.

Which was, of course, her imagination. Whatever he was doing, it likely had very little to do with her. And everything to do with charming her grandmother, who was chatting away as if this man had grown up next door.

She studied the intruder more carefully, going beyond his startling good looks this time. She noticed that despite the seeming rebelliousness of his hair, there was a stylish cut there. Noticed that the watch on his left wrist was, while not a Rolex, definitely out of her league. Noticed that while the jeans and knit shirt he wore weren't blatantly expensive, the belt around his slim waist was. Noticed that the athletic shoes he wore were past new, but a top brand.

Why?

Why would a good-looking, twenty-something guy, who obviously wasn't down on his luck, rent a room from an elderly couple in a tiny place like Summer Harbor? And be so darned nice to them to boot?

She could only think of one reason. He was up to something. And the most likely thing was trying to con her loving, generous grandparents. It was in the news almost every day—some poor, sweet grandmother or grandfather who had been taken in by a smooth operator. And that was something she would never, ever allow to happen. To her, people who scammed the elderly were beyond redemption. Anyone who would try to steal from the couple who had raised her, who had changed their entire life's plan for her, was going to have to deal with her. And she would not be kind.

"What are you doing in Summer Harbor?" Kate asked during the first pause in her grandmother's animated conversation, not caring if her bluntness offended him.

“Working,” he said, the charming smile still in place, but his reaction clear in the one-word answer. Oddly, that reassured her. If he’d acted as if her nearly rude query were normal, she’d have been even more convinced he was up to no good.

“You’re a photographer?” She reined in her tone a little, aware her grandmother was not looking pleased with her.

“This is a beautiful part of the world, worth photographing, don’t you think?”

Well, there’s an answer that avoids answering, she thought. “Freelance, I suppose,” she muttered, knowing the answer. If he said he worked for some established magazine or publisher, it would be too easy to check. Her suspicions deepened.

“I do some freelance work, yes,” he said, eyeing her steadily, almost as if he had suspicions of his own. “I like to make my own choices of what to photograph.”

“And I’ll bet you’ve been all over the world,” Dorothy said. Almost gushed, Kate admitted ruefully.

“I’ve logged some miles,” he agreed.

“You and Kate should talk. She used to travel a great deal. She was a big executive with an investment company back east.”

“I don’t think Denver qualifies as ‘back east,’ Gram,” Kate said.

“It’s east of here,” the man said, turning a smile on Dorothy that would have melted the heart of any woman.

Except one who was afraid for the people she loved most in the world.

“Exactly,” Dorothy said with obvious delight. “Come have a cup of coffee, now that there’s sugar to put in it.”

Oh, good grief, Kate thought again as the man followed her grandmother into the kitchen. She nearly said it aloud, then realized that if he was what she suspected, she’d best not antagonize him right off the bat. Better to let him think he was succeeding, and catch him in the act. She’d just have to watch him carefully.

That won’t be too painful, she thought, then immediately castigated herself for being beyond stupid. Besides, even though it might not be painful, it was going to be a pain. She didn’t have time for this. She already had those thefts at work to deal with. Plus her best mechanic, who’d lost his wife last year, was in a state of total distraction over his rebellious son. And then her grandparents needed a more reliable car to replace their old station wagon, and neither they nor she could afford it just now….

Which was why they’d decided to rent out a room, she realized suddenly. And felt guilty; they’d done so much for her. They’d taken her in and raised her at a time when they’d been looking forward to retiring, and then they’d taken her back again when her world had fallen apart. She owed them everything, and had paid them back so little. They’d argue with her, of course, and mean it. They’d done it out of love, but that didn’t lessen her worry that she wasn’t taking good enough care of them.

“I gather you didn’t know about this?”

The quiet voice behind her startled her. She spun around to see the new boarder watching her as he sipped from one of her grandmother's favorite coffee mugs.

She tried to rein in her antagonism, but it was fueled by worry and she wasn't very successful. "About this plan to rent a room in their own home? No, I didn't."

"And you don't like it."

She noticed it wasn't a question, but supposed her demeanor had made that obvious to all but the thickest bricks. He clearly wasn't one of those. But she supposed you didn't make a good con artist if you couldn't sense what your victims were feeling.

"No," she said, reverting to bluntness once more.

"Fortunate for me, then, that it's not your decision."

He turned then and walked back into the kitchen, leaving Kate gaping after him.

After a moment she closed her mouth.

You'd think a con man would be a little more careful about offending, she thought. Which led to the obvious thought that perhaps, just perhaps, he wasn't one.

Or, she amended, he was just a very good one, and knew better than to appear too ingratiating.

"Whatever you're up to, you're not going to get away with it," she muttered as she picked up her keys. "I'll see to that."

Somehow, she added silently. Along with everything else I have to do, I'll see to it.

Chapter 2

Kate Crawford was nervous, Rand Singleton thought.

She was also beautiful. Not in the way of the photos he'd seen in her personnel file, where she was glamorous, gorgeous and looked very high-power, but in a much more natural way. More real. More reachable. More.

Touchable, he thought, then shook his head at his own folly. It didn't matter what she looked like. Didn't matter that her hair was sleek and shiny and the color of rich, dark coffee. Or that her eyes were unexpectedly topaz and quite striking. Or that she was tall and graceful with just the right amount of curves. What mattered was the fact that she clearly didn't like the idea of him being here at all.

He mentally filed the knowledge away. This assignment was just beginning, so he wasn't sure where—or if—she fit in yet. What he was sure of was that she was in the perfect position at Redstone Northwest to be involved, or even be the mastermind behind the thefts. Especially since they had begun shortly after she'd started working there.

That's why he'd been so pleased with his luck. He'd planned to just stay in a local motel, figuring it would work for his cover as a photographer. Little had he known that the town of Summer Harbor didn't have a motel. Not this time of year, anyway; the small guest operations that were open during the tourist-filled

summer months were closed now, many of the owners fleeing south ahead of the approaching winter.

"Teach you to assume," he told himself as he finished unpacking in the comfortably sized upstairs room, furnished with older but quality pieces that made him feel as if he was staying back at his own grandparents' suburban home outside San Diego.

He smothered the pang he always felt when he thought of the two people who had loved him so. He still missed them, and the only thing that eased the pain was the knowledge that they had died as they had lived for so many years; together. Dorothy and Walt Crawford reminded him of them, and he'd felt immediately comfortable with the couple. And, as usually happened, they seemed to take to him right off. Sometimes this innocent baby face of his was an advantage.

He'd chosen the armoire as a storage place for his photographic gear. He handled the equipment with the familiarity of long usage. He'd once considered becoming a photographer in fact, but the lure of working for Redstone, Inc. had been too much, and once he'd landed on the crack Redstone security team, he knew he'd found his true calling.

His mother hadn't been happy about it, knowing he would occasionally be sent on risky assignments, but she'd finally backed off, saying that if he was going to have such an insane career, it might as well be for Joshua Redstone, who was known for looking out for his people.

Josh also made sure Rand had a chance to do some

photography work now and then, some of which had been used around the world in Redstone literature and advertising, and Rand felt as if he had the very best of two worlds.

When he'd finished with the photo gear, he turned to the rest of the things he'd packed. He tossed the jeans in a dresser drawer along with a couple of pullover sweaters and several shirts. He had a feeling he would be glad he'd taken Josh's advice and put in some heavy socks. The days were still warm, but the brisk scent of winter was already in the evening air up here in the Northwest, although the actual turn of the season was still a couple of weeks away.

The sound of singing from downstairs brought him back to his original thought about his luck. What else would you call it when you stumbled into the perfect setup—a room for rent by the family of the head of the very Redstone department he'd been sent to investigate?

When the man at the small grocery had mentioned that the Crawfords were looking for a tenant, it had seemed so lucky that he'd been suspicious at first, until he realized that in a town with a year-round population of less than two thousand, it was likely everybody really did know everybody else's business.

There didn't seem to be much buzz about anything going on at Redstone, though. He'd felt his way very carefully, saying only that he'd seen the place while out exploring the countryside. The only reaction he'd gotten was one of open, cheerful enthusiasm for the presence of Redstone. It had apparently done wonders for

the tax base of the tiny town, thanks to some bargaining Joshua Redstone had done with the county, making sure a large portion of the taxes they would pay would go directly to Summer Harbor.

But now someone was stealing from the benefactor. And although to some the crimes might seem petty when weighed against the vastness of the Redstone empire, Josh was not one to let things like this slide or consider them beneath his attention. Especially when what was being stolen was one of Redstone inventor Ian Gamble's latest inventions. The new self-regulating, automatic insulin pump functioned like a normal pancreas because it could sense when the body needed insulin and automatically administer it. It could not only save thousands of lives, but make thousands more easier.

Of course, that made it even more valuable to the thieves.

Rand finished unpacking the last of his clothes and stood for a moment, contemplating whether he was going to need the heavy parka he'd just hung up in the closet. He decided against it for now, figuring he'd get the feel of the temperature first. He'd just been in Canada last week, so perhaps he was still acclimated somewhat to the cooler clime.

Sure he'd left his small .38 revolver securely locked in the case for now, he was done. He dug his cell phone out of the side pocket of the duffle that had held everything he'd brought, including his laptop. He hit the button that had been programmed to dial Redstone Security at their California headquarters.

"Draven."

“It’s Rand,” he said to his boss, head of Redstone security. “I’m in place.”

“Good.”

Man of very few words, his boss. “You’ll never guess where.”

“No, I won’t.”

Rand sighed; John Draven seemed edgier than usual today, which was saying something.

“Crawford’s grandparent’s.”

There was a pause, and Rand thought with some satisfaction that for once he’d surprised the unflappable Draven.

“They were renting out a room,” he added, feeling he should.

“Convenient,” was all Draven said.

“Yeah, I wondered about that, especially finding out about it like I did. But the town’s so small, everybody knows everything.”

“Different.”

“Very,” Rand agreed.

“Your cover going to work?”

Rand had been offered a cover inside the Redstone facility here, but had decided it might work better if he was on the outside. Besides, there was a new security guy on board at this plant, Brian Fisher, a kid Josh himself had hired. He had been trying to investigate the thefts, and Josh didn’t want the twenty-two-year-old’s confidence crushed. So Rand had taken out the camera gear that had sat unused for too long and headed for the rural Northwest undercover.

“I think so,” he said. “Josh is right, it’s beautiful up here. It’s

the kind of place that draws photographers like flies."

"So does dead meat," Draven said dryly.

"Yeah, yeah," Rand retorted, long used to the man's off center sense of humor. "I'd better get started if I'm going to find out what's making those insulin pumps magically disappear between the time the trucks are loaded and delivery is made, with no sign of break-ins."

"I don't believe in magic."

"No, I don't suppose you do."

Rand knew what John Draven did believe in. He'd asked him once. The answer had been Josh Redstone, the randomness of life and the stopping power of a .45.

"Report when you have something to say," Draven said.

"As usual," Rand said, smothering a wry grin. Draven was nothing if not a master of brevity.

He understood, though. It had been a rough couple of years for Redstone when it came to employees. And that was unusual enough that Josh was a little touchy on the subject. He chose his people carefully, then gave them free rein to do what they did best, and it very rarely backfired on him.

But this bad stretch had begun with Bill Talbert, the employee Draven had caught feathering his own nest at the expense of guests at one of the Redstone resorts. Then Phil Cooper, found only in death to have been slime to his wife and son if not to Redstone itself. And just a few months ago, corporate secrets from Ian Gamble's research being sold to a competitor by

someone inside. Considering the size of Redstone, it wasn't all that much, but Josh tended to take such betrayals personally.

And he wasn't the only one—everybody at Redstone circled the wagons when someone tried to damage the place they all loved so much. Josh was the kind of man who inspired a loyalty that couldn't be bought, and every last one of the security team was dedicated to keeping things just the way he liked them: honest, clean and profitable.

Josh had made liars of many who insisted the three couldn't exist together in the business world. Rand wasn't about to let that change, not even out here in one of the smaller Redstone outposts. He'd find out who the thief was, and they'd come face-to-face with the other Redstone inexorable—justice.

As she did almost every morning she went to work, Kate paused after she turned off the road and into the driveway of Redstone Northwest. It seemed a small miracle, this place. Joshua Redstone had insisted a manufacturing plant could be built without destroying the countryside, and he'd proved it here.

Redstone Northwest looked more like an exclusive hunting lodge than a factory. Each building was clad in siding milled from the trees they'd had to clear. The entrance drive curved through big trees that had been intentionally left standing to mask the actual size of the building. It made bringing bigger supply trucks in and out a challenge, but when that point had been brought up to Josh he had merely nodded and said if the driver couldn't do it, he shouldn't be driving for Redstone, and if he wouldn't do it,

he didn't understand Redstone.

When she'd been interviewed for this job by the great Josh Redstone himself—in a process that had seemed more like a casual conversation than a job interview—he'd concluded their meeting by asking if she had any questions. The one that was obvious to her slipped out before she could stop it.

"Why here?" she had asked. "Why did you build a Redstone facility here, in tiny Summer Harbor?" She loved the little town she'd recently moved back to, but still wondered why a company the size of Redstone had located here.

"You don't like it being here?" the lanky, gray-eyed man had asked, not in a challenging tone but in the way of someone genuinely interested.

"No, no," she'd said quickly. "I'm happy you decided to build here. It's been great, done wonders for the town. I'm just curious. We're sort of at the crossroads of nowhere and can't get there from here."

Josh had laughed, and Kate had found herself smiling at the sound of it. She'd done a little research before she'd applied for the job, and had read that the man didn't laugh often anymore. Rumor had it that the death of his wife a few years ago had taken the laughter right out of him. That she'd managed to make him do it pleased her much more than she would have thought, given she'd only just met the man.

"Perhaps for just that reason," he said.

"Whatever your reason, I'm glad," she told him. "And I would

love to be part of it."

He had gestured at her résumé, on the table in front of him. In what she had since come to learn was typical Josh Redstone fashion, he had chosen to conduct interviews outside. She had arrived for this interview to find one of the richest men in the world seated at an ordinary card table under a large madrone tree in front of the building that was still being finished.

"You're a bit overqualified," he'd said.

She hadn't argued that, she knew it was true and wouldn't insult his intelligence by denying it.

"But I'm a lot overqualified for any other job in town," she had said. "And I'm staying here, no matter what, so I'd like the most challenging job I can get."

Josh Redstone had studied her for a long, silent moment. So long that she'd wondered if she should have been so blunt. Finally he'd stood up and held out a hand to her.

"Welcome to Redstone, Ms. Crawford."

And so now here she was, she thought as she finally continued on to the parking area on the far side of the building, distribution manager for Redstone Northwest. And while it wasn't the high-power, moving-millions-of-dollars-a-day job she'd held in Denver, it was enough to keep her mind sharp. Even more important, it let her stay in Summer Harbor, to take care of her grandparents. And right now that was the most important thing in the world to her.

She pulled into her usual parking spot, the one she'd picked at

the far end of the lot, although she could have had one with her name on it closer to the doors. She wanted this one to add a bit more exercise to her crowded days. The extra walking, coupled with lunch breaks frequently spent in the small basement gym Redstone had built, kept her in shape and the sneaky extra pounds off.

"Too much stuff," she muttered to herself, not for the first time as she gathered up her purse and heavy satchel. The canvas bag that held both ends of her record keeping spectrum—her traditional clipboard and her more modern PDA—was a far cry from the elegant leather briefcase she had once carried. But it was far more practical—and less conspicuous—here in the casual Northwest.

She headed for her office, remembering how joyous her first months here had been. In fact, her work here had been immensely satisfying, and the longer she worked for Redstone the more she liked it. And the idea of someone stealing from the company made her very angry.

Furthermore, the idea that what they were stealing was being taken from people who desperately needed the help of Redstone's newest invention turned that anger to fury. It was a fury tempered only by apprehension; she had some suspicions about who might be involved in this string of thefts—if two could be called a string—and she didn't at all like the possibility that she'd come up with.

As she turned down the hall and headed for her office, nodding and greeting the staff she encountered, she renewed her

determination to put a stop to this. Josh had opened this facility here because he loved the area and wanted to help the local economy, and she didn't want him to ever regret it. She felt as if the reputation of Summer Harbor was at stake. She would not let what had so far been a small problem become a large one for Redstone.

To her surprise, when she got to her office the usually locked door was already open. She took another step forward. Not only that, but there was someone inside and that someone was sitting at her computer.

The computer where the schedules for the shipments of the insulin pumps were stored.

Chapter 3

Kate stepped into her office quietly. There was no mistaking who the unexpected occupant was; the maroon streaks in her brown hair didn't leave much room for mistakes.

Kate watched for a moment before speaking. There was a spreadsheet on the computer screen, but she couldn't see from here which one it was.

"Mel?"

"Oh!" Melissa Morris spun around, clearly startled. "Ms. Crawford, I didn't hear you."

"Looking for something?" Kate asked, not taking her eyes off the girl while she set down her purse and canvas bag. It wasn't unusual for the girl to be there, but Kate was touchy these days.

"Yes. Those old shipping numbers. So I can finish that practice analysis you wanted." She looked embarrassed. "I lost my copy."

Kate relaxed. Inwardly, although she knew her critical data password was protected, she was grateful there was such an innocent explanation for Mel's presence and her actions. Outwardly, she frowned. "Don't you have a term paper to finish?"

The sixteen-year-old, who had adopted the nickname of Mel for the hated Melissa years ago, nodded. "But I keep getting them confused. If I sit down to work on the paper, I think of the analysis report. If I sit down to work on the report, all I can think

about is the term paper."

Kate, who could remember being in a very similar position in school more than once, smiled. "The brain sometimes sabotages you, doesn't it? No matter how hard you try to focus on one thing, other things keep sneaking in."

Mel gave her a look that trumpeted her relief that Kate understood. "Yes, exactly."

"So, what are you going to do?"

Mel hesitated. "Aren't you supposed to tell me that?"

Kate smiled. "The mentor program is supposed to give you the chance to learn. Sometimes the best way to do that is fight through to the answers yourself. And learn how to do that." She shrugged. "I'm just here to nudge if you head down a wrong path."

"Oh." The girl looked disconcerted for a moment, then thoughtful. "Well, while I was trying to do my term paper, I had some ideas about a different way to do the distribution analysis I thought were good. So I came here to get that done, while the ideas were fresh in my mind."

"All right," Kate said. "But you need to balance that. We don't want the work experience counselor revoking your privilege to spend mornings here. Tonight you work only on your paper."

The girl perked up. "Okay. I think maybe I can finish the rough numbers today, and that will be enough to get it out of my head so I can concentrate on my paper."

"If you can't get around the roadblock, sometimes you just

have to tear it down," Kate said.

Mel's nose wrinkled. "Is that another one of your grandfather's old sayings?"

Kate grinned. "Yep. He prefers to think of them as axioms of wisdom."

"Is that a weapon of some kind, an axiom?"

"It can be," Kate said. "Look it up when you're done with your paper," Kate added.

"Yeah," the girl said, then sighed somewhat morosely. "So, where can I find those shipping figures?"

"They're in the distribution spreadsheet. It hasn't been closed out for the quarter yet, so it's in the open files."

"Okay. I'll move out to the other computer."

"I've got some manifests to work on, so if you want to use mine, you can have it for about a half hour."

"Great! It's hard to concentrate out there," she said, gesturing toward the outer office where Kate's assistant had his desk, and held vendors, salespeople and job seekers at bay until their appointment times.

A few minutes later Mel's maroon-streaked head was bent over the keyboard as she brought up the spreadsheet she needed. When the student started working here, she hadn't been familiar with the software program Redwood used, but she knew computers and had quickly figured it out. The girl was bright enough, quite, in fact, but she was also chafing against the restraints of living in a small town that didn't even have a movie

theater. Kate had recognized the signs, which was why she'd offered herself as the girl's mentor when she'd signed up for the program at her school.

Why Mel had accepted, she wasn't quite sure. There had been people in other parts of the county who had volunteered for the mentoring program, places where there was much more of what Mel called "civilization." But she'd chosen Kate, right here in Summer Harbor, the very place she wanted so desperately to escape.

And that, Kate thought, was the first thing that had made her suspicious. That and the occasional flash of anger she saw in the girl, anger at being stuck here in the place she derided with a very descriptive and obscene term. Kate had had to tell her she could curse up a storm anywhere else she could get away with it, but not inside Redstone. And then realized she was going to have to live up to her own rules and rein in the occasional "damn" that escaped her.

But when the thefts had started, she'd wondered. Wondered if there was another reason Mel had chosen her as the person she wanted as her mentor. If perhaps it wasn't her, or her work that had attracted the girl at all, but Redstone, and getting on the inside. Kate didn't like thinking that way, but she couldn't help the questions that popped into her mind when the girl complained about tiny Summer Harbor.

Now that would be just peachy, she thought sourly, if she'd actually invited the thief into the nest, as it were.

She turned to look at the girl again. “Mel?” The teenager looked up. “Why did you pick me?”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have picked someone in L.A., Chicago or even Seattle. The kind of place you want to go. But you chose me, here.”

Mel nodded.

“Why?”

“Because you got out. Those others were always there, so they didn’t have anywhere to get out of. But you did, and you got out, even if you came back. That’s what I wanted to learn.”

It made a certain kind of sense, Kate thought. Teenage sense, but sense.

Of course, that didn’t mean she wasn’t involved in the thefts. It could just mean that part came later.

Kate began to sort the cargo manifests. As she organized them, part of her mind was still, as it had been since the start of this trouble, occupied with trying to solve the riddle of the thefts.

“Kate? Oh, she’s a good one,” the grocer said with a smile. “Not many who’d leave a big career like she had and come home to take care of her grandparents when they started having health problems.”

“Is that why she did it?” Rand had dropped by to thank the man for pointing him toward the Crawford’s room for rent, and had grabbed the chance to pump him a bit, since he seemed more than willing to talk.

"Well, she'll tell you she got homesick, didn't like the big-city life."

"Some don't," Rand said neutrally, even as he was thinking that going from Denver to this small town would be more than a major adjustment.

"I know I couldn't take it," the man behind the counter agreed, his tone a bit fervent. "Lived over in Seattle for a while, and even that about made me crazy."

"But you don't think that's Kate's real reason?" Rand gently nudged the conversation back in the direction he needed.

"Well, it may be true she didn't like the city, but the real reason is she loves her grandparents and knows they need her now."

Well, that's noble, I guess, Rand thought. Too noble to be believed?

He didn't know.

"So, she wasn't running away from any trouble or anything?"

The grocer's expression suddenly changed. His eyes narrowed, all trace of the warm, small-town welcome vanished now. "Kate's not the kind to run from trouble, if she were the kind to get into trouble in the first place."

Rand knew immediately he'd made a mistake. Hastily, he backpedaled. "It just seemed she was a bit edgy, when I met her. I didn't want to make it worse by saying something out of ignorance."

"Oh. Well. Then."

The man stopped short of an actual apology, but his demeanor

quickly shifted back to the genial storekeeper.

Hmm, Rand thought as he purchased a soda and departed.

His next stop was the only other establishment of any size in town, a carries-everything hardware store. He got much the same reaction there; open friendliness, liking for Kate Crawford and an instant withdrawal behind a screen of seeming protectiveness at the slightest suggestion she was anything less than a beloved local girl who made good and then came home.

It was the same everywhere, although admittedly the options were few; the small drugstore, the smaller post office, the yet smaller soup and sandwich café. He even braced himself and stepped into a shop labeled Curl and Cut, which smelled of some hair chemical that made his eyes water. He covered his presence by saying he would be staying in Summer Harbor for a while and wanted to know if they cut men's hair.

"For you, honey, you bet," the matronly blond woman wearing a black plastic apron said with a wink so broad he couldn't keep from grinning back at her. "I'd love to get my hands into that hair. I'm Esther."

"Hi, Esther. I'm Rand. I'm renting a room at the Crawford's."

The woman's smile became even broader. "Oh, that's good. I know they were looking to do that. They're good people, they'll take care of you."

He hesitated, aware of several women in the place, in various stages of what looked like strange and exotic treatments, then plunged ahead. "I like them. I don't think their granddaughter

likes me, though."

"Kate? Now that's odd, she likes most people. She's the sweetest girl. Glad she's back here where she belongs, especially after what she's been through. Whatever made you think she didn't like you?"

He decided on the concerned approach this time. "She's not in any trouble, is she? Is that why she's a bit edgy?"

"Kate, in trouble? Not likely," the woman replied, complete certainty in her tone. "If she's edgy, it's because she's worried. Her grandparents have had some money trouble, and they're not getting any younger, so their health is on her mind."

"Well," Rand amended, "maybe it wasn't just me, but the whole idea of me renting a room from her grandparents."

"Well, that could be. She's very protective of them. But I'd think she'd be glad to see a handsome, eligible young man around." The woman waggled an eyebrow at him. "You are eligible, aren't you?"

"For several things," Rand said.

She laughed. "Oh, Kate'll like you, all right. She's got a weakness for wit."

He smiled and thanked the woman, then turned to escape from the chemical smell and the interested gazes of the other women. He wondered if he'd be a topic at several dinner tables in Summer Harbor tonight. This small-town stuff was going to take some getting used to. He'd dealt with it in villages around the world, but somehow he'd never come up against it here at home.

Is anyone that perfect? he wondered as he got back in the small SUV he'd rented for the duration. Did everybody in this town think Kate Crawford walked on water?

It wasn't until he got to the single gas station to fill up that he got his answer to that.

"Oh, you mean Miss-too-good-for-the-likes-of-us?" The man in the grease-stained overalls, with the patch reading Scott, wiped his hands across his chest, depositing even more grease.

Rand's radar flipped into search mode. The man had wandered out from the garage when he'd pulled up to the pumps, as if he'd been waiting for someone to come in. After listening to him gripe about the weather and the people who complained about the price of gas, Rand had steered the man to the topic he wanted. And had gotten the first negative comment in town about Kate Crawford.

"Came back from the east a little snooty, did she?" he asked casually, keeping his eyes on the pump nozzle but also watching Scott out of the corner of his eye.

The man snickered. "It's those Redstone people, they think they own the world."

Whoa, Rand thought. Where'd that come from?

Scott sniffed audibly. "What's that? Smells like ammonia or something."

"It's probably me," Rand said, ruefully amazed it was still discernable over the gasoline fumes. "I stuck my nose in the Curl and Cut for directions."

Scott picked at a greasy fingernail as he laughed. “That’ll teach you. You can smell that Esther coming for miles. Good thing, since she insists on butting into everybody else’s business. Old hen.”

A small Japanese sedan went by, stereo booming out bass so loud it shook the metal price sign out at the curb.

“Damn kids,” Scott snarled. “Think everybody wants to listen to their crap.”

“It was loud,” Rand agreed mildly.

“Call that music, too. Stupid idiots. They’re as bad as those high-falutin’ classical snobs, with all that music by dead guys.”

Ah, Rand thought. I get it now. It wasn’t Kate or Redstone in particular, this guy just hates the world. Guess there’s one in every town, even one this small.

He paid for his gas and pulled out of the station. Tank now full, he decided to explore a little, get the lay of the land, particularly around Redstone. As he drove, he thought about something Esther of the Curl and Cut—or was it Cut and Curl?—had said.

Glad she’s back here where she belongs…

That seemed to be the consensus around here. Kate Crawford may have left Summer Harbor, but they’d clearly never forgotten her. And when she’d returned they had welcomed her with open arms.

The rest of what Esther had said came back to him then.

…especially after what she’s been through.

He knew, from the file he’d read at Redstone headquarters

before he'd come here, that Kate had been married once, and had lost a child to illness. Maybe that, he thought now, was the reason for that circle the wagons feeling he was getting. But that had been years ago. And she'd left Summer Harbor long before that, and only come back in the wake of that tragic loss.

Or maybe it was simply the dynamic of a small town.

Rand shook his head in wonder. He'd been around the world, been in cities, villages and places even smaller than Summer Harbor, where the nearest civilization was hundreds of miles away, but he'd never spent a lot of time in small-town America. And while he couldn't deny the sheer beauty of this part of the world, this kind of tightly knit community already had him completely bemused.

He thought about what he'd learned about Kate Crawford this morning. That for the most part, Summer Harbor loved her. And that she had been, at most, a bit edgy of late. Hardly enough to convict someone for theft.

But added to the fact that she had motive—apparent financial problems—and opportunity, it was enough to keep her way up on the suspect list.

And if he didn't care for the idea, it was only because he already liked her grandparents. He didn't like thinking about what it would do to them to find out their granddaughter was a thief.

He checked once more on the gun lockbox under the seat. His two-inch .38 was inside to avoid discovery, and he hoped

fervently he wouldn’t have to use it.

Chapter 4

"No, not that one, silly boy! Don't you know a weed when you see it?"

"Apparently not," Rand said with a grin as he released the threatened plant.

He'd been working in the backyard with Dorothy ever since he'd returned from his exploration. He'd figured it would be a good way to keep an eye on Kate since she spent so much time here, but he was soon enjoying himself.

"My mom used to say a weed was just a plant growing where you didn't want it to," he said.

Dorothy laughed. "Well, she's right. Do you see her often, Rand?"

"Not often enough," he said. "But it's not all my fault. She and my dad retired and they're off globe-trotting more than they're home these days."

"Oh, how nice," Dorothy said. She left it at that, but Rand had the feeling "for them" had followed in her mind. She was just too polite to say it aloud.

"This one goes?" He gestured at the next questionable plant he saw. At her nod he began to dig out the offender as he continued the conversation. "You don't like to travel?"

"Oh, we go to the coast now and then, and we used to go down to California in the winter, and up to Canada in the spring, but

we love home the best so we stay here most of the time now."

He wondered if they had had to curtail their travels for health reasons or financial reasons. He'd brought in the mail for them—their mail box was out at the end of a very long driveway—when he'd returned from his first recon of the area. He had noticed several windowed envelopes that made Dorothy frown when she saw them. But she'd merely put them away with a sigh in a desk cubby that held several more of what appeared to be the same kind of envelopes.

Definitely motive, he thought, yanking out a dandelion rather fiercely at the thought that Kate might have had to resort to stealing to help these sweet people.

Well, Dorothy was sweet, anyway; Walter Crawford was a bit of a curmudgeon. Rand got the sense the silver-haired man with the bushy moustache used the gruffness to hide a too-soft heart, but he was honest enough to realize he might be projecting his memory of his own grandfather onto this man who somewhat resembled Robert Singleton.

"You really don't have to help me with this chore," Dorothy said.

Rand tossed the excavated weed into the trash bag they were dragging around with them. "I don't mind. Unless you'd rather do it all yourself. I can understand that. My mom used to feel like that sometimes. She said the only thing that kept her sane was working in her garden."

"And what was threatening to drive her insane?" Dorothy

asked, with a sly grin that told Rand she was already guessing the answer.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, but he grinned back at her.

He had likely had the most normal family life of any of the Redstone security team, and his choice of careers had made his mother crazy. His father, at least, had understood, but then, he'd been a cop for nearly two decades before Rand's mother had prevailed upon him to retire—something he hadn't been that reluctant to do, saying all the good feelings had been driven out of the job anyway by the holes in the system and too many losing battles.

But Rand couldn't deny what Dorothy had said was true, most of the time it had been he himself who had driven his mother to the brink. If it hadn't been for Josh, who had, to Rand's shock, invited his entire family in to tour Redstone headquarters and then have lunch with him while he convinced them that he would look out for their only son, his mother would have made his life unbearable with her worrying.

But Josh had convinced them, and while Rand didn't tell his mother everything, he'd never been seriously hurt on an assignment for Redstone. Of course, his mother's opinion of what constituted seriously hurt might differ slightly from his, he admitted silently.

"Are you an only child?" Dorothy asked as they moved on to a shady flower bed full of what she told him were hostas and fuchsias.

“No, I’ve got a little sister. My mom said after my terrible twos she was sure there was never going to be another one. Took her nearly ten years to change her mind and have Lisa.”

“Are you and your sister close?”

“Pretty much,” he said. “I tried to always look out for her as a kid, although it was tough when I was sixteen having a six-year-old trailing after me.”

“I can imagine,” Dorothy said with a laugh. “Your friends must have loved to tease you.”

“That they did,” he agreed, thinking for the first time in years of the one friend who had gone way too far with his teasing.

“Oh, that was an unpleasant thought,” Dorothy said, and Rand realized something must have shown in his face.

“Yeah. I was thinking about one friend of mine, when we were in high school. He got tired of Lisa always tagging along, so one day he locked her in a closet so that she couldn’t follow us.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Yeah. Worst part was he forgot to tell anyone. We didn’t find her for hours.” Rand shook his head. “I’ll never forget the look in my parents’ eyes when they thought she was truly lost or had been taken.”

“What did your friend do?”

“He apologized. My dad somehow kept himself from trouncing the guy, and Lisa said she was okay, she wasn’t really scared at all, but we knew better.”

“What did you do?”

“Me?” The question surprised him, but after thinking about it a moment he answered, “I found some better friends.”

The smile Dorothy gave him then warmed him in the same way his grandmother’s approval had once warmed him.

“You remind me so much of my own grandmother,” he said, and her smile widened even farther.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Do. She was a wonderful lady, and I miss her and my grandfather every day.”

“How long since you lost them?” Dorothy asked, her tone sympathetic.

“Two years ago,” he said. “Grandpa had a heart attack, and she went less than two days later. She hadn’t even been sick, but she didn’t want to go on without him.”

“I hope Walter and I go together,” Dorothy said, in a matter-of-fact tone that told Rand she’d thought about this before. He couldn’t imagine ever loving someone that much, but he envied those who had achieved that state.

“How long have you been married?”

“We had our fiftieth last year. Kate threw us a wonderful party. It seemed like the whole town showed up.”

“That was nice of her.”

“Yes, that’s our girl. Always doing things for people. And not just her family, either. Do you know she started a mentor program here in Summer Harbor?”

“Oh?”

“It’s done wonders for the kids here. The ones who get in trouble always blame the fact that there’s nothing for them to do, so she gave them something.”

“That’s generous of her.”

“She’s currently mentoring her second student. The first is already off to college.”

“So it’s a success, then.”

“Oh, yes.” Dorothy sighed. “She spends so much of her time on us and everyone else. We worry that she has no life of her own.”

“I have a life, thank you.”

Dorothy nearly jumped as Kate came up behind them. Rand had heard the footsteps on the stone walkway and wasn’t surprised when she appeared.

“My goodness, dear, you startled me!”

“Sorry, Gram.” She looked at Rand. “Well, isn’t this just too sweet. Run out of things to take snapshots of?”

“Kate!” her grandmother exclaimed, in apparent protest at the sarcasm in her tone. “He’s helping me, and it’s very kind of him.”

“Sorry, Gram,” she repeated, but Rand had the feeling she didn’t really mean it this time. “Let me change,” Kate added, “and I’ll join you.”

The glance she gave Rand as she went inside was one of undisguised warning.

Well, he thought, as long as she’s suspicious of you, it won’t be hard to keep her close enough to watch.

Not, he added silently with a wry grimace as she returned more quickly than he would have guessed possible, that it would in any way be hard to watch her. Even in the work clothes she apparently kept here, she was lovely.

He thought again of the glamorous photograph he'd seen in the Redstone file. That shot had been taken, he'd guessed by the date on the back, while she was at the high-power, executive position in Denver she'd left to come back here. Here, there was no trace of the designer clothes and careful makeup. She was still lovely, but it was a different kind of beauty, the kind that fit with this place—natural, unaffected. This was a country beauty, not city slickness, and to his surprise Rand found the change refreshing. Perhaps he'd just seen too much in his work around the Redstone world, but he knew quite well that glamour could be a facade that hid something much darker.

Rand was turning some phrasing over in his mind, wondering just how he should approach Kate with questions about the thefts, when her grandmother did it for him.

"Any more problems at work, honey?"

Kate, in the midst of pulling on a pair of gardening gloves, went still. "Gram," she said, with a sideways look at Rand.

"Oh, heavens, child, what do you think Rand's going to do, blab it to the world?"

She looked at him as if she thought that was exactly what he would do. "It's still nothing I want to discuss in front of a total stranger."

There was a sharp undertone in her voice that told him she was beyond just edgy about this. So, did she really just not want to talk about this in front of a stranger—or a total stranger as she had emphasized to her grandmother—or was she nervous about something else?

Such as being found out?

Rand stifled a grimace. He really wasn't liking the idea she might be involved. He already liked Dorothy Crawford a great deal, and didn't like to think about what it would do to her to discover such a thing about her granddaughter. It would break her heart. And probably that of crusty Walter Crawford as well, although he'd hide it behind another layer of that gruff exterior.

"I can leave, if you two need to talk," he said neutrally.

Kate had, at least, the grace to blush slightly. "I didn't mean to be rude," she said. "I just try not to discuss company business outside."

"You work for Redstone?"

Her gaze sharpened. "How did you know that?"

He shrugged. "The guy at the gas station mentioned it, when I told him I was staying here."

Dorothy laughed. "Scott Paxton? I can just imagine what he said. In between complaining about the kids at the skateboard park, the way the grocery store is arranged and the color of the sky this morning."

Rand laughed. "That sounds about right."

"He's the local grump, all right," Kate said, smiling now.

“Has been ever since he moved here. We try to look on him as entertainment.”

It was a lovely smile, Rand noted. And Kate seemed like a good person, a small-town success story of sorts, who had come home to give back to her grandparents and the community. By all Redstone reports she was dedicated and loyal—the sort of person Redstone drew, welcomed and fostered. She was efficient, productive, concerned about the people who worked for her. Exactly the kind of person Josh hunted for.

But she was also used to making a lot more money than she was earning now. Not that Redstone underpaid by any means, the opposite in fact, but she had to have been making very big money in her previous job at that investment firm.

Rand frowned as he dug at the root of what Dorothy had told him was a sprig of Scotch broom, which if left alone would soon overtake the entire garden. What had Kate done with all the money she’d made in that other job? Even if she’d done as many people did and spent it on cars and clothes and a fancy house, there still should have been some left to salvage out of the debris. He’d have to check into that.

The obvious thought hit him then, that her money had gone for another kind of entertainment, the kind that usually went up noses or into veins. He glanced at her now, to where she stood beside her grandmother as they surveyed the garden for the area to tackle next.

Drugs?

He didn't think so. She was tall and toned, not skinny. Her eyes were clear, her nose was tilted sassily upward and not in the least red. And while he wasn't naive enough to think you couldn't find a supply of cocaine even up here in the rural Northwest woods, she didn't have the look. He was no expert, but he'd seen a lot in his years within Redstone security, and she just didn't have the look he'd come to associate with that particular problem.

He'd call Draven. He wouldn't have to mention the possibility, he'd just say he needed to know what her financial situation was, where the big bucks she'd been making had gone. Draven, who said he had been born a cynic and had never found reason to change his mind, would do the rest. He would immediately catch all the possible implications, and if there was anything to be found in Kate Crawford's big-city past, Draven would find it.

And then Rand would have to deal with it.

Chapter 5

"He's absolutely charming, and I don't see why you have such a problem with him."

Kate smothered a sigh. After all the weeding he'd done yesterday she decided it would be best not to say that the first thing she thought of—a snake—when her grandmother said yet again that Rand Singleton was charming. Of course, she was thinking of the man as the snake as well as the charmer, so that completely muddled that metaphor, and she ended up smiling wryly.

"I just worry about you and Gramps. I always have, so don't expect me to stop now."

Dorothy reached across the kitchen table and patted her granddaughter's hand. "We worry about you, too. You really do spend far too much time with us, and not nearly enough living your own life."

Kate sighed audibly this time, drawing a sideways look from her grandfather from behind his morning newspaper. "She's right," Walter said gruffly, and went back to the sports page, checking, no doubt, for scarce bits of rodeo news. Her grandfather had lived on a ranch in his teens, and had never quite gotten over it.

Kate took a long sip of the coffee her grandmother had poured. In this land of lattes, espresso and more coffee flavors

than ice cream flavors, the Crawfords stubbornly stuck to their old, everyday blend. But to Kate it was part of being home.

Her grandmother's worry was an old refrain she'd been hearing since the day she'd come home. It was even why her grandparents had refused to have her move back into this house with them. They insisted she needed her own space and her own life.

"We don't need a keeper yet," Gram had said, and Kate had realized she could easily insult them if she persisted, and that was something she didn't ever want to do.

So she had her own place a couple of miles away, a two-bedroom cottage she had leased from a retired teacher who had moved into a condominium in Seattle. The large master bedroom looked out on a garden with a small pond, while the second bedroom had already been set up as a home office, which made it even more convenient for Kate.

The house sat amid a private stand of tall fir trees and gave her a glimpse of the sound below. She'd put a porch swing in the corner where the view was best, and sat there often regardless of the weather. In fact, one of her favorite things was to be wrapped up in a warm throw in the cold air, listening to the rain on the porch roof and feeling the moisture in the air.

She'd had very little time to do that lately, however. She'd been so distracted by what was happening at Redstone that she'd rarely gotten home before dark. She spent her time trying to solve a mystery, and was missing most of what was turning out to

be an incredibly summerlike fall here in the Northwest. They'd barreled through September in the mid-seventies, and October was starting out the same way. She had the feeling they were going to go straight from summer to winter, probably overnight.

She should probably be glad, she thought glumly, that she had the mess at work as a diversion. Otherwise she'd be dwelling on the mess of her life. Obsessing about how badly she'd misjudged the man she'd married. Wondering if she'd ever trust a man again.

And most of all, missing her baby girl.

"Do I smell coffee? Can I beg some?"

Kate went still at the sound of the sleepy, masculine voice behind her. But her grandmother smiled and said a cheery "Good morning, Rand," while her grandfather gestured to the pot and said "Help yourself."

"Thanks."

She didn't turn to look at him. She didn't have to; she could see him perfectly well, reflected in the black, glassy front of the refrigerator. He stretched, expansively, the movement lifting his T-shirt to expose a strip of flat, muscular abdomen above the waistband of his jeans. He ran a hand through his tousled blond hair, yawned, then finally set off toward the coffeemaker.

Kate noticed he knew right where to go for a mug, and for some reason that bothered her. But her feeling of probably selfish perturbation evaporated when he politely brought the carafe over and, when they nodded, refilled both her grandparents' mugs. He then gestured at her with the still half-full pot, but she shook her

head and he put it back on the heating plate.

She waited for him to open the fridge for milk, just to further show how at home he'd made himself. But apparently he drank his coffee black because he came back to the table, pulled out a chair and sat. And managed to accomplish it anyway—he did look completely at home.

Not only that, but her grandfather actually put his paper down. Folded it up and set it aside, something she couldn't remember ever seeing while there were parts still unread. She glanced at her grandmother to see how she felt about the fact that this interloper could apparently accomplish with ease what she'd been trying to do for decades. Her grandmother was smiling, so obviously it didn't bother her. Which made it bother Kate all the more.

"Why don't I give you a hand with that gate before I head out, Walt?" the fair-haired boy said.

"I don't want to hold you up," her grandfather protested.

"No problem. I'm not on a set schedule."

"Must be nice," Kate muttered, goaded by his easy familiarity.

"I imagine you always have a set schedule," he said. She tried not to flush; she hadn't really meant to say that loudly enough for him to hear.

"Yes," she said.

"Redstone keeps you busy?"

She gave him a wary, sideways look. "Yes."

"You hear a lot about that company," he said. "What do you think of them?"

"I work in a very small part of Redstone," she said. "But if you mean are they as good to work for as you've heard, yes, they are."

"What exactly is it you do?"

"Distribution."

And that was enough Q and A for her. Her grandparents may have opened their life books for this man, but she wasn't about to.

"Don't you have pictures to take?" she asked abruptly.

He shifted his gaze to her. He looked at her for a moment, in a steady, assessing way that gave her the awful feeling he thought she was acting like a child. As perhaps she was, jealous of the way he'd beguiled the two people she loved most in the world.

"Eventually," he said easily. "At the moment I'm still looking around."

"Try going out to the lighthouse," her grandfather suggested. "Some good views from there, if you can catch a clear enough day."

"That's the trick," her grandmother put in. "But a clear day here is worth ten days anywhere else, so it's worth waiting for."

So, everybody's delighted with this guy except me, Kate thought as he waved a cheerful goodbye and headed out. Perhaps if she hadn't spent so much time in big cities, she'd be more trusting.

Or gullible, she amended silently.

Not that Gram or Gramps were stupid, not by any stretch. But they were trusting, like many small-town folks. Too trusting, she thought, remembering the boarder who had listened with

every evidence of genuine interest and appreciation to her grandparents' suggestions about photos and locations.

He was too good to be real, she thought. And didn't it just figure that the most attractive man she'd seen in ages wasn't just far too young, he was far too charming?

What's she hiding?

Rand had lost count of how many times that question had popped into his mind yesterday in her grandmother's garden. And again now, as he followed Kate Crawford. There was no doubting she was hiding something. Every time the subject of her work came up while he was around, she either dodged it or changed it immediately. And she did it with that edge that always seemed to appear in her voice and manner on those occasions.

If she was involved, he thought, she needed to work on her poker face.

Maybe that was it. She just acted guilty. But would somebody who had managed to pull off these rather clever thefts really be so awkward about hiding it?

He slowed the rental vehicle as she slowed her nondescript, mud-spattered coupe up ahead. If she was making any sudden and large sums of money, it hadn't turned up in her lifestyle yet. At least, not in her transportation.

It was difficult, in this small town with minimal traffic, to maintain a proper tail. There weren't lanes full of cars to hide among, and there were countless unmarked gravel roads that could be streets or simply driveways for a car you were trying

to surreptitiously follow to turn down. And on the often curving roads lined with tall trees, it would be the easiest thing in the world to lose a pursuer, if that were the intent.

But it apparently wasn't Kate's intent, at least not today. Or else she didn't even realize he was behind her. He wasn't sure if that meant she was innocent, or just never expected to be followed. Just how much protection did she think this remote piece of country provided?

He had to swerve wide to avoid three bike riders who insisted on riding side by side, and who in fact cheerfully waved and smiled at him as he went around them, making his irritation seem a bit petty.

When he was safely back in his lane, he had barely enough time to glance down the Redstone driveway and assure himself that she had really made the left turn and gone to work. When he was past it he pulled over, let the bikes he'd just passed go by him again, then made a U-turn. The camera bag on the seat beside him shifted, and he pulled it back as he parked in a turnout behind some large trees a few yards back from the road to Redstone.

It was a spot he'd found in his initial exploration of the area. It didn't seem to belong to anybody, or at least anybody who cared enough to fence it off, so he figured the car would be safe enough. And more important, out of sight.

He opened the camera bag, dug out the camera body and the smaller zoom lens he'd brought. He often used a digital for work,

and he'd brought that too, but for this he wanted film. It looked more like the real thing to most people, especially if it was to appear in print as he'd hinted. Besides, he might need the more powerful lens.

When the camera was loaded and ready, he got out and locked the car; no matter how safe this place was, he didn't want to have to deal with the hassle of a burglary with the gun inside or having the rental car stolen. Then he slipped on his small backpack, slung the camera over his shoulder by the contoured strap, grabbed the camera bag and started through the woods. He didn't worry much about encountering anyone; he'd always been amazed at what he could get away with by the simple device of carrying a professional-looking camera. People seemed to expect photographers to be a bit eccentric, and to blithely trek into strange places looking for the perfect shot.

As he was about to blithely trespass onto Redstone property. At least, his undercover persona was about to; as a member of Redstone security, he had open access to any Redstone facility, but as Rand Singleton, photographer, he could have some explaining to do to keep his cover intact if he was caught.

He made his way through the trees carefully. The ground was already partially obscured by fallen leaves, and on unfamiliar turf it made it difficult to be sure you were stepping down on solid ground. When he was into the woods several yards, he turned to his left and started up the rise. When he'd scouted this place out yesterday, he'd found a perfect spot to set up a surveillance. There

was a small break in the trees, giving a view of the towering, rugged Olympic Mountains, a vista well worth photographing.

That the spot also looked straight down on the Redstone plant was, he would insist to anyone who asked, purely coincidence.

Slipping off his pack and setting it and the camera bag down, he stood for a moment, marveling at the view. Those were some very serious mountains, he thought. He'd spent a rough few days in the Andes once, and hiked a long stretch through the Rockies, and these mountains were just as impressive in their own way.

He had to remind himself what he was here for. He dug through his camera gear bag, set up his portable tripod, attached the camera, then aimed it at the most dramatic stretch of rock and glacier he could see. He doubted anyone would spot him up here, but if they did, his story was ready.

Then he opened the backpack and pulled out a small folding tripod-based stool; it wasn't that he didn't want to sit on the ground, but more that the small seat gave him the option to rest his elbows on his knees for support. Something that was going to be necessary soon. Next he took out a pair of ordinary-looking binoculars that were, in fact, quite unusual. A product of Redstone Technologies, they were lightweight but very powerful, wide range, had pushbutton zoom capability, a range finder with pinpoint accuracy, a remarkable new polarized coating that made it possible to see through glass and water and a stabilizing system that made them easy to use even set for great distances.

But right now they were serving the simple purpose of letting

him survey nearly all of the Redstone plant below at once.

Not that there was much to see. The work of the plant was done indoors, and good as the binoculars were, they couldn't help him see through walls. There was the occasional passage of someone from one building to another, and vehicles came and went from the outside, but mostly it was quiet. This whole place was quiet, he thought.

Once, he saw Kate come out of the main building and walk quickly across to the manufacturing building, where he could see several vehicles parked, including two of the bobtail trucks used to move product out from this production center. He hadn't had his eyes to the binoculars at that moment, but nevertheless he knew it was her. He could tell not only by the dark, shiny fall of hair that swung as she went, but by the very way she walked, with that long-legged grace he'd noticed in her the first time he'd ever seen her move.

She was in the manufacturing building for nearly twenty minutes, and when she came out she was walking more slowly, as if thinking about something. Halfway across the courtyard that was landscaped to look almost like the untouched land surrounding the facility, she picked up speed again and went back to the main building where he knew her office was. He settled back down to watch some more, not sure what he was waiting to see, only that he would know it when he did.

By noon he was glad of the sandwich Dorothy had insisted he take with him. He opened the bottle of water he'd brought

and took a bite of the thick stack of ham, cheese, tomato and some nicely spicy mustard on slices of bread so fresh he wondered if she'd baked it herself. It wouldn't surprise him after the incredible stuffed pork chops she'd insisted he join her and Walter for last night.

I'll have to add board to the room rent, he thought idly, shifting his glance once more to the mountains to the west. Amazing to see all this salt water around, yet know the actual ocean was on the other side of those towering peaks. This was truly a magical place. From everything he'd seen, life seemed slower, easier and much more sane than he was used to. He could see where it would grow on a person. And why Josh so loved it here that he'd sited this wing of Redstone in this place.

Even Kate's life seemed simple and clean here, he thought as he walked back to the camera, figuring he'd better have some actual shots to show, to prove he was for real. She went to work, she spent lots of time with the people she loved, she breathed clean air, she glowed with health, appreciated the loveliness around her, she—

He snapped out of the uncharacteristic reverie as an oddly furtive motion from below drew his attention. A young woman, a girl really, had come out the same door Kate had, but she had turned and headed toward the small car parking area. She was walking oddly, hunched over, holding a sweater that looked too big for her closed in front with both hands as if it were much colder out than it actually was. That distracted him for

the moment from the maroon-tinted hair that told him Summer Harbor was perhaps not so isolated from the rest of the world after all.

The girl walked quickly to an old blue sedan with oxidized paint. She fumbled with a set of keys, dropped them, clutched the sweater tighter as she bent to pick them up. She finally got the trunk open. She leaned over, slid something out from under the sweater and into the trunk. She backed up hastily and slammed the truck lid closed.

She turned and ran back to the building.

Rand clicked off the last shot of the girl that would be recognizable, took his finger off the shutter release, and began to think about where to have some film developed.

And to wonder if he'd already found the thief.

Chapter 6

"I was just about convinced I'd slipped back in time here," Rand said as he leaned into the shovel. "Then I saw a girl with maroon hair."

Dorothy laughed. "Melissa Morris. She's actually Kate's new mentee, I guess you call it. You should have seen her before she started the program—it was blue."

So she was even younger than he'd thought. He got a sick feeling in his gut as the idea that Kate had recruited this girl to help in the thefts occurred to him. At least he told himself that's what it was, that it wasn't just the idea of Kate being involved herself.

"Deep enough?" he asked, gesturing at the irregular six by six hole he'd dug.

He'd come out this morning to find Dorothy trying to do this herself. He'd stopped and asked her about it, and she'd explained she wanted it done before Walt came back from the barber, so he wouldn't feel compelled to volunteer to do it despite his knees.

Dorothy had also made it clear she didn't want him to feel compelled either, but he'd talked her into letting him take over anyway.

Dorothy leaned over now to inspect the depth of her new bulb bed. "I need about another two inches, if you don't mind. The daffodils need to be deeper."

“No problem,” he said, and hefted the shovel again before continuing the conversation. “Did Kate choose her?”

“Melissa? Actually, it was the other way around. She wanted to work with Kate. Asked for her specifically, or I doubt Kate would have taken her on.”

“Is she a problem?”

“She’s been in a little trouble. Nothing serious, just kid stuff.” She gave a little chuckle. “But what’s serious out here would be kid stuff in the city.”

Like theft? Rand wondered. Was that why Kate had agreed to take on a problem child, did she figure it would be easy to involve the kid?

Don’t get carried away. You’re making her sound like Fagan, or whatever that guy’s name in Oliver Twist was, he told himself.

“Melissa would be fine,” Dorothy said, “if it wasn’t for that boyfriend of hers. Now there’s trouble.”

“Oh?”

“You mark my words, one day we’re going to open the paper and see Derek Simon’s photo on page one, and it won’t be for anything good.”

“So…he’s a bad influence?”

“You never would have seen her with that hair before,” Dorothy said. “But I tell myself it’s no different than the bobs women got in the twenties. They were shocking then, and this is now, which is the point at that age, I suppose.”

Rand smiled at her. “It’s a tough age. I remember following a

few trends in high school that make me cringe now."

"Funny how they think they're being so unique, yet end up all looking alike, isn't it?"

He laughed at that, unable to deny the simple truth of what she'd said. "You sure you don't want me to help with the rest of this?" he asked, gesturing at the hole he'd dug.

"Oh, no, thank you dear. The rest is sheer pleasure for me, mixing in the bone meal and compost, and planting the bulbs. You just leave the soil there in the wheelbarrow, and I'll do the rest."

"If you're sure," he said. "I don't mind. My mom tries every year to grow bulbs, but she hasn't quite got the knack of it down in Southern California."

"Tell her she should try planting ranunculus, and spar-axis. They're considered bulbs, and they do well down there, I think. Lovely flowers, too."

"I'll tell her that."

"You tell her to call me if she wants to talk about it. And thank you again, Rand. This was very sweet of you."

"No," he said, meaning it. "It was good of you to let me help. I'm never in one place long enough to even think about a garden."

"So, it keeps you trotting around the globe, your photography work?"

"I travel a lot," he said; that at least wasn't a lie. He tried to avoid direct lies whenever possible. "Speaking of which, if you're sure you don't need me, I guess I'd better get started."

"Oh, dear, I shouldn't have kept you from—"

She stopped when Rand held up a hand. "Please, I mean it, I was glad to do it."

"Walt can't do this like he used to. His knees are just too bad. But he would have tried, and maybe hurt himself, so I truly thank you."

"Has he considered replacement? My grandfather did it, said it was the best thing he'd ever done."

"We've considered it," Dorothy said, but she didn't look at him when she said it. Nor did she say anything more on the subject.

He thought about that as he loaded his photography gear into the car, and then headed out. He wondered if those bills he'd seen were what was stopping them. He frowned at the idea. No wonder Walt was gruff; he could well be hiding a lot of pain and frustration behind that crotchety exterior. Just like Dorothy was hiding a lot of worry and strain behind her cheerful demeanor.

He was surprised at how much both ideas bothered him. He liked the Crawfords, and the idea that they might be doing without anything—let alone needed medical treatment—grated on him. He put it on his mental list of things to look into. Right behind the whereabouts of Kate's former income, an inquiry he had yet to make. He wasn't sure why he was putting it off, but he knew that he was. He told himself it was because he was still just getting started on this case, but even he didn't quite believe that.

His surveillance today took a different turn. Shortly after noon, Kate came out of the main, lodge-style building and

walked to her car. There was no sign of the furtiveness he'd seen in the maroon-haired girl, but it was a change in the pattern he'd seen since he'd been here, so it caught his attention.

Lunch? he wondered with a glance at his watch. Possibly. Maybe the post office, although she hadn't been carrying anything. Could be in her purse, or briefcase, whatever that bag thing was she had slung over her shoulder. Heck, anything could be in there.

He wondered if it was a holdover from her big-city days, where women often carried a pair of walking shoes to travel between a subway station and their office, where they then changed into dress shoes. Or maybe she was just one of those that had to have a ton of stuff with them all the time; he'd never understood that. But it seemed to be the norm; his frequent partner, Samantha Beckett—Samantha Gamble now, he corrected himself—had been the only woman he'd ever known who preferred to carry no purse at all.

It suddenly occurred to him how small the insulin pumps were. And that it would be easy to carry several of them in a bag that size.

Could it be that simple? Was she simply walking out with them, in plain view of everyone?

The more complicated the plan, the bigger the chance for failure.

Rand tried to remember. Had it been Draven who had said it? No…St. John. It had been Josh's mysterious right-hand man

who had said it, but Draven had agreed, in the more blunt terms of Keep It Simple, Stupid. Whenever one of them came up with some elaborate plan for a job, he always found a way to simplify it, telling them to leave the Mission Impossible schemes to Hollywood.

Simple. What could be simpler than sticking a few things in your big purse and walking out the door, the same way you did every day? Were the boxes that were found empty at the delivery point in fact empty when they went into the truck in the first place? Was that why there was no sign of damage on the truck's locks, because in fact the trucks had never been broken into?

Suddenly where Kate was headed became critical. He waited until she opened the driver's door and got in, and he heard the car start. When it was clear she was actually going to leave, he grabbed up his equipment hastily and headed down the path to his car at a run.

He tossed the camera and binoculars somewhat haphazardly into the front seat, jumped in, then started the rental and maneuvered back toward the road. Her blue coupe was nowhere in sight. He inched forward, until he could see both ways down the road. He was just in time to catch a flash of blue headed toward town.

"Such as it is," he muttered as he turned that direction, at the same time being thankful there was so little traffic that he didn't lose her.

She turned into the small shopping center that held the post

office, the sandwich shop and the Curl and Cut.

The post office? he wondered. Was she actually mailing the things through the U.S. Mail? You couldn't get much more basic than that. Draven and St. John would appreciate the simplicity of it.

She parked at the outer edge of the parking lot, although there were several spaces available closer in. Odd, he thought. He pulled into the lot, stopping several yards away in the shelter of a huge four-by-four pickup. He watched as she got out of her car, waited to see where she was headed. If she indeed went to the post office, he wasn't sure what he would do. Come up with some story to get the clerk to tell him where the package had been sent. Maybe something about Kate sending him, afraid she'd put the wrong zip code on it or something. Or maybe—

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