

CHAPTER 1

I gasped, almost choking. Seconds ticked by as I collected my thoughts; only to realize those two beady eyes bearing down on me were surrounded by fluffy white fur.

“Mittens! What on earth?” The cat, in her usual astute manner, continued her stare, but added her demanding “m-e-o-w,” making sure she was heard. It was apparent she was not happy and, after five years, I was still determined not to let her have her way.

“What is your problem?” She climbed onto my chest and sat there, waiting.

It was early September and a cold front rustled the leaves of the elm tree just outside my bedroom window; the branches clapping against the panes of glass. Little moonlight shone through the trees onto the bedroom wall, limiting my vision. I lifted my head to look over Mittens, and quickly pushed her aside. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but with Mittens’ insistence I knew I’d better check things out if I wanted any rest.

It was three-thirty on the bedside clock and I chose not to turn on the lamp since I had every intention of going back to bed. I got up as quietly as possible, with all sorts of scenes playing in my head. The cold plank floor kept me alert as I wondered how I was going to protect myself. When I got to the bedroom doorway, Mittens bolted under the antique four-poster bed in the bedroom across the hall. It

was an ideal place to hide, and although I briefly considered going there, curiosity got the best of me. I eased into the hallway only to turn back for my trusty Louisville Slugger.

The darkness of Grandma Mary's small, aged, wood frame house, with its settling noises and creaking floors, overwhelmed me at times. Mixed with wonderful experiences throughout my childhood, were fears from my young imagination still ingrained in my thirty-five-year-old mind; and the usual soft sound of my bare feet padding across the cool boards was amplified in the silence. Things were different since Grandma Mary had passed on and, although I felt she was with me in the house at times, I attributed it to wishful thinking rather than consider myself insane.

There was nothing unusual in the living room. And, the musty smell of time, although comforting, seemed a bit foreboding in the dark of night. The front window curtains were drawn, so I pulled them aside. It was pitch black with only a sliver of light filtering through the overcast sky. Tangled, in the curtain and the memories, I watched and waited for anything suspicious and, although hesitant, flipped on the porch light, anticipating the boogeyman I'd feared since my youth.

A florist's box, wet from an earlier rain, was propped against the porch railing. It hadn't been there when I checked the doors at ten.

Someone had been outside my front door.

Should I have left it until daylight? There was no one in sight as I stood there, curtain in hand. I unlocked the door and pushed the screen door open while the wind whipped the tail of my cotton gown as I held it to my breasts. The faint serenade of cicadas painted the air and once more I leaned out making sure no one was around. It was then I noticed a note, crumpled and wet, wedged beneath the box.

The screen door slammed, startling me, as I tiptoed through the standing water to get the package and note. Without thinking, I flipped off the porch light, only to think twice, and flipped it back on. And, I made sure I locked the door.

It was difficult adjusting to living in Texas, but with the help of friends, I had grown fond of Nickel Town. That, and the promises of my latest love, Tom Anderson, convinced me it was the right thing to do. After all, Grandma Mary's house had set empty for over seven years in Nickel Town and it offered fond memories that I had long forgotten.

The move to Texas had jarred my nerves and I was determined to bring Mother's favorite chair with me. It was comforting, especially when I could take the time to plop into it, curling up as I had a thousand times before, with my toes tucked underneath the flattened seat cushion.

In the warmth of the faded cloth I regained my composure and laid the damp note on the coffee table, flattening it with my hands, doing my best not to smear it any more than had already been done.

Maggie was all I could distinguish. I pushed it aside and untied the red ribbon wrapped around the flower box and, when I lifted the lid and pulled aside the tissue paper, I was stunned. Lying in the box were twelve dead roses. They had been red roses at one time, and around them, a black satin ribbon tied ever so nicely.

It made no sense. Why would someone leave me dead roses?

The more I stewed on it the more my stomach tied in knots. Any hope of sleep was gone and I had worked myself into frenzy. I had to do something, so I called the sheriff's department.

"Montgomery County Sheriff's Department, Deputy Brown speaking. How may I help you?"

"Yes ma'am. This is Maggie Watson down on Toadsuck Lane. Someone left a package on my front porch sometime after ten last night, and I'm pretty upset about it." There was a pause and I caught my breath.

"Yes, ma'am. I need some information please. What's your address and phone number?"

"1718 Toadsuck Lane and my number is 555-0149."

"Do you live alone?"

"I do now. My boyfriend, Tom Anderson, was living with me, but he's gone now."

"Is it possible he had something to do with this?"

"Oh--no, not really. He left the state and I haven't heard from him in over six months."

"All right. Have you opened the package?"

"Well, yes. It was a dozen dead roses. That's why I found it so unsettling. That, and the fact they were put there after ten."

"I understand. Are you having problems with anyone? At work? Anywhere?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I own Stepping Stone Nursery and, frankly, I can't imagine anyone I know doing this. I know some of my neighbors, but just enough to say hello."

"Alright then. I'll radio Deputy Johnson. He should be there in just a few minutes."

"Oh, all right. Thank you."

"In the meantime, make sure your doors are locked."

“Yes, of course.”

As I sat the receiver down, Tom came to mind. Another winner. He coaxed me to move to Nickel Town, especially after finding out my grandma had a place there, and then what does he do? He up and left me, telling me he needed to tie up loose ends in Montana. That was over six months ago. I hadn't heard a word, not so much as a phone call, since he'd left. If that was love to him, well...Of course, the fact that I met him on the internet didn't make me the brightest light bulb in the box and, it certainly didn't speak well of my good sense. It was partially my fault.

Again, I had managed to get involved too fast and believed everything a man said. After two failed marriages, as well as all the others; I should have learned something. Especially since being a sucker for love had never served me well.

It dawned on me a deputy was on his way over. A robe was definitely in order. The thought of putting my nice black silk robe on in order to look seductive crossed my mind but, I rationalized, it was that kind of thinking that had gotten me into the very situations I no longer wanted to be in. Besides, with my luck it would be some old fart thinking he was going to get lucky and I really didn't want to go there. Even I, in all my wisdom, had limitations.

I pulled my tattered, terry cloth robe from the back of the bathroom door and glanced in the mirror. What a frightful sight. The need for running a brush through my pillow-matted hair was severe; but I soon considered it a lost cause and threw it into a ponytail.

The pounding on the front door caught me off guard. I turned off the bathroom light and dodged Mittens as she scampered back to the bedroom. With no peep hole in the fifty-some-odd-year-old door, although hesitant, I opened the door, hoping it was the deputy.

I kept the screen door closed to keep a safe distance. Not knowing exactly what was going on, I didn't want to be too accommodating, even if he was the law. It would be certain, should I have to share the story of how I came to Nickel Town, how easily I could be manipulated, something I hadn't been proud of. And, even though I was doing my best to overcome old habits, the history did follow me, closely.

“Ma'am, I'm Deputy Johnson. The dispatcher told me you had an intruder. Are they still here?”

He looked like any other deputy, khaki uniform pressed nicely, all the appropriate gear, radio, gun, handcuffs and whatever else, but he was definitely more attractive than any I had seen in my lifetime, either in Arkansas or Texas. And, like most of the women I knew, a man in a uniform was always striking.

“No. Whoever it was didn’t come into the house. They just left a box on my porch some time after ten last night with a note, although I couldn’t read it since it was soaking wet.” Fidgeting with the belt of my robe, I had wrapped it tightly around my hand. Maybe I had made too big an issue over a simple gesture, even if it was a strange one. It wasn’t so much that I was scared, but humiliated that someone had put me in this position. Well, maybe I was a little scared.

“May I see the package and note?”

“Oh—Of course.” I pulled my robe tightly together, excused myself, and darted over to the coffee table. As I snatched up everything, Deputy Johnson stepped through the doorway. I was taken aback, but tried not to react. What was he doing? That put me on edge.

As though he had read my mind, he stepped back. “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I should have asked before coming inside. I was just trying to save you some steps.” He took his hat off and nodded, as if it were all within a southern gesture of sorts.

He was quite impressive. There were no love handles that I could see, and his biceps flexed well, just below the tight edge of his short-sleeved shirt. The uniform pants obviously had to have been altered to accommodate his muscular build.

“That’s all right,” I stammered, shoving the package and note forward. I felt awkward and embarrassed so I stepped back, almost falling over my mother’s chair. My little toe hung on its leg but I wasn’t about to let him know I was weak, or whiney, so I choked on the intense shooting pain that ran up my leg.

He studied my face. Had he seen the pain wash over me? Surely not. I briefly considered easing him out the door since he’d over-stepped my unspoken boundary, but I was curious about the man. He had such a strong, confident presence. And, justifying my curiosity, I decided it was always good to have a friend in law enforcement, at least that’s how I chose to see it.

If only I had packed up and moved back to Arkansas when Tom left, I wouldn’t have been in that position. However, there I stood in Grandma Mary’s living room, afraid someone was stalking me, with a very handsome deputy only feet in front of me. The whole scene was surreal and I had a hard time understanding how it all came about. So much had happened in the last six months, it was a blur when reflecting back.

“Dead roses,” he paused. “Did you get crossways with somebody?” There was a hint of sparkle in his glistening blue eyes and a slight upward tilt of his lips, but he appeared serious as he listened.

“I have wracked my brain and nobody comes to mind. There’s been no reason for anyone to do such a thing. I go to work, I come home. That’s all. And, I spend most of my time covered in dirt and sweat, so I can’t imagine anyone being interested, or upset with me, for that matter.” The words sounded spasmodic and my stomach churned as I waited for his next question. The idea someone would have hard feelings towards me made me uneasy and I had wished I was back in Arkansas where things were simple. I’d never been one to cause problems and certainly didn’t mean to be one.

The more we discussed the incident, the more serious his tone and the more vulnerable I felt. Was I anxious because of the package and the fact someone had been at my front door in the middle of the night? Or was it because I had a tall, good looking officer, with incredible blue eyes, standing only a couple of feet in front of me in a nicely pressed uniform? Either way, the knots in my stomach were multiplying and I had a hard time standing still.

He turned his head briefly to the radio on his shoulder, stating, “Dispatch, 10-12, I’ll be in touch.” Then, he turned his radio off.

“Excuse me. Why did you turn your radio off?” Although I was unnerved by everything, including him, I wasn’t about to take the same clueless stance I had in the past with the men I had known. It was important I change my M.O., and even more important I appear confident, whether I was or not. There was no reason for Deputy Johnson to know my weaknesses.

Even though he was quite handsome, standing tall to my five foot six, he wasn’t the first tall man I’d laid eyes on, but for whatever reason, the deputy’s stature and formal appearance captivated me.

“I didn’t turn it off. I just turned it down so I could get a complete account of the incident without the radio interrupting. It’s hard enough for people to tell their story, without adding a bunch of static and noise. I’ll turn it back up as soon as we’ve finished the report.” He smiled slowly, confidently, easing my mind with his kind demeanor.

He’d pulled out a pen and paper and was ready to fill out the report.

“Let’s start with the nursery. The dispatcher said you own Stepping Stone Nursery. Can you tell me who works for you?” Poised, he listened intently.

“I have two high school boys who work for me, David Jones and Jimmy Andrews. They only work afternoons and occasionally on Saturdays if there’s a lot going on.”

“What about them? Have you had any problems with either of them?”

“Not really. They’re teenage boys, so they can be difficult, with attitude and all, but I can’t imagine either of them doing this. Besides, I doubt they could afford roses, dead or alive.”

The deputy grinned as he wrote it down, but looked at me with a straight face, even though his eyes sparkled.

“Anyone else?”

“Well, Joe Stephens comes around a lot, but he’s in his sixties and treats me like his daughter. The only other one would be my ex, Tom Anderson, and he went to Montana. To my knowledge, no one’s heard from him since. I know I haven’t.”

“And you know for a fact he’s still gone?” His eyebrows raised and he waited. I didn’t want to elaborate even though I felt I should.

“Well, he hasn’t been around, so I’m relatively sure.” By that time, I had begun to wring my hands. It was obviously a sore spot. He noticed it but, thankfully, said nothing. I think he got the gist of it anyway.

If you don’t have any idea who did this, there’s really nothing I can do at this point. Whoever it was obviously isn’t here right now. I could drive by for a few nights if you like and, if they see me, whoever they are, that should put a stop to it. If not, then we’ll have someone posted out here on your road for a few nights. Until then, let’s see if driving by takes care of it.”

“If you think that would help. Is there anything I need to do?” I felt as though I had a blank space between my ears and was hopeful any direction he gave me would be retained. It wasn’t just his stature that impressed me, his glassy eyes were mesmerizing. They were like two deep pools I could get lost in forever. And, that curl of sandy brown hair at the edge of his right eye; I was captivated, staring at it, blatantly. Although I could hear him talking, it was as if he was speaking a foreign language and I was unable to understand. He was straight-forward, not mealy mouth and sounded sincere. This man seemed to have it all going on and I was impressed.

“You might want to make a list of everyone you know, particularly men, of course. While you might not think anyone’s interested in you, you are an attractive woman, Miss Watson, and we don’t have many of those around here. Someone might be watching you without you realizing.”

Would he find me interesting? Oh Lord, that was not where my mind needed to go. There had to be advantages to behaving maturely, but at that fork in the road, I wasn’t so sure about it. Although, I had to admit, I didn’t want to make a bad impression.

It was time to end that conversation and lessen the chance of my making a fool of myself. The old familiar sensations were washing over me and I didn't want him picking up on what I was feeling. And certainly not what I was thinking, so I offered my hand.

"I really appreciate your taking the time to come by. I'm probably making a big deal out of nothing." I anchored myself to that spot, hoping he would accept my gesture and leave.

"I'll walk around the outside of the house before I go." He stepped towards the door.

"Deputy Johnson, thanks." I wanted to say something else, something seductive, or at the very least, flirtatious, but realized it was best I keep quiet, a thought that, a couple of years ago, would have never crossed my mind.

"Not a problem. And, when I leave, remember to lock the door." He tipped his hat and was out the door and pulling out of the drive, before I could move from that spot.

While I felt I should have been scared, there was something about that deputy. His straight forward demeanor gave me a sense of security, something I barely recognized.