

One

Les Capucines, October 1998

Allison didn't know what to expect. Would he recognize her? Was he as beautiful as when she'd left him? She quickened her steps down the steep incline, following the narrow trail that led to the barn. The trail wound around a stand of birches to lose itself in the darkness of a grove of pines. As the trees thinned out near the bottom of the hill, the old barn drifted into sight. She ran toward it, her heart throbbing. When she was in front of it, however, she stopped cold. Timbers and siding of any colour and shape had been used to repair the roof and walls.

This wasn't really the barn she remembered.

She took a few tentative steps around it, then decided to walk inside. Old memories began to flash back. She was fourteen when the roof of the stable collapsed under a heavy snowfall, injuring her beloved colt Morello. She could still see him sprawled on the floor, his left ear split in two, his forelegs, both broken, folded under his trembling body, his eyes imploring.

Attracted by a loud neigh Allison moved toward the end of the stable. Morello was in the last stall, a big horse now, a star-shaped blaze glistening in the middle of his forehead. Only a thin, long scar parted his hair across the ear, a remnant of the old wound.

Allison stroked the horse's neck. On impulse she rubbed her nose against his nose, but Morello retreated immediately. He panted in snorts and his ears twitched. "You don't remember, do you? You forgot me, eh?" Her mind wandered back to that fateful dawn, when she frantically searched for her brother's old sled. Morello was tiny then—barely one month old. She'd lifted him onto the sled, tucking a blanket around him. Then she'd tied the frayed rope around her wrist, and set off through the snow-covered fields. The vet's lab was seven miles away. She didn't dare to stop. If she halted she might not have the strength to get going again. So she plodded on, mile after slow mile, never stopping until she reached the vet. When she finally arrived, she was unable to speak. She could only point to her precious bundle.

Allison smiled at her memories.

"Do you like horses?" A male voice echoed in the almost empty stable.

"Yes. But I found only one." Allison turned around.

A tall man in jeans and a leather jacket leaned his back against the wall. He was studying her with undisguised interest. Allison wondered how long he'd been standing there.

He pushed off the wall and sauntered over, taking off his cowboy hat. "We used to have horses, but they've all been replaced by Jeeps. Not as pretty, but a heck of a lot more functional." He petted the horse's ears and was rewarded by a grateful whinny. "Morello is the only one left."

"I see."

He offered her a big hand. "Marvin Garland. I'm in charge of farming operations at Les Capucines."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Allison Summer." Allison looked up at the ceiling, and then down at the rotted floor. "This place isn't in very good shape, is it?"

"It should be torn down. But for some reason, Mr. Carmichael is attached to this old horse. As long as the horse stays, the stable stays. So what brings you here? You look very much like a city girl."

For a moment Allison thought of telling him who she was. But the man seemed so sure of himself, so much in control—maybe she should tease him a little.

"What kind of employer does he make?"

"Mr. Carmichael?" Marvin shot her a curious look. "He brought me in four years back to modernize his operation. He was a friend of my father's, and I've been running things for him after his heart attack. He's a good man." He flipped his hat inside out. "Why? Are you looking for a job?"

"Already got one. I'll be helping out at the infirmary."

"So you're the new nurse they've been talking about for weeks." He grinned. "Now isn't that a coincidence. I need immediate medical attention." He pressed one hand against his chest, and his hazel eyes clouded over in mock pain. "It's my heart. It has been pounding from the moment I saw you. I can't stop it. It might be dangerous."

"Hmm. It's a common disease. It affects men, mostly." She grinned. "The good news is, it's not catching." Her gaze moved up and down Marvin's body. "You look healthy and strong. I think you'll recover." She began walking back to the large entrance.

"Wait, wait." Marvin trailed her. "Since you're new here, I should show you around."

She kept walking. "What, in your condition? You shouldn't strain yourself."

"Come on, just an easy spin in my comfortable Grand Cherokee. You can't imagine how big this place is. It extends all the way up to the Indian reserve, twenty-five miles to the north."

As she reached the door, Allison turned to face Marvin. "Thank you for the offer, Marvin. I'll take a rain check."

Ian Summer rolled his wheelchair toward the fireplace, attracted by its pink granite mantel. He fingered the stones to feel their texture. Moving to Les Capucines had been an excellent idea. The studio was spacious, with beautifully framed pictures and photographs covering one entire wall. Two floor-to-ceiling bookcases and a credenza, all in solid oak, gave the room an imposing aspect. The sun, filtered through four stained-glass windows, created myriad colourful patterns on the dark, wooden floor.

Wheeling his way between an old desk and the leather chairs, he stopped in front of the portraits: there was Mike Carmichael with his pony; Mike with a sketching pad and crayons; Mike on a sailboat.

"Admiring my good looks? I was young then." Mike Carmichael closed the door behind him. Five-six, slim and almost bald, Mike was in his mid-fifties. "What's so urgent you wanted to see me at this early hour?" He slumped into the leather sofa.

"Don't move!" Ian raised the digital camera he carried around his neck. "Say 'cheese'." He snapped Mike's picture. "There, that's for my journal. To remember this special day." He moved over to the couch. "Now that I've seen the place, I'd like to start making plans."

"But you and Allison just got here!" Mike's eyes expressed even more anxiety than his words.

"It's never too early to make plans for the good life. And I intend to have a real good life."

Mike didn't comment right away, staring through the glass door at the back of the studio. Allison, riding Morello, was on her way to the lakeshore. He sighed, giving Ian a worried look. "What's left to plan? I thought this was what you wanted. A nice place to stay. Being taken care of."

"For one thing, I need cash. Maybe you can talk to your father. It's clear he's very happy Allison came here to stay. This could be the perfect moment."

"You can forget about that. He won't give me a penny—it's a miracle he lets me stay here at all."

"I'll have to get it from Allison, then. She's my wife."

"Ian! Please don't. She's my daughter, the only child I have left. I don't want her under pressure."

"Don't get sentimental now. You didn't care about her or . . ." An expression of guilt and pain flickered across Mike's face. Not

wise to remind him of that particular agreement, Ian thought. He wheeled closer, and reached for his friend's hand. "Remember all the dreams we had? Traveling, lying on the beach . . ." he said, searching Mike's face.

Mike waved off his words. "True. But that was then."

Ian fretted. He tried to read his friend's expression. Was it possible Mike had heard of what he'd done while Mike was at the rehabilitation centre? Maybe it was better not to press the issue. He'd have to tread carefully, at least for the moment.

A gigantic walnut tree towered over the shrubbery off the kitchen patio. Its fruit, still green, began to drop to the ground. A squirrel dashed out of the bushes to grab two walnuts. It swiftly hid them in its mouth and carried them away to stock up its winter supply.

Allison stood in front of the glass door, lost in the peace and harmony of the view. Glimpses of her childhood came to her as scenes of a remote, lost world: the rides with Morello, the walks with her brother on the lakeshores, the calls of the loons, the frantic planting of hundreds of nasturtiums to cover the front yard . . .

She jerked as a hand stroked her shoulder.

"You didn't hear me walking in, eh?"

She turned. "No. Good morning, grandpa. Breakfast is ready. Just for the two of us."

"It's so wonderful to have you around, Allison," Matthew Elliott Carmichael said as he sat at the table.

Allison filled his cup with tea, dropped a slice of fresh lemon into it and briskly kissed him on his thin, white hair. She sat beside him. "I didn't remember this old kitchen being so big. This table, for instance, could easily sit eight people."

"Your grandmother loved cooking. She liked to have people around, too. We often had our guests sitting here in the kitchen. This table was made to order for her. Bright ceramic top. You can cut on it. It doesn't damage easy." Matthew sipped his tea slowly. "So, what else surprised you? After your mother took you away you came here only once."

"The size of the farm as it grew to be. More cattle. More fields cultivated as cash crops." Allison grabbed a slice of bread from the toaster and coated it with a thin layer of grape jelly. "You bought so much new land. The property is huge now."

He nodded. "There's a lot of people depending on this farm. When I'm gone, they'll be your responsibility." He pressed her hand. "Don't look so worried. You'll do just fine. And I'm not

dead yet. But I can tell you, having you back here takes a weight off my chest.”

Allison looked directly into his eyes. They were bright, alert. If only she could confide in him . . . But he had his own cross to bear. His adopted child, her father, had wasted his life on drugs and bad company. She wasn't going to add to his worries—Mike Carmichael had done enough damage for both of them. Besides, her grandfather had a heart condition. She should never forget that.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Then Matthew looked up from his cup. “Your mother . . . She never forgave me, did she?”

“Oh, grandpa. That's not true.”

But the old man would not be deceived. He sighed. “She was right, you know, to take you away. I should have kicked Mike out long before I did, long before she left. It's just—” He shook his head. “I felt so sorry for him. When I looked at Mike, I still remembered the way I found him. Sitting on the house doorsteps in his pyjamas, all hungry and bruised. A small, scared boy who didn't talk for weeks.”

A quick smile appeared on Allison's face. “I know.” She put her hand on top of his, stopping his tremors.

“And then, when I think of you and Vern—I feel so grateful to him. He gave me two wonderful grandchildren.”

Grandpa would never fail to make her feel good about herself. “By the way, I didn't expect to find my father here.”

“Mike's social worker called me up. He asked me if Mike could stay at Les Capucines for the time being. He's in a recovery program. He's making great progress, the counsellor told me. So I said yes.” He slowly finished his tea.

“He looks tired, very much aged.”

“Well, with the lifestyle he had, my child, he's lucky to be alive.” Matthew's voice was sharp now. “By the way, I found your husband on edge. Any particular reason?”

The urge to open her heart became overwhelming. But Allison saw an old man, in poor health, who needed comfort, not more worries. “In spite of the doctors' opinion, Ian seems to believe he won't recuperate the use of his legs.”

“I see.” Matthew rose. “More tea?” As Allison nodded, he moved with unsuspected vigour around the kitchen counter. He put on the kettle and asked over his shoulder. “How is your own life, Allison? Hard, I bet, with the move and Ian in a wheelchair.”

Allison could hardly refrain from crying. She waited until she trusted her voice enough to speak. “Things, at the moment, aren't that easy,” she replied. “But don't worry. I'll be fine.”

Marvin drove over to his sister's house and pulled the Grand Cherokee into the driveway. He'd have supper with Susan and then head off for a weekend of freedom.

Susan knew his vehicle by sound. Before he had time to turn off the engine, she appeared in the doorway, one hand resting on her cane, the other on the doorframe.

"Hey, little brother!"

Marvin gave her a hug and a peck on the cheek. He wrapped an arm around her waist, and they walked in together.

"Beer?" Susan asked.

"Sure." Marvin sat in the family room, in the chair reserved for him. Everything in Susan's house had a precise place and function. He'd had the place custom-built to fit her needs. The small, one-storey house had a wrap-around porch with a secure railing, so she could move about in total safety. Susan was nearly blind—a result of the severe seizures she'd suffered since childhood.

She headed to the kitchen and returned with a cold beer. Susan manoeuvred among the different pieces of furniture with a confidence that defied her impairment, and sat in her own chair, close to Marvin's. "Anything new?" she asked.

"Not much. Oh, yes. A new arrival at Les Capucines. A young nurse."

"Good-looking?"

"Er . . . well, yes, I guess." He tried to hide his embarrassment, even though she couldn't see him. Susan, fifteen years his senior, knew him well. Too well for comfort.

She sat back. "All right, time for a full report." She waved her hands at him, eager, eloquent: she wanted to see through his words.

"Not too tall. Big eyes. Short hair, looks soft."

Susan sat upright. "Does she look like Charlene?"

Marvin didn't reply immediately. "Maybe a little. The eyes. Like Charlene's, they're light grey."

Susan just smiled. "A quiet girl?"

"Not exactly. More like composed. She acts kind of cold and distant. But her eyes are very much alive. There's fire burning inside."

Susan whistled between her teeth. "Uh-oh."

"Don't 'Uh-oh' me. If I wanted fire I could have had it long ago."

"Oh, sure. At the ripe old age of thirty-eight you're finished with life. You've got your job, you've got your loving sister, you don't need anything else." She kept her voice light, but he could see her mouth tremble.

“That’s right,” he said. He scooted over and took her hands. “That’s damn right.” But as he kissed the top of her head, he wondered. And he knew she was wondering too. Was another Charlene coming between them?

Malcolm Clark, head of ‘Invicta,’ nodded at the prim, straight-backed woman in front of him, and sent her one of his award-winning smiles. He didn’t like to antagonize potential customers. But Pamela Borodin wasn’t making things easy. She’d been rambling on and on in her high, whining voice for over an hour now. The meeting had been an exercise in patience and understanding, and it didn’t look like she was going to be done any time soon.

She ignored his smile and continued her tirade, lambasting the incompetence of police, prosecutors, and the justice system in general. Malcolm made sympathetic noises. To pass the time, he counted and recounted the pictures that covered the walls of his office. Twenty-four of them, each portraying a Stanley Cup winning team. Finally, Pamela stopped talking.

Malcolm looked up. “Mrs. Borodin—”

“Ms. Borodin,” she corrected him instantly.

“Ms. Borodin, as I told you before, there’s nothing I can do. Your brother died—”

“Was murdered,” she interjected.

“ . . . almost a year ago. There was enough evidence to call his death a suicide.”

“Mr. Clark, listen to me. I drove all the way from Montreal. I came to the Invicta because of its prestigious name. I was told it’s an organization established to help citizens.” She stopped and inhaled quickly, to gain strength for what she was going to say. “My brother Albert was killed and his body thrown into a river. I know who has done it. I collected a lot of evidence.” She tapped on the folder lying in her lap. “If nobody at the Invicta wants to help, I’ll take justice in my own hands.”

That was probably the only thing the woman could say to sway him to take the case. The woman was upset enough to do something foolish, cold enough to plan it carefully, and smart enough to get away with it. A deadly combination.

As if interpreting his thoughts, Ms. Borodin moved ahead full force. “I can pay your agency to expose my brother’s assassin or I can pay a killer to eliminate him.” She gave Malcolm Clark a cold, determined look.

“Statements of this sort,” muttered Malcolm, “could cause you big trouble, Ms. Borodin. Are you aware of that?”

“You told me on the phone, that our conversation would be confidential.” She looked like a cat ready to catch its prey.

Malcolm sighed. “Well, not really . . . not if it includes specific plans to commit criminal actions.” It wasn’t easy to scare this customer away. He had to gain time. He moved back behind his desk and slumped into his swivel chair. “Let’s see what you’ve got.” He stretched his arm to promptly receive a thick, black folder. He leafed through the pages. “Why don’t I see what I can do, and get back to you in a week. Ten days, tops. How does that sound?” He got up, hoping the meeting would come to an end.

Ms. Borodin rose too. She extended her hand. “Take two weeks,” she said.

Malcolm Clark forced a smile as he escorted her to the door. The woman knew how to be generous in victory.