

# DEATH HAS NO DOMINION



P. K. PARANYA

**Kate was the only thing that could tie him to the crimes, so all the killer had to do to escape was to eliminate her...**

“I know. I hope to learn how to block out some of the images when I want to.” Kate had the feeling the Catman was better at blocking than she was. She motioned toward the black plastic-wrapped body. “The woman in the river called to me so clearly. She wanted to be buried. She needed to be found.”

“Now that’s over, will you leave?”

“It’s not over. He has to go on killing.” A flash of an older man lying dead on a hard-packed earthen floor intruded. A figure above him tilted his head back to laugh. She shivered.

“Here, take my jacket,” Dillon began, pulling his arm out of the sleeve.

She stopped him. “No, I’m not cold. It was a feeling that he has to come back here. It’s as if he left something valuable behind.” That idea was new, and the first time it had entered her thoughts. He needed to return to Plenitude for some reason. “It may be the only mistake he’s made by killing two women in the same town. He feels angry and humiliated knowing this. I brought it to his attention and he has to do something to change it.”

“There’s one way he could change the past and that’s by eliminating you, the evidence of his mistake.”

That was smart of Dillon. She didn’t pursue that line of reasoning, fearing he would make more of it than he should. “He may be stalking someone right now. He isn’t ready to stop killing. He gets off on the fear and terror of his victim before he kills. It feeds his sickness, his emptiness.”

Kate knew he would return. Like an unsatisfied lover who can never leave, he would come back for her. All she had to do was wait.

**She stared at the sprawling body of a woman in the water.**

'*She is down there,*' the voice whispered, stiffening the hairs on the back of Kate's neck. No! She slams down the lid of her laptop computer. That was where the picture and sound had come from. But it doesn't help. On her first vacation ever, Kate is plagued by visions she doesn't want. Now she has no choice but to place her trust in a Colorado sheriff, who wants to be more than a friend, even though Kate has serious doubts about his motives.

In the sequel to *One...Two...Buckle My Shoe*, *Death Has No Dominion* takes the reader on a journey into the mind of a psychopathic killer. And the reluctant psychic detective, Kate Macklin, is the only one with any chance to stop him from unleashing his insatiable thirst for vengeance.

KUDOS for *Death Has No Dominion*

In *Death Has No Dominion* (love the title!) by P. K. Paranya, which is a sequel to *One...Two...Buckle My Shoe*, this time reluctant psychic Kate Macklin is taking a long-deserved vacation, or so she thinks. Traveling on a train through the Colorado Rockies, Kate gets another cryptic message from her computer: “She’s down there.” It’s the last thing that Kate wants or needs to hear. But despite her desperate desire to do so, she cannot let the message that a woman has been murdered go unanswered. So Kate hops off the train and into the frying pan, so to speak. She takes up residence in a small hotel in a small Colorado town and runs into the small town sheriff, who takes an unseemly interest in her. Is he trying to help her solve the murder, or is he trying to shut her up? She doesn’t know, and neither do we. That is part of Paranya’s brilliance. I love the way she develops her characters. They seem so human and real. – *Taylor Jones, reviewer*

I love the way P. K. Paranya writes, from her characterization to her vivid descriptions. I always feel like I am right there in the book with the characters. It is a gift that some authors have and Paranya has it in spades. I shivered in the cold Colorado winds right along with Kate, and I shook my head in confusion, right along with Dillon, even while I suspected him of murder—just like Kate. Too bad I didn’t get to sleep with him, too! Sigh. *Death Has No Dominion* is a chilling story about a psychic killer who is always one step ahead of the cops, and when Kate comes along to mess up his carefully laid plans, he is one step ahead of her, too. Plus, he knows who she is and where to find her. And he is coming for her. She doesn’t know who he is, or how she will recognize him. But she does know he is coming. It makes for a real edge-of-your-seat suspense/thriller. I loved it. Well done, Paranya! – *Regan Murphy, reviewer*

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P. K. PARANYA

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GENRE: PARANORMAL THRILLER/ROMANTIC ELEMENTS

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Though they go mad they shall be sane,  
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;  
Though lovers be lost love shall not;  
And death shall have no dominion.”

– *Dylan Thomas 1914-1953*

## CHAPTER 1

**K**ate Macklin stared at the grotesque body of a woman in the water. *'She is down there.'* The voice whispered into her ear, stiffening the hairs on the back of her neck. No! She put her hands over her ears, as if she heard the words out loud. She slammed the lid on the laptop computer, knowing it wouldn't help. But that was where the picture and voice had come from.

Out of the window of the Amtrak car, Kate glanced down into a deep gorge alongside the train tracks. The river crashed over the rocks, exploding in spumes of white, high into the air. The Colorado countryside in the fall appeared brilliantly clear and sharp. A sudden stab of unreality pierced Kate, and she closed her eyes.

In the past, she had seldom ventured out of her house. Now here she was, Katharine Macklin, speeding through another state, toward a destination she hadn't yet determined and enjoying every moment. Until now.

Without warning, Kate's fingers grew cold on the edge of the laptop and a sinking feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Her skin was as clammy and damp as if the spume sprayed over her from the water below. Slowly, cautiously, she opened the computer, expecting--hoping to see the familiar spreadsheet with figures from one of her bookkeeping jobs.



Slowly, in horrifying detail, pixel by pixel, the contorted body of a woman sprawled in death appeared in the center of the screen. Kate opened her lips. A low moan escaped her clenched teeth. She wanted to slam the computer lid down again but shock from what she had just seen paralyzed her.

The woman lay on her back underwater, her eyes wide, with long dark hair floating like seaweed about her head. It was her mouth, open in a silent scream that Kate focused on, feeling the woman's terror as she died.

The picture zoomed in closer, forcing Kate to view the wound on the woman's neck. She saw a wire noose, embedded deep in flesh, and twisted behind the head by small wooden pegs.

With shaking hands, she folded up the laptop. She'd get no work done now.

*It has started again.*

"Are you all right, Miss?"

A quavering voice came from the other side of the aisle.

Kate looked at the tiny, bird-like old woman sitting across from her. She appeared to be in her nineties, at least.

"Thank you. I'm fine."

The elderly woman gripped her worn brocade bag and stood up. Kate felt her tenseness slowly evaporate, and the chills leave her body. It was good to have a distraction.

"My name is Sarah. Sarah Jenkins." The woman stood waiting in the aisle for Kate to remove the laptop from the vacant seat.

Despite her reluctance to touch the machine again, Kate picked it up and leaned it against the wall, on the floor by her leg.

As soon as Sarah Jenkins nestled in the seat, she turned her bright, black-eyed gaze on Kate, waiting.

"Oh, sorry. I'm Katharine Macklin. Friends call me Kate." She didn't have that many friends, but it made her feel agreeably ordinary to say the words.

Sarah reached into her bag and drew out two granola bars, handing one to Kate.

Good. Maybe the woman wouldn't be able to talk around a mouth full of nuts and caramel. No such luck.

"This is my thirty-second train ride. I dearly love the rhythm of the moving train. It's addictive. Don't you think?"

Kate's noncommittal nods seemed to spur Sarah on. "Where are you going? I don't mean to be nosy, but when I reached ninety, I figured I was allowed certain liberties," she said as she smiled and touched the frail hand holding tight to her purse.

"I don't blame you. When I reach the age of ninety, I'll surely remember your words."

Sarah's laughter reminded Kate of glass wind chimes in a gentle breeze.

"To tell the truth, I'm not sure where I'm going. This is my first vacation ever and I was just going to stay on the train until I saw something I liked, but..."

"Are you a writer?" Sarah pointed to the laptop on the floor.

Thinking back to her daughter Annie, Kate recalled the last, tragic connection through the computer. She'd never wanted the gift, as her mother had called it. But her psychic ability came from a dark Scottish heritage. Using a computer worked like a crystal ball might have, but why did her psychic abilities always bring pictures of death?

Kate glared at the offending machine. "No. I'm not a writer. I do bookkeeping at home."

"And you brought work with you on vacation?" The beady little eyes crinkled at the corners. "Shame on you."

"You're right. It was a dumb thing to do."

She would never have brought it with her if it hadn't been a shiny new toy, a gift from Captain Murphy's precinct for her help on the Shoe Man case.

Kate turned to stare outside in a desperate attempt at calmness. The window reflected a thin-faced woman with frightened eyes. Sgt. Slater had told her she was beautiful. How absurd that had been, but for a while, she'd believed him.

"I like your outfit."

Sarah's chatter interrupted Kate's gloomy thoughts.

Kate smoothed out the long skirt of her embroidered denim dress. First new dress she'd bought in years. It seemed especially appropriate to wear through Colorado. "Thanks. I picked this up a couple of stops ago, when the train had a long layover."

The effect of Sarah's talking forced Kate to return to a sense of reality. Something she deeply needed.

"When does the next stop come up?" Kate asked, interrupting the monologue.

"Soon. Very soon. That will be Plenitude, my home. Lived here all my life. Used to be just a ranching community, but it's a nice little town now."

"You must be happy and satisfied, living here that long."

Sarah smiled. "How would I know? Never been anywhere but on those little train excursions I take now and again. Like I said, the town is nice. People complain about not getting cell phones to work here with all the mountains and trees, but I wouldn't have one of those things, anyway."

Kate didn't own a cell phone either. Who would be calling her? Before she could say anything in answer, the frail-looking woman scabbled up with surprising agility from the enveloping seat to gather her purse and luggage.

"I think I shall go to the little girl's room before getting off. Sometimes Jasper stops only long enough to throw down a bag of mail, but he knows I'm riding today. It was a pleasure visiting with you, my dear. Excuse me?"

Kate watched as she made her way down the aisle toward the back of the train.

A voice came from somewhere inside her head. *'There she is. She is down there.'*

Not wanting to look through the window again, but unable to turn away, Kate peered over the trees into the swiftly running river. As they passed one point, the river widened and grew calm.

The water was deepest there and Kate remembered seeing in the computer, where the woman lay at the bottom of the deep wa-

ter. Could be the woman wasn't in the river at this moment. Was she dead already, or was Kate seeing the future, an event she might be able to stop from happening?

She turned away from the window, willing serenity to return. The voice continued to whisper.

*'She is down there.'*

Her throat felt dry, making it hard to swallow, but she couldn't help picking up the laptop again. Maybe it had been a momentary aberration, stress from being in an unfamiliar situation.

When she touched her fingers to the switch of the computer, the keys hummed beneath her hand. It was supposed to turn itself off when the hinged top closed. A sense of urgency made her hands tremble and her heart palpitate beneath her sweater. She had two choices. One choice would be to go up on the observation platform and fling the laptop as far as she could over the side of the gorge or...

No good. She could never escape from her visions.

"The next stop is Plenitude." The conductor moved down the aisle with his announcement.

Kate gathered her belongings in frantic haste, fearful that if she missed the stop, the woman in the water might be lost forever. Twice she dropped her purse, her fingers cold and numb. She pushed past a slow-moving passenger in the aisle, her concentration so strong she barely mumbled an apology when the train began to brake for a stop. Sarah Jenkins had mentioned the conductor was quick with his stops. Kate ran toward an exit.

Something—someone cried out to her for help. She hoped this time it wasn't the killer summoning her.

## CHAPTER 2

The train slowed and stopped. Kate stepped down onto the platform, hating to leave the security of the train. The image of the dead woman flashed across her mind, and she almost turned to go back. Too late. The engine revved up speed, the cars lurching down the track.

Rails spanned a suspension bridge alongside the station. Beyond the bridge, the train disappeared over a hill. At the beginning of the walkway, Sarah waited for her and they fell into step together. Kate shifted her longer stride for the arthritic hesitancy of the old woman. “How did you manage to get your luggage?”

“Oh, the conductor brought it to the back for me. You didn’t mention getting off here,” Sarah said.

“No, it was a last minute decision,” Kate admitted, thinking Sarah didn’t know the half of it.

A wooden sign at the front of the station announced the town of Plenitude, Colorado. They passed through the narrow railroad building and stopped to look down upon a prosperous little community nestled between a mountain and a river gorge.

The village just before this stop was Gold Hill. Was she supposed to be in Gold Hill or Plenitude? There was no assurance of her choice. She was here now, and if she should be somewhere else, something would tell her.

“This must always feel like coming home,” Kate said.

“My yes, it does, child. I never get tired of leaving for a bit and never tire of coming home.”

Sarah walked ahead on the narrow sidewalk, and Kate followed with a suitcase in one hand and her purse and laptop in the other. A familiar panic rose in her throat and choked off her breath in the high, cold air. She should be back home, in her cozy suburban New York house with Rasputin, her cat. She hoped he would be all right in the kennel. He, too, hadn't been one to venture outdoors in years, taking his cue from her.

“Do you have a family? Are they coming to join you?” Sarah couldn't stop asking questions although she seemed breathless from the high, thin air. “Soon the ski season will begin. I love snow even if these old bones don't care for it anymore.” Sarah spoke in a high-pitched voice in sentences that lacked periods.

Kate was not comfortable talking to strangers and had not spoken to anyone about her personal life since—she couldn't remember when. What could it hurt? She wouldn't be here that long.

“I don't have a family. My husband, Mac, was killed in an accident on the job. My daughter Annie died two and a half years ago, killed by a hit and run driver. She'd be fourteen now. I do have a cat named Rasputin.” Kate carefully let her voice go into neutral, trying out the new idea of confiding in someone.

Sarah stopped walking and, with a “Tsk, tsk,” laid her hand on Kate's arm. “Dear, that is so sad. Of course, I should talk. My husband and three children are gone, and without leaving one grandchild behind for me.” Her voice turned peevish. “I've outlived them all.”

Kate thought of the empty years. “It's never easy.”

“Time will heal all, eventually,” Sarah pointed out, taking her hand away and beginning to walk again.

“You're right. I never thought it would, but now I can remember Annie sometimes without feeling guilty.” It was like a scar that had healed over, leaving rough edges to chafe from time

to time. She used to pick at it often but eventually she left it alone to mend.

Sarah shifted her belongings to the other hand. “Guilt? Guilty for being left behind? I had that. Quite a bit, at first. Then I got used to it.”

“Can I carry that for you?” Kate touched her shoulder, feeling the sharp bones beneath the woman’s navy blue cardigan. Sarah shook her head and looked as if she was waiting for an answer. “Well, yes. I felt guilty because I knew Annie was mad when she left home for school that day,” Kate continued. “We were arguing a lot. I couldn’t have been much fun for her. I drank a little then, too, which didn’t help.”

At Sarah’s inquisitive look, Kate hurried on. “Oh, not that much, just a couple of glasses of wine at night to help me sleep. Still, it made Annie uncomfortable. The day she died we’d argued and she forbade me to meet her after school.” It had only been five blocks. Five short blocks that had robbed Kate of her daughter’s presence for a long time.

They walked in companionable silence until Kate spoke. “This seems like a pretty little village.” At the same time she wondered long would she need to stay in this strange town, waiting for another vision.

*Waiting.* The word flowed around her mind with silky apprehension, sliding into her thoughts like the ominous whisper, ‘*She is down there.*’ Someone, something was waiting here for her. She felt it now, slipping through her thoughts.

She zipped up her ski jacket, grateful for the thick pullover sweater under it. She had hoped by fall that the tourist season would flicker out, to let her enjoy a quiet vacation. “Aren’t you cold in that light sweater?” she asked Sarah.

“Me? Goodness no, my dear. I was born and raised here in Colorado and I’d have to be knee-deep in snow now to feel any discomfort from the cold.”

The small town nestled against the side of a pine-forested mountain, which could have been a mammoth glacier millions of

years ago. The air filled with tiny brilliant prisms in front of her face from the crisp, clear cold. Kate inhaled the sharp woody smell.

The buildings had cutesy-pseudo gold mining era fronts while the sides and backs were of prosaic board and brick. Curious, Kate paused in her walking to peer into the alley behind a row of buildings. Beat-up ancient garbage cans, spilling over with boxes and trash, crouched at the back of each store as if hiding in shame. Seeing the rear of the buildings took some of the naiveté of the small town away, leaving a sense of sly furtiveness.

A good town for secrets.

“You live near here?” Kate asked. Hey, she was getting good at casual conversation. It felt liberating.

“Not far. Nothing’s very far away here,” Sarah said without explaining. She paused to lift her head and sniff the air. “Hmm. I never get tired of that clean pine smell. We lived on a ranch out of town most of the while the children were growing up, but now I live in town, not far from here. Any idea of where you’re going to stay?”

“Nope. Haven’t given it much thought.”

“How wonderful! I adore people with spontaneity. So many adults have lost it over the years, you know.” Sarah’s dark eyes twinkled and her smile showed white store-bought teeth that seemed just a little too large for her. Probably bought them through mail-order years ago.

“I’ll need a room,” Kate said. “Not too expensive.” Then she had to find the town library. It would have been faster and easier to go straight to the sheriff’s office and inquire if they had found anyone dead in the water lately, but she quickly dismissed that idea. She didn’t even know if the woman was dead. From past experience Kate had learned it didn’t pay to give away too much information in the beginning.

“You wouldn’t like where I stay,” Sarah said. “All of us are old. Really old. But just up the street is The Antlers Hotel, a nice place, not expensive. It’s ancient too, but not colorful enough and



visitors hardly bother staying there. Ralph's a hoot. He's the owner. Like me, he's lived here all his life. We call him the weatherman behind his back. That's his idea of small talk, always about the weather. We have two kinds of weather, cold and colder." She giggled.

"What a strange name for a hotel," Kate said, but when they drew close, she understood. Hundreds of moose, deer, and other varieties of animal antlers were attached all over an ancient wooden building, including up on the roof and gables. It seemed as if that kept the building from collapsing.

"Come in," Sarah urged. "I'll introduce you to Ralph. He's an old foggy, but he's got a good heart. Nosy as all get-out though. He'll know all your secrets in a few minutes."

Like someone else I just met, Kate wanted to say, but she turned away to hide her smile.

No one was at the desk, although the door squeaked when they opened it. Sarah hit the bell hanging over the counter with brittle impatience.

The small lobby was designed to look antiquated, but elegant. The stairwells gleamed darkly, and the front desk hid behind a facade of polished cherry wood with the top surface tiled in small squares, sprinkled with flowers and greenery. On the whole, it seemed cozy, but in another sense, reclusive. Why did she keep thinking of this town as having its own identity, one of furtive silence? Was there something hidden here that would have to be dug out? She hoped not. Her energy level, never high, had just plummeted.

A thin, wiry old man shuffled out from behind a nest of fake greenery. By his tousled hair, or what remained of it, she knew he had been dozing. He smelled vaguely musty, like the lobby.

"Ralph! On duty as usual," Sarah said tartly.

The man frowned, picking up the bickering as if they'd been doing it for years. "Don't torment me, old woman. I was just resting." He pulled his half-glasses down from his forehead and peered at Kate.

“This is my friend, Kate Macklin. I want you to be nice to her. She’s not one of them touristy people. She’s on her first vacation. And she doesn’t even own a cell phone,” Sarah added with a triumphant air.

More than Ralph cared to know obviously, by the impatient wave of his hand when he shoved the register forward for Kate to sign.

“I’ll be going on now, dearie. But I’ll check on you once in a while until you leave. Make sure this scoundrel here don’t take advantage of you.”

“Git along with you, Sarah. You’re the town troublemaker.”

Sarah laughed as if he had paid her a huge compliment. She motioned Kate forward, stood on her tiptoes, and bestowed a dry, whispery kiss on her cheek.

“Bye for now, Sarah. I enjoyed talking to you.” No need to ask where she lived in case she needed to ask some questions later. Ralph was sure to know.

Once checked into the downtown hotel, Kate looked out onto the street, thinking of the changes in her appearance and personality over the past months. She had gradually emerged from her morass of guilt and fear. Guilt for being alive when both her husband and daughter were dead, the fear of leaving her home, and wondering what terrible catastrophe would happen to her next.

Everyone important was gone from her life and here she was, supposedly on a long vacation to shed the past. Would she ever escape? Or was that a part of her, always trailing behind like a jet trail in the sky?

The temptation had been so strong to pass this town by, to continue on her travels. Still, she had little choice. Her psychic ability told her enough to realize that something strange had happened or was happening here. Someone had called out for help and she was the only one to hear the cry.

Kate climbed the stairs to the second story, to avoid the ancient elevator. She looked to the end of the hallway to see another

set of stairs climbing upward but noticed cobwebs attached to the railings. They didn't appear to have many guests at this hotel.

As soon as she unpacked, she changed into a soft gray, woolen pantsuit and decided to take the elevator down to the lobby. It squeaked and groaned mightily, but when the doors flew open, she felt she had accomplished something important, sloughing off a corner of another phobia.

The euphoria didn't last. Familiar feelings of doubt assailed her, causing her to want to rush back up into the safety of her room. But her room wasn't the secure shell she needed, not as long as her computer screen displayed the dead woman.

Kate closed her eyes, again seeing the woman with long hair flowing about her head, the noose of wire biting into her white neck, eyes open in terror with the sure knowledge that she was going to die.

"Are you all right, Miss?"

Ralph's voice came from a distance and she opened her eyes, still expecting to see the woman in the water. The elderly man walked from behind the desk, his face folded into wrinkles of concern.

"Thanks. I'm okay. Just a little tired from the trip. Do you have a library here? Maybe I'll just go sit a while and look at magazines."

He patted her shoulder gently, his hand like dry branches against the material of her sweater. "Oh, my yes, we have a fine library. Best in these parts, for the size of the town. Donated by some of the country club crowd, the winter people."

Kate felt grateful for the detour in her thoughts. "The winter people? I'd have thought your summer trade was more important."

"No siree. The summer people are cheapos. Families with noisy, ill-behaved kids. It's the winter folks that support this town." He paused, cocking his head to look at her, as if deciding which she was.

"I'm neither one, if you're trying to fit me somewhere." His expression of monkey-like curiosity amused her. "A friend told me

about this town and I just stopped off on my way somewhere else to check it out.” A little white lie never hurt. How else to explain her being here?

“That’s good. To tell the truth, I like the in-betweenies best of all. They come to see what’s here, bide a bit, and leave quietly.”

Kate wanted to hug the old man. He was so satisfied, so settled in his opinions, which he drew around him like a wool blanket on a windy night.

When she left the hotel, the dispossessed feeling hit her again, as if she stood out in the nippy wind, naked in the center of the town. She pulled her jacket tighter around her neck and raised her shoulders. She was okay, she could deal with the past now.

Her pulse sang in her veins, her temperature rose, she felt the flush in her cheeks. It was a matter of unraveling the ball of yarn to get to the center of the cry for help. It couldn’t be that tough, could it?

A woman lay dead, or would die. Murdered and thrown away in the water. That was Kate’s immediate problem. Was she to stop it from happening or was the body missing? Eventually the computer would tell her what her mission was.

Caution took over her rush of adrenalin. Something warned that her that prying would not be welcome in Plenitude.

In spite of the inner warning, Kate hurried, her responsibility now clear in her mind. She had to find out about the woman, to save her, if she was still alive, before a terrible fate overtook her.

## CHAPTER 3

**W**here to start? Probably with either the library or the local newspaper, if the town had one.

As if in answer to her musings, Kate looked up in time to see the clapboard sign of *The Sentinel*. Pushing through the door was like going a century back in time. The counter looked realistically ancient, as did the person behind it. Was everyone old in Plentitude?

“Yes?”

The woman stared rudely at Kate. Half-glasses perched on the end of her nose. Did the glasses cause her nasality?

“I need some information.” Kate took a flying leap at the truth but didn’t come close. “I’m looking up an old friend who’s supposed to live here, but I can’t find her.”

The woman raised plucked eyebrows. “What’s her name?”

“Uh, oh, that’s the problem. I haven’t seen her since high school. We were going to have kind of a reunion and I lost her address and her married name. All I remembered was the town.” She hoped the woman wouldn’t insist on a first name, although she could make one up, but then that might change the outcome of her quest.

The woman’s lips pursed, she gathered her patience with a huge sigh. “I’ve been here ages. What does she look like?”

Kate managed a small smile in gratitude. “She’s about my age, thirty-four, has long, dark hair, she’s shorter and rounder than me...” Kate faltered, reluctant to dredge up the details from her vision of the dead woman.

A short laugh issued from the pursed lips. “Not much there. Sure she wasn’t just passing through? We get a lot of women your age taking the rafting trips.”

Kate didn’t like her comment about women her age. “What do you mean by that?”

“What I meant was, women from the city, they come here to go rafting in the summer. Meet lots of men. Younger men.” The clerk looked inside her coffee cup on the counter, as if her cream had curdled.

Kate hoped it had. “I really don’t know about that. I thought she lived here. You don’t know anyone living here fitting that description?”

A closed expression on the woman’s face told Kate the conversation was finished.

“Was someone like that here a while ago, with the long black hair.” It seemed as if the woman needed to impart *some* gossip. “She caused a little stir when she turned up missing, paid a week’s rent on a car and never came to claim it. But they figured she just took off with someone.”

*They? They who? The sheriff’s department?* Kate opened her mouth to ask another question, but the woman turned a formidable back upon her to show that the interview was over. So much for small town hospitality.

“Thank you for your help,” Kate muttered with as much grace as she could manage. Just as her hand touched the doorknob, the woman spoke again.

“Check the library. They might have old newspapers from Gold Hill, that’s the next town up the river.”

Kate nodded and pushed through the door.

Odd. Why would Gold Hill have information on someone here? It could be a wrong guess on her part and the woman in the river might be from Gold Hill.

Something told her no.

When she passed by a small diner, she remembered not eating breakfast. The smell of fresh baked bread drew her inside.

She pushed open the door and paused on the threshold. One of her more unshakable fears was of eating alone with strangers staring at her. Resolutely, she moved forward and the warmth of the room encircled her in a comforting way. The noise level lowered immediately, but before she made up her mind whether to leave or not, the buzz of conversation started up again. Everyone was talking to everyone else. This must be one of those local cafes the guidebook mentioned, with excellent food and only the natives frequented the place.

Not wanting to take up a table, Kate sat on a stool at the counter. The mirror behind the counter reflected the patrons, who weren't paying any attention to her. But she did feel someone observing from the next stool.

The man regarding her so seriously didn't look away when she turned toward him. His dark mustache, the thick, slightly gray hair, and narrow body with wide shoulders made her think of the movie star, Sam Elliot. His nose was too prominent for him to be exceedingly handsome, but he certainly was masculine. She judged him probably five or so years older than herself.

Kate looked away quickly, conscious that she had been staring back. An uneasy thought threaded through her mind, that more than his rugged good looks bothered her. She knew this man—or would know him.

“You look as skittish as a Blue Tick just let off the leash,” he commented in a low voice, as if not wanting anyone else to hear. “Relax. Have a cup of coffee. We don't bite.”

“Blue tick?” Kate asked inanely, not knowing how else to reply and not wanting to discourage him altogether.

He laughed. "Hound. Blue Tick hound. Let me guess. You're from the city. A big, northern city."

"Maybe," Kate answered, cautious in the way of big city residents. She had already started a network of lies about why she was here.

"Try the special. It'll warm you right up." He reached for his hat on the next stool and stood. "*Adios.*" He touched a finger to his wide brim. When he turned, she caught a flash of gold on his chest. Before she had time to wonder if he was some kind of town official, maybe someone who could help her, the door jingled and he was gone.

"What'll you have?" A bored waitress scooped up the money he had left behind and began clanking the dishes away beneath the counter top.

"Coffee. Black. And what is that smell of baking bread?" she asked.

"That's our fresh cinnamon buns. Want one?"

"Yes, please." In spite of the stranger's idea for the special, she did not intend to face an enormous platter of bacon, eggs, and potatoes, which was probably what he had had.

Kate wanted to ask who he was, but too many people would hear. She swallowed the strong, black coffee, remembering how much Detective Slater had enjoyed his coffee, with at least four teaspoons of sugar. She missed him a lot, but Slater was part of the baggage of her past she had to let go. The next stop was the library. She hoped the librarian would be a bit friendlier than the woman at the newspaper was.



When Kate walked inside the library lobby, the sudden warmth and silence settled over her shoulders. Why was she pursuing this? She was playing detective with no idea of which way to go next. Her distress was because of the sense of urgency



hanging over her head, as if she could prevent something terrible from happening.

“May I help you?”

The young woman behind the library information desk seemed amiable. Not like the person at the newspaper.

“I’d like to look at some back issues of the Sentinel.”

“How far back? We have them on microfilm for several years, and then we store the film away. I can get you back issues from twenty years ago or more, if you’d like.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, not that far.” Kate tried to recall the scene on the computer screen. The trees were full-leaved, not like now with the aspen and others turning colors or limbs already bare. “How about the summer editions of this year?”

The librarian explained how to operate the reader. Kate jotted down her starting date. If she was not careful, she could miss valuable information by missing one edition.

What was she looking for?

A missing person, probably.

The library was quiet, with the crisp turning of pages occasionally to interrupt her concentration. Apparently, not too many people frequented the library this time of the year. Hours passed and still Kate sat glued to the chair, with a fragmented idea of what she might find.

Finally, just when she began to think about giving up, an eerie premonition made the hairs on her arms feel as if they all marched up and down her skin, telling her that she was getting close.

Whatever she searched for would soon turn up. She blinked to give her tired eyes a break and rubbed futilely at the headache forming just above the bridge of her nose. One by one, she continued to turn the pages, the creepy feeling still there but getting stronger.

Down at the very bottom on the second page of a July issue, a short article caught her attention. ‘Do You Know This Woman?’ The article described the approximate age, weight, height, color-

ing, and long dark hair of the missing person. She had vanished from town, leaving her rented tent and a few belongings behind.

The description matched that of the woman Kate had seen in the river.

She rubbed her eyes again and zoomed in on the article. A sense of regret and futility swept over her. She was too late to save this woman from a killer. Why then had she been summoned and by whom or what?

The article continued, stating that authorities had presumed the young woman had been a summer visitor, since they didn't find a purse or identification in her tent. It went on to say the authorities had dismissed the idea of foul play or robbery, because there was nothing disturbed at the campsite to denote a struggle. Trackers found her footprints in the woods, but she might have met another camper and walked away.

Had they ever learned her identity? Kate had a strong conviction that the body was still there in the water. Otherwise, she would not have seen it so plainly at that exact spot in the river.

She continued to go through the next few issues to see if they had discovered anything more about the missing woman. Someone murdered the woman, of that Kate was certain. Why would the local authorities assume the woman had walked away? Was anyone still looking for her? There was a possibility the newspaper, the pulse of small towns such as Plenitude, might have deliberately played down the incident, fearful of frightening the summer people.

Kate's eyes drooped with weariness, and she decided to quit reading. She jotted her stopping place on a note pad and tucked it in her purse. The woman was dead in the water, beyond help. Why did she continue to have this sense of urgency, as if something terrible was going to happen?

When the library doors closed behind her, Kate inhaled the clean, cold air and stood for a moment on the steps, clearing her mind. In the next block, she spied a grocery store. The hotel room contained a compact refrigerator, and she remembered it had been

a while since she ate. She bought sandwich spread, bread, and ginger ale. Since she lost Annie, the thought of eating meat made her sick. What one circumstance had to do with the other, she didn't know. Maybe it was the blood—blood she had seen spilled on the highway when the car ran over her only child.

In spite of the sense of hiding away in the comfortable, high-ceilinged hotel room, Kate felt edgy. She walked quickly, envisioning opening the first of several paperbacks she had bought, preparing for a night of relaxation. By tomorrow, things might appear normal and she could leave this place to get on with her vacation.

She thought about Rasputin, her cat. Was he okay in the boarding kennel? Since she found him as a kitten in the alley years ago, they had never spent a night apart.

In the beginning when she started seeing the visions on her computer screen, the cat seeing them, too, let her know she had not gone around the bend. When he saw the pictures, his back arched, his hair stood on end and he ran for his hiding place behind the refrigerator.

Kate waved at Ralph, who sat behind the desk, and took the stairs up to her room. She fluffed her pillows and tried to read. The mystery didn't hold her attention for long. When she dozed off, her hand relaxed and she dropped the book. When it fell to the floor, she bent to retrieve it, noticing the clock read 2 a.m.

On the nearby dresser, Kate saw a thin streak of light coming from the computer she knew she had turned off. A cold prickly feeling crept over the back of her neck and her heart seemed to skip a few beats. She rolled over and put a pillow over her head, but that didn't work. Slowly, reluctantly, Kate arose, walked to the computer, and opened the lid.

She stared at the picture waiting for her.

Wide-awake now, she tried to swallow past a dry throat, as she watched a scene form and re-form across the screen. It wasn't of the woman in the river with the wire around her neck. For that

she was grateful. Her gratitude did not last long, when she felt herself being drawn into the computer picture.



She walked up a dark road, past a mailbox with a name on it, up the steps of an old, two-story house. The nails holding the wooden steps together shrieked beneath her feet. The damp, pre-dawn chill penetrated her clothing.

On one side of the wooden porch was an old fashioned swing attached with chains to iron rings. Old furniture lay scattered about the lawn. The whole place resembled a museum. A very spooky museum.

The ethereal figure of a man emerged from the bushes and glided toward the house. He peered into the window before turning and walking to a large tree with branches hanging over the roof.

Cat-like, he leaped upward, grasping branches, never miscalculating, and arriving at a large, perpendicular branch. The shadowy form paused a moment, leaning forward to look through a window and then swung up to the top branch, a position that seemed impossible for a human being to reach. He concentrated his gaze on the roof for several minutes, and then, leaped onto the roof, flattening himself against the steep incline. Both hands stretched out, his fingers splayed, holding onto the shingles.

It seemed as if he must have practiced this exploit many times before. He slid down to the eaves, clung to the cornice for a heartbeat, dropped lightly down to the tiny balcony, and stepped through the open window.

Unable to pull herself out of the dream-like trance, Kate opened the screen door. A loud squeak broke the silence. In the front foyer, she looked up the narrow, dark staircase. That was where she had to go. Her back felt vulnerable. Eyes pierced her skin. The urge to turn—to see if anyone watched her—came and went. She could not move any direction but forward. She seemed

programmed to do certain things, with little leeway or latitude to alter her steps.

She knew she was supposed to go up those stairs and struggled to pull free, bound in a dream world with no way out. She slid her hands along the worn banister rail and slowly climbed the steps. At the top of the landing, she didn't pause, knowing which way to go—toward the room with the door ajar.

No! I cannot go in! Did she say the words aloud? Unable to turn back, she slowly pushed open the door.

Gloomy darkness closed in around her with only the feeble glow of a hall nightlight penetrating into the room. She avoided looking at the bed, and moved, captive within her own body, toward the balcony to look out on the pale dawn.

Her heart leaped when she saw the figure below, staring up at her from the cover of the dark trees. Could he see her? What had that meant, seeing him climb the tree and come inside the house? Was he a part of this walking nightmare or was he in a different time plane? She felt a malevolent savageness in the shadow and pulled back into the comforting darkness of the room. Catman. He was like a stealthy cat, tail twitching, waiting to pounce.

She had no choice. He would never allow her to break away. Kate moved toward the bed, dreading each step.

A young woman lay in the center of the bed, nightgown primly down around her legs to her ankles. Her dark brunette hair sprawled over her pillow as if arranged. Was she sleeping?

When Kate drew closer, she saw the woman's face gleaming whitely in the semi-gloom, eyes wide with fear, mouth open in an unheard scream. Around her neck, a wire noose bit into her flesh, a thin necklace of blood surrounding it.

Kate's gaze traveled down to her arm, flung outward. The upper part, a soft white, showed a small strip of darker skin, neatly incised. The cut was made so precisely it barely showed, obviously done after death, since there was barely a tiny sliver of blood left behind. Kate sensed it was not a mutilation. Was it a ritual killing? Something the killer had to do?

The back of Kate's neck prickled with the sensation of someone staring at her—the watching, waiting man outside. He knew she was here. Fear lined her mouth with dry cotton, and she gasped for breath.



Enough! An oozing blanket of spongy warmth began to envelop her, as if she were drowning in blood. She had to get out of this! With a supreme effort, she closed her eyes and pulled herself out of the dream, reaching instinctively toward the computer to slam the lid shut. Her fingers felt icy cold on the little machine but the touch had broken her journey. She staggered back to bed.

When Kate awoke, her body bathed in sweat, she imagined a spigot turned on inside her, letting all her blood leak out, leaving behind soft, jelly-like bones held in by her outer skin. The incongruity of the sun shining in through the window added to her confusion.

This woman was not the same one Kate had seen in the river.

## CHAPTER 4

**K**ate rested a while, letting the rays of sunshine warm her body. The previous night had turned cold but she lay in her pajamas on top of the bedspread. Until now, she hadn't felt the chill and did not remember getting out of her clothing and into her pajamas.

She sat up, running fingers through her hair. When her hand brushed her bare neck, she knew she hadn't been dreaming, but had seen another body with the same wound around her neck as the woman in the river.

It had happened again—a journey psychics called astral projection—a traveling of the soul or spirit through time and space.

She rubbed the goose bumps from her arms, grateful she had not experienced distant viewing this time, locked within the killer's mind. Yet, he had stood outside at the edge of the woods, and she had felt the evil floating upward.

Was the woman living there alone, unprotected? Kate shivered, pulling on a fleecy robe. "This woman I saw last night is not the one in the river." Her voice broke the silence. She was used to talking to her cat. The coffee was left over from the day before, but she didn't mind. She needed caffeine and plenty of it.

If the woman in the old house was not the one in the river, that meant there had been two murders committed. Two women

had died by the same method. When? Where? How far apart? Was the same killer loose, a predatory monster or a sick person wreaking vengeance in this little town? In other towns? She tore off a partially blank sheet from an advertising brochure on the nightstand and began noting the similarities in both murders.

Both women had died a violent, agonizing death. Both women had seen the killer clearly before their last breath. Kate had the sickening feeling that if she had stared deeply into the open eyes of the woman in the old house, she would have seen the reflection of the face of the killer.

She remembered the mailbox before going into the yard. What name had been on it? No matter how hard she concentrated, it would not come to her. Too much had happened, making her mind thick and sodden. Her thoughts were bogged down in a swampy mire, so that she had to pull each idea out, one by one, using all her energy.

Two murders should have blown this little town apart, yet the notice she found in the paper mentioned only a missing person. The newspaperwoman hadn't said anything about a murder of a young woman with long dark hair. Wouldn't she have told her about the death in the old house? Surely, it wasn't some conspiracy to protect the town's precious tourist trade.

Kate decided to make another trip to the library before she talked to a sheriff. She was not ready for that yet.

She washed down the dry muffin brought home the day before with another cup of stale coffee, just to get something in her stomach. She dressed hurriedly in new jeans and a flannel shirt bought especially for the trip. Her first pair of jeans—hard to believe. She left the hotel without catching sight of Ralph.

At the library, a balding gray haired man sat behind the reference desk. Kate nodded to him and walked back to the microfilm. Fast-forwarding the film to the date where she stopped reading the day before, she continued her search. The monotony of reading through a small town newspaper was soothing after the nightmare of last night.



One headline caught her eye and curiosity made her pause. She did not recognize the town but it must have been close by to have *The Sentinel* include it in their issue. It told of a tragic accident at a visiting circus where an experienced trapeze artist fell to his death. An unexpected chill ran up her spine and she hastily turned the handle to get away from the article. She didn't need to read about any new tragedies, she had enough on her plate.

Moving ahead, the next headlines blazed onto the screen, and she stopped the rolling screen to read.

*Elizabeth Bartlett, murdered in her home.* The name on the mailbox from her mind-journey lay just out of reach of her memory, but Bartlett didn't ring true. It would come to her in time. According to the article, the young woman was the daughter of the town's previous mayor. She had lived alone since moving into her parents' old homestead. The authorities were checking out clues but their one lead so far was the possibility of a jealous suitor; since everyone else questioned had alibis.

There were several articles, each smaller than the previous one, about the authorities checking out the murder, but reading between the lines, it seemed as if the search had ended. Disappointment settled over Kate's shoulders and she put her head down on her arms for a moment. She realized that both women were dead, and she had not come here to protect them.

Kate made copies of the articles and took them to the front desk. The librarian looked happy that someone needed his help. Sliding the copy of the article about the murder toward him, Kate carefully managed a few delicate lies. "I'm looking for a friend of mine, an old high school chum. I hope it's not, but this looks as if it could be her. We were supposed to have a sort of reunion here last July, but I couldn't make it."

The man pulled the paper toward him. After glancing at the column, he took off his reading glasses and stared at her. "And?" His voice sounded impatient for the first time.

“I wondered, since this is such a small town, if you might have known this woman. There isn’t much about her in the article.”

“Everyone knew Betsy. She taught school a while, but went away, Chicago I think, to study art. Moved into her folk’s old house at the edge of town so she could paint without interruption, I suppose. It had to be spooky out there in the woods alone. Maybe that was why her marriage broke up. Her husband didn’t want any part of living out there, I heard.”

As if realizing he rambled, the librarian backed up a little to put some distance between them. “I’m sure this isn’t the same person you’re looking for. Betsy was born and raised around here.”

And I’m obviously an outsider. Kate knew his thoughts without needing to be psychic.

“Then what about this woman? She could be the one I’m looking for.” Kate pushed forward a copy of the article about the missing woman the authorities presumed had walked away.

He put his glasses back on and read it.

“Don’t know anything about her. Nope. She was a tourist passing through. Some folks remembered her enough to give the sheriff her description, looks like, but I didn’t know her.”

She sensed an underlying hostility behind his polite words.

“Said I didn’t know her,” he repeated when she didn’t go away. “Why would you ask me?”

“Why not? You live here. Small town, everyone knows everyone,” she countered, irritated at the doors always slamming on her questions. The trick of turning suddenly aloof was supposed to be a big city maneuver, to keep people at a distance. She didn’t expect it here, in this quaint little village.

“I never keep up with the concerns of outsiders. Got enough to occupy myself.”

“Outsiders?”

He shrugged impatiently, shoving the copy back to her side of the counter. “That’s what I said. People passing through all look

the same to me. They come here expecting excitement, whether rafting or hunting or skiing, then decide they can't take the quiet."

So he thought this town was for people born and raised here. How provincial. Suddenly Kate felt as if she were in the middle of that movie about the Stepford wives, where everyone was like a clone.

Kate waited while a customer checked out books. "Where might I find out about her?"

"Most likely ask Sheriff Albarade." He looked at the big clock on the wall. "You'll probably find him in his shop, The Outfitters, about now." He turned his back to work on a stack of books and ignored her.

A wave of excitement caused her to lean against the counter for support. Albarade. The name on the mailbox at the old house. The dead woman's name was Elizabeth Bartlett Albarade. Was she connected to the sheriff?

"Excuse me. Two more questions." Kate ignored the old man's frown and the pucker of his thin lips as he turned back to glare at her. "Is the sheriff the only one named Albarade in Plenitude? Was Elizabeth Bartlett any relation to him?"

"Yes to both questions, young lady. You ask a lot of questions for a passerby. Anyway, it's a matter of record. Betsy and Dillon Albarade were married—for a while." He turned away again.

"Thanks," Kate said, pushing through the heavy library doors, inhaling the sweet, cold air outside. Interesting piece of information. A divorced husband killing his ex-wife for one reason or another happened all the time. But a sheriff garroting his wife and possibly a woman who looked like her? Who would suspect an upright member in such a tight-knit community as Plenitude?

Kate walked down the street looking in each shop window. What was an outfitters shop? The librarian might have told her how to find it. These people could be so rude. Still, Sarah Jenkins and Ralph at the hotel had been nice. Maybe they were pleasant because she hadn't asked them any questions to cause discomfort.

She would need to question Ralph later, since desk clerks in hotels probably knew everything going on in town.

Talking to the sheriff was the last thing Kate wanted to do. Even though she was out of her comfort zone and doing things she had never dreamed of doing in her life, she still held an abiding fear of authority figures. There was time to back out, leave Plenitude, and continue her vacation. How could she help either of the two women now?

If that was true, why did the woman in the river call out to her? Why did she see the body in the old house? When the truth hit her, it knocked her breath away. She half-stumbled to a nearby bench and sat, stunned at the simplicity of it.

*The woman in the river wants to be buried.* Like Annie, she wanted to be found and put to rest wherever it was she was supposed to spend eternity. In peaceful surroundings, not thrown away like so much garbage.

Relief flooded through Kate at the knowledge that the victim, rather than the killer, had called out to her. All her research into the Shoe Man case had given her insight into how the mind of a murderer worked. She sensed this killer had something to accomplish in his lifetime, some formalized ritual he had to perform. That made him a predator stalking and killing his prey.

Kate inhaled sharply, jolted hard by the horror of her theories. She let her breath out slowly as she realized that no one knew who the killer was, or where he was, or even what he was doing. Even worse, she seemed to be the only one who cared.

## CHAPTER 5

**K**ate found The Outfitter's Shop on the one long main street in town, just past the diner. When she entered, a bell clanged over her head. The smell of leather permeated the pine walls and floor. For a moment she stopped in the threshold, staring across the cluttered room at the tall stranger she recognized from the lunch counter. On his shirt, he wore a badge. A leather belt with two guns hung behind the counter on the wall within easy reach.

He stood talking to a customer, bending his head to the shorter man. He looked up, regarding her with a steady gaze for a long moment, and nodding briefly to acknowledge he remembered her. He turned back to the customer who listened intently.

Interested, she moved closer to observe. His hands were large, but he worked deftly with a delicate object trapped in a little vise on a table. He twisted a wire with skillful ease, wrapping it around the top. For a brief second she saw the flash of a woman's neck intermixed with hands and a thin wire leaving a narrow necklace of blood behind. It would take strong hands. Her legs trembled with the wild thoughts racing through her mind.

He reminded her of an old time western hero—or villain. He wore scuffed boots and a denim shirt, his long legs encased in Levis. Thick, dark hair curled slightly around the bottom of the

baseball cap he wore. The cap had a Cubs emblem, but looked old, before rooting for the Cubs was cool. When she had seen him earlier, he'd sported a Stetson.

Kate listened to the conversation about fishing for trout and rafting down the rapids while she pretended to examine sleeping bags hanging against the wall. What was she going to tell him? That she saw two bodies on her computer? She dared not trust anyone. What if he were involved? He might have gotten away with murder. Twice. Kate concentrated on what kind of story to offer, to trade for information. If he'd wanted to kill his ex-wife for some reason, maybe he would kill another woman just to throw everyone off track. She had read novels about that.

Before Kate had a chance to give it more thought, he was at her side, looming over her. How did he get there so quickly and quietly? She was not aware that the customer had left, since she hadn't heard the bell.

He looked down at her, his eyes squinting under the fluorescent glare of the overhead light and grinned.

"You're the lady from the Hole-in-the-Wall."

She returned his smile. "Is that the name of the restaurant? Good idea. It was the first thought that came to my mind. I'm Katharine Macklin, most people call me Kate."

"Dillon Albarade," he answered.

Browned to a rich mahogany by the sun, wrinkles of good humor around his eyes conflicted with the hard lines near his mouth, partially hidden by his mustache. His eyes intrigued her. They should have been chocolate brown to go with the rest of him. Instead, they were startling hazel-green, flecked with gold, surrounded by lashes that any woman would have envied.

"I see you're checking out camping equipment. You don't strike me as the outdoor type." His voice was a deep baritone, his teeth white and straight beneath the mustache. He was laughing at her!

Kate tilted her chin in that way her husband used to call her stubborn Scots look. "As a matter of fact, I wanted to try rafting."

She had never ever given that a second thought in her life. Why would she say that?

For a split second decision, it seemed vastly preferable to catching some poor misguided, slimy fish on the end of a hook. She had seen the sign mounted on the wall, *Fishing spoken here*.

“What were you doing with that vise?” she asked, diffusing her annoyance at his look of amused skepticism.

“Come on over here, I’ll show you.”

He led the way to a beat-up table with a coffee maker taking up most of the space on a corner of it. He poured two cups and motioned her to sit.

“I tie flies for fly fishing. I also teach anyone who wants to learn how to do it. Some are all thumbs and some learn real quick.”

She shook her head. The only time she had remembered hearing about fly-fishing, she thought anglers had used real flies. Now it made more sense, but she was not going to tell him that. The next thing he would ask is why she was here, in the off-season. It worried her that she had to leave a skein of lies trailing behind her everywhere she went in this little town. She did not like lying. It didn’t feel good. Nevertheless, what choice did she have?

“I’m a reporter for New York Country time,” she began to ad-lib. “It’s a Sunday supplement kind of paper. They want me to write an article about rafting the river.” Maybe telling him she was a reporter would make it more logical when she started asking questions about the women.

“And they sent you to do it?” A dark eyebrow winged upward and he laughed. The sound might have been pleasing had he not aimed it at her.

“Why not?”

“You’re about as big as one of our mosquitoes,” he said, still grinning. “I’d have to anchor you down in the raft so you wouldn’t fly out at the first sign of white water.”

“You’re one of those macho red-necks I’ve read about, aren’t you?” she accused, past caution now. “My size doesn’t have a

damn thing to do with my qualifications for anything.” Besides, she was not small, she was actually tall. Maybe her slimness made her seem smaller. No one had ever mentioned her size before as a drawback.

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “God preserve me from a woman who thinks she can do anything. I did come off like some overgrown macho jerk, didn’t I? How about another cup? This is my slack time, not many customers around.”

“My husband and I—we used to do some rafting,” she began a new layer of lies, not knowing how to stop now. Mac was city-bred, as she was, and probably would not have known a raft from a canoe. She twisted the finger a wide gold band used to encircle. She had removed the wedding ring about ten months ago.

“Well, that’s different. If you’ve got a husband to watch you and be responsible, we might take a trip on the river.”

“Mac died years ago. Accident at work, a steel girder fell on him.” Why did she tell him that? Talking with Sarah Jenkins had been the first she had spoken about Mac in a long time. Annie had never wanted to talk about her father.

“Sorry. That must have been rough.”

“Things happen.”

“I lost my ex-wife. It’s never easy.”

The name on the mailbox in front of the old house pushed at her memory again. She tried to hide her dismay at his confirmation of her suspicions. As he spoke, Kate saw the complete name on the mailbox. Elizabeth Bartlett Albarade. The article in the paper mentioned Elizabeth Bartlett, which had done nothing to trigger the remembered vision. She had probably taken back her maiden name after the divorce, but hadn’t bothered to change it on the mailbox.

“Ah, she died, and so young? I’m sorry.” Kate was not good at fishing for information, but she needed to know.

“She was killed. Just last summer.”



Kate had no warning before she looked into his eyes and caught the image of the dead woman on the bed in the old house. She shivered.

“Did they...did you find the murderer?” She knew the answer to that before he spoke.

He stared at her, then took off the baseball cap and slapped it angrily against his pant leg. “Hell no. Not a trace of a clue left behind. We only know she was choked to death and left like a discarded piece of trash. But I didn’t say anything about murder.” His eyes narrowed into what she supposed was his sheriff’s mode.

“I read something about it in an old edition of the paper. At least, he didn’t violate her.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s going on here? How’d you know that?”

“It was in the papers, wasn’t it? I was checking some back issues in the library for some local color to use in my article and came across the headlines. Last July it was.”

“Yeah. July. I don’t remember those details being part of the news. We had to be careful what we let out, so when we caught the bastard we could tie it all together.”

The woman was not choked with hands, like strangled. Law enforcement, even in this back woods town, would have termed it ligature strangulation. That must have been part of the details of death that the authorities were keeping a secret.

Albarade’s lean strength was obvious as he kicked back the chair to stand in front of her. Something about him frightened her. Like that shadowy figure outside the old house. Could that have been him? This man projected the same sense of strength and restrained vitality. Surely, Betsy would let him inside without him going to such lengths as to climb that tree and get on the roof. Maybe they didn’t part friendly.

“The newspaper article called her Elizabeth Bartlett.”

He sighed and hooked the chair out toward him with his booted foot, sitting down again. He leaned backward gracefully, balanced on the chair’s two legs.

“She wanted her own name back, went to court for it.”

“I guess your name is a bit unusual,” Kate said.

“My mother was Anglo, my father Basque.”

His clipped words made Kate think he was speaking against his better judgment, talking to a stranger.

“That’s where your unusual first and last names came from,” she said.

“Yep. My father’s name was d’Albarade when he came to Colorado. My mother wanted to call me Dylan after her favorite poet, but my grandfather insisted on spelling everything his way. So I wound up as a Dillon Albarade.”

“Mmm, that’s interesting.”

“You sure ask a lot of questions.”

“Don’t all reporters?” she countered.

Dillon stood and took a few steps to look out the window. Kate couldn’t see his expression, but his voice sounded cracked and filled with pain. She closed her eyes, trying to get an idea of his thoughts. Sometimes that happened, but not this time.

“I hated that old place, where Betsy died. It always gave me the creeps. She and I, we didn’t agree on much, but we parted friends. For that, I’ll always be grateful.”

Kate hated to push too fast and make him suspicious. “How about the rafting? Can you take me? Some place mild, just so I can get the feel of it.”

“I may have one more party to book, not sure. It’s too early for the hunting season.” He turned away from the window, the backlight making him look huge and threatening for a moment, before he moved forward. “But I don’t see you out on the water. Too dangerous.”

“I can take care of myself,” she lied.

He did not look convinced. She needed to have time alone with him, to pick his brain, but he was cautious. It wouldn’t be easy.

The phone rang and while he spoke to a customer about hunting deer, she wandered around. In the back of the room, a little

glassed-in cabinet held some rock specimens, a couple of big, ugly knives, and a long, awkward-looking pistol that might have been an antique. She peered closer and saw the Colt signature. A small leather book lay next to the pistol. Her fingers itched to touch it, to open the thin, butter-soft pages. She loved the smell and feel of old books.

He walked up behind her. “Just odds and ends I’ve collected.”

“That little book—is it a prayer book or a bible? It looks very old.”

Dillon opened the door and took it out, blowing off a fine spray of dust.

Kate followed him back to the table. He opened the book carefully, as if it had been made of the finest parchment.

“This was my mother’s proudest possession. Dylan Thomas was her hero, if she ever had one. Thomas was a fellow countryman, from Wales. My grandfather brought our family over when she was only a child.”

Kate liked the feel of the buttery-soft old leather when he handed it to her. She barely skimmed a page with her fingers, not wanting to mar the delicate paper. The sorrow, the loneliness of a woman of gentle rearing, living on a ranch and trying her best to survive in the harsh reality of pioneer life emerged as a vivid picture in her mind through her fingers.

“She loved you very much.”

Dillon looked surprised at her comment. “Yes. I guess she did. God knows I loved her. I think reading helped her hold on to her sanity over the years. When she was a young girl, she fell in love with my father, who owned a sheep ranch next to my grandfather. Of course, Grandfather would never have let her marry him, even when he found out she was pregnant with me. When Albarade disappeared she didn’t know if he had been paid off or if her father had him killed.”

“As a young boy, you knew all this?”

“I found her diary after she was gone.”

“After she was gone?”

“The old man wouldn’t let her take me away and I guess she couldn’t stand it, living there, not knowing if her own father killed her lover. She left one day and we never saw her again.”

That might make a man angry with women enough to hate them. Angry enough to kill?

“When I was fifteen, I left him, too. Never went back. Didn’t go to his funeral.”

“Do you really think your grandfather killed or had your father killed?”

“He never admitted it. The ranchers and the townspeople must have made my father’s life miserable. Even though Albarade and my grandfather came to this country around the same time, that didn’t seem to matter back in those days. Albarade was Basque—a brown-skinned outsider while my grandfather was Anglo. Even if he was a foreigner.”

“That’s sad.” She didn’t know what to say. He sounded as if his bitterness had not worn away any over the years.

“My mother had the last word. I don’t know how she found the courage, but she stood up to the old bastard and told him my last name was Albarade and had it put on my birth certificate.”

“Good for her.”

“The old man left the land and ranch to me, but I never set foot on my grandfather’s property after I left. He broke my mother’s heart, forced her to abandon me, and I’m sure he killed my father.”

Kate gave the book back. “Read your mother’s favorite passage.” Kate already knew what it was, coming to her in its entirety, and spread out in her thoughts, as if he had already read it.

“I memorized a lot of his poems when I was a kid. It always tickled my mother to have me recite this one especially.

“Though they go mad they shall be sane,

“Though they sink through the sea,

“They shall rise again;

“Though lovers be lost, love shall not.  
“And Death shall have no dominion.”

“That’s beautiful,” Kate finally said to break the silence. It also confirmed the possibility that Dillon Albarade could be the killer. A man who murdered two women might think that way.

He was bitter and angry over what happened so long ago. Death shall have no dominion. Did that excuse killing in his own mind? Maybe because his grandfather had done it? That didn’t make sense. Why would he kill two women merely because they resembled one another? Was it some elaborate scheme to get rid of Betsy and then someday when the body in the river was discovered, if there had been any suspicions toward him, he would be vindicated? Make it appear to be a stranger passing through town killed them both?

“You’re the sheriff.” Kate changed the subject. “I assume you discovered the body. Didn’t you call for help from the outside?”

“Of course, I did. Betsy was the first murder we had since gold rush days. About the only thing that happens here is when the town council’s parking tickets mount up and I have to serve notice.”

“Must be boring.”

“We like it that way. That’s why I kept my outfitter business. I’m on call twenty-four hours a day if need be, but no one expects me to sit in the sheriff’s office. Everyone knows where to find me.”

“From the train on my way here, I noticed a nice wide spot in the river. Is that a good place to raft?”

He frowned. “The Dells? Like you said, it’s a wide spot in the river. Hikers and kayakers can set up camps down there. No vehicles, not even 4-wheel drives are allowed.”

She had seen flashes of a tent in her visions, connected to the woman in the river.

“There was something else I caught in the papers before I saw the headlines about your ex-wife. A summer visitor was missing. Did you ever locate her?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Funny thing, we faxed everything we knew about her around the country. We didn’t have much to go on but descriptions from a few people in town who noticed her. According to the computer, no one reported her missing.”

“Nothing at the campsite?”

“Hikers found her empty tent and told me about it.”

“What do you think happened?” She wanted to tell him about the body in the water, but she could not trust anyone, especially not him.

“She ran off with one of the other tourists, no doubt.”

“Just left her camping gear behind?”

“Reckon she thought she’d be back for it and it didn’t work out. Wasn’t a whole lot of value there, a couple of hundred bucks maybe. She had rented a kayak and didn’t return it. She must not have arrived in a car. That would have made tracking her down simple, if she’d had a car registered anywhere.”

A kayak. Could have been a raft, too. The killer had to get her to the middle of the stream. Sheriff Albarade must be familiar with every inch of the river.

“On the other hand, if she’d left behind a car along with her tent, you’d have had to assume she didn’t just hike out with another camper,” Kate said. Plus a car would have a registration, but she didn’t go there.

A closed look shuttered his eyes and he shrugged.

Now was not the time or the place to confide in him, but she needed help. Could she track down this killer alone using the computer she looked upon as her adversary? Doubts assailed her and she felt an anxiety attack coming on. Kate needed to get back to her room and hide away for a while. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then stood and held out her hand.

“It was nice meeting you.” Maybe at his touch, she would get a feeling of good or bad. He reached forward and grasped her hand

in a strong grip. She liked the woodsy smell of him, mixed with some kind of after-shave, but she received no vibrations, good or bad.

“Sure you won’t change your mind about taking me rafting?”

He looked very sure. “Too risky. Maybe if it was the beginning of summer, with others in the raft. Then everyone’s green and they all look out for each other.”

“Okay. Guess I’ll go back to the hotel, write up some background for my story, and use my imagination for the rest. See you later.” There had to be some way of getting past that amiable reserve that seemed so much a part of him.

Looking into his eyes, Kate wanted some intuition if he was the one. He was muscular, dark, and moved fluidly. Was her sixth sense warning her and she wasn’t reading it? How to be sure? Her emotions and thoughts were on overload and she had to get back to her room to think things out. The cowbell clanged as she closed the door behind her and hurried toward the hotel.

It was time to pull some answers from her computer. A sinking feeling told her the man would not or could not stop killing.

## CHAPTER 6

In the hotel room, Kate checked to make sure the batteries were still charging on her computer and then poured a glass of milk. She sat looking out onto the street. The town reminded her of an eccentric recluse, allowing humanity to ebb and flow around her, but keeping a secret core in the middle that no one could touch. It was a feeling she knew very well from her own experience.

Reluctantly, she moved the computer from the desk to the bed. She kicked off her shoes, piled the pillows behind her, and put the computer on her lap.

As soon as the lid opened, it clicked on and Kate toyed with the figures from her bookkeeping accounts for a while, knowing it might take time before she received a vision. That was so frustrating about second sight. Never hers to command, it came and went seemingly at will.

Her mother and grandmother had called it “the gift.” Kate had never wanted to use it until she needed to find where the drunken hit and run driver had hidden Annie’s body. After she told the police, who had been unbelieving but cautiously cooperative, they found the body where she said, and she buried Annie next to her father.



Kate's thoughts returned to Sheriff Albarade. Something about him attracted her in spite of the reservations she felt. He was strong, yet showed a deep vulnerability buried inside. Had the sheriff been an actual suspect in his ex-wife's murder? The newspaper said the authorities were checking out local leads. The meaning of that statement was vague at best. She could imagine what visitors might think of this calm, bucolic town if they discovered a serial killer on the loose. It wouldn't look good to have the sheriff exposed as a suspect unless they were very sure he was the killer.

Kate shivered, thinking of how people could appear normal on the outside and yet harbor such monstrous propensities to do harm hidden inside. Was Albarade one of those people? Or was the stalker an outsider, moved on by now? Could he be waiting here for another victim? If the murderer was a tourist or from a surrounding town, he would be back. Only he knew his motivation, his reason for killing. And they always had a reason.

Kate leaned her head back against the pillows, staring at the screen. Her eyes narrowed, watching the sudden burst of colored lights as the screen saver took over, gyrating, pulsing, throbbing with color and weird forms, like a kaleidoscope that had fascinated her as a child. She couldn't look away.

The shapes changed and the color muted until she saw the image of the woman in the river merged with the woman in the old house. They looked so much alike it was uncanny. They could almost be the same person if she hadn't known better.

*'She is down there. Look for her.'*

The whispered voice in her mind floated around her shoulders, touching her ears and back of her neck like a soft, rolling fog. Kate moved her shoulders, trying to rid herself of the feeling.

"What do you want from me?" She said the words out loud. She didn't know how to communicate with this spirit. Could it read her thoughts or must she say the words? "What do you want from me?" she repeated.

No answer came. She touched the keys, at first tentatively, afraid to disturb the picture. 'What do you want from me?' she typed.

The picture shifted to the old house in the woods. This time she stood on the lawn in the front where the silhouetted figure had appeared. Fear tightened like a hard ball in her chest and she had to suck in air to breathe.

'*Can you see me?*' A voice, a man's voice whispered in her mind from the overgrowth of trees at the edge of the lawn. It was not the same voice that had asked her to look in the water.

Belatedly, she wondered if he could track her through the computer. If she could see him, could he see her? She pushed away the upsetting thought. Her fingers flew on the keys and she typed, *No, I can't see you.* Should she have admitted that? *Come out. Let me see you,* she typed.

A harsh laugh erupted from the monitor and then a long pause when she heard only crickets and an occasional frog from the distant woods.

*Are you playing a game with me?* she asked.

The laugh again. She tried to picture who the voice could belong to, what kind of person it would fit, but her psychic powers felt blocked. Blocked as effectively as if by a stone wall.

*Did you call me, or was it the woman in the river?* Kate thought that eventually she would ask a question he wanted to answer.

Jackpot.

*'She did. Not me.'*

*Are you going to tell me why?* she typed.

*'I don't have to tell you anything. You are the intruder here, not us.'*

Us. Did he mean the dead women? Was he including himself with the dead women? Kate took a deep breath. It was now or never. *Did you kill the women?*

Feeling his presence near, Kate drew up as small as possible into herself, fear causing her fingers to tremble so badly she didn't

think she could have typed another word. What was reality and what was in her mind? It blended so completely she couldn't be certain he was not able to harm her. She touched her fingers to her throat, as if feeling that cold piece of wire bite into her neck, letting her life forces flow out around it.

*'That's right. You feel it, don't you? I kill with the greatest of ease. But you are not the one I'm looking for.'*

*Looking for?*

*'You can't trick me. Don't think you're safe. I can come for you when I want to.'*

*Then why did you call me?* Panic left a bitter taste on her tongue, as Kate felt the foreground with his faint image fading into the background of trees.

*Please. Answer me.*

*'I didn't call you. Remember that.'* Then he was gone. The brush and trees were no longer menacing. His malevolent energy had dissipated. Kate closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep. When she awoke the next morning, daylight sifted through the curtains.

Before she forgot the details, Kate grabbed a pad found in the nightstand drawer and wrote what she remembered. She wanted to avoid touching the computer, which was back in its place on the dresser. Funny, she had no recollection of getting out of bed and putting it there.

She did not have much to write. The man spoke in a hoarse whisper. She could not place any special accent. He was looking for someone, a specific person. That was worth knowing. The figure said he could get to her any time. Was that just a bluff? How would she know?

Kate had no idea of where to start. Her first instincts were to tell someone about the woman in the river so they could dredge up her body. Whom could she tell?

The sheriff? Not yet.

The sheriff had said the victim in the house had been choked. He couldn't have meant that literally. It was a term the authorities

had decided to release to the public. She wouldn't have thought of pulling a steel wire around someone's neck and tightening it until they were dead as choking, although technically it could be. The terminology did not fit. Garroted or ligature strangulation maybe, she didn't know for sure, but something was wrong. She knew the victim had not been choked by someone's hands wrapped around her throat.

One thing for sure, she needed to call Captain Murphy back in the city and ask him to check on Dillon Albarade.

Caution overtook what she had first thought was a good idea. If she called from the room, the old fashioned switchboard in the hotel would be able to monitor the call. Better to use a payphone out on the street. The less anyone knew about why she was here, the better. Not that she understood the answer to that one herself.

Kate pulled the blanket closer around her shoulders, suddenly feeling a chill. The murderer had actually spoken to her. Had he spoken out loud or through her mind? It didn't matter. She had made a breakthrough. He'd told her, *'I didn't call you.'* That could mean when the woman in the river called, he picked up on it. How had he done that? Was he a psychic? The idea caused a swift chill up and down her spine and frightened her more than anything she had seen or heard so far. If he had "the gift," he wasn't bluffing. He would find her.

Did he want to be caught? She had learned that some killers were desperate to stop killing and could not. Killing became like a drug, an empowerment they couldn't give up.

She had to get the sheriff out alone, to ply him with questions. First another trip to the library and then she must call Murphy.

Kate pulled on her gray slacks and slipped a fern-green turtle neck sweater over her head. If she stayed here long, she would have to go shopping. She dashed on a light coral lipstick, and ran a brush through her hair, which she thought looked pretty this way, shiny brown and curved around her square jaw line. For years, she had left it long and somewhat stringy, but she had it cut before

leaving on her vacation. Everything had to be brand new, as new as she could make it.

She looked at her image critically. Not bad for the slightly-past-thirty generation. She was beginning to enjoy food again, too, and she had filled out a little bit in the right places.

She grabbed up her large, roomy purse and slung the straps over her shoulder, then turned for one last glance at the room. No cat to tell goodbye. Next trip she made, Rasputin was coming along, no matter what. She had seen people traveling with dogs and that seemed to work. Her cat was smarter than any old dog.

At the door to her room, her feet refused to move. Why couldn't she just stay here, safe and secure in this cozy room? Forces pulled at her to sit back down and stay put. Outside hid terrors never dreamed of.

Kate stepped out into the hall, her mouth dry. *I have been through this before and conquered it*, she told herself. *Move one foot at a time*. She patted her purse, which held a small tape recorder and a note pad. First stop would be the library to check if she could find anything more on the murdered Betsy Albarade. Any facts she could gather would help her know how to question the sheriff when the time came.

A chilly morning, sparkling sharp and clear, greeted Kate when she stepped out. She inhaled the strong scent of pines and imagined what it might be like, living in a little town like this.

Strangers nodded to her as Kate walked toward the little diner. She looked forward to a plate of fresh cinnamon bread. Once inside, disappointment claimed her when she looked around and didn't see the sheriff sitting at the counter.

The room felt warm and cozy with a large stone fireplace against the far wall, burning some kind of fragrant wood. She sat at the counter and nodded at the server who came her way with a cup and coffee pot. Kate held the thick white mug in her hands, letting her mind wander for a moment while soaking up the smells and sounds surrounding her. Customers spoke in subdued whispers, as if they too enjoyed the early morning tranquility.

A good way to start a morning, she decided, thinking of the blaring horns, ambulance or fire truck sirens, and brakes squealing on the city streets. She lived in the suburbs, so it wasn't that bad, but not as quiet as this.

"Hello there. Looks like you found the place again."

Kate almost spilled the coffee when her hand jerked. He was so quiet, so quick when he moved. It was uncanny. She swiveled the seat around to stare up at the sheriff.

He leaned over, one hand on the counter, looking into her eyes with an unnerving, penetrating look. It was as if he tried to see past her eyes, into her mind.

Her heart leaped into her throat. That could happen if he was the cat-like man in her computer. She didn't want it to be true, but now it seemed the most logical idea. She hadn't sensed a particular threat from this man, and yet his essence breathed an untamed masculinity that made her uncomfortable.

Where was her sixth sense, her psychic ability when she needed it? She wished there was some way to tame it, some way to make it do her bidding instead of the other way around.

She lowered her eyes from his probing look, and when he turned away, she watched him gracefully slide his long leg over the little stool. Her gaze traveled up his legs, his narrow waist, the wide buckle in his belt, the denim jacket covering what she now knew was a badge pinned on his chest.

"Hello there, yourself. You look pretty darn chipper for early in the morning," Kate said.

"Hah!" He snorted. "Call this early morning? I've been up since before daybreak. Got a call about some poachers. Game warden's on vacation so had to check it out. Never did find them, but they got the deer all right, saw the blood where they killed it."

"Does that happen often?" In her vision of the woman in the river, she had seen figures moving through the trees. At first, she thought of the stalker, but in thinking about it later, she had the impression of it being more than one person, shorter and bulkier than that of the man beneath the window of the old house. Hunters

may have witnessed the murder. The thought excited her until she remembered that poachers were unlikely to tell of seeing anything in the woods.

“Poaching happens a lot more than we’d like. Some of the people living here before the state changed the laws, claim they have the right to hunt to feed their families.”

“Haven’t they heard of welfare or job programs? We all pay taxes to help people who need it.”

He made a wry face. “Uh-uh. No one around here would be caught dead going on the dole. Hell, most of them regard unemployment as welfare and would never touch it. Nothing that smacks of standing in line waiting for charity is for these mavericks.”

She thought about that. This was indeed a strange place, as if she had stepped back in time a hundred years. She wondered if the surrounding small towns were like Plenitude. How far would the townspeople go to protect one of their own?

“Are you c—certain it was deer b—blood?” she stammered before she could get the rest of the words completely out. “Someone killed in this town and you’ve never discovered who did it. Maybe he killed twice.”

The waitress set a fresh cup of coffee in front of Dillon and refilled Kate’s cup.

Dillon’s eyes were unreadable beneath the lowered lids when he turned to face her. “Two killings? That’s a strange thing for you to say. There was no reason to think of Betsy’s killer as being anyone but a stranger passing through. She was unlucky enough to be in his path. Why would you think something like that?”

“Many reasons.” She struggled for logical answers. “I used to know a cop. A detective. He told me about some of his cases. In the instances of serial killers, some of them...”

“What?” The word exploded from his lips and people in the diner turned toward them with questioning expressions. He broke off a piece of toast but laid it down again on the side of his plate before he spoke.

“What gives you the idea that killing Betsy was the work of a serial killer?” He had lowered his voice to a husky whisper and she noticed the patrons had politely turned back to their breakfasts.

Had she said too much? She didn’t want to endanger herself, not until she could trust him.

“Well, then, if not a serial killer, you must have some idea of who did it and why.”

A look of strain showed on his face. He leaned his elbows on the counter, holding the mug with both hands, as she had done moments before. His hands engulfed the large mug and only little bits of the white showed through. They were big, strong hands, surely strong enough to overpower slender women and pull a wire tightly around their necks.

He set down the mug and moved off the seat, pushing some bills on the counter between them. He took her arm in a grip that made her wince.

“Come on. Let’s walk. I don’t know why this should interest you, but I have nothing to hide. If you want to know—Betsy’s death did create a scandal for her folks, a scandal we tried to hush up.” He pushed open the door for her. Outside it had grown cold and blustery. “At first I was suspect. People around here don’t get divorces and when they do, they don’t stay friends like Betsy and I did.”

“Did she ever see anyone? Have any other relationships?”

“She’d been seeing a fellow from the next valley. Not everyone knew that, but we talked about it. He’s a good enough sort, but she could have done better.”

They walked along at a good clip. She had to take two steps to his one to keep up with him.

“We questioned him, but he had a good alibi. I did, too. I was with an overnight rafting group.”

Far from here? She wanted to ask the question. As an experienced woodsman in good physical shape, it might be easy for him to run through the woods after the campers went to sleep, sneak into town, do the deed and run back to the campsite.



“And you’ve never had an inkling of who did it? And why?”

He put a hand out to stop her and looked down into her face as they stood on the narrow sidewalk. Not many people walked by. Seedy looking businesses edged toward the fringe of brush and trees that indicated the edge of town. The paved road passed on and disappeared around a bend.

“That’s what tortures me. We shut the case up because the mayor and his wife are in a rest home. She has Alzheimer’s and he’s trying to take care of her so he won’t have to leave her alone there. He’s not much better off, in his eighties. They had Betsy late in life and she was their pride and joy. They were not happy when she married me, let me tell you, but we worked it out at first. Too bad, it didn’t stay worked out. Anyway, the case isn’t closed, but what was the point of dredging it all through the papers and...”

“It must distress you that someone killed her and you don’t know who or why.”

“Hell yes! It boils the piss out of me.”

He was walking so fast, she looked longingly when they passed the last bench.

“About these...” She had almost slipped up and said these killings. “About the murder of your ex-wife, you said you asked for outside help?”

“I didn’t know what else to do. Still don’t. With every passing month, I know he will get away with what he has done. The man was a goddamned spook. He didn’t leave a clue. We don’t even know how he got in. The doors and windows were all locked.”

His angry words brought a picture flashing through her mind. The fleeting image of the cat-like figure climbing up the tree outside the window and leaping across to the roof and sliding down to enter the dormer window. Impossible. It was too far and humanly impossible. She had seen him do it. Wouldn’t Dillon have a key?

“We called in help from Denver,” he continued and she struggled out of her vision to pay attention. “Detectives from the attorney general’s office went over the house and the property

with everything they had. They spent a couple of weeks on it. Nothing.”

Kate felt the wave of pain beneath his words. It was real and not put on, she sensed that much.

“Do you still want to go rafting?” he asked abruptly.

She stopped in her tracks. A feeling of danger surrounded his words, pulsing through her temples. He shoved his hands in his pockets and started to turn away, as if her answer was not important.

Why did he offer now? Why did he suddenly change his mind? He looked the type of man who would have short patience with rafting novices, especially women. Had he read something in her eyes or had she asked too many questions? He might suspect she was other than she pretended to be. Yet, the killer was psychic or at least had some semblance of paranormal energy, and that didn't fit with Dillon.

Would she come back from such a trip? Or would she lie out there in the water alongside the other woman, without anyone knowing where she was? Kate needed to call Captain Murphy and tell him what she had discovered so far. If she didn't call back, at least he would know where to start checking.

A gauzy haze slid between her and Dillon, blurring his image. If this was a warning, why couldn't she tell? “I'd like to go,” she said.

*‘Famous last words,’* came the echo inside her head.

## CHAPTER 7

**A**fter Kate left the sheriff, she walked back toward the center of town. The first thing on her mind was to find a payphone and call Captain Murphy. The next, go to the library and start checking old newspapers again.

She found a payphone in the back of a magazine/book store, and no one stood close enough to eavesdrop. After dialing, panic hit. Suppose she sounded like a complete nut? Captain Murphy didn't have all that much patience with her at the best of times.

He sounded effusively friendly when he came on the line, probably because she was five or six states away from him.

"Good to hear from you, Kate. How's your vacation coming along?"

He had always called her Mrs. Macklin before. She was surprised he remembered her first name.

"Fine. Thank the boys again for chipping in for the laptop." *Yeah, thanks a bunch.* What would have happened if she had left it behind? Would the voice have found her anyway? Somehow, she doubted it. The electric static of the computer reacted with the energy field surrounding her psychic powers and formed the picture on the screen. Although that was not very scientific, she thought it happened that way. Who could explain such a thing? It just was.

“Could you check on a name for me? It’s important or I wouldn’t bother you.”

A long, pregnant pause and then he cleared his throat. “Ah, Mrs. Macklin, you’re not into another computer thing, are you?”

So. It was back to Mrs. Macklin. No matter, she was more comfortable with that coming from him. “I can’t give you any details right now, Captain. But yes, I’m afraid that little rascal your department gave me is acting up like crazy. I’ve come across two unsolved murders, so far.”

“Good God, woman!” He forgot his polite, suave facade and roared into the phone. “You had Detective Slater to protect and help you before. Don’t go poking your nose into things that shouldn’t concern you.”

“I know, I know,” she said and cut him off. “I’m not poking my nose anywhere.”

“Then why did you say two murders? Those were your very words. Don’t the authorities there know how to take care of things?”

She did not want to get into a deep conversation with Murphy. He was like a bulldog and wouldn’t let go. Still, someone needed to know she was in Plenitude, in case of...in case of what? She did not want to go down that road.

Kate sighed. There was always a price to pay. She longed to tell him about the murdered woman in the old house and the body in the river, but he would hit the ceiling. Probably send out a detective, stir up everything with his big city ways so she would never learn anything. Someone wanted her to get to the bottom of the murders and that was her one and only plan, if you could call it anything so dignified as a plan.

“I’m sure the authorities know what they’re doing, only they don’t have a lot of that sort of thing going on up here. No one’s been murdered in this area since the gold rush days.”

“And you know more than they do? Is that the impression I’m getting? Stop me if I’m wrong.” His voice raised an octave, grat-

ing on her nerves more than usual. In spite of that, talking to him gave her a sense of comfort.

“Really, forget it. I’m sure the local authorities have everything under control. I just want to check on one of them. Name’s Dillon Albarade. Could spell it d’Albarade.”

“Is this the suspect by any chance?”

His voice said he would be packed and out of the office if she said yes.

“No. Of course not. He’s the sheriff here. I just want a handle on his background.”

“Okay. I can check it out for you. Does this mean you are seeing those crazy vision things again? We should have never given you that laptop to take with you.”

*You didn’t think the visions were so crazy when they helped solve a case*, she wanted to say. “No, no, of course not,” she lied. She was getting used to telling lies and that bothered her. “I met this charming man and wondered about him. You can’t be too careful. I didn’t think you’d mind.” There she went again.

“That’s smart.” His voice changed. He sounded a little deflated, annoyed. “I don’t mind at all. Give me a telephone where I can reach you.”

“That’s no good. I’m in Plenitude, Colorado, staying in the hotel with a switchboard. It’s a small town and everyone knows everything about everyone. I can call you back tomorrow or the next day, if it wouldn’t be too much bother.”

“Sure. But you be careful.” He went into his Uncle Murphy mode, only he was not much older than she was so it had never been too effective. In his own way, Captain Murphy was not unattractive. It was only that he had suffered when she compared him with Slater. Murphy was sensitive and articulate, a university graduate in his chosen field, and dreadfully ordinary.

Kate gave him her address. She needed to have someone know where she was if she didn’t turn up at home eventually. What would happen to her cat at the boarding kennel?

What made her think of that?

After hanging up, she left the bookstore and headed toward the library, sailing past the man at the information desk. By now, she knew where to go.

In the back of the library, she immersed herself with the microfilm, starting with the date she had left off, and began reading the papers again. Two weeks after the headlines of Elizabeth Bartlett's death, she found a little box in the middle of the paper toward the bottom. It read, *The sheriff's office checked out a few local suspects in the slaying, but the death was attributed to person or persons unknown. The crime is listed as unsolved and the investigation will continue.*

Searching forward on the film to a week later turned up a smaller blurb in the paper stating that the mysterious tourist was officially listed as a missing person but would likely turn up safe and sound in her own home state. The folksy attitude of the editor annoyed Kate. In all fairness, though, if the sheriff had no name to work with, if the woman had not registered in a hotel, but camped out, how could any resident be expected to know who she was? It was only by a little digging, talking to people on the street, that Albarade had managed to work up a description.

A sinking feeling told her she had reached the end, and there was no need to look any farther. Now she had to choose whether to believe the sheriff. Was he really stalled in his investigation? Was this a guilty man hiding a terrible secret?

Maybe it wasn't a serial killer at work here, but her runaway imagination. Could the sheriff have become angry at his ex-wife, perhaps because of her new relationship, and killed her? That would make the woman in the river a stranger. Suppose the woman in the river had been killed years ago and it was just a coincidence that both women were murdered in this little town.

Kate sat on a bench on the library lawn. The street was peaceful, bucolic, a country street in the center of a country town. People walked down the sidewalks and as a diversion, she tried to pick out the locals, to see if she could tell them from the tourists. There weren't many visitors left.

The peaceful setting warred with her sinister, complex thoughts. The key. She needed a key to open the first door to the puzzle. The first key could be the stalking shadow that spoke to her in the computer, the same one who invaded the yard of the old house. If the sheriff did it, why would he skulk around in his ex-wife's yard? Was he waiting for something to happen in the house before he entered? Waiting for the lights to go out, for her to come home? Kate had a strong sense that the killer was waiting for something.

Chances were the woman in the river was connected to the murder in the old house. The method of killing seemed the same. Either there was a psychopathic killer hiding out as the local sheriff or a cunning predator who had invaded Plenitude. Whoever it was had killed two women and escaped. *Nearly* escaped, until the woman in the river had called out for help.

The call had brought the killer back, too. What an eerie feeling, wondering if she hadn't come this way, if she'd never decided to take this vacation, what then? Would the woman have lain in the water until she disintegrated, un-mourned and unburied?

The water was cold and dark, swift moving and not stagnant. Perhaps that held the body together so it hadn't fallen apart, so that Kate could see her as a whole person. Someone would have to dredge the river, but that couldn't happen until she could convince someone the woman was there, until she trusted someone enough to tell them.

Kate rose from the bench, suddenly chilled by the late afternoon wind coming off the mountain. Time to return to the hotel. The idea appealed to her so much that it scared her. Safe, tucked away in a small room. Safe only until she turned on the computer again, which she had to do.

What if it warned her about the rafting trip with Dillon Albarrade?

## CHAPTER 8

In the hotel room, Kate sat on the big chair at the window, not wanting to touch the computer. Was the town conspiring to protect their sheriff or the dead girl's family? Or was it simply that no one knew anything?

Should she go on a rafting trip with Dillon? That thought stopped her. When did he become Dillon instead of the sheriff? He hadn't mentioned if anyone was going with them, but there might be a last minute party of rafters, he as much as suggested that. With a group of people, surely nothing could happen to her. *Not necessarily*, a small voice chided. It would be a simple matter for a river-wise man to contrive a commotion in the raft and in the confusion, push her overboard.

She paced the room. Something didn't fit here. Something wasn't right, but it was impossible to put her finger on it. The computer drew her inexorably forward. She flipped on the switch. Immediately the spreadsheets came up with the last bookkeeping job she had worked on. All of her customers knew she was taking a vacation. She had worked ahead as much as she could, allowing for the time off.

Her fingers hovered over the keys, not knowing how to start her visions. She closed off the bookkeeping part of the program, entered the word processor and began typing questions.



*Who are you? Why do you kill? Why did you call me here?  
What do you want from me?*

She typed the words repeatedly until they filled the screen. Little jabs of electricity tingled at her fingertips and, looking up, she saw the words had disintegrated as if blown apart by a bomb. When the screen cleared, the river appeared with rushing, tossing water but no sound came through. It was like watching the TV with the sound off. The now familiar figure edged away from the tree line on shore, but not so clear as to let her make out anything. She could tell he was tall and moved with a feline grace.

She had to keep reminding herself that she was sitting in a hotel room and not out on the river.

*'You are getting closer to the center. You know how I got in the house.'*

The words flowed across the screen. So quickly, it might have been her imagination.

She rubbed icy fingers together, forcing the blood back in them in order to type.

*I saw you leap from the tree to the roof, but I still don't believe you did that. Impossible.* Her hands moved over the keys, putting the words on the screen as fast as she could, afraid to lose the connection.

*'I did it, believe. I can fly through the air, that's nothing for me. I don't understand how you saw it.'*

*How do you get in my head? How do you know my visions?*

Did she just hear that derisive laugh of his or was that, too, a part of her imagination?

*'You don't expect me to answer that, do you? I did not bring you here. She did, the one in the river. She wants to be found. I hadn't counted on that.'*

*But you know I am here, you know my thoughts. Some of them. How?*

No answer. He only answered what he wanted. Clever of him.

*Why do you kill? How many have you killed?*

A long pause came and she feared he wouldn't answer.

*'I told you, I am looking for someone. When I find her, she will be the last. I don't remember how many I've killed, that is not important. They all deserved to die, they look like her. They are bitches, too, I can tell. When I kill them, I am killing her but when I've finished it, with each one, I know I haven't found her yet.'*

Kate watched the ghostly form move restlessly back and forth just inside the perimeter of the trees. If only he would edge out a bit. Could she force his hand?

Kate took a deep breath and started to type.

*What if you are lying to me—lying to yourself? You enjoy the killing. Admit it. Are you truly searching for someone special, or do you just enjoy the hunt and the kill?*

That harsh laugh again.

*'You are a worthy adversary, but never forget, that is what you are to me, the enemy. I will tolerate you as long as it amuses me. I have never had this with anyone else, it's intriguing. Nevertheless, beware of annoying me. I know where to find you.'*

He was playing a game with her. He somehow locked on to her visions, to her thoughts. He had to be psychic, too. Was it on the same level as her ability? Stronger? That idea felt so frightening, her thoughts skittered away from it. Her heart beat faster until it was hard to breathe, her chest felt tight. He knew everything she thought. She didn't have to type it out on the keyboard.

Kate waited, but he had vanished into the dark trees.

When she backed out of the word processing program, the spreadsheet returned to the screen. Kate shut off the computer and moved back to the chair by the window.

Her skin felt clammy with a chill that went all through her. Her hands trembled until she had to clasp them together to hold still. Never could she have imagined someone able to challenge her with psychic powers. Her first instinct was to turn and run. That method had always worked for her in the past. Except once she involved herself in a puzzle, once she immersed her being into helping someone who called upon her, she could not turn back.

What next? The only hint of a key to the deaths started with the woman in the water. She had to be dredged up. The way to do that was to convince the sheriff. If he were guilty of killing the women, then he would have to kill her to stop the questions. The man in her computer didn't *feel* like the sheriff. But he could be very clever at trying to outsmart her, playing his sick game.

The phone rang, startling in the quiet room with the hum of the refrigerator as the only sound. No one knew to call her here.

"Mrs. Macklin? Kate?"

She sighed. He was not supposed to call the hotel. She hoped the switchboard was on automatic. An odd little burst of pleasure hit her to hear Captain Murphy's voice. He was so blessedly ordinary, so remarkably normal.

"Hello, Captain. This is after work for you, isn't it?" She smiled at the sound of him clearing his throat. He seemed nervous, which was unlike him.

"Umm. It was easier to call you from home. Did I pick a bad time?"

Kate felt comforted by his small talk. He was good at putting people at ease—when he chose to.

"No, of course not. I didn't want you to call at the hotel. How did you find me?"

"Ha! Simple deductions. You said you were in Plenitude, Colorado, a very small town according to the computer atlas. You also said you were staying at *the* hotel. From that I took it to mean there was probably only one hotel in town."

"Oh, my, I'm impressed, Captain." She really was. She'd had the idea of staying hidden away until it was necessary to get in touch with him.

"You can call me Murphy if you'd like. Most do behind my back."

She laughed. He had a sense of humor. That came as a surprise. Slater had despised him so much there hadn't been room to see anything but the man's faults.

“Okay, Murphy.” Suddenly she did not want to hear anything about Dillon Albarade.

“I know you said you’d call me, but the tone in your voice worried me.”

She wanted to tell him how sweet that sounded, but didn’t. “What did you learn?”

“In a second. First, I want to hear about you. Been worried about you and that computer.”

“I’m going on a rafting trip.” That ought to set him back on his pressed boxer shorts.

She had this funny image about men, since she began venturing outside again. It popped into her thoughts first to take away some of the fear of strangers. Men in authoritative positions frightened her the most and, to get past this hurdle, she imagined what kind of underwear they wore. Her husband had been boxers, Dillon was surely jockey, same as Slater, and here was charming, pompous Murphy in pressed, probably Egyptian cotton boxer shorts.

Kate giggled into her hand, turning the phone away so he wouldn’t catch the sound.

Too late.

“What was that? Did I hear you laughing?”

“Excuse me, had a cough coming on.”

“Kate? Did you say rafting? That doesn’t sound like something you’d do.”

How would he know? He was right, though. It had been her goal for so many years to blend into the background so that no one noticed her. When you weren’t noticed, not so many bad things happened to you.

“Listen up, I’ve got news.”

“I think I should go out and use the payphone down the street. Did an old-sounding man answer the phone when you called?”

“No. Not at all. It was one of those robot recordings.”

“Well, okay, guess Ralph stepped out. Go ahead, what have you got?”

Her thoughts fragmented off into meeting Dillon for breakfast this morning. She had begun to look forward to their little conversations.

“What?” She had missed part of his monologue. “Excuse me?”

“I said,” he growled, his patience short, for some reason, “Dillon d’Albarade was in Viet Nam. He went over after the war as part of the peacekeeping team. Mop-ups, they called them, a tough bunch.”

“He never mentioned that. Of course, we haven’t spoken all that much.” He’d had time to tell her about his grandfather and his mother and recite a Welsh poem to her, though.

“Most of them don’t talk about it.”

Murphy obviously hadn’t gone to Nam.

“That’s very interesting, but I was inquiring if he’d been in trouble or anything like that.”

“I just mention the Viet Nam thing because the special unit that he served in was strictly covert. Still is, but being a police captain gives me a little leverage here and there.”

Kate imagined him preening just a bit, touching the near-bald spot on the top of his head and rearranging the reddish blond hair to cover it.

“I still don’t see that this is anything I need to know.”

“It can mean something or nothing. It just means that you have to take care in your dealings with this man. Everything is not always as it seems. They were taught that black is black and white is white with no gray areas. These highly trained guerrillas were a law unto themselves, sent in to track down the worst war criminals who would never see justice and clean the slate.”

“Good Lord! Are you sure of this? The end justifies the means sort of mindset?”

“Exactly. As a cop, it goes against everything I believe in, but still, I can see the underlying justice in the idea.”

“So the mop-up committee went in like a bunch of Rambos to get the job done by punishing the unpunished?”

“You got it.”

Kate was silent, thinking about what it meant to her to know this about Dillon. Before she heard this, her immediate thought had been how bad she felt going behind his back, rifling into what he apparently wanted kept secret.

This new facet to the sheriff made him the perfect assassin. She had the greatest urge to hang up the phone and run back to bed, pull the covers over her head like she used to do when she stayed home alone.

“Okay. Anything else?” She took pride that her voice sounded normal.

“No, pretty much routine. Besides his stint in Viet Nam, he has lived in Plenitude all his life. I can fax you this information if you like.”

“No, Murphy, you don’t need to do that. I’d better hang up now, though. Can’t tell how long the desk clerk will be gone.”

“I’ll remember the switchboard next time.”

Kate wondered if there need be a next time.

“You didn’t tell me what you’re up to, Kate. Sounds like you may be getting in over your head. Again.”

He was the only one who knew the half of what happened in her last situation. She had often wondered how much he put on his official report. “No, it’s okay. Look, I’ll try to call you back as soon as I can, to keep in touch, if you want me to.”

“Hell, yes!” he blurted and then stammered like a schoolboy caught writing dirty words on the blackboard. “Of c—course I want you to. I’d just l—like to know what you’re into that you n—need information about the local sheriff.”

“It’s personal. Can’t talk now, Murphy. I’ll call from a phone booth sometime this week. Could be I’ll have something to tell you by then or maybe this is all one big ugly dream.”

“But, Kate—”

“Thanks a lot for your trouble. Bye.” She hung up briskly, to let him know she was finished, at least for now.

What did this latest wrinkle about Viet Nam mean? Even without this knowledge, she knew Dillon had the strength to overpower the women. When she saw the two women, on her astral projections, as she had learned to call her mind-travels, neither looked to be small and dainty. The one in the water was a hiker and camper, traveling alone, and apparently used to taking care of herself. They could not have been pushovers. Yet, there was no sign of a struggle in the old house. Had he caught Betsy in her sleep? Kate wished that were so, but didn't think it happened that way. With a stab of insight, she knew the killer needed his victims to see him as they died.

Kate imagined the wire tightening around their throats, cutting into the flesh. She touched her fingers to her own neck, trying not to feel the pain. She did not want to feel the pain. Slowly, slowly the wire tightened. Did he do it from the back? Surprise them? No, he wanted to see their terror. He needed to see himself mirrored in their eyes. That was probably when he realized he hadn't killed the right person, but he had to finish it.

Dillon was capable of such violence. It was plain in his past, in his government service. From what he told her about his childhood, he could have had mixed feelings toward his mother. He could have loved her for her gentle nature and at the same time despised her weakness that let her father ruin their lives. He must have seen her running away as abandonment. His mother left him behind with his grandfather, a man he hated.

Certainly, Dillon believed the old man ordered his father's death. He hated his grandfather so much he would not accept the valuable ranch and acreage that he left behind.

Did Dillon Albarade hate enough to kill the ones who tried to get close to him? There was still the outside possibility that he had known the tourist. She could have come into his shop to rent the kayak and they could have even gone out together.

Oh, God, and here she was blindly shooting into his circle like an unguided missile.



The following evening Dillon called from his shop saying he had time to take her rafting in the morning, early. “Early morning is the best time for you to see birds and wild life that disappear after the day wears on.”

It sounded sensible and Kate agreed, but didn’t sleep half the night because of her troublesome thoughts. Dreams came to her, dreams of lying in the still water, looking upward, no one to help her, no one to mourn her, no one to bury her. She woke, bathed in a cold sweat and couldn’t sleep any more. By the time she heard the wakeup call from the night clerk, she was dressed and ready to go.

Right on time, Dillon pulled up in front of the hotel in his four-wheel-drive. It was a good sign that he wasn’t hiding anything or he might have asked her to meet him somewhere.

He leaped out of his side to open her door, a gesture that seemed incongruous in the light of her worries the night before. He looked so damnably handsome, wearing a Stetson and a fleeced-lined denim vest. The hunter-green plaid shirt under his vest made his eyes look deep, jungle green. His baseball cap lay between them on the seat.

Was he trying to impress her with the cowboy gear? If so, it was working.

“Hi. Guess you couldn’t round up any more rafter business.”

“Morning. Hop in. Looks like you’re the last of my season.”

Kate looked in the back seat at the rolled up sleeping bags and lanterns. A warning zinged through her and she swallowed, unable to speak. She climbed in and fastened her seat belt with shaking hands. “Are you planning a camping trip? I don’t know if I can afford more than a one day trip.”

He shrugged. “We never spoke of a fee, no need to now. I have to haul in the canoes and raft and stow them in the shed for winter. I’d be going anyway and company’s always welcome.”



“It’s just that I don’t see why you need so much equipment.”

“Have to warm up after the rafting. Need somewhere to sit and dry out. That’s why I told you to bring the extra clothing. River spray soaks right through your clothes, and it’s damned cold.”

She felt warmth toward him without wanting to. “Do you provide all your guests with such individual attention?”

He grinned. “Maybe. Maybe not. I usually handle a trip on the water pretty much like this. I build a fire and furnish blankets to wrap up in. I grill fish or steak over the campfire. Don’t worry about a thing, it’s all part of the job description.”

Her lips curved in a tiny smile, thinking of the inappropriateness of frugality when she might not live to see tomorrow.

The car was warm and cozy, like the inside of a tomb. She felt the need to break the silence. “How many times do you take people out during the summer?”

“It varies from season to season. I choose my clients. This will be my last river ride until next summer, that’s why I asked you to come along. I’ll store my gear in the sheds and lock them up for the season.”

“Oh.” The dawn was just spreading pinkish tentacles of light across the curving highway, touching between the trees skirting the road. The thick row of trees along the edge and leading down the bank toward the river stayed in eerie darkness. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of the river off to the side. “Where are we going, exactly?”

Dillon didn’t answer, just took a right from the highway onto a narrow road that traversed above the river. They traveled a few miles and so far, there had been no other traffic on the little road.

He gave her jeans, thick wool shirt, and down jacket an approving look. She had pulled her hair back away from her face in a ponytail. She wore hiking boots she bought yesterday at a shoe store for what she considered an exorbitant fee. She would have to work all year at her bookkeeping jobs just to pay for this vacation.

“I’ve got the kapok vests, you needn’t worry about that,” he said.

What was he talking about? “Kapok vests?”

“Life preservers.” He glanced at her a long moment and she caught up the slack.

“Oh, of course, I know life preservers, just hadn’t heard that term kapok recently. Every place has different terminology, I suppose.” How dumb of her, not to know what a kapok vest was. She should have read up on rafting while she was in the library. But then she was supposed to be covering a trip for her newspaper, wasn’t she? That didn’t mean she had to know all the details.

He would spot a phony if she tried to make out she knew too much about water sports. As it was, she had fibbed in telling him that she and Mac had rafted.

“I’m not going to take you on white water,” he said. “Too dangerous first time out. We’ll just mosey down the river at a good pace.”

“We’re camping at the Dells, aren’t we?” A flare of excitement mixed with dread sped through her. That was why she brought her computer.

He shot her a quick look. “How’d you guess?”

Her pulses raced at his question. Was it innocent or calculated? She took a deep breath. “It wasn’t exactly a guess. I’m psychic.” She tried for lightness in her voice. “It runs in my family. My Scottish grandmother was psychic. I’m the last of the line, looks like.” She watched his eyes, to see if he flinched. If he was psychic, too, he might show some surprise at least.

He cleared his throat, as if the conversation made him uncomfortable.

“Are you?” she asked abruptly.

He turned to look at her, his dark eyebrow raised quizzically.

“Am I what?”

“Are you psychic?”

He laughed. She felt relieved that the laugh was not familiar, although the laugh from the killer was muffled within her thoughts, sort of whispered, so she couldn’t be perfectly sure.

“Hell, no. Wouldn’t want to be. Don’t think I even believe in it, though I try to keep an open mind about things in general.”

Kate waited for normal questions about how her psychic abilities worked, but none came. That was odd. It could mean that he didn’t want her to pry—if he *was* psychic. Surreptitiously, she reached her fingers toward his hats lying on the seat between them. She clutched the brim of the Stetson first, closing her eyes. Nothing. No sensations came through with the Stetson or the baseball cap. She had never been able to work in that way, in what psychics called psychometrics. When they touched an object belonging to someone, they received vibrations, visions. It had never worked for her.

Had he blocked her out? Experienced psychics could slam up blocks to keep out intruders. She had never tried that either. The more Kate learned about the subject, the more her reluctant acceptance of “the gift” developed into something she no longer feared.

“Thank you for bringing me along,” she said, turning in the seat to look at his stern profile. When he made no comment, she let it go, but the troublesome apprehension returned.

Dillon switched on the radio to a country western station. The fan in the heater hummed just below the sound of the music. She closed her eyes and rested her head back against the seat. He braked suddenly and before she knew what was going on, he opened the car door and raced around to the front of the vehicle.

They had stopped in a little pull-off area. Kate touched the can of mace in her pocket. Was this where he was going to approach her?

Dillon stuck his head in the open window. It was the first time she realized that she was cold.

“Sorry. Took the Bronco in for a lube job yesterday and Amos must have left the plug loose on the radiator. The car’s running hot.”

She could see steam boiling out of the front, under the raised hood. What she knew about cars she could carve on a wooden pencil, but this seemed remarkably convenient.

“I think I have an extra plug in the back. Have to let it cool. Do you have a cell phone?”

The question sounded odd to her. Did he want her to have one? “No. Never got used to the idea of someone calling me any time they wanted.”

“It wouldn’t do much good anyway, Plenitude is in a sort of a valley and when you climb this little incline on the side road, what with the trees and all, nothing gets through.”

Kate felt the trees lining the narrow road closing in on her. No sounds of traffic, even though he said the main highway was almost parallel with this cut off road. Nothing sounded in the stillness but the rush of water from far away. There probably was not a gas station closer than Plenitude, but she didn’t ask, afraid of the answer.

He left the hood up and slid back under the wheel.

“Too bad we can’t have the heater on,” she said for lack of anything else to say.

He laughed. “Ah, I can see you know all about cars. No water, no heater, that’s the way it works.” He reached toward the back seat. “Here, let me get a blanket to wrap around you.”

“No! I mean, that’s okay. I’m perfectly fine.” She was not going to wrap herself up like a sausage in a bun. If he was the killer, salivating for a new victim, he was going to have to work at it. The fact that she didn’t fit the description of the two dead women was of little consolation. The man who tuned into her thoughts knew what she looked like.

They sat in silence. The new day brought a bit of warmth from the sun, but very little of the rays made their way down through the trees.

“Are you here on a vacation?” he asked.

He obviously was not good at small talk or he was trying to catch her in a lie. She had already told him she was doing a piece on rafting for a Sunday supplement.

“Working vacation, I guess you’d call it.”

“Where you from?”

“New York. Ever been there?”

“Nope. Wouldn’t want to go, either. I got everything I need right here.”

“How wonderful.” She had begun a sarcastic answer but it turned into the truth. It *was* wonderful if you knew where you belonged with such certainty.

The minutes stretched past an hour. What was he waiting for? If he was going to make a move, why dally until another car could possibly come this way? Surely, someone would drive by eventually.

As if in answer to her thoughts, he said, “Not many people use this old road in the off-season. There’s a cutoff that the locals know and prefer.”

Great.

He got out and peered under the hood. Maybe she should get out, too, let him know she was concerned. Kate shivered as she crawled out of the car and stood in the front. How had he disappeared so fast? She looked down and saw him lying on his back, his long, denim-covered legs spread apart, pants tight around his hips. He was under the car, but not all of him. Oh, no, not all of him.

In spite of her fears and suspicions, she felt an audacious wave of desire. There was something erotic about a man lying flat on his back, helpless. Kate turned away when he slid out.

“I’ll go for water. I won’t be long.”

It took at least a half hour before he returned up the steep incline with two gas cans filled with water.

“I thought you’d abandoned me.”

“Nope. This is the highest crest of the road and river. When we leave here it’s all downhill.”

“Wouldn’t you know that’d be the way?” she said.

Dillon poured the water in slowly and paused often to look beneath the car.

“Doesn’t seem to leak. Amos just forgot to tighten the radiator petcock.”

He wiped his hands clean on a rag from the back of the car and walked toward her.

Her fingers, numb with cold, tightened on the mace container in her pocket.

Dillon leaned forward and reached out his hand. She flinched as he pulled a large, orange leaf out of her hair and waved it lightly across her nose.

“Say, you’re a mite jumpy.”

That was an understatement. She wasn’t sure if her clenched hand would release the mace can until she warmed up a bit. She managed a grin. “We about ready to go?”

He nodded, opened the car door for her and, when she sat down, walked to the front of the car and slammed down the hood.

They traveled the rest of the way in silence until he slowed and braked to a stop at another cutoff on the side of the road.

“Here we are. I keep most of the gear down there in a locked shed. I’ll make a couple of trips with our stuff. Wait here for me so I can help you. It’s a steep path.”

It was warmer now. The sun shone fully on their wide place off the road, a scenery pull-off from the looks of it. The river leaped and careened down the canyon and Kate felt misgivings rise up sour in her throat. She watched Dillon’s broad back, receding down the stone steps, and began gathering up sleeping bags and blankets. She might be a city woman, but she was not some hothouse flower he had to pamper every step of the way.

Part way down the path, she ran into him coming up. The blankets were blocking half her sight and running into him was like hitting a brick wall. She tilted back and he reached out to grab her arms, his hands rough and hard even through her jacket.

“What’s this all about?”

“I can help. You don’t have to do it all.”

“It’s my job, but hey, I can use the help. Follow the trail, but be careful. You’ll see where to pile the stuff. Wait there, this should be the last trip.”

“My, aren’t we bossy?” she muttered, watching her step as he suggested. She threw the armload on the beach and looked around. The river didn’t seem as loud down here as it had from up on the canyon road.

Standing on the windy beach, looking out over the dark restless water, she felt little fingers of cold begin to play against her skin. They were totally alone. She pulled the little black mace container out of her pocket, took off the safety latch, and poked it back into place. She would not go down without a fight.

Then she sat down on a fallen log and waited for him.

What would happen when they arrived at the Dells? By then, would intuition come to let her know if she could trust Dillon? A warning by then could be too late. He said he wasn’t psychic and the killer definitely was, but Dillon could be lying. She had certainly told enough lies since she came here.

Her life was on the line if she guessed wrong. Suddenly Kate had such a desire, such a tremendous need to live. She had so many things left to do. She had wasted so much of her life in grief compounded by her fear of strangers. She didn’t want anyone to take what she had left away from her. But, neither did the two women who had died so brutally.

It was a chance she had to take. She could not turn her back on the others to come, the others who deserved to live and wouldn’t if this madman was not stopped.

Filled with fear and wanting so badly to run and hide somewhere, Kate managed to steady her trembling body and waited for Dillon to come down the trail.

## CHAPTER 9

**W**hen Dillon returned with the last of the provisions, he put them down and sat next to her on the log. “That’s the lot,” he said.

“Looks like you intend to stay out a week.”

He took off his baseball cap and slapped it against his thigh as if shaking out dust. She was beginning to see that as a sign he was considering his answer.

“I stow my excess stuff in this aluminum building until next season, is all. Thought I might as well bring it down on my last few trips.”

“How long will this trip take?”

He leaned forward to look at her. His eyes, green as the trees surrounding them, stared into hers and it seemed as if he could not avoid the issue any longer.

“I usually make this last outing alone. I enjoy the solitude after so many tours with summer visitors.”

“Why did you bring me along then?”

He grinned, a little boy grin in a face that had been through the end of time and back. “You intrigue me. I wanted to get to know you.”



“Me?” Her voice squeaked up an octave, embarrassing her. Until the word intrigue hit her. Was that a word the killer had used? No, he’d said, ‘*You amuse me.*’

“Yeah. You’re different from anyone I have ever met. You looked prim and proper, kind of stiff when we first met. You may be a city woman, but you seem suited for this country. I like the way you look, have from the first time I saw you in the cafe.”

Was he putting her on? She thought of herself as terminally plain. Too thin, small boobs, long legs, brown hair, even features. Her only unique attribute was her wide, spare jaw line, giving her a bold, tenacious look that she had seen on popular models in women’s magazines. Yet, that was just a look, not her.

When his words sank in, the warm trickle of perspiration started to seep into her layers of clothing, even though it was still chilly. The wind blew sharp off the river. If he was the killer, then he was psychic and would know that she was going to track him down, no matter what. Maybe that was what intrigued him.

He reached to touch her hands, clenched together in her lap, as if in answer to her unasked question. His touch made her shiver. Kate pulled away and stood to look at the river. She should sense danger if he was the killer. She was afraid, but of what? Of physical danger or her feelings about this compelling man? If he was drawn to her, it was time to admit she had the same reaction to him.

Dillon unfolded his long legs to walk over next to her. “Are you cold? Or are you afraid of me?”

Kate laughed, a nervous little laugh she was not proud of. “I don’t know. Both, I guess,” she answered truthfully. “How do we begin our trip?” It was her turn to stall.

“We’ll have to hike upstream a ways. The river leaves the road and the best starting place is up there. This point is too rocky. I store the raft and my canoes here at the end of the season, but keep them up river for use during the season.”

“And the Dells are down that way?” she pointed downstream.

“Yep. We’ll raft, towing the canoes, and by the time we get to the Dells, you will probably be mighty weary of the trip. Then, depending on the time, we can camp there for the night or hike back here to the car. Beyond the Dells is severe white water.”

“Sounds like a lot of trouble just to take a little ride on the river,” she commented.

“Some hate it, others can’t get enough. From the time you get out there to the time you quit, you’re wet and cold and feel like you’ll never dry out.”

“Then why...”

“Why do people do it?” He shrugged. “Because it’s there, I reckon. It’s a challenge, only not as strenuous as mountain climbing or as dangerous as skydiving. We’ve never lost a customer yet.”

Yet? Not a definite comfort. “Will my laptop be okay? I keep it with me to make notes.” She hated to take a chance, bringing it along. Maybe the killer had discovered by now how she got into his head. It would be easy to destroy both her and the computer at one time. Still, she had to be at the Dells with her computer, praying it would tell her what she needed to know about the killer and the woman in the river.

“Sure thing. All our equipment will be under tarps. Unless we capsize and then I can’t guarantee. But that’s highly improbable unless a strong wind comes up.”

*Unless we capsize?* Was that a warning? The car was above them in the parking lot. She could still retreat and ask him to take her back to town. If she did that, he would never come out here with her again. She had to get him and her computer to the Dells.

“That’s good enough for me. How can I help?”

In a few minutes, they were on their way, hiking up the trail at a slight angle from the road. He wore a backpack with his sleeping bag rolled up and tied to it. She carried a lightweight backpack, plus her computer wrapped in plastic, and a smaller sleeping bag. Her load wasn’t heavy, not nearly as bulky and heavy as what Dillon carried, but still, after they walked halfway into the after-

noon, she felt weighted down and tired. It was slow slogging through the woods, sometimes down to the beach, and then up again when the trail changed.

When she lagged, he stopped and turned around. "Sorry, I keep forgetting you're a city girl. You keep up pretty good, though."

Kate took a deep breath and bent over to put her hands on her knees, resting her back and shoulders. "I'm not used to walking this much," she admitted. "But I enjoy it, maybe that makes the difference."

His eyes crinkled at the corners with his grin. "It's not far now, just around that bend." He pointed ahead.

When they finally made it, the river had straightened out, become less choppy, almost calm, and the wind had died away. A large rubber raft and a smaller one were pulled up on the shore with a long line that looped around a tree.

"Aren't you afraid someone will steal your raft between expeditions? It looks expensive."

"Nope. There isn't much theft around here. We all know each other. An occasional tourist might be tempted, but this is a special place that few outsiders know how to get to." He pointed upward. "You can't get back to the road from here, anyway."

Great news. She was down here alone with a possible serial killer and no way out. Where was that damn psychic stuff when she needed it?

Dillon tossed the gear in the small raft, covered it with a plastic tarp with a thick rope threaded through a huge grommet, and tied everything together to the side of the raft. There was a canoe at the edge of the water that he hooked to the back of the raft rigging.

"Here, let me help you with this." He held one of the kapok vests he had been talking about earlier.

She straightened out her arms and he slipped the vest on her and adjusted the collar. His hands felt warm and a little rough

against her skin. She imagined he lingered overly long near her neck before he reached down to tie it in front.

“Can I help you with yours?”

He shook his head. “No. Thanks anyway. I’m used to doing it.”

When he geared up to his satisfaction, he helped her on board, untied the mooring line, threw it in the craft, and then pushed off with an oar.

At first, Kate felt icy terror when they crested, splashed, and sailed over and through waves on the river. It was such a helpless feeling. She had no control over her situation. It was all up to Dillon and she had no way of being sure just how much control he had.

“I thought you said we wouldn’t be in white water?” Kate forced her voice into a high-pitched shriek to make herself heard over the water.

His grin was wide. “Lady, this isn’t white water by a mile. Just a little narrows to navigate until we get to the center.” His shoulders moved with effortless grace as he manipulated the oars, sliding the small craft around rocks that surfaced suddenly, keeping away from the shoreline.

After Kate’s first panic, she began to enjoy herself, tilting her face into the spray, smelling the rich, loamy river, tasting the icy water on her lips, inhaling the odor of pines that permeated the air.

Once he spared a look back at her and his rich laughter exploded against the walls of the narrow canyon of rocks and trees.

It was just dangerous enough to get her blood soaring. Every nerve ending in her body tingled and she began to feel a dimly remembered warmth spreading through her stomach and warming her breasts as she watched his movements. What was the matter with her? Was the danger turning her on? Or was it the sight of this rugged, powerful man in front of her, making all the right moves with his tight Levis and muscular arms and shoulders? He had slipped out of his jacket, disdaining the kapok affair he made

her wear. The sun slanted down on his dark hair curling damply on his neck at the edge of his collar.

What a terrible waste it would be if he were the killer. But then, she knew all about that kind of waste, didn't she? The old hurts of her life flooded back unexpectedly, coming in waves that overwhelmed her. She felt engulfed in sorrow for what had disappeared from her world.

She must not forget that if he was the killer, he had nothing but contempt for other people's lives. She tried to imagine his big hands pulling on a wire that terminated a living, breathing person, but her mind refused to picture it. Nothing in her psychic capacity was sending off any vibes either for or against Dillon.

She couldn't wait to get to her computer as soon as they stopped.

"Dells—up ahead," he shouted above the rushing noise of the water.

Kate held her breath. Now was the time for him to make a move, if he was going to. She had nothing to defend herself with, but will and caution and the tiny little mace container. But she was determined she wouldn't make it easy for him.

The canyon walls had gradually disappeared. The river widened and the water spread out, choppy but more even. The raft gave one last leap across a small wave and eased up, to settle on the still water. This section of the river was more like a gigantic lake, where the swiftness along the edges subsided calmly. It looked dark and deep. Trees closed in all around until only the center of the water was afire with sunlight.

Dillon worked the oars to move closer to shore and leaped out, snagging the line, and loping up the bank to tie it onto the nearest tree.

She was thankful her sudden lust for him was gone. It had been the combined excitement of the heady movement in the swift moving water, the sensation of imminent danger, the spectacle of the outdoors, and the unusualness of her situation, she told herself.

As Dillon lifted her out, he held her close to his chest a moment longer than he needed to. Kate tensed, waiting for his next move. He set her down easy, just above the lapping water line.

While he built a fire, Kate unpacked the raft and spread out the tarp to dry. She was chilled to the bone and as wet as she had ever been from a shower. Maybe that was why the erotic feeling left so abruptly.

“Want to share that smile with me?” He stopped laying out the kindling for the fire on the beach and looked up at her. “What are you thinking?”

“Ah...nothing, just a fleeting thought.” She felt herself blush. “What can I do to help?”

“We got a late start, no need to hurry back. We’ll camp here tonight. It’ll be dark by the time we get back to the shed and I don’t want a poacher mistaking us for a deer rambling through the woods.”

“Does that happen?”

“Some of them shoot first and look later. I’ve seen cows and dogs and almost everything you could name shot up and left to rot or thrown into the river.”

*Thrown into the river.*

“That’s awful. Can’t someone stop them?”

He shrugged. “It’s the way it’s always been here. Why don’t you get into something dry? It was on the list.”

“Yes, and a very detailed list it was, too.” She waited while he untied the heap of possessions and extracted her backpack.

“Ah...where do I...”

He lifted his head in that slight tilt, a grin splashing across his tanned face, his eyes crinkling at the corners. With the fire crackling and blazing up behind him, in silhouette, he looked surrealistic, not of this earth.

He looked shadowy.

She shivered and rubbed her arms.

“See? You’re already chilled. Pick a spot over there, just beyond the trees.” He motioned toward the edge of the woods. “No need to go too far away.”

He didn’t have to worry about that. It was late afternoon and the sun sank out of sight early in the mountains, earlier in the forest. It would be dusk soon and then dark. She moved back into the woods far enough so she could still see the campfire. It didn’t take long to shuck out of her cold, wet clothes and pull on a fresh pair of jeans and a warm flannel shirt. She would have to wear the same jacket, she hadn’t thought of bringing an extra.

“Here, take mine,” he said when he saw her emerge from the woods. “I’ve another inside the bedroll. I always take a spare. Someone is bound to forget.”

“Thanks.” She shrugged gratefully into his fleece lined denim jacket, savoring the smell of him left behind—woody, coffee, smoke from the fire. Man smells.

He laid out their bedrolls on the beach, a circumspect distance from each other, but not too far. Then he started to make supper.

“Need some help?” She didn’t want to move, she was so cozy, but it was only polite to ask.

“Thanks. It’s under control.”

When he had the meal ready, they pulled closer to the fire. After they ate the plate full of bacon, hash browns, and scrambled eggs, they sat a while, looking up at the canopy of trees. Stars peeked through like tiny twinkling grains of salt scattered with a giant shaker.

“Do you like the city, Kate Macklin?”

“Yes. It’s all I know. When I came here, I thought how comfortable, how serene, and peaceful it was and then...”

“And then you found out about Betsy. Hell, that is one murder. Your city has hundreds. Why would that bother you so much?”

“It’s not just that. In the city, you learn to adapt to a spirit of impersonality. Outsiders think of that as cold and hard, but it’s a method of survival. There is just too much going on that would

overcome you if you didn't insulate yourself. You have a lot of that closed feeling here, in this little town. It makes me uncomfortable."

"You don't think Colorado is beautiful? The mountains, the trees—the whole state is magnificent."

She liked the way he let his defenses down when he spoke of something he admired.

"It is beautiful. The people are nice, too, for the most part. Who knows? I may grow to love it here."

"I hope so."

They sat in silence near the comfort of the fire, and she sensed he didn't want to talk. The night was dark, the stars distant in their brilliance. The smell of pines, the tangy smell of water, and the burning coals lent a mystic air to the night. An owl hooted in the distance, a soft, gentle sound and always in the background a gentle lapping of water near the shore. Birds nestled in the thick trees making little rustling noises.

By the time they were ready for sleep, the fire had died down to orange coals, the night grew damp and chilly with the start of a light wind rushing through the trees.

Kate decided not to change into the flannel pajamas she had brought. It would be easier to sleep in her clothing, especially since she should be prepared. Prepared for what? Did she still believe Dillon could be the killer? She needed to get to the computer in the worst way.

Finally, Dillon got up to cover most of the fire, leaving a few coals burning for light. If they had to get up during the night, he explained. There was no moon and, except for the stars, it was the darkest night she had ever seen.

"Good night, Kate," he said, and she said good night back.

A few minutes later she heard his breathing change like when a person sleeps. She held her hand over the flashlight when she retrieved her computer, opened the lid, grateful to have remembered to charge the batteries.



At first, the bookkeeping program came on and she moved through the spreadsheets, impatiently. The scene on her monitor began shifting. The sensation of coldness surrounded her, the familiar crinkling ice at the back of her neck. She saw the woman in the river again.

*'Close. You are so close. I am down there.'*

The words didn't come from the killer. Kate felt it was the woman in the river talking into her ear. The voice in her mind was so low and whispering. It had no gender, but she also felt no threat.

*Can you tell me what happened?* She typed on the keyboard, clumsily, by the light of the dying embers. She didn't want to use the flashlight batteries up. She might need it later.

Gradually the scene changed and golden fog swirled as Kate concentrated on the little screen. When the soft haze cleared away, she saw the forest, this forest. A small tent stood in the clearing with a lantern hanging to shed light through the sides.

She was inside the woman, seeing with her eyes, feeling her emotions. Kate struggled to break the thread between herself and the computer screen. She did not want to watch her die. She didn't want to know how it felt at the last agonizing moment.

Inexorably, Kate was drawn farther into the scene, her psyche blending with the woman. There was no escape. She couldn't break away.

The woman was changing her clothes, getting ready for bed. Even out in the wilderness, she was modest, slipping an overlarge T-shirt over her head. She wrestled with the buttons of the flannel shirt and dropped it, then the bra, next she shoved down her jeans and left her panties on, kicking the jeans over against the tent wall. She was modest, but not neat.

As she began brushing her long, dark hair, she heard the snap of a twig, sounding loud even above the constant noise of the river. She started to turn toward the tent flap, but before she could move, something thin, cold, and hard snaked around her neck, tightening. A bone-hard knee pushed into her back, against her

spine, holding her erect, when she otherwise would have crumpled in fright and pain.

There never was a sound between them, even when she was almost unconscious. The terrible wire bit into her soft flesh, choking off air and yet he squeezed tighter.

For a brief instant, he relaxed his hold and took his knee away from her back. She gasped, hoping, praying he was going to stop. He turned her around, almost gently and let her look into his eyes.

The eyes of death.

She tried to focus. He looked blurry. Her mind cried out. She didn't want to die. Now it hurt, it hurt so bad. Now she wanted it to end, she wanted it over with. She was resigned. Ropy muscles in his neck popped up with the effort as he strained to finish it.

Then all was black. The computer screen was empty, dark, blending with the night, but the monitor made crackling noises. Kate knew there was more. Her heart was beating so loud she thought Dillon must be able to hear it.

The scene shifted to the picture she had received on the train, a picture of the same woman, just murdered, only now she was in the river.

The thin silver wire marred the white neck, part of the woman's shirt was torn and for the first time, Kate saw a strip of flesh gone on the inside of the woman's arm, above her elbow joint, excised precisely, carefully so as not to mar the surface of her skin.

The same mark found on Betsy Albarade.

The view of the woman in the river faded away and Kate saw the camping tent, almost where she sat now. She sensed the canvas walls surrounding her and watched a gracefully moving dark figure holding a purse, looking through it, his fingers touching paper money, which he passed over. He pulled out a driver's license, staring down at it a long time as if soaking up the details about the woman he had just killed.

Kate struggled to see what was printed on the license, but the killer moved away, pocketing the license and what appeared to be

credit cards. Outside the tent, he put some large, heavy rocks in the purse and flung it out into the river.

Kate watched the splash as it sank. She concentrated on her computer screen, needing to see more, needing to see the face of the killer. During her extreme concentration, as if he recognized her presence, the killer turned toward the screen to face her. She knew he couldn't see her, this had happened in the past, but that was no consolation. Although darkness shrouded his face, the eyes, dark and penetrating stared at her, pinning her to the spot.

Dillon had green eyes. But they could look dark at times.

She leaped to her feet and hit the dirt running for the woods. If the man lying next to her did this, she had to put as much distance between them as she could. In her blind terror, how she would get out of the woods, find her way back to Plenitude, occupied but a second in her thoughts. Get away, get away her heart pounded. A thick red haze formed in front of her eyes, she was so frightened.

She crashed through the brush and heard the sound of someone behind her. She made a bee-line for the water, past thinking straight, she wanted to get away from him. If the raft was there where he had left it, she could push it off into the water. He would have no way to follow then.

A hard hand grasped her ankle just as she toppled over at the edge of the river, a fraction short of hitting face first in the water.

Kate was past terror now. Sorrow overwhelmed her, making her bones turn soft, immovable. She would join the woman in the river, and lie here forever, with no one to know.

"For God's sake, Kate! What the hell's got into you?" Dillon pulled her backward, his hand on her ankle. He had taken a dive to reach her before she touched the water.

He hugged her close, wiping her hair away from her face. She struggled in his grip, trying to get loose, hitting him with her fists.

Her body felt drenched in sweat in spite of the cold night air. Her chest still burned from unaccustomed running. Her neck throbbed in sympathy for the woman she had seen die. She

touched her tongue to her lips, expecting to taste the warm liquid of her own blood.

“Shh. Quiet, woman, quiet now, everything’s okay.” His low deep voice penetrated her terror. Her heart slowed its drumbeat in her chest. Easier breathing returned gradually so that her throat relaxed and she quit struggling.

Dillon explored her face with gentle fingers, brushing away the grit and small stones, wiping her hair back from her face. She leaned into his shoulder with complete surrender. Only then did he tilt her head back and touch his lips gently to hers at first and then with a need that matched her own. The kiss seemed to go on forever. He was the first to pull away, shaking his head.

“I’ve needed to kiss you since the first time I laid eyes on you,” he admitted.

Me, too, she wanted to add, but didn’t. There was too much between them yet. He could have killed her on the spot. Those eyes, those terrible eyes staring out of the computer, the man those eyes belonged to would have killed her. But they weren’t Dillon’s eyes.

“I’ve been so wrong,” she murmured into his chest as he picked her up to carry her back to their campfire.

Blessedly, he refrained from asking her questions while he rubbed her hands between his and wrapped her in more blankets. They sat close to the flames he’d built up again and she leaned far enough away to watch the firelight slant off the planes of his cheekbones. How could she have thought he was the killer? There were so many inconsistencies in the way Dillon walked, his mannerisms, his attitude, his eyes. Not the eyes of the killer.

“I guess you want to know why...” Her voice was shaky and she swallowed past the tightness.

“When you want to talk.” He pulled her close, nestling her in the crook of his shoulder.

The killer, although she hadn’t seen his face, had none of Dillon’s brawn and density. The killer was thinner, wiry and muscular, like a ballet dancer.

“I woke to see you typing on your computer. All of a sudden you leaped out of the bedroll like a scared rabbit.”

“You chased me,” she accused.

“Damn straight. As soon as you veered toward the water, I knew I had to stop you. That water is so cold, you’d have died of hypothermia before I could get you back to town.”

“I need to tell you the truth of why I came here.” It was time to tell him everything she knew. It was time to be honest with him. She had to have an insider break through the town’s distrust, to drag the river for the body.

The body of the woman she had watched die and had come to bury.

## CHAPTER 10

**T**hey sat in front of the crackling fire. Kate wrapped her arms around her knees, her hands clenched so tight they hurt. She wanted to say it right, she might not get a second chance. Dillon waited for her to speak, his eyes unreadable.

Kate touched her hand to her neck, as if she felt the cold bite of the wire into her flesh. Did it take long to die that way? Was there a lot of pain? She knew the answers. She had just come back from the hell the woman had endured.

She pointed over the sleeping blanket to her laptop. “I see things in my computer,” Kate began, not sure where to start. When Dillon didn’t respond, she hurried on. “I saw my daughter, Annie, lying dead in the street, struck by a drunken driver. I saw the man loading her body into his car. I knew he would throw her somewhere she’d never be found.”

“Oh, God, Kate.” Dillon raised his hands as if telling her he didn’t know what to say.

She pushed on. It had been a while since she had let the memory outside to air and she needed to finish the story. Maybe her pain would heal now.

“It came to me on the computer. I saw where he hid Annie. Under a viaduct in a place the highway workers and equipment dumped the used cement and dirt. She never would have been

found. My daughter called out to me. She wanted me to find and bury her next to her father. That's why the woman in the river called to me."

Kate sensed Dillon's confusion. She waited for his interruption. It was hard to tell what was going on in his head. When he didn't interrupt, she continued.

"I was traveling on the train through Colorado on a vacation when I saw this woman in the river." Kate set the computer down and got to her feet, pointing. "There. She is lying down there. A voice told me she was."

"Let me see if I've got this straight. You aren't a newspaper reporter sent here to do a rafting story, are you? I didn't believe that for a minute."

"Why not?"

"You don't have that edge most reporters have, you know, story at any price."

"That's a wide generalization, but no, I'm not a reporter."

"You saw a woman in the river that no one else knows is there and you stopped off to investigate. For God's sake, why?"

"That's one reason why I'm taking the first vacation of my life. I had to get away. Actually, I wasn't sure if her death had happened yet and thought maybe I could prevent it."

"You've done this before?"

"Yes." Her voice was low.

He bent his head closer to hear. "Ah, I see. You look into your computer instead of a crystal ball. Makes perfect sense to me."

Kate sighed. This was not going to be easy, but at least it was far from the reaction she expected—outright disbelief. She could understand cautious skepticism.

"I know it's tough to accept, believe me, I've had problems with it myself."

"Any idea who the woman is in the river, or why she's there?"

Good questions to let her know he had an open mind. “No. I don’t know who she is. You and the town know as much about her as I do. She is—was—a traveler, a summer tourist. She had a tent just where we’re sitting.”

Kate had his full attention. He straightened, his eyes pensive, his body taut, as if he was holding his breath.

“How could you know that?”

“It had a little battery light hanging just there,” she pointed over her head. “It was still lit when he went inside. There was a purse. He filled it with rocks and threw it in the river after removing anything identifying her.”

“You’ve been checking the library files, but even so, there’s nothing in the paper about where the tent stood. And you are right, it was here.” He pointed his thumb downward to the ground where they sat. “And the woman was gone.”

“I told you, I see things.”

“What else did you see?”

*You don’t really want to know*, she thought, remembering the old house and the body of his ex-wife on the bed.

“She called to me. Someone called to me. This woman was killed in a cold-hearted fury, a wire wrapped around her neck.”

He leaped to his feet and pulled her up roughly to face him. “What the hell’s going on here? What do you know about the wire?”

Kate was silent, but looking into his eyes, she saw honest puzzlement and anger.

“We checked it out and figured the woman was a missing person who just took off for parts unknown,” he continued. “You’re getting her confused with Betsy.” After he had said the words, she knew he was shocked at admitting so much. The part about the wire must be information they were holding back.

“You’re hurting my arm.” She pulled away from him. She was five-foot-eight, and he loomed over her.

“Ah, I’m sorry.” He moved backward to put a little distance between them.



“That’s not all,” she plunged on. “I saw your ex-wife in that old house. She was killed the same way. Police call it ligature strangulation.”

The look in his eyes was one of stunned bewilderment. He could not have faked it. It was then her final doubts about him disappeared forever.

Dillon turned away for a moment, looking out over the water. She walked forward to stand at his side. They didn’t speak for a long time. When he looked at her, his expression was grim, his mouth a straight line with lips flattened in a grimace.

“That was privileged information. We told the reporters that Betsy was choked to death, but we never mentioned the murder weapon. You couldn’t possibly know that unless...”

“Unless I was there? Exactly. I was there. I didn’t want to be. It scared the hell out of me, but I had no choice. I saw other things, too.”

He bent his head to look into her eyes, as if that would let him understand what he was hearing.

“Here, on the inside of her arm...” Kate raised her own arm and pushed back the long sleeve to expose the tender white flesh on the inside. “There was a little strip of skin removed. No blood, so the killer excised it after she died. Carefully, as if he didn’t want to mar the skin too much or disfigure her.”

“Sonofabitch! I don’t believe what I’m hearing.” Dillon grabbed her shoulders, pressing his fingers in until she winced. “You *saw* all this? On your computer?”

“Yes, yes I did. You can call Captain Dennis Murphy in New York at the Tenth Street Precinct, if you want verification. He knows all about my visions.”

“Sit. I’ll get us some coffee. I need time to digest this.”

She watched him stride toward the fire, bend in a fluid movement, and pour the dark liquid. That graceful carriage of his, which she’d noticed from the beginning, was what had kept her thinking he was that shadow at the foot of the window. Now his grace proved not to be furtive, just something masculine to admire.

“I think of the woman in the river as Lenore. I’ve never said the name out loud before, but she should have a name.”

He stopped pouring the second cup and looked at her. “Lenore?”

“From Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*. Remember that old poem? ‘Sorrow for the lost Lenore, the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore, nameless here forevermore.’ I didn’t want to keep calling her the woman in the river.”

When they sat down side by side, Dillon covered her hand with his. “This had to be hard on you. It must be hell to be saddled with this so-called gift.”

Her hand felt warm and cozy, engulfed in his and she didn’t move away. He *believed* her.

“I hated the pictures when they first started,” she admitted. “Problem is, I don’t get to see exactly what I want to see. There is a selective vision taking place, something that is beyond my capacity to control. It’s as if fate or destiny has to be fulfilled and I am not allowed to stop it. Yet, at some point it’s okay that I step in. Believe me, it’s not something I’d wish on my worst enemy.”

“Did you go inside Betsy’s house?” His voice echoed his doubts, but he was intent, waiting for the answer.

“I didn’t go in the steps of the killer or the victim that time, thank God. I went in there afterwards. He had just...finished. She was lying on the bed as if asleep, with her long hair strewn out over the pillow.”

“The bastard cut some off, must have taken it and the piece of skin with him for twisted souvenirs.” He growled out the words, as if barely able to say them.

“Like the credit cards and driver’s license from the woman in the river.” A flash of something important, something she could not put her finger on, sped through her thoughts. She tried to slow the burst of ideas, but had no control over it.

Later. She could only hope it would return later.

“I saw the killer’s shadow at the edge of the trees in front of the house. He was looking up, as if he knew I was there. I call him the Catman. He does amazing things.”

“Tell me about the woman at the bottom of the river. Lenore,” Dillon prompted, after a few moments of silence.

It was clear that he wanted to get the sight of his dead ex-wife out of his head.

Kate listened to the crickets. Occasionally she heard a crash of brush from some small animal rushing through the woods.

“It could be dangerous,” she finally said.

“Does that mean you’re in danger? Does he know about you?” The frown between Dillon’s eyes told her he did not like that idea.

Good question. “I think he may be aware of my presence in a way.” She hedged a little not wanting him to know everything, especially about the killer being psychic. “I don’t think he knows where I am or who I am. He just knows someone is watching him.”

Dillon’s hands tightened on hers. “You can back away, go home, and leave. I would give anything to find the bastard that killed Betsy, but you have no stake in this. It’s not worth another life.”

“I’d be lying if I told you he doesn’t terrify me. I don’t have a good fix on him yet, but he is a psychopath. I get the feeling he wasn’t always evil, but he’s got to be stopped.”

“Few people are born evil, Kate. It’s a learned thing.”

Did he get that idea from his Viet Nam duty?”

“You’re probably right. He isn’t interested in killing me. Not yet anyway. I feel that very strongly. He is playing a game, taunting me to find him. A detective back in the city, an old friend, said that the psychotic killers sometimes beg to be caught. You just have to find the key.”

“Maybe the key is the woman in the river.”

“Exactly! I have felt that all along. I get the strong hunch that the killer messed up by killing two women in the same town. I

doubt he has ever done that before. His strength lies in striking in an unsuspecting area and moving out quickly, leaving no trace of why he chose his victim. That way there's no link between him and any other murders he might have committed."

"There's something else you may not know," Dillon said.

"What's that?"

Kate pulled her hand away to slap at a mosquito and immediately wished she hadn't. It had felt so warm, so protected inside his clasp.

"You're right. There was a wire involved in the murder, but when we found Betsy, he had taken it with him. You saw something that wasn't there."

"That was my vision." She rubbed her arms with her hands, trying to stave off the numbing cold, which permeated her clothing.

Dillon reached forward and stirred the fire so that it flared up.

"I'm not cold. It's terrifying to think the killer may have been in the room while I looked at the body." But she had seen him below, looking up at the windows at the same time. Did he know she was there? They had to be on separate planes of time and reality.

"I want to hear more about the dead woman." Dillon's voice was steady, a deep, comfortable sound that made her tangled thoughts smooth out to a little more normalcy.

"He killed her in the same manner, strangled her with a wire. I didn't see her arm until today, but the skin was removed the same way."

"She had long hair?"

"Yes. Long, dark hair. I saw it streaming around her head like seaweed."

"Curious. It begins to make a kind of sense. Both women were about the same age, same coloring, and same hair. I noticed that when the composite was made to put in the paper."

"Didn't you go out with the tourist at one time?" She thought the question might be out of line.

He laughed, a short bark that startled birds roosting overhead. “No. She came into my shop several times, looking at camping equipment, wanting to know about camping at the Dells. I told her if she could hike down there, she was allowed to camp. No vehicles,” he said by way of explanation.

At Kate’s questioning look, he continued. “That’s it. I did not date her, not once. The townspeople tend to gossip. The cops from Denver tried to work up a connection between Betsy and the missing woman and me, but they couldn’t make it stick. It was crap.”

“That’s what kept me from confiding in you in the beginning,” Kate admitted. “I thought there was a connection between you and the woman and it made sense that if you were a psychopathic killer, you’d—”

“You thought *I* was the killer?” He looked at her in astonishment. “Why the hell would you come down here with me if you thought that? Woman, that’s plain stupid.”

Kate laughed. “I know.”

“I hope to God you don’t make these snap judgments often. If you’re going to keep doing this thing with your computer, looking for stray bodies here and there, it only takes one time to make the wrong choice.”

Dillon sounded worried. Kate felt elated that he would be concerned about her welfare. “Can you drag the river? We need to find the body.”

“I can, but that holds a two-edged sword over my head. If we don’t find her, the town’s people will laugh me out of office. If we do, Denver will come back on me full force, wondering how I knew where to look for her.”

“You could tell them I told you.”

“Jesus! That is the worst idea yet. The people here are generous and good for the most part, but their way of thinking is sort of inbred, never changes. They make Washington Republicans sound like the most progressive liberals of our times. They would run us both out of town.”

“You’ve got a way with words, Sheriff.”

For a moment they were just a man and a woman, sitting side by side, enjoying each other's company.

The moment didn't last long.

"Are you going to look for her?" Kate prompted.

"I have to, don't I? Everything you have told me so far has been right on the money, and I would be foolish to ignore the lead. It's just going to be very tricky."

"I don't think we have to worry about the killer right now. He has this hit and run style. I sense that he never re-visits where he has killed. Or if he does, he would never kill again in that same place."

"You mean you think he's killed more than these two?"

"I'm afraid so. Like a cat, he stalks his victim. He's able to move around freely. I don't know how, but he'll never get caught at this rate."

"That's a bad scenario."

"There's more. He told me he's looking for someone." Oops, she hadn't meant to bring that out yet.

"What? Are you saying you talked to him? Did you see him? You said he didn't know you. What are you holding back?" His voice was harsh, a voice he might use to question a criminal, a police voice. The coziness between them had vanished.

Kate swallowed past a dry throat. "I just hadn't gotten around to telling you everything yet."

She tried to placate him with a steady, calm tone. No need to admit that the voice said he knew where to find her anytime he wanted. For one thing, the killer was probably bluffing so far. It would be the excuse Dillon needed to send her packing for home. She wasn't free to go yet. Not until she had helped the woman in the river.

His arms folded across his chest, his brow wrinkled with impatience. "I'm waiting."

"I see a figure sometimes. Once we tuned in on each other. I was typing on the computer and he seemed to be whispering, or

maybe it was some kind of telepathy. He said he was looking for someone.”

“Looking for someone?”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Lenore and Betsy are quite a bit alike in many respects. Both were attractive, with long, dark hair, both about the same age, same build. You said that yourself.”

He rubbed his mustache. “I could fax other sheriff stations, find out if there are any missing or homicides involving women of their description.”

“Yes!” He was finally getting into it. She knew he believed her, against his will, but still believed.

“There may have been witnesses to the murder of the woman in the river, or at least to the rifling of her belongings.”

He looked at her with interest, waiting.

“In my vision, he was rifling through her things, but I thought I caught sight of shadows at the edge of the woods. It could have been poachers.”

He grunted. “I’ll check it out.”

“There’s something else,” she began with hesitation, wondering how much of her visions he could or would absorb.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“The killer isn’t going to stop until he’s found the person he’s searching for. He said so.”

She clamped her hand to the back of her neck and stifled the scream that arose inside her, wanting out. The back of her neck warmed, the little hairs lifted, as if someone had just breathed against her skin.

The killer may have transferred through time and space as she did with her own psychic abilities. That was a frightening thought.

She could tell Dillon didn’t hear the wild, hysterical laughter ringing through the silent wood that turned her blood cold. The laughter continued until she wanted to put her hands over her ears, but she was afraid Dillon might think she was completely bizarre.

The shrieking cacophony gradually lessened, siphoning off toward the water where it subsided into a sibilant cackle some-

where in the middle of the river. A deadly reminder of the body that lay there at the bottom.

The Catman had been listening to them. He knew *everything*.

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## About the Author



Born in Phoenix, Arizona, Pinkie Paranya traveled all over the U.S., Alaska, and most of Mexico with her late husband. Ever since she can remember, writing has been her passion. After completing her fifteenth novel, trying to discover the genre she loved most, she still hasn't decided.

Paranya enjoys romances with their intrigue and uplifting happy endings, but she has also published two paranormal psychological suspenses, a cozy mystery, and an Early American Alaskan trilogy.

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